

DRAFT FOR COMMENTS

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

FACTS AND FICTION

What Today's Western Scholars Say

A. P. Joshi

Contents

	Page
Contents	2
Preface	3
Part 1: New Testament	
Chap 1 Compiling the Text	7
Chap 2 Additions, Alterations and Inventions	14
Chap 3 Contradictions and Discrepancies	18
Chap 4 Historic Christ	30
Chap 5 Mary: The Virgin Mother of Jesus	37
Part 2: Gnostic Gospels	
Chap 6 The Ishaputra of The Ancients	45
Chap 7 Gospels	50
Chap 8 Victory of the Church	56
Appendices	
Appendix A: Books of the New Testament	61
Appendix B: List of Gnostic Literature	61
Appendix C:	
Map 1: Palestine in First Century	62
Map 2: Centres of Jewish Population in First Century	63
References	65
Glossary	67

Preface

Note: Church with capital 'C' refers to the Orthodox Roman Catholic Church throughout this book

The discovery of the Nag Hammadi Gospels in 1945 and the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 has changed the very face of Christian scholarship. What was until then only guessed at by the critics was now proved with records from here as well as from excavations from several other places in the territories of the old Roman Empire. The Nag Hammadi find of Gnostic gospels conclusively proved that several other texts besides the official twenty seven books of the New Testament were widely prevalent and popular before they were suppressed by the Church. The Dead Sea Scrolls found in the Qumran caves were the records of a puritanical Jew sect called Essenes (related to *Isha?*). Many Christian beliefs as well as passages in the New Testament can be traced to them. In fact some scholars have termed Jesus as an Essenes apocalyptic prophet.

Based on such findings there has been a spate of scholarly works during the second half of the twentieth century examining various aspects of the birth and growth of early Christianity. Hundreds of books have been written so far expounding diverse theories about Christ and the early churches and more are still coming. It is quite educating to go to a book site like Amazon and explore the huge list of the available books on this subject including recent additions.

These developments show that the official version of the Church for the birth and mission of its founder and its subsequent growth is grossly incorrect. The facts are quite different and reveal an agonising process which ultimately culminated in this faith dominating the world. The Church's efforts to hoodwink the gullible masses are being increasingly exposed. Unfortunately all this information has so far remained confined only to scholars in this field and has not percolated to the general public in India as well as in the West. Some academicians like Elaine Pagels and Bart Ehrman are trying to address this ignorance by writing books for the lay reader. However in India not only that there has been no effort in this direction but also our scholars themselves are ignorant of these developments! Rather we tend to blindly swallow what the Church has chosen to tell us and respect what does not deserve respect.

Hence I have attempted here to present the views of a few distinguished western scholars on two topics of importance since they cover two major developments in this field – the compilation of their basic scripture namely the New Testament, other alternate competing scriptures which also thrived for three centuries and the process by which they were ruthlessly crushed as soon as a suitable opportunity presented itself in the fourth century. There is no original scholarship in what has been written here. Rather it should be viewed as an executive summary of some important books mostly published after 1990. A good many among them have appeared at the turn of this century and later. A list of important books dealing with the topics covered in the book is given in References. The object of this exercise is to acquaint an educated lay reader with the thinking of recent western scholars and enable him to go deeper into this subject. It will also provide a sound basis for those who wish to educate our masses on these findings.

The book has been divided into two main parts. The first part deals with the research on how the New Testament was compiled and lists some of the major editing that has been done in the first four

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

centuries of the Christian era. It then points out how, in spite of this massive editing, there are several contradictions and discrepancies in the final text which cannot be explained away. Obviously all this leads to an examination of who the historic Christ and his Virgin Mother could have actually been and separate chapters have been devoted to both.

The second part examines the main category of several other gospels and other books popular in the early centuries, namely the so called Gnostic Gospels mainly comprising of the Nag Hammadi find. This is an exciting subject to us since these gospels clearly present alternate philosophical models which are often refreshingly similar to the Indian worldview. But once the Church was backed by the imperial Roman power in the fourth century, these were brutally destroyed and their memory totally erased. The last chapter deals with the growth of the Roman Catholic Church and how it became supreme by ruthlessly crushing all opposition. Ultimately only its own view survived and Europe entered into a thousand year Age of Darkness.

After examining the views of these scholars in these two fields it is difficult to avoid these conclusions:

- The New Testament is *not* an inspired Word of God but a very human effort involving bitter debates which extended over several centuries
- The initial texts of the gospels written by *anonymous* authors were considerably altered for various reasons and even new material added so that they conform to the Church's dogma
- Many documents, especially the letters of the apostles were forged much after the lifetime of the purported authors for political and other reasons. In fact apart from Paul's seven genuine letters the other books including the gospels can be termed as pseudonymous or in plain words— forgery.
- In spite of all this editing, numerous discrepancies and contradictions exist in the final text most of which cannot be reconciled
- Jesus and Mary *as depicted in the New Testament* have no historical basis. Scholars have come to a conclusion that the historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and a mystery.
- Several other books, in fact far more than the books of the New Testament, were popular and these expressed a very different point of view. The Gnostic Gospels is the foremost example of such literature.
- The Gnostic Gospels continued the ancient pagan 'Son of God' or *Ishaputra* tradition in the Jewish context especially when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 AD and the Jews were scattered all over the Roman empire. The effort was for restoring their morale and to cheer up the fugitives that their agonies will soon be over
- The Gnostic Gospels presented a philosophy often very similar to the Indian worldview. The Hindu/Buddhist influence over their composition is quite evident.
- All differing Christian and pagan ideologies and their literature were ruthlessly crushed by the Church after it gained imperial Roman support and their memory obliterated

We invite the reader to study the material presented in what follows and come to his or her own conclusions.

Acknowledgements

The various chapters in this book were published as a series in the quarterly *Bharat Speaks* published by The Patriots' Forum of New Delhi and are now being compiled into this book along with a few more additions like pictures, maps and glossary.

PREFACE

I gratefully acknowledge the guidance of Dr Shreerang Godbole, Dr Krishen Kak, Sri B R Haran, Sri Vishwas Pitke and several others for reviewing my drafts and making excellent suggestions in order to improve the content

My interest in this field was awakened by the path breaking work of Sri Ram Swarup, *Hindu View of Christianity and Islam*. From him as well as from Dr J K Bajaj and Dr M D Srinivas of The Centre For Policy Studies I have learnt the importance of just stating all the facts politely and allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions.

I also thank them for putting together all the material and making a PDF file

Part I

Compilation of the New Testament
&
Historical Christ

CHAPTER 1

Tracing the original Texts

The ultimate emergence of the Christian religion represents a human invention—in terms of its historical and cultural significance, arguably the greatest invention in the history of Western civilization.

Bart Ehrman (Jesus Interrupted)

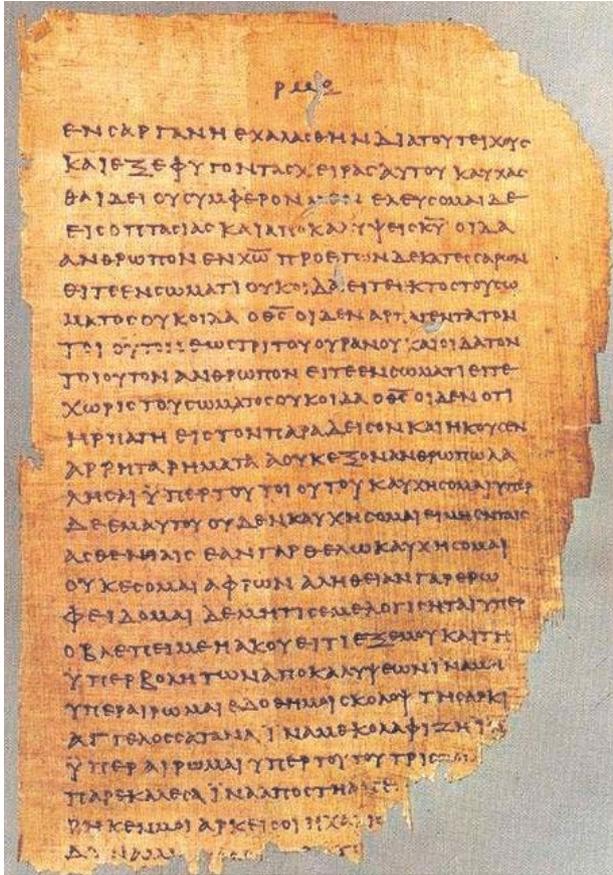
The Christian Bible consists of two major divisions— Old Testament and New Testament. The most important theme of the Old Testament is the fall of man. That of the New Testament is the career of the Christian saviour, Jesus. The Christian Old Testament is derived from the Jewish sacred texts which were finalised in 90 AD and 110 AD after rejecting the newer books like Jubilees, Enoch, Maccabees, Proverbs, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastics and Esther. However many of these rejected books were included in the Christian Bible. Regarding the number of books and their arrangement, Jews and various Christian sects hold different beliefs. The Christian Bible in spite of hostility against the Jews includes the Old Testament in order to show that the mission of Christ has been proclaimed by these scriptures since antiquity. In fact a great deal of New Testament shows how these prophecies were fulfilled by the mission of Christ.

The New Testament consists of 27 books and its arrangement consists of the four Gospels (i.e. “Good News”), Acts of the Apostles (missionary efforts of the Apostles after Jesus’ resurrection), twenty one letters of the Apostles and Revelation or Apocalypse (a cosmic upheaval in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil) ascribed to John. In this part we shall see when they were written and how it was decided which books to include in the Canon or sacred collection from the innumerable books in circulation and when the list was finalised. We should also be clear that except for the seven letters written by Paul in the middle of the first century, most of the other books including the Gospels are pseudepigraphical (i.e. not actually written by the alleged author), or in plain words, a forgery. Scholars have also shown that the Old Testament books are likewise pseudepigraphical. Different authors had different reasons for forging literary texts but mainly it was for reinforcement of one’s own view of the dogma. After studying the Bible historically and textually one cannot but conclude that it is not an ‘Inspired Word of God’, but a very human effort to define the dogma of a creed or cult.

Language and Transmission

Almost all the early books of Christianity were written in Greek and not in the languages spoken by Jesus and his disciples namely Hebrew and Aramaic. Initially the communication was oral but eventually they were recorded on papyrus scrolls which were often folded in two and bound as books called codex. Later on leather parchments were used to produce more sophisticated and durable copies. Without the facility of printing, books had to be laboriously copied by hand, letter by letter, one word at a time. The scribes who copied texts inevitably made alterations in those texts – changing the words they copied either by accident (via a slip of the pen or other carelessness) or purposefully. Anyone reading a book in antiquity could never be completely sure that he or she was reading what the author had written.

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY



Papyrus 46.2; Corinthians 11:33-12:9, c.175-225

the Gospels are largely based on Buddhist texts (see below) and the mystic numbers in the original texts have been replicated in Greek.

Added to this, the early Christians copying the texts were the ones who wanted the texts either for their own personal and/or communal use or they were making them for the sake of others in their community. It has been estimated that literacy in those days was less than ten percent and even among the 'literate' many could only read since special skills were needed to write. Obviously the early copies were made by amateurs who would have been wealthy, had leisure and hence were the leaders of the communities. It was only in the fourth century after the religion got patronage from Constantine that professional copyists were employed and we see a greater uniformity from copy to copy.

Particularly important for the history of the text were the translations into Latin, because a very large number of Christians in the West had this as their principal language. Problems emerged very soon, however, with the Latin translations of scripture, because there were so many of them and these translations differed widely from one another. The problem came to a head near the end of the fourth century, when Pope Damasus commissioned the greatest scholar of his day, Jerome, to produce an 'official' Latin translation that could be accepted by all Latin speaking Christians in Rome and elsewhere, as an authoritative text. Jerome himself speaks of the plethora of available translations, and set himself to resolving the problem. Choosing some of the best Latin translations available, and comparing their text with the superior Greek manuscripts at his disposal, Jerome created a new edition of the Gospels in Latin. This form of the Bible in Latin came to be known as the Vulgate (Common) Bible of Latin speaking Christendom. The first major work to be printed on Gutenberg's press was a magnificent edition of the Latin (Vulgate) Bible, which took all of 1450-56 to produce. In the half

One of the peculiarities and problems with ancient Greek texts is that no marks of punctuation were used, no distinction made between lower case and upper case letters, and, even more bizarre to modern readers, no spaces used to separate words. The chapter and verse numbers which we see in our texts have been added later. This kind of continuous writing is called *scriptio continua*, and it obviously could make it difficult at times to read, let alone understand, a text. For example the letters 'GODISNOWHERE' could mean quite different things to a believer (God is now here) and an atheist (God is nowhere)! The Old Testament was similarly written initially in ancient Hebrew written from right to left, on rough skins in ink. The writing consisted of badly formed capital letters only, with no vowels, stops or division into words by spaces. Obviously, if you don't know what you're reading, the possibilities of making mistakes in transcription multiply. The Greek text of the Gospels, called *koine*, is also often obscure, ambiguous or otherwise odd. Recently the Danish scholar Chr. Lindtner Klavrestrom has explained that this is because

century that followed, some fifty editions of the Vulgate were produced at various printing houses in Europe. The first Catholic Greek edition was published in 1522 in Spain. The Protestant Greek version by Erasmus was published in 1515 in Basel on the basis of a single twelfth century Greek manuscript. It was used by the translators of the famous King James Bible nearly a century later and hence the latter was subsequently found to be full of errors.

