

The First Christians

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Part 1

The Alternative Chronology

The first century, Yeshu ha-Notsri Apollos, Jewish scripture, Therapeutae

Most of the posts on this website depend on an alternative chronology in which the founding prophet of Christianity lived in the time of Alexander Janneus. The massive reorientation on the part of the reader that this alternative chronology requires involves a breathtaking time shift of one hundred years, something no New Testament scholar considers or even *can* consider—for the alternative chronology gives the lie to the New Testament itself. “Moving” the founding prophet back one hundred years in time requires one to deny the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth—which is Jesus mythicism.

At the same time, the alternative chronology solves intractable problems that have bedeviled as well as astonished scholarship for generations. Among them are the following:

(1) **Epiphanius.**

The Church Father dated Jesus to the time of King Alexander Janneus (Pan 29.3.3). Not only that, but he makes other revealing “blunders”:

(a) Epiphanius writes that “the Nasaraean sect was *before* Christ, and *did not know* Christ” (Pan 29.6.1). How can this be? For the Nasaraeans (Nasarenes/Natsarenes) were related to Christian heretical sects such as the Ebionites, Ossaeans and Nazarenes, they “made use of” Elxai, etc. (Pan 19.5.1 & 4; 29.6.1; 30.1.3). However, the mystery is solved when “Jesus” is moved back one century to the time of Janneus. In this case, the Nasarenes indeed emerge “before Christ” (that is, before the formation of New Testament Christianity in mid-II CE).

(b) Epiphanius writes that the “Jessaean” (= Essenes, see next entry) were “derived from Jesus” and “came to faith in Christ... *before* they were called Christians” (Pan 29.4.9). Again, this problem is solved when “Jesus” is moved back one century to the time of Janneus—and it also sheds new light on the nature of the Essenes.

(c) Epiphanius writes (Pan 29.5.1) that Philo “described none other than Christians” in the latter’s treatment of the Therapeutae of Alexandria (Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa*). But the Therapeutae were contemporaneous with Jesus of Nazareth (Philo wrote in the first half of I CE). This, of course, makes it chronologically impossible for the Therapeutae to have been “Christians” in any conventional sense—a problem that has long bedeviled scholars. With the alternate chronology, however, the enigma vanishes when “Jesus” is moved back one century to the time of Janneus. The Therapeutae then emerge as pre-Catholic Christians. (In fact, the Therapeutae were considered to be “early” Christians as late as the 19th century.)

Incidentally, Epiphanius considers that Philo dealt with the Therapeutae (“they live in monasteries in the vicinity of the Marean marsh”) in what he calls a “book entitled ‘Jessaean’” (Pan 29.5.1). This is convincing evidence that, for Epiphanius, Jessaeen/Essene = Therapeutae. (It seems that Epiphanius simply keyed onto the first words of *De Vita Contemplativa*: “Having mentioned the Essenes...”.) See (b) above.

(2) **Apollos.**

Acts describes the curious situation of Apollos, a Jew from Alexandria who “had been instructed in the way of the Lord” and “taught accurately the things concerning Jesus” (18:24–25) yet had received only John’s baptism (19:4). Apollos is then re-baptized (19:6). Here we see that “the way of the Lord” (which was associated with “*John’s* baptism”!) *preceded* Catholicity. The chronological impossibility is solved when “Jesus” is moved back one century to the time of Janneus. Apollos then emerges as a pre-Catholic Christian follower of Yesu haNotsri (whose given name was probably John/

Yuchannan), converted to Catholicism by Priscilla and Aquila (18:26) and then re-baptized by Paul.

(3) **The Talmudic Yeshu.**

Scholars have long known (and simply ignored) that multiple, unrelated Jewish writings describe a prophet Jesus the Nazarene (literally: Yeshu ha-Notsri) who lived in the time of Alexander Janneus one century before the Christian Jesus, a prophet who was excommunicated, tried by the Sanhedrin, and then crucified—just like Jesus of Nazareth. The astonishing nexus of coincidences (identity of name and history) is resolved when Jesus of Nazareth is considered fictive and Yeshu haNotsri considered historical. The two pertinent endpoints of the alternative chronology then become:

- 100 – 64 BCE

The life of Yeshu ha-Notsri

- Ca. 140 – 150 CE

The writing of the New Testament gospels, in which the fictive figure Jesus of Nazareth is furnished with a historical setting in Herodian times.

Besides the proposition that the Talmudic Yeshu ha-Notsri was the actual founder of the Christian religion, perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the alternative chronology is that an entire century (ca. 65 BCE to ca. 35 CE) previously considered *pre*-crucifixion suddenly becomes *post*-crucifixion, for Yeshu haNotsri was crucified around 64 BCE—just before the Romans conquered Palestine and brought an end to the Hasmonean dynasty.

One can now appreciate that, according to the alternate chronology, Philo's *Therapeutae* and the *Dead Sea Scrolls* may have been affected by Yeshu's career. In fact, the entire library of intertestamental literature must be reconsidered, for these works were also potentially affected by the ministry

and teachings of Yeshu haNotsri. While they cannot be considered Christian in a Catholic (Pauline) sense, they may be “Christian” in ways later denominated heretical—including the Gnostic Way, and the view that “Jesus” was a spiritual entity that entered into a worthy individual (such as Yeshu haNotsri himself).

In the next post I begin investigating intertestamental “Jewish” literature with the foregoing in mind. That literature may be more “Christian” than we have heretofore suspected. A re-examination of intertestamental texts is illuminating and clarifies many riddles—including, for example, the figure of Enoch, who (we shall see) provided a nuanced template for the invented figure Jesus of Nazareth.

Part 2

Gnostic elements in Judaism

B.C.E. times, christology, Gnosticism, Gospel of Mark Enoch

Very occasionally in Jewish scripture, man crosses the chasm separating him from God. Doing so is fraught with danger, for we recall that Moses could not even *look* upon the face of God (Ex 3:6), and when the prophet Isaiah “saw the Lord sitting on a throne” he exclaimed: “Woe is me! I am lost, for... my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of Hosts!” (Isa 6:1 & 5.) If merely *seeing* the Lord is anathema, then for man to ascend to heaven is far beyond the pale of Judaism. And, indeed, the later rabbis severely proscribed any consideration or study of such “ascents,” whether visionary or not.

However, at least two anomalous figures in Jewish scripture broke the mould. Both subsequently gave birth to enormous bodies of literature over many centuries. Enoch was a patriarch in the seventh generation from Adam (Gen 5:19), and Elijah was a 9th century BCE prophet (1 Kgs 18). Enoch and Elijah are “anomalous” because both ascended to heaven. Furthermore, they did not die.

In Christian scripture, of course, Jesus also ascended to heaven and overcame death (Mt. 28:6 etc). Some even opined that he was Elijah *redivivus* (Mk 6:15).

In important ways, then, the Christian Jesus follows a pattern that had existed only at the fringes of Judaism. Now, “ascending to heaven” is a quintessentially *gnostic* trope. When Enoch walked with the angels he learned all sorts of heavenly secrets—thus making him a conduit to mankind of valuable secret traditions. (In an alternative Jewish tradition, Seth assumes the

role of such a conduit.) In Enochian literature (of which a good deal exists), “heaven” is the place of wisdom—gnosis—as Enoch himself reveals:

Wisdom could not find a place in which she could dwell;
 but *a place was found for her in the heavens*.
 Then Wisdom went out to dwell with the children of the people,
 but she found no dwelling place [on the earth].
 So Wisdom returned to her place
 And *she settled permanently among the angels*.

[1 En 42:1-2, emphasis added.]

Much overlooked is that the name Enoch itself means “understand, acquire by experience, perceive” and is derived from the root cH-N-K.¹

The earliest ascent of Enoch in Jewish literature occurs in Genesis, in three cryptic verses: ²

Enoch walked with the angels after the birth of Methuselah three hundred years and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Enoch were three hundred sixty-five years. Enoch walked with the angels; then he was no more, because God took him. (Gen 5:22-24)

Later Enochic literature (beginning in the third century BCE) expanded upon this short Genesis narrative. The portion of 1 Enoch known as the *Book of Watchers* (chps. 1-36) describes two cosmic journeys by the patriarch and his ascension to the heavenly throne room (esp. 14:8–16:4). Because of his superhuman knowledge, Enoch serves as an intermediary between angelic groups and even evokes fear and trembling among angels when he approaches them (1 En 1:5; 13:3).

¹ P. Grelot, La légende d'Enoch dans les Apocryphes et dans la Bible: Origine et Signification. In *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 46 (1958) p. 186.

² Contrary to most editions of the Bible, I have translated this passage using “the angels” instead of “God” in two instances where the Hebrew reads ha-Elohim, following the analysis by James Vanderkam, *ENOCH: A MAN FOR ALL GENERATIONS*, 1995:13.

In the first person singular, Enoch summarizes his unique wisdom: “And I, Enoch, alone saw the sight, the ends of everything; and no man has seen what I have seen” (1 En 19:3). We note that several gnostic elements are here combined—deathlessness, the knowledge of heavenly secrets, and the instruction of others. Compare the famous beginning of the Gospel of Thomas:

Here are the secret words that Jesus the Living spoke, and that Didymus Judas Thomas wrote down.

And he said: “Whoever understands the meaning of these words will not experience death.”

Here too we have

- (a) deathlessness,
- (b) secret knowledge, and
- (c) instruction.

Enoch’s ascents to the heavenly realm gave birth to an esoteric Jewish genre known as *hechaloth* (“palaces”) literature (pertaining to visions of ascents into heavenly palaces), always frowned upon by the rabbis of later centuries.

Tension between proto-gnosticism and normative Judaism is also evident in the anomalous figure of Elijah, who ascended “in a whirlwind into heaven” with “a chariot of fire and horses of fire” (2 Kgs 1:11). This astonishing episode contributed to later Jewish *merkabah* (“chariot”) mysticism, which the rabbis similarly considered heretical.

Ezekiel also had visions “of the appearance of the likeness of the glory” of the LORD riding upon a great throne chariot (Ez 1:28). The foregoing anomalous figures in Judaism prefigure the Christian Jesus the Nazarene, a prophet who (1) pleased God so much as to become “my beloved son”—an echo of Enoch’s promotion to quasi-angelic status in 1 Enoch; (2) taught heavenly secrets; (3)

overcame death; (4) ascended into heaven; and (5) will be the eschatological cosmic judge (1 En 48:9–10).

The visions of and ascents to God in Jewish scripture mentioned above also prefigure the trajectory of Christian theology. In what I have termed Stage I “Jesus” (“Savior”) is the pure gnosis—the wisdom that saves. This stage is detectable only in certain logia and parables of the canonical gospels, of the Gospel of Thomas, and of a few other (suppressed and often fragmentary) texts. In Stage II “Jesus” is the spirit of God that unites with a worthy human (I CE). We detect this intermediate stage in works such as the Gospel of Nicodemus and the Gospel of Mark. And finally in Stage III “Jesus” is none other than the God-man Jesus of Nazareth (mid-II CE+). In other words, Jesus christology itself develops from the pure gnosis to the Creator of the World.

In the gnostic view, however, understanding already is divinity. This view was appreciated long before the Christian era:

Then the Lord God said, “See, the man has become like one of us, understanding good and evil...” (Gen 3:22)

Adam was expelled from Eden because he *understood* and thus became “like” God.

In the gnostic view, gnosis saves. There is no need for any further development. In fact, further development is a corruption, a devolution. The gnostic ascension (read: resurrection) happens in *this* life, not post-mortem. It is an “enlightenment.”³

Gnostics, proto-gnostics, and theologies of ascent have been anathema to organized religions since such organizations existed. Though efficacious and potent for the individual, the gnostic way is a fatal handicap and decentralizing force in a communal setting. After all, no church is possible if its various members each claim a direct connection with the divine. Such a claim renders

³ Gospel of Philip 56.15 f; Treatise on the Resurrection, NHL 1.4.

priesthoods, scriptures, and rituals entirely superfluous. The gnostic requires only effort and willpower to attain his own salvation (see, e.g., GTh 2, 5, 35, 56; Mk 12:30 etc).

It is no surprise that, in what became normative Judaism, the ascent of man to the divine is severely rebuked. For his hubris, in the Genesis account Adam is summarily ejected from the Garden of Eden. Instead of being rewarded for understanding the nature of good and evil, he is condemned “to till the ground from which he was taken.”

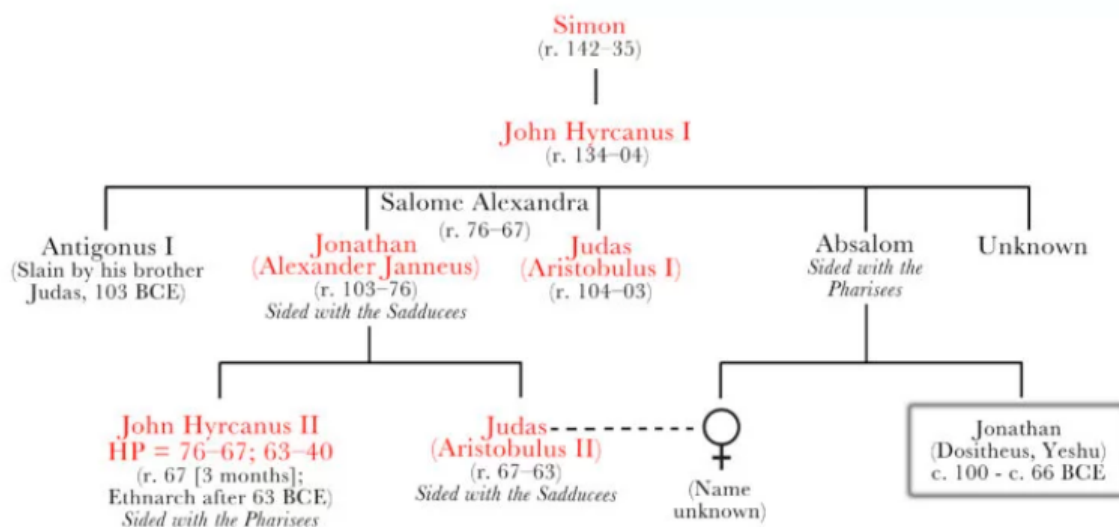
But the ascents (and attempted ascents) to God did not end with Adam. As we have seen above, they can be found at the fringes of Judaism, in the form of visions, dreams, and anomalous events such as Enoch “walking with the angels.” These nebulous ascents constitute a “Jewish proto-gnosticism” that involves the promotion of a human being to semi-divine, quasi-angelic status. This also seems to have been the view of the evangelist Mark, whose Jesus is a man imbued with the spirit of God. In the subsequent canonical gospels, however, Jesus is promoted from intermediate/angelic status to God himself—he is born of a virgin, rises bodily from the grave, was pre-existent (GJn), and will return as the eschatological judge.

Part 3

“New eyes” on the first century BCE

B.C.E. times, baptism, Christian origins, Gnosticism, John the Baptist Natsarene

The tradition dates Jesus of Nazareth’s birth to about 4 BCE. That was a full sixty years after the death of Yeshu haNotsri, whose given name was apparently Yochanan ben Abshalom in Hebrew, that is, John the son of Absalom. As we have seen, this prophet was a member of the Hasmonean royal family. Two of his uncles were kings (Aristobulus I and Janneus), his grandfather was John Hyrcanus I (r. 134–104), his own sister was married to Judas Aristobulus II—the king during whose reign John was executed—and his maternal uncle was none other than Joshua ben Perachiah, the head of the Sanhedrin (*nasi*) and the most powerful religious figure in the land.



Despite all these astonishing and powerful connections, according to Talmudic records John/Yeshu renounced all and became an outcast, preached “another

way,” and was ultimately caught and executed by the Sanhedrin, an elite assembly for which he himself had once been destined.

Within a year or two of John’s death the Romans conquered Israel (63 BCE) and brought an end to the Hasmonean Kingdom. They installed a puppet regime (Hyrchanus II as High Priest but not king) and divided the province into five autonomous regions. Thus began the centuries-long Roman rule of the land. In this, now Roman environment, the earliest Christian fellowship took root.

Accordingly, we must regard the decades after the execution of John about 64 BCE as the much-sought-after decades of “the first Christians.” This is about a century earlier than the standard estimation, which erroneously dates the first Christians to the time of “Paul” in mid-I CE.

