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A POOR MAN'S CHRISTOLOGY[1]

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The Jerusalem church called itself οἱ πτωχοί (Gal 2.10), probably from Isa 61.1, and held a prophetic Christology (Acts 3, 7). The Ebionites in Irenaeus and Epiphanius traced their name to Acts 2–5, and held Jesus to have been a prophetic figure, conceived naturally and possessed by the Spirit/'Christ' from baptism till before the passion. The same prophetic/possessionist Christology seems to be taught by Jewish Christians opposed by Justin and Ignatius: the 'docetists' believed that *Christ* (not Jesus) seemed to have suffered. It is also opposed by Polycarp, by John (especially in 1 John 4–5), by Paul (dramatically in 1 Cor 12.1–3), and in the pre-Marcan traditions.

Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, had contact with a group of Ebionites in the late fourth century. 'They pride themselves', he says, 'claiming to be poor because, they say, they sold their possessions in the time of the apostles . . . and so passed into poverty and self-denial; and that is why they are called by all πτωχοί, the Poor People.' However, the grace given to a Catholic bishop is always able to penetrate the deceit of a heretic: 'actually [their founder] was called Ebion in the normal way; the poor wretch got the name prophetically, I suppose, from his father and mother'.[2]

Epiphanius was mistaken in his uncharity: even a prophetic father might hesitate to name his son *Pauper*, and the false teacher Ebion is a fiction of the third century,[3] unknown to Irenaeus. But the point is significant. Most heretical movements were called by the Great Church after their founder-teacher: Valentinians, Origenists, etc., in this case followers of Ebion. Positive names – Gnosis, Poor People – were what such movements called themselves. Since names do not change easily, we may ask, 'How did the Poor People come so to name themselves?', and the answer they

[1] Read as a Main Paper at the SNTS Conference at Copenhagen, on 5 August 1998.
[2] *Panarion* 30.17.2f.
[3] Hippolytus, *Refut.* 7.35; Tertullian, *de Carne Christi* 14.18, 24; *De Virg. Vel.* 6.1.

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gave Epiphanius may seem rather plausible, as it was to Karl Holl.[4]

οἱ πτωχοί seems to be the name by which the pillars spoke of their movement in Gal 2.10: 'only [they asked] that we should remember the Poor People, τῶν πτωχῶν'. They were not asking Paul to give alms generally: the Poor People means the churches of Jerusalem and Judea, as is confirmed by Paul's collection for these communities, and they were in fact poor because of the way of life described in Acts 1–5. Paul glosses the title in Rom 15.26 when he says the money is 'for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem', for it is not to be thought that any rich Christian will benefit; but in 15.25, 31 the money is for 'the saints' generally.

All three Synoptic Gospels suggest independently that the first Christian community in Jerusalem saw itself as fulfilling the prophecy of Isa 61.1. Luke tells us that Jesus announced himself in his sermon at Nazareth as the one anointed by the Spirit to bring the gospel to the πτωχοί. Matthew has Jesus open the Sermon on the Mount with two Beatitudes on the πτωχοί (in spirit) and the πενθοῦντες. Mark gives Jesus' opening words as πεπλήρωται ὁ καιρός; his hearers are to believe the εὐαγγέλιον: the last verse of Isa 60 promised that κατὰ καιρόν God would gather his own, and in 61.1 the prophet is sent εὐαγγελίσασθαι τοῖς πτωχοῖς. So it is quite likely that the movement thought of itself as the poor people, **אביונים**, even in Jesus' lifetime.[5]

Hence it is no surprise that when Jesus has called the Twelve in Luke 6, he should address them, 'Blessed are οἱ πτωχοί', with hunger, tears and hatred as their lot. We should note, against many pious critics, that poverty is to *follow* discipleship. Jesus' first followers were, so far as our evidence goes, all middle-class:

[4] K. A. Holl proposed the thesis that the name **אביונים** went back to the primitive Jerusalem church, as evidenced by Gal 2.10, Rom 15.25f and other texts, in 'Der Kirchenbegriff bei Paulus in seinem Verhältnis zu dem der Urgemeinde' (1921), in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte II* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1933) 44–67. The view was disputed by L. E. Keck in two articles, 'The Poor among the Saints in the New Testament', *ZNW* 56 (1965) 100–29, and 'The Poor among the Saints in Jewish Christianity and Qumran', *ZNW* 57 (1966) 54–78. Keck is criticizing a form of the hypothesis not held by me, nor, I think, by Holl: viz, that the Jerusalem church adopted poverty as an ideal of self-denial. But Gal 2.10 says nothing of self-denial: the poverty has come as an armed man in consequence of the sharing policy – and also from Christians giving up work (1 Thess 4.11–12; 2 Thess 3.6–15; 1 Cor 4.12). The difficulties that he raises over the collection are not substantial. It is now widely thought that the Jerusalem church refused Paul's money, and Luke, in embarrassment, portrayed it as alms for the (Jewish) people.

[5] The Hebrew has **ענוים**, not **אביונים**, behind πτωχοῖς; but the Jerusalem church was probably bilingual, and the shortage of money would soon suggest 'the Poor People' as a better name than 'the Oppressed'. Matthew awards the kingdom of heaven first to the πτωχοί and last to the δεδιωγμένοι.

