Blogs On Early Christianity
From The Anxious Bench

Philip Jenkins

TWO GODS, TWO BIBLES?

August 30, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
3 Comments

I have posted recently about the Dualist sects who were such a persistent force through the Middle Ages, and who drew a sharp contrast between the inferior God of the Old Testament, and the pure deity of the New. In this, they were following on neatly from the old Gnostics, who so alarmed and disgusted the mainstream church in the earliest centuries. But where did Gnostics and Dualists get this radical idea? In large part, they were inspired by reading the Bible itself, and the moral horror they felt when they explored sections of the Old Testament.

In my book *Laying Down the Sword* (2011), I wrote about some of the extremely violent passages in the Old Testament – genocidal commands against the Amalekites and the Canaanites (Amorites), commands to slay those who violated racial purity laws. Modern readers usually deal with such texts by ignoring them, even pretending they don't exist, and if they do confront them seriously, they are usually troubled. It's easy to think that earlier generations were less sensitive to such issues, that they took the slaughter and racial violence in their stride. But they absolutely didn't. It was the moral repugnance against such stories that drew people to blame those acts on the commands of an inferior God, from whom Jesus came to rescue us.

One advocate of this stance was the second century thinker Marcion. The main thrust of his critique was on moral grounds, directed against a God who acted like a capricious tyrant. Marcion loathed the idea of God hardening the heart of his victims, making them commit evils for which he could then punish them. He had a clear preference for those on the losing side in the Old Testament, those who appear as the villains and victims of the Hebrew narrative. He taught that Christ's death had brought salvation to "Cain, and those like him, and the Sodomites, and the Egyptians", while the good characters of the Old Testament did not achieve salvation: not Abel, not Noah, none of the patriarchs or prophets who had gullibly followed the lesser god.

In his critique of the Old Testament, Marcion was closely followed by the radical Dualist prophet Mani. Both men mocked the notion of a united and harmonious Bible. As Mani wrote, "Some good God of the Law! He spoiled the Egyptians, expelled the Amorites, Girgashites and other nations and gave their land to the children of Israel. If He said, 'Thou shalt not covet,' how could he give them other people's land?"

Apart from Mani himself, the movement's most famous representative was Faustus, "an African by race, a citizen of Mileum," and a Manichean bishop. I quote the *Catholic Encyclopedia*:

Born at Mileve of poor parents, he had gone to Rome, and being converted to Manichæism he began to study rhetoric somewhat late in life. He was not a man of profound erudition, but he was a suave and unctuous speaker. His fame in Manichæan circles was very great. He was a Manichæan episcopus and boasted of having left his wife and children and all he had for his religion. He arrived at Carthage in 383, and was arrested, but the Christians obtained the commutation of his sentence to banishment and even that was not carried out.

His attack on mainstream Christianity called forth St. Augustine's tirade, the *Contra Faustum* (c.400).

Faustus pointed out what he claimed were flagrant contradictions between the Pentateuch and the teachings of Jesus. As Augustine protested, "Faustus blames God in the Old Testament for slaughtering thousands of human beings for slight offenses, as Faustus calls them, or for nothing." He "speaks of Moses as commanding and doing many cruel things." To many modern eyes, Faustus was making a solid case for the prosecution.

Augustine's response, the *Contra Faustum*, stressed God's absolute sovereignty and righteousness. No matter how wrong an act might seem to human eyes, if God orders it, it can never be wrong, and must be obeyed.

Using this principle, he offered a detailed defense of the Bible. Yes, said Augustine, many of the acts described seem cruel or vicious, but they could be defended in various ways. Augustine argued that many of the most extreme stories had to be understood allegorically, but even if we did not use this let-out, God still remained uncondemned. If the violent actions were done in obedience to God, that fact in itself entirely justified them. God is absolute, and his standards above those of men. For Augustine, God "commands nothing but what is most just." John Calvin would closely echo these sentiments.

Historically, Augustine certainly won the debate. In the sixth century, the Western church condemned the works of "Faustus the Manichean" as apocryphal, and none have survived.

Even so, many Christians remained profoundly unconvinced by Augustine's argument, and chose to reject the whole Old Testament in the name of what they believed to be the principles put forward in the New.

Lost Christian Nubia

April 14, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

A spectacular recent find in northern Africa throws new light on early church history, but at the same time it also points to the existence of a vast and forgotten Christian kingdom, and just how the faith – or indeed, any religion – fades and dies. The story makes for highly appropriate reading in the Easter season.

The find in question was made at al-Ghazali on the Nile, in northern Sudan. This "massive" burial ground was apparently associated with a Christian monastery, and many tombstones were inscribed in Greek or Coptic. Commonly, the prayers beseech that "that the soul will be taken care of and can rest on the bosom of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or in the world of the Living." The site itself stands near other remains marked by Christian rock art, which depict churches and saints.

Coptic monasteries were once very common, but the location of this particular one is so significant because it stands in an area where Christianity is not practiced today. That marks it off from Coptic

Egypt to the north, and the lands of Ethiopia to the south east. Yet once upon a time, Christian kingdoms stretched all the way from the Mediterranean in the north to the Red Sea, from Egypt to Ethiopia, passing through the lands of Nubia. And al-Ghazali was clearly a monastic house of that lost Christian kingdom of Nubia, which is presently the missing ink in that Christian chain. It is one of the great examples of a region that was once largely Christian, but where the faith became extinct.

G. K. Chesterton once wrote of "The lands where Christians were… the little lands laid bare." Yes, Christians were in Nubia, but these were anything but "little lands." A rough estimate of the kingdom's core territory would be rather larger than the size of Texas, or of France.

I described the story of Christian Nubia in my 2008 book *The Lost History of Christianity*, and I will adapt some of that material here.

The Christian faith arrived here no later than the fourth century, and the great patriarch Athanasius consecrated a bishop in the region. Nubia survived as a Christian kingdom from the sixth century through the fifteenth, dominating the Nile between Khartoum and Aswan, and straddling the modern-day border of Egypt and Sudan. Nubia's churches and cathedrals were decorated with rich murals in the best Byzantine style, showing their dark-skinned kings in royal robes. Its main cathedral at Faras was adorned with hundreds of paintings of kings and bishops, saints and biblical figures – images that lay forgotten under the sands until rediscovered in the 1960s.

This Christian state became a major player in African politics. In 745 its king invaded Egypt, with the goal of defending the patriarch of Alexandria:

And there were under the supremacy of Cyriacus, king of the Nubians, thirteen kings, ruling the kingdom and the country. He was the orthodox Ethiopian king of Al-Mukurrah; and he was entitled the Great King, upon whom the crown descended from Heaven; and he governed as far as the southern extremities of the earth.

By the 830s, the patriarch of Alexandria "appointed many bishops, and sent them to all places under the see of Saint Mark the evangelist, which include Africa and the Five Cities and Al-Kairuwân and Tripoli and the land of Egypt and Abyssinia and Nubia."

The Nubians signed a treaty, a "pact," with Islamic Egypt, which both sides respected for an impressive six centuries.

But Nubia's fortunes deteriorated in the later Middle Ages, with the rise of the great Mamluk regime in Islamic Egypt. In 1275, the ferocious sultan Baybars conquered Christian Nubia, capturing its capital, Dongola. His forces sacked churches and forced the king, David, into exile. Repeated attacks weakened the state, while the growing crisis of the Egyptian church prevented Coptic authorities from supplying the bishops and priests essential to maintaining church life. By 1320, the royal church in Dongola had become a mosque, and around 1372, we hear of the ordination of the last Christian bishop.

Within a few decades, Nubia was both dechristianized and Arabized in language and culture, although a tiny Christian statelet lingered on until the late fifteenth century. At some unknown point – around 1500, perhaps? – some unknown church must have celebrated the land's very last Good

Friday liturgy, its final Easter service. The last Christians probably vanished around the time that Europe began its Reformation.

Sixteenth-century travelers were told that Nubia's Christians

had received everything from "Rome" [i.e., Constantinople] and that it is a very long time since a bishop died whom they had received from Rome. Because of the wars of the Moors, they could not get another one, and they lost all their clergy and their Christianity and thus the Christian faith was forgotten.

I quote Wikipedia:

The influx of Arabs and Nubians to Egypt and Sudan had contributed to the suppression of the Nubian identity following the collapse of the last Nubian kingdom around 1504. A major part of the modern Nubian population became totally Arabized and some claimed to be Arabs (Jaa'leen – the majority of Northern Sudanese – and some Donglawes in Sudan). A vast majority of the Nubian population is currently Muslim, and the Arabic language is their main medium of communication in addition to their indigenous old Nubian language.

In modern times, northern Sudan was devoutly Muslim, and its Christian past was largely forgotten. Just in the past few decades, at least two of its key monastic sites vanished under the newly constructed Lake Merowe.

The remains at al-Ghazali thus speak to a glorious but utterly lost history.

Or was the destruction as total as it seems? I will add one curious footnote. Nubians have always used the waters of the Nile for various ritual purposes, but one of the most persistent involves the washing of newborn babies, in what is commonly taken as a distant recollection of baptism. I quote Samia Ibrahim:

This ritual is similar to baptism performed by Christians for their newborn children. According to the book entitled ***'Discovery of Ancient Nuba History****' by Giovanni Fantini, these rituals still exist in Nuba areas in northern Sudan and Darfur in the west. These rituals testify to Nubians' Christian past.*

The priest of Two Martyrs Church, father Velothaos Faraj said a number of customs in Nuba districts are regarded as remnants of Christianity which existed in the Nubian regions between the sixth and the sixteenth centuries. These customs continued after the advent of Islam, including those that were associated with the river Nile. "The Nile is a sacred river to all Nuba population and they turn to it for renewed life," he added.

The BBC radio series Heart and Soul recently broadcast an evocative podcast about the clandestine survival of baptism and other Christian practices among Nubians, at considerable risk to themselves.

Even now, even today, five hundred years after the national church formally ceased to exist.

Those Who Know

February 9, 2015 by Philip Jenkins

3 Comments

Ever since my undergraduate years, I have been interested in early Christian history and Gnosticism. In the next few posts, I will talk about some of the things I have learned about Gnosticism, why it is so important, and some of the areas I am still trying to explore in my present book project. Here, I will just define my terms, and identify my main questions.

Every history of early Christianity talks about Gnostics, who were so important between the second and fourth centuries. Gnostic thinkers wrote extensively, including many works presented as gospels and expansions of the canonical scriptures. Most are lost, but many selections have been preserved in the controversial works of early Fathers like Irenaeus and Epiphanius. Other Gnostic writings have been rediscovered in modern times. The 1945 find of the library at Nag Hammadi, Egypt, was very important, although several other major works were discovered both before and afterwards. Elaine Pagels's book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979) did much to bring these writings to public attention.

Some important works challenge the whole scholarly construction of Gnosticism. I am thinking of Michael Williams's *Rethinking "Gnosticism"* (1996) and Karen King's *What is Gnosticism?* (2003). King, for instance, rightly points out that the whole category of Gnosticism is quite new historically, dating to the seventeenth century. Critically, she also stresses the diversity of texts we broadly label as Gnostic, showing that some make statements quite at odds with what we assume to be "Gnostic orthodoxy." These are all excellent points.

While accepting the caveats about generalizing, I believe we can see enough common features to make the category worth analysis.

Gnostic ideas were very diverse, but fundamental was the idea that human beings are exiled in the material world. One common version of the Gnostic myth (and I stress, one of many) goes like this. We can understand the divine world as the *Pleroma*, the Fullness, which emanated from one absolute God. The Pleroma includes many different entities or Aeons with such names as Depth and Silence, Mind and Truth. In some systems, the Aeons appeared in balanced pairs, syzygies. Through ignorance and delusion, one of those entities created the flawed material world, and proclaimed himself its God. This is the vain, angry and judgmental deity described in the Old Testament, and he is sometimes called Ialdabaoth or Sakla. Sometimes, he is accompanied by other lesser deities called Rulers, Archons.

to be created. She suffered a Fall into this flawed world and forgot her divine nature. Another Aeon, Christ, came to re-enlighten and redeem her, to wake her from her sleep. Through this process of fall and redemption, sparks of the divine were left scattered in the material creation. Gnostics often described human experience in terms of sleep and forgetting, through which people lost contact with their divine origins. They needed to be awoken, to overcome their amnesia.

The details of the myth scarcely matter, and they are certainly not intended as a historical narrative. It is meant to explain how human beings found themselves in this evil material world, from which they can be liberated or redeemed. They do this through knowledge, *gnosis* – knowledge of the nature of the universe, knowledge that they have sparks of the divine light within them, which can be

restored to primal splendor. A Gnostic is one who knows, and who yearns to ascend to the divine realm. Often, that ascent is framed in mythological terms as a path through successive heavens.

Or as I once wrote in *Christian History*,

This world is not my home. As it stands, that statement reflects the views of a great many orthodox Christians, but a Gnostic would take it much further. From that perspective, the material world is not just fallen but an utterly flawed creation, beyond redemption. God – or at least, the good, true, God – certainly does not work in history. Escape is only available to the small minority who know, who recognize the need for liberation, which lies within. Wisdom, Sophia, is for the spiritual, the elite, and distinguishes them from the gullible herd of humans enmired in the material, the victims of cosmic deception. They will remain asleep, while the true Gnostic is awakened.

Gnosticism has proved attractive to modern thinkers, partly because its ancient leaders were so at odds with what is presented as a repressive orthodox church structure. Gnostic leaders are commonly seen as daring free-thinkers, who included many women. Also, Gnostics understood the New Testament narrative more as an internal psychological process rather than as sober history. Crucifixion and resurrection were events that occurred within the individual believer, and the suggestion that Christ might have taken material form struck them as blasphemous. They absolutely rejected complex Christian ideas of Incarnation and physical Resurrection. For good or ill, they took the Christian story outside history. A Gnostic belief in reincarnation made it easy to reconcile with Asian religions such as Buddhism.

Modern fans tend to underplay unattractive aspects of Gnosticism, including its basic anti-Judaism and its condemnation of that religion. Also, in practice, its rejection of sexuality and reproduction made it deeply hostile to women.

At least under that name, Gnosticism faded by the fifth century, but those basic ideas carried on for a millennium afterwards in the form of the Manichaean religion, and the Christian Dualist sects found through much of Europe and the Middle East. They did not share the elaborate mythology, but offered a similar view of the Creation and the relationship between material and spiritual worlds. I usually characterize these movements as Dualist/Gnostic. They persisted alongside Orthodox/Catholic Christianity for three-quarters of the Christian story.

Although the Gnostics have attracted a lot of scholarly attention, a couple of pressing issues demand notice:

**The relationship between Gnosticism and orthodox (small-o) Christianity*. Gnosticism is usually seen as a Christian heresy, but until quite recently, scholars drew a sharp line between the two strands, seeing Gnosticism as so radically distinct that it almost constituted a separate religion. Today, Gnostic ideas are usually seen as part of the broad spectrum of thought within the Jesus movement and Christianity, ideas that were only gradually labeled as monstrous and unacceptable heresy.

Complicating this issue, we also find Gnostic texts and ideas that are clearly non-Christian, particularly Jewish. This raised a further critical question, namely,

**Did Gnosticism precede Christianity?* This was a common idea in early twentieth century scholarship, but it has become much less popular. The older theory went like this: Gnosticism was a pre-

Christian system, deriving perhaps from Neoplatonism, mystery religions, Persian religion, even Buddhism. It included a heavenly Redeemer myth, and that in turn likely influenced the theology of the emerging Christian church. The problem is that it is exceedingly hard to find any evidence of such a Redeemer myth that is clearly earlier than the rise of Christianity, or wholly separate from it. Dylan Burns has written aptly of "the old red herring of pre-Christian Gnosticism."

**What inheritance, if any, did Gnosticism leave in other, later, systems?* I have already pointed out the strong continuities to Manichaean and Dualist movements, where the chronological sequence is clear. Much more intriguing, if less celebrated, is the Jewish side of the story. The Qabalistic tradition has many aspects that recall Gnosticism, not least the idea that the world was created through the fracturing of the vessels into which the divine goodness was poured. Resulting flaws in the Creation left shards of divine light scattered through the material universe, until they were once more collected and restored. In addition to seeking their own mystic ascent to God, believers also pledge themselves to achieving *tikkun olam*, the restoration of the broken world. Also very familiar is the idea of creation as a process of emanation from the one absolute God, which strongly recalls Neoplatonism, possibly received via Gnostic channels. Most of the texts that present these views, though, were written down long after the probable disappearance of active Gnostic communities. There almost certainly is a connection – there has to be – but it is not easy to trace.

For present purposes, though, I will be focusing on one basic question, namely where did Gnosticism come from? Beyond doubt, Gnostic thinkers were active no later than the early second century AD, the time of such Egyptian thinkers as Basilides and Valentinus, and they claimed a direct inheritance from St. Paul, or from one or other of Jesus's own disciples. But how much earlier can we trace these ideas?

That's the subject of my next post.

The Beginning of Wisdom

February 13, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have been posting on the subject of Gnosticism and its origins.

By the early second century AD, Gnosticism was clearly in evidence as part the early Christian movement, but its history before that date is obscure. Undoubtedly it drew from multiple sources and influences, including Greek philosophical ideas and terminology, but we do not have to look far outside the Jewish world for most of its basic themes. Quite apart from Hellenistic influences, those building blocks appeared within various schools of Jewish thought in the two or three centuries before the Christian era, and remarkably little construction was needed to complete the Gnostic end-product.

In that era, we can trace the rise of several ideas critical to the later Gnostic synthesis. The idea of a Satanic figure, a Belial, had become prominent, with the suggestion that (as in the New Testament), he was the lord of this world. The sect that wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls was not Gnostic, but they

preached a stern Dualism, a conflict between the Children of Light and Children of Darkness, both of whom were predestined to that status before they were born. Putting those elements together, it was not a great leap to suggesting that the Children of Light were somehow exiled in a world ruled by Belial. But how might such a dreadful situation have begun?

This extremely creative era also sought explanations for the origins of human evil. Particularly popular was the tale of the descent of the angelic Watchers in Genesis 6, which associated these demonic creatures with the foundation of human culture and civilization. If we have not yet arrived at the Gnostic explanation, that the material world is under the sway of an inferior deity, that conclusion is not far off.

Quite apart from the focus on good and evil, light and darkness, many Jewish thinkers became intensely interested in the figure of wisdom. Wisdom as an idea had been a literary theme for centuries, but from around the time of Sirach (200BC), Wisdom was not only exalted but personified, to be portrayed almost as a near-divine figure, through whom God created the world. Whether or not particular authors meant that as more than a metaphor is not clear, but readers could easily take the texts in that sense.

By the time of the Wisdom of Solomon, from the first century BC, we read that

For [Wisdom] is a breath of the power of God,

and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;

therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her.

For she is a reflection of eternal light,

a spotless mirror of the working of God,

and an image of his goodness (7.25-26)

This sounds very much like Wisdom as a figure in contemporary Greek philosophy, an intermediary between the unchangeable transcendent Monad, the One, and the material creation. It is also densely packed with what sound like technical terms from contemporary Platonism.

Nor is the passage far from the vision of God's creative Logos in the Gospel of John. Writing about the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, James H. Charlesworth remarks that "God's word is seen first as the word of God, then the word from God, and finally, perhaps in only a very few circles, as 'the Word'."

Putting those ideas together, imagine Jewish thinkers around Jesus's time, seeing themselves as the Children of Light, in cosmic warfare with the forces of Darkness. Worse, they know that darkness rules this world. In seeking an explanation for this reality, they turn to the creation story. God himself cannot have fallen into sin or darkness, but perhaps his handmaiden did, and that catastrophe was a kind of Fall, which could only be restored by an anointed Redeemer.

I am assembling that package of ideas out of pure imagination, and I can point to no group of texts that prove its existence. What I am suggesting is that a large part of Gnosticism could, hypothetically, have been constructed without wandering too far outside Judaism as it existed, in its very diverse and sectarian forms, during the first century AD.

Of course, Greek elements also had a direct influence, as I will discuss in my next post.

Athens, Jerusalem and Nag Hammadi

February 15, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

Through the celebrated discovery of many alternative gospels and scriptures, the word Gnostic has entered popular discourse almost as synonymous with bold or experimental religious thinking. Of course, the term Gnostic has a specific meaning as a movement, and one about which we now have a substantial body of written evidence. I have written recently about some modern debates about this idea. Here, I want to focus on the Greek and Hellenistic roots of the movement. Yes, we know that Gnosticism was a powerful temptation to the early church, but it also tells us a lot about how Jewish and Greek ideas merged and interacted between, say 200 BC and 300 AD. It also matters greatly to understanding how early Christianity framed its appeal within the Greek-speaking world(s). Adolf von Harnack famously described Gnosticism as "the acute Hellenization of Christianity" – a phrase that demands a "Discuss!" after it.

Among the scriptures and texts found at Nag Hammadi were some very clearly rooted in Greek and specifically Platonist thought, with titles such as the *Hypostasis of the Archons*. Yet these has once shared shelves with obviously Hebrew and biblical-derived manuscripts, focused on Adam, Noah and (especially) Seth. How had the two traditions come into contact? Where, when and how?

To begin with a general chronology. Plato lived from c.428-348 BC, and after his death, his tradition was carried on by his academy, which lasted into the first century AD. Platonism moved through various phases, as identified and named by modern scholars. Middle Platonism, which built on the insights of other schools of thought, prevailed from c.100 BC through the early third century AD. It was succeeded by Neoplatonism, which flourished from the third through the sixth century AD. The main philosopher of Middle Platonism was Plutarch (45-120 AD).

Fundamental to Plato's thought was the theme of hierarchies of reality and perfection, the idea that the visible, changeable material world is only an image of a higher and authentically real world, which does not change. Visible things are images of higher Forms. In terms of Judaism and Christianity, Philo (25 BC-50 AD) belongs in the Middle Platonist phase, as do most of the Christian apologists of the second and third centuries. Within the New Testament, Platonist ideas are obvious in the Epistle to the Hebrews, in passages like "The law is only a shadow [*skia*] of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves" (10.1). C. S. Lewis did much to popularize Platonic approaches for modern-day Christians.

Over the past thirty years or so, a sizable literature has evolved around the relationship between Platonism and Gnosticism, and specifically Neoplatonism. In terms of chronology, that is a little misleading, because Gnosticism was flourishing in the first and second centuries, long before the emergence of Neoplatonism. In the second century AD, the very important Gnostic thinker Basilides drew on Middle Platonism, and he in turn influenced Valentinus.

Gnosticism thus emerges from a world in which Platonism more generally defined had become a common currency of philosophical language and thought. Of the vast number of ideas and theories that Plato and his successors generated, some are particularly relevant to our subject here, in providing the intellectual vocabulary of Gnosticism.

Perhaps the greatest Platonic contribution was in the area of Dualism, as taught in his *Phaedo*. His system is of course quite distinct from Cosmic Dualism, the struggle of forces of Light and Darkness, but the one concept is an essential foundation for the other. Plato made a novel and revolutionary distinction between the worldly reality that we see, the world of the body, and the non-visible non-material realm of Ideas. Humans have a visible material body, and an incorporeal soul. So fundamental has that matter/spirit distinction become to us that it seems incredible that anyone could ever have invented it at a given historical moment. Linked to this Platonic approach is the theme of the soul being imprisoned in the body, from which it needs liberation.

Obviously, these Platonic themes had an enormous impact within both Christianity and Gnosticism. More generally, Greek philosophy in the last two or three centuries BC made a powerful distinction between body and soul, which presented the material world as inferior. Although these concepts are usually termed Platonic, scholars like Abraham P. Bos also stress the Dualist content of much Aristotelian thinking.

Middle Platonist philosophers explored the relationship between the good creator and the flawed material world, a discussion they drew from Plato's *Timaeus*. Plato had portrayed the creation of the world through a Demiurge, *demiourgos*, or Craftsman, who shaped the material world – crudely, a Creator. Plato's description of Creation makes extensive use of geometry and mathematics, and gives the origins of the planets and the elements. The Demiurge also created a world-soul, *psyche tou kosmou*.

The Middle Platonists understood the universe as deriving from two principles, the One, God or the Monad, and the Dyad, which is matter. Plutarch believed that the creation had transformed matter into the divine soul of the world, but that matter continues to function as a force for disorder, and even for evil. Although he did not offer anything like Cosmic Dualism, that construction could easily be reconciled with the Gnostic dichotomy between one all-powerful God, and an inferior creator of the material world.

Plutarch portrayed God as a transcendent being who ruled through subordinate creatures or intermediaries, daimons, which we know as gods or spirits. The only way to reach the highest good, the One, was through these intermediary forces. That hierarchical vision fitted well into the Jewish/Christian/Gnostic syntheses emerging in these years, and especially the hierarchy of divine Aeons formed by the highest God. Plutarch also believed in divine interventions in the material world through revelation and prophecy.

But here's the problem. Platonists were fine with talk of one great God, provided he was not directly involved in the detailed work of Creation. You needed some kind of intermediate Creator figure who tended to become divine in his own right. In the Jewish or later Christian sense, it was very difficult to be a Platonist and a strict monotheist.

In my next post, I'll expand on these Gnostic parallels and precedents.

Gnostics and Platonists

February 20, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
3 Comments

Although the origins of Gnostic thought are controversial, many of the core themes and terms undoubtedly stemmed from Greek philosophical thought, especially Platonism. That did not necessarily mean that early Gnostics were taking these ideas directly from Greek thinkers or schools, rather that they came from a Jewish (and emerging Christian) world that had long sought to integrate Platonic concepts. Any attempt to separate Greek and Jewish elements in this synthesis is doomed to failure.

In the Gnosticism of the second and third centuries AD, we trace many Platonic themes:

-The word "Gnostic" itself derives from Platonism, although not in anything like its later religious or esoteric sense. Rather, it suggested knowledge in the sense of talent or ability. Over time, though, Christians and other groups adopted it for their own purposes.

-Also from Platonism is the idea of the Demiurge. Although Gnosticism adopted the concept, though, its substance changed radically. In the Platonic tradition, the Demiurge was a benevolent being seeking to create the best possible world. Gnostics saw the Demiurge as a flawed being responsible for a defective material creation.

-Middle Platonists postulated a division between the highest Creator and the inferior world-soul linked to matter. There was an immovable First God, Nous or Mind, the One or the Good. Derived from him is a World-Soul or Demiurge, that was in motion, and therefore inferior. This is the being that creates and governs the world. That is very reminiscent of the Gnostic world-view, in which the material universe was created by an ignorant lesser deity, sometimes called Ialdabaoth.

-Both Neoplatonists and Gnostics shared ideas of emanation, that is, the process by which lower kinds of reality emanated from the godhead. As that flow travels further from the source, so it progressively loses its divinity. This idea was attributed, dubiously, to Plato.

-Neoplatonists and Gnostics also looked to Plato's *Republic* for the idea of a contemplative ascent to the divine world.

-Platonism teaches the transient and illusory quality of the visible material world. While that concept becomes fundamental to Christianity, it had special force within Gnostic systems, which so often taught the need to free oneself of illusion. That lesson was often taught in metaphors of sleep and awaking. When it accepts the material world as real, the soul is in a state of sleep, from which the Redeemer awakes it. That idea gains support from many New Testament passages in which sleep plays such an important symbolic role.

-The word *hypostasis* is rooted in Platonism, meaning the underlying reality or substance of something.

-The process of Bible translation also played its part. From the third century, Jews had access to their scriptures in Greek translation, especially the Septuagint, which became immensely popular. As they read the sacred text, they found words and concepts that had particular resonance within the contemporary philosophical and Platonic framework, not least words like *gnosis* itself. In Genesis 1, Philo read that God made man "according to the image of God" (*eikona theou*), which justified a whole Platonic reconstruction of the creation. Not just for Philo, that made it both easy and tempting to assimilate the Biblical stories to Greek philosophical interpretations. Septuagint translations also opened the way to imagining other divine beings. In Psalm 82, God stands in the Assembly of gods, *synagoge theon.*

Gnosticism thus shares many common intellectual assumptions of its time, but did not emerge inevitably as an offshoot of Platonic thought. What we do see, though, is that between about 100 BC and 200 AD, a number of groups rooted in the Jewish world borrowed extensively from those ideas and long remained in dialogue with Platonic philosophy. That was true of those Christians we think of as orthodox, as well as those we label Gnostics. Both used Platonic thought to frame and develop their ideas, and for much of that intellectual journey, they traveled alongside Middle- and Neo-Platonists

Some major books on these general topics include the collections by Richard T. Wallis and Jay Bregman, eds., *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism* (State University of New York Press, 1992); John D. Turner and Ruth Majercik, eds., *Gnosticism and Later Platonism* (Society of Biblical Literature, 2000); John D. Turner, *Sethian Gnosticism and the Platonic Tradition* (Presses Université Laval, 2001); and Kevin Corrigan et al, eds., *Gnosticism, Platonism and the Late Ancient World* (Brill, 2013).

Dylan M. Burns's important book *Apocalypse of the Alien God* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014) explores the relationship between Gnosticism and third century Neoplatonism.

Asking the Wrong Question

February 22, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have been puzzling over the origins of Gnosticism, and we can certainly find some plausible answers to that issue. Jewish, Greek and Christian, (and possibly Persian), the building blocks were all clearly there. Perhaps, though, I have been asking the wrong question all along. Instead of asking why some people came up with that particular set of answers, we should rather inquire why others didn't.

I will focus on the era from roughly 150 BC through 150 AD. In the Greek world, the best-known intellectual current in this era was Platonism, but this coexisted with several other schools of thought, including Stoics, Pythagoreans and Aristotelians. From about 100 BC, Middle Platonism drew on these other ideas, with which it remained in dialogue. At least from the second century, Jewish thinkers confronted these Greek ideas, and tried to frame their own thinking according to the dominant international world-view. As I have remarked, they were trying to adapt to cultural globalization.

In many ways, drawing on Greek thought and language was not difficult. One massive problem, though, involved the strict monotheism that was and is the absolute foundation of Judaism. In trying to Hellenize, Jews encountered massive problems in Greek views of religion, and that certainly did not mean integrating such familiar figures of popular religion as Zeus, Dionysus and Herakles. At this time, any learned Greek would have happily accepted that these figures were symbolic manifestations of the divine, handy totems of vulgar faith.

The basic problem lay in explaining the Creation, and identifying the Creator. Greek thinkers commonly presented views that to us seem like pure monotheism, imagining one transcendent deity over all things, an absolute One. Material things existed only as shadow images of ideal forms within that One. Not for a second, though, could philosophers tolerate the suggestion that this being might have created the material universe. Of its unchangeable and immovable nature, the highest One could have had nothing to do with the lower realms of change and motion. That process was the work of a lower being, which was still exalted, but which was only a Demiurge, a Craftsman. Think of the distinction between a celebrity architect designing a building and the mere building contractor getting his hands dirty.

The One, the Monad, was above all things; the Dyad, the Two, made the world. The Demiurge and the World-Soul, were divine, but not absolute, and that distinction was stark and unavoidable. Of its nature, a transcendent deity could not be a creator.

What was a Jewish intellectual to do? The Bible made it easy to identify the Jewish God as the One who reigned above all, and Jews had no hesitation in claiming that identification. But that same Bible also left no doubt that that same God was directly involved in creation, and interfered in that worldly process, directly and repeatedly.

From a Greek perspective, this was not merely absurd, but actively scandalous. Worse, this same deity was so far from being impassible and unchangeable that he actually felt emotions. This was the behavior of a primitive tribal god. It was rather like treating the Greek fables of Zeus or Hera as serious theology.

In popular history, many Christians imagine the early church trying to take their exalted view of the one God to ignorant polytheists, and trying to rid them of their silly superstitions. For the educated

Greek world, though, the conventional construction of the Jewish/Christian deity was so self-evidently primitive as to be embarrassing.

Jews could of course ignore Platonism and the other Greek philosophies, but if they did, they were abandoning any claim to a place in civilized society. Somehow, Jewish thinkers had to find ways of reconciling competing views of the divine. As I will discuss in my next post, scholars like Philo made heroic efforts to do this, postulating aspects of the deity that could serve as creator and as intermediary. The difficulty was in constructing such a figure, the Logos, without it acquiring divine qualities in its own right, and contaminating the monotheist vision.

The simpler solution was to accept the philosophical logic, and to admit freely that the transcendent God was not identical with the creator of the world. This is not true cosmic Dualism, which implies two equal divinities, but rather imagines one true God and a flawed imitator. Such a distinction was fundamental to Gnostic systems, which evolved many myths and stories to suggest how such an inferior deity might have arisen. In some cases, that two-God solution might have owed something to anti-Judaism, a deliberate rejection of the Old Testament deity. As the Jesus movement arose and became a separate faith, it was natural and logical for some believers to identify the two deities with the old and new dispensations, the gods of the Old and New Testament.

Complicating the situation was the very powerful drive in the Jewish world at exactly this time to imagine a very powerful Devil who (by some accounts) was in fact Lord of this World. If we identify that Satan with the Demiurge, then we really have reached full-scale Dualism.

But whatever other explanation we reach, we have to admit that it follows exactly the logic of the contemporary philosophical schools. The real wonder is not that Gnostic/Dualist views emerged, but rather than the mainstream church remained rooted in strict monotheism.

Some Jews, of course, would dispute that last assertion, and argue that Christianity itself succumbed to tritheism.

Philo's Answer

February 23, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

Greek philosophy made it all but impossible to reconcile the transcendence of God with a deity who created and ruled the world, with a deity like that portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. During the Second Temple era, that clash of visions was deeply troubling for Jews who wished to integrate into the Greek-dominated international culture.

Of the thinkers who tried to reconcile the systems, the best-known was Philo of Alexandria (25 BC – 50 AD), whose life overlapped with figures like Jesus and Paul. At first sight, Philo presents God in a way instantly recognizable to a contemporary Greek Platonist. He sees God as unchangeable, without name, without relation to any other being, and humanity cannot perceive him. Philo briskly rejected the Bible's anthropomorphism, its description of a deity with hands or eyes, with a face and

"back parts." Such words were all symbolic and metaphorical expressions used by Biblical authors, and only a very simple reader would treat them seriously.

Having excluded God from the world, though, Philo used a Stoic concept to bring him back (and he often ran into serious contradictions in the process). God was transcendent, but also thoroughly immanent, a constant creative force in all things. As a would-be Platonist, Philo explained creation as the work not of a God separated from the world, but of divine powers or attributes.

The most important of these powers that lay between perfect Form and imperfect matter was the Logos, Reason, God's "first-born," which is equivalent to Plato's creative Demiurge. The Logos concept also stemmed from Stoic thought, but it was current in other Greek schools. Again trying to integrate ideas from multiple traditions, Philo is quite confused about how his Logos relates to the divine Wisdom, and deciding which emanates from which.

Philo understands the Logos as "the image of God" as mentioned in the Septuagint translation of Gen. 1.27, almost as the shadow of God's perfection. He also identifies the Logos with the "Angel of the Lord," mentioned periodically throughout the Bible. Philo presents the Logos as at once the archetype of things, including the human mind, and the creator of all. In a much-quoted passage, he wrote that "the Logos of the living God is the bond of everything, holding all things together and binding all the parts, and prevents them from being dissolved and separated."

It is difficult to read Philo without invoking Christian theology and especially the Prologue to John's Gospel. We inevitably think of the word that was with God, and that was God. The actual influence of the one on the other remains open to debate, but it is not hard to find statements by Philo that seem to close to the Christian model. (That certainly does not extend to the extremely radical notion of the Logos taking flesh).

Philo demonstrates to an extreme degree the difficulties of merging Judaism and Platonism without creating another figure who is, in effect, another manifestation of God.

One important book on Jewish ideas relating to this theme is Alan Segal's much-discussed *Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* (Leiden: Brill, 1977). I won't engage with it here, except to note the existence of the debates.

Dating the Gnostics

February 27, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
4 Comments

In recent posts on Gnosticism, I have been tracing possible linkages with older Jewish movements. To understand some of these connections, it helps to have a chronology of Gnostic ideas and movements, something which is not as straightforward as we might think. And if we don't know *when* these ideas arose, then it is very difficult to say too much about how and why they originated.

Through rhetorical necessity, Gnostics had to present their religious systems as at least as authoritative as those of the mainstream churches, rather than as later innovations. They therefore claimed links with the apostles or their immediate successors, usually via some secret tradition. For similar reasons, early dates are also favored by modern writers who are sympathetic to the Gnostics, or anxious to advocate the historical value of alternative scriptures. Yet in fact, it is not easy to find much evidence of Gnosticism before about 100 AD. (I am summarizing a complex scholarly debate here!)

Our earliest systematic survey of Gnostic schools and teachings is Irenaeus's *Against the Heresies*, written around 175 AD (Book I, 22-31). He avowedly aims "to give an account of their source and root, in order that … you may understand the nature of the tree which has produced such fruits." Despite that assertion, he is rarely concerned about dating his subjects too precisely. At best, we hear that a given thinker taught under a particular Roman emperor, or came to Rome during the time of a certain bishop.

The earliest heretical thinker he mentions is Simon Magus, who emerges as the "source and root." Irenaeus identifies this man with the Simon mentioned in Acts 8, who claimed divine or messianic status. Simon's "successor" was Menander of Antioch, another Samaritan. Irenaeus then continues "*Arising among these men,* [my emphasis] Saturninus (who was of that Antioch which is near Daphne) and Basilides laid hold of some favorable opportunities, and promulgated different systems of doctrine— the one in Syria, the other at Alexandria."

In the following sections, Irenaeus proceeds to list (and denounce) thinkers like Carpocrates, Cerinthus, Cerdo, Marcion and Tatian. These accounts follow a rough chronological sequence, with most attention devoted to Valentinus, whose ideas were such a pressing danger in Irenaeus's own day.

In the fourth century, the great *Church History* of Eusebius built these various statements into a kind of anti-apostolic tradition. Beginning with Simon Magus, Gnosticism then evolved into the reality we know in later centuries.

Taken together, this would give floruits roughly as follows (and I stress *roughly*):

Simon Magus 35-55

Menander 70-100?

Cerinthus 100-110

Basilides 117-38

Carpocrates 120-140?

Cerdo 130-150

Valentinus 130-160

Marcion 140-160

Tatian 160-180

Marcus 160-180

Ptolemy 170-180

Heracleon 175

All these names are documented by various sources, so we can say they really existed, but our knowledge of their activities and beliefs is slight. The recurrent problem throughout involves chronology.

This is especially true of Simon Magus. He is described in the work of Justin Martyr (fl. 130-160), who makes him a wonder-worker with divine pretensions, whose ideas have little in common with anything we know about Gnosticism. A little later, Irenaeus fleshes out a much more Gnostic-sounding system, but there are problems here. Simonians certainly existed in the mid-second century, and may well have followed these ideas, but it is an open question just when the actual theories emerged, and whether they were retrojected into Simon's own time. On balance, the simpler account found in Acts is much earlier than that offered by Irenaeus, and has a far greater claim to credibility. (See the discussion by Edwin Yamauchi in his essay Pre-Christian Gnosticism, the New Testament and Nag Hammadi in Recent Debate). If the Simon described by Irenaeus really was such a key innovator, we must ask whether he was in fact the same as the character in Acts, or whether a proto-Gnostic thinker from a generation or so later has been merged with the earlier leader.

We are on rather firmer ground with Menander, and Justin had actually met some of his aged disciples. As with Simon, Menander had messianic ambitions, but we do hear some Gnostic-sounding language. Menander is reputed to have believed, for instance, that the world was in subjection to angels, from whom believers needed to be liberated. But dating his career is not easy. If he actually was the mentor for those second century thinkers, then he can scarcely have begun his career early enough to be "successor" to Simon Magus, in the sense of an immediate heir. In fact, Menander's activities would more likely date to the end of the first century, rather than the middle.

Drawing on the work of Justin, Irenaeus and others, Eusebius leaves no doubt that Gnostic teachers abounded in the early second century, especially after 120, and theological debates were raging on all fronts by 150 or so. Yet grounding these thinkers in the previous century is very difficult, as are attempts to blame the whole movement on Simon. Orthodox students of heresy happily claimed that teacher X was a follower of Simon Magus, but the chronology is hard to reconcile. Irenaeus, for instance, writes that "Cerdo was one who took his system from the followers of Simon, and came to live at Rome in the time of Hyginus [c.140]." He could well have learned from "Simonians," but Simon himself would have been a distant memory by that point.

It is tempting, then, to see Gnosticism as a product of the late first century, with no obvious precursors to Menander.

Assume for the sake of argument that Simon Magus is the Simon of Acts, and we date his activities roughly to 35-55. That means that for the lengthy period 55-100, later writers tell us of basically *two* Gnostic thinkers or teachers, namely Menander and Cerinthus – and that might even be putting Cerinthus a little too early. While the church may have wished to condemn the memory of its enemies, second century polemicists like Irenaeus devoted a great deal of attention to listing and denouncing anyone deemed a heretical leader. If in fact Gnostic heresiarchs had been numerous in, say, the 70s AD, it is very odd that they are not commemorated and condemned.

Although the New Testament does name and stigmatize some enemies, such as the Nicolaitans of Revelation, in few cases do we have any evidence to suggest that they taught anything resembling Gnosticism. The New Testament also tells us about Docetists, those who believed that Christ had not appeared as a human being rather than a spiritual entity, but again, that falls far short of full Gnosticism. The best example of an anti-Gnostic polemic is in 1 Timothy 6, where the writer urges staying far away from what is falsely called knowledge or gnosis (*pseudoymou gnoseus*), but that is almost certainly a second century text.

Obviously, arguing from silence is risky. The account I have given here is drawn from Irenaeus, who was widely traveled and well-connected, but who did not necessarily know everything that was in progress in every corner of the Christian world. He knew Asia Minor, Rome and Gaul at first hand, but might not have had such good connections elsewhere. As I have remarked, such early accounts of Gnosticism are curious in their geographical emphasis. They focus on Alexandria and Antioch, with much commuting to and from Rome. Few pay much attention to the quite intense activity that seems to have been in progress in Mesopotamia, where Jewish Christian, baptismal and Gnostic sects were highly active no later than the early second century. Perhaps Irenaeus was simply missing some key events and activists.

Alternatively, perhaps Irenaeus really was depicting historical reality, in which Gnosticism really was an innovation of the late first century, at least a generation or two after Jesus's time. And at least in its early days, it was strictly confined to Syria, even to Antioch itself.

The question then arises: why then, and why there?

Gnostics and Other Christians

March 1, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
9 Comments

It is very difficult to find much evidence of Gnosticism before the start of the second century, and the earlier traces seem strictly confined geographically. In admittedly simplistic form, I want to explore some of the implications of this. (For present purposes, I am taking a very broad definition of Gnosticism).

A Christian Heresy?

Early Christian writers argued that Gnosticism grew out of Christianity itself, a theme personified by the stress of Acts' Simon as the movement's source and root. It was thus a heresy, a fundamental misunderstanding of Christian truth. We can argue about which side in these debates actually had the greater share of truth, but the chronology does suggest that Gnostic schools usually saw themselves as part of the Christian spectrum.

The problem here is in defining Christianity at this very early point. Before about 120, it is exceedingly difficult to draw sharp lines between the Jesus movement and Judaism broadly defined, and examples of hostility and excommunication on one region did not necessarily apply elsewhere. Judaism also covered a broad spectrum, with a very wide range of attitudes to issues like the centrality of the Temple, and to the universality of the message. If they were not actually proto-Gnostics, then particular groups held many ideas that would later coalesce into Gnosticism. Some groups gave a special role to Jesus or John the Baptist, without necessarily fitting into what later historians would classify as Christianity.

We should rather say that Gnosticism emerges from these Jewish-Christian borderlands. It did *not* exist as a free-standing pre-Christian movement rooted in pagan or Hellenistic ideas.

The New Testament?

For perhaps 150 years, scholars have claimed to find traces of Gnosticism, and debates over Gnosticism, in the New Testament itself. Even with all the manuscript discoveries in recent times, those attempts seem quite tenuous. Where we do find links and parallels between Gnostic texts and the New Testament, the influence always stems from the latter. If Gnostic texts sound like, for instance, the canonical Christian gospels, there is a simple reason for that, namely that the Gnostics emerged at a time when the New Testament was already coming into existence, and the Gnostics know those documents.

It might be futile to wish this, but let me express the hope that this fact will condition any future discussions of newly found alleged lost gospels.

Out of Samaria?

The well-informed Irenaeus gives a doubly surprising picture of the geography of Gnostic origins, and one we would not imagine if we lacked his account. His first two heretical leaders, Simon and Menander, both derive from Samaria. Also, he places the movement's early rise in the Syrian city of Antioch, with an expansion into Egypt only around 110 or so.

The Samaritan link has inspired some scholarly discussion. Later sources tell us about individuals and movements said to have been active in Samaria, leading scholars to suggest that Gnosticism emerged from these sects, like the Dositheans, who supposedly influenced Simon. Most of these alleged movements, though, are very hard to date.

If we knew more about what Simon actually taught, we could say more about the possible relationship to distinctively Samaritan ideas of the time.

Antioch

Irenaeus suggests that Gnostic thought developed in Antioch in the late first century. That would have been a wonderfully appropriate setting, as the city was a junction for so many different influences, including Jews, Christians, and pagan Greeks.

As the former capital of the Seleucid kingdom, it was a major center of Hellenistic learning. Naturally, it had a Jewish population, in its *Kerateion* quarter, and it was, famously, the place where Jesus's disciples ere first called Christians. Confirming the city's close link to Palestine, after the first Jewish war of the 60s AD, Antioch became the stronghold (*claustrum*) over Judea, the base from which future risings could be prevented. (Antioch stands about 450 miles from Jerusalem).

In the 70s, after the Jewish War, the inhabitants petitioned the Emperor to expel its Jews. We also hear, though, that Antioch's Christians were slow to detach themselves from Judaism, provoking furious sermons by John Chrysostom as late as the fourth century.

Because of its role in the spice routes and the Silk Road, its connections even stretched deep into Asia. Around 13 AD, we even hear of an Indian monk visiting the city.

Already in the first century, Antioch had become one of the great centers of the Eastern Mediterranean, surpassed only by Alexandria. The history of the Church in the late Roman Empire revolved around the complex and conflicted relationship between those two cities.

In my next post, I will suggest why Gnostic ideas became so common and so influential in the first quarter or so of the second century. I'll suggest that this period was uniquely hospitable to such ideas, and that political factors contributed substantially to the movement's rise.

The Gnostics and the Interwar Crisis

March 6, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
10 Comments

The first thinkers we can find who probably did advocate complex Gnostic systems belong to the latter part of the first century AD, with a major efflorescence of activity in the first quarter of the second century – say, roughly between 70 and 130 AD. That chronology demands some explanation, but it does also offer some likely explanations of the forces driving change. Although Gnosticism was a diverse phenomenon, it was commonly rooted in anti-Judaism, in the belief that the Jewish God of the Old Testament was an imperfect and inferior deity. To understand this perspective, we have to pay due attention to political events, and especially the pervasive threat of war and racial violence in this era.

The obvious phenomenon that transformed every aspect of life, faith and thought was the Jewish War of 66-73 AD. This led to the Fall of the Temple, the end of the age-old sacrificial cult, and the devastation of Judean society. The number of dead probably ran into the hundreds of thousands, possibly more. That catastrophe had multiple consequences, including the destruction of the

traditional parties within the Jewish world. That included the Essenes and the followers of Enochic ideas, who are so conspicuously absent in the founding texts of Rabbinic Judaism from the late second century onwards. Presumably the conflicts did not annihilate each and every thinker of those movements, nor destroy all their texts, and their flight outside Palestine might well have spread their ideas, although in new forms.

The crisis of Judaism reverberated throughout the religious world. The collapse of central control allowed the upsurge of many previously minor groups, especially the nascent Jesus movement. Such splinter groups were deeply divided overt the familiar issues we have encountered before, including circumcision, dietary laws and ethnic particularism. Meanwhile, the war hugely exacerbated tensions between Jews who supported the nationalist cause and anyone who could be seen as a traitor or heretic. The early Christians fled east across the Jordan, as did the followers of the Jewish Baptist sects that looked to John rather than Jesus. Facing the imminent danger of killing at the hands of insurgents, Gentile residents of Palestine were also forced into exile. (It is easy to forget that the Jewish revolt was not just anti-Roman in character, but also involved extensive massacres of non-Jews within the land).

For many reasons, then, we see a widespread diaspora of alternative and sectarian forms of Judaism.

Within Christianity, these multiple crises caused a major rupture in the historical continuity from the earliest church, and vastly enhanced the Gentile and Hellenizing element within the Jesus movement. The same years also witnessed the composition of the gospels and the New Testament. Throughout those texts, we observe the movement's swiftly evolving attempts to comprehend Jesus's mission in light of the wider debates about the Jewish people and their land, the Temple and its sacrifices.

Nor did the disasters end in the 70s, and insurgencies continued into the 130s. Between 115 and 117, a series of very widespread insurgencies are collectively described as the Kitos War, but are also known as the Second Jewish-Roman War. This coincided with Rome's heavy military involvement in Parthia, and Jewish extremists probably hoped to take advantage of Roman forces being thinly spread within the empire itself.

As in the 60s, the revolts began with Jewish massacres of Gentiles, and ended with Roman slaughters of Jewish populations. Racial and political violence erupted in Cyprus, Mesopotamia and Cyrenaica (Libya), but by far the most traumatic events occurred in Egypt. A Jewish Revolt in Alexandria was followed by a brutal Roman reaction that uprooted an ancient and crucial community. That was vastly significant given Alexandria's role as a second Jewish capital, and a primary center of Christian thought and innovation. Again, contemporary writers suggested that the numbers of deaths ran into the hundreds of thousands.

The continuing crisis culminated with the messianic Bar-Kokhba revolt of 132-135. The Romans responded by the mass expulsion of Jews from the land that the conquerors now renamed Palestine. These disasters further sharpened divisions with Christians, who were now definitively excluded from synagogues, and often persecuted.

That 70-130 period, then, marks not only a crisis within Judaism itself, but among movements that had grown up within the Jewish framework. We might usefully describe this era, in fact, as an

interwar period, one that lived with the after-effects of one disaster while grimly awaiting the near-inevitable second phase. Anti-Judaism became more common, as did critical attitudes towards Jewish claims to exclusivism. Thinkers were struggling to build a Jewish-derived world-view without the necessity to accept the exclusive God of the Hebrew Bible, with his burdensome Law. Gnosticism is much more than anti-Judaism, but without that element, it is impossible to sustain.

Basilides, Carpocrates, and other Alexandrian Gnostics were working only a very few years after the suppression of the massive Jewish insurgency in that city. That strictly contemporary context gives a special force to the reported theories of Basilides, who described

those angels who occupy the lowest heaven, that, namely, which is visible to us, [who] formed all the things which are in the world, and made allotments among themselves of the earth and of those nations which are upon it. The chief of them is he who is thought to be the God of the Jews; and inasmuch as he desired to render the other nations subject to his own people, that is, the Jews, all the other princes resisted and opposed him. Wherefore all other nations were at enmity with his nation.

