

Entangled Christianities

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-9302-1

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9302-2

For Claudia, who brought light to the darkness

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The essays in this collection were written over a five-year period and many people were helpful in their composition and collection in this volume. I am grateful to the good people at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, especially Victoria Carruthers, for taking a chance on a new writer and for gentle guidance through the publishing process. I would like to also thank the staff at *Nevada Magazine* and *The Daily Californian*, for printing earlier versions of “Wovoka: Paiute Messiah” and “Jefferson and Madison: Founders of Religious Liberty”, and for giving permission to reproduce those essays here. In addition, I would like to recognize The University of Nevada at Reno for allowing me the opportunity to present “Jefferson and Madison” at the 2014 Constructing Humanity conference.

Professor Christopher Ocker and Father Edward L. Krasevac of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley provided great support in researching several of the chapters, as did Dr. Jonas Wellendorf of UC Berkeley’s Scandinavian Department and Talia Di Manno of the French Department. Deborah Keats and Ben Aleck gave invaluable assistance in researching Wovoka and the history of the Pyramid Lake Paiute Tribe.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Claudia, for her patience and friendship.

INTRODUCTION

The Quest for the Historical Jesus in the 21st Century: Entangled Christianities looks at Christianity in flux. Each chapter recounts a moment of crisis and opportunity in the history of Christianity; from the selection of the biblical canon to the Iconoclast struggle of the Reformation, and from the religious conversions of Scandinavian Norsemen and Native Americans to the establishment of religious liberty in the US Constitution. In each event, Christianity engages in a dialogue with internal and external voices, thereby negotiating the shape and meaning of Christianity. Underlying these negotiations is an often unstated reality; that there is not and never has been a single Christianity. The meaning and direction of Christianity was disputed, even in the days of Peter, Paul and James. The history of Christianity can perhaps be better understood as a history of Christianities. This work is designed to capture pivotal moments, wherein Christianity encountered challenges to its identity and structures.

The first four chapters look at struggles over doctrine in the developing church. Chapter One looks at a variety of communities which identified as Christian in the first centuries of the church. Pauline Christianity, Marcionite, Ebionite, Montanists and Gnostic: these overlapping sects co-existed for centuries, each establishing scriptures and theological boundaries. Chapter Two explores the early church councils as they established internal boundaries, marking the frontiers of orthodoxy and heresy. Chapter Three looks at Thomas Aquinas and Scholasticism. The established doctrines of the church were recast in relation to the rediscovered categories of Aristotelian philosophy, and theology was established as a discipline in the great universities of Europe, alongside the new fields of philosophy and science. The Reformation is examined in Chapter Four, as Protestant Iconoclasts enforced *Sola Scriptura* through assaults on the visual riches of the Catholic Church.

Chapters Six through to Nine focus on Christianity as it competes and comes into conflict with outside forces. Chapters Five and Six trace the expansion of Christianity into Scandinavia. Chapter Five presents an overview of the Old Norse religion from prehistory through to the 10th century, moving from sun worshipping cults to the installation of Ódinn as the All-Father. Chapter Six shows the impact of Christianity on established Norse religions, looking specifically at the Christian cross as

an implement of religious and cultural conversion. Chapter Seven explores the conflict between religion and the Enlightenment. Medieval Christianity had become intertwined with secular power structures, and a major thrust of modernity was to separate the spheres of religion and politics. A pivotal moment in this struggle was the outlining of a principle of religious freedom in the Constitution of the United States. Two men, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison worked together to establish free religious expression as a primary right in the modern world. Remaining in the Americas, Chapters Eight and Nine return to an examination of religious expansion and conversion. Chapter Eight describes the occupation of Native American lands and the ways in which indigenous people struggled to maintain their traditions. Chapter Nine presents an account of Wovoka, a spiritual teacher of the Paiute Tribe, whose vision of the Ghost Dance led to a religious awakening among the Western tribes, then to brutal repression.

Chapter Ten returns to a core historical debate: the quest for the historical Jesus. The story of that quest, as it developed over centuries, focuses attention on the development of critical methodologies within the study of Christianity. The historical Jesus has become a touchstone for scholarly research and piqued the popular imagination. The final chapter takes us back to the beginning, opening us again to the fundamental identity of Christianity.

