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The Accusation of Heresy in Jewish-Christian-Gnostic Polemics

Abstract: The article explores the semantic and historical tension between heresy and orthodoxy. It seeks also an answer to the question whether there were any preserved examples and evidence of accusations of heresy in the polemics between representatives of Judaism, Christianity and Gnosticism in time of late antiquity.

Keywords: heresy, polemics, late antiquity, gnosticism, Nag Hammadi library

Oskarżenie o herezję w polemikach żydowsko-chrześcijańsko-gnostyckich

Streszczenie: Artykuł podejmuje zagadnienie semantycznego i historycznego napięcia między herezją a ortodoksją. Szuka również odpowiedzi na pytanie, czy istniały literackie przykłady oskarżeń o herezję w polemikach między przedstawicielami judaizmu, chrześcijaństwa i gnostycyzmu w czasach późnego antyku.

Słowa kluczowe: herezja, polemika, późny antyk, gnostycyzm, Biblioteka z Nag Hammadi

Introduction - Is it good to be labeled a heretic or orthodox?

Nobody wants to consider themselves a heretic, perhaps only after some further thought, or with some reservations. Surprisingly, it seems to be similar with orthodoxy, this concept is considered positive only after some reflection. Chesterton pointed this out

very clearly at the very beginning of his book entitled *Heretics* from 1905¹. This is not a simple distinction that orders the world. Although they should be quite typical evaluative terms that, in their own way, help to organize the world of religious values, when you look closely at specific historical periods, these terms have always been used to divide groups of people, and this is still the case today².

And this division is quite intriguing - because it is not a simple division into “us, our own people” and “aliens, strangers”. In the first perspective, heresy and orthodoxy concern religious trends that are close to each other. If anyone were asked about the heresy in Christianity, it is unlikely that they would point to Mahayana Buddhism. The answer would probably be that it is about Arianism, Hussitism, or the like. Hence, it can be assumed that this division boils down to the distinction between “us” and “those dangerously similar to us.”

In this text, an attempt will be made to answer the question whether there were accusations of heresy in the relations between Jews, Christians and Gnostics. Another question needs to be asked about the purpose of calling somebody a heretic and about the consequences of that naming. Therefore, the turning point for this search is the time when Gnosticism, Christianity and Judaism entered into more serious reactions with one another, when they entered into ‘discussion’ with each other. This analysis will be limited to late antiquity.

1. Outline of the definition – “heresy” and “orthodoxy”

To begin these considerations, it is essential to focus on explaining important concepts. The original and historically older is the concept of heresy. It comes from the Greek *αἵρεσις* (translit: *haireisis*), which had numerous meanings in ancient Greek: among others: taking, especially of a town; choice; election; preference; philosophical system; party; it is therefore connected with the process of choosing – and the concept did not have a pejorative meaning (Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon).

¹ “Nothing more strangely indicates an enormous and silent evil of modern society than the extraordinary use which is made nowadays of the word “orthodox.” In former days the heretic was proud of not being a heretic. It was the kingdoms of the world and the police and the judges who were heretics. He was orthodox. He had no pride in having rebelled against them; they had rebelled against him. The armies with their cruel security, the kings with their cold faces, the decorous processes of State, the reasonable processes of law--all these like sheep had gone astray. The man was proud of being orthodox, was proud of being right. If he stood alone in a howling wilderness he was more than a man; he was a church. He was the center of the universe; it was round him that the stars swung. All the tortures torn out of forgotten hells could not make him admit that he was heretical. But a few modern phrases have made him boast of it. He says, with a conscious laugh, “I suppose I am very heretical,” and looks round for applause. The word “heresy” not only means no longer being wrong; it practically means being clear-headed and courageous. The word “orthodoxy” not only no longer means being right; it practically means being wrong. All this can mean one thing, and one thing only.” Chesterton 1905, 11-12.

² An equally interesting reflection on heresy was written by the Polish philosopher L. Kołakowski. It was published in Polish: Kołakowski 2010, and some parts in English – Komorowska and Żuk 2020, 1059-1077.

‘Heresy’ was understood in this way not only by classical Greek, but also by Flavius Josephus, the Jewish historian. Josephus used this term for theological schools: Essenes, Pharisees and Sadducees (Josephus, *The Wars of the Jews*, II 8. Baumgarten 2016, 261-272). Similarly, in the Acts of the Apostles, e.g. 15:5: “some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees” (τῆς αἰρέσεως τῶν Φαρισαίων), “the Nazarene sect” (Ναζωραίων αἰρέσεως, 24:5). It must be noted, however, that it still was not a pejorative term. Therefore, Josephus compared the Pharisees to the Stoics and the Essenes to the adepts of Pythagorean way of life .

