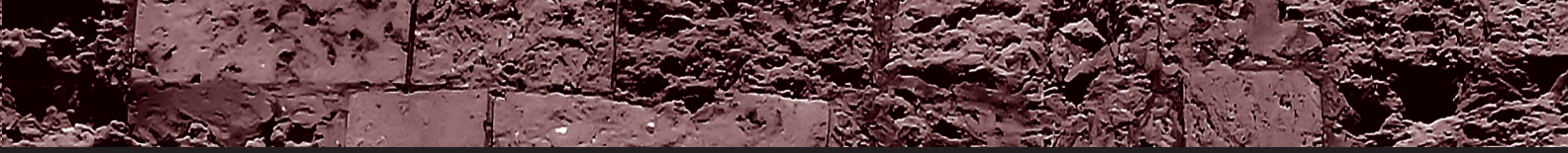


WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

The Rise of Primitive Christianity, 30–70 c.E.

Gerd Lüdemann

“The times they are a-changin’”—and so are modern perceptions of Christian origins. Taking as their standards the Gospels and Acts, traditionalists long overlooked the disciples’ precipitate flight to Galilee after Jesus’ execution, preferring to focus on the loyal women at the empty tomb and the miraculous infusion of spiritual ecstasy at Pentecost. Today, however, many scholars see the empty tomb as special pleading, and the tongues of fire in Jerusalem as a mythic dramatization of convictions that gradually arose in Galilee before the disciples returned to the Holy City with their proclamation of a



Risen Lord. In spite of Luke's idealized portrait of a unified movement and a single doctrine spreading from Jerusalem to Rome—and thence to all the world—scholars now recognize multiple traditions dating from as early as the first decade after Jesus' death. In addition to the Aramaic Jewish community in Jerusalem, there were "churches" of Hellenistic Jews in Damascus and Antioch whose witnessing turned Paul from persecutor to propagator. Thus evolved Pauline Christianity, and from it the primarily Gentile traditions we find in Mark and Luke. A few scholars go so far as to see separate beginnings in groups represented by such texts as the Didache, the Gospels of Thomas and Mary, the Sayings Source (Q), and a number of Gnostic texts. To be sure, some of these arose after 70 C.E., but the multiformity of early Christianity is now beyond question; and the mythic tales of a single Christian origin have given way to historical accounts based on objective evidence and critical review.

When Jesus was crucified one Friday in the spring of (about) 30 C.E. after being arrested by the Roman military, the male disciples who had accompanied him to Jerusalem fled in fear back to their native Galilee. Several female members of his entourage were more tenacious, among them a woman named Mary from the Galilean fishing village of Magdala.

It is clear that Rome had ample reason for executing Jesus: troublemakers—especially any seeming to have royal pretensions—must be summarily removed. And although Jesus rejected the radical theocratic program of such insurgents as Judas the Galilean, his ethical, social, and economic radicalism was based on a similar message of God's in breaking kingdom and exclusive rule. To be sure, Jesus' political statements are rare, and they never explicitly contrapose God and the emperor, but several of his symbolic actions were at least critical of contemporary political realities. Think only of his assignment of twelve fishermen to rule over Israel, the contrast between his reportedly humble approach to Jerusalem and the show of pomp and power typical of the Roman governor's entry, or his highly ambivalent comment on a Roman coin and the imperial power it represented. The clear subtext of these performances was a stark ultimatum: God or the emperor. If God indeed rules, any apportionment of authority must be, at best, derivative and provisional.

Moreover, Jesus's violent disruption of temple business at Passover surely alarmed the Jerusalem priesthood: it could well have been seen (or even intended) as a symbolic overthrow of the temple. Its aim was neither reform nor the prevention of further pollution but rather seemed to echo his call for a completely new temple granted by God. Together with reports of messianic pretensions that included a claim to be the long-awaited Son of Man, these perceived threats gave the

Jerusalem priesthood ample reason to urge action against a common enemy.

The arrest of Jesus and his death—without benefit of a trial—occurred on a single day. Since the next day was the Sabbath, the problem of disposing of the body arose. Jewish law and custom forbade leaving a corpse on the cross overnight, but even more offensive to Jewish sensibilities would be its remaining there on a Sabbath. The Roman authorities apparently allowed Jesus's body to be taken down from the cross; thereupon either Jewish leaders entrusted its entombment to Joseph of Arimathea or persons unknown buried or

“... mythic tales of a single Christian origin have given way to historical accounts based on objective evidence and critical review.”

otherwise got rid of the corpse. Both the Roman and Jewish officials assumed that this would be the end of the matter.

