

# Were the Paulicians Christians?

I have written before about the [Albigensians](#) and explored the question of whether they were true Christians or not. Now, I would like to focus on another group in the “trail of blood” called the [Paulicians](#) who thrived in modern-day Armenia from the seventh to the tenth centuries. According to [Photius](#), the name [Paulician](#) comes from their claim that they followed the teachings of the Apostle Paul.

Unlike the Albigensians, when it comes to discerning what the Paulicians really believed, none of their own writings have survived. So, we are dependent on those who wrote about them to discern what they believed and all of the authors who wrote about the Paulicians agree that they held to beliefs that were similar to the heresy of [Marcionism](#).

The historian [Philip Schaff](#) summarizes the beliefs of the Paulicians based on the writings of these authors:

“(1) Dualism was their fundamental principle. The good God created the spiritual world; the bad God or demiurge created the sensual world. The former is worshipped by the Paulicians, *i.e.* the true Christians, the latter by the ‘Romans’ or Catholics. (2) Contempt of matter. The body is the seat of evil desire, and is itself impure. It holds the divine soul as in a prison. (3) Docetism. Christ descended from heaven in an ethereal body, passed through the womb of Mary as through a channel, suffered in appearance, but not in reality, and began the process of redemption of the spirit from the chains of matter. (4) The Virgin Mary was not ‘the mother of God,’ and has a purely external connection with Jesus. Peter the Sicilian says, that they did not even allow her a place among the good and virtuous women. The true *theotokos* is the heavenly Jerusalem, from which Christ came out and to which he returned. (5) They rejected the Old Testament as the work of the Demiurge, and the Epistles of Peter. They regarded Peter as a false apostle, because he denied his master, preached Judaism rather than Christianity, was the enemy of Paul (Gal. 2:11) and the pillar of the Catholic hierarchy. They accepted the four Gospels, the Acts, fourteen Epistles of Paul, and the Epistles of James, John and Jude. At a later period, however, they seem to have confined themselves, like Marcion, to the writings of Paul and Luke, adding to them probably the Gospel of John. They claimed also to possess an Epistle to the Laodiceans; but this was probably identical with the Epistle to the Ephesians. Their method of exposition was allegorical. (6) They rejected the priesthood, the sacraments, the worship of saints and relics, the sign of the cross (except in cases of serious illness), and all externals in religion. Baptism means only the baptism of the Spirit; the communion with the body and blood of Christ is only a communion with his word and doctrine. In the place of priests the Paulicians had teachers and pastors, companions or itinerant missionaries, and scribes. In the place of churches they had meeting-houses called ‘oratories’; but the founders and leaders were esteemed as ‘apostles’ and ‘prophets.’ There is no trace of the Manichaean distinction between two classes of the *electi* and *credentes*. (7) Their morals were ascetic. They aimed to emancipate the spirit from the power of the material body, without, however, condemning marriage and the eating of flesh; but the Baanites ran into the opposite extreme of an antinomian abuse of the flesh, and reveled in licentiousness, even incest. In

both extremes they resembled the Gnostic sects. According to Photius, the Paulicians were also utterly deficient in veracity, and denied their faith without scruple on the principle that falsehood is justifiable for a good end” (*History of the Christian Church*, Book 4, Section 131).

In his paper “The Key of Truth: A Monument of Armenian Unitarianism,” [Sean Finnegan](#) outlines what the Paulicians believed according to their critics:

1. Dualism: an evil God made our world while the good God has power only over the world to come (PS 36, 38; PH 9; AFA 1; AFB 4, 8, 13; AFC 1, 6, 8; EZ b)
2. Rejection of the Old Testament as scripture (PS 42, 81; PH 14; AFA 7)
3. Rejection of 1-2 Peter as scripture (PS 44; PH 14)
4. Rejection of baptism, allegorizing it as Christ’s words (PH 16; AFB 5; AFC 19)
5. Rejection of communion, allegorizing it as Christ’s words (PS 40; PH 12; AFB 5, 14)
6. Rejection of Mary as the mother of Jesus, interpreting her as heavenly Jerusalem (PS 39, 117; PH 11; AFB 5; EZ e)
7. Docetism: the heavenly Christ brought his body from heaven and did not take flesh from Mary (PS 39; PH 11; AFA 4, AFB 12, AFC 2, EZ e).

The abbreviations for the sources that he references are: PS = Peter of Sicily, PH = Peter the Higoumenos, AFA = Abjuration Formula A, AFB = Abjuration Formula B, AFC = Abjuration Formula C, EZ = Euthymius Zigabenus.

[Peter of Sicily](#) claimed that the Paulicians were [Manichaeans](#) who borrowed their doctrine from Manichaeism:

“There are not two separate groups, but the Paulicians are also Manichaeans, who have added the foul heresy they discovered to the heresy of their predecessors and have sunk in the same gulf of perdition” (As cited in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650 – c. 1450*, eds. Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton, p. 7).

He said that they rejected the Old Testament just as [Marcion](#) did in the second century:

“Fifth, they do not accept any book of the Old Testament, calling the prophets cheats and brigands, as will be shown at more length later, in its proper place. They accept only the four holy gospels and the fourteen epistles of St Paul, the catholic epistle of James, the three epistles of St John, that of St Jude and the Acts of the Apostles, using the same text as we do” (As cited in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650 – c. 1450*, eds. Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton, p. 73).

According to him, the Paulicians believed that the one who created the world was different from the God whom Jesus represented:

“Paulicians say that this is what divides us, that they say that the maker of the cosmos is one god, and that another god, whom they call the heavenly father, has no power in this cosmos but does in the age to come, whereas we confess that there is one same God, creator of all, Lord of all, all-powerful. They say to us, ‘You believe in the maker of the cosmos, we believe in him of whom the Lord speaks in the

gospels (John 5.37), saying, ‘You have not heard his voice nor seen his face’” (As cited in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650 – c. 1450*, eds. Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton, p. 72).