Nor is it coincidental that Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament follows within at most a decade of the Bar-Kokhba rebellion. As Stephen Wilson writes, "Gnostic anti-Judaism was unique, radical and deeply embedded in a significant portion of the early Christian movement" (*Related Strangers*, Fortress Press, 2004, p. 207).

Many of the religious themes that had emerged in the previous two centuries or so now became common currency in the Jewish and near-Jewish world. These included Dualism, images of Light and Darkness, a fascination with heavenly visions and revelations, interest in angels and mighty near-divine beings with great influence over the material world, messianic beliefs, and the exaltation of Wisdom to near-divine status. Also commonplace was the interest in the Creation and the origin of sin, a story told through the narrative of the pre-Flood patriarchs. We also find the tendency to frame those theories in Greek and Platonic modes.

We don't know exactly who developed the Gnostic synthesis, but these political and cultural events give us the essential background. In the aftermath of the Temple's Fall, and the subsequent generation of horrors and massacres, the emergence of something like Gnosticism was not surprising.

From a huge literature, one useful book on this era is Carl B. Smith, *No Longer Jews* (Hendrickson, 2004). Where I disagree with Dr. Smith is that I stress the endemic crisis of that whole era, rather than just the aftermath of the Kitos War. Miriam Pucci Ben Ze'ev offers a great collection of sources and resources in *Diaspora Judaism in Turmoil, 116/117 CE* (Peeters, 2005).

From Qumran to the Gnostics

March 8, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I have been describing the emergence of some key ideas of sectarian Judaism that continue into Christianity, and to some extent in Rabbinic Judaism. My argument is that the era in which those ideas appear, roughly the last two centuries BC, is one of the most creative and influential in Western religious thought.

Many of these continuities are obvious from Gnosticism. When we read the account of early Gnostic thinkers, as reported in the Christian writer Irenaeus c. 175 AD, we see so many themes that would have been instantly familiar to sectarian Jewish predecessors.

I am nervous about raising some of these arguments, as they have such a long and disreputable history in scholarship, with excessive claims about Jesus and John the Baptist being Essenes, and over-reaching Essene-Gnostic linkages. As far back as 1875, J. B. Lightfoot commented, sagely, that

It has become a common practice with a certain class of writers to call Essenism to their aid in accounting for any distinctive features of Christianity, which they are unable to explain in any other way. Wherever some external power is needed to solve a perplexity, here is the deus ex machina whose aid they most readily invoke. Constant repetition is sure to produce its effect, and probably not a few persons, who want either the leisure or the opportunity to investigate the subject for themselves, have a lurking suspicion that the Founder of Christianity may have been an Essene, or at all events that Christianity was largely indebted to Essenism for its doctrinal and ethical teaching.

I am not arguing that these Jewish predecessors were "proto-Gnostics" or even Jewish Gnostics, but rather they had created a vocabulary for so many later movements.

I offer a couple of examples here.

In the very influential 1 Enoch (late third century BC) we hear a great deal about the power of the angels, good and evil, with the fallen angels exercising power over the world. Angelic speculations were also central to the Dead Sea sect. The idea of an evil angel ruling the world was quite familiar.

In the second century AD, angels played a central role in all schools of Gnostic thought. According to Irenaeus, Simon Magus claimed to have been incarnated because the angels ruling the world exercised their power badly, with each struggling for supremacy. His successor Menander likewise instructed how to overcome the angels who had made the world.

In the early second century AD, Menander's own successor Saturninus of Antioch headed the Syrian school of Gnostic thought. According to Irenaeus, "The world, again, and all things therein, were made by a certain company of seven angels. Man, too, was the workmanship of angels, a shining image bursting forth below from the presence of the supreme power."

Of Saturninus, Irenaeus writes that "This heretic was the first to affirm that two kinds of men were formed by the angels, the one wicked, and the other good. And since the demons assist the most wicked, the Savior came for the destruction of evil men and of the demons, but for the salvation of the good." Like the emphasis on angels, this division into evil and good races would have been thoroughly familiar to the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Other parallels abound, for instance in the interest in astrology, and the common emphasis on predestination.

To put these parallels in context, the Essenes were a major force in Jewish society up to the Jewish War of the 60s AD, and the Fall of the Temple. The Qumran settlement fell around the same time, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were concealed, say around 70. Although Menander is difficult to date too precisely, he seems to have been working in Antioch in the last quarter of the century, no more than a decade or two after those events in the Judean desert. A short time after that, we see similar parallels in the Gnostic school emerging in Alexandria.

Both in Antioch and Alexandria, connections of some sort are highly likely.

Christmas and Epiphany, Birth and Baptism

December 26, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
13 Comments

You may have noticed an interesting theological debate currently under way among evangelicals. Critiquing the New Testament evidence for the Virgin Birth, Atlanta megachurch pastor Andy Stanley ventured the opinion that "Christianity doesn't hinge on the truth or even the stories around the birth of Jesus. It really hinges on the resurrection of Jesus." This view attracted a rebuke from Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, who declared that the Bible's claims about birth and incarnation were "the central truth claim of Christmas." The Bible, he says, "reveals Christ and it reveals Christ to have been conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of a virgin, born in Bethlehem as predicted by the prophets, and born in order to save sinners."

This is a significant debate, and I hope it continues, but when people do pursue the argument, they should remember the very extensive arguments about this topic in the early church. Let's not reinvent the wheel.

To take a specific issue, assume for the sake of argument that we reject the claims about Christ's birth and incarnation, but that we do preach his divinity or Sonship. So if he was not divine from his birth, at what moment did he actually become divine? When did he *become* the Son of God? Was it at, or even after, the Resurrection, or was it at some point during his lifetime? Actually, early thinkers generally tended to one particular answer to this question, and it's one that is quite relevant around this time of year.

In Western Christianity, Christmas falls on December 25, with the twelve days of that season culminating on January 6, Epiphany, which conventionally marks the visit of the Magi. The Christmas commemoration is obvious enough, but that January 6 date is interpreted differently in various parts of the world. Crucially, it is usually followed closely by the celebration of Christ's Baptism, a linkage I will explain shortly. But at one time, that January date was a lot more significant than December 25.

The story takes us back to the very earliest days of Christian history, when some drew a sharp distinction between the man Jesus and the Heavenly Christ. During the second century, there were multiple competing interpretations of Christianity. To oversimplify, Gnostic Christians taught that

Christ came from higher spiritual realms to redeem and enlighten the sparks of true divinity that survive within the pollutions of matter.

Egypt produced two of the earliest and most influential Gnostic teachers, Basilides and Valentinus. In the 120s, Basilides taught a complex system of Creation and unfolding degrees of reality. One supernatural figure, the Great Archon, wrongly believed himself to be the ultimate God, forgetting or ignoring the higher spiritual levels, and this is the divine figure we know from the Old Testament.

The true heavenly powers sent messengers to illumine and redeem the world, and also to teach the Archon his error. One of that exalted elite was the Aeon known as Christ, who descended on Jesus at his Baptism, and remained with him until the Crucifixion. The Christ of the Gospels thus taught absolute truth, but the material Jesus was only his vehicle.

Put another way, Jesus was not divine from birth, but rather divinity descended upon him at a specific moment, namely at his baptism in the Jordan. That fits reasonably with the interpretation we might get if we relied only on the gospels of Mark and John, where the baptism clearly marks some kind of explosive, transformative, moment in Jesus's career. Neither Mark nor John tells a birth story, and Mark shows no awareness of the birth occurring in Bethlehem (John probably does). Of course, that reading of the Baptism is not the only possible interpretation, nor necessarily the best, but it does have an internal consistency.

As Irenaeus wrote around 180,

The father without birth and without name, … sent his own first-begotten Nous [Mind] *(he it is who is called Christ) to bestow deliverance on them that believe in him, from the power of those who made the world. He appeared, then, on earth as a man, to the nations of these powers, and wrought miracles. ….*

Those, then, who know these things have been freed from the principalities who formed the world; so that it is not incumbent on us to confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man, and was thought to be crucified, and was called Jesus, and was sent by the father, that by this dispensation he might destroy the works of the makers of the world.

Although Basilides's formulation diverges so massively from any familiar Christian orthodoxy, he claimed to have received his teachings from Glaucias, an interpreter of St. Peter, and also claimed a special tradition from the apostle Matthias. In other words, he boasted an alternative apostolic succession.

So what does this have to do with Christmas or the Epiphany? Well, at the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria tells us that Basilides's followers had a special veneration for Jesus's Baptism, which they celebrated on or near January 6:

And the followers of Basilides hold the day of his baptism as a festival, spending the night before in readings. And they say that it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, the fifteenth day of the month Tubi; and some that it was the eleventh of the same month.

This is a fascinating text in lots of ways, including the early attestation of a Christian night service devoted to scripture reading (*prodianuktereuontes en anagnosesi*). And oh, how we would like to know what those readings actually were! The Gospel of John, perhaps?

The baptism marked the moment at which the spiritual being Christ descended on the man Jesus, to remain with him until the crucifixion. This was thus the date at which God became manifest – in Greek, the time of Epiphany. The mainstream church appropriated the festival easily enough, as the lines between orthodoxy and heresy were not too strictly defined in Egypt at this time. (Do note here that I am summarizing this briefly, and ignoring a great many scholarly caveats and complexities).

So is this all ancient history? Well, maybe not, as we see if we move from Egypt to the ancient and still flourishing church of Ethiopia. Still today, by far the greatest celebration of the year is Timkat, which marks the Baptism of Christ, and the Epiphany. The event draws pilgrims in their millions. But why? I suggest that the commemoration recalls that ancient time when Jesus's followers had a special veneration for the Baptism, which some believed marked the moment when Christ received his divinity.

Although most of the church's earliest records have been lost, we know that Ethiopian Christianity was flourishing by the fourth century, and that it has always had a very close relationship with the church of Egypt, and especially Alexandria. Not surprisingly, then, Ethiopia keeps alive very early Egyptian interests and obsessions, even some that might have been forgotten in Egypt itself. Whatever the church's official theology says, Timkat recalls a very old interpretation of Christ's baptism.

Epiphany, then, means "made manifest," but once upon a time that idea was not connected to the Magi, but to a quite separate event.

If you want to see Timkat at its most spectacular, then go and see the celebrations in Ethiopia's royal city of Gondar. Gondar, by the way, was built in the seventeenth century by a great Ethiopian emperor who bore the auspicious name of Basilides.

Three Gnostic Books

October 12, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I write a lot about alternative non-canonical scriptures, and the diverse Christianities they represent. One idea I challenge regularly goes something like this: for long centuries, Christians believed there were only the scriptures we know in the New testament. Then, suddenly, a series of amazing discoveries in the mid-late twentieth century (like the famous Nag Hammadi finds in Egypt) transformed our understanding. From the 1970s onward, we began to realize just how diverse and effervescent early Christianity was. These lost scriptures portray Jesus teaching mystical truths, and commonly to women disciples who are depicted as exalted holy figures. Mary Magdalene was an

exalted disciple! If only we had known all this earlier. How differently the churches might have developed!

Here's my main problem. Very little in the "lost scriptures" was ever really lost, and was pretty well known through texts preserved – accurately, and at great length – by various Church Fathers. More to the point, the great age of rediscovering original heretical and alternative texts occurred long, long, before the 1970s, or 1940s. If there was a turning point in the process of rediscovery, it occurred closer to 1890 than 1980. We have forgotten a century or so when all these insights were well known, and were in fact thoroughly absorbed into popular culture.

To illustrate this, I want to discuss three collections of documents that were found long before the twentieth century, and which had their impact long ago. Just how far back these events occurred might startle. All included selections of texts, mainly falling into the general category of "Gnostic," and all closely resemble the spectacular finds from Nag Hammadi. One specific text, the *Pistis Sophia*, basically told modern readers everything they knew about ancient Gnostic and alternative Christianity, and most of what we have found since can be classified as commentary. Here are the three:

The Bruce Codex

Traveler James Bruce bought this in Egypt in 1769, which really is impressively early. At that date, George Washington was still a busy planter not terribly interested in politics, and Edward Gibbon was still planning his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Although the Coptic language was not well known in the West at the time, the work was translated into Latin and German in the 1890s, and appeared shortly afterwards in English. The main find was the Gnostic *Book of Jeu*, through which Jesus reveals cosmic mysteries to male and female disciples.

The Askew Codex

It is hard to exaggerate the significance of this find for understandings of early Christianity. An English traveler probably obtained it in Egypt c.1770, and in 1785 it was bought by the British Museum. Its main content is *Pistis Sophia*, "Faith Wisdom", a work probably composed in the third or early fourth century, and I'll say much more about this below. (There's much debate about what the work was originally titled).

The Berlin Codex (Akhmim Codex)

Discovered in Egypt in 1896, this includes several pivotal Gnostic texts, including the *Gospel of Mary, Apocryphon of John,* and *Sophia of Jesus Christ*. When these works have been published in English in modern times, the usual assumption is that they are fresh and thrilling finds. Thrilling yes, fresh no. The *Gospel of Mary*, for instance, has been reasonably well known for many years.

Pistis Sophia

All these texts had their impact, but one in particular was transformative. Because it is so elaborately detailed (it runs to some three hundred pages in translation), *Pistis Sophia* offers a thorough

introduction to Gnosticism, including many of the aspects which attracted the most attention in the Nag Hammadi gospels.

Pistis Sophia claims to report the interactions of Jesus and the disciples after the Resurrection, but it differs radically from the canonical texts in its account of the spiritual powers ruling the universe, its belief in reincarnation, and its extensive use of magical formulae and invocations. The Jesus depicted here was a mystic teacher, whose main disciples include several female characters. Repeatedly, Jesus praises those women for their wisdom and their perceptive questions.

Most of the text takes the form of a dialogue on spiritual mysteries between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, whom he addresses as "thou spiritual and light-pure Mary," "inheritress of the light," and who is depicted as his primary follower and disciple. Jesus addresses Mary, "thou blessed one, whom I will perfect in All mysteries of those of the height; discourse in openness, thou, whose heart is raised to the kingdom of heaven more than all thy brethren." Of 46 questions addressed to Jesus by the apostles, Mary poses 39.

Other women are also prominent questioners, including Mary, Jesus' mother; Martha; and Salome. In one memorable scene, Peter is forced to interrupt on behalf of the excluded men: "My lord, let the women cease to question, in order that we may also question." Jesus is sympathetic, telling the women "Give your male brethren the opportunity, that they too may ask."

Much of the book concerns the stages by which Jesus liberates the supernatural (and female) figure of Sophia, heavenly Wisdom, from her bondage in error and the material world, and she is progressively restored to her previous divine status in the heavens. Characteristic of these gospels, the events described occur symbolically and psychologically, in sharp contrast to the orthodox Christian concern with historical realities.

M.G. Schwartze translated that work into Latin in 1851, claiming it as a Valentinian work, and it soon began its astonishing career in English. Charles William King discussed it in his hugely influential 1864 book *The Gnostics and Their Remains*, citing it as "sole survivor of the once numerous family of Gnostic Gospels; but fortunately the most important of them all for our purpose, and the very one for whose escape (in its Coptic disguise) the archaeologist ought to feel most grateful to the ignorance of the destroyers." The breakthrough translation by the Theosophist G. R. S. Mead appeared in 1890-1891, in the magazine *Lucifer*, and his free standing book version followed in 1896. Mead was consciously publicizing such texts as hidden gospels: he described *Pistis Sophia* as a Gnostic gospel, and the text was commonly recognized as "a sort of Gospel coming from some early Gnostic sect."

Once translated and made easily available in popular editions, the *Pistis Sophia* had a general cultural impact quite comparable to the later Gnostic discoveries as they were popularized from the 1970s onward. In 1900, King's pioneering *Remains* was superseded by G. R. S. Mead's mammoth and much-reprinted *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten…. A contribution to the study of Christian origins based on the most recently recovered materials.* The subtitle indicates the already common idea that the heretical texts might shed much light on the earliest days of the faith. The *Fragments* included extensive translations from the Gnostic writings themselves, including the *Pistis Sophia*, the *Books of the Savior* and the *Gospel of Mary*. Mead went on to publish the eleven volume *Echoes from the Gnosis* (1906-1908), a comprehensive edition of every Gnostic writing then known – which made for a very large work.

By the 1920s, the British SPCK, the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge, published cheap translations of *Pistis Sophia*, together with other recent discoveries. A translation of the *Pistis Sophia* also appeared from the mainstream house of Macmillan.

If you read *Pistis Sophia* in one of those many easily available versions, you knew a massive amount about alternative early Christianity, and Gnosticism. Above all, you knew about the critical role of those women figures in that mythology. If you were a feminist, you found there ample ammunition for your cause, and for reconstructing the church on woman-friendly lines. Then as now, you might also view the early Christians as daring progressive feminists and egalitarians, whose authentic doctrines were tragically suppressed. In this view, true Christianity taught the Divine Feminine.

Already around 1900, you might believe that (following Frances Swiney) the Gnostics found their chief supporters among the emancipated women of the Roman Empire, "early pioneers of the liberation movement of their sex, dialectical daughters questioning the truth and authority of received opinions, earnest intellectual women." She believed – rightly – that the *Pistis Sophia* gave a pretty comprehensive view of that Gnostic faith, or at least one of its most significant manifestations.

And all that before 1910. If you were an ordinary literate person in that era, and you were interested in religion – by no means a credentialed expert – if you didn't know about "Other Christianities," you must have been living in a cave (and not the well-furnished sort of cave that has scrolls in jars). With all this in mind, we should see the contemporary rediscovery of early Christianity as déjà vu all over again.

You can find the full text of *Pistis Sophia* in many places on the Internet.

Christmas and Epiphany, Birth and Baptism

December 24, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

What follows is adapted from a blogpost of mine at this site some years back.

The earliest Christian communities varied substantially in their ideas about the birth of Christ. Here, I want to explore the implications of that fact for our understandings of the Christmas celebration.

Let me begin with a familiar enough observation. Not until half a century after the Crucifixion can we find any recorded evidence of stories concerning Jesus's birth, nor any reference to Bethlehem in that context. I stress *recorded*. The fact they were not written down or preserved does not mean they did not exist, but the fact is suggestive. Neither Mark nor John includes a birth story, and Mark shows no awareness of the birth occurring in Bethlehem (John does, obliquely – see 7.42). Paul says nothing to imply any special stories concerning the birth. Nor do any of the Epistles. Nor, as far as we can tell, did the hypothetical early gospel source Q. Our traditional Christmas stories come from Matthew and Luke, composed towards the end of the first century. And of course, no Biblical

source places the birth in late December, a time when no sane shepherd would have ventured into the Galilean hills, unless he was on the run.

Arguing from silence can be risky, but the absence of birth stories suggests that many early communities did not attach any special weight to that event. That seems odd if they understood the birth as the moment of Incarnation.

For the sake of argument, let's assume that we set aside the stories about Christ's birth, but that we do preach his divinity or Sonship, for which those early believers were prepared to lay down their lives. So if Jesus was not divine from his birth, at what moment did he actually become divine? When did he *become* the Son of God? Was it at, or even after, the Resurrection, or was it at some point during his lifetime? Actually, many early believers tended to one particular answer to this question, and they look to Baptism rather than Birth, to Epiphany rather than Christmas. This is reflected in how some communities celebrated the Incarnation.

In Western Christianity, Christmas falls on December 25, with the twelve days of that season culminating on January 6, Epiphany, which conventionally marks the visit of the Magi. The Christmas commemoration is obvious enough, but that January 6 date is interpreted differently in various parts of the world. Crucially, it is usually followed closely by the celebration of Christ's Baptism, a linkage I will explain shortly. But at one time, that January date was a lot more significant than December 25.

The story takes us back to the very earliest days of Christian history, when some drew a sharp distinction between the man Jesus and the Heavenly Christ. During the second century, there were multiple competing interpretations of Christianity. To oversimplify, Gnostic Christians taught that Christ came from higher spiritual realms to redeem and enlighten the sparks of true divinity that survive within the pollutions of matter.

Egypt produced two of the earliest and most influential Gnostic teachers, Basilides and Valentinus. In the 120s, Basilides taught a complex system of Creation and unfolding degrees of reality. One supernatural figure, the Great Archon, wrongly believed himself to be the ultimate God, forgetting or ignoring the higher spiritual levels, and this is the divine figure we know from the Old Testament.

The true heavenly powers sent messengers to illumine and redeem the world, and also to teach the Archon his error. One of that exalted elite was the Aeon known as Christ, who descended on Jesus at his Baptism, and remained with him until the Crucifixion. The Christ of the Gospels thus taught absolute truth, but the material Jesus was only his vehicle.

Put another way, Jesus was not divine from birth, but rather divinity descended upon him at a specific moment, namely at his baptism in the Jordan. That fits reasonably with the interpretation we might get if we relied only on the gospels of Mark and John, where the baptism clearly marks some kind of explosive, transformative, moment in Jesus's career. Of course, that reading of the Baptism is not the only possible interpretation, nor necessarily the best, but it does have an internal consistency.

Around 180, the orthodox Irenaeus summarized those views, which he detested:

The father without birth and without name, … sent his own first-begotten Nous [Mind] *(he it is who is called Christ) to bestow deliverance on them that believe in him, from the power of those who made the world. He appeared, then, on earth as a man, to the nations of these powers, and wrought miracles. ….*

Those, then, who know these things have been freed from the principalities who formed the world; so that it is not incumbent on us to confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man, and was thought to be crucified, and was called Jesus, and was sent by the father, that by this dispensation he might destroy the works of the makers of the world.

Although Basilides's formulation diverges so massively from any familiar Christian orthodoxy, he claimed to have received his teachings from Glaucias, an interpreter of St. Peter, and also claimed a special tradition from the apostle Matthias. In other words, he boasted an alternative apostolic succession.

In the late second century, orthodox Fathers denounced this view as the heresy of Adoptionism.

So what does this have to do with Christmas or the Epiphany? Well, at the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria tells us that Basilides's followers had a special veneration for Jesus's Baptism, which they celebrated on or near January 6:

And the followers of Basilides hold the day of his baptism as a festival, spending the night before in readings. And they say that it was the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, the fifteenth day of the month Tubi; and some that it was the eleventh of the same month.

This is a fascinating text in lots of ways, including the early attestation of a Christian night service devoted to scripture reading (*prodianuktereuontes en anagnosesi*). And oh, how we would like to know what those readings actually were! The Gospel of John, perhaps?

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So is this all ancient history? Well, maybe not, as we see if we move from Egypt to the ancient and still flourishing church of Ethiopia. Still today, by far the greatest celebration of the year is Timkat, which marks the Baptism of Christ, and the Epiphany. The event draws pilgrims in their millions. But why? I suggest that the commemoration recalls that ancient time when Jesus's followers had a special veneration for the Baptism, which some believed marked the moment when Christ received his divinity.

Although most of the church's earliest records have been lost, we know that Ethiopian Christianity was flourishing by the fourth century, and that it has always had a very close relationship with the church of Egypt, and especially Alexandria. Not surprisingly, Ethiopia keeps alive very early Egyptian interests and obsessions, even some that might have been forgotten in Egypt itself.

Whatever the church's official theology says, Timkat recalls a very old interpretation of Christ's baptism.

Epiphany, then, means "made manifest," but once upon a time that idea was not connected to the Magi, but to a quite separate event.

If you want to see Timkat at its most spectacular, then go and see the celebrations in Ethiopia's royal city of Gondar. Gondar, by the way, was built in the seventeenth century by a great Ethiopian emperor who bore the auspicious name of Basilides.

EGYPT'S FAITH

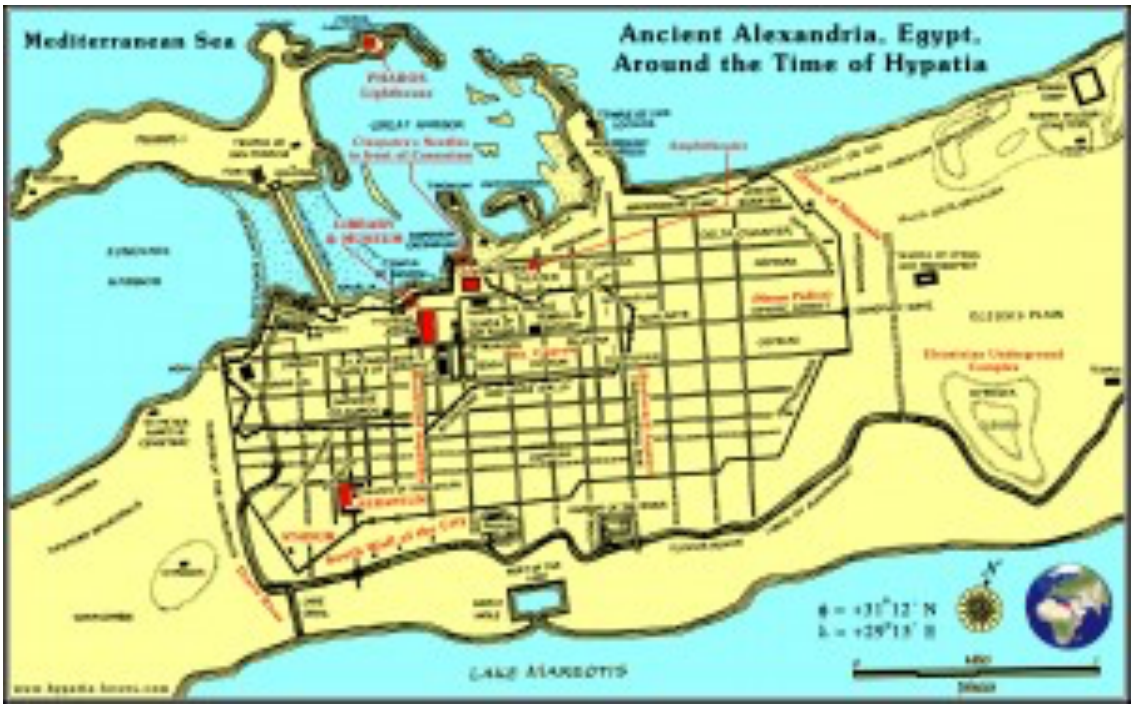
July 26, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

It's grim to watch recent developments in Egypt, as the nation's Coptic Christians face growing threats.

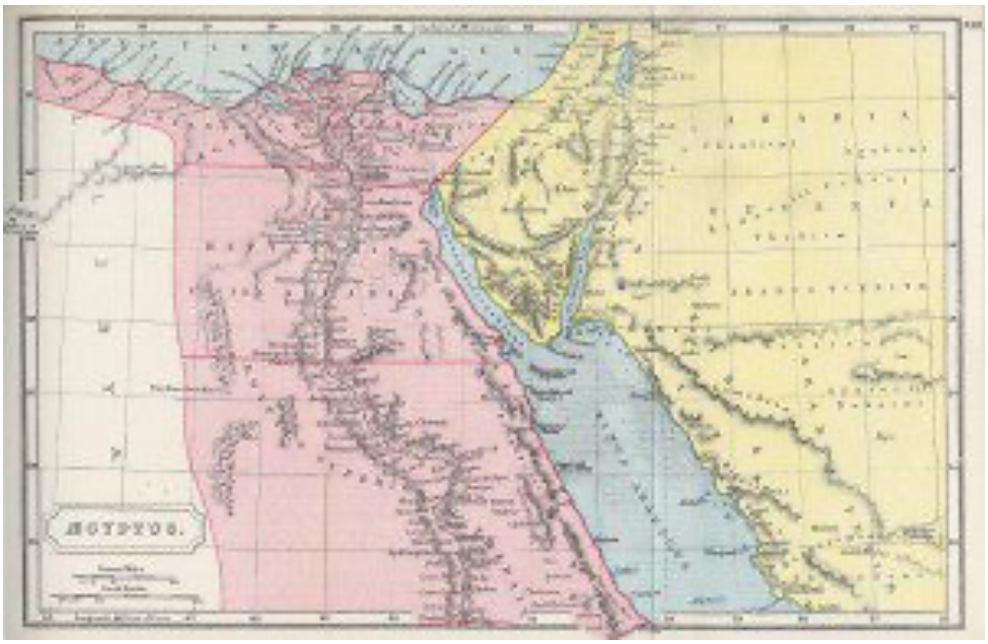
Not that Egypt's long-suffering Muslim majority does not deserve full sympathy and respect, but the Copts stand in a very special place in the Christian story. So central are they, in fact, that I sometimes fantasize about writing a History of Christianity from the Egyptian perspective. Without Egypt, we would miss so many critical turning points in the making of the Christian faith. My next few posts will cover some of those issues and moments.

Before Christianity, Egypt held a special place in Jewish hearts. As early as the fifth century BC, Jewish settlers at Elephantine were operating a full-scale Temple, of a kind not theoretically supposed to exist outside Jerusalem.

Alexandria was the capital of the Jewish Diaspora, the world's second largest Jewish city, and almost certainly the center where the Septuagint was translated. By the first century AD, the city had five quarters, two of which were mainly Jewish. During Jesus's lifetime, Philo was the towering giant of that Hellenistic world, the genius who integrated Greek philosophy into the Jewish world-view. Among other contributions, his concept of the Logos would have a staggering philosophical afterlife.



This Jewish context made it inevitable that Christianity would make very early inroads into Egypt: only three hundred miles separate Jerusalem and Alexandria. Followers of Jesus presumably arrived here very shortly after his death, if not before. For reasons I will discuss later, we know little of the very early Christian presence, but that soon became very marked, and influential.



We are often uncertain where exactly ancient books and manuscripts might have been produced, and the fact that a writer reflects particular ideas does not mean where he or she was actually located. Having said that, ideas and language that seem to derive from Hellenistic Egypt are strongly

marked in some early Christian writings, including the Gospel of John, and in texts like the Epistle of Barnabas.

Also, the fact that Egypt had so many libraries and monasteries in a very dry climate means that the country has been a treasure trove of ancient document finds, from Oxyrhynchus a century ago to the Nag Hammadi library and the Bodmer Papyri in mid-century. St. Catherine's Monastery in Sinai was for many centuries the home of the glorious Codex Sinaiticus.

If we can't be sure just where these most of these various texts were written, we can certainly say that they circulated in Egypt, and contributed to the making of an extremely rich and diverse Christian culture there between, say, 100 and 500.

If we just look at the period 200-500, the volume of achievements becomes simply breathtaking. The third century was the era of Origen, certainly a candidate for the title of the most brilliant and daring scholar in Christian history. By the end of that century, Egypt became the home of the monastic movement, which would transform the faith worldwide, and lay the foundation for the making of medieval European civilization.

In the fourth and fifth century, the patriarchs – popes – of Alexandria were pivotal to the church debates and councils that established Christian orthodoxy for centuries to come. This was the era of Athanasius and Cyril, of the Councils of Nicea, Ephesus and Chalcedon. Underlying the theological debates was a more basic question, of Alexandria's aggressive and daring claims of to a kind of supremacy over the wider Christian world.

Finally, Egyptian Christians of this era contributed powerfully to creating the Christian visual imagination, as they developed the tradition of icon painting.

Memories of older depictions of the goddess Isis and her son Horus were transformed into the wildly popular image of the Virgin Mary and her divine Son, soon to be seen wherever Christians prayed.

In the sixth century, Severus of Antioch complained that "Alexandrians think the sun rises just for them." But why shouldn't they? Egyptians had already done so much to establish Christian culture, art and intellectual life. They made the faith we know.

BASILIDES AND THE BAPTISM

July 29, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I was discussing the theory that the oldest level of Egypt's Christianity was very different from anything we would recognize as orthodoxy, and that the most prominent leaders were what we would call Gnostic. That theory can be advanced in extreme terms, so that basically there is no early orthodoxy. Even if we do not go that far, we certainly find plenty of Gnostic teachers and groups in early Egypt, and they are influential.

That Gnostic term is of course controversial today, and scholars often put "Gnosticism" in quotes, as it suggests that these ideas were somehow radically distinct from Christianity, almost a different religion. However foreign or bizarre the ideas might seem to a modern Christian audience, they shared the same roots, growing out of a common inheritance – Christian, but especially Jewish.

Generally, Gnostics taught a process of Creation, emanating from absolute perfection, and descending to lower levels of reality. These systems and the names used varied enormously between individual teachers. The common theme though was that the material world we know is the creation of an inferior spiritual being, who is also the God described in the Old Testament. Christ came from higher spiritual realms to redeem and enlighten the sparks of true divinity that survive within the pollutions of matter.

In the first half of the second century, Egypt produced several of the earliest and most influential Gnostic teachers, Basilides, Valentinus and Carpocrates. I'll focus here on Basilides.

In the 120s, Basilides taught a complex system of Creation and unfolding degrees of reality. One supernatural figure, the Great Archon, wrongly believed himself to be the ultimate God, forgetting or ignoring the higher spiritual levels, and this is the divine figure we know from the Old Testament. The world we know is a deeply flawed creation, combining the bungling errors of the Archon with some sparks of divinity from the spiritual heights.

These superior beings sent messengers to illumine and redeem the world, and also to teach the Archon his error. One of that exalted elite was the Aeon known as Christ, who descended on Jesus at his Baptism, and remained with him until the Crucifixion. The Christ of the Gospels thus taught absolute truth, but the material Jesus was only his vehicle.

As Irenaeus wrote around 180, describing the views of his heretical opponents:

Those angels who occupy the lowest heaven, that, namely, which is visible to us, formed all the things which are in the world, and made allotments among themselves of the earth and of those nations which are upon it. The chief of them is he who is thought to be the God of the Jews; and inasmuch as he desired to render the other nations subject to his own people, that is, the Jews, all the other princes resisted and opposed him. Wherefore all other nations were at enmity with his nation. But the father without birth and without name, perceiving that they would be destroyed, sent his own first-begotten Nous (he it is who is called Christ) to bestow deliverance on them that believe in him, from the power of those who made the world.

He appeared, then, on earth as a man, to the nations of these powers, and wrought miracles. Wherefore he did not himself suffer death, but Simon, a certain man of Cyrene, being compelled, bore the cross in his stead; so that this latter being transfigured by him, that he might be thought to be Jesus, was crucified, through ignorance and error, while Jesus himself received the form of Simon, and, standing by, laughed at them. For since he was an incorporeal power, and the Nous (mind) of the unborn father, he transfigured himself as he pleased, and thus ascended to him who had sent him, deriding them, inasmuch as he could not be laid hold of, and was invisible to all.

Incidentally, that view of the crucifixion as illusion is one that would be long popular in the eastern Christian world, and it found its way into the Qur'an.

Here is Irenaeus again:

Those, then, who know these things have been freed from the principalities who formed the world; so that it is not incumbent on us to confess him who was crucified, but him who came in the form of a man, and was thought to be crucified, and was called Jesus, and was sent by the father, that by this dispensation he might destroy the works of the makers of the world. If any one, therefore, he declares, confesses the crucified, that man is still a slave, and under the power of those who formed our bodies; but he who denies him has been freed from these beings, and is acquainted with the dispensation of the unborn father.

According to the fourth century historian Epiphanius, Basilides also took his message outside Alexandria proper, into the Delta, in "the districts of Prosopitis and Athribis; not but that he also visited the district or nome of Sais and Alexandria and Alexandreiopolis." Basilides still had followers in the fourth century, although his movement was eclipsed by later Gnostic teachers.

Although Basilides's religion diverges so massively from any Christian orthodoxy, he certainly located himself in Christian tradition. He claimed to have received his teachings from Glaucias, an interpreter of St. Peter, and also claimed a special tradition from the apostle Matthias. In other words, Basilides was boasting an alternative apostolic succession.

Also, he was one of the very first to write commentaries on the New Testament, in his now vanished *Exegetica* (although recent scholars like James Kelhoffer would play down this contribution).

Basilides also left his mark on other movements that continue today. I adapt the following from a piece I wrote for CHRISTIAN CENTURY:

In the ancient Christianity of Ethiopia, by far the greatest celebration of the year is Timkat, which marks the Baptism of Christ, and the Epiphany. The event draws pilgrims in their millions. But why? I suggest that the commemoration recalls a time when Jesus's followers had a special veneration for the Baptism, which some believed marked the moment when Christ received his divinity.

In the second century, we know that Basilides's followers had a special veneration for Jesus's Baptism, which they celebrated on January 6. This was the date at which God became manifest – in Greek, the time of Epiphany. The mainstream church appropriated the festival easily enough, as the lines between orthodoxy and heresy were not too strictly defined in Egypt at this time.

In light of those origins, let us look again at the Ethiopian Timkat. Although most of the church's earliest records have been lost, we know that Ethiopian Christianity was flourishing by the fourth century, and that it has always had a very close relationship with the church of Egypt, and especially Alexandria. Not surprisingly, then, Ethiopia keeps alive very early Egyptian interests and obsessions, even some that might have been forgotten in Egypt itself. Whatever the church's official theology says, Timkat recalls a very old and somewhat heretical interpretation of Christ's baptism and its significance.

If you want to see Timkat at its most spectacular, then go and see the celebrations in Ethiopia's great royal city of Gondar.

Gondar, by the way, was built in the seventeenth century by a great Ethiopian emperor who bore the auspicious name of Basilides.

THE EGYPTIAN MYSTERY

July 28, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I recently described the extraordinary position that Egypt held in early Christian history, when the country became the source of many ideas and institutions that would spread throughout the wider Christian world. Given that importance, it is really surprising that we know so very little about the early history of Egyptian Christianity, an ignorance that really demands explanation.

As I wrote, its very strong Jewish presence means that Egypt must have been a very early center of Christian expansion. Late in the second century we start to hear of Alexandria as the base for many major religious and cultural figures. Pantaenus, for instance, headed Alexandria's great catechetical school, while Clement of Alexandria was his celebrated pupil. Origen's great era was soon to come.

But what about the earlier years, between say 30 and 180? Our only reliable source is Eusebius, who knows next to nothing beyond a tradition that Mark was the first bishop. He cites the names of some successors, but they remain that, only names. In the tenth century, historians tried to collect the biographies of the various patriarchs, and the material on Late Antiquity is dazzlingly rich. Before 180, though, there is nothing worthwhile beyond what we find in Eusebius. Of the second century bishop Cerdon, all we read is that "He was chaste, humble and innocent throughout his life," which can charitably be described as filler.

Partly, this may be because the early Alexandrian patriarchate was collective, so that the bishop would have worked closely with a kind of committee of priests, but even so it is odd that no individual really makes an impression. (Later Presbyterians loved to cite that Alexandrian precedent!)

Also, prior to the early third century, we have no accounts of martyrdoms.

So where are the early Christians? Who exactly is copying and reading all the second century gospel texts that turn up from time to time in the Egyptian desert? We have a couple of names, but Apollos in Acts is the only celebrity. Why is Alexandria in 120 or 160 not producing its local counterparts of Ignatius, Polycarp and Irenaeus? Alexandrians were not famous for being humble or self-effacing.

A couple of solutions come to hand. One is that the earliest Christians were firmly located within the Jewish community, which suffered appallingly during the wars and massacres of the late 60s, and again in Trajan's time, 115-117. Perhaps the Christian minority took a particularly long time to recover momentum after this debacle, while many early records and documents had been destroyed.

One scholar, though, offered an alternative solution to this mystery. In 1934, Walter Bauer published the still-provocative *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, challenging the familiar view that "Great Church" orthodoxy had always been the Christian mainstream, while "heresy" bubbled up sporadically at its fringes. No, said Bauer, originally Christianity was extremely diverse, and radically different variants dominated different regions. In some areas, what we call Catholic

orthodoxy was itself a fringe cult. In Edessa, Marcionism was so strong that the orthodox were a tiny sect labeled the Palutians.

Only gradually did orthodoxy spread throughout the Christian world, suppressing and displacing older variants. Retroactively, the Catholic/Orthodox rewrote history to make it look as if they themselves had always enjoyed mainstream status, and writing their old enemies out of the picture.

Bauer's thesis has been much criticized through the years, and few scholars today would accept his work without qualifications. He did overclaim, and he bent every available piece of evidence to fit his argument. He also omitted texts that failed to fit his theory. Even so, his basic idea still intrigues, and nowhere more so than in Egypt.

Bauer's view, simply, was that Egyptian Christianity in the first and second centuries was a flourishing enterprise, but it was overwhelmingly Gnostic in character. That is going too far. But the faith in Egypt looked very different from later orthodoxy, with much more of a slant to Jewish Christianity and extreme asceticism as well as to Gnosticism.

If so-called "mainstream" orthodox Christianity existed, it was strictly marginal. Even Apollos, a heroic figure in the New Testament, originally followed a version of faith that knew only the baptism of John. If we believe the Western Gospel text tradition, then he had learned his doctrine "in his own country," namely Egypt.

What little we know about the so-called Gospel of the Egyptians shows that it was strongly anti-material and anti-sexual, preaching an asceticism that condemned sex and reproduction. At the end of the second century, Clement of Alexandria quoted it, "the Savior himself said: 'I came to destroy the works of the female'. By female he means lust: by works, birth and decay." Around 150, Justin Martyr reports an Alexandrian Christian who sought official permission to castrate himself. A half-century later, Origen did just that.

Matters eventually changed only with daring figures like Clement himself, who taught a "Christian gnosis."

If Bauer was right, then Egypt did indeed have its famous Christian leaders in the second century, but they preached doctrines that would ultimately be relegated to the far fringes of faith. If Basilides and Valentinus really were the most significant leaders of what Egypt knew as Christianity, then the early Christian world was a very diverse place indeed.

By the way, there is an excellent account of these movements, and the debates surrounding them, in Birger Pearson's Gnosticism, Judaism and Egyptian Christianity. Also useful is C. Wilfred Griggs, Early Egyptian Christianity.

HERACLEON

August 4, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

Here's a trivia question. Who wrote the first ever commentary on a piece of Christian scripture? The answer is quite surprising, and it says a lot about some of the diverse subcultures that existed within different parts of the Christian world

Elaine Pagels earned fame through her 1979 book *The Gnostic Gospels*. Far less well known is her 1973 work *The Johannine Gospel in Gnostic Exegesis: Heracleon's Commentary on John*, a technical-sounding study that actually deals with a very important topic in early Christian history. Like her later work, it points to the strikingly narrow boundaries that separated orthodoxy and heresy, especially in the intellectual hothouse of Egypt. As so often, daring innovations in this region soon spread throughout the Christian world.

During the first and second centuries, Egypt was a very lively center of Christian activity, but most was far-removed from conventional views of Catholic orthodoxy. The prevailing thinkers were Gnostics like Basilides and Valentinus. Whatever their differences with the emerging Great Church, they shared a passion for the gospels, especially that of John. It is an open question whether John in its present form originated in Egypt. The oldest extant gospel fragment, Rylands Library Papyrus P52, is a portion of John written around 125, during the lifetime of both Basilides and Valentinus. (By the way, on some of the issues involved in dating these materials, see Roger Bagnall's important Early Christian Books in Egypt).

So enthusiastic were Egypt's Gnostics about John that some Christians rejected both John's Gospel and Revelation, crediting their writing to the infiltration of some sinister Gnostic. If heretics loved these books so much, something had to be wrong with them.

Valentinus's pupils carried on his love affair with the Fourth Gospel. Around 175, one disciple, Heracleon, wrote a commentary on John and possibly other gospels, which represent the first certain examples of commentaries on New Testament books. I repeat: Heracleon's writing on John is the *first* surviving commentary on any portion of Christian scripture, and possibly the first ever written. (Basilides may or may not have attempted something earlier, also in Egypt, but that is controversial).

Already by the 170s, then, John was not only well known as a gospel, but the text enjoyed immense prestige, in Egypt at least.

Despite his heretical status, Heracleon had orthodox readers, particularly in what was almost certainly his homeland of Egypt. Clement of Alexandria cited him (although not this commentary). Around 230, moreover, Origen quoted Heracleon's work extensively, and (sometimes) approvingly. This Egyptian attitude is in sharp contrast to that of Irenaeus in Gaul, who was baffled and horrified to see the heretics misappropriating the sacred text, to which he believed they had no legitimate claim.

Through Origen, portions of Heracleon's commentary survive, and give some idea of his approach. The most substantial section concerns the Samaritan Woman who talks with Jesus at the well. Heracleon discussed the text in fine detail, and tries to draw complex meanings from every nuance of the words. Naturally, his readings reflect his doctrine that the material world is the creation of a flawed inferior God, the Demiurge or Craftsman. The Samaritan Woman, meanwhile, represents the "pneumatic" (spiritual) Christian.

One text is: "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.'" Heracleon expounds:

The mountain represents the Devil, or his world, since the Devil was one part of the whole of matter, but the world is the total mountain of evil, a deserted dwelling place of beasts, to which all who lived before the law and all Gentiles render worship. But Jerusalem represents the creation or the Creator whom the Jews worship . . . The mountain is the creation that the Gentiles worship, but Jerusalem is the creator whom the Jews serve. You then who are spiritual should worship neither the creation nor the Craftsman, but the Father of Truth. And [Jesus] accepts her as one of the already faithful, and to be counted with those who worship in truth.

On the text "So the woman left her water jar, and went away into the city, and said to the people, 'Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?'" Heracleon comments: *The water jar that is capable of receiving life is the disposition and the thought of the power that is from the Savior. She left it with him, that is, she had with the Savior such a vessel in which she had come to fetch living water.*

Reading Heracleon, we immediately find ourselves in a world of allegorical, mystical, Biblical interpretation that is precisely that of Origen and the so-called Alexandrian school. Not only was the mainstream Christian happy to quote the heretic, but he shared his approach to unpacking the Biblical text.

When we trace the potent tradition of Alexandrian Christianity and Christian scholarship, then, we have to acknowledge its heterodox roots.

VALENTINUS THE EGYPTIAN

August 2, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Early Egyptian Christianity had a strong non-orthodox strand, if that "Gnostic" current did not actually dominate. I have already discussed the influence of Basilides, but Egypt produced an even more celebrated teacher in Valentinus. What makes him so interesting for a modern Christian audience is that he shows just how close the Gnostics were to a mainstream faith, while being so radically distant in fundamental assumptions. It's like seeing a familiar picture through a distorting mirror.

Valentinus was an Egyptian who came to Rome in the mid-130s, and taught there through about160. Even his deadliest enemies admired his talents. Tertullian called him "an able man both in genius and eloquence." Reputedly, he was even a serious candidate for the Roman bishopric, but was defeated.

Like Basilides, he taught a Creation myth of descending orders of perfection. Below the absolute deity, Bythos (Depth) there was a sequence of Aeons, each with its pair, forming a syzygy (Depth/Silence, Mind/Truth, Logos/Life, Man/Church). Fifteen syzygies made thirty Aeons, and together they comprise the Fullness, *Pleroma*, the spiritual universe.

Incidentally, that is useful to know when reading present or future claims about strange gospel finds suggesting that Jesus had a sexual relationship with some woman, usually Mary Magdalene. Of course, a Valentinian or Gnostic would know that Jesus must have a partner to form a male-female syzygy, and the relationship is easily expressed in sexual analogies. Only a gullible modern would claim that such a symbolic passage must reflect a historical reality.

The blunder of one of the Aeons, Sophia (Wisdom) led to the creation of the inferior material world, with its ignorant deity, the God of this world. Christ, an Aeon, came to liberate human beings, who represent a blend of spiritual substance trapped in dark matter. As for Basilides, this Christ was a cosmic power, who descended on Jesus at his baptism, and left near his bodily death, perhaps during his interrogation by Pilate.

In modern times, the rediscovery of the Nag Hammadi library has vastly expanded our knowledge of the Valentinians, as eight of the works represented are considered to belong to that movement. In particular, the Gospel of Truth allows us to read Valentinus's interpretation of the role of Christ, perhaps in the teacher's own words:

The gospel of truth is joy to those who have received from the Father of truth the gift of knowing him by the power of the Logos, who has come from the Pleroma and who is in the thought and the mind of the Father; he it is who is called "the Savior," since that is the name of the work which he must do for the redemption of those who have not known the Father….

That is the gospel of him whom they seek, which he has revealed to the perfect through the mercies of the Father as the hidden mystery, Jesus the Christ. Through him he enlightened those who were in darkness because of forgetfulness. He enlightened them and gave them a path. And that path is the truth that he taught them. For this reason error was angry with him, so it persecuted him. It was distressed by him, so it made him powerless. He was nailed to a cross. He became a fruit of the knowledge of the Father.

(I am using Robert Grant's translation).

It's hard for non-specialists to pay much attention to the obsessive account of the Pleroma, but the Gospel of Truth is often much more comprehensible. In its evocations of something like the canonical Epistles of John, it can be quite powerful. If not actually orthodox Christianity, it teaches a system that is not too far removed from it. It imagines a flawed world wandering in error, terror, and oblivion, into which comes a redeemer from the world of Light, to teach the words of the Father. Christ came to remind us of our spiritual home, to wake us from sleep, ignorance and separation.

Also strangely familiar is the doctrine of predestination found here:

Those whose name he knew in advance were called at the end, so that one who has knowledge is the one whose name the Father has uttered. For he whose name has not been spoken is ignorant. Indeed, how is one to hear, if his name has not been called?

Like Basilides, Valentinus placed himself firmly in the Christian tradition. He claimed a secret revelation handed on from Theudas, who reputedly had received secret teachings from Paul himself. Valentinus also rooted himself in the New Testament. Remember those thirty mysterious Aeons? Well, he found them clearly described in the gospel. As Irenaeus reported:

They maintain also, that these thirty Aeons are most plainly indicated in the parable of the laborers sent into the vineyard. For some are sent about the first hour, others about the third hour, others about the sixth hour, others about the ninth hour, and others about the eleventh hour. Now, if we add up the numbers of the hours here mentioned, the sum total will be thirty: for one, three, six, nine, and eleven, when added together, form thirty.

However strange this seems, it's very much in keeping with the highly allegorical style of Bible interpretation that was already an Alexandrian specialty, and which would reach dizzying new heights in the next century with Origen.

SHENOUTE AND THE GNOSTICS

August 12, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
5 Comments

I described the Egyptian monk Shenoute and his fierce wars for orthodoxy in the fourth and fifth centuries. If we look at his struggles against Egypt's still continuing Gnostic movement, it helps us understand the context of many of the key books and documents that have surfaced in modern times, revolutionzing our understanding of early Christianity.

Egypt had always played a key role in the development of Gnosticism, which survived even after the triumph of orthodox Christianity. Even in the fifth century, remarkably, the mainstream church still saw Gnostics as an enemy needing to be fought, especially when they seemed to have established footholds in some monasteries.

Shenoute wrote against both Origenists and Gnostics, and (not surprisingly, being Shenoute) he also undertook direct action. One of his campaigns, against the temple of Pneuit near Akhmim, around 412, was probably directed against still-surviving Sethian Gnostics. He particularly wanted to seize their "books full of abominations" – presumably, a collection very much like what was found at Nag Hammadi in modern times.

