

# Biblical Unitarianism from the Early Church through the Middle Ages

MARK M. MATTISON

The term "biblical unitarianism," as used in this journal, denotes a non-Trinitarian theology which is consistent with the inspired Word of God. It is our belief that this understanding of the Scriptures is not new, but has been propagated at various times and places throughout church history. The purpose of this article is to lay a foundation for the future discussion of this topic.

First, however, we must define our terms.

The term "psilanthropism" is inappropriate as a description of our Christology. Though some of the theologies discussed here may be appropriately labeled "psilanthropist," it should be noted that biblical unitarians have always been accused of making Christ a "mere man." This is less than fair. A man who, from the moment of His creation, is the only begotten or unique Son of God, who alone has been miraculously born of a virgin, who alone has led a sinless human life, and who has been raised immortal, is hardly a "mere man."

The term "Adoptionist" will be used in its broadest sense. Technically, the term denotes a Christology held by some eighth-century Spanish bishops who regarded Jesus as a man "adopted" by the Son. More generally, it is used of any Christology which regards Jesus as an exalted man. It is often used in a derogatory sense with the implication that Jesus became the Son of God at his resurrection, transfiguration, baptism, or birth. We believe, with Matthew (1:16, 20) and with Luke (1:35), that

Jesus was created the Son of God at His conception. For the purposes of this article, we will use the term to describe any Christology which denies the preexistence of Jesus.

As we will see, unitarianism and Adoptionism were not absent in the early Christian Church. At times these tendencies found expression in what we would characterize as biblical unitarianism, a theology which regards the Father as the only true God and Jesus as the only begotten Son of God who was born of a virgin and who died on the cross for our sins.

## I. JEWISH CHRISTIANITY

"Jewish Christianity" is notoriously difficult to define,<sup>1</sup> and it is used in a variety of ways. For the purposes of this study, we will define Jewish Christianity as the earliest stratum of the Christian Church (the first Christians, including most of the authors of the New Testament, were Jews) as well as the heterodox Jewish Christians of the second century and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

The Church Fathers, who are notoriously untrustworthy in this area, collectively describe five types of heretical Jewish Christians: Cerinthians, Symmachians, Elkesaites, Nazoraeans, and Ebionites.

Though Cerinthus is characterized by later Fathers as a Jewish Christian and a Millenarian (a tradition traceable to Caius claimed that Cerinthus was the author of Revelation), the earliest and most reliable sources depict him as a thorough-going Gnostic with few Jewish tendencies.<sup>3</sup> We may therefore conclude that there never was a heterodox Jewish Christian group known as Cerinthians.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cf. various definitions in the *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, ed. Everett Ferguson, New York & London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990, sv. "Jewish Christianity"; A. F. J. Klijn, "The Study of Jewish Christianity," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 20, 419-431; Stanley K. Riegel, "Jewish Christianity: Definitions and Terminology," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 24, 410-415; J. Munck, "Jewish Christianity in Post-Apostolic Times," *New Testament Studies*, Vol. 65, 103-116; Bruce J. Malina, "Jewish Christianity or Christian Judaism: Toward a Hypothetical Definition," *Journal for the Study of Judaism*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 46-57; R. A. Kraft, "In Search of 'Jewish Christianity' and its 'Theology,'" *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, Vol. 60, No. 1, 81-92.

<sup>2</sup>The more general Jewish Christian ideas as described by J. Daniélou may then be considered "Judaean-Christian."

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.*, I.26.1.

<sup>4</sup>A. F. J. Klijn and G. J. Reinink, *Patristic Evidence for Jewish-Christian Sects*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973, 3-19.

It appears that the Symmachians also existed only in the minds of the heresiologists. Most probably Symmachus was actually an Ebionite and a distinct group of Jewish Christians known as Symmachians never existed, though the fact that Jewish Christians used Symmachus' translation of the Old Testament may have encouraged early Christians to invent the label.<sup>5</sup>

The syncretistic Elkesaites did have Jewish Christian tendencies, but it appears (in spite of Epiphanius' speculations) that these Jewish apocalypticists were only later influenced by Jewish Christian groups of the Jordan river. It is therefore questionable that they can be fairly identified as a Jewish Christian sect.<sup>6</sup>

The Nazoraeans' theology does not appear to have been objectionable to early Christians, though of course their adherence to the Laws of Moses was not appreciated by the "orthodox" Church. Jerome testifies that "they believe in Christ, the Son of God born of Mary the virgin, and they say about him that he suffered and rose again under Pontius Pilate, in whom also we believe, but since they want to be both Jews and Christians, they are neither Jews nor Christians."<sup>7</sup> Jewish Christians were typically excluded from both the "orthodox" Church and the synagogues and therefore formed a sort of "middle ground."

