

## Chapter XV: Progress Of The Christian Religion.--Part II.

The enfranchisement of the church from the bonds of the synagogue was a work, however, of some time and of some difficulty. The Jewish converts, who acknowledged Jesus in the character of the Messiah foretold by their ancient oracles, respected him as a prophetic teacher of virtue and religion; but they obstinately adhered to the ceremonies of their ancestors, and were desirous of imposing them on the Gentiles, who continually augmented the number of believers. These Judaizing Christians seem to have argued with some degree of plausibility from the divine origin of the Mosaic law, and from the immutable perfections of its great Author. They affirmed, that if the Being, who is the same through all eternity, had designed to abolish those sacred rites which had served to distinguish his chosen people, the repeal of them would have been no less clear and solemn than their first promulgation: that, instead of those frequent declarations, which either suppose or assert the perpetuity of the Mosaic religion, it would have been represented as a provisional scheme intended to last only to the coming of the Messiah, who should instruct mankind in a more perfect mode of faith and of worship: [15] that the Messiah himself, and his disciples who conversed with him on earth, instead of authorizing by their example the most minute observances of the Mosaic law, [16] would have published to the world the abolition of those useless and obsolete ceremonies, without suffering Christianity to remain during so many years obscurely confounded among the sects of the Jewish church. Arguments like these appear to have been used in the defence of the expiring cause of the

Mosaic law; but the industry of our learned divines has abundantly explained the ambiguous language of the Old Testament, and the ambiguous conduct of the apostolic teachers. It was proper gradually to unfold the system of the gospel, and to pronounce, with the utmost caution and tenderness, a sentence of condemnation so repugnant to the inclination and prejudices of the believing Jews.

[Footnote 15: These arguments were urged with great ingenuity by the Jew Orobio, and refuted with equal ingenuity and candor by the Christian Limborch. See the *Amica Collatio*, (it well deserves that name,) or account of the dispute between them.]

[Footnote 16: *Jesus... circumciscus erat; cibis utebatur Judaicis; vestitu simili; purgatos scabie mittebat ad sacerdotes; Paschata et alios dies festos religiose observabat: Si quos sanavit sabbatho, ostendit non tantum ex lege, sed et exceptis sententiis, talia opera sabbatho non interdicta. Grotius de Veritate Religionis Christianae, l. v. c. 7.* A little afterwards, (c. 12,) he expatiates on the condescension of the apostles.]

The history of the church of Jerusalem affords a lively proof of the necessity of those precautions, and of the deep impression which the Jewish religion had made on the minds of its sectaries. The first fifteen bishops of Jerusalem were all circumcised Jews; and the congregation over which they presided united the law of Moses with the doctrine of Christ. [17] It was natural that the primitive tradition of a

church which was founded only forty days after the death of Christ, and was governed almost as many years under the immediate inspection of his apostle, should be received as the standard of orthodoxy. [18] The distant churches very frequently appealed to the authority of their venerable Parent, and relieved her distresses by a liberal contribution of alms. But when numerous and opulent societies were established in the great cities of the empire, in Antioch, Alexandria, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome, the reverence which Jerusalem had inspired to all the Christian colonies insensibly diminished. The Jewish converts, or, as they were afterwards called, the Nazarenes, who had laid the foundations of the church, soon found themselves overwhelmed by the increasing multitudes, that from all the various religions of polytheism enlisted under the banner of Christ: and the Gentiles, who, with the approbation of their peculiar apostle, had rejected the intolerable weight of the Mosaic ceremonies, at length refused to their more scrupulous brethren the same toleration which at first they had humbly solicited for their own practice. The ruin of the temple of the city, and of the public religion of the Jews, was severely felt by the Nazarenes; as in their manners, though not in their faith, they maintained so intimate a connection with their impious countrymen, whose misfortunes were attributed by the Pagans to the contempt, and more justly ascribed by the Christians to the wrath, of the Supreme Deity. The Nazarenes retired from the ruins of Jerusalem [18] to the little town of Pella beyond the Jordan, where that ancient church languished above sixty years in solitude and obscurity. [19] They still enjoyed the comfort of making frequent and devout visits to the Holy City, and the hope of being one

