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Anti-Adoptionistic Corruptions of Scripture

Introduction: Adoptionism in Early Christianity

While Christians of the first three centuries agreed that Christ was the Son of God, they disagreed over what this sonship might entail. For most believers, it entailed a different level of existence from the rest of humankind. For them, Christ was himself divine.

Other Christians, however, rejected this claim and argued that Christ was a flesh and blood human being without remainder, a man who had been adopted by God to be his Son and to bring about the salvation of the world. To be sure, these representatives of adoptionism constituted no monolith; they differed among themselves, for example, concerning the moment at which Jesus' adoption had taken place. But by the second century, most believed that it had occurred at his baptism, when the Spirit of God descended upon him and a voice called out from heaven, begotten you.

For the vast majority of believers,"You are my Son, today I have whether heretical or orthodox, this form of Christology represented an error of the most egregious kind.[1] For if Christ were a "mere man" ($\psi\iota\lambda\sigma\varsigma\ \alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\sigma\varsigma$), then the salvific efficacy of his work could be radically called into question. Irenaeus appears to have been genuinely perplexed, his rhetoric notwithstanding: "How can they be saved unless it was God who wrought out their salvation upon earth? Or how shall a human pass into God, unless God has first passed into a human?" (*Adv. Haer.* IV, 33, 4).[2]

As we have seen, such controversies over Christology were linked by the combatants themselves to questions concerning the text of the New Testament. I have already considered the proto-orthodox pamphlet cited by Eusebius, a pamphlet that accuses the Roman adoptionists Theodotus, Asclepiades, and Hermophilus of tampering with the manuscripts of the New Testament in order to secure their own theology within them *(Hist. Ecci.* V, 28).[3]

Whether the charge was justified can no longer be determined: the anonymous author cites as evidence the variant exemplars produced by the group, and these are no longer extant. Furthermore, few other traces of this kind of activity among the heretics have survived antiquity.[4] What have survived are the scriptural texts produced by scribes who held to the author's own theological persuasion. Interestingly enough, some of these "orthodox" texts do evidence tampering—precisely in passages that might have otherwise proved useful as proof texts for the adoptionists. The alterations, that is, do not lean toward the heretical point of view, but toward the orthodox.

Before we can consider specific instances of such corruptions, however, it is necessary to understand more fully who the early adoptionists were and why their christological opinions proved so offensive to the ancestors of orthodoxy.

The Earliest Adoptionists

Christians of the second and third centuries generally—regardless of theological persuasion—claimed to espouse the views of Jesus' earliest followers.[5] With regard at least to the adoptionists, modern scholarship has by and large conceded the claim. These Christians did not originate their views of Christ; adoptionistic Christologies can be traced to sources that predate the books of the New Testament.

The business of reconstructing the preliterary sources of the New Testament is a highly complex affair, and a discussion of the attendant difficulties lies beyond the purview of the present investigation. It is enough to observe that form-critical analyses of the New Testament creedal, hymnic, and sermonic materials have consistently demonstrated earlier strata of tradition that were theologically modified when incorporated into their present literary contexts.[6] Many of these preliterary traditions evidence adoptionistic views.

One of the earliest examples derives from the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he appears to be quoting a bipartite christological creed: "[Christ Jesus . . .] who came from the seed of David according to the flesh, who was appointed Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:3-4). That the text embodies a pre-Pauline creed is evident on both linguistic and ideational grounds:[7] terms such as $`ορισθεντος$ ("appointed") and $‘πνευμα$ $αγιωσυνης$ ("Spirit of holiness") occur nowhere else in Paul, nor does the notion of Jesus' Davidic descent.[8] In particular, the idea that Jesus received a divine appointment to be God's Son at his resurrection is not at all Pauline. What has struck a number of scholars in this connection is that the highly balanced structure that one normally finds in such creedal fragments[9] is here broken by a phrase that *is* distinctively Pauline, *"εν δυναμει"*[10] Once this Pauline feature is removed, a balanced structure is restored, and one is left with a christological confession that appears to pre-date the writings of our earliest Christian author, or at least his letter to the Romans (dated usually in the late 50s C.E.), a confession that acknowledges that Christ attained his status of divine sonship only at his resurrection.'[11]

Interestingly, the same christological notion occurs in other preliterary sources embedded in the New Testament. Thus, a form-critical analysis of Paul's speech in Acts 13 reveals traditional material that has been incorporated in a surprisingly unedited form.[12] Here Paul makes the following pronouncement: "What God promised to the [Jewish] fathers he has fulfilled to us their children, by raising Jesus from the dead—as it is written in the second Psalm, 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'" (vv. 32-33). The force of the final clause should not be minimized: it is on the day of his resurrection that Jesus receives his sonship.[13] This corresponds closely with other preliterary traditions of the book of Acts. In his sermon on the day of Pentecost, Peter proclaims that Jesus' unjust treatment at the hands of his executioners was reversed by his glorious vindication when God raised him from the dead and exalted him to his right hand: "Let all the house of Israel know that God made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (2:36); later, when addressing Cornelius's household, Peter speaks of Jesus as "the one who has been appointed ($εστιν ο ωρισμενος$, cf. Rom 1:4) by God to be the judge of the living and the dead" (10:42). Paul also, in his speech on the Areopagus, speaks of God having appointed ($ωρισεν$) Jesus in connection with his resurrection (17:31). The adoptionistic thrust of these passages is not mitigated by a minor change of wording, as happened in Romans 1:3-4, but by their incorporation into the wider context of Luke- Acts, where Jesus is the Son of God already at his birth (Luke 1:35)[14]

