Daily Gnostic movement: The Paulicians

Today we will be talking about the Paulicians:

Paulicians were a Christian adoptionist sect from Armenia which formed in the 7th century, possibly influenced by Gnostic movement and religion of Marcionism and Manichaeism. According to medieval Byzantine sources, the group's name was derived from the 3rd century Bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, but Paulicianists were often misidentified with Paulianists, while others derived their name from Paul the Apostle, hence the identity of the Paul for whom the movement was named is disputed. Constantine-Silvanus is considered to be its founder. They flourished between 650 and 872 in Armenia and Eastern Anatolia and since then in Theme of Thrace of the Byzantine Empire. They had a widespread political and military influence in Asia Minor, including a temporary independent state in the mid-9th century centered in Tephrike, because of which were continuously persecuted by Byzantine emperors since the mid-7th century. They were also persecuted because of religious reasoning but were not during the periods of Byzantine Iconoclasm or their activity was ignored in exchange for military duties. Between the mid-8th and mid-10th century, Byzantine emperors forcibly moved many Paulician colonies to Philippopolis in Thrace to defend the empire's boundary with the First Bulgarian Empire as well to weaken Paulician influence in the East, where they were eventually brought to the Catholic Church at the time of emperor Alexios I Komnenos. In Armenia the movement evolved into Tondrakism, while in Europe influenced the formation of Bogomilism, Catharism and other gnostic movements. In Europe they are the ancestors of the Roman Catholic Bulgarians, specifically of Banat Bulgarians. The fundamental doctrine of the Paulicians was that there are two principles, an evil God and a good God; the former is the creator and ruler of this world, the latter of the world to come. From this they deduced that Jesus was not truly the son of Mary, because the good God could not have taken flesh and become man. It was influenced most directly by the dualism of Marcionism, a Gnostic movement in early Christianity, and of Manichaeism, a Gnostic religion founded in the 3rd century by the Persian prophet Mani. They especially honoured the Gospel According to Luke and the Letters of St. Paul, rejecting the Old Testament and the Letters of St. Peter. They rejected also the sacraments, the worship, and the hierarchy of the established church.

Constantine-Silvanus, the founder:

Constantine-Silvanus (died 684) was the founder of the Paulicians, a Christian movement in 7th century Armenia, who sought to return to the purity of the church in the time of Paul the Apostle. They were considered heretical by the Byzantine Church. Constantine was born in Mananali, near Samosata, Commagene. About 653 A.D., Constantine became friends with a traveling Armenian who had been held captive by the Saracens. The traveler gave Constantine a copy of the four gospels and the letters of Paul. Reading the gospels and epistles caused Constantine to change his name to Silvanus, after the companion of Paul, and begin preaching, gathering around him a group of followers who rejected what they considered the image worship and superstition of the Byzantine Church. Silvanus founded his first congregation, who became known as Paulicians, in Kibossa, near Colonia, in Armenia. For thirty years he traveled extensively, along the Euphrates valley, across the Taurus Mountains, and into the western parts of Asia Minor, making converts on the way. His missionary activities came to the attention of the Byzantine Emperor, Constans II, known as Constantine Pogonatus (the bearded). The Emperor issued a decree condemning the teachings of Silvanus and sentenced him to death by stoning. Simeon, the officer sent to carry out the execution, ordered Silvanus’ friends and followers to stone him. The followers refused and dropped their stones, except for one young man, Justus, whom Silvanus had raised like an adopted son, who cast a stone at Silvanus and killed him. Simeon was impressed with the piety of Silvanus’ followers and joined them, taking the name Titus. Justus betrayed Titus and the Paulicians by informing on them to the bishop. Emperor Justinian II ordered Titus and all the Paulicians to be burned to death as heretics in 690.

Middle Ages and move to Byzantine Empire:

