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FROM GREEK HAIREISIS TO CHRISTIAN HERESY

In the introduction to his classical study, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, Walter Bauer summarizes the view of the early church on the historical relation between orthodoxy and heresy as follows : "The development takes place in the following sequence: unbelief (*Unglaube*), right belief (*Rechtglaube*), wrong belief (*Irrglaube*). There is scarcely the faintest notion anywhere that unbelief might be changed directly into what the church calls false belief. No, where there is heresy, orthodoxy must have preceded <sup>1</sup>."

It is of course true that many writers in the early church assumed that heresy, in comparison to orthodoxy, is (and can only be) a secondary phenomenon. Orthodoxy constitutes the pure tradition as handed down by successive generations in an unbroken line from the authentic Gospel of Jesus and his Apostles. We should note, however, that according to this scheme, the priority of truth to error appears only from the moment that Christ began to preach. In a larger sense, heresy can sometimes claim — and certain ecclesiastical writers have acknowledged this — a higher antiquity than orthodoxy. When Hegesippus, cited by Eusebius (*Hist. eccl.* 4.22.5), attributes to a certain Thebouthis the responsibility for first dishonoring the virgin church by his false opinions, he is in line with the scheme suggested by Bauer. Nevertheless, the root of error, in his view, is to be found at a time prior to the establishment of the church. Hegesippus found it in the seven Jewish sects which he mentions in this same context and from which he regards Thebouthis himself as having come. It seems out of place to apply the term *Unglaube* (unbelief) to

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1. Walter BAUER, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. R.A. Kraft and G. Krodel (Philadelphia, 1977) xxiii.

these groups, since this term, according to Bauer, applies to the first stage in the religious development of mankind as the early church sees it. Since the sects mentioned by Hegesippus were Jewish, not pagan, they necessarily possessed a fragment of the truth, and, in the words of the Epistle to the Hebrews, at least "a shadow of the good things to come".

We can suppose that in using the word *hairesis* for Jewish sects Hegesippus already gave it the pejorative sense that it assumed in early Christian usage. If so, we would be speaking of seven deformations of authentic Judaism and the question arises where one should look for authentic Judaism. What school of thought in Israel represented it? In this view *Irrglaupe* (wrong belief) would certainly be present, in its Jewish form, at the beginning of an evolution which passes through orthodoxy and ends finally in Christian heresy. In fact, the orthodox stage that Thebouthis experienced was not always present. There were probably cases when a dissident Christian sect sprang directly from a marginal Jewish group without any other identifying mark than simple adherence to Jesus as Messiah. This seems evident — as I have shown in other writings<sup>2</sup> — at least in the case of the pre-Christian Nasaraeans (Νασαραῖοι) described by Epiphanius (*Haer.* 18) who are carefully distinguished from the Jewish-Christian Nazoraeans (Ναζωραῖοι). The chief characteristics of the former appear point for point, with only the addition of faith in Christ, in the Judeo-Christian sect of the Ebionites as described by Epiphanius (*Haer.* 30), who were also responsible for the Pseudo-Clementine writings in their earliest form.

The Pseudo-Clementines propose a relation between truth and error that is the inverse of the one Bauer attributed to the entire ancient church. "First, ignorance, then knowledge... Just as in the beginning God, who is one, made first the heavens and then the earth as things set (so to speak) on the right and the left, so also he created all the syzygies. But for men this is not the case since the order of all the syzygies is inverted: while it is the first works of God which are superior and the second ones which are inferior, we see the contrary to be true of men; the first things are inferior, the second ones are superior" (*Hom. Clem.* 2.15). Cain comes before Abel, Ishmael before Isaac, Esau before Jacob, Aaron before Moses. "From this order of succession one can

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2. M. SIMON, *St. Stephen and the Hellenists in the Primitive Church* (London, 1958) 91-94; SIMON, *Jewish Sects at the Time of Jesus* (Philadelphia, 1967) 103-105.