

BASIC NEW TESTAMENT

LESSON 10--THE APOSTOLIC AGE AND BOOK OF ACTS: PART I

The Apostolic Age began with the death of Jesus in or about 30 A.D., and ended about the close of the first Christian century.

Scholars of an earlier generation attempted to trace the development of Christianity from an original unity to an increasing diversity. It is now apparent, however, that Christianity developed in basically the opposite direction. It moved from an original diversity to an increasing unity in doctrine and organization, with major progress in this direction during the Fourth Century A.D. The earliest Christians had widely differing levels of competence in comprehending Jesus and his teachings. They interpreted his significance in a wide variety of ways.

In addition to Biblical evidence, we should take special note of the group in Eastern Syria who wrote the 'Odes of Solomon,' which is the earliest known Christian hymnal. The Odists were closer to the original teachings and spirit of Jesus than most First Century Christians. For example, Ode 1:1 opens with the affirmation:

The Lord is on my head like a crown,
And I shall never be without Him.

"From the very start, these odes proclaim the inward nature of the kingdom of God. They express the essence of Jesus' statement: "The kingdom of God is within you." (Luke 17:21, King James Version) The Lord is not only Jesus, but the Cosmic Christ which is on the Odist's head, i.e., in his consciousness. All healing, all wisdom, and all truth find their radiating center within."¹

Rowan A. Greer of the Yale Divinity School notes:

"The unity of the church, or at least of the existence of the ecumenical Great Church, was the achievement of the late second century rather than the condition of the earlier period. Consequently, we must speak of a progress from diversity to unity, a process that culminates in the Great Church and its Christian Bible."²

From about 30 A.D. to 100 A.D., Christianity spread to the farthest bounds of the Roman Empire. It came into close contact with many rival religions, such as Roman Emperor-Worship, Greek Cynicism, Epicureanism, Stoicism, variant forms of Judaism, and various Egyptian and Oriental cults. This period saw the growth of a chain of Christian churches which reached from Babylonia in the east to Spain in the west, and from the Black Sea in the north to Ethiopia in the south.

Professor Greer continues:

"Those loyal to the Great Church anachronistically presumed that their understanding of the church had obtained from the beginning. In their minds there was no fundamental difference between the church of the New Testament and their own."³

"The conclusion seems inescapable that we cannot be very sure how to describe the diversity of early Christianity. Our evidence not only is partial but derives for the most part from sources toward the end of the second century and afterward....Moreover, we have no statistical evidence at all and cannot even be certain that the majority of 'Christians' in Irenaeus' day [late 2nd Century] were members of the Great Church... We cannot accept the view of the Great Church that its position was the original one and that those who differed from it in the past were heretics who had departed from the truth. Instead, we must understand what happened as the gradual emergence of unity out of diversity."⁴

THE BOOK OF ACTS

The historical value of the book of Acts is one of the difficult issues of current New Testament scholarship. Its traditional author is Luke to whom the Gospel of Luke is also attributed. It has a strong emphasis upon the life and teachings of Paul. In this book, the writer traces the triumphs and progress of the early Christian Church from Jerusalem to Rome.

The likelihood is that Acts has been evaluated too negatively by many scholars. As Brevard Childs, another Yale professor, notes: "The Book of Acts appears to have more historical integrity than once thought."⁵ Yet in one respect, this confidence can be taken too far. For any official history will tend to minimize internal conflicts within an organization, as it would be self-defeating to emphasize such conflicts.

Acts is a useful source of information regarding what is today called extra-sensory perception and psycho kineses in its variety of forms, as it functioned in ancient times both in a pagan and in a Christian context. Divine Science does not place any special emphasis on psi phenomena. We do, however, find such phenomena occurring as we move beyond materialistic boundaries of thought.

THE DAY OF PENTECOST AND FOLLOWING

In the First Chapter of Acts, the resurrected Jesus promises his disciples that they would receive spiritual illumination. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you." (Acts 1:8) This experience came to the disciples when they assembled at the house of one of Jesus' followers. It occurred on the day of Pentecost, a day which had been celebrated in Old Testament times 50 days after the Passover, and was known as the Feast of the Harvest.

According to the record in Acts, Chapter 2, their expectations were fully realized. Acts 2:2-4 reads:

"Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

As those present upon this memorable day recalled the life and teachings of their beloved leader, their spiritual enthusiasm was kindled. They were filled with a desire to carry on the work of spreading the Gospel, the Good News which Jesus had taught them. They considered it to be a sacred trust.