As I have already stated, most of the later adoptionists that we can actually identify—the Ebionites,

Theodotus, Artemon—located the time of Jesus' adoption not at his resurrection, but at his baptism. One would naturally expect that unless they invented this notion themselves, traces of it should be found in earlier traditions. Such traces do in fact exist, and most of them, as we shall see, were changed in one way or another by various scribes during the history of their transmission. Adoptionists could read the Gospel of Mark itself as one indication that Jesus was made the Son of God at his baptism. There is no birth narrative here, no mention of Jesus at all until he is an adult; his first public appearance comes at his baptism, when the Spirit of God comes upon him and the divine voice proclaims him to be his Son. Whether Mark "intended" an adoptionistic Christology is difficult to say. What is clear is that this, our earliest Gospel, makes absolutely no reference to Jesus' virginal conception, nor to his pre-existence or deity.[15]

With respect to other New Testament traditions concerning Jesus' baptism, the earliest textual witnesses of the Gospel according to Luke preserve a conspicuously adoptionistic formula in the voice from heaven, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Luke 3:22). I will argue that this text is, in fact, original to Luke and that it coincides perfectly with his portrayal of Jesus' baptism elsewhere in his two-volume work. Here it is enough to observe that an adoptionistic construal of the scene appears to be as primitive as our oldest textual witnesses to the Gospel.

Other potentially adoptionistic texts within the New Testament will be discussed throughout the course of this chapter, as we see how they were invariably changed by one or another orthodox scribe. This introductory sketch is sufficient to show that the adoptionists of the second and third centuries stood in a long line of christological tradition and could therefore appeal to this earlier tradition in support of their views.[16]

The Ebionites

Whether seen from a social or theological point of view, Jewish Christianity in the early centuries was a remarkably diversified phenomenon.'[7] This has become increasingly clear to scholars conversant with the wide range of New Testament materials: Matthew and Paul are both in the canon, as are Hebrews, James, and Jude; many of Paul's opponents were clearly Jewish Christians, as (conceivably) were the secessionists from the Johannine community, attacked by the author of the Johannine epistles, who was himself probably Jewish. Nonetheless, scholars have not infrequently construed Jewish-Christianity in rather monolithic terms, influenced, no doubt, by early heresiologists who demonstrated a remarkable ability to package social groups according to discrete theological categories.[18]

The modern emphasis on theological diversity in the early centuries, however, has brought some sense of reality to the description of Jewish Christianity, forcing scholars to recognize that there were in fact radically different points of view represented by different Jewish Christians, and that various Jewish-Christian groups probably developed their views over time, so that what was believed by the majority of a group's members in the year 180 C.E. may not have been at all what was believed in the year 120 C.E. Nonetheless, there appears to be a tendency even now to think along the lines of several distinct groupings, two or three monoliths instead of one, rather than to recognize that Jewish Christianity probably manifested itself in vastly different ways from one community to the next over time.[19]

My concern here, however, is less with Jewish Christianity as it really was than with Jewish Christianity as it was perceived by the proto-orthodox. For it was their *perception* of their opponents that led scribes to modify their texts of Scripture. Most of our heresiological sources recognize two major groups of Jewish Christians: those who are essentially orthodox, who err only in subscribing to the abiding validity of the Mosaic Law, and those who are patently heretical, particularly in light of their aberrant Christologies.[20] Members of the latter group are frequently labeled "Ebionites" ("those who are poor") by their opponents.[21]

Unfortunately, not even the patristic testimony to the Ebionites is altogether unified, for reasons I have already intimated. On the one hand, the group itself was not internally coherent: Christians calling themselves Ebionite did not all subscribe to the same theological views (any more than all "Christians" did or do), and some of the Ebionite groups may have undergone significant transformations in the

course of their history.[22] Moreover, the patristic testimony tended to be both self-perpetuating and progressively distorted over time—later authors invariably adopted views earlier presented by Ireneaus and his contemporaries, modifying them in more or, usually, less reliable ways.[23] Nonetheless, some ideas and practices appear with some regularity in the patristic accounts, making it possible at least to reconstruct how a typical orthodox Christian might have understood the teachings of a typical Ebionite.