day restored to those seats which both nature and religion taught them to love as well as to revere. But at length, under the reign of Hadrian, the desperate fanaticism of the Jews filled up the measure of their calamities; and the Romans, exasperated by their repeated rebellions, exercised the rights of victory with unusual rigor. The emperor founded, under the name of Aelia Capitolina, a new city on Mount Sion, [20] to which he gave the privileges of a colony; and denouncing the severest penalties against any of the Jewish people who should dare to approach its precincts, he fixed a vigilant garrison of a Roman cohort to enforce the execution of his orders. The Nazarenes had only one way left to escape the common proscription, and the force of truth was on this occasion assisted by the influence of temporal advantages. They elected Marcus for their bishop, a prelate of the race of the Gentiles, and most probably a native either of Italy or of some of the Latin provinces. At his persuasion, the most considerable part of the congregation renounced the Mosaic law, in the practice of which they had persevered above a century. By this sacrifice of their habits and prejudices, they purchased a free admission into the colony of Hadrian, and more firmly cemented their union with the Catholic church. [21]

[Footnote 17: Paene omnes Christum Deum sub legis observatione credebant Sulpicius Severus, ii. 31. See Eusebius, Hist. Ecclesiast. l. iv. c. 5.]

[Footnote 18: Mosheim de Rebus Christianis ante Constantinum Magnum, page 153. In this masterly performance, which I shall often

have occasion to quote he enters much more fully into the state of the primitive church than he has an opportunity of doing in his General History.]

[Footnote 18: This is incorrect: all the traditions concur in placing the abandonment of the city by the Christians, not only before it was in ruins, but before the seige had commenced. Euseb. loc. cit., and Le Clerc.--M.]

[Footnote 19: Eusebius, l. iii. c. 5. Le Clerc, Hist. Ecclesiast. p. 605. During this occasional absence, the bishop and church of Pella still retained the title of Jerusalem. In the same manner, the Roman pontiffs resided seventy years at Avignon; and the patriarchs of Alexandria have long since transferred their episcopal seat to Cairo.]

[Footnote 20: Dion Cassius, l. lxxix. The exile of the Jewish nation from Jerusalem is attested by Aristo of Pella, (apud Euseb. l. iv. c. 6,) and is mentioned by several ecclesiastical writers; though some of them too hastily extend this interdiction to the whole country of Palestine.]

[Footnote 21: Eusebius, l. iv. c. 6. Sulpicius Severus, ii. 31. By comparing their unsatisfactory accounts, Mosheim (p. 327, &c.) has drawn out a very distinct representation of the circumstances and motives of this revolution.]

When the name and honors of the church of Jerusalem had been restored to Mount Sion, the crimes of heresy and schism were imputed to the obscure remnant of the Nazarenes, which refused to accompany their Latin bishop. They still preserved their former habitation of Pella, spread themselves into the villages adjacent to Damascus, and formed an inconsiderable church in the city of Beroea, or, as it is now called, of Aleppo, in Syria. [22] The name of Nazarenes was deemed too honorable for those Christian Jews, and they soon received, from the supposed poverty of their understanding, as well as of their condition, the contemptuous epithet of Ebionites. [23] In a few years after the return of the church of Jerusalem, it became a matter of doubt and controversy, whether a man who sincerely acknowledged Jesus as the Messiah, but who still continued to observe the law of Moses, could possibly hope for salvation. The humane temper of Justin Martyr inclined him to answer this question in the affirmative; and though he expressed himself with the most guarded diffidence, he ventured to determine in favor of such an imperfect Christian, if he were content to practise the Mosaic ceremonies, without pretending to assert their general use or necessity. But when Justin was pressed to declare the sentiment of the church, he confessed that there were very many among the orthodox Christians, who not only excluded their Judaizing brethren from the hope of salvation, but who declined any intercourse with them in the common offices of friendship, hospitality, and social life. [24] The more rigorous opinion prevailed, as it was natural to expect, over the milder; and an eternal bar of separation was fixed between the disciples of Moses and those of Christ. The unfortunate Ebionites, rejected from one religion as apostates, and

from the other as heretics, found themselves compelled to assume a more decided character; and although some traces of that obsolete sect may be discovered as late as the fourth century, they insensibly melted away, either into the church or the synagogue. [25]