Jesus's thoughts and feelings in his last hours are of course unknown. Because none of his followers were present, the words attributed to him from his arrest until his death are certainly creations of the Christian community. Clearly, the reports we have differ widely and reflect the agendas of several evangelists. Luke, for example, goes so far as to portray Jesus promising the criminal on his right a place with him in paradise that very day, then asking God to forgive his enemies, and finally commending his own spirit into his Father's hands. These motifs of Jesus's glory and sovereignty run like a scarlet thread throughout Luke's narrative in Acts.

THE DISCIPLES OVERCOME THE DISASTER OF GOOD FRIDAY

For Jesus's disciples, his death was so severe a shock that it demanded a process of reconceptualization—one that began in Galilee and was marked by visionary experiences. Not long after Good Friday, Peter had a visual and auditory experience of Jesus's presence that initiated an extraordinary chain reaction. In Galilee, Peter instituted (or reconstituted) the circle of the twelve, presumably modeled on the fellowship founded by Jesus. It may also have reflected a shared conviction that the twelve tribes of Israel would symbolically herald the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. After all, they had followed Jesus to Jerusalem yearning for, and perhaps half expecting, the advent of that "kingdom," an inchoate notion derived from the message and example of their master. At first, Jesus's death had destroyed their earlier hope, but repetitions of Peter's experience rekindled and at last surpassed

Gerd Lüdemann is professor of History and Literature of Early Christianity at the University of Göttingen, Germany, the director of the Institute of Early Christian Studies, and a fellow of the Jesus Project. The university has placed restrictions on his teaching due to his work in religious criticism. His new book is *Intolerance and the Gospel* (2007).

it. The kingdom of God had begun, though not in the way the disciples had expected.

Jesus's postmortem appearances—both to Peter, who repudiated and later deserted him and to the other disciples who had earlier fled—were surely taken to signify forgiveness, and naturally the content of these experiences was passed on to others. No doubt, the reports emphasized that, far from abandoning Jesus, God had taken him to heaven. They may even have suggested—perhaps speculatively at first—that Jesus would soon be reappearing from heaven as the Son of Man. That scenario emboldened his followers to embark on a tremendous new venture: the women and men who had at-

“The ever-increasing distance between Judaism and what only later was termed ‘Christianity’ stemmed in large measure from Paul’s view of Jesus’ divinity on the basis of his resurrection and the resulting conviction that God’s action alone had conferred that status upon him.”

tached themselves to Jesus would return to Jerusalem to continue the work their master had left unfinished. Once again (and perhaps it would be God's last offer), they would call for a change of heart and mind. These first visions reported by Peter and the twelve proved so infectious that we are told of another appearance, this time to more than five hundred people at once. At this point, surely, any non-ecstatic interpretation comes to grief.

The dynamic power of such a beginning is not to be underestimated. Jesus's own brothers were sufficiently swept up in the excitement that James—who had so little sympathy for Jesus's cause that he likely participated in the reported attempt to have his “crazy” brother put away (Mark 3:21)—is said to have received an individual vision. In addition to these personal visionary encounters with the “Risen One,” three powerful historical elements defined and galvanized the early community's faith: (1) the act of breaking bread together recaptured, and thus restored, the presence of the master who had been so cruelly killed; (2) recalling his words and works set him again in their midst; and (3) the messianic promises of Scripture, especially the familiar Psalter hymns, became expressions of the present reality of the exalted Son of Man.

THE RISE OF THE HELLENIST FACTION AND ITS EXPULSION FROM JERUSALEM

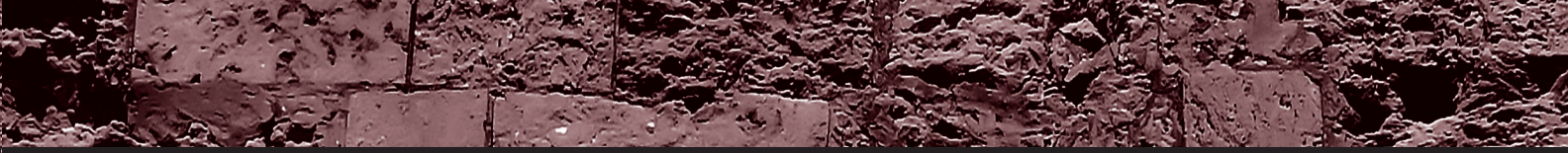
Even at this earliest stage, the movement took on new dimensions when Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem became part of it—perhaps in the aftermath of a reported ecstatic experience of more than five hundred brothers at one time at the feast of the Pentecost. This led to a new spiritual interpretation of the words of Jesus and an imminent expectation that undermined their prior allegiance to the Torah and temple cult. The hostile reaction of the temple priests was inevitable, and when, in the resulting altercation, a charismatic Hellenist leader was killed, the group fled Jerusalem and began to spread their message about Jesus—which called for the inclusion of Gentiles—to cities like Damascus, Antioch, and Caesarea. As Luke indicates, they were the first to transfer primitive Christianity to the cities of the empire and to change the new faith from a backwoods Galilean sect into a successful city religion.

