

The Radical Deformation
A Survey of the History of Dogma, Volume 1
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**“Has a nation changed their gods, when they were not gods?
But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit.”**

Jeremiah 2:11

Adolf von Harnack (1851-1931) wrote his *History of Dogma* between 1886-1898, motivated by a conviction that many of us share. His view was that the Lutheran tradition into which he was born, for all its being staunchly protestant, belonged to an as yet 'unfinished reformation'. Protestantism simply had not gone far enough in stripping back from the original person and teaching of Jesus the layers of dogma which, growing up around it, had eclipsed some of its most central aspects.

He believed that the process of the development of dogma could be understood historically without recourse to metaphysics and so the objects of his rigorous historical criticism were the sources which document the development of what was to eventually become the dogma of the orthodox Church.

By delineating the process by which dogmas originate and develop, he sought to obtain a 'critical reduction of dogma', identifying and removing them. The remainder, by process of elimination, would be a fully reformed faith, a pure and authentic snapshot of the religious genius of Jesus.

Historical study for him was the means by which the church could be liberated from the chains of dogmatic Christianity. In this way she could, by means of history, overcome history. On account of this Harnack maintained that a historical knowledge is indispensable to Christian faith. How could any person attempting to understand Jesus, yet being ignorant of the history of the dogmatic development which has come to form the lens through which he is seen, not be destined to fall prey to it?

His thorough treatment of all the contemporary sources, historical analysis and scholarship accessible to him brought about great advances in the field, and earned him an enduring title as the 'prince of church history' among evangelicals.

The value of his work lies in the thorough account he provides of the profound metamorphosis which took place between the writings of the New Testament and those of the 'church fathers'. I leave it to the reader's judgment as to whether or not he provides a sufficient foundation to support his weighty assertion that, by virtue of this, the task of reformation must be equally radical and far reaching.

This paper will confine itself to examining some of the broad themes that emerge from Volume 1 of *The History of Dogma*, in which Harnack's provides an account of the earliest period.

Introduction

Poles apart

With lightning speed an alternative and significantly different version of Jesus to the one presented in the New Testament was introduced to the church. The document is 2nd Clement. The verse reads: "If Christ the Lord who saved us, **being first spirit, then became flesh**, and so called us, in like manner also shall we in this flesh receive our reward." (2nd Clement 9.5)¹

The remark is made in passing, while the author is on his way somewhere else². Blink and you could miss it. Yet Harnack's comment on this short clause is that: "this is the fundamental, theological and philosophical creed upon which the whole Trinitarian and Christological speculations of the Church of the succeeding centuries are built, and it is thus the root of the orthodox system of dogmatics."³ The reason for this is that it presents a Jesus who existed as a personal spirit being before 'becoming flesh'.

¹ Two opinions currently prevail regarding the dating of 2nd Clement. Either it was the work of Clement, who was the bishop of Rome between 88-98 AD, or it was written later, at around 140-160 AD. Either way the document is early. Other writers mentioned in this paper are Ignatius, 35 to 98-117 AD and Justin Martyr 100-165 AD.

² This fact is significant in itself since it gives the impression that he expected the proposition to be something his readers would take for granted, and not be in any way controversial.

³ A. Harnack, *History of Dogma (HOD)*, Volume 1, p.328

Contrast this with what Harnack calls the 'classic passage' in which the original Jewish concept of the pre-existence of Jesus is to be found: "For he was **foreknown** before the foundation of the world, but has **appeared** in these last times for the sake of you." (1st Peter 1.20)

Of course, the issue at stake is not whether Jesus pre-existed but, rather, in what sense he did. On this point the Jewish conception, summed up by Peter and the Greek standpoint of Clement are, Harnack notes, "as wide apart as the poles."⁴

In 1st Peter the key terms are *prognosmenos* and *phanerotheis*. Understood this way, the birth of the Messiah was a transition from being 'fore-known' by God to being 'made-known' to men. But 2nd Clement presents this transition as the "assumption of flesh" of an already personally existent and ontologically distinct (i.e. other than human) being.

This, according to Harnack, has several undesirable consequences among which are the fact that it "threatens the monarchy [supremacy] of God", that it results in a "naive docetism"⁵ on account of the fact that "the flesh [of Jesus], that is the human nature created by God, appears depreciated, because it was reckoned as something unsuitable for Christ, and foreign to him as a spiritual being."⁶

It also stands in contradiction to the synoptic birth narratives "The miraculous genesis of Christ in the Virgin by the Holy Spirit and the real pre-existence are of course mutually exclusive. At a later period, it is true, it became necessary to unite them in thought."⁷

This tension became explicit later on⁸ "For example, [In Justin] instead of the formula 'Jesus was born of (*ek*) Mary,' is found the other, 'He was born through (*dia*) Mary.'"⁹ The miraculous conception was no longer considered to have any connection with the origin of the Son. Instead he is a visitor from outside, passing 'through' the human race.

Between 1st Peter and 2nd Clement a revolution had taken place. Perhaps this had something to with the different backgrounds of the two writers...