[Footnote 22: Le Clerc (Hist. Ecclesiast. p. 477, 535) seems to have collected from Eusebius, Jerome, Epiphanius, and other writers, all the principal circumstances that relate to the Nazarenes or Ebionites. The nature of their opinions soon divided them into a stricter and a milder sect; and there is some reason to conjecture, that the family of Jesus Christ remained members, at least, of the latter and more moderate party.]

[Footnote 23: Some writers have been pleased to create an Ebion, the imaginary author of their sect and name. But we can more safely rely on the learned Eusebius than on the vehement Tertullian, or the credulous Epiphanius. According to Le Clerc, the Hebrew word Ebjonim may be translated into Latin by that of Pauperes. See Hist. Ecclesiast. p. 477. \* Note: The opinion of Le Clerc is generally admitted; but Neander has suggested some good reasons for supposing that this term only applied to poverty of condition. The obscure history of their tenets and divisions, is clearly and rationally traced in his History of the Church, vol. i. part ii. p. 612, &c., Germ. edit.--M.]

[Footnote 24: See the very curious Dialogue of Justin Martyr with the Jew Tryphon. The conference between them was held at Ephesus, in the

reign of Antoninus Pius, and about twenty years after the return of the church of Pella to Jerusalem. For this date consult the accurate note of Tillemont, *Memoires Ecclesiastiques*, tom. ii. p. 511. \* Note: Justin Martyr makes an important distinction, which Gibbon has neglected to notice. \* \* \* There were some who were not content with observing the Mosaic law themselves, but enforced the same observance, as necessary to salvation, upon the heathen converts, and refused all social intercourse with them if they did not conform to the law. Justin Martyr himself freely admits those who kept the law themselves to Christian communion, though he acknowledges that some, not the Church, thought otherwise; of the other party, he himself thought less favorably. The former by some are considered the Nazarenes the latter the Ebionites--G and M.]

[Footnote 25: Of all the systems of Christianity, that of Abyssinia is the only one which still adheres to the Mosaic rites. (Geddes's *Church History of Aethiopia*, and *Dissertations de La Grand sur la Relation du P. Lobo*.) The eunuch of the queen Candace might suggest some suspicious; but as we are assured (Socrates, i. 19. Sozomen, ii. 24. Ludolphus, p. 281) that the Aethiopians were not converted till the fourth century, it is more reasonable to believe that they respected the sabbath, and distinguished the forbidden meats, in imitation of the Jews, who, in a very early period, were seated on both sides of the Red Sea. Circumcision had been practised by the most ancient Aethiopians, from motives of health and cleanliness, which seem to be explained in the *Recherches Philosophiques sur les Americains*, tom. ii. p. 117.]

While the orthodox church preserved a just medium between excessive veneration and improper contempt for the law of Moses, the various heretics deviated into equal but opposite extremes of error and extravagance. From the acknowledged truth of the Jewish religion, the Ebionites had concluded that it could never be abolished. From its supposed imperfections, the Gnostics as hastily inferred that it never was instituted by the wisdom of the Deity. There are some objections against the authority of Moses and the prophets, which too readily present themselves to the sceptical mind; though they can only be derived from our ignorance of remote antiquity, and from our incapacity to form an adequate judgment of the divine economy. These objections were eagerly embraced and as petulantly urged by the vain science of the Gnostics. [26] As those heretics were, for the most part, averse to the pleasures of sense, they morosely arraigned the polygamy of the patriarchs, the gallantries of David, and the seraglio of Solomon. The conquest of the land of Canaan, and the extirpation of the unsuspecting natives, they were at a loss how to reconcile with the common notions of humanity and justice. [261] But when they recollected the sanguinary list of murders, of executions, and of massacres, which stain almost every page of the Jewish annals, they acknowledged that the barbarians of Palestine had exercised as much compassion towards their idolatrous enemies, as they had ever shown to their friends or countrymen. [27] Passing from the sectaries of the law to the law itself, they asserted that it was impossible that a religion which consisted only of bloody sacrifices and trifling ceremonies, and whose rewards as well as punishments were all of a carnal and temporal nature, could inspire

