

The following is an excerpt from Gerd Lüdemann. *The Acts of the Apostles: What Really Happened in the Earliest Days of the Church*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2005, pp. 365–384.

A Brief Narrative of Primitive Christianity from 30 to 70 CE

by Gerd Lüdemann

In retrospect: Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God and the circumstances of his death

Under the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate¹ Jesus was crucified on a Friday in the spring of about 30 CE. At or just after his arrest, the male disciples who had traveled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem—apparently to share a never-to-be-forgotten Passover—abandoned him and fled in fear back to their native Galilee. Several women who were part of that same entourage were more tenacious. They remained as near as possible, though of course they could not prevent his fate. Among them, we may be sure, was a woman named Mary from the Galilean fishing village of Magdala.

The reason of the Roman authorities for executing Jesus is clear. Here was one of many troublemakers—and one with apparent royal pretensions—who must be permanently put out of action. Besides, members of the Jerusalem priesthood appear to have lodged false political charges against him as a result of perceived eschatological and messianic aspirations that may have included a claim to be the long-awaited Son of Man and certainly involved his teaching or even proclamation of something he called the kingdom of God.

Although Jesus and his disciples rejected the radical theocratic program of Judas the Galilean,² their advocacy of a form of ethical radicalism was influenced by Judas' message of an in-breaking of God's kingdom leading to God's exclusive rule. To be sure, Jesus never proposes an explicit choice between God and the emperor; but then, he rarely makes political statements. Any teaching that might impinge on political realities was expressed in terms of symbolic action. We need think only of his assignment of twelve fishermen to rule over Israel, the contrast between the report of his humble approach to Jerusalem and the typical entry of the Roman governor surrounded by the pomp and panoply of power, or his use of the image on a coin to comment the fiscal rights of the empire. However subtle the political import of

¹ Let me hasten to add that Jesus was not tried before Pilate; the simple and obvious reason is that the verdict is lacking. In the chaotic situation of an approaching Passah, when thousands of Jews were flocking to Jerusalem, the Roman authorities among others grabbed Jesus and crucified him in order to deter others from rebelling. At that time Pilate was prefect in Judea and present in Jerusalem.

² Acts 5:37.

these token performances, the clear subtext of the proclamation of God's kingdom is the presentation of a stark ultimatum: God or the emperor. If God indeed rules, any apportionment of authority must be at best provisional; no other power can pretend to reign beside him.³

Moreover, Jesus' cleansing of the temple⁴ must have alerted the Jerusalem priesthood. As such it may have been a symbolic deed referring to something beyond. Jesus intended a symbolic overthrow of the temple. His deed had in view neither reform nor the prevention of further pollution. Rather he wanted to make room for a completely new temple, one that was eschatological and thus granted by God. Yet, anything that could be interpreted as a threat against the present temple outraged the Jerusalem priesthood and afforded them a pretense to take action against a possible offender.

The condemnation and death of Jesus occurred on a single day. Next day was the Sabbath, which that year fell on the first day of the Passover feast. This raised the problem of what to do with the body of Jesus, for Jewish law and custom forbade leaving a corpse on the cross overnight. Even more offensive to Jewish sensibilities, of course, would be its remaining there on a Sabbath, especially when that was also the first day of Passover. For whatever reason, the Roman authorities apparently gave permission for Jesus' body to be taken down from the cross. Perhaps the Jewish leadership entrusted Joseph of Arimathea to place the body in a tomb; perhaps persons unknown to us buried the corpse elsewhere. At any rate, as far as the Roman and Jewish authorities were concerned, that ended the matter.

Completely unknown are Jesus' thoughts and feelings in his last hours. The words attributed to him during the trial and on the cross are certainly creations of the Christian community, since none of his followers were present to hear and pass them on; moreover, they are variously reported and clearly reflect the agendas of the several evangelists. Of these it is Luke who puts the most daring words into Jesus' mouth—promising the criminal on his right side a place with him in paradise on the very same day, asking God to forgive his enemies and finally commending his own spirit into his Father's hands. The theology of glory and the sovereignty of Jesus expressed in his last sayings on the cross can be followed like a scarlet thread throughout Acts. Indeed, Luke will create many parallels between Jesus and the heroes we meet throughout Acts.

³ For the last paragraph see Gerd Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1999), pp. 240–41.

⁴ Mark 11:15–19.

How the disciples managed to overcome the disaster of Good Friday

For Jesus' disciples his death was so severe a shock that it required an explanation proportionate to their devastation. The process of reconceptualization began in Galilee and was marked by visions that involved admonitions and interpretations. The disciples' propensity towards phantoms is backed by several reports in the Gospel tradition.⁵ Not long after Good Friday, Peter experienced a vision of Jesus that included auditory features, and this event led to an extraordinary chain reaction. Peter reconstituted the circle of the Twelve in Galilee, apparently modeling the fellowship on that founded by Jesus. This regathering reflected the hope—which may also have been Jesus'—that at the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God, the twelve tribes of Israel would be fully represented.