The theology of these first Christians can be gleaned from texts outside the New Testament. We will look at those texts in upcoming posts. They are centered around the transformative ascent to divinity—a “resurrection” available to every person. This ascent was modeled on the teachings (and life) of the prophet John himself, symbolized and enacted in baptism, where the proselyte dips into gnosis (water) and emerges transformed, having exchanged the linen garment (sindon in the NT) of the acolyte for the royal robe (*stolé*). Thus, the transformative event in the Christian’s life was spiritual baptism, resurrection, and marriage all rolled into one.

The saving gnosis was called simply “Savior” in Hebrew—*Yeshua*, or “Jesus” in translation. For the first Christians, the beloved, saving Jesus was the groom, and the proselyte was the bride. The spiritual Jesus united with the righteous person at baptism/resurrection/marriage. This is the Jesus of the text known as Secret Mark, a text in which the beloved Jesus lies with the proselyte at night. In short, we are dealing with a rich symbolic language, an encratite language developed by the early Christians—a sort of in-group code replete with nuptial symbolism including bridegroom, bride, wedding garment (linen or robe), and so on. This symbolism, of course, would mislead outsiders—

including the later Church Fathers, who were only too happy to label these “heretics” as libertines.

Thus, John the son of Absalom was early dubbed John the Baptizer, for his teaching “baptized” others—that is, it had the power to transform them through gnosis. Inevitably, the prophet also soon became known by the saving teaching with which he was ineluctably associated, Yeshu, “Savior.” And, finally, the moniker haNotsri was attached to him—that is, “the Natsarene”—which roughly means “Keeper/Guardian/Revealer of Secret Traditions.” In this way, and probably by the turn of the era, the prophet was ennobled under a cavalcade of honorifics, and he became known as Yeshu ha-Notsri, “The Savior, Revealer of Secret Traditions.” His real name, Yochanan ben Abshalom, was suppressed, and this for theological reasons. For, just as the prophet had renounced power, status and wealth, so his followers were faithful to his example and ignored his royal pedigree. Later Christian heresy-hunters denominated these early Christians *ebionites* (< Heb. *'bion*, “poor”), for one of their central teachings was the evil inherent in worldly power and riches.

According to their own conception of the prophet, the early followers called themselves Natsarenes, “Keepers of Secret Traditions” and saw themselves as heirs to hidden traditions going far back in history, marginal non-Mosaic traditions that had been associated with Enoch (who went to heaven and there learned the divine secrets) and with Seth. Epiphanius called these early Christians Nasarenes (with sigma, Panarion 18). The Church Father reports that they “would not accept the Pentateuch itself” and were “before Christ and did not know Christ” (Pan 29.6.1). This is our first intimation that the ebionites and the Nasarenes were identical. From Epiphanius’ fourth-century point of view, “before Christ” meant “before Jesus of Nazareth,” that is, before the turn of the era—which perfectly fits the first century BCE that we are now considering. And Epiphanius was correct: the Nasarenes *were* before Christ/Jesus of Nazareth.

We can expect that the first Christian writings—memories of John the Baptizer/Yeshu and initial reactions to his ministry—were written in the

decades following the prophet’s shocking death in the late 60s BCE. John/Yeshe may himself have written down some things (Samaritan records suggest that he in fact did so). After all, he was a highly educated man. To my knowledge, however, no writings by the prophet survive—unless some managed to enter the library of the Dead Sea Sect. (I am referring to the *Thanksgiving Psalms*, Heb. *Hodayoth*, whose “intensely personal tone... stands in sharp contrast to that of the rest of the scrolls.”⁴

The religious writings that do survive from the later decades BCE and the first decades CE are today termed “intertestamentary literature” and generally fall into the category of the Jewish pseudepigrapha (“false writings”). The standard resource for this literature is edited by J. Charlesworth in two thick volumes, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*.⁵ This large body of works contains “legends, wisdom and philosophical literature, prayers, psalms, and odes, fragments of lost Judeo-Hellenistic works” (according to the inside cover). With one exception, these lesser-known texts were, for one reason or another, not admitted into the canon as scripture. The exception is 1 Enoch, which has always enjoyed canonical status in Ethiopia.

Understandably, the attention given to the Jewish pseudepigrapha is small compared to the attention accorded the *Torah* (Pentateuch), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings)—the three branches of Jewish scripture totaling 39 books. For scholars, the pseudepigrapha have been like brass compared to the gold of the Jewish canon. However, when we look at the pseudepigrapha with new eyes, as it were, this body of neglected literature becomes a treasure trove. The “brass” turns to gold, for the Jewish pseudepigrapha includes works by the first Christians, followers of Yeshe who considered themselves separatist Jews, who wrote in Hebrew and Aramaic, and who couched their new religious views in the familiar language of their

⁴ Wise, Abegg, & Cook, *THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS*. Harper/SanFrancisco, 1996:84. Cf. pp. 113, 171, 405.

⁵ Anchor Bible Reference Library. New York: Doubleday, 1983.

heritage, Judaism. Those views were revolutionary, and they were taken up neither by Judaism nor by what was to become normative Christianity. I submit that here, in obscure texts now catalogued in thick scholarly tomes, are writings of the Nasarenes, the first Christians. Reading those texts (with new eyes) reveals to us that they cherished gnostic ideas of ascent to the divine, voluntary poverty (ebionism), voluntary chastity (encratism)—and an enigmatic figure they called the “Son of Man.”

In the next post we will begin to explore these precious Christian works of the earliest disciples, first century BCE works that have been in plain sight for generations.

Part 4

The earliest “Christian” sects

Christian origins, Dositheus, Nazarene, Samaritans, Yeshu ha-Notsri

The purposes of this post are to situate the reader in a relatively unfamiliar time (the first century BCE) and political situation (the Hasmonean Kingdom giving way to Roman hegemony); as well as to introduce religious groups that go by various names and later petered out: Nasarenes, Nazoreans, Therapeutae, and Essenes.

The Roman general Pompey conquered Palestine in 63 BCE and subordinated it to the province of Syria. The conquest marked the end of the Hasmonean kingdom and was the last time Jews would rule the land until the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. The Temple still stood after the Roman conquest (it would be destroyed in 70 CE), priests and Pharisees continued to jockey for influence under puppet rulers, while threats and influences appeared—especially from the East (for example, the Parthian invasion of 40 BCE).

Also from the East came new ideas (from Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, and Buddhism) including speculations on the afterlife, the eschatological day of judgment, angels and cosmology, and the notion of religious purification by dipping in water (cf. *mikvaoth*), which had long been practiced in India.

The settlement of Qumran was founded, possibly as late as mid-I BCE (see below). *Qum* in Hebrew means “rise up, ascend”—a gnostic trope. Most scholars consider that the settlement was associated with the Essenes and that the Dead Sea Scrolls were written onsite. There is still much uncertainty regarding the relationship of Qumran to both the Jerusalem establishment and Christianity, with many proposed theories. Here I’ll present a view that

incorporates my theory regarding Yeshu haNotsri as the founder of Christianity. Because Yeshu lived in the early decades of I BCE, Qumran could have been influenced by his ministry—whether it was or was not founded by him.

Yeshu’s first followers before his return to Palestine

Yeshu haNotsri was excommunicated from Judaism on his way back to Palestine from Alexandria. This was in 76 BCE (the year King Alexander Janneus died) or very shortly thereafter. Yeshu (“Savior”—his actual name was in all likelihood John) was then about twenty-four years old. He had lived in Egypt at least twelve years, that is, since at least 88 BCE when Janneus’ pogrom reached fever pitch in the mass crucifixion of Yeshu’s people, the Pharisees. It is possible that Yeshu’s father, Absalom, died in that bloody event. Thus, it would make sense that Yeshu fled to Egypt under the wing of [his powerful uncle, Joshua ben Perachiah](#), the *nasi* or head of the Sanhedrin and the most powerful Pharisee in the land.

The fact that Yeshu was excommunicated on his way back from Egypt shows that his heretical ideas were already formed. This, in turn, leads us to a question: Were Yeshu’s first followers located in Alexandria, Egypt?

This must be accounted a real possibility, and certain clues do point in this direction. For example, the evangelist Mark “first established churches at the city of Alexandria” (Eusebius *Hst.Eccl.* II.16). Then there is Philo’s interesting account of the Alexandrian Therapeutae—a group of [quasi-Buddhist](#) meditators whom Epiphanius (and subsequent church writers) considered Christians. Philo’s account dates to the first decades of this era—too early for the Therapeutae to have been influenced by “Jesus of Nazareth,” but perfectly situated chronologically for them to have been among the early Christian followers of another Jesus—Yeshu haNotsri. So, Epiphanius (Pan. 29.5.1) may have been right—the Therapeutae could have been Christians *before* Jesus of Nazareth.

Yeshu’s first followers after his return to Palestine

When the excommunicated but [high-born Yeshu](#) (two of his uncles were kings of Israel) returned to Palestine, it appears that he went to Samaria (cf. GJn 4). This was friendlier territory for him, for Samaria was outside the immediate reach of the Pharisees, now his mortal enemies. (They would eventually capture, try, and execute him.) Sectarian writings among the Dead Sea Scrolls (written in mid- to late-I BCE) attest to a “Man of the Lie” operating with great success in Samaria/Ephraim. I have proposed that the Man of the Lie was none other than Yeshu haNotsri. At least one passage in the DSS describes a confrontation between the Man of the Lie and the Teacher of Righteousness. However, it is not possible with such limited data to draw hard-and-fast conclusions. It may be that the pertinent DSS texts were penned one or several generations after the death of Yeshu and that they do not reflect the situation during Yeshu’s lifetime but a later state of affairs, when a fracture had already taken place in the fellowship.

The archaeologist Jodi Magness has recently discounted DeVaux’s early stage of Qumran activity. She now concludes that Qumran may have begun as late as 50 BCE. Her dating indicates that the Dead Sea Sect may have taken form in the generation after Yeshu’s ministry. This would permit the conjecture that the Dead Sea Sect was influenced by the ministry of Yeshu and perhaps even founded by him, and that there was some serious rupture in the fellowship at an early date. This appears plausible to me, and that such a rupture had to do with Yeshu-followers who maintained the Mosaic law (Qumranites) versus radical gnostics (Naṣarenes) who repudiated the Torah and remained active in Samaria. We are told that the Naṣarenes “would not accept the Pentateuch itself” (Epiphanius, Pan 18.1.3). I suspect they were identical with a non-Qumranic subsect of Essenes, encratites who were “a unique people... without women and renouncing sex entirely... into which no one is born” (Pliny the Elder, Nat. Hst. 5.73).

A major rupture in the Essene movement has been investigated by G. Boccaccini.⁶ In fact, it appears that there were at least three branches of the Essene movement (more on this in a subsequent post). All Essene subjects betray some gnostic influence, a key factor that may indicate the influence of Yeshu and, through him, the influence of distant Buddhism. The more radical, Yeshuine branch of Essenes active in Samaria (i.e. the Naṣarenes who would not accept the Pentateuch) were no longer Jews in a Mosaic sense. They broke away from Judaism and eventually gave rise to non-Jewish branches of gnosticism (the Gospel of Thomas, etc). On the other hand, the followers of Yeshu who refused to jettison Torah and tradition yielded an amalgam of gnosticism and Judaism (Qumran, certain Jewish Christian sects). For a time these various Yeshuine sects existed side-by-side in Palestine, but the Dead Sea scriptures already betray conflict between them in the first century BCE.

Epiphanius emphasizes Samaria as the origin of Christian heresy (Pan 9). He correctly notes that “Samaritans” means “watchmen.” In fact, the roots SMR and NTsR are synonymous, with the semantic field of “watch, protect.” Thus, from a very early time, “Samaritan” and “Naṣarene” were related. For Epiphanius, the Samaritans had four subsects: Essenes, Sebuaeans, Gorotheans, and Dositheans (Pan. 10). Interestingly, when Epiphanius describes Dositheus, he is actually describing the career of Yeshu:

He was a mixture, because he turned from the Jews to the Samaritan people. He was a leading student of the Law and the Jewish repetitions of it, and ambitious for the highest rank. But as he failed to achieve it and was not considered worthy of any special respect among the Jews, he defected to the Samaritans and founded this sect. (Pan. 13.1.3)

Here we see that “Dositheus” (read: *Yeshu*) was “a leading student of the Law” (indeed, he was groomed by Perachiah for the Sanhedrin), had something to do with “the highest rank” (he was a nephew of the king), “was not considered worthy of any special respect among the Jews” (he was excommunicated),

⁶ Beyond the Essene Hypothesis: The Parting of the Ways between Qumran and Enochic Judaism. Eerdmans, 1998.

“turned from the Jews to the Samaritan people” (upon his return from Egypt), and “defected to the Samaritans and founded this sect.”

The DSS describe followers of both parties (that of the Man of the Lie and that of the TR) defecting one to the other. This situation immediately recalls the Johannine account (Jn 1:35 ff) of John the Baptist’s followers going over to Jesus. (One can also point to echoes in the Pseudo-Clementine writings of the struggle between Dositheus and Simon Magus, as they contested for leadership of the fellowship after the death of John the Baptist—Homilies II.24 = NTA II.513).

The Dead Sea Sect has been extensively studied. Their sectarian writings reveal a severe, ascetic, encratite, and conservative offshoot of Judaism. They thought nothing of criticizing the Jerusalem Temple and the way it was being managed, of having a “higher interpretation” of Jewish scripture, and considered themselves “angels” already in this life (cf. Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice). Like the Therapeutae they had a probationary period of 2-3 years and spent a great deal of time parsing scripture. Both the Therapeutae and the Qumranites were ascetic, encratite, held goods in common, and were devoted to poverty. I view the Therapeutae and the Qumranites as two branches of early Jesus/Yeshe followers called Essenes. One branch (falsely termed “Nazoraeans” by Epiphanius, for no sect ever existed that used that name) was devoted to Jewish law and tradition. The other (correctly termed “Nasaraeans”) was not.

We have a great deal of literature from Qumran. In the next post we will look at early “Christian” literature belonging to the Naṣarenes, literature dating to I BCE that was *not* found at Qumran.

Part 5

Jewish-Christian literature: the Parables of Enoch

Christian origins, Gnosticism Enoch

The period between the death of Yeshu haNotsri ca. 65 BCE and the acceptance of the canonical gospels ca. 150 CE (215 years in all!) represents a lengthy period in which the theology of Jesus took forms that today we would scarcely recognize as “Christian.” A vast literature survives from this era, some of it denominated Christian, some denominated Jewish, some considered an amalgam of the two religions, and some whose theology remains frankly “uncertain.” This literature, because it did not enter either body of religious scripture, is termed “Jewish pseudepigrapha” and “Christian apocrypha.”⁷ Both terms are treated pejoratively by the guild. *Pseudepigrapha* literally means “false writings,” and the term “apocryphal” immediately raises suspicion in biblical scholarship. Helmut Koester once noted acerbically: ⁸

The terms “apocryphal” and “canonical” reflect a traditional usage which implies deep-seated prejudices and has had far-reaching consequences. Any standard dictionary, like Merriam-Webster, will explain the term “apocryphal” as “not canonical; unauthentic; spurious.” The synonyms are listed under “fictitious,” i.e., “invented or imagined rather than true and genuine,” and the term “apocryphal” is explained here as follows: “implies a mysterious or extremely dubious source of origin.” More than half a century ago, Montague Rhodes James wrote in the introduction to his edition of the

⁷ J. Charlesworth (ed.), *THE OLD TESTAMENT PSEUDEPIGRAPHA*, 2 vols., Doubleday. W. Schneemelcher, *NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA*, 2 vols., Westminster.

⁸ H. Koester, “Apocryphal and Canonical Gospels,” in *HTR* 73 (1980) no. 1/2, p.105. The embedded citation is from H. R. James, *THE APOCRYPHAL NEW TESTAMENT*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1924: xiv.

apocryphal writings of the NT:

“The old word apocrypha is good enough for my purpose, and I employ it here in the sense of false and spurious, even when I am dealing with writings which may contain ancient and truthful elements.”

Something that contains “ancient and truthful elements” is automatically treated as “false and spurious”? It doesn’t get much worse than that, folks...