But one must always ask: where did these medieval scribes get the texts they copied in so professional a manner? Obviously from earlier texts, which were copies of yet earlier texts, which were themselves copies of still earlier texts and so on. Therefore, the texts that are closest in form to the originals are, perhaps unexpectedly, the more variable and amateurish copies of early times, not the more standardised professional copies of later times.

The third century Church father Origen, for example, once registered the following complaint about the copies of the Gospels at his disposal: 'The differences among the manuscripts have become great, either through the negligence of some copyists or through the perverse audacity of others; they either neglect to check over what they have transcribed, or, in the process of checking, they make additions or deletions as they please'.

Charges against "heretics" that they altered the texts of scripture to make them say what they wanted them to mean are very common among early Church writers. What is noteworthy, however, is that recent studies have shown that the evidence of our surviving manuscripts points the finger in the opposite direction! Scribes who were associated with the Church tradition not infrequently changed their texts, sometimes in order to eliminate the possibility of their 'misuse' by Christians affirming heretical beliefs and sometimes to make them more amenable to the doctrines being espoused by Christians of their own persuasion.

Textual Criticism

Until the discovery of the printing press by Gutenberg in the fifteenth century and the well known English translation, King James Bible published in 1611, ordinary Christians were ignorant of the contents of the Bible and had to entirely depend on the interpretation of the Greek and Latin texts by the church clergy which was using its own versions of these books. But with mass publication and distribution the need for a standard text became obvious. This proved to be a very difficult task since with the passage of time new manuscripts with text variations were continuously been discovered. The original version of the texts was of special importance to Protestants who relied more on the scriptures and the written word as compared to the Church (Orthodox Roman Catholic Church) which relied on traditions. Hence with the rise of the Protestant movement which more or less coincided with the art of printing, a new branch of studies, 'Textual Criticism' evolved in order to determine what the original version of the text was. This involves determining the date of a manuscript followed by comparison with earlier and later texts so that alterations and additions can be determined.

The method of textual criticism which has been generally practised by editors of classical Greek and Latin texts involves two main processes, recension and emendation. Recension is the selection, after examination of all available material, of the most trustworthy evidence on which to base a text. Emendation is the attempt to eliminate the errors which are found even in the best manuscripts. The application of critical methods in the editing of classical texts was developed principally by three German scholars, Friedrich Wolf (1759-1824), Immanuel Bekker (1785-1871), and Karl Lachmann (1793-1851). This first involved classifying the available texts. The basic principle of classification employed by them was constructing a *stemma* or a family tree of manuscripts so that, apart from

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

accident, identity of reading implies identity of origin. Often, however, difficulties hinder the construction of a *stemma* of manuscripts. Thus, several families of texts may be represented in a single manuscript. Four types of families of texts have been broadly defined:

- The Alexandrian Text. This text arose in Egypt and is generally conceded to be the most important one.
- The Byzantine or Syrian Text. These were medieval manuscripts and hence not important
- The Western Text comprising of copies of the early amateur scribes
- Neutral texts like Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, which consisted of manuscripts that had not undergone any serious change or revision in the course of their transmission but represented most accurately the texts of the originals.

A major breakthrough occurred in 1707, with the publication of an edition of the Erasmus' Greek New Testament by Oxford scholar John Mill. He had spent 30 years of his life comparing the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament available to him, their ancient translations into other languages as well as quotations from them by the early church fathers. He compiled all his results and published an edition of the New Testament that included an 'apparatus' of variant readings he had discovered, that is, places where there were significant differences among the manuscripts. To the shock and dismay of many of his contemporaries, Mill's apparatus indicated 30,000 places of variation. And these were only the variant readings he considered 'significant'! He knew about many others but did not include them. Since then, scholars have uncovered many more variant readings among our manuscripts. Mill had examined only 100 manuscripts. Today, we have well over 5000 manuscripts available and the variations are estimated to exceed 2,00,000 or in other words far more than the words in the New Testament itself! Most of these are obviously minor errors in copying the texts but some are major changing the very meaning and context of the passage which we shall study in the next two chapters.

These variations were a great challenge to the scholars. After a great deal of study and discussions the following criteria are adopted by modern scholars to trace the original text.

- Age of the manuscript. The older ones are more likely to conform to the originals
- The more difficult reading which is harder to explain is preferable to the easier one since later scribes always tend to simplify, harmonise or theologically 'improve' it.
- Internal evidence. This takes into account the author's style of writing, the words and phrases which he generally uses and his theological views
- External evidence like other writings incorporating passages from the Bible

We shall study the present view of leading western scholars on major variations in the texts in some detail in the next two chapters. It is sufficient to point out here that in English several versions like the New International Version, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, the New King James, the Jerusalem Bible, the Good News Bible etc. have followed the original King James Bible incorporating several of these findings.

Books of the New Testament

At this stage it is useful to briefly survey the contents and arrangement of this book. The arrangement of the books or chapters of the Bible is not chronological. Paul's letters which have been accepted as

genuine, have been written in the fifties of the first century i.e. about twenty years after the purported death of Christ. The Gospel of Mark followed next between 65-80 AD. Peter Kirby has summed up the estimated range of dates for various Christian works including the Gnostic gospels on his website:

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/index.html>

Gospels

This is the most popular and widely read part of the Bible as far as the lay reader is concerned. It is generally accepted that Mark's gospel is the first and John's the last during the period 70-130 AD or even later i.e. long after Jesus' death. They are believed to be based on oral traditions circulating and later put down in writing by these pseudonymous authors and hence written in the third person. Mark, Luke and Matthew are called synoptic gospels since their arrangement and content is broadly similar although each author interprets Jesus in such a way so as to buttress his own theological convictions. The gospel of John is radically different and more like a Gnostic gospel. It propagates a well developed theological outlook, its parts being linked together as a uniform whole to a much greater extent than the other gospels. It is more than the set of pericopes – units of oral tradition linked together, that can be seen in the synoptic gospels. John is more didactic, philosophical and theological than the synoptics. It is mainly a discourse rather than a narrative.

Many scholars assert that the gospels could have been written only in the second century since there is no mention of them in the first. For instance one of the first Christian texts that did not become canonised but was respected as authentic is the first epistle of Clement of Rome reasonably dated to 95 AD. In it Clement does not refer to any Gospel but frequently refers to various epistles of Paul. On a few occasions he quotes Jesus but the quotations do not correspond to anything in any known written texts. The first time we vaguely hear about them as well as a historical Christ is from a letter written by Ignatius around 110 AD. It is only around 160 AD that Tatian of Syria, a close disciple of Justin Martyr of Rome, for the first time named the four gospels and 'harmonised' them in a single gospel based mainly on John along with some letters of Paul and the book of Acts to form the first canon. Fortunately no single editor ever had the authority to rewrite all the holy texts to eliminate contradictions. That was to be a boon for the Church, allowing it to do as it wished, always able to quote some bit of scripture in justification, but it is also a boon for the inquirer because ad hoc editing leaves inconsistencies that can be revealing. The first certain reference to the four Gospels is in the writings of the church father Irenaeus (180 AD). In a five volume attack on Christian heresies he names as the four Gospels of the church Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke repeat much of the material in Mark and in addition contain passages believed to be sourced from another lost book (code named) 'Q'. Lindtner claims that these gospels are based on Buddhist scriptures written in Sanskrit. He points out that the Greek text of the gospels is, on the whole, an extremely artificial work. His research suggests that this is because each word and syllable in them has been carefully counted so as to correspond with the numerical values of the original Buddhist texts written in Sanskrit. Many names and words have been chosen only for their numerical value. Often, the gospels imitate the numerical patterns of the original Sanskrit. He sums up his findings in this stunning equation:

$$Q = MSV + SDP \text{ and other Buddhist texts}$$

Where MSV is *Mûlasarvâstivâdavinaya* and SDP *Saddharmapundarîka sûttram* or the well known Lotus Sutra. More details of his work can be found on his website

<http://www.jesusisbuddha.com/>

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Acts

The gospels are followed by Acts. Luke, allegedly a one time secretary of Paul, is believed to be the author of Acts (apart from the gospel in his name) which describe the missionary expeditions— of mostly Paul but of a few other disciples as well, undertaken soon after the death of Christ. It is widely accepted that this book was written mainly to provide a historical context to the story of Jesus

Epistles

The letters written by Paul and other disciples come next. There are twenty one letters in this section out of which thirteen have been attributed to Paul. These are letters that Paul wrote to churches that he had established in Asia Minor, Macedonia, and Achaia— i.e. modern Turkey and Greece. Paul's letters were, by and large, written to deal with problems of his churches, involving both how to live and what to believe. Out his thirteen letters seven (Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) are widely accepted as written by him. There are three Deutero-Pauline Epistles, which he may well not have written (2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Colossians). Scholars base their debate about whether Paul actually wrote these letters on consistencies of vocabulary, writing style, and/or theological beliefs. And there are the three pastoral Epistles, which he certainly did not write (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus) since the problems of the church with which they deal with as well as his tirade against heretics did not exist in Paul's days. The other letters have been pseudonymously written (or forged) in the names of several apostles.

Revelation or Apocalypse of John

Probably the most intriguing and least understood book of the New Testament is the Apocalypse of John, otherwise known as the Book of Revelation. In it is described the future course of history, in which widespread disasters and calamities strike the earth until the very end of time, when God intervenes in the affairs of the world to destroy the forces of evil and establish his perfect utopian kingdom on earth. The most important point to stress is that this was not written as a blueprint for our own future: It was written for Christians of the time. As is well known, both Jesus as well as Paul believed that the end of the world is well nigh soon (Mark 9:1). But we all know that it has yet to occur! Most 'End of the world' predictions made by Christians are based on their interpretation of Revelation.

Compiling the books of the New Testament

Exclusivistic religions were virtually unknown in the polytheistic world of the Roman Empire. Even Judaism is only a partial exception, because not even the Jews were eager to convert others to their own faith. But from the beginning, Christians insisted that there was only one right religion, only one way to be right with the one true God, and only one set of beliefs that could be acceptable to Him. Anyone with a contrary belief was termed as infidel or heretic. As a result, it was imperative to have the right beliefs and the right knowledge. If what mattered was proper beliefs, one needed to know what things to believe and on whose authority. The ultimate authority, of course, was Jesus. After his death, authority naturally descended upon the apostles. But as they were scattered and eventually died, what could take their place as authorities? The answer was: The books they left behind. As we have seen the books were far too numerous and holding widely differing views. So the problem was selecting the books which conformed to the Church's dogma as well as interpreting them properly. The debates over interpretation continued for centuries.

The canon was the result of a slow and often painful process, in which several disagreements were aired and different points of view came to be expressed, debated, accepted, and suppressed. The debate over which books to include in the Bible was long and hard fought.

TRACING THE ORIGINAL TEXTS

As difficult as this is to believe, there never was a final decision accepted by every church in the world. The first known list, the Muratorian Canon, known after the Italian scholar Muratori, dates from an eighth century manuscript but is believed to belong to the late second century. The unknown author includes twenty-two of our twenty-seven books as canonical— all except Hebrews, James 1 and 2 Peter, and 3 John. But he also includes the Wisdom of Solomon and the proto-orthodox Apocalypse of Peter. He indicates that the apocalypse known as The Shepherd of Hermas is acceptable for reading but not as part of the church's sacred Scriptures. The Codex Alexandrinus, a famous manuscript of the fifth century, includes as part of the New Testament the books of 1 and 2 Clement, allegedly written by the person Peter had appointed to be the bishop of Rome. And the Codex Sinaiticus, from the fourth century, includes both the letter of Barnabas and The Shepherd of Hermas.

In the struggle to win converts, only one group, the Roman Church, eventually won out. The Church declared itself orthodox (holding right views), argued that its views really were those of Jesus and the apostles, claimed that it had *always* been the majority view and then rewrote the history of the conflict. What emerged was a Christianity characteristic of the Roman Church. It was not hard for the Church to weed out books that were clearly unorthodox. The evidence was *a priori*: the books were heretical, and apostles would never write heresy! There were numerous other books, too, that stood on the fringes and debate continued which of them should be included.

The first time any author from Christian antiquity lists our twenty-seven books and indicates that they are the only twenty-seven books of the canon comes in the year 367 CE. The author is Athanasius, the famous bishop of Alexandria, Egypt. In his thirty-ninth "Festal Letter," Athanasius, as was his wont, gave his readers a good deal of additional pastoral advice, including a list of books that could be read in church. He listed all the books of our New Testament. However this list of Athanasius's did not end all discussion of the matter. For centuries various churches continued to accept slightly different lists.

In subsequent chapters we shall list some of the additions, alterations and inventions made so that the texts conform to the Church and the authors' ideologies and see how the final version still contains irreconcilable discrepancies and contradictions in spite of all the editing that they have undergone. We shall conclude by examining what modern Biblical scholars have to say about the historical Christ and his mother Virgin Mary.

CHAPTER 2

Additions, Alterations and Inventions

I should not believe in the gospels if I had not the authority of the church for so doing

Saint Augustine

"The Gospels are neither histories nor biographies, even within the ancient tolerances for those genres."

Dr. John Dominic Crossan, The Historical Jesus

That it is necessary sometimes to use falsehood as a medicine for those who need such an Approach... For falsehood is something even more useful than the above, and sometimes even more able to bring it about that everyone willingly keeps to all justice.

Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica 12.31

For Christianity, history is more central than in any other religion because Christians claim that Jesus of Nazareth appeared on earth as God incarnate, died and was resurrected, and that *these are indisputable historical facts*. In Chapter 1 we have seen how their canon was finalised after a long painful process and how efforts have recently been made to trace the original texts. It has been found that in order to present a certain theological viewpoint, several additions and alterations were incorporated in the original texts and some events even invented. We shall first study some of these significant changes and then in the next chapter see how in spite of all the editings and conciliations the final version of the New Testament still contains innumerable discrepancies and contradictions which cannot be satisfactorily explained. It may be mentioned in passing that similar discrepancies are found even in the Old Testament.