"The main features of the message concerning Christ, of the matter of the Evangelic history, were fixed in the first and second generations of believers, and on Palestinian soil. But yet, up to the middle of the second century, this matter was in many ways increased in Gentile Christian regions... at the beginning of the second century... the old tradition was recast or rejected."¹⁰

⁴ "According to the theory held by the ancient Jews and by the whole of the Semitic nations, everything of real value that from time to time appears on earth has its existence in heaven. In other words, it exists with God, that is God possesses a knowledge of it; and for that reason it has a real being... The old Jewish theory of pre-existence is founded on the religious idea of the omniscience of and omnipotence of God, that God to whom the events of history do not come as a surprise, but who guides their course." (HOD, p.318)

"According to the Hellenic conception, which has become associated with Platonism, the idea of pre-existence is independent of the idea of God; it is based on the conception of the contrast between spirit and matter, between the infinite and finite, found in the cosmos itself. In the case of all spiritual beings, life in the body or flesh is at bottom an inadequate and unsuitable condition, for the spirit is eternal, the flesh perishable." (HOD, p.319)

⁵ **Docetism**, from the Greek *dokeō*, "to seem" is the belief that Jesus' physical body was an illusion, that is, Jesus only *seemed* to have a physical body, but in reality he was incorporeal, a pure spirit.

This belief is most commonly attributed to the Gnostics, who believed that matter was evil, and hence that a material body would be inconsistent with the chosen one of God. This statement is rooted in the idea that a divine spark is imprisoned within the material body, and that the material body is in itself an obstacle, deliberately created by an evil lesser god (the demiurge) to prevent man from seeing his divine origin.

Docetism could be further explained as the view that, because the human body is temporary and the spirit is eternal, the body of Jesus therefore must have been an illusion and his crucifixion as well. Even so, saying that the human body is temporary has a tendency to undercut the importance of the belief in resurrection of the dead and the goodness of created matter.

⁶ HOD, p.330

⁷ HOD, p.105

⁸ The time difference depends upon the date of 2nd Clement, see footnote 1, page 1.

⁹ HOD, p.205

¹⁰ HOD, p.144

The lost years

How did this happen? By what process? The answers to questions such as these can be difficult to find owing to the fact that this pivotal transitional period is shrouded in historical uncertainty.

“The greatest gap in our knowledge consists in the fact, that we know so little about the course of things from about the year 61 to the beginning of the reign of Trajan [98]. The consolidating and remodeling process must, for the most part, have taken place in this period. We possess probably not a few writings which belong to that period; but how are we to prove this? How are they to be arranged? Here lies the cause of most of the differences, combinations and uncertainties; many scholars, therefore, actually leave these 40 years out of account, and seek to place everything in the first three decennia of the second century.”¹¹

Nevertheless, in spite of this there are some clear milestones- matters which were undoubtedly of great consequence in bringing about the Christological developments which were already well under way by the time 2nd Clement 9.5 made its abrupt appearance.

1) *Plucked up by the roots- The Church’s break with the Synagogue*

To begin with it bears witness to a fundamentally different worldview from the Jewish one. A severance from the Jewish roots of the Christian faith is evidently already at an advanced stage.

“The Church doctrine of faith, in the preparatory stage, from the Apologists up to Origen, hardly in any point shows the traces, scarcely even the remembrance of a time in which the Gospel was not detached from Judaism. For that very reason it is absolutely impossible to understand this preparation and development solely from the writings that remain to us as monuments of that short earliest period.”¹²

But what could have motivated the church to abandon her precious Jewish heritage?

It would not be entirely fair at this very early period to charge the Gentile churches with anti-Semitism and lay the responsibility for the break with Judaism on their shoulders alone. It was not a question of them jumping so much as being pushed.

According to the historian Flavius Josephus¹³ (37-100 AD), in 62 AD a prominent leader of the Christian community in Jerusalem was killed, along with ‘several others’ by a group of Jews at the instigation of the High Priest Ananus. The act resulted in his being deposed by king Agrippa. Josephus tells us that this person was none other than James the ‘brother of Jesus’. This sent a message to the entire Christian community which resulted in a slowing down of evangelism among Jews while at the same time the gospel was spreading rapidly among the Gentiles in the regions beyond Judaea.

Divisions were further deepened by the destruction of the temple in AD 70, which did more than just remove a natural meeting place between Jews and Jewish Christians. Though the Jews were expelled, the Christians had not joined in the revolt and so were soon allowed to resettle.

The Jewish leadership had to find somewhere else to go. Talmudic tradition tells us that the emperor Vespasian had previously given permission to Johanaan ben Zakkai to establish a *Yeshiva* in a place called Jabneh to the West of the city of Jamnia. And so it was there that the Sanhedrin set up their new base of operations.

By 80 AD at the latest the *Yeshiva* formally instituted the ‘*birkat ha-minim*’. This was a curse on Christians contained in the 18 benedictions to be recited as part of the synagogue service.¹⁴ It made it impossible for Christians or even sympathetic Jews to participate in the life of the synagogue without being easily detected.

¹¹ HOD, p.144

¹² HOD, p.47

¹³ ‘Jewish Antiquities’, 20, 197-203.

¹⁴ It goes something like this: “May apostates have no hope and may the kingdom of impertinence be uprooted in our day. May the Nozrim and Minim (the Christians) disappear in the twinkling of an eye. May they be removed from the book of the living and not be inscribed among the just. Bless you, Lord, you who cast down the proud.” Charming.