The above deprecatory attitude towards non-canonical literature reigns in the academic guild and, quite simply, prevents any whole-hearted investigation into Christian origins. Scholars in the field routinely and obstinately bypass an entire library of quasi-Jewish and quasi-Christian writings dating from Hasmonean and Early Roman times, a period usually referred to as “intertestamental.” However, as the historical reliability of the Christian scriptures themselves comes under increasing suspicion (from both within and outside the guild), the focus of research must necessarily move to the so-called “apocrypha” and “pseudepigrapha” (including the Dead Sea Scrolls). There is simply no other choice.

When we focus our attention on the “false and spurious” texts neglected by history, we note a number of works that describe *in grosso modo* an ascent to the divine. As mentioned in the [previous post](#), that ascent is a hallmark of gnosticism and characterizes the religion of the naṣarenes, whom I propose were early followers of Yeshu haNotsri. Potentially naṣarene writings from around the turn of the era include (in no particular order): the Parables of Enoch, the Psalms of Solomon, the Odes of Solomon, the Ascent of Isaiah, and the *Urschrift* of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.

The Parables of Enoch

Before the New Testament canon was settled (about 200 CE)...

... the authority of the Enochic scriptures was defended by influential theologians such as Irenaeus, Tertullian and Origen, although they knew that the authority of these scriptures was not recognised in all churches. The authority of Enoch was then strongly denounced by Augustine in “The City

of God,” which most possibly was one of the reasons why the book [1 Enoch] went out of use and was long forgotten in the western Church. The only place it survived was in the orthodox Ethiopic Church, since this church through the centuries was isolated from the West.⁹

According to Gen 5:24, Enoch while alive “walked with the angels; then he was no more, because God took him” (on this translation see [COMMENT here](#)). This astonishing statement stimulated a great deal of literature in intertestamentary times, when—for some reason—interest in the ascent of man to God became pronounced. I suspect that reason had something to do with the ministry of Yeshu haNotsri in the 70s and 60s BCE, for his teachings (many of them recorded in the canonical gospels) insist that such an ascent is possible. In any case, the ascent to divinity through hidden wisdom (gnosis) became a hallmark of gnosticism, and Enoch became “the ultimate revealer of divine secrets” (Kvanvig). These elements—ascent to divinity, and “ultimate revealer”—would later be taken over by Jesus of Nazareth. These are two reasons to view *Enoch as the proximate precursor to Jesus of the New Testament*. We will be adding more reasons (such as Enoch as the Son of Man—next post), and will be keeping count as we add more similarities between Enoch and Jesus of Nazareth.

In all, three books are ascribed to Enoch in the Jewish pseudepigrapha. Here, I consider *1 Enoch*, which is a sprawling work of 108 chapters. It is also a composite work, more a library than a single book, with sections of varying date and provenance. Josef Milik divided *1 Enoch* into five sections or “booklets,” a division that still (roughly) holds:

1. The Book of the Watchers (chps. 1–36)
2. The Book of Parables (37–71)
3. The Book of Astronomical Writings (72–82)

⁹ H. Kvanvig, 'The Watcher story and Genesis: An Intertextual Reading.' *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* vol. 18 no 2 (2004), p. 165.

4. The Book of Dream Visions (83–90)
5. The Book of the Epistle of Enoch (91–107)

One of the sections that I suggest is linked to the early followers of Yeshu haNotsri is the Book of Parables (chps. 37–71), sometimes called the “Similitudes of Enoch.” Scholars date the section to around the turn of the era –the time of the first Christians, according to [the alternative chronology](#) presented on this website. There are three “parables”: chps. 38–44; 45–57; and 58–69. An Introduction (chp. 37) and a conclusion (chps. 70–71) complete the booklet. Scholarship notes that the Parables of Enoch have undergone a good deal of tampering, interpolations, and movement of passages from one place to another. This is particularly the case with the third parable, where chps. 64–69 are late additions (including Noachic fragments that have nothing to do with Enoch) and chps. 62–63 seem to be misplaced from the second parable. In brief, the basic scheme of the three parables is as follows:

- Parable 1: Pre-eschatological judgment (our present world); the righteous “Chosen Ones” persevere despite the wealthy rulers who oppress them.
- Parable 2: The judgment (administered by Enoch = the Son of Man).
- Parable 3: Post-judgment (the heavenly realm).

The tenor of these parables is clearly ebionite. The author repeatedly inveighs against “the rich who have denied the Lord of Spirits and are destroyed” (38:4-6; 46:4-6; 48:8-10, etc). The author’s anger also extends to those who deny the gnostic “way” (i.e., that gnosis alone leads to salvation). The first parable begins with a slap to the face of anti-gnostic traditionalists:

1/ The vision that Enoch saw...

2/ This is the beginning of the words of gnosis, which I took up to recount to those who dwell on the earth. Listen, O ancients, and look, you who come after—the words of the Holy One, which I speak in the presence of the Lord of Spirits.

3/ It is profitable to speak these things at first, and from those who come after, let us not withhold the beginning of gnosis.

4/ Until now there had not been given from the presence of the Lord of Spirits such gnosis as I have received according to my insight, according to the good pleasure of the Lord of Spirits, by whom the lot of everlasting life was given to me.

5/ Three parables were imparted to me, and I took them up and spoke to those who dwell on the earth. (1 En 37:2–5)

Many elements stand out in these astonishing verses. First of all, the beginning of the passage has an uncanny resemblance to the opening of the Gospel of Thomas: “These are the secret words that Jesus the Living spoke...” In both cases, “Jesus the Living” and Enoch teach from a supra-mundane realm. We know from Gen 5:22–24 that Enoch “walked with the angels,” but in the above passage he is elevated even higher—into “the presence of the Lord of Spirits.” Other passages in the Parables reveal that the position of Enoch (in his various appellations of “Chosen/Elect One,” “Son of Man,” etc) is in no wise inferior to divinity itself—he “will crush the teeth of the sinners” (46:4), has “glory forever and ever” (49:2), and even sits upon the “throne” of God (51:3). In other words, Enoch is no longer human but is tantamount to “*the* Son of God” (Mt 3:17). This is our third parallel with Jesus of Nazareth.

Enoch in vss. 2–3 above speaks words of gnosis to the “ancients” and those who “come after”—that is, to *all* humanity past, present, and future. He speaks these things “at first.” We learn elsewhere that Enoch is [pre-existent](#) (from “before time began” and with the “Head of Days,” 46:1–6). This recalls the Gospel of John (Jn 17:5 etc) and is our fourth parallel with Jesus of Nazareth.

In the above citation God receives a new name not known elsewhere in Judaism: Lord of Spirits. The name entirely ignores the material realm. This is

consistent with other Enochian passages, where the enochian author is even capable of rewriting Jewish scripture. For example, Isa 6:3 reads: “holy, holy, holy is the YHWH of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” But at 39:12, the author of the Parables writes: “holy, holy, holy, the Lord of Spirits, he fills the earth with spirits.” To Enochians, materiality is evidently of no account. From a normative Jewish perspective, this is pure heresy.

Part 6

The Parables of Enoch – 2

The First Christians Enoch, Natsarene

In the previous post I introduced the Parables (also called “Similitudes”) of Enoch, which forms a major part (chps. 37–71) of the book known as 1 Enoch. Scholars date these chapters to around the turn of the era, which happens also to be the critical period of the first followers of Yeshu haNotsri (d. ca. 65 BCE). I identify those early followers with Epiphanius’ Nasarenes (Panarion 18)—not to be confused with his invented sect of Nazoraeans (Pan 29). Except for the “nazirite” (in Judaism, a person consecrated to God, generally temporarily), all cognates with the “z” sound betray Catholic inventions: Nazarene (Mk 1:24), Nazareth and Nazoraean (Mt 2:23), as well as variations of these words found in various passages and textual witnesses of the gospels. Any authentic forms in Greek have a sigma (only Nasarene qualifies, q.v. Epiphanius, Pan. 18).

The sect of the Nazarenes/Nazoraeans is not mentioned before Epiphanius in the fourth century (Pan. 29).¹⁰ The Church Father invented the sect due to Acts 24:5, where Paul is described as “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazoraeans [*Ναζωραίων*].” Epiphanius opens Panarion 29 with two confusing paragraphs that start: “After these come Nazoraeans, who originated at the same time or even before, or in conjunction with them or after them... I cannot say...” Obviously he has no historical information at hand. The rest of the section (seven long pages) is a digression which allows the Church Father to get into all kinds of trouble, including that Jesus lived in the time of Alexander

¹⁰ Klijn & Reinink, 'Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects,' 1973:44.

Janneus (29.3.3), [that Philo's Therapeutae were "Christians"](#) and "Jessaean" (= Essenes, 29.5.1), and that the Nasarenes [with sigma] existed "before Christ" (29.6.1). So, in trying to solve one problem for the Church, Epiphanius only created several more.

Let us turn from Epiphanius' dissimulation to the Nasarenes (Pan. 18), who I maintain were in fact the first Christians. They were a radical sect that "effected a schism" (Pan 19.5.1) and that had nothing to do with Jesus of Nazareth, for (as mentioned above) they were "before Christ" and "did not know Christ" (29.6.1). This is Epiphanius' transparent ploy to remove the gnostic Nasarenes as far as possible from the invented figure Jesus of Nazareth. But his maneuver came at a price: by dating the sect of the Nasarenes "before Christ" the Church Father introduces an oxymoron that has befuddled inquirers ever since: the existence of "pre-Christian Christians."

Epiphanius was right, and we now have a solution to this particular conundrum. Yeshu haNotsri being the founder of Christianity, his followers (the Nasarenes) could *not* have known Jesus of Nazareth (the Church's "Christ") who, [I have argued elsewhere](#), was created by the evangelists in mid-II CE. According to the [alternative chronology](#), Yeshu's followers did not know Jesus of Nazareth for over two centuries (ca. 65 BCE–ca. 150 CE). With the triumph of Pauline Christianity, the fourth century Epiphanius now disowned the Nasarenes, for they held very different beliefs from the emergent Roman Church—an outmoded theology that did not admit Jesus of Nazareth, as well as heretical beliefs that were gnostic, ebionite, and encratite.

As we considered in the previous post, the Parables of Enoch present a revolutionary theology, one of ascent from man to God, and were composed later in the first century BCE.¹¹ This theology contrasts with all contemporary Jewish sects—Pharisees, Sadducees, and Qumranic Essenes. The scriptural anchor for the Enochian ascent was Gen 5:21–24, which reports that the

¹¹ J. Charlesworth, 'Can we Discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?' in ENOCH AND THE MESSIAH SON OF MAN, 2007:467. Cf. also p. 47.

patriarch Enoch was “taken” by God while still in the flesh. Enochian literature elaborates upon this theme beginning with the Book of Watchers (1 En 1–36, late II BCE), which presents Enoch as a privileged magus who, while in heaven, heard “everything [from the angels] and understood” (1 En 1:2). This myth derives ultimately from Mesopotamian religion, and we can find precursors for Enoch in the figure of [Oannes](#) (the fish-man who brought wisdom to mankind) and [Emmeduranki](#), the seventh pre-dynastic king of Sumer who was also taken up to heaven by the gods. Finally, [we recall](#) that the name Enoch itself means “understand, acquire by experience, perceive” and is derived from the root cH-N-K. Enoch, in other words, is fundamentally a *gnostic* figure.

The Book of Daniel was written in the late 160s BCE. The Enochians borrowed from this book the concept “Son of Man,” so pregnant for future developments:

“In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” (Dan 7:13–14)

The Parables of Enoch essentially expand upon this passage and answer the question: “Who is the Son of Man?” Daniel tells us that: (1) the Son of Man is “in the presence” of God; (2) he has “authority, glory and sovereign power” (all these are attributes of divinity); and (3) he has “everlasting dominion” and “his kingdom will not be destroyed” (this is also godlike). In short, Enoch becomes divine. Man becomes God.

The Parables of Enoch traces this transformation from man to God and uses Enoch as the model figure. At the beginning of the text Enoch is the naive but pure human who depends upon the Angel of Peace to answer his questions (1 En 40:8; 52:3; 53:4; 54:4; 56:2) and to reveal to him the “hidden things” (Heb. *nešuroth*, related to the word Naṣarene).

Then, the enigmatic “Son of Man” is introduced to Enoch. The Son of Man is pre-existent (48:2), he is with the “Head of Days” (46:1-2), he *is* the name of the Lord of Spirits (i.e. is divine, 46:6); he is righteous (46:3), and he is the eschatological judge (46:5) who will crush the strong and sinners (46:4-6). All these elements were, of course, later taken up by the Catholics in the composition of the canonical gospels and applied by them to Jesus of Nazareth.

Having gradually learned about the Son of Man, Enoch is himself designated in terms such as “the Chosen One” (or “Elect One”) and the “Anointed One” (“Messiah”).

Finally, the culmination of the entire Book of Parables (and a passage that conservative Christians consider outrageous) identifies Enoch himself as the Son of Man (71:14). He is also the Messiah (Anointed One) and the Chosen One who “sits upon the throne” of God (1 En 51:3). This, of course, is the apotheosis of Man. It is also thoroughly un-Jewish. It demonstrates that Enochian theology moved over the centuries from a non-Mosaic form of Judaism to well outside Judaism altogether.

From where came this notion of the apotheosis of man? It is quite new with the Parables of Enoch which, as noted above, dates to the late first century BCE. Involved in that apotheosis, however, is a critical re-definition of “God.” For the author of the Parables, God is not the creator and ruler of the material realm. We saw in the previous post that materiality is of little consequence in the Parables of Enoch. God is uniquely called the “Lord of Spirits”—an epithet that occurs over one hundred times in the Parables and nowhere else.

If, like the author of the Parables, we consider “God” to be a purely spiritual entity, then becoming *like* God takes on an entirely new meaning. It is a spiritual transformation, one that the Parables emphasize entails the acquisition of gnosis, of learning “hidden things.” This, in fact, is the definition of the “Naṣarene”—the one who perceives the hidden wisdom of existence.

In my opinion, this new element of spiritual transformation through gnosis, together with a re-definition of God, originated with the teaching of Yeshu haNotsri and passed from him to his followers, the Naşarenes.

Part 7

The Parables of Enoch – 3

Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls, The First Christians

The Parables of Enoch (chapters 37–71 of 1 Enoch) is a unique composition dating to the last decades of the first century BCE. It has been preserved as part of the First Book of Enoch (1 Enoch), but scholars have noted that it does not fit its context, neither as to theology nor vocabulary. Its dating is also different: the remaining parts of 1 Enoch have been dated to late II BCE, while the Parables of Enoch have been dated a century later (more on dating below). One writer has opined: “I think we should not even rule out the possibility that the authors of the Parables might have been Jewish Christians.”¹² The theology of the Parables—in which the Son of Man becomes divine—is, in fact, unprecedented in intertestamental literature. Even the terminology of the Parables is different—God is called “the Lord of Spirits,” an epithet that occurs nowhere else, while the antediluvian patriarch Enoch is termed “the Son of Man.” One specialist has written:¹³

The evidence available today gives us reason to believe that the Parables of Enoch had a different origin and early transmission history than the other four works in 1 Enoch. In all likelihood the booklet was not copied together with other Enochic texts at Qumran, where no fragment of the Parables has been identified. Long before discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Book of Parables was thought to have a different origin than the other parts of 1 Enoch...

¹² I. Froehlich, 'The Parables of Enoch and Qumran Literature,' in *ENOCH AND THE MESSIAH SON OF MAN*; Eerdmans 2007:351.

¹³ J. Charlesworth, 'Can we Discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?' in *ENOCH AND THE MESSIAH SON OF MAN*, 2007:467. Cf. also p. 47.

The various differences that set the Parables off from the other booklets have led to the conclusion that the Book of Parables stems from another kind of Jewish group.

At the conclusion of the preceding post I suggested that the Parables were authored by a Naṣarene follower of Yeshu haNotsri and that its astonishing theology of Enoch becoming divine rested upon a redefinition of divinity, in which the material creation becomes of no account and God emerges as the “Lord of Spirits.”

In the Parables, Enoch takes a journey from ignorance (materiality) to gnosis (spirituality). He is at first the naive questioner (Parable 1). He is then introduced to the Son of Man (Parable 2). And finally Enoch himself becomes the Son of Man (1 En 71:14)—he sits upon the divine throne dispensing eschatological judgment (45:3; 49:4; 51:2-3). Enoch essentially replaces Yahweh and assumes roles that no human being can assume in Judaism. In sum, the Parables of Enoch are not “Jewish” in any normative sense, though the text uses the language of Judaism. This work represents something quite new.