CHAPTER ONE

ENTANGLED GOSPELS

The church at Rhossus was in crisis. In the early years of the third century, some members of the church had introduced a new text, *The Gospel of Peter*, and sought to include this gospel in the church's liturgy. Many community members had concerns about the authority and teachings of this new gospel, and brought the matter to Serapion, their bishop, who was passing through the area. Not being familiar with the work himself, Serapion reviewed the text cursorily, scanned the attribution to Simon Peter, and approved the gospel for use, saying "If this is the only thing that seems to cause you dissension, let it be read."¹

Later, having received further complaints from Rhossus, Serapion sat down to more carefully examine the gospel. He found that the gospel added many heretical statements to an otherwise orthodox narrative. Realizing he had approved a book which included many elements of Docetism, he sent off a letter to Rhossus, accompanied by a pamphlet titled "The So-Called Gospel of Peter." "For we ourselves, brothers," Serapion wrote, "receive both Peter and the other apostles as Christ, but the pseudepigraphal writings in their name we reject, as having experience in such things, knowing that we did not receive such writings by tradition."²

This challenge to orthodoxy suggests an inconvenient truth. There has never been a single Christianity. An entanglement of different Christianities developed in the earliest years of the faith. Even in Paul's time, there was conflict between competing orthodoxies, notably between Pauline Christianity and the Jerusalem church, comprised of observant Jews led by Peter and James. The tradition preached by Paul to the Gentiles, which represented the tradition known today as the *proto-orthodoxy*, contrasted sharply with a variety of other early Christian sects, such as the Ebionites, who believed that acceptance into Jesus' kingdom required following the laws of the Jewish people, and fully converting to Judaism. The issues of

¹ Hill, 82.

² Ibid, 89.

conversion and circumcision were central to Paul's developing theology and his missionary efforts. "The difference was enough to infuriate Paul," Bart Ehrman writes. "His letters to the Galatians seethe with white-hot anger. His opponents are false teachers who stand under God's curse."³

These incidents, and countless others, are indicative of the relationships between various Christian movements, each with its own accounts of Jesus and his disciples, transmitted through oral and written traditions. It would be another 200 years before an authorized list of Christian texts would be sanctioned by *the church*, yet many different Christianities were already engaged in heated debates over their views of orthodoxy. In tracing the outline of these entanglements, our primary sources are the written documents which survive, especially those which came to be known as the Christian scriptures, or New Testament. Besides these accepted writings, a panoply of texts offered alternate formulations of Christianity, and these other traditions gathered many followers. For historians, the distinctions of orthodoxy and heresy are crucial to understanding the development of both mainstream and *heretical* Christianity. How did the individual churches, often in infrequent contact with any episcopal authority, recognize and celebrate the accurate teachings of Jesus? Were the four gospels we recognize today seen universally as the "word of God?" What distinguished apocryphal texts from the sanctioned texts which were later canonized as the New Testament?

Some recent authors have interpreted the first centuries of Christian development as a polydoxy. In this view, "Christianity was never merely One to begin with. Internally multiple and complex, it has always required an agile and spirited approach to theological reflection."⁴ Some of these "multiple and complex" expressions of Christian faith appear to predate the gospels themselves, and go back to the beginnings of the oral tradition. But can we apply the term polydoxy to the early years of Christianity, or even contemporary Christianity? Was there really a fluidity and open sharing of doctrine within and among these distinct groups? Most scholars would probably say no. Rome was itself the polydoxy, which Jews, and later Christians, rebelled against.

The Roman Empire was populated with religions of all kinds: family religions, local religions, city religions, state religions. Virtually everyone in this mind-boggling complexity, except the Jews, worshipped numerous

³ Ehrman, 161.

⁴ Keller, 1.

gods in numerous ways. So far as we call tell, this was almost never recognized as a problem.⁵

The Roman Emperor cult was, at least in public observance, supreme and apparently mandatory. But once the Emperor was appeased, the attitude seemed to be *anything goes*.

How then can we describe the cultures in which the early Christianities developed? One view suggests that something like open warfare existed between the proto-orthodoxy and the assemblage of *others*. Many, like C. E. Hill, are scornful of this view. He quotes Elaine Pagels, a well-known religious scholar, as saying that “Irenaeus confronted the challenge.... by demanding that believers destroy all those ‘innumerable secret and illegitimate writings’ that his opponents were always invoking.” Pagle’s description of Irenaeus, Hill says, “sounds positively barbaric!” He counters that “nowhere in the five books of *Against Heresies* does Irenaeus demand that anybody destroy any rival, holy books.” In fact, Irenaeus, and later figures like Origen, had their own libraries of heretical texts, which they read and responded to. They seem to have conversed with members of other sects, either in person or by letter, to learn about their views.

While it can be assumed that hostilities between different traditions in the early church sometimes led to the destruction of texts or even physical violence, it seems not to have been the norm. “Doctrinal disputes in early Christianity were not fought with pickaxes and swords. They were fought with words.”⁶ In addition, the common tendency in our culture to divide *oppressors* and *victims* does not seem to apply to the early church. Examining the historical record, especially discoveries of long-lost apocryphal or heretical texts, “suggests the more realistic view, that those who thought they were ‘right’—that is, every side in the disputes—stood up and fought for their views so that the war of words was waged heartily all round.”⁷

While the various churches developed separately, they worshipped in a similar manner and were indistinguishable to the Roman authorities. And, while there is little evidence that the early Christianities routinely marginalized or physically destroyed opposing churches, it is certain that they all shared in the persecution aimed at *the Christians*. Under Diocletian “Marcionites, Montanists, and mainstream Christians knew the experience of martyrdom”. Heretical books seemed to be ready at hand, as

⁵ Ehrman, 91.