Mentioning the name of Nag Hammadi draws our attention to the local geography of the region, roughly between Sohag and Qena on the upper Nile. This was the site of a cluster of extremely important monastic sites, and also of critically important document finds. Shenoute's White Monastery was near Sohag, with the Red Monastery nearby. In the 1890s, Akhmim itself (ancient Panopolis) produced the famous Berlin Codex that contains such treasures as the Apocryphon of John, the Sophia of Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of Mary. Were these the "abominations" that Shenoute was seeking?

Some sixty miles away stood the ancient house of St. Pachomius at Chenoboskion, and Nag Hammadi itself is in the neighborhood. In fact, the Hammadis were originally a Sohag family, who gave their town to the new settlement. It's highly plausible that the library found in modern times was once located at the monastery of Chenoboskion, although it is open to debate exactly what use the monks might have made of it. Another major document find, although more orthodox in content, surfaced nearby at Dishna, again near an ancient monastery: we know these as the Bodmer Papyri.

Just to be comprehensive, we might move south of Qena to the Luxor area, and Medinet Habu. It was here, in 1769, that Scottish traveler James Bruce bought the so-called Bruce Codex, the first of the great Gnostic texts to be rediscovered in modern times.

What we can say, then, is that Shenoute's area abounded in monasteries, and some at least held documents that he would have found highly suspect. Quite possibly, his becoming abbot of the monastery in 388 may well have convinced the owners of the Nag Hammadi library that rapid concealment would be highly desirable.

Not surprisingly then, Shenoute's hatred of Gnosticism was linked to his profound suspicion of apocryphal texts of all kinds, particularly alternative gospels. As we know today, Egypt was extremely fertile in such texts, which were commonly associated with Gnostic groups. Shenoute was comprehensive in his denunciation. He asked,

Who will say that there exists another gospel outside of the four gospels and not be rejected by the church as heretical? … What did the apostles lack and all the saints? What is not in the scripture, through the Holy Spirit who speaks in them, that we shall look for apocrypha?

His use of the term "apocrypha" may mean that he is referring to texts that we know from Nag Hammadi, including the Apocrypha of James and John.

We can understand why Shenoute was hunting for Gnostic books. But the more interesting question might be, why were other monks likely using them? Did they still value them for their religious truth? Or were they mining them for evidence to denounce heresy? Scholars have debated this for years. Increasingly, I think these were books that monks themselves were reading for enlightenment and spiritual revelation, or at least had at some stage in their institutional development.

And that gets us to the whole question of the complex origins of monasticism, its Middle Eastern predecessors and parallels.

SHENOUTE'S WARS

August 11, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

The Egyptian abbot Shenoute is one of the major Christian figures of Late Antiquity. He never shied away from a fight, and often a literal physical confrontation. As a result, he has left a mixed historical reputation, and he is easily stereotyped as a crude and even thuggish figure. But the abundant evidence we find in his writings gives us a startlingly detailed picture of the world in which he lived, and its many dangers. It sometimes evokes the modern world of emerging Christianity, especially in other parts of the African continent.

Some years ago, Michael Gaddis published an excellent book entitled *There Is No Crime for Those Who Have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire*. The main title is a remark made by Shenoute when he was raiding a pagan's house in search of idols. As we know from multiple

sources, the monks of Late Antiquity could be a ferocious and even lethal brood, and the Egyptian representatives were among the toughest. Shenoute made no apology about deploying them against pagans, who remained strong in Upper Egypt long after the Roman Empire formally became Christian.

We see material signs of this struggle in the physical remains of many older Egyptian churches, which either annexed older temples, or else raided their structures for building materials. In the White Monastery itself, we find reused fragments of old temples, with hieroglyphics still intact. Historic preservation was of no concern to the monks!

Although it does not excuse the violence and intolerance, Shenoute's ferocious hostility to pagans is easier to understand when set in a class perspective. Shenoute himself was the son of a peasant, and spent his youth as a shepherd. His deadliest enemies were the local pagan landowners, who he saw as vicious oppressors of the poor, and who needed urgently to be put in their proper place.

Also, he saw the temples not as centers of a rival world faith, but literally as the haunt of demons. Literally and spiritually, the landscape stood in need of conquest. (We might see parallels with contemporary Nigerian charismatic Christians, who believe their land is tainted by centuries of pagan worship and blood sacrifice).

Shenoute's Egypt was also a very lively intellectual center, with many competing beliefs and ideologies, and the controversy between rival factions could become vicious. Under its successive patriarchs or popes (Theophilus, Cyril and Dioscuros), the Alexandrian church became a fortress of militant orthodoxy, determined to suppress all potential enemies. The murder of the philosopher Hypatia in 415 was a notorious milestone in these campaigns. When the Alexandrian leaders needed muscle to enforce their views, they turned to the monasteries, and especially to a monastic overlord like Shenoute, who deployed a sizable militia.

Best recorded are the struggles against two ancient but surviving currents of belief, particularly Origenism. The steps taken against it were savage, and repressive. In the 440s, Patriarch Dioscuros wrote to Shenoute about an Origenist monk, Elijah

who was a priest indeed for a time, but who was revealed as a destroyer of souls and on this account we degraded him; on this account we appointed and ordained that he should not be found, nor should he live from this time forth either in the diocese of Shmin [Panopolis] or in any other city of the Eparchy of the Thebais, or in the monasteries, or in the caves in the desert; we being anxious lest he should contaminate others so as to become zealots and partakers of his heresy or his evil teachings.

Shenoute was to assist in seizing any books teaching this heresy, to send them to Alexandria.

Shenoute lived at a time of warfare, physical as well as spiritual. He never doubted that he was called to be a warrior.

By the way, one informative book on these matters is Johannes Hahn, Stephen Emmel & Ulrich Gotter, eds., *From Temple To Church: Destruction And Renewal Of Local Cultic Topography In Late Antiquity*

(Brill, 2008). See especially Stephen Emmel's chapter, "Shenoute of Atripe and the Christian Destruction of Temples in Egypt."

SHENOUTE THE GREAT

August 9, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
4 Comments

Who's the odd man out: Ambrose, Patrick, John Chrysostom, Leo the Great, Shenoute?

All were great Christian leaders who lived in the century after 350. But it's a trick question, as there are two answers. One answer is "Patrick" as we have virtually nothing written by him, while the others all left copious literary remains. Alternatively, we should say "Shenoute," as he's the only one whose name is unknown to the vast majority of educated Christians, even those with long experience in church history. As I'll argue, the amnesia about Shenoute is truly sad. It is also a powerful object lesson in the making and breaking of historical reputations.

Shenoute reputedly lived from 347 to 465, and revolutionized the practice of monasticism in Egypt. By the time of his death, his White Monastery was home to several thousand monks and nuns (Its remains stand near Sohag). He also had a powerful impact on the political world, and attended the Council of Ephesus in 431. He wrote at astonishing length.

Shenoute's writing is at once the core of his greatness, and the reason for his obscurity in the West. He wrote in Coptic, which over the previous two centuries had become a standard language for Egyptian Christianity. All key Christian texts were translated into Coptic, and Christians composed many new works. St. Anthony, founder of monasticism, was a pioneer of that tradition, and he also gives some idea of the language's spread. Already by the end of the third century, the non-Greek speaking Anthony was hearing the Bible in church, either from a Coptic manuscript or an oral recitation. When the Nag Hammadi library was discovered, the books were of course in Coptic.

Shenoute himself was an amazingly prolific writer. Some four thousand pages of his writings survive around the world. He did not despise Greek, or view it as a language of alien occupation, but as a monk from Upper Egypt, Coptic was his natural medium. He wrote work of extremely high quality and sophistication.

It is difficult to overestimate his importance to that Coptic tradition. He was "the first outstanding writer of the Egyptian language in its Coptic form, and his literary importance was never equaled." His disciples and successors strove to carry on as he had begun. Through those efforts, Coptic greatly increased its prestige as a language of literature and scholarship

This linguistic fact is enormously important for the survival of Christianity in Egypt. After the Islamic conquest of the Middle East, the pressure to join the more dominant religion was obviously strong. Egyptians, though, were very slow to abandon a religion that was so wholeheartedly acclimatized in their soil, and which spoke their native language.

That is why, even in the twentieth century, some ten or fifteen percent of Egyptians were still Christians, proud members of the Coptic Church. In very recent times, that church was headed by its Pope Shenouda III, who reigned from 1971 through 2012. His name is a variant spelling of Shenoute. (You can now see a reverential documentary about the modern-day Pope Shenouda).

But that Coptic tradition of course is the problem with the historical reputation of the original Shenoute. After the fifth century, theological debates drove a wedge between the Coptic and Greek-speaking worlds. Even those Catholic or Orthodox churches who remained aware of Egypt maintained their distance from the Coptic Church, which they regarded as Monophysite. The Islamic Conquest further reduced links with Europe, which increasingly became the demographic heart of the Christian world. Even after the Renaissance, the Coptic language was unknown in Europe except to a handful of highly trained specialists.

Not until the twentieth century did some visionary scholars realize what a knowledge of Coptic might contribute to understanding early Christian history, a message reinforced by the Nag Hammadi finds. In recent years, scholars have produced several key studies on Shenoute and his world, including Rebecca Krawiec, *Shenoute and the Women of the White Monastery: Egyptian Monasticism in Late Antiquity*; Caroline T. Schroeder, *Monastic Bodies: Discipline and Salvation in Shenoute of Atripe*; and most recently, Ariel G. Lopez, *Shenoute of Atripe and the Uses of Poverty: Rural Patronage, Religious Conflict, and Monasticism in Late Antique Egypt*. Stephen Emmel has edited *Shenoute's Literary Corpus* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004).

Even so, it is striking that so much of Shenoute's work remains untranslated. This is doubly startling for scholars of early Christianity or Judaism, who can easily refer to Internet sources for translations of even the more obscure ancient texts, by writers far less significant that Shenoute. Can we imagine a world in which the works of (say) Augustine or John Chrysostom remained untranslated and unavailable to non-specialists?

In the fifth century, any reasonable survey of the Christian world would have rated Shenoute's importance astronomically high, in marked contrast to a distant border evangelist like Patrick. The comparative history of the two reputations is a humbling statement about how historical reputations are shaped by events occurring long after the lifetime of a particular individual.

THE FATE OF THE PATRIARCHS

August 16, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Once upon a time, the Alexandrian Patriarch Mark was visiting a provincial Egyptian city called Agharwah (Aghra). "And the clergy came out to meet him according to the custom, that they might chant before him, with a body of the laity, chief men and leaders of the people; and he blessed them and prayed for all of them. And there came out among the others a person possessed by a devil, which threw him down in the midst of the people, and choked him until foam flowed from his mouth." The Patriarch then made the sign of the Cross over the man's face, so that he was healed. "So that man threw himself at Abba Mark's holy feet, and thanked God for the deliverance thus

granted." The Patriarch admonished him to be careful in taking Communion in future, lest the possession be repeated.

Nothing in that story seems surprising for anyone familiar with the Christianity of Late Antiquity or the early Middle Ages. What is notable, though, is the date, as the episode occurred around 810, when Egypt had been under Muslim rule for 170 years. Yet reading an account like this, so little seems to have changed. Monks and bishops still go about their lives in a heavily Christian countryside, with the usual roster of apparitions and miracle stories. It casts a different and often surprising light on popular impressions of the Muslim conquest of the Middle East.

The source is an amazing and very substantial document called the History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, which is available online full text, running to some 175,000 words in translation. Some two-thirds of the narrative takes place after the rise of Islam.

With such a lengthy source, it would be easy to cherrypick, to select incidents that confirm one interpretation or another. You want to show that Christians had few problems with the Muslim occupation? You want to show that the Muslims were ruthless persecutors? The History offers rich pickings for either approach. The answer, of course, lies somewhere between, and a nuanced reading is essential.

From the anti-Muslim perspective, you might for instance choose this story from 718. Muslim authorities

commanded the monks not to make monks of those who came to them. Then he mutilated the monks, and branded each one of them on his left hand, with a branding iron in the form of a ring, that he might be known; adding the name of his church and his monastery, without a cross, and with the date according to the era of Islam. … If they discovered a fugitive or one that had not been marked, they brought him to the Amir, who ordered that one of his limbs should be cut off, so that he was lame for life.

However, this extraordinary situation soon passed, and the History records the relief that later caliphs granted to Christians, in Syria as well as Egypt:

after him reigned Hishâm his brother, who was a God-fearing man according to the method of Islam, and loved all men; and he became the deliverer of the orthodox. For when he learnt that we Christians had had no patriarch in the East since Julian, the late patriarch of Antioch, in whose stead the bishop Elias had taken his seat, and that Elias also had died, he took a man named Athanasius, full of every spiritual grace, who also was a bishop, and gave him the patriarchate of Antioch. So the bishops laid their hands upon him in turn, and made him patriarch.

Some Muslim rulers were wise and benevolent, others were ruthless thugs. It sounds very much like the secular regimes that saints were confronting in contemporary Christian Europe, although the Muslim rulers were marginally less nervous about committing sacrilegious acts that could draw down divine anger. Often, when the History describes a brutal tyrant, it mentions that he was a terror to all the subjects, Muslim as well as Christian. Often, not always, this was equal opportunity tyranny.

Oddly too, the church historian regards even the worst atrocities visited on Christians by Muslims as fairly minor compared to those inflicted by other Christians in past times. From the fifth through the seventh centuries, Egypt had usually been under the rule of Orthodox Chalcedonian Roman

regimes, who were determined to enforce their will on the overwhelmingly Miaphysite Coptic Christians. Large sections of the History are devoted to the tortures, martyrdoms and persecutions involved in that process, after which the Muslims came almost as a relief.

What makes the History so striking is its combination of worlds that we often think of as so radically separate, the medieval Christian and the "Oriental" Muslim. This is nowhere brought home more effectively than in the name of the work's tenth century compiler, the Bishop Severus, known as Severus ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, or (from his diocese) Severus of El Ashmunein. El Ashmunein is the name given to the ancient Egyptian and Hellenistic city otherwise known as Khmun, and later as Hermopolis Magna. Roman, Greek and Arabic names merge together, very much as the cultures did in the Egypt of his time.

Severus certainly saw signs of trouble in his day, the late tenth century, when the Coptic language was fading before the spread of Arabic. He even made grudging concessions to this process, by publishing works in Arabic himself. But even three centuries after the coming of Islam, he gives little impression of serving a church in danger of vanishing.

I am painfully well aware of the plight of the church in modern-day Egypt, especially given the savage violence and mob attacks directed against Christians just in the past few days. But it wasn't always thus.

IDLE TALES AND EMPTY SLANDERS

August 25, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I am rethinking my attitude to paranoia.

For many years, I have written on the demonization of out-groups, the way in which similar charges are deployed against marginal minorities. Seemingly, the same sort of bogus allegations surface in widely different cultures around the world. Some such groups actually existed, even if they never committed the crime charged against them (Jews in early modern Europe), while other demon figures are wholly invented (witches in the 1590s, Satanist murder gangs in the 1990s), but the accusations remain the same. Commonly, these charges involve the abduction or murder of children.

One example I use for this process concerns the charges brought against Christians in the Roman Empire, when they too were a demonized sect. Around 177, Athenagoras wrote his *Legatio pro Christianis*, which noted that "Three things are brought against us Christians: atheism, Thyestean feasts, and Oedipodean intercourse," which is to say, cannibalism and incestuous orgies. Naturally, he concluded, "these things are only idle tales and empty slanders."

I'm still sure those specific charges are utterly false, especially since they so closely echo the nightmare fantasies brought against other groups in other eras. Think of medieval portrayals of the witches' Sabbat. (See the selection of charges assembled here).

In some cases, we can see a direct literary inheritance from charges made *against* early Christians to polemic that Christians themselves directed against their enemies, including heretics and Jews. The fourth century writer Epiphanius had a fertile, and indeed sickening, imagination when it came to denouncing the misdeeds of heretical sects. You can have an awful lot of smoke, and no fire behind it.

But here's a question. While skepticism is always valuable, are we *always* right to reject allegations of sexual libertinism, including orgies, in the context of Christian sects?

I ask because I have been reading Clement of Alexandria, who around 200 wrote controversial works against rival sects who we would commonly call Gnostic, but who defined themselves as Christian. As I have suggested, such groups would have represented a significant part of the Christian spectrum in second century Alexandria.

What makes Clement stand apart from other heresy-hunters is that he was describing sects in his local area at a time well within living memory, and in some cases still surviving in other parts of the city. We are not dealing here with a medieval monk describing the sinister deeds of heretics or Jews whom he has never met, living on the other side of the continent, or indeed long extinct.

With that in mind, look at his discussion of marriage in Book III of his *Stromata*. Amusingly perhaps, the ideas he was describing were so shocking that in the classic *Ante-Nicene Christian Fathers*, this section appears only in Latin translation!

Clement acknowledges the diversity of opinion on the topic of marriage and sexuality. Valentinians, he says, approve of marriage, partly because their view of Creation imagines a sequence of divine male-female pairs, which human beings mirror. He accuses followers of Basilides of hypocrisy, in rejecting marriage while committing sexual sins.

He then turns to the followers of Carpocrates, who was probably from Alexandria, and taught in the first half of the second century. According to Irenaeus, Carpocrates taught that human beings contained a divine spark of life trapped within the material world ruled by the Archons. Jesus was a human being, but he became Christ when a heavenly power descended on him, and he came to liberate humanity. Once redeemed, believers claimed to be perfect, and were not subject to worldly laws or restraints. They claimed equality with the apostles, if not with Christ himself. As such:

they lead a licentious life, and, to conceal their impious doctrines, they abuse the name [of Christ], as a means of hiding their wickedness; … they declare they have in their power all things which are irreligious and impious, and are at liberty to practice them; for they maintain that things are evil or good, simply in virtue of opinion.

In fact, they argued that it was necessary to experience all things, good and evil, as part of the process by which they completed the journey of transmigration. The group sounds very much like the medieval sect of the Free Spirit, which likewise taught antinomian ideas.

Irenaeus also remarked that

Others, again, following upon Basilides and Carpocrates, have introduced promiscuous intercourse and a plurality of wives, and are indifferent about eating meats sacrificed to idols, maintaining that God does not greatly regard such matters.

We might well think that Irenaeus was using vulgar slanders against an enemy. But compare Clement:

These then are the doctrines of the excellent Carpocratians. These, so they say, and certain other enthusiasts for the same wickednesses, gather together for feasts (I would not call their meeting an Agape), men and women together. After they have sated their appetites, then they overturn the lamps and so extinguish the light that the shame of their adulterous "righteousness" is hidden, and they have intercourse where they will and with whom they will. After they have practiced community of use in this love-feast, they demand by daylight of whatever women they wish that they will be obedient to the law of Carpocrates – it would not be right to say the law of God.

In support of his claims, Clement provides a substantial quote from a book written by Epiphanes, son of Carpocrates. Epiphanes really did advocate antinomian doctrines, including community of property:

Consequently one must understand the saying 'Thou shalt not covet' as if the lawgiver was making a jest, to which he added the even more comic words 'thy neighbor's goods'. For he himself who gave the desire to sustain the race orders that it is to be suppressed, though he removes it from no other animals. And by the words 'thy neighbor's wife' he says something even more ludicrous, since he forces what should be common property to be treated as a private possession.

Incidentally, Epiphanes might be recalling a doctrine found in several early alternative gospels when he wrote that "He did not make a distinction between female and male, rational and irrational, nor between anything and anything else at all." Compare the Gospel of Thomas, 22: "When you make the two one, and when you make the inside like the outside and the outside like the inside, and the above like the below, and when you make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female female." This would tend to confirm that he belonged to the same spectrum of thought as Egypt's contemporary Gnostics.

But to return to the alleged orgies. I would argue that in this instance, Clement was in an excellent position to know what he was talking about. His statements also gain strength from the fact that he does not make comparable claims against other groups. Suggesting occasional immorality, as he did with the Basilidians, is nowhere close. He was much more restrained than Irenaeus, leave alone a hysterical scandal-monger like Epiphanius.

Also, sexual mysticism is by no means uncommon in religious traditions, from Tantra to modern Western esoteric movements. There's nothing ipso facto improbable about its occurrence among Gnostic sects.

In the Carpocratian instance, then, I'm prepared to believe that the sexual charges might actually be true.

If they were, that would help explain the allegations against contemporary Christians of all shades. When pagans or Jews denounced the libertinism of one sect acting in the name of Jesus, they

obviously drew no distinctions between particular schools of thought. As Clement himself says, "Through them the worst calumny has become current against the Christian name."

One final note: although scholars debate the origins of Athenagoras, who complained about anti-Christian slanders, Birger Pearson locates him in Egypt, and presumably Alexandria. Athenagoras would thus have been referring to strictly local scandals and rumors.

ALEXANDRIAN CHRISTIANS

August 23, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

With all the turmoil faced by modern-day Egyptian Christians, I hope it doesn't seem inappropriate to write more on their ancient beginnings. It should remind us of just how much of the Christian heritage is at stake in these battles.

I have described the oddly obscure nature of the early Egyptian church, suggesting that Christianity must have been very strong in the country, but not necessarily orthodox. Matters changed at the end of the second century, when we suddenly find abundant evidence of a vigorous church in Alexandria, and one that is orthodox enough to be celebrated by historians like Eusebius.

Even so, Alexandrian Christianity remained remarkably flexible, diverse and outward-looking. It really had no option, given the many powerful rivals to orthodoxy – Gnostics of every shade, Jewish-Christians, and of course the very strong traditions of Jewish scholarship.

The first major figure cited by Eusebius (v.11) was the scholar Pantaenus, reputedly the pupil of a Stoic school. Around 180, he became head of Alexandria's legendary Catechetical School. Colin H. Roberts suggested that he might have taken over a school originally headed by Gnostics like Basilides, and that his primary task was to purge that influence.

Eusebius then tells us a strange and evocative story about Pantaenus:

he was appointed as a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations in the East, and was sent as far as India. … It is reported that among persons there who knew of Christ, he found the Gospel according to Matthew, which had anticipated his own arrival. For Bartholomew, one of the apostles, had preached to them, and left with them the writing of Matthew in the Hebrew language, which they had preserved till that time.

This passage has intrigued modern scholars of the New Testament, who debate whether Matthew's gospel might actually have had a Hebrew original. Most think not, and wonder exactly what Eusebius might be referring to here.

striking that Pantaenus had visited Christian communities in India. That is not implausible. We know of a very early Christian presence there, especially in southwestern regions like Malabar, and

Alexandria did have a lively trade with the Indian Ocean world. It's hard to believe that someone with Pantaenus's interests would have visited India without at least taking some interest in the local intellectual and spiritual climate.

One of Pantaenus's pupils was the brilliant Clement of Alexandria, about whom I can say very little here. Clement was deeply imbued in Hellenistic philosophy, and strove to apply its lessons to Christian theology. Surprisingly for later readers, he was also remarkably open to influences from what would later be designated the heretical fringe.

That is nowhere more true than in his use of Christian scriptures. Clement's citations reveal a dazzling knowledge of literature and scripture, Christian, Jewish and pagan. Although he did not regard them as fully canonical, he was happy to cite a series of texts, including the Shepherd of Hermas, Didache, Epistle of Barnabas, Apocalypse of Peter, 1 Clement, the Gospel of the Egyptians, Sibylline Oracles, and the Traditions of Matthias. He also had a high regard for the Gospel of Hebrews. Judging by survivals of manuscripts, the Shepherd of Hermas was the most popular Christian text in early Egypt, apart from the Bible itself.

From the Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Clement knew the Apocryphon of Ezekiel, 1 Enoch, and the Assumption of Moses, and assuredly many others. He cites the *Exagoge* of Ezekiel the Tragedian, a strange attempt to put part of the Old Testament story in the form of a Hellenistic drama.

Clement seemed "practically unconcerned about canonicity. To him, inspiration is what mattered" (quoted here).

His omissions also demand note. He referred very often to the Christian Bible, both Old and New Testament, especially the latter. Even so, and despite his very wide-ranging reading and study, he seems not to have referred to several books of our canonical New Testament, including James, II Peter, and III John. Those gaps are not really surprising, as these books were regarded with great skepticism by contemporary Syriac churches, and would not be included in the Peshitta translation. Nor did Clement cite Philemon, possibly because that is such a brief and ephemeral text.

Both Clement and Pantaenus suggest the remarkable breadth of that early Egyptian church.

Egypt's Diaspora

November 21, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

Although the third century BC is a shadowy time in Jewish history, both faith and people were being transformed in multiple ways. I recently lamented how little we know of the Jewish world in Palestine at this time, but of course revolutionary developments were occurring elsewhere, in the emerging Diaspora.

Two developments in this era demand our attention. One was the growth of the city of Alexandria, which was founded in 331BC. It soon attracted a Jewish population, and by the second century was

emerging as a key Jewish center, exceeded in importance only by Jerusalem itself. By the first century AD, the city had five quarters, two of which were mainly Jewish, but synagogues could be found across the city.

The city's importance for Jewish thought and culture can hardly be exaggerated. This was for instance the home of Philo (20BC-50AD). Although we can rarely know the specific location in which particular works were written, modern scholars have cited Alexandria as the likely home of such texts as the Wisdom of Solomon.

If not Alexandria, Egypt was also the home of the Jewish historical novel Joseph and Aseneth, probably written in the late first century AD. That work, incidentally, has now become the basis of yet another silly "Jesus married Mary Magdalene" fairy story, which really does not merit any more analysis or demolition here. There are plenty of good debunkings out there already.

Inevitably, given this intense cultural activity, Alexandria also became one of the critical bases for early Christianity. As I have written before, so much of that story is incomprehensible except in an Egyptian context.

We also know that the institution of the synagogue began in the Jewish Diaspora rather than in in Palestine itself, and the earliest example of such a prayer-house is in Egypt.

Rarely indeed do we have much evidence for the circumstances in which Biblical books were written, but one exception is the text known as Ecclesiasticus, or the Wisdom of Jesus ben Sirach. According to the text, it was written by the scribe of that name in Jerusalem, in Hebrew, around the 170s. His grandson then translated it into Greek, "when I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of [Ptolemy] Euergetes and stayed for some time." That dates the grandson's move precisely to 132 BC. It is also a specific reference to a Jew traveling to Egypt, and making a text available to his Greek-speaking contemporaries.

Alexandria, above all, was where the Jewish world had its great encounter with Greek language and thought. It may well have been in the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus that the Septuagint version of the Bible was prepared.

Although the main source for that dating is the fictional account in the Letter of Aristeas, probably written around 130, the chronology is plausible. Greek was the language in which the scriptures were read in the synagogues.

Alexandria, above all, was where Jews learned to think in Greek.

Making Monks, Forming Souls

May 4, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I have been reading an important new book called *Monasteries and the Care of Souls in Late Antique Christianity: Cognition and Discipline* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). This is by my former colleague Paul Dilley, an excellent scholar whose work I have discussed in the past. The book is important because of its Egyptian setting, using many texts that are only available to those scholars with a knowledge of Coptic, besides the familiar Greek. Egypt is so critical to the making of early Christianity, right up through the sixth and seventh centuries and beyond, but our standard Western emphasis often means that this is underplayed. Also, given the central importance of monasticism through much of Christian history, Dilley's book addresses a central if under-explored question: just how did people become monks? Not just how did they sign on to the profession, but how did they discover and absorb the lifestyle, its particular ways, assumptions and ideologies? How did they learn to live its world?

This would be a fine book if it just offered a straightforward historical analysis, but it is much more daring that that, and approaches its subject from the field of cognitive studies. Dilley describes such key cognitive disciplines as "meditation on scripture, the fear of God, and prayer." He also discusses "various rituals distinctive to communal monasticism, including entrance procedures, the commemoration of founders, and collective repentance." That emphasis on ritual behavior fits so well with what we know about religious practices across the faith spectrum.

The book has a great deal to say about the process of admitting and evaluating postulants. The whole work has many implications for the study of monks (and nuns) in many different societies through the ages, not to mention the whole idea of spiritual direction.

My particular favorite among the sections was the chapter on "scriptural exercises and the monastic soundscape." It makes brilliant points about the history of reading and writing and the ways in which the Bible was absorbed and understood. In this area, as in prayer, one added difficulty was the firm belief that the voices playing in one's mind could be demonic as well as divine, making discernment a crucial talent that needed to be learned, and taught. When did you last encounter a history of *listening*? This is provocative stuff.

The resulting book is something really innovative: a true psychological history, in the sense of the history of the development of new models of mind, and the means by which they were cultivated and transmitted to new generations. It is nothing less than the history of how souls were made.

Reading the book took me back to work I have done through the years on new religious movements (NRMs), sects and cults. I am not so much suggesting rival ways of looking at Dilley's topics, but rather offering some analogies from the way in which scholars look at other much later periods.

When I taught courses on these matters, I warned students to be careful about using words like "conversion," which implies a life changing moment. Don't say that "X converted to sect or cult Y" There are multiple stages in joining a religious group. You begin with the act of formal joining, of *recruitment*, but that does not necessarily mean much in terms of your mindset. Perhaps you are just trying a kind of experiment, to see how it works for you – checking it out. Over time, you increase your degree of *commitment*, and then at that advanced stage, we might talk of *conversion*, an inner spiritual experience. The three stages – recruitment, commitment, conversion – are quite different. Those distinctions also apply to how people join political groups, or even terrorist movements.

Sects and cults are awfully good at manipulating the degree of commitment you experience, and leading you to full conversion. Commonly, they control and manipulate the *boundaries* – physical, emotional and symbolic – so that you have ever more contact and connection with other members of the group, and are progressively detached from the outside.

Those boundaries might involve physical removal from "normality" – living in a compound or special house – or they might be symbolic, wearing a special haircut, beard, or garb. Perhaps you speak a special language, a jargon or set of phrases, which you know and mere worldlings don't. Food and drink can be particularly effective markers: you are what you refuse to eat. Are members even required to choose new names? Sexual behavior (including celibacy) can be another form of boundary.

When you are researching a sect or NRM, always begin by identifying and mapping those boundaries. *We* are on this side of the line; *They* are outside. These tokens all serve to separate you from "The World" while identifying you with that special in-group. They also pose real obstacles to leaving on a whim. All those points suggest analogies with the early monastic world.

I think back to an excellent book that Rosabeth Moss Kanter published back in 1972, on *Commitment and Community: Communes and Utopias in Sociological Perspective.* (Kanter has had a wildly successful and prestigious career, but I believe that was her very first published book). She looked at the ways in which nineteenth century sects and utopian movements reshaped their members through what she called a six point commitment building process. The phases were *sacrifice, investment, renunciation, communion, mortification and transcendence.* It's a great working model, although obviously it won't fit each and every circumstance. Specifically:

Sacrifice. Members give up something of value to join – the greater the sacrifice, the more the love of the group, to justify such a renunciation. This weeds out potentially weak members. Such renunciations might include worldly goods, higher education, and other enticing prospects.

Investment. Members contribute resources to the group, in terms of property or time. The more they invest in the group, the more stake they have in continuing to work for its survival and continuation. Group needs outweigh selfish individual desires.

Renunciation. Members relinquish interpersonal relationships that damage group cohesion, or that might cause to question beliefs and values.

Communion. literal or symbolic. Such group activities and rituals enhance the sense of the collective "we" – "we" are not "them." There might be communal events, and perhaps a distinctive calendar.

Mortification. The death of the private self, as private autonomous selves perish. The self flourishes only as part of the group. Members need the group in order to feel whole and fulfilled. Among the Amish, for example, this means condemning self-pride, or pride in one's own achievements. There must be a group consciousness, based on humility. The self must die.

Transcendence. This is a special power or virtue that results from being part of the group. The group membership lifts members above the ordinary and everyday. "Transcendence strengthens

commitment because those who experience it seek to increase their devotion to the group that gave them such an elevated sense of being." This creates a cyclical and self-feeding effect.

Reading such a list, you will see why I was tempted to apply this model to the monastic system that Dilley portrays, especially because it too draws on psychological concepts of the self. In that sense, principles invented to comprehend New Religious Movements can usefully be applied to religious structures that are very old indeed.

I'd love to see a comparative review of Dilley's book by someone who understands Buddhist monasticism! They would find so much in common between east and west.

The Forgotten Temple

February 18, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I have written a lot through the years about Christian origins and their Jewish background, mainly in my 2017 book *Crucible of Faith*. In writing that work I came across what seems to me a really intriguing aspect of the history, and one that rarely gets the attention it deserves.

Not just once in history, but twice, Jewish temples stood in the land of Egypt. One was at Elephantine, in the fifth century BC, and quite a bit has been written about it because it seems to record a community that knew a female deity besides YHWH. That is often discussed in surveys of the Old Testament world, and the emergence of monotheism. Far less frequently noted is another Jewish Temple that stood at Leontopolis, in the Nile Delta, from roughly the 160s BC through to 70 AD – at least 230 years. Both those temples, of course, contradict our normal assumptions because of the theory that just one Temple could exist, and that was in Jerusalem. But the Leontopolis one raises plenty of other questions, especially in terms of what might have been written or created there.

In the early second century BC, the Jewish religious/political elite was starkly divided between two warring family factions, the Oniads (descendants of Onias) and the Tobiads. During the lethal feuds in Jerusalem in the 170s BC, Onias, son of the high priest, was defeated and sought refuge in Egypt. The then king, Ptolemy VI Philometor, received him warmly. He granted him permission to build at Leontopolis a new temple, supposedly an imitation of the main Jerusalem sanctuary. As Josephus records,

Here Onias erected a fortress and built his temple (which was not like that in Jerusalem, but resembled a tower) of huge stones and sixty cubits in altitude. The altar, however, he designed on the model of that in the home country, and adorned the building with similar offerings, the fashion of the lampstand excepted; for, instead of making a stand, he had a lamp wrought of gold which shed a brilliant light and was suspended by a golden chain. The sacred precincts were wholly surrounded by a wall of baked brick, the doorways being of stone. The king, moreover, assigned him an extensive territory as a source of revenue, to yield both abundance for the priests and a large provision for the service of God. In all this, however, Onias was not actuated by honest motives; his aim was rather to rival the Jews at Jerusalem, against whom he harbored resentment for his exile, and he hoped by erecting this temple to attract the multitude away from them to it. There had, moreover, been an ancient prediction made some six hundred years before

by one named Esaias, who had foretold the erection of this temple in Egypt by a man of Jewish birth. Such, then, was the origin of this temple.

Like Jerusalem, this temple was staffed by priests of the proper lineage and maintained all the forms of the sacrificial cult. Later Jewish scholars were remarkably mild about this rival enterprise, presumably because by the time they were writing, it had long ceased to exist. Also, the sense was always that this Temple was an adjunct to the real institution at Jerusalem, not a replacement.

The Temple attracted Jewish settlers into this Land of Onias, adding still further to Egypt's role in Jewish history.

As it would have had the requisite complement of scribes, the Leontopolis Temple might well have been yet another center of Jewish literary activity, over and above Jerusalem and Alexandria. We know that the years from roughly 200 BC through 70 AD were a phenomenally productive era in Jewish and proto-Christian texts, commonly pseudepigrapha – that is credited to some famous name, such as Enoch or Adam or Abraham. Many were certainly composed in Egypt. That includes many works about angels, and focused on apocalyptic speculation. Unfortunately, savage wars and massacres against the Jewish community in 115 AD mean that much of our detailed knowledge of this activity was subsequently lost.

It is intrinsically likely that Leontopolis should have been a prime creative center. As I said, it had the skilled literate people on staff and in the neighborhood, and moreover it was close to Alexandria. Can any of the texts we know have come from there?

One prime candidate is found among the so called Sibylline Oracles, works composed over a lengthy period and including Jewish and Jewish-Christian content. For present purposes, the most significant sections of the Oracles are found in book 3, most of which was written by an Egyptian Jew in the mid-second century BC. Conceivably, it might even be the work of that Onias who fled Jerusalem in order to establish the new Temple. Like the Book of Daniel, this oracle offers a description of the Hellenistic empire, and it shows how deeply Seleucid aggression had aroused eschatological hopes and fears. The oracle portrays an imminent crisis and the destruction of invading pagan forces. When God uttered judgment with a mighty voice, all creation would tremble; mountains would be split asunder. All would end "by fire and by overwhelming storm, and brimstone there shall be from heaven:"

And all the unholy shall be bathed in blood;

And earth herself shall also drink the blood
Of the perishing, and beasts be gorged with flesh.

I don't know the answer to this, but I ask: did this Temple have all the sects we know from Jerusalem, namely Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes? We know that an Essene-like sect called the Therapeutae existed in Egypt, at Lake Mareotis.

Let us move the story forward to the mid-first century AD, and imagine those scribes and priests as they existed at Leontopolis between (say) 30 and 70 AD, of whom we know next to nothing. Let me offer a speculation, and it is nothing more. Were any of them influenced by the Jesus Movement in

any of its forms, including those trends that we call Gnostic, which were so common in Egypt? When the Leontopolis Temple fell, we know that it was closed rather than destroyed, so that its literate priestly staff survived. Did any of those people survive in new roles, either within Judaism or related movements? What did they do with the texts they would have possessed at the Temple?

Might any of those people actually have written some of the texts that we find in Egypt in later years, and which grew out of the larger Jewish universe – the Gnostic and Sethite tracts, even the earliest layers of early Christian documents? When we look at writings like the Gospel of John, we comment on its powerful roots in Jewish and Hellenistic thought and the world of the Temple, but it helps to recall that there was not just one Temple operating at the time. The Logos doctrine of course was best known from Philo, who had been based at Alexandria.

It's curious to think that this other temple stood and flourished throughout the lives of the apostles, and the literary career of Paul.

To take another interesting character, the Book of Acts tells us about "a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria … a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord … and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John." But the Western text of Acts presents a slightly different story about Apollos, who "had been instructed *in his own country* in the word of the Lord." I wonder where exactly in Egypt he might have picked up that somewhat variant understanding of the new faith?

All speculation, I know, and please don't quote me as stating a new theory about the origins of John's Gospel. But what we can say with confidence is that Leontopolis should by all rights have been an influential and widely connected center of Jewish thought, and we would dearly love to know more about it.

And if nothing else, it does give me an excuse to write blogs with titles like "The Forgotten Temple."

The scholarly literature on Leontopolis includes:

Robert Hayward, "The Jewish Temple at Leontopolis: a Reconsideration," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 33,1-2 (1982) 429-443.

Joan Taylor, "A Second Temple in Egypt: The Evidence for the Zadokite Temple of Onias," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 28 (1998), 297-321.

I have not seen the story cited much in explorations of early Christianity in the region, but I am quite prepared to be corrected on that.

By the Rivers of Babylon

December 1, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

In 1973, Geza Vermes reminded us, indelibly, that Jesus was a Jew, and subsequent generations of scholars have thoroughly absorbed that lesson. Less effective, though, have been statements that early Christianity also operated in a thoroughly Jewish matrix, and that the separation between the two movements was slow, uneven and patchy. Long after the first century, Christians tended to be found in regions and centers where Jews already existed, and relations between the two groups varied enormously in warmth and sympathy. In 1992, James Dunn edited a collection of essays on the theme *The Parting of the Ways AD 70 to 135*. In 2003, Adam Becker and Annette Yoshiko Reed edited their collection on the dissenting theme of *The Ways That Never Parted: Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*.

That continuing relationship has major consequences for how we understand the early growth of Christian communities, and where we look for them. In the century or so after Jesus's time, the movement's best-known centers were in the Jewish heartlands of Palestine, Syria and Egypt, with Jerusalem and Alexandria as by far the most important cities. That obviously changed somewhat with the multiple wars, massacres and revolutions between 66 and 135, but scholars naturally look to Alexandria as a likely home for many early thinkers and writers.

Rather lost in this picture are developments east of the Roman Empire, in Babylonia, or what would later be called Iraq. In my book *Lost History of Christianity*, I emphasized the early and vigorous appearance of Christian communities in that country, certainly no later than the first century, and Iraq became a crucial base for later expansion into Asia. Mainly for reasons of space, what I did not stress there at sufficient length was the immense importance of Judaism in that part of the world, which provides the essential context of that upsurge. For centuries, in fact, Iraq had an excellent claim to stand as the capital of the Jewish world, and without appreciating that, we cannot understand how eastern Christianity emerged and grew.

A chronology might help here. (Jewish readers please note: I know this is a very basic account). Between about 180 and 220AD, Jewish scholars compiled the oral Torah in the great collection called the *Mishnah*, which was assembled in Palestine. This was the great monument of what we call rabbinic Judaism. Further commentaries and elucidations appeared in the *Jerusalem Talmud*, in the fourth century. Finally, chiefly between the fifth and seventh centuries, we find the *Babylonian Talmud*, which was assembled by scholars living in that country. From the sixth through the eleventh centuries, Babylonia was the setting for the Talmudic (Geonic) academies, At that point, Babylonia was the indisputable center of Judaism.

Why Babylonia? Jews had of course been settled there during the exile of the sixth century, and a community had always remained. Jews flourished during the Seleucid Empire that ruled the land from the fourth century through the second, and then under the Parthian Empire that conquered Babylon around 160BC. Jewish numbers grew with exiles fleeing from the Jewish Revolt onwards. The Parthian regime actively favored the Jews, not least because they were such fierce enemies of Rome. Jewish influence was particularly strong in the border states and petty kingdoms separating Parthia and Rome: in the first century AD, the king of Adiabene converted to Judaism.

That Jewish presence continued under the new dynasty that took power in the third century AD. To quote the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, "It was … before the accession of the Sassanids that the powerful

impetus toward the study of the Torah arose among the Jews of Babylonia which made that country the very focus of Judaism for more than a thousand years." We can actually date this move fairly exactly, as it was in 219 that the renowned scholar Abba Arika moved from Palestine to Babylonia.

Just a word on geography. Unlike Egypt, Babylonia had no one single city to provide continuity of learning and culture. The city of Babylon itself flourished until 275BC, when the Seleucid kings built a new capital at Seleucia on the Tigris. The Parthians then built their new capital just across that river, at Ctesiphon. For some centuries, Seleucia-Ctesiphon was the world's largest city.

Finally, in the eighth century, the Muslims created a lasting capital at Baghdad.

Despite all these changes, though, the same places along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers supplied cultural continuity. The greatest Jewish center was Ctesiphon itself. The rabbis who compiled the Babylonian Talmud came from cities like Mahoza or al Mada'in, between Seleucia and Ctesiphon; from Nehardea on the Euphrates; and from nearby Pumbeditha, which is now the war-ravaged modern community of Fallujah. The Pumbeditha academy operated from 258 AD through 1038. Further south, another prestigious academy at Sura looked to the heritage of Abba Arika.

This story is critical to the development of Judaism, especially in its rabbinic forms. More to the point, it is also, almost exactly, the history and geography of Christianity east of Syria, and of that great Church of the East that ultimately spread its power over much of Asia.

More in my next post.

On the Babylonian Talmud, see now Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in its Sasanian Context* (2014).

Christians in Babylon

December 5, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

In the early Christian era, Mesopotamia/Iraq was a thriving center of rabbinic Judaism, and throughout the first millennium it was the intellectual capital of that faith. Given the Jewish background, naturally we find very early Christian settlements in Iraq.

Within the Persian empire, the greatest seat of church power was of course at the capital Seleucia-Ctesiphon. The city's bishop – later the patriarch – ruled from there until the move to Baghdad in early Islamic times. In northern Iraq, Nisibis, likewise, was critical to both Jewish and Christian scholarship. (See Adam H. Becker, *Fear of God and the Beginning of Wisdom: The School of Nisibis and the Development of Scholastic Culture in Late Antique Mesopotamia* (2013).

The Church of the East (the "Nestorians") wrote extensively about the origins of their faith, and the account they offer is quite plausible. Briefly, their tradition reported that Christianity reached Edessa very soon after the death of Jesus, and that the earliest missionaries stemmed from Antioch. Given the relationship of the cities and trade routes, that general pattern is overwhelmingly likely. It also suggests a Christian presence based in Ctesiphon from the early second century, which meshes beautifully with the Jewish history.

The tradition also claims that early leaders of the church, perhaps in the early second century, claimed a direct relationship with Jesus's family, through Joseph, husband of Mary. The claim can't be proven, but we do know that early Christians did give a special role to Jesus's relatives.

Recently, scholar Joseph Amar examined this Jewish context in an important article published in the *Times Literary Supplement* (October 3, 2014) under the title "A Shared Voice: When Jews and Christians Drank from the Same Wells." Because it is paywall-protected, I will summarize its conclusions here.

Amar noted how closely Mesopotamian Christians resembled not just sectarian Judaism in general, but specifically the world of the Essenes and the Dead Sea Scrolls. "Like the Qumran sectarians, they used the word 'holiness,' – *qadishutha* in Aramaic – as the technical term for their practice of celibacy. And like the 'Men of Holiness' at Qumran, they took vows that spoke of an impending battle between good and evil. " A direct link between the community that produced the scrolls and the Christians of Mesopotamia seemed to be the only way to account for such explicit parallels."

Amar's main theme concerns the Psalms Scroll found at Qumran, which includes psalms not otherwise known in the West, either to Jews or Christians. However, amazingly, the Mesopotamian Christian church had continued to copy and use five of these "lost" psalms throughout the Middle Ages, and beyond, as Ps. 151-55.

Amar concludes, "The extra-canonical psalms preserved for centuries by Syriac Christians, and discovered only in 1956 at Qumran, are the echo of a long-silenced voice once shared by Jews and Christians – a voice that is only now being heard."

I will discuss this issue in later posts, but let us assume some kind of inheritance from sectarian Judaism into later Syriac Christianity. Early monasticism represents one area in which we might seek such a legacy. As is well known, monasticism commonly claims as its founder the Egyptian St. Anthony (reputedly, c.251-356 AD), and the institution certainly developed early in Egypt. But Syriac monasticism has quite separate, and equally ancient, roots.

In Western Syria at least, monasticism seems to have been an Egyptian import, probably in the early fourth century. Earlier origins, though, can be traced in eastern Syria, in Mesopotamia and Persia, where monks were living at least as early as Anthony's time, no later than the 280s. Anthony found his Syriac counterpart in Jacob of Nisibis, a bishop who attended the Council of Nicea.

This dating suggests an independent origin, as do many features of Syriac monastic life. Syrian monks were much fiercer than Egyptian in their asceticism and their contempt for the body – characteristics probably recalled in Islamic portraits of Jesus as a very rigorous hermit. In some

accounts, Syriac monks so hated and despised the world that they reputedly sought out martyrdom and group suicide.

Many years ago, scholar Arthur Vööbus stressed the very early origins of Mesopotamian monasticism, which he directly traced to Manichaean influence. Mani's movement was flourishing in the mid-third century, and the prophet himself died around 270. Mani's critics attacked the Indian influences in his thought, and Vööbus took these charges seriously, suggesting that monasticism here might have been a spiritual offshoot of Indian patterns.

Later historians like H.J.W. Drijvers discount these Manichaean analogies. In light of what we now know, moreover, we would rather look to Jewish traditions. In Egypt, monasticism emerged in a landscape that had once been home to a Jewish contemplative sect called the *Therapeutae*, who have often been compared to later Christian monks. Scholars have long speculated about possible linkages between the two movements.

Perhaps we can find similar continuities in Mesopotamia. Like Manichaeanism, Mesopotamian Christianity emerged alongside several Jewish-Christian sects, some of which clearly did hark back to predecessors at Qumran. As I will show, some of these sectaries were even known as "Essenes." Vööbus himself notes that ascetics described themselves as sons (or daughters) of the Covenant, *qeiama*, a usage that takes us right back to Qumran. And as Amar notes, so does the obsession with concepts like *qaddisha* and *qaddishutha* – "holy" and "holiness," usually in the context of celibacy.

Now, the chronology here raises real problems. Qumran fell during the Jewish War of 66-73 AD, leaving a clear two centuries before we see unambiguous evidence for Syriac monks. But let me just raise the possibility here.

More shortly.

For an unexpected and quite surprising sidelight on these topics, see the recent book by Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge University Press, 2013). Siegal notes "striking parallels and connections between Christian monastic texts (the *Apophthegmata Patrum* or 'The Sayings of the Desert Fathers') and Babylonian Talmudic traditions …. The shared literary elements in the literatures of these two elite religious communities sheds new light on the surprisingly inclusive nature of the Talmudic corpora and on the non-polemical nature of elite Jewish-Christian literary relations in late antique Persia."

Babylonian Baptists

December 12, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
3 Comments

I have been posting about the emergence of Christianity in Iraq/Mesopotamia, and its possible inheritance from sectarian Judaism.

Other continuities from the older Jewish world lay beyond the realms of orthodox Christianity, and these likewise tell us much about the importance of those Mesopotamian lands.

During the third century, Mani founded a Dualist-Gnostic religion that drew on Christianity as well as Zoroastrianism and Buddhism, and his Manichaean faith endured through the end of the Middle Ages. In modern times, scholars have been able to trace Mani's origins within that Jewish Babylonian world.

Mani, we now know, was born near Seleucia-Ctesiphon around 216. He had many dealings with the Persian royal court at Ctesiphon, before his eventual martyrdom at the Persian city of Gundeshapur in 270. Mani's mother was Parthian, but his father, Patik, belonged to a very significant group called the Elchasaites.

This name takes us back to very early forms of Jewish-Christian belief. In the early third century, Western writers like Hippolytus of Rome report stories of a heretical thinker called Elchasai, who lived in the early second century. Reputedly, he was a Parthian. Elchasai reported a vision he had experienced of the Son of God, a titanic being many miles tall, who had revealed to him a heavenly book. Among other teachings, Elchasai advocated a special baptism for the remission of sins. He also urged obedience to the Mosaic Law, Sabbath observance, and circumcision. This baptist sect was related to the Jewish-Christian Ebionites, and also, possibly, to the Jewish Essenes.

The fourth century writer Epiphanius of Salamis discusses Elchasai in the context of a group of Jewish and Jewish-Christian sects, including Nazareans, Ossaeans (?Essenes) and Sampsaeans. He is by no means the world's most reliable writer, but he implies that Elchasai joined the Ossaean sect, which lived around the Dead Sea, before writing his famous book by revelation.

Well, that requires a number of jumps of reasoning, but we might just be talking about a linkage from the Essenes through Elchasai, and on through the Manichaean faith, which in its day was a great transcontinental religion.

Scholars have speculated for many years over the possible connections of the Elchasaites, to whom Albert Henrichs gives the delectable name of the "Babylonian Baptists." They might be connected with the Gnostic-Dualist sect of the Mandaeans that still survives in southern Iraq, and which claims a special inheritance from John the Baptist. Arguably, both Mandaeans and Elchasaites really were descended from followers of John the Baptist who rejected Jesus's message.

For present purposes, though, what is interesting is where we find this Elchasaite movement, which was clearly rooted in Jewish and Palestinian tradition. Like that other sectarian Jewish movement, the mainstream Christians, the Elchasaites originated in Palestine, but they decisively moved eastwards, to establish a major base of operations in Mesopotamia.