THE ITINERANT MISSIONARIES AND THE Q COMMUNITY

Another group of Jesus's followers— itinerant activists ignored by the book of Acts—remained in the rural areas where Jesus's ethical radicalism found a welcome home, for the economic dimension of his radical message offered a clear choice between God and Rome's confiscatory policies. His deprecation of the wealthy is harsh to the point of exaggeration. While the homeless might easily bid farewell to kith and kin and aspire to the spiritual exaltation of life without employment, possessions, or even means of defense, the wealthy can find salvation only by renouncing their possessions—a task much harder for the “haves” than the “have-nots.” Yet, while a recurrent theme of asceticism marks earliest Christianity as a movement recruited from among the dispossessed and having a strongly countercultural ethos, Jesus's exalted and universal ethic was inherent from the outset. Thus, primitive Christianity shows a dual spirit: while seeking to exit or overthrow a corrupt society, the faithful strove to establish the highest ethical principles.

The ethical stance of early Christianity, combining political resistance and moral rebuke, shows that ethical radicalism may have been reborn in political struggle as early as the first generation after Jesus's death. Indeed, the sayings collection known as Q (the probable source for many of the sayings of Jesus in Matthew and Luke) challenges the radical itinerant ethos. At three points, it departs from a formulaic presentation of Jesus's words to narrate his temptation, his healing of a centurion's servant, and his cure of a blind and mute demoniac. Together with Jesus's explanatory remarks about the prince of demons, these seem, to a number of scholars, to reflect later editing that in turn indicates a changed social context.

The mountaintop climax of the temptation story could well allude to Caligula's attempt in 39/40 C.E. to place his own statue in the temple, for the resulting crisis likely obliged the fledgling movement both to reassess its radical ethic and to compile a written collection of its traditions. The story of the centurion whose trust amazed Jesus would then offset the antiauthoritarian myth by portraying a ranking representative of the empire



who acknowledged Jesus's authority and won his respect. In this context, the saying about Beelzebul's divided kingdom becomes a metaphor for the imperial conflict between Satan and God and the exorcism a vivid example of Jesus's dominion over the world. Where Jesus confronted those in power with symbolic deeds, the Q editor is formulating the conscience of the early movement by satirizing Roman imperial power as the ineffective posturing of Satan.

PAUL, A PERSECUTOR OF THE CHURCH, BECOMES A MISSIONARY OF THE GOSPEL

Paul of Tarsus stands among the most influential figures in the Christian West. At once a Jew, a Roman, and a Christian, he saw himself as an apostle called personally by the risen Jesus to take the Gospel to the Gentile world. Born about the same time as Jesus, a few hundred miles north of his master's native Galilee, Paul was a Diaspora Jew who had inherited Roman citizenship from his father and therefore belonged to both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman worlds. Despite Jewish restrictions on contact with Greeks, he did receive a basic education, mediated through Hellenistic Judaism that included instruction in the Greek language and the study of rhetoric. Still, deeply imbued elements of his ancestral culture remained and appeared in his letters many years later. To be sure, familiarity with the theater, contests in the arena, and philosophical disputations in the marketplace showed him the breadth and beauty of the Hellenistic world and its innately rational temper; but his ancestral religion offered both a sense of belonging and the security of exclusiveness. Far from being an average follower of his ancestral faith, he knew much of the Jewish Scripture in Greek and accepted the God who had chosen Israel and prescribed rules for it to live by. No wonder Paul left his ancestral home for Jerusalem; he wanted to pursue his studies at the center of the world, where his heavenly Father's temple stood and where daily sacrifice was offered for the sins of his people. Here, the young zealot would complete his education as a Pharisee; here, he would follow his ordained career as a scholar.

But as the result of a zeal that bordered on fanaticism, things turned out otherwise. In Damascus, Paul encountered a group of Greek-speaking Jews who identified themselves with a crucified Galilean named Jesus and went so far as to proclaim him Messiah. Not only that, they claimed that he had been elevated by God and this, too, publicized his criticisms of the law. Then, as if announcing a crucified criminal as Messiah were not enough, they called for changes in Jewish practice! It was too much for Paul. The elect of Israel had often felt driven to glorify God in their zeal for the ancestral law, and Paul forcibly attempted to squelch this new movement. Others saw no reason for draconian intervention, but the young zealot saw it as a threat. The rapid growth of this largely diasporic sect was to prove him right. To have imagined that he was to play a key role in the dissemination of a movement that would soon be a deadly threat to Jews would have taken his breath away.

But in the course of his furious persecution in Damascus, the very one whose followers he was harassing appeared to Paul in a vision. Personally chastised by the risen Lord, Paul

had no choice: it was imperative to enter into his service, for surely this was the Son of God, and all that his followers had said of him was true. The persecutor must immediately join the community he had been persecuting. Of course, the heavenly vision rendered him blind—for all this took place at a deeply emotional level—but one of his new brothers in the faith, Ananias, healed Paul in the name of Jesus, welcomed him, and instructed him in the new faith of which he had only a persecutor's rudimentary knowledge.