This rift left an ideological vacuum:

“The separation from Judaism having taken place, it was necessary that the spirit of another people should be admitted.”¹⁵

That the church was now set adrift is not sufficient to account for the radical transformation that its beliefs underwent. They can only be explained in the light of another, foreign, influence.

“The attempts at deducing the genesis of the Church's doctrinal system from the theology of Paul, or from compromises between Apostolic doctrinal ideas, will always miscarry; for they fail to note that to the most important premises of the Catholic doctrine of faith belong an element which we cannot recognise as dominant in the New Testament. viz., the Hellenic spirit.”¹⁶

The Gentile world into which the gospel had gone out and enjoyed such success was dominated by Greek culture, philosophy and religion. This is what Harnack means by the ‘Hellenic spirit’.

2) *Another spirit- The origins of Greek influence*

To really appreciate how Greek thinking came to dominate the Roman empire and, as a consequence, the regions surrounding Israel, it is necessary to reach back to a time long before even Jesus.

Over 300 years previous, Alexander the Great (356-323 BC) had overthrown the Persian empire, conquering the lands around the Eastern Mediterranean as far as India. But his vision was to leave behind a legacy which would outdo even this extraordinary military achievements. It was his desire to set up an empire in the hearts and minds of men by instilling a respect and desire for Greek culture in the peoples that he conquered.

He established numerous cities, -calling all of them Alexandria (A candidate for ‘The Donald Trump of Antiquity’ award?)- schools and cultural centers for the promotion of all things Greek, most significantly its language, culture and religion. By the time he died, aged only 33, he had effectively seen to it that the world would never be the same again. It would aspire to and be profoundly shaped by Greek ideals, excepting the more stubborn Palestinian Jews of whom Jesus was typical.

3) *When the fullness of the time was come... The Graeco-Roman world was hungry for a new religion*

But that world, which the Roman empire eventually inherited, was a rapidly changing one. Harnack outlines "the wholly changed conditions of the time" in the period subsequent to Cicero and Augustus.¹⁷

This brought about a "revival of religious feeling which embraced all classes of society"¹⁸ and which the old religions were unable to satisfy. "The ideas of moral personality, conscience and purity" led to new emphases in which concepts of "repentance and of expiation and healing of the soul became of special importance."¹⁹

Moreover, people had learned to place value, not upon their whole selves but upon their 'soul' (The juxtaposition itself bears witness to the sharp distinction between the Greek, versus Hebraic understanding of the word). They were disillusioned and weary with the world and longed to be released from it into a state of other-worldly bliss in an supramundane paradise²⁰. They sought some religion or philosophy which would

¹⁵ HOD, p.47

¹⁶ HOD, p.47

¹⁷ "Corresponding to and including the intercourse and mixing of the nations; decay of the old republican orders, divisions and ranks; monarchy and absolutism and social crises; pauperism; influence of philosophy on the domain of public morality and law; cosmopolitanism and the rights of man; influx of Oriental cults into the West; knowledge of the world and disgust with it." (HOD p.117)

¹⁸ HOD, p.117

¹⁹ HOD, p.177

²⁰ "Common to them all, as distinguished from the early Stoics, is the value put upon the soul, (not the entire human nature), while in some of them there comes clearly to the front a religious mood, a longing for divine help, for redemption and a blessed life beyond the grave, the effort to obtain and communicate a religious and philosophical therapeutic of the soul." (HOD, p.122-123)

offer them, in this very qualified sense, redemption. From now on "no one could any longer be a God who was not also a saviour."²¹

But the salvation of the Greeks was a different matter entirely to the 'salvation of the Jews'²² so cherished by Jesus and his contemporaries. The latter did not seek escape from either their bodies or the world. They embraced God's material world as essentially good, though temporarily cursed. They looked forward to the 'age to come', a coming *palingenesia*, -regeneration or second-genesis- of the entire created order in which it would be returned to a pristine, edenic state and both suffering and evil would be forever banished.

The inability of the old pagan religions to satisfy the new requirements left the way open to anything that could. The result was that the Graeco-Roman world was eagerly searching for a religion to satisfy these emerging needs, *but* would only be ready to accept it based upon Greek presuppositions. The conditions were therefore ripe for Christianity to make her debut and be well received, though not necessarily on her own terms.

4) *Alexander would have been so proud - Egyptian Judaism*

A similar dynamic had already been operative for some time in a Southern region of the empire. There the enterprise of mixing the Jewish religion with Greek philosophy had already been undertaken and developed to a sophisticated level.

The Judaism of Judah had focused predominantly on the temple cult, while in the Northern regions around Galilee the sense of detachment from Jerusalem, coupled with the challenge to Jewish identity posed by living in close proximity to Gentiles, had resulted in a stringent adherence to the Mosaic *torah* and oral traditions. But another altogether different direction was taken in an Egyptian city named, appropriately enough, Alexandria. There, in the land which God had always forbidden his people to rely on, Alexandrian Judaism sought to appeal to the Greek Pagan world by showing that all that was best in it could be found in Judaism.

