

Max Weber Revisited: Charisma and Institution at the Origins of Christianity¹

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Abstract: This article examines the applicability of Max Weber's well-known analysis of charismatic leadership and charismatic community to Jesus and his first followers through a close examination of Weber's work and a re-examination of its applicability to the early Christian community. It reopens the often disputed question of the origins of Christian institutions by suggesting that elements of institutionalisation were present from the origins of Jesus' ministry.

Key Words: Max Weber, charisma, charismatic leadership, charismatic community, church institutions, institutionalisation.

Max Weber is generally regarded, along with Émile Durkheim and Karl Marx, as one of the founders of modern sociology. He has also been a major, if not always recognised, influence upon the Christian Church in the 20th century. That influence has not always been direct: more often than not, his ideas have been mediated by others, who perhaps have not always been aware of their source, and who may sometimes misrepresent Weber's own thought. In this article I want to:

1. look at Weber's ideas about charisma and charismatic authority and about what he called the "routinisation" of charisma;
2. show how these ideas have been influential in conceptualising the social history of Christianity;
3. see how far Weber's ideas do in fact apply to the case of Christian origins.

CHARISMATIC AUTHORITY AND THE ROUTINISATION OF CHARISMA

At a certain point in his major work *Economy and Society (Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft)*, published posthumously in 1922,² Weber distinguishes three pure types of authority, according to their respective source: legal, traditional and charismatic (he acknowledges

¹ This is a revised version of a lecture given at the Centenary Conference of the Melbourne College of Divinity in July 2010. Since then it has benefited from criticisms and suggestions offered by several readers.

² Edited from various published and unpublished texts by his wife Marianne Weber and published under the title *Grundriss der Sozialökonomik. III. Abteilung. Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, [1921-] 1922). The English version cited here as *Economy and Society* is from the 4th German edition (1956/1964) by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (eds), *Max Weber, Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (2 volumes, but pages numbered continuously throughout entire work; Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 1978). The German text is available online at: <http://www.zeno.org/Soziologie/M/Weber.%20Max> (accessed 12 April 2012).

that they may not always exist in a pure state).³ Legal authority is conveyed by and according to rationally devised laws, e.g. a constitution. Traditional authority typically depends on holding a traditionally sanctioned office, such as monarchy. So far, so good. Weber's innovation consisted in defining a third sort of authority, which he called charismatic. He acknowledges that he borrowed the term charisma from Christian theology, ultimately from the New Testament (e.g. 1 Cor 12), and immediately from the German legal theorist Rudolf Sohm and his book *Church Law (Kirchenrecht)*, first published in 1892.⁴

This book has had its own influence upon the development of ecclesiology in the 20th century, including at the Second Vatican Council (notably Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 4 and 12), which we cannot go into here.⁵ I strongly suspect that the strictly theological development initiated by Rudolf Sohm has not been without impact upon the sociological analysis stemming from Max Weber when that has been applied to Christianity.

In any case, Weber borrowed the term charisma from Sohm.⁶ And here has been the source of a first confusion. Many people who have been influenced by Weber's ideas (usually at second-hand) have assumed that by charisma he meant some sort of heaven-sent gift, after the fashion of the Spirit-bestowed grace of Christian theology. Equally misleading, by the way, for understanding what Weber meant by charisma is the common contemporary use of the word to mean compelling attractiveness, glamour, crowd-appeal or "celebrity" status. In fact, what Weber meant by charisma was precisely a title to authority, which does not rest on tradition or on rational-legal processes, but on some personal quality perceived in an individual; it might, but need not, be thought of as having a divine origin.⁷ Whatever its origin is taken to be, once charisma is acknowledged, it commands obedience. It was precisely Weber's contribution to develop – and at the same time to generalise and secularise – the notion of charisma as a basis for exercising power, and so of charismatic authority.

For Weber, the legitimacy of charismatic authority rests on "devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him."⁸ He defined charisma itself as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as

³ *Economy and Society*, 215-216. See also his article "Die drei reinen Typen der legitimen Herrschaft", first published in *Preussische Jahrbücher*, 187 (1922), 1-12; republished in Johannes Winckelmann (ed.), *Max Weber: Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (6th edition; Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), 488; also available online at: <http://www.zeno.org/Soziologie/M/Weber.%20Max>.

⁴ Rudolph Sohm, *Kirchenrecht I: Die geschichtlichen Grundlagen* (Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1892).

⁵ See Enrique Nardoni, "Charism in the Early Church Since Rudolph Sohm: An Ecumenical Challenge", *Theological Studies* 53 (1992): 646-662.