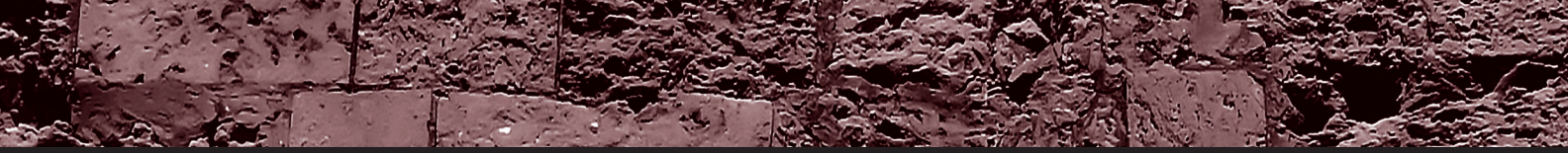
“When Paul's work was done, the downfall of the vibrant, ancient culture that had grown up out of Hellenism was complete.”

PAUL DISCOVERS HIS DISTINCTIVE ROLE IN THE DRAMA OF SALVATION

With time to reflect on Jesus's appearance and its meaning, Paul recalled the passages in Scripture that foretold a future Messiah. But how could he reconcile these with the fact that the leader of these Christians had died on the cross? None of the prophecies had envisioned a suffering Messiah, but the heavenly Lord who had accosted him was unmistakably the crucified Jesus. The scripturally sophisticated ex-Pharisee found a ready answer: in a bold leap of thought, he combined the Jewish ideal of the Messiah with the trope of the “suffering servant” from the book of Isaiah—a conflation made easier by the fact that Jesus's suffering had marked only a brief transition to his heavenly glory. The like must be true for all Christians: they would all suffer tribulation before the great day.

In Scripture, Paul also discovered his own distinctive role in the heavenly drama. He eagerly sensed a new significance in passages from Isaiah and Jeremiah, in which the prophets assert that God himself had ordained them in their mothers' wombs; perhaps he, too, like those great prophets of the past, had been specially called to be an apostolic preacher. The tremendous self-confidence that now filled Paul exceeded even that of his pre-Christian period—a development all the more remarkable when one considers that this enthusiast from Tarsus never personally knew Jesus of Nazareth.

But how could Paul claim authority directly from the risen Lord without learning from the followers he had so recently persecuted something of their leader's life and teaching? How could one visionary experience place him on the same footing as the personal followers of Jesus? His strategy was to appropriate the formula that he must have learned from either the Damascus or the Antioch community as part of the institution of the Lord's Supper: “I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you. . . .” He similarly accounted for everything else that he learned—or wished to claim he had learned—



about Jesus. The authority of the Lord, who had personally commissioned his apostle, automatically hallowed Paul's words. Believing himself in direct contact with the Lord, Paul took his deepest convictions to be revelations—and he followed them without hesitation.

While heaven was almost always an open book to Paul, an angel of Satan could also castigate him if the Lord so willed or if his supply of revelations went to his head. On the other hand, he was sufficiently sure of himself to invoke the power of Satan when preserving the community from uncleanness and saving a sinner's soul by requiring condemnation to death. Paul also saw the spirit of Satan at work when rival apostles caused dissension in the communities he founded. Still, Satan and his angels functioned only as predetermined by God and never gained power over Paul and his communities. They could not thwart the purpose of God, who had sent his Son into the world to save men and women from sin. As a self-proclaimed agent of God and the Lord Jesus, Paul was bound up in this cosmic drama of redemption. The key point was that salvation would, and should, include Gentiles: they were to belong to the church of Jesus Christ on the same footing as the Jews who believed in Jesus. Naturally, such a view was repugnant to many Jewish Christians.

THE NEW EXPERIENCE DEVELOPS IN PAUL AND AMONG OTHER CHRISTIANS

From the beginning, Paul had almost intoxicatingly experienced the unity of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles. We see this first in a passage from Galatians (3:26–28) in which he quotes the liturgy for the baptism of converts: “There is neither Greek nor Jew, male nor female, slave nor free, but all are one in Jesus Christ.” In this formula, which was repeated time and again in worship, Israel's carefully erected boundaries were demolished. It also appears in his jubilant cry in 2 Corinthians (5:17–18): “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. All this [is] from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ.”

