

Corinthian Gnosis?

by
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The Religio-Historical School, founded by Old and New Testament Scholars in Göttingen in Germany about the turn of this century and further developed and promoted until at least the middle of the century by the influential Rudolf Bultmann, to mention only the *instar omnium*, believed that gnosis or gnosticism was of pre-Christian origin. Various kinds of origin were proposed, such as Iranian, Babylonian, Egyptian, or even Greek, while only a few advocated a Jewish source. The religio-historical view, not to be confused with the liberal theology and its psychological approach as represented by the great Adolf Harnack in Berlin at the same time, made it possible to presuppose that Hellenistic Christianity had been influenced by gnosticism and was, at any rate partly, an exponent of gnostic thought. The Dead Sea scrolls, discovered only shortly after the Nag Hammadi texts had been found, seemed to substantiate the correctness not only of the view that gnosticism was a pre-Christian phenomenon, but also that gnosticism had penetrated into the oldest strata of the New Testament writings themselves: the dualism between light and darkness, between good and evil, between life and death, which is so characteristic of both the Qumran texts and the Johannine literature, was understood to affirm that this was really so: even the Qumran movement, which clearly antedated Christianity, was – at least according to some scholars – basically gnostic. Why, then, should not also Christianity itself, even Palestinian Christianity, be a movement deeply influenced by gnosticism?

The two complexes of discovery, on the one hand that of the Dead Sea texts and on the other that of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, both made within the same epoch, would in this way seem to supplement each other. Both before and after the beginning of Christianity gnosticism existed and its influence upon the new religion was overwhelming.

Today we all know that this is a simplistic way of thinking. Not only was it premature to define the Dead Sea texts as gnostic – something more than dualism and contrast between light and darkness, good and evil, life and death is required before one should be allowed to speak of gnosticism. But also the relatively late dating of the Nag Hammadi documents – they were all copied about the middle of the fourth century A.D. – should be a warning against a too early dating of the origin of gnosticism itself, even if many of these manuscripts are (secondary) translations of older Greek works known to have been composed and produced in the second century A.D. There is a wide gap of time between the copying of even the latest of the Dead Sea texts at Qumran and the corresponding copying of the Coptic documents at Nag Hammadi – actually, a gap of almost 400 years, that is, the same span of time as from Shakespeare to ourselves. And we all know how fast things move.

Added to this there is a more serious double-edged objection to the assumption of an early origin of gnosticism. First, the religio-historical school in Germany, notwithstanding all its valuable insights, has not been able to uphold it-

self, but has been forced to acknowledge its own weaknesses. The book by Carsten Colpe: *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule. Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (FRLANT 78), Göttingen 1961, signifies no less than a fatal blow to the most impressive effort of this school, and especially that of Reitzenstein and Bultmann: the attempt to prove that behind the figure of the heavenly saviour and redeemer was a complex of gnostic ideas of pre-Christian origin. Indeed, it is tempting to say that the year in which Colpe's book appeared was also the year in which the tide in New Testament scholarship turned from German to American predominance. As to the significance of this alternative approach it is perhaps even more adequate to point to Ernst Käsemann, one of Bultmann's own disciples. Almost at the same time as Colpe published his book, Käsemann, in his article *Die Anfänge christlicher Theologie* (*Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 57, 1960, pp. 162-185 = *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen*, II, Göttingen 1964, pp. 82-104), went violently against his teacher claiming a totally different origin of Christian theology from gnosticism, namely Jewish apocalypticism with its vertical 'heaven – earth' division. Even though this may only have been known to insiders, Käsemann's claim was meant as a severe attack against Bultmann and his entire theological thinking: to maintain that apocalypticism was the 'mother' of Christian theology, in short, that it formed the origin of Christianity, was the same as to say that Bultmann's demythologizing with its undoing of the division between heaven and earth would have to be revised in favour of a re-evaluation of apocalyptic thinking. It was also the same as saying that there was an insurpassable gulf between apocalypticism and gnosticism, or, in other words: that the question of defining what was meant by 'apocalyptic' and by 'gnosis' was asked once again.

The showdown within German New Testa-

ment scholarship about 1960 was suicidal to its own immediate future. The religio-historical school was put to an end by Colpe, and Bultmann's programme of demythologizing was exposed by Käsemann, the most competent of his pupils, as being inadequate to the texts. Non-German scholars were ready to take over. And indeed, very soon the French religio-historian Simone Pétrement, acutely aware of what happened in German scholarship, put forward her thesis that gnosticism had its origin – not in pre-Christian times but, quite to the contrary, in Christianity itself. This is evident from her book *Le Dieu séparé. Les origines du gnosticisme*, Paris 1984 (= *A Separate God: The Christian Origins of Gnosticism*, London 1991). Without Christianity, no gnosticism. This meant that what seemed in the New Testament writings to be gnosticism was in reality only quasi- or pre-gnosticism which did not deserve the name of gnosticism at all.