Like the Christians, the Manichaeans used their Iraqi foothold to expand throughout Asia.

Returning briefly to the Mandaeans, I just want to echo a point here that is made by scholar James McGrath who says, absolutely correctly, that most non-specialists vastly underestimate their importance. You can read his argument in full, but as he says,

Imagine that someone today unearthed previously unknown scrolls, written in a dialect of Aramaic, and in a unique alphabet, reflecting the beliefs and practices of a Gnostic religious group. That alone would suffice to make them headline news. But imagine if, on further investigation, the texts had other interesting characteristics. Like other Gnostic texts, they mentioned Biblical characters – but while these texts appreciate John the Baptist, they regard Jesus negatively. And imagine if, seeking the origin of those texts, it turned out that the texts were connected not with an extinct religious group, but one that still exists in small isolated communities in Iraq and Iran. Their rituals could then be observed, allowing us to understand the texts in ways that might otherwise be impossible – as well as their religious rituals in the present day being of interest in their own right. All of this would result in sensational headlines, worldwide media attention, and a concerted scholarly effort to study and make sense of the data.

Well, we didn't just unearth them, we have known about the Mandaeans for over a century – but every other word of this passage is exactly right. Why don't we focus more on this amazing group?

One excellent study of these various movements is John C. Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996). Now we also have Dylan M. Burns's *Apocalypse of the Alien God* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), which I will be discussing shortly.

Gerard P. Luttikhuizen summarizes what can reliably be said about the Elchasaites in *The Revelation of Elchasai* (Mohr Siebeck, 1985).

Seth and the Alien God

December 15, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

The origins of Gnosticism are normally discussed in terms of debates within Christianity. However, one richly informative conflict occurred beyond the familiar realm of church history.

One of the great minds of Late Antiquity was the Egyptian-born philosopher Plotinus, the leading figure of Neoplatonism, and a younger contemporary of Origen. Around the year 263, in Rome, Plotinus engaged in a furious debate with some Gnostic thinkers. Although the two sides shared many assumptions and terminology, Plotinus condemned his enemies for what he saw as their gross misunderstanding of Platonic philosophy. Among other complaints, he warned that their radical elitism would lead them into misconduct and immorality. Effectively, he expelled these Gnostics from the mainstream philosophical world of the time, after a long period in which Platonists and Gnostics had coexisted and debated together.

That story is quite well known, but recent work has shed major light on just who these Gnostics were. I am referring to Dylan M. Burns's excellent recent book *Apocalypse of the Alien God: Platonism and the Exile of Sethian Gnosticism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014). This ambitious and wide-ranging work identifies Plotinus's Gnostic foes as Sethians.

The best evidence comes from the philosopher Porphyry, whose *Life of Plotinus* records that "there were in his [Plotinus's] time many others, Christians, in particular heretics who had set out from the ancient philosophy, men belonging to the schools of Adelphius and Aculinus . . . who produced revelations of Zoroaster and Zostrianos and Nicotheus and Allogenes and Messos." Burns notes that these "revelations," *apokalypseis*, sound very much like the "Apocalypses," we know from the Nag Hammadi library, including works we know as Zostrianos and Allogenes.

Sethians followed Seth, brother of Cain and Abel. Sethian writings now known include the Gospel of Judas, Apocalypse of Adam, Apocryphon of John, the Trimorphic Protennoia, the Coptic Gospel of the Egyptians, the Three Steles of Seth, and the Zostrianos and Allogenes already mentioned. As the book's jacket description summarizes Burns's view of Sethian literature, **"**Blending state-of-the-art Greek metaphysics and ecstatic Jewish mysticism, these texts describe techniques for entering celestial realms, participating in the angelic liturgy, confronting the transcendent God, and even becoming a divine being oneself. They also describe the revelation of an alien God to his elect, a race of 'foreigners' under the protection of the patriarch Seth, whose interventions will ultimately culminate in the end of the world."

Sethian mythology described an Unknown God, who emanated a series of paired spiritual beings or Aeons, all of whom together constitute the Fullness, the Pleroma. Without approval, the Aeon Sophia (Wisdom) then imitates the highest God by emanating a lesser being, who proves to be the flawed Ialdabaoth. This is the Demiurge, the Creator of the material universe, who is identified with the God of the Old Testament. He is served by lesser Rulers or Archons. The story of Fall and ruin culminates with the creation of Adam and Eve. Because of their interest in the Serpent in Eden, some related movements are known as Ophites, followers of the Snake. (The system is also described by the Church Father Irenaeus in *Adversus Haereses*, 1.30). In some variants of the tradition, Jesus was an incarnation of Seth.

Far from being pagan, as some scholars once imagined, Sethians definitely belonged on the Jewish-Christian continuum. "This Sethian literature emerged along the fault lines between Judaism and Christianity, drew on traditions known to scholars from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Enochic texts, and ultimately catalyzed the rivalry of Platonism with Christianity." Several such works were "deeply conversant with advanced Platonic metaphysics" (3) while others were more firmly rooted in a Judaeo-Christian tradition.

Burns neatly summarizes his argument in his Chapter Seven, "Between Judaism, Christianity and Neoplatonism" (pp 140-59), which tries to locate Sethian origins. Although he dismisses "the old red herring of pre-Christian Gnosticism," Burns sees strong analogies between Sethian practices and beliefs and those of sectarian Judaism. These linkages are apparent in the Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Hekhalot* or "Palace" literature, accounts of ascents into heavenly palaces. (The *Hekhalot* literature has been characterized as "Jewish Gnosticism," although its works are not easy to date). Meanwhile, the Dead Sea Scrolls often refer to angels, heaven and "knowledge," ideas very familiar from later Gnosticism. Underlying both genres we find the legacy of Enoch, that pioneer voyager in the heavenly realms, whose books tell us so much about the various ranks of angels. Some scholars have also traced affinities between Enochic literature, especially 2 Enoch, and Sethian works like *Zostrianos*.

He also draws extensive analogies with the Mesopotamian Christian and Gnostic material I have been discussing recently. I will describe these in my next post.

Among many acute observations, Burns draws one telling conclusion: "Despite the insistence of our modern sense of Judaism and Christianity, the ancient world birthed movements that do not fit scholars' categories of these terms but rather fall between and beyond them, without necessarily belonging to contemporary Greco-Roman culture either."

On a trivia point, I was amused to see Sethian mythology revived in the recent film of *Noah*, which distinguishes between the noble race of Seth and the evil descendants of Cain. Not that *Noah* was the single worst film of modern times. Not while we have *Exodus*.

Sons of Light and Sons of Seth

December 19, 2014 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I discussed Dylan M. Burns's book *Apocalypse of the Alien God,* an account of the influential early Gnostic sect called Sethians. Burns's arguments resonated because of work I have been doing recently on the origins of Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, and the influence of the sectarian Judaism we know from Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Chronologically, those ideas originated in the late third or early second century BC, while the Qumran community survived until the Jewish Wars of the 60s AD. They thus span the early years of Christianity. Some scholars believe that we can see the legacy of this tradition in the early stages of Mesopotamian Christianity. Other memories survive in Jewish-Christian baptismal sects like the Elchasaites of the second century AD – the "Babylonian Baptists" – and the Dualist Manichaeans of the third. (I stress the "some scholars" as the matter of linkages is far from settled).

Burns likewise traces that sectarian Jewish heritage into the Sethians, and thus the mainstream of what becomes Gnosticism. "Like those of the Jewish-Christian Elchasaites and the Manichaeans, the Sethian tradition appears to have drawn from a common well of Jewish priestly lore glimpsed in the Dead Sea scrolls and *Hekhalot* literature. It was inspired by Jewish, apocalyptic texts and built a salvation history around multiple descents of the primeval ancestor Seth."

Repeatedly, he notes parallels between Sethians and Manichaeans, concluding that "some kind of genetic relationship between Sethianism and Manichaeism is all but certain." Just how and where this connection might have occurred is not obvious, but he plausibly suggests that "the relationship between Sethianism and Manichaeism is best explained by a common background in Syro-Mesopotamian Jewish baptismal groups, [so that] Sethian literature itself is probably a product of such a group, perhaps one like the community of Mani, either belonging to or resembling the Elchasaites." In fact, says Burns, "All this – baptismal community, Encratism, deep interest in Jewish lore, belief in reincarnation, and a veneration of Jesus as one of many incarnations of the

savior – points to a community like the one in which Mani was born and raised." (Encratism is the profound hostility to the material world that leads believers to eschew meat-eating and sexual activity).

In short, Sethianism "emerged from the borderlines between Judaism and Christianity, drawing on Christological and eschatological traditions associated with groups scholars today call Jewish-Christian, together with a wealth of Jewish apocryphal lore." Despite those eastern origins, Sethians strove to present their message in the most sophisticated philosophical language of the day, namely, Platonism.

As I hope I have made clear, I found Burns's book rewarding and convincing, not to mention amazingly succinct. Personally, I would also be interested in following up more thoroughly on some of the leads he suggests:

**Light From the East*?

Burns traces the Sethians eastwards, into Syro-Mesopotamia, and even plays with the idea that the tradition might have had its start in the Syrian city of Apamaea, where Platonic, Elchasaite, Gnostic and Jewish ideas intersected. He definitely links the Sethians to groups from that region, including the Elchasaites, Manichaeans and (even) Mandaeans. That is counter-intuitive, in that so much of the work on Gnosticism is so rooted in Egypt. Eusebius offers a clear tradition from the first century onwards, and he does mention Syria, but only in the context of Antioch, rather than points further east. Most of his emphasis is strongly Egyptian, focused on figures like Basilides, Carpocrates and Valentinus. Most of the great manuscript finds have likewise been in Egypt, and commonly in the Coptic language. Of course, the accident of where a text is discovered says nothing about where it originated, but scholars do tend to stress Alexandria as a crucible of Gnostic thought.

Much modern research on Gnostic origins, though, tells us always to look east and north-east from Palestine, as well as west. The Euphrates and Tigris matter just as much as the Nile.

While stressing those local contexts, though, we should never forget the "globalized" nature of learning and of religious thought in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. People traveled widely, and so did texts and ideas. Plotinus himself was born in Egypt, but had his greatest influence in Rome itself, and it was there he encountered the Sethians. Speaking of people who traveled, Plotinus was a near-contemporary of Mani, who wandered from Mesopotamia through Persia and India

**Essenes?*

One minor oddity about Burns's book is that the Essenes scarcely feature (he does make much use of the Dead Sea Scrolls). The book's whole structure argues for continuity between sectarian Judaism of the last century or so BC into the Syro-Mesopotamian worlds of the first two centuries AD. But surely that continuity extended to people and even organized groups, rather than just texts?

Scholars argue at length about the relationship between the Essenes and the Qumran sect, the "Sons of Light," but some kind of relationship is virtually certain. We also know that, in the late Second Temple era, Essenes were one of the three main political-religious parties in Palestine, alongside Sadducees and Pharisees. So what happened to the Essenes after the Jewish Revolt? The continuities

with those Mesopotamian groups are suggestive, to say the least. As I have written elsewhere, the early Mesopotamian church inherited some obscure Jewish writings otherwise known only from Qumran.

Now, these linkages are not perfect. Sethian literature seems to denounce water baptism, although we are not sure about the nature of their own initiation ritual of Five Seals, and whether that was in fact baptismal in nature. But all the other continuities do suggest that people and ideas linked to Qumran moved decisively eastwards, and the late first century AD would have been the obvious time to do so. Can we speculate about Essene migrations?

On related themes, see John C. Reeves, *Heralds of that Good Realm: Syro-Mesopotamian Gnosis and Jewish Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

**Patriarchs*?

Briefly, why Seth?

As I have discussed before, the Second Temple period sees a surging interest in Biblical figures as the subjects for apocryphal and pseudepigraphical writings, some of which focus on distinctively Jewish subjects like Moses, Isaiah and the Twelve Patriarchs. A very large amount of this literature, though, is firmly based in the pre-Flood period, the age from Adam through Noah, with Adam's own family as a theme of special interest. Enoch also belongs to this archaic period. The veneration of Seth exactly fits this approach.

Two speculative thoughts occur as to this concentration on earliest antiquity. One is that it looks beyond and before the covenants with Abraham and Moses. Perhaps radical reformers were seeking an entirely reconstructed Judaism, thoroughly purged of the abuses and tyrannies associated with the political/religious elites of the day.

Also, those earlier stories by definition apply to the entire human race, not just to the descendant of Abraham, so that any lessons would apply equally to all human cultures, and all humanity. Such a message would be uniquely appropriate for the kind of globalized world that the Jews faced in the Persian period, but even more so for the Hellenistic and Roman eras. Rather like St. Paul's interpretations of Jesus, these were attempts to frame the religious message in universal terms. Like Paul's writings also, they would have a special appeal for Gentiles sympathetic to Judaism.

More on Gnostic origins shortly.

Mani and the Persian Kings

January 25, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I have been reading an excellent new scholarly book on the Manichaean religion: Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn and Paul Dilley, *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*: *Studies on the Chester Beatty*

Kephalaia Codex (Brill 2015). This post is not intended as a serious academic review, but rather as a series of thoughts and impressions that this fine book provokes. I will divide my comments into two separate posts.

It is astonishing that scholars of religion refer so little to the Manichaean faith, which in its day – roughly from the third century AD through the fourteenth century – was a fully fledged world religion, which interacted with Christianity, Buddhism, Islam, Zoroastrianism and Judaism. At various times, its adherents could be found across the whole of Eurasia, from France to China. It also created a substantial body of scriptures and commentaries, most of which are now lost.

Manichaeanism (Manichaeism) is, I believe, the *only* example of a world religion that has arisen and then vanished entirely, seemingly without trace. (Although Zoroastrianism is much diminished, it does survive in scattered remnants). Bear that in mind the next time someone says that "You can't kill an idea." That unique quality in itself makes the faith eminently worth studying. Of course, there are fine Manichaean specialists – three of them wrote this book – but you can still read plenty of books on early and medieval Christianity or Islam that manage to ignore the presence of this powerful and sometimes threatening neighbor.

For centuries, our knowledge of Mani's faith was mainly dependent on comments in other rival traditions, which naturally tended to be hostile. In the 1930s, though, that situation was revolutionized by the amazing discovery of a collection of codices that told the Manichaean story in the words of believers themselves. Other texts have subsequently been found in Greek, Iranian and Uighur, reminding us of the extraordinary spread of the faith. Some of the most important discoveries have been made in Western China, in oasis settlements connected to the Silk Road.

The find of this collection, the Medinet Madi library, reminds us of how extraordinarily lucky we have been with such discoveries in modern times. We think for instance of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi library, but in fact ancient manuscripts have turned up in amazing profusion – look at the records of the Cairo Genizah, which have transformed our knowledge of medieval Jewish history. For a variety of reasons, Egypt is especially productive in such treasure troves, and the present document is no exception.

Although Mani himself was a Mesopotamian, who lived under the rule of the Persian Empire, he had followers in Egypt, who translated his sacred words into Coptic. In that form, the collections turned up in the 1920s near ancient Terenouthis. The collection would have been concealed not long after the Nag Hammadi library of Gnostic texts, and presumably for the same reason. The new Christian regime in Egypt was increasingly intolerant even of Christian heretics, and Manichaeans were far beyond the pale of decency. Egyptian monks tended to resort to vigilante violence to seek out and destroy such abhorrent scriptures.

In modern times, the texts returned to the light of day (a nice Manichaean phrase, incidentally). As W. H. C. Frend writes, "Eventually, seven complete works were recovered, which a native had originally found in a waterlogged chest in the rubble of a Roman house in a village in the Fayum, and brought with him into Cairo. Here were not only some translations of the works of Mani himself, but more interesting, the hymns and psalms sung by his humble followers in Egypt. For the first time the impact of this sad dualistic religion of resignation and fatalism on the ordinary people of the Roman Empire was revealed." I like Frend's remark that the saga of this discovery "belongs

almost to the realm of science fiction"! When the library reached the hands of modern-day antiquities dealers, they divided it up in order to maximize profits. Some of the documents found their way to Berlin, others to Dublin's Chester Beatty Library. Not surprisingly, the disasters of the 1940s took their toll on the Berlin materials, some of which are now lost.

In full, the whole collection consisted of several codices – probably seven – which together comprised an essential library for the Manichaean "church":

-The *Chapters [Kephalaia] of the Teacher*

-Mani's *Epistles*

-the *Acts*, a history of the church

-the *Psalm-Book*

-a collection of *Homilies*

-the *Synaxeis of the Living Gospel*

-The *Chapters [Kephalaia] of the Wisdom of my Lord Manichaios*

Incidentally, these codices represent some of the largest books known from antiquity.

Parts of this material have been published through the years, and in 1995, Iain Gardner published *The Kephalaia of the Teacher*, which included a text with translation and commentary. (See also Iain Gardner and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds., *Manichaean Texts from the Roman Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2004.) The present book, though, focuses on the last-named of these works, the *Chapters [Kephalaia] of the Wisdom of my Lord Manichaios*. This stellar team of authors, Gardner, BeDuhn and Dilley, is now working on a similar edition of that text.

Almost certainly, the text was written in Syriac, before being translated into Coptic around 400. Its main focus is the life and historical role of Mani himself, the messianic prophet who died in 270. The text was collected by one or more of his faithful disciples, who became fervent evangelists for his teachings.

In 1969, Egypt again produced a remarkable find in what became known as the Cologne Mani Codex, discovered near Asyut (Lycopolis). This supplied critical new biographical background about Mani and his background. Together with the Medinet Madi texts, it also showed the utter falsehood of the older view that Mani's faith was a straightforward Christian or Gnostic heresy.

Tomorrow, I will be describing some major themes that emerge from this evocative material.

Mani the Prophet

January 26, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

There is an excellent new contribution to the literature on the Manichaean religion: Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn and Paul Dilley, *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*: *Studies on the Chester Beatty Kephalaia Codex* (Brill 2015). Yesterday, I described the rediscovered ancient texts on which this book is based.

Although this is a rich and wide-ranging collection, several points strike me. One is the sheer geographical range of the events described, the world in which Mani and his immediate followers moved. As I have described, Mani came out of a movement with Jewish-Christian roots, which looked back to Palestinian events and trends. Yet we hear of him for instance at the Persian court, with remarkably good access to the great king Shapur I (240-270). Beyond that, he was active distant eastern corners of the Persian Sassanid empire, at Turan in modern Baluchistan. And of course, the actual manuscript we are dealing with was found in Egypt.

Anyone approaching the "new" Manichaean material for the first time must be struck by this global quality, which makes nonsense of any assumptions we may have about dividing the ancient world into neat compartments. Over here, we might think, we have the Mediterranean role of Greece and Rome, while over in this far corner lies China, and there is India: and how sad that those great civilizations never interacted! But of course they did.

Mani grew up in a Mesopotamia long exposed to Zoroastrian influence from the east, but which was also at the time becoming the world's intellectual center of Judaism. Christianity was very strong, with powerful Jewish-Christian currents. He saw himself as the culmination of several earlier faiths. He was the heir of Jesus and Zoroaster, but also of the Buddha, and his disciples engaged as much with Buddhists as with Christians. Through the early Middle Ages, across Central Asia, Manichaean missionaries competed fiercely with Christians of the Church of the East, and with Buddhists (and, later, Muslims).

So what kind of literature was the Kephalaia, into what genre did it fall? As Paul Dilley shows, the dialogues with their question-and-answer formats could equally well be read in very different ways – "as a modified example of Greco-Roman *erotapokrisis*, Iranian *frashna* or Buddhist sutra." For our purposes, the technical terms don't matter, but think of the implications – that this movement was writing in ways intelligible to civilized people from the Ganges to the Tiber. Hardly less open to universal translation was the movement's use of Wisdom, a concept deeply rooted in Judaism and early Christianity. In the same vein, Jason BeDuhn offers a mind-stretching comparison between the Kephalaia materials found in Egypt and the comparable texts from Turfan, in Western China.

Following on from this point about geography is the overwhelming power of Buddhist ideas and movement's on Mani's self-concept. While presenting himself as the heir to Jesus, he and his followers portrayed him as a new Buddha, indeed the messianic figure of Maitreya (pp.72-74).

Another of Dilley's points that I found helpful. Although the Manichaean enterprise was transcontinental, its spiritual homeland (so to speak) was in the borderlands between the Roman and Persian empires, the Syro-Mesopotamian lands that today comprise the modern countries of Syria and Iraq (insofar as those two nations still exist in unified form as of 2015). At the outer limits of

this border country were the two great cities of Antioch and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, where so much of the action occurs both in Late Roman and Sassanid history (p.49). Studied in isolation, the one city without the other, we lose so much of the story – political, cultural and spiritual. It is the interplay between the two centers that is critical.

Here's a suggestion. If anyone ever wrote a dual biography of these two cities between, say, 100 and 600 AD, they would have a wonderful book on their hands. Readers would certainly gain a far greater understanding not just of Manichaeanism but also of Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism and Islam.

I am still wrestling with the book's important final chapter, in which Jason BeDuhn discusses "Mani and the Crystallization of the Concept of 'Religion' in Third Century Iran" (247-75). Beyond doubt, our modern definition of "a religion" would have been very difficult to explain to (for instance) early Romans or Greeks, but that situation changed in Late Antiquity. BeDuhn shows that in Mani's time, not only had the concept come into existence, but that this dramatic change was shaped by the growing interaction of global faiths – with Buddhism, arguably, as "the first religion" in anything like the modern sense. Mani was self-consciously striving to go beyond even those categories to create a world religion that absorbed and superseded all its competitors.

If he does not actually say that Mani Invented Religion (!) then BeDuhn is exploring potent ideas.

As I hope I have made clear, this is a very rewarding book.

THE EMPIRE IN THE MIRROR

March 13, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
3 Comments

Whether or not we like the fact, the fate of great religions is often shaped by political factors, by the rise and fall of empires and Great Powers. Just look for instance at the distribution of those thriving Catholic and Anglican churches across the former imperial possessions in Africa. When we write Christian history, though, one empire in particular often escapes our attention, and it provides a vast hole in the story.

Once upon a time, in the ancient world, there was a vast empire. Although it was at times deeply hostile to Christians, which it actively sought to suppress or exterminate, the fact of that empire's existence provided an essential framework for Christian expansion. Christian communities flourished in the empire's booming cities, which they made the seats of church organization. They also benefited from the stability and peace that the empire imposed, and the vast network of roads and sea communications that it sustained, not to mention its common languages. Where the empire stretched, there followed the churches. Ultimately, the empire faded and died, but the churches that had formed in that matrix survived and flourished, outlasting the empire for many centuries.

Such a phenomenon is of course very familiar in the Western world, which emerged on the ruins of the Roman Empire. As Thomas Hobbes famously remarked, "And if a man consider the original of

this great ecclesiastical dominion, he will easily perceive that the papacy is no other than the ghost of the deceased Roman Empire, sitting crowned upon the grave thereof: for so did the papacy start up on a sudden out of the ruins of that heathen power." But in this instance, I am not speaking of the Roman Empire, but of the vast eastern superpower that was its counterpart and deadly rival: the Sassanid realm of Greater Persia. Without that other empire – that empire in the mirror – the story of Christian expansion to the east, as well as the west, is incomprehensible.

Although the Sassanid Empire attracts plenty of fine scholars, it is much more difficult to find general histories of that state than the Roman Empire. Yet its achievements were deeply impressive. The dynasty lasted from 224 to 651, and stretched far beyond what we think of today as Iran, and deep into Central Asia. That was so critical because the Sassanids linked directly to the Silk Route, the world's most important commercial artery at that time, and a crucial cultural channel, stretching from Syria to China. The Sassanid capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris was in its day one of the world's greatest cities, and the direct precursor of later Baghdad.

Also important for our story, Sassanid Persia fought deadly wars with the Roman Empire, and in the early seventh century came within an ace of utterly destroying the Eastern Roman world. Without those wars, Islam could never have gained the victories it later did.

The story of Christianity in the East also depends on Sassanid affairs. Yes, anti-Christian persecutions could be savage, under a realm that strictly followed the Zoroastrian faith. But Christians also used the imperial framework to expand into Central Asia, through what we now call Afghanistan and the "stans" of Central Asia, and into the Silk Route itself. Just look for instance at a map of the metropolitan sees of the vast Church of the East, the so-called Nestorians. Is that not a ghost of the Sassanid world?

I'll be posting more about this lost dimension of Christian history, and the empire that we seem to have forgotten so completely.

The Reality of Persecution

February 6, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
8 Comments

Rome was not the only empire in antiquity, nor the only one with a sizable Christian population.

I stress that repeatedly because of the number of times we read about Christian engagement with the secular world, which seems to be defined as the Roman Empire. In fact, the Persian Empire also had plenty of Christians, and any rounded account of Christian history needs to take them into account. Doing so can radically change our perceptions of that history.

As a case in point, I cite Candida Moss's widely-publicized 2013 book *The Myth of Persecution*, which dismisses as largely mythical the familiar Christian narrative of extensive persecution and martyrdom in the early church. No, she says, persecution was rare and infrequent, and when it did occur, it was

not for specifically religious motives: rather, Christians suffered for their political positions. Christians simply blew up the stories that did occur for their own propagandist purposes.

Let me say right off that I admire much of Moss's work enormously. Her columns at CNN and elsewhere are smart and valuable: see for instance her recent attack on claims made about the discovery of an ancient gospel in an Egyptian mummy mask. Having said that, I will critique her work on persecution.

I disagree with her book on many points, but for the sake of argument, let us accept that every word in it is correct. Even so, her account of the secular sphere wholly concerns the *Roman* world, and I see no reference in the book to Persia, where martyrdom and anti-Christian persecution undoubtedly did occur, on a vast and horrendous scale. Surely, that fact gravely undermines her argument?

From 224 through 651, Persia was ruled by the Sassanid dynasty. Apart from our modern concept of Persia/Iran, their empire stretched deep into Central Asia and usually incorporated much of what would call Pakistan and Iraq. Christians were numerous in its Western territories, and in the borderlands between the Persian and Roman empires, in lands that we know as Syria and eastern Turkey. Persia also had a state religion in the form of the Zoroastrian faith, which like Christianity had its various sects and denominations.

The Persian regime thus had a natural bias against minority faiths, far more so than did the Roman Empire, where the official emperor cult made minimal demands on subjects. Persecution was all the more likely when the Persian regime saw Christians as potential allies of Rome, which tolerated Christianity in 313 and made it the empire's official faith in 380. Anti-Christian persecutions in the Persian Empire began in the late third century, and became ferociously intense from the fourth century onwards. Between 320 and 620, Rome and Persia were locked in a deadly Superpower confrontation, in which Cold War conditions sporadically erupted into open conflict. Over time, these wars became increasingly religious in nature, with horrible consequence for Persia's Christian subjects.

As in Rome, certain eras and particular rulers stand out as the most notorious. If Western Christians loathed the name of Diocletian, their eastern counterparts trembled at the memory of Shapur II, who ruled (incredibly) from 309 through 379. On his era, and on so much else, I draw on the wonderful *Encyclopedia Iranica*, which is freely available online.

I quote Andrew Walls:

"The persecutions under Decius and Diocletian are a well-known feature of the story of Christianity of the Roman Empire; the Christians of the Persian Empire knew still fiercer, and more sustained, pressure. In one forty-year period of the fourth century, no less than 16,000 Christians were put to death by the Persian emperor Sapor [Shapur] II. The cause for this particularly savage attack on Christians was a direct response to the increasing favor shown by Constantine to Christians."

The "sixteen thousand" figure is from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen, ii 14. I stress that the number is credible, and is not just a random big statistic grasped out of the air to create shock and

awe. It is based on calculations by the very well-connected and well-informed Christians of Edessa, who had excellent relations with the persecuted communities.

Bloody persecutions continued into the fifth century, and sporadically beyond.

Not just were these mass persecutions on exactly the lines that Candida Moss dismisses as mythical in the West, but they were very specifically religious, undertaken by adherents of Religion X because of its theologically motivated loathing of Religion Y. Of course politics also played its role in driving hatred, but those factors cannot be separated from religious. Zoroastrians had a firm belief in a Devil or Devil-like figure, and saw Christians as his earthly servants.

Also as in the West, martyrdom and persecution were fundamental to the Christian world-view, to the self-concept of believers and their perception of the faith. The Syriac *Acts of the Persian Martyrs* were cherished for centuries. There is an excellent recent discussion of this process of commemoration in Philip Wood's important study *The Chronicle of Seert: Christian Historical Imagination in Late Antique Iraq* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

Looking eastwards, then, must make us ask: what "myth" of persecution?

Shapur's Great Persecution

February 8, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I posted on the topic of early Christian martyrdom, arguing that the phenomenon was as widespread as Christian writers claimed, and that it truly was driven by religious motives. That was especially true in the Persian Empire.

One of the great church historians of antiquity was Sozomen, who was born near Gaza, in Palestine, around the year 400. His name, incidentally, translates roughly to "Being Saved," in itself a concise statement of Christian faith. In his great *Ecclesiastical History*, Sozomen wrote at length about the church within the Persian realm, and much of this account concerns persecution and martyrdom. As Sozomen lived within a Christian empire, while Christians were still sporadically persecuted in Persia, we would not expect his coverage to be terribly even-handed. That is especially true because Rome and Persia were locked in a superpower struggle that often produced ruinous wars. To take a modern analogy, American evangelicals in the 1950s were not too objective on the subject of Soviet Communism. Moreover, much of what Sozomen wrote has to be interpreted in the light of the very substantial scholarship that we now have both on Syriac and Persian sources.

Having said that, Sozomen was not far removed from the events he was describing, either in time or space, and he would have heard many of the details first hand from Christian travelers and exiles. He certainly had access to great Christian cities like Edessa, which carefully preserved the records of eastern churches and their sufferings.

Sozomen describes the rapid growth of Christaintiy within the Persian Empire in the early fourth century. The more Christianity grew, the more it disturbed the Zoroastrian hierarchy, as well as the Jews, who were well-established. Sozomen tells us in detail about the resulting persecutions under King Shapur II, from around 340. One key victim was Simeon bar Sabbae, the powerful bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the imperial capital (ii 9-10). First, the king imposed severe taxes on Christians:

"The churches were demolished, their vessels were deposited in the treasury, and Symeon was arrested as a traitor to the kingdom and the religion of the Persians. Thus the Magi, with the co-operation of the Jews, quickly destroyed the houses of prayer."

Symeon himself was arrested, and executed after refusing to worship the Sun in Zoroastrian style.

"On the same day a hundred other prisoners were ordered to be slain. Symeon beheld their execution, and last of all he was put to death. Amongst these victims were bishops, presbyters, and other clergy of different grades. As they were being led out to execution, the chief of the Magi approached them, and asked them whether they would preserve their lives by conforming to the religion of the king and by worshiping the sun. As none of them would comply with this condition, they were conducted to the place of execution, and the executioners applied themselves to the task of slaying these martyrs…. After the executioner had dispatched a hundred, Symeon himself was slain; and Abedechalaas and Anannias, two aged presbyters of his own church, who had been his fellow-prisoners, suffered with him."

The literature on the Persian persecutions stresses the concerns of the Zoroastrian priests, but Sozomen puts almost as much emphasis on Jewish rivals. He reports for instance how the Persian queen came to blame Symeon's sister Tarbula for her illness. She did this in response to Jewish charges "since she had embraced their sentiments, and lived in the observance of the Jewish rites, for she had great confidence in their veracity and in their attachment to herself."

Whatever the reason, Shapur's persecution then spread across the empire. He commanded that "Christians should not be slaughtered indiscriminately, but that the priests and teachers of the opinions should be slain, the Magi and Arch-Magi traversed the whole country of Persia, studiously maltreating the bishops and presbyters. They sought them especially in the country of Adiabene, a part of the Persian dominions, because it was wholly Christianized." (ii 12)

We then hear catalogues of bishops and clergy being martyred:

"Under this rule, an innumerable multitude of presbyters, deacons, monks, holy virgins, and others who served the churches and were set apart for its dogma, terminated their lives by martyrdom. The following are the names of the bishops, so far as I have been able to ascertain: Barbasymes, Paulus, Gaddiabes, Sabinus, Mareas, Mocius, John, Hormisdas, Papas, James, Romas, Maares, Agas, Bochres, Abdas, Abdiesus, John, Abramins, Agdelas, Sapores, Isaac, and Dausas. The latter had been made prisoner by the Persians, and brought from a place named Zabdæus.He died about this time in defense of the dogma; and Mareabdes, a chorepiscopus, and about two hundred and fifty of his clergy, who had also been captured by the Persians, suffered with him." (ii 13)

Sozomen concludes:

"I shall briefly state that the number of men and women whose names have been ascertained, and who were martyred at this period, have been computed to be sixteen thousand; while the multitude outside of these is beyond enumeration, and on this account to reckon off their names appeared difficult to the Persians and Syrians and to the inhabitants of Edessa, who have devoted much care to this matter." (ii 14)

And that, of course, was only one of the persecutions Sozomen records.

I really do wonder about the "myth of persecution."

I should just add that after my last column, I received a characteristically courteous and astute response from Candida Moss, which I will not reproduce here without her permission. I will however be pursuing these debates in future posts.

Importing Christianity

March 20, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

In the third century, Christianity spread into the Persian Empire, where it became a powerful presence. The means by which this auspicious event occurred are startling and even humbling for anyone who thinks in terms of deliberately planned missionary efforts. At least at first, many, perhaps most, of the Christians who found themselves under Persian rule really had no wish whatever to be there.

Man proposes, and God disposes.

I described the major Christian growth on the Empire's western borderlands, which divided the Persian and Roman realms. Very significant for religious history were the wars and conflicts that raged over these regions from the first century through the sixth, and which became still more fierce under the Sassanid empire (224-651 AD). War meant enslavement, deportation and population movement, which brought reluctant populations into new lands. Here, though, they introduced new faiths, often to the horror of their new masters. As I have described in the past, Christian slaves played a potent role in spreading the faith into Caucasian lands like Iberia and Georgia, part of what I call Daniel Syndrome. Later, borderlands adopted particular forms of faith to appeal to one superpower, and to seek help against its rival.

Once war broke out, it was usually fought in the same general areas, where Christianity was both very strong, and exceedingly diverse. In modern terms, this meant northern Iraq, eastern Syria, and especially eastern Turkey, with the holy city of Nisibis a pivotal prize. If you find a strictly current map of where the US and its allies are fighting ISIS, you get a pretty good idea of the landscape.

Ironically, the better the Persians did in war, the more territories and populations they gained in these disputed areas, and the greater the unwanted spread of Christianity into their own empire. If they gained a substantial Christian minority, they had only themselves to blame. It was not so much that Christianity came to the Persian Empire: the Empire came to them.

The main "culprit" for Christian expansion was king Shapur I, son of the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, Ardashir. Shapur's wars against the Romans raged through the 240s and 250s, culminating in his spectacular capture of the Roman Emperor Valerian. Briefly, Shapur even occupied Antioch itself. He conquered and deported many peoples, bringing them home to Persian soil.

One of the settlements he created would become very influential indeed. In the 260s, Shapur settled here many Roman prisoners he had taken during his successful war. A city emerged, bearing his name: Gundeshapur (Jundaisapur). I will be writing about this place in a future post, but in the fifth and sixth centuries it emerged as one of the greatest intellectual centers of the ancient world, almost a facsimile of a research university, with a special focus on medicine. Although it is difficult to disentangle truth from legend, Gundeshapur is often cited as a major influence on early Islamic learning and scholarship. And it was, par excellence, a Christian center, base of one of the metropolitan provinces of the Church of the East. Its Christian identity became even more marked when it became a refuge for scholars fleeing religious oppression in the Eastern Roman Empire.

Not surprisingly, then, by the late third century, the Persian Empire found itself with abundant Christians, drawn from a wide variety of sources and ethnic traditions.

I'll describe these populations in more detail shortly.

Useful readings on these matters include Jes Peter Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in Ehsan Yarshater , ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran Volume 3: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanid Periods, Part 2* (Cambridge University Press , 1983), 924-48. Also Michael H. Dodgeon and Samuel N. C. Lieu, eds., *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 226-363: A Documentary History* (Routledge, 2002); Geoffrey Greatrex and Samuel N. C. Lieu, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars AD 363-628* (Routledge, 2005); and Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge University Press, 2007). Christian Van Gorder has a valuable book on *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran* (Lexington 2010).

Persia's Christian Roots

March 13, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
5 Comments

I have been exploring the history of Christianity within the Persian Empire, a subject very well known to specialists working on that area, but less so to their counterparts who study the story in its "mainstream" (Mediterranean and European) forms. Before writing about this in any more detail, it's important to understand the geographical setting, which means locating some very famous

names. Geography may or may not be destiny; but it is very important indeed for the fate of religions.

Anyone even slightly familiar with the ancient world, or with the Old Testament, knows certain names of peoples, regions and great cities – Medes, Persian and Parthians, Susa and Persepolis. Actually placing them in relation to each other is quite a different matter. It matters enormously, though, because each of those regions was differently situated in relation to other nations and cultures. Some, like the Persians, looked west and south, towards Babylonia and the world of the "Persian" Gulf. Others, like the Parthians, never lost touch with Central Asia. At different times, different parts of the broader Persian world dominated, and that shifting emphasis gave a different political and cultural coloring to the empire's outlook.

For convenience, I refer to this older map of the Achaemenid Empire, describing the world of c.500BC. (Click on it for more detail). I will just focus on the few regions that would be significant in Christian history.

Assyria and Babylonia together comprehend modern Iraq. Going eastward, we find the west and south-west of what we today call Iran. In Iran's far south-west is the very ancient city of Susa, in Susiana (in the modern province of Khuzestan).

Just east of that, on the Persian Gulf, is the region of Persis (modern Fars), with its capital at Persepolis. This was the ceremonial capital of the Achaemenids, and Persis gave its name to the whole of "Persia." Going north, into the heart of modern Iran, we see the land of the Medes, Media. When the Bible talks about the Medes and Persians, these are the peoples referred to. Parthia, meanwhile, lies to the far north-east.

The Parthian (Arsacid) Empire flourished from 247 BC through 224 AD. It was then supplanted by the Sassanids, who prevailed from 224 through 651, when they were in turn conquered by the new force of Islam. The shift from the Parthians to the Sassanids also meant a move in the empire's center of gravity, from the north-east to the southern region of Persis/Fars. The Parthians had ruled from different capitals, including Seleucia-Ctesiphon in modern Iraq, but the Sassanids definitively chose that as their royal seat.

Early accounts of Christianity in this part of the world are suspect precisely because it was so strong and flourishing in later centuries, and there were so many church writers who were striving to make claims for their city or kingdom. We can, though, dig behind these competing claims to trace the geography of expansion with some confidence.

Christianity made its first impact in the distant western regions of what was then the Parthian Empire, in regions that today we place in northern Iraq or eastern Turkey. By the second century, the faith was well established in these borderlands between the two empires, in kingdoms like Osrhoene (with its capital at Edessa) and Adiabene (Arbela). It later gained a critical foothold in the Caucasus, in Armenia and Iberia. Sometimes Rome ruled all these lands, sometimes Persia prevailed, but most commonly, the empires shared the lands between them, while tolerating a network of buffer states.

As so often, Andrew Walls offers a concise summary that is both acute and provocative:

"The little buffer state of Osroene, on the Roman imperial frontier, was the early base of a remarkable Christian movement. In Edessa, its capital, are the remains of the oldest church building yet discovered, built at a time when no such thing was possible in the Roman Empire. Edessa, indeed, often does appear on maps of the early church. Unfortunately, it is usually at the eastern extremity of the map, yielding the idea that it represents the eastern extremity of a Christianity centered on the Mediterranean. If, however, we place Edessa at the western end of the map, and pigeonhole the Roman Empire for a while, we can observe a remarkable alternative Christian story. Early Christianity spread down the Euphrates valley until the majority of the population of northern Mesopotamia (i.e., modern Iraq) was Christian. It spread through the Arab buffer states …. It moved down to Yemen and was adopted by the royal house. It moved steadily into Iran proper, into the Zoroastrian heartland of Fars, and northward to the Caspian." (I take this from Walls's brilliant article, "Eusebius Tries Again," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 24(2000); 105-11).

As I'll show, the spread of Christianity into the Empire proper involved some real ironies. The harder the Persians fought against outside enemies, the more they found themselves, unwittingly and unwillingly, importing those alien ideas – including Christianity.

Making the Church of the East

March 23, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Christianity spread in the Persian Empire during the second and third centuries, when it became a major force, especially in western regions. Looking today at some of those early centers is multiply depressing, as they are today in the process of witnessing that ancient tradition being uprooted.

From the fifth century through the fourteenth, the Church of the East was a mighty presence in Global Christianity, which saw itself as equal or superior to the churches of Constantinople or Rome. Syriac scholars preserved many early documents and traditions, from which we can trace the most important early centers of the faith.

Christians originated among the Empire's large Jewish population, which was concentrated in Babylonia, as well as in frontier states like Adiabene. During the third century, Christian numbers were swelled by newly conquered populations deported into the Empire, much as the Jews had been brought to Babylonia many centuries before. Several major centers emerged, especially around the capital, Seleucia-Ctesiphon; in Adiabene (Arbela); and in Susiana, in what is now the south-western Iranian province of Khuzestan. By the start of the fourth century, monasticism was spreading rapidly in these eastern Christian lands.

Different Christian centers claimed precedence, usually citing real or invented historical traditions and apostolic connections. As for western centers like Rome, the direct association with imperial power proved irresistible, giving special prestige to Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Still, it had its rivals, especially Nisibis. By the early fifth century, we see what would become the church's classical structure of six great metropolitan provinces, chiefly concentrated in what we would call Iraq and south-west Iran. In order of precedence, they were:

-Seleucia-Ctesiphon, in Babylonia (Bet Aramaye);

-Gundeshapur (Bet Lapat), in Susiana/Bet-Huzaye;

-Nisibis, in Bet Arabaye;

-Perat de-Mayshan in Mesene/Mayshan, southern Iraq – later centered on Basra;

-Arbela, in Adiabene;

-Bet Garmai, near the modern city of Kirkuk.

A glance at the headlines will suggest how troubled some of these areas are today. Arbela/Irbil is the capital of the breakaway Kurdish state, which is locked in deadly conflict with ISIS. Kirkuk is the scene of regular battles between the two forces. Not long ago, this area was home to many Christians, many of whom have though fled. (The Kurds are Muslims of a tolerant nature, but the destruction wrought by war has been grim). Just last week, there have been appalling reports of the systematic destruction of ancient Christian shrines in these regions of northern Iraq. As one story notes, "A series of images also showed the total destruction of what appears to be the tomb of Mar Behnam, a fourth-century site built by the Assyrian king Senchareb and maintained by the Syriac Orthodox church, with nothing left in the wake except rubble. The fate of the nearby Mar Behnam monastery, built in the 12th century as a retreat for Christians to renew their faith, is unknown, said Patriarch Ignatius."

These six were not the only provinces even in the fifth century, when various church synods acknowledged believers and bishops further afield – for instance in Persis (Fars), with its bishop at Rewardashir. Also, more provinces and metropolitans were recognized in the sixth and seventh centuries as the church expanded into Central Asia and around the Indian Ocean. New metropolitans included Merv (Turkmensistan) and Herat (Afghanistan). The "Islands," meanwhile, comprised eastern Arabia and Bahrain, where many monasteries functioned. Those original six, though, remained at the church's heart for a thousand years.

In 410, the church declared itself an independent patriarchate, under the Primate Isaac. By the end of the century, the church was headed by the "Bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Katholikos and head over the bishops of all the Orient." In 762, the Katholikos followed the Caliph in moving to the new capital, of Baghdad.

Again, a major source has been Jes Peter Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," in Ehsan Yarshater , ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran Volume 3: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanid Periods, Part 2* (Cambridge University Press , 1983), 924-48. The same volume incidentally contains other valuable and highly relevant writing, including Jacob Neusner, "Jews in Iran," pp. 909-23; and G. Widengren, "Manichaeism and its Iranian Background," pp 965-90.

Another terrific source for this or any related matters is the online *Encylopedia Iranica.*

Nazarenes and Christians and Baptists

July 20, 2020 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

SPOILER ALERT: Despite my title, this blogpost is not about the modern-day Baptist denomination. These aren't the Baptists you're looking for. You can go about your business.

When we look at the early Christian world, we usually draw a straightforward line between Christians, Jews, and pagans. At the time, matters seemed more complicated, especially when we look beyond the strict confines of the Roman Empire, and some of the divisions that people drew should surprise us. I will here be drawing on an intriguing source for early Christian history that is surprisingly little known. That raises the much larger issue of how we study that history, and how we define the world(s) we are looking at.

From very early times, Christianity became a real force in the lands east of Palestine, in Syria and Iraq, and in many territories ruled by the vast Persian Empire. In a sense, that empire represented a kind of mirror image of the Roman world. Yet much of that eastern Christian history is virtually unknown to mainstream scholars of early Christianity, who focus exclusively on Europe and the Mediterranean world. In consequence, we are missing a large part of the story.

A leading figure in Persia's Zoroastrian priesthood in the mid-late third century was one Kartir (or Kerdir), a revolutionary figure who departed from the standard imperial model of wide-ranging cultural tolerance. In the 270s, at Naqsh-e Rajab near Persepolis, Kartir commissioned some immodest inscriptions that vaunted his services to this faith and his empire. Among these informative words, we find a boast of his intolerant and persecuting activities, and how he had "smitten" various minority religions:

The heresy of Ahriman [the Devil] and the demons departed and was routed from the empire. And Jews and Buddhists and Hindus and Nazarenes and Christians and Baptists and Manicheans were smitten in the empire, and idols were destroyed, and the abodes of the demons disrupted and made into thrones and seats of the gods.

But who was actually smitten? Translators agree that he gave seven names, but they vary quite widely on how they identify the victims. For the sake of argument, let us agree on Buddhists, Hindus, Manicheans, and Jews, about whom there is a general consensus, and focus on the controversial Christian aspects of the inscription. In most readings, "Nazarenes and Christians and Baptists" all fall under the general umbrella of what we would call Christians, but they are as separate from each other as they are from Jews or Buddhists

All scholars who have addressed this issue agree that he listed Christians, *kristen*, but what about the other groups? Two other words are reconstructed as *Nasra* and *Makdag*. The first of these is commonly read as Nazarenes/Nazoreans. Conceivably, Kartir was drawing a distinction between Greek and Syriac-speaking Christians, regardless of any theological bent: in recent years, the Persian Empire had captured and deported many Christian communities into its homeland. "Christians" would be Greek, "Nazarenes" Syriac.

But would that linguistic divide in itself to justify Kartir's distinction? Would he really be so informed as to assume that the two groups were not essentially the same? Perhaps, as has been suggested, these represented different churches and critically distinctive theological approaches. In the West, Nazarenes/Nazoreans often implies Jewish-Christians, perhaps related to the Ebionite sect. In the east, though, its suggests orthodox/mainstream believers. This was the usual self-description of the great Syriac Church of the East, and even today that is the name that believers give themselves in contemporary Iraq.

We naturally assume that the unadorned "Christians" refers to mainstream, orthodox believers, the kind who would be in fellowship with Antioch or Alexandria, but that is not necessarily so. Scholars suggest that in this context, the word refers to Marcionites, those Christians who rejected the Old Testament and its God. If that is the case, then orthodox believers are comprehended under another term, namely Nazarene/Nazorean.

You could either be a "Christian," or you could believe in the Old Testament: pick one option. It's rather like in parts of modern-day Asia, where uninformed outsiders draw a self-evident distinction between "Christians" and "Catholics"!

That third group, the "Makdag" are the most difficult to decipher. The term could well refer to Jewish-Christian baptismal sects like the Elchasaites, and that is how many scholars read it. Less likely, it suggests another related group altogether, such as the Gnostic Mandaeans who survive in southern Iraq. The Elchasaites, by the way, have been called the "Babylonian Baptists."

Let us assume that Kartir was listing the empire's "Western" religious minorities as Jews, Manicheans, and three "flavors" of Christians. I suggest that these Christians were, respectively, mainstream/orthodox; Marcionites; and Jewish-Christian baptismal sects. Put another way, in the late third century – within the lifetime of the future Constantine the Great – this was the familiar taxonomy of Christians in the eastern world, in that vast territory lying east of Syria. There were Christians, Nazarenes, and Baptists, with no suggestion that any one group was dominant.

Just possibly, the order in which sects are listed suggests that Kartir saw the Manicheans as part of the broader Christian continuum. And that was by no means a ridiculous idea. Mani actually began his career in the Elchasaite baptismal sect.

To Western eyes, this is an odd and surprising catalogue, which is very different indeed from what we might expect from a standard source like Eusebius's *Church History*. Clearly these eastern Christians had their own distinctive range of controversies and divisions, which differed fundamentally from the concerns obsessing the Christians of Egypt or Italy.

The sheer number of groups listed is also surprising. Kartir makes no quantitative claims, and assuredly had no idea of the actual number of adherents that any given tradition had. The order in which he lists sects may or may not give any indication of their relative population or strength, but it is interesting that he begins with Jews, who we know to have abounded in Persian-ruled Babylonia. Although Christian (or Christian-ish) sects do not stand at the start of his list, there are no fewer than three of them. That suggests that Christians enjoyed real numbers and/or visibility, enough to arouse real alarm for the Persian state religion.

Of course, Kartir's assertion that he had "smitten" or destroyed these groups was simply false. There were plenty of Christians left for the Persians to persecute in later centuries.

Not for a second do I believe that I am making some kind of scholarly discovery in recounting this story, which is absolutely familiar to that body of highly-qualified experts who specialize in Persian and Iranian matters, in Iranology. Yet I don't believe I have often seen this inscription referred to in the very substantial "mainstream" literature on early Christian history, or on those movements we deem heretical. That may be my ignorance, and I am quite prepared to be corrected.

My impression, though, is that this is yet another example of that vast eastern Christian history that we do not study because it did not happen on the maps that limit our geographical perspective. Then as now, a whole other Christian world existed out there, and we should not neglect it.

The literature on all this is huge. I offer a very brief and near-random list by way of background and sources:

Encyclopedia Iranica online is a wonderful and accessible resource, with great bibliographies.. See for instance the entries on Kartir, Shapur I, the Sasanian Dynasty, Jews, or Manicheism. The entries on Christianity are invaluable, and extensive, with a separate entry on Christian martyrs.

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I write about the baptismal sects at some length in my 2017 book *Crucible of Faith*.

I am adapting this post from a column I wrote several years ago for Aleteia.

