

The rule of the Seventy Shepherds

Summary

A dream vision in the Book of Enoch reveals a proto-gnostic myth in which Yahweh has appointed seventy fallen angels called 'Shepherds' to rule the world. This proto-Gnostic myth is a Midrash on the Book of Jeremiah and other Old Testament scripture concerning the Babylonian exile. In Jeremiah the 'shepherds' are gentile kings but in the Midrash they become angelic rulers.

Each angel is to rule the world in turn for 'one year' which is interpreted as a generation. Christians of Paul's time believe that they live under the rule of the seventieth angel.

The parable of the vineyard owner, in its early Gospel of Thomas form, is linked to the dream vision in the Book of Enoch and shows that the myth of the Shepherds lies at the heart of Christianity

The parable of the vineyard owner implies that the crucifixion of the Christ takes place in a higher heaven at the hands of the seventy angels and not on earth.

The two servants and the son in the vineyard owner parable are three divine beings who bring three covenants to man. The servants are the angels Noah and Moses who bring their respective laws; the son, the Christ, brings a new spiritual law which 'is written in their hearts'.

Other Thomas sayings can also be linked to the same proto-Gnostic Midrash and specifically to the Enoch dream vision.

Paul's account of the passion is consistent with it being carried out by the Shepherd angels, whom he calls by the name 'archon' meaning ruler.

The passion account in Mark shows that the trial of Jesus was originally in front of the Shepherds. Mark has mistakenly confused the seventy angels with the Sanhedrin council of seventy elders.

In the Enoch dream vision Yahweh appears to mankind first on the top of a rock and then on the top of a tower. It is suggested that the names Cephas/Peter meaning 'the rock' and the Magdalene being based on the Hebrew for 'tower' may also have been derived from the dream vision. It is also suggested that both names denote the prophetess Mary who first witnessed the crucifixion and resurrection of the Christ in the higher heaven.

The seventy Shepherds: a pre-Christian gnostic myth

The Jesus movement emerged from Jewish proto-Gnostics who believed that the world was ruled by seventy rebel angels. This is the implication of a surprising link between the parable of the vineyard owner and the Book of Enoch. The seventy angels ruled the earth in succession each reigning for a 'year' – which was interpreted as a generation. It was these fallen angels and not the Jews or Romans who were believed to have put Jesus to death.

This proto-Gnosticism arose in answer to a question that has bothered many people over the ages – if God is good then why do evil things happen? The Jewish proto-gnostics came up with a simple and comprehensive answer. All the bad things that happen to mankind are the result of disobedience against God - disobedience on the part of both men and angels.

The appointment of the seventy was itself the result of man's disobedience. Man had turned away from Yahweh to worship idols of wood and stone. So in his anger Yahweh turned man over to the authority of the fallen angels or demons that had corrupted him. Yet at the same time he made a compact with man. The rule of the demons was not to last forever. Yahweh would redeem mankind by sending the Messiah, the Christ to end the rule of the demons. At this time the demons themselves and all who had been corrupted by them would be cast into the abyss. Most of the early followers of the Jesus movement, including Paul, thought that they lived during the reign of the seventieth angel and that this final reckoning would happen in their lifetime.

Jewish proto-gnosticism emerged by a Midrash on the scriptures. The key text was the book of Jeremiah. This tells the story of the fall of Jerusalem to the Chaldeans in the reign of Zedekiah, king of Judah. Yahweh gave Judah into the hands of the Chaldeans as a punishment for the Jewish people's disobedience. For seventy years the gentile kings were to rule over the Jews but at the end of that period they were to be held to account for their actions -

And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. And it shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, said the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations. (Jeremiah 25:11-12)

Yahweh has placed the flock of his chosen people into the care of these foreign gentile rulers who are termed 'Shepherds' in the Book of Jeremiah. The Shepherds are the instruments of Yahweh's wrath. Yet they will revel in their abuse of the flock and will eventually be punished for this abuse -

Howl, you shepherds, and cry; and wallow yourselves in the ashes, you masters of the flock: for the days of your slaughter and of your dispersions are accomplished; and you

shall fall like a pleasant vessel. And the shepherds shall have no way to flee, nor the masters of the flock to escape. A voice of the cry of the shepherds, and an howling of the masters of the flock, shall be heard: for the LORD hath spoiled their pasture. (Jeremiah 25:34-36)

The Messiah will come to defeat the Shepherds and redeem the flock -

Behold, the days come, says the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell safely: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Therefore, behold, the days come, says the LORD, that they shall no more say, The LORD lives, which brought up the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt; But, The LORD lives, which brought up and which led the seed of the house of Israel out of the north country, and from all countries whither I had driven them; and they shall dwell in their own land. (Jeremiah 23:5-8)

