CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

THE HOLY SPIRIT ACCORDING TO
THE EARLY CHURCH*

Around 100 C.E. the Jewish Christian Elxai (Elkesai) described a vision in which Christ handed him a book: “Opposite Him, however, stood the Holy Spirit in the shape of an (invisible) female being”.\(^1\) This scheme is the “oldest form of the doctrine of the Trinity known to us”.\(^2\) The important thing is that it is found in a Jewish Christian text.

For some time now we know (or ought to know) that the pursuit of visionary experiences was not uncommon in the Judaism of those days. Even within the strictest Pharisaism in Palestine, secret teachings were being transmitted which explained how to ascend to the Throne itself and to see the Glory. Gershom Scholem demonstrated that this mystical Jewish teaching was much older than he had originally assumed and that it goes back to the first century C.E.\(^3\) At the time, the Jews did not only hear, they also saw. That is why Elxai’s vision on Jewish soil at that time is not extraordinary.

But neither do we have any indication that the vision of Elxai in itself was special or idiosyncratic. It should be assumed rather that it was traditional and that it had very ancient roots. Paul is familiar with the notion that the Spirit is a Paraclete, that is a person who intercedes and prays for man; who calls out “Abba” (Galatians 4:6), who prays for us with groanings that cannot be spoken (Romans 8:26). Even closer to Elxai is the Gospel of John, which takes both Christ and the Holy Spirit to be a Paraclete (John 14:16). When one assumes that Paul and John here draw on a tradition from which Elxai eventually also derived his vision, it must be concluded that the concept of the Holy Spirit as a Person had very ancient roots.

But it is important that this notion of Elxai is accompanied by visionary experiences.

\(^1\) Hippolytus, Refutatio IX, 13, 2; Wendland, 251, 14.
\(^2\) G. Kretschmar, Studien zur frühchristlichen Trinitätstheologie, Tübingen 1956, 99.
Another source for the notions of the Jewish Christians in this respect is the Gospel of Thomas. Many researchers admit that this work contains Words which were transmitted by Jewish Christians. The question is, however, whether these in turn depended on the canonical gospels or relied on an independent tradition.

Logion 44 of the Gospel of Thomas says:

Jesus said, “Whoever blasphemies against the Father will be forgiven, and whoever blasphemes against the Son will be forgiven, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven either on earth or in heaven.”

It is certain that this saying has not been changed appreciably by the author of the Gospel of Thomas. A similar formula can be found in the Tuscan Diatessaron. And since more than a hundred parallels between the various versions of the Diatessaron and the apocryphon found at Nag Hammadi demonstrate that both the author of the Diatessaron, Tatian, and the author of Thomas drew on one and the same Jewish Christian tradition, we may also assume in this case that the logion was transmitted in this form by Jewish Christians. The choice of words: “neither on earth or in heaven [= or by God]” is a Semitism.

It may be supposed that this Jewish Christian logion is an adaptation of Matthew 12:31–32, a combination of Mark 3:28–29 and Q (= Luke 12:10). But in that case it ought to be explained why Thomas bears no traces of Mark, preserved so faithfully in Matthew and Luke. It seems more probable that the tripartiteness of the logion owes its existence to an independent tradition.

This problem, however, has little bearing on our aims. The essential importance of the logion is this, that it reflects the notions of the Jewish Christians. And we may add to this: the religion of the Jewish Christians was trinitarian. Even when the Christian revelation is expressed in Semitic categories, it receives a trinitarian differentiation. Although there are some who think that the dogma of the trinity is a product of the Greek mind on evangelical soil, this cannot be maintained from a historical perspective. The Jewish Christians, too, possessed a doctrine of the trinity. And in the case of Elxai one might furthermore add that he was a heretic. But there is no evidence pointing to the fact that the Jewish Christians who transmitted the tradition which is to be found in the Gospel of Thomas, were also heretics.

To them this was no speculation in the first place. They say there is no forgiveness for sins committed against the Holy Spirit, on earth.