

has been slow and gradual, still it contains very ancient elements and perhaps may well enshrine the primitive preaching of John.

Any study of the formation of the Gospels must floodlight the importance of the Church's tradition in interpreting the events of Christ's life. Faith is a living thing ; but its life can only be sustained by and in the Church. And her office it was, under the guiding finger of the Holy Spirit, to penetrate the mystery of Christ. There was no call for her to 'create' events—she had sufficient matter on which to ruminate. The term of her primitive reflections, which were stimulated by her everyday life of faith, is presented to us in our Gospels, in those Minutes, if you wish, which summarise the meeting of God and man.

PATRICK FANNON, S.M.M.

*St Mary's Scholasticate,
Church Stretton, Salop*

ESSENISM AND CHRISTIANITY ¹

The Dead Sea Manuscripts have something to offer us which is entirely new. For the first time we can through their help make ourselves contemporaries with our Lord. Till now this has never been possible. We have never been able to discover the feelings and thoughts of the contemporaries of our Lord. As a result the Gospels have been for us at one and the same time both familiar and far-removed. There is scarcely a Sunday Gospel with which we are not well acquainted ; yet despite that it could never before have been said that their language was that of our everyday life and culture. The Gospels were in fact another world to us. Clearly if we were really to penetrate their modes of expression, it was not sufficient merely to be familiar with the words of the Gospels by dint of constant repetition.

The words which our Lord used were words and expressions in constant use every day. Take for example that phrase from the Our Father : 'Thy Kingdom come.' It must be admitted that the 'Kingdom of God' is not a news item of daily occurrence in our newspapers. This does not cause us any surprise since it is not regarded as ranking in importance with the major political issues of our day. Nevertheless, if there had been newspapers at the time of our Lord, the phrase 'Kingdom of God' would have featured almost daily in

¹ From a conference given during the Biblical Week at Fribourg 1960, and translated from the French by K. Kelly.

the Jerusalem press. It had a significance as familiar for the Jews of those days as had the word *débarquement* (liberation) in occupied France during the last war. In fact the two notions are quite similar. For the Jews of the time of our Lord the phrase 'Kingdom of God' signified the end of the Roman Empire. It meant that in place of this empire God would establish the people of Israel in power; after having been crushed unjustly by all the great pagan empires, they would finally become His ministers in this world. Hence this notion included the idea of the complete and glorious fulfilment of the hope of the people of Israel; it also meant their revenge for the humiliation which had denied them independence for so long. The same might be said for the various other expressions which fill the pages of the Gospels. Till the present we have not been able to hear them as they sounded to our Lord's contemporaries and consequently, although we have been quite familiar with the words, we have missed much of the significance of many of our Lord's expressions.

At last, however, we have in our possession books which played a great part in the education and cultural formation of the hearers of our Lord. We are thus enabled to see the Gospels, as it were, in 3-D. Such a vision needs two images slightly distant from each other. Until the present we have been limited to the Gospel-image and the second image has been lacking. Now at last we have it and so we are able to see, set against its background of the common culture of the time, what was absolutely new in the message of Jesus for the ears of his contemporaries. What exactly were some of the people thinking about when on the shore of the Lake of Galilee they said: 'No-one has ever spoken like this man'? Now we can see quite clearly the reason for their amazement, since we know now what were the chief questions under discussion among the people at that time. Hence we realise now that when our Lord spoke, everything he said was not equally profound. Some of the things were merely repetitions of themes very much in the air in those days, while others on the contrary certainly surprised his audience and struck them as strange, so strange that they were scandalised.

*The Theology of the Essenes*¹

The fundamental point in the comparison of Essenism and Christianity is to consider their respective notions of sanctity. In other words how did these contemporaries of Jesus conceive the relation between

¹ The following attempt at a synthesis is based essentially on the *Manual of Discipline* and the *Hymns of Thanksgiving*.

God and man, and how did their conception compare with the teaching of Jesus himself? The Essenes were a very logical people and their view of the world was very precise, and yet extremely original. Hence if we wish to understand their notion of sanctity we must begin with their theology.