the love of virtue, or restrain the impetuosity of passion. The Mosaic account of the creation and fall of man was treated with profane derision by the Gnostics, who would not listen with patience to the repose of the Deity after six days' labor, to the rib of Adam, the garden of Eden, the trees of life and of knowledge, the speaking serpent, the forbidden fruit, and the condemnation pronounced against human kind for the venial offence of their first progenitors. [28] The God of Israel was impiously represented by the Gnostics as a being liable to passion and to error, capricious in his favor, implacable in his resentment, meanly jealous of his superstitious worship, and confining his partial providence to a single people, and to this transitory life. In such a character they could discover none of the features of the wise and omnipotent Father of the universe. [29] They allowed that the religion of the Jews was somewhat less criminal than the idolatry of the Gentiles; but it was their fundamental doctrine, that the Christ whom they adored as the first and brightest emanation of the Deity appeared upon earth to rescue mankind from their various errors, and to reveal a new system of truth and perfection. The most learned of the fathers, by a very singular condescension, have imprudently admitted the sophistry of the Gnostics. [291] Acknowledging that the literal sense is repugnant to every principle of faith as well as reason, they deem themselves secure and invulnerable behind the ample veil of allegory, which they carefully spread over every tender part of the Mosaic dispensation. [30]

[Footnote 26: Beausobre, *Histoire du Manicheisme*, l. i. c. 3, has

stated their objections, particularly those of Faustus, the adversary of Augustin, with the most learned impartiality.]

[Footnote 261: On the "war law" of the Jews, see Hist. of Jews, i. 137.--M.]

[Footnote 27: Apud ipsos fides obstinata, misericordia in promptu: adversus amnes alios hostile odium. Tacit. Hist. v. 4. Surely Tacitus had seen the Jews with too favorable an eye. The perusal of Josephus must have destroyed the antithesis. \* Note: Few writers have suspected Tacitus of partiality towards the Jews. The whole later history of the Jews illustrates as well their strong feelings of humanity to their brethren, as their hostility to the rest of mankind. The character and the position of Josephus with the Roman authorities, must be kept in mind during the perusal of his History. Perhaps he has not exaggerated the ferocity and fanaticism of the Jews at that time; but insurrectionary warfare is not the best school for the humaner virtues, and much must be allowed for the grinding tyranny of the later Roman governors. See Hist. of Jews, ii. 254.--M.]

[Footnote 28: Dr. Burnet (Archaeologia, 1. ii. c. 7) has discussed the first chapters of Genesis with too much wit and freedom. \* Note: Dr. Burnet apologized for the levity with which he had conducted some of his arguments, by the excuse that he wrote in a learned language for scholars alone, not for the vulgar. Whatever may be thought of his success in tracing an Eastern allegory in the first chapters of Genesis,

his other works prove him to have been a man of great genius, and of sincere piety.--M]

[Footnote 29: The milder Gnostics considered Jehovah, the Creator, as a Being of a mixed nature between God and the Daemon. Others confounded him with an evil principle. Consult the second century of the general history of Mosheim, which gives a very distinct, though concise, account of their strange opinions on this subject.]

[Footnote 291: The Gnostics, and the historian who has stated these plausible objections with so much force as almost to make them his own, would have shown a more considerate and not less reasonable philosophy, if they had considered the religion of Moses with reference to the age in which it was promulgated; if they had done justice to its sublime as well as its more imperfect views of the divine nature; the humane and civilizing provisions of the Hebrew law, as well as those adapted for an infant and barbarous people. See Hist of Jews, i. 36, 37, &c.--M.]

[Footnote 30: See Beausobre, Hist. du Manicheisme, l. i. c. 4. Origen and St. Augustin were among the allegorists.]

