

The Paulicians

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“Paulicians, or the Paulician Movement, was a movement of preachers springing up in the in the mid-7th century in Armeniakon, a boarder providence of the Byzantine Empire in eastern Asia Minor. The sect, surrounded by legend and myth, is presumed to have taken its name from its leader Paul the Armenian, prominently in power between 688 and 718. He established the community's solid foundation making it an Armenian national movement with a religious ideology on Byzantine territory. Like the Bogomilis, the Paulicians were mainly a peasant movement that forced change within the political and social structure of the Byzantine Empire. The free peasantry community which had never completely vanished during the Roman Empire now increased in strength under the influence of the Slav and Armenian settlers. Gradually strife grew between the peasantry and the aristocracy of Constantinople. For centuries the sophistication of the Byzantine capital with its bureaucracy, bourgeoisie, and clergy living in Greek and Roman palaces of splendor overwhelmed the agrarian countryside. But after the 7th century this relationship deteriorated, military reform occurred giving the provinces more political importance. The organization of the themes became strategically effective, and the Byzantine borders were effectively defended. This meant that locally all administration was handed over to the aristocracy of the themes; therefore, the peasant communities were able to assert in their quest for an independent social and cultural life. This followed years of dogged fighting to free themselves from the stringent confines of archaic village living.

It was amid this conflict that the Paulicians gained strength, not so much because their teachings were Armenian, but they proved to be an emerging force against the Byzantine High Church as well as a vehicle for the peasant opposition to urban culture and civilization. The doctrine of Paulician teaching, or heresy, is only discovered in documents fond as late as the 9th century. The heretical ideology was based upon radical dualism: there were two forces, the evil god of the visible, material world this side of death and the beneficent god of the invisible, heavenly world. The opposing forces were equally engaged in a bitter, unending struggle against each other. This doctrine was declared purely Paulician, which is the reason that it was decided that when tried all suspected heretics, individual cases not accepted, were made to recite the entire orthodox Creed with its professions of belief in one God, creator of Heaven and Earth, the visible and the invisible. This radical dualistic doctrine created antagonistic feelings by the Byzantine Empire towards the Paulicians which led to military action.

Paulicianism was just another version of Gnostic. The Orthodox Church was considered the work of the evil-god. The sacraments, baptism, communion, repentance, and marriage, were considered to be worthless; and, the holidays, fasting, and all forms of holiness were rejected. There was bitter animosity against the worship of the cross, prayer to the saints, and iconolatry. Also included in this radical break with Christian tradition was the declaration that the Old Testament was the wok of the evil creator as well as the writings of the prophets. There also was the rejection of all clergy, officials of the Church, on the assumption they were completely superstitious to the requirements of religious life.

Added to this was the Paulician Gnostic-version of Jesus Christ, claiming that he had been a supernatural being sent by the beneficent god. His incarnation and passion was misinterpreted by the Orthodox Church; thus their mission was to give the correct teaching. This was their reason for rejecting the adoration of the cross and communion. They proclaimed Mary to have been an ordinary woman. Christ was a special messenger sent to tell the world of the invisible, beneficent god, and this was their mission to continue.

Their main aim was the elimination of the institutionalized church. They did away with the hierarchy within their own sect. Their leaders were pastors or teachers resembling the Apostles; and they greatly admired the Apostle Paul. The lives of the Paulicians were very simple, dedicated to preaching, prayer, and expounding the Gospels. Other forms of worship were not significant; and their simple life marked a sharp contrast to the Byzantine High Church.

The struggle between the Paulicians and the Byzantine Church and Empire becomes complex and unclear at times. The reasons for this are similar to those within the conflict between the Bogomils and the Byzantine Empire: mainly in this time of transition disputed lands were changing hands between enemies. Large chunks of territories frequently changed sides, your friend today might be your enemy tomorrow; avoiding soldiers and war at times became a daily routine for shepherds and farmers. This continuing hostility helped consolidate the description of an evil world which the Paulician preaching played into; it was not hard to win converts among the peasant who saw the Byzantine Church was backing the military that was invading their land.

