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The Earliest Church

The church of Jesus Christ began, we are told, with a group of frightened men and women in an upper room in Jerusalem (Acts 1:12–14). They were all Jews, and they were all frightened—and not without reason.

We do well to learn as much as we can about this group, since they were the acorn out of which grew the stately oak that we see today. But it is not easy to come into direct contact with them. They have left no written record of their own. Our principal authority is the earlier chapters of the Acts of the Apostles, a work supposed to have been written by that Luke who had been a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. We shall have occasion to note from time to time the astonishing brilliance of Luke as a historian, and his accuracy in detail where this can be tested. But Luke was writing, in all probability, more than fifty years after the events he was describing. There were many people still living who could guide him with their recollections, especially if he was actually the Luke who had spent two years in Caesarea with Paul. Yet we cannot rule out the possibility that he is to some extent idealizing that primitive church, and presenting a portrait rather than aiming at exact photographic accuracy in every detail. So we shall treat Luke's evidence with a certain amount of caution. We are able to check it at certain points from the references in the Epistles of Paul, who had contact from time to time with the church in Jerusalem. We can see those early days dimly through the researches of scholars who are trying to get behind the written documents of the New Testament to that period in which the earliest traditions of the church were taking shape.¹ And we now know a great deal more than we ever knew before about Judaism in what we call the first century A.D. and about the life of the

1. This is the method of study known in English by the rather clumsy title, "Form Criticism." The first three practitioners of this craft were Karl Ludwig Schmidt, Rudolf Bultmann, and Martin Dibelius. One of the first expositions of the method in English (not altogether friendly) was Vincent Taylor, *The Formation of the Gospel Tradition*, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1942). For a useful guide to the method see Edgar V. McKnight, *What is Form Criticism?* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

Jewish people in that period. It is against this background that we have to attempt to reconstruct the convictions of the earliest group of believers.

A critical study of such evidence as we have leads us to the conclusion that the Christian experience of this group can be summed up in three words: resurrection, Spirit, and reconciliation.

What distinguished the Christians from the other inhabitants of Jerusalem was their conviction that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been crucified by the authorities, was alive. The Resurrection was the burden of their proclamation in the earliest days.

We have been so much influenced by the Greek tradition, in which body and spirit appear as separate, and separable, constituents of human nature, that it is difficult for us to think ourselves back into the unitary Jewish concept of human nature. According to that view, man is alive only when what we call body and soul, or body and spirit, are united. If he has no body, he is a ghost, an inhabitant of Sheol, very much like those "strengthless heads of the dead" whom Odysseus saw in his pilgrimage to the netherworld. Very few Jews believed in the total extermination of a human being at death; perhaps even fewer believed in anything that could be called *life* on the other side of the grave. Those who, in the time of the Maccabean troubles (second century B.C.), came to believe in the new doctrine of resurrection seem to have thought that the faithful Jews who had died in the time of persecution would be called out of their graves to live again a physical life on earth in the kingdom of God.²

Some students of the New Testament have thought that the earliest Christians were content with the idea of a spiritual resurrection, but later, in the desire to reinforce their preaching, added the stories of the empty tomb and of those physical appearances of Jesus that are recorded in the Gospels. But this view involves a serious misunderstanding of the Old Testament, and an almost total disregard of the evidence that we have. Paul's discussion of the Resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15 (the earliest written evidence for the Resurrection that we possess) will yield us clues of the greatest value. The whole burden of the Corinthians' questions is this (v. 35): "Someone will ask, How are the dead raised? *With what kind of body* do they come?" Paul takes it for granted that resurrection implies a body, and that, if the dead are raised at all, they will have what he calls, without explaining his words in detail, a spiritual body. And he defends this doctrine by analogy with the Resurrection of Jesus Christ; this he could not have done unless he believed that the

2. See especially 2 Macc. 12:43-45.

Resurrection of the Lord was a total resurrection, in which the whole personality including the body was involved.

It was Christian preaching of the Resurrection that aroused the anger and hostility of the Jewish authorities. That some Jews should proclaim the absurdity that a man who was known to have been crucified and killed was still alive was bad enough. That they should go on to affirm that one whom the Jewish authorities had rejected and who had become accursed by being hanged on a tree (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:23) was in reality the chosen one of God, that his Resurrection was God's vindication of his righteousness as against the baseless charges made by his accusers, and that he would come again to establish the kingdom of God on earth—all this was intolerable.