At this time Yahweh will give a new covenant to his people –

But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, says the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Jeremiah 31:33)

The promise of redemption is symbolised in Jeremiah by the strange story of a property transaction. The Babylonians held Jerusalem under siege and Jeremiah was confined to prison for his gloomy prophecies. At this point the prophet receives an instruction from Yahweh to purchase a field from Hanameel son of his uncle Shallum. He is visited in prison by Hanameel who offers him the field and tells him that the right of redemption is his. This right of redemption meant that a kinsman had first refusal when land had to be sold. Even if land were sold out of the family a kinsman would still have the right to repurchase it. The transaction is duly completed and Jeremiah pays seventeen shekels of silver for the field. Two copies of the sale agreement are made, one sealed and one open. Yahweh tells Jeremiah to place both copies in an earthen vessel to protect them, ‘that they may continue for many days’. The earthen vessel is presumably to be buried out of reach of the Babylonians. The field itself is in Anathoth a few miles outside Jerusalem and would have been in the hands of the besiegers.

The meaning of this transaction is symbolic. Yahweh tells the prophet that even though Jerusalem is to be given to the King of Babylon he will make a covenant with the people that they will be gathered up and return to Jerusalem and the land about it. The property transaction symbolises this covenant.

The proto-agnostics interpreted Jeremiah spiritually rather than literally. To them the Shepherds were not gentile kings but angelic rulers. These angelic rulers were appointed by Yahweh to punish the guilty but they greatly exceed their instructions and persecute the flock. However mankind has Yahweh’s promise that the Messiah will come to

redeem them from the demons. At that time the Shepherd angels themselves will be punished.

The evidence for this proto-Gnostic interpretation is contained in the pre-Christian Book of Enoch. Different parts of the Book of Enoch are believed to have been written at different times but most of the book, including the sections concerning the demonic rulers, dates from the centuries before the Christian era. By the time of the first century it was very popular among the Jews, in particular among the Messianic groups from whom the Christians were to emerge.

Enoch himself is mentioned in Genesis in the list of the generations of Adam (Genesis 5:21-24). About Enoch it is said -

And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him

From this arose the notion that Enoch had not died but had been taken directly up into heaven by God. The Book of Enoch gives us the account of what Enoch saw in heaven.

Two versions of the proto-Gnostic myth exist in the Book of Enoch. The first is the story of the Watchers in Book 1. In this myth the angels, the Children of Heaven, look down on Earth and lust after the daughters of men. Under their leader Semjaza they descend to the earth and take wives. From these wives are born monstrous giants. The rebel angels also teach mankind forbidden knowledge such as the art of making weaponry, jewellery and cosmetics along with magic, plant lore and astrology. The creatures they have begat and the arts they have taught wreck havoc upon mankind until four good angels intervene. They inform Yahweh about the activities of the rebel angels. Yahweh orders that the rebels be bound and their offspring destroyed. The rebels will be held for seventy generations until the time of judgement. Then the rebel angels will be sent down into the fiery chasm along with those others who have been condemned. To destroy the evil that the angels have produced Yahweh will send a great flood and Noah is warned to prepare for this so that man will not die out.

The connection with Jeremiah is evident in the seventy generations for which the angels will be held. This corresponds with the seventy years for which the gentile Shepherd kings will rule over the Jews. In the second version of the proto-Gnostic myth this connection is made completely explicit.

The key section is the dream vision in Chapters 85-90. This parable sets out the entire history of the world from Adam to the last judgement in the form of a story in which animals represent people and people represent angels. Different species of animals represent different races: the Jews are sheep, the Egyptians wolves and so on with the enemies of Israel represented by various predators. The parable starts with Adam as a white bull. The offspring of Adam and Eve increasing into a herd of cattle. At this point stars, representing the fallen angels, fall from the skies. The stars turn into bulls and mate with the cows. The offspring are monstrous animals - elephants, camels and asses – who introduce discord and fighting.

Four men, representing the four good angels appear, and bind the fallen stars and cast them into the abyss. They then destroy the monstrous animals. One of the angels instructs a white bull (Noah) to prepare for the coming flood. The parable continues with the story of the flood, and the subsequent history of mankind as represented in the scriptures. The twelve tribes of Israel emerge with the birth of twelve sheep. The sheep dwell with the wolves in Egypt and are oppressed by the wolves until the 'Lord of the sheep' makes a personal intervention to save them. He appoints a sheep (Moses) to lead them out of Egypt. Once out of Egypt many of the sheep become blinded and disobedient. Moses builds a house for the sheep, representing the tabernacle. Eventually the sheep come into the Promised Land and there a tower is added to the house. The Lord of the sheep descends to the top of this tower and thus appears to the sheep. However the sheep continue to be disobedient and eventually the Lord of the sheep loses patience with them. He gives them into the hands of the lions and tigers, wolves, hyenas and foxes. These wild beasts destroy the house and the tower.