According to orthodox sources, the Ebionites self-consciously traced their lineage back to apostolic times, and like the earliest followers of Jesus worked to preserve their Jewish identity and customs, including the practices of circumcision and kashrut.[24] Although a variety of Christologies are attested for such groups,[25] they are most commonly portrayed as adoptionists who rejected both the notion of Jesus' pre-existence and the doctrine of his virgin birth, maintaining instead that Jesus was a "normal" human being, born of natural generation: "They regard [Christ] as plain and ordinary, a man esteemed as righteous through growth of character and nothing more, the child of a normal union between a man and Mary" (Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* III, 27).[26] Jesus was distinct only because of his exemplary righteousness, on account of which God chose him to be his Son at his baptism and gave him his messianic mission. This he fulfilled by dying on the cross, after which God raised him from the dead and exalted him to heaven. From there he was expected to return to Jerusalem, the city of God, which still preserved its sacred status.

The heresiological sources agree that the Ebionites accepted the binding authority of the Old Testament (and therefore the continuing validity of the Law) but rejected the authority of the apostate apostle, Paul. The sources do not agree about the character and contours of the gospel used by the Ebionites.[27] Most of the fathers from the early second century (Papias) to the late fourth (Jerome) claimed that it comprised a truncated form of Matthew (outwardly the most Jewish of the four) written in Hebrew, one that lacked its opening chapters, that is, the narrative of Jesus' miraculous birth. But the only quotations preserved from the so-called *Gospel of the Ebionites* are found in the writings of the fourth-century heresiologist Epiphanius—who also claims a personal acquaintance with an Ebionite group in the Trans-Jordan—and these quotations derive from a harmony of the Synoptics written in Greek.[28] The question concerning the character of the Ebionite Gospel is particularly thorny because two other Jewish Christian gospels are attested in the church fathers, the *Gospel of the Hebrews* and the *Gospel of the Nazarenes,* the latter of which may well have been confused with the *Gospel of the Ebionites* by church fathers who had seen neither one.[29]

Theodotus and His Followers

In external appearance, the Roman adoptionists of the second and early third century do not seem at all like the Ebionites. They claimed no Jewish roots; they did not follow the Torah, nor practice circumcision, nor revere Jerusalem. But in other respects they appear strikingly similar: Theodotus and his followers believed that Jesus was completely and only human, born of the sexual union of his parents,[30] a man who, on account of his superior righteousness, came to be adopted as the Son of God at his baptism. They also maintained that their views were apostolic, advocated by the disciples of Jesus and transmitted through true believers down to their own day.[31]

The patristic sources provide a relatively sparse testimony to the views of Theodotus the Cobbler, which is somewhat surprising given his distinction as the "first" to claim that Christ was a "mere man" ($\psi\iota\lambda\sigma\varsigma$ $\alpha\nu\theta\rho\omega\pi\sigma\varsigma$; Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* V, 28). Of his two principal disciples, Theodotus the Banker and Artemon, little more is known than that they perpetuated their leader's heresy with intellectual rigor and, as a result, were evidently separated from the Roman church. As might be expected, later heresiological sources supply additional anecdotal material, resting more on pious imagination than on solid evidence.[32]

The earliest accounts are provided by Hippolytus and the so-called Little Labyrinth—three anonymous fragments preserved by Eusebius that are often ascribed, perhaps wrongly, to Hippolytus.[33] Both sources are contemporaneous with their opponents, and despite their differences, provide a basic sketch

that coheres with later portrayals.[34] Theodotus the Cobbler came to Rome from Byzantium in the days of Pope Victor (189-198 C.E.). He claimed that Christ was not himself divine, but was a "mere man."[35] Because Jesus was more pious than all others, at his baptism he became empowered by the Holy Spirit to perform a divine mission. According to the report of Hippolytus, Theodotus denied that this empowerment actually elevated Jesus to the level of divinity, although some of his followers claimed that Jesus did become divine in some sense, either at his baptism or at his resurrection. The Little Labyrinth reports that Theodotus's followers insisted that the view of Jesus as fully human but not divine was the majority opinion in the Roman church until the time of Victor's successor Zephyrinus, who "mutilated the truth." The author of the fragment argues quite to the contrary that the belief in Jesus' full divinity is attested both in Scripture and in a wide range of ancient Christian authors, naming in support Justin, Miltiades, Tatian, Clement, Irenaeus, and Melito. Moreover, the author insists that Victor himself had excommunicated Theodotus for his heretical views, a claim that became standard heresiological fare in later times.

The Little Labyrinth also attacks Theodotus's followers for their adoptionistic views, although, as one might expect, it provides some evidence that their theology developed over time. In particular it denounces these troublemakers for preferring secular learning (syllogisms and geometry) to the rule of faith, and secular scholars (Aristotle, Theophrastus, and Galen) to Christ. Furthermore, as we have seen, it accuses them of corrupting their texts of Scripture in order to make them conform to their own views.[36]

Paul of Samosata

I conclude this overview with the notorious Paul of Samosata, not because he actually was an adoptionist, but because the Council of Antioch in 268 C.E. condemned him on these terms, and consequently removed him from his influential post as bishop. In fact, there are reasons for doubting the charge against him.