Unless the body of Jesus had been surreptitiously removed, as was suspected by some (Matt. 28:13),³ the Jews had in their hands the perfect instrument for putting a stop to the babbling of the Christian believers. All they had to do was to open the tomb in which Jesus had been buried and show his body in an advanced state of decay. There could have been no difficulty about identification. As recent discoveries have shown us, the skeleton of a crucified man is easily identifiable as such after nineteen centuries.⁴ If this had been done, it is likely that the believers in Jesus would have contrived to preach *some* doctrine of resurrection, but they could not have gone on preaching *that* doctrine of resurrection which all the evidence combines to show they did actually preach. There is no evidence that the Jewish authorities ever took this simple step to put an end to the Christian preaching. It is at least possible that they did not do so because they did not know where the body of Jesus was.

The second major doctrine proclaimed by the first Christians was that the Spirit of God had come to men in a new and universal fashion. Every good Jew knew about the Spirit as portrayed in the Old Testament. The Spirit was a manifest and exceptional power, which came upon specially selected people to enable them to do certain things that would be beyond the limits of unaided human capacity. This could be manifested as sheer spiritual strength, as in the case of Samson (Judg. 14:19; 15:14); it could be the power that enabled the prophet to say, "Thus saith the Lord" (Mic. 3:8); in Isa. 61:1-4, the claim of the anointed one that the Spirit of the Lord was upon him to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor comes near to the

3. Joachim Jeremias seriously discusses this possibility in his *New Testament Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 1:305ff.

4. A good account of these discoveries is in J. H. Charlesworth, "Jesus and Jehohanan: an Archaeological Note on Crucifixion," *The Expository Times*, February 1973, pp. 147-51.

New Testament usage of the term. The Spirit could come and go; it could be fitful in its operations. But throughout the Old Testament this gift is one that is limited in its extent; God could take some of the Spirit that he had granted to Moses and distribute it among seventy of the elders of the people of Israel, with startling effects (Num. 11:16–30); but there is no suggestion that the desire of Moses that the Lord would put his Spirit upon all his people ever became a reality (Num. 11:29).

We may be inclined to think that the elegant speech recorded in Acts 2 represents not so much the extemporaneous utterance of Peter in a moment of great excitement as a condensation of innumerable Christian sermons, as these took shape in the experience of Christian living and through the minute study of the Old Testament Scriptures in the light of the revelation in Christ. But whether the speaker was Peter or another, the believers soon came to grasp the significance of the new dispensation, and found in the Old Testament the proof text that would guarantee the correctness of their understanding. The prophet Joel had foretold in the name of the Lord, “I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh” (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17).⁵ On the basis of this and other prophecies some of the Jewish interpreters had declared that one of the signs of the messianic age would be the universal distribution of the Spirit. To the early Christians it was self-evident that this was what had occurred; the prophecy had been fulfilled.

It is not easy to determine exactly what happened on the first day of Pentecost after the death of Jesus, for knowledge of which we are wholly dependent on Luke and the narrative of Acts 2. Luke, as is his way, has painted a highly artistic picture in which the events of that day are represented as the reversal of the curse of Babel in Genesis (11:1–9). There the false unity that man had attempted to engineer through his own ingenuity had been condemned by God, and had ended in frustration and misunderstanding. Now had come the true unity of all men, planned and intended by God. Luke is careful to arrange the representatives of the nations under the three Old Testament groups of the sons of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japheth—in order to emphasize the universality of the gift of the Spirit on this occasion (see Gen. 10:1 ff.). The traditional interpretation has been that the apostles were then given the power to speak in many diverse languages in order that the gospel of Jesus might go out into all the world. This is reflected in the Proper Preface for Whitsunday in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer: “giving them both

5. The NEB “upon everyone” avoids the awkward Hebraism, “upon all flesh,” but is too weak: the phrase means “upon the whole human race.”

the gift of diverse languages, and also boldness with fervent zeal constantly to preach the Gospel unto all nations.” But in point of fact those who came from all these geographical areas would speak or understand one or more of three languages—Latin, Greek, and Aramaic; if the disjointed utterances of the apostles had been expressed in these three languages, almost all of those present would have been able to understand something of what was being said.