The Lord of the sheep then appoints seventy shepherds over the sheep. The shepherds are clearly inspired by the shepherds in the book of Jeremiah. Each shepherd is to pasture the sheep for one day so that the reign of the shepherds will be seventy days – standing for the seventy years in Jeremiah. The lord of the sheep numbers those sheep marked out for destruction so that the shepherds might destroy them. But the Lord of the sheep knows that the shepherds will exceed their instructions and will destroy many more of the sheep than marked. So he appoints a man/angel to secretly watch the shepherds and keep a record of their deeds.

The shepherds do indeed abuse the sheep. When thirty-five of the shepherds have completed their pasturing the birds of heaven descend upon the sheep and pick at their eyes and their flesh. In the time of the last twelve shepherds lambs begin to open their eyes but are oppressed by the birds. Then the lambs begin to grow horns which are overturned by the birds. Eventually a sheep (the Messiah) grows a large horn and that sheep is attacked by all the birds who try to break the horn. But the sheep is given a sword and prevails against the beasts and birds and begins to slay them.

The Lord of the sheep then sweeps away all the beasts and birds and brings judgement to the fallen stars and the shepherds. Both the fallen stars and the shepherds are bound and thrown into the abyss where they are joined by the blind sheep.

What is most interesting about the parable is the division between men and angels. All men, no matter how grand, are represented as animals. This applies even to the Jewish kings who are rams and the prophets who are sheep. Even the great prophet Elijah, who is taken up to heaven, is represented by a sheep. In only two cases is the boundary between animals and men crossed – the first is Noah who turns from a bull into a man and the second is Moses who turns from a sheep into a man. The implication is that both Noah and Moses, and only those two, were considered to be angels – either they were angels who had assumed the form of men or men who turned into angels. This is

confirmed in Chapter 106 of Enoch where there is a section about the birth of Noah. His father reports –

I have begotten a strange son, diverse from and unlike man, and resembling the sons of the God of heaven; and his nature is different and he is not like us, and his eyes are as the rays of the sun, and his countenance is glorious. And it seems to me that he is not sprung from me but from the angels, and I fear that in his days a wonder may be wrought on the earth.

The special status of Noah and Moses is linked to the fact that these two were the intermediaries in the first two covenants between Yahweh and mankind. The first covenant with Noah applied to all mankind and gave some basic laws which all must follow. The second covenant made through Moses was for the Jews only and set out the greater Law that would apply to his chosen people.

Apart from these two, Noah and Moses, all men are represented by animals. So the shepherds cannot be the gentile kings of the book of Jeremiah – they must instead represent angels. The dream vision is evidence of a Midrash on Jeremiah and other scriptural texts in which the world has been placed under the authority of angels who turn to evil. In the dream vision the shepherds are appointed at the same time as the fall of Jerusalem to the King of Babylon. The author of the dream vision has taken this literal chronology directly from the book of Jeremiah. But there is evidence that in the original proto-gnostic myth the reign of the shepherds should be put back to before the flood. In the story of the fallen angels in the first book of Enoch the angels are bound for seventy generations. Their bondage starts immediately before the flood. If this term corresponds to the seventy years in Jeremiah then it is evidence that a year was interpreted as a generation and that the reign of the shepherds started after the initial corruption of mankind. This is confirmed by another section of Enoch in which the history of the world is presented as ten seven-day weeks with each day standing for a generation. This makes seventy days for the history of the world corresponding to the seventy-day reign of the Shepherds.

The fallen stars and the Shepherds may have been originally the same group – in the book of dream visions both are judged at the same time and in the same manner and both meet with identical punishments. The scriptural authority for the story of the fallen angels is a few lines in Genesis -

the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose. And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:2-5)

As a result of the failings of man Yahweh decides to send the flood. There is nothing here about the punishment of the 'sons of God'. But there is a great deal in Jeremiah about the punishment of the Shepherds. Did some of the proto-gnostics equate the sons of God in Genesis with the Shepherds in Jeremiah? There is a certainly a deep connection between the events of the flood and the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians. Both are disasters which are inflicted by Yahweh in response to the wickedness of men and both result in a new covenant between man and Yahweh.

But the most important piece of evidence linking the Shepherds to the fallen stars is the extraordinary taunt against the Babylonian king in Isaiah 14. This seems to compare the king to Satan -

How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you weakener of nations! And you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the sides of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most high.' Only into Sheol you are brought down, to the sides of the pit. (Isaiah 14:12-15)

It is easy to see that the proto-gnostics would have made the connection that the King of Babylon was another name for the chief of the fallen stars. We see in this passage that the fate of the king of Babylon is to be brought into the pit of Sheol. This agrees with the punishment of the stars and the Shepherds in Enoch.