"Between the Graeco-Roman world which was in search of a spiritual religion, and the Jewish commonwealth which already possessed such a religion as national property, though vitiated by exclusiveness, there had long been a Judaism which, penetrated by the Greek spirit, was, ex professo, devoting itself to the task of bringing a new religion to the Greek world, the Jewish religion, but that religion in its kernel Greek, that is, philosophically molded, spiritualised and secularised...

This alliance, in my opinion, was of no significance at all for the origin of the gospel, but was of the most decided importance, first, for the propagation of Christianity, and then, for the development of Christianity to Catholicism, and for the genesis of the Catholic doctrine of faith²³ ... For that non-Palestinian Judaism formed the bridge between the Jewish Church and the Roman Empire, together with its culture. The gospel passed into the world chiefly by this bridge."²⁴

So it was among the adherents to this system that the message found a most ready audience: "the great mass of the earliest Gentile Christians became Christians because they perceived in the Gospel the sure tidings of the benefits and obligations which they had already sought in the fusion of Jewish and Greek elements."²⁵

But in the process of doing so they made it their own in a very particular sense. They took from it what they wanted and imprisoned its meaning within their existing categories of understanding.

"The Gospel was at first preached to those Gentiles who were already acquainted with the general outlines of the Jewish religion, and who were even frequently viewed as a Judaism of a second order, in which the Jewish and Greek elements had been united in a peculiar mixture... The conception of the OT as we find it in the earliest Gentile Christian teachers, the method of spiritualising it, etc., agrees in the most surprising way with the methods which were used by Alexandrian Jews."²⁶

²¹ HOD, p.118

²² John 4:22

²³ HOD, p.54

²⁴ HOD, p.56

²⁵ HOD, p.57

²⁶ HOD, p.54

For this audience to accept the Jewish, historical Jesus and his kingdom message would have meant their undergoing a significant paradigm shift. For them to grasp the meaning of some of the fundamental concepts at stake would unavoidably entail their having to let go of their old frame of reference and embrace a new one. That they did not do so was destined to have a crippling and far reaching effect upon their understanding of some vital issues.

The unfortunate corollary to this willingness to embrace a redefined Christianity was that its genuine form was increasingly lost. The issues it spoke to did not concern this new audience. Matters it valued as being of the utmost importance meant nothing to them. And vice versa. Authenticity was sacrificed on the altar of popularity.

“The Gentile Christians were little able to comprehend the controversies which stirred the Apostolic age within Jewish Christianity²⁷ ... But as soon as that speculation was detached from its original foundation, it necessarily withdrew the minds of believers from the consideration of the work of Christ, and from the contemplation of the revelation of God which was given in the ministry of the historical person of Jesus. The mystery of the person of Jesus in itself, would then necessarily appear as the true revelation.”²⁸

Was the church complicit in this process? Had she, in endeavouring to win the world around her, sold her soul and become one with it? Harnack’s take on this is pragmatic: “The religion which is life and feeling of the heart cannot be converted into a knowledge determining the motley multitude of men without deferring to their wishes and opinions.”²⁹

Either way, the impact of this Alexandrian syndrome was destined to be far reaching.

5) *Oil and Water* - The church chooses to adopt the methods of Alexandrian Judaism

The analogy of a bridge used above by Harnack is well chosen with regard to the transition between 1st Peter and 2nd Clement. In Alexandrian Judaism “Foreknowledge and predestination invest the known and determined with a kind of existence. Of great importance is the fact that even before Philo, the idea of the wisdom of God creating the world and passing over to men had been hypostatized [personified³⁰] in Alexandrian Judaism (see Sirach, Baruch, the wisdom of Solomon, Enoch, nay, even the book of Proverbs [Chapter 8]).”³¹ The new Gentile converts were aware of this but seem to have got a little bit overexcited. In the Alexandrian predilection for personification can be found a connecting link between ideal pre-existence and personal pre-existence. These developments, in turn, go on to inform the most fundamental Christological presuppositions. “The assumption of the existence of at least one heavenly and eternal spiritual being beside God was plainly demanded by the Old Testament writings, *as they were understood*; so that even those whose Christology did not require them to reflect on that heavenly being were forced to recognise it.”³²

The process of Hellenisation was also destined to be the determinative influence not only on the way the church understood her saviour but also upon the wider issue of how she interpreted her scriptures.

Though she had chosen to revere the Hebrew Bible as her sacred text, its potential to act as a safeguard against further innovations was severely compromised by a commitment to “refute the Jewish interpretation of it.”³³ In other words, choosing to read it through the eyes of the Alexandrian, as opposed to Palestinian hermeneutic. Above all else, this meant adopting the allegorical method.

“A historical view of [the Hebrew Bible], which no born Jew could in some measure fail to take, did not come into fashion, and the freedom that was used in interpreting the Old Testament, -so far as there was a

²⁷ HOD, p.51

²⁸ HOD, p.105

²⁹ HOD, p.46

³⁰ **Personification**, or *anthropomorphism* is a figure of speech that gives non-humans and objects human traits and qualities. These attributes may include sensations, emotions, desires, physical gestures, expressions, and powers of speech, among others. Personification is widely used in poetry and in other art forms.