The sources for Paul's life and the two or three councils held to consider charges against him are relatively sparse and of varying degrees of historical reliability.[37] Although there are fragmentary records of the conciliar investigation—the so-called *Acta,* preserved in manuscripts of the fifth and sixth centuries—most recent investigators have discounted their authenticity.[38] There is also a letter addressed to Paul by six bishops at the council, the *Epistula,* which is now widely considered authentic but which proves problematic for knowing what Paul himself believed because it expresses only the theological affirmations of his orthodox opponents, not the heretical views it was drafted to oppose.[39] Finally, Eusebius had apparently read accounts of the trial, and preserves the synodal letter that came out of it. This letter is normally taken to be authentic, and gives some clues as to Paul's Christology.

What is striking is that while the synodal letter explicitly states that Paul was deposed for his aberrant christological views, it scarcely deals with such issues per se, but instead focuses on Paul's haughty attitude and ethical improprieties.[40] The bishops object to his strutting through the marketplace with bodyguards and adoring crowds, to his suspicious accumulation of wealth, to his decision to build a throne, tribunal, and *secretum,* to his preference of the title *ducenarius* to bishop, and to his indiscreet consorting with women. The fact that the council deposed him in favor of Domnus, the son of the previous bishop, Demetrian, makes one suspect that the proceedings had as much to do with rivalry and personal loyalty as with Christology (Eusebius, *Hist. Ecci.* VII, 30). Here one cannot fail to observe that Paul's christological error was not at all self-evident. At the first council convened to decide his case, his opponents could find no grounds on which to press charges *(Hist. Ecci.* VII, 28); at the second it was only after the skillful verbal maneuverings of Malchion, a professional rhetorician whose services were acquired just for the occasion, that the opposition was able to expose the error of his opinions. It appears that Paul did not so much advocate a particular heresy as take a position with potentially heretical implications. On such terms, one wonders who would have been safe.

In any event, the christological charge against Paul is clear: the synodal letter likens him to the adoptionist Artemon, his spiritual "father." And so Paul was condemned for professing "low, degraded

opinions about Christ," namely that Christ was "just an ordinary man" (κοινος ανθρωπος, *Hist. Ecci.* VII, 27); for disallowing the singing of hymns to Christ (VII, 30); and, most decisively for the council (but enigmatically for us), for refusing to confess that "the Son of God came down from heaven," insisting instead that Jesus Christ derived "from below" (`Ιησουν Χριστον κατωθεν VII, 30). In effect, whatever the real agenda at the Council of Antioch in 268 C.E., Paul was condemned for subscribing to the views of Artemon and his forebears among the Roman adoptionists.

Anti-Adoptionist Polemics and the Orthodox Corruption of Scripture

To sum up, orthodox Christians knew of several prominent individuals and groups who denied that Jesus was himself divine and that he pre-existed. For these "heretics," Jesus Christ was a flesh and blood human being without remainder. Several such persons flatly denied that his birth had been miraculous: he had human parents and his mother was not a virgin. According to their view, Jesus was more righteous than other humans and, on account of his righteousness, had been chosen by God to be his Son, adopted at some critical point of his existence, either at his resurrection, or more commonly, at his baptism.

Against such notions the orthodox insisted on their strongly paradoxical Christology. To be sure, Christ *was* human; but he was also divine, the preexistent Son of God through whom all things were made. It is no surprise to find that the key points of this controversy affected the texts of Scripture over which it was waged: the scribes who copied these texts were by no means immune from the polemical contexts within which they worked. And so, as we will now see, they altered passages that might suggest that Jesus had a human father, or that he came into existence at his birth, or that he was adopted to be the Son of God at his baptism. They changed other passages to accentuate their own views that Jesus was divine, that he pre-existed, and that his mother was a virgin. In each of these textual corruptions we can detect the anonymous workings of orthodox scribes, who through their transcriptions have left us a record of the far-flung impact of the theological controversies of their day.

Jesus the Unique Son of God: The Orthodox Affirmation of the Virgin Birth

Since the orthodox struggle with adoptionists centered in part on the doctrine of Jesus' virgin birth, we might expect to find a theological battle waged over the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke, the only New Testament passages that affirm the belief.[41] As we have seen, some of the heterodox Christians who denied the doctrine were accused of excising these passages from their canon of Scripture altogether.[42] Others were charged with tampering with the texts so as to remove any notion of a virgin birth from them.[43]

So far as we can tell from the surviving evidence, no scribe chose to pursue the latter course with any rigor or consistency. One might conceivably point to the Syriac manuscript discovered at St. Catherine's Monastery on Mt. Sinai as a possible exception. The fifth-century scribe of this manuscript was either thoughtless in the extreme or somewhat inclined to see Joseph as Jesus' actual father, for he concludes Matthew's genealogy of Jesus with the words "Jacob begot Joseph; Joseph, to whom was betrothed the virgin Mary, begot Jesus, who is called the Christ" (Matt 1:16). Similarly, the following pericope ends not with the statement that Joseph "had no relations with her [Mary] until she bore a son," but with the curious observation that Mary "bore to him [i.e., Joseph] a son" (1:25).[44]