The significance of the morning star is that it reigns in the sky in the pre-dawn hours. Although it is splendid and rules the sky in the hours of darkness the coming of dawn shows that it is feeble and easily extinguished by the light of the true sun. In the same way the King of Babylon shall rule the earth only to be extinguished with the coming of the messiah.

Intriguingly the morning star makes two appearances in the book of Revelation in the New Testament. The first reference uses the morning star in the same sense as in Isaiah -

And he that overcomes, and keeps my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. (Revelation 2:26-28)

We can see here the same imagery as Jeremiah 25:34-36 passage where the shepherds are compared to a pleasant vessel that shall fall implying that it will be broken 'to shivers'. Just as power over the nations will be given to 'he that overcomes' so also will the morning star, the chief Shepherd, be given to him.

The second reference is in the final section –

I, Jesus did send my messenger to testify to you these things concerning the assemblies; I am the root and the offspring of David, the bright and morning star! (Revelation 22:16)

This line is probably a Christian redaction as it reads oddly in the context of the passage. It may be that some reference to the morning star is original as it follows directly from a line about “*the dogs, and the sorcerers, and the whoremongers, and the murderers, and the idolaters, and every one who is loving and is doing a lie*”. Did the original writer of Revelation include Christians among those “loving and doing a lie”? Regardless of what was written originally a later Christian redactor has failed to understand the meaning of the morning star and equated it to Jesus.

The redactor of the Revelation is not the only one to make such a mistake. In Luke we find the seventy evil angels have actually become disciples! Luke 10:1 tells how ‘The Lord appointed seventy others’ and sent them out. These seventy appear only in Luke and not the other gospels. We can deduce that the author of Luke has come across a reference to the Lord appointing seventy shepherds just as the Lord of the sheep does in Enoch! In the Old Testament ‘shepherd’ means king or ruler and does not imply that the individual referred to is necessarily good. But in Mark and Mathew the word ‘shepherd’ is used specifically to mean Jesus. By extension Luke has interpreted ‘seventy shepherds’ to mean seventy apostles. But the demonic origins of the seventy are quite clear when they come back to report to Jesus –

And the seventy turned back with joy, saying, ‘Sir, even the demons are subject to us in your name;’ and he said to them, ‘I was beholding the Adversary, falling like lightning from the heaven’ Luke (10:17-18)

The demons are indeed subject to the Shepherds! In this strange passage we can see the shadowy outline of the original material employed by Luke in which the seventy are reporting back not to Jesus but to the Adversary, the King of Babylon, who had fallen from heaven like lightening.

The Shepherds myth and the parable of the vineyard owner

The central importance of the Shepherds to Christianity is evident in the parable of the vineyard owner. The version in the Gospel of Thomas is saying 65 -

He said: A good man had a vineyard. He gave it to husbandmen that they might work it, and he receive its fruit from their hand. He sent his servant, that the husbandmen might give him the fruit of the vineyard. They seized his servant, they beat him, and all but killed him. The servant came (and) told his master. His master said: Perhaps they did not know him. He sent another servant; the husbandmen beat the other also. Then the master sent his son. He said: Perhaps they will reverence my son. Those husbandmen, since they knew that he was the heir of the vineyard, they seized him (and) killed him. He that hath ears, let him hear. (Thomas 65)

This parable is derived from the same myth as the Book of Enoch. The parable takes place at the divine level as can be seen from the list of characters -

The good man is Yahweh.

The husbandmen are the Shepherd angels.

The servants are the angel-men Noah and Moses

The son is Jesus, the Son of God.

The vineyard parable moves on from the Book of Enoch by replacing the Messiah, who in Enoch is a sheep and hence a man, with the divine Son of God. In the vineyard parable the son is killed while in Enoch the Messiah is triumphant.

It is important to note that all the characters are divine. This suggests that the action does not take place on earth but in a higher heaven.

There are several separate pieces of evidence that link the parable to the dream vision in the Book of Enoch –

- There is a clear and striking parallel between (i) the man giving his vineyard into the charge of husbandmen who then refuse to give him the proceeds, and (ii) the Lord of the sheep giving his flock into the hands of shepherds who then proceed to abuse it.

- There is an explicit link between the Shepherds and the vineyard in Jeremiah in a line spoken by Yahweh -

Many shepherds have ruined my vineyard, they have trampled down my field; They have made my desirable field become a wilderness, a desolation. (Jeremiah 12:10)

- The two servants in the Thomas story gave the gospel writers a problem in their version of the parable because they were interpreted as being prophets and there were more than two prophets. Yet it is explained by the dream vision in which there are two and only two men who change into angels.