The disciples had, after all, followed Jesus to Jerusalem yearning for and perhaps half expecting the advent of that “kingdom,” the arrival of which was somehow intertwined in their minds with the message and example of their Master. At first his crucifixion and death had destroyed their hope, but these appearances rekindled, then fulfilled, and at last even surpassed it. The kingdom of God had begun, though differently from the way the disciples had originally expected it.

Peter experienced Jesus' appearance to him as reacceptance by the one whom he had thrice repudiated; the other disciples experienced it as forgiveness for their desertion. Peter had seen and heard Jesus. Naturally the content of the vision and the attendant audition was passed on to others, and the news swiftly spread that far from abandoning Jesus in death, God had indeed taken Jesus to himself. To this may well have been added—at first, perhaps as a merely speculative notion—the report that Jesus would soon be appearing as the Son of Man on the clouds of heaven. That created a new situation, and the circle around Jesus embarked on a tremendous new venture. Now the women and men who had attached themselves to Jesus could return to Jerusalem and there take up the work their master had left unfinished: to call on both the people and the authorities to undergo a change of heart and mind. (This may well have been seen and proclaimed as the very last reprieve that God would offer.) The first vision of Peter proved formally infectious, and was reportedly followed by others—one to the Twelve, and another to more than five hundred at one time. At this point, at least, any non-ecstatic interpretation comes to grief.

⁵ Mark 6:49; Matt. 14:26.

We must fully take into account the dynamic power of such a beginning. It was so compelling that the natural brothers of Jesus were caught up in the excitement, and went to Jerusalem; James even received an individual vision⁶—the same James who had shown little if any affinity with his brother during Jesus’ lifetime, and seems likely to have participated in Mark’s reported attempt to have his “crazy” brother put away.⁷

A number of concurrent and mutually supporting elements can be identified in the earliest Christian experience. In addition to the personal visionary encounters with the “Risen One,” we find the recurrence of three powerful historical themes galvanizing the community’s faith: 1) the act of breaking bread together enabled the members to recapture the presence of the Master who had been so cruelly killed but was now so wonderfully restored; 2) recalling his words and works at table and in worship set him again in their midst; and 3) the messianic promise of scripture, and especially the familiar Psalter hymns, now took on new meaning as expressions of the present reality of the exalted Son of Man.

The rise of the Hellenist fraction of Primitive Christianity in Jerusalem and its expulsion

Even at this earliest stage, the movement took on new dimensions when Greek-speaking Jews in Jerusalem joined, perhaps in the aftermath of Christ’s appearance to the more than 500 brothers at one time at the feast of the weeks (Pentecost).⁸ Bilingual disciples may have talked to and converted them.⁹ They in turn newly interpreted the words of Jesus in the context of the experience of the Spirit and an imminent expectation that led them to break through the intense traditional link with Torah and cult.¹⁰ Yet the hostile reaction of the temple priests was only a matter of time, and in one resulting altercation one of the Hellenist leaders was killed. Thus the Hellenists were forced out of Jerusalem and began to spread the message about Jesus—as their inclusion of Gentles caused it to be interpreted and practiced—to cities like Damascus, Antioch and Caesarea. As Luke indicates, they were the first to transfer primitive Christianity from the village to the city and to change the new faith “from a basically rural and rustic sect whose founders were Galilean ‘backwoodsmen’ into an active and successful city religion.”¹¹

⁶ 1 Cor. 15:6.

⁷ Mark 3:21. Because this information was so embarrassing, Matthew and Luke (who obviously had Mark’s gospel in front of them) left it out.

⁸ 1 Cor. 15:6.

⁹ Cf. Martin Hengel, *From Jesus to Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), p. 14.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25–26.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

The itinerant missionaries and the formation of the source Q

The itinerant activists—another group of followers of Jesus—who did not make it into the book of Acts remained within the rural areas.¹² Indeed, Jesus' ethical radicalism found a welcome home in their ranks. In matters economic, his radical message is explicit in the choice he offers between God and mammon.¹³ Jesus' deprecation of wealth and the wealthy is harsh to the point of exaggeration: no rich person can find salvation;¹⁴ anyone who aspires to be his follower must first sell all his possessions.¹⁵ Those who in effect had nothing might understandably bid farewell to home and family, and aspire to the spiritual exaltation of life without employment, possessions, or even means of defense. The demand for asceticism marks earliest Christianity as a movement recruited from among the dispossessed and having a strongly counter-cultural ethos. Yet since the ideal of an exalted and universal ethic was inherent from the outset, primitive Christianity may be said to have had a dual spirit: while seeking to exit or overthrow a corrupt society, it strove to establish the highest ethical principles. The faithful must overthrow one set of values and conform to another.

In the ethical stance of Jesus and his immediate followers, then, we see both implicit resistance to political power and an explicit moral rebuke to their own people. And this ethical radicalism may have been resurrected and reformulated by political struggle as early as the first generation after Jesus' death; for Q seems clearly to reflect a sharp challenge to the itinerant radical ethos. At three points it departs from the relatively formulaic presentation of sayings to narrate Jesus' temptation,¹⁶ the healing of the centurion's servant,¹⁷ and the cure of the mute demoniac¹⁸ that is followed by Jesus' explanatory remarks about Beelzebul. A number of scholars believe these accounts to be related, and to reflect editing of Q.

