

34. Streeter, Burnett Hillman, *The Primitive Church, Studied with Special reference to the Origins of the Christian Ministry* (The Macmillan Company 1929)

Reading Streeter's 1929 book led me to seriously ask what in the world has changed in basic knowledge concerning Primitive Christianity since the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Nag Hammadi Library? Streeter's basic insights are very similar to Daniélou's (item # 13) and Crossan's (items # 10, 12), in many ways.

Actually, there is new knowledge to be had, as becomes evident when reading Eisenman especially. Eisenman's books point out some things no one in Streeter's time knew. One thing is just how proto-Christian the apocalyptic Jews, as evidenced by the Dead Sea Scrolls, really were. And no one knew how James was idealized in some of those circles. The same James, likely but not certain, that Streeter disparages as a Judaizer. Streeter also couldn't have known how Jewish the immediate followers of Jesus were, although he rightly sees Peter's attitude toward the law as probably reflective of Jesus' teachings, as did Daniélou and Eisenman and others.

Streeter begins his book with these words that brought a smile to my face: I had also at one time read church history to boost the claims of my religion, including the claim of having been organized as the Primitive Church was organized. Streeter says on page viii:

For four hundred years theologians of rival churches have armed themselves to battle on the question of the Primitive Church. However great their reverence for scientific truth and historic fact, they have at least *hoped* that the results of their investigations would be to vindicate apostolic authority for the type of

Church Order to which they were themselves attached. The Episcopalian has sought to find episcopacy, the Presbyterian Presbyterianism, and the Independent a system of independency, to be the form of church government in New Testament times. But while each party to the dispute has been able to make out a case for his own view, he has never succeeded in demolishing the case of his opponent. The explanation of this deadlock, I have come to believe, is quite simple. It is the uncriticised assumption, made by all parties to the controversy, that in the first century there existed a single type of Church Order.

On the next page, Streeter says there was an evolution in Church Order evident in the New Testament, and by the end of the first century, there were different systems of church government crystallizing in different provinces of the Empire. It is among these different systems, Streeter asserts on page ix, that . . . "the Episcopalian, the Presbyterian, and the Independent, can each discover the prototype of the system to which he himself adheres."

On pages 267 and 268 he reiterates this case for there having been several different forms of church government in place, in several locations, at the end of the first century. The book that lies in between these two claims provides solid evidence for several types of church infrastructure existing by the beginning of the second century, depending largely on geographical location.

But what does Streeter say about the very primitive Primitive Church we are interested in? Quite a bit, and it dovetails nicely with what experts several later generations also say.

It is interesting, to me, that Streeter is a believer, as is the publisher, who added into the front-matter of the book a

"testimony" from the person whose will sponsored the lectures on which this book is based. These chapters are by believers for believers.

Given that, it surprised me that Streeter basically already saw into the relationship of James and Peter and Paul the same things that Smith (see item # 33) saw. For example, in the Synopsis of Chapter II on page 29 he writes (this paragraph is greatly expanded in the chapter that follows the Synopsis):

The remarkable position held at Jerusalem by James, the brother of the Lord. This due to the fact that he was the eldest male of the Messianic House. But for the catastrophes which overwhelmed Jerusalem and the Jewish Christian Church, a Caliphate, hereditary in the family of our Lord, might have been developed.

On page 30 he also surprised me with a statement (backed up in the chapter he is summarizing) to the effect that:

Historically, James was the leader of the Judaizing section of the Church. Peter's position was intermediate between James and Paul. Since, however, James was one of the brethren who did not believe in our Lord during His earthly life, while Peter was his most faithful follower, it is reasonable to suppose the Petrine attitude towards the Law of Moses represents much nearer the actual teaching of Jesus. The attitude of James would represent rather that of the home in which Jesus was brought up.

There, in just a few words, Streeter gives a synopsis of what Smith also seems to believe, essentially. Smith is aware of the content of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Streeter was not. But Eisenman (see items # 15, 16) holds a very different position

and makes a good case for James being very close to Jesus, being the resident authority in Jerusalem, and Peter being, as apostles were supposed to be, an itinerant minister, a missionary, under James. I think that on this one I'll follow Eisenman's suggestion and not see James as a usurper. But the evidence can be argued several ways, and either view, to me, has some credibility problems.

James was known as James the Just according to Eusebius, and on pages 44 and 59 Streeter acknowledges that and asserts that this righteousness was a reflection of his attitude toward the Law. On pages 59 and 60, he suggests Matthew 23:2, 5:18-19, and 10:5 reflects . . . "a tradition ultimately emanating from the Church over which James presided."