The unusual theology of the Parables also contributed to its unpopularity with the later Church. In far too restrained language, J. Charlesworth basically writes that the Church ‘did not like it’.¹⁴

Perhaps the early scholars of the church [i.e. the Church Fathers] considered the document polemical. For them the Book of Parables was most likely not a source for explaining the origins of the Christian affirmation that ancient prophecy proved the divinity and messiahship of Jesus of Nazareth. These scholars may have reasoned that if Enoch is the Son of Man and identified as the Messiah, then it should not be translated from Aramaic to Greek or explored and mined for Christian kerygma and didache [“proclamation and teaching”].

¹⁴ J. Charlesworth, 'Can we discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?' in *ENOCH AND THE MESSIAH SON OF MAN*; Eerdmans 2007:457.

In Hebrew *ben adam* (*bar enash* in Aramaic) literally means “Son of Man,” but it is also the routine locution for “man, human being.” Thus, “Son of Man” in the Parables of Enoch has a double meaning: (1) it narrowly refers to Enoch as the archetypal Son of Man; and (2) it refers more generally to Enoch as a human being, as one of us. In portraying the journey of the Son of Man to divinity, the author of the Parables is portraying a transformation that is potentially within the reach of us all. The Enochian odyssey from ignorance to gnosis/divinity is, by implication, the journey that all humans must take. This is the deeper message of the Parables.

Parallels between Enoch and Jesus of Nazareth in the gospels are many and close. The Parables are intensely ebionite (praising the poor and condemning the rich), a theme that continues in the gospels (Lk 6:20–26; GTh 54, 68, 69). Both Enoch and Jesus of Nazareth are the Son of Man, the eschatological judge, and the bearers of higher wisdom. Such obvious parallels merit the sounding of bells and whistles when the name “Enoch” is mentioned in early Christian studies. But scholars are not interested, for such parallels diminish the uniqueness of Jesus. For example, instead of presenting the equivalent of a neon sign pointing from “Enoch” to “Jesus,” the scholar above, J. Charlesworth—arguably the doyen of the field for the past generation—timidly notes (and in passing) a distant connection between Enoch and Jesus:¹⁵

In the Parables of Enoch the Son of Man is a celestial judge. It is significant that in the words attributed to Jesus, the Son of Man is assumed to be the judge at the end of times (cf. Mark 8:38; 13:24–27; esp. John 5:27).

Charlesworth’s argument is not that both Enoch and Jesus were denominated the “Son of Man” (which is the elephant in the room) but that words are “attributed” to Jesus and the Son of Man “is assumed to be” judge (very tentative language) which just might indicate some resemblance in both cases.

¹⁵ J. Charlesworth, ‘Can we discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?’ in *ENOCH AND THE MESSIAH SON OF MAN*; Eerdmans 2007:466.

It is past time that scholars lost their timidity and went down this path connecting Enoch and Jesus. For readers of this blog, of course, the connection is no longer between Enoch and “Jesus,” but between Enoch and Yeshu haNotsri, a connection that we shall now consider.

Yeshu and Enoch

The allegations raised against Yeshu haNotsri during his trial ca. 65 BCE—allegations that led to his stoning and “hanging upon a tree”—included the following charges: (1) he made himself into God; (2) he called himself (or was called) the “Son of Man”; and (3) he claimed to ascend to heaven:

R. Abahu said: If a man says to you ‘I am God,’ he is a liar; if [he says, ‘I am] the Son of Man,’ in the end people will laugh at him; if [he says] ‘I will go up to heaven,’ he says but will not perform it. (Pal. Talmud, Taanith 65b. Cf. NazarethGate 422.)

Though the above passage does not mention Yeshu, “That it refers to Jesus there can be no possibility of doubt”—Herford.¹⁶ We note that all three of the above allegations against Jesus/Yeshu perfectly fit the late I BCE theology of the Parables of Enoch, in which Enoch (1) becomes God, (2) becomes the “Son of Man,” and (3) ascends to heaven. This is strong evidence that the Parables stem from circles influenced by Yeshu haNotsri.

It appears, then, that the author of the Parables, a I BCE follower of Yeshu haNotsri, used the already-existing Enochian literature (the Book of Watchers, Dream Visions, Astronomical Book, Epistle of Enoch) and attempted to fuse the theology of Yeshu onto the figure of Enoch, the patriarch whom “God took” (Gen 5:21–24). His fusion produced the Parables of Enoch, a provocative mixture of Naṣarene theology and Enochian lore: God morphs into the “Lord of Spirits”; Enoch becomes the archetype for Everyman and Everywoman; and life becomes a journey from ignorance to the realization

¹⁶ R. Herford, *CHRISTIANITY IN TALMUD AND MIDRASH*. Rpt. 1975:62. Cf. NazarethGate 422. Of course Herford did not realize (he wrote in 1903) that the Talmud is not referring to Jesus of Nazareth at all, but to Yeshu haNotsri who lived a century earlier.

that we are all the “Son of Man,” lords and masters of our own universe through free will and knowledge of the “divine secrets” (gnosis, Heb. *netsuroth*).

Along the existential journey, Enoch changes. This renders the Parables a literary tour de force. Depending on where the reader is in the text, he sees *a different Enoch*. Furthermore, Enoch himself in the story has an evolving self-conception. Perhaps James Joyce would have been equal to such literary challenges! In any case, the Naṣarene author doesn’t fare too badly. He makes clear (or attempts to make clear) that who Enoch is depends upon Enoch’s own state of understanding: “You, son of man, *according to the degree to which it will be permitted*, you will know the hidden things” (60:10, Isaac translation and emphasis added).

A closer look at dating and composition

The Parables of Enoch (1 En 37–71) is not a unitary composition. It betrays different stages and even incompatible theologies. In the first place, we have seen that the Naṣarene author was not interested in the material realm. For him, God is the “Lord of Spirits”—a name that occurs in no other document. And yet, the Parables contain three extended passages detailing cosmic events in nature (Chps. 41/43; 52; 59–60)—one passage in each of the three parables. These passages are similar in tone and content to those found in earlier Enochic literature of the late second century BCE.¹⁷ Thus, I would suggest that these “cosmic” passages belong to an earlier stratum of the Parables of Enoch.

In the second place, the Naṣarene author upheld the doctrine of free will. For him, good and evil come from the choices one makes. This view puts him at odds with earlier Enochian literature, in which evil has been irrevocably introduced into the world by an exterior source, namely, the “Fallen Watchers/Angels” (1 En 6–14; Jubilees 5, etc). Therefore, the passages that speak of

¹⁷ The BOOK OF WATCHERS: 1 En 17-18; 21-24. The BOOK OF HEAVENLY LUMINARIES: 1 En 72-82; The TWO WAYS: 1 En 101-02.

Fallen Angels in the Parables (1 En 54:5–6; 55:3 ff; 56) must also be credited to an earlier pre-Naṣarene stratum. Apparently, the Naṣarene author adapted a pre-existing composition and “modified” it to conform to his radically *spiritualized* theology.

The Naṣarene belief in free will also opposed any notion of determinism or predestination as, for example, [practiced at Qumran](#), where the sectarians “believed that God determined all, and thus theirs is a metaphysics of fatalism” (Stauber). The Naṣarene position is confirmed by Epiphanius, who in his section on the Nasarenes writes that they “did not introduce fate or astrology” (Pan 18.1.2). These are precisely the two points I have signaled above: by rejecting “fate” (and the myth of the Fallen Angels) the Naṣarenes maintained human agency and free will; and by rejecting “astrology” they rejected preoccupations with the heavens, the cosmos, and materiality.

Thus the Parables of Enoch is a composition with at least two stages. The Naṣarene author supplemented and changed an already existing composition, one that conformed to the earlier (deterministic) Enochic point of view as evidenced in the Book of Watchers, the Astronomical Book, Jubilees, and so on.

Scholarship has settled upon the date “late I BCE” for the Parables of Enoch.¹⁸ However, the two-stage nature of the work requires a more nuanced dating: the first stage was as early as ca. 125 BCE, contemporaneous with other early Enochic literature, while the second stage, the “Naṣarene” stage, dates to late I BCE.

In conclusion, we note that other hands also seem to have “interpolated” the book. Chapters 64–69:26 (with “Noachic” fragments) are clearly intrusive. They include a hostile anti-gnostic diatribe (Chp. 65:10–12) in which we read that only the condemned learn “things which are secret” and that the “pure and

¹⁸ J. Charlesworth, 'Can we Discern the Composition Date of the Parables of Enoch?' in ENOCH AND THE MESSIAH SON OF MAN, 2007:467. Cf. also p. 47.

kindhearted” actually detest secret things. This, however, is the polar opposite of the Naṣarene view. Thus, the text as it stands betrays opposing theologies. It witnesses to intense theological battles that raged on the ground long ago.

For the Naṣarene author, however, the essential is that Enoch the “Son of Man” transforms into the divine eschatological judge (chps. 70–71). At that point, which is the climax of the book, all humanity comes into judgment. Enoch executes that judgment from an intensely “ebionite” point of view—for each one of us, everything depends upon how one has treated one’s neighbor.

Part 8

The early Christians and Qumran

Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls, The First Christians, Yeshu ha-Notsri

Early Enochian literature of the second century BCE (the Book of Watchers, Dream Visions, etc.) was very popular at Qumran, as attested by the many copies that survive in the DSS. However, Naṣarene literature of the first century BCE is spectacularly absent from the DSS, including the Parables of Enoch which we have looked at in recent posts. Other works that were inspired by the sect of the Naṣarenes are also absent from the DSS.

We should recognize that the early followers of Yeshu—those who lived in the mid- to late-first century BCE—were not yet called Naṣarenes. The name “Naṣarene” came after their founding prophet was dubbed “haNotsri,” which means “the guardian, preserver.” Thus: Yeshu haNotsri, The Guardian Savior. The epithet probably accrued to the founder within a couple of generations after his ignominious death, ca. 64 BCE. Thus, if it took a generation or two for the founding prophet to be called “Yeshu haNotsri,” then the word “Naṣarene” as a self-designation for his followers became current shortly thereafter, perhaps around the turn of the era.

Before that time the followers were disciples of John (Jonathan) the son of Absalom, who had been by blood a member of the (now conquered) Hasmonean royal family. John was by theology a gnostic and repudiator of much of his Jewish heritage. His radical teachings brought a new way of looking at life, a new way of understanding, and a new way of liberation through gnosis (cf. Buddhism). This was the religion of the first Christians, whom I am now describing.

John also understood the connection between gnosis and ethics—that these two go hand in hand: the good man is close to gnosis, the evil man is far from the proverbial “kingdom.” He also understood the old Buddhist doctrine of change: life is change; one cannot plant one’s staff anywhere, for nowhere will it “stick.”

It is interesting that John and/or his followers used flowing [water as a symbol of understanding](#). Even as flowing water is always changing, so life changes. One must find a way to “stand” in the middle of the river, like an unchanging “stone” (Josh 3:8; 4:3). Such words became code to John’s early followers, words that referred to “The Standing One” (cf. Simon Magus) who endures by means of gnosis through life’s turbulence, like a stone in a moving river. Rather than being immersed in the affairs of the world, raising a family, and accruing riches, the first Christians were symbolically standing in gnosis as in flowing water. This immersion/standing was their “baptism”—both a symbol and a sacrament.

Only the ethically pure person could be baptized. This was the message of “John the Baptist”—the first title assigned to John the son of Absalom. He preached “a baptism of repentance” (Mk 1:4) where the soul is “purified beforehand by righteousness” (Josephus Ant. 8.5.2). According to the Parables of Enoch, that soul is the conscience in us all, and on its purity depends the saving wisdom/gnosis: “and from the conscience of his mouth shall come out all the secrets of wisdom” (1 En 51:3). The “ebionite” John also chastised the rich, the mighty, the privileged, and (in general) the Jews: “Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father’” (Mt 3:9). This prophet of royal blood, once himself groomed for the sanhedrin and the recipient of the finest religious education, reserved his especial venom for religious hypocrites (Mt 23:13 ff), for the self-complacent masters of Temple, synagogue, and sanhedrin who eventually tried him and put him to death:

Woe to you priests, all... Woe to you rabbis, all... Woe to you, scholars and teachers... Woe to you Torah, for John is to be born in Jerusalem. John is to receive the Jordan and be counted a Prophet in Jerusalem. (Mandean Book of John, 18.70)¹⁹

In the garbled traditions that have come down to us, full of interpolations, falsities, excisions and additions, the bright light of the prophet can still shine through—but only from around the edges of history, as it were.

We are fortunate to possess the Dead Sea Scrolls, for they were penned at the very time that early Christianity was forming. John/Yesu died ca. 64 BCE, and the DSS sectarian works were written in the generations following. It appears that the Teacher of Righteousness—the founder of the Dead Sea sect—was an older contemporary of John/Yesu. He may or may not have been a sometime follower of Yesu. On the other hand, Yesu may or may not have been a sometime follower/member of the sect at Qumran. In any case, the two young movements grew up at the same time and in many respects were close. The main difference is that the Qumran sectarians did not repudiate their Jewish heritage but were, in fact, the contrary—“super Jews” in severity and respecters of Temple and Torah. On the other hand, the followers of John/Yesu did not “tithe mint, and dill, and cumin,” and were open to all—even gentiles.

The Qumran writings do not include contemporary seminal writings that may well have been penned by followers of Yesu. These include the Parables of Enoch that we have examined, as well as the (abridged) Epistle of Enoch, the Odes of Solomon, and the (much interpolated) Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. Why were these works not found and preserved at Qumran? The

¹⁹ M. Lidzbarski, *DAS JOHANNESBUCH DER MANDAEER*. Giessen: A. Toepelmann, 1915, pp. 77-78.

reasons may be found in important differences between the two groups:

(1) Determinism.

The Qumran texts endorse a radical determinism: humans are predestined for either salvation or damnation, regardless of their actions or thoughts. This contrasts with the Naṣarene emphasis on individual freedom of choice.

(2) Agency.

Following on the previous point, in the DSS agency is with God/Yahweh—humans are powerless in the face of God’s predetermined choice for them (fate). In the Naṣarene view, however, agency is with man: one’s salvation or damnation depends on one’s own choices and actions.

(3) Universality.

The Yachad (community) was elitist and strictly set apart from other branches of Judaism. At the same time it was firmly within the Jewish sphere. The Qumranites considered themselves priests (even “angels”). The Naṣarenes, on the other hand, viewed the Jewish hierarchy with suspicion.

(4) Theology.

Per Judaism, the sectarian writings from Qumran endorse the material creation and its creator, Yahweh. Naṣarene writings, on the other hand, show little interest in the creation and spiritualize God (the “Lord of Spirits” in the Parables of Enoch).

(5) Jewish law.

The Naṣarenes deemed the laws and tenets of their ancestors non-binding and were open to gentiles (unimaginable in the context of the DSS). Those at Qumran, however, not only followed Jewish *halacha* (religious law) but made it even more exacting (cf. MMT, the Temple Scroll). To become a member of the *Yachad* one had to be a Jew and additionally to endure a three-year probation. It is also likely that only males were admitted.

(6) Coded language.

The Naṣārenes used inverted (opposite) meanings for common terms, thus conveying “hidden things” (Heb. *netsuroth*). Above, we touched on the words “stone”, “water”, and “stand”. “Living” (life, alive) also does not have the obvious meaning of a material body that dies, but signifies the contrary, the spiritual essence “that does not die” (GTh 11; cf. “the *living* Jesus”, “*living* water” = gnosis, etc). Other code words with “inverted” meanings: bride, bridegroom, and wedding (which have nothing to do with physical mating and everything to do with chastity).

Despite these differences, both the Yachad and the Naṣārenes shared much in common: (a) ebionism (favoring the poor); (b) encratism (asceticism, disparagement of pleasure); and (c) dedication to the search for “wisdom.” In all three of these cases, however, the DSS seem pale in comparison with more radical Naṣārene teachings—despite the fact that the Qumranites were more strict as regards the minutiae of rite, ritual, and purity.

It is possible that the sect at Qumran as well as the Naṣārenes were both influenced by the ministry of Yeshu haNotsri, which took place in the 70s and 60s BCE. If this is correct, then the Naṣārenes were more faithful to Yeshu’s gnostic and world-denying message, while the Qumranites attempted the impossible: namely, to wed that message to their Jewish heritage.