The sources show that most Paulician leaders were Armenians. The founder of the sect is said to have been an Armenian by the name of Constantine, who hailed from Mananalis, a community near Samosata, Syria. He studied the Gospels and Epistles, combined dualistic and Christian doctrines and, upon the basis of the former, vigorously opposed the formalism of the church. Regarding himself as having been called to restore the pure Christianity of Paul the Apostle (of Tarsus), he adopted the name Silvanus (one of Paul's disciples), and about 660, he founded his first congregation at Kibossa, Armenia. Twenty-seven years later, he was arrested by the Imperial authorities, tried for heresy and stoned to death. Simeon, the court official who executed the order, was himself converted, and adopting the name Titus, became Constantine’s successor. He was burned to death (the punishment pronounced upon the Manichaeans) in 690. The adherents of the sect fled, with Paul at their head, to Episparis. He died in 715, leaving two sons, Gegnaesius (whom he had appointed his successor) and Theodore. The latter, giving out that he had received the Holy Ghost, rose against Gegnaesius but was unsuccessful. Gegnaesius was taken to Constantinople, appeared before Leo the Isaurian, was declared innocent of heresy, returned to Episparis, but, fearing danger, went with his adherents to Mananalis. His death (in 745) was the occasion of a division in the sect; Zacharias and Joseph being the leaders of the two parties. The latter had the larger following and was succeeded by Baanies in 775. The sect grew in spite of persecution, receiving additions from some of the iconoclasts. The Paulicians were now divided into the Baanites (the old party) and the Sergites (the reformed sect). Sergius, as the reformed leader, was a zealous and effective converter for his sect; he boasted that he had spread his Gospel "from East to West; from North to South". At the same time the Sergites fought against their rivals and nearly exterminated them. Baanes was supplanted by Sergius-Tychicus in 801, who was very active for thirty-four years. His activity was the occasion of renewed persecutions on the part of Leo the Armenian. Obliged to flee, Sergius and his followers settled at Argaun, in that part of Armenia which was under the control of the Saracens. At the death of Sergius, the control of the sect was divided between several leaders. The Empress Theodora, as regent to her son Michael III, instituted thoroughgoing persecution against the Paulicians throughout Asia Minor, in which 100,000 Paulicians in Byzantine Armenia are said to have lost their lives and all of their property and lands were confiscated by the empire until 843. Paulicians, under their new leader Karbeas, fled to new areas. They built two cities, Amara and Tephrike (modern Divriği). By 844, at the height of its power, the Paulicians established a principality of the Paulicians centered in Tephrike. In 856, Karbeas and his people took refuge with the Arabs in the territory around Tephrike and joined forces with Umar al-Aqta, emir of Melitene (who reigned 835–863). Karbeas was killed in 863 in Michael III's campaign against the Paulicians and possibly was with Umar at Malakopea before the Battle of Lalakaon (863). Karbeas's successor, Chrysocheres, devastated many cities; in 867, he advanced as far as Ephesus, and he took many priests as prisoners. In 868, Emperor Basil I dispatched Petrus Siculus to arrange for their exchange. His sojourn of nine months among the Paulicians gave him an opportunity to collect many facts, which he preserved in his History of the empty and vain heresy of the Manichæans, otherwise called Paulicians. The propositions of peace were not accepted, the war was renewed, and Chrysocheres was killed at Battle of Bathys Ryax (872 or 878). The power of the Paulicians was broken. Meanwhile, other Paulicians, sectarians but not rebels, lived in communities throughout the empire. Constantine V had already transferred large numbers of them to Thrace. According to Theophanes, the Paulicians of Armenia were moved to Thrace, in 747, to strengthen the Bulgarian frontier with a reliable population. In 871, the emperor Basil I conquered their stronghold in Tephrike and the survivors fled to the East to the Byzantine-Arab border - in Armenia, in the 10th century the Tondrakian sect emerged. In 885, Byzantine general Nikephoros Phokas the Elder had a military detachment of Paulicians serving in Southern Italy. In 970, some 200,000 Paulicians on Byzantine territory were transferred by the emperor John Tzimisces to Philippopolis in Theme of Thrace and, as a reward for their promise to keep back "the Scythians" (in fact Bulgarians), the emperor granted them religious freedom. This was the beginning of a revival of the sect in the West, but it was true to the empire. According to Annales Barenses, in 1041 several thousand were in the army of Alexios I Komnenos against the Norman Robert Guiscard but, deserting the emperor, many of them (1085) were thrown into prison. By some accounts, Alexius Comnenus is credited with having put an end to the heresy in Europe. During a stay at Philippopolis, Alexius argued with the sect, bringing most, if not all, back to the Church (according to his daughter Anna Comnena in her "Alexiad", XV, 9). For the converts the new city of Alexiopolis was built, opposite Philippopolis. After that episode, Paulicians, as a major force, disappear from history, but as a powerless minority, they would reappear in many later times and places. During the First Crusade some, called as "Publicani", were present in the Muslim army, but sometimes also helped the Crusaders. The term "Publicani" would be generally used for any heretic, even a political traitor, through Europe, often identified with the Cathars and Albigensians, because of which became a widespread consideration that Paulicians were the ancestors of Western Neo-Manichaean sects.

Modern age and Bulgarian Paulicians:

According to the historian Yordan Ivanov, some of the Paulicians were converted to Orthodoxy and Islam, the rest to the Roman Catholicism during the 16th or 17th century. At the end of the 17th century, the Paulician people were still living around Nikopol, Bulgaria and persecuted due to religious reasons by the Ottoman Empire. After the uprising of Chiprovtsi in 1688, a good part of them fled across the Danube and settled in the Banat region. There are still over ten thousand Banat Bulgarian Paulicians in Romania and Serbia today. However, they no longer practice their original religion since they converted to Roman Catholicism. After Bulgaria's liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, a number of Banat Bulgarians resettled in the northern part of Bulgaria. In Russia, after the war of 1828–29, Paulician communities could still be found in the part of Armenia occupied by the Russians. Documents of their professions of faith and disputations with the Gregorian bishop about 1837 (Key of Truth, xxiii–xxviii) were later published by Frederick Cornwallis Conybeare. It is with Conybeare publications of the Paulicians disputations and The Key of Truth that Conybeare based his depiction of the Paulicians as simple, godly folk who had kept an earlier Adoptionistic form of Christianity.

