

DOCETISM - WAS IT COMBATED AS A MAJOR PROBLEM IN THE EARLY CHURCH?

"When Jesus appeared on earth, he performed miracles and great wonders for the salvation of humanity. And since some [walked] in the way of righteousness while others walked in their transgressions, the twelve disciples were called. He began to speak with them about the mysteries beyond the world and what would take place at the end. Often he did not appear to his disciples as himself, but he was found among them as a child." From the Gospel of Judas (docetist)

The gospels say that a miracle healing man called Jesus Christ lived. They say he died by crucifixion and three days later he rose again. The tomb he was placed in was found wide open with the stone that had been across the entrance moved back and the tomb was mysteriously empty. His body was gone. Certain witnesses claimed that Jesus appeared to them as a resurrected being.

There were many who in the early days of the Church did not believe that there was a man called Jesus who died recently at least in the sense that people knew him before he died and seen his death. Most of them thought he was just an apparition not a man. Docetism was rooted in the Christian and pagan doctrine that matter was evil and being holy and spiritual and transcending the body is the goal. The New Testament does not have a healthy view of the human body but sees it as a slave to be abused and beaten into submission to God.

It is thought that these people, the Docetists, give no evidence that Jesus never lived. It is thought that they didn't deny that, but just denied that Jesus was a real man.

It is clear from the way the Docetists saw Jesus in a highly visionary way and cared nothing for the alleged history of Jesus and tended to come up with their own stories that they did not think the evidence for a Jesus of history mattered or was good. Many scholars say the docetists got there first and that the gossellers came along and tried to turn Jesus into a real flesh and blood historical figure. They had to present the risen Jesus as saying that he was no ghost for he could eat. But if Jesus was an illusion or a vision, his being able to eat would prove nothing. A vision could appear to eat though it was not actually eating.

By saying that Jesus was a vision and used tricks to appear like a man, the Docetists were denying the reliability of the evidence for Jesus. To deny the reliability of evidence for Jesus as a man is only a short step from denying the reliability of the evidence of the existence of Jesus.

And if the Docetists thought that the apostles could see Jesus but nobody else could that would be strong evidence that Jesus never existed.

The top early Christian and first Christian writer, St Paul, wrote two epistles to the Church in Corinth to contend with believers who denied the resurrection of the body and Jesus' resurrection by implication. He was converted soon after the alleged resurrection of Jesus but even he gives clues that Jesus was an apparition. He says nothing about Jesus that is incompatible with this interpretation and makes statements that prove that despite his belief that Jesus was a man he had no evidence for it only visions. But he knew they weren't great evidence either for he told the Corinthians that Jesus must have risen for the dead will be lost forever if he hasn't which is obvious nonsense and desperation. It wouldn't be the end of the world if Jesus wasn't the saviour for somebody else could be the real saviour and maybe God could save the dead without him. The first generation of Christians as evidenced by Paul, gave us much evidence that Jesus was not a man but a vision. Their evidence precedes the gospels in time so it is what we should listen to in preference to the gospels.

The book, St Paul Versus St Peter, considers all the evidence about disputes in the early Church and concludes that the heresy that Jesus was an apparition not a man was not what was combated in the New Testament and by the earliest fathers such as Ignatius of Antioch.

The book argues that there was a schism between Paul's Church and the Peter Church in Jerusalem. The latter followed the Law of Moses and held that Jesus was born of Mary and Joseph without a virgin birth. They held that the highest angel in Heaven was the Christ. The man Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man who was possessed by the Christ at his baptism by John in the Jordan. The Holy Spirit was the Christ so when Jesus was possessed by the Holy Spirit it was the same as saying he was possessed by the Christ. From then on he was able to do miracles. The Christ didn't die on the cross for he left Jesus before then so Jesus died on the cross and Christ didn't. Christ only seemed to die for it wasn't obvious that he had left. Jesus rose again and Christ reunited with him again. So Jesus died and rose but Christ didn't. It is held that with this theology, it is easy to misinterpret and think that Jesus was the same person all the time as the Christ. This would give the impression that it was being said that the death and resurrection was an illusion or something. However there is absolutely nothing to indicate that the book is right.