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owners of houses and boats, employers of hired labour, running tax offices, women who could pay for the movement, successful prostitutes, etc. Matthew is at pains to exclude the merely poor from the Beatitude: one has to be πτωχὸς τῷ πνεύματι to be blessed. The paradox of the NT's general abhorrence of riches alongside evidence of a middle-class church is eased if the Jerusalem church thought of itself as οἱ πτωχοί, and actually fell into poverty as the later Ebionites claimed. So although Holl made some false steps in his 1921 article, I do not think it has been overthrown by the robust response of Leander Keck and other critics.[6]

All authorities[7] agree that the Ebionites kept Jewish customs, circumcised their boys, would not use the Pauline letters as being hostile to the Law, read Matthew's Gospel only as the most Jewish, etc.: indeed they are the only clearly Jewish-Christian sect described by Irenaeus. Irenaeus takes us back two centuries from Epiphanius, and he adds the interesting comment that they had the same Christology as Kerinthus:

> He supposed that Jesus was not born of a virgin, but was the son of Joseph and Mary like all the rest of mankind, and that he was more righteous, prudent and wise. And after his baptism, Christ descended into him in the form of a dove from the highest Ruler, and he then proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and then Jesus has suffered and risen again, while Christ has remained untouched by suffering, as he was a spiritual being.[8]

This element of Irenaeus's testimony has been distrusted by scholars as varied as Martin Hengel[9] and Gerd Lüdemann;[10] but it seems probable for several reasons:

[6] A more recent critic has been G. Strecker in Appendix 1 to W. Bauer's *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity* (ET London: SCM, 1972) 272–85. Holl was supported by a number of critics, including H. Lietzmann, *An die Römer* (HNT 8; Tübingen: Mohr, 4. Aufl. 1933), Excursus on 15.25; E. Bammel, art. πτωχός, *TDNT* 6, 885–915, p. 909; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (NTGTC; Exeter: Paternoster, 1982).

[7] Our only real information comes from Irenaeus, *A.H.* 1.26.1f, and from Epiphanius, *Panarion* 30. Further texts in Hippolytus, *Ref.*, Origen and Filaster seem to be dependent on Irenaeus: see A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinynck, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish Christian Sects* (NovTSup 36; Leiden: Brill, 1973) 19–43.

[8] Irenaeus, *A.H.* 1.26.1: τὸν δὲ Ἰησοῦν ὑπέθετο μὴ ἐκ παρθένου γεγεννῆσθαι, γεγονέναι δὲ αὐτὸν ἐκ Ἰωσὴφ καὶ Μαρίας υἱόν, ὁμοίως τοῖς λοιποῖς ἅπασιν ἀνθρώποις, καὶ δικαιότερον γεγονέναι καὶ φρονιμώτερον καὶ σοφώτερον. καὶ μετὰ τὸ βάπτισμα κατελθεῖν εἰς αὐτὸν ἀπὸ τῆς ὑπὲρ τὰ ὅλα αὐθεντίας τὸν Χριστὸν ἐν εἴδει περιστερᾶς· καὶ τότε κηρῦξαι τὸν ἄγνωστον πατέρα καὶ δυνάμεις ἐπιτελέσαι. πρὸς δὲ τῷ τέλει ἀποστῆναι τὸν Χριστὸν ἀπὸ τοῦ Ἰησοῦ, καὶ τὸν Ἰησοῦν πεπονθέναι καὶ ἐγηγέρθαι, τὸν δὲ Χριστὸν ἀπαθῆ διαμεμενηκέναι πνευματικὸν ὑπάρχοντα.

[9] M. Hengel, *The Johannine Question* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity, 1989) 59–61, simply treats Irenaeus as reporting Kerinthus's Christology, and ignores his comment on the Ebionites.

[10] G. Lüdemann, *Heretics* (London: SCM, 1996) 52f: Lüdemann cites Irenaeus on the Jewish practices of the Ebionites, and omits his comment on their Christology.

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(i) It is Hebraic. Jesus was like a prophet of the OT, on whom 'the Word of the Lord came'. Such prophets had access to the council of heaven, and could reveal divine secrets, just as Jesus could 'proclaim the unknown Father' in the Matthaean Gospel. 'The hand of the Lord' was upon Elijah, and he ran before Ahab's chariot from Carmel to Jezreel, and did many miracles, like Jesus. Isa 61, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me (ἔχρισέν με) to evangelize the poor, to proclaim (κηρῦξαι) release . . .', probably lies behind Irenaeus's wording (Χριστόν, κηρῦξαι). For such a Christology we should avoid the muddling term Adoptionist (Adoptianist) and use the word Possessionist, or Prophetic. The divine power *possessed* Jesus from his baptism till just before his death.[11]

(ii) Epiphanius had access to the Gospel of the Ebionites, or Hebrews, as he calls it; and this included an account of Jesus' baptism:

> When the people were baptized, Jesus also came and was baptized by John. And as he came up out of the water, the heavens were opened and he saw the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove that descended and entered into him. And a voice sounded from heaven that said, Thou art my beloved Son; in thee I am well pleased; and again, I have this day begotten thee. (30.13.7)[12]

This account varies a little from Irenaeus in that the possessing power is here spoken of as 'the Holy Spirit', not as 'Christ'. But two features fit well with Irenaeus. The Spirit *entered into* Jesus (εἰσελθούσης εἰς αὐτόν), and so *possessed him*; we notice the careful contrast in Matthew and Luke, who write ἐπ' αὐτόν; Luke has the Spirit come down *in bodily form*, so there is no question of its entering Jesus; and John eliminates the baptism of Jesus altogether. Secondly, Jesus is said to have been *begotten by God* at his baptism, not at his conception as in Matthew and Luke. The Ebionites did not believe in the virginal conception, and (Epiphanius tells us) suppressed the first two chapters of Matthew in their 'bastardized' version (30.3.7; 30.13.2).[13]

[11] The notion of *adoption* derives from the divine words 'Today have I begotten you'; but it does not make it clear either that this adoption means being taken over by a divinely powered spirit external to the human Jesus, or that this adoption will terminate unceremoniously on the cross.