It has been remarked with more ingenuity than truth, that the virgin purity of the church was never violated by schism or heresy before the reign of Trajan or Hadrian, about one hundred years after the death of Christ. [31] We may observe with much more propriety, that, during that period, the disciples of the Messiah were indulged in a freer latitude,

both of faith and practice, than has ever been allowed in succeeding ages. As the terms of communion were insensibly narrowed, and the spiritual authority of the prevailing party was exercised with increasing severity, many of its most respectable adherents, who were called upon to renounce, were provoked to assert their private opinions, to pursue the consequences of their mistaken principles, and openly to erect the standard of rebellion against the unity of the church. The Gnostics were distinguished as the most polite, the most learned, and the most wealthy of the Christian name; and that general appellation, which expressed a superiority of knowledge, was either assumed by their own pride, or ironically bestowed by the envy of their adversaries. They were almost without exception of the race of the Gentiles, and their principal founders seem to have been natives of Syria or Egypt, where the warmth of the climate disposes both the mind and the body to indolent and contemplative devotion. The Gnostics blended with the faith of Christ many sublime but obscure tenets, which they derived from oriental philosophy, and even from the religion of Zoroaster, concerning the eternity of matter, the existence of two principles, and the mysterious hierarchy of the invisible world. [32] As soon as they launched out into that vast abyss, they delivered themselves to the guidance of a disordered imagination; and as the paths of error are various and infinite, the Gnostics were imperceptibly divided into more than fifty particular sects, [33] of whom the most celebrated appear to have been the Basilidians, the Valentinians, the Marcionites, and, in a still later period, the Manichaeans. Each of these sects could boast of its bishops and congregations, of its doctors and martyrs; [34] and,

instead of the Four Gospels adopted by the church, [341] the heretics produced a multitude of histories, in which the actions and discourses of Christ and of his apostles were adapted to their respective tenets. [35] The success of the Gnostics was rapid and extensive. [36] They covered Asia and Egypt, established themselves in Rome, and sometimes penetrated into the provinces of the West. For the most part they arose in the second century, flourished during the third, and were suppressed in the fourth or fifth, by the prevalence of more fashionable controversies, and by the superior ascendant of the reigning power. Though they constantly disturbed the peace, and frequently disgraced the name, of religion, they contributed to assist rather than to retard the progress of Christianity. The Gentile converts, whose strongest objections and prejudices were directed against the law of Moses, could find admission into many Christian societies, which required not from their untutored mind any belief of an antecedent revelation. Their faith was insensibly fortified and enlarged, and the church was ultimately benefited by the conquests of its most inveterate enemies. [37]

[Footnote 31: Hegesippus, ap. Euseb. 1. iii. 32, iv. 22. Clemens Alexandrin Stromat. vii. 17. \* Note: The assertion of Hegesippus is not so positive: it is sufficient to read the whole passage in Eusebius, to see that the former part is modified by the matter. Hegesippus adds, that up to this period the church had remained pure and immaculate as a virgin. Those who labored to corrupt the doctrines of the gospel worked as yet in obscurity--G]

[Footnote 32: In the account of the Gnostics of the second and third centuries, Mosheim is ingenious and candid; Le Clerc dull, but exact; Beausobre almost always an apologist; and it is much to be feared that the primitive fathers are very frequently calumniators. \* Note The Histoire du Gnosticisme of M. Matter is at once the fairest and most complete account of these sects.--M.]

[Footnote 33: See the catalogues of Irenaeus and Epiphanius. It must indeed be allowed, that those writers were inclined to multiply the number of sects which opposed the unity of the church.]

[Footnote 34: Eusebius, l. iv. c. 15. Sozomen, l. ii. c. 32. See in Bayle, in the article of Marcion, a curious detail of a dispute on that subject. It should seem that some of the Gnostics (the Basilidians) declined, and even refused the honor of Martyrdom. Their reasons were singular and abstruse. See Mosheim, p. 539.]

[Footnote 341: M. Hahn has restored the Marcionite Gospel with great ingenuity. His work is reprinted in Thilo. Codex. Apoc. Nov. Test. vol. i.--M.]