Converting the (Other) Empire

March 11, 2022 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

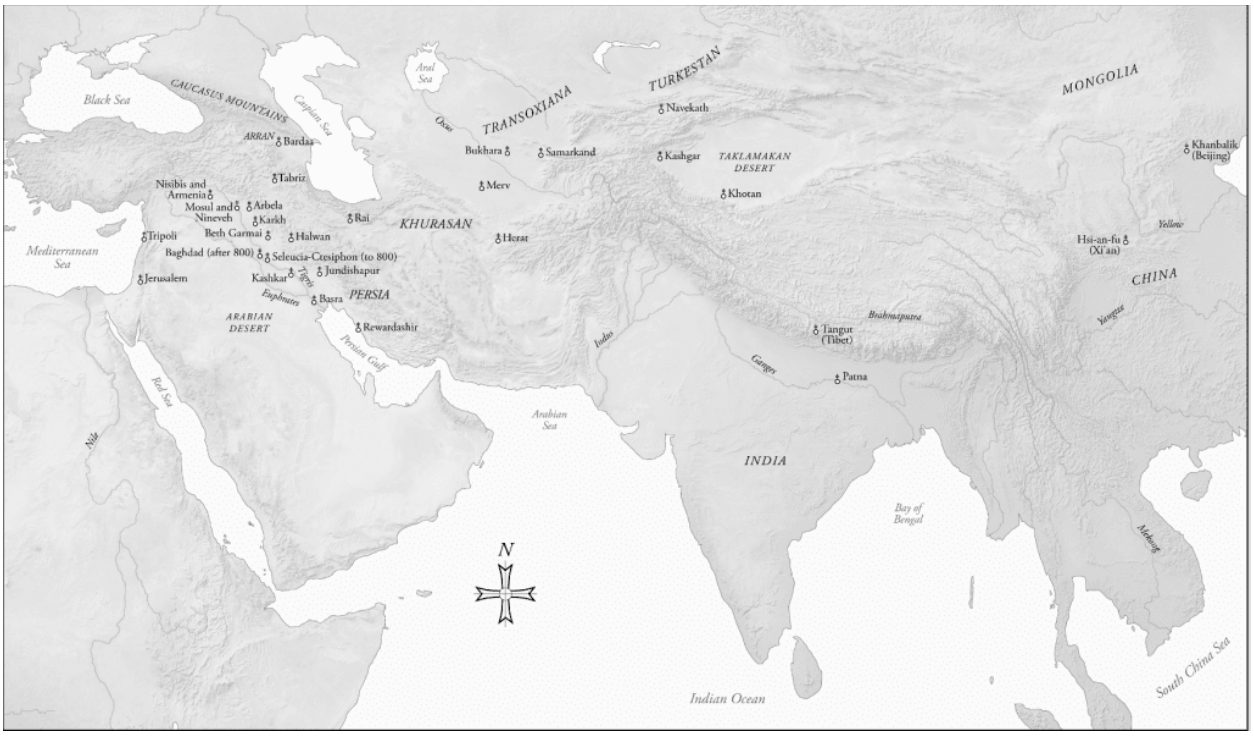
I have been posting about the linkage between empires and the shaping of world religions, particularly (by no means exclusively) Christianity. I have especially stressed the role of unintended consequences, of empires doing things that resulted in outcomes utterly different from what they wanted or expected. Man proposes, and God disposes.

When we write Christian history, one empire in particular often escapes our attention, and it provides a vast hole in the story. Once upon a time, in the ancient world, there was a vast empire. Although it was at times deeply hostile to Christians, which it actively sought to suppress or exterminate, the fact of that empire's existence provided an essential framework for Christian expansion. Christian communities flourished in the empire's booming cities, which they made the seats of church organization. They also benefited from the stability and peace that the empire imposed, and the vast network of roads and sea communications that it sustained, not to mention its common languages. Where the empire stretched, there followed the churches. Ultimately, the empire faded and died, but the churches that had formed in that matrix survived and flourished, outlasting the empire for many centuries.

Such a phenomenon is of course very familiar in the Western world, which emerged on the ruins of the Roman Empire. But in this instance, I am not speaking of the Roman Empire, but of the vast eastern superpower that was its counterpart and deadly rival: the Sassanid realm of Greater Persia. Without that other empire – that empire in the mirror – the story of Christian expansion to the east, as well as the west, is incomprehensible.

Although the Sassanid Empire attracts plenty of fine scholars, it is much more difficult to find general histories of that state than the Roman Empire. Yet its achievements were deeply impressive. The dynasty lasted from 224 to 651, and stretched far beyond what we think of today as Iran, and deep into Central Asia. That was so critical because the Sassanids linked directly to the Silk Route, the world's most important commercial artery at that time, and a crucial cultural channel, stretching from Syria to China. The Sassanid capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris was in its day one of the world's greatest cities, and the direct precursor of later Baghdad.

The story of Christianity in the East depends utterly on Sassanid affairs. Yes, anti-Christian persecutions could be savage, under a realm that strictly followed the Zoroastrian faith. But Christians also used the imperial framework to expand into Central Asia, through what we now call Afghanistan and the "stans" of Central Asia, and into the Silk Route itself. Just look for instance at a map of the metropolitan sees of the vast Church of the East, the so-called Nestorians. Is that not a ghost of the Sassanid world?



Just how did all this happen? Christianity made its first impact in the distant western regions of what was then the Parthian Empire, in regions that today we place in northern Iraq or eastern Turkey. (I describe the geographical background at length here). By the second century AD, the faith was well established in these borderlands between the two empires, in kingdoms like Osrhoene (with its capital at Edessa), and Adiabene (Arbela). It later gained a critical foothold in the Caucasus, in Armenia and Iberia. Sometimes Rome ruled all these lands, sometimes Persia prevailed, but most commonly, the empires shared the lands between them, while tolerating a network of buffer states.

Just how Christianity spread much further afield in the east is a classic story of unintended consequences. At least at first, many, perhaps most, of the Christians who found themselves under Persian rule really had no wish whatever to be there.

As I remarked, major Christian growth first occurred on the Empire's western borderlands, which divided the Persian and Roman realms. Wars and conflicts that raged over these regions from the first century through the sixth, and they became still more fierce under the Sassanid empire. War meant enslavement, deportation and population movement, which brought reluctant populations into new lands. Here, though, they introduced new faiths, often to the horror of their new masters.

Christian slaves played a potent role in spreading the faith into Caucasian lands like Iberia and Georgia. Later, borderlands adopted particular forms of faith to appeal to one superpower, and to seek help against its rival. Once war broke out, it was usually fought in the same general areas, where Christianity was both very strong, and exceedingly diverse. In modern terms, this meant northern Iraq, eastern Syria, and especially eastern Turkey, with the Christian holy city of Nisibis a pivotal prize.

The better the Persians did in war, the more territories and populations they gained in these disputed areas, and the greater the unwanted spread of Christianity into their own empire. If they gained a substantial Christian minority, they had only themselves to blame. It was not so much that Christianity came to the Persian Empire: the Empire came to them.

The main "culprit" for Christian expansion was king Shapur I, son of the founder of the Sassanid dynasty, Ardashir. Shapur's wars against the Romans raged through the 240s and 250s, culminating in his spectacular capture of the Roman Emperor Valerian. Briefly, Shapur even occupied Antioch itself. He conquered and deported many peoples, bringing them home to Persian soil.

One of the settlements he created would become very influential indeed. In the 260s, Shapur settled here many Roman prisoners he had taken during his successful war. A city emerged, bearing his name: Gundeshapur (Jundaisapur). In the fifth and sixth centuries, this emerged as one of the greatest intellectual centers of the ancient world, almost a facsimile of a research university, with a special focus on medicine. Although it is difficult to disentangle truth from legend, Gundeshapur is often cited as a major influence on early Islamic learning and scholarship. And it was, par excellence, a Christian center, base of one of the metropolitan provinces of the Church of the East. Its Christian identity became even more marked when it became a refuge for scholars fleeing religious oppression in the Eastern Roman Empire.

Not surprisingly, then, by the late third century, the Persian Empire found itself with abundant Christians, drawn from a wide variety of theological and ethnic traditions. Over time, the Church of the East operated ever more closely with the Empire, despite its apparently hostile religious traditions. I quote the *Encyclopedia Iranica*:

In 410, a Synod was convened at Ctesiphon: The royal capital had become also the acknowledged center of Christianity in the Empire. The proceedings began with a prayer for the king, Yazdegerd I; and the Synod adopted the creed of Nicaea. Six provinces were then listed as Christian jurisdictions, including Ray and Abaršahr; in the late 6th century, Marv and Herat, whose Christian communities were already centuries old, are prominently mentioned.

By the seventh century, the Church of the East happily allied with the Sassanids against the Orthodox Christians of Constantinople. At times, it looked uncannily like an imperial state church.

In the West, the papacy maintained its center at Rome long after the passing of the Empire that had originally stood at that place. In the East, the Church of the East occupied the Persian imperial city of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and stayed there long after the Arab Muslims had supplanted the Persian empire. Only when the Muslim Caliphate moved to nearby Baghdad did the Church's Patriarch follow the new rulers, and select a new residence. Meanwhile, Christian missions were enthusiastically spreading north and east into Central Asia, through what had been the provinces of the Sassanid empire. And thus was the Church of the East born.

As I'll suggest next time, if Sassanid Persia never became a Christian empire, the dynasty's Christian connections were very powerful indeed. Empires are strange things… See what happens when you go and conquer and deport all those innocent people, and bring them back with you?

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The Last Emperor, and His Faithful Bishop

March 14, 2022 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I recently wrote about how the mighty Persian Empire became a powerful vehicle for the spread of Christianity through much of Asia. That role was unintentional, in the sense that the empire itself followed a very different creed, that of Zoroastrianism, and at various points, the Persian state had brutally persecuted Christians. But in the last days of that empire in the seventh century AD, before its conquest by Islam, the Christian presence became very strong indeed. Unknown to non-specialists, the Christian role in those final days makes for quite a moving story.

Under different dynasties, the Persian Empire ruled from the sixth century BC through the 640s AD, more than 1,200 years. The final dynasty was the Sasanians or Sassanids, who ruled from 224 AD. In the early seventh century, Sassanid Persia fought devastating wars against the Roman Empire, struggles that exhausted both states, and made possible the conquests by Islam. A couple of years ago, at this site, I placed those events in the context of a huge volcanic eruption in 626 AD, which effectively shattered the Persian Empire, and thus opened the door for Islam. As so often occurs following natural disasters that transform the climate, a horrendous plague followed that devastated the western provinces of the Sasanian Empire. Muslim forces took full advantage of those opportunities. In 636, Muslim Arabs won a great victory over the Persians at al-Qadissiyah. They won a second triumph at Nahavand, in 642.

The last of the Sassanid emperors was Yazdegerd III, who came to power in 632, as a child of eight. Pursued by Arab forces, he repeatedly sought refuge in the outer regions of the empire and fled to the great city of Merv/Marw, in what is now Turkmenistan. In light of modern events, it is fascinating to see him and his advisers desperately trying to seek what help he could from another Great Power, namely the China of the Tang Dynasty, which was deeply worried about the spread of Islamic military strength into Central Asia. Hmm, a China-Iran alliance, what an intriguing thought …

Ultimately, Yazdegerd was betrayed and killed in 651, in circumstances that have produced countless myths and legends. He was only 27 at the time of his death.

Given the religious history of the previous centuries, the Christian element in Yazdegerd's closing days was remarkable. Besides being a key center on the Silk Route, Merv was a vital base for the "Nestorian" Church of the East, from which Christians launched mission ventures to the east, among the Turkic tribes of central Asia, and beyond that, into China. For half a millennium, multiple dynasties and rulers used those "Nestorians" as envoys between the Middle East and Eastern Asian kingdoms, including China, and it is highly likely that these Christians supplied the linguistic and diplomatic skills that allowed Yazdegerd to seek his Chinese alliances. Intellectually, Merv was an astonishing place, where Christians rubbed shoulders with Buddhists, Zoroastrians, and Manichaeans. In its intellectual and spiritual vigor, Merv outclassed any western European center, certainly before the universities emerged during the twelfth century. By that point – the twelfth century – Merv might have been one of the two or three largest cities on the planet.

In 651, the metropolitan (or senior bishop) of Merv was Elijah or Elias, a noted and versatile scholar of Bible and liturgy, who achieved the conversion of some Turkic peoples. Recalling as he did Yazdegerd's Christian ancestors, Bishop Elijah remained true to him at a time when everyone else had deserted the tragic last emperor. After the king's death,

Yazdegerd was according to tradition buried by Christian monks in a tall tomb that was situated in a garden decorated with silk and musk. His funeral and the construction of a mausoleum for his body near Merv was organized by the Nestorian bishop Elijah.

Almost literally, it was Christian monks who performed the last rites on the ancient Persian Empire.

The monks cursed [the king's assassin] and made a hymn to Yazdegerd, mourning the fall of a "combative" king and the "house of Ardashir I." Whether this event was factual or not, it emphasizes that the Christians of the empire remained loyal to the Zoroastrian Sasanians, even possibly more than the Iranian nobles who had deserted Yazdegerd.

Indeed, there were close links between the late Sasanian rulers and Christians, whose conditions had greatly improved compared to that of the early Sasanian era. Yazdegerd's wife was according to folklore a Christian, whilst his son and heir, Peroz III was seemingly an adherent of Christianity, and even had a church built in Tang China, where he had taken refuge.

Well into the eighth century, Peroz's descendants – who may themselves have been Christians – continued to use allied Chinese forces to try and restore the Sassanid dynasty, and to evict the Muslims.

If anything parallel to the death of Yazdegerd had occurred to a Roman or Frankish ruler, it would unquestionably have become the subject of Christian epics, and likely hagiographies.

Many dramatic moments in the Christian story have occurred very far away from the places and settings that we might expect. In this instance, in Turkmenistan. Who would have thought it?

REMEMBER SEVERINUS

December 21, 2012 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Most modern readers find it hard to identify with ancient or medieval saints' lives, written at times when people had such very different expectations of sanctity. We may or may not *believe* that Saint X healed lepers or foretold dynastic changes, but it's hard to identify with the situations. What do the concerns of those early readers have to do with us?

Well, here's an exception. It's called the *Life of Severinus*, and it tells the story of how a courageous Christian leader coped with a world in the throes of destruction – of a systematic ruin that in its day must have seemed as overwhelming as the threat of total war or environmental collapse in the modern world. Written 1,500 years ago, it is as modern a spiritual life as you will ever read.

The setting is the fifth century, the era when the sophisticated urbanized Roman world was under assault from waves of barbarians. Apart from the immediate danger of massacre and physical destruction, civilized inhabitants faced the dangers of famine, economic collapse, and plague. By this time, most of Rome's European empire was officially Christian, and it is not surprising that believers saw the accumulating horrors as signs of the apocalyptic End Times. Particularly in the border territories, cities fell, churches were destroyed, communities killed or enslaved, and all familiar institutions were uprooted.

What makes the tale of Severinus so amazing is that it offers a first hand snapshot of a civilized world in dissolution. According to a strictly contemporary *Life*, Severinus (410-482) first appears in Noricum and Pannonia (modern Austria, Slovenia and Croatia) at one of the worst moments of European history, in the immediate aftermath of the Hun invasions of the 450s. Roman forces have been destroyed or withdrawn, leaving the work of defense to local militias. Throughout the book, we find laconic suggestions of the horror of the time: "That night the Heruli made a sudden, unexpected onslaught, sacked the town, and led most of the people into captivity. They hanged the priest Maximianus on a cross. … A vast multitude of the Alamanni, minions of Death, laid everything waste." It is a horribly convincing picture, one that could have been drawn from Germany in the 1640s or the 1940s, or the Congo in the past decade.

Severinus visits cities either recovering from invasion, or preparing for massacre. He offers spiritual guidance, as he "set forth examples of salvation from of old, in which the protection of God had freed his people in unforeseen and wondrous ways." Naturally, we hear of the miraculous aid he offers, opening frozen rivers and causing earthquakes to terrify barbarian raiders.

But Severinus also responded very practically indeed to what we would today call the humanitarian crisis. When cities were threatened by famine, he approached rich citizens who had hoarded food, bullying them into sharing all they have. He kept up a stream of letters to surviving cities to beg for spare food and clothing for the homeless and the refugees, and his pleas succeed. One friend "had hired many companions, to carry on their backs, for the benefit of the captives and the poor, a collection of clothing which the people of Noricum had piously given." "[Severinus] took so great care of captives and the needy that almost all the poor through all the towns and fortresses were fed by his activity." In a society where war was lavishly funded by the profits of slave trading, it was Severinus who ransomed the hostages, using all his spiritual charisma to bully captors when offers of money failed. Using his powers of healing and prophecy, he befriended and overawed barbarian chieftains.

As time went by, his efforts moved to evacuation, and the wholesale resettlement of refugees. Time and again, he inspired communities to organize themselves for defense, and the Romans won some victories. Eventually, though, he realized that the cities have become indefensible, and that the survivors must be moved into a sanctuary zone. He told the people of one city, " 'Know that you are now set free through the protection of God to the end that you may depart hence within a little space of time, granted you as a kind of armistice. So gather together and go down with me to the town of Lauriacum [modern Enns].' … But when the people of Batavis hesitated to leave their native soil, he added, 'Although that town also, whither we go, must be abandoned as speedily as possible before the inrushing barbarism, yet let us now in like manner depart from this place.' … After the destruction of the towns on the upper course of the Danube, all the people who had obeyed the warnings of Saint Severinus removed into the town of Lauriacum." At the end of the *Life*, Lauriacum maintains a shaky independence.

The *Life of Severinus* is a magnificent historical source, but much more, it is also a spiritual classic, of a major Christian leader who combined a fiercely ascetic personal piety with wide-ranging activism in political and social affairs. He was a shining Christian role-model for the modern world.

TURFAN AND THE CHRISTIANS OF THE SILK ROUTE

March 11, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

Some years ago, I published *The Lost History of Christianity*, which traced the early expansion of Christianity into Asia and Africa, as well as Europe. For perhaps a thousand years, Christianity flourished at least as well in Asia as in Europe, and that when we focus wholly on the Western side, we are missing a very great deal of the Christian story.

Much of my story concerned the Silk Route, which ran from Syria into China through Central Asia. This was in its day the central artery of transcontinental commerce, which allowed the phenomenal development of cities like Merv, in present day Turkmenistan – at the time, one of the largest urban settlements on the planet.

Besides its economic importance, the Silk Route was also a highway of ideas and faiths, which was used extensively by Muslims, Buddhists, Manichaeans, and of course Christians. From the fifth century through the thirteenth, this was the great missionary road used by the legendary Church of the East, the so-called Nestorians, from their base in Mesopotamia. The Church operated major centers at Merv, Kashgar, Samarkand and Herat (Afghanistan).

Although it is only one Christian site among hundreds that would once have existed, we get some sense of this lost world from the amazing oasis of Turfan, in what is now far north-western China. Its transcontinental connections made Turfan a natural hub for religious groups, who built settlements in the area. Even better, the dry climate allowed the survival of manuscripts that would assuredly have perished in other settings. Modern scholars have been amazed and delighted to uncover whole libraries in the region, including some of the richest surviving evidence for the Manichaean faith.

The Christian finds are no less spectacular. In the early twentieth century, a German expedition uncovered the site of a monastery at Bulayïq, with extensive library remains. Among the treasures were fragments of over a thousand manuscripts, dating between the ninth and twelfth centuries. (Still other manuscripts come from Dunhuang, a Silk Road station east of Turfan, but I will concentrate here on this latter collection.)

Some of the Turfan texts were written in Syriac, the church's usual language, which is closely related to the Aramaic of Jesus's own time. Others though were in the standard languages of the people who lived and traded in those parts, although written in Syriac script. One such tongue was Sogdian, from the people whose merchants ranged across Central Asia. Other documents were in Uyghur, the language of the people who still inhabit the area. Sogdian is connected to Iranian languages, while Uyghur is Turkic. The effort to translate and comprehend these documents still proceeds, almost a century after the initial finds. Many remain unpublished.

What is important about the Turfan documents is no particular single text – for instance, some spectacular new gospel find – but the total impression they give of the spiritual and cultural life of a thriving community so far removed from what we still stubbornly think of as the heart of medieval Christianity, in distant Europe.

The collection is a remarkable mixture of what we might think of as the exalted and the humble. Of course, the community had its Biblical and liturgical texts, psalters and hymnals, all absolutely necessary for the daily spiritual life that was its raison d'etre. Equally valuable were the ascetic writings that sustained and inspired the monks – excerpts from the great Syriac fathers, and works by such once-legendary Egyptian ascetics as Abba Isaiah and Macarius. Other items reflect popular religion – Christian prayer amulets, a book of oracles.

One Turfan text is a work by Evagrius Ponticus, from the region we would today call Northern Turkey. Evagrius was a leading figure of the fourth century church in the East Roman empire, who ended his career as an ascetic in the Egyptian desert. His writings exercised a vast influence on the emerging monastic world, and still, half a world away and several centuries later, the Turfan community still cherished a copy of his *Antirrhetikos*.

I note one striking point here. Recently, I posted about the mighty influence of Egyptian Christianity on the emerging churches of the British Isles. But here too, in East Asia, Egypt cast its long shadow.

We also find major works of scholarship, including histories of events that otherwise would be wholly lost to us. The collection includes a history of the Syrian city of Nisibis, the intellectual hub of the eastern Christian world. There are also Lives of saints like Serapion, and of John of Dailam (660-738). John was as critically important to expanding the faith in Central Asia as figures like Boniface would be in contemporary Germany and Western Europe.

A Sogdian-language *Life* of Yazdin and his disciple Pethion describes the martyrdom of missionaries struggling to make converts in Sassanid Persia, where the church's deadliest enemies were not Roman pagans but Zoroastrian magi.

Today, what non-specialist remembers the name of Bishop Bar-Shabba? Yet the story of this great missionary, this great Church Father, survives in a Turfan text, originally written in Syriac and later translated into Sogdian. He lived during the Sassanian Empire that ruled Persia until the Muslim conquest of the seventh century. We hear how, at that time, he pushed the church's frontier's forward deep into Central Asia, establishing settlements of monks and nuns.

Bar-Shabba operated in such evocative places as northern Parthia and Margiana, in Bactria and Hyrcania. He founded monasteries and convents at Balkh and Herat, and reputedly became Merv's founding bishop. The priests and deacons whom he settled "began to teach and to baptize, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and by the authority and power that they had received from the pious Lord Bar Shabba….. [and to him] power and might was given… over the unclean spirits." (I take this quote from *Christians in Asia before 1500*, by Ian Gilman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit).

Obviously, in describing these finds I am only offering the barest of outlines. Even so, it suggests the sheer scale of this lost eastern church, and its heroic struggles.

BETWEEN THE EMPIRES

March 24, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I posted recently about the network of small states that existed between the Roman and Persian empires, the two superpowers of Late Antiquity. Most of these buffer states are of little interest to non-specialists, but two of those middling powers in particular demand our attention for what they suggest about the early history of both Christianity and Islam. Arguably, early Islamic history makes little sense except in the context of these two remarkably influential tribal powers, which together represent a lost Christian realm.

A familiar myth suggests that it was mainly the force of Islam that brought Arab peoples into the traditional heartlands of the civilized Near East, around the 630s. We perhaps visualize this in terms of memories of massed camel charges from *Lawrence of Arabia* – though camels really had nothing to do with those early Islamic conquests. In reality, Arab tribes and ethnic groups were very powerful

indeed long before this, and some formed influential states in the lands that we would today think of as Jordan, Iraq and Syria, territories contested between the two great empires. To the west stood the Ghassanid kingdom, the "Sons of Ghassan," allied with Rome. In the east were the pro-Persian Lakhmids, with their capital at al-Hira. (The best scholar on this era is Irfan Shahid, author of several key books on the Arabs before Islam).

The Ghassanids arrived in the region as refugees from further south in Arabia, possibly as Christians fleeing persecution by Jewish tribes. From the fifth century they formed a powerful state, which became vastly more powerful in the sixth century as the wars between Rome and Persia escalated. The Byzantine Empire relied heavily on Arab allies (*foederati*) like king al-Harith ("Arethas") and his son al-Mundhir. Far from being barbarians, the kingdom was deeply integrated into the Byzantine politics of the day.

Its leaders were also strongly Christian, and were mainstays of the Syriac-speaking Monophysite/Miaphysite churches. The sixth century kings ensured that the Syrian Monophysite church survived and flourished under their protection, creating a powerful Middle East tradition that endured for centuries. Al-Harith was the patron of Jacobus Baradeus, the church's wide-ranging evangelist (hence "Jacobites"). This story by the way exactly fits the pattern I described in earlier posts of religious traditions persecuted in one region being able to flee for safety across a convenient border, of "refugee faith." Later Ghassanids refused conversion to Islam, and many of their descendants remained Christian until modern times.

Although they served the Persians, the Lakhmids also included a strong and deeply rooted Christian element. Al-Hira was an important bishopric of the Church of the East.

The landscape in which the Ghassanids operated included several cultural and religious centers that would be critical for both Christianity and early Islam. One was Sergiopolis (Resafa) the beloved shrine of the martyr saint Sergius, and effectively the religious capital of a wide region of what is now Syria and Iraq. In the sixth century, it was the seat of a metropolitan, with five suffragan sees. As so often happened in Western Europe, later medieval rulers continued to build in and around such ancient religious shrines, so that Sergiopolis became the palace of the eighth century Caliph Hisham.

Another great Ghassanid city was Bostra, the metropolitan see of Arabia. It also featured extensively in later legend as the place where the prophet Muhammad met the Christian monk Bahira, who acknowledged his prophetic destiny.

By the seventh century, both empires were facing growing difficulties from their client states. The Lakhmids rebelled openly against the Persians, while religious divisions made the Ghassanids ever more discontented with Roman rule. These conflicts formed the background to the new movement of Islam. Reputedly, the Lakhmids helped the Muslims against their former Persian enemies.

But even after Islam had triumphed, the two Arab kingdoms exercised a lasting influence on the new empire, which still based itself in their former territories. I have already suggested how highly the new Muslim rulers valued places like Bostra and Resafa. In the East, al-Hira was supposedly the place where the Arabic alphabet. It is very close to Kufa – hence "Kufic" script. Others attribute it to the Christian Arabs of al-Anbar

Some scholars go much further in proposing Christian influence over the emerging Islam. For one scholar, Christoph Luxenberg, the Qur'an demonstrates a Christian Syriac literary background that could certainly not have arisen in Mecca or nearby parts of Arabia, which had no adequate schools or libraries. Instead, he suggests, the Qur'an originated in a Christian environment in al-Hira or al-Anbar – and so, by implication, did much of the faith of Islam. Although this is highly controversial, there is no doubt that the old Christian Arab world left a substantial inheritance.

FAITH ON THE FRONTIER

March 17, 2013 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

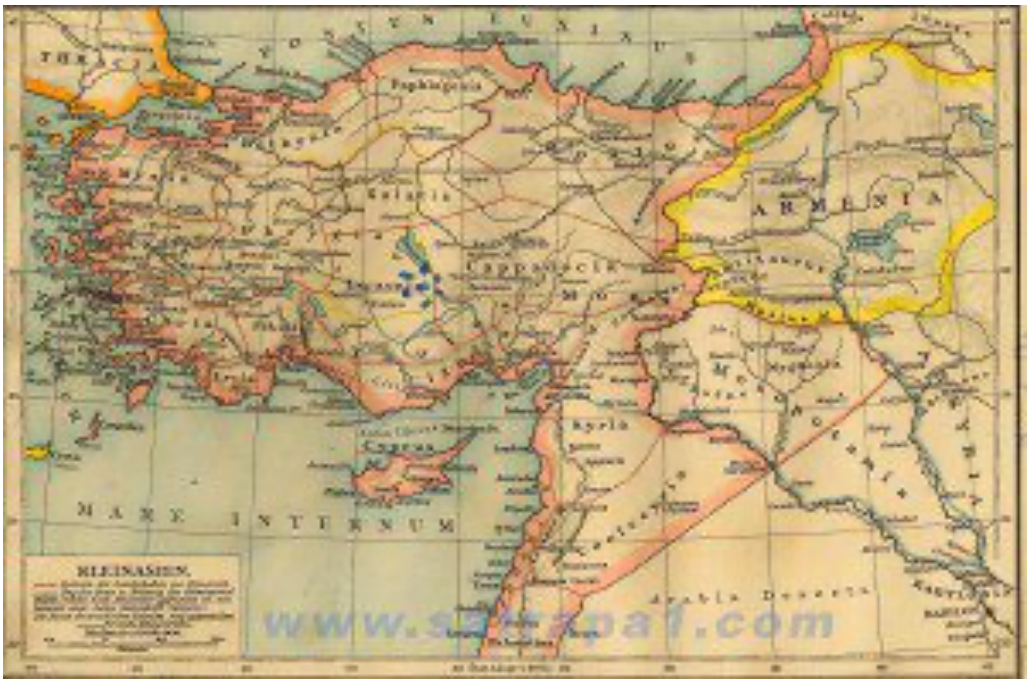
Some day, I would love to write a history on religion on the frontiers, and I don't mean the frontiers of faith or rational inquiry.

Governments throughout history have disliked regions that are difficult to control. They strongly prefer fertile lowlands over pastoral uplands or mountain regions. They dislike sprawling cities, especially cosmopolitan seaports. They especially loathe border regions, where foreign influences can penetrate easily, and where local people can easily flee where the writ of the law does not run. This is all the more true when the nation on the other society of that border is hostile or uncooperative.

Those general statements go far towards explaining religious configurations, especially when a government tries to enforce a strict orthodoxy. Religious minorities do best in jurisdictional borderlands, in regions where armies and police, Inquisitors and tax collectors, are least likely to penetrate. That is true whether we are dealing with both Catholics and Protestant Dissenters in early modern England, or Protestants in early modern Catholic Europe. It is also true of Christian minorities in Muslim states. Show me a map of the borderlands, and a relief map showing regions over two thousand feet or so, and I will show you where religious dissidents are most likely to survive and flourish.

Sometimes, those distant marginal regions prove to conceal hidden wealth, which give unexpected power to dissident minorities. Hence the Protestant Nonconformists of England and Wales found themselves in the coal-rich regions at the center of that country's Industrial Revolution, while the despised Shia Muslims of the Arabian peninsula happened to be sitting on the region's richest oil reserves. Never say that God lacks a sense of humor.

I posted recently on the early Christian expansion eastwards from Jerusalem, towards the powerful Persian realms successively ruled by the Parthians and the Sassanid dynasty. From the second century onwards, the Roman Empire clashed repeatedly with this eastern superstate, and the intervening lands often changed hands. Although the Sassanids based their power in Mesopotamia, that region briefly fell under Roman power under Trajan.



Through the seventh century, the dueling superpowers repeatedly clashed in the lands that we would now call Northern Iraq, Syria, and Eastern Turkey. Ultimately, the Romans utterly crushed the Sassanids, but it was a Pyrrhic victory, as the two exhausted empires fell easy prey to the surging force of Islam.

That superpower conflict had vast religious consequences. For one thing, the imperial rivalry meant that the two states were forced to tolerate a network of smaller kingdoms between their borders, which could serve usefully as buffer states, leaning from one side to another as conditions changed.

Armenia was the greatest of these states, but other kingdoms and city-states rose and fell over the centuries – Osrhoene, Atropatene, Palmyra, and others. Two great border states, Armenia and Georgia, stubbornly maintained their Christian faith through the millennia, a stance made possible by their mountainous terrain.

As successive wars and persecutions swept the two major empires, so it was natural for refugees and dissidents to flee beyond the frontiers, making these small states a hothouse of religious development. The ruling family of Adiabene accepted Judaism. In the second century, Osrhoene became the first kingdom anywhere to establish Christianity as its official religion. When Roman religious constraints became too much, the center of Eastern Christian faith and scholarship moved eastwards across the border, from Edessa to Nisibis, which remained legendary well into the Muslim period.

Moreover, great powers used this religious complexity to justify their own policies. The Romans used the persecution of Christians to justify wars and invasions. The Persians in turn favored the Church of the East, the Nestorians, as a counterbalance to the Catholic/Orthodox. They also favored Jews against Roman-style Christians, leading to a terrifying massacre of Christians when the Persians took Jerusalem in 614. The Fall of Jerusalem, by the way, was one of the traumatic events of Late Antiquity: its shockwaves can be observed in the Qur'an, among many other places.

Trace the frontiers, and you follow the patterns of religious development.

The Byzantine Dark Ages

June 10, 2016 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

In my last post, I urged the use of the unpopular term "Dark Age" as a valid historical and archaeological concept. Specifically, I suggested that it should refer to eras of "systematic societal collapse and cultural impoverishment, reflected in collapsing population levels, and acute declines in urbanization, technology, literacy, productivity and communications." This is in my mind presently as I have been reading about the Dark Age concept in an unfamiliar setting, namely the Byzantine world of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Quite bravely, Michael J. Decker has used the D word in his important new book The Byzantine Dark Ages. What strikes me about it is just how thoroughly the situation he describes fits the model I have suggested, and which we know so well from Western Europe. Drawing on a wide range of types of evidence, he leaves no doubt about the scale and severity of the decline, and the suitability of the Dark Age label.

His focus is on the period 600-900 AD, with a strong focus on the very worst years, the seventh and eighth centuries. The cataclysmic plague of the 530s left a long shadow, exterminating perhaps a third of the population of the Mediterranean world. Wars, barbarian invasions, and frequent defeats cut the empire off from most of its greatest eastern cities, which fell under Islamic rule. That wiped out much of the empire's tax base, and also turned Asia Minor into a perpetual war zone.

Large ares of the surviving empire suffered catastrophic shrinkage and decline. It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that civilization went into reverse.

I quote from a review by Sean Kingsley:

Different towns exhibit different rhythms of change. At Nicopolis-ad-Istrum in Bulgaria, the Roman villas were abandoned as early as the mid-5th century. By the first quarter of the 6th century, at the impeccably excavated city of Butrint in Albania, fishermen and craftsmen had taken over the grand domus in the Triconch Palace, before its noble ruins were stripped and filled with burials in the 7th century. As Richard Hodges and William Bowden conclude, by AD 700 Butrint fell under the spell of an historical Ice Age, as commerce was reduced to 'to a scale of prehistoric proportions'.

At Corinth, the capital of the province of Achaia, the Lechaion road was blocked by a lime kiln and the latrine went out of use by the early 7th century, as the countryside invaded the city. By the end of the 7th century, Aphrodisias was reduced to a skeleton crew of clergy and local civilians. A graphic indication of the depopulation of town and country has been captured by the Southern Euboea Exploration Project, where just 2.5% of Late Roman sites continued into the Early Byzantine era between 700 and 1000. In Greece, only seven hoards are known for the period 711-811, compared to 82 hoards for the century spanning 518-618. ….

The Cappadocians adapted by moving into underground cave-homes to stay warm and safe from Arab raids. The rock-cut villages of Ova˙ren and Filiktepe developed into sizable troglodytic settlements during the 7th and 8th centuries, boasting religious and economic infrastructure, churches, stables, and defensive features – notably millstone doors to block passages from attackers. These rock-cut towns could host populations of over 1,000 people – and, in the case of the 2,500m² site of Derinkuyu, up to 20,000 people.

It is scarcely surprising that the Empire went in search of scapegoats, those who had so infuriated God that he was punishing people thus: hence the Iconoclastic struggles of the eighth century. Those battles in themselves further destroyed civic order. Inevitably, the seventh and eight centuries were a golden age of apocalyptic and millenarian speculation, with many pseudo-scriptures notionally written in the name of long-dead prophets and patriarchs.

Matters did not improve until the mid-ninth century, under Basil I.

I am well aware that the term "Dark Age" is unpopular in medieval history. In the context of the early Middle Ages, an unscientific survey suggests that the phrase was reasonably common in book and article titles through the 1980s, but not since. Where the phrase does occur in catalogues, it is in the context of popular television documentaries. One odd exception to that rule is Chris Wickham's splendid *The Inheritance of Rome: Illuminating the Dark Ages 400-1000* (2010) in the Penguin History of Europe. However, the 2009 British original of that bore the subtitle *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000*. I wonder if the author groaned at the change? As a respectable academic term, then, the "Dark Ages" is not an acceptable term for medievalists.

That is totally different from the world of ancient Greece between the twelfth and ninth centuries BC, where the Dark Age term and concept are both absolutely standard, if debated. See for instance Susan Langdon, *Art and Identity in Dark Age Greece (*Cambridge University Press, 2008); Thomas R. Martin, *Ancient Greece: From Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*, 2nd edition (Yale University Press, 2013); or Paul Cartledge, *Ancient Greece* (Oxford University Press, 2009). I am selecting just a few titles from

prime academic publishers to show just how mainstream the concept is for that era. Nobody blinks when you use the phrase.

Thomas Martin, incidentally, has a fine summary of "The Poverty of the Early Greek Dark Age," every word of which perfectly fits post-Roman Western Europe. Here is a short sample:

The Greeks cultivated much less land and had many fewer settlements in the early Dark Age than at the height of Mycenaean prosperity. … Developed political states no longer existed in Greece in the early Dark Age, and people eked out their existence as herders, shepherds, and subsistence farmers bunched in tiny settlements as small as twenty people in most cases. Prosperous Mycenaean communities had been many times larger. Indeed, the entire Greek population was far smaller in the early Dark Age than it had been previously. As the population shrank, less land was cultivated, leading to a decline in the production of food. The decreased food supply in turn tended to encourage a further decline in the population. …. As a result of this less-settled lifestyle, people built only simple huts as their houses and got along with few possessions.

Anyway, for whatever reason, medieval historians shy away from speaking of a Dark Age, and that is why the Decker book is so unusual.

So here is my question. I think that Decker is unquestionably correct to speak of a Dark Age, a term that in this context is not just legitimate but mandatory. So what else *could* we call it?

How Many Christians?

September 22, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

I have been involved in a project on the early church, around the year 200 AD. My first basic question concerns the issue of numbers, and the results offer some surprises.

Just how many Christians were there in 200? Around 197, Tertullian's *Apology* made extravagant claims for the scale of Christian numbers. He spoke of "the immense number of Christians … almost all the inhabitants of your various cities being followers of Christ." His numerical claims for the overall number of Christians are ludicrous, but his statement points to the extreme concentration of Christian numbers in some centers.

Estimating Christian numbers at any point in history (even today) is a difficult task. For the early church, the classic figures come from my Baylor colleague Rodney Stark in his 1996 book *The Rise of Christianity*. This made an excellent attempt at providing some kind of general parameters. Drawing analogies with modern new religious movements, Stark showed that Christians could have achieved their remarkable growth in the first few centuries by quite familiar forms of growth and conversion, without any claims to miracle or uniqueness. He estimated a global Christian population of 40,000 in AD 150, rising to 218,000 in 200, and 1.17 million by 250. According to his calculation, it was around 180 that global Christian numbers first surpassed the symbolically weighty figure of 100,000.

Stark would be the first to admit that those figures are anything but precise, but they provide plausible limits. If someone suggested a Christian population in 200 as ten thousand, or as ten million, then they would assuredly be wrong. But a range anywhere from (say) 150,000 to 350,000 would be quite plausible.

There are some reasons to place the figure for AD 200 a bit higher than Stark proposed. One specific issue concerns the total population with which Stark is working, which is that of the Roman Empire. His estimate for the overall Roman population is rather lower than more recent estimates, and Christian numbers must be adjusted accordingly. Also, it is never quite clear whether early estimates for Christians were taking account of the full spectrum of people who would have used that description for themselves, including all "heresies."

For the sake of argument, let us suggest a global Christian population of perhaps 250,000. That represents a stunning expansion from the small groups we glimpse in apostolic times, but the number is tiny when we think of the vast geographical extent of the large world, from Mesopotamia to Britain. It is also a tiny fraction of that world – perhaps 0.36 percent of whole population of the Roman Empire at this time, or one in three hundred.

To put that in context, think of a modern grouping like the Baptist General Convention of Texas, with 2.1 million members. That represents a larger share of the contemporary US population than the Christians in 200 did of the whole Roman Empire. Muslims in the US today represent about one percent of the nation's population, compared to that 0.36 percent for Christians in the Roman world.

Even taking the most optimistic view, Christians at this stage were extremely thinly spread.

Overwhelmingly, Christianity was an urban faith, and we recall Tertullian's boast about "almost all" the city dwellers being Christian. In fact they weren't, but the remark does suggest how easily Christians might be found in major urban centers. The largest Christian communities were in the six or so leading cities of the Roman Empire, including Rome itself, Carthage, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Antioch. In turn, each metropolis cast a powerful shadow over smaller cities within the local urban hierarchy, where we would likely find related congregations.

At first glance, the Christian world was impressive in its scope and geographical range, to the point where it seems to constitute almost a parallel to the Roman Empire – almost a shadow Christian Empire in waiting. But then we turn again to the likely numbers, with just 250,000 believers in that wide world. Without any firm basis for such estimates, let me propose some possible figures for the largest communities, remembering that these would incorporate all churches and sects combined. Rome itself would likely have been by far the largest, with (say) 40,000 Christians. We might then estimate communities of 10-15,000 for such regional capitals as Antioch, Alexandria, and Carthage, 5,000 for Jerusalem and Ephesus. Those numbers do not seem very high, but if they are even close to accurate, those six centers alone would account for 100,000 people, or 40 percent of the world Christian population. That leaves just 150,000 to fill all those smaller cities and towns, from Britain to southern India.

Some other cities come to mind as just possibly qualifying for the elite level of size and influence, including Edessa, Corinth, Thessalonika, and Córdoba, but we really have no way of securing more accurate figures. Any of those might have had believers running into the low thousands.

Without attempting any further breakdown, such an analysis points to the very small and limited size of the vast majority of Christian communities, and thus of the power of their bishops and leaders. To put this in perspective, a city with a thousand Christians (of all shades combined) would have been a very important center indeed in 200. Given the fragmentation of the time, such a large population might well have been divided between two or three distinct worshiping communities, sects-within-sects, only one of which might have identified with the Great Church (and might thus have been recorded by orthodox historians like Eusebius).

You're asking about the local Christian church? Oh yes, sure. Well, the Marcionite house church is over there, the Ebionites are down the road, and there are a couple of others that way. There used to be some Montanists, but I'm not sure if they left. Not to mention the philosophical schools, and the study groups. And yes, they all call themselves orthodox.

A bishop recognized by a few hundred people, and exercising power over a congregation of that size, would very much have been at the powerful and influential end of the spectrum of power and influence. A following of fifty to sixty would have been much more common. In modern terms, only a tiny minority of early congregations would qualify as a megachurch. (The normal cutoff for that label is two thousand members).

And to think that little over a century after that point, Christianity would be the dominant religion in the whole Roman Empire.

Forgetting Christian Spain

September 29, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

"In the West … early Christianity has lost its history." That powerful statement demands some explanation.

I have been working on early Christian history, chiefly in the era between the closing of the New Testament and the time of Diocletian – say, the second and third centuries. One sobering lesson to learn from all this is how very partial indeed is our knowledge of what was actually happening in this era, and how much probably is lost forever.

Robin Lane Fox's *Pagans and Christians* (1986) offers a valuable map of churches known to be founded before 300 AD (pp. 274-275). This shows six particularly dense clusters, which presumably indicate the greatest bulwarks of Christian strength and numbers. These are:

-Asia Minor, chiefly in the southern and western regions, especially in the provinces of Asia, Lycia, Pamphylia and Galatia. That regional concentration shades seamlessly into

-The Levant, mainly the coastal regions of Syria and Palestine.

-Egypt, in the Delta, but also spreading up the Nile Valley

-North Africa, chiefly in modern Tunisia and the far eastern parts of Algeria

-Italy, mainly the central regions

-Southern Spain, in the province of Baetica.

Five of these make wonderful sense, as these reflect the heavy concentration of known Christian activity in five great cities, namely Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus. With very few exceptions, every piece of surviving Christian writing from the era 100-250 that we can plausibly locate comes from one of those five centers (Those exceptions include Lyon, probably Jerusalem, and almost certainly Edessa). The first five of the regions outlined above correlate very well to the local "urban empires" of those respective Big Five cities.

But what about the sixth grouping, that gaggle of churches in southern Spain, centered on Córdoba? This territory comes strongly into focus around 300 with the famous Synod or Council of Elvira, near modern Granada. An impressive nineteen bishops attended, suggesting a potent and widespread church network – although there is no evidence how far back that dated. At the Council of Nicea in 325, one of the key players was Córdoba's bishop, Hosius. Seville (*Hispalis*) also boasted a very early Christian background, however hard it is to dig through later legends. By the later fourth century, Spain was playing a really active role in the larger Christian world, with the Priscillianist heresy, and the influential poetry of Prudentius. Priscillian, incidentally, has the honor of being the first Christian heretic to be executed by the state – technically, though, for practicing magic rather than for his beliefs.

What are the origins of this tradition? St. Paul had expressed a wish to visit Spain, and very early tradition suggested that he had done so. Perhaps he left a strong legacy. That Christianity should have sunk early roots here looks plausible given the extreme importance of Spain in the larger story of imperial Rome. Spain (in fact, Baetica) was the birthplace of the second century emperors Trajan and Hadrian. Such a Christian concentration in this area makes good sense in terms of the traditions of the Jewish Diaspora, which claimed prominent centers in the same territory, at Córdoba, as well as further north at the cities that would become Toledo and Mérida. Commonly, Christian and Jewish populations overlapped closely. (The Council of Elvira was very concerned about Christian-Jewish relations).

But if early Christian communities really proliferated in this region, history has been remarkably silent about them. Spanish Christians left few written records before the end of the third century, Eusebius knew nothing about them, and was never too strong on Latin-speaking communities anyway. Carthage and Africa compensated for that absence by producing the prolific Tertullian, but there was never a Spanish equivalent – at least, not in this age. Or if there was, his writings have been entirely lost. As far as we know, Spaniards before 300 made no contributions to the great controversies rending the Great Church, like the debates over the date of Easter in the 190s. But absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

Just what was Spanish Christianity like in 150 or 225? Was there a whole lost cohort of Spanish Church Fathers? Did Spain in this era have its local equivalents of Irenaeus or Cyprian? Were there early Gnostic sects in Spain? We have no idea. If we knew more, might we be counting Córdoba and Mérida alongside Carthage among the spiritual powerhouses of the early Church?

Early Christian Spain is a black hole. It's theoretically possible that Roman Córdoba might have produced the most brilliant and challenging heresy in Christian history, which never made any impact outside Spain, and which vanished utterly. If it had existed, we would know nothing about it. Presumably, these Spanish churches produced very early Latin versions of the gospels, but again, if they did, we don't know about the tradition or how it developed.

By way of comparison, think how much we know about one Western center, namely Lyon. We have all the critical writings of Irenaeus, from the 170s, and a major martyrdom account. All those survived because of Irenaeus himself and his extensive contacts in Asia Minor (he was from Smyrna). He wrote in Greek, and addressed a Greek-speaking audience. That meant that he was involved in larger church politics, and moreover that his writings survived to be used by Eusebius. If he had not had those eastern contacts, we would presumably know nothing of him or his work, and Gaul before Constantine would be a complete blank on our maps.

What matters here is not specifically that we have lost the early history of Christian Spain, but that an area seemingly so thriving in the early Christian story could so totally have vanished into historical oblivion.

This example raises the obvious question of what other regional churches might be escaping our attention, particularly in the West. We know of some scattered early churches across Gaul and into the Rhineland, towards the frontier, but we are surely missing much important activity. As Robin Lane Fox writes, in the words with which I began, "In the West, in short, early Christianity has lost its history." For historians, that is a humbling insight.

What other critical parts of the early church story are we missing? What other regions have dropped off the map?

For late Roman Spain, see Kim Bowes and Michael Kulikowski, eds., *Hispania In Late Antiquity: Current Perspectives* (Brill, 2005); and now Paula Hershkowitz, *Prudentius, Spain, and Late Antique Christianity: Poetry, Visual Culture, and the Cult of Martyrs* (Cambridge 2017).

The First Christians and the Urban Thesis

October 30, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I recently posted on the question of Christian numbers around 200 AD. Since then, I have read a new book that is a significant contribution on the subject, namely Thomas A. Robinson, *Who Were*

the First Christians: Dismantling the Urban Thesis (Oxford University Press, 2017). This blogpost offers some reactions to that book and its thesis.

Most scholars of early Christianity agree that it was an overwhelmingly urban religion, and some major writers who have advanced numbers based on that approach are Wayne Meeks, Rodney Stark, and Ramsay MacMullen. (Just to confess an interest, Rod Stark is a colleague of mine at Baylor). Robinson offers a stern (and sometimes hyper-critical) challenge to these ideas, both what he terms the "Urban Thesis," and the various numbers estimated for early Christianity – which do indeed vary alarmingly. The book's arguments just can't be ignored.

Throughout, Robinson asks some excellent and provocative questions, especially about the nature of our sources. What in fact can we say about population numbers overall, never mind how we approach more tenuous and subjective categories like "Christians"? He is correctly scornful of the extremely high and long discredited figures of Jews in the Empire. No, Jews never made up ten percent of the empire's population, or anything close to it. And indeed, we should be very cautious about taking our literary sources – especially Christian apologists – as if they are presenting anything like objective fact.

As social scientists warn us, the plural of "anecdote" is not "data." Nor does a bogus figure gain value merely by the fact of constant repetition. Among other virtues, Robinson offers a good history of statistical mythologies.

Robinson particularly develops one sequence that proceeds logically thus. A common consensus holds that by around 300, Christians represented some ten percent of the total population of the Roman Empire. (That figure dates back to a century old guesstimate by von Harnack, but has since found wider support). The urban population of the Roman Empire was around ten percent. If both those figures are correct, then Roman cities would already have been overrun with Christians, leaving no room for Jews or even pagans. Therefore, suggests Robinson, if that figure of ten percent Christian is even vaguely accurate, then we are missing a great many non-urban Christians. And therefore, we need to pay a lot more attention to the presence of early rural Christianity, which forms a major topic of his book. The existence of such a large rural component so early in the Christian story runs flat contrary to virtually all the scholarly literature.

I would have found this argument more of a knockdown if Robinson's own Preface had not spoken of Christians in the countryside, "where at least 80 percent of the empire's population lived." That would leave the empire's urban proportion as a bit under twenty percent, rather than ten, and that would have left plenty of room in the cities for all those supposed Christians, not to mention Jews, pagans, and miscellaneous other groups. So that is quite an inconsistency, especially if we are trying to be precise about numbers.

But let's pursue that rural theme. Robinson duly cites recent studies of rural churches and Christian communities, many of which have only received full scholarly attention. This is important and highly relevant material. But how large a share were they of the whole Christian community? One question would be just why those communities are so utterly neglected in the quite extensive Christian writing we do have from the era between, say, 120 and 320. Obviously city dwellers tend mainly to write about cities, and literate elites despise peasants. But at some point, if in fact Christianity was

anything like the force Robinson suggests, it would be such an overwhelming temptation to state this outright.

You can almost imagine Tertullian proclaiming that Christianity was sweeping the ranks of the world's most despised, that we surround your great pagan cities, all supported by some appropriate agricultural metaphors about planting, seed, and harvest. God's countryside surrounds the cities that are the fortresses of the Devil…. But he doesn't. There is no such literature anywhere, is there? Why not?