[12] τοῦ λαοῦ βαπτισθέντος ἦλθεν καὶ Ἰησοῦς καὶ ἐβαπτίσθη ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰωάννου. καὶ ὡς ἀνῆλθεν ἀπὸ τοῦ ὕδατος, ἠνοίγησαν οἱ οὐρανοὶ καὶ εἶδεν τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον ἐν εἴδει περιστερᾶς, κατελθούσης καὶ εἰσελθούσης εἰς αὐτόν. καὶ φωνὴ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ λέγουσα· σύ μου εἶ ὁ υἱὸς ὁ ἀγαπητός, ἐν σοὶ ηὐδόκσα, καὶ πάλιν· ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε.

[13] The version of the baptism in *G.E.* is not from Matthew, but is a compound of the three Synoptics and other material. No doubt different 'Ebionite' communities produced a variety of 'Gospels', like the Great Church.

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Philipp Vielhauer dates the Ebionite Gospel to before 150,[14] and it is likely that its form of the tradition, with the Holy Spirit as the possessing power, is older than that with an angelic 'Christ'. The Spirit would be in line with Isa 42 and 61, and an *angel* called Christ is an innovation. Once the doubled name Jesus Christ, so common from Paul onwards, became standard, there must have been pressure to change the denotation of Christ: Jesus was the human being, Christ the possessing power.[15] But we may think that the Christ tradition is much older than Irenaeus.

(iii) Epiphanius knows enough plausible detail about the Ebionites to make it likely that he had met a group of them. They contradicted one another on Christology, he says (30.3.3–6; unlike Catholic theologians!); but the mainstream view is repeated a number of times. 'The Spirit which is Christ came into him and clothed him who is called Jesus' (30.3.6, εἰς αὐτὸν ἦλθε . . . ἐνεδύσατο αὐτόν). 'Christ was in [Jesus], having descended in form of a dove . . . and been united with (συναφθέντα) him' (30.14.4). 'They call Christ the prophet of truth, and Christ Son of God by virtue and by union of exaltation which befell him from above' (κατὰ προκοπὴν καὶ συνάφειαν ἀναγωγῆς τῆς ἄνωθεν πρὸς αὐτὸν γεγενημένης: 30.18.5). Some of this language is an attempt at sophisticated theology, and has neither been taken over from Irenaeus and Origen[16] nor made up by the saint himself. Other wording, like ἐνεδύσατο, sounds refreshingly like the OT. The Spirit clothed himself with Gideon (Judg 6.34), with David's lieutenant Amasai (1 Chron 12.18), and with Zechariah (2 Chron 24.20). Epiphanius is in touch with an Ebionite group with the same name, and substantially the same creed, as the groups known to Irenaeus: their theology is now a little more developed, but it also reveals more of its Hebraic roots.

(iv) The link with Kerinthus is also encouraging. He is associated with St John in the famous legend of the bathhouse: John said, 'Let us run lest the bathhouse collapse with Kerinthus the enemy of the truth in it' (Irenaeus, *A.H.* 3.3.4). Irenaeus believed that John

[14] P. Vielhauer, 'The Gospel of the Ebionites', in E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, eds, *New Testament Apocrypha* (ET London: Lutterworth, 1963) 1.153–8: 'the first half of the 2nd century' (156).

[15] A parallel would be the angel Israel, who was incarnated in Jacob according to *The Prayer of Joseph*. We do not know that the angelic Christ was so named by Jewish Christians: we first hear of a 'Christ party' at Corinth (see below), with (presumably) a majority of Gentile members.

[16] Strecker, in Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy*, 293, gives the evidence for Origen's contact with Ebionites, some of whom held opinions close to orthodoxy. In *c. Celsum* 5.61 he speaks of διττοὶ Ἐβιωναῖοι, either confessing the virgin birth like us, or claiming that he was not so conceived, but like the rest of mankind. οὐχ οὕτως γεγεννῆσθαι ἀλλ' ὡς τοὺς λοιποὺς ἀνθρώπους sounds rather like Irenaeus.

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wrote the Gospel against Kerinthus (3.11.1).[17] I shall argue below that this is substantially correct; that much of the Johannine writings are directed against a Kerinthian/Ebionite Christology. If so, it is unsurprising if 50 years on they were thought of as contemporary rivals, with John scoring points effectively.

JUSTIN

We have no reference to Ebionites earlier than Irenaeus, because they have not yet come to be thought of as a heresy; but things are going that way in Justin. 'There are of our race', he says, meaning Christians, 'those who think [Jesus] to be a man of men' (*Dial.* 48), and while a liberal himself, he owns that other Christians deny salvation to such. This view of Jesus as ψιλὸς ἄνθρωπος sounds like the Ebionite doctrine of his natural conception, and an unsaved member of the Christian race sounds like a heretic.