However, for understanding heresy in the times of early Christian thought, extracts from the apostolic letters are more important. In 2 Peter 2:1: “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies” or 1 Corinthians 11:19: „, for there must be factions (αἵρεσις) among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized”. We see that heresy is understood here as a clearly harmful division introduced by those whose teaching and authority are not rooted in an (as yet undefined) orthodoxy. In these texts, heresy takes on a clearly pejorative character.

Orthodoxy (ὀρθοδοξία) as a term opposite to heresy was not coined until the 4th century. It is a compound derived from ὀρθός orthós - right, reliable, δόξα dóxa - faith, glory/fame. It does not appear at all in the NT writings, nor in the Greek Jewish writings used by early Christians. The concept of orthodoxy only appears relatively frequently in the literature from the 4th century onwards, when Christianity became the leading religion of the Mediterranean world and the Roman Empire.

After these explanations, the presentation will focus on the following issues. In discussing the Jewish identification of the heretic, the analysis will look at the interpretation of the Amidah’s 12th blessing entitled *Birkat ha-minim* (i.e. Blessing of Heretics). The literature of one of the most important heresiologists, namely Irenaeus of Lyons, will be helpful in identifying the heretic in the Christian version. At the end, an attempt will be made to identify who the heretic was for the Gnostic, using the treatises contained in the Coptic Library of the Nag Hammadi.

2. Jew vs. Christian and Gnostic

It is worth mentioning at the outset that the developing Judaism produced various currents. We can mention, for example, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes or Rabbinic Judaism, Talmudic Judaism and also Messianic Judaism³. Until the destruction of the Temple, there were conflicts and disputes within Judaism as a whole. It was only that catastrophe that

³ There is a lot of literature on the subject, for example: Goodman 2009, 202-213; Schwartz 2014; Schiffman 2003; Grabbe 2010; Neusner 2002; Cohn-Sherbok 2000.

led to significant changes. The aim of the efforts made was to preserve Israel's identity. The hitherto multi-ethnicity and diversity began to be seen as an obstacle and a threat, which ultimately led to an attempt to clearly delineate who was truly Jewish and who was heretical.

Judaism developed its own term, other than the Greek, for those who are heretics, i.e. "like us but not with us". In the circle of Jewish scholars gathered at Yavne after the destruction of the Second Temple, there originated the commandment to recite the "Eighteen Blessings" every day. Among them the twelfth blessing was called *birkat ha-minim* ("blessing of heretics"). And this is probably the most famous text that speaks of heretics in ancient Judaism, especially in the context of other religious currents, most probably Christianity and Gnosticism (Cohen 2012, 44-70).

This curse essentially has two types of versions – a shorter Babylonian version and a longer Palestinian one (Ehrlich and Langer 2005, 63-112). The longer version presents as follows:

For the **apostates / *meshumaddim*** let there be no hope,
and uproot the kingdom of arrogance, speedily and in our days.

May the **Nazarenes / *nocrim* / *ha-Notzrim*** and the **sectarians / heretics / *minim*** perish
as in a moment.

Let them be blotted out of the book of life, and not be written together with the righteous.
You are praised, O Lord, who subdues the arrogant.

(Allison 2011, 397; Marcus 2009, 529; Hakola 2005, 46)

This text is directed against the *meshummadim* apostates. In brief, it can be pointed out that the apostates were Jews who did not keep the Mosaic Law. The referenced Palestinian version of this blessing uses two hostile terms: heretics (*minim*) and Nazarenes (*nocrim*). In view of the fact that the text was most likely written in a rabbinic environment – *minim* heretics were those who opposed the Pharisaic (rabbinic) teaching. It seems that in the area of Palestine it was necessary to formulate a separate phrase against the Nazarenes, i.e. the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, since the Christians living there originated from both hellenism and Judaism. According to the rabbis the Judeo-Christians were heretics because they betrayed the faith of their fathers. Pagan-Christians were not heretics because they had never adhered to rabbinic Judaism, yet identified with those who were considered heretics by the rabbis. It was therefore necessary to clearly specify against whom *Birkat ha-minim* is directed. It includes both Gentile and Judeo-Christians.

How a heretic is to be treated is illustrated very vividly by Tosefta *Hullin*, which points most generally to the prohibition of all commercial and social contact with *minim*. It says that meat, bread and wine from *minim* is abominable and unclean, books are impious, and their children are bastards unworthy of giving education.

Meat that is found in the hand of a star-worshipper is permitted to benefit from; in the hand of a heretic it is forbidden to benefit from; from the house of a heretic, behold, it is the meat of the sacrifices of the dead, as it is said, "The slaughter of the heretic for the sake of star-worship, and a their bread is the bread of star-worshippers, and their wine is

the wine of libation, and their produce is untithed, and their books are the books of sorcery, and their children are *mamzers* [bastards], and we do not sell to them, and we do not buy from them, and we do not marry their daughters, and we do not give to them, we do not teach their children an occupation, and we do not [accept] treatment from them, either monetary treatment or medical treatment” (Tosefta *Chullin* 2,6).