The surviving texts betray a parting of the ways between these two sects that modern scholars label “Essene.” Gabriele Boccaccini has concluded that the Qumran community opposed another branch of Enochic Judaism, one “reflected in the Epistle of Enoch and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.”²⁰ Of course, he has no inkling that this “other sect” was the Naṣārenes, the followers of John the Baptist/Yeshu haNotsri. But his statement supports such a linkage, for the two texts that Boccaccini highlights—the Epistle of Enoch and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs—are Naṣārene works. By connecting the clues, then, we see that the rift to which Boccaccini

²⁰ G. Boccaccini (ed.), *ENOCH AND QUMRAN ORIGINS*, Eerdmans 2003:387.

refers was between the sect at Qumran and the first Christians—the sect of the Naṣarenes.

The most intense disputes are often between siblings or between spouses. So, too, the dispute between the Yachad at Qumran and the Naṣarenes was internecine, personal, and intense. Both sects had their own leader—the Teacher of Righteousness, and Yeshu (as I will call him here, following the Talmud). The TR was committed to Judaism, to the Sadducean (Zadokite) priesthood, to the Temple, and to Jewish tradition. Yeshu, on the other hand, had fundamentally broken his commitments to all these. While Yeshu was still alive (pre-64 BCE), his followers learned and absorbed his radically gnostic ideas, aware that they were following not only a prophet but also an influential member of the Hasmonean royal family.

However, after John the Baptist/Yeshu was executed by the Sanhedrin, some followers fell away. Evidently, a struggle for leadership took place. This strongly recalls the struggle between Simon Magus and Dositheus, which took place after the death of John the Baptist as recorded in the Pseudo-Clementines.²¹ It is possible that the Teacher of Righteousness was the leader of those who broke away from Yeshu's followers. These defectors were unwilling to jettison their Jewish heritage and to whole-heartedly embrace the gnostic way. While they absorbed some of Yeshu's tenets, they rejected his acceptance of gentiles and also his world denying views.

By the time the TR died (in the 50s BCE?) the rift between the Qumranites and the followers of Yeshu was complete. Those at Qumran formulated their tenets in a series of sectarian writings, which followed the ultra-Jewish line of the TR. The DSS pesherim (composed later in I BCE) refer to the Qumranites as “the chosen ones” while also mentioning “traitors” who belong to a rival sect. Yeshu is now the “Man of the Lie” and the “Spreader of Lies”:

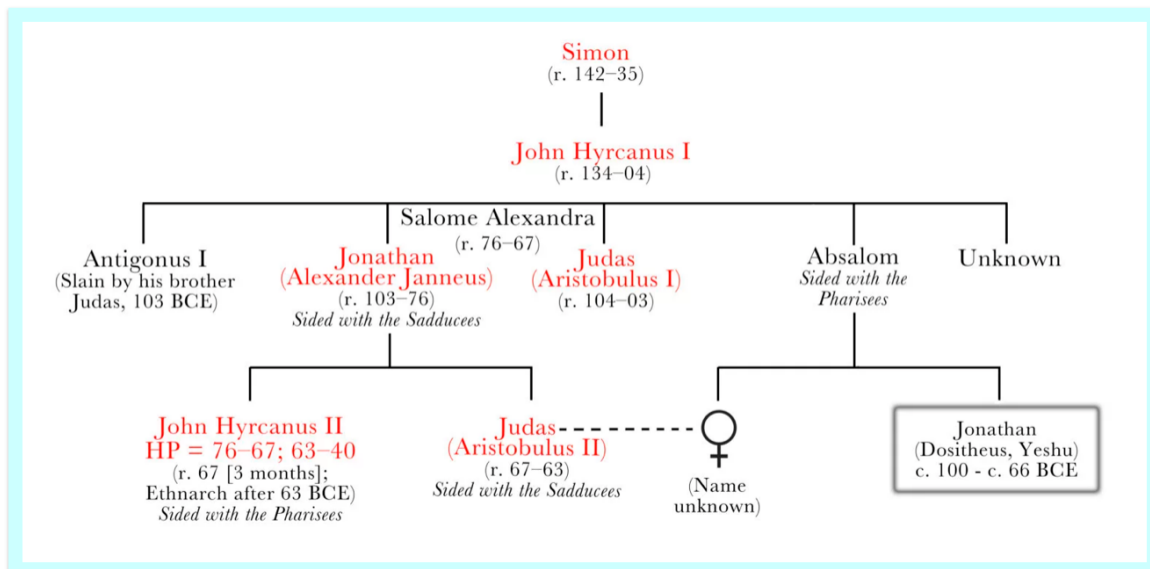
²¹ Homilies II.22 ff. In NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA, vol. 2:512 f.

“This refers to the Spreader of Lies who deceived many... *forming a community* by lies for his own glory... They blasphemed and reviled God’s chosen ones [i.e. the Yachad]” (1QHab col. 10:9–13.)

“Interpreted, this concerns the *house of Absalom* and the members of its council who were silent at the time of the reproach of the Teacher of Righteousness and did not help him [i.e. the TR] against the *Man of Lies*, who flouted the law in the midst of their whole [congregation]” (1QHab col. 5:9–12.)

My prediction is that the second passage above will become the *locus classicus* defining the relationship between the earliest Christians and Qumran.

Interpreted, it presents a *personal* confrontation between Yeshu and the Teacher of Righteousness. Therefore, the passage refers to an incident before 64 BCE. Furthermore, Yeshu (the “Man of the Lie”) is in the stronger position. This could only have been the case during the reign of Queen Salome Alexandra (76–67 BCE), for clues indicate that she was favorable to Yeshu—who was, after all, her husband’s nephew—and that she was perhaps even his disciple. It is no coincidence that shortly after her death Yeshu was apprehended and executed.



“Absalom” surely refers to the father of John/Yesu haNotsri. And the “house of Absalom” is the once-powerful Hasmonean royal family, conquered by the Romans in 63 BCE.

Part 9

The road to two Gods

Christian origins, Gnosticism, Nag Hammadi, The First Christians

Prior posts have noted that (a) the Naṣarenes disparaged the material realm and termed God “the Lord of Spirits” (Parables of Enoch); (b) they were radically ebionite, despising the rich and identifying with the poor of the world; and (c) “[Rather than being](#) immersed in the affairs of the world, raising a family, and accruing riches, the first Christians were symbolically immersed in gnosis as in flowing water.” At Qumran we similarly witness a general flight from the world, together with asceticism. But Qumran, [as we have seen](#), attempted a fusion (or compromise) between the radically *uncompromising* message of Yeshu on the one hand, and Judaism on the other. Thus, the Qumranites present a mixture of the possible and the impossible—they tried to lead perfect lives while believing in determinism, valuing Temple and Torah, and maintaining Jewish tradition. As Yeshu/John himself probably perceived from the beginning, that fusion is simply not possible.

John “the Baptist’s” followers set out on a different trajectory, one that included a radical denial of the world—as mirrored in many texts, including the canonical gospels: “It is the spirit that quickens; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you, they are spirit and they are life” (Jn 6:63). Such a saying may come directly out of the earliest Christian movement, and perhaps even out of the mouth of the founding prophet himself. Other uncompromising sayings that I consider authentic are peppered throughout the canonical gospels, works in which one must distinguish between authentic utterances of “Jesus” and the detailed but inauthentic narrative frame in which those utterances are placed. These radical, Naṣarene sayings disparage materiality,

worldly riches, and customary social ties. For ordinary people, they are impossibly rigorous. For the few saints among us, religious “athletes” as it were, those teachings are *barely* feasible—if, that is, one gives up *everything* else (cf. Mt 13:45 ff) for the sake of “understanding.”

Consider the following striking sayings, to which I have added some questions:

- “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Lk 18:25)

[Question: What is “the kingdom of God”?]

- “Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time...” (Lk 18:29–30)

[Question: Ditto.]

- “The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.” (Lk 20:34–35)

[Question: What is “the resurrection from the dead”?]

- “I will give you what no eye has seen and what no ear has heard and what no hand has touched and what has never occurred to the human mind.” (GTh17)

[Question: What is this mysterious substance that “I will give you”?]

- “If you do not fast from the world you will not find the kingdom.” (Gth 27)

[Question: What is “the kingdom”?]

- “Become passers-by.” (GTh 42)

[Question: What enables us to become passers-by?]

- “Blessed are the solitary and the elect, for you will find the kingdom. For you are from it, and to it you will return.” (GTh 49)

[Question: Once again, what is “the kingdom”?]

- “Whoever has come to understand the world has found a corpse, and whoever has found a corpse is superior to the world.” (GTh 56)

[Question: What is this understanding?]

- “Many are standing at the door, but it is the solitary who will enter the bridal chamber.” (GTh 75)

[Question: What is “the bridal chamber”?]

- “It is I who am the light that is above them all. It is I who am the All. From Me did the All come forth, and to Me did the All extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find Me there.” (GTh 77)

[Question: Who/What is “I”?]

- “You read the face of the sky and of the earth, but you have not recognized that which is in front of you...” (GTh 91b)

[Question: What is this recognition?]

- “Seek and you will find.” (GTh 92)

[Questions: Seek what? Find what?]

For the early Christians, the answer to all the above questions is one word: “gnosis.” The word means the understanding of “hidden things” (Heb. *nešuroth*, from which Semitic *Našraiia* [Mandaic], *Notsri/Nošri* [Talmud], as well as the defective Greek *Nazarene*, *Nazoraean*, and *Nazareth* [New Testament]).

The radical disparagement of materiality in favor of gnosis—evident in the above sayings, as well as in the Parables of Enoch that we examined in prior posts, and in other early Christian writings (Odes of Solomon, Testaments of the 12 Patriarchs, etc)—inevitably leads to the conception of two worlds:

- (a) this inferior world of materiality, and
- (b) a superior world of spirit.

But such a conception of two worlds was not the original teaching and is nowhere reflected in the sayings above. It is certain, however, that soon enough—perhaps by the turn of the era—the gnostic followers of Yeshu haNotsri had made a conceptual leap from a doctrine that teaches *understanding of this world* to the existence of two worlds: this inferior world in which we all live, and the perfect, invisible world of spirit that Yeshu taught. The “two worlds” conception is the beginning of mythological gnosticism, a manner of thinking quite foreign to John/Yeshu but eventually developed by his followers.

Two worlds requires two gods. Because the Naṣarenes disparaged materiality, the Jewish creator Yahweh became the inferior God, the *demiurgos*, while the ethereal God of the spirit and of gnosis became the “Unknown God.” Later traditions ascribe the beginning of this doctrine to “Simon Magus,” a renegade disciple of John the Baptist (whom we have identified with Yeshu haNotsri). The connection is significant for it betrays a genetic relationship between Simon’s gnosticism and the original teachings of Yeshu.

The evolution of “Simon Magus” is fascinating and requires a separate study, for “Simon” (< Heb. *Sum/Sim*, “be established,” BDB 963) and “Peter” (= Petros/Cephas, “rock, stone”) are actually synonyms for the “one who stands” which, as we saw in [the preceding post](#), was Naṣarene code for the “enlightened” one. “Simon” became the father of the gnostic trajectory which, though original, was now vilified by the Church. “Peter,” on the other hand, became the father of the Catholics (“and on this rock I shall build my church”—Mt 16:18). The Catholics could not deny the existence of gnosticism, so they

attempted to co-opt it by making Simon another name for their hero, Peter—thus “Simon Peter” in the New Testament (Mt 4:18 etc). This supports the thesis that the canonical gospels do not actually combat gnosticism but, perhaps more effectively, attempt to bring gnostics into the fold. After all, there are many gnostic-type sayings among the canonical words of Jesus (and even more in the Gospel of Thomas).²² The Pseudo-Clementine literature took a different tack. There, Simon and Peter are not only separate individuals but are also rivals to the death.

Other clues, hardly detected even by scholars, exist that tie Simon Magus to the original message of Yeshu haNotsri. For example, Yeshu was tried and executed in Lydda (Lod) in Samaria, where he conducted his ministry. Archeology has identified the town of Lydda with that of Gitta/Gath. The latter is the town where the Samaritan Simon was reputedly born (Justin Apol. 1.26, 56; Epiph. Pan. 21.1.2). Thus, Simon [metaphorically and chronologically](#) “[took over](#)” when his master John the Baptist/Yeshu haNotsri died.

According to Peter, God the Creator first made the world and all that is in it, and then his creature Adam. Peter is a monotheist and defends his position as such, whereas Simon, according to Peter, is a polytheist who places another Unknown and Unknowable God above the Jewish God the Creator, and thus turns Jehovah into his Agent.²³

In sum, Naṣarene teachings originated in a pure, non-mythological gnosticism in which gnosis itself saves. In this religion there are no worlds, no gods, and no aeons. This spiritual religion that deprecates the flesh is found in (Theravada) Buddhism, the Gospel of Thomas, and carefully selected sayings and parables from the New Testament and the Christian apocrypha. As time went on, however, Naṣarene theology became mythologized, with multiple worlds that were considered *real* (not merely abstract conceptions), with

²² See list a-L above; also Mt 7:7; Lk 17:20-21; Jn 3:7-8; 4:24; 6:63; 8:23, etc.

²³ E.S. Drower, THE SECRET ADAM: A STUDY IN NASORAEAN GNOSIS. Oxford, 1960 p. 89.

multiple gods and aeons (i.e. discrete stages to enlightenment), and with the reality of a “soul” and an afterlife.

The original message devolved into mythological gnosticism during the first centuries of our era, and in the process it was greatly diluted and altered in innumerable ways. The reasons are clear. Firstly, the gnostics had no institutional support. This meant there was no central control of the message (in contrast to Catholic Christianity). Secondly, the gnostics were fragmented from the start. These poor (ebionite), world-denying ascetics removed themselves to the fringes of civilization, to deserts, mountains, and unpopulated places where they would not be persecuted and attempted to live in peace. Given the geography of the Levant, this meant that they migrated from Palestine in three general directions: (1) east into Syria, Iraq, and Iran (beginning with the flight to Pella); (2) south down the Nile River valley into Upper Egypt (where the Nag Hammadi writings were eventually found) and Ethiopia; and (3) west along the Mediterranean littoral, through the Nitrean desert all the way to Carthage and beyond. Each group in every region, no longer in communication with its siblings, evolved its own views that were loosely related to the parent theology. These are the reasons for so many and varied gnostic groups, as venomously described by the Church Fathers.

Those Church Fathers began writing in the later second century CE and observed a landscape full of all sorts of baptist sects, many of which espoused strange views of existence with complex systems of creation and exotic heavenly dynamics (e.g. The Gospel of the Egyptians, Zostrianos). In them we find personified powers (“Aeons”) and theories of creation leading from the one to the many. Gnostic works that lack an evolved cosmic mythology, however, are probably earlier texts. Such works are largely sapiential (how to think) and ethical (how to act). In the Nag Hammadi Library, these include:

- The Gospels of Thomas and Philip (II.2,3)
- The Book of Thomas the Contender (II.7)
- The Second Apocalypse of James (V.4)

- The Sentences of Sextus (XII.1)

The above and other important works betray signs of having originated in early Naşarene circles. They contain valuable clues regarding the religion of the first Christians and, indeed, clues regarding the teachings of their founder, Yeshu haNotsri.

Part 10

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs

B.C.E. times, Christian origins, The First Christians

The [Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs](#) (T12P) is a long work made up of deathbed testaments of the sons of Jacob, they being the patriarchs of the twelve tribes of Israel. The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha edition (1983) suggests a dating shortly after 150 BCE (I.778), loosely based on suspected parallels with Qumran literature. However, in recent decades the dating of Qumran has itself moved several generations later (DeVaux's early Period 1 is doubtful), with the result that those suspected "Essene" parallels should now be moved up to a century later. This revised dating conforms with my own research that places both the heyday of the DSS and that of Naṣarene literature in the middle to the second half of I BCE. Thus, the T12P are probably contemporary with the Parables of Enoch [that we have examined](#), and also with other literature of the first Christian generations after the death of Yeshu haNotsri ca. 64 BCE.

The twelve testaments are very uneven in quality and inspiration. Each testament has a focus. They are (in order):

Continence (encratism) – Against envy – Understanding (gnosis) – Against promiscuity, drunkenness, love of money – simplicity – Integrity, uprightness – Charity, compassion – Against anger – Against hatred – The two ways – Encratism, perseverance, humility – Right view, karma.