Peter took charge of the meetings. In a stirring sermon, he declared his belief that God had raised up Jesus to fulfill prophecy. (Acts 2:14-36) He preached repentance and baptism as the requirements for beginning the Christian life. The Book of Acts records that 3000 were baptized that day. (Acts 2:41)

They began a community life, an attempt to establish a perfect brotherhood which would exemplify the principles laid down by Jesus. The religious life of these early Christians was one of helpfulness, joyfulness, and unselfishness, a partial realization of the Kingdom of God on earth. In this effort, mentioned in Acts 2:44-47, we can see a partial parallel to the Essene community at Qumran.

Many Jews were attracted by the life and teachings of the apostles, who had no thought at this time of a break with Judaism. They considered the Scriptures and Temple services as essential factors in their religious life. They regarded Jesus' teachings as later revelations, and believed that he was commissioned by God to establish the new order. They believed that Jesus was the true Messiah. Like the Essenes, their interpretation of their ancient Scriptures led them to conclude that they were the faithful "remnant," the true Israel, from which the future kingdom would be developed.

THE WORK OF THE EARLY FOLLOWERS OF JESUS

THE HEALINGS - "Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles." (Acts 2:43) The Book of Acts records the following healings and resurrections:

Individual:

The man lame from birth (3:2-4:22)
 Paul regains his sight (9:10-18; 22:11-13)
 Aeneas healed of paralysis (9:32-35)
 Tabitha is resurrected (9:36-42)
 The crippled man at Lystra healed (14:8-10ff)
 Girl freed from spirit of divination (16:16-18)
 Eutychus is resurrected (20:7-12)
 Paul unharmed by snake-bite (28:3-6)
 Publius's father healed of dysentery (28:8)

Collective:

Many wonders and signs (2:43)
 Many sick people healed in Jerusalem (5:12-16)
 Stephen does great wonders and signs (6:8)
 Philip heals many sick people in Samaria (8:5-8)
 Signs and wonders in Iconium (14:3)
 Paul heals many sick people in Ephesus (19:11-12)
 Paul heals sick people on Malta (28:9)

THE WORK AND DEATH OF STEPHEN - Stephen was one of the first disciples to adequately perceive the scope and potential of Jesus' teachings, as the basis for universal enlightenment.

According to Acts 6:8, Stephen was full of grace and power, and performed great wonders and miracles among the people. He went into the synagogues, and engaged in the open discussion so much enjoyed by the Hellenistic Jews. He endeavored to show that the Jews had been divinely guided through the centuries, each prophet and deliverer playing a part, with Jesus as the greatest prophet and teacher of all.

His address to the Sanhedrin, recorded in Acts 7:2-53, shows definite affinities with the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Qumran community's spiritual interests. It is, in the main, a reasoned discourse. In Acts 7:51, however, Stephen shifts to a tirade. Apparently he and the Sadducees engaged in a debate between verses 50 and 51 that is not recorded in Acts. The long-standing rivalry between the Essenes and the Sadducees may have shaped the debate at this time.

The Sanhedrin charged Stephen with blasphemy, and found him guilty. He was condemned and stoned to death. Nevertheless, his work was significant, helping to lay the foundation for the worldwide expansion of Christianity.

PAUL, A PIONEER APOSTLE OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY

People vary greatly in their estimation of Paul, though none would deny the impact that he had on the early growth and development of the Christian movement. Many hasten either to defend or to attack him and his work. To gain a correct estimate of the man and his contribution, two steps are necessary:

(1) We will accept Paul on his own terms. This means that we shall examine his life, character, ideas, and writings in terms of the times in which he lived and worked. Most discussions regarding Paul have pertained to his work as it was reinterpreted by later generations of Christians. This method has been shown to be inadequate.

(2) We will treat the creative process, through which his writings came into being, as being of equal importance with the writings themselves. Paul is unique among Biblical writers in that, by considering his letters in sequence, we can trace his spiritual and intellectual development over approximately a 12 year period, during which he did his most significant work.

THE EARLY LIFE OF PAUL

Paul, who is first mentioned by his Hebrew name, Saul, declares in Acts 22:3: "I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem] at the feet of Gamaliel, educated strictly according to our ancestral law, being zealous for God, just as all of you are today." In Philippians 3:5, he writes of himself as a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin.

Tarsus, Paul's birthplace, was an important commercial center. A gateway between East and West, it was also a center of Greek philosophy and education, where many philosophers lived and taught.