Streeter says Paul is not the primary creator of Gentile Christianity. This contradicts Maccoby (see item # 27, and Armstrong (see item # 3). He expands on this idea on pages 48 through 50, and makes a case for churches having been founded by many others in addition to Paul. Some were itinerant preachers like Paul and Barnabas, others were unrecognized Christians moving into a city and starting a church in their home. This Gentile Church . . . "had no New Testament, no thought-out theology, no stereotyped traditions." (P. 49) And on pages 51 and 52, after discussion the evident diversity between early churches, but at the same time the growing idea that these churches represented the true Israel, the 'remnant' prophesied in the Old testament, Streeter observes:

During the first fifty years of Christianity—but less so with every decade after that—the adoption of this conception of the Church as the 'remnant' of Israel entailed four important consequences:

1. Lack of definition, and even considerable diversity in regard to doctrine, caused small

offence. . . .

The other consequences are that method of organization was relatively unimportant, while membership in the "congregation of Israel" through baptism was the primary concern. A sense of being "the mystical body of Christ" was shared between these churches differing in other details. The "Old Testament was the Holy Book, Jerusalem was the Holy City." These were the cohering principles, all other organizational details or doctrinal matters were allowed to be quite diverse. I get the impression that Streeter felt that Paul was reflection these ideas and ideals, and expanding on them in a unique way. But he was not their inventor. On page 48, Streeter also suggests that Paul simply expanded on and interpreted the actions of Peter when it came to the Law and the necessity for Gentile converts to observe it.

Streeter gives evidences for diversity well into the 200's, the third century. This is done on pages 53 through 57. On page 53 he makes a statement that gave me pause, he is discussing . . . "an antecedent expectation of discovering . . . a wide range of local diversity." Then observes that . . . "in every case this diversity appears to be, not a recent development, but the survival of a more primitive state of things."

Why did that give me pause? Because it is amazing that I had not thought of this before: what mattered to the earliest Christians was the spiritual experience that converted them (like Paul's), not the community of believers or the structure or organization thereof. They were simply believers in Christ, the Messiah, among the Jews. They remained Jews for all community and organizational purposes.

Getting back to the question of Paul, Streeter joins several others in this list by making the case for Paul's teachings to

be in line with Jewish-Christian beliefs. But Paul added a Hellenistic twist in terms of vocabulary and symbols.

It takes Streeter several pages (pages 33 through 42) to establish that the names of the twelve apostles as not well defined, with different lists in different places. He also asserts that they were not a "College of Cardinals" but were instead itinerant teachers to the Jews, as per their charge by Jesus. At the end of these pages he dismisses the idea of a quorum of twelve apostles, running a church as its legislators, as "a fancy picture drawn in a later age," (p. 42)

Previous to this, Streeter had gone into an examination of both orthodox and non-orthodox sources that he would use, carefully, in his analyses, and I was surprised at how many of the sources being used in newer books, post Dead-Sea and Nag-Hammadi libraries, were already known in 1929.

I don't want to summarize what he had to say about these sources, but I will summarize his own Synopsis on pages 1 and 2 as saying in essence the following:

There were two parties writing propaganda concerning the works and fates of the apostles, Gnostics and Ebionites who were opposites in many ways. Gnostic is what he asserts the following sources to be: the "*Acts of John*—and to a varying extent those of Paul, Peter, Andrew and Thomas" Ebionite is what he asserts the *Clementine Homilies* and *Recognitions* to be.

The Ebionite documents are a veiled attack on Paul, poorly disguised as Simon Magus, who is defeated by Peter. The Gnostic *Acts of Paul* may contain some material that reflects "genuine tradition." Finally, were it not for Eusebius it would be very difficult to reconstruct anything about early Christian

history. Streeter finds plenty of fault with the style of Eusebius, on page 23. But his point is that this and other flawed sources allow a good picture to be reconstructed of the earliest Christian churches.

Streeter is a believer. He may question the existence of some of the apostles or disparage James as a usurper, practically. But he never does, and in my opinion never would question the reality of Jesus Christ. He does, however, make note of the serious contradictions between the infancy and passion narratives of the Gospels. He believes this shows that (p. 54) . . . "there existed a high degree of local independence in the sub-Apostolic age—even in regard to matters which must have been considered as of extreme importance." Seems reasonable, more so than saying these contradictions prove there never was a Jesus.

The Messiahship of Jesus is mentioned in the classic nationalistic sense as existing among the Jewish Christians. On page 43 he hints that the vision was that Jesus would return to usher in a grander version of the Davidic empire. On pages 47 and 48, Streeter tells that James' belief in Jesus' Messiahship rest on a "post-resurrection Appearance."

The Messiahship of Jesus, as taught in the church that James was the organizer of, was both spiritual and nationalistic. Since the Clementine Recognitions were Ebionite-influenced, and the church of James was likely closely related. Perhaps the Jamesian definition of God and humanity deserves a closer look (see Van Luik, item # 36).