The above list is not typically Jewish. We note a focus on encratism, the two ways, the warning about "love of money" (ebionism), and an emphasis on ethics. The tone and content of the testaments is new. This is not Catholic

(“Christian”), for the date is late I BCE—*before* the (mythical) ministry of Jesus of Nazareth!

Given the early date and the novel emphases, the above may well stem from the ministry of Yeshu haNotsri. Consider the following passage from the Testament of Gad, with obvious parallels to the much later New Testament:

Now, my children, each of you [is to] love his brother. Drive hatred out of your hearts. Love one another in deed and word and inward thoughts... Love one another from the heart, therefore, and if anyone sins against you, speak to him in peace. Expel the venom of hatred, and do not harbor deceit in your heart. If anyone confesses and repents, forgive him. If anyone denies his guilt, do not be contentious with him... But even if he is devoid of shame and persists in his wickedness, forgive him from the heart and leave vengeance to God. (Test. Gad. 6)

Passages such as the above show that a “Christian” tone towards forgiveness did not begin with the canonical gospels (which I date ca. 150 CE). It was prefigured in the T12P already towards the end of I BCE, that is, almost two centuries earlier.

Disagreement has existed and continues to exist regarding the extent and number of Catholic interpolations in T12P. There are at least a few. But readers of this website can now admit another possibility: some passages, formerly considered Catholic, actually refer to Yeshu haNotsri and not to Jesus of Nazareth. For example, consider the following, written from the point of view of the patriarch Benjamin, who on his deathbed speaks to his children:

And in later times there shall rise up the beloved of the Lord, from the lineage of Judah and Levi, one who does his good pleasure by his mouth, enlightening all the nations with new knowledge. The light of knowledge will mount up in Israel for her salvation, seizing them like a wolf coming upon them, and gathering the gentiles. Until the consummation of the ages he shall be in the congregations of the gentiles and among the rulers, like a musical air in the mouths of all. He shall be written of in sacred books, both his work and his word. And he shall be God’s Chosen One forever. He shall range widely among them, like my father Jacob, saying “He shall fill up what was lacking of your tribe.” (Test. Benjamin 11)

Scholarship has assumed that the above passage is a Christian interpolation and that the “he” refers to Paul (minority position: Jesus of Nazareth), who brought “new knowledge” to Israel and to the gentiles. The passage knows “sacred books” in his name and considerable activity among the gentiles. Scholars who hold this view and who follow the traditional chronology consequently date such interpolations to between the two Jewish revolts (c. 70–130 CE).

But Paul was of the tribe of Benjamin, not of “Judah and Levi.” The New Testament also does not exalt Paul to messianic and quasi-divine status, as we read in the above excerpt (enlightener “of all the nations”; alive “until the consummation of the ages”; “God’s Chosen One forever”; “beloved of the Lord” [Cf. Mk 1:11]). The minority position seems to make more sense to me, and some scholars suppose that the passage describes Jesus of Nazareth. The statement “he shall be... among the rulers” might even suggest a very late date, when Christianity was gaining ground among Roman ruling elites.

Quite overlooked (and understandably so) is that the above passage was written by the Naṣārenes, Yeshu’s followers in I BCE. This conforms to the later I BCE dating for T12P (scholarly consensus) and also does not require the additional hypothesis of later Catholic interpolation (to make it refer to Paul or Jesus).

When read in this new light, the above passage refers to John the Hasmonean, aka Yeshu haNostri, described as the “beloved of the Lord.” The passage tells us that he will rise up “from the lineage of Judah and Levi.” This unusual phrase reveals much about the Naṣārene view of their founding prophet. We will now look at it in some detail.

“Judah and Levi”

To my knowledge, this pairing of tribes occurs only in T12P. Generally, Judah (the southern kingdom) is paired with Joseph (the northern kingdom) in

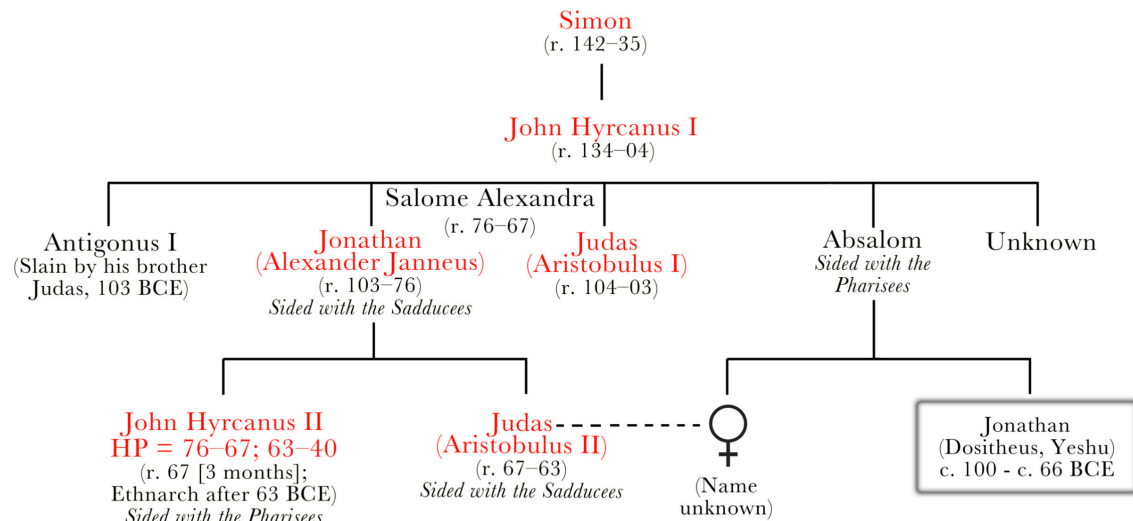
Jewish scripture,²⁴ where the reference is geographical and demographic—“Judah and Joseph” means “all the land/people west of the Jordan River.”

The pairing “Judah and Levi” has other referents. Traditionally, the secular power of the state was invested in the tribe of Judah—Jewish kings could only come from that tribe (particularly from the lineage of David). Messiahship, too, was kingly and invested in the “Lion of Judah.”

“Levi,” on the other hand, was the tribe invested with religious power. Chief Priests (and priests in general) had to belong to that tribe. Thus, the combination “Judah and Levi” signifies the combined power of all Israel: secular and religious.

The above passage relates that the “beloved of the Lord” was of the lineage of both Judah and Levi. Interpreted, this means that he possessed both kingly and messianic/religious power. This combination occurred only once in Jewish history: during the period 134 BCE to 63 BCE (beginning with [John Hyrcanus](#)), when a few Hasmoneans (of the tribe of Levi) were invested with both the office of High Priest and the throne. Thus, as it happens, John the son of Absalom and grandson of John Hyrcanus (aka Yeshu) was both a Levite by birth and also a member of the ruling family. Though not officially so, *to his Naṣarene followers* he was both High Priest and Lion of Judah (i.e. messiah).

²⁴ Josh 18:5, Zech 10:6, Ez 37:16-20, etc.



During the brief period following 134 BCE, secular and religious power were combined in the symbolic fusion of Judah and Levi. This non-traditional union, however, was a very sensitive point that did not sit well with either the Pharisees or the people. As a result, the two offices were soon divided once again (Hyrcanus II was only High Priest).

But Yeshu haNotsri (c. 100 to c. 64 BCE) lived precisely in the short period when the religious and secular powers were combined. We thus understand the later designation in T12P to “honor Levi and Judah, because from them shall arise the salvation of Israel” (Test. Joseph 19:11). This is a direct Naṣarene reference to the era in which Yeshu haNotsri lived.

We can now understand numerous other passages in T12P that refer to Judah and Levi in combination. Some of those passages follow:

- **Test. of Simeon.** “And now, my children, be obedient to Levi and to Judah. Do not exalt yourselves above these two tribes, because from them will arise the savior come from God. For the Lord will raise up from Levi someone as high priest and from Judah someone as king, God and man. He will save all the gentiles and the tribe of Israel.” (T. Sim. 7:1–3. COMMENT: This passage is usually considered a later Catholic interpolation, even though Jesus of Nazareth was not of the tribe of Levi.)

- **Test. of Dan.** “And there shall arise for you from the tribe of Judah and the tribe of Levi the Lord’s salvation. He will make war against Beliar; he will grant the vengeance of victory as our goal. And he will take from Beliar the captives, the souls of the saints; and he will turn the hearts of the disobedient ones to the Lord.” (T. Dan 5:10-11.)

- **Test. of Joseph.** “And you, my children, honor Levi and Judah, because from them shall arise the salvation of Israel.” (T. Joseph 19:11)

- **Test. of Benjamin.** “And in later times there shall rise up the beloved of the Lord, from the lineage of Judah and Levi, one who does his good pleasure by his mouth, enlightening all the nations with new knowledge.” (T. Benj. 11:2. Full passage with commentary furnished above.)

So we see that the Naṣarene veneration of Yeshu prefigured, in important ways, the later Christian veneration of Jesus. Both brought salvation to gentiles as well as Jews, but the Naṣarene prophet, the “beloved of the Lord,” was particularly venerated as a bringer of enlightenment, i.e. gnosis: “enlightening all the nations with new knowledge” (T. Benjamin).

Part 11

An early Christian poem

Gnosticism, The First Christians Natsarene

A remarkable poem from the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (T12P) invites commentary. I give the passage in full below, which comes from the Testament of Levi. [We have seen](#) that the author of T12P singled out Levi and Judah for special recognition. Among the Jews, these two tribes held religious power and royal power respectively. Yeshu haNotsri was a Levite (as were all males in the Hasmonean line) and thus was a priest by birth.

Historically, the poem below has been routinely interpreted through Catholic lenses. Today, conservative scholarship assumes it (and much of T12P) refers to Jesus of Nazareth and accordingly dates the entire work to late I CE+. However, the consensus of scholarship dates the work one century earlier, that is, to the closing decades of I BCE, while proposing that one or more Catholic editors interpolated the T12P in an effort to render it palatable to the Church.

The number and extent of Catholic edits and interpolations are subject to debate. However, the recognition that the poem originally referred not to Jesus at all but to the earlier Yeshu haNotsri allows us to reduce the number of Catholic edits, many of which can now be seen to authentically refer to Yeshu haNotsri rather than falsely to Jesus of Nazareth.

In the following I have taken the liberty of highlighting gnostic-leaning phrases in red font and adding comments. To enter the world of the first Christians, I can think of no quicker way than consideration of this poem and similar passages that we will be considering in subsequent posts.

- 1** When vengeance will have come upon them from the Lord,
the priesthood will lapse.²⁵
- 2** And then the Lord will raise up a new priest
to whom all the words of the Lord will be revealed.²⁶
He will execute the judgment of truth upon the earth for a multitude of days.
- 3** And his star will rise in heaven as of a king,
kindling the light of knowledge as the sun illumines the day.
And he will be magnified in the world.
- 4** This one will shine forth as the sun on the earth,
And he will remove all darkness from under heaven,
And there will be peace in all the earth.²⁷
- 5** The heavens will greatly rejoice in his days,
And the earth will be glad,
The clouds will be filled with joy,
And the *knowledge of the Lord* will be poured out on the earth,
as the water of the seas;²⁸
And the angels of glory of the Lord's presence will be glad in him.
- 6** The heavens will be opened,
And from the temple of glory sanctification will come upon him,
With the Father's voice as from Abraham to Isaac.²⁹

²⁵ 'Them' refers to a long list of Jewish sinners given in the immediately preceding verse: 'priests, idolators, adulterers, money lovers, arrogant, lawless, voluptuaries, pederasts, those who practice bestiality.' The High Priesthood 'lapsed' between 159 and 153 BCE, before the first Hasmonean (Jonathan Apphus) assumed the religious office.

²⁶ Scholarship reflexively concludes that these verses are a Catholic interpolation, on the assumption that the 'new priest' (and other things related about him) refers to Jesus of Nazareth--an impossibility if the text dates to late I BCE. However, once Jesus of Nazareth is removed as an historical figure, the verses emerge as an authentic tribute to Yeshu haNotsri.

²⁷ This verse echoes Isa 11:6--'The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together.' The Nasarene author sees Yeshu's message of peace as bringing about a new world.

²⁸ Note the link between 'knowledge' and 'water' (a Nasarene symbol for gnosis). This symbolism will reappear in v. 7.

²⁹ Though open to gentiles, the Nasarene author is very Jewish. The 'temple of glory' probably refers to the Jerusalem temple, still standing in late I BCE when the author was writing. The 'Father,' of course, is Yahweh (called the 'Lord of Spirits' in the Nasarene Parables of Enoch). Notice, however, that

7 And the glory of the Most High will burst forth upon him,
And *the spirit of understanding* and sanctification
will rest upon him *in the water*.³⁰

8 For he will give the majesty of the Lord to those who are his sons
forever,³¹

[And he will have no successor for all generations forever.]³²

9 And in his priesthood the Gentiles will be
multiplied in knowledge on the earth,
And they *will be enlightened* through the grace of the Lord,
but Israel will be *diminished by her ignorance* and darkened by her grief.³³
In his priesthood will sin come to an end,
And the lawless will cease to do evil,
And the just will find rest in him.³⁴

10 [And he will open the gates of paradise,

He will remove the sword that has threatened since Adam.

11 And he will grant to the saints to eat from the tree of life,
And the spirit of holiness will be on them.

Yahweh is not a commanding or disciplining father as we read so often in Jewish scripture. He is now a loving father, and his love is compared to the fierce love Abraham had for his son Isaac (Gen 22).

³⁰ A reference to baptism and a continuation of the water symbolism from v. 5. The parallels with Mk 1:9-11 are astonishing.

³¹ Note that 'the majesty of the Lord' is not reserved for Yeshu/Jesus alone--it is given 'to those who are his sons forever.' For the Nasarene author Yeshu/Jesus was not one of a kind. His teaching was precisely to show the way that he himself had trod, so that they might be like him. The Catholic Church later rejected this by making Jesus the *only* Son of God. This was not the Nasarene view. In fact, it was only through emulation of Yeshu/Jesus that the new world could come about.

³² In my view this line is a Christian interpolation. It contradicts the immediately preceding line in which (see note 7) Yeshu/Jesus is a model for emulation and is by no means unique. Other certainly Christian interpolations have been identified throughout the T12P.

³³ The author includes Gentiles in the new dispensation and accuses Israel of 'ignorance' (the ultimate accusation in a gnostic perspective). The author's anger against Israel, of course, goes back to the nation's rejection, excommunication, and execution of Yeshu. The prophet's death took place in 64 BCE, immediately before the Roman conquest of Israel in 63 BCE. Looking back, the Nasarene author probably viewed the Roman conquest ('Israel's grief') as God's immediate retribution against the land for its execution of Yeshu.

³⁴ 'His priesthood' does not refer to Yeshu/Jesus himself but to the Nasarene community. It is by joining that community that sin will come to an end, lawlessness will cease, and the just will find rest.

12 And Beliar will be bound by him.]³⁵

And he will give power to his children to trample on wicked spirits.³⁶

13 And the Lord will rejoice in His children,
And will be well pleased in his beloved ones for ever.

14 Then will Abraham and Isaac and Jacob exult,
And I will rejoice,³⁷
And all the saints will be clothed in righteousness.

³⁵ Very possibly vvs. 10-12a have been edited by the Catholic interpolator noted above. These verses reflect the subtle but telling apotheosis of Yeshu/Jesus. Properly phrased, v. 10 should read: 'And *his teaching* will open the gates of paradise.' But here the text has 'and *he* will open... *he* will remove...' Similarly, in v. 11 it is *he* who 'grants to the saints,' while in v. 12a *he* (rather than 'his teaching') binds Beliar. Thus, a critical transfer is effected from the all-important teaching of Yeshu to the person of Jesus himself.

³⁶ 'He' is 'the Lord' (see following line). Note that 'his children' (i.e., the Nasarenes) do not trample on *people*, as did their ancestors in Jewish scripture, but trample on wicked *spirits*. This conforms with the spiritualizing of Judaism that we have observed in other Nasarene writings such as the Parables of Enoch, where God is termed 'the Lord of Spirits.'

³⁷ Who is 'I'? Is it simply the Nasarene author? The enigmatic introduction of the first person at the end of the poem is somewhat jarring.