Even if we could at all get back to the originals, we would find it still tricky to reconstruct the details of Christ's life and teachings. These discrepancies are profound and seemingly insoluble in many cases. Whereas once there was a clamour to find the "original words" of the evangelist authors of the gospels, there is now a movement within textual criticism to determine exactly *why* there were such massive "variant readings" or changes made to the Holy Bible over the centuries. These are now a valuable evidence for the history of the early Christian movement. According to the scholarship there were indeed social and political purposes for many of these changes which means that these texts are not necessarily recording "historical" events. The "Holy Writ" then becomes not a historical record but a matter of political expediency!

We shall first note a few major additions and alterations made to texts as well as outright inventions of various spectacular events in Jesus' life and then study the numerous discrepancies and contradictions in the New Testament accounts. This list is by no means complete but it will give the reader some idea about the magnitude of the problem, textual as well as historical.

Additions

The Last Twelve Verses of Mark: historically the first gospel, the original version of Mark, ended with 16.8 (Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid). Thus there was no mention of his resurrection and ascent to

ADDITIONS, ALTERATIONS AND INVENTIONS

heaven. Scribes have *later* added the resurrection verses 16.9-20 in which Jesus meets the eleven disciples and asks them to preach his message and is then taken up into heaven.

The opening passages in John (1.1-18): this highly celebrated poem glorifying the divinity of Christ speaks of the “Word” of God, who existed with God from the beginning and was himself God and who “became flesh” in Jesus Christ has been found to be a later addition on grounds of vocabulary and incoherence to the rest of the Gospel.

The story of the women taken in adultery in John (7.53-8.11): this is arguably the best known story about Jesus in the Bible but found only in John. As it turns out it was added by later scribes

John: chapter 21 appears to be a later add-on possibly added to fill out the stories of Jesus’ resurrection appearances.

A good deal of the history of Christianity, including its early history, involved a movement to *oppress* women and to take away their voices, a movement spearheaded by those who believed that women should be in complete submission to men. The alleged letters of Paul to Titus and Timothy instruct Christian women to be silent and submissive and sexually active with their spouses; those who wanted to enjoy the benefits of salvation were to recognise the superiority of their husbands, to keep quiet, and to produce babies (1 Tim 2:11-13). Paul’s injunction to women to be “silent” in the churches and “subordinate” to their husbands was not originally part of 1 Corinthians 14 (34–35) but was added by later scribes intent on keeping women in their place.

Did Luke think that Jesus was in agony when going to his death, or that he was calm and controlled? It depends entirely on what you make of the textual variant in Luke 22:43-44, where Jesus allegedly sweated great drops as if of blood before his arrest. Leave the verses in, as some manuscripts do, and Jesus is obviously in deep agony. Take them out and there is no agony, either in this passage or anywhere else in Luke’s Passion narrative. It was important for the Church to counter the docetists (who maintained that Jesus only “seemed” or “appeared” to be human) by asserting that Christ was a *real* man of flesh and blood.

And not only did Jesus physically suffer and die, for the Church he was also *physically* exalted to heaven: “And it happened that while he was blessing them, he was removed from them; and they returned to Jerusalem with great joy” (Luke 24:51-52). But in some manuscripts like the Codex Sinaiticus the bland “removed from them” was replaced by “and he was taken up in heaven” to stress the physicality of Jesus’ ascension. It is also intriguing that whereas here this happened on the *same* day of resurrection, in the Acts written by the same Luke, it took place forty days after the resurrection and that, “after he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes” (Acts 1:1-11)

Alterations

Did Luke understand that Jesus’ death was an atonement for sin (Luke 22:19–20)? Everywhere else in Luke he has eliminated Mark’s references to Jesus’ death as an atonement. But in the earliest and best manuscripts, these words are missing (much of v. 19 and all of v. 20). It appears scribes have added them to make Luke’s view of Jesus’ death conform to Mark’s and Matthew’s.

Some scribes have omitted the prayer of Jesus spoken while being crucified, “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they were doing” (Luke 23:34). Early Christians interpreted this as a prayer of forgiveness for the Jews, ignorant of what they had done. No wonder some scribes omitted the verse in the context of Christian anti-Judaism in the second and third centuries, when many Christians believed that Jews knew exactly what they were doing and that God had in no way forgiven them.

Was Jesus compassionate or angry?: The textual problem of Mark 1:41 occurs in the story of Jesus healing a leper. The surviving manuscripts preserve verse 41 in two different ‘forms’ both readings are shown here, in brackets. And a leper came to him beseeching him and saying to him, “If you wish, you

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

are able to cleanse me” (1.40). “And [feeling compassion (Greek: SPLANGNISTHEIS) / becoming angry (Greek: ORGISTHEIS)], reaching out his hand, he touched him and said, “I wish, be cleansed.” Mark has portrayed Jesus as an authoritative powerful person. In many other places also similar changes have been made to ‘tone down’ his wrath.

In Matthew’s 27.26 Pilate is said to have flogged Jesus and then “handed him over to be crucified.” Anyone reading the text would naturally assume that he handed Jesus over to his own (Roman) soldiers for crucifixion. That makes it all the more striking that in some early witnesses—including one of the scribal corrections in the Codex Sinaiticus—the text is changed to heighten even further the Jewish culpability in Jesus’ death. According to these manuscripts, Pilate “handed him over to them [i.e., to the Jews] in order that they might crucify him.” Now the Jewish responsibility for Jesus’ execution is absolute, a change motivated by anti-Jewish sentiment among the early Christians.

Lord’s prayer: One of the best known liturgical changes to the text is found in Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer. The prayer is also found in Matthew where it is much longer and is most familiar to Christians. By comparison, Luke’s version was hopelessly truncated (11:2-4). Scribes resolved the problem of Luke’s shortened version by adding the petitions known from the parallel passage in Matt. 6:9-13.

The teachings on divorce (Mt 19; Mk 10) also changed from manuscript to manuscript over the years, with the details of adultery, for example, clarified and re-clarified to fit the era and sentiments of the ruling party of the time.

In Matthew 24:36, where Jesus explicitly states that no one knows the day or the hour in which the end will come, not even the angels of heaven nor the son, but the father alone. A significant number of our manuscripts omit the phrase “not even the son.” The reason is not hard to postulate – if Jesus does not know the future, the Christian claim that he is divine is compromised.

Inventions

We know that the original manuscripts of the Gospels did not have their authors’ names attached to them. For example if someone calls it the *Gospel according to Matthew*, then it’s obviously someone else trying to explain at the outset that it is Matthew’s version. Also none of the Gospels claims to be written by an *eyewitness*. The disciples were illiterate and spoke Aramaic and not Greek. In fact, for half a century after the books were first put into circulation, nobody who quoted them, or even alluded to them, mentioned their authors’ names. Clearly the names are a later invention.

Jesus was supposed to hail from Nazareth in keeping with the predictions of the Hebrew prophets. But archaeologists have found that this place did not even exist in the first century! It is not mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, or even in the writings of Josephus who was in charge of the Jewish military operations in Galilee and had a lot to say about the region in his many volumes of writings.

The census in Luke that required knowing where one’s ancestors were from and going there in person! Moreover, this census involved the entire Roman Empire, and there is no account of such a huge census anywhere except in Luke.

The Herodian massacre of the infants has never been demonstrated to be historical. The fact that this strange but pivotal episode receives mention only in Matthew is revealing in that the other authors make no mention of it.

The *only* place in the entire New Testament where the doctrine of the Trinity is explicitly taught is in a passage that made it into the King James translation, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one” (1 John 5:7–8) but is not found in several early Greek manuscripts of the New Testament.

ADDITIONS, ALTERATIONS AND INVENTIONS

The following fantastic events in the New Testament are unnoticed by every non-Christian writer, including the historians Josephus, Seneca and Pliny the Elder.

- The Christmas Star that disturbed Herod and “all Jerusalem” [Mt 2:3],
- Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem [Mt 21:8-11],
- The Good Friday earthquake [Mt 27:51],
- The Good Friday resurrections that “appeared to many people” in Jerusalem [Mt 27:53] with dead saints rising out of their graves and wandering around town
- The Good Friday 3-hour darkness “over all the land” [Mk 15:33, Lk 23:44, Mt 27:45]

In the next chapter we shall see that even with all these editings, how numerous contradictions and discrepancies still exist in the official canon.

CHAPTER 3

Contradictions And Discrepancies

The evangelists were fiction writers– not observers or eyewitnesses of the life of Jesus. Each of the four contradict the other in writing his account of the events of his suffering and crucifixion

(Against the Christians 2,12-15), Porphyry

Normally the Gospels are read vertically i.e. one after another. In such a case it is rather difficult to note any difference easily. But there is another way to read them: horizontally. In a horizontal reading one reads a story in one of the Gospels, and then reads and compares the same story as told by another Gospel, as if they were written in columns next to each other. Reading the gospels in this manner reveals all sorts of contradictions and discrepancies. Some of these discrepancies are simple details where one book contradicts what another says about a minor point like the number of soldiers in an army. But in some cases however seemingly such trivial points of difference can actually have an enormous significance for the interpretation of a gospel or the life of a historical Jesus. And then there are instances that involve major issues, where one author has one point of view on an important topic like the significance of Jesus' death, and another author has another. Sometimes these views are simply different from one another, but at other times they are directly at odds.

A horizontal reading of the four gospels as they have come to us and then comparing the various events in the life of Jesus himself reveal a number of discrepancies and contradictions. We shall first study them right from his birth to resurrection and then look into other discrepancies in the Bible accounts

The Genealogy of Jesus and Mary's virginity

Matthew and Luke are the only Gospels that give Jesus' family line. Both of them trace his lineage through Joseph to the Jewish ancestors. Both Matthew and Luke want to insist that Jesus' mother was a virgin: she conceived not by having sex with Joseph but by the Holy Spirit. Hence Joseph is not Jesus' biological father. But that creates an obvious problem. If Jesus is not a blood-relation to Joseph, why is it that Matthew and Luke trace Jesus' bloodline precisely through Joseph?

Apart from this general problem, there are several obvious differences between the genealogies of Matthew 1 and Luke 3. The two authors also have different end points for their genealogies – Matthew starts from Abraham but Luke goes all the way to Adam. Now a simple question: who, in each genealogy, is Joseph's father, patrimonial grandfather, and great-grandfather? In Matthew the family line goes from Joseph to Jacob to Matthan to Eleazar to Eliud and on into the past. In Luke it goes from Joseph to Heli to Mathat to Levi to Melchi. Both are not clear even about who Joseph's father was! The genealogy lists in Matthew and Luke clearly trace Christ to David through Joseph, but in Matthew (1:7) Joseph descends from David's son Solomon, while in Luke (3:31) Joseph is descended from David's son Nathan! Matthew's genealogy also considerably varies from the Hebrew Bible.

Can we call Mary a virgin if Jesus had brothers and sisters? According to Mark 6:3 (also Mark 3.32, Luke 8.19 and Matthews 13.55), “ Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?” One brother, James, was the head of the church in Jerusalem as testified in the book of Acts. Obviously Mary was not a virgin as far as the Bible is concerned and neither gives any details of her life (see Chapter 5 for more).

When was Jesus born?

Even if it could be demonstrated that Jesus really existed and was born at some point, there is no consensus as to when that birth took place, as the day, month and year are not identified. It is well known that Christ's December 25th birthday is based not on an actual date of birth but on the traditional pagan winter-solstice and the birth date of Mitra. Even the year as put forth in the gospels is undecided, since according to Matthew's gospel, it would be before 4 BC when Herod died, whereas Luke appears to place Christ's birth after 6 AD when Quirinius was appointed the governor of Syria.

Discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus' birth

There are only two accounts of Jesus' birth in the New Testament, the opening chapters of Matthew and of Luke. Mark and John say nothing about his birth, he appears on the scene as an adult. Nor are the details of his birth mentioned by Paul or any of the other New Testament writers. And not only do Matthew and Luke tell completely different stories about how Jesus was born, but some of the differences appear to be irreconcilable and historically improbable.

Matthew 1:18-2:23 goes like this: Mary and Joseph are espoused to be married, when Mary is found to be pregnant. Joseph, naturally suspecting the worst, plans to divorce her, but is told in a dream that Mary has conceived by the Holy Spirit. They get married and Jesus is born. Wise men then come from the east, following a star that has led them to Jerusalem, where they ask about where the King of the Jews is to be born. King Herod makes inquiries and learns from the Jewish scholars that it is predicted that the king will come from Bethlehem. He informs the wise men, who proceed to Bethlehem – once again led by the star, which stops over the house where the family of Jesus resides. The wise men offer him gifts and then, warned in a dream, do not return to inform Herod, as he had requested, but make their way home by another route. Herod, since he himself is the king, is fearful of this one born to be king and sends his troops to slaughter every male child two years and younger in and around Bethlehem.

Strangely, after tracking the star for many miles the strangers from the East become so lost that they must stop at the house of Herod in order to inquire where the new "king" has been born! Bizarrely, Herod shows them the way, but he too is so confused that he seems to have forgotten completely his own instructions and must slaughter all the children under the age of two in the village, instead of simply finding Jesus using the same directions he gave to the magi. Joseph is warned of the danger in a dream. He, Mary, and Jesus flee from town in advance of the slaughter and travel to Egypt. Later, in Egypt, Joseph learns in a dream that Herod has died, and now they can return. But when they discover that Archelaus, Herod's son, is the ruler of Judea, they decide not to go back, but instead go to the northern district of Galilee, to the town of Nazareth where Jesus is raised. One feature of Matthew that makes it distinctive from Luke is how Matthew continually emphasises that the various events were "to fulfil what the prophet had said" (Mt 1:22, 2:6, 2:18, 2:23).