At the stage when both versions of *birkath haMinim* were probably being created, there was little distinction within Judaism between Judeo-Christianity, Gentile-Christianity and Gnosticism with exclusively Judaic roots and Christianized Gnosticism. This, in turn, meant that Gnosticism was arguably identified with the *minim* and *nocrim* heresy, but there is no obvious evidence for this.

To sum up, for a Jew a heretic was a Judeo-Christian, a Gentile-Christian and, most likely, a heretic must also have been a Gnostic and any Jew who did not keep the Mosaic Law. No relations were to be maintained with such people.

3. Christian vs Jew and Gnostic

The early Church was also not uniform and consisted of local churches, Christian communities. Although the early Christians had a strong conviction of belonging to one single community, the surviving texts indicate that there were some relationships maintained through personal meetings and correspondence. In the letters of the apostolic fathers, including Cyprian of Carthage and Ignatius of Antioch, the first exhortations to maintain unity in the faith appear. This was due, among other things, to the previously described division into Judeo-Christians and Gentile-Christians (e.g. *On the Unity of the Church*, Cyprian 1990; *The Epistle of Ignatius to the Philadelphians*).

Consequently, the relationship to the Jewish religion was of particular importance to the emerging Christianity. However, in the early Christian texts, there is no term suggesting that Jews are heretics. Over time, hostile, anti-Jewish rhetoric started to appear. Jews were called ‘hypocrites’ by *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas* named them ‘the previous people of God’ and stated that Jews do not understand the Scripture; the account of *Martyrdom of Polycarp* suggested that Jews were helping the Romans to persecute Christians, and the *Epistle to Diogenetus* referred to Jews as thoughtless and erring, ritually scrupulous and conceited people. These terms were finally and emphatically articulated by Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho*. However, the Jews were not accused of heresy *per se* by the early Christians writers. Only later, in Augustine and Jerome texts appeared a suggestion that there was a great similarity between Jews and Christian heretics.

This information allows us to conclude that Christians in ancient times did not regard Jews as heretics understood as ‘dangerously similar to us’.

The case is completely different in the Christian-Gnostic polemic. Essentially, it can be summarized in the prototypical views of Irenaeus of Lyons, the first great Christian heresiologist, who wrote *On the Detection and Overthrow of the So-Called Gnosis*, which is usually cited as - *nomen omen* - *Adversus haereses*, 'Against Heresies' [AH].

However, the issue of defining heresy was not at the center of Irenaeus' concern. Nevertheless, he presents a certain framework of views, opposition to which equates, in his view, with heresy:

These have all declared to us that there is one God, Creator of heaven and earth, announced by the law and the prophets; and one Christ the Son of God. If any one do not agree to these truths, he despises the companions of the Lord; nay more, he despises Christ Himself the Lord; yea, he despises the Father also, and stands self-condemned, resisting and opposing his own salvation, as is the case with all heretics (AH III, 1, 2).

The point of Irenaeus' attack is not primarily the heretics' refusal to recognize certain Christian ideas, but their interpretation incompatible with the tradition going back to the apostles. Heretics and heresy itself, however, are not for Irenaeus a definite whole; on the contrary, he emphasized its diversity as opposed to Christian uniformity:

Let us now look at the inconsistent opinions of those heretics (for there are some two or three of them), how they do not agree in treating the same points, but alike, in things and names, set forth opinions mutually discordant. The first of them, Valentinus, who adapted the principles of the heresy called Gnostic to the peculiar character of his own school, taught as follows... (AH I, 11, 1)

Irenaeus does not equate heresy with Gnostics; indeed, Valentinus' heresy is precisely what he describes as Gnostic. However, there is no doubt whatsoever that all Gnostics are heretics.

In short, for the early Christians, the Jews were not heretics. For Irenaeus and his successors in heresiography, a heretic is anyone who interprets Christian doctrine in his own way, without connection and communion with apostolic teaching.

4. Gnostic vs. Jew and Christian

Just as Judaism and Christianity of the Imperial era are difficult to define unambiguously, Gnosticism is incomparably more difficult to define. Gnosticism was a religious movement made up of many currents. Two main currents can be identified - Setianism and Valentinian Gnosticism - as well as a multitude of minor Gnostic schools, variously identified and named. It can be assumed simplistically that Setianism was the current originally more Judaized and Valentinianism the current that emerged as Christian and not Christianized later.