The mountaintop climax of the temptation story can easily be imagined to constitute an allusion to Caligula's attempt in 39/40 CE to place his statue in the temple.¹⁹ This crisis could well have challenged the fledgling movement both to reassess its radical ethic and to compile a written collection of its traditions. In short, this important introductory narrative suggests the historical provenance of this early collection of prophetic sayings. The story about the centurion whose trust amazed Jesus would then offset the anti-establishment screed by

¹² Luke has included traditions about them in his gospel thus restricting their activity to the life of Jesus; see Luke 10.

¹³ Matt. 6:24.

¹⁴ Mark 10:25.

¹⁵ Mark 10:21

¹⁶ Matt. 4:1–11.

¹⁷ Matt. 8:1.

¹⁸ Matt. 12:22.

portraying the acknowledgment of Jesus' authority by a ranking representative of the empire. The saying about Beelzebul can then be seen as yet another counter-march to highlight the imperial conflict between Satan God, and the exorcism as a vivid example of Jesus' dominion over the world. Where Jesus confronted those in power with symbolic deeds, the writers who are formulating the conscience of the early movement deal in myth. Thus Roman imperial power was seemingly parodied in the mountaintop posturing of Satan.²⁰

How Paul, a persecutor of the church, turned into a missionary of the gospel

Paul, from the great city of Tarsus in Cilicia, is rightly regarded as one of the most influential figures in the Christian West. He was at once a Jew, a Roman, and a Christian. Above all, he saw himself as an apostle called personally by the risen Jesus to take the Gospel to the Gentile world. He was born around the same time as Jesus, but some four hundred road miles north of his master's native Galilee. He was a Diaspora Jew and had inherited Roman citizenship from his father. As a result, he had a share in both the Jewish and the Greco-Roman worlds. Certainly some restrictions were imposed on contact with Greeks, and we cannot be sure that Paul studied the Greek classics. However, he did receive a basic education, mediated through Hellenistic Judaism, which included instruction in the Greek language and rhetoric. At the same time, elements of his ancestral culture remained, and were reflected many years later in his letters. Paul went to the theater, followed the contests in the arena, and witnessed philosophical disputations in the market place. In other words, he was imbued with the breadth and beauty of the Hellenistic world and its innate rational temper as well. Even as a child, Paul may have been prompted to wish that one day he might become part of this great cosmos.

Nonetheless, from his ancestral religion he gained both a sense of belonging and the knowledge of its exclusiveness. He learned by heart large parts of the Holy Scripture in Greek (the Septuagint). He was no average member of his ancestral religion, but someone who took seriously the God who had chosen Israel and given it the commandments by which to live. No wonder, then, that sooner or later Paul left his ancestral home for Jerusalem. He had to go and study at the place where his heavenly Father had had the temple built and where—by divine grace—daily sacrifice was offered for the sins of his people. Here was to be found the center of the world for all true Jews. Here, the young zealot completed his education as a Pharisee, and here—where God had placed him—was where he wanted to work. It seemed to have been pre-ordained that his would be a scholar's career.

¹⁹ Note the depiction of one who rules over all and demands to be worshipped.

However, as a result of his zeal—or should we say fanaticism?—things turned out otherwise. In Damascus, Paul got to know a group of Greek-speaking Jews who named themselves after a crucified Jew named Jesus and even confessed that he was Messiah. Not only that, they claimed that he had been elevated by God and to this added criticism of the Law: as if the proclamation of the crucified Jesus as Messiah were not enough! It was too much for Paul. As had often happened to the elect of Israel, he was driven to act out of zeal for the ancestral law, to the glory of God. He attempted to nip this new movement in the bud by the use of physical force. Other fellow-countrymen thought that as yet there was no reason to intervene—at any rate in such a draconian way. But the young zealot took a completely different view, and the subsequent burgeoning of this group of Jesus’ followers, originally from the Diaspora, was to prove him right. It was the beginning of a movement that would soon be a deadly threat to Jews; the notion that he was to play a key role in its dissemination would have taken his breath away.

Still, the inconceivable happened: in the midst of a bloody persecution near Damascus, the very one whose followers he was pursuing appeared to Paul in heavenly form. Seeing him in his glory, Paul had no doubts. 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. All this happened so suddenly that Paul had no choice, no alternative course of action. He had to seek to join the community that previously he had been persecuting. Since all this took place at a deeply emotional level, Paul temporarily lost his sight immediately after this heavenly vision. But one of his new brothers in the faith, Ananias, healed him, of course in the name of Jesus: Ananias welcomed Paul and instructed him in the new faith which the persecutor so far knew only in a rudimentary way.