According to Luke (1:4–2:40) however, there is a decree from the Roman emperor Augustus that every one in the empire needs to register for a census; we are told that this is the first census, when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. Everyone is to return to their ancestral home to register. Since Joseph's ancestors were from Bethlehem (he is descended from King David, who was born there), he travels there with Mary. While there she gives birth to Jesus and wraps him in bands of cloth and lays him in a manger, "for there was no room for them in the inn." Shepherds in the field are visited by an angelic host who tells them that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem; they go and worship the child. Eight days later, Jesus is circumcised. Jesus is then presented to God in the Temple, and his parents offer the sacrifice prescribed for this occasion by the law of Moses. Jesus is recognised there as the Messiah by a righteous and devout man named Simeon and by an elderly and pious widow, Anna. When Joseph

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

and Mary have finished “everything required by the Law of the Lord” concerning the birth of their first born, they return to Nazareth, where Jesus is raised.

But these are not all the discrepancies in their account. A few more things also are left unexplained. In Matthew, for example, what does it mean that there is a star guiding the wise men, that this star stops over Jerusalem, and then starts up again, leads them to Bethlehem, and stops again over the very house where Jesus was born? What kind of star would this be, exactly? A star that moves slowly enough for the wise men to follow on foot or on camel and low enough in the sky to stop over a single house to identify it?

The historical problems with Luke are even more pronounced. For one thing, we have relatively good records for the reign of Caesar Augustus, and there is no mention anywhere in any of them of an empire-wide census for which everyone had to register by returning to their ancestral home. And how could such a thing even be imagined? Joseph returns to Bethlehem because his ancestor David was born there. But David lived a thousand years before Joseph. Are we to imagine that everyone in the Roman Empire was required to return to the homes of their ancestors from a thousand years earlier?

When Did Jesus Become the Son of God?

- Out of the Gospels of the New Testament, three do not call Jesus God. Only for John he existed with God in the very beginning, before the creation of the world, as the Word of God (Jn 1:1–14), before coming into this world as a human being
- Both Peter (Acts 2:36) and Paul (Acts 13:32–33) declare that he became a Son of God at his resurrection
- For Mark (1:11) it was at baptism by John the Baptist
- For Luke (1:35) and Matthew (1.23) he was the Son of God for his entire life

It should be remembered that for ancient Jews, being the “Son of God” did not mean being divine. Being the son of God normally meant being the human intermediary for God on earth just as we believe that the king is an avatar of Vishnu.

Temptation of Jesus

In the temptation accounts, Matthew depicts the temptation as occurring at the end of the forty day fast, while Luke portrays the devil as tempting Jesus throughout the period. Oddly enough, Mark doesn't portray Jesus as fasting at all during the forty days when he is in the desert, and John does not even report on this all-important event in Christ's life! Bizarrely, the battle between Jesus and the devil is composed of quotes from the Old Testament, specifically Deuteronomy and Psalms. If this strange and incredible occurrence really happened, why would the characters involved be recorded as quoting little else but the Old Testament?

Jesus' ministry

According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, the public life of Christ lasted about a year. If John's Gospel is to be believed, his ministry covered about three years. Again the Synoptics teach that Christ's public work was confined almost entirely to Galilee, and that he went to Jerusalem only once, not long before his death. But John maintains that most of the public life of Christ was spent in Judea, and that Christ was many times in Jerusalem.

Differences in the Teachings of Jesus:

In many ways the teaching of Jesus in Mark is summarised in the first words he speaks: “The time has been fulfilled; the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!” (1:15). His message is

CONTRADICTIONS AND DISCREPANCIES

essentially apocalyptic. In John practically all that Jesus talks about: who he is, where he has come from, where he is going, and how he is the one who can provide eternal life. Jesus does not preach about the future kingdom of God in John. The emphasis is on his own identity, as seen in the numerous “I am” sayings like “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me” (14:6). The idea that there would be soon a future kingdom on earth in which God would rule supreme and all the forces of evil would be destroyed is no part of Jesus’ proclamation in John.

The calling by Jesus of his disciples is also portrayed in various manners in the different gospels. The variances are such that it is impossible to insist that all of the evangelists recorded the scene correctly, if they are indeed depicting an historical event. Therefore, one or more of the accounts must be incorrect. Moreover, in Matthew 5 and 6, Christ first advises his followers to “let their light shine before men”—i.e., in public—so that others can see their “good works.” Later, Jesus admonishes that we should pray and give alms in secret! At one point (Mt 5:22), Jesus admonishes us not be angry with our brother, but he also says that our foes will be those of our own household, including our brothers. Similarly Christ first tells his followers to hate their mother and father but later exhorts them to honour their mother and father (Mt 15:4). How can we do both?

Jesus also tells us (Mt. 5:44) to “love our enemies,” which sounds Utopian and which also contradicts Christ’s own sentiments when he angrily condemns the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum (Mt 11:21, 23). In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ first tells us not to judge anyone, but then advises us to determine who are “dogs” and “swine,” so we don’t give them what is holy and throw our “pearls” before them (Mt 7:6).

A number of other contradictions and inconsistencies appear within the gospels, including Jesus commanding his followers to bother not with the Gentiles, but only with the “lost sheep of Israel”; yet, at the end, after his resurrection, Christ exhorts his disciples to go to “all the nations.” Throughout the gospels Jesus is quite adamant that he has only come for Israel – why is this mission altered suddenly and dramatically in the end? Did the omniscient Lord profoundly change the reason for his mission all of a sudden? These factual discrepancies are not simply disagreements in doctrine or dogma that can be smoothed over by theology and philosophising. These are incongruities in supposed facts of what purportedly happened historically on Earth. No other subject in history is treated in this haphazard and kid-gloves manner. Should we not simply ask whether or not the evangelists and later scribes made mistakes, because they were writing fictionalised accounts?

In addition to the many problems already noted are several others concerning anachronisms and erroneous gospel topography or geographical locations. Some of the towns mentioned in the New Testament have never been found to exist in the historical or archaeological record, and still others are evidently plucked from the Old Testament, such that their names are outdated and were not in use at the



Map 2. Palestine in the first century CE

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

time the gospel drama supposedly took place. Indeed, the gospel story is anachronistically set in a time that had been long gone by the beginning of the first century, depicting, for example, archaic agriculture, and giving an impression of a vast wilderness full of sheep and shepherds, when in fact much of the small, 90-mile-long area of Palestine in question was already well developed and densely urbanised in the first century of the common era. In fact, the population of Palestine overall during this period was an estimated half to 1.5 million.

Was Jesus a man of peace?

Jesus is portrayed by the Church as a man of peace and goodwill. But then how does one explain passages like these in the gospels?

- I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! (Lk 12:49)
- Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. (Lk 12:51)
- He said to them, "But now if you have a purse, take it, and also a bag; and if you don't have a sword, sell your cloak and buy one" (Lk 22:36)
- Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword (Mt 10:34)
- For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. A man's enemies will be the members of his own household. (Mt 10:35-36)
- Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son (Jn 3:18)
- If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned (Jn 15:6)
- Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell? (Mt 23:27-33)

What do we know of the twelve apostles

The gospels tell us little of most of the 12 apostles apart from their names. Yet even in names there are serious discrepancies. In the gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, the disciples Peter, James and John are Jesus' closest followers. In John's gospels, however, Peter plays only a minor role and James and John are not even mentioned. John's gospel, on the other hand, presents us with the apostles Nathanael and Nicodemus, who make no appearance in the other three gospels. On top of this, the list of names of the disciples is very clumsily worked into the text of Mark and Matthew, which has led scholars to conclude that the number of disciples was what was originally important, and the names were a later consideration.

The traditional view of Church history is that after the resurrection the twelve apostles played a decisive role in establishing the Church. Their deeds are recorded in the Acts of the Apostles. Yet, although the author (Luke) of Acts, in line with the pagan significance of this number, ascribes the greatest importance to the number twelve, he tells us nothing about nine of them apart from their names. Of the twelve, Acts concerns itself only with Peter. But even Peter is not mentioned after Chapter 15, and we hear only of Paul, who was not one of the twelve and was never supposed to have met Jesus.

When did Jesus clean the Temple?

The Gospel of Mark indicates that it was in the last week of his life that Jesus “cleansed the Temple” by overturning the tables of the money changers and saying, “This is to be a house of prayer ... but you have made it a den of thieves” (Mark 11), whereas according to John this happened at the very beginning of Jesus’ ministry (John 2). Some readers have thought that Jesus must have cleansed the Temple twice, once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end. But that would mean that neither Mark nor John tells the “true” story, since in both accounts he cleanses the temple only once.

On which day did Jesus die?

At the end of his life Jesus makes a journey to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Jewish feast of Passover; while he is there he is arrested and crucified. In the days of Jesus, the Passover, held annually, was the most important Jewish festival celebrating the Exodus during Moses’ time. On the Day of Preparation for the Passover, Jews had a lamb sacrificed to prepare a special meal.

It should be noted that in traditional Judaism the new day begins at *sunset* just as for Hindus it begins at sunrise. Hence the meal was prepared in the afternoon. The meal was eaten that night, which was actually the beginning of the *next* day, the Passover day which began with the evening meal. In Mark 14:12, the disciples ask Jesus where they are to prepare the Passover meal for that evening i.e. they ask on the Day of Preparation for Passover. After the disciples eat the Passover meal they go out to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray. Judas Iscariot brings the troops and performs his act of betrayal. Jesus is taken to stand trial before the Jewish authorities. He spends the night in jail, and the next morning he is put on trial before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty and condemns him to death by crucifixion. We are told that he is crucified that same day, at nine o’clock in the morning (Mk 15:25). Thus Jesus dies on the day of Passover, the morning *after* the Passover meal was eaten.

In John they do eat a final supper together and after the meal they go out. Jesus is betrayed by Judas, appears before the Jewish authorities, spends the night in jail, and is put on trial before Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty and condemns him to be crucified. And we are told exactly when Pilate pronounces the sentence: “It was the Day of Preparation for the Passover; and it was about noon” (Jn 19:14). Thus in John, Jesus dies a day *earlier*, on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, sometime after noon. And so the contradiction stands: in Mark, Jesus eats the Passover meal (Thursday night) and is crucified the following morning. In John, Jesus does not eat the Passover meal but is crucified on the day before the Passover meal was to be eaten. Moreover, in Mark, Jesus is nailed to the cross at nine in the morning; in John, he is not condemned until noon, and then he is taken out and crucified.

Why did John, our latest Gospel, change the day and time when Jesus died? It may be because in John’s Gospel, Jesus is the Lamb of God (John 1.29), whose sacrifice brings salvation from sins. Exactly like the Passover Lamb, Jesus has to die on the day (the Day of Preparation) and the time (sometime after noon), when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in the Temple. In other words, John has changed a historical datum in order to make a theological point: Jesus is the sacrificial lamb. And to convey this theological point, John has had to create a discrepancy between his account and those of the others.

Again it is significant that in John’s Gospel, on three occasions Pilate expressly declares that Jesus is innocent, does not deserve to be punished, and ought to be released (18:38;19:6; and by implication in 19:12). In Mark, Pilate never declares Jesus innocent. Paul Winter observes: “The stern Pilate grows more mellow from gospel to gospel. The more removed from history, the more sympathetic a character he becomes”. Other first-century writers, Jewish and Roman, however describe a very different man. Philo describes Pilate as a man of “ruthless, stubborn and cruel disposition,” famous for, among other

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

things, ordering “frequent executions without trial”. With regard to the Jews a parallel process occurs, but in reverse– the Jews become increasingly antagonistic. Scholars have long noted that John is in many ways the most virulently anti-Jewish of our Gospels (see John 8:42-44, where Jesus declares that the Jews are not children of God but “children of the Devil”).

Why Did Jesus Die?

Mark is clear that Jesus’ death brought about an atonement for sin (Mk 10:45). So what is the reason for Jesus’ death in Luke? The matter becomes clearer in Luke’s second volume, the book of Acts. Salvation comes not through an atoning sacrifice but by forgiveness that comes from repentance. And for Paul it is faith in Jesus.

Who was crucified?

There is however some confusion in the Bible account itself. Another person called Barabbas was also arrested, tried along with Christ, but set free in deference to the wishes of the crowd which elected Christ to be crucified. But there is an interesting bit of information from an older version of the Gospel of Matthew, which states the full name of the person called ‘Barabbas’ – “*Jesus Barabbas*”! The word ‘Barabbas’ literally means ‘son of god’. ‘Bar’ is ‘son of’ and ‘abbas’ is ‘father’ (like *appa* in Tamil), but which was then interpreted as ‘The Father’ or God! It appears from the Gospels that this man called Barabbas was accused of being a Jewish rebel and killing people during an insurrection. Thus Barabbas was not an ordinary criminal as is made out, but a Jewish fanatic (Jn 18.40). He was charged with the same crimes against the Roman state as Christ. Then who died and who was released?

In this context we may mention the works of the Hellenized Jewish philosopher and historian Philo of Alexandria (20 BC-50 AD), “Trial of a Mock-king,” or passion, which oddly resembles that of Christ. Philo was thus a contemporary of Jesus. If we factor in the many other evidences, it seems that the gospel passion was based significantly on the passion account found in Philo as concerns a man named “Karabbas” who was dressed up in a mock crown and purple robe, given a fake “sceptre” and paraded about in the same manner as Christ. Friedlander remarks, “Philo has been a valuable mine whence the writers of the New Testament have drawn some of their best treasures.”