This new experience called for rites to keep it alive. Paul knew the two chief ones—baptism and the Eucharist—from the congregation he formerly persecuted. That they were also the major rituals of other developing communities we learn from the Gospel of Mark, whose anonymous author, a younger contemporary of Paul, frames his Gospel with accounts of Jesus's baptism (Mark 1:9–11) and his institution of the Eucharist (Mark 14:22–25). This is an all but certain indication that the evangelist is consciously involved in the narrative creation of a new community of faith that includes both Jews and Gentiles. In Mark's account (written about 70 C.E.) Jesus takes his message to the Gentile areas of Galilee, his fame precedes him on a trip to Syro-Phoenicia, and he repeatedly nullifies the purity and dietary codes that had long distinguished Jews from Gentiles. Mark also invokes the revered Isaiah to put into Jesus's mouth the assurance that God's house must be open to all peoples. What amounts to an open-door policy for Gentiles cannot be an unintended feature of this earliest Gospel.

Luke's account in Acts (which may have been written as much as five decades later) tells a different story: Jewish rejection of the new message triggered the Gentile mission. But it probably worked the other way around, with erosion of Jewish traditions and practices facilitating the conversion of Gentiles and provoking Jewish outrage. Be that as it may, Mark and Luke agree in picturing an ever-widening gap between Christianity and its Jewish roots.

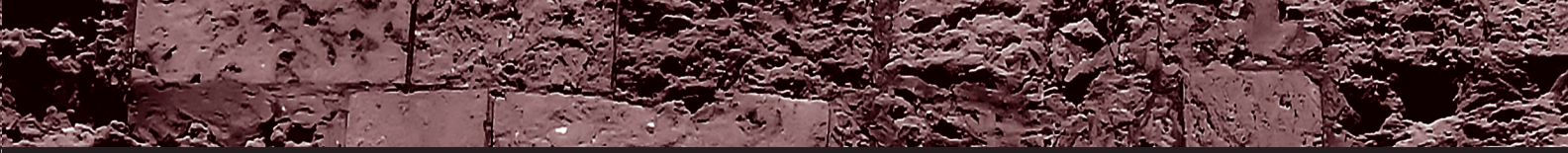
THE ESTRANGEMENT OF PAULINE CHRISTIANITY FROM JUDAISM: REASONS AND RESULTS

Appearances of the risen Lord to early Christians were experiences not of the senses but of the “spirit,” and their spiritual hopes envisioned an even greater event—the return of Jesus on the clouds of heaven, attended by the long-anticipated establishment of God's reign. These excited speculations presented Paul with a problem. In such a supercharged atmosphere, how would he impress on Jesus's personal followers the importance and validity of his own ecstatic experiences and thus persuade them that his apostleship and authority were equal to theirs? How could his interpretation of Jesus's life and teaching be made paradigmatic?

Paul's unsteady relationship with the Jerusalem community clearly indicates the existing stresses. An initial two-week visit some three years after his vision of Christ enabled Paul to make cautious contact with Cephas (Peter), Jesus's first disciple and present leader of the fellowship. The Gentile mission, the personhood of Jesus of Nazareth, and the nature of the Easter events were already prickly issues. Paul was gratified by this meeting and especially by the validation of his preaching activity that shortly followed. Important events soon came thick and fast. Not only did Paul's Gentile mission prove extraordinarily successful, but Jewish-Christian communities also sprang up in Lydda, Joppa, Caesarea, Sidon, and elsewhere. The “Holy Spirit,” imagined as a mysterious and miraculous being, found widespread acceptance and favor, first of all in Syria and then in the Pauline communities in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia. A movement had been born, called to life by a man who, never having known the earthly Jesus, was all the more in contact with the heavenly counterpart.

The situation was something like a gigantic closed vessel of hot water. The growing number of disciples who invoked the risen Christ had brought Judaism to its boiling point, and the water could no longer be contained. The container burst; the water poured out, and, still steaming, found different ways into somewhat calmer channels. In short, numerous new communities that embraced both Jews and Gentiles sprang into being only to generate later conflicts—for strict Jewish Christians were scandalized by nonobservant activity in the mixed communities and attempted to outlaw it. They did not so much mind what Gentile Christians did, but they were determined that ecumenism should not erode their own unique identity and practice.

A demand for strict segregation of the Jewish Christians from their pagan brothers was not long in coming. In Paul's presence, delegates from Jerusalem fomented a bitter dispute over purity concerns in the mixed community of Antioch and



thereby threatened all that he had achieved. And so it was that, fourteen years after the first visitation, Paul received a revelation from his heavenly Lord to return to Jerusalem. Proud and unbowed, he took with him Titus, an uncircumcised Greek, to establish a precedent. It is no coincidence that Paul's former mission partner Barnabas was also a party to the discussion, but so, too, were those strict Jewish Christians who, as Paul put it, had crept into the (mixed) community and provoked a bitter dispute. Initially, this was completely different from the first visit, for besides Cephas, John now had a voice, and Jesus's biological brother James led the triumvirate. It is indicative of the changing alignment of forces that two of the original disciples were now subordinate to one who had been—at the very least—skeptical of Jesus's ministry.