As Robinson properly notes, anti-Christian critics like Celsus denounced the low-born, low-class and even criminal component of early Christian churches, and they may have had a point about the faith's cross-class appeal. That is quite different though from suggesting broad masses of rural peasant believers.

One theme that Robinson's book must make us consider is the whole question of what constitutes urban, against rural, and when that divide fades to the point of vanishing. In a sense, both urban and rural are strictly relative terms. (His chapter five is very good on this). There are degrees of urban, and degrees of rural.

If we are looking at Rome or Alexandria or Ephesus, then very clearly we are talking about cities and urban life in the purest sense, but the great majority of Roman cities were far smaller concerns, and by definition, they were much closer to the surrounding countryside. Often, cities would be surrounded by a network of smaller towns or settlements, some military or commercial in nature, or transportation centers, which might be small in themselves, but which would fall under the general umbrella of the City of X. Modern geographers include such outliers within the "metropolitan region" of a given city.

Throughout history too, the process of rapid urbanization often leaves many people straddling the urban-rural divide. Imagine for instance a Roman province like Britain, where urban life only really arrived in the mid-first century AD, but cities then proliferated. By the fourth century, there were at least 22 towns with substantial defended areas of fifteen hectares or more, and the leading centers were really sizable – London covered 128 hectares, Cirencester 88, Verulamium-St.Alban's 79, and Wroxeter stood at 77 hectares. Some of the urban inhabitants would be foreign migrants, including military veterans, but many would be British people who moved from the countryside, and quite recently.

Around twenty of the major British towns were *civitas* centers, or the capitals of tribal territories. Cirencester was the civitas of the Dobunni people, Wroxeter of the Cornovii. The assumption is that these towns would have had quite extensive and continuing contacts throughout their tribal region, which was roughly the size of a modern English county. If later historical examples are any guide, those new native city dwellers would not cut their ties with the countryside overnight, but would rather maintain networks of kin and friends. They would travel back to the countryside regularly, and country dwellers would visit them. Country dwellers often traveled to cities to sell produce. At elite social levels, wealthy people had sizable country estates, villas, which were usually only a few miles from flourishing cities like Gloucester and Cirencester. Such new growth was especially characteristic of the Western Empire, and particularly in Northern Gaul and the Rhineland.

Incidentally, such arguments about overlap and continuity are often made in the context of the urbanization associated with the Industrial Revolution, making the mushrooming new towns of that era much more rooted in the countryside than might initially appear. Workers in new industrial plants even went "home" to help their families with the harvest. Did the inhabitants of upstart Roman towns do the same?

A city, then, would cast a massive shadow over a surrounding region, creating a rural/urban penumbra. As Wayne Meeks observes, the network of towns and villages dependent on the city was the *chora*, and it would have fallen naturally under the power of the urban bishop (Robinson 22-23). It would be only natural for ideas to develop in cities, and to spread into these immediately surrounding regions, the urban-ish areas. These regions would be rural in a very different sense, and a radically different degree, from more distant regions separated from the whole Roman world of commerce and communication. If these areas near cities are not exactly suburban, or ex-urban, they are still intimately tied into urban life. If a modern US-style government somehow found itself in charge of the Roman Empire, it would incorporate many of these regions within something like our Metropolitan Statistical Areas, and we would be talking of (say) the Ephesus-Smyrna Metro Region.

So if we imagine a Christian community living a couple of miles outside a city, wholly dependent on that city in economic terms, and subject to its episcopal authority … is that an urban or a rural church? Interesting question.

If the urban/rural divide is questionable, so we need to be careful discussing "Early Christianity," and chronology demands careful consideration. The term "Early Christian" might refer to the whole period from, say, AD 30 through 325, a three century era that is roughly the same as the time that separates us from, say, the birth of Ben Franklin. Things obviously change a great deal in such a time-span, and especially in the context of a new and booming movement like an emerging religion. It is quite possible to argue, for instance, that Christianity before 150 AD was near-totally urban, while it was developing a real rural outreach after 250. That chronology is roughly what I believe, but which Robinson challenges in his chapter seven.

I raise a major point of disagreement here. Robinson says that if indeed Christianity developed solidly in the countryside only after 250, then there is no way it could have become the popular mass movement it did by the fourth century. Ergo, there must have been significant rural growth before that, to provide the essential platform for later growth. But that argument assumes that the large rural presence we see from the fourth century onward represented *spontaneous* growth – that all the rural conversions and affiliations to Christianity after 300 or so are based on a rational series of religious choices, and that such choices are wholly voluntary. In fact, rural believers were highly subject to the whims of their elite neighbors and their landlords, who were often ferociously oppressive and exploitative. Rural elites could thus have imposed Christian practice vastly more rapidly than it appeared in the cities, especially when that was reinforced by state action against rural temples. An initial top-down imposition does not preclude the growth of authentic mass conversions in the next generation, or indeed the development of popular forms of Christian devotion.

To look at a later parallel, see how the near-solid Catholic countryside of late sixteenth century England became the fervent Protestant region of 150 years later. Why did that change happen? Because landlords insisted on the new faith, and so did an intrusive and often violent state. And

gradually, that opened the door for ordinary people to follow the new faith of their own volition, and often on their own terms. The closer those rural regions were to Protestant cities, the faster and more complete the conversion.

Does any of that sound familiar in the world of Late Antiquity?

Robinson asks a great many good questions, and forces us to think about many of the conventional clichés and statements that we might be tempted to use about early Christian numbers. And yes, there were rural Christian communities from an early date. I don't think, though, that he comes close to substantiating his claim about the relative importance of that rural element, and especially not over the whole span of Early Christian history (as opposed to just after 250). The "Urban Thesis" has not been dismantled.

I make one common sense argument. When Constantine opted to favor Christianity in 313, he was seeking the support of a movement that was widespread in the Empire, and which commanded a sizable share of support, especially in the East. I think that statement is uncontroversial enough? Obviously Constantine was not just aiming for the support of a few thousand fringe cultists and their hangers on. I don't know if we can plausibly estimate the faith's overall numbers at that time at ten percent, but surely – surely! – it must have been more than one or two percent. But how much more?

Or is it a mistake speaking of overall percentages at all? The Empire had no interest whatever in mass democracy. Imagine a situation where Christians made up (say) one percent of the total imperial population, but a quarter of the elites (I don't propose those figures as valid, but suggest a hypothetical). In those circumstances, Constantine would have had a firm and comprehensible basis for his seemingly radical new turn.

But these are specific questions within a larger agenda. However many mistakes have in the past been made in seeking precise figures for Christian numbers, then the search itself absolutely is a legitimate enterprise.

For my British examples, see David Mattingly, *An Imperial Possession* (2006). On "urban" themes, I will just note here the impressive new collection edited by Steve Walton, Paul R. Trebilco, and David W.J. Gill, The Urban World and the First Christians (Eerdmans, 2017). I'll have more to say about this in a later post.

I post quite a bit in late Roman/post-Roman topics, and I offer my working bibliography, which you can find here.

ADDENDUM: Professor Robinson has offered a thoughtful response to my review, for which see below.

Inventing The Clergy

November 10, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

I have been working on the early church, mainly the era of Tertullian, around 200 AD. What you find in that era has many implications for later debates about the church, and especially at a time when we are talking so much about commemorating the Reformation.

For Christians, the question of what the church actually did and thought in that very early era has always been a matter of significance. To varying degrees, Christians of all shades and traditions have always claimed to be grounding themselves in the Bible and the early Church. A practice is justified as authentic if it can be validated by scriptural reference, or else by the historical precedent of the early Christian centuries, and the venerated Church Fathers. The guiding principle is that the era closest to the time of Christ and his apostles was most likely to have preserved their message most faithfully and accurately.

That view was especially prominent during the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Even Protestants who claim to be following the strict practice of the New Testament acknowledge that the early church did not immediately lose or betray the glories of the apostolic age, thus granting some authority to Patristic authors. Commonly, this "early church" designation extends to what occurred before the Council of Nicea of 325 AD, creating the concept of "Ante-Nicene."

Such a resort to the "early church" commonly features in debates over present-day ideas and practices. Roughly, if an idea or theme can be demonstrated to have been recognized in the early church – and the earlier the better – that of itself gives solid grounds for reviving or restoring it in the modern world. That approach explains the strong concern of modern-day liberals and feminists with early church history, in such crucial matters as the existence of ordained women clergy. Although such activists challenge the current state of the church and the traditions that it claims to follow, they do so by seeking the warrant of a tradition still more ancient and, in this view, authentically truer to the spirit of Jesus and his first followers. On all sides, the past is usable.

By these criteria, the state of the church as it existed around 200 AD – over a century before Nicea – is clearly a significant matter in contemporary debate. (For Americans, this approach has much in common with the Original Intent approach to the Constitution).

Several critical issues come to mind from that early Christian era, and one involves the definition of clergy. Already around 200, the concept and definition of the clergy was changing rapidly, moving in the direction of a distinct class or caste that we know from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages. To oversimplify, that idea was already becoming quite visibly "catholic."

To indicate just how wide such a gulf would ultimately become, we might look at conditions in the High Middle Ages, when clergy were multiply distinguished from the laity by the fact of ordination. Depending on the country in question, they were required to be celibate, they often wore distinct clothing and styles of hair or beard, and they were subject to a distinct system of justice and discipline. Clerical life had its own hierarchy and career ladder, and senior clergy normally passed through lower grades of status. Critically, clergy were literate in a society where most lay people were

not. Clergy and clerk come from the same root. Reinforcing that separation, the clergy served a church that was a political and economic power in its own right, and a major landowner. Presenting such a picture highlights critical differences with ante-Nicene times, when the lay/clerical divide was narrower. But the clergy were evolving in status and distinctiveness.

Unlike the Middle Ages, literacy was widespread in Roman times, and prosperous lay people were likely to have access to books equal or superior to their clergy. Also, clergy were still not celibate. But the language of "clergy" was definitely present. In Latin, it first surfaces in Tertullian's tract *De Monogamia*, written after 210. Tertullian supported the institution of marriage, but denied that Christians could remarry after a partner died. He was especially concerned about the role of bishops, priests and deacons, writing: "For whence is it that the bishops and clergy [*episcopi et clerus*] come? Is it not from all? If all are not bound to monogamy, whence are monogamists (to be taken) into the clerical rank? [*in clerum*?] Will some separate order of monogamists have to be instituted, from which to make selection for the clerical body? [*clerum*]"

For anyone used to later Christian history, this language of clergy and clerical order is wholly unsurprising, but it is new at this historical moment. The word also appears fully formed, in exactly the sense that it would convey in future ages. If there was a clergy, then some word was also needed for believers who did not fall into that category, and that word was "lay" or laity, from the Greek word *laos*. A lay person was a *laikos*, "one of the People," which Tertullian imports into Latin as *laicus*.

Tertullian also used other terms that would become very influential as they acquired a technical meaning. In his time different groups might constitute an order, *ordo*, a term applied to bishops and elders (and eventually to lower clerical ranks). Admission to the *ordo* of clergy became ordination.

An identical usage of the term "clergy" occurs at just this time in the writings of another early father, namely Hippolytus. Around 220, he wrote a scabrous account of Callistus, Bishop of Rome (Pope) and his laxity towards sexual conduct among clerics. Callistus supposedly taught that "if a bishop was guilty of any sin, if even a sin unto death, he ought not to be deposed. About the time of this man, bishops, priests, and deacons, who had been twice married, and thrice married, began to be allowed to retain their place among the clergy [*kathistasthai eis klerous*]. If also, however, any one who is in holy orders [*en klero*] should become married, Callistus permitted such a one to continue in holy orders [*en to klero*] as if he had not sinned."

I quote here the standard English translation of the text, which is loaded with technical terms for clerical status and discipline that at first glance sound almost medieval. There is a class of clergy from which one can be expelled, people are "in holy orders." That last phrase is misleadingly medieval, and the translator has only introduced it to add some variation to Hippolytus's frequent repetition of the word *kleros*, clergy. But the idea of a clerical caste or even profession is definitely present. It matters enormously whether one has fulfilled the proper qualifications for membership, and it is a public scandal that the unqualified or sinful are permitted to remain. Throughout his account, he speaks regularly of the clergy as a group, for instance in terms of the bishop's care of his clergy, *kleros*.

Tertullian and Hippolytus were using the idea and institution of hierarchical "clergy" in the church of their time. And that is definitely in the era of the "early church."

Around this time too, an even more controversial idea appeared in the Christian world view, namely Priesthood.

More on that next time.

Inventing the Christian Priesthood

November 13, 2017 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I've been discussing the Christian church at an early stage in its development, around 200 AD. This is definitely the "early church," long before the Council of Nicea, and the kind of precedents we find there should presumably be relevant to later generations of Christians, including Protestants. That's important because early Fathers from this time, such as Tertullian, show how commonly the church then talked not only about a distinct class of clergy, but even referred to them as priests. The overall result looks startlingly catholic, and indeed Catholic.

Tertullian is significant in the number of times he speaks of priests and priesthood, using the Latin term *sacerdos,* often as a synonym for *presbyter*. Modern readers naturally think of a threefold distinction of bishops, priests and deacons, and see "priest" as a standard term for a lower-ranked cleric. Such a usage would have been surprising in the time we are discussing. For Jews and pagans alike, the term priest always connoted sacrifice, usually the killing of an animal or bird at an altar, as was commonly described in the Old Testament.

Some early Christian writers had used sacrificial language in a Eucharistic context, but without any sense of those presiding as priests in any but a metaphorical sense. The first author to apply priesthood language to Christian clergy was Clement of Rome, who probably wrote about 100 AD. He was less interested in the language of sacrifice than in the notion of each group having its proper assigned place within the order, with Christian leaders occupying a place parallel to priests in the old dispensation.

Tertullian takes these arguments much further in applying those many Biblical passages to apply to Christian clergy, with the implication that the *klerus* constituted a special order of society like that of the Hebrew priests and Levites. In the Greek Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy, we hear of the special portion or inheritance (*kleros*) of those servants of God, encouraging parallels with the later Christian *kleros* or clergy (Deut 18). In his tract *On Baptism*, Tertullian writes of that ceremony: "Of giving it, the chief priest (who is the bishop) [*summus sacerdos, si qui est episcopus*] has the right: in the next place, the presbyters and deacons, yet not without the bishop's authority, on account of the honor of the Church, which being preserved, peace is preserved." Speaking of the chief bishop as the *summus sacerdos* recalls the Jewish high priest of old. Hippolytus spoke of the episcopal office as inherited from the apostles, "as participators in this grace, high-priesthood [*archierateias*], and office of teaching."

But if those Biblical passages applied to Christian clergy as well, that implied that this Christian kleros too had the same duty to observe rules of purity as in times of old, and also the same claim to

special rights, privileges and financial rewards. This meshed superbly with emerging ideas of a clerical caste or profession, which stood almost as a sacred counterpart to the profane elites of the pagan world. By the mid-third century, key Fathers like Cyprian are speaking naturally of the clergy as God's priests or *sacerdotes*, as the "divine priesthood," while bishops constitute a *collegium sacerdotal*e. It sounds very Catholic indeed, if not highly medieval.

The "priestly" language also stirred theological speculation about exactly what the role of those priests was in the liturgy. In Tertullian's time, the priestly language was still metaphorical, and we are still some way from medieval theories of the Sacrifice of the Mass, carried out by ordained priests. But Tertullian's extensive writings laid an indispensable foundation for such innovations.

In a future post, I'll talk about another innovation that shows its first signs in these years, namely clerical celibacy

When the Jesus Movement Became the Christian Church

March 9, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
7 Comments

I have blogged quite a bit recently on early Christian history, and the further I get into this material, the more interested I become in one particular period – quite a narrow period in fact, of a quarter century or so. I keep coming back to these years as *the* critical turning point in early Christian history, and it rarely receives the respect it demands. For all the attention paid to the era of the Council of Nicea, about 325, there is an earlier time that is at least as important, and arguably much more so. Let me make my case for the years around 200 AD – or let's say, more broadly, between the late 180s and 215. One generation.

In terms of modern social theory, this period was when the movement changed from being an upstart sect – spontaneous, passionate, inchoate – to a fully-formed institutionalized "church," a change symbolized by new structures and hierarchies, more formalized patterns of worship and liturgy, and the strict regulation of individual prophecy. Also transformed were notions of authority, with a shift from charismatic or prophetic credentials to an emphasis on tradition and (gradually) on bureaucracy. Newer institutions also felt a powerful impetus to centralization and standardization. This was a classic transmutation of a kind that has befallen so many other new religious movements through human history.

To illustrate this, let's think about the Easter Wars then raging. In the 190s AD, Christians were passionately divided over the question of whether Easter Sunday should fall on Sunday. However nitpicking the issue might sound, the controversy actually involved very substantial issues of identity, culture and faith, issues that shaped the West's religious tradition. Just how closely should the new Jesus movement hew to practices derived from Judaism?

Easter commemorates the Resurrection that is the central fact of Christian faith. According to the lunar Jewish calendar, Jesus had perished on the 14th day of the month Nisan, a Friday, and the gospels reported that he had been resurrected on the Sunday. As that Friday fell in the season of the

Passover, Christians commemorated it with the Greek term for that feast, *Pascha*. For many centuries, Christians have followed that Friday/Sunday pattern. The date may vary from year to year, but Good Friday always falls on a Friday, and Easter Sunday on a Sunday. How could things ever have been otherwise?

But matters were very different in early times. In the churches of Asia Minor – some of the oldest of all Christian communities, and the ones most closely tied to the apostles – Christian Pascha in the second century always fell on the fourteenth of Nisan, whatever the day of the week, and thus followed Jewish practice. The Alexandrian church, in contrast, favored Sunday observance, and so did Rome. About 190, Rome's bishop Victor demanded that Asian bishops fell into line, and a series of strikingly far-flung councils and synods demanded that the Resurrection day should fall on Sunday. Those holdouts who favored the old apostolic practice of observing the fourteenth day of the month of Nisan suddenly found themselves labeled as heretics with the ugly technical label of Quartodecimans, literally "Fourteeners."

However technical the calendrical minutiae in this affair, it points to a powerful theme in Christian history, namely just how *late* in that story the churches decided matters that we might have thought were absolutely fundamental. We normally think of a rigid separation between Christian and Jewish practice sometime around 70 AD, and certainly no later than the end of the first century. That is the interpretation offered in the myriad of books, articles and sermons that appear each year. Yet a hundred years after that supposed separation, some of the most significant churches were still relying on a Jewish structure of months and days. How, we might ask, how could so fundamental an issue, so powerful a symbolic marker of religious identity, still be undecided?

In many other ways as well, Christians at this time were still believing and doing things that fit better with what we might think of as the earliest apostolic ages. Most accounts present the earliest church as a thoroughly radical and utopian sect, open to prophecy, charisma, and miracle, and living in daily expectation of Christ's imminent return. As this event was pushed ever further into the future, so the emerging church spiritualized its messages and promises. At the same time, it developed into a more formal institution, with its hierarchy and bishops. That transformation was acutely apparent in matters of authority. While the earliest church depended on living apostles and inspired prophets, its successors followed an institutional church, and obeyed the mandates of scripture. Surely, we think, such a change must have been accomplished not long after the closing of the New Testament, at the start of the second century.

Such a trajectory fits poorly with the historical facts. Still at the end of the second century, major congregations were seriously debating the approval of the so-called New Prophecy of Montanism, a charismatic movement that claimed that its living prophets were proclaiming spiritual truths equal in authority to those of the scriptures. Still at this time, the range of scriptures in general Christian use was far larger than later Christian concepts of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament. Still at the end of the second century, some respected Christian leaders insisted that the Bible's promises of a future miraculous age of peace and plenty had to be read in a material and terrestrial sense, and not postponed and spiritualized as a supernatural promise of Heaven. Still, major churches followed interpretations of Christ and his mission that by later standards were radically heretical, and far beyond the fold of acceptable belief. Large sections of the Christian community felt able to reject the whole Old Testament, and the Jewish God that it revealed.

On every one of these issues, and on many other questions of belief and practice, and we see the critical era of transformation and decision at the turn of the third century. Although changes had been accumulating gradually, the pace of change then accelerated rapidly to create a revolutionary transformation. This was the watershed moment at which the Christian movement made the decisive move from being a Jewish sect to a free-standing independent church, on the verge of becoming a world religion.

If all the simmering issues were not resolved and the various factions suppressed – as they assuredly were not – then at least it was clear that future debates would be fought out within one mainstream community, the Great Church, a vast transcontinental entity spanning the known world, from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. The wave of councils summoned forth by the Paschal debates of the 190s was in fact the first clear evidence of that global reach.

That Great Church was fundamentally committed to the defense and promotion of the doctrinal mainstream, defined in ever more precise terms. Wholly new concepts of orthodoxy became commonplace, together with new vocabularies. It was around 200 that the brilliant African theologian Tertullian (c.160-220) first applied the Latin word *trinitas* to the Christian deity. As with the poor Quartodecimans, those who espoused yesterday's normality suddenly became today's heterodoxy.

A brief summary of this era would include the following "firsts" – the innovations and breakthroughs – all from that short period around 200:

**Scale and Diversity*: The church's vast geographical scale demanded a much greater recognition of linguistic and cultural diversity, beyond the original Greek and Aramaic. For the first time, Latin and Syriac became vehicles of major Christian writing and thought.

**A World Church*: Despite its growth, the church retained its sense of common identity, as manifested by the first great councils.

**Planting Roots*: Globalization coincided with localization. As the churches developed local roots, they no longer relied on itinerant leaders and immigrants. Victor, whom I have already mentioned as the Roman Pope of the 190s, was the first holder of that office to speak Latin.

*As a dubious blessing of this trend, the church's very first *anti-Jewish polemic* in Latin appeared a year or two after 200.

**Authority and Tradition*: In the extensively preserved Christian discourse and debate of this era, arguments repeatedly relied on church tradition and long authority, exactly the characteristics of an institutionalized church rather than a sect.

**Hierarchy*: Although bishops and clergy are recognizable in earlier eras, their roles and functions now become much more standardized and formalized. They become the crucial transmitters and guarantors of tradition and authenticity. Victor may have been the first Roman Pope to act as a bishop, rather than the chair of the governing board of the local congregation.

**Institutional Life*: churches and bishoprics now became corporate property-owning institutions, vastly increasing the material concerns at issue in any theological debates.

**Clergy and Laity*. It was precisely around 200 that we find the first evidence of clergy as a distinct profession or caste, a textbook sign of the distinction between a sect and a "church." That concept in turn consigned the rest of believers to the category of "laity", literally just "the people."

**Priesthood*. The theory of Christian clergy as priests originates in this era, with all the Old Testament implications of that term, and all the theological implications of that insight.

**Christian Identity*: The Easter controversy was the clearest example of a newly assertive Christian identity and ideology separate from Judaism. Meanwhile, it was also around 200 that Jewish thinkers took their own steps to a new distinct identity with the maturity of Rabbinic Judaism.

**Creating Catholic Theology*. Around 200, Tertullian creates the language of later Catholic theology in a wide range of matters, notably including the concept of clergy, and of clerical celibacy. His writings gave later Latin-speakers a firm theological foundation both in language and concepts.

**Church Order*: These years mark a new sophistication in Christian liturgy and devotional practice, and more formal rituals. Several surviving texts demonstrate the near-obsessive concern with "Church Order," with its assumptions about formality, hierarchy, and the specialized roles of the emerging clerical caste.

**Eucharistic ideas* in particular became central to spiritual power and prestige, with shared communion the essential criterion for church membership.

**Cultural Genesis*: The volume and diversity of Christian cultural and literary contributions grow massively in these years, suggesting a whole new scale of intellectual engagement. Christian musical culture and hymnody also originate at this very time.

**Engagement with Mainstream Culture*: Only in this era could Christian thinkers, for the first time, engage in serious debate with the pagan cultural mainstream, through sophisticated apologetics, and the emergence of distinctively Christian philosophy. These efforts manifest a new social confidence, and new class pretensions.

**Engagement with Political Power*: Tentatively at first, Christians first began to appear among ruling elites, and even included in their ranks the king of a state, the borderland of Osrhoene.

**Theology, and the Great Leap Forward*: The need to participate in mainstream intellectual life revolutionized Christian theological discourse, demanding a new rigor in theological categories, and in turn provoking the debates that so agonized the Great Church over the following three centuries. These divisions were especially evident in concepts of the Trinity, and of the person of Christ.

**Exploring the Christian Scriptures*: From earliest times, Christians had been deeply engaged in scriptural exegesis and commentary, but with reference to the Old Testament. From the end of the second century, the focus shifted to the newly-defined New Testament, with the first pioneering

commentaries on books in that collection, and intense debates about the proper contents and limits of Christian scripture.

So many critical components of later Christian thought, life, writing, culture and devotion – so many ideas, arguments, institutions, and genres – have their roots in this effervescent period.

So prolific are the changes of this era, and so far-reaching, that it demands to be recognized as one of the most significant turning points in the formation of Christianity. It was at least equal in importance to the far better-known era of Nicea, when the range of possible historical outcomes was far narrower than in the earlier period. The period around 200 was a time of near-infinite possibilities, on matters far broader than something as specific as the date of Easter. Indeed, so much of what the Council of Nicea debated reflected issues that had arisen about 200.

Scholars have long recognized the pivotal importance of some of the thinkers of this era, especially Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria, but new (and indeed very recent) discoveries and insights have vastly enhanced our knowledge of these years. We know much more than we did about the Gnostics and Sethians, about the pagan world, and indeed about the mainstream church itself – and scholarship has boomed. The more we discover, the more vital these transition years appear.

In terms of that Christian story, the years around 200 marked the end of the beginning. More on this in coming posts.

The Church of Many Voices

March 19, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

As I study the early history of Christianity, I become ever more interested by one critical era, namely the decade or so on either side of 200 AD. That is a time of terrific expansion, but more particularly, I have argued that this marks the point at which a sect becomes a church, or more specifically, when the Jesus Movement becomes the Christian church. This transition had powerful consequences for language and languages.

That expansion had vital implications for the languages in which the faith was transmitted and discussed. Although there is some controversial evidence of early Christian writing in Aramaic, virtually every surviving trace of the faith we have before the late second century is in Greek. Even Irenaeus, writing in Lyon, in Gaul, around 180, naturally wrote in Greek. Of course, Greek continued to be a primary medium of Christian writing long afterwards, but Hellenes suddenly found themselves in a polyglot world. Greek became one of a Big Four of languages, alongside Latin, Coptic and Syriac – and not necessarily in that order of importance.

We know most about the Latin component because those texts were more likely to survive into medieval and modern times, and to be extensively studied in modern academic and Church settings. In the 190s, Tertullian become the first Christian writer in Latin, and indeed the founder of Christian thought in that language. Through direct quotation and influence, through oblique

references and confused memories, Tertullian is the source of a huge amount of later Latin Patristic (and medieval) writing. He indicates some knowledge of a Latin Bible translation, but one probably made not from much before his time.

There were many milestones about this time, during a cultural and linguistic revolution. While Tertullian broke new paths in Latin, his contemporary Hippolytus (170-235) was the last western theologian whose works we know in Greek. In 189, meanwhile, Victor became the first Latin-speaking Pope.

Other languages became priceless vehicles for Christian thought, and for centuries they considerably outweighed Latin in importance. In Coptic, the first translations in the two main dialects both appeared precisely at the cusp of the late second and early third century.

But it was in Syriac that this period marks a singular breakthrough. Although the exact date is uncertain, the Syriac translation of the Scriptures (Peshitta) was probably available by 200, both Old and New Testaments.

Throughout the first millennium, Syriac Christians were immensely energetic and productive, but they often faced the dilemma of how to deal with the founding father of that tradition. This was Bardaisan (154-222), a wide-ranging genius and polymath who was enormously influential in many genres, including philosophy, astrology, theology, and history, and he was a pioneer what we might call comparative religion.

Bardaisan has a strong claim to rank as the founder of Christian hymnody, and of church music. In geographical terms, he worked in Syria and Mesopotamia, Babylonia and Armenia, and his account of Indian intellectual life was widely read. If Tertullian was the first Christian thinker that we know in Latin, then his near-exact contemporary Bardaisan was the first of any significance to write in Syriac.

Bardaisan was raised at the court of the Syrian kingdom of Osrhoene, and around 200, that land's king Abgar became the world's first ruler to accept Christianity. Arguably, the most dynamic Christian intellectual center in 200 was neither Rome nor Alexandria, but Edessa.

The problem with Bardaisan was that his views were characterized as Gnostic, although he undoubtedly saw himself just as firmly located in the Christian mainstream as did Tertullian, or any bishop of the time. Later generations, though, were not forgiving, and only a tiny fraction of his works survive intact, so that he largely dropped out of the mainstream historical record. By any reasonable reckoning, he must be counted among that stellar group of innovators around 200.

The church began to speak in many tongues.

The Church in the Mainstream

March 23, 2018 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have been posting about the years around 200 as marking a decisive, formative, moment in the history of Christianity, at least as significant as the celebrated era around the Council of Nicea (325). It is difficult to exaggerate just how important this earlier period was for defining every aspect of Christian thought and belief.

Figures like Tertullian, Bardaisan, and Clement of Alexandria indicate the real maturity of Christian thought around this time, and their impact on the larger intellectual community. Besides those giants, we know of other prolific writers and thinkers who were celebrated at the time, but whose works have been lost. That comment would apply to the prolific historian Julius Africanus (c.160-240), and to most of the writings of Hippolytus.

By 210, an educated Christian could possess a really sizable library of authors from his or her own faith, including all the main genres of civilized discourse, in a way that absolutely had not been the case even a generation earlier. And the volume of publication was accelerating, in multiple languages. Pagans had no option but to pay attention, however grudgingly at first.

Adding to this relevance to the wider world, this was the first era in which Christians could plausibly aspire to some kind of political power. Bardaisan was well connected with the Syrian kingdom of Osrhoene, and around 200, that land's king accepted Christianity. That court background indicates the respectable and even aristocratic background of some leading Christians by this time, and even in Rome elite Christian sympathizers mitigated official persecution. The court of emperor Alexander Severus (222-35) was notably friendly to Christians.

By 200, that Christian presence was becoming ever harder to ignore. This was the time that pagan philosophers found it worth their while to denounce and parody Christianity, as Celsus did so comprehensively in the 170s. Around 220, a *Life* of the philosopher Apollonius of Tyana depicted him as a kind of pagan version of Christ, together with miracles and even hints at a resurrection appearance. At every point, Apollonius is explicitly presented as a counter-balance to the depiction of Christ in the Gospels, a disturbing image that pagans felt the need to counter. At last for the non-Christian world, this was the point at which Christianity began to matter.

In turn, Christians like Clement and (later) Origen had to combat these assaults, and they did so by appropriating and adapting the advanced philosophical thought of the time. The more ferocious the assaults, the deeper Christians ventured into the intellectual arena. Christian thought came of age.

That new intellectual sophistication revolutionized theological debate. Ever since New Testament times, authors had borrowed Greek and particularly Platonic ideas and language, but by the 190s such adaptation was essential to make sense such emerging questions as the nature of God, the personality of Christ, and the role he had played in making the world. At every stage too, Christians had to decide how, or if, their distinctive positions fitted into older Jewish schemes.

The range of ideas under discussion in this era was staggering. Depending on the thinker and the school of thought, we might hear that there were two Gods, and one created spirit and one matter; or that Christ was fully human in his body, but divine in his inner spirit; or perhaps that God occupied the body of the man Jesus at the moment of his baptism, and left it at the crucifixion.

Around 200, one major division concerned so-called Monarchian thought, the idea that Father and Son were essentially the same, or else were forms of modes of one being. In this sense, we might even imagine God the father being crucified and dying on the cross, which later generations would consider as a grotesque theological absurdity.

These debates would continue for two centuries, but it was around 200 that Tertullian, above all, offered both the concepts that would become the building blocks of later theology, and the language. Tertullian was the first to frame the concept of "Trinity," of what he daringly termed "three persons, one substance." (*tres personae, una substantia*). Those terms – persons and substance – would have a very long afterlife.

Ever flexible, and ever quotable, Tertullian also offered a novel justification for his daring views, in this case on the Resurrection: *certum est, quia impossibile*: It is certain, because it is impossible.

The faith had come an inconceivably long way from the world of a few house churches under the ministry of fishermen and itinerant tent-makers. And it was no longer a fringe sect of Judaism.

The Sun God in the Synagogue

February 3, 2020 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Last year, I wrote several post about the relationship between Judaism and Hellenism, the issue that sparked the Maccabean revolt. The anti-Hellenist rebels won the war, and secured national independence. But that certainly did not mean the end of Greek influence on Jews, and indeed on the emerging Christian movement. In the light of some very recent archaeological finds, we now see just how thoroughly Jews continued to absorb Greek imagery and iconography throughout what we would call the early Christian centuries. That fact seriously affects how we understand the parallel trends among Christians in those very same years.

By way of introduction, this image depicts a detail of a mosaic floor in what once a magnificent synagogue at Hamat, Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee, and it is a famous Israeli archaeological treasure. In the fourth century, this would have been the seat of the Sanhedrin, and as such the building called for lavish display. The mosaic in question depicts the Greek sun-god, Helios, holding the celestial sphere. He is at the center of a larger image of the whole zodiac.

Now, an obvious comment here is that Jewish tradition strictly forbade visual depictions of the deity, and in later eras, that suspicion extended to human figures in general, certainly in a sacred context. But the more early synagogues we find – from, say, between the third and the sixth century – the more evidence we see of the popular use of human figures, on a huge scale.

This is a vast topic that I will not get into here, but there are some really famous sites. You should follow the links cited here for some stunning works of art. One of the finest and earliest, from the 240s, stands at Dura-Europos in Syria, and it includes extensive murals showing Biblical scenes. All the characters are shown in the finest Hellenistic mode. Early in the fifth century, some wonderful

mosaics were crated at the synagogue of Sepphoris/Tzippori, which is within walking distance of Nazareth. Again, Helios is in his sun chariot, but Biblical scenes also feature prominently.

Just over the past decade, a synagogue site at Huqoq (near Tiberias) has produced jaw-dropping art-works, again from the fifth century. I quote Amanda Borschel-Dan:

The scenes vary from well-known religious stories such as Jonah and the Whale, Noah's Ark, and Pharaoh's soldiers being swept away by the Red Sea and swallowed up by dozens of fish, to the pagan zodiac at the floor's center, as well as a portrayal of what may be the first purely historical non-biblical scene in a synagogue — complete with armored elephants.

We now have a vast range of writing on these works, scholarly and popular. Some authors particularly address the question of "What is the sun god doing on the floor of ancient synagogues? Doesn't that violate the second commandment?" As Mike Rogoff notes,

Jews recognized . . . that the universe is entirely in the hands of the Creator; but since any representation of Him was the most severe prohibition of all, they adopted and adapted a long-popular Mediterranean design to convey the idea. There was no veneration of the pagan deities or celestial bodies—after all, the congregation routinely tramped over them—and thus no violation of the second part of the Second Commandment [which states of images:] "…thou shalt not bow down unto them, nor serve them.

It's useful to bear these parallels and precedents in mind when looking at Christian culture in the same era. One of the most famous early depictions of Jesus, from the Vatican Necropolis, seems to depict him as Helios. A great deal of ink has been spilled through the centuries noting how Christians came increasingly to depict their sacred characters in Greco-Roman guise, drawing heavily on the iconography of pagan gods and heroes. But as we see from those Jewish examples, that did not necessarily represent any kind of concession to syncretism. Rather, Jews and Christians alike were just using what they regarded as the finest aesthetic standards of the time, and using craftsmen who were used to creating figures of Heracles or Apollo.

At the end of the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom notoriously denounced Antioch Christians who freely ran off to synagogues, especially for the solemnity of the great holydays. When we read such accounts, it helps to recall that the physical appearance of the particular places of worship was not as radically different as we might suppose.

Incidentally, early Muslims were just as easy-going about using human representations, even if not in places of worship. Just look at the eighth century royal site of Qusayr' Amra in Jordan, with its extensive human depictions, and again, with the zodiac and the constellations heavily prominent. And of course, Islamic traditions are even more strongly opposed to human imagery than were the Jewish precedents.

This whole story actually gets to a larger issue about how we understand early Christianity, at least in popular reconstructions, as opposed to serious scholarship. When we think of New Testament or early Christian times, we often imagine Judaism as we know it from medieval or modern manifestations, rather than the complex and multi-faceted phenomenon that actually existed at the time. Hence a great many sermons through the centuries that try to contrast Jesus's liberal attitudes with the supposed rigidity of "the Jews" at the time – do excuse the rampant stereotypes here.

Hence also the attempt to speak of different gospels as more or less "Jewish" or "Gentile," when the supposed Gentile content had already been absorbed into Judaism long before Jesus's time. Just witness generations of writing about the Gospel of John and its Logos theology.

The same golds true in the early Christian centuries. A common impression suggests that Christianity began in a Jewish matrix, and then became progressively more Gentile and Hellenized as it developed as an independent movement, breaking from that Jewish stem. One sign of that supposed rupture is the increased willingness of Christians to adopt visual imagery, and even to borrow from pagan iconography, and that process became ever more marked once Christianity became the state religion in the fourth century. But as I have suggested here, that idea would be very misleading. Jews and Christians alike borrowed similarly from those Gentile/Greco-Roman ideas and images, and followed very similar trajectories. Around 400, at least some synagogues were *more* open to appropriating pagan imagery than were churches – though of course they borrowed them without the explicit pagan connotations. In making that point, I relish the coincidence (and that is all it is) that the best Jewish examples of this story come from Jesus's homeland, of Galilee.

As so often, it is very difficult to tell the story of early Christianity without getting quite deep into the Judaism of the same era.

Finally, it is also somewhat weird to think of all these artistic extravaganzas specifically in Palestine dating from the third century through the sixth, exactly the key period of the writing and compilation of the Talmud, and specifically the Jerusalem Talmud. Some of the key figures actually worked in centers like Tiberias and Sepphoris. Somehow, I never thought of all those great sages living and working in such a rich world of visual display. My ignorance.

A Saint for Failed States and Refugee Crises

May 1, 2020 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Most modern readers find it hard to identify with ancient or medieval saints' lives, written at times when people had such very different expectations of sanctity. We may or may not *believe* that Saint X healed lepers or foretold dynastic changes, but it's hard to identify with the situations. What do the concerns of those early readers have to do with us? Well, here's an exception. It's called the *Life of Severinus*, and you can read it full text. It tells how a courageous Christian leader coped with a world in the throes of destruction – of a systematic ruin that in its day must have seemed as overwhelming as the threat of total war or pandemic or environmental collapse in the modern world. Written 1,500 years ago, it is ideal reading for an age of mass migration and failed states, of refugees and asylum-seekers. It is as modern a spiritual life as you will ever read.

The setting is the mid-fifth century, the era when the sophisticated urbanized Roman world was under assault from waves of barbarians. Apart from the immediate danger of massacre and physical destruction, civilized inhabitants faced the dangers of famine, economic collapse, and plague. By this time, most of Rome's European empire was officially Christian, and believers saw the accumulating horrors as signs of the apocalyptic End Times. Particularly in the border territories, cities fell,

churches were destroyed, communities killed or enslaved en masse, and all familiar institutions were uprooted.

The tale of Severinus offers a first hand snapshot of a civilized world in dissolution. According to a strictly contemporary *Life*, Severinus (410-482) first appears in Noricum and Pannonia (modern Austria, Slovenia and Croatia) at one of the worst moments of European history, in the immediate aftermath of the Hun invasions of the 450s. Roman forces have been destroyed or withdrawn, leaving the work of defense to local militias. Throughout the book, we find laconic suggestions of the horror of the time:

That night the Heruli made a sudden, unexpected onslaught, sacked the town, and led most of the people into captivity. They hanged the priest Maximianus on a cross. … A vast multitude of the Alamanni, minions of Death, laid everything waste.

It is a horribly convincing picture, one that could have been drawn from Germany in the 1640s or the 1940s, or of parts of Central or Western Africa today.

Map is public domain

Severinus visits cities either recovering from invasion, or preparing to face massacre. He offers spiritual guidance, as he "set forth examples of salvation from of old, in which the protection of God had freed his people in unforeseen and wondrous ways." Naturally, we hear of the miraculous aid he offers, opening frozen rivers and causing earthquakes to terrify barbarian raiders.

But the saint responded very practically indeed to what we would today call the humanitarian crisis. When cities were threatened by famine, he approached rich citizens who had hoarded food, bullying them into sharing all they have. He kept up a stream of letters to surviving cities to beg for spare food and clothing for the homeless and the refugees, and his pleas succeed. One friend

had hired many companions, to carry on their backs, for the benefit of the captives and the poor, a collection of clothing which the people of Noricum had piously given. …

[Severinus] took so great care of captives and the needy that almost all the poor through all the towns and fortresses were fed by his activity.

In a society where war was lavishly funded by the profits of slave trading, it was Severinus who ransomed the hostages, using all his spiritual charisma to bully captors when offers of money failed. Using his powers of healing and prophecy, he befriended and overawed barbarian chieftains.

As time went by, his efforts moved to evacuation, and the wholesale resettlement of refugees. Time and again, he inspired communities to organize themselves for defense, and the Romans won some victories. Eventually, though, he realized that the cities have become indefensible, and that the survivors must be moved into a sanctuary zone. He told the people of one city,

'Know that you are now set free through the protection of God to the end that you may depart hence within a little space of time, granted you as a kind of armistice. So gather together and go down with me to the town of Lauriacum [modern Enns].' … But when the people of Batavis hesitated to leave their native soil, he added, 'Although that

town also, whither we go, must be abandoned as speedily as possible before the inrushing barbarism, yet let us now in like manner depart from this place.' … After the destruction of the towns on the upper course of the Danube, all the people who had obeyed the warnings of Saint Severinus removed into the town of Lauriacum."

At the end of the *Life*, Lauriacum maintains a shaky independence.

But do note one thing. In large sections of the Roman world, the Latin language survived to become the basis of later tongues like French, Italian, and Spanish, which suggests a high degree of continuity below the level of ruling elites. Regular life carried on for ordinary people, to some degree. That was not true in Severinus's areas, where Latin eventually gave way to the invading tongues, to German, and later Slavic. Latin *Lauriacum* became Enns. The old world perished.

The *Life of Severinus* is a magnificent historical source, but much more, it tells of a Christian leader who combined a fiercely ascetic personal piety with wide-ranging activism in political and social affairs. He was a role-model for the modern world.

I am adapting an older blogpost at this site.

Empires, Slaves, and Daniel Syndrome

March 3, 2022 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Throughout history, Empires have shaped religions worldwide, often in quite revolutionary ways. Commonly, they have their greatest impact through actions that are unconscious and unintentional. To take an example, empires fight wars, and through most of human history, that has involved various kinds of population transfer, from mass enslavement and deportation, to the forced relocation of individual captives and slaves. Those unwillingly moved people commonly take their religions along with them, and the consequences can be far reaching. The obvious example is the deportation of the Hebrew people by the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. The echoes of that action resonate to this day, in terms of the impact on Judaism, and later Christianity, while Mesopotamia/Iraq remained a crucial Jewish center until quite modern times.

So frequently do such things happen that this appears to be a regular but under-studied factor in the transmission of religious beliefs and loyalties. This may be a dumb question, but has anyone written a book on current and former slaves as vehicles for evangelization? I don't just mean slaves becoming preachers or ministers in the land where they had always lived, but rather serving to transport the faith to wholly new territories, perhaps even introducing it for the first time.

The best-known example of such a slave-as-missionary was Patrick, seized as a boy in Britain in the early fifth century AD, and carried to pagan Ireland. He escaped, but returned to convert the land of his captivity. The enslavement was anything but an unusual experience at the time, as the borders of the Roman Empire crumbled in the West, while eastern territories too were prone to constant

warfare and barbarian raids – and those raids were usually intended to collect slaves. Contemporary saints' lives show how frequently bishops and clergy sought to relieve and ransom Christian captives in barbarian hands, suggesting that this must have been a very commonplace situation, in Europe as well as the Middle East.

The Caucasian land of Georgia produces the astonishing story of Nino, who was probably born in Cappadocia. Accounts of her life vary, but a strong early tradition says she was brought to Georgia as a slave around the year 300. When the queen became sick, Nino healed her, and that in turn led to a royal conversion. Georgia then became Christian, which it remains to this day. Nino is remembered as the Enlightener, "equal to the apostles," and she remains Georgia's national heroine.

I tend to believe the story of Nino's early slavery for this reason. When a medieval writer was describing a venerated saint, it was natural to make her or him as aristocratic or royal as possible, preferably the sibling of some famous Christian leader. You did not invent a story of a slave past unless it was rooted in some *very* strong authentic tradition.

One other part of the Nino story: when we list the reasons why people converted to Christianity in ancient, and not so ancient times, never underestimate the role of healing. Throughout the centuries, that has very frequently been one of the faith's key selling points, and in many parts of the world, that continues to be true today.

Then there was Bulgaria. From the seventh century through the ninth, the very strong pagan kingdom of Bulgars posed a deadly threat to the Byzantine Empire, on occasion overrunning most of its Balkan possessions. It was a key moment for the history of Christianity when, in the mid-ninth century, the Bulgar khan Boris converted to the Christian faith, and moreover in its Eastern and Orthodox form. So why did he do that? According to a source written not long after the event, captives again played a pivotal role. The story begins with the empress regent, Theodora (who ruled 842-867), who proposed an exchange of war captives:

And either because of certain dreams and visions, or for some other reason, Theodora had the ruler of Bulgaria make an enquiry and earnest search for a monk called Theodore, by surname Koupharas, who had been taken captive long before, and solicited him in a letter to search him out and to release him to her for whatever price he might want. And Boris [ruled 852-889] *also solicited, taking this as an occasion to negotiate on behalf of a sister of his who had once been taken captive by the Romans and was now being held at the court of the emperor. Now, this sister had been happily brought over to the faith and had learned to read during the time of her captivity and, besides this, she particularly admired, as it happens, the Christians' order as well as their awe and honor for the Godhead; and when she obtained her return to her brother, she did not cease inspiring and pleading and sowing the seeds of faith in him. As for Boris, who had been taught somewhat and instructed in the Mysteries by the aforesaid Koupharas, he sent him off and received his sister as reward.*

Although Boris did not formally convert quite yet, that exchange initiated the process. We note that both captives played their part in evangelizing – the Christian monk, and the converted princess who "did not cease inspiring and pleading and sowing the seeds of faith." Faith is catching.

Note incidentally that the historian does not deign to mention the name of the mere woman who is instrumental in this process, even if she is a princess. She was actually Anna.

I also think of the conversion of the Norse between the ninth and eleventh centuries. They raided heavily in the British Isles, and the Irish slaves they took have left a powerful genetic marker, especially in the new colony of Iceland. When we read the sagas, we see how these Celtic Christians familiarized Scandinavians with the faith, long before formal conversion. The defeated, even the enslaved, ultimately gain cultural ascendance over their conquerors. The poet Horace was referring to a similar phenomenon when he wrote that, although defeated politically and militarily, it was captive Greece that took all-powerful Rome under its cultural sway: *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit*. The captives captured the conquerors.

So many other examples come to kind, but one modern story involves the land of Ethiopia, which for so many centuries was under the unquestioned sway of an ancient and glorious *Tewahedo* ("One-ness") church, the Ethiopian Orthodox. But much like the Catholic church of medieval Europe, that church operated in what was for ordinary people a strange and foreign language, of ancient Ge'ez, and not until the nineteenth century was the Bible translated into accessible languages. That decision launched what we can only call an Ethiopian Reformation, which continues up to the present day.

In the nineteenth century, the Bible translated into Amharic, through the heroic work of a mysterious figure called Abu Rumi, who was probably an Orthodox monk. By the end of that century, that Bible was starting to reshape the faith, sparking revival movements.

But even more remarkable was the work of Onesimos Nesib. Born to the Oromo people, Onesimos was enslaved as a child but was liberated by Swedish missionaries, who educated him. He dedicated himself to translating the Bible into Oromo, aided by another freed slave, a woman called Aster Ganno. By 1899, the Oromo people had their Bible. Not surprisingly, perhaps, given historical prejudices, Onesimos has usually received all the credit for this work. In a just world, both he and Aster should be the dual subjects of a Great Christian Life. The reason their work matters so much is that Oromo is the language of Ethiopia's crucial Oromo minority, who represent over a third of the population.

We are dealing with an important phenomenon in Christian history, and one that certainly extends into the history of Atlantic slavery. So well known are such stories in an Atlantic and African context that I am deliberately not getting into that large literature here. In the past, I have suggested a name for this for the phenomenon, of former slaves rising to high honor among their owners, and spreading their faith. The name has excellent Biblical credentials.

My suggestion is "Daniel Syndrome."

We now have an excellent book on these issues in Jehu Hanciles, *Migration and the Making of Global Christianity* (Eerdmans 2021)

Between Two Empires

March 17, 2022 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Empires commonly have religions that enjoy an established or favored status, and in many cases, those empires suppress rival forms of faith. When we write the history of empires and religion, we often have to look beyond the heartlands of a given regime, and turn to the borderlands, and to the smaller states or statelets on the periphery. Those border states can serve as refuges for groups fleeing official persecution, and they become hothouses and laboratories, from which new movements emerge. The Romans called their extended frontier the *limes*, which gives us the word "liminal." In the history of religions, so much development and evolution is liminal, a thing of the borderlands, and I don't mean the borderlands of faith or rational inquiry.

Governments throughout history have disliked regions that are difficult to control. They strongly prefer fertile lowlands over pastoral uplands or mountain regions. They dislike sprawling cities, especially cosmopolitan seaports. In modern times, this is why nations like to build new capitals in safe inland regions like Brasilia and Abuja, rather than obvious port cities like Rio do Janeiro or Lagos. (Don't get me started on Washington DC, and why the US never chose a capital at New York or Philadelphia). Governments especially loathe border regions, where foreign influences can penetrate easily, and where local people can easily flee where the writ of the law does not run. This is all the more true when the nation on the other society of that border is hostile or uncooperative.

Those general statements go far towards explaining religious configurations, especially when a government tries to enforce a strict orthodoxy. Religious minorities do best in jurisdictional borderlands, in regions where armies and police, Inquisitors and tax collectors, are least likely to penetrate. That is true whether we are dealing with both Catholics and Protestant Dissenters in early modern England, or Protestants in early modern Catholic Europe. It is also true of Christian minorities in Muslim states. Show me a map of the borderlands, and a relief map showing regions over two thousand feet or so, and I will show you where religious dissidents are most likely to survive and flourish.

Sometimes, those distant marginal regions prove to conceal hidden wealth, which give unexpected power to dissident minorities. Hence the Protestant Dissenters or Nonconformists of England and Wales found themselves in the coal-rich regions that became the centers of that country's Industrial Revolution. In the Arabian peninsula, the long-despised Shia Muslims happened to be sitting on the region's richest oil reserves. Never say that God lacks a sense of humor.