Secondly, about or after the year in which Simone Pétrement's book was published, new attempts were made at understanding what apocalypticism really meant. It had become increasingly clear that apocalyptic and eschatological thinking were not just two aspects of one and the same thing (also Posidonius had an eschatology, namely a doctrine of the fate of the soul after death), and that apocalypticism deserved more attention than hitherto paid to it. I shall mention three names in this connection. First, in 1979, John J. Collins edited an epoch-making morphological analysis in the American journal *Semeia* 14: *Apocalypse: Morphology of a Genre*, in which he attempted to define what the literary genre called 'apocalypse' signified; cf. his book *The Apocalyptic Imagination* (New York 1984). Next, in England Christopher Rowland published his book *The Open Heaven: a Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London 1982), which, as already the title suggests, shows that apocalyptic thinking is characterized by its world view: that the world

consists of two physically separated parts, heaven and earth, and that only from time to time passage is possible from one sphere to the other, either in that heaven is being opened up and God making himself heard, or else that the elected seer travels through heaven, where he is informed about what he observes; after returning to earth, he tells his fellow-beings about his experiences and also how these heavenly experiences can explain earthly phenomena. And thirdly, in 1994, the young Danish theologian Henrik Tronier published an article about the apocalyptic *angelus interpretis* and the *logos* (in: *Fra dybet. Festskrift til John Strange i anledning af 60 års fødselsdagen den 20. juli 1994*, Forum for Bibelsk Eksegese 5, Copenhagen 1994, pp. 253-273). This was followed up in his book, also in Danish, on *Transcendence and Transformation in First Corinthians* (Tekst & Tolkning 10, Copenhagen 1994). In these works Henrik Tronier shows that apocalypticism, with its division between heaven and earth, is directly dependent upon Greek philosophical thinking, especially as represented in the so-called Middle Platonism. Without Greek philosophy, no apocalypticism. It differs mainly from it in that apocalyptic divides physically from each other what in Greek philosophy is only conceptually separated into ideas and phenomena; contrasting Philo of Alexandria with Paul of Tarsus, Tronier shows that, while Philo keeps to the philosophical understanding, Paul's understanding of the world is typically apocalyptic.

The views of the German religio-historical school are today outmoded and have been so since about the year 1960. Since then we have learnt (1) that apocalyptic and gnosis, however related they may be, are two different things not to be confused, (2) that apocalyptic comes first and gnosis only second, (3) that apocalyptic thinking presupposes the influence from Greek philosophy, and (4) that gnosticism has Christianity as its precondition. There are, in

other words, two sequences to be taken into account: (a) Greek philosophy followed by apocalypticism, and (b) Christianity followed by gnosticism.

It remains to be considered whether gnosis could be spoken of in Paul's Corinthian church after all, and in what way Paul's apocalyptic may be related to the gnosticism of the second century.

Corinthian Gnosis?

Since 1977 I have been increasingly convinced that what was going on in Paul's Corinthian church, when about 54 A.D. he wrote 1 and 2 Cor., was a struggle between, on the one side, Greek philosophy of an Alexandrian-Jewish origin represented by Apollos from Alexandria (cf. Acts 18,24-28) and, on the other, Paul's own Christian theology which was, as might be expected, of the apocalyptic type. Although the Corinthian church had been founded by Paul, not by Apollos, the latter had worked also there, but only after Paul had departed; he did not represent him, and Paul and Apollos in fact never met in Corinth; cf. 1 Cor 3,6: »I planted, Apollos watered« – words suggesting a chronological sequence of the two men's Corinthian activities.

I shall not go into details. What matters is the resulting clash between two views diametrically opposing each other. Not only does Apollos seem to have had no eschatology, except in so far as he probably thought that the *nous*, the superior part of the soul, was immortal and not subject to physical death, nor was his thinking in any way apocalyptic. Quite to the contrary, he considered himself and his followers kings, because true philosophers are like independent and infallible kings – a wellknown philosophical *topos*. And this élitist view was accompanied by a very distinctive anthropology dividing humanity into three different categories: the pneuma-possessing, or pneumatic, to

