

# **THE RELIGION OF THE APOSTLES: ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST CENTURY**

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Myths about Christianity abound, and some myths even pass as common knowledge. One such myth is that Christians, after Jesus Christ started a new religion, worshipped in a very simple manner, revolving around undeveloped doctrines of love and sharing. Only later, we are often told (by both devout Protestants and by unbelievers, advancing different agendas) was this plain worship larded up with new doctrines and liturgies, which are encrustations on true Christianity. Stephen De Young works hard to explode all parts of this myth, explaining in *The Religion of the Apostles* that the beliefs and worship of the first Christians were essentially identical to those written down some years later, and were not, in most important ways, new at all.

De Young, an Orthodox priest whose book *God is a Man of War I* discussed a few months ago, doesn't claim to be a neutral observer. This is a work of apologetics, which uses intense Scriptural analysis, along with recorded history, in an attempt to demonstrate that Orthodox doctrine and worship, as practiced today, are both correct and largely indistinguishable from the worship of A.D. 50 or so. I'm not a neutral observer, either, although I'm certainly (especially relative to De Young) an uneducated one, but I don't think this book is the last word in either Biblical interpretation or history. Still, I think De Young makes a reasonably compelling case for his claims, many of which revolve around the little-understood relationship of early Christianity to Judaism.

Christians are aware of different strains of Jewish belief at the time of Christ; the conflicts described in the New Testament between Pharisees and Sadducees are familiar even to casual Christians. It is less clear to Christians that none of these strains of Judaism bear much resemblance to Judaism today, rabbinic Judaism. What we think of as Judaism only developed after A.D. 70, following the destruction of the Second Temple, and took centuries to fully develop. Not a few of rabbinic Judaism's rules and doctrines were entirely new and designed in direct opposition to Christianity, the result of centuries of Jewish-Christian conflict (in which the Jews gave as good as they got). To be sure, all religions

develop to some degree, and Judaism has faced far more challenges than most, so substantial changes over time are no real surprise. But still, what is mostly forgotten today is that Second Temple Judaism, which was dominant when Christ walked the Earth, was very different from rabbinic Judaism, in both doctrine and practice. De Young's core claim is that Christianity is a continuation, and fulfilment, of Second Temple Judaism; it is rabbinic Judaism that is a drastic break from both Second Temple Judaism and Christianity.

The religion of the Apostles was not shallow and simple, but deep and complex. As with Judaism of the time, it was intricate in belief and ritual, with many of those beliefs and rituals being identical between Christianity and Judaism. To take a high-profile example, Saint Paul did not convert to Christianity, and he never described his turn to preaching Christ as a conversion to a new religion. Rather, De Young shows how Saint Paul, when he went by Saul, appears to have been a proponent of Jewish "chariot" mysticism, which centered around the visions of the prophet Ezekiel. This was a strong current in first century Judaism, though later rejected by rabbinic Judaism. The Second Temple tradition, of focused meditation and a belief in communication with angels and multiple heavens (as Saint Paul refers to in II Corinthians 12) was wholly compatible with Christ's revealing himself as God to Saint Paul on the road to Damascus. Christ did not appear to Saint Paul and offer him a new religion, but additional, fresh facts about what he already strongly believed. That is to say, Saint Paul practiced "Old Testament Christianity," not some newfangled religion for which he had thrown over the Judaism of his youth.

As this discussion shows, De Young spends quite a bit of time on demonstrating the continuation between Old and New Testament beliefs—not by reinterpretation of the Old Testament through a new, Christian, lens, but showing actual unbroken continuation of beliefs often incorrectly thought to have been introduced by Christianity. Perhaps the central dichotomy today drawn between Judaism and Christianity is that Judaism is said to be unitarian monotheistic, one God in one Person, as supposedly shown by the Old Testament, while Christianity believes in the Trinity, one God in three Persons, revealed in the New Testament. But Second Temple Judaism, while it did not believe in the Trinity as such, according to De Young clearly understood that

there were two Persons in God, two *hypostases*. “Rather than enacting a new vision of God, the New Testament clarifies and affirms the nature of the God spoken of in the Old.”