I posted recently on the early Christian expansion eastwards from Jerusalem, towards the powerful Persian realms successively ruled by the Parthians and the Sassanid dynasty. From the second century AD onwards, the Roman Empire clashed repeatedly with this eastern superstate, and the intervening lands often changed hands. Although the Sassanids based their power in Mesopotamia, that region briefly fell under Roman power in the 110s. From the fourth century, a Christian Roman

realm confronted a no less militantly Zoroastrian Persia.

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Through the seventh century, the dueling superpowers repeatedly clashed in the lands that we would now call Northern Iraq, Syria, and Eastern Turkey. Ultimately, the Romans utterly crushed the Sassanid Persians, but it was a Pyrrhic victory, as the two exhausted empires fell easy prey to the surging force of Islam.

That superpower conflict had vast religious consequences. For one thing, the imperial rivalry meant that the two states were forced to tolerate a network of smaller kingdoms between their borders, which could serve usefully as buffer states, leaning from one side to another as conditions changed. Armenia was the greatest of these states, but other kingdoms and city-states rose and fell over the centuries – Osrhoene, Atropatene, Palmyra, and others. Two great border states, Armenia and Georgia, stubbornly maintained their Christian faith through the millennia, a stance made possible

by their mountainous terrain. Many alternative and apocryphal scriptures that were lost elsewhere survived in Armenia, and in the Armenian language.

The name of Atropatene, by the way, survives today as Azerbaijan.

As successive wars and persecutions swept the two major empires, so it was natural for refugees and dissidents to flee beyond the frontiers, making these small states a hothouse of religious development. The ruling family of Adiabene accepted Judaism. In the second century, Osrhoene became the first kingdom anywhere to establish Christianity as its official religion. When Roman religious constraints became too much, the center of Eastern Christian faith and scholarship moved eastwards across the border, from Edessa to Nisibis, a spiritual and intellectual hub that remained legendary well into the Muslim period.

Moreover, great powers used this religious complexity to justify their own policies. The Romans used the persecution of Christians to justify wars and invasions. The Persians in turn favored the Church of the East, the Nestorians, as a counterbalance to the Catholic/Orthodox. They also favored Jews against Roman-style Christians, leading to a terrifying massacre of Christians when the Persians took Jerusalem in 614. The Fall of Jerusalem was one of the really traumatic events of Late Antiquity: its shock-waves can be observed in the Qur'an, among many other places.

Trace the imperial frontiers, and you follow the patterns of religious development. And even the emergence of whole new faiths.

More in coming posts.

Islam and the Borderland of Empires

March 23, 2022 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have been posting about the borderlands of empire, territories beyond the tight control of rival realms. Some of those buffer states, those often-neglected liminal kingdoms, have a special significance in the history of religion. Arguably, early Islamic history makes little sense except in the context of two remarkably influential tribal powers, which together represent a lost Christian realm. The new religion of Islam emerged from these embattled borderlands.

A familiar myth suggests that it was mainly the force of Islam that brought Arab peoples into the traditional heartlands of the civilized Near East, around the 630s. We perhaps visualize this in terms of memories of massed camel charges from *Lawrence of Arabia* – though camels really had nothing to do with those early Islamic conquests. In reality, Arab tribes and ethnic groups were very powerful indeed long before this, and some formed influential states in the lands that we would today think of as Jordan, Iraq and Syria, territories contested between the two great empires. To the west stood the Ghassanid kingdom, the "Sons of Ghassan," allied with Rome. In the east were the pro-Persian Lakhmids, with their capital at al-Hira.

The Ghassanids arrived in the region as refugees from further south in Arabia, possibly as Christians fleeing persecution by Jewish tribes. From the fifth century they formed a powerful state, which became vastly more powerful in the sixth century as the wars between Rome and Persia escalated. The Byzantine Empire relied heavily on Arab allies (*foederati*) like king al-Harith ("Arethas") and his son al-Mundhir. Far from being barbarians, the kingdom was deeply integrated into the Byzantine politics of the day. In modern terms, think of the Ghassanids as the empire's surrogate forces.

The Ghassanid leaders were also strongly Christian, and they were mainstays of the Syriac-speaking Monophysite/Miaphysite churches. The sixth century kings ensured that the Syrian Monophysite church survived and flourished under their protection, creating a powerful Middle East tradition that endured for centuries. Al-Harith was the patron of Jacobus Baradeus, the church's wide-ranging evangelist (hence the church being known as the "Jacobites"). This story exactly fits the pattern I outlined above of religious traditions persecuted in one region being able to flee for safety across a convenient border, of "refugee faith." Later Ghassanids refused conversion to Islam, and many of their descendants remained Christian until modern times.

Although they served the Persians, the Lakhmids also included a strong and deeply rooted Christian element. Al-Hira was an important bishopric of the Church of the East.

The landscape in which the Ghassanids operated included several cultural and religious centers that would be critical for both Christianity and early Islam. One was Sergiopolis (Resafa), the beloved shrine of the martyr saint Sergius, and effectively the religious capital of a wide region of what is now Syria and Iraq. In the sixth century, it was the seat of a Christian metropolitan, with five suffragan sees. As so often happened in Western Europe, later medieval rulers continued to build in and around such ancient religious shrines, so that Sergiopolis became the spectacular palace of the eighth century Caliph Hisham.

Another great Ghassanid hub was Bostra, the Christian metropolitan see of Arabia. It featured extensively in later legend as the place where the prophet Muhammad met the Christian monk Bahira, who supposedly acknowledged his prophetic destiny.

It's not just the border states that matter in this story. It's the border cities like Resafa and Bostra, the entrepôts for all kinds of trade and exchange, spiritual and cultural no less than commercial.

By the seventh century, both empires were facing growing difficulties from their client states. The Lakhmids rebelled openly against the Persians, while religious divisions made the Ghassanids ever more discontented with Roman rule. These conflicts formed the background to the new movement of Islam. Reputedly, the Lakhmids helped the Muslims against their former Persian enemies.

But even after Islam had triumphed, the two Arab kingdoms exercised a lasting influence on the new empire, which still based itself in their former territories. I have already suggested how highly the new Muslim rulers valued places like Bostra and Resafa. In the East, al-Hira was supposedly the place where the Arabic alphabet was created. It is very close to Kufa – hence "Kufic" script. Others attribute that script to the Christian Arabs of al-Anbar

Some scholars go much further in proposing Christian influence over the emerging Islam. For one scholar, Christoph Luxenberg, the Qur'an demonstrates a Christian Syriac literary background that could certainly not have arisen in Mecca or nearby parts of Arabia, which had no adequate schools or libraries. Instead, he suggests, the Qur'an originated in a Christian environment in al-Hira or al-Anbar – and so, by implication, did much of the faith of Islam. Although that idea is highly controversial, there is no doubt that the old Christian Arab world left a substantial inheritance.

G. W. Bowersock has some indispensable books on this era, such as *The Crucible of Islam (*Harvard University Press, 2017). See also key books on the Arabs before Islam by Irfan Shahid.

The Heretics on the Borderlands, And Their Strange Books

March 28, 2022 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Empires move or deport populations, often against the will of those subject peoples. Such movements can have the quite unintentional result of fostering and spreading new religious developments, often of a kind that imperial authorities strongly disfavored. The consequences can last for centuries.

The Heretics on the Borderlands …

Empires are deeply concerned abut maintaining public order and stability, and such concerns are all the greater in border regions, where a revolt might open the door to foreign invasion. When an empire has reasons to suspect a subject people, it is likely to relocate it, perhaps thousands of miles away. In the First World War, the Ottoman Empire initially decided to deport the Armenian minority that it suspected of pro-Allied sympathies, although that movement rapidly escalated into genocide. In that case, the effect was to wreak terrible devastation on a population following an ancient religion, in this case, Christianity. But the religious consequences of such a move can be very different, and far more positive or productive. One of the best examples of that also occurred in that very same territory, of Armenia and eastern Asia Minor.

I have stressed how, historically, dissident and controversial religious ideas flourished at the edges of empire, where enforcement mechanisms were weak. In the context of the Later Roman and Byzantine Empires, that was especially true of the eastern borders with Armenia, which preserved many older beliefs and doctrines that had been suppressed in the empire itself, together with the documents and alternative scriptures that supported them. It was not surprising, then, that around 650, a new sect arose in this part of the world that closely resembled older Christian heresies, including Adoptionism, Marcionism, Manicheanism, and strands of the larger Gnostic world-view. Thew new movement became known as Paulicianism. It had Dualist elements, (probably) teaching that Christ represented the God of the New Testament, while rejecting the Old Testament. They also rejected the veneration of Mary, associated as it was with ideas of material incarnation, as well as many aspects of Orthodox devotion.

The Paulicians became extremely powerful in Armenia, ruling their own territories. As their ideas expanded into the Byzantine-ruled areas of Asia Minor, so the emperors naturally persecuted what they called the "Manicheans," killing thousands.

From the mid-eighth century, the Byzantine emperors tried a new policy, using the Paulicians as military surrogates in their western territories, particularly in the Balkans. This was no instant transfer, but was spread over a lengthy period, culminating with the transfer of a reputed 200,000 of the sect in 970. These settled Philippopolis in Thrace (modern Plovdiv, Bulgaria). Here, those tough mountain people would help defend the borders against the Bulgarians, who were placing ever-greater pressure on the frontier.

It was a win-win situation. The Paulicians would be weakened massively in the east, while they would be kept busy as faithful guardians of the border in the west. Their survival depended on maintaining that border.

What could go wrong?

I'm sorry, but did I hear somebody say "Isn't that a really bad idea, because those religious dissidents would take their beliefs with them, and plant them in a whole new territory? Wouldn't it be a kind of heretical church planting, on a transcontinental scale?" And you would be correct. Already under the year 755-56, the ninth century chronicler Theophanes reports that "The Emperor Constantine [V] resettled in Thrace the Syrians and Armenians he had brought from Theodosiopolis and Melitene; they have spread the Paulician heresy."

In the mid-tenth century, there arose in Bulgaria the very important sect of the Bogomils. As with the Paulicians before them, there is some doubt about just how fully Dualist they were, but what we can say confidently is that – what was that phrase again? – the Bogomils closely resembled older Christian heresies, including Adoptionism, Marcionism, Manicheanism, and strands of the larger Gnostic world-view. For centuries, Western church figures would use "Bulgarian" as synonymous with Dualist heresy.

… *And Their Strange Books*

I also wonder what else the Paulicians and their clergy might have brought west with them?

In the study of lost and apocryphal scriptures, some of the most exciting finds in modern times have occurred in the so-called Slavonic Pseudepigrapha, a whole library of ancient Jewish texts preserved in the Slavonic-speaking churches of eastern Europe. These included long-forgotten works as 2 Enoch and the Apocalypse of Abraham, some of which dated from the Second Temple Era, and which often presented strongly Dualist views. ("Pseudepigrapha" means a work falsely attributed to some venerated figure, such as Moses or Ezra). In many cases, these texts were utterly forgotten elsewhere, and existed in no other languages, so their modern rediscovery has transformed the academic study of early Judaism, Christian origins, and the roots of Jewish mysticism. Were it not for those Slavonic translations, we would never have suspected that most of those works ever existed.

Just where these priceless texts were translated into the Slavonic languages is uncertain, but an excellent candidate for the venue would be the Bulgarian royal and ecclesiastical center of Ohrid, probably in the eleventh century (Ohrid is now part of North Macedonia). I discuss these origins in detail in my 2015 book *The Many Faces of Christ*.

Conceivably, the imperial decision to move those Paulicians not only brought the heretics and dissidents, but also their learned figures, and even a whole library of otherwise lost texts that had been preserved in Armenia, conveniently beyond the grasp of Byzantine censors. I stress the "conceivably": I can't actually prove how these writings migrated, but that seems to me a plausible reconstruction. If there is not a linkage from the Paulician settlement through the Bogomils to the new Western heresies, then we are dealing with some very strange and far-fetched coincidences.

Here is another example, which concerns the so-called Revelation (or Apocalypse) of Peter. A number of works circulated under this title, but the most notorious was the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter, which was discovered at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. It was Gnostic in the sense that the author believed that the material world was ruled by a defective lower God, while Christ was an emissary from the forces of Light. Peter thus taught monstrous heresy, and the book had to be utterly suppressed – hence the burial at Nag Hammadi sometime about 380. And so, scholars believed, it was completely lost until it was rediscovered in 1945.

But that chronology is just wrong. In 1045, in Constantinople, the Orthodox monk Euthymius, denouncing the Bogomils, described a potent initiation rite in which the heretics read the words of a "Revelation (or Apocalypse) of Peter." Euthymius claimed that this "Satanic spell" exercised a stunning influence: "If the heretics get in first, reading this to a man, the devil makes his house in him and brings him to complete destruction. From then onwards, no arguments about knowledge of God enter his soul." Given the close harmony between Bogomil views and the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter, it is very likely that this is the work Euthymius was referring to – some seven hundred years after the last known copy of the work supposedly vanished into the Egyptian desert.

Incidentally, the other place that produced a comparable range of otherwise unknown ancient scriptures, both Jewish and Early Christian, was in Ethiopia, which also stood beyond the immediate span of Roman imperial power.

From the point of view of the Orthodox/Catholic institutional churches, this heretical expansion was disastrous, but worse was to come. During the eleventh century, views very much like the Paulicians and Bogomils increasingly appeared in Western Europe, especially in southern France and Italy, where they became known as the Albigensians, or Bulgarians: the now-popular term "Cathar" was little used at the time. In the thirteenth century, the crusade against the Albigensians devastated large sections of southern France. The struggle to suppress the heresy led to the creation of a fearsome new tactic in the form of the Inquisition. Albigensians persisted at least into the 1320s.

A great deal of ink has been shed about the actual religious views of these groups, and many scholars see them as an activist church reform movement, rather than outright Dualist. However, as I have argued, many of their views do bear a close resemblance to those older Bulgarian and Eastern beliefs. The Albigensians also had access to otherwise lost alternative gospels and scriptures, one of which has been preserved as *The Secret Supper*. Very much like the famous Gnostic Gospels of antiquity, the *Supper* purports to be a record by the Apostle John of secret dialogues with Jesus, and

it really is Dualist. We also know how the Inquisition labeled this text: "This is the secret book of the heretics of Concoreze [sic], brought from Bulgaria by their bishop Nazarius; full of errors." I wonder if it had once stood on a library shelf next to other writings that we today know as the Slavonic Pseudepigrapha? Or the Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter? And what other Bulgarian-derived texts might have circulated in Western Europe without finding their way into the hands of the Inquisition?

It's a near miracle that we still have the *Secret Supper*, and without its survival, we would never have dared speculate that such a thing existed and circulated in the High Middle Ages, some eight centuries out of its time.

The Byzantine Empire thought it was shoring up its Western borders by importing some Armenian warriors. It did not expect to be launching a European religious revolution.

Of Roman Roads, Missions, and Subways

March 23, 2023 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

A couple of recent encounters have reshaped my understandings of the ancient world, and specifically of Christian origins. The specific topic is Roman roads. Like everyone, I have always known that the Romans built such things, but these discoveries have really helped me grasp their importance as never before, and I am still processing the implications. In a couple of ways, Roman roads are suddenly back in the news.

The first is an excellent series of radio programs or podcasts by the British archaeologist Bettany Hughes, who is a major media personality in the UK. She has a series of three episodes about the splendid Roman road called the *Via Egnatia*, which ran for six hundred miles from Byzantium (later Constantinople) to Dyrrachium/Durrës on the Adriatic, passing through such key New Testament sites as Philippi and Thessaloniki. Knowing the *Via Egnatia* is critical to understanding just what Paul and the early Christians were doing, and how the new religion spread. It would be possible to write a history of that particular road alone in term of the religious and mystical ideas that it conveyed, from the early Jesus Movement to the Christian heresies of the high Middle Ages, and later Sufi orders. The road remained a principal artery for imperial communications well into the Byzantine era, and indeed through Ottoman times. The programs are available on BBC Sounds, and they are great listening

That is very good in its own right, but more generally useful, indeed startling, is a remarkable map devised by Sasha Trubetskoy, which I can't reproduce here for copyright reasons, but you can find it easily enough. What Trubetskoy has done is simple but brilliant. He has mapped the empire's Roman roads in a stylized form imitating a modern subway map, all of which ultimately derive from the original designed for the London Underground. As with subways, you don't need to understand every twist and turn of the route, which you can depict as a straight line, with cities as "stations," some of which are junctions and points at which to change lines. To understand just what a

contribution this is, contrast any of the many standard maps we get of those road systems, which often seem so puzzling and intricate.

[Public domain]

The "subway" map is very effective indeed: just look at it, and think about the implications for early Christianity, which was centered on the five great cities of Rome, Carthage, Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus. Each of these hubs stood at the center of a far-reaching network of fine roads, which our map allows us to see with ease. Just to take a prominent example, one great Asian road stretched from Jerusalem to Tyre and Antioch, on to Smyrna and Ephesus, and then connecting to the *Via Egnatia* for access to Europe.

You can gaze at this map for hours and see connections and insights. So Saul of Tarsus came from "no mean city"? Look at Tarsus, and where it stands as a junction between that Asian road and the *Via Valeria* crossing Asia Minor, through Tyana and Ancyra. Not mean at all. Look how the *Via Graeca* runs from Thessaloniki to Corinth. Or see how those roads are so crucial for the world of the seven churches named in the Book of Revelation.

In Gaul, look at Lyon/Lugdunum, which was such a key center for second century Christianity in those parts, and just look at the road networks and communications that are so essential to that role. The city is actually a junction for three key roads. The mission routes, and the subsequent history, write themselves.

Obviously too, everything I am saying here is essential for understanding the spread of the Jewish Diaspora in these same centuries.

It would be nice to have the sea routes included as well, especially for the world of Acts. I don't claim this as a scientifically valid survey, but I see that the word "sail" features fifty times in the whole NIV version of the Bible, and Acts alone counts for 29 of those usages. Luke was very well aware of how his characters got around, of how sea and roads worked together, and you can actually do a good reconstruction job of the routes they traveled.

Anyway, I will take what I can get by way of resources. In summary, just look at the "subway" map, and see for yourself.

Finally, I note a scholarly article that just appeared, which has a lot of implications for all sorts of fields, again including the history of religion. This is Carl-Johan Dalgaard, et al, "Roman Roads To Prosperity: Persistence And Non-Persistence Of Public Infrastructure," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 50(4)(2022): 896-916. Briefly, the article suggests very strong continuity between the way Roman roads were distributed at the height of the Roman empire and later patterns of prosperity and commerce. Partly, that means that those roads were very well sited and built, which we already knew, but it also suggests that the fact of having those roads had an amazingly potent and long-lasting influence on later societies. "Ancient Roman roads predict modern roads' location and local economic activity." The key factor making for such continuity was the market towns that grew on the strength of those old and deeply familiar routes.

As the authors say,

We examine the territory under dominion of the Roman Empire at the zenith of its geographical extension (117 CE), and find a remarkable pattern of persistence showing that greater Roman road density goes along with (a) greater modern road density, (b) greater settlement formation in 500 CE, and (c) greater economic activity in 2010–2020.

The linkage was not perfect:

Exploiting a natural experiment, we find that persistence in road density and the strong link between early road density and contemporary economic development weaken to the point of insignificance in areas where the use of wheeled vehicles was abandoned and caravan trade routes replaced road-based trade from the first millennium CE until the late modern period. Studying channels of persistence, we identify the emergence of market towns during the early medieval period and the modern era as a robust mechanism sustaining the persistent effects of the Roman roads network.

Interesting and important stuff, and especially for Christian history, a topic the authors do not really get into. Those market towns would often have become bishoprics, and centers of ecclesiastical life and organization.

Early Christian Women and the Making of Scripture

April 29, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
8 Comments

I have been writing about different traditions of the Resurrection and what I understand to be the late appearance of stories involving Mary Magdalene as a witness of the Resurrection. Modern scholars devote much attention to the developing story of Mary Magdalene, commonly emphasizing how her early importance was denied and denigrated by a patriarchal church. I wonder if we have this upside down? Instead of being demoted and denigrated, women were rather being advanced and built up as the first century progressed, and attributed roles that they never received in their lifetimes. I will suggest instead that the expanding importance of women in scripture from the later first century might represent a real sociological shift in the structure of the church, and a growing emphasis on women believers. Are we in fact seeing a kind of feminization in the early church? I will particularly focus on the years between roughly 80 and 120 AD, which saw the writing of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, the final edition of the Gospel of John, and the Book of Acts.

As I have suggested, Mary Magdalene plays little role in the gospel traditions before the very end of the first century. In Mark 16, written around 70, she hears the Resurrection proclamation, but does not receive an appearance. Only much later – in the famous passage in John – does she acquire the heroic role as Resurrection witness that we recall today. That enormous growth in significance is very much what occurs in the same period in the role of the Virgin Mary. As I have written elsewhere, this other Mary's role in the Christian narrative is basically zero before the 70s, and what there is is largely negative. But that role then begins a process of rapid exaltation, culminating at the very end of the century with her heroic role in Luke and (parts of) John. However we interpret it, Revelation 12 (from the 90s) includes an astonishing passage that appears to give a heavenly role of the Virgin, and which supplies the foundation for much later Christian art in her honor.

That interest in heroic women reaches a dramatic scale with the *Protevangelium*, the Infancy Gospel of James, probably written around 140 or so. This represents almost a whole alternative gospel devoted to the Virgin Mary. Obviously we do not take this seriously as history, but those traditions did not appear out of nowhere. Despite its relatively late date and wholly legendary quality, the *Protevanglium* includes some odd textual reminiscences of the Johannine school, implying some quite early foundations. In art, the earliest visual representations of the Virgin, with or without the Christ-child, date from the first half of the second century, very much the same time as the *Protevanglium*. In the mid-second century (if not earlier), believers fascinated by the life and doings of St Paul usually heard that story as part of a larger tale of Paul and the martyr Thecla – and the Thecla literature was incredibly popular. It also taught that women should have the right to preach and baptize. The Gnostic texts of the second and third centuries commonly made women characters central figures, with a special fondness for Mary Magdalene. Women characters and female images are prolific in second century Christian writings, such as the *Shepherd of Hermas*.

I offer a rough principle of interpretation. You can make a fair effort at dating early Christian texts by the amount of attention they devote to heroic women characters, especially those two Marys. The more attention, the more central the role, the later the text is likely to be. This is the opposite of the pattern we might expect if patriarchal editors were censoring and concealing women's achievements.

As to the reason for this shift, we note the strong evidence for women as a powerful force in supporting, sustaining, and guiding early Christian communities, and not just for the Gnostic or alternative congregations. Revelation was particularly concerned with denouncing a woman prophet whom the orthodox titled "Jezebel." Around the same time, in the late first century, a woman

believed to be the daughter of the apostle Philip was a distinguished figure in the very important church of Hierapolis.

This is speculation, but is it unreasonable to suggest that well-off women had the means to patronize writing, and that they might have had a special interest in women characters? Gospels written after the 80s featured women more prominently, partly in response to the interests of the congregations they were serving. They were written for particular audiences. Of itself, an interest in women characters does not necessarily indicate a female audience or readership. But such a linkage has been noted in many other contexts, for instance with the rise of the English or French novel in the eighteenth century.

We might see a trace of this process in the controversial letter 1 Timothy, which is widely regarded as a non-Pauline writing belonging perhaps to the late first or early second century. The letter today is notorious for its harsh commands concerning women's spiritual authority in the churches, and the nature of their participation. But such fierce rhetoric only makes sense if women's authority was being debated, and was a potent reality in at least some important churches. There was no point in denouncing women's leadership in churches if they were not actually exercising it at least somewhere. That does actually get to an interesting point of methodology, and how we use evidence. Laws or regulations forbidding something should not necessarily be taken to prove that the something really ceased to exist as a result, but rather that the something was believed to be an important problem. You don't pass a law banning the hunting of wolves unless people really are hunting wolves. And equally, you don't assume without further proof that the new law actually stopped the hunting.

Particularly interesting in that regard is the verse 1 Timothy 4.7, in which "Paul" warns readers to hold fast to sound doctrine, and avoid what the NIV translates as "godless and silly myths." The Greek phrase for those myths is *graodeis muthous*, literally myths derived from old women – old wives' tales. The gender emphasis of much of the rest of the letter makes it plausible to suggest that the author was here specifically referring to what he regarded as deviant ideas produced by women, by "old wives." They are not silly myths, they are women's myths. And how we would love to know exactly the kind of stories he was denouncing. It would be doubly interesting to know what someone like Philip's daughter – an incontestably old woman at this very point – was telling her congregation.

It is not clear when these patterns might have changed. Right through the second century, women occupied key roles in church structures, both institutional (acknowledged widows, and deacons) and as charismatic figures of prophets. So were they ordained? Well, yes and no. One odd piece of evidence comes from Tertullian, writing about 200, who is the source of some ferocious rhetoric about the evils of women and womanhood, and who loathed the Thecla stories. In his *Exhortation to Chastity,* he wrote about the number of clerics who voluntarily accepted chastity, but his exact wording deserves note. Tertullian observes, "How many men, therefore, and how many women, in ecclesiastical orders, owe their position to continence." The mention of both men and women is clear in the Latin: "*Quanti igitur* ***et quantae*** *in ecclesiasticis ordinibus de continentia censentur.*" This can only be read to say that some women served "in ecclesiastical orders," which seems surprising.

The answer lies in the broad definition of clergy prevailing at the time, which was not synonymous with priesthood. Look for instance at the *Apostolic Tradition*, which preserves recollections of the

church in the third century. Beyond the traditional hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, the text counts other ranks among the clergy, all of whom demand special rituals with appropriate formulae, and here we find the widows. Widows as a class held a special and potent status within the church, as mentioned in several letters preserved in the New Testament. Other passages in Tertullian show that widows were not merely a category of recipients of alms or charity, but that they had their own allocated place within the church, comparable to that of the presbyters. Even by that late date, around 200, widows were still influential – and in orders. That is quite apart from the deaconesses, who were very much in evidence in a third century work like the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. They too were definitely part of the clergy, and in orders. Presumably, those women too were reading, and looking for Christian materials that spoke to them and their interests.

These issues surfaced in my recent exchange with my Baylor colleague Mikeal Parsons, who expressed doubts about any argument I might make about any such "feminization." Like most scholars, he perceives a precisely contrary direction in church history. As he writes,

The tradition moves from the earliest stratum of the Pauline churches, in which women freely and widely participated in congregational leadership as apostles—Junia; deacons—Phoebe; evangelist/teachers—Prisca; and co-laborers with Paul—Euodia and Syntyche, to more and more restrictive roles (evidenced, for example, even within the NT itself in the post-Pauline Pastoral Epistles).

These points are well taken, and let me say again that Dr. Parsons is here presenting a standard mainstream opinion, from which I am deviating. In this case, I am the heretic.

But everything depends on the nature and quantity of *available* evidence – not the evidence that once existed, but that which happened to survive, often by the most bizarre of historical accidents. Just how do we know that "women freely and widely participated in congregational leadership "? As Dr. Parsons writes, this is all based on "admittedly slender" evidence, but let us think exactly what that evidence is, and how vanishingly rare it is. Virtually all the evidence for that early role of women depends on the astonishing survival of just one source, namely the Pauline letters of c.48-62 AD. It is here we find the very lengthy lists of names, including the key women characters, most of whom are mentioned in passing, leaving historians to grasp whatever meaning and significance they can from the vaguest hints. Phoebe and Junia are in Romans 16, Euodia and Syntyche in Philippians. Prisca is also in Romans 16, but is unique among the group in having several citations in various sources, including Acts.

I do not for a second dispute Dr. Parsons' interpretation of those names – for the importance of Junia, for example. But think of the larger period, from before the 160s (say). What other strictly contemporary evidence do we have that would allow us to reconstruct anything like this activity, if it was occurring? What personal or church letters do we have from this era that allow us to reconstruct a list of key names and activists, and which might conceivably allow us to offer a roster of key early women, if such existed? Ignatius offers a few names in passing, some possibly prominent. In the *Letter to Polycarp*, he writes, "I greet all by name, and the wife of Epitropus, along with the entire household of her and her children." But this is nothing like the babbling torrent of names that we find in something like Romans 16. We have a sense of powerful and respected women in the churches of the 50s AD. But what surviving evidence do we have that would allow us to draw any comparisons for (say) the 90s or 110s? We would seek to compare like with like, but in this instance we are comparing like with nothing.

Am I missing anything by way of obvious sources?

Put another way, without Romans 16 above all, and a couple of other comparable lists of "Say hello to" greetings in other letters, would any later scholar dared have portrayed very early Christianity in the gender-equal way that modern scholars suggest? Think how easily something like Romans 16 might have dropped out of the transmission history of that document, if an early scribe had decided it was just personal stuff, and not worth preserving. If that had occurred, just what would we know or think about gender roles in early Christianity then?

That is quite apart from the geographical basis of the available evidence. Women were active in the churches that Paul happened to know. I wonder what the situation would have been in, say, Alexandria, or Galilee, or Pella, or Jerusalem itself? We have no basis on which to judge. Put another way, 1 Timothy offers stern warnings about women's leadership, but we have not the slightest idea where such a policy might have had an impact, if it actually did. Certainly not across every corner of the disparate Christian world. To press the argument to an extreme, might such harshness have been confined to certain congregations in the western suburbs of Corinth? How would we know?

And as I have suggested, women remained active as church leaders, including as deacons, at least through the second century. When Pliny was investigating Christians in Asia Minor in 112 AD, he did so by "torturing two female slaves who were called deaconesses." [*quae ministrae dicebantur*]. I honestly don't see a shift in the church to women being confined to "more restrictive roles" in the period I am considering. They were prophets and charismatic leaders, and as widows and deaconesses they were even "in ecclesiastical orders."

You have assuredly heard the story that the early Jesus Movement was extremely progressive in terms of gender, but that situation soon changed, and we can see the evidence in the New Testament itself. Next time you do hear that case being made, please remember the extraordinarily slim foundations of evidence and source material on which it depends. Let me state my argument in the most conservative way: the evidence for a process of feminization from the 80s onward is at least as powerful and consistent as the evidence that can be marshaled for the conventional view, of women being increasingly marginalized by growing patriarchalism. A decent case can also be made that in this particular area, nothing changed.

Should Dr. Parsons care to respond to my remarks here, he would be most welcome to do so at this site.

Debates about the role of women in the early church often have a strong relation to modern-day controversies, for instance about women's ordination or leadership: "They didn't do it then! Why should we do it now?" In making the arguments that I present here, I am drawing no such implications whatever, but speaking solely to historical interpretation. As evidence of my own stance on such matters, I cite my diocesan Bishop, Audrey. Who takes no blame at all for anything I happen to have said here.

Why A Founding Father of Communism Has Some Really Worthwhile Things to Say About Early Christianity

September 8, 2022 by Philip Jenkins

2 Comments

There is an odd but very useful source on early Christianity that even now remains strangely unfamiliar to many writers on that topic. Even less known is the discussion by a totally unexpected nineteenth century source, which provides many insights that are still valuable. There is great material here for the sociology of religion, in any era.

In the late second century, the pagan satirist Lucian wrote the story of one Peregrinus, who died in the 160s. (He ultimately burned himself alive). Lucian presents Peregrinus as a Cynic, a rogue pseudo-philosopher who wanders from city to city, exploiting the gullible. For our purposes, there is a remarkable section when he is taken up by local Christians, who assume he has been persecuted for his faith in Christ. He lives very well off them until he moves on yet again. This is one of the few pagan sources of the period to mention Christians in any detail, even from a hostile point of view. (Some modern scholars treat Peregrinus's Christian career much more seriously).

No less interesting, though, is the use of this story by Friedrich Engels, the partner and patron of Karl Marx. Engels had a deep interest in early Christianity as a social movement. Although he was a deadly enemy of the churches, he respected early Christianity as an authentic voice of the poor, before it was co-opted by the state and the institutional church. I should also say that his comments on these topics can actually be … well, pretty funny.

In the 1890s, Engels used the story of Peregrinus to frame that early situation. Remarkably, he was not using Lucian to depict Christians as fools, and he drew quite startling parallels between those early believers and the radical Left of his own day. In both eras, he says, there were dedicated activists for the poor, but if they were not careful, they tended to slide off into hare-brained schemes, and to fall for the manipulation of deceivers, tricksters, grifters, confidence tricksters, and what we might call cult-leaders.

In both eras, con-men could go a long way before being found out. A little apocalyptic preaching went a long way. It even helped when people began to find out what you were up to, as it was easy enough to dismiss charges against you as the result of the lying plots of an evil world. And as the radical movement developed, so it attracted flaky eccentrics who pinned their particular causes on the true doctrine of the mainstream movement.

Engels's attitude to the early church fooled by Peregrinus is a sympathetic "Oh my, you also had to deal with rogues like that even way back then?" Engels himself can remember meeting people like Peregrinus in the leftist underground of nineteenth century Europe, which had plenty of would-be prophets and self-proclaimed messiahs.

Engels made no claims to be fair and balanced on this or any topic, but his account does ring true for the developmental stages of many new and emerging religious movements.

The Adventures of Peregrinus

You can read Engels's account in full, but let me offer an excerpt here. Engels writes:

[Lucian] relates among other things the life-story of a certain adventurous Peregrinus, Proteus by name, from Parium in Hellespontus. When a youth, this Peregrinus made his début in Armenia by committing fornication. He was caught in the act and [nearly] lynched according to the custom of the country. He was fortunate enough to escape and after strangling his father in Parium he had to flee.

"And so it happened … that he also came to hear of the astonishing learning of the Christians, with whose priests and scribes he had cultivated intercourse in Palestine. He made such progress in a short time that his teachers were like children compared with him. He became a prophet, an elder, a master of the synagogue, in a word, all in everything. He interpreted their writings and himself wrote a great number of works, so that finally people saw in him a superior being, let him lay down laws for them and made him their overseer (bishop) …. On that ground (i.e., because he was a Christian) Proteus was at length arrested by the authorities and thrown into prison….

"As he thus lay in chains, the Christians, who saw in his capture a great misfortune, made all possible attempts to free him. But they did not succeed. Then they administered to him in all possible ways with the greatest solicitude. As early as daybreak one could see aged mothers, widows and young orphans crowding at the door of his prison; the most prominent among the Christians even bribed the warders and spent whole nights with him; they took their meals with them and read their holy books in his presence; briefly, the beloved Peregrinus" (he still went by that name) "was no less to them than a new Socrates. Envoys of Christian communities came to him even from towns in Asia Minor to lend him a helping hand, to console him and to testify in his favor in court.

"It is unbelievable how quick these people are to act whenever it is a question of their community; they immediately spare neither exertion nor expense. And thus from all sides money then poured in to Peregrinus so that his imprisonment became for him a source of great income. For the poor people persuaded themselves that they were immortal in body and in soul and that they would live for all eternity; that was why, they scorned death and many of them even voluntarily written by his sacrificed their lives. Then their most prominent lawgiver convinced them that they would all be brothers one to another once they were converted, i.e., renounced the Greek gods, professed faith in the crucified sophist and lived according to his prescriptions. That is why they despise all material goods without distinction and own them in common — doctrines which they have accepted in good faith, without demonstration or proof. And when a skilful imposter who knows how to make clever use of circumstances comes to them he can manage to get rich in a short time and laugh up his sleeve over these simpletons. For the rest, Peregrinus was set free by him who was then prefect of Syria."

Then, after a few more adventures,

"Our worthy set forth a second time" (from Parium) "on his peregrinations, the Christians' good disposition standing him in lieu of money for his journey: they administered to his needs everywhere and never let him suffer want. He was fed for a time in this way. But then, when he violated the laws of the Christians too — I think he was caught eating of some forbidden food — they excommunicated him from their community."

A World of Cults and Cult-Leaders

Engels then offers his own interpretations, from his own time, where he finds lots of parallel cases. We note the near-total overlap between religious and political movements, a world of radical political networks, communes, and apocalyptic believers. We could be talking about the US at the same time, or indeed, around 1970. A cultural/spiritual explosion had created a perfect environment for an unscrupulous political/spiritual entrepreneur, and they saw rich opportunities. As Sammy Davis jr. sang in *Sweet Charity*,

Daddy, there's a million pigeons

Waiting to be hooked on new religions.

This is what Engels tells us – and you don't have to get every passing reference to people and movements to get the idea:

What memories of youth come to my mind as I read this passage from Lucian! First of all the "prophet Albrecht" who from about 1840 literally plundered the Weitling communist communities in Switzerland for several years — a tall powerful man with a long beard who wandered on foot through Switzerland and gathered audiences for his mysterious new Gospel of world emancipation, but who, after all, seems to have been a tolerably harmless hoaxer and soon died.

Then his not so harmless successor, "the doctor" Georg Kuhlmann from Holstein, who put to profit the time when Weitling was in prison to convert the communities of French Switzerland to his own Gospel, and for a time with such success that he even caught August Becker, by far the cleverest but also the biggest ne'er-do-well among them. This Kuhlmann used to deliver lectures to them which were published in Geneva in 1845 under the title The New World, or the Kingdom of the Spirit on Earth: Proclamation. In the introduction, supporters (probably August Becker) we read:

"What was needed was a man on whose lips all our sufferings and all our longings and hopes, in a word, all that affects our time most profoundly should find expression …. This man, whom our time was waiting for, has come. He is the doctor Georg Kuhlmann from Holstein. He has come forward with the doctrine of the new world or the kingdom of the spirit in reality"

I hardly need to add that this doctrine of the new world is nothing more than the most vulgar sentimental nonsense rendered in half-biblical expressions a la Lamennais and declaimed with prophet-like arrogance. But this did not prevent the good Weitlingers from carrying the swindler shoulder-high as the Asian Christians once did Peregrinus. They who were otherwise arch-democrats and extreme equalitarians to the extent of fostering ineradicable suspicion against any schoolmaster, journalist, and any man generally who was not a manual worker as being an "erudite" who was out to exploit them, let themselves be persuaded by the melodramatically arrayed Kuhlman that in the "New World" it would be the wisest of all, ie, Kuhlmann, who would regulate the distribution of pleasures and that therefore, even then, in the Old World, the disciples ought to bring pleasures by the bushel to that same wisest of all while they themselves should be content with crumbs.

So Peregrinus Kuhlmann lived a splendid life of pleasure at the expense of the community — as long as it lasted. It did not last very long, of course; the growing murmurs of doubters and unbelievers and the menace of persecution by the Vaudois Government put an end to the "Kingdom of the Spirit" in Lausanne — Kuhlmann disappeared.

This is a classic portrait of a nineteenth century messianic cult leader, the main novelty being that this is in Europe: that sort of character is much more familiar to us from the American situation. If you read German, there's a detailed account of Kuhlmann's career here.

Religious Fringe Movements Through History

Engels continues:

Everybody who has known by experience the European working-class movement in its beginnings will remember dozens of similar examples.

Today such extreme cases, at least in the large centers, have become impossible; but in remote districts where the movement has won new ground a small Peregrinus of this kind can still count on a temporary limited success. And just as all those who have nothing to look forward to from the official world or have come to the end of their tether with it — opponents of inoculation, supporters of abstemiousness, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, nature-healers, free-community preachers whose communities have fallen to pieces, authors of new theories on the origin of the universe, unsuccessful or unfortunate inventors, victims of real or imaginary injustice who are termed "good-for-nothing pettifoggers" by all bureaucracy, honest fools and dishonest swindlers — all throng to the working-class parties in all countries — so it was with the first Christians.

Hmm, "opponents of inoculation," or as we might know them, anti-vaxxers – surely such strange people don't exist in modern times?

All the elements which had been set free, i.e., at a loose end, by the dissolution of the old world came one after the other into the orbit of Christianity as the only element that resisted that process of dissolution — for the very reason that it was the necessary product of that process — and that therefore persisted and grew while the other elements were but ephemeral flies. There was no fanaticism, no foolishness, no scheming that did not flock to the young Christian communities and did not at least for a time and in isolated places find attentive ears and willing believers.

It sounds just like the American 1960s and 1970s, doesn't it?

As a historian, Engels had the enormous virtue of moving outside the library, to understand early Christianity though his own lived experience in the nineteenth century radical Socialist underground. He knew exactly what it was like to operate in a clandestine transnational movement of the lower class. Both were under constant observation by the police, and you never knew exactly who might be a spy or informer.

Engels and The Early Christians

Oddly, given his strongly anti-religious opinions, Engels had something like a love for the early Christians, and he imagines talking to them as fellow-sufferers who came from exactly the same kind of setting. As he writes,

The history of early Christianity has notable points of resemblance with the modern working-class movement. Like the latter, Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers' socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society. Both are persecuted and baited, their adherents are despised and made the objects of exclusive laws, the former as enemies of the human race, the latter as enemies of the state, enemies of religion, the family, social order.

Engels uses a quote from Ernest Renan: "If I wanted to give you an idea of the early Christian communities, I would tell you to look at a local section of the International Working Men's Association." [The so-called First International]

Hah! says Engels. What can a mere academic know about the everyday details of that kind of life?

I should like to see the old "International" who can read, for example, the so-called Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians without old-wounds re-opening, at least in one respect. The whole epistle, from chapter eight onwards, echoes the eternal, and oh! so well-known complaint: "les cotisations ne rentrent pas" — contributions are not coming in! How many of the most zealous propagandists of the [eighteen-]sixties would sympathizingly squeeze the hand of the author of that epistle, whoever he may be, and whisper: "So it was like that with you too!" We too — Corinthians were legion in our Association — can sing a song about contributions not coming in but tantalizing us as they floated elusively before our eyes.

More seriously, his comments on the turbulent early Christian world merit quotation:

In fact, the struggle against a world that at the beginning was superior in force, and at the same time against [amongst?] the innovators themselves, is common to the early Christians and the Socialists. Neither of these two great movements were made by leaders or prophets — although there are prophets enough among both of them — they are mass movements. And mass movements are bound to be confused at the beginning; confused because the thinking of the masses at first moves among contradictions, lack of clarity and lack of cohesion, and also because of the role that prophets still play in them at the beginning. This confusion is to be seen in the formation of numerous sects which right against one another with at least the same zeal as against the common external enemy.

So it was with early Christianity, so it was in the beginning of the socialist movement, no matter how much that worried the well-meaning worthies who preached unity where no unity was possible.

Beyond noting parallels and echoes, Engels is making the vital point that these were the ways that insurgent apocalyptic and millenarian movements tended to act, and the problems they tended to face – all the sectarianism, the credulity, and the cultish behavior. You don't have to agree with every one of Engels's comments and criticisms, but the whole piece is well worth reading, and indeed eye-opening, for reading the New Testament.

Ben Jones discussed Engels in his recent *Apocalypse Without God : Apocalyptic thought, ideal politics, and the limits of Utopian hope* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

Christianity and the Making of the Quran

March 16, 2023 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I have just read a very good book that throws major new light on the history of religion(s), the making of Scripture, and the relationship between Christianity and Islam. It has substantially changed my mind on points on which I have long held quite different views.

The book is Stephen J. Shoemaker, *Creating the Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Study* (University of California Press, 2022). Among other things, Shoemaker is a leading scholar of the apocryphal and alternative gospels of the Virgin Mary, which is highly relevant to the present book because ideas from those Christian writings appear conspicuously in the Quran. I used his work extensively in my own book *The Many Faces of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story of the Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels* (Basic Books, 2015). Through the years, I have often touched on those Christian resonances in the Quran, arguing for example that the famous Sura 97, *al-Qadr*, "The Night of Power" originated in a Christmas liturgy or hymn, or that the Quran directly quotes the Epistle of James. And there are plenty of other examples.

Like most people, I have explained these parallels or borrowings by assuming that Muhammad and his contemporaries had extensive access to alternative Christian traditions, which must have been freely available in his day, roughly the 620s. (Jewish ideas were also widely available, and influential). Those other traditions then informed the making of the Quran, which (I assumed) must have been substantially complete by the time of Muhammad's death in 632. I also attach a lot of weight to the verses in Sura 5, al-Ma'idah (82-84), in which God declares that

the nearest in affection towards the believers are those who say, "We are Christians." That is because among them are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant. And when they hear what was revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflowing with tears, as they recognize the truth in it. They say, "Our Lord, we have believed, so count us among the witnesses. And why should we not believe in God, and in the truth that has come to us, and hope that our Lord will include us among the righteous people?"

So when they accepted Islam, those converted priests and monks presumably brought a lot of texts and treasures to the new faith, and these were duly translated and absorbed into the Quran. Obviously there was later editing and selection before the text as we have it, but basically that was the story.

Shoemaker makes nonsense of that approach, both in terms of place and time. Here is the description of the book:

Creating the Qur'an *presents the first systematic historical-critical study of the Qur'an's origins, drawing on methods and perspectives commonly used to study other scriptural traditions. Demonstrating in detail that the Islamic tradition relates not a single attested account of the holy text's formation, Stephen J. Shoemaker shows how the Qur'an preserves a surprisingly diverse array of memories regarding the text's early history and its canonization. To this he adds perspectives from radiocarbon dating of manuscripts, the linguistic history of Arabic, the social and cultural history of late ancient Arabia, and the limitations of human memory and oral transmission, as well as various peculiarities of the Qur'anic text itself. Considering all the relevant data to present the most comprehensive and convincing examination of the origin and evolution of the Qur'an available, Shoemaker concludes that the canonical text of the Qur'an was most likely produced only around the turn of the eighth century.*

Read that last part again:

Shoemaker concludes that the canonical text of the Qur'an was most likely produced only around the turn of the eighth century.

I scarcely know where to start in describing such a rich and well-researched book, but here are some leading points. First, the Christian resonances and memories in the Quran are not just incidental. Rather, they assume an audience totally familiar with Christianity as it existed in Late Antiquity, with its alternative scriptural traditions. Second, and no less important, there is essentially zero evidence for any Christian presence whatever in the central Hijaz, the area in which Muhammad was living and working. Those Christian "priests and monks" were just not there to become converts, certainly in nothing like the numbers suggested by that passage I quoted earlier. Could Muhammad have had contact with such ideas elsewhere, on trading trips? Sure, but to nothing like the extent demanded here. So where is this Christian world with its knowledgeable audience? And just as important, *when* do we find such an audience?

Furthermore, Shoemaker looks at the landscape described in the Quran, the social, economic and environmental landscape, and shows how totally different it was from anything like the Central Hijaz. To take an obvious point, it assumes the presence of fishermen and seagoing ships. On the other hand, the picture exactly fits more fertile regions to the north, in Syria/Palestine, and/or Mesopotamia.

I am brutally summarizing Shoemaker's argument here, but what he argues is that Muhammad existed in the 620s, and preached a message very much like what we know from conventional history. But the Quran in anything like the form we know it was mainly written in the world of Syria/Palestine/Mesopotamia as it existed around the year 700, long after the Arab Muslims had conquered and occupied the region. Or to quote the words of a very much later scholar, Al-Suyūṭī, "The Qur'an was revealed in three places: Mecca, Medina, and Syria." It is in the late seventh century, presumably, when we find all those Christian clergy and monks accepting Islam.

As I say, I am only scratching the surface of the book, but here is an example that I find compelling. In its Sura 19:22–28, the Quran

gives a highly compressed account of the birth of Jesus that depends on a distinctive combination of Christian Nativity traditions that is uniquely found—outside the Qur'an—only in the liturgical practices of a particular Marian shrine just outside Jerusalem, the Kathisma church. In the vast world of late ancient Christianity, it is only at this church that we find combined the two early Christian traditions that appear in the Qur'an's account of the Nativity: Christ's birth in a remote location (rather than in Bethlehem) and Mary's refreshment by a miraculous palm tree and spring. For good measure, one must add, the liturgical traditions of this same shrine also explicitly name Mary as the sister of Aaron, just as in the Qur'an's Nativity account, at last providing a clear solution to this "well-known puzzle" of the Qur'an. The correspondence between this Qur'anic passage and the traditions and liturgical practices of the Kathisma church is simply too close to be mere coincidence: clearly the Qur'an knows, and expects its audience to know, this particular configuration of Christian Nativity traditions.

That is not just "drawing generally from Christian ideas," that is taking directly from the practices of one specific monastery. This example is very convincing, and the book offers much more in the same vein.

Assuming that every part of Shoemaker's argument is correct, this in no sense invalidates the faith of Islam, or even the value of the Quran, any more than Higher Criticism of the Bible destroys or undermines the Christian faith. But like the Biblical example, it demands real consideration of how we view the scripture. From a Christian perspective, we can see how reading the Quran also gives us

a remarkable insight into the thought world of the Eastern Christianity of that era. If Shoemaker is correct, we can use the Quranic text to reconstruct that Syrian/Palestinian Christian world of Late Antiquity in some detail, and more fully understand the range and diversity of its literary resources.

That late seventh century context is multiply striking. As I have mentioned, my forthcoming book is on the iconoclasm controversy in the Byzantine world. This officially began in the 720s, and it is commonly believed that it was at least in part a response to the rigid Islamic piety reflected in that faith's stern prohibition of images. The emperor responsible for the new policy, Leo III, was from the border region of Commagene. But if Shoemaker is right, then Leo and his contemporaries must have been very keenly aware of the religious tumult in neighboring Syria at the turn of the century, with such a fluid and dynamic relationship between the faiths.

On a related topic, I have suggested elsewhere that among the texts and writings that converted Christian clergy brought over to Islam were some key apocalyptic works with a vehemently anti-Jewish tone, which duly found their way into the Islamic hadith. If we assume that those clerical conversions are under way at the end of the seventh century, that fits the chronology of those works very well. There is a great deal to absorb here.

Read Shoemaker's book and judge for yourself. Amazingly, the whole text is free as a pdf.

The Quest for the Crown of Creation

August 17, 2020 by Philip Jenkins
2 Comments

Some years ago, I wrote a book called *The Many Faces of Christ: The Thousand-Year Story of the Survival and Influence of the Lost Gospels*. Rarely have I enjoyed writing a book more. That project involved pursuing a lot of odd historical byways through multiple cultures and different languages, and confronting some real historical mysteries. Here is one of my favorites, and one that still puzzles me.

So here is a medieval religious mystery. I didn't want to detect a murderer lurking in the cloister — I'll leave that to *The Name of the Rose* and the Brother Cadfael books. Rather, my quest was to explain how one almost forgotten Italian heretic seemingly tapped into a mind-boggling underworld of ancient mystical speculations, in a way that defies all our assumptions about the narrow and blinkered nature of the European Middle Ages. Above all, I needed to know where he had found the Crown of Creation. (Older readers should feel free to insert Jefferson Airplane reference here).

The man's name was Nazarius. He lived from about 1175 to 1250, and around 1210, he became a clandestine bishop of the heretical sect called the Albigensians or Cathars. Nazarius's whole religious career was not only covert but thoroughly illegal, but only after his death did the church take action against him, in the form of burning his remains. To put those dates in context, he was a rough contemporary of St. Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) and of St. Dominic (1170-1221).