- In the Coptic Thomas manuscript there is a superlinear stroke over the two servants. This indicates divine status and shows that the two were indeed believed to be angels.

- Interpreting the servants as Noah and Moses leads to a deeper meaning of the parable since Noah, Moses and Jesus represent the three successive covenants between Yahweh and man.

The same parable of the vineyard is also found in the gospels of Mark, Mathew and Luke. The earliest of the Gospel versions is that of Mark -

And he began to speak to them by parables. A certain man planted a vineyard, and set a hedge about it, and digged a place for the wine vat, and built a tower, and let it out to husbandmen, and went into a far country. And at the season he sent to the husbandmen a

servant, that he might receive from the husbandmen of the fruit of the vineyard. And they caught him, and beat him, and sent him away empty. And again he sent to them another servant; and at him they cast stones, and wounded him in the head, and sent him away shamefully handled. And again he sent another; and him they killed, and many others; beating some, and killing some. Having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved, he sent him also last to them, saying, They will reverence my son. But those husbandmen said among themselves, This is the heir; come, let us kill him, and the inheritance shall be ours.' And they took him, and killed him, and cast him out of the vineyard. What shall therefore the lord of the vineyard do? He will come and destroy the husbandmen, and will give the vineyard unto others. And have you not read this scripture; The stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner: This was the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes? (Mark 12:1-11)

The Mark version adds details from the analogy of the vineyard in Isaiah 5. The Thomas version is simpler and this is the first clue that the Thomas version is earlier than Mark. More importantly the Thomas version has the structure of three rising to a climax that would be expected in an original parable – the two servants who are beaten followed by the son who is killed. This same underlying structure is also evident in the Mark version although it has been corrupted by the insertion of extra servants in the confused phrase “*and again he sent another; and him they killed, and many others; beating some, and killing some*”. Even before the Gospel of Thomas had been discovered it had been deduced that the Mark version was derived from an earlier parable that only had two servants!

Mark has extra servants because the person who wrote the Mark version did not understand that the two servants were supposed to represent the men-angels Noah and Moses. He thinks that they represent the prophets. But there were many more prophets than two and some met with death as well as physical abuse. So the author tries to improve the parable to make it more closely reflect what he thinks it should mean.

Mark ends his parable by adding a conclusion not found in the Thomas version. The husbandmen will be destroyed and the vineyard shall be given to others. He goes on to add the saying about the cornerstone that is taken from Psalm 118. The question is why does Mark add this cornerstone saying to the parable? It does not appear to have any direct relevance to what has gone before. Both Mathew and Luke also add the cornerstone quotation at this point but then they are both copying Mark.

Thomas also has a cornerstone saying and in the Coptic manuscript it also comes directly after the vineyard owner's parable -

Jesus said: Teach me concerning this stone which the builders rejected; it is the corner - stone. (Gospel of Thomas 66)

So it may be that Mark has simply followed the Thomas ordering. However it is more likely that this association of the two sayings in Thomas has itself been derived from the gospels. The version of the Gospel of Thomas that has come down to us has been heavily

edited in the centuries between the gospels being written and the manuscript being buried in the desert. We cannot assume that the current ordering of the sayings reflects the order in which they would have circulated before Mark was written.

Yet there is a justification from Jeremiah for placing the cornerstone saying exactly where Mark does place it. In Jeremiah the Shepherds are the Babylonian kings. There is a reference about the destruction of Babylon which includes the prediction that no cornerstone will be taken from the destroyed Babylon -

And I will render unto Babylon and to all the inhabitants of Chaldea all their evil that they have done in Zion in your sight, says the LORD. Behold, I am against you, O destroying mountain, says the LORD, which destroyed all the earth: and I will stretch out my hand upon you, and roll you down from the rocks, and will make you a burnt mountain. And they shall not take of you a stone for a corner, nor a stone for foundations; but you shall be desolate for ever, says the LORD. (Jeremiah 51:23-26)

In the proto-gnostic Midrash on Jeremiah, Babylon stands for the rule of the angels. So this passage would be interpreted as meaning that the Shepherds would be destroyed and would not leave so much as a corner stone. But this is equivalent to the ending of Mark which tells us that the husbandmen will be destroyed and that the true cornerstone is the stone that the builders rejected!