⁶ See Jean-Martin Ouedraogo, "La réception de la sociologie du charisme de M. Weber", *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*, 1993 (83): 141-157, here 141-142, who points out also Weber's unacknowledged debt to K. Holl, *Enthusiasmus und Bussgewalt beim griechischen Mönchtum* (Leipzig, 1898), especially his notion of "obedience" and "command."

⁷ See D.N. Smith, "Faith, Reason and Charisma: Rudolf Sohm, Max Weber, and the Theology of Grace", *Sociological Inquiry* 68 (1998): 32-60.

⁸ *Economy and Society*, 215.

of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as 'leader'.⁹ Classic examples of the charismatic leader in a pure state are the heroic war-leader, the prophet, the saint or the sage. An example from twentieth century history would be in the line of the providential man-of-the-hour, such as Charles de Gaulle.

The characteristic mark of charisma itself or of charismatic authority is that it is "extraordinary." However, the use of that adjective in English may be misleading, as, in combination with the word charisma, with its theological meaning of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, it is likely to reinforce the expectation that charismatic authority is always, or at least is always deemed to be, of supernatural origin. In many cases, we should take a lower view of "extraordinary", as simply "out of the ordinary", or, to translate more literally Weber's German expression *ausseralltaglich*, "outside the every-day"; perhaps "exceptional" might be the best adjective.

Charismatic authority typically emerges when the regular holders of authority, whether legal or traditional, seem to be incapable of rising to the situation. In fact, charismatic leaders frequently, though not always, emerge in opposition to the established authorities of their society. In any case, charisma is usually a force for social change and innovation.

Charismatic leaders, according to Weber, typically gather around themselves a band of helpers. The social group thus constituted tends to have certain characteristic features, which led Weber to refer to it as a "charismatic community" based on an "emotional form of communal relationship."¹⁰ Members belong to it by virtue of their personal link with the leader and share in the leader's charisma. They usually depend on the leader for their livelihood. They are the leader's staff, carrying out orders or interpreting utterances and generally seconding the exercise of the leader's charismatic authority.

The problem with charismatic authority, as Weber saw, is its essential instability: it is of its nature impermanent.¹¹ It may disappear as quickly as it emerges if leaders lose their charisma, for example, if they are no longer able to "deliver the goods" to their followers or to society at large. (Before Charles de Gaulle there was Philippe Petaın, who was also hailed as the man-of-the-hour, who had saved France in the Great War and would do so again.) Incidentally, the fact that leaders may lose their charisma shows clearly that, in the last analysis, charisma is not just an inherent personal gift, but is precisely an exceptional title to exercise authority. In other words, the gift that is not acknowledged or that is no longer acknowledged is powerless. More generally, charismatic authority tends at all times to be transformed into regular authority of one or the other type, legal or traditional.¹² The original circle of helpers may be turned into a hierarchical or official administration. Sometimes the leader's charisma itself is transferred, for example, to a blood descendant, to a heaven-appointed successor, or through some special rite.

⁹ Ibid., 241.

¹⁰ Ibid., 243.

¹¹ He could even say that, "in its pure form charismatic authority may be said to exist only *in statu nascendi*" (Ibid., 246).

¹² Ibid., 246-254.

The momentum for regularising charismatic authority often comes precisely from the need to provide a successor to the leader. Another impetus may be sheer economic necessity: the war leader may have satisfied his band by pillaging the enemy; he will not be able to do so for very long by pillaging his own people. In general terms, we might say that charismatic authority tends to turn into a more regular form in order to perpetuate the new regime or the political or social changes it has introduced. Thus, the exceptional authority wielded by de Gaulle after his recall to political life in May 1958, which went well beyond that of a Prime Minister of the Fourth Republic, was soon regularised under a new constitution in the office of President of the Fifth Republic. Weber had a term for this transformation, however it happens and for whatever reason; he called it the “routinisation” – more literally, the every-daying, *Veralltäglicung* – of the charisma.