In the beginning God created the 'Spirits of Light' and the 'Spirits of Darkness.' That is the first article of the Essene Creed. In this sense they understood the text, 'God created the Light. . . .' Light and Darkness were at the very outset of Creation. Hence according to them God in the very beginning created two species—the 'Spirits of Light' (also called the 'Spirits of Fidelity') and the 'Spirits of Darkness' (the 'Spirits of Perversity'). That these latter were bad was not due to any kind of original fault; it was simply due to the creative will of God. God for all time loves the Light but hates the Darkness. He therefore actually hates these 'Spirits of Darkness' whom He has created. His Love is restricted to the 'Spirits of Light.' Their function is to praise God, while the work of the 'Spirits of Darkness' is to tempt man.

These 'Spirits of Light' are what we would call the Angels. There are many degrees among them. Those of the highest rank are called the 'Angels of the Face.' They are the angels who are ever before the face of God, engaged in praise and thanksgiving. They have no connection with those monstrosities of the popular imagination which often pose under the name of angels. For the Essene an angel is an immense creature, bright and incandescent and able to remain before the face of God; a creature who can understand God and who, in the enthusiasm arising from the presence and possession of God, 'sings' His praise. This song of praise is a kind of ecstatic silence.

It is most remarkable that the Essenes understood that the centre of creation is not man but God, and directed towards this centre is the praise of all His creatures who are able to possess Him. Man is on quite a different level. He is defined as a being born of the dust, a carcass destined to be the food of worms, fashioned from a little clay, already in the process of decomposition and knowing how to desire nothing except dust like himself. Obviously there is a great difference between this notion and their concept of an angel. But the prodigy of God's grace is that He has been willing from among men to produce companions of the angels.

The whole of humanity has been handed over to guardian spirits. This is a basic point in Essene theology. One part of humanity has been confided to the 'Angels of Light' and the other to the 'Angels of Darkness.' This is the present situation and there is no questioning why or how it can be. At the root of everything there is for the Essene

neither love nor injustice, but merely God's good pleasure. There is no asking why of God. Moreover the predestination of one and the reprobation of another is according as God has given them over to the influence of the good or the bad spirits. It is fixed once and for all. There is obviously no room for a drama of salvation in this conception. The predestined are saved necessarily, whereas there is no escaping damnation for the reprobate. Nevertheless this does not imply that there is no tragedy in the world. There most certainly is, although it is only an apparent one. It is the fact that God has permitted the 'Time of Impiety' to arrive during the era of the Essenes. This 'Time of Impiety' is characterised by the fact that the 'Angels of Darkness' have it in their power totally to obscure the Light. They have been given a free hand, and even those who are predestined among men have let themselves be overcome by this powerful temptation and, according to the expression of the Essenes, have 'wallowed in infidelity.' It is not known how long this situation will continue, but they say that for the present God has given this free hand to the 'Angels of Darkness' in much the same way as He allowed Satan to tempt Job. Job was also someone who must be saved, and yet Satan was given permission to cause havoc in the world around him. The Roman occupation is interpreted in this light and thus there is no surprise that it has taken place. The same is true of various other events.

But what is to be done in the face of this situation, where for the moment the darkness has deceived the light, and the 'sons of fidelity' have given themselves over to infidelity under the stress of temptation? There is only one solution, and this is conversion. The duty of the 'sons of fidelity' in this era, called the 'domination of Impiety,' is to be converted. God is sending into this world the holy Spirit and this holy Spirit has to reawaken in the predestined the spirit of fidelity which, due to the domination of infidelity, is temporarily dormant. When converted, these predestined should reunite during the period of conversion, and leave this world which is dominated by impiety. It is well to note here that the Essenes have no idea of *world* conversion; due to their doctrine of absolute reprobation they do not regard that as possible. The only danger is to remain in the grip of the darkness. Hence once converted a man leaves the world completely, and in this way fidelity is segregated and kept apart. The predestined thus isolate themselves and form the 'citadel of Fidelity.' Qumran, of course, is the special location of this citadel.

Scarcely anyone in Israel could be ignorant of the existence of this community of converts living their common life. The very presence of this community should act as a kind of magnet on all who are

predestined and assist them in their own conversion. There is no question of leaving this citadel of fidelity to go out and preach conversion, for that would be to run the risk of once again succumbing to temptation, and thus further delay the liberation. The mere fact of the existence of their community should be a sufficient encouragement for people to come to them.