How Paul discovered his special role in the drama of salvation

Now, Paul had time to reflect on how Jesus had appeared to him and what it meant. He recalled all those passages in scripture in which a future Messiah had been prophesied. But how could he reconcile with this the fact that the Christian Messiah had died on the cross—in other words, that he had suffered? In his previous studies, Paul had never learned of a suffering Messiah. However, since his encounter with the heavenly Lord unmistakably proved to him that this was none other than the crucified Jesus, the ex-Pharisee who was so knowledgeable about the Bible did not find it difficult to give an answer. In a bold leap of

²⁰

For the above cf. Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, pp. 241–42.

thought, he combined the Jewish ideal of the Messiah with the Suffering Servant from the book of Isaiah. This was made easier by the fact that the suffering of Jesus was in any case only a transitional stage before his entrance into the heavenly glory. And this must be true not only for Jesus but also for all other Christians. They would all suffer tribulation before the great Day.

In scripture Paul also discovered a special role for himself in the heavenly drama. He eagerly appropriated those passages in which the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah said that God himself had set them aside from their mothers' wombs and applied them directly to himself²¹ and fantasized that, like the two great prophets of the past, he had been called from his mother's womb to be a preacher—of course by God himself. So a tremendous self-confidence developed in Paul that exceeded even that of his pre-Christian period. This becomes the more remarkable the more one considers that this man from Tarsus never knew Jesus of Nazareth personally.

How then could Paul derive his own authority immediately and directly from the heavenly Lord himself without learning from those whom he had persecuted? What had he experienced to claim this immediacy from heaven that allowed him later to set himself on the same footing as the personal followers of Jesus? Indeed, Paul attributes the words of institution at the Lord's supper, which, after all, he must have learned in teaching from the community, to a direct intervention and report by the Lord himself: "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you..."²² He similarly accounted for everything else that had been communicated to him about the Lord. The authority of the Lord, who had personally commissioned Paul to be his apostle, automatically hallowed it. Believing himself in direct contact with the Lord, Paul received the special indications he needed—he called them revelations or mysteries—and immediately followed them.

Thus, while for Paul heaven was almost always open, an angel of Satan could also castigate him if the Lord so willed and if the abundance of revelations went to his head. At the same time, he was strong enough to invoke the power of Satan where grievous sinners had to be condemned to a just death²³ in order to preserve the community from uncleanness and to save the spirit of the sinner—imagined in a bodily form made incorruptible through baptism—on the day of judgment. Furthermore, Paul recognized the spirit of Satan where life was made difficult for him in the communities in the persons of false apostles. Still, whatever adversity

²¹ Cf. Gal. 1:15–16.

²² 1 Cor. 11:23.

²³ 1 Cor. 5:1–5.

they gave rise to, Satan and his angels functioned only as predetermined by God and never had power over Paul and his communities. Their real power could in no way oppose that of God, who had sent his Son into the world to save men and women from sin. Paul felt that he was the agent of God and the Lord Jesus, who was bound up in this cosmic drama of redemption. Here, the key point for Paul was that salvation would and should include Gentiles: they did not have to become Jews first, but were to belong to the church of Jesus Christ on the same footing as the Jews who believed in Jesus. Such a view was repugnant to many Jewish Christians.

How the new experience developed in Paul and among other Christians

From the beginning, Paul had experienced in an almost intoxicating way the reality and the praxis of the unity of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles. We see this in two passages 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.”²⁴ In this formula, which was repeated time and again in worship, all the barriers that the Torah had erected around Israel were demolished: “If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come.”²⁵ That was Paul’s cry of jubilation. But this new element could be introduced only through the atoning death of the Son of God himself, as the continuation of this cry of jubilation indicates: “All this (is) from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ.”²⁶ Paul constantly finds new descriptions to explain the liberation brought about in this way: “If God is for us, who can be against us? For he did not spare even his only-begotten son, but has given him up for all of us.”²⁷

This new experience called for rites to keep it alive. Already Paul had received instruction about the two chief one—baptism and eucharist—from the congregation that he persecuted. They were the major rituals also of other developing communities, for thus we read in the Gospel of Mark whose anonymous author, a younger contemporary of Paul, provides the basis for the two new rites of the first Christians. That his gospel is framed by Jesus’ baptism and his institution of the Eucharist is an unmistakable indication that the evangelist is consciously involved in both the narrative creation of a new community of faith and the narrative inclusion of both Jews and Gentiles in that body. In Mark’s account not only do the effects of Jesus’ preaching spill over into the Gentile areas of Galilee, but his fame precedes

²⁴ Gal. 3:26-28, repeated in 1 Cor. 12:13 without “male and female”.

²⁵ 2 Cor. 5:17.

²⁶ 2 Cor. 5:18.

²⁷ Rom. 8:31-32.

him on a trip to Syro-Phoenecia,²⁸ and Mark's Jesus repeatedly nullifies the purity and dietary codes that had long divided those two populations. Most notable is the fact that Mark invokes no lesser an authority than Isaiah to put into Jesus' mouth the assurance that God's house must be open to all peoples.²⁹ It cannot be imagined that what amounts to an open-door policy for gentiles is an unintended feature of the first gospel.