³¹ HOD, p.109

³² HOD, p.197

³³ HOD, p.224

method, it was the Alexandrian Jewish- went to the length of even correcting the letter and enriching the contents."³⁴

"In consequence of this view, all facts and sayings of the Old Testament in which one could not find his way were allegorised. Nothing was what it seemed, but was only the symbol of something invisible."³⁵

This approach would eventually allow the 'fathers', whilst all the while resisting those who would seek to undermine the value of the Old Testament to be able, at the same time, to conform its meaning to their presuppositions. In other words this permitted them to decide beforehand what the law and prophets should say and then, with a little ingenuity, make them say it, thus securing their support.

"What a wealth of relations, hints and intuitions seemed to disclose itself, as soon as the Old Testament was considered allegorically, and to what extent had the way been prepared by the Jewish philosophic teachers!"³⁶

We could say that on occasion some of the apostles may have done the same. This plea was commonly made in defense of this system. But the difference, and it is an important one which Harnack has already underlined above, is this- they did so in a way that made sense within the scope of existing Jewish frames of reference. In contrast, the proponents of the emerging orthodoxy, seeking to free Christianity from these confines, found the means to overthrow them, allowing "all that was transmitted to remain, and at the same time abolishing it by transforming it into mysterious symbols."³⁷

In effect this subjugated the body of revelation to a tool of the art of the religious philosopher, enabling them to invoke its authority whilst remaining for not a single moment accountable to it.

6) A bad climate

Change was further facilitated by a more general climate in Gentile congregations which opened the door to lots of new and revolutionary revelations.

Widespread 'enthusiasm' was left unchecked and taken way too far. With regard to this Harnack notes that "A special peculiarity of the enthusiastic nature of the religious temper is that it does not allow reflection as to the authenticity of the faith in which a man lives."³⁸

The lack of objective reflection on Christian doctrine during this time resulted in, among other things, various Gnostic³⁹ frauds gaining an influential foothold in many congregations. "To understand how such people were able to obtain a following so quickly in the Churches, we must remember the respect in which the 'prophets' were held (Didache XI.). If one had once given the impression that he had the Spirit, he could win belief for the strangest things, and could allow himself all things possible."⁴⁰

All this was far more exciting than getting bogged down with some dry old texts. "The existing authorities (Old Testament, sayings of the Lord, words of Apostles) did not necessarily require to be taken into account; for the living acting Spirit, partly attesting himself also to the senses, gave **new revelations**."⁴¹

With so much fun to be had, reason was painfully out of style. The purpose for the gathering together of believers began, in many cases, to be regarded as a mystical ritual, imparting a spiritual 'blessing' in which the understanding need play no part. The order of the day was "a communion which does not communicate

³⁴ HOD, p.156

³⁵ HOD, p.224

³⁶ HOD, p.225

³⁷ HOD, p.226

³⁸ HOD, p.141

³⁹ **Gnostic**, from the Greek *gnosis* "knowledge", *gnostikos*, "good at knowing".

A collective name for a large number of greatly-varying and pantheistic-idealistic sects, which flourished from some time before the Christian Era down to the fifth century, and which, while borrowing the phraseology and some of the tenets of the chief religions of the day, and especially of Christianity, held matter to be a deterioration of spirit, and the whole universe a deprivation of the Deity, and taught the ultimate end of all being to be the overcoming of the grossness of matter and the return to the Parent-Spirit, which return they held to be inaugurated and facilitated by the appearance of some God-sent Saviour.

⁴⁰ HOD, p.240

⁴¹ HOD, p.142

the knowledge by discourse, but by mysterious efficacious consecrations and by revealed dogmas."⁴² In the light of subsequent developments it is possible to see here the foundations of the rise to supreme power in the church of those who administered these rites, beginning with the Lord's supper. The origins of the monarchical episcopate.

Pagan practices began to replace those of the Primitive church. "In the earliest Gentile communities brotherly love for reflective thought falls into the background behind ascetic exercises of virtue, in unquestionable deviation from the sayings of Christ, but in fact it was powerful."⁴³

This helped to create the conditions in which the church, in a surprisingly short space of time, mutated Christianity into a substantially different faith. It was also these factors, combined with the allegorical interpretation which the Church had adopted to the Old Testament being applied to the writings of the Apostles, that gave the initial impetus to Gnosticism and facilitated its growth and development.

"We meet with a religious mode of thought in the Gospel and the early Christian writings, which so far as it is at all dependent on an earlier mode of thought, is determined by the spirit of the Old Testament and of Judaism. **But it is already otherwise in the earliest Gentile Christian writings.**

The mode of thought here is so thoroughly determined by the Hellenic spirit that we seem to have entered a new world when we pass from the synoptists, Paul and John to Clement, Barnabas, Justin or Valentinus."⁴⁴

7) *Losing the plot- The Church begins to forget the gospel and the Biblical Jesus*

"The cause of the great historical fact is clear. It is given in the fact that the Gospel, rejected by the majority of the Jews, was very soon proclaimed to those who were not Jews, that after a few decades the greater number of its professors were found among the Greeks, and that, consequently, the development leading to the Catholic dogma took place within Graeco-Roman culture.