The death of Jesus in Mark and Luke

In Mark’s version of the story (Mk 15:16–39), Jesus is condemned to death by Pontius Pilate, mocked and beaten by the Roman soldiers, and taken off to be crucified. Everyone mocks at him but Jesus is silent until the very end, when he utters the wretched cry, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani,” which Mark translates from the Aramaic for his readers as, “My God, my God, why have you *forsaken* me?” The Greek verb in this verse literally means “left behind”. The Church took it to mean “forsake” and argued that because Christ had taken the sins of the world upon himself, he felt forsaken by God and in some manuscripts the dying Jesus cries “My God, my God, why have you reviled me?” The Gnostics, on the other hand, understood the word in its more literal sense, so that for them, Jesus was lamenting the departure of the divine Christ.

In Luke however Jesus is not at all silent on the way to his crucifixion and speaks to many. He is completely calm and in control of the situation. Rather than uttering a cry expressing his sense of total abandonment at the end, he prays to God in a loud voice, saying, “Father into your hands I commend my spirit.” He then breathes his last and dies (23:46). These are not disinterested accounts of what *really* happened when Jesus died. It is theology put in the form of a narrative. The picture gets even more confused if Matthew’s and Luke’s accounts are thrown in. In all the four Gospels the last words spoken by Christ are different.

The Resurrection Narratives

At his death the apostles abandoned Jesus in panic, even though they should have been expecting his resurrection if they had indeed witnessed his miracles, heard his divinity claims, and heard him say at least four times [Mk 8:31, 10:34; Mt 16:21, 17:23, 20:19; Lk 9:22, 18:33, 24:7, 24:46] that he would “rise from the dead” or be “raised to life” “on the third day”. The New Testament accounts of the resurrection appearances develop over time from silent to vague to contradictory to fantastic. The Empty Tomb story could have resulted from a discreet reburial or removal, perhaps by a disciple. Nowhere are the differences among the Gospels more clear than in the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection! They differ at almost every point which are just impossible to reconcile!

In Matthew, Jesus says he will be dead for three days; yet, he dies on Friday afternoon and rises on Sunday morning, constituting fewer than two days. The apologist argument that Friday, Saturday and Sunday can be counted as whole days does not account for the “sign of Jonah,” which puts the messiah in the tomb for three nights as well. Clearly, Christ was not in the tomb for three nights. (Jonah 1:17; Mt 12:40).

All the four Gospels agree that on the third day after Jesus’ crucifixion and burial, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and found it empty. But on virtually every detail they disagree.

- Each gospel has different persons accompanying her.
- Again had the stone already been rolled away from the tomb (as in Mk 16:4) or was it rolled away by an angel while the women were there (Mt 28:2)?
- Whom or what did they see there? An angel (Mt 28:5)? A young man (Mk 16:5)? Two men (Lk 24:4)? Or nothing and no one (Jn 20:1)?
- And what were they told? To tell the disciples to “go to Galilee,” where Jesus will meet them (Mk 16:7)? Or to remember what Jesus had told them “while he was in Galilee,” that he had to die and rise again (Lk 24:7)?
- Then, do the women tell the disciples what they saw and heard (Matthew 28:8), or do they not tell anyone (Mk 16:8)? If they tell someone, whom do they tell? The eleven disciples (Mt 28:8)? The eleven disciples and other people (Luke 24:8)? Simon Peter and another unnamed disciple (Jn 20:2)?
- What do the disciples do in response? Do they have no response because Jesus himself immediately appears to them (Mt 20:9)? Do they not believe the women because it seems to be “an idle tale” (Lk 24:11)? Or do they go to the tomb to see for themselves (Jn 20:3)?
- One point in particular seems to be irreconcilable. In Mark’s account the women are instructed to tell the disciples to go meet Jesus in Galilee, but out of fear they don’t say a word to anyone about it. In Matthew’s version the disciples are told to go to Galilee to meet Jesus, and they immediately do so. He appears to them there and gives them their final instruction. But in Luke the disciples are *not* told to go to Galilee. They are told that Jesus had foretold his resurrection while he was in Galilee (during his public ministry). And they never leave Jerusalem—in the southern part of the Israel, a different region from Galilee, in the north. In John he meets them both in Jerusalem and Galilee.
- On the day of the resurrection Jesus appears to two disciples on the “road to Emmaus” (Lk 24:13-35); later that day these disciples tell the others what they have seen, and Jesus appears to all of them (24:36-49); and then Jesus takes them to Bethany on the outskirts of Jerusalem and gives them their instructions and ascends to heaven. In Luke’s next volume, Acts, we’re told that the disciples are in fact

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

explicitly told by Jesus after his resurrection not to leave Jerusalem (Acts 1:4), but to stay there until they receive the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. After giving his instructions, Jesus then ascends to heaven. The disciples do stay in Jerusalem until the Holy Spirit comes (Acts 2). And so the discrepancy: If Matthew is right, that the disciples immediately go to Galilee and see Jesus ascend from there, how can Luke be right that the disciples stay in Jerusalem the whole time, see Jesus ascend from there, and stay on until the day of Pentecost? With Mark, the verses 16:9-21 describing the event are now accepted as a later addition.

Mark's ignorance of geography of Judea and the Jewish traditions

The first gospel writer Mark seemed unfamiliar with the country of Palestine or common Jewish customs. Scholars give following examples:

- Dalmanutha referred to in Mark 8:10 does not exist by that name, though it seems to be the same as Magdala of Matthew 15:39 properly rendered Magadan
- In Mark 5:1 the country of the Gerasenes extends to the Sea of Galilee but Gerasene is really some forty miles from the lake, behind the mountains in what is now Jordan and then was the country of the ten Greek cities called Decapolis
- He describes the town of Bethsaida in Mark 8:26 as a village
- He thought the appearance of Jesus before the High Priest was a trial, not the committal hearing that it was
- He thought (10:12) a wife could divorce a husband contrary to Jewish law
- In the seventh chapter, for instance, Jesus is reported as going through Sidon on his way from Tyre to the Sea of Galilee. Not only is Sidon in the opposite direction, but there was in fact no road from Sidon to the Sea of Galilee in the first century AD, only one from Tyre. Similarly the fifth chapter refers to the Sea of Galilee's eastern shore as the country of the Gerasenes, yet Gerasa, today Jerash, is more than thirty miles to the south-east, too far away for a story whose setting requires a nearby city with a steep slope down to the sea.

The Death of Judas

In all four Gospels Judas Iscariot is said to be the one who betrayed Jesus to the authorities, leading to his arrest. But they differ on why Judas did the foul deed. There is no reason stated in Mark, although we are told that he received money for the act, so maybe it was out of greed (14:10-11). Matthew (26:14) states explicitly that Judas did it for the money. Luke, on the other hand, indicates that Judas did it because "Satan entered into him" (22:3). In other words, the devil made him do it. In John, Judas is himself called "a devil" (6:70-71). And more interesting is the question of what happened to Judas after he performed the act of betrayal. Mark and John say nothing about the matter: Judas simply disappears from the scene. The commonly held view that Judas went out and "hanged himself" comes from Matthew (27:3-10). In Acts (1:18-19) written by Luke we are told that Judas himself and not by the Jewish priests as in Matthews, purchased the field with "the reward of his wickedness," the money he earned for his betrayal and he fell "headlong" and "burst open in the middle" so that "his bowels gushed out." For Luke the reason the field was called the field of Blood was because Judas bled all over it.

Some key differences between John and the synoptic gospels

With the exception of the Passion Narratives, most of the stories found in John are not found in the Synoptics, and most of the stories in the Synoptic Gospels are not found in John. And when they do cover similar territory, John's accounts are strikingly different from the others. Without any reference to virgin birth, Bethlehem, baptism or temptation in wilderness John starts with a prologue (a later addition) that mysteriously describes Jesus as the Word of God. Jesus in John is not simply an apocalyptic Jewish prophet who suddenly bursts onto the scene, as in Mark; and he is not a divine-human born of a Virgin as in Luke and Matthew. He is God's very Word, who was with God in the beginning and who has temporarily come to dwell on earth bringing the possibility of eternal life.

John does tell of Jesus performing miracles during his public ministry, but the miracles are never called miracles, which literally means "works of power." Instead, they are called signs. Signs of what? Signs of who Jesus is, the one who has come down from heaven to provide eternal life to all who believe in him. Seven signs are narrated in the Gospel of John, most of them not found among the miracles of the Synoptics (except walking on the water and feeding the multitudes). In John, Jesus usually speaks in long discourses rather than in memorable aphoristic sayings as in the other Gospels.

Other Discrepancies In The Bible Accounts

When was the end of the World to come?

The earliest Christian writer Paul was convinced that the end would come in his own generation. In fact, in the very earliest writing that we have from his pen, Paul speaks about the imminent end of the age to be brought by Jesus' return. Thus is the first letter to the Thessalonians: "For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord by no means will precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call, and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air (1 Thess. 4:15-17). It is clear that Paul appears to understand that he himself will be one of those living when Jesus returns.

The next writer Mark echoes this: "Truly I tell you, there are some who are standing here who will not taste death until they see that the Kingdom of God has come in power" (Mk 9:1). Luke takes over this verse but leaves out the last few words, so that now Jesus simply says: "Truly I tell you, there are some who are standing here who will not taste death until they see the Kingdom of God" (Lk 9:27). The difference might seem slight, but in fact it's huge. Now Jesus does not predict the imminent arrival of the Kingdom in power, but simply says that the disciples (in some sense) will see the Kingdom. For according to Luke, the Kingdom has already "come to you" in Jesus own ministry (Luke 11:20, not in Mark), and it is said to "be among you" in the person of Jesus himself (Luke 17:21, also not in Mark). Luke continues to think that the end of the age is going to come in *his* own lifetime. But he does not seem to think that it was supposed to come in the lifetime of Jesus' companions. Why not? Evidently because he was writing after they had died, and he knew that in fact the end had not come. To deal with the "delay of the end," he made the appropriate changes in Jesus' predictions. And in the Gospel of John, the last of our canonical accounts to be written, rather than speaking about the Kingdom of God that is soon to come (which is never spoken of here), Jesus talks about eternal life that is available here and now for the believer. The emphasis now is on faith in Jesus who gives eternal life in the present. This world is not going to enter a crisis at the end of the world before being redeemed. This "de-apocalypticising" of Jesus' message continues into the second century. In the Gospel of Thomas, for

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

example, there is a clear attack on anyone who believes in a future Kingdom here on earth. In some sayings, for example, Jesus denies that the Kingdom involves an actual place but “The Kingdom of the Father is spread out on the earth and people do not see it” (saying 113).

Discrepancies involving the life and writings of Paul

Next to Jesus, Paul is the most prominent person in the New Testament. Thirteen letters supposedly written by him are included in the collection and about two thirds of the narrative of Acts (written by Luke) is concerned with him. A lot of the information that people “know” about Paul comes from Acts and only from Acts, since these are pieces of information that Paul doesn’t mention in his letters. But there is a huge discrepancy in the two accounts since each author had his own agenda. For example

- According to Acts 9, immediately after Paul converted he spent some time in Damascus and when he left the city, he headed directly to Jerusalem, where he met with the apostles of Jesus. But Paul in Galatians (1:16-20) declares that he went to Arabia, Damascus etc. for three years and then went to Jerusalem where he met *only* Peter and James “the Lord’s brother” and no one else
- Did the churches in Judea know Paul? According to Acts yes and according to Paul no
- How many trips did Paul make to Jerusalem? According to Paul twice, according to Acts thrice
- Were the congregations that Paul established made up of both Jews and gentiles? According to the book of Acts, the answer is a clear yes. According to Paul it was only gentiles and he calls himself the “apostle to the gentiles.”

Some key differences between Paul and the gospel writers

It should be remembered that Paul was writing *before* any of the Gospels were written. One important aspect of Paul’s teaching is the question of how a person can have a right standing before God. In his several letters he argues that a person is “justified by faith” in Christ’s death and resurrection, not by observing the works of the Jewish law. In the Gospel of Matthew followers of Jesus need to keep the Jewish law if they are to be saved. In fact, they need to keep it better even than the Jews (Mt 5:17-20). Matthew suggests, in fact, that salvation is not just a matter of belief but also of action, an idea completely alien to the thinking of Paul. Paul uses the word “justification” to refer to a person’s having a right standing before God. Paul believed eternal life comes to those who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus or in other words only faith in Jesus could bring eternal life. In Mathews’ account (Mt 25:31-45) of the sheep and the goats, salvation comes to those who have never even heard of Jesus. It comes to those who treat others in a humane and caring way in their hour of deepest need. This is a completely different view of salvation.

Did Paul and Matthew see eye to eye on keeping the law? Evidently not. Did Paul and Jesus advocate the same religion? It is a *key* historical question, and the answer is hard to deny. Jesus taught his followers to keep the law as God had commanded in order to enter the kingdom. Paul taught that keeping the law had nothing to do with entering the kingdom. For Paul, only the death and resurrection of Jesus mattered. The historical Jesus of the Gospels taught the law. Paul taught a spiritual Jesus in line with other pagan *ishaputras*. Or, as some scholars have put it, already with Paul the religion *of* Jesus has become the religion *about* Jesus or Pauline Christianity.