In this way the community is formed in Israel. It calls itself the 'nursery-plantation of eternity.' They attach a very precise meaning to this expression. It is a matter of rearing the companions of the angels. As yet they have not sufficient roots to be able to be transplanted into eternity. Hence they develop here on earth by dint of much labour and suffering, and through their exercises and ascetical practices. The essential thing is that when they die they be 'viable,' so that at the appropriate time they may be fit to be transplanted among the angels. Until they have reached this stage they cannot breathe such a rarified atmosphere. They remain there, like young trees in a plantation, as long as is necessary, until they have sufficient roots to be able to be planted definitively in eternity with the angels of praise. The role of the citadel, this community of the chosen and predestined, is to make this nursery-plantation a reality. Their isolation therefore is not simply for self-protection, but also to consolidate their true destiny, something which before their conversion was not possible.

The others who remain in this world and who do not come to the community are called the 'sons of the pit'—a name coming from the Hebrew usage of 'son of' in the sense of 'destined for,' e.g. 'son of malediction,' 'son of perdition,' etc. They are destined for the tomb and after that there is nothing more for them except eternal suffering, in which the Essenes had a deep belief.

This separation and profound division in the world is absolute and can be traced back to the very creation of each man, in which his lot among either the 'Spirits of Light' or the 'Spirits of Darkness' was determined. But the sign of this predestination is entrance into the community. Nevertheless the Essenes soon came to realise that it was not quite so simple as all that. There was a 'fifth column' of the 'sons of impiety' which had penetrated into the community. That complicated their theory and consequently an adaptation had to be made. So they maintained that at the beginning it is impossible to judge adequately and discern the spirit of an entrant into the community. One might come filled with enthusiasm and yet turn out to be a renegade. Clearly that is a sign that there has been a mistake somewhere. However it is not the sign that the community has made a mistake in its pedagogical training and thus caused one of its followers

to lose his good dispositions. It is never interpreted in that light. It is merely the sign that there has been a mistake in thinking that such a one is a son of fidelity. To obviate this danger they institute a novitiate as a testing period, so that in the course of two or three years a true estimation can be made of a man's correct category. If anyone does enter the community with the wrong intention, as soon as he is discovered he is expelled because he belongs to this fifth column of the 'sons of perversity.'

It is for this very reason that the 'secret writings' are produced. There are three forms of this secret writing—probably they were revealed in the successive stages of initiation. We find that in the one manuscript the writing is in normal Hebrew and then suddenly changes into a secret writing; it returns once more to the normal Hebrew, and then later reverts to another type of secret writing. This is simply to economise on copies, since in this way the one copy can be used for the initiated and the novices. They will understand the various parts of it according as to whether they have been initiated into the secret of these writings or not. The secrecy was necessary to safeguard the mysteries of the sect—it might be noted in passing that the account of their theology that has been given above was probably reserved to the initiated, found in a special part of the rule, which was written for the more intelligent. Whether one was able to understand this section or not was the criterion for judging whether one was intelligent or not.

The separation of fidelity from the world, and its preparation for sharing the lot of the angels should of itself bring about the end of the world. They arrive at this conclusion in the following manner. If justice is not isolated from injustice, there will be a balance established in the world between justice and injustice and hence God will not be able to make His final choice. Once however justice is placed apart, all that remains is injustice in its absolute state, and therefore God will make His choice and destroy injustice. In other words, if justice has not yet been established in this world, it is because there is still too much of it. This paradoxical statement needs further elucidation. If the state of affairs is not fully satisfactory for one who has a thirst for justice, it is because there has been allowed to remain in the hearts of the unjust a certain amount of true light, due to attempts to instruct them and to draw them away from their error. The result of this is that an equilibrium is thus formed and hence God does not intervene. Once however it is admitted that there are some who are destined for salvation and others destined for annihilation, then the reprobate should be allowed to sink deeper and deeper into their injustice, until finally at a given moment God will intervene. If a blow given to an

innocent man is revenged, God sees that the scales of justice have been brought back into equilibrium ; but if, on the contrary, the one who is unjustly struck does nothing about it, his aggressor will go from strength to strength and thus the balance of God's justice will become more and more upset. In the end there will come a moment when God cannot but intervene. That is exactly the technique of the Essenes. By separating the good on one side and the wicked on the other, they completely upset the balance of God's justice, with the result that God is forced to bring about the end of the world and destroy impiety, now present in the world, in its absolute state.