⁶ Ehrman, 181.

⁷ Ibid.

well. In 303, when proto-orthodox Christians were ordered to turn over their scriptures for destruction by the Roman forces, some members tried to “pass off apocryphal and heretical texts.”⁸

The pre-Constantine church was definitely not a Roman-style polydoxy, but neither was it a repressive mono-orthodoxy. It might best be described as an entangled multidoxy. The figure of Jesus was central to their beliefs, though their understanding of Jesus as teacher, Messiah or Christ, was unique to each community. The cores of the individual orthodoxies, and the knots which entangled them materially, were expressed in their scriptures, especially the gospels. It is well-established that the four gospels attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John arose in distinct cultural milieus and answered the very different theological concerns of specific communities. By all estimates, these gospels predate any of the opposing gospels, though the Gospel of Thomas does share a remarkably similar foundation in the oral tradition, and closely followed the writing of the other gospels. The written collection of four gospels represented an evolved tradition, originating in oral traditions of their faith, which were compiled and composed in written form decades later. The four gospels “handed down” through tradition were central not just to the proto-orthodox church, but to most, if not all, of the alternative traditions; though, as we will see, the gospels were often abridged and subject to alternative interpretations.

To understand the story of the New Testament, and its hermeneutical applications by proto-orthodox, gnostic and other traditions, we have to start at the source. It is clear that Jesus and his chosen disciples had a single scripture: The Hebrew Bible. Jesus lived and taught from the Torah.

Jesus alludes to or quotes all five books of Moses, the three major prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel), eight of the twelve minor prophets, and five of the writings... the ‘canon’ of Jesus is pretty much what it was for most religiously observant Jews of his time.⁹

Craig Evans has compared the use of Hebrew Scriptures in the Christian Synoptic Gospels and in the Essene Dead Sea Scrolls and found strong similarities. As both communities focused on an expected eschatological event, both drew heavily on Isaiah and the Psalms.

It seems, then, that Jesus’ usage of scripture was pretty much in step with what we observe in similar circles, circles that took the Law very seriously,

⁸ Ibid, 317.

⁹ Evans, 185.

understood the Prophets eschatologically, and had some regard for the Writings.¹⁰

From the analysis of the gospel texts, and extrapolating backwards to recover their oral foundations, there is strong evidence that the first generations of Christians saw the Hebrew Bible as their scripture as well. Passages of scripture, that is to say, quotes from the Hebrew Bible, are clearly distinguished in the New Testament by the use of citation formulae. The formulae used by early Christian authors are similar to those used by contemporary Jewish authors. When introducing a biblical passage, in sources from Samuel to Philo to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the author highlighted its sacred quality with the words “it is written,” or “as it (scripture) says.” New Testament writers use these same formulae, but sometimes add what is called the fulfillment formulae, as in “Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says...”¹¹ It is clear that the Hebrew Bible was recognized as scripture by the proto-orthodox Christians, though filtered through a different hermeneutic.

The proto-orthodox church saw itself, and Jesus, as firmly entrenched in the Jewish tradition. The proto-orthodoxy and the disparate communities of meaning developed three major oral and literary forms, which Harry Gamble classified as “smaller collections.” These were “the four gospels, the letters of Paul, and the catholic (or general) epistles. Together these account for all but two documents in the canon: Acts and the Apocalypse.”¹² It has been widely noted that these five attributions (the gospels, Pauline letters, general epistles, Acts and Apocalypse) are also followed by the writers of ex-orthodox texts, and were also applied to non-orthodox texts, such as the Gospel of the Ebionites, the Acts of Peter, the Letters of Peter and James, and the Apocalypse of Peter. Admittedly, the attribution and titling of texts (including the four orthodox gospels) occurred years or decades after their composition. Nonetheless, this mimicry of the orthodox forms is usually seen as an attempt to gain adherents from the proto-orthodox community.¹³

Many books were widely read and even accepted as authoritative in the first and second centuries, only to be discarded or marginalized by later generations. Souter described a process of “temporary canonization,” that is to say “books which had canonicity, or something very like it, in a particular church for a particular period, but were afterwards dropped.”

¹⁰ Ibid, 186.

¹¹ Penner, 66.

¹² Gamble, 275.

¹³ Ehrman, xi.

His list of temporary scriptures includes “the Didache (or The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles), the Epistle of Barnabas, 1 and 2 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Apocalypse of Peter, and Acts of Paul.”¹⁴ In addition to heretical books, such as the Apocalypse of Peter, many books were accepted as orthodox, but still rejected from the sanctioned canon which was developed after Constantine, such as 1 Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas.