Paul was both a Jew and a Roman citizen. He had inherited his Roman citizenship from his father. After his conversion, he saw the Roman Empire as a fertile field for the establishment of Christian centers. His knowledge of Roman law enabled him to exercise his rights as a Roman citizen. Yet, though he became a Christian and an apostle to the Gentiles, Paul considered himself a true Israelite, carrying "the promise of God to the fathers."

The Pharisees found in Saul, as a young man, a valuable agent for their persecution of the followers of Jesus. He had youthful zeal and intolerance, as well as an intense devotion to the Law. Later, he said of his work, I persecuted this Way up to the point of death." (Acts 22:4)

PAUL ' S CONVERSION

For the most part, liberal historians give greater weight to statements of Paul as found in his genuine letters, than to statements attributed to Paul, or about him, found in the Book of Acts. There are, in the New Testament, four accounts of Paul's conversion. The oldest account comes directly from Paul in Galatians 1:11-17, which includes the statement: "God, who had set me apart before I was born and called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me [footnote, "in me"], so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles." (1:15-16) The other accounts are found in Acts 9:3-9, 22:6-21, and 26:12-20.

What happened to Paul, as he journeyed toward Damascus, has been variously interpreted. From the standpoint of modern neuroscience, there may have been a sudden shift from left-hemispheric dominance to right-hemispheric dominance, which would have radically changed his consciousness and mental orientation. His temporary blindness fits this scenario, as a transitory result of a shift in brain function.

Upon the appearance of Jesus to Paul, and Paul's subsequent baptism, he gained the permanent conviction of being indwelt by Christ as Spirit. His understanding of the significance of this indwelling changed and expanded over the years, but such an indwelling became his dominant conviction at this time.

We know little about the years following Paul's conversion, which is believed to have taken place not later than 36 A.D. He spent some time in retirement in the Arabian Desert, in order that he might adjust himself to this new vision of Jesus, and to his new apostolic calling.

Apparently Paul began his apostolic ministry in and near Syria. The record in Acts 13:4-12, of his missionary Journey to Cyprus, is apparently an authentic fragment of an earlier Paul. He is depicted as a man of power, a Christian psychic who would battle his adversaries on their own level. We can understand that "fighting fire with fire" led him into dangerous situations and, on occasion, bitter persecution. In II Corinthians 11:23-27, he gives a vivid word-picture of these difficult times.

A group of Essene converts to Christianity, living in Damascus, probably influenced Paul as he adopted two dominant themes of his self-concept as an apostle, which are reflected in his letters:

(1) The revealer of mysteries, a primary theme of the Qumran Book of Hymns and other scrolls. Paul refers to Christian mysteries, for example, in I Corinthians 15:51ff and Colossians 1:26ff. This requires us to question the earlier conclusion, of certain Pauline scholars, that the Greek mystery religions had a dominant influence upon Paul and his development.

(2) The spiritual warrior, as exemplified in the Qumran War Scroll and other works. This theme appears frequently in Paul's letters, but its most developed form is found in the allegory in Ephesians 6:10-17. To him, the spiritual warfare was perpetual, and would continue until the final consummation when God would be universally known as All-in-all.

A third basic theme of Paul's letters, his interpretation of Christian baptism as a symbolic death and resurrection in Christ, may or may not have been original with him. There is a good possibility that this concept was already practiced, at the time of his conversion, among certain early Christians in Syria.

NOTES

1. Winterhalter, Robert; The Odes of Solomon: Original Christianity Revealed; St. Paul, Llewellyn Publications, 1985, p. 3
2. Early Biblical Interpretation; op cit, pp. 116-117
3. Op cit, p. 117. Emphasis added.
4. Op cit, p. 119
5. Childs, Brevard S.; The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction; Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1985, p. 219
6. For psi-related events and experiences, see Acts 1:3-5; 1:14, 21-26; 2:1-4; 2:6; 4:31; 4:33; 5:12-26; 8:26; 8:29; 8:39-40; 9:1-9; 9:10-12ff; 10:1-11:18; 11:28; 12:1-17; 13:1-3ff; 16:6-10; 16:19-40; 18:9-11; 21:10-14; 23:11; and 27:33-44.

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY MENTIONED IN LESSON 10

The New Testament as Canon - Brevard S. Childs
 The Odes of Solomon - Robert Winterhalter

REQUIRED BIBLE READINGS

Read the Acts of the Apostles.

QUESTIONS

1. Explain: "Early Christianity moved from an original diversity to an increasing unity."
2. Did the healing ministry continue after the resurrection of Jesus? Explain your answer.
3. What was the significance of Paul's conversion?
4. Briefly discuss three major themes in Paul's letters.