Despite the apparent bias of these corruptions, there are reasons for thinking that they were produced from carelessness rather than intent. If the scribe had wanted to show that Joseph was actually Jesus' father, it seems peculiar that he did nothing in the narrative that follows either to eliminate the word "virgin" (παρθενος, v. 23)[45] or to modify the clear statements that Joseph had no sexual relations with Mary so that her child was from the Holy Spirit (vv. 18, 20).[46] Since there is almost no reason to construe any of the manuscript's variant readings as original in these cases,[47] one can only conclude that the scribe was simply inattentive to the doctrinal ramifications of some of his changes.[48]

In none of our other surviving manuscripts is there any clear evidence to suggest that adoptionistic scribes thoroughly revised their texts so as to eliminate the notion of the virgin birth from the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke. The more sensible choice for them, of course, was to do what the patristic sources claimed they did: delete the passages altogether. But even this more radical step would have had a negligible effect on the manuscripts of Scripture that have survived antiquity. For even if thoroughly adoptionistic texts had been created, they would have had very limited currency, limited, that is, to the adoptionistic circles in which they were produced. Once they ceased to serve their function, that is, once adoptionism no longer presented a live option, such manuscripts would naturally not have been preserved, let alone reproduced, among orthodox Christians who by now were thoroughly conversant with the stories of Jesus' miraculous birth.

What have survived are manuscripts produced by the winners of the conlict, Christians who at times went out of their way to guarantee the "correct" (i.e., their) understanding of Jesus' birth in the face of the claims made by adoptionists such as the Ebionites mentioned by Irenaeus, who maintained that Christ "was begotten by Joseph" (*Adv. Haer.* III, 21, 1),[49] Not surprisingly, in virtually every case of possible ambiguity in the passages in question—whenever, for instance, Joseph is called Jesus' "father" or when he and Mary are designated as Jesus' "parents "—one or another scribe has remedied the potential problem by replacing the word in question with an appropriate (i.e., more patently orthodox) substitution. Examining several such passages will provide an entree into our study of the orthodox corruption of Scripture.[50]

Joseph is called Jesus' father twice in Luke's birth narrative (2:33, 48).[51] In both instances scribes have modified the text to eliminate what must have appeared incongruous with the firmly entrenched notion that although Joseph was Mary's betrothed, he was not the father of Jesus. Thus, Luke 2:33 states that Jesus' "father and mother began to marvel" (*ην ο πατηρ αυτου και η μητηρ θανμαζοντες*) at the things being said about him. The majority of Greek manuscripts, however, along with a number of Old Latin, Syriac, and Coptic witnesses, have changed the text to read "Joseph and his mother (*`Ιωσηφ και η μητηρ αυτου*) began to marvel."[52] The change makes perfect sense, given the orthodox view that Joseph was in fact not Jesus' father. There can be little doubt that in this case the majority text represents a corruption rather than the original reading: a wide range of early and superior manuscripts consistently give the reading that is also more difficult.[53] The wide attestation of the variant reading and the confluence of ancient versions in its support, however, do show that the text had been changed relatively early in the history of its transmission, at least in the third century and more likely in the second—precisely during the time of the adoptionist controversies.

This widespread evidence of corruption contrasts with the other instance in which Joseph is called Jesus' father in Luke's birth narrative. In 2:48 Jesus' mother finds him in the Temple and upbraids him by saying, "Look, your father and I (*`ιδου `ο πατηρ σου καλω*) have been grieved, searching for you." Once again the text has been changed, but this time in no consistent pattern of variation. One important but fragmentary Greek witness of the fifth century and two Old Latin manuscripts read "Your relatives and I (*οι συγγενεις σου καλω*) have been grieved..." (C[vid] *β* e); while a number of ancient versional witnesses read simply *"We* have been grieved..." (a b ff[2] g[1] 1 r[1], syr[c]).[54] Here again the character of the attestation—the combination of an Alexandrian witness with Old Latin and Syriac texts—shows that the reading had already suffered corruption during the period of our concern; yet interestingly the change was not adopted by the majority of manuscripts that evidence corruption in verse 33.

Two general observations concerning these units of variation suggest what we will find throughout the course of this study. The changes appear to be made at an early date for theological reasons,[55] yet they occur randomly in various textual witnesses, not at all with the kind of consistency one might expect. Similar results obtain when we cast our nets a little further to consider two kinds of closely related passages: those that speak of Jesus' "parents" (*γονεις*) in the birth narratives, and those that name Joseph as Jesus' father in other contexts.