To focus our research, we will investigate one particular genre of scripture: the gospel. It appears that gospels were the earliest developed narratives, though many have speculated that these gospels may be dependent upon an earlier collection of sayings, either written or oral, sometimes referred to as Q or the Signs Gospel. Growing from these traditions, the four gospels developed as liturgical elements of distinct Christian communities. It is presumed that many communities possessed only one of the gospels, while some may have had two or more. Certainly, the text of each gospel can be seen as filling the needs of specific *Christianities*. As Lee McDonald writes,

Most biblical scholars have concluded that the writings of the New Testament addressed the needs of specific communities and that the writers had the needs of those communities in mind while telling their story (gospels).¹⁵

Though they likely emerged from distinct communities, and emphasized different facets of Christ’s life and teachings, the four were recognized early as the “tradition handed down to us.” It also seems clear that the gospels were primary elements of early liturgy. In the first years of Christian practice, the proto-gospels were recited during liturgy. Even after the gospels were written, they maintained performative functions in the ritual life of believers. Most Christians

encountered <the gospels> primarily in worship. Christianity took over from Judaism the practice of reading scriptures as an integral part of worship, and Justin, writing in the mid-second century, speaks of ‘the memoirs of the apostles’ being read at the Eucharist ‘for as long as time allowed.’¹⁶

¹⁴ McDonald (2010), 20-21.

¹⁵ McDonald, 415.

¹⁶ Mursell, 246.

Traditionally, the written gospels were seen to have circulated individually, only later being combined into codices containing two, three or all four gospels.

Bart Ehrman casts the fourfold gospel tradition as a creation of the proto-orthodox communities, which existed alongside and in competition with a variety of other Christianities. These alternate “communities of meaning” that we will examine, primarily Marcionite, Ebionite, Montanist, and Gnostic, arose in the first centuries of Christianity and survived in some form until Constantine raised Christianity to the status of a legal and preferred imperial cult. Some thrive even in the present. During that time, the different orthodoxies offered competing versions of Jesus’ teaching and mission. In the end, however,

Only one form of Christianity, this group we have been calling proto-orthodox, emerged as victorious, and it is to this victory that we owe the most familiar features of what we think of today as Christianity.¹⁷

Western Christianity, Protestant and Catholic, builds upon the four-gospel tradition of the proto-orthodox community, and their understanding of Jesus and the Bible is defined by the categories of faith established in these early Christian communities.

What were the guide posts or “boundary markers”¹⁸ which outlined the terrain of orthodoxy, accepting some and excluding others? McDonald highlights four major criteria used by the early church to determine orthodoxy: Apostolicity, Orthodoxy, Antiquity and Use. The application of these criteria was not standardized and some communities gave primacy to one or more categories over the others. Further, the perception of the texts was constrained by the church and cultures in which they were received. These broad categories give us insight into how these apocryphal communities defined their tradition, but, perhaps more cogently, they also create a negative image of the heresies and external dangers they represented to the proto-orthodox churches.

Apostolicity can be viewed broadly as reverence toward the teachings and opinions of the first generations of Christians, above those of later generations. What we might call the *core* of the New Testament was established very early and there was little dissent concerning the authenticity of these narratives. As McDonald writes,

¹⁷ Ehrman, 136.

¹⁸ Keller, 1.

Some works that were selected for inclusion in the Christian Bible, especially the gospels and Paul's letters, were recognized by the end of the first century and the early second century to have considerable value for the church in its life and ministry.¹⁹

The gospels, letters, acts and apocalypses accepted as scripture are all attributed directly to those disciples who personally followed Jesus (Matthew and John) or to followers of those first disciples (Mark and Luke). Paul, while neither an immediate disciple of Jesus nor one of their followers, is granted apostolic authority, probably because of his importance in founding many of the important church centers, but also because he was a contemporary of the first disciples, consulted personally with them, and, of course, he is counted as one who experienced a vision of the risen Christ.

Orthodoxy, in the early centuries of the church, was an evolving concept. As we saw in the discussion of Serapion and the Gospel of Peter, the use of the Apostle's name apparently gave the bishop some assurance of the text's authority. After careful examination, however, he revoked his approval, writing that the author of Peter "was dwelling in some hole of heresy." Serapion's rejection of the gospel "was not because of its questionable authorship, though that may have played a small role, but because the theology was considered out of step with the 'rule of faith' operating within the church."²⁰ Internally, the proto-orthodoxy spanned the gulf between Mark's sparse narrative and John's effluent philosophy, but definite theological boundaries were formed, which excluded the heretical multidox communities.

The four gospels and the letters of Paul offer starkly contrasting views of basic truths. The theological differences were "so wide even in the New Testament that we are compelled to admit the existence not merely of significant tensions, but, not infrequently, of irreconcilable theological contradictions."²¹ There was, however, an overriding ethos which guided the larger church and the individual churches through the loose orthodoxy of the first generations towards more settled views in the second and third centuries. Theologians, like historians, are prone to making lists, so we will accept Gerd Theissen's outline of early Christian theology as a starting point. As quoted by McDonald, Theissen describes the early church as being

¹⁹ McDonald, 419.