Details are perplexing. The central argument is clear. The conviction that runs through the whole New Testament, and not merely through the Acts of the Apostles, is that the promise of the messianic age has been fulfilled; all who by faith in Jesus Christ have entered into that new age have received the Spirit, who is now known as the Spirit of the living Christ. To be a Christian is to have received the Spirit. Moreover, that gift is not a presence that may come and go, like the Spirit that came intermittently on Samson and then again left him; it is a permanent reality by which the life of the believer is at every point conditioned.⁶ Of the many gifts ascribed in the Old Testament to the Spirit, those most stressed in the early church were understanding and power (e.g., Isa. 11:2). The believer was now in a position to understand the whole counsel of God, including the mystery of that Providence that had permitted the death of the Messiah at the hands of the chosen people. To be an inhabitant of a new world demanded a new manner of living, the pattern of which had been seen in the life of Jesus Christ; the believers discovered in themselves a mysterious power that made it possible for them to live this new life—including the willingness to die—and they identified this power with the Spirit.

This is not to say that all this was evident to the believers in the first days and weeks after the Resurrection. All theology is a matter of slow growth; the church does certain things, and then retrospectively discovers the reasons for doing them. What experience of the Spirit meant to the earliest Christian believers has to some extent to be inferred from the rest of the New Testament. But when Paul and John and later writers set forth the nature of life in the Spirit, they claim not to be adding anything new but to be expounding and elucidating that which had been accepted and believed from the beginning, and in favor of which no special argument needed to be adduced.

The third pillar of the faith, reconciliation, is slightly less easy to identify in the earliest traditions. The early Christians continued to

6. There are, of course, other references to the coming of the Spirit with power on those who had already received him, e.g., Acts 4:31; 13:9.

attend the temple, in which the offering of the lamb daily in the morning and “between the two evenings” continued for another thirty years. They seem not yet to have affirmed that, since the perfect sacrifice had been offered, all other sacrifices, including the daily reminder of God’s covenant with his people, had been reduced to insignificance. The traditions of the church, as we find them reflected in the earliest Christian worship, drew more on the synagogue than on the temple. Here was the regular round of Scripture-reading, exposition, and prayer, and these were combined with certain specifically Christian elements. But Jesus himself had added a new dimension of intimacy to the old tradition of worship. He addressed God as *Abba*, “Father,” and this our best authorities tell us was something new in the Jewish approach to God. He bade his disciples address God in the same way. The Jewish religion, as it existed in the first century A.D., was one of barriers and of exclusion.⁷ As the Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us (7:11–14), since Jesus belonged to the tribe of Judah and not to the tribe of Levi he would have had no access at all to the earthly sanctuary. But this made no difference at all to his approach to God; he passed always as through an open door. The believer knew from experience that his fellowship with Jesus was unbroken, and therefore for him the direct approach to God “through Jesus Christ our Lord” became the determining reality of life. Jesus was reported as having spoken, at the Last Supper, of a covenant, or a new covenant, in his blood. Long before the Epistle to the Hebrews was written, devout believers must have discovered that covenant in Jeremiah 31, where it is written, “They shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more” (v. 34). Forgiveness comes to be one of the great words in the Christian proclamation.

There were Christians in places other than Jerusalem. In Galilee there must have been many who had been witnesses of the ministry of Jesus and had believed. But Jerusalem was the center of the civic as well as the religious life of the Jews; as the environment of the early Christians, it played so important a part that some attention must be paid to the city and to its life.

I had long tried to work out what the population of Jerusalem might have been in the days of Jesus, and, on the basis of the slender evidence available to me, had reached the figure of thirty thousand as being at least probable. Since then Joachim Jeremias has

7. A plan of the temple in the days of Jesus makes plain the limitations of access for different classes of people—Gentiles, women, Israelites, priests, and the high priest. Details are found in Joachim Jeremias, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 79ff.

confirmed my estimate on the basis of far more extensive learning.⁸ This means that the Jerusalem of those days would rank today as a fair-sized town; and as ancient cities were always, like the old City of London, close-packed and crowded, no one would live far from the center of affairs or far beyond the sound of the temple trumpets.