Weber did not give much space in *Economy and Society* to applying his central insights to Christianity: the scope of that book is very broad, and, when he does deal there with the sociology of religion, he gives as much attention, if not more, to the religions of India, ancient Israel, or Persia and to Islam. He does, however, see Jesus of Nazareth as a Prophet, one of the classic types of charismatic leader, defined as a “purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment.”¹³

THE PROPHET

Weber compares the Prophet with the Priest and the Magician (or wonderworker), to bring out the exceptional character of prophetic authority.¹⁴ First, he remarks that it is not important in this context whether a new community results from the prophetic preaching or whether the prophet remains a solitary though influential figure. Nor does it matter whether it is the prophet’s person that attracts followers – the case, he believes, of Jesus, as also of Zarathustra and Muhammad – or rather their teaching as such – the case of the Buddha and the ancient Israelite prophets. The decisive feature is the prophet’s *personal* calling. This distinguishes the prophet from the priest, who serves a holy tradition and is legitimised by office, whereas the prophet claims authority in consequence of a personal revelation or in virtue of charisma. It is, therefore, no accident that, with few exceptions, no prophet (in the sense defined) has emerged from the ranks of the priesthood. On the other hand, the prophet is distinguished from the wonderworker, in that prophets proclaim a revelation with content: their mission does not lie essentially in working miracles but in their teaching or their commandments.

The boundaries here can, of course, be fluid. In fact, it is only in exceptional circumstances, that a prophet has won authority without any charismatic authentication, which normally takes the form of “signs and wonders.” In particular, states Weber,

It must not be forgotten for an instant that the entire basis of Jesus’ own legitimation, as well as his claim that he and only he knew the Father and that the way to God led through faith in him alone, was the magical charisma he felt within himself. It was doubtless this consciousness of power, more than anything else, that enabled him to traverse the road of the prophets.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., 439.

¹⁴ Ibid., 439-442.

¹⁵ Ibid., 440.

A final mark of the prophet in the sense meant here is economic: properly prophetic activity is exercised free of charge. The typical prophet spreads the message for its own sake, and not for reward (at least not in the usual form). Paul in his letters emphasises that apostles, prophets or teachers make no trade out of their proclamation, claim hospitality from the faithful only for short periods, either work with their own hands or live off what is spontaneously offered (e.g. 1 Cor 4:12; 2 Cor 11:7-9; 12:14). For Weber this is “of course. one of the chief reasons for the success of prophetic propaganda itself.”¹⁶

Weber also compares the prophet with other not dissimilar figures, such as the lawgiver¹⁷ and the teacher, especially the teacher of ethics.¹⁸ This latter figure can in fact fuse with the prophet, especially when the wisdom that is taught offers a way to salvation. However, in the “pure state”, as it were, the prophet is distinguished by the fact that the truth proclaimed has its source in revelation received personally.

PROPHET AND COMMUNITY

We have seen that, for Weber, every charismatic leader gathers a community. So the prophet normally has a group of permanent helpers or co-workers.¹⁹ What characterises such people and distinguishes them from members of a guild or official hierarchy is their purely personal link with the prophet. These personal followers or companions actively collaborate in the prophet’s own mission and often possess charismatic qualities of their own.

In addition to this inner circle of disciples, comrades or followers, there may also be an outer circle of adherents. These latter support the prophet’s mission with accommodation, money or other services, in return for their own salvation.²⁰ In certain cases and in particular circumstances, they may come to form a coherent group or even be socialised on a permanent basis to form a community. According to Weber, such a community comes into being only in the case of prophecy (rather than with other kinds of charismatic leadership), and not in every case. When this development does take place, it is as a typical product of “routinisation.” Either the prophet or the prophet’s disciples want to ensure the continuation of the prophetic message and accompanying charismatic gifts even beyond the lifetime of the prophet or outside the range of the prophet’s personal activity. At the same time they are ensuring the continued existence of any economic benefits that may accrue for administering the prophet’s message and gifts and a monopoly of rights for those responsible for doing so. Weber labelled such a group of adherents a “congregation.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 441.

¹⁷ Ibid., 442-444.

¹⁸ Ibid., 444-446.

¹⁹ Ibid., 452.

²⁰ Ibid., 452.

SOME APPLICATIONS OF WEBER'S ANALYSIS TO CHRISTIANITY

During the 20th century, Max Weber's seminal ideas of charisma and charismatic authority have had great influence in various branches of sociology and been the subject of constant study and discussion.²¹ It was inevitable that much attention would be given to their applicability to the study of Christianity, not only in its origins, but also throughout its history. Among particular fields of research have been: the leader-disciples relationship; conditions for the emergence of charismatic movements; the type of the charismatic leader; charisma and institution; the routinisation of charisma.²²

This article addresses especially these last two subjects as linked, namely the routinisation of charisma in the religious context and its applicability to the origins and development of religious institutions in the case of Christianity.

I note first that the notion of the routinisation of charisma in general seems to have remained rather incomplete with Weber himself. Consequently, there is continuing debate about what it is and how it happens.²³ In any case, it is clear that, according to Weber, routinisation belongs to the second stage of the history of the charisma (if, in a particular instance, the history gets that far). I note further that the process of routinisation does not seem to have been regarded by Weber himself as an essentially negative development.