It is only at that moment, when all the impious have been isolated and destroyed, that the glory of Adam will be restored to the predestined. To effect this renewal of creation which will be the restoration of the glory of Adam the destruction of darkness and infidelity is required.

The mode of life of the Essenes follows logically from their doctrine. The logic of this doctrine is quite obvious. It springs from their admittance that the darkness and the light were created by God ; that this total separation determines the category to which each man belongs ; that for the moment the darkness has the right to overshadow the light ; and that the task of the predestined is to isolate themselves so that the light might appear in its fulness and that the darkness might be destroyed. That is the main line of their logic and their manner of life follows directly from this. It can be divided into three main elements which, despite the narrow-minded and isolationist mentality of Essenism, bear witness to the very highest qualities.

The first element characterising their life is religious asceticism. According to them it is a matter of circumcising by community of life the prepuce of the heart. Men, they would argue, often have the most fantastic desires—which St Paul terms 'the desires of the flesh'—but a communal life is the best means of conquering and mastering all these undisciplined desires which do not fit in with the will of God. Hence, for them the community life is their principal ascetical practice. This is indeed a truth borne out by experience. For example, the first question a novice master may well ask a late vocation seeking to enter a monastery is : 'Have you been married?' If the answer is in the affirmative, the novice master may well reply 'All the better.' This is because such a man has already experienced a communal life with its ascetical value, and consequently it will have already forced him to master some of the wilder tendencies of his moral life which may have appeared and which would otherwise by now have been impossible to prune. It is a matter of stopping the inclinations from straying in directions other than are in accord with what God desires ; a matter

of preventing this loss of vitality due to a dissipation of energy by such wayward wanderings. This Essene asceticism of community life has for its basis a renewal of the alliance of Sinai. Each man, almost from the very moment of his birth, has entered by circumcision into the alliance of Moses. When he reaches manhood and, regaining possession of himself, is converted and becomes conscious of his duty in this world which is destined for impiety, he makes a deliberate and conscious renewal of this alliance of Moses by his entrance into the community. In other words, he engages himself under pain of death to observe the law of Moses according to the constitutions of the faithful priests who have founded this citadel of fidelity.

The second point which is characteristic of the life of the Essenes is fraternal charity. This is a matter in which their contribution was quite considerable. For them the life in common is the building up of the new temple, since in their eyes the whole of Israel has been profaned in this time of impiety. The Temple especially has been profaned and consequently there is no hope of offering to God agreeable sacrifices, for it is in the hands of the impious, that is not only the Romans, but the whole of Israel since they are under the dominion of the impious. But how can a new Temple be built? It will not be a temple made of hewn rock but one formed from living stones, which are none other than the predestined and converted, who have the spirit of sanctity dwelling in them. The mortar binding the stones together is fraternal charity. These are elements extremely close to Pauline teaching, and the theme of building a new and spiritual temple is found in 1 Peter.

The third important element in which they prefigured the Gospel is the idea that the praise of God must replace all the sacrificial butchery of the Temple of Jerusalem. All this has come to an end. Now that the Temple is profaned there can no longer be the slaying of calves and bulls—or at least never again until the end of time, since they leave open the possibility that later on, in the regeneration, sacrifice is to be offered once again. However for the present it is this Community-Temple, offering itself to God in its attitude of praise, which is the victim of the true God; the victim is man himself giving himself to God. This is a very significant element since, as we have already seen, the principal sacrifice in this order is the sacrifice of the angels, the sacrifice of their praise offered to the Lord. The sacrifice of man, therefore, will consist of the participating in the spiritual sacrifice of these heavenly creatures giving praise to God.

J.-D. BARTHÉLEMY, O.P.

Fribourg

(to be concluded)