THE SACRAL KINGSHIP

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FOR THE HISTORY OF RELIGIONS
(ROME, APRIL 1955)

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THE EFFECT OF THE DESTRUCTION OF JERUSALEM IN A. D. 70 ON PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN SOTERIOLOGY

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From the documents which constitute the corpus of the New Testament is it possible to show that, by the end of the 1st century there had emerged in Christianity all the constitutive elements of what has been defined as the ‘myth and ritual’ pattern centring round the idea of a divine-king: the historical Jesus of Nazareth is adored as the incarnated Son of God, and by virtue of this status, as also of that of his Davidic descent, is acclaimed as royal; in conflict with the powers of Evil he suffers and dies, his death being variously regarded as a vicarious sacrifice for human sins and as the means of breaking the daemonic hold on mankind; his Resurrection gives the assurance of the victory of Good over Evil, of Life over Death, while his Ascension into the heavens completes his triumph and proclaims his eternal sovereignty. From the sequence of the moments which constitute the so-called ‘myth and ritual’ pattern that of the Sacred Marriage is notably absent in the Christian mythos; but even this defect may be fairly explained in terms of a transformation of imagery, in that under the image of the birth of the Church at Pentecost, which is to be the vehicle of the new life, the fertility motif has been also incorporated.

The fact that the ‘myth and ritual’ pattern can thus be reasonably made out in the primitive Christian soteriology is very suggestive, and it is calculated to prompt speculation along the lines of the psychology of mythopoetic thought or of syncretistic influences. However, it appears on closer examination of the factors of the historical environment in which the primitive Christian soteriology was formulated that more prosaic forces were responsible for the achievement of its distinctive form.

In the long debate which has gone on among New Testament...
scholars about the origins of Christian soteriology there has been a
danger of neglect to consider the significance of two facts, the impor-
tance of which would seem to have been obvious. They are (1) Paul’s
explicit statement in Gal. 1, 6-9 and II Cor. xi, 4 that there were then
current in the Church two rival interpretations of the nature and
mission of Jesus. (2) the effects of the destruction of Jerusalem in A. D.
70 on nascent Christianity. The causes of this strange neglect are in-
teresting, but time does not permit of the discussion of them here.

A proper appreciation of the significance of the two statements of
Paul, to which reference has just been made, would necessarily involve
a lengthy exposition of the psychology of his conversion and of his
situation in the Church1): it must suffice, therefore, briefly to note the
content and bearing of what he says in them. In the Galatian passage
Paul writes to his converts: “I marvel that ye are so quickly remov-
ing from him that called you in the grace of Christ unto a different gospel
(εἰς ἄλλων εὐαγγέλιον); which is not another gospel ὃ ὄντι ἐστὶν
(ἄλλο): only there be some that trouble you, and would pervert
the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven,
should preach (unto you) any gospel other (or contrary to: παῦ’, ὃ)
than that we preached unto you, let him be anathema.” In the other
passage Paul writes in admonition to his Corinthian converts: “But I
fear, lest by any means, as the serpent beguiled Eve in his craftiness,
your minds should be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity
that is toward Christ. For if he that comeareth another Jesus
(ἄλλον Ἰησοῦν), whom we did not preach, or if ye receive a different
spirit (πνεῦμα ἄλλον), which ye did not receive, or a different
gospel (εὐαγγέλιον ἄλλον), which ye did not accept, ye welcome
it (καὶ δέ μη ἐνέχεσθαι).

In these passages Paul clearly attests the currency in the Church of
two decisively different interpretations of the person and mission of
Jesus; and these two interpretations are not regarded by him merely
as instances of divergent opinion, but as rival versions of the faith, of
which the difference was so serious that the exponent of that gospel
which he rejects is to be anathematised.