The book of Jeremiah contains the promise of the redemption of the chosen people. They will return to Jerusalem after the seventy years have expired. The promise of redemption is symbolised by the curious purchase of the field by Jeremiah from the son of his uncle. This purchase of the field also features in Thomas –

Jesus said: The kingdom is like a man who had in his field a [hidden] treasure about which he did not know; and [after] he died he left it to his [son. The] son also did not know; he took (possession of) that field and sold it. The man who bought it came to plough, and [found] the treasure. He began to lend money at interest to whomsoever he chose. (Gospel of Thomas 109)

The Gospel of Thomas does not simply copy the proto-gnostic myth. Proto-gnosticism is the starting point to which Thomas Christianity adds a spiritual depth not seen in the Book of Enoch. This spiritual depth is apparent in this saying. The promise of redemption has been spiritualised in the form of a pearl hidden in a field. Jeremiah's uncle has become a man who has died and who has left the field to his son. We are not told in the book of Jeremiah that the uncle has died but we can deduce that this is the case. Jeremiah would be an old man at this time and his uncle would be older. Jeremiah buys the land from his cousin Hanameel who must have legal possession of the family land so that his father must already be dead. In the Gospel of Thomas there is a treasure buried in the field that is unknown to both the man who dies and his son. In the Thomas Midrash on Jeremiah, Hanameel and his uncle Shallum represent the people of the covenant of Moses whereas Jeremiah represents the new covenant. The sale of the land is symbolic of the passing of the promise of redemption from the old chosen people to a

new elect. Redemption shall not apply to the Jews as a people but only to the few who plough the field and find the hidden treasure. These few may include gentiles as well as Jews.

The passing of the old covenant is also symbolised in another Thomas saying which may be linked to the dream vision in Enoch –

Jesus said: I will des[troy this] house, and none shall able to build it [again]. (Gospel of Thomas 71)

In the dream vision the house symbolises the tabernacle. The Lord of the sheep destroys the house at the time of the Babylonian invasion. The sheep later attempt to rebuild the house and the tower but their worship is not successful because they are blind. Eventually the Lord of the sheep rebuilds it at the time of judgement.

It is significant that in Thomas the house will not be rebuilt. The importance of the tabernacle is that it embodies the covenant of Moses. After Yahweh first gives his law to Moses, the Israelites ignore it by worshipping the golden calf. In his anger Yahweh declares that he will desert them and leave them to find their own way in the wilderness. Moses begs Yahweh to reconsider and it is at this point that Yahweh gives Moses the new covenant. Because of the covenant Yahweh will continue to dwell with the Israelites in the tabernacle that Moses is to build. So the destruction of the tabernacle is also the destruction of the second covenant – Yahweh will no longer dwell with his chosen people.

If the Thomas saying is inspired by the Enoch myth then it is not a prophecy of the destruction of the temple by the Romans but a spiritual destruction symbolised by the story of the Babylonian conquest. Jesus destroys the tabernacle because he brings the new covenant that replaces the old. God will no longer dwell in a tent or building of stone, but now, in the form of Jesus, he will dwell directly within the hearts of his followers.

By the time the Gospel of Mark is written political events have overtaken the original interpretation. The Jerusalem temple has been physically destroyed by the Romans and this saying is regarded as a miraculous prophecy. Although emphasising the prophetic nature of the saying the Gospel of Mark hints at the earlier meaning in a passage that equates the resurrected Jesus with the new temple -

We heard him say, I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and within three days I will build another made without hands. (Mark 14:58)

But in another place in Mark we have the destruction of the temple in literal terms that recall the uncompromising nature of the Thomas saying –

And as he went out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, Master, see what manner of stones and what buildings are here! And Jesus answering said to him, See you

these great buildings? there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. (Mark 13:1-2)

Another saying in Thomas that may be linked to the dream vision is the Samaritan carrying the lamb –

They saw a Samaritan carrying a lamb going into Judaea. He said to his disciples: Why does he carry the lamb? They said to him: That he may kill it and eat it. He said to them: So long as it is alive he will not eat it, but if he kill it and it become a corpse. They said: Otherwise he will not be able to do it. He said to them: You also, seek for yourselves a place within for rest, lest you become a corpse and be eaten. (Gospel of Thomas 60)

The link with Enoch is that in the dream vision people are represented by sheep and lambs and are eaten by the Shepherds. Thomas has interpreted this spiritually. To be eaten by the Shepherd angels is to be consumed by demons. To avoid this fate the disciples must not be corpse-like but ‘alive’ by having the living one within.

The Shepherds myth in Paul and Mark

It has already been noted that in the Thomas parable of the vineyard owner all the characters are divine. This suggests that the action should not be located in this world but in a higher heaven. It is the angels who put the son to death and not man. The Romans and Jews have nothing to do with it! This is remarkable similar to the conclusions that others have reached (for example Earl Doherty) from Paul’s description of the crucifixion in 1 Corinthians -

But wisdom we speak among the perfect, a wisdom not of this age, nor of the rulers [archon] of this age, who are passing away, but we speak the hidden wisdom of God in a secret, that God foreordained before the ages to our glory, which no one of the rulers [archon] of this age did know, for if they had known, they would not have crucified the Lord of the glory; (1 Corinthians 2:6-8)