But within this culture there was lacking the power of understanding either the idea of the completed OT theocracy, or the idea of the Messiah. Both of these essential elements of the original proclamation, therefore, must either be neglected or remodeled."⁴⁵

Among this new breed of believers "the idea of the Theocracy as well as the Messianic hopes of the future faded away or were uprooted."⁴⁶ The devastating effect of this can hardly be overstated. The 'Theocracy' here mentioned is nothing less than the kingdom of God- the very substance of Jesus' gospel. The

⁴² HOD, p.227

⁴³ HOD, p.147

⁴⁴ This is how the quote appears in context: "There is indeed no single writing of the New Testament which does not betray the influence of the mode of thought and general conditions of the culture of the time which resulted from the Hellenising of the east: even the use of the Greek translation of the Old Testament attests this fact. Nay, we may go further and say that the Gospel itself is historically unintelligible, so long as we compare it with an exclusive Judaism as yet unaffected by any foreign influence. But on the other hand, it is just as clear that, specifically, Hellenic ideas form the presuppositions neither for the Gospel itself, nor for the most important New Testament writings. It is a question rather as to a general spiritual atmosphere created by Hellenism, which above all strengthened the individual element, and with it the idea of a completed personality, in itself living and responsible. On this foundation we meet with a religious mode of thought in the Gospel and the early Christian writings, which so far as it is at all dependent on an earlier mode of thought, is determined by the spirit of the Old Testament and of Judaism. But it is already otherwise in the earliest Gentile Christian writings.

The mode of thought here is so thoroughly determined by the Hellenic spirit that we seem to have entered a new world when we pass from the synoptists, Paul and John to Clement, Barnabas [the epistle, not gospel, that is], Justin or Valentinus.

We may therefore say, especially in the framework of the history of dogma, that the Hellenic element has exercised an influence on the Gospel, first on Gentile Christian soil, and by those who were Greek by birth, if only we reserve the general spiritual atmosphere above referred to. (HOD, p.48)

⁴⁵ It may even be said here that the *athanasia* [immortality] (*zoe aionios*), on the one hand, and the *ekklisia* [church], on the other, have already appeared in place of the *basileia tou theou*, [Kingdom of God] and that the idea of Messiah has been finally replaced by that of the Divine Teacher and of God manifest in flesh. (HOD 1 p.50)

In plain English, the big losers in this process were the historical Jesus and his message.

⁴⁶ HOD, p.107

community commissioned to preach the gospel was becoming increasingly ignorant of it. Yet that was not all. The loss of understanding concerning the future kingdom was inevitably coupled with a loss of the sense in which Jesus is the kingly Messiah. "As the Gentile Christians did not understand the significance of the idea that Jesus is the Christ (Messiah), the designation "*christos*" [Christ/Messiah] had either to be given up in their communities or subside into a mere name."⁴⁷ So where the term remained at all, it was reduced to an empty shell, devoid of its original meaning.

Other titles which the apostles, on the basis of Old Testament witness, attached great significance to disappeared entirely- "It is very interesting to observe how [the title 'servant of God'] was gradually put into the background and finally abolished."⁴⁸

The church did not value the Jesus who had introduced himself to us in the gospels and set about developing a portrait of him that was more in keeping with the taste of the age- "The Adoptian⁴⁹ Christology, that is the Christology which is most in keeping with the self-witness of Jesus (the Son as the chosen Servant of God), is here shown to be unable to assure to the Gentile Christians those conceptions of Christianity which they regarded as of the highest value."⁵⁰

The relation to Gnosticism

Another Jesus was called forth. And so, as Gnosticism began to emerge, a great show was made of publicly refuting it in some areas, but it was not rejected entirely. The back door was left open. "The Catholic Church has learned but little from the Gnostics, that is, from the earliest theologians in Christendom, in the doctrine of God and the world, **but very much in Christology**; and who can maintain that she has ever completely overcome the Gnostic doctrine of the two natures⁵¹, nay, even Docetism? ... We might say without hesitation that to most Gnostics Christ was [in the exact language adopted later by the orthodox church] a *pneuma, homoousion*⁵² *to patri* [of the same substance as the Father.]"⁵³

"It is therefore no paradox to say that Gnosticism, which is just Hellenism, has in Catholicism obtained half a victory⁵⁴ ... For the Greek spirit, the element which was most operative in Gnosticism, was already concealed in the earliest Gentile Christianity itself."⁵⁵ With the result that "in the communities of the second century there was frequently no offence taken at Gnostic docetism."⁵⁶

⁴⁷ HOD, p.184

⁴⁸ HOD, p.185

⁴⁹ **Adoptionism** or **adoptianism** is an attempt to explain how Jesus is related to God (that is, it was one option that arose in the Trinitarian controversies of the early church.) Adoptionism arose among early Christians seeking to reconcile the claims that Jesus was the Son of God with the radical monotheism of Judaism. Adoptionism states that Jesus was born fully human, and he became the Son of God at a later point in his life (usually held to be at his baptism), at which point God 'adopted' him. Adoptionism was condemned by the church as heresy at various times, most explicitly at the Council of Nicaea.