²⁰ McDonald, 428.

²¹ Kasemann, 419.

governed by two basic axioms, monotheism and belief in the redeemer. In addition, there are eleven basic motifs: the motifs of creation, wisdom and miracle; of renewal, representation and indwelling, of faith, agape and a change of position, and finally the motif of judgment.²²

The Hebrew Bible, as we have seen, was *the* scripture used by Jesus and his immediate followers. Jesus built his teaching on the foundations of the Hebrew Bible, albeit with a radicalized interpretation, and those teachings informed the oral tradition and subsequent written gospels. Thus the principle of Antiquity begins with an acceptance of Hebrew Scriptures as foundational to Christian theology. The oral tradition placed Jesus' teachings in the context of "Old Testament" scriptures. As the narratives developed into gospels, the words and later the texts were attributed to specific figures belonging to the first generation of Christians; either the *apostles*, immediate disciples of Jesus (Matthew and John), or to *apostolic men* (Mark and Luke), who were students or close confidantes of the apostles themselves. Along with Paul, these men are the only authorities finally accepted in the New Testament. The definition of antiquity places the apostles and apostolic men as carriers of tradition. Later writers may be considered important, even inspired, but they always interpret the traditions handed down from antiquity, and do not create them anew.

The ministry of Jesus had become the defining moment in history. Consequently, the church's most important authorities were those closest to this defining moment. The early Christians believed that the books and writings that gave them their best access to the story of Jesus, and thus defined their identity and mission, were those that came from the apostolic era.²³

Antiquity is closely linked to the principle of Apostolicity, but is expansive in its inclusion of the Hebrew Bible as authoritative scripture. Though modern scholarship has disproven the dates and authorship attributed to most of these texts, the church's perception of them guided their decision making. "Antiquity, perhaps linked with apostolicity and the 'rule of faith,' appears to have been an important criterion for canonicity for some of the churches."²⁴ The combined application of Apostolicity and Antiquity also excluded many *temporary* scriptures from final acceptance in the scriptural canon. McDonald lists "the Didache, 1 Clement, perhaps the Epistles of Ignatius, Barnabas, Hermas, the Martyrdom of Polycarp,

²² McDonald, 430.

²³ McDonald, 431.

²⁴ Ibid.

and possibly even 2 Clement” as books that were excluded through the application of these two categories.²⁵

As is true even today, the scriptures were not revered as isolated statements of faith, but were deeply enmeshed in the liturgy and rites of the early Church. Eusebius recognized that the *Use* of a certain text was as central as any other factor in determining its acceptance as scripture. Eusebius states that accepted texts were “recognized (homologoumena)” and eventually “encovenanted (endiathekoi = ‘testamented’ or ‘canonical’).” McDonald specifically addresses the Letter to the Hebrews, whose authorship was questioned by many in the early church, as a text whose *use* qualified it for inclusion. “Churches were reluctant to dismiss a useful and cherished document.”²⁶ Use was not always the dominant factor, however. The texts mentioned previously—1 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache and others—were integrated into the liturgical practices of many communities, however issues related to Apostolicity and Antiquity overrode their widely accepted use.

So, an interaction of these four major criteria guided the early church in its acceptance of certain texts as authoritative scripture, and later in the formal canonization of the books of the New Testament. For our purpose of examining the many Christianities which existed in the first four centuries of the new faith, we can use these criteria as establishing boundary markers to delineate the proto-orthodox church from contemporary traditions. As Ehrman notes in *Lost Christianities*, history and theology produce winners and losers; and the winners write their version of the story. But those early Christianities shared a common matrix, insofar as “all forms of early Christianity claimed authorization of the views by tracing their lineage back through the apostles to Jesus.”²⁷ Without engaging in counter-factual scenarios, or debates as to the correctness of any particular Christianity, we can examine the similarities and differences between the proto-orthodox winners and some of the theological losers, which will give us a fuller map of the variety of faiths which co-existed in the first four centuries of Christianity.

Marcion’s name reverberates through histories of the early church. He is, in many ways, the proto-heretic, standing in defiance against the proto-orthodoxy. It should be stated that most of what we know about Marcion comes from the writings of his orthodox opponents, as is true with most of the traditions we will discuss. Marcion is best-remembered for two literary creations: his commentary, *The Antitheses*, and his redacted New Testament.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, 432.

²⁷ Ehrman, 93.