Luke offers a somewhat different scenario: for him the Jews' rejection of the new preaching triggered off the Gentile mission. In all likelihood it worked the other way around—that is, dispensing with Jewish traditions and practices to facilitate the conversion of Gentiles so diluted Judaism as to provoke Jewish outrage. Be that as it may, the Markan and Lukan models agree in picturing an ever-increasing withdrawal and alienation of Christianity from its Jewish roots.³⁰

The estrangement of Paul and his communities from the Jewish mother religion: reasons, results, consequences

Experiences of Christ in the early community were experiences of the Spirit. But the Spirit pointed to an even greater event, namely the consummation of the kingdom with the coming of Jesus on the clouds of heaven. Now Paul faced a problem. To those who had known Jesus himself and who in Jerusalem were awaiting the future glory and the rewards of the coming kingdom, how was he to explain experiences that he had had time and again in his home community? Moreover, how could he persuade them that his authority was equal to theirs and that he could provide the story of Jesus with an independent interpretation that was of at least equivalent value?

The history of Paul's relationship to the Jerusalem community is a conclusive indication that all this was far from being a matter of course. A first visit, around three years after Paul's vision of Christ, lasted two weeks and enabled him to make cautious contact with the leader of that community, Cephas, Jesus' first disciple. During the visit, the mission to the Gentiles was already a topic of discussion, along with issues involving Jesus of Nazareth and the Easter events. Paul was glad to have this meeting and the resulting agreement over the Gentile mission as validation for his preaching activity that shortly followed. Then events came thick and fast. The mission to the Gentiles, which Cephas had agreed was Paul's task, proved extraordinarily successful, but Jewish-Christian communities also came into being: Lydda,

²⁸ Mark 7:24–30.

²⁹ Mark 11:17 (Isa. 56:7).

³⁰ Cf. Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, p. 182.

Joppa, Caesarea, Sidon, etc. Moreover, the “Holy Spirit,” imagined as a mysterious and miraculous being, found acceptance and favor everywhere: first of all in Syria and then under the influence of Paul in Galatia, Macedonia, and Achaia. A movement was born and really first called to life by a man who, though he had never known Jesus personally, was all the more in contact with the heavenly Jesus.

We will perhaps understand this event better if we compare it and its antecedents with a gigantic closed container of water that is coming to a boil. The growing number of disciples who invoked the risen Christ had brought Judaism to the boiling point. The water could no longer be kept in the container. It burst, and the water poured out hissing everywhere until, still steaming, it made different ways for itself into somewhat calmer channels. In this manner, numerous new communities composed of both Jews and Gentiles suddenly came into being. But this inevitably generated later conflict, for strict Jewish Christians were scandalized by non-observant activity in the mixed communities and attempted to put a stop to it. While they did not mind what Gentile Christians did, it was important to them that ecumenical mixing did not erode the unique identity and practice of Jewish Christians.

Understandably, the demand for strict segregation of the Jewish Christians from their pagan brothers was only a matter of time. The inevitable happened: in Paul’s presence delegates from Jerusalem fomented a bitter dispute over the purity of the Jewish Christians in the mixed community of Antioch. This put in question all that had been achieved. Thereupon, fourteen years after his first visit, Paul received a revelation from his heavenly Lord to go to Jerusalem. No doubt he traveled with a proud and unbowed heart, for he took the uncircumcised Greek Titus with him to establish a precedent. It is no coincidence that Paul’s former partner in the mission, Barnabas, was also a member of the party, but so too were those strict Jewish Christians who, as Paul put it, had crept into the (mixed) community and provoked a bitter dispute.

The initial situation was completely different from that of the first visit. In Jerusalem, power had shifted. Now no longer Cephas alone, but also Jesus’ biological brother, James, had a say. James stood at the head of a group of three consisting of himself, Cephas, and John. Here, it is illuminating that Cephas and John, two immediate disciples, were junior to someone who had not followed Jesus in his lifetime but, along with the rest of the family, including Jesus’ mother Mary, was at least skeptical about him.

After vigorous clashes in Jerusalem, an agreement was sealed with a formal handshake. In spreading the Good News, the Jerusalem church was to be responsible for the Jews, Paul and Barnabas for the Gentiles. More important than this rule, which needed interpretation, was the very fact of the meeting, for it provisionally rescued the unity of the church, and that was Paul's main concern. The agreement was, like so many treaties, a kind of elastic statement that allowed both parties to read their own understandings into it. In the case of the Jews, for example, one had to consider both those living in the mother country of Palestine and also those in the Diaspora.

It should also be noted that the most burning problem of all, how people were from then on to live together in mixed communities, was not discussed at all. At any rate, the agreement did not rule out an interpretation in favor of a strict segregation of Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians; in fact, the agreement was about conditions for separation. However, despite all the problems of the "formula of union,"³¹ there was agreement on the collection;³² no dispute was possible over the terms of the collection—a project that, ironically, was soon enough to become an acid test for the relationship between the Gentile-Christian and the Jewish-Christian churches.

The Gentile-Christian communities, represented by Paul and Barnabas, were to bring it—Barnabas from the church of Antioch and Paul from the churches in Greece and Galatia that he had founded as early as the late 30s CE. Since this gave Paul the possibility of holding the Jerusalem people to their agreement by expeditiously collecting from his mission churches an offering to sustain the Jerusalem community, it also served as an instrument in church politics; at the same time, this was confirmation of his own hope that his apostolate to the Gentiles was based on the unity of the church made up of Jews and Gentiles. Paul's own assessment was that without this unity of the church, his apostolate to the Gentiles was null and void.