Paul unfortunately never explicitly names the exponents of this rival
interpretation of Christianity, but their identity can be surely inferred

1) This has been done by the present writer in his book The Fall of Jerusalem and
from the fact that their teaching was presented with such authority that Paul’s own converts were in danger of accepting it and were thus causing him such profound concern. Consequently, when this fact is set alongside that of Paul’s obvious embarrassment about his position vis-à-vis the Church of Jerusalem, there can be little doubt that this other interpretation was the ‘gospel’ of the original community of Jewish disciples located at Jerusalem. 2)

This identification is a matter of fundamental importance for our understanding of primitive Christianity; however, even when it is made, we are still left with the essential problem of the content of this Jerusalem ‘gospel’, because Paul nowhere explicitly describes it and it has been preserved in no document which has descended to us. But the situation is not hopeless, and it is possible to reconstruct its main outline from allusions and reflections in various writings, namely, the Epistles of Paul, the Acts of the Apostles, the Gospels, the surviving fragments of Hegesippus, and the Clementines. The task of identifying relevant data is long and complicated, and, since it has been done elsewhere, notably by H. J. Schoeps in his Theologie und Geschichte des Judenchristentums 3) and by the present speaker in his Fall of Jerusalem and the Christian Church, 4) it must suffice here to give a summary account of the conclusions.

It is obvious that in the Jewish Christian evaluation of Jesus the fact of his death by crucifixion constituted a problem of peculiar seriousness. Both pagan and Christian evidence agree in representing the Crucifixion as an adventitious event, accomplished by the Roman government in Judaea, whereby the career of Jesus was suddenly and violently cut short: the extant records are also at one in stating that the penalty was decreed by the procurator after a trial for sedition, and there is in them significantly no suggestion that Jesus designedly offered himself in some way as a victim of a sacrifice on behalf of others. Now, in their proclamation of Jesus as the Messiah of their nation, these Jewish Christians had to face in the fact of his criminal’s death an objection of peculiar gravity, because not only did the current Messianic expectation envisage a glorious warrior who would overthrow the hated yoke of the heathen, but the very idea of a ‘crucified Messiah’

2) Fall of Jerusalem, pp. 136-145.
3) Tübingen, 1949.
4) Chap. 5.
was a profound offence to the deepest of Jewish sensibilities. Accordingly, the Jewish Christians were obliged, if they were to persist in their belief in the Messiahship of Jesus, to formulate an apologetic to meet this initial objection. This they quickly succeeded in doing by finding in the sacred scriptures of their people passages which could be interpreted as prophecies of the suffering of the Messiah; chief among such testimonia were the Isaianic Oracles concerning the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. The important point for us here, however, is that, in thus interpreting the death of Jesus, the original Jewish Christians were primarily animated by an apologetic motive, namely, to explain, indeed to explain away, the objection which the Crucifixion constituted in their proclamation of the Messiahship of Jesus: whatever soteriological significance lay in the testimonia which they employed, they left it completely unexplored, because it was quite beyond their comprehension to imagine that their Master, the Messiah of Israel, could have died to win eternal salvation for all mankind. On the contrary, the more concerned were these Jewish Christians to prove that in his earthly life Jesus had fulfilled in various ways the ancient prophecies concerning the Messiah. Consequently, their 'gospel' took the form of presenting what we today would term 'the historical Jesus' in the context of his Palestinian environment, seeking thereby to show how in word and deed he fulfilled the Messianic rôle; his career had indeed been interrupted by the unfortunate accident of his Crucifixion, but that too had been divinely foretold, and soon he was to return on the clouds of heaven to 'restore the kingdom again to Israel'.

Of the content of Paul's 'gospel' we also unfortunately have no formal statement; however, from his extant writings its essential points can be discerned, even despite the unsystematic nature of his thought.5)

For Paul it would seem that the Crucifixion of Jesus had also been a matter of basic concern. Before his conversion it would appear that for him the skandalon of Christianity lay in the proclamation of the crucified Jesus as the Messiah. In his Galatian Epistle Paul is intent on showing that he was not won to the new faith by the arguments of the Jerusalem Christians, and he maintains that his conversion was due to the direct interposition of God — in other words, Paul avows that he never accepted the Urgemeinde's interpretation of Jesus. It would, ac-