The Ebionites are described as strict unitarians who denied the deity of Christ, repudiated Paul, and practiced the Laws of Moses. Though many of them denied the Virgin Birth, both Origen<sup>8</sup> and Eusebius<sup>9</sup> admit that some of them accepted the doctrine. The most reliable authorities on the Ebionites were Irenaeus (who knew a group in Rome), Origen (who knew a group in Egypt), and Epiphanius (who possessed several Ebionite writings from beyond the Jordan, including the *Preachings of Peter*, the *Ascents of James*, and a Gospel).<sup>10</sup> There appear to have been differences between these various groups of Ebionites, and one wonders if perhaps they were not a homogeneous group. Some scholars suggest "that 'Ebionites' was just one appellation (among others, particularly 'Nazoraeans') of Jewish Christians and, moreover, that the Jewish Christians included a variety of groups and communities."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 52-54.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 54-67.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>8</sup>*Contra Celsus* V.61.

<sup>9</sup>*Eccl. Hist.* III.27.1-6.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, 68-71.

<sup>11</sup>*Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, s.v. "Ebionites."

Very few Jewish Christian writings have been preserved. We know that they tended to use different versions of Matthew's Gospel, sometimes written in Hebrew or Aramaic and sometimes edited. The Jewish Christian document known as the *Preachings of Peter* is believed to have been used in the writing of the *Recognitions of Clement* and the *Clementine Homilies*, fourth-century novels that preserve some Jewish Christian doctrines. Another Jewish Christian document, the *Ascents of James*, is generally believed to be quoted in *Recognitions* I.33-71.

In the final analysis, we know very little about Jewish Christianity. That there was no uniform Jewish Christian theology is obvious. We do know that Jewish Christians tended to be unitarians who observed the Torah and practiced circumcision. Some of them denied the Virgin Birth, but some affirmed it. They tended to deny the preexistence of Christ.<sup>12</sup> Some of them denied the authority of Paul, but others recognized the existence of a genuine Gentile Church. In the 47th chapter of his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin Martyr writes of Jewish Christians who do not require Law-keeping from Gentile Christians. In his estimation they are "kinsmen and brethren" in Christ.<sup>13</sup> This conciliatory attitude, of course, did not last long in the Church.

Though many of these Jewish Christians obviously do not reflect the attitudes and practices of the Apostles (many of them are closer in spirit to Paul's Judaizing opponents), they must be given credit for preserving some of the original New Testament doctrines in the face of an increasingly paganizing "orthodox" Church. Where Jewish Christian influence is most prominent, Christians tend to emphasize the humanity of Christ (and often the unitary nature of God) as well as a literal hermeneutic of the Scriptures. Jewish Christianity lasted for centuries in the East and was particularly strong in Antioch.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *Recognitions* I.45 for an exception.

<sup>13</sup>It should be noted that in the next chapter Justin mentions Gentiles who believe Jesus to be the Christ yet "a man among men." Who were these apparently "Adoptionist" Christians? Justin does not tell us. Like unitarians generally, these believers in the true humanity of Christ have been largely passed over in silence.

<sup>14</sup>Cf. R. M. Grant, "Jewish Christianity at Antioch in the Second Century," *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, Vol. 60, 97-108; Paul J. Donahue, "Jewish Christianity in the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch," *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 32, 81-93; Robert R. Hann, "Judaism and Jewish Christianity in Antioch: Charisma and Conflict in the First Century," *The Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 341-360.