The Antitheses lays out the basic theological foundations of his doctrine. First, he rejects the idea of a father/son relationship between the God of the “Old Testament” and Jesus. The God of the Old Testament is the God of the Hebrews and the creator of the material world. His strict laws and vengeance were opposed by the God of Jesus, who “came into this world to save people from the vengeful God of the Jews.” Further, Jesus did not belong to the material world, which was created by the Old Testament God. He was not born and did not have a material body. Marcion was a Docetist, as were many of the gnostic Christians and believed that “Jesus only ‘seemed’ to have a fleshy body.”²⁸

Marcion’s theology is based on his understanding of Paul, who he saw as distinguishing between the *Law of the Jews* and the *Gospel of Christ*.²⁹ He was also strongly influenced by the Gospel of Luke, and especially Jesus’ teaching that “a tree is known by its fruit.” The God of the Old Testament produced bad fruit, a flawed material world. The God of Jesus produced good fruit, a new world of “love, mercy, grace, salvation and life... There are two Gods, then, according to Marcion, Jesus himself said so.”³⁰ Marcion’s New Testament mirrored his commentary, excluding all but ten Pauline Letters and an edited version of Luke’s Gospel. He also dismissed Jesus’ own faith in the Jewish scripture, by excising the entire Hebrew Bible.

As is the case of all Christianities of the early centuries, Marcion believed his understanding of Jesus was the correct one, and that the universal church would come to share his views. He presented those views to a church council, which he himself may have called. He was promptly excommunicated and left Rome, beginning his own Pauline-inspired missionary effort. In fact, his message was popular, and he founded a great many churches. His teachings co-existed with the proto-orthodox church for centuries.³¹ Marcion’s teachings directly contradicted the teachings of the early Orthodox church. There were points of overlap, but these were few. Marcion’s disavowal of Matthew, Mark and John was a direct challenge to the apostolicity of the early church, which mandated the inclusion of all four texts. The combined four gospels gave elasticity to the church’s views, while Marcion’s focus on a heavily-edited Luke imposed a single interpretation. Marcion

²⁸ Ehrman, 105.

²⁹ Ibid, 104.

³⁰ Ibid, 106.

³¹ Ibid, 109.

‘appears not to have thought of the New Testament as “scriptural” in the sense with which the Old Testament was scriptural, but to have thought of it as a collection of generally reliable historical documents which, however, needed editing to remove errors and slips... He had no hesitation in reworking the books or books which he had received as the gospel of his own community... because he himself knew the truth, and could identify and correct’ the errors of the gospels.³²

Marcion also directly attacked two other criteria of the early church: *Orthodoxy* and *Antiquity*. Interpreting the New Testament to identify two distinct gods—the God of the Old Testament and the God of Jesus—violated a basic tenet of orthodoxy: monotheism. Though seen as a demiurge, the God of the Old Testament was a deity in his own right, though not bound to Jesus in any Trinitarian formula. In addition, removing Jesus from the context of the Hebrew scripture and culture nullified the traditions of antiquity which guided the proto-orthodox community. In the early church, “A high value was placed upon the past, and what was old was generally considered more reliable and acceptable than what was new.”³³ Jesus’ message integrated and redefined the old, while Marcion jettisoned it.

The Ebionites have been seen as a polar image of Marcion. While Marcion saw Jesus as a God who negated the God of the Jews, Ebionites saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, a perfect sacrifice sent by God to expiate the sins of the Jewish people. However, the Ebionites were Adoptionists, believing that Jesus was a flesh and blood human, not a God, and that he was adopted by God as his son to serve a spiritual purpose. For the Ebionites,

what set Jesus apart from all other people was that he kept God’s law perfectly and so was the most righteous man on earth. As such, God chose him to be his son and assigned to him a special mission, to sacrifice himself for the sake of others.³⁴

While Marcion selected Luke’s gospel and the letters of Paul as his scripture, abandoning the Hebrew Bible, the Ebionites, quite naturally, accepted the Hebrew Bible intact, and rejected Paul, whose mission to the Gentiles made him “the archenemy, the heretic who had led so many astray by insisting that a person is made right with God apart from keeping the Law and who forbade circumcisions, the ‘sign of the covenant,’ for his

³² McDonald, 345.

³³ McDonald, 430.

³⁴ Ehrman, 101.

followers.”³⁵ Matthew was also part of their scripture, though they apparently changed to the title to *The Gospel of the Nazareans*. The Nazarean Gospel followed Matthew closely, but excised the chapters recounting Jesus’ holy birth. Proto-orthodox writers also mention a lost text, *The Gospel of Ebionites*, which is thought to be a harmonic gospel; a text which overlaid the narratives of multiple gospels; in this case, the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. While not certain, it appears that the Ebionites also co-existed with the proto-orthodoxy for several centuries. The fourth-century Orthodox Bishop of Cyprus, Epiphanius, condemned their practices and even quotes seven passages from their *Gospel of the Ebionites*, the only surviving record of the text.

