

3. Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God : The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Alfred A. Knopf 1994)

I bought and read the entire book on a long business trip. Parts of it were immensely interesting, parts were not. The part of special interest in the present context is on pages 86 through at least 114. What immediately caught my eye in re-reading this part for this review was this on page 86:

St. Paul, the earliest Christian writer, who created the religion we now know as Christianity, believed that Jesus had replaced the Torah as God's principal revelation of himself to the world.

This clearly puts her in Maccoby's camp (see item # 27). However, she goes out of her way to show that Paul's concept of Christ was in tune with contemporary Jewish thought. In fact, she points out a Pauline statement that, to me, is in keeping with Jewish thought, as well as Arianism, because it has God elevating Jesus to a status just below himself, at a given point in time, which is what the Arian/Athanasian war was all about (see item # 32). On pages 88 and 89 she cites Philippians 2:6-11 in the following words and follows it with these comments that also bring in the Gospel of John:

Who subsisting in the form of God
did not cling
to his equality with God
but emptied himself,
to assume the condition of a slave,
and became as men are;
and being as men are,
he was humbler yet,
even to accepting death,

death on a cross.
But God raised him high
and gave him the name
which is above all names
so that all beings
in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld,
should bend the knee at the name of Jesus
and that every tongue should acclaim
Jesus Christ as Lord (*kyrios*)
to the glory of God the Father.

The hymn seems to reflect a belief among the first Christians that Jesus had enjoyed some kind of prior existence "with God" before coming a man in the act of "self-emptying" (*kenosis*) by which, like a *bodhisattva*, he had decided to share the suffering of the human condition. Paul was too Jewish to accept the idea of Christ existing as a second divine being beside YHWH from all eternity. The hymn shows that after his exaltation he is still distinct from and inferior to God, who raises him and confers the title *kyrios* upon him. He cannot assume it himself but is given this title only "to the glory of God the Father."

Armstrong surprises me by suggesting that fifty years later John wrote something very similar by claiming that the Word or *logos* had been with God from the beginning and was the agent of creation. Armstrong claims John's use of *logos* puts him . . . "more in tune with Palestinian than Hellenized Judaism." After bringing in the close similarity between the description of the *logos* in John and the Wisdom and Holy Spirit of scripture, Armstrong suggests that this is all . . . "comprehensible in a strictly Jewish context, though later Christians with a Greek background would interpret them differently."

Next Armstrong explains that the workings of God through the Holy Spirit at Pentecost showed that at about 100 A.D. . . . "the first Christians still had an entirely Jewish conception of God." She also continues to press this point through page 90 and part of 91, with compelling statements suggesting the Christians were very much like, in fact were, Jews. Except for the Jewish proselytes that flocked to the new religion because in it they were fully accepted without the many onerous requirements faced by someone attempting to become a Jew. This is of course what fueled the fire of the great excommunication: the Jewish Christians did not teach that it was a requirement to keep the law.

What happened after is that Christians were persecuted in the Roman Empire as a group setting a bad example and not respecting hoary tradition. They were a radical group, fanatics who broke away as a new religion from one that was accepted and established. They were not trusted. But even as Roman persecution re-reared its head, developments within the religion included the conversion of those who could reinterpret Christianity in the light of Greek philosophy, and those who brought their mystical insights into the religion and reinterpreted it into a Gnostic mold. This was strictly a second century development, says Armstrong (page 94). Later in the second century, Armstrong explains in the following pages, some of the brightest lights of early Christendom, Clement, Origen and Plotinus, developed consistent theologies on a structure of philosophy, and the modern Christian religion was born. It was Clement who claimed Godhood for Christ (p. 98), but it took until the fourth century to decide at what point Christ had become God (see item # 32). The winners decided he was God from all eternity, God made manifest in human form to die for us all. Her approach to Gnosticism reminded me of the approach in Couliano's book, see item # 9.

Armstrong's book is much larger than just this subject. I found most of it interesting, some of it not. Just like most other books on this list.