

Yesterday I posted about the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter, which clearly differentiated between the man Jesus and the spiritual being, the Christ, who inhabited him temporarily – leaving him at his suffering and death since the divine cannot suffer and die. That understanding of Jesus Christ is not, strictly speaking, “docetic.” The term docetic comes from the Greek word DOKEO which means “to seem” or “to appear.” It refers to Christologies in which Jesus was not a real flesh-and-blood human but only “seemed” to be. In reality, what they saw, heard, and touched was a phantasm.

That is not what is going on in the Coptic Apocalypse of Peter. Here there really is a man Jesus – flesh and blood like the rest of us. But he is indwelt by a divine being who leaves him at his death, abandoning him to die alone on the cross. That is similar to a docetic view, but also strikingly different. I call it a “separationist” Christology because it separates Jesus from the Christ (who himself separates from Jesus at his death).

A separationist Christology is what you find in various ways among different groups of Gnostics. Many of them thought that Jesus was born as a human, but at his baptism the Christ entered into him (remember in the Gospels, the “Spirit” comes upon him: that’s when he came to be filled with the divine being). That enabled Jesus to begin to do miracles and to deliver such amazing teachings. Then at the end, when he began to suffer, the Christ left him. And that is why on the cross he cried out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me [i.e., left me behind]?” He died alone.

Both the docetic and separationist Christologies wanted to ensure that no one think that the divine Christ could actually suffer.

There was a third, and far less popular view of what happened at Jesus crucifixion that confused people into thinking that the Christ suffered when in fact he did not. It was the view, only occasionally, attested, that at his crucifixion Jesus pulled ...

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