Other passages in the *Dialogue* point us in the same direction. The previous chapter, *Dial.* 47, distinguishes hard-line from soft-line Jewish Christians, of whom the former evangelize for circumcision, sabbath observance, etc., while the latter merely keep Jewish customs themselves: we are on the way to Origen's two kinds of Ebionites (*c. Celsum* 5.61, 65), and to Epiphanius's Nazarenes (*Pan.* 29) and Ebionites (*Pan.* 30). In *Dial.* 98 Justin begins a long exposition of Ps 22 as 'showing that [Christ] has truly become man capable of suffering' (ἀληθῶς γέγονεν ἄνθρωπος ἀντιληπτικῶς παθῶν); and at the end of *Dial.* 103 he says that the passion fulfils Ps 22:

> in order that we may perceive that the Father wished his Son really to undergo such sufferings for our sakes, and may not say that He, being the Son of God, did not feel what was happening to Him and inflicted on Him.

He knows of people who maintain that the divine cannot feel pain: this sounds like Irenaeus's Ebionites, for whom the divine Christ did not suffer the passion, being an impassible, spiritual being. On the contrary, Christ became incarnate, capable of suffering.

[17] 'John, the disciple of the Lord, preaches this faith, and seeks, by the proclamation of the Gospel, to remove that error which by Kerinthus had been disseminated among men': the error is traced back to the Nicolaitans, and consists both of gnostic dualism in the godhead and of a possessionist Christology, as in 1.26.1.

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IGNATIUS

Earlier than Justin we find Jewish Christians at work in the letters of Ignatius. Of the five letters to Asian churches, *Magnesians* and *Philadelphians* contain explicit warnings against those who 'live after the manner of Judaism' (*Magn.* 8–10), or 'propound Judaism to you' (*Philad.* 6–8). In *Trall.* 5 the saint claims (somewhat implausibly) to 'comprehend heavenly things, and the arrays of angels, and the musterings of the principalities, things visible and invisible': this seems to be in competition with rival missionaries, and recalls the stuff of Jewish mystical visions from Enoch to the Hekhalot (and Col 1.16). In *Eph.* 6.2 he warns against 'anyone speaking more than about (πλέον ἢ περί) Jesus Christ': the same word πλέον is applied to the name used by Jewish Christians in *Magn.* 10, and in *Eph.* it suggests additional Jewish-type rules rather than 'docetic' teachings which are *less* than Catholig doctrine. *Smyrn.* 5 speaks of those who 'deny Him' as not being 'persuaded by the prophecies nor by the law of Moses', which seems to imply that they accepted those authorities. Also Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, is anxious about 'the error of many', and cites Paul's Ephesian letter, 'By grace ye are saved, not of works' (*Phil.* 1), which again suggests a Jewish background to the error. So it is likely that the opposition in the Ignatians is Jewish Christian throughout. Ignatius had been to Philadelphia, and knew details of Jewish Christians at Magnesia; so it is probable that he saw the whole Asian church as afflicted with the same problem.[18]

This is certainly true of the doctrinal position that Ignatius is fighting. In all five Asian letters he stresses the reality of Jesus Christ's passion, 'which some deny', the need for devotion to the passion, the reality of other aspects of the life of Jesus Christ, etc. Twice he actually cites the opponents' position, in almost the same words (*Trall.* 10.1; *Smyrn.* 2): 'not as certain godless people, that is faithless people (ἄπιστοι) say, that he seemed to have suffered (τὸ δοκεῖν πεπονθέναι αὐτόν)'. This phrase led Bishop Serapion to coin the term δοκηταί about 200, and this ambiguous name has stuck.[19] In both *Magnesians* and *Trallians* the references to Jewish Christians lead straight on into the warning against christological error.

The question is, assuming that the phrase is what the Jewish

[18] For further discussion, and engagement with the secondary literature, see my forthcoming article, 'Ignatius' "Docetists"', in *VC* 53 (1999).

[19] Eusebius cites Serapion's letter in *H.E.* 6.12.6, where it refers to a community using the *Gospel of Peter*, which is not a docetist document on any clear definition. Serapion claims to have coined the name δοκηταί himself.

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Christians actually said, who was the subject of δοκεῖν? It is usually assumed, for example by Udo Schnelle[20] and Charles Munier,[21] that the subject was Jesus. Jesus only seemed to suffer: that is, either Jesus was a bodiless, angelic being who appeared at the baptism, as Marcion thought; or he had a spiritual double as well as a material body, as in the *Acts of John*.[22] But Ignatius never says that *Jesus* really suffered; it is always Jesus Christ, or Christ Jesus. This then opens the possibility that what we have is Irenaeus's Ebionite Christology in the background. The opposition knew perfectly well that Jesus suffered: what they denied was that *Christ*, the possessing spirit, suffered. Christ only seemed to suffer: he was an impassible spirit, and left Jesus on the cross.

I have no doubt that it is this second interpretation that is correct.

(i) The ideas that Jesus was only a ghost, or had two bodies, are not evidenced till well after Ignatius.[23] Marcion was a dualist who was far from seeing Christ as fulfilling the scriptures, while Ignatius's opponents were Jewish Christians who put their trust in the ἀρχεῖα, and whom he never accuses of dividing the godhead. The *Acts of John* often speaks of the immaterial body as the Logos (note, the Acts of *John*), and the book is a reworking of the Fourth Gospel which has missed the central stress, 'The Word *became* flesh'. The Ebionite christology on the other hand is simple, and is likely to be primitive; indeed to a Jew it must seem more rational than its competitor, the incarnation.[24] Jesus was an inspired prophet, like Elijah, possessed for a period by an angelic power.