Attacking the Paulicians soon became evident. The Bishop of Colonia, under the orders of the Emperor, arranged for the burning at the stake of the first documented head of the Paulician sect, Constantine of Armenia in 682; his successor, Symeon, suffered the same fate in 688. Extinction of this small sect seemed imminent, only by fleeing to small border villages, especially in the vicinity of Samosata which was under Arab control, did the sect escape annihilation.

The Paulicians got along fine with the Arabs as they had with the Greeks and Romans. The chief group of which they fiercely denied affiliation with were the Manichaeans. The reason for the common, mistaken connection brought up by the Byzantine Church of the two sects was the similarity of the teachings, but there existed no historical link between the two. The only similarity between the teachings of both sects was that they were based on Greek and Roman influence, which did not represent a continuation in newly formulated teachings.

The Paulician population of Samosata was composed of a large number of Greeks; Symeon, the leader, was of high Greek birth, and not the only member of this stature. As intermittent wars waged throughout the 8th century between the Byzantines and Arabs there was another changing of patriotism; after Melitene fell to the Byzantines around 751, the Arabs again mistrusted the native population, including the Paulicians, and the conditions again were more favorable for the Byzantium.

In addition to land wars, or disputes, the Iconography Struggle also had been raging since 726. At the heart of the struggle was the question of whether icons helped mediation between man and God, or the saints, or were icons just a form of idolatry. Such struggles resulted in many bloody wars and atrocities

against the people. The struggle assumed overwhelming proportions involving almost every segment of society; it included the struggle of subordinating the church to the state, the confiscation of the church's wealth, attempts of theme aristocracies to gain a great proportion of central powers, the peasants' struggle against the threat of feudalism, and many more. The battle was complex and never one-sided as Iconoclastic Emperors often succeeded icon-worshippers, and vice versa creating situations capable of disrupting the economic, social, and intellectual aspects of life.

Such an unstable situation proved favorable for the Paulicians, the iconoclasts and heretics found common ground for their rejection of icon worship. The bitter criticism which the heretics spouted toward the church was favored at times; the Paulicians were allowed to preach without fear of prosecution. The tolerance of the heretics was so astounding at times that the Iconoclastic Emperors were accused of being among the heretics and failing to prosecute them.

The accusations of the enemies of the iconoclasts were unfounded because they shared neither ideological nor social roots; the iconoclasts were just reformers who never attacked the structure of the church; and both groups differed in attitudes concerning the worship of the cross. However, the iconoclast movement was extremely beneficial for the Paulicians as it led to their expansion into the border regions of north-eastern Asia Minor where a mass movement by the beginning of the 9th century was gaining thousands of new adherents, not just among shepherds and farmers, but also among the officers of the themes and the emergent rural aristocracy.

But this reprieve was short lived, soon after the Byzantine Emperors increased their resistance against the heretics, and when military conditions permitted, they organized Inquisitions in border provinces. Many Paulicians were condemned to death, and the drastic punishments handed down had equally drastic effects. Many, including the heretics, who had sought asylum in the Arab territory, took up arms to fight the Byzantine oppressors; such radicalism led to Paulician massacre which resulted in about 5,000 members rapidly moving and determined to maintain the domain of Emir of Melitene. The structure of the state was simple, keeping with the character of the order. Karbeas, who had been a Byzantine theme officer and whose father had been killed for his Paulician activity, was a strong leader until his death, and a fanatical Paulician. His military and organizational abilities greatly helped this Paulician state to rapidly rise politically and militarily. The Paulicians successfully held their own against the Byzantines until the latter started to defeat the Arabs, which caused the surviving Paulicians to flee or become victims of Inquisitions.

There seem to be two exceptional features linked to the Paulician movement. One seemed to explain its failure and why the heresy did not survive into the Middle Ages, this was the absence of an established church. Although the movement was reacting to external events a church of their own might have assured its success; there are indications that they were trying to organize their church in the Paulician state, but it appeared to have been too late. The second exceptional feature of the movement was its military nature which was an exception to the rule. Usually such groups did not resort to militarism when battling evil in the material world, especially before the Middle Ages. Such action was more common in the later Middle Ages when individual heretical teachings were adopted into the ideology of revolutionary class struggle, then the social impact of heresy assumed a new phase." *By Alan G. Hefner*