In the official record, Nazarius appears briefly as the owner of a subversive alternative gospel. This was a strange visionary text called the *Secret Supper*, or the "Book of John the Evangelist," which used

a dialogue between Christ and his apostle to teach ideas of cosmic Dualism. In this vision, not only does God combat eternally with Satan, but Satan (under various names) actually rules the world and the material creation. One very powerful Dualist church, the Bogomils, was based in Bulgaria, and they influenced the West European movement we call the Albigensians.

The *Secret Supper* was probably written in the 11th or 12th century, and Dualist congregations could have used it for decades or centuries before it was finally seized. Mere possession of the book would likely have meant death. The book is preserved in the records of the Inquisition of Carcassonne, in France, where it is introduced thus: "This is the secret book of the heretics of Concoreze, brought from Bulgaria by their bishop Nazarius; full of errors." The note suggests a Dualist missionary smuggling a Bogomil text to Concorezzo near Milan, Italy, from whence it found its way to southern France.

Two Catholic Inquisitors described Nazarius and his career. One was Rainier Sacconi, who about 1250 reported Nazarius's belief

that the Virgin Mary was an angel, and that Christ did not take on human nature, but an angelic nature and a celestial body. And he said that he learned his error from the Bishop and the Elder Son of the Church of Bulgaria, now almost sixty years ago.

(The "Elder Son" was a senior rank in the Bogomil hierarchy.) That would place Nazarius's conversion to Dualist views somewhere in the 1190s, around the time of the Third Crusade.

Another Inquisitor called Anselm of Alessandria went on to sketch Nazarius's vision of the Creation and the Heavens, and in so doing, he suggested a radically heretical cosmology far more sophisticated, and more ancient, than anything we might have suspected given the time and place. Anselm wrote that

Nazarius believes that from Adam's crown, the Devil made the sun, that is, from one part of it, and from another he made the moon; from the crown of Eve, he made the moon and the stars and the five stars which are not in the firmament [the planets]. From another part [of Eve's crown]*, he believes that the Devil made the throne where Satan sits in the starry heaven and from which he rules over all the world below, with the exception of good souls.*

Is it just me, or does that passage sound like someone – presumably Nazarius – is semi-quoting or summarizing something like a narrative from an existing text? Although Nazarius's universe might be the product of an idiosyncratic poetic imagination, some of its features recall truly ancient layers of Christian tradition, not to mention Jewish precedents, and also the ideas of the Manichaean religion that spread deep into Asia.

The rejection of Christ's material humanity is standard Dualist/Docetic stuff, which you find in a thousand places over the previous millennium. But just where did he find that story of the crowns of Adam and Eve?

The Vulgate Bible?

Let me start with one Biblical source. Psalm 8 describes the creation, including the moon and the stars, and then says, in the words of the KJV:

What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?

For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour.

The Epistle to the Hebrews regards this as a messianic prophecy of Jesus, the Son of Man.

The NIV translates the word here as "mankind," and plural "them," but the singular better reflects the Hebrew. Also, at least in its original circumstances, the psalm is widely taken to refer not just to man in general, but specifically to Adam. It is Adam, not any generic man, who is a little lower than the angels. If that reading is right, it is actually one of the very few passages in the Hebrew Bible that takes any particular interest in Adam after the opening of Genesis. It also links Adam and Creation with a crowning. But even though the Vulgate Latin that Nazarius would have known refers to *homo* and "crowning," nothing points directly to the figure of Adam. Nor is there a word about Eve. A reader really could *not* have derived any of the other exalted ideas that Anselm describes.

So no, I don't think Nazarius could have found his ideas just through an interpretation of the canonical Bible. So where else might he have got it?

The Eastern Churches?

Crown imagery has a long history in Christian churches, but chiefly those of Eastern derivation. In the early Syriac text called the *Cave of Treasures*, God sets a crown of glory on the head of the newly created Adam as a symbol of his sovereignty over the world, possibly borrowing from Psalm 8. This infuriates Satan:

When Satan saw Adam seated on a great throne, with a crown of glory on his head and a scepter in his hand, and all the angels worshipping him, he was filled with anger.

Adam's crown of glory prefigured Christ's crown of thorns. Ethiopian churches still hymn "the Glory of Adam and the Crown of Eve." Neither source, Syriac or Ethiopian, should have been available in medieval Latin Europe, ad presumably they weren't in the originals? But what intermediary sources were available?

Jewish Mysticism?

Jewish mysticism offers still closer parallels, with a telling juxtaposition of the ideas of Adam, crown, and creation. In the potent tradition of the Qabala, thinkers imagined the universe to be structured on the pattern of a human body, which together constitutes *Adam Kadmon*, Primordial or Original Man. Superimposed on that body is the chart of the divine radiances, or attributes, known as the Sefirotic Tree. At the summit of this figure is the divine Crown (Keter or Kether) through which the lower spheres of reality are generated. This Primordial Man creates the first human being reported in Genesis, *Adam ha-Rishon* ("First Man"). The different spheres are usually identified with cosmic bodies, with Keter as the stellar sphere. In that sense, God created the world through Adam's Crown. The stars and planets also have their place on the mystical tree of creation.

The image of *Adam Kadmon* is described in the Zohar, an awe-inspiring Qabalistic text that originated in Spain in the thirteenth century. The Zohar also has a great deal to say about heavenly

thrones. Although these ideas were not fully codified until shortly after Nazarius's death, they were percolating in Jewish mystical circles in Spain, Italy, and elsewhere across the Mediterranean world. Might Nazarius have stemmed from a Jewish background, or else can we imagine mystics from Jewish and Christian traditions in dialogue?

Manicheans?

Nazarius might also have drawn from Gnostic or Manichaean ideas. From early times, Gnostic sects had distinguished Primordial Adam (*Anthropos*) from the first human being recorded in Genesis — Heavenly Man, as opposed to earthly man. For the prophet Mani, Primordial Man was a creature of the kingdom of light, while material Adam was a product of darkness. Following that principle, it would make sense for Adam to be a vehicle for the creation.

In the 10th-century text known as the *Kitab al-Fihrist*, "Catalogue of Books," an ancient Manichaean creation epic tells how the forces of Light created the sun and moon as refuges for the Light that was liberated from its captivity in matter. Although it is not directly linked to the creation episode, the next passage in this epic passage reports a heavenly being investing Adam with a crown of splendor to protect his son Seth.

Whether Nazarius's sources were Manichaean or Qabalistic, the "Adam" he was crediting with the heavenly creation was almost certainly not the familiar first man of the Bible. The orthodox Inquisitors of the day could scarcely have begun to grasp this subtle distinction.

We can argue, then, about exactly where Nazarius found his ideas, and he might have have invented parts of his system. But his thought often suggests a wider intellectual world, including some of the age's most intriguing undercurrents. Lacking that couple of hostile mentions, would we ever have dreamed that an obscure small town medieval figure could have contemplated such cosmic depths?

What other bizarre treasures might he have had on his shelves? And what might this story suggest about the esoteric underworlds that operated in hundreds of other medieval towns and villages, if we were only able to see them in more detail?

Mani and the Giants

November 27, 2015 by Philip Jenkins
3 Comments

Last time, I described the Book of the Giants. Probably written in the third or second centuries BC, this text is closely related to the Book of 1 Enoch and its story of fallen angels begetting monstrous offspring on human women. The book probably originated and circulated in the Jewish world, probably in the sectarian traditions we call "Enochic." It was known at Qumran, and Aramaic fragments have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Never, though, was it approved or widely known, in the later Rabbinic tradition that became the Jewish mainstream. (The Babylonian Talmud does cite one reference to Ohya, son of Semjaza, who is prominent in the Book of the Giants).

But if the book vanished from the Jewish world, it had an afterlife that was far-reaching, and quite puzzling. The Book of the Giants was venerated by the Manicheans, the Dualist religion formed in the third century AD by the Mesopotamian prophet Mani, which spread across Asia, and only perished in the seventeenth century. Mani extensively rewrote the text to express his own distinctive doctrines. In that form, the Manicheans treated the work as canonical, and through them (as we have seen) it circulated in a dozen languages. Possibly, they also liked it because its condemnation of the evil forces ruling the world meshed well with their own experience of persecution at the hands of worldly regimes: mani himself was executed, possibly crucified. The word *Kawan*, the name for the book's Persian version, could mean either Giants or Tyrants.

That continuity – from the Jewish sectarian world into Manicheanism – is intriguing. It fits well with other evidence that suggests Mani's links to older Jewish sectarian and Jewish-Christian baptismal movements like the Elchasaites. In turn, those "Babylonian Baptists" might even have had some kind of linkage with Qumran, and conceivably the Essenes. (Again, I have posted a few times on that theme). It is fascinating to think of the heritage of that long-dead Jewish sectarian world still flourishing in medieval Central and Eastern Asia: from Qumran into Turkestan.

Whatever we make of those possible connections, though, the Book of the Giants is significant enough in its own right for what it tells us about the growth of literary cultures. From the fifth century onwards, ancient Israel moved towards finding religious authority in texts and scriptures, rather than direct charismatic or prophetic inspiration. We see the emergence of a religion of the Bible, which achieved canonized form by around 200 BC.

Religious debate and speculation increasingly took the form of writing new texts and pseudo-scriptures, which took the familiar canonized stories and developed them according to contemporary needs and interests. It is scarcely too much to describe some of these pseudepigraphic and apocryphal works as fan fiction. To use another phrase not commonly used in Biblical scholarship, authors are taking known themes and freely riffing off them.

The Book of the Giants shows this process at work in highly developed form – I almost said, in full flood. Not only are writers developing stories, but they are doing so in amazingly florid form, creating whole new mythologies packed with abundant names and titles. Presumably, some authors are sitting down and inventing these names of demons and giants afresh, while others are taking those and adding their own contributions to the expanding mythos. As we know from modern-day fantasy writers, once that process begins, it rapidly spreads and expands. This is exactly what was happening in this same era with angels, who now acquired names and individual identities.

Just why authors are so committed to inventing names so prolifically is not obvious, but I have suggested elsewhere that this might be connected with magical practices. If you knew the names of demons or evil forces, you could invoke or combat them.

The Book of the Giants thus offers a wonderful snapshot of this literary universe as it would have existed in, say, the third or second centuries BC. If not for its chance survival at Qumran, would we ever have suspected the existence of this ornate mythos?

One major source on these themes is John C. Reeves, *Jewish Lore in Manichaean Cosmogony: Studies in the Book of Giants Traditions* (1992). For the Enochic heritage, see Nicholas J. Baker-Brian, *Manichaeism: An Ancient Faith Rediscovered* (Bloomsbury, 2011), especially pp. 86-89.

Losing the Faith: Of Apostates, Renegades, and Traitors

June 24, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
8 Comments

Through writing about church history in many different eras, I have acquired a long standing interest in apostates and apostasy. In so many ways, apostates stubbornly refuse to fit into our normal assigned categories. We spend a huge amount of time addressing why people convert to particular faiths and causes, but rather less on why they leave. In the history of Christianity, this latter angle is actually a vast topic, and one that hugely occupied the minds of church councils and bishops through the centuries, especially in times of persecution. Let me offer a couple of thoughts about this here – on the matter of apostasy – and I'll return to the point in later columns. Perhaps you can't understand the nature of faith without analyzing how and why it is lost.

The word *apostasia* means something like defection, abandonment, or falling away, and it occurs a c0uple of times in the New Testament, in Acts 21.21 and 2 Thessalonians 2.3, where it suggests a grand event in the end times. That is quite apart from general references to different kinds of falling away, most famously in the parable of the Sower.

As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. (Matt 13.4-7)

But what about the history of actual apostates?

One of the very earliest external sources for church history is the famous letter of Pliny to the Emperor Trajan, written in 112 AD in the region of Bithynia and Pontus, at a time when the New Testament was still a very fluid state. Pliny is widely quoted on the nature of early belief and liturgy, but we may pay rather less notice to what he says about ex-Christians, who were already a substantial group. As he writes,

A libel was sent to me, though without an author, containing many names [of persons accused]. These denied that they were Christians now, or ever had been. They called upon the gods, and supplicated to your image, which I caused to be brought to me for that purpose, with frankincense and wine; they also cursed Christ; none of which things, it is said, can any of those that are really Christians be compelled to do; so I thought fit to let them go. ***Others of them that were named in the libel, said they were Christians, but presently denied it again; that indeed they had been Christians, but had ceased to be so, some three years, some many more; and one there***

was that said he had not been so these twenty years. *All these worshiped your image, and the images of our gods; these also cursed Christ.* [my emphasis]

Other versions suggest the last person cited had left the faith as much as twenty five years previously.

Assume for the sake of argument that these dates are more or less correct, and not just "Christian? Oh yeah, but that was twenty years ago! Nothing serious, just a phase." We would have to imagine a man converted in the 70s, say, who abandoned the faith around 90, and was thus a member of the church during a time of effervescent creativity in Christianity, at the time when for instance the gospels were being written – and who then gave it up, for whatever reason.

I am speculating completely, but I wonder why he defected? He lost interest? Pressure or threats from neighbors or family? Pressure from pagans or Jews? Quarrels within the church? Can we just assume that he "had no root," as in the parable? Or was he a passionate believer who faced a spiritual crisis? And what did he convert from, and back to? Was he a pagan who dabbled in Christianity, for three years or for thirty? Or was he a Jew who explored the Jesus movement, and then returned to mainstream faith. Would the Romans have forced a Jew to worship the emperor's image? It all cries out for discussion, if only we had anything whatever to go on. We'll never know.

And of course, there are excellent reasons why we don't have more to go on, namely who is going to write about such people? We hear a lot about the stubborn believers who held out to the end, but far less about the ones who compromised – "He's gone, good riddance!" Go to an art gallery and count the Old Master images of martyrs who persisted to the end – a daunting task. Now count the great apostates, if you can find any.

Hmm, Peter as he heard the cock crow, maybe.

Nor do we hear much about that other interesting category, those who left but who would would turn back to the faith again in later years. And there must always have been plenty of those, especially in times of persecution and violence. If you ever read Shusaku Endo's stunning novel *Silence*, he gives a terrific sense of this subculture of serial apostates and floating believers, in the Japan of the seventeenth century, and of the psychology of individual turncoats. (I wish I could claim to have invented the phrase "serial apostates").

Also from that early modern era, there is a sizable literature on Christians who deserted the faith to flight for Islam, mainly in the Mediterranean world – those who denied, or "renegades." Tobias P. Graf has a 2017 book on *The Sultan's Renegades: Christian-European Converts to Islam and the Making of the Ottoman Elite, 1575-1610*; and Claire Norton edited a 2017 collection of essays on *Conversion and Islam in the early modern Mediterranean*. Dr. Norton also published an article on "Lust, Greed, Torture, and Identity: Narrations of Conversion and the Creation of the Early Modern Renegade." Now *that's* a title.

So what are the other big eras for research and writing? Christian Hornung has a fine academic study of related themes in early Christianity, in his 2016 book *Apostasie im antiken Christentum* (Brill) but I don't believe it's been translated yet. It covers issues of theology, church discipline and pastoral care, mainly from the fourth century onward.

There's a big literature on Donatism, which is not exactly full-scale apostasy, but which touches on precisely the same issues. That involved clergy and church leaders who handed over scriptures to the authorities in times of persecution, thus becoming "traitors" (*traditores*, from *traditor*, literally, a "hander-over"). The issue then was not whether they had left the church entirely, but what should be the standards applied to those who had erred so badly, and how could they resume their previous roles and prestige? Many Donatists held rigorist and perfectionist views on these matters. If a bishop was a traditor, then he could not lawfully ordain anyone, so the credentials of the person ordained were invalid. The Donatists held that existing clergy had betrayed the church, and schisms followed (See Richard Miles, ed., *The Donatist Schism*, 2016).

In late Roman North Africa, struggles over Donatism often amounted to a virtual civil war among Christians, and came close to destroying Roman authority. Donatist controversies took up a lot of St. Augustine's time as bishop. Out of the arguments came a lot of later theories about separating the sacred nature of the priestly office from the sinful qualities of the individual office holder.

As I will argue over my next couple of posts, you actually have a great range of issues and questions that almost define themselves as book chapters: the idea of apostasy; reasons for abandoning a church; the nature of apostasy – actual or clandestine; degrees of apostasy; double faith, double lives, and double minds; the motives for return; church responses; and so on. It cries out for comparative discussion over many different eras and places.

Help me here: does anything like such a book actually exist already?

More on this next time.

Losing the Faith: Peregrinus

July 8, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

I posted recently on the subject of apostasy, abandoning the faith, or defecting from it. I offer one unusual case study here, which comes from a period where we have very few sources for Christian history, but which remains little known to non-specialists. (I originally discussed this case some years ago).

Around the 160s, the Greek satirist Lucian posted on the life and times of one Peregrinus (c.90-165), whom he depicted as a rogue and confidence trickster of dubious sanity. It's a rollicking story, but one with serious implications for reading and teaching Christian history.

According to Lucian's account, Peregrinus went through multiple incarnations: as a criminal on the run, as a Cynic philosopher, and for some years, as a Christian, who was supported by other Christians on the grounds of his supposed faith and record of persecution. He eventually burned himself alive, perhaps in a philosophical gesture to show his contempt for human sensations, and

the material world. To put this in chronological context, Peregrinus's martyrdom/suicide occurred within at most a decade of the far better known martyrdom of Polycarp.

Here is Lucian's account of Peregrinus's Christian career:

It was then that he learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.

The specific words used in the original here are interesting, far more so than the translation here might suggest, and I will explore them at greater length in my next post.

Reading Lucian, it is easy to see Peregrinus as a pure fraud, even a fictional character in a novel. But he was a real documented, historical character, and we might rather see him as someone who floated between different faiths and philosophical schools in an era of intellectual ferment. For at least a time, he probably was a Christian believer and leader, conceivably among the Ebionites. (See Jan N. Bremmer, "Peregrinus' Christian Career," in Anthony Hilhorst, Emile Puech, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (Brill 2007), 729-747).

For all we know, Peregrinus was at the time perfectly sincere in his beliefs, although he later moved on to other positions. But how would we know that? It's hard enough to look inside the head of another person today, and all but impossible when we are relying on accounts by contemporaries who perished many centuries ago.

This, for me, is the most important part of the story, precisely because it is so hard to fit into our existing categories of historical writing. When we write about the early Church, say, there are really thee sorts of people: there are Christians who live and die in the faith; there are non-Christians; and there are apostates, who renege on their commitment, for whatever reason.

Apostate, of course, is a singularly damning term. But what about someone who adopts Christianity for a time before moving on to some other position, just like someone else might pass through other phases of religion or philosophy? Must we only judge them harshly as apostates, as traitors or betrayers? Surely, in the second or third centuries, the boundaries of Christianity were as fluid and porous as that of any other religion, mystery cult, or philosophical school. We need to think more about those people in spiritual transit, and how we might characterize their particular trajectories. The Roman world must have abounded with ex-Christians.

I wish we knew more about Peregrinus, but might we suggest that he was looking for martyrdom somewhere, and if he couldn't find it as a Christian, he would do so in whatever suicidal cause came to hand? That's a familiar enough syndrome in the modern world.

Karl Marx's collaborator Friedrich Engels wrote about Peregrinus, and as a good nineteenth century skeptic, he could not resist offering a dark suggestion about the tainted origins of the Christian scriptures:

And like our first communist workers' associations, the early Christians too took with such unprecedented gullibility to anything which suited their purpose that we are not even sure that some fragment or other of the "great number of works" that Peregrinus wrote for Christianity did not find its way into our New Testament.

I don't believe that charge, because by the 150s the texts of the New Testament were becoming standardized.

But what about other Christian literature? Lucian says that Peregrinus wrote texts for the Christian community, and they were much valued, at least for a time. If any of them survived, how might we recognize them? Or perhaps they have indeed turned up and we know them by some convenient name, assigned either to some heretical sect, or even placed in the mainstream of mid-second century orthodoxy. There really is no way we would know. Before anyone raises this: there is a bizarre literature out there that tries to identify Peregrinus with the real life Ignatius of Antioch, which is simply impossible on grounds of chronology alone.

It might be nice to think that, once people heard about Peregrinus's apostasy, they immediately pulled all his writings from their shelves, but the extreme diversity of the Christian world makes that unlikely.

One final thought. Just imagine some first century pagan hearing about an apostle called Paul, and writing a hilarious satire about his crimes and misfortunes, based entirely on charges made by his deadliest enemies. Would it look too different from what Lucian says about Peregrinus? And imagine further that none of Paul's own writings survived? What a villain we would think him.

How would we ever know the truth?

See also Jan N. Bremmer, "Lucian on Peregrinus and Alexander of Abonuteichos: A sceptical view of two religious entrepreneurs," in Richard L. Gordon, Georgia Petridou, Jörg Rüpke, eds., *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire* (Walter de Gruyter 2017).

Peregrinus and the Early Christians

July 12, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
0 Comments

Last time I talked about the second century philosopher Peregrinus, whom we know who went through a ruthless satire written by Lucian of Samosata in the 150s. Part of Peregrinus's bizarre career involved a Christian phase, and the exact wording of that account is quite surprising. I plead

ignorance here, but I am not sure if the full implications for early Christian history are as well known as they should be. (Jan N. Bremmer has a fine essay on "Peregrinus' Christian Career" in Anthony Hilhorst, Emile Puech, and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, eds., *Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies in Honour of Florentino García Martínez* (Brill 2007), 729-747).

Here again is Lucian's account of Peregrinus's Christian career:

It was then that he learned the wondrous lore of the Christians, by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And—how else could it be?—in a trice he made them all look like children, for he was prophet, cult-leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.

The specific words used in the original here are interesting. The phrase translated as "wondrous lore" is t*haumasten sophian*, which could even mean something like "wisdom of wonders."

I was intrigued by the description of Peregrinus as a "cult-leader," which is a very modern phrase. The original Greek is *prophetes kai thiasarches kai synagogeus*, and that really unusual word *thiasarch* demands discussion. It means the head of a *thiasos*, "a group of singers and dancers assembled to celebrate the festival of one of the gods." It might imply an ecstatic or Dionysiac context, so that is a multiply interesting borrowing.The word translated as "cult" in the last line is *teleten*, which was commonly used in the context of the pagan Mysteries, for example at Eleusis, and otherwise appears as festival or ceremony – usually of a secretive and nocturnal kind. As in the Dionysiac sense, it implies something sneaky and suspicious, with the hint of naughty deeds being done literally in the dark. This is pretty concentrated Mystery-speak.

So "cult" in the popular sense is actually pretty accurate, in terms of reflecting what mainstream Greek thinkers thought about the emerging religion. Yet other words clearly declare the Jewish context – prophet, synagogue. So in his view, Christianity is a kind of Dionysiac mystery cult sprung from Judaism.

No less suggestive is the fact that even in the 150s, Lucian still assumed that Christians belonged to a synagogue. And do note how centered Christian life is on "their books" – whether in this context that means the Old or New Testament.

I would love to know more about the Christian "priests and scribes" that Lucian suggests can be found in Palestine – *hiereusein kai grammateusin*. I really doubt if he means it literally, in the context of the Christian church at the time. But does that reflect his ignorance, or is he making a really cunning point? That phrase *sounds* like authentic New Testament language, "priests and scribes," as regularly denounced in various ways. The form g*rammateusin* occurs twice in the gospels for "scribes," at Mark 10.33 and Matthew 20.18. The gospels use *hiereusein* for priests at Matt. 12.4 and Luke 17.14. Jewish priests and scribes were certainly not functioning in Palestine in the mid-second century, as the Temple had fallen in 70.

Can we even read Lucian's words as a wry joke? Jesus is always denouncing priests and scribes, but now the Christians themselves have them, and as it happens, they are none too smart, if they fall for Peregrinus.

Is it vaguely possible that Lucian has heard these loaded words from the gospels themselves, or from some Christian text? If so, that really would be quite a momentous finding for what it implies about pagan knowledge of the New Testament, and as early as the 150s. To put that in context, we know that not long after that date, in the mid-170s, the pagan Celsus was drawing on plenty of Christian written sources in order to construct his polemical attack on the faith. His work is lost, but we know most of it through Origen's *Contra Celsum*.

So what exactly had Lucian been reading? What did he know and when did he know it?

See also Jan N. Bremmer, "Lucian on Peregrinus and Alexander of Abonuteichos: A sceptical view of two religious entrepreneurs," in Richard L. Gordon, Georgia Petridou, Jörg Rüpke, eds., *Beyond Priesthood: Religious Entrepreneurs and Innovators in the Roman Empire* (Walter de Gruyter 2017).

The Four Gospels, and the Through Four

September 16, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
5 Comments

Not for the first time, I am thinking about gospels, and specifically the four gospels. After so much scholarship has been undertaken through the centuries, there is not much I can add on these matters that is new, but I will make one point that seems important to me. I'll offer an argument for the antiquity and authority of those four that is worth remembering when you next hear claims bemoaning those lost alternative gospels we hear about from time to time. Briefly, it involves a famous (and largely lost) early Christian work called the Diatessaron, the "Through Four."

Four or More?

As everyone knows, there are four canonical gospels. A widespread popular opinion holds that this is because the Big Four are the best, the earliest, the most authentic and historical, and they have held that position for a very long time. But how long? And why were they chosen rather than others? Luke opens his gospel by acknowledging that plenty of other accounts of Jesus were in circulation, and in modern times, lots more ancient gospels have been discovered, in whole or in part. The Gospel of Thomas is one famous example, and the Gospel of Peter was another early one. So what was their relationship to the Big Four?

As I say, a conservative view suggests that these were the best-authenticated, most prestigious, and most likely to be accurate and historically plausible. A couple more night have been early contenders – the Gospel of the Hebrews often appears on this list – but otherwise, really, the four stood alone.

But there is a potent alternative view. This suggests that a great many gospels circulated together, with none enjoying any particular privilege, until the emerging church hierarchy clamped down at some particular point. Of the teeming mass of would be gospels, they selected four, perhaps because they were popular in particular centers, or else because they favored the orthodox and anti-Gnostic position about Resurrection being bodily rather than symbolic or spiritual in nature. The others were then consigned to oblivion.

As to just when that happened, some favor the Council of Nicea in the 320s (think Dan Brown), but other scholars point to one particular man, Irenaeus of Lyon, writing around 180-185. Irenaeus was a deadly enemy of heresy, and actually invented that term in its Christian sense. He also specified that the church must have four gospels, those particular four, and there could never be more than four (or, presumably, fewer). There were four winds, four cardinal points of the compass, and four gospels.

The Curse of Irenaeus

Irenaeus is a bugbear of many modern liberal thinkers. In a television interview, Elaine Pagels once remarked that Irenaeus denounces his opponents as "heretics, which means people who make choices about what to think. Irenaeus didn't want people making choices. He wanted them thinking what the bishop told them to think" In her view, the orthodox obediently followed irrational dogmas, while heretics continued to exercise their intellects freely. His insistence on the four gospels – four alone, and definitely, specifically, no options, these – reflected that bigotry. Often, that polemic against Irenaeus focuses on gender issues, both the exclusion of women as spiritual leaders, and as the authors or subjects of gospels.

Irenaeus plays a critical role for Bart Ehrman. I have vast respect for Ehrman, for his integrity as much as his breadth of scholarship, but there are points on which I disagree with him. I was listening to a podcast in which he debated Richard Bauckham about the latter's controversial book *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. Pardon an over-simplification, but Ehrman was (as I understand) arguing the following. There were many gospels circulating in the second century. Most or all claimed no author, and we never really know what someone is referring to when they speak about, for instance, Matthew or Mark. Only in the 180s, with the arch-heresy hunter Irenaeus, did the church concentrate so narrowly on those four gospels, and moreover (he says) they now received the names by which we know them. That was largely to confirm their authority either as apostolic sources, or as sources linked to some apostle. That reflected growing church control and institutionalization.

Supporting Ehrman's point of view, he cited a much quoted passage from Papias, around 120, who *seems* to describe the gospels of Matthew and Mark. But this "Matthew" is an originally Hebrew text, which consists of *logia*, sayings, and is therefore nothing like the Matthew we know, which was written in Greek, and which includes a lot of narrative and a Passion scene. Score one for Bart.

I won't address the issue of naming here at any length, except to say that Ehrman raises some excellent questions. Rather, I'll concentrate on the question of how and when the church selected and defined the four, and that particular four. To understand this, we need to go back to Justin Martyr, who was writing between 155 and 165. Justin used the synoptics, and referred to the memoirs or recollections (*apomnemoneumata*) of the apostles. It's not certain if he cites John, but he

does suggest that in Rome in his time, the range of acceptable gospels was already quite limited, and moreover, that it focused on the synoptics.

Tatian and the Through Four

One of Justin's pupils was Tatian, an "Assyrian," born around 120, which would make him a slightly older contemporary of Irenaeus. Probably around 170, Tatian composed one of the most influential and widely circulated texts in early and medieval Christianity, namely a harmony of the gospels designed to be read together. Justin may well have had his own harmony, but this one was much more enduring, and influential. Tatian's harmony brought together four gospels, namely the four we know well, and this became the "Through Four," or Diatessaron. The work does not survive intact, but much of it can be reconstructed through the appearance of extracts in an astonishing range of languages worldwide: detailed reconstructions naturally vary.

Based on what we do know, the main point that must strike us is how unsurprising the text was to Christian readers over the next millennium or so, or today. What Tatian mixed and matched here was very much what would be expected to someone who knew the four canonical gospels, without any shocks or surprises – nothing like we might find from controversial texts like the Gospel of Mary or Gospel of Judas. That is an argument from silence, but it is important. If the work had contained any such material, its many critics would have jumped on it at a very early stage in its history. Either those Gnostic gospels had not been written yet, or if they had, Tatian saw no reason to take them seriously. I suspect a mixture of both reasons. He knew what real gospels looked like, and already in 170, that was what we think of today. "Gospels" meant Matthew, Mark, Luke. and John.

The name *Diatessaron* is not positively evidenced until the early fourth century, and that was almost certainly not the original title (Was it something like *The Gospel of Jesus Christ*?) . Therefore, we cannot absolutely positively say that Tatian held to a four-and-four-only view – but he was not far off. In many small instances, you can spot Diatessaronic readings because they differ from the canonical texts we know – not massively, not enough to shake the foundations of anyone's faith, but enough to be noticed. For instance, when Jesus was baptized, then a great light or fire shone in the Jordan.

Just conceivably, Tatian might have found that point and others in another source, like the Gospel of the Hebrews, which might even have constituted a fifth source for the work. I don't personally accept that, but I mention it for purposes of full disclosure. Even if he was drawing on G. Hebrews, the fact we find that influence so hard to spot was because so much of that otherwise lost gospel was very close to texts we have in the Big Four, particularly Matthew.

Alternatively – and this should be stressed – maybe passages like that "light shining in the Jordan" were part of the original text of one or other of the canonical gospels we have, but from which they subsequently dropped out. Tatian was after all using the gospel texts as they existed in the mid-second century, far earlier than most of our textual tradition, and he was often preserving truly primitive readings.

Tatian and Irenaeus

Note two key points about all that.

First is the date. You will see different estimates for the writing of the Diatessaron, but around 165-170 is a good consensus. If that is right, then at least a decade before Irenaeus's famous writings, another major church luminary thought that there were four gospels, that these were the key Christian texts, and that the four were the same that we know today. Even if the dates are off a bit, and the two men were writing close to the same time, Tatian is not being influenced by Irenaeus. This does not necessarily mean that Tatian himself cooked up that list of four, any more than Irenaeus did. I assume that both men were just reflecting opinion in the churches they knew, as it stood no later than the 140s or so. Given Justin's relative lack of interest in John, it's interesting that this ends up as part of the Through Four.

Justin, Tatian, and Irenaeus were each in their different ways responding to the crisis brought on by Marcion of Sinope, who was a major force in the Roman church until he was expelled around 144. Marcion famously taught a stern opposition between the Old and New Testaments and their respective gods. He devised his own idiosyncratic New Testament canon using a heavily edited version of Luke (the *Evangelikon*) and of the Pauline epistles. That forced the orthodox to determine their own canon, which they did, and that is what drove the new emphasis on the Big Four. Conceivably, and controversially, some scholars believe that the orthodox themselves took this opportunity to add some final revisions and rewrites to the gospels as they had previously been known, in order to make the case against Marcionite readings ever more airtight. But the choice of the Four was a church consensus, rather than a bee in Irenaus's intolerant bonnet.

Do also note that already around the 130s, even Marcion was treating one of our canonical gospels, namely Luke, as a core text, rather than choosing some now-forgotten fringe or alternative gospel. Long before Irenaeus, then, the gospels that mattered were the ones we know.

The second key point about the Diatessaron concerns orthodoxy. Let us agree that Irenaeus was the pit-bull of orthodoxy and anti-Gnosticism. Tatian was a very different character, associated with the world-rejecting movement of Encratism, which demanded celibacy, and by some accounts, he associated with the Gnostic Valentinus. Tatian, of course, did not see himself as a heretic, but the rest of the church thought he was flying far too close to Gnosticism. That is why church authorities spent a thousand years or so trying to exterminate the Diatessaron, an enterprise in which they were only partly successful, as large segments can, as I say, be reconstructed.

Among Tatian's deadly critics was Irenaeus, who wrote,

A certain man named Tatian first introduced the blasphemy. He was a hearer of Justin's, and as long as he continued with him he expressed no such views; but after his martyrdom he separated from the Church, and, excited and puffed up by the thought of being a teacher, as if he were superior to others, he composed his own peculiar type of doctrine. He invented a system of certain invisible Æons, like the followers of Valentinus; while, like Marcion and Saturninus, he declared that marriage was nothing else than corruption and fornication. But his denial of Adam's salvation was an opinion due entirely to himself.

The two men were on diametrically opposed ends of the theological spectrum, they couldn't agree on much – except that there were four real and worthwhile gospels, and they were the texts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

One other argument here concerns the Muratorian fragment, which appears to give the New Testament canon at Rome somewhere around 170 (? or 190?), and this clearly implies a four gospel sequence on the lines we know. The opening passage is missing, and we move straight into the third gospel, which is Luke: so what else might items one and two have been, except for Matthew and Mark? I note this fact, but do not lay too much weight on it because the fragment cannot be dated too exactly.

Some Conclusions

Based on all that, I would suggest:

a.That the Big Four gospels already enjoyed pride of place no later than (say) 140, and probably well before that.

b.None of the rival or alternative gospels of which we have record shows any signs of being vaguely that early, and virtually all of the ones we possess show acquaintance with one or more of the Big Four. There are a couple of non-derivative exceptions in short extracts, like the miracle in Pap. Egerton 2. (The voices in my head assure me that this is from the Gospel of the Hebrews, but I suppose that's not hard evidence). But none of the famous "new" gospels of recent years show any hint of roots before the mid-second century at the very earliest, and most are much later. Most of the famous Nag Hammadi texts derive from the third or fourth centuries. All gospels are *not* created equal.

c.People in particular churches carried on reading alternative gospels through the end of the second century – Clement of Alexandria is an obvious example – but they were increasingly outliers. In particular, the Gospel of the Hebrews was amazingly persistent, and its eventual disappearance really is one of the great untold stories of the early church. When in the early fourth century Eusebius drew up his list of disputed parts of the New Testament, the *antilegomena*, he included the Gospel of Hebrews alongside several items that we today think of as integral parts of the canon, including Revelation, the Epistles of James and Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John, and the Epistle to the Hebrews. That's distinguished company.

d.I don't know why Papias writes what he did about Matthew, which is dead wrong, but the account he gives of Mark in those same writings definitely fits the Mark we know, with the overwhelming Petrine element. We also know that Mark must have been very prestigious in the late first century church, or it would not have been so extensively plundered by Matthew and Luke. So the likelihood that Papias is writing about anything other than the Mark we know is vanishingly small. I disagree with Bart Ehrman on this one.

e.Crucially, the existence of the Diatessaron confirms the early acknowledgment of four gospels, and pretty much the same four we know, quite apart from anything Irenaeus wrote or thought.

f.Any attempt to write the history of the definition of the gospel canon that gives too much play to Irenaeus and his obsessions should be treated with enormous suspicion. Anyone who tells you that the church freely accepted a whole host of gospels until 325 and the Council of Nicea knows nothing, and should be dismissed as a publican and a sinner.

g.This is speculative, but the existence of the Diatessaron surely affected concepts of what gospels looked like, and what they should include. For anyone who knew the Diatessaron, "real" gospels must look roughly like what we know – biographical format, parables and miracles, Last Supper, Passion and Resurrection – rather than the familiar Gnostic format of post-Resurrection visions and dialogues. That would also raise suspicions about other older formats, like the sayings gospels that lacked any narrative (think *Thomas*). If something did not more or less fit the model of what we today call a gospel, then that surely raised suspicion about its credentials. That helped draw the thickening line separating orthodox and non-orthodox texts and beliefs. I wonder in fact if that process made possible the later and much better known work of Irenaeus? Put another way, Irenaeus stands at the *end* of a process of the definition and defense of a gospel canon, over the previous forty years or so.

So there we have a potent argument about the Four Gospels versus the also-rans. What about the Diatessaron? Why is it the Through Four, and not (say) the Through Nineteen?

More on these matters next time.

By far the best scholarship on the Diatessaron is the book by William L. Petersen.

And an important update to the above. Recently (July) T and T Clark published a substantial collection of essays edited by Matthew R. Crawford and Nicholas J. Zola, on *The Gospel of Tatian: Exploring the Nature and Text of the Diatessaron*. The book looks exceptionally interesting, and it represents state of the art scholarship. I quote, "The contributors explore numerous questions: did Tatian intend to supplement or supplant the fourfold gospel? How many were his sources and how free was he with their text? How do we identify a Diatessaronic witness? Is it legitimate to use Tatian's Diatessaron as a source in New Testament textual criticism? Is a reconstruction of the Diatessaron still possible?" I had not come across the book, but will remedy that as soon as possible.

Incidentally, Dr. Zola's doctorate is from Baylor.

Reading the Rabbis

March 30, 2023 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

It's fair to say that most Christians are respectfully aware of the Talmud as something that exists somewhere out there, and they know that it has a sacred quality for Jews, but is not something that they themselves are likely to approach – nor do they have any great idea what it might contain. The same is true of the larger body of rabbinic writing and scholarship – the Mishnah, Midrashic interpretations, legal Halakhah, mystical Qabala, This post is not only to suggest some of the treasures that can be found there, but also to point to an invaluable online resource for doing so. I

stress immediately that I am primarily writing for Christians, who might find at least some of what I have to say novel or surprising!

In my recent book on the many lives of Psalm 91, *He Will Save You from the Deadly Pestilence*, I naturally used such resources to examine how Jews had understood that text, about which they wrote a great deal. I will cite one example that I find truly evocative. In the sixth century AD, Jewish scholars in Babylonia, ancient Iraq, compiled a collection of legal and ritual decisions that were collectively known as "instruction," or Talmud. Despite their relatively late date, these texts included much authentic material dating back to the time before the destruction of the Second Temple four centuries before, traced through a series of authorities.

One of these tractates, known as *Shevuot* or "Oaths," hauntingly recalls the consecration of an addition to the old Temple's courtyard, and the music that accompanied it, with harps, lyres, and cymbals. Drawing on the Mishnah, it records that after the psalms of thanksgiving and celebration, the clerical choirs sang Psalm 91, remembered as "the Song of Evil Spirits, which begins: 'He that dwells in the secret place of the Most High.' And some say that this psalm is called the Song of Plagues." "The Song of Evil Spirits" is *shir shel pega'im,* and changing one letter makes it "the Song of Plagues," *nega'im*, suggesting the dual purposes for which it was employed. It was meant both to fight demons, and to protect against plagues and disease.

Think about that. What we have here is a direct recollection of a scene in the Temple when it still stood, in – shall we say – 50 or 60 AD, when St Paul might have been visiting the building, and when the Essene house at Qumran was still operating. Further, we now appreciate the special connection that the Psalm had with the Temple. Now remember the scene in Luke 4 which Satan confronts Jesus in the Wilderness, and puts him at the pinnacle of the Temple. Throw yourself down, he says, and he actually quotes Psalm 91 – angels will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone. What could be a more appropriate text in that time and place?

Before I proceed further, let me turn to the resource I mentioned for finding such material. Once you have a citation (and fine indexes are easily available) you can then go online to the user-friendly *sefaria.org*, "the largest free library of Jewish texts available to read online in Hebrew and English." For instance, the line I quoted earlier can be found here, where you find both Hebrew text and English translation, together with access to multiple commentaries. Sefaria's wonderful library includes all the major kinds of text available – the Bible, of course, the Tanakh, but also the rabbinic material I listed earlier, drawn from multiple translations, and all introduced with helpful guides. It's a treasure house, and you can dip and browse until the last syllable of recorded time. You can get a Sefaria app for your IPad. (The site takes donations: they are an excellent cause to support!)

I offer a screenshot of the main offerings – the links are not live, but just go here for the real thing:

Pro tip: there are two Talmud versions, the Jerusalem (*Yerushalmi*) and Babylonian (*Bavli*). The two have some tractates with the same name, but which are utterly different in their content: *Eruvin* is an

example. Citations will specify which version is meant with a letter y or b, so you know whether to look for y. Eruvin (*Yerushalmi*) or b. Eruvin (*Bavli*). Trust me, knowing those little letters saves you precious time in hunting down citations.

A World of Spirits, Demons, and Angels

Using such resources, I traced the history of Psalm 91 as it was interpreted by those rabbis, and the journey was fascinating. Much of the literature concerns what Christians call spiritual warfare, because, as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi observed around 240AD, "the entire world is filled with spirits and demons." Or to take another comment, "There is not a piece of ground which supports one *roba* of seed, in any part of the world, that does not contain nine hundred *kabs* of demons." We do not have to translate the quantities too exactly to grasp the point that demons were ubiquitous and threatening.

Let me say right away that I don't wish to suggest that such concerns are in any way central to Talmudic texts, which cover an inconceivably broad range of issues and topics: this just happens to be what I was working on at this particular time.

You can actually reconstruct a whole demonology from those rabbinic exchanges over 91. In reading the psalm, the sages regularly gave personal identity to the terms and concepts listed there, and then let their imaginations run free in describing what these monstrous creatures might actually look like and how they would behave. One popular use of personification was *qeteb* (*ketev*), or Destruction, as in the psalm's "destruction that wastes at noonday." Around 500 AD, one tractate in the Babylonian Talmud, *Pesachim*, notes:

There are two types of ketev demons, one that comes before noon in the morning and the other one comes in the afternoon. . . . The ketev in the afternoon is called ketev yashud tzaharayim [the destruction that wastes at noonday] . . . , and it appears inside the horn of a goat and revolves around inside it like a sifter.

A midrash on the Book of Lamentations harks back to 91 when it describes this *qeteb* as "full of eyes, scales, and hair . . . whoever looks at it falls down dead."

The *Midrash Tehillim* expounds at length the various demons believed to be mentioned in 91. On the destruction that wastes at noonday, Rabbi Judah noted only that this was a demon active at that time of day. Rabbi Khunna was more creative in describing the demon Bitter Destruction as

covered with scale upon scale and with shaggy hair and he glares with his one eye and that eye is in the middle of his heart. . . . He rolls like a ball and from the seventeenth day in Tammuz to the ninth day in Av he has power after the fourth hour in the day and up to the ninth hour. And every man who sees him falls upon his face.

Is it just me, or do you agree that the rabbi was thoroughly enjoying himself in offering such descriptions?

Commentators debated what kind of evils the psalm was enumerating, and whether they involved literal demons or more metaphorical evils and sins.

Inevitably, 91 also inspired discussion of angels and their roles, and especially the appealing promise of a protective angel. The *Midrash Tanchuma* (seventh century AD?) explained the psalm's v. 11 thus:

When a man performs one precept, one angel is assigned to guard him; when he performs two precepts, two angels are given to him; when he performs all the precepts, many angels are assigned to him, as it is said: For He will give His angels charge over thee. Who are these angels? They are the beings who will protect him from demons, as it is said: A thousand may fall at thy side, and ten thousand at thy right hand. . . . What is meant by may fall? It means that they force [their opponents] to surrender to him.

But those protective angels wielded a two-edged spiritual sword, threatening the ordinary believer who fell into sin. If one who sinned in secret hoped to escape the day of judgment, he would be disappointed. "The two ministering angels who accompany a person will testify against him, as it is stated: 'For He will give His angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways'."

Against the Darkness

Most readers may have cherished the psalm's protective qualities, but thoughtful commentators were troubled by the use of scripture as a form of magic or incantation. Talmudic sages respected the psalm's power and used it freely themselves for protective purposes, especially for night prayer. Most agreed that it should be prayed on a daily basis. Even so, they warned that while defensive or "apotropaic" (warding off or turning away) uses were acceptable, there were strict limits. To pray for healing and protection was highly desirable. It was a very different matter to assert that repeating the words or letters of a particular text would somehow compel God or his angels to supply such protection.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, whom I have already mentioned, indicates the fine line to be walked in such practices. He declared that "one is prohibited from healing himself with words of Torah," which seems explicit enough, yet at the same time, we know that he used protective verses from Psalms 3 and 91: "[He] would recite these verses to protect him from evil spirits during the night and fall asleep while saying them." That led to one of the exchanges that we often find throughout these texts, where one rabbi has to reconcile the seemingly contradictory opinions of an esteemed contemporary, or predecessor. When challenged to explain the apparent discrepancy, Rabbi Yehoshua replied that "to protect oneself is different, as he recited these verses only to protect himself from evil spirits, and not to heal himself." Apotropaic uses were acceptable, but curative ones were not. Other rabbis were not as forgiving, and forbade any use of scripture either in healing or for protection.

Through Christian Eyes

Obviously, all these texts must be read totally in their Jewish context, but they can also provide valuable material for Christian scholarship.

Those centuries between roughly 200 and 800 AD cover large portions of the Early Christian Church and the Patristic Era, as well as late Antiquity. Throughout, Jews and Christians were often in close proximity and interaction, and they shared a very large number of assumptions and commonplaces. Still, at the end of the fourth century, a Christian leader like John Chrysostom was hectoring his Antioch congregations to urge them not to join in Jewish feasts and fasts, or to attend

synagogues. (His homilies on these relationships still make for eye-opening reading). Jewish-Christian borders were still more porous in regions further east, where the Church of the East would prevail for long centuries. That church spoke Syriac, which was easily comprehensible to Jews who spoke Babylonian Aramaic. For interactions between the two faiths, see the books by Michal Bar-Asher Siegal in the list of references below. On spiritual matters, the kind of demonic material I explore here is very close indeed to what we find in Western Christian contemporaries, such as Cassiodorus.

I would argue that if we just look at such Christian materials, without the Jewish parallels, we are missing a large part of the Early Christian story. That issue runs far beyond notions of demons and spiritual warfare.

The available literature on these topics is of course enormous, but I will just list a few items I find especially valuable.

As an introduction, you can still do far worse than Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud* (Basic Books, 1976, and many later editions).

A really useful academic starting point is Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Martin Goodman and Philip Alexander, eds., *Rabbinic Texts and the History of Late-Roman Palestine* (Oxford University Press/British Academy, 2011)

Richard Kalmin, *Migrating Tales: The Talmud's Narratives and Their Historical Context* (University of California Press, 2014),

Hayim Lapin, *Rabbis as Romans: The Rabbinic Movement in Palestine, 100-400 CE* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

Shai Secunda, *The Iranian Talmud: Reading the Bavli in Its Sasanian Context* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013)

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Early Christian Monastic Literature and the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge University Press, 2013)

Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, *Jewish-Christian Dialogues On Scripture In Late Antiquity: Heretic Narratives Of The Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge University Press, 2019)

Moulie Vidas, *Tradition and the Formation of the Talmud* (Princeton University Press, 2014).

See also the (bit dated) bibliography here. From that same BBC site, you can also access on informative podcast on the topic.

Finally, the early twentieth century *Jewish Encyclopedia* is fully available online. It is of course very dated, but the general level of scholarship is stunning, and the work endlessly repays reading.

Scrolls, Lost Gospels, And Why Nobody Came Back To Get Them

November 25, 2019 by Philip Jenkins
1 Comment

Last time, I looked at the discovery of various kinds of buried treasure. I suggested that we needed to think very carefully not just about what the objects are, but why we have them. In the words of my two key questions, *Who buried it?* And at least as important, *why did nobody return to dig it up?* That last point often tells a story in its own right.

As a famous example, I cite the Dead Sea Scrolls, which were buried by members of the Qumran community around the time of the Jewish revolt and the subsequent Roman war, around 70 AD. Almost certainly, they were Essenes, but scholars are a little nervous about making the explicit identification. Actually, there were multiple concealed collections of these scrolls, and we have references to scrolls being discovered at various places – one in the third century, and again in the ninth, before the famous modern discovery in the 1940s.

In this case, we know exactly why a Jewish sectarian order might have buried their treasures at that time, to avoid their destruction or profaning at pagan hands. But think through the second question, about why the texts remained in those caves or hiding places. At first glimpse, that means that nobody was able to come back and reclaim those treasures, not months or years or even generations after the concealment. That in itself surely tells a story. That would mean that all the buriers were dead, not to mention anyone who held the key information about locations. That would right away exclude much possibility of any later group claiming any significant heritage from the Qumran sect, or at least from the main institutional structures. We sometimes speculate about possible heirs to Qumran, possibly among Jewish Christian baptismal sects, but whoever they were, they did not have access to Qumran's great secrets.

Or did they? We don't know how many hiding places they originally used. On no basis of fact whatever I offer a pure speculation, merely as an intellectual exercise. Let us suppose that the Qumran sect left (say) twelve hiding places. (They loved the number twelve). Survivors of the sect reclaimed nine, but three were left to be found in later years. How would we know? Prove it or disprove it! But in any case, why did they miss those three?

Maybe the great Scroll find is yet to come…

Or take the gospel collections that occasionally show up in Egypt, as at Nag Hammadi. Again, somebody had an excellent motive to conceal these books, presumably because their heretical and Gnostic content made them obvious targets for rigidly orthodox monks roaming the countryside in the late fourth century. Perhaps the original owners belonged to some kind of Gnostic heretical sect;

or perhaps they were themselves fairly orthodox monks who had those volumes as spiritual reading in their library. Or else they had them in order to write controversial polemics against them. It is very hard to say. But the fact that the collection stayed hidden means, either, that the concealers died, or they lost the secret treasure maps. Or else, they decided that never again in their lifetimes would it be safe to bring those books back to light.

I like to speculate about a monk in the year 420 dying in the knowledge that he is the last person who knows about that explosive collection of books we hid away all those years back. Sad that they will never see the light of day again! But how could we bear to destroy such sacred objects?

Either way, the fact of continued concealment is in itself a very powerful historical fact, and one that demands investigation and elucidation. I say again: If something is precious, people don't just bury or conceal it for the sake of posterity. They bury it meaning to retrieve it, and if they don't succeed in doing so, we must think about the reasons for that failure.