Later Christians pushed Paul’s distinction even further. Marcion for example insisted that Paul’s distinction between law and Gospel was an absolute one. For Marcion there were literally two Gods,

CONTRADICTIONS AND DISCREPANCIES

and the God of the law has nothing to do with the God of Jesus. The Old Testament belongs to the wrathful God of the Jews. And so we have one of the great ironies of the early Christian tradition. *The profoundly Jewish religion of Jesus and his followers became the viciously anti-Jewish religion of later times.*

We have highlighted here only some of the significant discrepancies in these accounts of the “eyewitnesses” in the New Testament but there are several more. A discerning reader studying these theological controversies may now wonder whether these are gospels or gossips? And was Jesus a real historical figure or merely a creation of myth and propaganda? In the next two Chapters we shall see what today’s scholars say about the *historical* Christ and his Virgin Mother.

CHAPTER 4

Was there a historical Christ?

The quests had been fruitless....There is no history of Jesus that can be discovered. The historical Jesus will be to our time a stranger and an enigma
Albert Schweitzer, The Quest of the Historical Jesus (1906)

It's like peeling an onion. You start peeling an onion, looking for the centre, and what you discover is that the layers are the onion.

Michael White

"...the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

Thomas Jefferson, The Adams-Jefferson Letters (594)

In the first three chapters we have seen that the New Testament canon took over three centuries to be compiled and it was a long, painstaking and controversial process. Yet in spite of extensive editing, numerous contradictions and discrepancies remain which cannot be reconciled try as you may. We are then lead to ask if there was an actual historical Jesus and if he really lived what do we know about him.

There are many millions of people today who believe as they have been taught that the gospels are historical texts, infallibly inspired and inerrant, containing the sayings and deeds of the Son of God, who came to Earth 2,000 years ago in order to provide redemption and salvation. Because of the difficulties in believing all the miracles ascribed to Jesus, there are also many millions of people who do not believe Jesus is the Son of God who supernaturally confers anything upon anyone. This latter category of people usually perceives the gospel story as containing some history, including a general outline of the life of a man called Jesus, with the addition of a number of fables and fairy tales. There is a third school of thought, however, that sees no evidence for either of the first two premises. In fact, this group apprehends that the story of Christ as recorded in the disparate and divergent gospels has so many difficulties, inconsistencies and fallacies that it cannot be taken literally. This faction maintains that the gospels are works of fiction placed within a historical setting, and, scandalous as it may sound, that no such historical person as Jesus Christ ever existed in the first place.

What will also be surprising or rather shocking to an unbiased scholar or reader is that he appears to have been almost a complete unknown to the public at large. What do Greek and Roman sources have to say about Jesus? Or to make the question more pointed: if Jesus lived and died in the first century (death claimed to be around 30 AD), what do the Greek and Roman sources from his own day through the end of the first century have to say about him? The answer is breath taking. They have absolutely nothing to say about him. He is never discussed, challenged, attacked, maligned, or talked about in any way in any surviving pagan source of the period. There are no birth records, accounts of his trial and death, reflections on his significance, or disputes about his teachings. In fact, his name is unambiguously never mentioned once in any pagan source. And we have several Greek and Roman

WAS THERE A HISTORICAL CHRIST?

sources from the period like Seneca, Plutarch, Pliny the Elder and Ptolemy: religious scholars, historians, philosophers, poets, natural scientists as well as thousands of private letters; we also have inscriptions placed on buildings in public places.

Coming to Jew writers, in the extensive writings of Philo, the great Jewish philosopher of Alexandria, Egypt (20 BC-50 AD) and a contemporary, Jesus is never mentioned. The well known Josephus in his *The Antiquities of the Jews* mentions Jesus in two places but most scholars have concluded that these are later interpolations. As we shall see below, even Paul talks basically of a spiritual Christ and the book of the first century Jew revolutionary Justus of Tiberias makes no mention of Jesus. The first unambiguous reference to a historical Jesus occurs only around 110 AD by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch in his letter to Trallians: "Close your ears then if anyone preaches to you without speaking of Jesus Christ. Christ was of David's line. He was the son of Mary; he was really born, ate and drank, was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was really crucified....He was also truly raised from the dead."

Before we proceed we should discuss an important literary development among the Jews of the first century – 'midrash' or exposition which filled in the gaps behind the oft-times sketchy, skeletal narrative of the Torah, adding meat to its bones and telling us things we otherwise would never know. It was an ancient Jewish practice of interpreting and enlarging on individual or combinations of passages from their Bible to draw out new meanings and relevance, to get beyond the surface words. One way to do this was to embody them in new stories with present-day contexts. This was similar to our own Puranas which consist of many tales expounding the cryptic Vedic utterances so that their truths could be grasped by the masses. Many scholars suspect that this technique has been beautifully employed in the construction of the Gospels which, as we have seen, are based almost exclusively on the teachings and prophecies of the Old Testament. In fact in the gospel of Matthew, the author makes it a point to link every event or teaching to the Old Testament passages.

Leaving aside the vast number of believing and practising Christians who unwaveringly believe in the historical Christ born of a Virgin, his miracles and his resurrection (otherwise their faith becomes meaningless since total belief is the *sole* requirement for their salvation), there is a growing number of Christians who question the official Church version. They may be broadly divided in the following categories:

- 'Rational' Christians who ignore all or most of the miracles including the resurrection but accept that Christ was a historical charismatic person who actually lived and preached
- A great mystic Master and/or a yogi and seeker of Truth
- A purely mythical figure
- A revolutionary and apocalyptic prophet mercilessly executed by the Romans
- Other explanations

The subject is vast and here we can only highlight opinions and theories of various scholars. A good summary and classification of recent scholars of various categories, their theories and their books have been provided by the following website which has been updated until about 2002. Many more books on this subject have been written since then.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html>

We should also make it a point to note that in general in the scholarly writings by Western scholars on historicity, their emotions, own upbringing and fear of offending the majority as well as the establishment view prevents most of them from walking 'the last mile' to unequivocally declare the bare

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

truth and one finds a lot of hedging and hawing in their writings. Freke and Gandy proponents of the “Mystic Jesus” theory in their opening chapter of *The Jesus Mysteries* confess, “We had both been raised as Christians and were surprised to find that, despite years of open-minded spiritual exploration, it still felt somehow dangerous to even dare think such thoughts. Early indoctrination reaches very deep... .. To dare to question a received history is not easy. It is difficult to believe that something which you have been told is true from childhood could actually be a product of falsification and fantasy.” But pagans and infidels like us need not have such mental blocks and can explore this question in an unbiased manner.

Rational Christians

Several such scholars view Jesus as a man of spirit and a wisdom sage. A few examples are:

- Borg in *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* claims, “he was a spirit person, subversive sage, social prophet, and movement founder who invited his followers and hearers into a transforming relationship with the same Spirit that he himself knew, and into a community whose social vision was shaped by the core value of compassion”.
- Crossan in *The Historical Jesus* explains that in the twenties of the first century in Galilee the agrarian peasantry were being exploited as the Romans were commercialising the area. For him the historical Jesus proves to be a displaced Galilean peasant artisan who had got fed up with the situation and went about preaching a radical message: an egalitarian vision of the Kingdom of God present on earth and available to all. The historical Jesus was a roving preacher whose mode of teaching can be understood on analogy with the Cynic sages but who was nonetheless a Jew who believed that the kingdom was being made available by the God of Israel to his people. The revolutionary message of Jesus was seen to be subversive to the Roman vision of order and led to his execution by Pilate.
- Geza Vermes portrays the historical Jesus as a charismatic teacher, healer, and exorcist who believed in the soon-to-be-realized Kingdom of God. He was a Galilean holy man and a prophet, one who expected decisive action from the God of Israel in the near future.
- Patterson in *The Gospel of Thomas and Jesus* feels that “Jesus was a wisdom teacher, and that the early Jesus movement thought of itself as a kind of wisdom school”. He feels that this wisdom movement later moved in a more speculative direction.

A Great Yogi And Mystic

In the second Part of this book dealing with the Gnostic Gospels we shall cover in detail those who had looked upon Jesus as a great spiritual Teacher and their teachings. And now there is a recent addition to this mystic dimension – that he spent time in India to imbibe the great spiritual truths and become a Master Yogi himself! His Indian visit could have taken place at two stages in his life – in his youth since the Gospels are silent about his life from the age of about twelve to twenty eight and after his ‘crucifixion’ when he was around thirty. Both these periods have been covered by different writers.

The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ by Levi H. Dowling, published in 1908 (said to be transcribed from The Book of God’s Remembrance from “*Akashic Records*”), claims to be the true story of the life of Jesus, including the ‘lost’ eighteen years in the New Testament. The narrative follows the

young Jesus across India, Tibet, Persia, Assyria, Greece and Egypt. Gruber and Kersten claim that Buddhism had a substantial influence on the life and teachings of Jesus. They claim that Jesus was influenced by the teachings and practices of Therapeutae, described by them as teachers of the Buddhist Theravada school then living in Judea. They assert that Jesus lived the life of a Buddhist and taught Buddhist ideals to his disciples; their work follows in the footsteps of the Oxford New Testament scholar Barnett Hillman Streeter, who established as early as the 1930s that the moral teaching of the Buddha has a remarkable resemblance to the Sermon on the Mount. We have already seen Lindtner's claim in Chapter 1 that the gospels are based on Buddhist scriptures written in Sanskrit. A Dutch scholar doing research on Jesus' sojourn in Puri during his travels writes in a personal communication, "he only preached maximum three years and probably two years or even less. How is it possible that the preaching over some two years of a rather radical Jewish rabbi had a world-wide effect over the next 2000 years? The answer is that Jesus was a perfected Yogi or Siddha who knew exactly what he did. His activities and the words he spoke were based on the highest levels of Yoga practice."

A more astonishing theory is that Jesus did not die on the cross. The bible itself records that the body was handed over to Joseph of Arimathea for burial who wrapped it in a clean linen cloth (Mt. 27.57-60). Apparently Jesus was not dead then and was eventually cured and then he set on a long journey along with his mother Mary passing through many countries and ultimately arrived in Kashmir as described by Holger Kersten's book *Jesus Lived in India*. He lived there until a ripe old age and was buried in a tomb in Srinagar. The Koran also asserts that Jesus did not die at the cross and many Muslims believe that it is the tomb of their prophet Issa (Jesus in Arabic). Some passages from *Bhavishya Purana* are also cited to support this theory. A recent thriller *The Rozabal Line* a la *The Da Vinci Code* is based on this theory. Thiering has however given a different interpretation about Christ's life after crucifixion.

A Mythical Figure

An increasingly large number of Christians in the West now consider Christ as a mythical figure. A 2005 study conducted by Baylor University, a private Christian university, found that one percent of Americans in general, and 13.7 percent of religiously unaffiliated Americans, believe that Jesus is a fictional character. Comparable figures for Britain in 2008 say 13 percent of the general population, and 40 percent of atheists, do not believe that Jesus existed. A 2009 study found that 11 percent of Australians doubt that Jesus was a historical figure. It is expected that this proportion will progressively increase with time.

In Part 2 on Gnostic Gospels we shall cover in detail the mystics in the Roman Empire venerating Jesus as a Master. According to them those baptised by water (Psychic), i.e. ordinary Christians, considered Jesus as a historical person. However those who were more advanced i.e. those who were baptised by the holy breadth or fire (Pneumatics and Gnostics) understood his story only as an *allegorical* myth and ultimately realised that they were one with Christ or Logos. Several scholars feel that Alexandria in Egypt was the crucible in which the Jews who had migrated there synthesised their own faith drawing from the Egyptian legends of the resurrecting Osiris, the Therapeut (based on Buddhist Theravada) schools and their own expectation from persistent prophecies announcing that an avatar was going to be born around that time to bring about a radical transformation of the world. The destruction of the Jew Temple made the resurrecting God-man theory attractive and the first Gospels were written providing a historical Jewish context for the Psychics in line with the Jewish midrash. The Roman Church which took the Gospels literally ruthlessly suppressed the mystics in the fourth century after obtaining imperial support (see Chapter 8).

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

During the last two centuries there are several scholars who support this theory. Among the more recent ones we can mention the names of Earl Doherty, Freke & Gandy, G A Wells and D. M. Murdoch (pseudonym S. Acharya). It is now universally acknowledged that the seven genuine Pauline letters written in the fifties of the first century preceded the Gospels. And what is surprising is that when Paul speaks of “scripture” and “prophetic writings”, he is referring to the *Old Testament*, specifically its Greek translation called Septuagint. In that book, the word “Christos” appears some three dozen times, and it is evident that in his revelation of Christ, Paul is building upon so-called “messianic prophecies,” not the words or deeds of a *historical* Jesus of Nazareth. In fact he rarely refers to the famous sayings of the historic Christ of the Gospels in his letters although he is talking about the same thing. In other words, the Christ of the Gospels represents not a “fulfilment of prophecy” but, rather, a patchwork of Old Testament “messianic scriptures”, amalgamated with Pagan philosophical notions and mythical motifs, along with both Jewish and Gentile wisdom sayings. In fact the great Gnostic sages of the early second century called Paul ‘the Great Apostle’ and honoured him as the primary inspiration for Gnostic Christianity. Valentinus explains that Paul initiated the chosen few into the ‘Deeper Mysteries’ of Christianity which revealed a secret doctrine of God. The texts found at Nag Hammadi include *The Prayer of the Apostle Paul* and *The Apocalypse of Paul*.