(ii) When Ignatius runs through a list of the ways in which Jesus was real, he omits everything in the ministry.

> For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived in the womb of Mary . . . and he was born, and was baptized. (*Eph.* 18.2)

[20] U. Schnelle, *Antidoketische Christologie im Johannesevangelium* (FRLANT 144; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987) 76–8.

[21] C. Munier, 'Où en est la question d'Ignace d'Antioche? Bilan d'un siècle de recherches', *ANRW* 2.27.1, 359–484, esp. 407–13.

[22] *AJ* 93, 99–101. The position of *AJ* is unclear. In ch. 92 John sees a double of Jesus conversing with him, which, from 99–101, seems to be the Logos. 93 speaks of John sometimes touching Jesus' material body, and sometimes it is immaterial and his hand goes through it; perhaps sometimes he was touching Jesus and sometimes the Logos.

[23] Schnelle, *Antidoketische Christologie*, 76, refers to an unpublished thesis by P. Weigandt, *Der Doketismus im Urchristentum und in der theologischen Entwicklung des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Heidelberg, 1961), which defines docetism as Jesus' non-corporeality, and limits docetic sources to Satornilus, Cerdon, Marcion and the *Acts of John*. I have been unable to see Weigandt's thesis. We know little about Satornilus and Cerdon (Marcion's teacher), whose views may have been assimilated to Marcion's by the time of Irenaeus.

[24] So Trypho in *Dial.* 48.

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> Jesus Christ, who was of the race of David, who was the son of Mary, who was truly born and ate and drank, who was truly persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was truly crucified and died in the sight of those in heaven and those on earth and those under the earth, who moreover was truly raised from the dead. (*Trall.* 9)

In such a catalogue, we might have expected some details from the Gospel ministry, in the same way that *Smyrn.* 3 draws on specific details of the Lucan resurrection narrative, but there is none; the only apparent exception, the 'persecution' by Pilate, refers in fact to the passion. Ignatius stresses Christ's humanity (of the race of David, son of Mary), his birth, eating and drinking, and baptism; and then the passion and resurrection – all the things that the Ebionites denied to Christ, and allowed only to Jesus. Note that in Irenaeus Christ entered Jesus *after* his baptism; and that the witness of angels and demons is enlisted here to guarantee the reality of Christ's sharing in the passion.

(iii) For the Ebionites the baptism was a key moment: it was then that Christ, or the Spirit, entered Jesus. Ignatius refers twice to the baptism, both times with evident embarrassment. In *Eph.* 18 'he was baptized that by his passion he might cleanse water'; in *Smyrn.* 1 he was 'baptized by John that all righteousness might be fulfilled by him'. The Synoptists thought that the big thing about Jesus' baptism was that it was then that the Holy Spirit came on him. It sounds as if Ignatius does not want to say that, but he might have thought up something more convincing than 'that he might cleanse water'.

(iv) Ignatius's Jewish Christians clearly disliked the Catholic doctrine of the cross: 'his passion, which some deny', 'they say that he seemed to have suffered'. Now it was precisely at this point that the Ebionites drew the line. Jesus was possessed by Christ all through his ministry. It was at the cross that Christ left him, and so only seemed to have suffered. So the crisis point for Ignatius's Jewish Christians coincides with the crisis point for Irenaeus's Ebionites.

(v) A number of passages, which seem rather pointless on the ghost theory, gain force with the Ebionite interpretation. *Eph.* 7 warns against

> some of malicious guile . . . mad dogs, biting by stealth . . . hard to heal. There is only one physician, of flesh and of spirit, generate and ingenerate, God in man, true Life in death, Son of Mary and Son of God, first passible and then impassible, Jesus Christ our Lord.[25]

[25] εἷς γὰρ ἰατρός ἐστιν, σαρκικὸς καὶ πνευματικός, γεννητὸς καὶ ἀγέννητος, ἐν ἀνθρώπῳ θεός, ἐν θανάτῳ ζωὴ ἀληθινή, καὶ ἐκ Μαρίας καὶ ἐκ θεοῦ, πρῶτον παθητὸς καὶ τότε ἀπαθής, Ἰησοῦς Χριστός.

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What is the point of this catalogue? Jesus Christ is εἷς ἰατρός because he is both σαρκικός and πνευματικός: he is a unity, the Word made flesh, unlike the Ebionite Jesus who was σαρκικός and distinct from Christ who was πνευματικός. He was γεννητός, the Son of Mary, and at the same time ἀγέννητος, the unbegotten Son of God; God in man, a single being, not a colloid. He was ἐν θανάτῳ ζωὴ ἀληθινή, because it was in his crucifixion that he brought us salvation, 'his passion which some deny'. In this he was πρῶτον παθητὸς καὶ τότε ἀπαθής: at first, on the cross, he was liable to suffering, but then, with his resurrection, he is a heavenly being and so impassible – not as the Ebionites say, impassible from the start. The fact that such passages give so much more forceful a sense commends the Ebionite interpretation.

(vi) Ignatius mentions the saviour about 140 times; and about 130 of these use the form 'Christ Jesus' or 'Jesus Christ'. Both 'Jesus' and 'Christ' are rare on their own. This rather monotonous feature would be explained if Ignatius felt the pressure to emphasize the unity of the human Jesus and the divine Christ against Ebionite dualism.