It should be noted that the main contemporary source of knowledge about Gnosticism is the Nag Hammadi Library. This is a collection of codices discovered in the middle

of the 20th century in Egypt. They are written in Coptic, the language which shows a strong dependence on Greek. Therefore, there are references to Greek *haeresis* in the Gnostic texts. This makes it possible to read certain patterns of Gnostic image of heretics.

The Valentinian *Tripartite Tractate*⁴ explicitly calls the Jews heretics. For example, the author makes this point when he mentions prophecies which, in a heretical version, circulate among the Jews, as the author points out - right up to the present day.

Their vision and their words do not differ because of the multitude of those who have given them the vision and the word. Therefore, those who have listened to what they have said concerning this do not reject any of it, but have accepted the scriptures in an altered way. By interpreting them they established many heresies which exist to the present among the Jews (TracTrip 112,14-22).

In Gnostic teaching, as in St Paul's, there appeared a division of people into pneumatics (the elite of the elect), psychics (listeners, believers) and somatics (people who have sunk too deeply into matter and are unable to hear the divine call). Those people who have access to the whole truth, i.e. orthodox Gnostics, are the spiritual, the pneumatics. In *Tripartite Tractate*, the Jews are described as those who are partly right, but nevertheless ultimately wrong because they reject Christ and are assigned to the psychics. Apostolic Christians, on the other hand, have the ability to see the truth, but at the same time need guidance in this and therefore are also classified as psychics.

The matter is more complicated when it comes to Gnostic texts that are Christian-gnostic in origin. This is the case with the treatise entitled *The Apocalypse of Peter*. The author of this work considered himself a Christian and a Gnostic at the same time. And he argued against the official Christian teaching and fought against the doctrine of the real death of the savior on the cross and its salvific significance. The view that the savior did not succumb to suffering on the cross was a part of the essence of the Gnostic message that Peter was to further propagate. The author pointed out that the teaching of the apostolic church, understood in this way, was the basis for a schism and heresy.

And the guileless, good, pure one they push to the worker of death, and to the kingdom of those who praise Christ in a restoration. And they praise the men of the propagation of falsehood, those who will come after you. And they will cleave to the name of a dead man, thinking that they will become pure. But they will become greatly defiled and they will fall into a name of error, and into the hand of an evil, cunning man and a manifold dogma, and they will be ruled heretically (Apocalypse of Peter 74,3-22).

The situation is similar in the much debated text entitled *Testimony of Truth*, of unspecified affiliation. It is also a polemical treatise. The Gnostic author polemicized not only with Christians, but also with other Gnostics. The text mentioned Valentinus, Basilides and others, whom – as we can assume – he did not consider orthodox Gnostics. The polemic shows above all that the author has treated Christians and some Gnostic heretics

⁴ All translated gnostic texts are taken from: Robinson 1996.

equally - saying of both that they accept 'death in the waters' of baptism or that they adhere to the rejected biblical law. It can therefore be assumed that he was trying to draw a sharp line between heresy and orthodoxy. For this purpose, he used, like the church writers, the invocation of Galatians 1:8, as much as the damaged text allows it to be interpreted well: his teaching, saying, "[Even if] an [angel] comes from heaven, and preaches to you beyond that which we preached to you, may he be anathema," (cf. *Ga 1:8*) not letting the [...] of the soul which [...] freedom [...]. For they are still immature [. . .] they are not able to [keep] this law which works by means of these heresies - though it is not they, but the powers of Sabaoth - by means of the [...] the doctrines [...] as they have been jealous of some [... law(s)] in Christ (TestVer 73,19-79,4).

In conclusion, from the rather limited source that is the Nag Hammadi library, a picture emerges that presents categorical uses of the term heretic. For a Gnostic, a heretic is a Jew who does not accept Gnostic truth and thus introduces divisions into the infallible Gnostic doctrine, which for the Gnostics themselves was strongly vague and mystical. A heretic is the Christian who distorts the teaching about the savior, who could not suffer bodily and physically on the cross and the Christian who believes that something other than the Gnosis is necessary to achieve salvation. But both the Jew and the Christian have a chance to turn back from their heretical path because they are psychics and not doomed hylics/somatics.

Conclusion

To answer the main question whether the Jews, the Gnostics and Christians, were 'insulting each other' by the name of heretics - the answer is a definite yes. Another question is what was the purpose of being called a heretic in the first place, and what were the consequences of using this label? First and foremost, it divided people, helping to distinguish who was 'ours' and who was 'theirs', and who to watch out for. It is worth adding that the fight against heresies, more than against heretics, gave an incredible stimulus to the development of theology in Judaism, Christianity, and presumably also in Gnosticism. And importantly, the use of the heretic-orthodox division, which began to draw a definite line in antiquity, had an incredible career in later stages of history.

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