Although isolated on its hills from the main highways, Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan town. Here were the palaces of the Herods, unoccupied for the greater part of the year, but bringing in from time to time with the multitude of servants and retainers a strong breath of another and non-Jewish world. These Herods were an international family, some of whom maintained intimate relations with the ruling family in Rome (one of them had actually been for a number of years a hostage there) and spoke Greek among themselves.⁹ The Roman colonial power, with a tact that might have been more extensively used, had arranged that Caesarea and not Jerusalem should be the ordinary residence of the governor. But the Antonia Tower was in Jerusalem, and Roman soldiers, who were not likely at that stage of imperial history to be Italian in origin, were part of the life of the city. It would seem hardly possible for anyone living in Jerusalem to be wholly ignorant of Greek. But even in a cosmopolitan community it is possible for certain people, on aristocratic or sectarian grounds, to keep themselves separate from the life that is going on around them. Certain Europeans, after fifty years of residence in Kenya, boast that they do not know a single word of Swahili, the *lingua franca*. In the same way, some of the more fanatical Jewish sects may have cut themselves off from the life around them and limited themselves to Hebrew and one of the Aramaic dialects. But this must not be regarded as typical. Many of the early Christians were Galileans, whose attitude to the outside world was more open than that of Judean tradition. The Acts of the Apostles tells us (chapter 6) that a number of the believers belonged to the Diaspora groups which spoke Greek at home, and to which Hebrew was a foreign and largely incomprehensible language.

Jerusalem was a city actively engaged in trade and therefore directly aware of the wider world outside Palestine. But what kept it constantly in touch with the whole of the ancient world was the fact of pilgrimage. According to the Jewish Law all the males of the people of Israel were to present themselves before the Lord three times a year at the great annual festivals (Deut. 16:16). Once Israel

8. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

9. On the complicated family history of the Herods see the accurate study by Arnold H. M. Jones, *The Herods of Judea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938). More popularly, Stewart H. Perowne, *Life and Times of Herod the Great* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1956) and *The Later Herods: The Political Background of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1958). See also Harold W. Hoehner, *Herod Antipas* (Cambridge, 1972).

had become settled in the land of promise it became plain that this command could not be fulfilled by every adult male in the population. But the practice of pilgrimage never died out, and the New Testament is not our only evidence that in the time of Jesus and later it played a considerable part in the life of the Jews, as it has in the life of the Muslims since the days of the prophet Muhammad. The majority of the pilgrims no doubt came from the land of Palestine, but Simon of Cyrene was far from being the only pious Jew who had made the long journey at least once in a lifetime in order to present himself to the Lord of hosts in his sanctuary (Ps. 84:5–7).

For many years I had wondered whether it was possible to determine the number of pilgrims who assembled every year, or three times a year, in the Holy City. As far as I know, the only evidence in ancient literature comes from the Jewish historian Josephus (A.D. c. 37–c. 100), who reckons the number of those sharing in the Passover meal at 2.7 million.¹⁰ This is obviously absurd. Our debt to Josephus is great, since without his *Histories* we would know little of the Herods or of that calamitous war against the Romans in which Jerusalem was destroyed and burned. But this statement should serve as a warning as to the critical care that we have to exercise before accepting anything that Josephus tells us. It is reckoned that at the great Kumbh Mela, observed once every twelve years in India at the junction of the Ganges and the Jumna, sometimes a million pilgrims assemble, to the great distress of the police who are always anxious about the spread of epidemics. The area of the Kumbh Mela, however, is the vast sandy expanse exposed when the waters of the rivers have fallen to their lowest level. The rocky heights of Judea, with their inhospitable crags and declivities, are as different as could well be imagined from the plains of India. Josephus was using a reckless imagination rather than the sober caution of the historian.

Working on slender evidence, I had come to the conclusion that, when the flood of pilgrims was at its highest, the population of Jerusalem might treble, and that this would be likely to occur at the annual celebration of the Passover. Thus an influx of more than sixty thousand pilgrims at any one time would not be expected. Professor Jeremias puts the figure considerably higher, but recognizes that his is a maximum estimate.

10. *Bella Judorum* 6.9.3, quoted by Emil Schürer, *The Jewish People in the Time of Jesus Christ*, rev. ed., edited by Geza Vermès and Fergus Millar (Naperville: Allenson, 1973), 2:291. Schürer remarks correctly that "there was nothing that contributed so much to cement the bond of union between the dispersions and the mother country as the regular pilgrimages which Jews from all quarters of the world were in the habit of making to Jerusalem on festival occasions." See Henry St. John Thackeray, trans., *Josephus*, vol. 3, *The Jewish War Books IV–VIII*, The Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1928), p. 499. Thackeray corrects the arithmetic of Josephus and points out that the total should be 2,556,000.