THE JOHANNINES

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, was Ignatius's host and friend, and the troubles which Ignatius describes in his letter to the church are echoed in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians. He warns them to

> abstain from false brethren . . . who lead foolish men astray. For everyone 'who shall not confess that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh, is antichrist'; and whosoever shall not confess the testimony of the Cross, is of the devil; and whosoever shall . . . say that there is neither resurrection nor judgment, that man is the first-born of Satan. (Pol. *Phil.* 6f)

The near-quotation is from 1 John 4, and since that epistle was written only some fifteen years before Polycarp, and in the same area, western Asia, it suggests that it was composed with the same 'false brethren' in view.[26]

The situation envisaged in 1 John 4 is of ecstatic worship: 'Beloved, do not trust every spirit, but test the spirits, whether they

[26] Tertullian, *De Praescr. Haer.* 33.20, associates 1 John 4.3 with 'Hebion': 'in his Epistle [John] especially designates those as antichrists who denied that Christ was come in the flesh, and who refused to think that Jesus was the Son of God. The one dogma Marcion maintained, the other Hebion.'

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are of God.' Church meetings are rent by cries, allegedly under the influence of spirits; and John commends applying a criterion to distinguish divine from demonic spirits, 'for many false prophets have gone out into the world'. The demonic spirits lie behind the false prophets, visiting holy men who are not part of the community.[27] These are often spoken of as 'wandering preachers', but we may be suspicious of these shadowy figures. They go back at least to the AD 70s, when Matthew wrote that 'false prophets come to you in sheep's clothing' (7.15), and they are still in evidence a century later in the *Didache*. That is a long time for a movement of individual initiatives to keep going, and in face of persistent hostility. John also says that there are many of them, and that they have gone out into the world: it would be easier to understand their perseverance, and their lack of welcome, if they were representatives of an organization. One is reminded of the missionaries whom Jesus sent out two and two in Mark 6; or indeed of those who visited Corinth, and whom Paul calls false apostles sent by Satan (2 Cor 11.13f).

John's criterion is a doctrinal one: 'In this you know the spirit of God: every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh is of God. And every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God; and this comes from the antichrist' (1 John 4.1–3). The asymmetry of the phrasing is notorious; and although there is some variation in the MS tradition, the majority wording is defensible.[28] John and his friends 'confess Jesus Christ come in the flesh'; his opponents 'do not confess Jesus'. 'Confessing', ὁμολογεῖν, means ascribing divinity to. John believes in the incarnation: Jesus Christ was a pre-existent united being who 'came in the flesh'. It is not said that his opponents fail to confess Christ: they refuse to confess *Jesus*. This does sound very like the Jewish Christian tradition I have been tracing.[29] To them Jesus was just a human being, the son of Mary and Joseph; to ascribe divine honour to him would be ridiculous, and blasphemous – like ascribing divine honour to

[27] Cf. Ign. *Eph.* 9.1, 'I have learned that certain persons passed through you from yonder.'

[28] A minority reading λύει/*solvit* is found in Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and a number of Latin Fathers and MSS, in place of the (grammatically surprising) μὴ ὁμολογεῖ. λύει is difficult to translate, and the usual rendering *destroy* (Schnackenburg) is not well supported by 3.8, 'destroy the works of the devil'. More likely it is a retranslation of the Latin *solvit*, itself an explanation of the mysterious 'does not confess Jesus'. The majority reading seems to be implied by Polycarp *Phil.* 7.1.

[29] So Klaus Wengst, *Häresie und Orthodoxie im Spiegel des ersten Johannesbrief* (Gütersloh: Mohr, 1976). Wengst argues (15–23) that the opposition are *Christians*, and their denial that Jesus is Christ/Son of God (1 John 2.19, etc.) cannot mean that he is not Messiah; they must draw a sharp distinction between Jesus and Christ.

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Elijah. They 'confessed' Christ as a heavenly being; it was only Jesus at whom they drew the line.

The same background gives sense to 1 John 5.6–8: '[Jesus, the Son of God] is he who came by water and blood: not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood; and the spirit is the one which witnesses, for the spirit is the truth. For there are three which witness, the spirit and the water and the blood; and the three are a unity (εἰς τὸ ἕν εἰσιν).' Jesus the Son of God 'came', he was incarnate, δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος. Water and blood, according to *Lev.R.* 15.2, are the physical elements out of which human beings are made: 'Man is evenly balanced: half of him is water and the other half is blood': Jesus was fully human, he 'came in the flesh', 'he came in water-and-blood', the elements which make up σάρξ. He did not come ἐν ὕδατι μόνον: that is the Ebionite christology that God begot him at his baptism, by water alone: note the change of preposition – he came διά water and blood, by means of these elements, not ἐν water only, with accompanying water. He 'came' with the water and with the blood, the two elements being stressed by the repeated ἐν τῷ; and of course Jesus was also animated by the divine Spirit which spoke in him, and so witnessed to his union with the Father. But actually all three elements witness to the incarnation, the physical elements that he was really human, the Spirit that he was really divine. And these three are a unity, εἰς τὸ ἕν εἰσιν; unlike the possessed prophet of Jewish Christian belief, who is a duality, a human being who never 'came' at all, possessed from his water-baptism by an alien Christ.[30]

This understanding seems to be confirmed by the scene of Jesus' death in the Gospel of John. The soldier pierces Jesus' side, and 'there came out immediately blood and water. And he who has seen has borne witness, and his witness is true . . .' (John 19.34f). The incident is enormously significant for the evangelist, and he at