After no doubt vigorous debate, it was agreed that the Jerusalem church was to spread the Good News to the Jews, and Paul and Barnabas would spread it to the Gentiles. Like many treaties, it was a kind of elastic statement that allowed both parties to read their own understandings into it; besides, the situation was very different for Jews living in Palestine than for those in the Diaspora. Most important to Paul was reaching an agreement, for that answered Paul's primary concern: namely, securing the unity of the church.

But the compromise failed to answer the burning problem of how people in mixed communities would live together. Far from ruling out a fairly strict segregation of Jewish and Gentile Christians, the agreement was about conditions for separation. Still, despite all the problems of the "formula of union," all agreed on a collection of funds to aid the Jerusalem community—a project that, ironically, would prove an acid test for the relationship between the Gentile-Christian and the Jewish-Christian churches.

Barnabas was to bring funds from the church of Antioch, and Paul, from the churches in Greece and Galatia that he had founded as early as the late 30s. This would enable Paul to hold the Jerusalem leaders to their agreement (thereby serving as an instrument in church politics) and at the same time would confirm that his apostolate to the Gentiles was based on the unity of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles. For without this unity, he believed, his apostolate to the Gentiles was null and void.

Besides, Paul had already envisaged a mission in Spain in order to conquer the last part of the known world for his Lord. This was a matter of some urgency, for the Lord's coming was near. But, since the agreement had to be safeguarded, Paul first undertook a journey among his communities to secure the collection and solidify the bond between his churches and those in Jerusalem. On the first day of every week, he instructed, the members of each community were to put something aside in order to guarantee a handsome sum when Paul traveled through to receive funds that he would deliver to the delegation that would take them to Jerusalem. Of course, the journey served more than financial and political ends. When the occasion arose, as it did in Ephesus, Paul founded new communities of believers. And, of course, existing communities needed his personal advice and exhortation, or strengthening by delegates like Titus or Timothy.

Then disaster struck. Ultraconservatives from Jerusalem began to invade Paul's communities and threatened to destroy all that he had laboriously built up and steadfastly defended. The traditionalist "false brethren" he had defeated in Jerusalem now attacked him in his own churches. They challenged his apostolic authority and called for closer observance of the law, thus driving a wedge between Paul and Jerusalem. Thus, the battle for the collection became the battle for the unity of the church as well. To make sure that the collection would be received in Jerusalem, Paul changed his plans and joined the delegation carrying it there. This would be his third campaign of a struggle in which he had previously prevailed.

“. . . Paul's religion was not the product of a mind trained in logic . . . at its center is not the mind but the emotions—the mystical exaltation of the self seized by the Spirit.”

At the height of this conflict, shortly before Paul set off for Jerusalem, he wrote his letter to the Roman church, a missive that must have been intended for the eyes of the Jerusalem community as well. In this memorable document, the apostle proclaimed his message of righteousness by faith, promising salvation on the basis of Jesus's atoning death, which is available to both Jews and Gentiles. Strangely, though, he did not seem to notice that in Romans 9–11 he partly retracted much of his previous teaching. Whether from a latent ethnocentrism or a desire to ingratiate himself with Jewish partisans, he now affirmed that after a full complement of Gentiles has been converted, all of Israel would be saved without reservation—indeed, without even believing in Christ (Romans 11:26). Suddenly, being one of the chosen people seemed more valuable than it did in the first eight chapters.

His explanation for this about-face appears at the beginning of chapter 9: he suffers deeply and personally on account of his many Jewish brothers who have not found salvation in Christ, and he would willingly be accused by Christ if it would effect their deliverance. Coming on the heels of Paul's sharp disparagement of Jewish law, this sounds strange; no doubt, it attests to an ultimate priority of feeling over thought—in Paul as in nearly all humans.

This apparent softening, however, would afford Jews no solace in subsequent eras. In Paul's own Gentile-Christian churches, his special dispensation for Israel could not prevent unbelieving Jews from being damned to eternity, any more than a like provision could save unbelieving Gentiles from condemnation in later times. A subsequent editor of Mark attributes to the risen Jesus a comprehensive curse (Mark 16:16): "Who

believes and is baptized will be saved, but who does not believe will be condemned.”

THE EARLIEST EVANGELIST’S REPUDIATION OF JUDAISM

Mark’s Jesus is a heavenly being with an earthly form. Long before the resurrection, a divine glory illuminated his life. To dramatize this dual nature, Mark places epiphany scenes at the beginning, middle, and end of his account. At Jesus’s baptism, a heavenly voice identifies him as God’s son; in the transfiguration story, the same heavenly voice repeats the title; and at the cross, a Roman centurion—a Gentile—is the first person to confess Jesus’s divine sonship. The first two are divine proclamations addressed only to Jesus and his disciples, but the centurion is a man whose message is to be passed on to others. The

“Christian anti-Judaism on pagan soil received a powerful impetus from Paul, along with others, and had a devastating effect.”

divine mystery is gradually unveiled, but instead of having Jesus claim divinity, it has been assigned to him—on the final occasion by one unlikely to be moved by divine promptings.