The Ebionites transgressed the same boundary markers as the Marcionites, though from different directions. Dismissing Paul, they violate the principle of Apostolicity, and their Adoptionist beliefs also contradict the Orthodox teachings of Christ’s divinity. In terms of Antiquity, it could be argued that Ebionites out-antique the orthodox. As “Jewish followers of Jesus” they accepted the law of the Old Testament, excepting the need to make sacrifice, as Jesus had become the *once-and-for-all sacrifice*. As Jesus had, they kept kosher, observed the Jewish holy days and practiced circumcision. Their scripture, at least their version of Matthew, may have been written in Aramaic; if so, they read the words of Jesus as he would have spoken them.³⁶ They did not interpret antiquity in the same way as the proto-orthodox, but it could be debated who had the purer understanding of Jesus’ teachings.

The third challenger to the proto-orthodoxy, the *Montanists*, presented challenges to all four scriptural criteria. They disagreed with the proto-orthodox understanding of antiquity and apostolicity, holding that divinely-inspired prophecy and scriptures continued past the end of the apostolic age. Eusebius condemned the Montanists for their “rashness and daring <in> composing new scriptures.”³⁷ The Montanists were named after one of their prophets, Montanus, who “understood himself to be a prophet who received revelations directly from God.”³⁸ Joined by two female prophetesses, Maximilla and Prisca, they proclaimed their own scripture and visions as equal to those of antiquity. One proto-orthodox critic charged “they say that the Paraclete said more in Montanus than Christ revealed in the Gospel, and they say he has said not only more, but

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ehrman, 102.

³⁷ Ferguson, 315.

³⁸ Ehrman, 150.

things that are better and greater.”³⁹ The Montanist challenge to apostolicity, orthodoxy and antiquity are easily identified. In addition, the creation of scripture through prophecy also violated the traditional paradigm of use, which abjured new revelations and recited traditional scripture to link communities to the past.

Finally, the Gnostics. There was not one gnostic tradition, but many, though Valentinus is a central gnostic figure, and Gnosticism was often referred to as Valentinianism by the early church. The core of the conflict between proto-orthodoxy and Gnosticism is the interpretation of scripture. Gnostics based their teachings on the traditions of secret knowledge passed from Jesus to select disciples, as well as speculation regarding the nature of the universe prior to creation. Perkins argues that the Gnostics were not interested in canon-formation, but in philosophical speculation.

The Christian Bible originates in a hermeneutical framing of Jewish scriptures so that they retain their canonical authority and yet serve as witnesses to the Christ-centered experience of salvation. Gnostic and Valentinian exegesis adapts hermeneutics of esotericism to enlist parts of the emerging Christian Bible and the oral traditions about the words of the Savior to frame a different experience of self, world, and salvation.⁴⁰

While the proto-orthodoxy maintained a dynamic tension between the Hebrew and Hellenistic worlds, Gnostics were firmly entrenched in Hellenistic philosophy. They were aware of the Hebrew Scriptures, though their texts cite Genesis most often, with fewer references to the other books of the Pentateuch, or the Prophets and Histories. When they do cite the Hebrew Scriptures, the citation formula, “as it is written” is rarely used. One gnostic text, the Apocryphon of John, inverts the citation formula, negating passages from Genesis by using the formula “not as Moses said.”⁴¹

Gnosticism claims roots in Apostolicity, in a similar way to the Ebionites. The Ebionites saw themselves as heirs of the Jewish-Christian tradition promoted by Peter and James in Jerusalem. The Gnostics, on the other hand, drew from apostolic traditions such as the messianic secret and the imparting of special knowledge to the disciples. A tradition of Gnosticism can be discerned in Matthew 13:10-11: “The disciples came to him and asked, ‘Why do you speak to the people in parables?’ He replied, ‘Because the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been

³⁹ Ibid, 150-151.

⁴⁰ Perkins, 371.

⁴¹ Ibid, 364.

given to you, but not to them.” The Antiquity of Gnosticism is negatively expressed in Paul’s letter to the Colossians, which is seen as a warning against false gnostic philosophy and deceit.

The New Testament is largely accepted as scripture by the Gnostics, though they do not follow the protocols of orthodoxy and use, as defined by the proto-orthodox church. Pherm Perkins catalogued the citations or references to the four gospels in the texts recovered from the Nag Hammadi library. Since the Gospel of Thomas is often believed to have drawn from the same oral tradition as the fourfold gospels, it is probably not surprising that Thomas has the most connections to the orthodox: 74 references to Matthew; 35 to John; and 39 to Luke. All of the Nag Hammadi “scriptures” have at least one reference to a proto-orthodox gospel, and most have multiple references to multiple gospels. The Nag Hammadi texts may have been referencing the written gospels, or may be working from the oral tradition which preceded the written forms.⁴² For all these reasons, Gnosticism represented a forceful challenge to the proto-orthodoxy.