⁵⁰ HOD, p.199

⁵¹ The doctrine of the **Dual-Nature** of Jesus, also known as the Hypostatic Union (from the Greek: "*hypostasis*," meaning essence) is a technical term in orthodox Christian theology, used in reference to Christology to define its view of how the human and divine are united in the person of Christ. The term "hypostatic union" became official at the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451), which stated in its Creed that God is one *ousia* yet three *hypostates*- yet within the *hypostasis* of Jesus there were united a further two natures- divine and human.

⁵² **Homoousian** (from the Greek *homo* meaning common or same and *ousia* meaning essence or being) means "same substance". It is a technical theological term used in the orthodox Christian understanding of God as Trinity. The Nicene Creed describes Jesus as being *homoousian* with the Father - that is, they are of the same substance and are equally God. The term is not found in the Bible.

The *homoousian* doctrine (or as it is called in modern terms consubstantiality), eventually prevailed in the struggle to define Catholic Church dogma for the next two millennia when its use was confirmed by the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

⁵³ HOD, p.261

⁵⁴ HOD, p.228

⁵⁵ HOD, p.218

⁵⁶ HOD, p.195

So what was the difference between the Catholic end-product of this emergent orthodoxy and Gnosticism? Simply this: "The great distinction here consists essentially in the fact that the Gnostic systems represent the acute secularising or hellenising of Christianity, with the rejection of the Old Testament; while the Catholic system, on the other hand, represents a gradual process of the same kind with the conservation of the Old Testament"⁵⁷ and the identity of the creator of the world with the supreme God⁵⁸.

You ain't seen nothing yet

Yet in spite of all this, Jesus' status of actually *being* God Almighty was still far from a foregone conclusion. Of all propositions to gain eventual acceptance this was surely the most radical of all.⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, the earliest traces of a movement in this direction are found in connection with language which describes Jesus in his exercise of divine prerogatives, and thinking of him "*hos peri theou*"-as of God⁶⁰. This "indirect theologia Christi" or use of oblique 'God language' concerning Jesus is "unanimously expressed in all witnesses of the earliest epoch."⁶¹

It is of paramount importance to note that, in spite of this "the formula says nothing about the nature or constitution of Jesus."⁶² Also that "Christ never was, as "*theos*", placed on an equality with the Father - monotheism guarded against that."⁶³ It would not do so for very much longer.

There is a world of difference between recognising that a person can function 'as', in the sense of 'on behalf of' or 'on the authority of' another, and their actually being that person. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, Joseph is elevated to a position in which he is described as being '*as* Pharaoh'⁶⁴ with regard to Egypt. Moses is even made 'a god' to Pharaoh⁶⁵. What Harnack is saying is that in none of the sources from this time does the church seem to have stepped beyond these bounds in their depictions of Jesus.

Further doubt is cast on any ontological connotations even in the use of the word '*theos*' -God- (it is notable that '*ho theos*' -the God- was not used of him), of Jesus by the fact that "not only are there some passages in Justin to be urged against this, but also the testimony of other writers."⁶⁶ So to do this would appear to constitute a reading back of later ideas into the writings not only of the Apostles, but also the first 'fathers' as well.

"The common confession did not go beyond the statements that Jesus is the Lord, the Saviour, the Son of God, that one must think of him as of God, that dwelling now with God in heaven, he is to be adored as guardian and helper of the weak and as High Priest of our oblations, to be feared as future Judge, to be esteemed most highly as the bestower of immortality, that he is our hope and our faith."⁶⁷ Nothing controversial in any of this.

⁵⁷ HOD, p.227-228

⁵⁸ "The Jewish, that is, OT element, divested of its national peculiarity, has remained the basis of Christendom. It has saturated this element with the Greek spirit, but has always clung to its main idea, faith in God as the creator and ruler of the world." (HOD, p.52)

⁵⁹ Radical, given the fact that Christianity began as a Jewish faith (See previous footnote). For according to their scriptures "God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent." (Numbers 23:19) For Pagans, this was not so much of an issue, for "among the cultured and the uncultured... They still regarded the gods as passionless men living forever. The idea therefore of a *theopoiesis* [divinisation of humans], and on the other hand, the idea of the appearance of the Gods in human form presented no difficulty (See Acts XIV. 11:XXVIII. 6)." (HOD, p.119)

⁶⁰ HOD, p.186

⁶¹ HOD, p.187

⁶² HOD, p.187

⁶³ HOD, p.190

⁶⁴ "Then Judah came near to him, and said, '... let not your anger burn against your servant: for you are even *as* Pharaoh.'" (Genesis 44:18)

⁶⁵ "And Yahweh said to Moses, 'See, **I have made you a god to Pharaoh:** and Aaron your brother will be your prophet.'" (Exodus 7:1)

⁶⁶ HOD, p.187

⁶⁷ HOD, p.190

Furthermore, faith varied, at this time, not only from congregation to congregation, but also from individual to individual within groups. Upon inspection the church of the period is shown to embody a spectrum of opinion stretched between two poles. On one, the 'adoptian Christology' of Hermas (Closer to 1st Peter and, according to Harnack above, the self-witness of Jesus), and at the other, the Alexandrian style 'pneumatic Christology' typified by 2nd Clement.