In each of the three instances that Luke refers to Jesus' "parents," various scribes have effected changes that circumvent a possible misconstrual. The most widely attested instance occurs in Luke 2:43,

where "his parents" (γονεις αυτου) is changed to "Joseph and his mother" (`Ιωσηφ και μητηρ αυτου) in a wide range of Greek and versional witnesses.[56] Virtually the same phrase (οι γονεις αυτου) is changed, less frequently, in Luke 2:41, where one late Greek manuscript and a number of Old Latin witnesses read "both Joseph and Mary" (`ο τε `Ιωσηφ και `η Μαριαμ).[57] The first occurrence of the phrase in 2:27, however, is modified only in several witnesses of the Diatesseron,[58] and is omitted in several Greek minuscules of a later period.[59]

The same kind of sporadic corruption occurs in passages outside the birth narratives. The text of Luke 3:23 would presumably have caused orthodox scribes few problems, since it explicitly states that Joseph was not Jesus' real father, but was only "supposed" to have been. Nonetheless it is striking that in two of our Greek witnesses (W 579) the genealogy of Joseph that follows is deleted altogether.[60] It is difficult to judge what may have led scribes, either those of our manuscripts or those of their exemplars, to omit some fifteen verses from their text; but perhaps they recognized the incongruity of tracing Joseph's ancestry back to Adam in a story about Jesus, when Joseph was in fact not Jesus' father (as the text of v. 23 itself indicates). Some modern scholars have seen in the genealogy an implicit challenge to the notion that Jesus had no earthly father;[61] some such difficulty may have disturbed certain early scribes as well.[62]

The fact that Luke had already indicated in chapter 3 that Jesus was only supposed" to have been the son of Joseph may explain why scribes were not particularly concerned to change the text of chapter 4, when the townsfolk of Nazareth are amazed at Jesus' rhetorical skill and ask "Is this not the son of Joseph?" (Luke 4:22). Most orthodox Christians would have recognized that the question evidences a simple failure to understand—these unbelievers *thought* they knew who Jesus was, but he was only "supposedly" the son of Joseph—so that in some sense changing the text would have proved self-defeating. All the same, it is worth noting that one important minuscule manuscript that frequently preserves a very ancient form of text (MS 13) omits the question altogether, whereas another later manuscript (MS 1200) modifies the text to read, "Is this not the son of Israel?" The function of both corruptions is clear, even if it is understandable why most scribes simply never deemed similar changes necessary.

Much the same can be said of the comparable rejection scene of John 6:41-51. Here again the Jewish crowds ask, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (6:42), and again the text goes on to indicate that Jesus' real father is in fact not Joseph but God: when Jesus replies to their query in verses 43-44, he refers to "the Father who sent me." Rather than eliminating the unbelievers' misperception that Jesus was the son of Joseph and Mary, several scribes simply modified the text to heighten its irony. The clearest instance occurs in two changes embodied in one of our earliest manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel, 𝔭[66] (early third century). Here the crowd's misguided question is changed into a false assertion, "This is Jesus the son of Joseph,"[63] whereas Jesus' reply is changed to strengthen his counterassertion that he comes from heaven. He now refers explicitly to *"my* father (πατηρ μου) who sent me."[64] A similar effect obtains in a more widely attested corruption of verse 42, where some early Greek, Latin, and Syriac manuscripts omit και την μητερα, so that the crowd's claim to know Jesus' lineage applies only to his father. The change heightens the irony of the passage: the crowd mistakenly claims to know Jesus' earthly father, but Jesus states that his Father has sent him from above.[65] In both cases the scribal changes function to reinforce the "correct" construal of the passage, so that in fact the orthodox purpose is achieved even more effectively here than in passages in which the reference to Joseph as Jesus' father has simply been deleted.

There is only one other reference to Joseph as Jesus' father in the New Testament (John 1:45), and this one alone appears to be invariant in the tradition.[66] Yet once again, given the clear ironies of the passage ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" [1:46]) and the orthodox "knowledge" that Joseph is not really Jesus' father—any more than Jesus really comes from Nazareth—it is not altogether surprising that the passage has been left intact.

We would do well at this point, before going further in the analysis, to reflect on the orthodox tendency to corrupt the text of Scripture, based on this initial sampling. That there was such a tendency should already be clear: in virtually every instance in which Joseph is called Jesus' father or parent, various scribes have changed the text in such a way as to obviate the possibilities of misconstrual. The

tendency will become increasingly clear as I begin to survey the surviving data. But this matter of survival itself should give us pause. For scribes do not appear, at least in the materials considered so far, to have been thoroughly consistent or rigorous in their attempts to rid the text of latent ambiguities and so to eliminate the possiblity of interpreting these texts in adoptionistic terms. The reasons for this lack of consistency are not too difficult to find. As I have already argued, the majority of orthodox Christians, and presumably orthodox scribes, could live perfectly well with the text as originally written, interpreting it, that is, according to orthodox criteria and beliefs.[67] Furthermore, the very process of transmitting texts was itself a radically conservative process. These scribes understood that they were conserving rather than creating tradition, however problematic the notion might appear to scholars living in a post-modernist world in which every "conservation" and every "reading" of a text is itself an "interpretation" or "writing" of a text.[68]