To demonstrate, De Young translates and analyzes numerous Biblical passages. For example, he shows how the “Angel of the Lord” several times referred to in the Old Testament is viewed as both Yahweh and as a person distinct from Yahweh who interacts with Yahweh and humans, and is also referred to as the “Word of the Lord” (often causing confusion among those who think this means merely some auditory phenomenon). This Person on more than one occasion takes physical form, unlike Yahweh, and once this is realized, “many New Testament passages considered allegory or reinterpretations of the previous revelation can be seen to be quite literal.” For example, Moses is told that he will speak to God “face to face” (Exodus 33:11), yet in Exodus 33:20 it is said Moses cannot see the face of God and live. Similarly, the Book of Daniel shows a vision of the Son of Man, a divine being distinct from Yahweh, with whom Jesus explicitly identified himself. The logical conclusion is that God has two *hypostases*, and the one that God permits men to see face-to-face is the Angel of the Lord, the Word of the Lord, the Son of Man. Although the Jews debated who this Person was precisely, for Christians it is this Person, of course, who became incarnate as Jesus Christ, completing his partial earlier revealings. The innovation was rabbinic Judaism’s insistence on unitarian monotheism, although Christianity certainly further developed the understanding of God’s *hypostases*.

All this is very interesting and compelling. Less convincing, however, is De Young’s attempt to demonstrate that Second Temple Judaism also acknowledged the Holy Spirit. This argument revolves around the “Name of God”—God’s Spirit who is also God, mentioned in more than one place in the Bible. De Young gives much less direct evidence that this meant a third *hypostasis*, but he nonetheless draws that conclusion, which strikes me as considerably less textually supported. Perhaps this Scriptural vagueness is inevitable; for most laymen, the Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity who seems most abstract. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely to me that most Second Temple Jews were any kind of trinitarian. Early Christians were, however, and De Young rejects the myth that Christian trinitarianism was a later accretion to the religion—though from his Preface, the reader expects considerably more discussion of

how in this matter, and others, the worship of the Apostles was indistinguishable from that of later centuries, that is, a showing that there was little evolution in belief. But the main focus remains on continuity of belief from the Old Testament, not the specifics of apostolic-era worship as compared to later worship, and moreover we get almost nothing on ritual, as opposed to doctrine.

Having addressed the Trinity directly, De Young next turns to a favorite topic of his (most notably in his podcast, “The Lord of Spirits,” and also discussed in *God is a Man of War*). This is the divine council, certain of the non-human entities whom God has created and who play roles in His creation—notably the roles of governance, over peoples and other elements of creation. De Young covers the corruption of some of these beings, their lordship over peoples of the earth after Babel, their desire to convince humans to worship themselves instead of God, and their fate. These pagan gods, in Orthodox belief, are real, but they are demons, or fallen angelic beings (those two are not necessarily exactly the same, De Young says, also discussing the somewhat muddled understanding of Satan in both Judaism and Christianity). Their former lordship has been given by Christ to others—including, after the Resurrection, to glorified humans, who are patrons of churches, cities, and nations, and who may become part of the divine council—most prominently the Mother of Christ, the Theotokos, a queen mother in the style of many in the Old Testament. Nearly all of the text analyzed here is Old Testament, and again familiar to Second Temple Judaism. So, for example, the Book of Daniel tells us (Daniel 12:3) that the righteous will shine forever like the stars of heaven; in like manner, Christ will glorify righteous humanity, body and soul, who will share (in some ways) the likeness of Christ himself, “beyond the ranks of angels,” as also shown in the visions of Isaiah.

In his podcast, De Young often says that in the afterlife, we will have jobs. We’re not going to sit around playing harps. What that means he does not flesh out in any meaningful way, and nobody has ever been able to give me a coherent explanation of what this might look like, especially given that time is putatively absent, or at least very different, in Heaven. I suppose we’ll find out, as with everything (after all, we see through a glass, darkly) but the claim that jobs are in our future, given that most people default to analogizing that to jobs during our

mortal life, seems to me arguably more confusing than clarifying, and something De Young might do well to discuss further, perhaps in the context of the divine council.

Next, De Young covers core doctrinal topics: creation and salvation. We move somewhat away here from a direct relationship between Christianity to Judaism, but De Young continues to draw lines between the Old and New Testaments. As elsewhere, De Young here vigorously rejects the theology of atonement, which assumes God is “subject to some overarching system of rules or justice,” while in fact there is “no reason to assume that God’s ways operate according to ‘mechanisms’ intelligible to the human mind.” Moreover, atonement has no Scriptural basis. The word does not appear in the Bible, it is a sixteenth-century English neologism. Rather, Christ’s death is “the revelation of His divine glory.” (The Orthodox belief that in the three days before his Resurrection Christ was defeating Satan in a way not completely understood, as well outlined by Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev in *Christ the Conqueror of Hell*, is closely tied to this doctrine.) And God’s judgment, inevitable for each one of us, does not involve wrath in the way humans are angry; it is a purifying fire that has different effects on each person, who is thereby “set in order as God’s creature.” God’s punishments, including those in the Old Testament, are thus aimed at restoring “the right relationship of justice,” not some tantrum of an offended deity.