## II. ANTIOCHENE CHRISTIANITY

The Christians at Antioch have long been commended for their literal hermeneutic in contradistinction to the allegorizing hermeneutic of the Alexandrian Christians. Another fundamental difference has been noted between the two schools: while the Alexandrians emphasized the deity of Christ, the Antiochenes emphasized His humanity. These Antiochene traditions can be traced to the first century. Peter, who was revered by Jewish Christians, himself had a "low" Christology, as Luke records.<sup>15</sup>

Early in the second century, Ignatius of Antioch criticized Jewish Christians in his epistles to the *Magnesians* and the *Philadelphians*, but he appears to have been fighting a losing battle. Ignatius' "high" Christology does not appear to have been the norm at Antioch.

Theophilus of Antioch, an apologist of the late second century, was profoundly influenced by Jewish Christianity.<sup>16</sup> He portrays Christ primarily as a man through whom God reveals Himself.<sup>17</sup>

Despite his distinction of being the first Christian writer known to use the term Trinity, it is hard to regard Theophilus as a trinitarian at all. His God is rather a Unity with ill-defined offshoots or personified qualities.<sup>18</sup> After three quarters of a century we find similar ideas occurring and gathering new force in the theology of Paul of Samosata.<sup>19</sup>

## III. PAUL OF SAMOSATA

Paul of Samosata, the bishop of Antioch from 260 to 272, was also influenced by Jewish Christian monotheism.<sup>20</sup> Though it is difficult to reconstruct Paul's theology from the fragmentary sources at our disposal, it appears that Paul was a strict unitarian.<sup>21</sup> Though he appears to have

<sup>15</sup>Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986, 124, 125.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Grant, "Jewish Christianity," 106.

<sup>17</sup>Grant, *Gods*, 128-133.

<sup>18</sup>Theophilus writes of "the Trinity of God and his Word and his Wisdom" (*To Autolycus*, II.15).

<sup>19</sup>D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch: A Study of Early Christian Thought in the East*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, 69.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, New York: Penguin Books, 1967, 114.

<sup>21</sup>Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954, rev. 1967, 111, 112; Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1910, Vol. 2, 575, and J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978, 117-119 affirm

approved of the *homoousia* doctrine, he asserted that the Word lacked subsistence (i.e., he did not believe the Word to be a hypostasis). For Paul, the Word was not a person but an attribute of God which indwelt the man Jesus. "For Paul, God and his Word are one (*homoousios*) without differentiation, and to affirm the preexistence of the Son is to profess two Sons, two Christs; Jesus is a uniquely inspired man."<sup>22</sup> Though he was of course accused of making Jesus "a mere man," he did believe that Christ was born of a virgin and that He conquered sin. Philip Schaff describes Paul's doctrine and compares it to that of the later Socinians:

He denied the personality of the Logos and of the Holy Spirit, and considered them merely powers of God, like reason and mind in man; but granted that the Logos dwelt in Christ in larger measure than in any former messenger of God, and taught, like the Socinians in later times, a gradual elevation of Christ, determined by his own moral development, to divine dignity. He admitted that Christ remained free from sin, conquered the sin of our forefathers, and then became the Saviour of the race.<sup>23</sup>

Paul of Samosata was a dynamic Monarchian in that he explained the Sonship of Christ in the language of Adoptionism. In this he stands firmly in the tradition of the Jewish Christian monotheists and can be classified as a biblical unitarian.<sup>24</sup>

## IV. MARCELLUS AND PHOTINUS

Though he consciously tried to avoid philosophical speculation and to rely solely on the Scriptures, Marcellus of Ancyra's theology was not as biblical as that of Paul of Samosata. Marcellus was a spokesman for the Nicene party in the *homoousios* conflict of the fourth century. Though he believed that God was "an indivisible Monad" or "a single person" and

Paul's unitarianism. D. S. Wallace-Hadrill, 72ff. and R. V. Sellers, *Two Ancient Christologies*, London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1954, 118ff., 130ff. prefer not to classify Paul as a unitarian. But, as Kelly demonstrates, the fragments which depict a debate between Paul and Malchion are untrustworthy and appear to have originated in Apollinarian circles (158, 159). Further, though later fathers classified Paul with Sabellius and Marcellus, his earliest critics characterize him rather as an Adoptionist (cf. Kelly, 119).

<sup>22</sup>Chadwick, 114.

<sup>23</sup>Schaff, 575.