The ever-increasing distance between Judaism and what only later was termed “Christianity” stemmed in large measure from Paul’s view of Jesus’s divinity on the basis of his resurrection and the resulting conviction that God’s action alone had conferred that status upon him. Reflecting this view in his Gospel, Mark endows the earthly Jesus with divine powers and continually disparages the disciples for what he sees as their inability to bridge the conceptual gap between the Jesus they know and the Eternal Son. It is this divinization of Jesus (which at least parallels if it is not derived directly from Paul) that led the Gospel tradition inexorably away from the strict monotheism of Judaism.

This separation is evident in Mark’s recurring accounts of conflict with Jewish opponents over Sabbath observance, purity regulations, and the value of sacrifice. But it is most striking in his employment of the temple as a symbol. For Paul, it was enough that Jesus fulfilled Jewish prophecy; Mark has him prophesy the destruction of that very embodiment of Judaism and has his last cry accompanied by the rending of the temple veil that represents the exclusivity and sanctity of the cult. And the contrived concurrence of that cataclysm with the centurion’s confession (the soldier at the cross could not have seen the temple) is an unmistakably symbolic assertion of both Christianity’s supersession of Judaism and the inclusion of Gentiles in God’s scheme of salvation.

PAUL AS A SOURCE OF ALIENATION FROM JUDAISM

Paul himself experienced the Jewish-Christian repudiation of the merger with Gentile Christianity. Not only was the collection he brought to Jerusalem rejected, but hostile Jewish-Christian “brothers” also denounced him to the Roman authorities, charging that he took a Gentile Christian into the temple. Trapped, Paul appealed to the emperor for his life and only thus reached Rome, where he was executed under Nero. He never got to Spain.

However tragic the result, it is only fair to say that the charges against Paul—that he was teaching Diaspora Jews not to circumcise their sons and generally alienating them from the Jewish law—were essentially valid. While these are not explicit items in Paul’s letters (indeed, he emphatically calls on Jews not to renounce circumcision), his preaching had results closely resembling the charges.

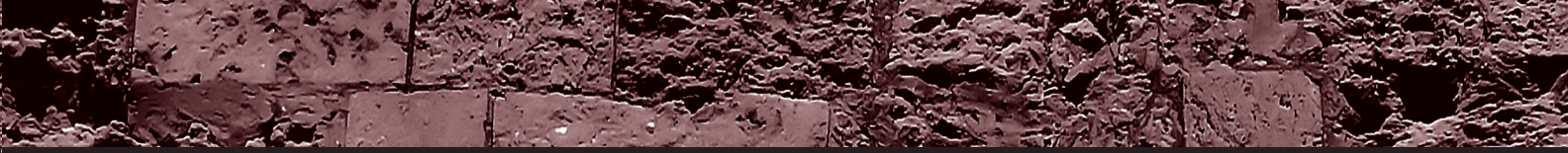
Since Jewish Christians in Pauline communities were often a minority alienated from their mother religion, many gave up circumcision and soon lost their Jewish identity. In addition, the apostle’s doctrine of justification by faith not only challenged the sanction of Jewish law but also could easily be misconstrued as libertinism. Last but not least, Paul’s position on the law was anything but clear. Having concluded that a life in Christ provided the answers to all meaningful questions, he made contradictory or equivocating statements about the purview and force of the law; and thereafter staunchly Jewish Christians could no longer come to an understanding with him.

PAUL AND GREEK ENLIGHTENMENT

This self-described “Gentile to the Gentiles and Jew to the Jews” had become, in effect, neither a Gentile nor a Jew. Combining a strong measure of arrogance and a tendency toward vacillation, he must have been perplexing to honest spirits. But, as his great accomplishment attests, this openness on all sides was a good way to succeed. Only in Athens did it cause him to run into a brick wall. When he attempted to impress the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers by proclaiming future judgment through Christ and bodily resurrection, they summarily showed him his limits. His religion, grounded in mystical experiences, was not up to the intellectual challenge of Greece. That he founded no community in Athens may be indicative; it suggests that his remarks in the First Letter to the Corinthians about human wisdom being folly before God were in part an evasion and in part a way of rationalizing the Athenian snub.

For Paul’s religion was not the product of a mind trained in logic—one that objectively examines all concepts and views without yielding to the phantasms of the imagination. Rather, the Hellenistic Christianity that is his legacy showed a supernatural flavor in its subjection to authority and surrender to divine guidance: at its center is not the mind but the emotions—the mystical exaltation of the self seized by the Spirit.