On the other hand, the process of routinisation is often represented in negative terms, as involving a decline or deterioration, a cooling down of inspiration, a fixing of original spontaneity. So, it seems, after the "first fine careless rapture", things settle down again into the everyday round, even if that round has now been changed through the impact of the charismatic leader. The more brilliant is that leader's star the greyer the aftermath. The contrast may feel like this:²⁴

The charismatic man breaks into reality like a ray of sunshine into a dusky and depressing day. He gives meaning to many lives; he offers, receives and spreads love; everything, absolutely everything seems to be changed in the twinkling of an eye. But alas, not for long. The leader must die and disappear and the shadows at once close in. Love degenerates into law; the direct apprehension of God becomes dry-as-dust theology; the place of worship is usurped by dead ritual. In the end, the name of the prophet is merely a label which covers – misleadingly – a structure opposed to everything he felt, thought and longed for when he prayed.

In fact the formation of the earliest church has often been represented along the above lines in something like the following way. Jesus of Nazareth was a highly gifted prophet. He quickly became a charismatic leader, as his charisma was recognised by a band of disciples and companions, who shared in aspects of his mission, and by a wider circle of adherents, who supported Jesus and his immediate followers. He began to have an

²¹ Among recent studies, see Hubert Treiber, "Anmerkungen zu Max Webers Charismakonzep", *Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte*, 11 (2005): 195-213.

²² See Ouedraogo, "La réception de la sociologie du charisme de M. Weber": 147-150, with bibliographies.

²³ See, for instance, Moriyuki Abukama, "Routinization of Charisma in Early Christianity", online at: http://www.ne.jp/asahi/moriyuki/abukama/moriyukis/christ/rout_chri.html (accessed 12 April 2012); Michael A. Toth, "Toward a Theory of the Routinization of Charisma" (April, 1972), online at: <http://web.pdx.edu/~tothm/vita/index.htm> (accessed 12 April 2012).

²⁴ Werner Stark, *The Sociology of Religion: A Study of Christendom*, 5 volumes (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 1966-1972), vol. V, 366-367.

impact upon surrounding society, which many of the ruling classes perceived as a threat. His death by crucifixion initially threatened to disperse those who had believed in him. However, within a few days some of those closest to him began to claim that they had seen him alive, and they even began to work miracles of the type that he had himself performed. Jesus' erstwhile followers and adherents accepted that his charisma had been transferred, at least in the interim, to his apostles. Their reawakened faith was for a time sustained by the expectation that he would soon return. As this hope was longer and longer delayed, the leadership assured the continuation of the community by introducing institutional structures: office-bearers, rules, a founding story and commentary on it, sacramental rites that celebrated and strengthened the community's identity, and so forth. In other words, Jesus' charisma was thoroughly routinised. The dull everyday had replaced the blaze of prophetic newness. On the other hand, at least on an optimistic view, this routinisation permitted the survival, albeit in reduced and secondary form, of some vestiges of what Jesus had come into the world to proclaim.

A narrative of this sort is frequently implicit or explicit in contemporary accounts of the origins of Christianity. (Readers will readily think of examples they have encountered.) At any rate, it is often assumed that the institutional features of the Church – law, sacraments, office, and so forth – are secondary developments that came along only after Jesus left the scene and really in contrast or even opposition to his own message. They are the result, in effect, of “routinisation”, understood in a negative way. As a consequence, such institutional features are regarded as, at best, useful, may be, for getting across what is primary, namely the message of Jesus, but liable to get in the way of that message and in any case dispensable. At worst, they are a betrayal of what he stood for. This idea has, I believe, been very influential in the 20th century and it has exercised a powerful hold over the Christian imagination.

A CRITIQUE

For myself, I believe that the study of Christian origins reveals a rather different reality that does not at all correspond to the narrative just given above and its presuppositions. On the contrary, I find that the institutional elements in Christianity are not secondary but primary and existed from the beginning and even before the beginning. They are to be found, even though in a simple form, in the original apostolic band itself and were extended to the wider community as it came into existence. In that process of extension, they inevitably became more complex, but they did not originate as secondary developments introduced where they were previously absent. Furthermore, these institutional features can be related to structures found in contemporary Judaism, so cannot be dismissed as theologically motivated inventions on the part of the canonical writer.