“Characteristic of the one is the development through which Jesus is first to become a Godlike Ruler, and connected therewith, the value put on the miraculous event at the baptism; of the other a naive docetism.”⁶⁸ It may even be that other opinions existed for which no records survive to this day.⁶⁹

Uncertainty

Neither was it in any way clear at this stage which would eventually gain the most widespread acceptance. “It might, perhaps, still have seemed doubtful about the middle of the second century as to which of the two opposing formulae, "Jesus is a man exalted to a Godlike dignity" and "Jesus is a divine spiritual being incarnate", would succeed in the Church.”⁷⁰

Even those writings at the pneumatic extreme of the spectrum were, in comparison with their later developments, extremely unsophisticated...

“But even to [Ignatius] we cannot ascribe any doctrine of the two natures: for this requires as its presupposition, the perception that the divinity and the humanity are equally essential and important for the personality of the Redeemer Christ. Such insight, however, presupposes a measure and a direction of reflection which the earliest period did not possess⁷¹ ... For no one as yet had thought of affirming two natures in Jesus: the Divine dignity appeared rather, either as a gift, or the human nature (*sarx*) as a veil assumed for a time, or as the metamorphosis of the Spirit.”⁷²

No wonder the pneumatic Christology of this period was destined to have so much difficulty distinguishing itself from the Gnostic version.

Further ambivalence is shown with regard to the spirit of God: “The conceptions about the Holy Spirit were still quite fluctuating: whether he is a power of God, or personal; whether he is identical with the pre-existent Christ, or is to be distinguished from him; whether he is the servant of Christ (Tatian Orat. 13); whether he is only a gift of God to believers, or the eternal Son of God, was quite uncertain.”⁷³

All this is evidence of a developing and tentative movement away from an original view and towards what would later be considered orthodoxy. It vindicates Harnack's thesis against the prevailing majority church's myth of origins according to which it consistently held fast to the witness that 'Jesus is God' and developed its dogma in the form of apologetics against the onslaught of 'heresy' from the outside.

In fact during this speculative, relatively early period many Christological differences were not felt to be a matter of very great significance. A degree of tolerance that would be completely alien to a later age was still in evidence here and there. Despite being among the foremost proponents of the personally pre-existent Jesus, “Yet Justin [Martyr] did not make this a controversial point of great moment.”⁷⁴

⁶⁸ HOD, p.194-195

⁶⁹ **Whatever happened to Timothy?**

It is interesting to note that all the Gentile Christian assemblies whose writings remain trace their origins back to the twelve, not Paul (HOD, p.162-163). So what happened to those vibrant Pauline communities? What happened to men like Timothy and Titus who were left with the oversight of them?

Did they simply disappear from the face of the earth between 61 and 100 AD?

There is a hole in the historical record, the exact shape of the Gentile Pauline communities. If they did not vanish and their voice is no longer heard, then we would have to conclude that the documents that remain to us today only tell half the story.

⁷⁰ HOD, p.199

⁷¹ HOD, p.195

⁷² HOD, p.195

⁷³ HOD, p.197-198

⁷⁴ HOD, p.298

Justin Martyr did not make belief in the pre-existence or divinity of Jesus a necessary prerequisite to faith in him as the Christ. He described those who deny the personal pre-existence of Jesus as ‘my friends’.

It was only as a result of the Gnostic controversy that opinions hardened and the polemics became heated. Who of the first 'fathers', often victims of persecution at the hands of Pagan authorities, could have imagined that, with the subsequent alliance of their doctrinal heirs with the power of the state, their legacy would result in the torture and murder of dissenters?

These men don't seem to have deliberately set out to alter the faith. Many times they suffered for what they believed. But this doesn't mean that what they presented was the authentic faith of Jesus and his Apostles. Harnack's historical reconstruction accounts for how the powerful social and ideological forces, the very spirit they breathed, led so many of them to embrace a misunderstanding with such sincerity.

Conclusion

Jeremiah's question at the opening of this paper implies that the hardest thing for a people to change are their religious beliefs. To truly follow in the footsteps of Abraham entails being called out from all that is cherished and familiar, even our worldview and most deeply seated convictions.⁷⁵ Both first century Judaism and the early Gentile church appear to have been either unable or unwilling to do so. The full price of their tragic choice would be paid over the ensuing centuries.

This may even be the reason why the Protestant reformers themselves were pleased to go back only as far as Nicaea. But a complete reformation requires nothing less than a return back, past even the earliest church 'fathers' all the way to the New Testament.

“Now assuredly, Trypho,’ I continued, ‘**[the proof] that this man is the Christ of God does not fail, though I be unable to prove that He existed formerly as Son of the Maker of all things, being God,** and was born a man by the Virgin. But since I have certainly proved that this man is the Christ of God, whoever He be, even if I do not prove that He pre-existed, and submitted to be born a man of like passions with us, having a body, according to the Father's will; in this last matter alone is it just to say that I have erred, and not to deny that He is the Christ, though it should appear that He was born man of men, and [nothing more] is proved [than this], that He has become Christ by election. For there are some, **my friends,**’ I said, ‘**of our race, who admit that He is Christ, while holding Him to be man of men;** with whom I do not agree, nor would I, even though most of those who have [now] the same opinions as myself should say so.’”

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⁷⁵ Genesis 12:1, Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16