To be sure, Paul had already envisaged a great plan to carry out a mission in Spain. In this way, the apostle wanted to conquer the last part of the world for his Lord; it was urgent for him to reach his destination as the Lord was near. But, for now, the agreement had to be safeguarded. Paul first undertook a journey among his communities to secure the collection and to cement the bond of unity between his churches and the church in Jerusalem.

³¹ Gal. 2:9.

³² Gal. 2:10.

Accompanied by a staff of colleagues, Paul traveled through Galatia where he passed on detailed instructions about how the collection was to be made; he gave his other communities in Macedonia and Achaia instructions to do likewise. On the first day of every week, the members of the community were to put something aside in order to guarantee a handsome sum when Paul traveled through to collect it and deliver it to the delegation that would take it to Jerusalem. Of course, the journey for the collection did not serve only financial and political ends; Paul naturally initiated missions among new believers when occasion arose, as in Ephesus. Furthermore, there was constant need to advise and to exhort the existing communities personally or to strengthen them through delegates like Titus or Timothy.

Then disaster struck. Suddenly delegates from Jerusalem began to invade Paul's communities and threatened to destroy all that he had laboriously built up and steadfastly defended in Jerusalem. The "false brethren" whom Paul had defeated in Jerusalem now attacked him in his own communities. They put his apostolic authority in question, introduced additional precepts of the law, and thus destroyed any fellowship between Paul and Jerusalem. So the battle for the unity of the church became the battle for the collection, or rather the battle for the collection also became the battle for the unity of the church. To make sure that the collection was still welcome to the people in Jerusalem, Paul changed his plan to have others take it to Jerusalem. By appearing in person, he would be fighting for the third time a battle in which he had on the previous occasion prevailed.

At the height of this conflict, shortly before he set off to Jerusalem, Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, an intended destination of which must also have been the Jerusalem community. In this memorable document, the apostle proclaims his message of righteousness by faith, which is to be grasped in faith as free grace on the basis of the atoning death of Jesus and which is available to both Jews and Gentiles. But he does not seem to notice that in Romans 9–11 he in part takes back everything that he has written previously. Suddenly, an ethnocentric attitude that Paul thought he had overcome draws him under its spell, for now he rather explicitly suggests that after the fullness of the Gentiles has entered in, all Israel will be saved without any ifs, ands, or buts—in other words, even without believing in Christ.³³ Thus, belonging to the chosen people suddenly seems more valuable than one might have expected after reading the first eight chapters of Romans.

Paul indicates the special reason for this about-face in his introductory remarks at the beginning of chapter 9. On account of his Jewish brothers, the vast majority of whom have

³³ Röm 11:26a.

not accepted salvation in Christ, he suffers deeply and personally, and goes so far as to express the wish that if it would effect their deliverance, he might be accursed by Christ for their sake. Here, we see another side of Paul. After the sharp attacks on the law in Galatians and in the first part of Romans, this sounds strange; yet at the same time it attests the ultimate priority of feeling over thought—in Paul as in nearly all humans.

However, none of this was of any use to the Jews in the subsequent era. In the Gentile-Christian church founded by Paul, the invention of a special way for Israel to attain salvation could not prevent unbelieving Israel from being damned to eternity, any more than a like provision could save the unbelieving Gentiles in a yet later period from divine wrath. The statement by the risen Jesus from the secondary ending to Mark, in fact, applies to both of them: “Who believes and is baptized will be saved, but who does not believe will be condemned.”³⁴

*The oldest Evangelist as an example of alienation from Judaism*³⁵

In Mark’s gospel, the historical Jesus appears as a heavenly being miraculously given earthly form. Long before the resurrection a divine glory illuminates the life of the human teacher and healer. To signal this transformation Mark places epiphany scenes at the beginning, middle, and end of his account. In the baptismal vision, a heavenly voice identifies Jesus as God’s son;³⁶ in the transfiguration story the same heavenly voice accords him once again the same title³⁷ and at the foot of the cross a Roman centurion—a Gentile—is the first person to confess his divine sonship.³⁸ The first of these proclamations is addressed only to Jesus. The second commands the disciples—in the presence of Moses, Elijah, and Jesus himself—to “listen to” Jesus who, standing in the presence of Moses and Elijah, thus symbolically supersedes the Torah and the Prophets they represent. In both cases we have heavenly figures and speakers; but at the cross Mark has put into the centurion’s mouth a message that is to be passed on to others. The intrusion of heaven into the real space-time of this world becomes at each step more dramatic until the demand that the message be spread implicitly includes all mankind. As the divine mystery is gradually unveiled, the reader comes to see the full significance of his adoption, his presentation to the disciples, and his recognition by a representative of the very power that has sought to eliminate him. Jesus has not claimed divinity; it has been assigned to him—and at last by one of those least likely to be moved by divine promptings.