The idea of a Christ spirit uniting with the man Jesus and then leaving him so as to avoid dying on the cross is odd. If Christ was that separate from Jesus then Jesus' death would not have affected him. The notion could not have been popular. Marcion was able to pass off the notion of a Jesus who was not flesh but a vision quite easily indicating that it was an influential idea before he took it on board.

The book correctly observes that the heretics in Corinth who Paul had to convince that Jesus Christ rose from the dead were saying that the kingdom of God had come and they were reigning with Christ (page 39, 1 Corinthians 4:8). They were able to say that because they considered Christ to be a spiritual invisible entity.

The book says Paul was angry and sarcastic about what they were saying for he didn't believe the kingdom had already come. This is incorrect for Paul complains that they were saying they were reigning without Paul and Co. He is not saying the kingdom isn't here but that they are not in the kingdom for they are against Paul and the authorised teachers set up by Christ.

The book says that Paul contradicts their claim to be in the kingdom already for flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom (1 Corinthians 15:50) meaning flesh and blood as they are now. This would mean that Paul is denying the gospel teaching that the kingdom of God already exists (eg Matthew 12:28). This again would prove he never knew the gospel Jesus. The simplest meaning is that if you are a physical being you are a weak being and so cannot fit in in heaven. You need to be turned into a supernatural spiritual being that has little or no physicality to enter Heaven. This suggests that Jesus' body didn't rise though part of it may have been a seed for the new spiritual body.

The book reminds us of where Paul told the Corinthians that when the Holy Spirit inspires somebody to speak they cannot say Jesus be accursed and only the Holy Spirit can make a person say that Jesus is Lord (1 Corinthians 12:3). This totally contradicts his view that Satan pretends to be a sweet loving angel of light. Satan can confess that Jesus is Lord to bait souls. Satan cannot lure people into error unless he uses plenty of the truth. The implication is that if a person says they have had a vision from Jesus they are telling the truth and it is from God. This is totally ridiculous. Paul does not talk like a person who was really having visions for such a one would know what they are talking about. He talks like a fraud.

The book also says that Paul said that Jesus was genomenou or conceived as in coming from a human father (page 101) against the teaching of two of the gospels.

The book distorts the saying of Ignatius that Jesus Christ truly was born, ate and drank, crucified and died and if his death was an illusion then Ignatius wouldn't be in chains. This statement of Ignatius clearly refers to Docetists but the book says it refers to people who denied that Christ died when Jesus died! If Ignatius meant that he wouldn't have used the words Jesus Christ but only Christ. And why would he stress that Jesus Christ was a real physical being?

The First Epistle of John says that whoever denies that Jesus Christ has not come in the flesh is not of God. It also says that of those who deny that Jesus is the Christ. Despite the fact that the epistle never indicates that anybody was separating Jesus from Christ and despite the fact that it never indicates that there were followers of Jesus who denied he was the Christ, the book says it condemns the theology that was allegedly followed in Jerusalem by Peter and Co that Jesus was possessed by a godlike spirit called the Christ! Jesus was not the Christ but indwelt by a spirit being called the Christ. There is no evidence that Jerusalem taught that doctrine.

Docetists often believed that Jesus was an apparition that never came in the flesh and which wasn't the Christ for Christ was the title of the political king of the Jews while Jesus was anti-world and anti-politics. Those that did call Jesus the Christ meant a spiritual king by it.

On page 139 the book discusses Romans 8 where Paul says that his Church members cannot be separated from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus by trials or tribulations, or heavenly powers, angels or principalities. It says he has the idea of angels sending trouble to test our love of God.

