

Haggadic Concord and Halakhic Conflict in the First Christian Generation: A Response to Jeffrey Peterson

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I am very grateful to Jeff and the other organizers for inviting me to this consultation, and for the chance to offer a brief response to Jeff's stimulating paper. Thanks too to Jimmy Dunn for chairing. The subject of unity and diversity in early Christianity remains in my view one of the nodal points of debate about the period of Christian origins; and the approach taken to this problem is in a sense likely to determine one's view not only of early Christianity but perhaps of the historic place of the Christian Scripture, church and faith more generally. So for that reason we must be grateful to Jeff for daring to stick out his neck and tackling this big-picture issue in such an accessible and winsome fashion.

I should preface my remarks by indicating not only broad sympathy for the approach adopted in this paper, but also for the conclusions he arrives at. A few days ago I emailed him saying was worried that I might not find enough to disagree. I've tried a little harder since then, and hope I can fill my allotted few minutes fruitfully. (NB this is a response to the paper, not the summary.)

I would like to structure my comments in two parts: (I) the approach and presuppositions, and (II) a few quick comments on each of the major literary headings. What I have to say is intended as a discussion starter rather than a comprehensive assessment.

1. Approach and Presuppositions

The question of a shared underlying narrative outline among early Christian theologies seems to me a promising avenue for exploring the wider issues of unity and diversity. And it is surely appropriate to expect this convergence to cluster around the cross and resurrection of Jesus as demarcating 'God's decisive saving act': if there is no coherence here, there will be no coherence worth talking about. I find that way of posing the question compelling and promising, and in the course of tracing this theme through a range of early Christian literature Jeff scores a number of important points vis-à-vis the once-dominant paradigms of FC Baur and latterly Walter Bauer. I wish all strength to his arm in this respect, and hope that he will continue to work out

the implications of this argument in relation to different models of visualizing that narrative coherence.

Jeff's paper argues that while there was a degree of convergence on this narrative point, the Christian practices in keeping with that narrative were the subject of conflict and contention. I have two opening queries here. The first is that the paper only really argues the first half of this thesis, about early Christianity's unifying kerygmatic narrative, but without demonstrating either the extent or the intensity of contentious praxis. It is as if haggadic unity is controversial but halakhic diversity is self-evident. Can that have been the intention? Or was it mainly a matter of economy for purposes of this session? If diversity of praxis seems to Jeff incontrovertible, I would suggest that the case may in fact be rather similar to that of the core kerygmatic narrative. The earliest Christian texts show a remarkable moral convergence on themes of the imitation of Christ, love of God and neighbour, respect for the sanctity of all human life, and the avoidance of idolatry and sexual immorality. These are points on which it would be difficult to find significant dissent. Contested issues tend to cluster in second-order areas of calendar, diet, purity, and social or ecclesial authority. Interestingly, although circumcision features so prominently in Galatians and one or two other New Testament documents, it is in fact marginal to the later New Testament writings and hardly ever surfaces as a bone of contention in later texts: it is almost invariably accepted that circumcision is not expected of Christian Gentiles, and there is only occasional debate about whether it is either required or permitted for Christian Jews.

Jeff is I think right to see idiosyncrasy in calling his use of narrative theology "haggadah" and praxis "halakhah". This is for me not so much because its applicability to early Christian discourse is sometimes contested; indeed I have had mud slung at myself on that account too, but would still want to defend that usage in appropriate circumstances. My main concern here is that it does not seem to me to be the case that a crucifixion-resurrection sequence, however skeletal, maps self-evidently onto rabbinic ideas of haggadah; or that Christian ethics is quite the same thing as halakhah. There would be scope here for further development of terminology.

Finally under this opening section, a brief word about each of his four "unargued" presuppositions. First, I agree that the development of early Christianity is indeed usefully described in generational terms. No problem here, except that I think the extent and nature of these generations is not easily reducible to forty years, but might appropriately be related to actual assertions about intergenerational relationships in the texts themselves. Some of these

generations may be considerably shorter than 40 years, others considerably longer. It is worth bearing in mind that Irenaeus could still claim around 190 that he had been taught by Polycarp, an eyewitness of the apostles.

Secondly, the idea that the sectarians of Qumran represent the most appropriate point of comparison for the earliest history of Christianity. I have no problem with the idea that the defining cultural and religious context is Jewish, or that the Scrolls provide some of our best source material. But beyond that I think we need to be careful to state our case clearly but not too narrowly. The *yahad* behind the Community Rule is not self-evidently representative either of first-century Judaism or even of the Dead Sea Scrolls as a whole, the majority of which show few signs of sectarian orientation; and while groups like the Qumran sectarians do permit some interesting comparative case studies for Christian origins they are not in my view privileged in that respect.