³⁴ Mark 16:16.

³⁵ For the following cf. Theissen, *A Theory of Primitive Christian Religion*, pp. 171–75.

³⁶ Mark 1:11.

³⁷ Mark 9:7.

³⁸ Mark 15:39.

A first step in distancing Christianity from Judaism—I use the term “Christianity” anachronistically—came with Paul’s view of Jesus as a divine being on the basis of his resurrection, and the resulting conviction that it was God’s action alone that had conferred divinity upon him. By reflecting what might be called Jesus’ Easter sovereignty in the account of his life, Mark has endowed the earthly Jesus with a divine aura, and thereby continually betokens the divine nature of the one who multiplies loaves and walks on the water. Mark’s derogation of the disciples, poignantly dramatized in Jesus’ plaintive “Do you not yet understand?”³⁹ stems from what he sees as their inability to bridge the conceptual gap between the Jesus they know and the Eternal Son. And it is his divinization of Jesus (a step that comports with if it does not derive from Paul) by which Mark steers the gospel tradition onto a path that led inexorably away from the strict monotheism of Judaism.

That separation is evident in Mark’s theme of recurring conflicts with Jewish opponents over Sabbath observance, purity regulations, and the value of sacrifice. But nowhere is it so striking as in his employment of the temple as a symbol. It is no longer enough—as it was with Paul—that Jesus fulfils prophesy; now he is the prophet who invokes the destruction of the indispensable structure that in its provision of the locus of sacrifice embodies Judaism itself. And at the end Jesus’ death symbolically rings the death knell of that tradition and the temple that is its central artifact; for his last cry, Mark reports, is accompanied by the rending of the veil that represents the exclusivity and sanctity of the cult.⁴⁰ Not only that, but the concurrence of that cataclysm and the centurion’s confession (clearly a Markan contrivance, for the soldier at the cross could not have seen the temple) makes unmistakably clear the evangelist’s use of symbology to assert both Christianity’s substitution of Judaism and the inclusion of deserving Gentiles in God’s plan for the salvation of mankind.

Paul as an example of alienation from Judaism

Paul himself was to experience how the Jewish-Christian church repudiated its bond with the Gentile-Christian church. The collection from his own communities was rejected, and the Christian “brothers” who were hostile towards him even denounced him to the Roman authorities in order to get rid of him. He was said to have taken a Gentile Christian into the temple. In order to save his life, Paul appealed to the emperor and only thus reached his destination, Rome. Alas, he was executed there under Nero. He never traveled to Spain.

³⁹ Mark 8:21.

Tragic though all that was, it is only fair to say that the charges made against Paul by his opponents in Jerusalem were based on facts. They had claimed that Paul was now teaching in the Diaspora that Jews should no longer circumcise their sons and was alienating them from the Jewish law. Granted, we do not find anything of this sort said explicitly in Paul's letters—Paul emphatically calls on Jews not to go back on their circumcision—but it has to be conceded that the consequences of Paul's preaching were similar to those expressed in the charge mentioned.

In practice, Jewish Christians who lived in Pauline communities were alienated from their mother religion, and as a result, the minority of Jewish Christians ceased to circumcise their male descendants. In other words, sooner or later Jewish Christians lost their identity in the Pauline communities. And there was another thing. The apostle's doctrine of justification, according to which grace is attained only through faith without the Law, left the ethical question unanswered⁴¹ and could easily be misconstrued as libertinism.

Finally, Paul's way of dealing theologically with the Law was anything but clear. In fact, Paul no longer stood on the ground of the Law but made mutually exclusive, i.e., contradictory, statements about the Torah; because he had already found an answer in the light of Christ or in the light of that answer he equivocated about the Law. The Jewish side could no longer come to an understanding with such a man.

Paul and Greek enlightenment

One last point must be made: the Jewish theologian Paul had become a Gentile to the Gentiles, a Jew to the Jews, and thus in effect neither a Gentile nor a Jew. Where then was his commitment? Throughout his activity there was not only a dash of arrogance but also a tendency to vacillation, which must have been perplexing to honest spirits. But as his great life's work 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 on the occasion when he attempted to convince the intellectual elite, the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers who showed him his limits when he tried to impress them by speaking of the future judgment through Christ and the bodily resurrection.⁴²

⁴⁰ Mark 15:38.

⁴¹ Cf. Rom. 3:8.

⁴² Acts 17:16–34.

Despite his repeated—if sometimes deceptive—advocacy of the right use of reason, his religion, grounded in mystical experiences, was not up to the intellectual challenge of Greece. The fact that Paul founded no community in Athens speaks volumes here. At the same time, it suggests that his remarks in the First Letter to the Corinthians about human wisdom being folly before God were at least in part an evasion and a way of coping with the defeat in Athens.⁴³

Here, some general remarks about Paul's relationship to the Greek enlightenment might be appropriate. Paul did not come to a knowledge of the truth through a mind trained in logic—one that examines strictly the content and viability of all concepts and views, and that defiantly fights against the phantasms of the imagination and acknowledges no authority over itself, whether that of a god or of a human being. By contrast, the mysticism that Hellenistic Christianity and its leading figure Paul represent is of a supernatural kind. It calls for mindless subjection to authority and surrender to divine guidance: the norm is not the mind but the feelings and the mystical exaltation of the self seized by the Spirit. In this way, the pneumatics are elevated high above people with everyday minds (the psychics), and thus to them alone is disclosed the vision of the mysterious truth which can never be grasped by reason.