Chapter 21 asks why Jesus calls himself the Son of Man so much in the gospels. It rejects the traditional Christian lie that it refers to Jesus being a supernatural godlike being like the being called the Son of Man in the book of Daniel in the Old Testament for that book says the entity is LIKE a son of man. The title means ordinary man whether it refers to you or me or Jesus or even if it refers to an angel who became incarnate as Jesus and lived as a real ordinary man. The title is used so much in the gospels that the proper conclusion is this. Jesus is stressing that he is a real man. That shows how much his reality was being questioned in the years that produced the gospels. It shows that the writers invented stories about him to counteract ideas current in the time they were writing that they didn't like.

Despite quoting Paul complaining that some Corinthians were saying there is no resurrection from the dead the book argues that they didn't deny that Jesus rose. But Paul had to tell them that Jesus did rise for if he didn't the dead are lost!

The book says that their question about what kind of body the dead rise with shows the issue was not about the resurrection but about whether the resurrection was physical or non-physical (spiritual). But it could be just as easily a question that is meant to show up the silliness of saying that there is a resurrection. They could still be people who don't believe in a resurrection of any kind. In the culture of the time, talking about a non-physical resurrection was an oxymoron. Even Paul's doctrine of the spiritual resurrection body teaches that the physical body somehow contributes to it. A complete transformation of the physical body is not needed but the physical body provides a seed.

The book argues that Paul when he defended the resurrection against the heretics was defending the body resurrection idea. There is no evidence for that view and reading 1 Corinthians 15 disproves it. Paul argues for the resurrection. A spiritual resurrection is still a resurrection and Paul never makes it clear that the body rises though the body has the seed of the resurrection body which is more like a gas and basically a spirit type body. If Paul was defending the idea of body resurrection as against spiritual then why did he argue that Jesus was seen? Jesus being seen doesn't mean Jesus was physically raised.

Also, when Paul argued that the resurrection happens and it results in a transformed body that is so like a spirit how can one say this is an answer to those who deny the physical resurrection but affirm the spiritual? You can't expect to refute heretics by teaching stuff that is close to their heresy. The heretics may have believed in a symbolic or mystical resurrection but not in a physical or spiritual one. Heretics like Hymenaeus and Philetus (2 Timothy 2:18) who were saying the resurrection had happened already for everybody believed in that kind of resurrection. They didn't interpret the word as dead bodies coming to life but as people who were spiritually dead coming to spiritual life. They believed that Jesus' resurrection and ours is one and the same. Paul taught that we died and have risen again with Jesus like they did (Romans 6). His problem was not with this teaching but with the idea that the resurrection was not bringing bodies back to a transformed life. Paul told the heretics that if Christ is not risen then their faith is in vain and the dead are lost forever. From this it seems that the heretics must have denied life after death. The later statement that some are baptised for the dead which is pointless unless they rise again doesn't suggest that the heretics were baptising for the dead. Yet the book thinks it does. But how could it when Paul mentions it to show that the dead rise? Paul is saying that life after death is impossible unless there will be a resurrection. He sees no point in baptising for the dead if they will survive death but don't need to rise.

The book gives us no evidence that Docetism was rare and wasn't a major problem in the earliest Church. All the indications are that the early Church suffered a lot from those who thought that Jesus did not have a real body but only seemed to.

A Separate God, The Christian Origins of Gnosticism, Sophie Petrement, Harper, San Francisco, 1984 is an excellent scholarly argument for the belief that Gnosticism came out of Christianity and was sparked off by the teaching of Paul and the author of the John material in the New Testament. That would mean that Gnostics who regarded Jesus as a vision or a myth not a man were originally regarded as true Christians and later their teaching was suppressed as heresy by the Church Fathers.

Docetism threatened the very existence of the notion of a historical Jesus like the gospel one. It was a huge force in a Church which knew the historical evidence for Jesus was so thin that it had to be concocted.