The term ‘archon’ is Gnostic terminology for the demonic rulers of the earth. Applying this terminology back to Paul may be anachronistic but we can see that Paul’s description fits perfectly with the Shepherds if these are the same as Paul’s rulers. The word ‘archon’ means ruler or power whereas ‘shepherd’ in the Old Testament is used to mean king or ruler so we can see that the two terms are equivalent. The Shepherd rulers are passing away because the term of seventy ‘years’ allotted for them is coming to an end. Although the Shepherd angels have some secrets of heaven they do not know God’s secret plan. The Book of Enoch makes it clear that the fallen stars do not possess all the secrets of heaven –

"You have been in heaven, but all the mysteries had not yet been revealed to you, and you knew worthless ones, and these in the hardness of your hearts you have made known to the women, and through these mysteries women and men work much evil on earth." (Enoch 16)

In the dream vision the Messiah is triumphant militarily over the beasts but in the Christian version the Christ is paradoxically triumphant by being defeated. The Christ through his sacrifice takes on the sin of mankind and releases man from the power of the Shepherd rulers. The Shepherds have been fooled into killing the Christ not knowing that his death marks the end of their reign.

Given another century or two of development full blown Gnosticism emerges and the shepherd/archons become the archons of Gnostic myth. In some versions Yahweh, who was responsible for appointing the shepherds, also becomes the demiurge.

Paul makes several references to angels that imply that they are doubtful or even malevolent forces. In 2 Corinthians 1:14 we are told that 'even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light'. In Romans it is implied that angels would try to separate us from the love of god -

For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39)

The most revealing quote is Corinthian 6:3 - *Know you not that we shall judge angels?* This refers to the final judgement where the elect will be involved in the punishment of the Shepherds who have exceeded their authority.

Although the vineyard owner parable suggests that the Christ is killed by the angels there is still the possibility that the murder takes place on earth. In this case Jesus would be a man who was believed by his followers to be the embodiment of the Christ. Following his crucifixion his followers develop the myth that it was really the Shepherd angels working through the Romans and Jews who were responsible for the deed. That this is not the case can be seen in the Mark account of the passion. For the Shepherds are involved in the trial in the disguised form of the Sanhedrin.

We learn from Mark that Jesus was tried by night before the Sanhedrin council of Jewish elders. It has long been recognised the Sanhedrin did not in fact meet at night. But night is the perfect time for a council of fallen Shepherd angels to meet to try the Christ. And there is one telling detail that indicates that the Sanhedrin has been mistaken for the Shepherds. We know from Enoch and the Midrash on Jeremiah that the Shepherds were seventy in number. Yet the Sanhedrin also consisted of seventy members plus a president! Has the author of Mark mistakenly taken a reference to a council of 'the seventy shepherds' as referring to the Sanhedrin?

That this is the case and that the Sanhedrin and the seventy Shepherds are one and the same is indicated by another link between the two. When Jesus is abused by the Sanhedrin they inexplicably ask him for a prophesy-

and certain began to spit on him, and to cover his face, and to buffet him, and to say to him, 'Prophesy' and the officers were striking him with their hands. (Mark 14:65)

It is significant that Mathew, followed also by Luke, adds at this point some extra words of explanation "*Prophesy to us, you Christ; who is the one who hit you?*". The person who added the extra words understood that there is something odd about this Mark passage that required smoothing over. The Mark reference to prophesy simply does not fit in with the story of a Jewish council trying Jesus. This is because it is derived from original Shepherd material in the form of this passage in Ezekiel –

"Son of man, prophesy concerning the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock? The fat you eat, the wool you put on, the fed sheep you slaughter the fat sheep without feeding the flock. Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the driven away you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; and with might you have ruled them and with rigour."'" (Ezekiel 34:2-4)

In the context of Ezekiel 'son of man' clearly refers to the prophet. But suppose that the early part of this passage came to the author of Mark out of context or in derivative form along with other material relating to the Shepherds. He would assume that the 'son of man' referred to Christ and that 'shepherds of Israel' referred to the Sanhedrin. So 'Prophesy and say to those shepherds' would mean that Jesus was to prophesy in front of the Sanhedrin!

It is possible that the Mark account is compiled from more than one source and that story of Jesus appearing before the Roman governor Pilate is an alternative version of Jesus' confrontation with the Shepherds. Mark may have mistaken a reference to the ruler or governor of the time, meaning the seventieth Shepherd, as wrongly meaning the Roman governor Pilate. Another incident that is suggestive is the strange mock acclamation of Jesus as king by the Roman soldiers. This can be understood in terms of the Shepherd angels being forced to bow down to the King of heaven even as they were planning to kill him.