<sup>24</sup>We would hasten to add that we do not condone any moral problems that Paul may have had, though it is not clear whether his opponents were completely honest in their allegations.



that the Word lacked subsistence and could not be called a Son until the Incarnation, his theology was much closer to the "economic Trinitarianism" of Irenaeus, Hippolytus, and Tertullian.<sup>25</sup> Marcellus believed that at the creation and in the Incarnation the Monad "expanded" into a Dyad, then into a Triad in the outpouring of the Spirit. After the Judgment, he believed, the Triad would once more become a Monad. Chadwick writes:

To Marcellus the unity of God was prior to all plurality: in himself God is one, and he is only 'three' in a relative sense because of his activity in creation and redemption. . . . Any distinction between Son and Father is only temporary and relative to the created order.<sup>26</sup>

Marcellus' denial of the subsistence of the Word but affirmation of the economic unfolding of the Trinity places him closer in spirit perhaps to Sabellius than to Paul of Samosata.

Marcellus' disciple Photinus of Sirmium, however, placed this doctrine of the nonsubsistent Word firmly in the context of a biblical unitarianism by combining with it a form of Adoptionism. For Photinus, denial of the subsistence of the Word was an affirmation of the true humanity of Christ. Sozomen testifies that Photinus "acknowledged that there was one God Almighty, by whose own word all things were created, but would not admit that the generation and existence of the Son was before all ages; on the contrary, he alleged that Christ derived His existence from Mary."<sup>27</sup> Sozomen adds that both the Niceneans and the Arians equally opposed this doctrine.

Photinus' critics rightly compared his teaching to that of Paul of Samosata and classified him with the Jewish Christian "heretics." Jerome writes that "Photinus of Gallograecia, a pupil of Marcellus, and ordained bishop of Sirmium, attempted to introduce the Ebionite heresy."<sup>28</sup> Though Photinus denied the preexistence and deity of Christ, it should be noted that he apparently did not deny the Virgin Birth, despite Marius Mercator's objection to the contrary. Since Epiphanius would surely have attacked Photinus if the latter had in fact denied Christ's miraculous conception, the allegation should probably be considered an embellishment.<sup>29</sup> The

<sup>25</sup>See Kelly, 240, 241.

<sup>26</sup>Chadwick, 135.

<sup>27</sup>*Ecc. Hist.* IV.6.

<sup>28</sup>Klijn and Reinink, 213.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Lydia Agnew Speller, "New Light on the Photinians: The Evidence of Ambrosiaster," *Journal of Theological Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 1, 102.

seventh book of Augustine's *Confessions* further implies that the Photinians did affirm the Virgin Birth.

Photinus was officially condemned four times before he was successfully ousted, though he appears to have been returned to his see during Julian's reign. Julian praised Photinus for denying that God had ever entered the womb.<sup>30</sup> With the accession of Valentinian in 364, however, he was again deposed, and he died in exile twelve years later. Though he wrote extensively, none of his works have survived.

To support the doctrine that Christ did not preexist his birth, the Photinians cited 1 Corinthians 15:45, in which Paul states that Christ was preceded by Adam.<sup>31</sup> Scriptural texts which may seem to teach Christ's celestial origin, the Photinians explained, in reality refer to the celestial origin of Christ's teaching and power. They cited Isaiah 44:6 in defense of their strict monotheism: "This is what the LORD says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD almighty: I am the first and the last; apart from me there is no God" (NIV).

#### V. ADOPTIONISM THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES

Adoptionism survived in Armenia and Byzantium in the form of Paulicianism, a movement which kept early Syriac Christian traditions alive for several centuries. Though the Paulicians were so named because of their theological affinities with Paul of Samosata, there is no compelling reason to regard the Antiochene heresiarch as their progenitor.<sup>32</sup> Their rejection of Rome's authority, dependence upon the Scriptures, practice of adult baptism, disregard for icons, and insistence that Jesus was a man adopted by God reflect early Christian attitudes.<sup>33</sup> In the ninth century, many of them exchanged their Adoptionist doctrine for a revived gnostic dualism complete with a docetic Christ, though Adoptionism survived in some Paulician circles for another millennium.<sup>34</sup> Though the Paulicians should probably not be considered as strict biblical unitarians any more

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>31</sup>Cf. Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 71.3.