[Footnote 35: See a very remarkable passage of Origen, (Proem. ad Lucam.) That indefatigable writer, who had consumed his life in the study of the Scriptures, relies for their authenticity on the inspired authority of the church. It was impossible that the Gnostics could receive our present Gospels, many parts of which (particularly in the

resurrection of Christ) are directly, and as it might seem designedly, pointed against their favorite tenets. It is therefore somewhat singular that Ignatius (Epist. ad Smyrn. Patr. Apostol. tom. ii. p. 34) should choose to employ a vague and doubtful tradition, instead of quoting the certain testimony of the evangelists. Note: Bishop Pearson has attempted very happily to explain this singularity.' The first Christians were acquainted with a number of sayings of Jesus Christ, which are not related in our Gospels, and indeed have never been written. Why might not St. Ignatius, who had lived with the apostles or their disciples, repeat in other words that which St. Luke has related, particularly at a time when, being in prison, he could have the Gospels at hand? Pearson, Vind Ign. pp. 2, 9 p. 396 in tom. ii. Patres Apost. ed. Coteler--G.]

[Footnote 36: *Faciunt favos et vespae; faciunt ecclesias et Marcionitae*, is the strong expression of Tertullian, which I am obliged to quote from memory. In the time of Epiphanius (*advers. Haereses*, p. 302) the Marcionites were very numerous in Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, and Persia.]

[Footnote 37: Augustin is a memorable instance of this gradual progress from reason to faith. He was, during several years, engaged in the Manichaeear sect.]

But whatever difference of opinion might subsist between the Orthodox, the Ebionites, and the Gnostics, concerning the divinity or the obligation of the Mosaic law, they were all equally animated by the

same exclusive zeal; and by the same abhorrence for idolatry, which had distinguished the Jews from the other nations of the ancient world. The philosopher, who considered the system of polytheism as a composition of human fraud and error, could disguise a smile of contempt under the mask of devotion, without apprehending that either the mockery, or the compliance, would expose him to the resentment of any invisible, or, as he conceived them, imaginary powers. But the established religions of Paganism were seen by the primitive Christians in a much more odious and formidable light. It was the universal sentiment both of the church and of heretics, that the daemons were the authors, the patrons, and the objects of idolatry. [38] Those rebellious spirits who had been degraded from the rank of angels, and cast down into the infernal pit, were still permitted to roam upon earth, to torment the bodies, and to seduce the minds, of sinful men. The daemons soon discovered and abused the natural propensity of the human heart towards devotion, and artfully withdrawing the adoration of mankind from their Creator, they usurped the place and honors of the Supreme Deity. By the success of their malicious contrivances, they at once gratified their own vanity and revenge, and obtained the only comfort of which they were yet susceptible, the hope of involving the human species in the participation of their guilt and misery. It was confessed, or at least it was imagined, that they had distributed among themselves the most important characters of polytheism, one daemon assuming the name and attributes of Jupiter, another of Aesculapius, a third of Venus, and a fourth perhaps of Apollo; [39] and that, by the advantage of their long experience and aerial nature, they were enabled to execute, with sufficient skill

and dignity, the parts which they had undertaken. They lurked in the temples, instituted festivals and sacrifices, invented fables, pronounced oracles, and were frequently allowed to perform miracles. The Christians, who, by the interposition of evil spirits, could so readily explain every preternatural appearance, were disposed and even desirous to admit the most extravagant fictions of the Pagan mythology. But the belief of the Christian was accompanied with horror. The most trifling mark of respect to the national worship he considered as a direct homage yielded to the daemon, and as an act of rebellion against the majesty of God.

[Footnote 38: The unanimous sentiment of the primitive church is very clearly explained by Justin Martyr, *Apolog. Major*, by Athenagoras, *Legat. c. 22. &c.*, and by Lactantius, *Institut. Divin. ii. 14--19.*]

[Footnote 39: Tertullian (*Apolog. c. 23*) alleges the confession of the daemons themselves as often as they were tormented by the Christian exorcists]