Thirdly, the distinction between orthopraxy and orthodoxy. Here I think Jeff hits the nail on the head in denying the idea that orthodoxy is somehow irrelevant; but perhaps he misses the chance to identify a possible corollary in pressing for the logically reciprocal interdependence of orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

Fourthly, the idea that we can and should use the term “Christianity” legitimately to denote “the messianic Jewish sect that became the imperial religion”. Here I am a little worried that more is presupposed than is either historically warranted or for that matter conducive to the overall thesis. It is not obvious to me that we can or indeed need to assume demonstrably socio-religious continuity between, for example, the circles that produced the gospel of Thomas or the Book of Revelation on the one hand and the ecclesial structures of the fourth century on the other. Much that was Christian had been lost by then, and much that stood at the heart of the imperial religion’s belief and practice would have been unrecognizable to the first generation. I am content, indeed keen, to speak of some degree of *organic continuity* between the first generation and Nicaea. But I think it is important to recognize how much of the ecclesial reality of the first three centuries did *not* in any definitive sense “become the imperial religion”.

My query about the four assumptions, in other words, is whether they may be largely true but in their present wording overstated to the point of being distracting and counterproductive.

For the remainder of my remarks I now wish to turn more briefly to main headers of Jeff's argument.

2. Pauline Literature

First, the Pauline literature. Here I am in large-scale agreement and believe that Jeff scores some very important points in stressing the extent to which Paul takes for granted that the facticity and significance of cross and resurrection are among the common core convictions of apostolic Christianity. I would suggest that we can press further a point mentioned by Jeff only *en passant*: in Romans, Paul's manifesto-cum-apology addressed to the churches in the Capital whom he had never met, Paul strikingly assumes a range of shared convictions and practices about faith in the crucified and risen Christ, baptism and the new life. He hints at that shared doctrinal basis explicitly in 6.17, with the Greek phrase τύπος διδαχῆς: "You who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed." (The τύπος may well be Christ himself, as some have argued; but that would not take away from the notion of a shared subject-appropriate catechesis, as is also implied in Ephesians 4.20-21.

This evidently suggests what New Testament scholarship has long recognized in passages like 1.3-4 or 3.25-26: Paul is well acquainted with key kerygmatic traditions of early Christian confession, to which he knows he can appeal as a common denominator. It seems a particularly potent point in support of Jeff's agenda that in writing to a church Paul does not know at first hand, he can nevertheless appeal to a shared core of doctrinal commitment, based presumably on a shared catechesis.

I have no extensive comments on the remainder of the Pauline section, except perhaps to note that on occasion Jeff appears to suggest that practical or halakhic conclusions are grounded in the theological or "haggadic" rehearsal – so for example explicitly for Ephesians, but similar logic can easily be observed in Romans and other letters. If true, does this not question the ease with which he affirms halakhic diversity alongside haggadic unity? A related point on Ephesians is the remarkable *disappearance* of halakhic difference or tension from the writer's conception of the relationship between the Gentiles and the commonwealth of Israel. This is true in a sense both in the theological chapter 2 with its happy conclusion that the dividing wall between the two has been broken down, and also in the ethical section of chapters 4-6. Here then I wonder if

Jeff's thesis could do with somewhat greater clarification. It is characteristic of the early Christian literature, and also of the martyrs' confession *Christianus sum*, to answer moral challenges in theological witness and theological challenges in moral witness – because they regard them as one.

3. Johannine literature

Time is almost up, and so permit me just two more brief queries on the Johannine section and on Q. On John, I wondered if Jeff arrived a little too easily at the conclusion that this literature opposes *docetic* opponents (a point I have heard increasingly queried in recent discussion), and also that the Fourth Gospel could really be said 'to ground the observance of the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist in the physical reality of Jesus' death' (p15). I would like to believe that but am not sure it is quite so clear. More to the point, perhaps, is the old problem of whether the doctrine of cross and atonement in 1 John stands in tension with that of the Gospel.

4. Q

Puzzlingly, almost a third of the whole paper is devoted to a document in whose existence Jeff does not believe. (I myself am more agnostic, although sympathetic to that position.) That is certainly a magnanimous gesture towards those for whom Q establishes precisely the thesis of a cross-free, eschatology-free gospel that Jeff queries here. But at the same time I wonder if it is nevertheless a little disproportionate – both in terms of the space given to it and in terms of his decision to grant it the tag of a "gospel". The Gospel of Thomas could be said to acquire that tag only by virtue of its status as secondary to the synoptic tradition, a point well argued by writers like my colleague Christopher Tuckett (cf. also Nicholas Perrin). Substantively, the interesting argument that Q must have had a passion narrative may be better suited as evidence against the existence of a pure sayings gospel Q rather than as evidence that there was a Q Christianity that must have had a notion of the cross after all.

5. The Synoptic Gospels

The decision to foreground Q unfortunately also short-changes the Synoptics, squeezing them into less than a page and allowing for too little differentiation between them.

6. Gospel of Thomas

I am largely in agreement here, although I wonder if in view of recent discussion by Elaine Pagels and others one could usefully say a little more about this document's relationship to the Fourth Gospel.

All in all, I am most grateful to Jeff for his stimulating paper. As I've said to him already, for purposes of this discussion I am only sorry that I didn't find more to disagree with. He seems to me to have given us an excellent contribution to help kick off this SBL consultation. I'm reminded of a proverb written on the walls of my favourite Italian restaurant in Oxford:

L'appetito vien' mangiando, Appetite comes as you eat. I hope that will be true for the future work of this seminar.