[30] R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (AB; London: Chapman, 1982) 572–85, G. Strecker, *Die Johannesbriefe* (KEK; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1989) 270–9, and R. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1992 = Herder, 1972) 230–8, all take the water and the blood in vv. 7f to stand for the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. This is unlikely for several reasons: (1) ἐλθὼν . . . ἐν is paralleled by ἐληλυθότα ἐν at 4.2, and by ἐρχόμενον ἐν at 2 John 7, in both of which it refers to the incarnation; it would be unnatural to speak of Jesus Christ 'coming' in the passion. (2) So far from thinking that Jesus Christ came in the baptism, John does not even record the baptism – indeed, he suppresses it (John 1.32). (3) The eucharistic passage in John 6 speaks of the eucharist as Jesus' flesh and blood; there is no Johannine reference to the eucharist as 'blood' on its own. (4) The first phrasing, δι' ὕδατος καὶ αἵματος, links the two nouns into a single unity: a reference to two events, the baptism and the passion, would require a second article.

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once rushes in to confirm its reliability: Jesus was really totally human still when he died, for the two elements of humanity were there. Further, when Jesus actually died, he handed over the Spirit: the third witness of 1 John 5 is specified here also. But we notice the curious verb, παρέδωκεν. In Matt 27.50 ἀφῆκεν τὸ πνεῦμα, he let the spirit go: it would be easy for a wrong-headed Jewish Christian to think that the Spirit left him. John emphasizes Jesus' control: he handed the Spirit over to God. So Jesus is displayed in his death as having been plainly incarnate: the Spirit, the water and the blood were all there, three witnesses, backed by the witness of the Beloved Disciple. The three were εἰς τὸ ἕν in the Gospel as in the Epistle.

The Johannine writings are all dominated by fear: the hatred of 'the Jews' which pervades the Gospel, and the harsh spirit of the Epistles are alike evidence of a fear which is far from being cast out by perfect love. The opponents are not a few wandering preachers. Maurice Casey has pointed to evidence that those in the first Epistle are Jews.[31] 'No one who denies the Son has the Father' (1 John 2.23) comes in the earlier antichrist passage, 2.18–25. 'Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son' (2 John 9). These followers of antichrist claim like Jews to have the Father, but if you deny the Son, you deny the Father also; only those who stick to John's incarnational gospel have both Father and Son. Another hint of the same Jewish nature of the opposition is 3.4, 'Everyone who commits sin commits law-breaking (ἀνομίαν) also, and sin is law-breaking': who is concerned about law-breaking but Jewish-type Christians? So the opposition of the Epistles, so veiled, seems to clarify: those who thought they had the Father but denied the Son must be Jewish, and, since they had been members of the church, they must be Jewish Christians, champions of Torah, νόμος.

I must limit myself to one further Johannine passage, John 8.31–59, perhaps the most scandalous piece in scripture, where Jesus tells 'the Jews' that they are of their father, the devil. This is because he has spoken of himself as the Son abiding for ever in his Father's house, unlike the slave; his teaching is the truth which he has heard from the Father, from whom he came. Eventually he says, 'Before Abraham was, I am', and they take up stones to kill him, as he foretold in v. 37. Now a surprising feature of this

[31] M. Casey, *From Jewish Prophet to Gentile God* (Cambridge: Clarke, 1991) 158.

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discourse is that it is in fact addressed to 'those Jews who had believed in him' (8.31); and the phrase in the discourse following, 'the seed of Abraham', together with the contrast between the son abiding and the slave dismissed from the house, recalls Paul's attack on the Jewish Christians of Gal 4. John does not apparently distinguish 'Jews who have believed in him' (v. 31) from 'the Jews' (v. 52); and this gives a much more convincing explanation for the fear and hatred we deplore in the Johannines. John sees two religions, Judaism and incarnational Christianity, where Jewish Christians saw one, Judaism with a hopeful Messianist movement within. To John, Jews who had believed in Jesus were not proper Christians at all; and as a majority of the church (as we would see it) they were a frightening threat: that is why he abhors them, as the Trotskyists abhorred Stalin. In other words, the opposition against whom John wrote the Gospel, and the opposition in the Johannine epistles, are the same: Jewish Christians who deny the incarnation. As Irenaeus said, John wrote the Gospel against Kerinthus.

A POOR PEOPLE'S CHRISTOLOGY

Polycarp's deceivers were attacked for denying three cardinal positions of his church: the incarnation, the cross and the resurrection. It is difficult to think that such a movement had arisen recently if it had infected all the major churches of Asia, and had presented a mortal threat to him and Ignatius, and even more so to the Johannine author or authors. It is inevitable then that we ask whether there are any suggestions of it in the earlier NT writings.

We hear in 2 Corinthians of a visiting Jewish Christian missionary who 'proclaims another Jesus, whom we did not proclaim' (11.4); it is another *Jesus*, not another Christ – Paul and his rival agreed on the divine nature of Christ, but the man's Jesus was far removed from Paul's eternal Christ Jesus who emptied himself, and humbled himself to the cross. We may think also of Col 2.9, 'in him the whole fulness of divinity dwells σωματικῶς' – unlike the views of those who would make spoil of you through their philosophy and vain deceit (see 2.8). But Polycarp brings 1 Corinthians to mind more obviously, because the opposition there also refuse the gospel of the cross, deny the coming resurrection, say 'I am of Christ', and dispute the incarnation in terms close to the 1 John 4 passage which he quotes. The Pauline parallel is in 1 Cor 12.1–3,

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and has remained a *crux interpretum*, but the Ebionite theory provides a solution to it.[32]

The Corinthians' letter had asked Paul about πνευματικά, by which they mean χαρίσματα. But first he has heard of a scandal, and he settles this quickly and firmly. As in 1 John 4, its setting is ecstatic worship. John: 'every spirit which confesses Jesus Christ come in the flesh . . . and every spirit which does not confess Jesus . . .'; Paul: 'no one speaking in the spirit of God says ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς, and no one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit'.