These scholars feel that the myth of Christ was progressively built up in the following sequence:

- The Letters of Paul c.50 AD: Jesus is a mystical dying and resurrecting godman.
- The Gospel of Mark 70-110 AD: The myth of Jesus is given an historical and geographical setting after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple. The original version of the Gospel of Mark, the earliest historical account of Jesus, did not include the resurrected Jesus at all nor any details of his virgin birth.
- The Gospels of Matthew and Luke 90-135 AD: Details of Jesus’ birth and resurrection are added and the story embellished.
- The Gospel of John c. 120 AD: Christian theology is developed.
- Acts of the Apostles 150-177 AD: Having now created the illusion of an historical Jesus, Acts is created to account for his disciples.
- Letters of the Apostles 177-220 AD: Letters attributed to Paul and other apostles are forged by the orthodox in their battles with Gnosticism, attacking ‘many deceivers’ who ‘do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh’ (John Letter 2.7).

Chapter 6 also explains under which circumstances and how this myth began and establish itself.

A Revolutionary And Apocalyptic Prophet

We have seen above how several modern scholars interpret Jesus as a wisdom teacher. But several other leading scholars like Ehrman and Sanders feel that the gospels are best interpreted by considering him as an apocalyptic (A cosmic catastrophe in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil) prophet who predicted that these evil times will end soon and a new era of a glorious age ruled by God himself will be ushered. A few others like Eisenman consider him as a revolutionary prophet.

In support they argue that the historical Jesus is one of the apocalyptic prophets that have appeared throughout history proclaiming the end of the age. Ehrman argues that John the Baptist was apocalyptic, Paul was apocalyptic and the Palestinian Jewish environment was also apocalyptic. Hence it only makes sense that the historical Jesus was apocalyptic too. Thus the very first thing that Jesus is recorded to have said in Mark, the earliest gospel, is the urgent message: The time has come and the Kingdom of

God is almost here; repent and believe in the good news! (Mk 1:15). Later Christians however translated this very term “good news” literally to “gospels” in order to prophesy the mission of Jesus especially the accounts of his death and resurrection. We find that in this gospel Jesus has repeated this warning on several occasions. Jesus claimed that the end was at hand, that God was *about to* establish his kingdom, that those who responded to him would be included, and (at least by implication) that he would reign (Mk 8:38-9:1, 10:29-31, 13:30, 13:33-37). In pointing to the change of eras, he made a symbolic gesture by overturning tables in the temple area. This is the crucial act which led to his execution, though there were other contributing causes. We have seen earlier that this urgent message was subsequently de-apocalypticised in the succeeding gospels.

Elaine Pagels in her book, *Adam, Eve And the Serpent* writes, “When Jesus dared enter the Temple courtyard before a certain Passover, brandishing a whip, throwing down the tables of those changing foreign money, and quoting the words of the prophet Jeremiah to attack the Temple leaders for turning God’s house into a ‘den of robbers’... But soon afterwards the authorities took action to prevent this *firebrand village preacher* [our italics] from fanning the religious and nationalistic passions already smouldering among the restless crowds. The Jewish Council, eager to keep the peace, and hoping to avoid recriminations from their Roman masters, collaborated with the Roman procurator to have Jesus arrested, tried, and hastily executed on charges of having threatened to tear down the Temple single-handed, and having conspired to rise against Rome and make himself king of the Jews”.

Jesus appears, then, to have taught that people needed to repent and live in ways God wanted them to in light of the soon coming Kingdom. Supporters of this theory have explained away many of his seemingly contradictory messages mentioned in Chapter 3 under the heading “Was Jesus a man of peace?” as a call to his supporters to quickly get ready for the coming catastrophe. All of Jesus’ injunctions to love others, to give oneself to others, to serve others, and so on were instructions on how to inherit the Kingdom that was soon to appear. For Jesus, everything else paled in comparison. For him the present life holds no real attractions. Life in the present age should be at best a matter of indifference. The Kingdom is coming, and the concerns of this life are trivial by comparison even if it means “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mk 12:17). The material things of this world were a matter of indifference, and the love you show another should be manifest in your willingness to forgive whatever was owed you. Just as everyone is eager for God to overlook the ways they’ve mistreated him (by breaking his laws, for example) so, too, they should be willing to overlook the ways others have mistreated them (Mk 11:25).

Other Explanations

In the early days of Christianity, its critics’ main argument was a different one— Jesus was a bandit and a magician! A Jewish source says Jesus was crucified at Lydda as a false teacher and a beguiler. Celsus and Lucian early in the second century and Sossianus Hierocles late in the third tell us that Jesus was a sorcerer and a fomenter of rebellion who committed highway robbery at the head of a band of men. A passage from Celsus quoted by his critic Origen will illustrate this: “You, sir, have invented your birth from a virgin! You, Jesus, were born in a certain Jewish village, of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning. When she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been convicted as guilty of adultery, and she bore a child to a certain [Roman] soldier named Panthera. After being driven away by her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, who, brought up as an illegitimate child, having hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired the knowledge of certain miraculous powers, on which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of those powers proclaimed himself a god.”

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

We know that these documents existed because later scholars refer to them. But where are they now? Gone! Nothing of this remains now because Christians, when they came to power under Constantine, began to destroy anything contrary to their own view. Death penalty was prescribed for anyone owning or trying to preserve any books describing Jesus as a magician or an agitator! Thus a book, vital because it was written at the end of the first century by Justus of Tiberias, who organised the revolt in Galilee, has also gone. But Photius, Bishop of Tyre in 448 AD, commenting on Justus's book which still existed then, expressed surprise that it made no mention of Jesus. Justus knew the events of that period from direct experience and could hardly have avoided mentioning the execution of a claimant to the Jewish throne.

Another theory claims that Jesus had married Mary Magdalene and had issues from this marriage. After crucifixion Mary and her children migrated to Europe where the progeny survived for many generations although they were haunted by the Church which wanted to suppress this inconvenient fact. In fact many European royal genealogies are traced to Mary's progeny! Several books – serious and fictional including the international best seller *The Da Vinci Code* authored by Dan Brown, have been written on this provocative subject.

Scholars like Barbara Thiering, Australian theologian and scholar, in her book *Jesus the Man* claim that Jesus survived the crucifixion. But instead of proceeding to India he went to Rome. She claims that he had married Mary Magdalene, fathered a family, and later divorced. He was seventy years old in AD 64, and it is probable that he died of old age in seclusion in Rome.

Summing Up

It will be difficult to decisively conclude about the existence of a historical Jesus from this broad survey of various theories. But most myths contain a kernel of truth and it could be that there is a kernel of truth regarding a historical Jesus around whom several myths were built with passage of time. Otherwise it will be difficult to explain his rapidly growing and amazing popularity among several followers all over the Roman Empire who held diametrically opposite spiritual and religious views. He was venerated both as a mystic and as a revolutionary. Then was he a (failed) Galilean mini-edition of a Guru Govind Singh or a Samarth Ramdas who successfully integrated spirituality and freedom struggle?

Since all unfavourable records pertaining to this period have been destroyed or tampered with by the Church it will be difficult to come to any conclusion. But we can say with near certainty that the Jesus Christ depicted in the New Testament is a myth and fraud and a pious mask behind which all the Christian churches have committed untold atrocities and duplicities during the last seventeen centuries.

CHAPTER 5

Mary: The Virgin Mother of Jesus

Judaism is a totally male centric faith. Even the human Eve was created from Adam's rib in order to provide him companionship. The same tradition was carried over to the budding Christianity and sufficed as long as its adherents were only Jews. But with the efforts of Paul and others, more and more gentiles were attracted to the faith and this posed an acute problem to the Church. Most of these gentiles like all other pagans in the ancient world (including ours) worshipped the Divine in the form of a Mother and hence were uncomfortable with an exclusively male god. The only way was to create a female icon worthy of worship and there was no one else but the mother of Jesus who could do this. Never mind that she is referred to by name *fewer than twenty times* in the New Testament. It certainly goes to the credit of the Church that it could build such a magnificent edifice on such a shaky foundation.

The name Mary comes from the Hebrew Miriam, and means rebellion! The first and the last gospels make no mention of a virgin birth and mother Mary is relegated to an insignificant role. In the first gospel written around 70 AD, that of Mark, the author names her only once (6:3) and mentions her as Jesus' mother without naming her in 3:31. In 6:3 Mark describes Jesus as the "*son of Mary*". In the Jewish tradition (as in ours), a man is always identified as the son of his father, even if the father is dead. Hence a doubt arises whether he has done this since Jesus' birth was illegitimate. But Matthew and Luke describe Jesus normally as the "son of Joseph". Mark also portrays Mary negatively, showing her as among those who think Jesus is deranged. Mark 3.21 declares "When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, 'He is out of his mind'" (in many translations family has been translated as friends or associates). This is corroborated in the next verse where some Jew teachers also declare that he is possessed by Satan. The succeeding gospel writers Luke and Matthews however depict her more positively and as helping Jesus' ministry in some instances.

The last gospel, that of John, written around 130 AD, refers to her twice but never mentions her by name! Described as Jesus' mother, she makes two appearances in John's gospel. She is first seen at the wedding at Cana of Galilee (Jn 2:1-12) an incident mentioned only in this gospel. The second reference in John, also exclusively listed in this gospel, has the mother of Jesus standing near the cross of her son together with the unnamed 'disciple whom Jesus loved.' (Jn 19:25-26). Incidentally John 2:1-12 is the only text in the canonical gospels in which Mary speaks to (and about) the adult Jesus.

In both these gospels Jesus appears on the scene as an adult. It is only in the gospels of Luke and Matthew that Jesus' virgin birth is described in all its glory and hence Mary plays a large role in his birth and childhood. Luke's gospel mentions Mary most often, identifying her by name twelve times, all of these in the infancy narrative (1:27, 30, 34, 38, 39, 41, 46, 56; 2:5,16,19,34). Matthew's gospel mentions her by name five times, four of these (1:16,18,20; 2:11) in the infancy narrative and only once (13:55) outside the infancy narrative.

Coming to the other Books, in the Book of Acts, Luke's second writing, Mary and the 'brothers of Jesus' are mentioned in the company of the eleven who are gathered in the upper room after the Ascension.(Acts 1:14). In the Book of Revelation (12:1,5-6). John's apocalypse never explicitly identifies the "woman clothed with the sun" as Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus. However, many interpreters have conveniently made that connection.

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

This clearly shows the efforts of the clergy to superimpose the widely prevalent pagan myths of the Son of God on Jesus, an essential requirement of this being that he was born of a virgin due to good offices of a god. More details can be found in the first part of the Gnostic gospels series.

Was Jesus an illegitimate child?

In the previous chapter we have seen that in the second century, critics like Celsus had claimed that Jesus was an illegitimate son of Mary and a Roman soldier Panthera. James Tabor who has extensively studied this aspect after investigating a Roman soldier Panthera's grave in Germany writes in his book *The Jesus Dynasty* that whether Jesus' father is this soldier or not there are several give away passages in the New Testament itself suggesting his illegitimacy. In this context it will be interesting to compare this passage from Mark who wrote his gospel before the virgin myth was developed with that of Matthew who along with Luke elaborately describes the virgin birth aspect:

Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this *Mary's son* and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us? And they took offence at him. (Mk 6.3)
Isn't this the *carpenter's son*? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? (Mt 13.55)

Tabor writes, "Calling Jesus 'the son of Mary' indicates an unnamed father. In Judaism children are invariably referred to as sons or daughters of the father – *not* mother. Mark never refers to Joseph at all, by name or otherwise. He avoids the paternity issue altogether. There has to be a good reason for his silence. Matthew, in contrast, is quick to reshape Mark's wording so that the illegitimacy issue is not even hinted at. We even find that the later Greek manuscripts of Mark's gospel try to 'fix' the scandal by altering the text to read 'the son of Mary *and Joseph*'. In the gospel of John the things are even more explicit. At one point Jesus was in Jerusalem sparring with his Jewish critics. The conversation became very heated and almost turned violent. One of their response to Jesus was the startling assertion– 'We were not born of fornication' as if to imply that, as *you* were (Jn 8.41). Something is clearly going on here. This was a very low blow: an obvious attempt to undermine Jesus' standing by reference to a rumour of his illegitimate birth." Tabor also cites John 6.42, "They said, "Is this not Jesus, the son of Joseph, *whose father and mother we know*? How can he now say, 'I came down from heaven?' " He asks, "Why name Joseph and then redundantly add– 'do we not know his father and mother'?The notion of illegitimacy is a consistent element found in all four New Testament gospels. Each seems to agree– *Joseph was not the father of Jesus*." He also cites saying 103 of the Gospel of Thomas, 'One who knows his father and mother will be called *the son of a whore*' and claims that, "Many scholars have found in this cryptic saying an echo of the ugly label that Jesus had faced throughout his life– namely that his mother Mary had become pregnant out of wedlock."

Were Jesus' siblings from a different father?

This issue has cropped up mainly because of the later Christian dogma that Mary was a perpetual or ever virgin and never had *any* sexual relationship with *any* man. Actually the teaching of 'Perpetual Virgin' is simply not to be found in the New Testament and it is not a part of earliest Christian creeds. The first official mention of this idea is only in AD 374 from the theologian Epiphanius and by the end of the fourth century. As a result the mention of brothers and sisters had to be explained away. Until then the early writings took for granted that they were natural-born children of Mary and Joseph.

Christian devotion to Mary however goes back to the second century and predates the emergence of a specific Marian religious ritual system in the fifth century, following the First Council of Ephesus in 431. The Council itself was held at a church in Ephesus which had been dedicated to Mary about a

MARY: THE VIRGIN MOTHER OF JESUS

hundred years before. In Egypt the veneration of Mary had started in the third century and the term *Theotokos* (one who bears the God's body) was used by Origen, the Alexandrian Father of the Church.