The application of Weber's notion of “routinisation” to the origins of Christianity has been challenged, notably by Werner Stark, on theological grounds. It could also be criticised as resting on a romantic view of history. In fact, however, certain aspects of Weber's theory can be applied to Jesus himself, to his disciples and to the first believers. On the other hand, they have to be applied carefully and with discrimination. For they do not provide a complete explanation of the data as represented in the New Testament.

1. JESUS

There is no doubt that Jesus himself – whatever else he may have been – was a prophet. The title is applied to him in the gospels, which also compare him implicitly to the Biblical prophets Elijah and Elisha (thus Luke 7:11-17). John P. Meier does not hesitate to declare:

... Jesus saw himself as an eschatological prophet and miracle worker along the lines of Elijah. He was not a systematic teacher, scribe, or rabbi; he was a religious charismatic. Now it is of the nature of a religious charismatic to derive his or her teaching not from traditional channels of authority (e.g. Scripture, law, custom, liturgical or political office) or from detailed logical argumentation. The religious charismatic claims, implicitly or explicitly, to know directly and intuitively what God's will is in a particular situation or on a particular question.²⁵

That being said, it would be misleading to imagine that Jesus the charismatic prophet was any sort of antinomian or anarchist. The same John P. Meier also states: “the historical Jesus is the halakic Jesus.” From examination of his teaching on divorce, oaths and the Sabbath, it is clear to Meier that

Jesus was neither a 1st-century Jewish hippie nor a Cynic philosopher nor a wild-eyed apocalyptic prophet who had no time for or interest in the details of *hālākā*. Instead, ... we find a truly Jewish Jesus arguing with the halakic opinions of various Jewish groups that, like himself, were competing for the adherence of ordinary Jews attached to no one party.²⁶

2. JESUS' DISCIPLES

The group of Jesus' own disciples as portrayed in the gospels exhibits a number of features that Weber attributes to the immediate companions and followers of the charismatic leader and in particular the prophet. Their personal association with him, either explicit or implicit in the context, is fundamental: his person and their response to him determine the existence and nature of the relationship. Further, according to the gospels, the disciples shared in Jesus' work even in his lifetime. Suffice it to refer here to the apostolic mission in Matthew 10 and parallels, in which Jesus sends out his disciples to preach that “the kingdom of heaven is close at hand”, to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons: in other words, to do what Jesus himself has been doing.²⁷

Jesus' disciples are distinct from, yet comparable with, the disciples of John the Baptist or of the Pharisees (cf. Matt 9:14; Mark 2:18; Luke 5:33; also Luke 11:1). Instead of having a fixed seat, however, the group was itinerant. Although Jesus' disciples were later described as “uneducated, common men” (Acts 4:13), this does not mean that they were

²⁵ John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. IV, *Law and Love* (The Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 415 – the reader will not have failed to notice the echoes of Weber in these lines.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 296-297. The question of Jesus and purity laws is much more complex. For Meier (352-405), the long section of controversies in Mark 7:1-23 does not come from Jesus himself (with the probable exception of the logion in vv. 10-12). This might be disputed, but it is not our business here.

²⁷ That Jesus had disciples and that at least some were sent out on mission to Israel may safely be taken as historical, according to John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol. III, *Companions and Competitors* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York, etc.: Doubleday, 2001), 41-47, 128-163.

ignoramus, only that they did not fit into any recognised system of doctrinal competence.

The group of Jesus' disciples was not, however, characterised only by emotional attachment to Jesus. If one reads the gospels attentively, and especially against the background of contemporary Judaism, one finds a number of important institutional elements already existing in the group in Jesus' lifetime. If they form, in Weber's terms, a "charismatic community", that does not mean they are simply a loosely constituted group of enthusiasts. For one thing, they are in a true sense disciples, distinct from the crowds that gather to listen and watch and who are even said to "follow" him (e.g. Matt 4:25). Now, in any society, the relation of teacher and disciples is always structured and not simply a matter of personal empathy.