Implicit in this analysis, and ultimately made explicit by De Young, is that he is very much not a universalist. Universalism, the idea that all people are ultimately united with God, is a thread in Orthodox thinking, more so than in Catholic thinking. I used to be quite interested in universalism, but have concluded that such matters are simply above my pay grade. It certainly is the modernist Christian heresy to rule all others; most notably it rules Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart, of whom I used to be a big fan but who has on several axes gone off the rails, and who recently wrote a widely-panned book shrieking that only evil people deny universalism, *That All Shall Be Saved*. De Young’s position, clearly stated and supported, but not necessarily universal (ha ha) among Orthodox theologians, is that all will be raised at the Last Judgment, but that does not mean that all will then be judged righteous. Some will not shine forever like the stars of heaven, by their own choice and as a necessary consequence of God’s justice.

Finally, De Young turns back to Judaism, discussing the nation of Israel and the Law. He puts forth a lengthy analysis of the constitution of Israel by God as the chosen people, after the nations were dispersed as a result of the events of Babel, with their governance given to spirits who later became corrupt, leading then to the creation of Israel, an entirely new nation. Contrary to rabbinic belief, the prophesied rebirth of Israel comes about through the Gentiles, into whom the “lost” ten tribes had assimilated, and “the Church is the assembly of Israel, God’s people, which has been renewed and restored.” Crucially, the Church has not replaced Israel and it is not a new Israel. It is Israel, as it has developed according to God’s plan. The promise to Abraham, therefore, was not a promise exclusively to the Jews, “but it is through Israel [as originally constituted] as the heir that the promises and blessings of God were mediated to the entire human family.” Judaism struggled with the fate of the ten tribes; Christianity saw this as merely a step toward Christ’s regathering of Israel from all the nations, formally begun at his Ascension. To be sure, not that De Young mentions it, the odious Pope Francis has rejected the Great Commission, as have a great many other Western Christians, but no matter; the commands of Christ are going to outlast this present unfaithful generation.

As to the law, the law as given to Moses was not abrogated by Christ, nor was it somehow divided into new categories of relevant and irrelevant, as some Protestants (notably John Calvin) would have it. De Young discusses the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15), and rejects the idea that it relieved Christians of the Mosaic laws. Rather, he says, those laws relating to “clean” and “unclean” foodstuffs no longer exist, because Christ has restored the creation, purifying it through his sacrifice. Along the same lines, excommunication has, for moral offenses, replaced the death penalty. De Young says “Christians, therefore, are called on to ‘keep kosher’ in a deeper and truer sense than outward compliance with the Torah’s commandments.” Similarly, circumcision, while gone as a commandment, is not “done away with. Rather, every element is filled to overflowing in such a way that Christ represents the truth and reality behind the shadow of the ordinance of circumcision (Col. 2:17). . . . Circumcision, in the Church, is not abolished but fulfilled.” In like manner, the forms of worship used by the Orthodox are not optional,

but based on the commandments of the Torah, “now grasped more fully and deeply in Christ.”

Maybe, but most of these “fulfillments” are, in logical and practical terms, indistinguishable from abolishment. It is no doubt true that “Through Christ, in the life of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, the commandments of the Torah can finally be fully lived out.” Yet some of this seems like hand waving and conclusory thinking. I am pretty sure there are other commandments in the Torah that are simply treated as a nullity by Christians and not by observant Jews. Certainly many modern Christians want to nullify all of the law, most especially the rules on sexual morality, and claim the mantle of Christ for their heresy, but that does not change that there do seem many other laws that are a dead letter. It’d require someone who knows a lot more than me to engage with De Young on this point, but I’m by no means convinced.

And that brings up the biggest problem with this book. Everything De Young says is very interesting, and to a devout Christian helpful to expand and root his faith. But I’m not sure that De Young really conclusively proves much he sets out to prove. The vast majority of his exegesis is exactly that—interpretations of Scripture, through an orthodox Orthodox lens. Even though De Young is very familiar with the Church Fathers, there are very few references to their writings, and I think their (often diverse) thoughts on many of these matters, and the development of those thoughts, would have greatly fleshed out the analysis. Worse, there is almost zero engagement with anyone who disagrees with the author’s interpretations, and history, and I am sure there are many such. Thus, it seems to me this book is a place to start, not the last word. Oh, I’m sure the myth of a primitive, nearly puerile, early Christianity, one lacking in ritual and demanding little of its followers except sharing, is exactly that. But I expect there is much more to the story, a good deal of which we will never know, at least on this Earth.