I have devoted all my attention so far to textual variants involving Jesus' relationship to Joseph in Luke and John. Joseph is never called Jesus' "father" or "parent" in Matthew's Gospel, but given the circumstance that Matthew also records a birth story, one might expect to find some kinds of orthodox corruption here as well. We have already seen that the scribe of the Sinaitic Syriac manuscript, apparently through carelessness, presents a potentially adoptionistic variation of Jesus' genealogy in Matthew 1:16. It is striking that other witnesses supply different variations of precisely the same verse, and that these variations serve rather well to stress orthodox notions concerning Jesus' birth. The text of most manuscripts reads "Jacob begot Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom (fem.) was born Jesus, who is called the Christ." But several witnesses of the so-called Caesarean text read "Jacob begot Joseph, to whom being betrothed, a virgin Mary begot Jesus, who is called the Christ" (Θ f^{13} OL arm [syr^c]). The Caesarean changes are patently orthodox: now the text explicitly calls Mary a "virgin" ($\pi\alpha\rho\theta\epsilon\nu o\varsigma$) and it no longer calls Joseph her "husband" ($`\alpha\nu\eta\rho$) but her "betrothed" ($\omega\,\mu\nu\eta\sigma\tau\epsilon\upsilon\theta\epsilon\iota\sigma\alpha$). These changes serve not only to keep the text in line with the rest of the story (esp. vv. 18-25), but also to eliminate the possibility of misconstrual. Mary was not yet living with a man as his wife, she was merely his betrothed; and she was still a virgin, even though pregnant.[69] It should be added that there is little reason to suppose the Caesarean reading to be original. Not only does it lack early and widespread support, it also fails to pass muster on the grounds of transcriptional probabilities. Given the story of verses 18-25, who would have wanted to change the perfectly innocuous Caesarean text of verse 16 into one that could be understood as problematic (by calling Joseph Mary's $`\alpha\nu\eta\rho$ and by eliminating the word "virgin")?[70] This Caesarean reading is thus better explained as an early modification of the other, an orthodox corruption that serves to circumvent an adoptionistic construal of the text.[71]

Other textual variants that stress the orthodox doctrine of the virgin birth occur outside the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. One of the most striking appears in the manuscript tradition of the Fourth Gospel, a Gospel that does not record a birth narrative of its own. Some orthodox Christians of the early church thought that John nonetheless did allude to Jesus' miraculous birth in the opening chapter of his Gospel. The most interesting patristic discussion occurs in Tertullian, who accuses his Valentinian opponents of tampering with the text of John 1:13 *(de carne Christi,* 19). Originally, claimed Tertullian, the text referred to the birth of Jesus: "Who was born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of a human, but of God." The Valentinians, he maintained, sought to replace this reference to Jesus' miraculous birth by making the passage refer to their own. This they did by making the verb plural: "who *were* born, not of blood, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of a human, but of God." Tertullian went on to argue that the verse affirms in no uncertain terms both the supernatural character of Jesus' conception (in that it occurred apart from sexual intercourse ["born not from blood . . ."]), and the reality of his birth as a physical event (against the Gnostics).

Is it possible that Tertullian's form of the text, that is, with the singular form of the verb, was generated in an anti-adoptionistic milieu?[72] It is worth observing that in another context Tertullian cites the verse (in the singular) explicitly to counter the teachings of "Ebion" *(de carne Christi,* 24). Somewhat earlier, Irenaeus also quotes the verse in the singular to argue that Jesus was not a mere man, but that he came from God and was born of the virgin *(Adv. Haer.* III, 16, 2; 19, 2). Earlier still, the orthodox forgery, the *Epistula Apostolorum,* uses the verse to sanction belief in the miraculous birth of Jesus, quoting it again in the singular (chap. 3).

Despite the currency of this anti-adoptionistic form of the text in the second century—we can

assume from Tertullian's discussion that he, at least, knew of its presence in actual manuscripts of the Fourth Gospel—today the plural is read in every known Greek manuscript and by all the versional evidence, with one solitary exception: the Old Latin manuscript b. This scanty documentary support notwithstanding, the variant reading was championed by a number of textual scholars in the nineteenth century, and perhaps most convincingly by Adolf von Harnack at the beginning of the twentieth.[73] Nonetheless, virtually all recent investigators have been impressed by the overwhelming support of the plural reading in the textual tradition and have recognized the tendentious character of the singular number.[74] Tertullian's protestations notwithstanding, what we have here is not a heretical tampering with the text, but an orthodox one. The corruption serves to locate the orthodox notion of Jesus' birth in a passage that otherwise lacked it.

A comparable textual corruption occurs elsewhere in the Johannine corpus, this time near the end of the first epistle. Establishing a plausible interpretation of 1 John 5:6 has proved more difficult over the years than establishing its text.[75] Nonetheless, the verse's textual problems prove interestingfor our investigation, because here the author says something about Jesus' manifestation to the world: "This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ; not in the water only, but in the water and in the blood." Among the variant readings preserved in the textual tradition, those that affect the introductory clause are particularly germane to the present discussion. For the words "the one who came through water and blood" ($\delta\iota\ \upsilon\delta\alpha\tau\sigma\varsigma\ \kappa\alpha\iota\ \alpha\iota\mu\alpha\tau\sigma\varsigma$) have been modified in a variety of ways. The following four variants are all attested: [76]

1. "through water and spirit" (MSS 43, 241, 463, *945,* 1241, 1831, 1877*, 1891);
2. "through water and spirit and blood" (MSS P 81 88 442 630 *915* 2492 arm eth);
3. "through water and blood and spirit" (MSS ℵ A 104 424^c 614 1739^c 2412 syr^h sa bo Or); and
4. "through water and blood and the Holy Spirit" ($\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\sigma\varsigma\ \alpha\gamma\iota\sigma\upsilon,$ MSS 39 61 326 1837).