[Euthymius Zigabenus](#) wrote that the Paulicians claimed that another creator or Satan himself is the creator of our world rather than God:

“Some of them say that the Good God is the creator only of the heaven, and introduce some other maker of the earth and what lies between. Some of them (for the error takes many forms) have the audacity to say that the very heavens and all that lies between them and the earth are the creation of the evil one” (As cited in *Christian Dualist Heresies in the Byzantine World c. 650 – c. 1450*, eds. Janet Hamilton and Bernard Hamilton, p. 172).

I believe that the authors of the information that we have about the Paulicians are trying to accurately depict what they believed so that others could identify the teachings of their movement and recognize it as heresy. If they were intentionally distorting or slandering their beliefs, that would make it more difficult for others to recognize their movement. And they are in agreement when it comes to their beliefs giving us multiple confirming testimonies.

While we do not have primary source material from the Paulicians like we have with the Albigensians, there is one scholar who has argued that we do have a document from them called [The Key of Truth](#).

This manuscript was discovered by Frederick Conybeare in the nineteenth century and he translated it from Armenian and added his own lengthy introduction to it claiming that it was written by the Paulicians. *The Key of Truth* presents an [adoptionist](#) or unitarian view of Jesus rather than a Marcionite one. Conybeare was an adoptionist himself and believed that adoptionism was the primitive teaching of Christianity.

Conybeare believed that the *Key of Truth* was originally written between the years 800-1200 AD (*The Key of Truth*, p. xxxii). But the document itself says that it was written in 1782 (*The Key of Truth*, p. 71) which Conybeare interpreted to mean that it was only copied in 1782 but written before then. However, most modern scholars, such as [Anna Ohanjanyan](#), believe that *The Key of Truth* was written in the eighteenth century based on this statement and the modern style of the Armenian language that it uses. The document also uses our modern system of verse numbering when it quotes the Bible and these verse numbers were not put into the New Testament until 1555 by the Greek scholar [Robert Estienne](#), also known as Stephanus.

After reading *The Key of Truth*, it is evident that the author was not a Marcionite. He wrote that the true God created all things:

“First, the heavenly Father, the true God, fashioned (or created) the heavens with all that belongs thereto, and the earth with all its kinds” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 114).

What makes interpreting *The Key of Truth* challenging is that a later editor, who did not believe in adoptionism or unitarianism, erased many of the references to Jesus being created from the document. However, the original reading is still barely visible and was placed in brackets by Conybeare in his translation.

The author believed that Jesus was created by the Father:

“And so it was that it pleased the heavenly Father in pity [to create] the new Adam out of the same deceitful blood. But [the created] man Jesus knew his Father, and by inspiration of the Holy Spirit came to St. John in all gentleness and humility to be baptised by him” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 79).

“Forasmuch as the [created] man Jesus became very faithful to his Father, for this reason, the Father bestowed on him a name of praise which is above every name” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 80).

“And when his [maker] took away the feasting and the fellow-converse from him, then he hungered” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 81).

The author believed that we should address prayer to Jesus even though he was made by his Father:

“And here must we say this prayer before Christ. ‘O sweet Lord of mine, Jesus Christ, we worship, we pray, we entreat and beseech thine all-powerful Lordship, who art at the right hand of thy Father [and maker], mediate and intercede for us sinners now and in the hour of our death. Amen’” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 84).

But the editor did not always erase the references to Jesus being created:

“Yet nevertheless out of thy divine compassion thou didst create the new man Jesus, as the holy Paul saith: ‘By man came death and by man salvation’” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 108).

“Thus, previously to Mary’s bearing the new-created Adam, Gabriel the archangel pronounces her a virgin and greets her” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 114).

The editor did not erase the reference to the Holy Spirit being made:

“Blessed art thou, Spirit of the Heavenly Father, forasmuch as thou wast made by the Father, and coming, didst give unto our Lord Jesus Christ authority over all flesh” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 100).

The author uses the adjective “increate” to describe the Father as uncreated in contrast to the Son who is created:

“When therefore he had pleased his increate and loved Father, at once the Spirit led him on to the mountain of temptation” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 80).

“Cleanse their spirits and minds, and make them a temple and dwelling-place of the Father increate, of the Son our intercessor, now and ever and unto eternity of eternities” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 100).

A humorous line in the document states that you can’t be a pastor if you are too short or too tall!

“Let him not be tall to excess above all men, nor let him be shorter than all men” (*The Key of Truth*, p. 95).

Conybeare’s work is the reason why so many people are confused about what the Paulicians really believed. Were they Marcionites or were they adoptionists as Conybeare believed? After comparing what the original critics of Paulicianism said about them with the teachings of *The Key of Truth*, it seems obvious that these are two different religious movements with contradictory beliefs that existed at two different times in history. And neither of them were Christian or Baptist.

Conybeare's conclusions about Paulicianism is not the first time that he has been wrong about something. He also [infamously argued](#) that the triune baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19 was a later addition to the Gospel of Matthew even though every Greek manuscript of Matthew 28 that we have has this baptismal formula in it. Conybeare's arguments were refuted by [F. H. Chase](#) in his article "The Lord's Command to Baptize" and then by [Bernard Cuneo](#) in his dissertation by the same title. Conybeare's beliefs about the Paulicians and Matthew 28:19 were motivated by his rejection of the Trinity rather than the evidence.

## 2 thoughts on “Were the Paulicians Christians?”

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