Part 12

Levites and early Christians

B.C.E. times, Christian origins, Dead Sea Scrolls, Dositheus, The First Christians Levite

We have recently looked at the Testament of Levi as a Naṣarene-inspired work. Another work, one found at Qumran (1Q21) and known as “The Words of Levi,” seems to have been an earlier version of Test. Levi and has a similar tone. The Naṣarenes and Qumran were antagonists (as were Yeshu and the Teacher of Righteousness), and the fact that some Naṣarene writings were found in the Qumran caves suggests to me that the DSS was a *library* and not the repository of a single sect.

Levi—the third son of Jacob and Leah—is accorded particular reverence in a number of works, including the Naṣarene *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* (T12P), where two patriarchs are accorded special status: Levi and Judah—the religious leader (High Priest) and the secular leader (king). Lest the reader be in any doubt as to which of the two is pre-eminent, the author addresses this question in a critical passage from Test. Judah:

[Judah speaks on his deathbed.] “And now, children, love Levi so that you may endure. Do not be arrogant toward him or you will be wholly destroyed. To me God has given the kingship and to him the priesthood; and He has subjected the kingship to the priesthood. To me He gave earthly matters and to Levi heavenly matters. As heaven is superior to the earth, so is God’s priesthood superior to the kingdom on earth...” (Test. Judah 21:1–3. Cf. Test. Reuben 6:7–8.)

The superiority of priest to king, and of “earthly matters” over “heavenly matters” is entirely consistent with Naṣarene theology which, [as we have seen](#),

describes God as the “Lord of spirits.” The crux of the matter is the statement: “As heaven is superior to the earth.” This vital assertion is a departure from normative Judaism and veils an incipient dualism, a disparagement of materiality that can be considered Platonic, “idealistic” (a modern philosophical term)—or even Buddhist, in which materiality is viewed as an illusive decoy.

Historically, the special veneration of Levi is not a coincidence, for numerous affinities exist between the “Levites” and the early Christians, the early Naṣarene followers of Yeshu haNotsri—as I show below.

Who were the Levites? In Deut. 18:5 (621 BCE) Levi is granted the right “to stand and minister in the name of the LORD, him [Levi] and his sons for all time.” In one scholar’s words, “Deuteronomy demands that a single cultus be established and that an exclusive priestly monopoly be granted to the tribe of Levi.”³⁸ This eternal promise, however, would soon be broken, for in the fourth century BCE the rewritten Pentateuch (the so-called “Priestly Source”) appeared and introduced a completely new class of priests, the Aaronides (sons of Aaron, the brother of Moses), who arrogated to themselves exclusive rights to minister to Yahweh at the new Second Temple, where only they could approach the altar. While the Aaronides made sure to claim membership in the tribe of Levi, through their pen they reduced all other Levites to the status of inferior religious functionaries. They also rendered all country altars illicit, ensuring that the Jerusalem Temple was henceforth the only sanctioned venue of sacrifice. Hence the ubiquitous phrase in Jewish scripture, “priests *and* Levites” (as if Levites were not/no longer priests—E. Rivkin, *op. cit.* chp. 2.)

It will become clear that the “Levites” were carriers of suppressed (including proto-gnostic) religious traditions in opposition to the dominant Second Temple priesthood (Zadokites, Aaronides, and [later] Sadducees). To illustrate, I here consider a passage from the Testament of Levi, in the T12P:

³⁸ E. Rivkin, THE SHAPING OF JEWISH HISTORY. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1971:18.

- 1** [Levi speaks.] “Now I have come to know that for seventy weeks you will wander astray and profane the priesthood and defile the sacrificial altars.
- 2** “You will set aside the Law and nullify the words of the prophets by your wicked perversity. You persecute just men and you hate the pious; the word of the faithful you regard with revulsion.
- 3** “A man who by the power of the Most High renews the Law you name ‘Deceiver,’ and finally you will plot to kill him, not discerning his eminence; by your wickedness you take innocent blood on your heads.
- 4** “I tell you, on account of him your holy places will be razed to the ground.” (Test. Levi 16:1–4)

Verse 3 mentions a man “you name ‘Deceiver.’” From v. 1 we see that “you” (pl.) are those who “wander astray and profane the priesthood and defile the sacrificial altars.” Note the plural—the author is writing about multiple altars that have been desecrated. This cannot refer to the Jerusalem temple but to the many competing local altars in the land that were destroyed after the return of the Aaronides from captivity in Babylon (beginning c. 539 BCE). Those local altars were the purview of the Levites, country priests who were dispossessed after the construction of the Second Temple c. 516 BCE.

The “seventy weeks,” 70 x 7, when counted in years = 490 years. If one takes the number literally, then the author of Test. Levi was writing about the year 26 BCE. He was signaling a long period of time reaching back to c. 500 BCE when the ancient (Levitical) priesthood was replaced by the Aaronides and “the sacrificial altars” throughout the land were rendered moot. In the words of E. Rivkin, the Aaronides “come to power with the finalized Pentateuch and, as such, are their own creation.”³⁹ We read in the book of Numbers:

So bring with you [Aaronide priests] also your brothers of the tribe of Levi, your ancestral tribe, in order that they may be joined to you, *and serve you... But they must not approach either the utensils of the sanctuary or the altar*, otherwise both they and you will die. (Num 18:2-3.)

³⁹ E. Rivkin, 'Aaron, Aaronides' in: The Interpreter's Dict. of the Bible, Suppl. vol. (1982).

With these and similar verses (cf. Num 18:4–7; 8:19; 16:40) the country Levites became servants of the Jerusalem religious establishment (later the Sadducees). Henceforth, only the descendants of Aaron carried out priestly duties. The altars in high places outside Jerusalem became unusable (and were doubtless destroyed), for according to the above verses the Levites could no longer approach an altar to perform sacrifice. The Levites became Aaronide servants and ancillary Temple staff (e.g. musicians—Ezra 7:7).

In v. 3 above we can infer that the Temple priests call somebody “the Deceiver,” a person who “by the power of the Most High renews the Law.” They “plot to kill him, not discerning his eminence” and thus they “take innocent blood on [their] hands.”

Contemporary Dead Sea Scroll accounts (esp. Peshers Nahum and Habakkuk) associate “the man of the lie” with Ephraim/Samaria (see below), and similarly describe his followers as “deceivers”:

This refers to the deceivers from Ephraim, who through their deceptive teaching, lying talk, and dishonest speech deceive many: kings, princes, priests, native and foreigner alike. (pNah 2:8)

I have [already demonstrated](#) that the Man of the Lie was none other than Yeshu haNotsri. It seems clear to me that the author of the Test. Levi, in the previous citation above, is rebuking contemporary Qumranites who are accusing the Naṣarene leader of being a “deceiver” and “Man of the Lie.”

If the foregoing analysis is correct, then we have arrived at an important milestone in research—where the data begin to confirm each other. In the above paragraphs we have *multiple attestations* from *independent sources* (indeed, antagonistic sources) converging on the same historical datum: the ministry of a prophet known (in the Talmud) as Yeshu haNotsri. The Talmud dates Yeshu to the early decades of I BCE. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the *Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs* date later in that century, during the first Christian generations. Thus the data from multiple sources (and more sources are to be presented in other posts) converge on the I BCE era of Yeshu

haNotsri, who was tried and executed by the Sanhedrin c. 64 BCE, and on his first followers who were writing in the ensuing generations.

With the convergence of multiple attestations, it is (or should be) increasingly difficult to write off the Yeshu haNotsri thesis as “unfounded,” “crank,” or worse. The onus of proof moves to the person who *doubts* verifiable (albeit obscure) historical data. The facts are there. The texts exist. The history is patent. Scholars of early Christianity, long inured to Greek and Latin writings, will have to look at these non-Greek and non-Latin works (for example, the Qumran *Words of Levi* is in Aramaic), no matter how uncongenial, “suspicious,” or “marginal”—for they constitute real history that has been heretofore assiduously suppressed.

Verse 4: “*on account of him your holy places will be razed to the ground.*” The Naṣarene author looks back and views the Roman conquest of Palestine in 63 BCE as immediate retribution for the execution of Yeshu haNotsri by the Sanhedrin only one year earlier.

If Test. Levi is a Naṣarene work, as I believe, then it appears that some of the long-dispossessed Levite priests and their families rallied to Yeshu haNotsri (himself a Levite by blood) and were counted among his early followers. They are known to have been strongest in the northern province of Galilee—a region distant from the Jerusalem priesthood—and are known as “Galileans” in some writings, the term being somewhat pejorative and implying unorthodox views. The (much maligned) Levite stronghold was far to the north at gnostic Dan, a sanctuary originally founded by a Levite from (*nota bene*) Bethlehem (Judges 19). Dan lies at the headwaters of the Jordan River. Thus, the Levites are implicated in a nexus of gnostic tropes: [Bethlehem](#), the Jordan River, baptism, and Jesus’ Transfiguration (which occurs in the region of Dan—“the district of Caesarea Philippi,” Mt 16:13; 17:1–8).

There is not space here to investigate the links between the dispossessed Levites and the gnostic region of Dan/Mt. Hermon—the ancient place of [meeting between God and man](#) (cf. the Epic of Gilgamesh, 1 Enoch), or the

links between the Levites and the similarly dispossessed Kenites/Rechabites (James the Just was one), and their ties to the “scribes” of Jabets (1 Chr 2:55). In sum, there existed an alternate “underground” tradition in the land—one that valued education and was ebionite (the Kenites, Rechabites, and Levites were all landless and distrusted both urbanization and money)—an alternate tradition that opposed the Jerusalem establishment and was basically written out of Jewish scripture. “Levi” became a pejorative. (Cf. “Leviathan,” the sea monster—and note its connection with water, an age-old gnostic symbol).

To recap: I suspect that among the first followers to rally around Yesu haNotsri in I BCE were long embittered anti-Jerusalem Levites from the north. A significant number of them probably made up an important contingent of the Naṣarenēs/early Christians, which may be the reason that the later evangelists located Jesus’ ministry in the Galilee. One of those anti-Jerusalem Naṣarenēs/Levite scribes may have penned the verses of the Testament of Levi cited above.

Samaria

We recall that when Jonathan the Hasmonean (Yesu) returned to Palestine from exile in Egypt, [he went to Samaria](#). His followers there formed a new, gnostic, sect dubbed “Dositheans” (< Gk. “Gift of God”) after an alternate name for Jonathan (< Heb. “Gift of God”). *Dositheus* is thus [the Samaritan cipher for Yesu haNotsri](#), and the Dositheans are another name for Yesu’s followers in Samaria.

The Dositheans were genetically opposed to both the Jerusalem priesthood and the contemporary Samaritan priesthood, for the Samaritans, when they first split religiously from Judaism in mid-IV BCE, had simply imported a version of the (hated) Priestly Code, now centered on Mt. Gerizim (see Rivkin, IDBSuppl., 1982:3.i). Modern scholarship views Dositheanism as a branch of Samaritanism, but we can now appreciate that this view is incorrect. The Samaritans themselves have consistently and pointedly disavowed the sect as heretical. My investigations confirm the impassable split between

Dositheanism and Samaritanism. Incidentally, Dositheus' principal disciple was named Levi,⁴⁰ and further study is required to establish the links between the Dositheans (Naṣarene followers of Yeshu in Samaria) and the old class of Levites in the land.

Dositheus in the Pseudo-Clementine literature was a disciple of John the Baptist—another cipher for Yeshu. So all these traditions come together when one cuts through the abundant “misinformation” created by the Church Fathers.

In my view, an obscure Dosithean work (currently dubbed “Samaritan”) obliquely refers to Yeshu haNotsri:

And of [the twelve sons of Jacob], Levi became the portion and lot of God, for he was the bearer of the *ray of light* for the sake of prophecy. In him He placed His glory. From his seed the house of the priesthood grew. For God selected him to minister and to bless his congregation, and his seed for all time. The Levite tribe with all the blessings that he had, carried *the mystery of Moses*, and in goodness the essence was carried when he transmitted his seed. For *from the seed of this holy tribe arose the exalted of all men*. (S. Miller, [Molad Mosheh](#). New York, 1949, p. 240. Emphases added.)

This passage informs us that the Levite tribe carried the “mystery” and “seed” of Moses, and that from the seed of the Levite tribe “arose the exalted of all men.” Apparently, we have here an identification of Yeshu haNotsri, written in I BCE, by a Dosithean of Samaria.

* * *

There is much new in this post and in its outward-pointing links. Perhaps your head is spinning from all the astonishing information. The Church has woven such a rich tapestry of falsehoods, for so many hundreds of years, that clarifying the early history of Christianity is tantamount to revealing a new world. But the work must be done. Those who are incurably addicted to old

⁴⁰ J. Bowman, SAMARITAN DOCUMENTS RELATING TO THEIR HISTORY, RELIGION, AND LIFE. Pittsburgh: Pickwick Pr. 1977:165.

views are not able to proceed. On the other hand, those who can jettison the comforting myths of the gospel savior from Nazareth will discover a story that is empowering because it is real, human, and very true.

Part 13

The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (conclusion)

B.C.E. times, Christian origins, Gospel of John, The First Christians

In the last couple of posts we have looked ([here](#) and [here](#)) at the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs (T12P), a work written in the last half of the first century BCE and later edited and interpolated by Catholic Christians. Here I signal one more passage of interest and then will conclude this particular discussion with a some closing observations on T12P and the New Testament.

Testament of Benjamin, chp. 11

2 And in later times there shall rise up the beloved of the Lord, from the lineage of Judah and Levi, one who does his good pleasure by his mouth, enlightening all the nations with new knowledge. The light of knowledge will mount up in Israel for her salvation, seizing them like a wolf coming upon them, and gathering the gentiles.

3 Until the consummation of the ages he shall be in the congregations of the gentiles and among the rulers, like a musical air in the mouths of all.

4 He shall be written of in sacred books, both his work and his word. And he shall be God's chosen one forever. (T. Benj. 11:2–4)

Verse 2.

- *in later times* = “in recent times.” That is, the “beloved of the Lord” lived within a generation or two of the writing of this passage.

- *the beloved of the Lord* [αγαπητος κυριου]. The prophet Yeshu has exemplary status and is unique among men. He ranks higher than one of the prophets of old, but there is no hint (yet) that he is anything but human. The view of the divine Son emerged with Catholicism about a century later. T12P uniformly knows Yeshu as purely human (T.Naph 4:5; T. Levi 16:3; 18:1, 12; T. Judah 24:1 ff).

Excursis: Where the Fourth Gospel got its name?"

The Fourth Gospel uses the phrase “the beloved disciple” (or: the disciple “beloved of the Lord”) [six times](#). Twice, his head is described as lying on Jesus’ breast (13:23; 21:20). To my mind, the uncanny suspicion arises that Jesus and the Beloved Disciple were somehow one and the same person—even if only by literary allusion.

If this fusion of Jesus and the Beloved Disciple has merit, then it lends an interesting light on the final verses of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 21:20, 24), where the Beloved Disciple is credited with having written the work. We thus have—again, perhaps only by literary allusion—the strange situation that the person who wrote the gospel may somehow be identified with Jesus himself.

We continue down this curious path... The name of the Fourth Evangelist is (traditionally) John. This, then, would also be the name of the Beloved Disciple, who wrote the gospel. As it happens, the given name of the prophet later called Yeshu haNotsri in the Talmud (which furnishes the most details regarding the prophet’s life and ministry—see Salm, *NazarethGate* pp. 419–27) was also “John” (son of Absalom the Hasmonean).

It is as if the author of the Fourth Gospel knew a unique prophet “beloved of the Lord”—the identical epithet used in the T. Benjamin above (v. 2).

If this suspicion is correct, then the Fourth Evangelist has taken this detail and woven it into his gospel. In so doing, the original prophet has suffered reduction to “the Beloved Disciple.” Yet, because the words of the entire Fourth Gospel are credited to that disciple, we have an ambiguous resonance between the gospel and the actual

words of Yeshu HaNotsri. It is a little riddle, whose solution may have been known only to the evangelist and his inner circle. If this is correct, then John the Hasmonean's name ultimately attached itself to at least one Christian gospel.