Doctrines:

Little is known of the tenets of the Paulicians except for the reports of opponents and a few fragments of Sergius' letters they have preserved. Some argue that their system was dualistic, while others add that it was also adoptionist in nature. They might have also been nontrinitarian, as Conybeare, in his edition of the Paulician manual The Key of Truth, concluded that "The word Trinity is nowhere used, and was almost certainly rejected as being unscriptural." In dualistic theology, there are two principles, two kingdoms. The Evil Spirit is the demiurge, the author and lord of the present visible world; the Good Spirit, of the future world. The Paulicians accepted the four Gospels (especially of Luke); fourteen Epistles of Paul; the three Epistles of John; the epistles of James and Jude; and an Epistle to the Laodiceans, which they professed to have. They rejected the First Epistle of Peter and the whole Tanakh, also known as the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, as well as the Orthodox-Catholic title Theotokos ("Mother of God"), and they refused all veneration of Mary. They believed that Christ came down from heaven to emancipate humans from the body and from the world. Their places of worship they called "places of prayer", small rooms in modest houses. Although they had ascetic tendencies, they made no distinction in foods and practiced marriage. They called themselves "Good Christians" and called other Christians "Romanists". Due to iconoclasm they rejected the Christian cross, rites, sacraments, the worship, and the hierarchy of the established Church, because of which Edward Gibbon considered them as "worthy precursors of Reformation". Although the Paulicians have been traditionally and overreachingly labeled as Manichaeans, because of identification with Cathars and Waldensians as their ancestors, as Photius, Petrus Siculus, and many modern authors have held, they were not a branch of them. Mosheim was the first to give a serious criticism of identification with Manichaeans, as although both sects were dualistic, the Paulicians differed on several points, and themselves rejected the doctrine of the prophet Mani. Gieseler and Neander, with more probability, derived the sect from Marcionism, considering them as descendants of a dualistic sect reformed to become closer to Early Christianity yet unable to be freed from Gnosticism. Others doubted the resemblance and relation to both Manichaeism and Marcionism. Mosheim, Gibbon, Muratori, Gilles Quispel and others regard the Paulicians as the forerunners of Bogomilism, Catharism and other "heretic" sects in the West. By the mid-19th century the mainstream theory was to be a non-Manichaean, dualistic Gnostic doctrine with substantial elements of Early Christianity, closest to Marcionism, which influenced emerging anti-Catholic groups in Western Europe. However, it was primarily based on Greek sources, as later published Armenian sources did indicate some other elements, but the general opinion did not change. Conybeare studying Armenian sources concluded that they were survivors of Early Adoptionist Christianity in Armenia, and not dualism and Gnosticism, which consideration Garsoïan related to earlier by Chel'tsov which argued their doctrine was not static yet showed marked evolution. Garsoïan in a comprehensive study of both Greek and Armenian sources confirmed such conclusions, and that the new Byzantine Paulicianism independently manifested features of Docetism and dualism because of which could be called as Neo-Paulicianism. Another theory was held by Soviet scholars since 1940s who instead of theological origin rather argued a proletarian revolt which was expressed in the theological sense. Such an approach is supported by both Greek and Armenian sources, but it is very limited in explanation and description of the sect. The Paulicians were branded as Jews, Mohammedans, Arians, and Manichæans; it is likely that their opponents employed the "pejorative" appellations merely as terms of abuse. They called themselves Christians, or "True Believers". Armenians always formed the majority in the provinces where the Paulicians were most influential and successful in spreading their doctrines.

The Key of Truth:

The Key of Truth is a text identified as a manual of a Paulician (Tondrakian) church in Armenia. Frederick Conybeare first identified the 1782 manuscript from the library of Ejmiacin in Armenia and published a translation and edition in 1898. Conybeare claimed that the text was a servicebook of the medieval Paulicians, and it contains a rite of adult baptism with water and conscious omission of Trinitarian terminology. There is scholarly consensus that The Key of Truth was used by sectarians with beliefs derived from the Paulicians, but scholars after Conybeare consider that these beliefs may have evolved since the Middle Ages.

The Asiti group:

The Astati were a Paulician sect in the 9th century, the followers of Sergius, who renewed the beliefs of Manichaeism. They prevailed much under Emperor Nicephorus I, but later, under Michael I Rhangabes, they were curbed with very severe laws.

Sergius-Tychicus, the founder:

Sergius, also known as Tychicus, (?-835) was a religious leader of the 9th century. In 801, after joining the Astati at Argaoun (now Arguvan), he founded the Paulician Church of the Colossians. He later led a mission to Cilicia and founded the Church of the Ephesians, based in Mimistra. According to Peter the Hegoumenos, Sergius was the seventh and last leader of the Paulicians, and the successor to Baanes (or Vahan) the Filthy. The sect was suppressed in 835.

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