which category the Apollos wing reckoned itself, the psychic and the sarcic. This anthropological distinction between *pneuma*, *psyche* and *sarx* is extremely important and very characteristic of Apollos and his philosophy. It implied claims of super- and subordination to such a degree that Apollos seems to have enjoyed a sufficient independence from Paul to have been able to decline Paul's appeal to him that he visit Corinth (1 Cor 16,12). Paul's authority was apparently not acknowledged by Apollos at all. The knowledge and wisdom which Apollos and his collaborators possessed, and which made them perfect, *teleioi*, in their own and their followers' eyes, were qualities only possessed by charismatic and pneumatic leaders who accordingly boasted of their superiority, totally forgetting what both Philo of Alexandria and Paul himself could tell them: that what they possessed they had received (that is, from God), but if they had received it, why boast as if they had not received it? Wisdom and knowledge are things given by God through sheer grace – in this respect Philo and Paul agree against Apollos who, being from Alexandria, ought to have known better.

The immense following which the philosophy of Apollos seems to have enjoyed in Corinth forced Paul to stay away and communicate with his congregation only by way of letters. This was certainly a weak position. But the more fortunate for us who are in the lucky position of being able to follow both Apollos' as well as Paul's own thinking.

Paul's handling of the delicate situation was not simply to oppose Apollos. He seeks to find common denominators between Apollos and himself in order not to push the followers of Apollos away from him. To these common denominators belongs first and foremost the conviction that *logos* – or *pneuma* or *nous* – is the source of all wisdom and knowledge. It is because *logos* is the source of all wisdom and knowledge that the constitution of the world,

or universe, is as it is and can be comprehended as such. In this respect there is not the slightest difference between Apollos and Paul. They would both agree to such a statement. Both refer basically to the same frame of understanding when they, behind the chaotic phenomena of this world, presuppose that all things, whether visible or not, are to be traced back to one and the same *logos* as their ultimate cause and originator.

Where they differ from each other is precisely in respect of the philosophical tradition. Apollos would follow the main stream of Middle Platonism in his conviction that the universe is one and undivided, that the distinction between phenomena and ideas is only conceptual, and that a person with perfect insight into the constitution of this world, therefore, is also ruler of the world. To Paul, there are two physically separated worlds: heaven and earth, as the apocalyptic tradition has taught him, and a human being could never become a ruler, since flesh and blood of this world cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven which does not consist in (human) words but in power (of God). That Apollos and his followers considered themselves kings was, according to Paul, simply an illusion.

Both Apollos with his Jewish-Alexandrian tradition and Paul were intensely active in respect of Scriptural investigation. The Mosaic laws were common ground in the Greek translation of the Septuagint. The interpretation was allegorical, that is, it aimed at revealing the hidden meaning of the Scriptures, only comprehended by and through the spirit, *pneuma*. Both Apollos and Paul would agree to belong to hermeneutical communities whose main endeavour was the enormous task of studying the inspired writings of God himself. But according to Apollos only the initiated, *pneuma*- or *nous*-possessing individuals were able to see the deeper meaning of the Scriptures, to the exclusion of all others, both the psychic and – not

less – the sarcic persons. According to Paul, however, every Christian who had been baptized was in possession of the spirit, and if in this way perhaps not everybody was able to interpret the words of the Bible, they were at least all able to perform various valuable services of which the church was in great need. One and the same spirit was given in various ways and in various degrees to all who believed in Christ in order to serve the needs of the church. To some the spirit was given as the ability to interpret the Scriptures, but then again, the interpretation itself revealed that the governing principle of interpretation was – the spirit (2 Cor 3,17). But it was a mistake to assume, as Apollos did, that only some of the believers were in possession of the spirit. Those who, like Apollos and his followers, were mistaken in this way, were themselves not even pneumatics, but only sarcic and therefore belonged to this material world that would some day perish.

Arrived at this point in my paper, I shall ask whether it would be justified to speak of gnosis

or gnosticism in Corinth. I myself shall answer this question in the affirmative. But I hope not to be misunderstood. I do not think that Apollos and his Alexandrian philosophy had much to do with gnosticism. The occurrence of the term 'gnosis', which certainly was characteristic of his language, is not indicative of the occurrence of gnosis. Rather, what is of interest is the hidden possibility that Paul's own apocalyptic thinking with its physical separation of heaven and earth would eventually turn into gnosticism and separate this material world from God who, being separated from it, could no longer be called its creator. For this is exactly what characterizes gnosticism: that God is not the creator of this world which is instead subjugated to its own evil prince from whose dominion the spirit of the elected is to be set free. When Paul writes about 'the god of this world' and about 'a new creation' (2 Cor 4,4; 5,17) his apocalypticism has indeed come very close to gnosticism, and a straight line can be drawn from Paul to Marcion, whom I consider a genuine gnostic.

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