This survey of Early Christianities is not all-encompassing, but does present a glimpse of the entangled traditions which arose in the first centuries. While not adapting the “anything goes” polydoxy of the Roman Empire, there was wide latitude in the expression and enactment of different traditions. These Christianities co-existed for several centuries, until Constantine gave the proto-orthodox Christian church status as a legal cult. Shortly after adopting the cross as his military emblem, Constantine reached out to Eusebius with a simple command, “to have prepared for the churches in Constantinople fifty copies ‘of the sacred scriptures which you know to be especially necessary for restoration and use in the instruction of the church.’”⁴³

In choosing the books of the New Testament, Eusebius used three common categories of text: Acknowledged, Disputed and Spurious. The acknowledged books were accepted without reservation. Among the disputed books, he included “those that met the criteria of deriving from apostolic time and authorship by apostles and apostolic men.”⁴⁴ That allowed the inclusion of 2 Peter and 2-3 John and Jude, even though their apostolic attribution was widely disputed. Eusebius presented his list of scripture to Constantinople, which is identical to the 27-book New Testament recognized today, with the exclusion of Revelations. Eusebius’ canon sanctioned the four-gospel tradition that Irenaeus outlined in 160

⁴² Perkins, 368-369.

⁴³ Ferguson, 318.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

CE, and closely mirrored a hypothetical canon proposed by Origen in the third century, though Origen's list included the Shepherd of Hermas, and excluded James, 2 Peter, and 2nd and 3rd John. Eusebius' New Testament, with the Book of Revelations added, was officially recognized in the West with Athanasius' Festal letter of 367.

Christianity grew out of a nexus of Jewish and Hellenistic cultures. The life and teachings of Jesus, a devout follower of monotheistic Judaism, were introduced to the pagan polydoxy of the Roman Empire, and spread quickly from Africa to Europe. Within the relaxed structures of Roman religious practice, several different Christianities developed: proto-orthodox, Marcionite, Ebionite, Montanist, and Gnostic, among others. These movements all self-identified as Christian, and formed their doctrines on distinct interpretations of the same oral and literary traditions. A shared reverence for Jesus and the gospel genre entangled them in a shared identity as Christian. While keeping the communities segregated from the pagan practices of the Romans, their multidox views also established distinct theological boundaries separating one Christianity and another. Within the polydoxy of Hellenistic religions, Christianity developed as a multidox of distinct churches. Lactanius, an advisor to Constantine, captured that ghost of rival Christianities:

There is no occasion for violence and injury, for religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than by blows, that the will may be affected. [...] We do not entice, as they say; but we teach, we prove, we show.⁴⁵

These Christianities were in close contact and open competition for centuries, though the Ebionites, who demanded circumcision and observance of Jewish practices, were quickly eclipsed by other traditions. Pagans made no distinction between the multidox faiths, however, and all were subject to state persecution. Ironically, it was the adoption of the proto-orthodox church by Rome which disrupted the dynamic equilibrium of the multidox traditions. In the edict of 323, Constantine ended worship in house churches, empowering the proto-orthodox church, soon to be known as the "catholic" church, to enforce their theology on divergent, heretical Christianities.⁴⁶ Constantine favored the proto-orthodox communities over their rivals, but Theodosius openly embraced coercive tactics to marginalize and even destroy heretical beliefs. As Kreider explains,

⁴⁵ Kreider, 126.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

Emperor Theodosius I (379–95) chose violence. In 380, urged on by Bishop Ambrose of Milan, Theodosius addressed an edict to the people of Constantinople, stating that ‘all peoples... shall be engaged in... that religion which the divine Peter, the apostle... transmitted to the Romans,’ the Trinitarian orthodoxy that Pope Damasus now represented.⁴⁷

From that time forward, competitive multidox Christianity was replaced with a militant monodoxy. In 382, Theodosius set up the first Christian inquisition, to root out (dis-entangle) the remaining heretical groups opposing the new orthodoxy. In 392, he outlawed all pagan practices. The repression continued, and all heretics or pagans were banned from holding any state office. The goal of the monodoxy was clear: “Public life, including public religious activity, would henceforth be purged of heresy and pagan religion. Public life would be Christian, orthodoxly Christian.”⁴⁸

Arising from the Jewish monotheism and the polydoxy of pagan Rome, Christianity developed for three centuries as a competitive multidox, with differing theologies competing for adherents. Within 100 years of becoming a legal cult in Rome, however, proto-orthodox Christianity had transformed into a repressive monodoxy. The union of religious and political authority was fatal to multidox. For 1000 years, the Catholic Church silenced dissent, sometimes with theological argument, sometimes with violence. Since the stormy years of the Reformation, the monodox church has given way to a new multidox, with many competing traditions all operating under the banner of Christianity. The future of multidox Christianity is not certain. It may continue splintering the faith, moving toward a post-Christian secular society, or even a new polydoxy. Or it may encounter a renewed monodoxy. The next century will likely be as crucial as the fourth century in setting a course for the future of religious expression. Some of today’s thriving communities could also vanish with knowledge of their teachings existing only as silent ghosts in the writings of their opponents.

⁴⁷ Kreider, 127.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