- *from the lineage of Judah and Levi.* We have seen that his followers considered that Yeshu haNotsri belonged to both tribes—to the tribe of Levi through blood, and to the tribe of Judah through membership in the Hasmonean family that ruled Israel.
- *one who does his good pleasure by his mouth.* The importance of Yeshu for the Naṣarenes was his teaching. There is no inkling (yet) of a miraculous wonder-worker, or that Yeshu had any super-human propensities.
- *enlightening all the nations with new knowledge.* Yeshu's teaching was “new knowledge” and an “enlightenment”—that is, gnosis.
- *The light of knowledge will mount up in Israel for her salvation.* The Naṣarene author considers himself a Jew and hopes for the gnostic reformation of Judaism according to the teachings of Yeshu.
- *and gathering the gentiles.* The new teaching is all-inclusive. The wall of separation between Jew and Gentile has been breeched, and the corollary is near at hand: the Jews are no longer God's “only” or “chosen” people. This point would ultimately force the Naṣarenes out of the Jewish orbit.

Verse 3

- “He” is both the work of Yeshu and his word (cf. v. 4).

Verse 4

- *He shall be written of in sacred books.* Doubtless many of those books were familiar to the author of T12P. Unfortunately, only some

enigmatic names have survived: the Gospel According to the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Nazoraeans, the Gospel of the Ebionites...⁴¹

- *both his work and his word.* “His work” refers to the life and ministry of Yeshu, still remembered by the Naṣarene author but replaced by the Catholic invention of Jesus of Nazareth. Nevertheless, the gospel narrative is ultimately based upon the life and ministry of Yeshu haNotsri.
- *And he shall be God’s chosen one forever.* Yeshu was unique (see above, v. 2). He was the perfect man, the quintessential revealer of gnosis. Being inimitable, he was “God’s chosen one forever.” Nevertheless, for the Naṣarene he suffered and died as a man and was not *God*. The Church Fathers were quite aware that this view of Jesus was prevalent among “Jewish Christians.”

T12P and the New Testament

One commentator of a century ago ([Oesterley—PDF link](#) includes text of T12P) notes that the work has “an astonishingly high ethical standard” that resembles, yet also precedes, the New Testament (p. xxi). He points to the following parallels:

- “Love the Lord with all your life, and one another with a true heart.” [T. Dan 5:3. Cp. Mk 12:28-34; BCP 1:C9.]
- “If a man sins against you, speak peaceably to him and do not harbor guile in your heart. And if he repents and confesses, forgive him... And if he is shameless and persists in his wrong-doing, even so forgive him from the heart and leave vengeance to God.” [T. Gad 6:3,

⁴¹ See Schneemelcher, NEW TESTAMENT APOCRYPHA, 1991, vol. I, pp. 154 ff. for a few verses attributed to these lost 'Jewish Christian' gospels.

7; cf. also 7:7. Cp. Mt 5:43–48; 18:25, Lk 6:27–36; 17:3; 2 Cor 11:20; BCP 1.]

- “Righteousness casts out hatred; humility destroys envy. For he that is just and humble is ashamed to do what is unjust, being reproved not by another, but by his own heart, for the Lord sees its [every] inclination. [T. Gad 5:3; cp. Mk 4:22.]
- “For by whatever human capacity anyone transgresses, by that he is also chastised.” [Mk 4:24. This is the karmic law: BCP 27.]

Oesterley goes on to write that “Ethical teaching of this kind is as exalted as much that we read in the Gospels...” Of course, he had not the slightest knowledge of Yeshu haNotsri or of the Nasarenes (he wrote in 1917), nor the remotest suspicion that Jesus of Nazareth was an invented figure (though that view was already mooted by a few). So Oesterly writes:

There are many other passages in this book [T12P] which show such close affinity in thought and language with what we read in the Gospels that it is difficult not to believe that Christ was familiar with our book, and willingly made use of it sometimes in His teaching. (G. Oesterley, in his introduction to R. H. Charles’ edition of *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, 1917, p. xxii. PDF link above.)

Of course, it was not “Christ”—from the (invented) backwater village of Nazareth—who “was familiar with our book,” but the New Testament evangelists. A further striking parallelism occurs between a passage in the Testament of Joseph and the Gospel of Matthew:

Testament of Joseph 1:3–5	Gospel of Matthew 25:35–36
I was sold into slavery, and the Lord of all set me free	I was <u>hungry</u> , and you <u>gave me food</u>
I was taken into captivity, and his strong hand succored me	I was thirsty, and you gave me to drink
I was beset with <u>hunger</u> , and the Lord himself <u>gave me food</u>	I was a stranger, and you welcomed me
I was alone, and God comforted me	I was naked, and you clothed me
I was <u>sick</u> , and the Lord <u>visited me</u>	I was <u>sick</u> , and you <u>visited me</u> ,
I was <u>in prison</u> , and my God showed favor to me	I was <u>in prison</u> , and you came to me.
I was in bonds, and he loosed me.	

Beyond doubt the two passages are related. Scholarship agrees that the Testament of Joseph is the earlier—by one hundred years according to the traditional dating of GMt (ca. 90 CE), and by as much as two hundred years according to my dating ([canonical gospels written 140–150 CE](#)). Thus, Jesus of Nazareth’s words above (they are in the Olivet Discourse, Mt 24–25) are hardly original but are based upon an existing text—a Naṣarene text belonging to the *real* “first Christians.”

The pieces of the puzzle are beginning to come together... The New Testament evangelists pilfered authentic material belonging to the first Christians, the Naṣarene followers of Yeshu haNotsri. From that rich body of material they deleted the gnostic content and “Catholicized” what they could, substituting faith for gnosis and Jesus of Nazareth for the generally forgotten Yeshu haNotsri, who died two centuries earlier (c. 64 BCE–c. 140 CE). The Church did the rest. When Constantine recognized (Catholic) Christianity in the early fourth century, burning heretical texts became the order of business and remained so for a millennium. Most of the Naṣarene works were destroyed—that is the main reason only “clues” remain, scattered here and there among heavily Catholicized/interpolated/edited writings. The one or two authentic early Christian writings to survive intact have done so despite the most assiduous efforts of the Church to utterly destroy them—such as the Gospel of Thomas and a few other works from the Nag Hammadi library and elsewhere.

Part 14

The demise of the Natsarenes: From Christians to heretics

B.C.E. times, Christian origins, Gnosticism, Natsarene, The First Christians

I bring this series of posts to a close with the migration out of the land of Palestine of the Natsarenes/Našarenes—the word derives from Semitic našar, with tsade, and is critically not to be confused with the later Greek (Catholic) Nazarene (Ναζωραῖος / Ναζαρηνός) as found in the New Testament. This was the watershed event that began the gradual decline of the first Christians, for after the so-called “[flight to Pella](#)” the early community no longer had a central authority—cf. the early reputation of James the Just in Jerusalem, referenced in GTh 12, Gal 1-2 and also by the Church Fathers.

The flight to Pella

It is unfortunate that we do not have precise details as to when that migration took place, for such historical information would help date “pre-migration” and “post-migration” texts. Scholars suspect that many gnostic “Jewish Christian” writings—such as the Gospel of Thomas and Odes of Solomon—were penned in Syria. Such works have been dated to I CE, and they ushered in a long train of ascetic and ebionite writings such as the various (apocryphal) acts of apostles, works that have colored Eastern Christianity through the centuries.

In any case, both the provenance and the dating of early Jewish-Christian writings support a migration of the Semitic (not Greek-speaking) Našarene fellowship roughly around the turn of the era. An earlier or later dating is also

possible. For example, the [Parthians invaded Judea](#) ca. 40 BCE during a period of much turmoil. Alternatively, ca. 40 CE, Caligula ordered the erection of a statue of himself in the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem and riots occurred in many Jewish cities, provoking a [stern Roman response](#). The Christian Naṣarene fellowship in this era was poor, small, and fragile. When and why it decided to forsake Palestine, the land of its ancestral traditions, and cross the Jordan River into the sparsely-inhabited regions of the Decapolis, may never be known.

The flight to Pella may alternatively have been connected with (or a result of) the martyrdom of the Naṣarene leader James the Just. Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* Chp. 23) dates the death of James to immediately before the First Jewish War—the late 60s CE—and blames the “Scribes and Pharisees” for his death.

I find it interesting that the pre-conversion Paul was a persecutor of Christians. I suspect that “Paul” is a cipher for “Hellenist Christians” and their developing theology. What role (if any) the Hellenists may have had in the persecution of Naṣarenes is, of course, unknown. In the turmoil preceding and during the First Jewish War, “pacifist” Jesus-followers would certainly have been suspect for their views, and perhaps even persecuted by Jews in general as collaborators, traitors, and natives unwilling to participate in the rebellion against Rome. Whether the Hellenist Christians (pre-conversion “Paul”) were implicated in “identifying” them is not out of the question. In Acts 8:1 “Paul approved of their killing him.” This refers to the stoning of Stephen at the hands of Jews, but H.J. Schoeps long ago suggested that Stephen is a stand-in for James the Just. In any case, the death of James and the imminent Jewish War may have impelled the now leaderless Naṣarenes to flee across the Jordan.

In addition to the New Testament writings (Acts 6, Galatians 1-2, etc), clues to the Naṣarene migration can be found in the overlooked (but also quite unreliable) Mandaean scriptures. The Mandaeans are unquestionably descendants of the early Naṣarenes. Unfortunately, the sacred texts of those “followers of John the Baptist” do not exist earlier than Islamic times and come to us only in very garbled form.

From Christians to heretics

What is clear is the contrasting attitude of the later Catholics towards the Naşarenes before and after the flight to Pella. Before the migration, the early Christians in Jerusalem under James the Just are accorded grudging respect as disciples of Jesus:

The people of the Church in Jerusalem were commanded by an oracle given by revelation before the war to those in the city who were worthy of it to depart and dwell in one of the cities of Perea which they called Pella. To it those who believed on Christ traveled from Jerusalem, so that holy men had altogether deserted the royal capital of the Jews and the whole land of Judaea. (Eusebius, Church History 3, 5, 3.)

In the New Testament, despite his differences with “the acknowledged pillars” (Gal 2:9) in Jerusalem, Paul still raises a collection for the Naşarenes (Gal 2:10; Rom 15:26; Acts 11:29-30; etc) and seeks their benediction to preach to the Gentiles. However, tension is evident between the two camps, as we read in Acts 6:1-6, where “the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews.” It is clear that the two factions of Christians were distinguished not only by language and culture (Greek speaking and Hellenist in custom vs. Semitic speaking and non-Hellenist) but also by theology. The Hellenists were incipient Catholics little tied to Mosaic law and Jewish halacha. They increasingly viewed their founding prophet as divine. The “Hebrews,” on the other hand, were Jewish-Christians who viewed the founding prophet as a man, a man who brought saving gnosis. They rejected the virgin birth and the resurrection of the body. They also rejected the doctrines of atonement and redemption by the Cross as elaborated in the writings of Paul. Theirs was the way of works and effort (Epistle of James), not the way of faith and belief.

After the flight to Pella, however, the rupture in the fellowship was unbridgeable and the early Jewish-Christians are henceforth denominated heretics:

This heresy of the Nazoraeans exists in Beroea in the neighborhood of Coele Syria and the Decapolis in the region of Pella and in Basanitis in the

so-called Kokaba (Chochabe in Hebrew). From there it took its beginning after the exodus from Jerusalem when all the disciples went to live in Pella because Christ had told them to leave Jerusalem and to go away since it would undergo a siege. Because of this advice they lived in Perea after having moved to that place, as I said. (Epiphanius, Panarion 29,7,7-8.)

The Naṣarenes became ancestors to a bewildering variety of gnostic sects on the fringes of Christianity: Mandeans, Manichaeans, baptists and, in fact, to virtually the entire panoply of heretics chronicled, lampooned, and misrepresented by the Church Fathers.

The basic problem for the incipient Catholics was gnosticism. The Naṣarenes essentially taught that “he who finds the meaning of these words will not experience death” (GTh 1). But the Catholics would teach that effort is useless (Rom 9:16) and that “it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”⁴² Simply put, the way to salvation through gnosis is incompatible with the way to salvation through faith.

And yet, the Catholics included in their New Testament much that is gnostic. “Seek and ye shall find” and “the truth will make you free” are but two examples (Mt 7:7; Jn 8:32). Jesus of Nazareth also teaches the need for extreme effort (Mk 12:33)—which is seemingly contrary to salvation through faith—as well as total renunciation: “If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.”⁴³

⁴² The colossal transposition of the time of Jesus from the era of Janneus (early I BCE) to the era of the Herods (early I CE) occurred as early as the Protevangelium of James, an overlooked infancy gospel used by both Matthew and Luke. PrJ was written in opposition to the Toldoth Yeshu (<https://www.mythicistpapers.com/2022/03/31/a-note-on-the-toldoth-yeshu/>), an acrid Jewish anti-Christian screed which, however, is still faithful to Jesus/Yeshu's original and correct dating in the time of the Hasmonean King Janneus.

⁴³ Lk 14:26; cf. Mk 9:43-48; Mt 19:21; Lk 18:22.

One finds a typically gnostic, world denying theme in many of Jesus' words: "You are of this world; I am not of this world" (Jn 8:23; cf. 17:14, 16; 1 Jn 4:5). In fact, much that seems "gnostic" is to be found in the gospel bearing the name John. Is this pure coincidence? John was the birth name of Yeshu. We have already touched on a possible link between the "beloved disciple" of the Fourth Gospel and the "beloved disciple" of the Naṣarenes, noting that the Beloved Disciple himself penned the Gospel of John.

From the foregoing data (and much more evidence can be adduced) it is indisputable that the Catholics borrowed—and that they did so copiously—from existing Naṣarene teachings and writings. Had they not done so, the canonical gospels would undeniably be weaker. The early Catholics not only borrowed material from their Naṣarene precursors—they *themselves* were disaffected Naṣarenes. No doubt, many early "Pauline" Christians continued to be recruited from the ranks of the Naṣarenes.

We can now recreate the general religious situation that obtained in I CE, when the first stirrings of Catholicism were in the offing. A split was occurring among the Naṣarenes: some were less enthusiastic than others as regards the total commitment required, the rejection of worldly norms and familial ties reflected in the sayings cited above, the ebionism (rejection of wealth) and encratism (chastity) enjoined by the founding prophet. These disaffected Naṣarenes probably spoke Greek rather than Hebrew. It was only a matter of time before they would coalesce and break away. When they did so, they took with them an intimate acquaintance of Naṣarene teachings.

The great betrayal on the part of these disaffected Naṣarenes occurred with the wholesale rejection of the gnostic way. At that point, they possessed a body of sublime teachings that, however, they could not (or refused to) follow. But they had a great source of potential support: the large mass of humanity that also would not be able (or wish to) follow the radical, ultra-demanding Gnostic Way. What these incipient Catholics needed was clear: a hero to carry their more palatable message to the world. And this they found with the invention of Jesus of Nazareth, a savior who has already done all the "hard" work for us.

The early Catholics patterned their savior on the dim memory of Yeshu haNotsri. They retained his opposition to the “Scribes and Pharisees,” his trial, his execution by crucifixion. But they divorced their Jesus from any clear link to the Hasmonean Yeshu, for such a link could be historically checked and would only serve to undermine the unprecedented nature of *their* Jesus. So they placed their hero in a contrasting social stratum—a carpenter from an out of the way place called “Nazareth” in Galilee, an invented place impossible to validate—and, more importantly, impossible to *invalidate*. Yeshu had been known as a Naṣarene to his followers (*ha Notsri*), a hated Gnostic designation (*Natsar* in Hebrew means “examine, guard, keep secret”) that the evangelist Mark redefines for the reader as merely “the holy one of God” (Mk 1:24). The evangelists also invented a contrasting Sitz im Leben for their hero—the era of the Herods—for whose history they could pilfer at will from the works of Josephus.⁴⁴

The result is the canonical gospels, which may have been finalized in quick succession in the decade of the 140s CE. The purposes of the gospels were to bring their new hero/savior to the masses, to obliterate any memory of the counter-figure Yeshu haNotsri, to negate the gnostic way to salvation, and to gain converts. The evangelists succeeded brilliantly in all of these endeavors.

And, as they say, the rest is history.

⁴⁴ The colossal transposition of the time of Jesus from the era of Janneus (early I BCE) to the era of the Herods (early I CE) occurred as early as the Protevangelium of James, an overlooked infancy gospel used by both Matthew and Luke. PrJ was written in opposition to the Toldoth Yeshu (<https://www.mythicistpapers.com/2022/03/31/a-note-on-the-toldoth-yeshu/>), an acrid Jewish anti-Christian screed which, however, is still faithful to Jesus/Yeshu's original and correct dating in the time of the Hasmonean King Janneus.