Meier draws attention to the remarkable particularity of the use of the term "disciple" (Gk. *mathêtes*) in the Gospels and Acts, although it is not used of the followers of Christ outside the New Testament. The corresponding Hebrew term (*talmîd*) is almost absent from the Old Testament and is not found at Qumran. On the other hand, it occurs frequently in the Rabbinical tradition. In fact, the nearest parallel to the gospels' use of the term is to be found in Josephus, in passages that seem to reflect the master-disciples relationships typical of Greek philosophical schools.²⁸

Jesus' disciples did not merely collect oracular utterances from the prophet. They received a tradition from the master and were expected to hand it on. This tradition is explicitly cited by Paul, who attributes it either to "the Lord" (1 Cor 7:10 – contrast 7:12; 11:23) or else, implicitly, to the first disciples (1 Cor 15:3). The importance placed on oral teaching – which did not, of course, exclude written texts but did not rely on them exclusively or even primarily – aligns the disciples and their immediate successors with the Essenes and also with the Rabbinic tradition.²⁹ They may have had comparable methods of passing on the tradition and assuring its accuracy.³⁰ At any rate, it would, be a mistake to imagine that the transmission of Jesus' teaching went uncontrolled.³¹

Jesus demanded total renunciation from those who would follow him (cf. Matt 19:21, 27; Mark 10:21, 28; Luke 18:22, 28). While they were with Jesus, they shared a common economic life: Judas, we are told, kept the common purse (John 12:6 and 13:29). It is obviously possible to think here of the "charismatic community" of the leader's immediate companions and followers, as described by Weber, living together and sharing everything that came to the group. On the other hand, such a community does not have to be spontaneous and unorganised but may live within quite precise structures that govern common life and possessions. For we know of contemporary Jewish groups, notably the

²⁸ Ibid., 42-45.

²⁹ See Etienne Nodet and Justin Taylor, *The Origins of Christianity: An Exploration* (A Michael Glazier Book; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998), 36-39.

³⁰ This is the famous argument of Birger Gerhardsson in his 1961 Uppsala doctoral thesis, *Memory and Manuscript: Oral Tradition and Written Transmission in Rabbinic Judaism and Early Christianity*, and subsequent publications.

³¹ Thus James D.G. Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*. Vol. I, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), 192-210.

Essenes, that practised community of life and goods, as described by Philo and Josephus and prescribed by the Dead Sea Scrolls.³²

Within the body of Jesus' followers, it is possible to distinguish the inner circle of the Twelve, and a wider group (cf. the Seventy Two of Luke 10:1-16, or the disciples who leave Jesus as opposed to the Twelve who remain with him, according to John 6:66-68). Certain followers of Jesus, such as Martha and Mary of Bethany (Luke 10:38-42; John 11:1ff), did not leave everything, but showed their devotion by giving hospitality. Along with the women mentioned in Luke 8:1-3, they supported Jesus and his disciples economically. They thus exhibit certain characteristics that Weber attributes to the congregation of adherents of the prophet. On the other hand, at least some of them, Mary Magdalene in particular, appear to have been so close to the inner circle as to be part of it, at least for many purposes.³³

3. THE FIRST BELIEVERS

The early chapters of the Book of Acts show the way of life and the early growth in Jerusalem of a community of believers in the risen Jesus. Immediately after the Ascension, Luke portrays them as consisting of several recognisable sub-groups: Jesus' original disciples, some women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, and his "brothers" (Acts 1:12-14). To these, perhaps, we should add adherents, who attached themselves to one or other group. A little later, the whole company is said to number about 120 (Acts 1:15), as it proceeds to replace Judas in the company of the Twelve.

The Twelve, and especially Peter and John, emerge as the leaders of the group. Their chief activity is to "witness" to the Resurrection of Jesus. A little later, the community institutes a new office, that of the Seven (Acts 6:1-6). The group's community of life and goods is described (2:42-47; 4:32-35). These narratives and descriptions should not be dismissed as hagiographical idealisation. They can be related to institutional features that are found also in certain Jewish groups we know about from elsewhere and characterise the religious culture from which Christianity emerged.

Acts 4:32 uses of the community a Greek term that in this context is highly appropriate: *plêthos*.³⁴ This word is usually translated by a general term, and not infrequently by "crowd." In Greek it can have the particular sense of a group that is capable of being counted, and therefore not simply a crowd. In Luke's Gospel, 19:37, narrating Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, the evangelist writes of "the *plêthos* of the apostles", who are implicitly contrasted with the "crowd" (*ochlos*) mentioned in v. 39. The word *plêthos* can carry a juridical or even political sense, such as "corporation" or "(legislative) assembly." It does not always have this meaning in Acts, but I believe it does so in 4:32. It clearly has this meaning in 6:1-6, where it designates the community that convokes the

³² See Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit* (§§85-87); Josephus, *Jewish War* (II, e.g. §§122, 127); the *Damascus Document* (cf. CD 14,11b-16); the *Qumran Community Rule* (cf. 1QS 6,19-22).

³³ On the "unclear boundaries of discipleship", compare Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, III, 73-80 (women?) and 80-82 (supporters of Jesus who did not leave their homes).

³⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Justin Taylor, "The 'Plêthos' of Jesus' Disciples", in Simon C. Mimouni and F. Stanley Jones (eds), *Le judéo-christianisme dans tous ses états* (Actes du Colloque de Jérusalem 6-10 juillet 1998; Paris: Cerf, 2001), 67-74.

Twelve and demands a solution to the problem affecting the Hebrews and the Hellenists, then accepts the proposal of the Twelve and chooses Seven who are presented to the apostles, for laying on of hands. Incidentally, in the Septuagint, *plêthos* can translate the Hebrew word *rôb*, an expression that is used at Qumran to designate the qualified members of the community.³⁵

In the aftermath of Pentecost, Luke gives a cameo portrait of the community (Acts 2:42-47). V. 44 clearly shows them practising a common life – very likely living together or very close by – and a community of goods: “And all who believed were together (literally, “in the same [place]”) and had all things in common.” The following verse states that “they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need.” This way of life can be regarded as an extension or continuation of that lived by Jesus with his immediate disciples.

In Acts 4:32, on the other hand, the community is said to be “of one heart and soul.” By thus emphasising its psychological unity, the text may imply that the community’s members are no longer living together; in other words, community of life has changed its mode, no doubt owing to increased numbers. If that is so, we should expect a different mode also of community of goods. In fact, the same verse goes on to tell us, that “no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common.” The expression “everything in common” is repeated from 2:44; but is now qualified by the preceding phrase, “no one said that any of the things which he possessed was his own.” As described here, community of goods means, not pooling one’s possessions, but being prepared to put them at the disposition of others and share with them. Nevertheless, vv. 34-35 go on to state that “as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles’ feet; and distribution was made to each as any had need.” We seem to be again in the world of 2:45; but now the anonymous “they” who distributed the proceeds of the sales have become “the apostles.”

How literally should we take the “as many as”? Vv. 36-37 give an example of one who did, the Levite Barnabas. As for the story of Ananias and Sapphira in 5:1-11, Peter’s reproach to Ananias in vv. 3-4 – and especially his use of the expression *nosphisasthai*, literally “embezzle” – fits best a practice such as that found in the Qumran Community Rule, where those who have made a first commitment to the community hand over their property, which is, however, kept apart and not added to the common goods until the final commitment.³⁶ Peter appears to be telling the couple that their property remained – at least provisionally – theirs to claim; their fault was to have declared they were bringing all their property into the community, whereas they were keeping some of it back. In this context, their action would amount to an embezzlement of the community’s property.

It is both difficult and unnecessary to harmonise all that is written in Acts about the community of goods in the Jerusalem church. But that is also true of all that is written

³⁵ As in 1QS 5:2, which speaks of “the *rôb* of the men of the Community (*yhd*) who hold fast to the covenant. According to their order shall go forth the determination of the lot about everything concerning Torah, property and judgment...”

³⁶ B.J. Capper, “The Interpretation of Acts 5,4”, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 19 (1983): 117-131.

about the Essene community of goods described by Philo and Josephus and prescribed in the Qumran texts.³⁷ What we have in all these cases is a set of variations on a theme.

Was there a rite of initiation into the group? Jesus himself and at least his first disciples had undergone the baptism of John.³⁸ Was this true of all? The Gospels do not tell us. In any case, the baptism of John should be seen, not just as a prophetic gesture that marked a moment of repentance, but as part of a course of conversion and initiation that has analogies with the Essenes and Qumran – and also with the so-called “proselyte baptism” of rabbinical Judaism. According to John’s Gospel (3:22; 4:1-2), Jesus and his disciples were “baptisers.” The Synoptic Gospels are silent on this point; I do not interpret this silence as necessarily meaning that Jesus abandoned the practice. At any rate, the Book of Acts reveals the existence of “the baptism of John” at Alexandria and Antioch (Acts 18:15 and 19:3).

The Book of Acts 2:41 clearly shows that, from the beginning, entry into the community is by way of baptism. In v. 38, in reaction to Peter’s address at Pentecost, the crowd asks, “What shall we do?” Peter replies: “Repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” The formula used – with the important addition of “in the name of Jesus Christ” – is identical with that used about the baptism preached by John in Luke 3:3; this implies a continuity of rite, which acquires a new significance. Indeed it is difficult to imagine Peter inventing a new rite or reintroducing one that had been abandoned by Jesus. For, as a general rule, rites tend to be stable, and a change of rite or the introduction of a new one is usually contested – and there is no trace of any contestation of baptism in the first generation. The word “repent” or “repentance” does not signify a merely interior attitude. In a Jewish context, such things do not count: a change of heart has to be shown by a change of behaviour – as John insists of those who come to him for baptism in Luke 3:7-14.