All this leaves one question – if Jesus is crucified in a higher heaven then how has this event been observed? There is another clue in the dream vision in Enoch. After Yahweh has led the sheep out of Egypt he appears to them in two ways. He appears to the sheep Moses on the top of a rock (really a mountain but in the parable things are diminished!) and later he appears on the top of the tower that is built onto the house in Jerusalem. It just so happens that the names of two of Jesus' most important followers can be derived from the words 'rock' and 'tower' - Cephas/Peter means 'rock' and the root of Magdalene is the Hebrew 'migdol' meaning tower. If these names have been derived from the dream vision then they indicate that the person concerned is an intermediary between Yahweh and man. They denote a prophet or prophetess of almost divine status. The implication is that Yahweh has descended through the medium of that person and has

used them to reveal to mankind the things of heaven. (In the Old Testament both 'rock' and 'tower' are used as names for Yahweh himself.)

And there is a further 'coincidence'. It is precisely these two followers who are most closely associated with witnessing the trial, crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus! In Mark it is Peter alone who follows into the courtyard of the high priest when Jesus is brought to trial before the Sanhedrin. It is Mary the Magdalene who observes the crucifixion from a distance and is also looking on when the body is deposited in the tomb. Mary the Magdalene is also mentioned first among the women who visit the tomb, find the stone rolled away and see the angel. The angel tells them that Jesus will appear to Peter - "*say to his disciples, and Peter, that he does go before you to Galilee; there you shall see him, as he said to you*". But in the long ending to Mark we are told that Jesus actually appeared first to the Magdalene.

(In Mark the Magdalene is accompanied variously by two other women – Salome and a woman described as Mary the mother of James the less and Joses, Mary of Joses and Mary of James. I have argued elsewhere that Mary of Joses and Mary of James are really alternative names of the Magdalene and that Mark was mistaken in believing her to be the mother of James and Joses.)

So the two followers whose names indicate their role as intermediaries of Yahweh are the two who, between them, have observed the whole process of the trial, crucifixion, burial and resurrection of the Christ. The implication is that these two are really the same person, the prophet or prophetess through whom Yahweh has revealed the secrets of the death and resurrection of the Christ.

Paul's description of the resurrection also gives the key role to 'the rock' in the Aramaic form of the name, Cephas -

For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures: And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all, as if through miscarriage [or abortion] he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3-8)

If the passion and resurrection took place mystically in heaven rather than physically on earth then this passage tells us that Cephas, as the first person to witness the events, must be the person who founded Christianity. It also shows that the mystic experience of the crucifixion and resurrection may have originally been part of the initiation of all 'spiritual' Christians. We are given a long list of over five hundred persons who are believed to have witnessed the resurrection and these seem to include everyone who was important in the early church.

But what is most striking about Paul's description is the complete absence of the Magdalene in contrast to the importance of her role in the passion story in Mark. If Mary were believed to have been the first witness of the resurrection then how could Paul not mention her – even if she were only a woman? If, on the other hand, the author of Mark has made up her role from nothing then surely his contemporaries would have angrily rejected his gospel? This difficulty is solved if 'the tower' and 'the rock' were originally two titles given to one person. Paul refers to this person under the title he habitually uses, Cephas, but Mark mistakenly thinks that the two titles refer to two separate individuals.

There remains the most obvious difficulty with the tower equals the rock hypothesis – the Magdalene is a woman and Cephas/Peter is a man. But this can be understood if the person who founded the Jesus movement were a female prophetess. This would be scandalous to the Jews and would give the motivation for the movement to use a male pseudonym to disguise the founder's gender from outsiders.

In the dream visions the Lord of the sheep descends onto the top of the tower to show himself to the sheep. This suggests an even more radical interpretation of the Magdalene's role than that of chief prophet. It is possible that the early Christians believed that God in the form of Jesus had descended spiritually into the Magdalene in order to give his message to mankind. This could be the sense in which the Christ has come 'according to the flesh'. It may also be the meaning of a passage in Paul often quoted to demonstrate that Paul believed that Jesus was a man of flesh and blood –

and when the fullness of time did come, God sent forth His Son, come of a woman, come under law that those under law he may redeem, that the adoption of sons we may receive; (Galatians 4:4-5)

If Paul had meant 'born of woman' he should have used the Greek verb 'gennaō' meaning to be physically born. Instead Paul uses the word 'ginomai' that means 'come into existence', 'come to pass', 'to arise'. This suggests that Jesus has come spiritually through a woman.

The same idea of Jesus descending spiritually into Mary may have given rise to the nativity story in Mathew and Luke whereby Jesus is born to Mary after conception through the Holy Spirit. If this is the case then the mother of Jesus and the Magdalene must have originally been the same person. The nativity story would have distorted the spiritual descent of Jesus into Mary into a physical birth arising through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Indeed in Docetism we find a persistent early belief that Jesus had come spiritually and not physically through the medium of Mary.

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