cordingly, seem that consequent upon that experience which convinced him that the crucified Jesus was still alive and therefore of supernatural status, Paul was profoundly concerned to understand the meaning of the Crucifixion. Unable to accept the interpretation of the Jerusalem Church, that it was an unfortunate accident which had nevertheless been foretold in ancient prophecy, Paul was obliged to seek some deeper significance in it. How he arrived at the conclusion that he did, it is not possible for us now to know, and we can only surmise that the syncretic culture of which he was possessed helped in some way to supply the categories in terms of which he set forth his new conception. What we do know certainly is that he lifted the Crucifixion out of its historical setting and proclaimed it was an event divinely predestined before the present aeon. Its purpose was consonant with its origin, namely, God planned in some unexplained way to rescue mankind from enslavement to the daemonic powers of the universe, the ‘archontes tou aionos’, by causing them in their ignorance to crucify a supernatural preexistent being, called by a variety of terms such as ‘the son of God’ and ‘the Lord of glory’, who was incarnated in the person of the historical Jesus. Thus Paul’s ‘gospel’ was essentially a soteriology, of which the divine Soter was the incarnated Son of God, a god-man, who won life for men by the surrender of his own life in death and assured it to them by his triumphant resurrection. Parallels naturally suggest themselves in the various cults of saviour-gods, which then flourished in the Graeco-Roman world; but it seems improbable that in Paul’s conception there was any conscious borrowing from such types, although we may notice the remarkable similarity which is to be found between Paul’s doctrine of baptism as a mystical assimilation of the Christian neophyte to Christ in his death and Resurrection and the ritual identification of Osirian devotee with the saviour-god in his death and resurrection, which is first attested in the Pyramid Texts of the 3rd millenium B.C.6)

We see then that there was current in the Church within three decades of the Crucifixion two fundamentally different interpretations of the faith. The one, that of the Jerusalem Urgemeinde, which was the older and thus the more authentic, was essentially a Messianic cult with its

terms of reference strictly within the ethos of Israel’s national religion; it was, moreover, not a soteriology in the religious sense of the word. The other, of which Paul was the protagonist, was truly a soteriology, but of a gnostic type, its relation to historical event being essentially tenuous and secondary.

What would have been the fate of these rival interpretations, if left free to continue their source of mutual hostility, is a matter for speculation. It can, however, be shown that Paul’s position vis-à-vis of the Jerusalem Urgemeinde was inherently weak and there is reason to believe that, after his unsuccessful encounter with James, the Lord’s brother, as recounted in Acts xxii, his reputation was eclipsed and his churches laid open to the unopposed propaganda of the Jerusalem ‘gospel’. If this state of affairs had thus continued, the Pauline interpretation must surely have perished and Christianity been kept within the bounds of Judaism as a Messianic cult centred on Jesus of Nazareth.7) But in the year 66 the Jewish nationalists rose in revolt against Rome and after four years of disastrous war Jerusalem, with its Temple, was destroyed and Israel’s life as a nation came to an end — in that Jewish catastrophe the Jerusalem Church was fatally involved and after the year 70 it completely disappears and the Christian movement is bereft of its original centre of authority and source of tradition.8)

With the destruction of Jerusalem and the obliteration of the Urgemeinde the Gentile Christians were faced with a difficult situation. It was clearly imperative for them to reorientate their faith in such a manner that they were no longer dependent upon their Jewish mentors and yet remained faithful to the original tradition; to this end the recollection of Paul’s teaching was of immense value and influence. Into all the factors operative in this situation time does not permit us to enter here, and it must suffice to state briefly that within a decade of A. D. 70 a new interpretation of Christianity was set forth, which was in effect a synthesis of the rival ‘gospels’ of Paul and the Jerusalem Urgemeinde. This new interpretation was the Markan Gospel. In it the original tradition of the Urgemeinde of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel is fused with the Pauline doctrine of the divine saviour who gives his life a ransom for many. The subject is naturally very complicated and it requires detailed elucidation; for that the present speaker can only

7) Cf. Fall of Jerusalem, chap. 7.
8) Cf. op. cit., chap. 9.
refer again to his book already cited.9) Its interest, as it effects our present subject, lies in this: in the Markan synthesis there was brought together fortuitously the essential elements which give to Christian soteriology its apparent conformation to the 'myth and ritual' pattern centred on the god-king. The Markan Jesus is a divine being incarnated on earth, where by virtue of his Davidic descent he is truly a king; the forces of evil gather themselves against him and he suffers and dies; but by his death he wins salvation for men and he finally triumphs in new life.

But this conformation to the pattern is only apparent, for it owes its origin, as we have seen, to a fortuitous combination of circumstances. Consequently, it would seem that on analysis the Christian mythos really constitutes a warning against a facile tracing of cultic pattern, and it should serve to remind us that every apparent instance of the 'myth and ritual' pattern must be rigorously examined in order to understand the real factors of its constitution.

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9) Chap. 10.