<sup>32</sup>Nina G. Garsoian, *The Paulician Heresy*, Paris: Mouton & Co., 1967, 230.

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Monroe E. Hawley, "The Key of Truth," *Restoration Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1.

<sup>34</sup>Malcolm Lambert, *Medieval Heresy: Popular Movements from Bogomil to Hus*, New York: Holmes and Meier Pubs., 1977, 11.

than, say, Theodotus the leatherworker,<sup>35</sup> it is nevertheless significant that a consistent tradition maintaining Jesus' humanity can be traced throughout Church history.

This tradition survived in other circles also. In 431, Marius Mercator wrote of a Sardician bishop, Bonosus, who with Marcellus and Photinus was supposedly a follower of Ebion, the legendary founder of the Ebionite sect. His followers, the Bonosians, are found in Spain and southern Gaul until at least the seventh century. These Adoptionists (who, incidentally, practiced rebaptism) were characterized as Photinians by their contemporaries.<sup>36</sup> In 675, the Synod of Toledo reacted against them by declaring that Christ was the Son of God by nature, not by adoption.

This assertion was denied a century later by Elipandus and Felix, two Spanish bishops to whose doctrine the title "Adoptionist" properly belongs. Their popular theology was close to Nestorianism, to which their opponents traced their heresy. It is in fact unclear whether their reformulation of the Chalcedonian "two-nature" doctrine of Christ was dependent on Nestorianism, Antiochene Christology (such as that of Theodore of Mopsuestia), or some other source. It is doubtful that their Adoptionism was derived from the Bonosians, who were biblical unitarians.

Elipandus and Felix taught that the eternal Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, adopted the man Jesus at the latter's baptism. Their Christology, like that of the Paulicians, has little to commend it apart from its insistence on the true humanity of the man Jesus. Adoptionism does not appear to have lasted long after the death of these bishops, but traces of their Christology can be found throughout the remainder of the Middle Ages. Peter Abelard and his followers temporarily revived Adoptionism in the twelfth century, and Duns Scotus (1300) and Durandus a S. Porciano (1320) used the term "adopted Son" in a qualified sense.<sup>37</sup> The Spanish Adoptionists' assertion that the human Jesus was the Son of God "not by nature, but by grace"<sup>38</sup> sounds remarkably like Michael Servetus'

<sup>35</sup>Theodotus was a dynamic Monarchian who taught that the Christ descended on the man Jesus at the latter's baptism (cf. Hippolytus, *Refutation of all Heresies*, VII.23). This form of Adoptionism is far closer to the gnostic Christology criticized by John (cf. 1 John 2:22; 4:2) than biblical unitarianism.

<sup>36</sup>*The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Samuel Macauley Jackson, s.v. "Bonosus and the Bonosians."

<sup>37</sup>Schaff, Vol. IV, 517.

<sup>38</sup>Albert Henry Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, Philadelphia: The American Baptist Publication Society, 1899, rev. 1942, Vol. 1, 357.

statement that Christ is God "not by nature but by grace."<sup>39</sup> Of the Adoptionist heresy, Albert Newman has written:

This controversy extended far into the Middle Ages and may have persisted in some of the sects until the time of the Reformation and later. It is probable that the Christology of the Antiochene school was directly or indirectly influential in the Adoptionist Christology.<sup>40</sup>

This assertion, while tantalizing, is probably too optimistic. Though it is tempting to draw a direct line from the New Testament through Jewish Christianity, Antiochene Christology, Spanish Adoptionism, and the unitarianism of the Radical Reformation, to the biblical unitarian churches of the present day, we would probably not be justified in doing so.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Though we may not be prepared at this point to postulate an unbroken chain of biblical unitarianism from the days of the Apostles to the present day, we may conclude that the doctrine has not been absent throughout church history. Various Jewish Christian sects, some of the Antiochene bishops (such as Paul of Samosata), Photinus of Sirmium, Bonosus and the Bonosians of Spain and southern Gaul, and others have recognized the fact that God is absolutely *one* and that His Son, Jesus Christ, is the virgin-born, exalted, sinless man who became our substitutionary atonement. The Church of God of the Abrahamic Faith's claim for the historicity of one of its cardinal doctrines is therefore vindicated.

<sup>39</sup>*On the Errors of the Trinity*, p. 12b.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 358.