But the deepest reason for the victory of the Christianity of Paul and his pupils lay in the spirit of the time. The world had become weary of thought. Large numbers of people sought a more convenient way to secure their immortality—through initiation into mysteries, of which baptism and the Lord's Supper were only two of many. The public had become completely credulous and the power of the human intellect had suffered total defeat.

Thus, in Paul and his Christian brothers, a reaction against the Greek Enlightenment occurred in the sphere of spiritual and religious life in the same period in which state and law and customs, even forms of greeting, came to be dominated by authoritarianism. The quintessential freedom of ancient Greece was throttled just as much as the constitutional spirit of the Roman state. Authority replaced untrammelled research; faith substituted for knowledge; the humble subordination of the human spirit to the deity above the world took the place of its independence; and slavish observance of the commandments imposed by God on human beings supplanted the moral law recognized as morally free life. This was the world that Paul entered. As a result, the downfall of the ancient state, along with its worldview and culture that had grown up out of Hellenism, was complete.

⁴³ 1 Cor. 1:17–25.

The result of Paul's activity

What did Paul's life yield? First of all, it has become clear that the Christian church owes almost everything to this Jewish man from Tarsus, and Luke rightly devotes more than half of Acts to him whom we may call the real founder of Christianity. Paul was right when he said that he worked harder than all the rest,⁴⁴ for he created the foundations for all future developments in the church. Here, he transplanted his misunderstanding of the religion of Jesus to Gentile territory and, without really wanting to, formulated the lasting separation of the church and Israel.

This in turn occasioned the tragic outcome of his activity. Christian anti-Judaism on pagan soil was given decisive stimuli by Paul along with others, and had a devastating effect. The New Testament authors thrashed the unbelieving Jews with anti-Jewish language for not accepting Jesus as the savior. At any rate, without Paul and his brothers in Christ, Judaism would never have been led into the abyss.

In addition, the primitive Christians and Paul find themselves facing insuperable arguments from the side of critical reason. These extend to almost all the details of their beliefs: (a) the notion that God's Son had to atone for the sins of the world; (b) the nonsensical identification of Jesus and the Christ and with it the arrogant claims of Paul and of other Christian authors to serve as the mouthpieces of someone whom they had never known personally; (c) the view that human beings can derive a serious expectation of decisive help from mystical wishes; (d) the confused statements about the Law which persistently conceal their presuppositions, including the assumption that a solution—"Christ"—has already been found before a question can be put; (e) the claim that a historical event can bring about the salvation of the world.

One can perhaps understand a man of the first century along with anonymous worshippers of Jesus making such foolish assertions, but we see how dangerous such claims can finally become when we see how they are still advocated by the Christian churches and even by academic theologians. To cite just one example, this means that the resurrection of Jesus has an objective significance for the history of the world: indeed, that together with the death of Jesus, it becomes the turning point of that history and at the same time also an event of cosmic significance.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ 1 Cor. 15:10b.

⁴⁵ Cf. one of Germany's leading theologians, Joachim Ringleben, *Wahrhaft auferstanden. Zur Begründung der Theologie des lebendigen Gottes* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1998), p. 47n93.

The disastrous effect of Christian “monotheism” along with its political theology

To narrate the story of the primitive Christianity means to make at the same time a critical judgment about Paul and his brothers in Christ. True, the apostle to the Gentiles was certainly a great figure in primitive Christianity, indeed the real founder of the Church. But the view that his letters and the rest of the New Testament scriptures represented God’s word is a crime against reason and against humanity. Studying them today may make us realize that no real pointer to the future can be expected from his way of thinking. Because of its image of God it purveys, such “logic” cannot respect the “unbelievers” but only summon them to be obedient so as to avoid the eternal punishment of hell. With Primitive Christianity, monotheism—shaped by Christology—was on the brink of turning into totalitarianism with no respect for dissenters within and nonbelievers such as Jews and Pagans outside of the church catholic. It took only three centuries until these dissenting or merely different groups became the target of a joint action of the true believers along with the political forces of the Roman Empire and were destroyed or at least neutralized. The burning of books that in Acts 19 Luke had reported as a voluntary measure of former pagans and now Christians was henceforth as an act of violence directed against the opponents of orthodox Christianity. Thus willy-nilly Luke’s overtures to the Roman Empire had really paid off and indeed bore rich fruit.

Yet despite the 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 God. At the same time, the religious zeal of its representatives remains suspiciously close to a fanaticism of faith, the kind of fanaticism that, once it had found an ally in political power, over the course of the succeeding two millennia has cost the lives of at least a million people per century. Unfortunately, as history shows, conflict inevitably turns such a commitment against human beings, mere mortal men and women that they are.