Indeed, the success of Pauline Christianity reflected its accord with the spirit of the time. The world had become weary of thought. People wanted a convenient way to secure their immortality, and one of the most popular was by initia-



tion into mysteries, two examples of which were baptism and the Lord's Supper. Let us be blunt: Paul's brand of Christianity—which became the movement's normative form—constituted a spiritual reaction against the Greek Enlightenment at the same time when state law, customs, and even forms of greeting came to be dominated by authoritarianism. The quintessential freedom of ancient Greece was throttled along with the constitutional spirit of the Roman state. Prerogative replaced research; faith substituted for knowledge; independence of the human spirit gave way to humble subordination to an all-powerful deity in the sky; and slavish observance of divine commandments supplanted natural human morality. When Paul's work was done, the downfall of the vibrant, ancient culture that had grown up out of Hellenism was complete.

THE RESULT OF PAUL'S ACTIVITY

What did Paul accomplish? First of all, it is clear that the Christian Church owes its very existence to this Jewish man from Tarsus; Luke rightly devotes more than half of Acts to the one we may call the real founder of Christianity. And Paul was right when he said that he worked harder than all the rest; he set the course for the future voyage of the Church by transplanting his misunderstanding of the religion of Jesus to Gentile territory and, contrary to his deepest instincts, forged the lasting separation of the church and Israel.

This, in turn, occasioned the tragic outcome of his activity—a chain of events that has extended nearly two millennia beyond the time frame of this narrative. Christian anti-Judaism on pagan soil received a powerful impetus from Paul, along with others, and had a devastating effect. The New Testament authors initiated a shameful tradition of thrashing nonbelieving Jews for not accepting Jesus as their savior. Except for Paul and his brothers in Christ, Judaism would never have been led into this abyss.

In addition, Paul and the other primitive Christians faced insuperable challenges from critical reason, objections that undermine nearly every detail of their belief system: (1) the notion that God's Son had to atone for the sins of the world; (2) the nonsensical identification of Jesus with Israel's long-awaited Messiah—and with it the arrogant claims of Paul and of other Christian authors to speak for someone they had never met; (3) the view that human beings can ground in mystical wishes a serious expectation of decisive help; (4) confused statements about the Law that persistently conceal their presuppositions, including the strange notion that a solution—Christ—has already been found before a question can be put; and (5) the claim that a historical event can bring about the personal salvation of all mankind.

One can perhaps understand a man of the first century joining anonymous worshipers of Jesus in making such foolish assertions, but such claims become dangerous when, after two millennia, they are still advocated by the Christian churches, and even by academic theologians. Consider just one example: such people claim that the resurrection of Jesus is of objective, historical significance—indeed, that it is the turning point of world history and thereby an event of cosmic importance.

THE DISASTROUS EFFECT OF CHRISTIAN “MONOTHEISM” AND ITS POLITICAL THEOLOGY

In such apocryphal gospels as those attributed to Thomas and Mary, along with the Sayings Source (Q) and the Didache, we have evidence of the existence of other early Christian traditions, but, by and large, their contributions were marginal, suppressed, or co-opted. It is the proto-orthodox expression of the faith that we have examined, the strand that became what

“Indeed, the success of Pauline Christianity reflected its accord with the spirit of the time. The world had become weary of thought.”

we know as historical Christianity. To narrate the story of this dominant form of primitive Christianity means to make critical judgments about Paul and his brothers in Christ. That the apostle to the Gentiles was a towering figure in primitive Christianity—indeed the real founder of the Church—is certain. But the view that his letters and the rest of the New Testament scriptures represent God's word is a crime against reason and humanity. Studying them today should make us recognize that such thinking offers no useful key to the future. Their image of God cannot claim the respect of nonbelievers but only command obedience purported to avoid the eternal punishment of hell. Primitive Christianity was a christologically distorted monotheism on the brink of becoming a totalitarianism that lacked any respect for dissenters within, and nonbelievers—such as Jews and pagans—outside of, the church. Only three centuries later, in fact, these dissenting (or merely different) groups became the target of a joint action by the “true” believers and the political forces of the Roman Empire. They were destroyed, neutralized, or expelled. The burning of books reported in Acts 19 as a voluntary action by former pagans prefigured centuries of violence against the opponents of Christian orthodoxy. Luke's overtures to the Roman Empire bore rich fruit.

Despite the many unfortunate historical results of primitive Christian apologetics, one can neither deny the human accomplishments of the earliest churches nor doubt that these derived in large measure from their members' conscious commitment to what they perceived as God. At the same time, the religious zeal of its representatives remains suspiciously close to a fanaticism that, since it found an ally in political power, cost the lives of at least a million people per century for the last two millennia. Unfortunately, as history shows, conflict inevitably turns that kind of commitment against the well-being of mere mortal men and women. 