Once admitted to the post-Easter community, the new members follow its way of life, which is summed up in Acts 2:42: “And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” – four elements that are taken up again in the following verses.

The “breaking of bread” is a ritual practice that is in clear continuity with that of Jesus. The common life that Jesus led with his disciples included common meals, which would have constituted the central act of their common life. The Gospels do not set out to inform us directly about them. On the other hand, those narratives in which Jesus takes bread, pronounces a benediction or thanksgiving, breaks the bread and distributes it, seem to indicate a regular ritual that might be capable of conveying more than one meaning (e.g. Wisdom feeding her devotees; the eschatological ingathering of God’s

³⁷ See further B.J. Capper, “Community of Goods in the Early Jerusalem Church”, *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, II, 26.2 (1995), 1730-1774, esp. 1739f; Justin Taylor, “The Community of Goods among the First Christians and among the Essenes”, in David Goodblick, Avital Pinnick and Daniel E. Schwartz (ed.), *Historical Perspectives from the Hasmoneans to Bar Kokhba in Light of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium of the Orion Center for the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Associated Literature, 27-31 January, 1999; Leiden/Boston/Köln: Brill, 2001), 147-161.

³⁸ The historicity of Jesus’ baptism by John is defended by John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*. Vol II, *Mentor, Message and Miracles* (The Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York, etc.: Doubleday, 1994), 100-105.

people). At the Last Supper, the words of Jesus identify the broken bread as his body, the wine of the “blessing cup” as his blood. He also said, according to Paul and Luke, “Do this in memory of me.” In other words, the familiar rite becomes a “memorial” of Jesus. There are important analogies of such a ritual meal both among the Essenes and at Qumran and also in rabbinical Judaism.³⁹

One fascinating episode is the night vigil in an upper room in Troas recounted in Acts 20:7-12, during which Paul speaks at length – probably commenting the Scriptures – and which culminates in the “breaking of bread.” It is remarkable that there is no mention of Jesus and no reason for thinking that these people have just adopted the rite of the “breaking of bread” at the instigation of Paul. Rather, Paul is attempting to Christianise a group of Jews, along with their religious practices, which included the “breaking of bread.”

Therefore, I would argue, we have precedents and parallels within early Judaism for the way of life of the early Jerusalem community, namely institutional structures that define and develop the original project of living together and having all things in common.⁴⁰

Of course, the way of life of the first community of believers in Jerusalem according to the Acts of the Apostles involves more or less complex forms of community of goods, initiation, ritual meals, office – and no doubt law, though we hear very little of that. But this more structured way of life is in continuity with the common life of Jesus with his disciples and an extension of it, rather than an innovation arising out of the need to keep the community together after Jesus does not return. The institutional features of the earliest Church are already to be found – though no doubt in a more simple form – in the way of life that Jesus led with his first followers and companions. So there is a structural continuity between the original group of Jesus’ disciples and the later community of believers.

CONCLUSION

Weber’s model of “routinisation of charisma” probably can be applied to certain aspects of the origins of Christianity. On the other hand, the way that model is often understood and applied to the origins of Christianity – as a process of degeneration and even a betrayal, though perhaps an unavoidable betrayal, of Jesus and his message – is not adequate to the New Testament data. Furthermore, it seems to misrepresent Weber’s own thought. In particular, the institutional features of the Church should not be regarded as secondary. Rite, office, tradition belong to the very origins of Christianity and were inherited from the original Jewish environment from which Christianity emerged. Indeed, the Christian gospel can be seen as breathing new life and meaning into existing structures. So, Christian baptism is still a rite of initiation, as at Qumran, but is now a mystical participation in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ (cf. Romans 6:1-11).

³⁹ Justin Taylor, “Bread that is Broken – and Unbroken”, in Zuleika Rodgers with Margaret Daly-Denton and Anne Fitzpatrick McKinley (ed.), *A Wandering Galilean: Essays in Honour of Seán Freyne* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism, 132; Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2009), 525-537.

⁴⁰ The argument here converges with that of James Tunstead Burtchaell, *From Synagogue to Church: Public Services and Offices in the Earliest Christian Communities* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992), that the first Christians continued the offices of the synagogue.

The Eucharist is still a ritual meal reserved to initiates, but is now a sharing in the blood and the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:16). Perhaps the emergence of Christianity involved not simply the “routinisation of charisma”, but also the “charismatisation of routine.”

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