CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

JUDAISM AND GNOSIS*

I

My distinguished colleague, Robert McLachlan Wilson, in 1960 saved the honour of New Testament scholarship. After the publication of the Gospel of Thomas, quite a few professors considered this text as nothing but a Gnostic perversion of Holy Writ. But Wilson pointed out that the parable of the Wicked Husbandmen, logion 65, in its Synoptic form had undergone some expansion, having been converted into an allegory in which the servants represent the prophets. The striking thing about the version in the Gospel of Thomas, as he saw it, only appears when we compare it with Dodd’s reconstruction of the original story, in which we should have “a climactic series of three”—two slaves and then the son. This is, in fact, precisely what we find in the Gospel of Thomas. From this and similar observations Wilson concluded that perhaps we may speak of an element of genuine early tradition, possibly embodying a few authentic sayings, and of an element parallel to but perhaps independent of our Gospels.¹ Some twenty years later Antoine Guillaumont, carefully studying the Semitisms in the Gospel of Thomas, definitively proved that these views were correct.²

Wilson also stressed the importance of Judaism for Gnostic studies. He was not the first to derive Gnosticism from Judaism. That was the particular merit of the great Berlin Church historian August Neander (David Mendel, 1789–1850).³ But the man from St Andrews was probably the first Anglo-Saxon, if not the first of all New Testament scholars, to reconsider this hypothesis after a long eclipse. In 1958 he

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³ A. Neander, Genetische Entwicklung der vornehmsten gnostischen Systeme, Berlin 1818.
expressed the opinion that certain elements of Gnosticism were purely Jewish, and that other, pagan elements were also derived from Diaspora Judaism, even though it was not the ultimate source. Thus Diaspora Judaism was established as a contributory source for the development of Gnosticism. Already at the time he stressed the importance of Philo for Gnostic studies, not because one of the richest men of Alexandria was himself a Gnostic, but because he was developing, modifying, and generally carrying to a conclusion the work of those who had gone before. Philo did not simply concoct his theories and allegories for himself, but drew upon an existing tradition. This is an excellent vantage-point for considering the special relationship between Gnosis and early Christianity.

Wilson never paid much attention to the rediscovery of Judaic Christianity by Erik Peterson and others, and he once frankly told me that he hesitated to follow me in this field. But this treacherous ground perhaps became a bit safer when a mutual friend of ours set the seal of his approval upon the bold hypotheses of H.J. Schoeps and Jean Cardinal Daniélou, and their followers.

Marcel Simon starts his survey of the present state of the problem by observing that only a few decades ago nobody spoke about Jewish Christianity, whereas today there is barely a single scholar in the field of early Christian literature who does not feel he has to express his opinion on this question. The result is that the problem has been made extremely complicated. But there can be no doubt whatsoever that there did exist in Antiquity sects like Ebionites, Nazoreans and Elkesaites, which somehow more or less continued the tradition of the primitive congregation of Jerusalem (more especially, I add, the tradition of the “Hebrews” there, as opposed to the “Hellenists” like St Stephen and St Paul: Acts 6:1; 7:58).

Schoeps has been criticised for limiting his scope too much when he considered the Jewish Christians (Elkesaites) of the pseudo-Clementines as the exclusive and direct heirs of these “Hebrews” or “Nazoreans”. Daniélou, on the other hand, was too sweeping when he identified as Jewish Christian every writing before 150 C.E. which expressed itself

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