It might appear at first glance that the first variant is an early assimilation of the text to John *3:5* ("Whoever is not born from water and spirit cannot enter the kingdom of God"), with the others representing different kinds of conflations of this corrupted reading with the one normally understood to be original ("through water and blood").[77] But it should not be overlooked that the *third* variant is in fact the earliest and most widespread of the four, and occurs in witnesses generally acknowledged to be superior to the Byzantine manuscripts attesting the others. With its occurrence in Origen, it can be dated to the early third century, and its variegated attestation shows that it was widely known. It also would have been an easy reading to create out of the original text, since it involves no erasure or suhstitution, but the simple addition of the two words $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\sigma\varsigma$ to the end of the clause. Furthermore, the word $\pi\nu\epsilon\upsilon\mu\alpha\tau\sigma\varsigma$ would no doubt have been abbreviated as one of the *nomina sacra,* so that the entire corruption could have been made by penning six letters (ΚΑΙΠΝΣ), perhaps above the line. The third variant may therefore represent not a conflation but the earliest form of corruption.

In this case, however, the phrase "water and spirit" is not the earliest modification from which the others derived, so that the parallel to John *3:5* does not explain why the text was changed in the first place. Instead, because the passage refers to "Jesus Christ" and his "coming," one may well suspect that the change was initially made in order to affirm the orthodox doctrine that Jesus did not come into the world through natural means, but through the miraculous working of the Spirit of God (he came "through water and blood and Spirit"). This understanding of the phrase is made yet more explicit in the fourth of the variants, which leaves virtually no room for doubt that the agency of the Holy Spirit is in view (cf. the *locus classicus* of the orthodox doctrine, Luke 1:35). The first two variants, then, simply attest the assimilation of this early and widespread corruption to the familiar words of Jesus to Nicodemus in John, chapter 3.

One other variant reading that may be taken to support the orthodox understanding of Jesus' birth, or at least to circumvent an adoptionistic view, occurs in the unlikely context of Peter's sermon on

the day of Pentecost (Acts 2).   In speaking of Jesus' resurrection, Peter appeals to a scriptural "proof": David pronounced that God would not allow his holy one to see corruption (Psalm 15). Peter claims that David spoke not of himself but of one to come, for he knew that God would raise up for himself one to sit on David's throne, one who would come "from the fruit of his loins" (`εκ καρπον της οσφυος αυτου , Acts 2:30). An interesting variant is found in codex Bezae, which states instead that David's successor would come "from the fruit of his heart" (εκ καρπον της καρδιας αυτου).[78] One might be inclined to see here a simple reference to the well-known saying that David was "a man after God's own heart." In this case the Messiah would be understood to enjoy David's favored status before God. Without denying this possibility, it is worth noting another way the change might function: for now Jesus is no longer said to be a physical descendant of David, but is instead one *like* David.[79] Why would an early scribe want to make such a change?

     Some have claimed that the change is accidental, either the mistranslation of an Aramaic source of the speech,[80] or a faulty reversion of the word *praecordis* ("heart" or "belly") by the Greek scribe of codex Bezae from the Latin text on the opposing page (i.e., it[d]).[81] The first possibility depends on the existence of such an Aramaic source for the speeches of Acts, a view everywhere recognized as riddled with problems;[82] the second depends on the influence of Bezae's Latin text on its Greek, an influence that almost certainly occurred in just the reverse direction.[83] It may be more fruitful then to consider the change as deliberate rather than accidental. A plausible explanation is that a scribe who knew that Jesus was born of a virgin recognized that he was not, technically speaking, one of David's line, since he stood in that line only through a legal adoption; so he modified the text to circumvent a misconstrual of Peter's claim. Now Jesus is said to be from David's "heart" rather than his "loins."[84]

More Than Chosen: The Orthodox Opposition to an Adopted Jesus

Representatives of proto-orthodoxy objected to Christian adoptionists not only because they denied that Jesus had been born of a virgin, but also because they claimed that a profound change had occurred in his relationship with God at a critical point of his existence. The righteous man Jesus had been chosen by God, adopted to be his Son. For most adoptionists this had occurred at his baptism. Diametrically opposed to this view was the orthodox notion that Jesus had *always* been the Son of God, prior to his baptism and even to his birth. As the heresiologist Irenaeus states: [**End of Excerpt From *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, Bart D. Ehrman. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993**] **Buy this book!!!**