The scene is such as may be observed today in charismatic churches, in Britain especially in black churches. Excitement rises as 'prophets' in the community are moved by the Spirit; messages from angels are announced, then shouted; the murmurs of support, 'Alleluia!', 'Amen!' spur the prophet, or prophetess, to further revelations, sometimes in English, sometimes in Fanti. It is all too easy to stand in the Church of the Cherubim and Seraphim, Gillott Road, Birmingham, and imagine the inspired Pauline crying out 'Jesus is Lord'. But in a divided church, what could be more provocative? κύριος, the name of God in the LXX, the Church's Bible: that is 'confessing' him, ascribing divinity to him. For Christians from the Jerusalem, Ebionite tradition, this was blasphemy: there is only one God. In the heat of the moment cries go up from the opposite side of the peristyle, ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς – he was just a man, a prophet.

Paul does not want to tackle the issue head on by declaring the anathematizers blasphemers, which would simply exacerbate the divisions; but nor is he prepared to say that messages 'in the spirit' are not to be trusted. So he starts off by attributing the trouble to the inexperience of new converts. He does not want them to be ignorant: 'You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to voiceless idols, however you were led.' So he assures them (διὸ γνωρίζω ὑμῖν) that no one speaking in the Spirit of God says ἀνάθεμα Ἰησοῦς. The λαλῶν takes up the ἄφωνα in v. 2, and this can lead on to the positive claim that all true Christians – that is, Pauline Christians – speak in the Spirit. He knows it would be useless to hit the roof on so controversial an issue: the σοφὸς ἀρχιτέκτων glosses over a few unfortunate words uttered in the heat of the moment, like a wise parent not making a fuss when

[32] There is a good discussion of alternative possibilities in Johan Vos's 'Das Rätsel von 1 Kor 12: 1–3', *NT* 35 (1993) 245–69, with citation of the opinions of numerous scholars. Vos offers an impressive interpretation linking 12.1–3 to the following verses; but he underplays the link of ἄφωνα/λαλῶν, which seems to give the line of Paul's thought.

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their child brings home a swear word from school.

Wild words under apparent inspiration raise a problem: how is the church to tell the true Spirit of God? Paul and John alike offer the same criterion: doctrinal orthodoxy, or, to be more precise, incarnational orthodoxy. Paul's gospel was correct: Jesus is κύριος, on a parity with God from the beginning, who was rich but for our sakes became poor, who for his self-giving was exalted by God and given the name κύριος, and adored by the whole of creation. If you join in that adoration, God's spirit speaks through you. If you accept the 'other Jesus', the prophet proclaimed by the Ebionite missionaries, the 'Christ party', you are just wrong, and the spirit cannot be speaking through you. John is writing to a rump church, and can happily announce that those who are wrong are antichrists. Paul is writing to a divided church which he is hoping to unite, and he says no such thing. *Aureum silentium*.

The Jerusalem church was led at first by Jesus' inner circle, Peter and the Zebedaids; if the Ebionite Christology went back to them, they must have told stories about Jesus, the prophet whom God anointed to proclaim good news to the אביונים. Their form of the good news will not have included any account of the virginal conception: for them the beginning of the gospel will have been Jesus' baptism by John, when the Spirit descended *into* him, like a dove. Thereafter, we may suppose, Jesus will have been pictured as like a prophet, like Elijah or Elisha. Perhaps they spoke of him in the desert, with the wild creatures, with angels ministering to him, like Elijah on the Cherith, or on the way to Horeb. Perhaps they told of their own calling, like Elisha's from the plough. Perhaps there were tales of marvellous happenings: a leper made clean, like Naaman; a child raised from death; the feeding of large gatherings from a few loaves; a moment of vision on the mountainside. Perhaps Jesus was told as healing by the power of God, and not of Beelzebub the god of Ekron; or John Baptist's death at the hands of Herodias as the fulfilment of the work of Jezebel.

But Jesus was seen also as the promised prophet like Moses (Acts 3.22; 7.37). Perhaps it was told that he said, 'O faithless generation!'; or restated Moses' ruling on divorce; or added one extra commandment to the Decalogue; or inferred from Moses the resurrection of the dead; or pronounced which of the commandments was the greatest; or extended Moses' prophecy of the coming gathering of the elect from the ends of the earth. Of one thing only can we be certain: there must have been some note of Christ leaving Jesus before his death. If I had been them, I would have

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looked for a validating text in scripture, perhaps from the Psalms.

It would be nice if we had such a document: but of course the Pauline churches did not keep heterodox texts written in Aramaic, and this imaginary gospel was probably never written. If it had survived, I suppose it would have been re-edited by one of Paul's disciples; interpolated with accounts of how Jesus took the Pauline line on sabbath observance and the food laws; and decked out with the Pauline doctrine that Jesus was the Son of God. We might ask, But how then would such a Pauline follower have known such stories? Who knows? Perhaps, when he was a lad, he heard the disciples telling them in his mother's kitchen.

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