From the end of fourth century churches began to give official explanations. Two types of explanations were offered— that they were cousins or were from a previous marriage of Joseph. But we know that the Gospels were written in Greek, not Aramaic or Hebrew. In the Greek language, the words brother and cousin are distinct, these are not considered synonymous. Again it is a fantastic coincidence that the same word is used in all the three gospels.

The Bible makes no mention of Joseph after the virgin birth, only Mary and her children find a place. Hence it is possible that Joseph died soon after Jesus' birth. According to the Torah i.e. Jewish law the oldest unmarried brother is obligated to marry the widow and bear children in the dead brother's name so that his lineage is preserved (*yibbum*). The Church held the view that these siblings were actually cousins and the Greek Orthodox church claimed that they were from an earlier marriage of Joseph. Tabor has argued from an analysis of the various Marys mentioned in the four gospels during crucifixion, burial and resurrection of Jesus that there is an internal evidence showing that they were children of Mary either from Joseph or from his brothers.



Madonna of Humility, Artist: Fra Angelico ca 1430

given to service as a consecrated virgin in the Temple in Jerusalem when she was three years old. According to Sacred Tradition, Mary died surrounded by the apostles (in either Jerusalem or Ephesus) between three days and twenty four years after Christ's ascension. When the apostles later opened her tomb, they found it to be empty and they concluded that she had been assumed into Heaven. Mary's

Birth and Death of Mary

The Bible offers no clue about when and where Mary was born, but the Catholic Church celebrates her Nativity (birth) on September 8 and her Assumption on August 15 when she was crowned as the Queen of Heaven. Legend has it also that her father, Joachim, was the brother of Joseph, father of Jesus. Thus Mary and Joseph were first cousins. Gospels also contain very little information about her, and since her life is being told through oral tradition, it is possible that the real Mary was very different from what one normally assumes. Starting with her appearance, paintings and sculptures usually show a fair Caucasian woman with blue eyes, light hair and almost a blond complexion. But being a Semitic she could have been actually quite dark.

It will be interesting to see how the myth of Virgin Mary was gradually built up over several centuries from the second century onwards. According to the disputed proto-Gospel of James, probably written in mid or late second century, Mary was the daughter of Saint Joachim and Saint Anne. Before Mary's conception Anna had been barren. Mary was

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Tomb, an empty tomb in Jerusalem, is attributed to Mary. The Roman Catholic Church teaches Mary's Assumption, but does not teach that she necessarily died. An old story about Mary's death is told in an apocryphal book, attributed to John, says she met with the apostles and was assumed into heaven by Jesus himself, as he blessed each one of them, and a choir of angels sang a song of joy to her, saying, Blessed art thou among women. No one has questioned why John himself does not mention in his gospel such an important event.

The earliest extant biographical writing on Mary is *Life of the Virgin* attributed to the seventh century saint, Maximus the Confessor which portrays her as a key element of the early Christian Church after the death of Jesus. In the nineteenth century, a house near Ephesus now in Turkey was found which has since been visited as the House of the Virgin Mary by pilgrims who consider it the place where Mary lived until her Assumption. The Gospel of John states that Mary went to live with the Disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn 19:27) identified as John the Evangelist. Irenaeus and Eusebius of Caesarea wrote in their histories that John later went to Ephesus, which may provide the basis for the early belief that Mary also lived in Ephesus with John.

Worship of Mary

Over the centuries, devotion and veneration to Mary has varied greatly among Christian traditions. It should be noted that although both Catholics and the Orthodox may honour and venerate Mary, they do not view her as divine, nor do they worship her. Love and veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary is the soul of Orthodox piety. For them faith in Christ which does not include his mother is another faith, another Christianity from that of the Orthodox church. Catholics view Mary as subordinate to Christ, but uniquely so, in that she is seen as above all other creatures. Most other sects, especially Protestants, although they accept Jesus' virgin birth, do not attach too much importance to Mary. The position of various sects is summarised in the table below:

Doctrine	Church action	Accepted by
Mother of God	First Council of Ephesus, 431	Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Methodists, Latter Day Saints (as Mother of Son of God)
Virgin Birth of Jesus	First Council of Nicaea, 325	Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Anglicans, Lutherans, Protestants, Latter Day Saints
Assumption of Mary	<i>Munificentissimus Deus</i> , encyclical Pope Pius XII, 1950	Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, some Anglicans, some Lutherans
Immaculate Conception	<i>Ineffabilis Deus</i> encyclical Pope Pius IX, 1854	Roman Catholics, some Anglicans, some Lutherans, early Martin Luther
Perpetual Virginity	Council of Constantinople, 533; Smallcald Articles, 1537	Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, some anglicans and Lutherans, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley

In this table the doctrines of the Assumption or Dormition of Mary relate to the taking up of the body and soul of the Virgin Mary when her earthly life had ended. While the Roman Catholic Church has established the dogma of the Assumption, namely that Mary directly went to Heaven without a usual physical death, the Eastern Orthodox Church believes in the Dormition, i.e. she fell asleep, surrounded by the Apostles. Roman Catholics believe in the Immaculate Conception of Mary, as

MARY: THE VIRGIN MOTHER OF JESUS

proclaimed Ex Cathedra by Pope Pius IX in 1854, namely that she was filled with grace from the very moment of her conception in her mother's womb and preserved from the stain of original sin. The Perpetual Virginity of Mary, asserts Mary's real and perpetual virginity even in the act of giving birth to the Son of God made Man.

Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutherans venerate the Virgin Mary. This veneration especially takes the form of prayer for intercession with her Son, Jesus Christ. Additionally it includes composing poems and songs in Mary's honour, painting icons or carving statues of her, and conferring titles on Mary that reflect her position among the saints.

There is a long tradition of Roman Catholic Marian art and no image permeates Catholic art as does the image of Madonna and Child. Similarly the icon of the Virgin is without doubt the most venerated icon among the Orthodox. Both Roman Catholics and the Orthodox venerate images and icons of Mary, given that the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 permitted their veneration by Catholics with the understanding that those who venerate the image are venerating the reality of the person it represents, and the 842 Synod of Constantinople established the same for the Orthodox. The Orthodox, however, only pray to and venerate flat, two-dimensional icons and not three-dimensional statues.

The Catholic view

Mary is considered by Catholicism as mediator, that is, a mediator of grace through Jesus and co-redeemer of mankind, having been the mother of Christ the Redeemer. There is in Catholic theology, a number of studies on Mary, Mariology, which is divided into six sections: the early church, the period since the beginning of Christianity until the Council of Ephesus (431), the period of Ephesus until the Gregorian Reform, from the year 1000 by the Council of Trent, the period of Trent to Vatican II and the time of Vatican II to the present. The latter proclaimed that the Immaculate Virgin was taken up body and soul to heavenly glory at the end of her earthly journey.

Not only do Roman Catholics have more theological doctrines and teachings that relate to Mary, but they have more festivals, prayers, devotional, and venerative practices than any other group. She is accorded the title "Blessed," in recognition of her ascension to Heaven and her capacity to intercede on behalf of those who pray to her. But Catholic teachings make clear that Mary is not considered divine and prayers to her are not answered by her, they are answered by God. For centuries, Roman Catholics have performed acts of consecration and entrustment to Mary at personal, societal and regional levels. In Catholic teachings, dedication to Mary does not diminish or substitute the love of God, but enhances it, for all devotion is ultimately made to God. Catholics place high emphasis on Mary's roles as protector and intercessor and the Catholic Catechism refers to Mary as the "Mother of God to whose protection the faithful fly in all their dangers and needs".

The medieval Church also developed the worship of 'seven sorrows' and 'seven joys' which she experienced in her life time. They are depicted in the numerous cherished sculptures and paintings by the medieval masters

The seven sorrows are:

1. The Prophecy of Simeon. (Luke 2:34-35) or the Circumcision of Christ
2. The Flight into Egypt. (Matthew 2:13)
3. The Loss of the Child Jesus in the Temple. (Luke 2:43-45)
4. Mary Meets Jesus on the Way to Calvary. (Luke 23:26)
5. Jesus Dies on the Cross. (John 19:25)
6. Mary Receives the Body of Jesus in Her Arms. (Matthew 27:57-59)
7. The Body of Jesus Is Placed in the Tomb. (John 19:40-42)

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

And the seven joys are:

1. The Annunciation
2. The Nativity of Jesus
3. The Adoration of the Magi
4. The Resurrection of Christ
5. The Ascension of Christ to Heaven
6. The Pentecost or Descent of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and Mary
7. Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin in Heaven

Orthodox and other views

Orthodox Christianity includes a large number of traditions regarding the Ever Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*. The Orthodox believe that she was and remained a virgin before and after Christ's birth. She is also proclaimed as the "Lady of the Angels". The Orthodox view Mary as "superior to all created beings", although not divine. The Orthodox venerate Mary as conceived immaculate and assumed into heaven, but they do not accept the Roman Catholic dogmas on these doctrines. The Orthodox celebrate the Dormition of the *Theotokos*, rather than Assumption. Protestants in general, in keeping with their principles of going strictly by what is written in the text of the canon, reject the veneration and invocation of the Saints. They typically hold that Mary was the mother of Jesus, but was an ordinary woman devoted to God. Protestants acknowledge that Mary is "blessed among women" (Lk 1:42) but they do not agree that Mary is to be venerated. She is considered to be an outstanding example of a life dedicated to God.

The multiple churches that form the Anglican Communion and the Continuing Anglican movement have different views on Marian doctrines and venerative practices given that there is no single church with universal authority. Thus unlike the Protestant churches at large, the Anglican Communion (which includes the Episcopal Church in the United States) includes segments which still retain some veneration of Mary. Mary's special position within God's purpose of salvation as "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*) is recognised in a number of ways by some Anglican Christians. The views of other sects has been summarised in the table.

Islamic perspective

Mary or Maryam, the mother of Jesus, is mentioned more in the Quran than in the entire New Testament! She enjoys a singularly distinguished and honoured position among women in the Quran. Chapter nineteen in the Quran is titled "Maryam" (Mary), which is the only chapter in the Quran named after a woman, in which the story of Mary (Maryam) and Jesus (Isa) is recounted according to the Islamic view of Jesus.

She is mentioned in the Quran with the honorific title of "our lady" (*syyidatuna*) and as the daughter of Imran and Hannah. She is the only woman directly named in the Quran and variously praised like: declared (uniquely along with Jesus) to be a Sign of God to mankind (Quran 23:50); as one who "guarded her chastity" and an obedient one (66:12). She was chosen of her mother and dedicated to God whilst still in the womb; cared for by Zakariya (Zacharias, one of the prophets of Islam) and that in her childhood she resided in the Temple and was provided with heavenly 'provisions' by God (3: 36-37). There are many more laudatory phrases culminating in, "exalted above all women of the world" (3:42). It is possible that the high respect shown to Mary can be traced to the heretical Christian sect Collyridianism, which was found throughout Arabia sometime during the 300s AD. This sect was made up mostly of women and even had women priests. They were known to make bread offerings to the Virgin Mary, along with other practices.

MARY: THE VIRGIN MOTHER OF JESUS

Although Quran accepts virgin birth it does not accept the concept of trinity. Thus “O People of the Book [Bible]! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not “Trinity”: desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah...” (4.171) and “They do blaspheme who say: “Allah is Christ the son of Mary.” But said Christ: “O Children of Israel! worship Allah, my Lord and your Lord.” Whoever joins other gods with Allah,— Allah will forbid him the garden, and the Fire will be his abode. There will for the wrong-doers be no one to help.”

Incidentally while the Quran accepts the virgin birth of Jesus it denies that he is the Son of God since Allah cannot have any partner. Also he was not crucified but instead he was raised up bodily by God unto the heavens— “That they said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’;— but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no (certain) knowledge, but only conjecture to follow, for of a surety they killed him not. Nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself (4.157-58).

Mary in India

The Church has faced the same ‘pagan’ problem in India where the Mother aspect of the divinity is worshipped with fervour especially in the south. Hence it is not at all surprising that the enterprising Church has set up Virgin Mary in competition with Shakti or ‘Devi Adi Parashakti’ especially after De Nobili posing himself as a ‘Roman Brahmin’ and asserting that the Bible is the fifth Veda. And as elsewhere what better places to build the Mary churches than replacing the ancient Devi temples? Thus the Portuguese who were blown ashore at a fishing village 12 kms south of Nagapattinam sold a story that they were saved by Virgin Mary and took over the local temple “Vel Ilankanni Amman” Temple, which was a sister shrine of “Vel Thandakanni Amman” Temple situated in a place called Sikkil closer to Nagapattinam. The Portuguese converted the Vel Ilankanni Temple and built a church for Virgin Mary over it. Later the Church, with its marketing skills, converted the village into a pilgrimage centre and built another huge Church for “Our Lady of Health” and deliberately named the Virgin Mary as “Velankanni”. Similarly in a village called Kallikulam in Thirunelveli district a Hindu temple for Devi was turned into a church located on a small hillock based on a concocted story that a lady with her child in her one arm and holding silver stick on the other hand frequently came in the dream of the village leader and asked for that part of land. Here Mary was named as *Pani Mata* or “Our Lady of Snows”. This encroachment is still continuing.

Some of the forms in which Mary is worshipped in south India are:

- Our Lady of Health
- Madonna of Velankanni
- Our Lady of Snows
- Our Lady of the Rosary
- Our Lady of Perpetual Help

Theoretical and scholarly dimensions are being given to Indianising this virgin *Mata* by Jesuit scholars like Francis Clooney who has authored “*Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary*” and has managed to win sympathy and support from influential Vaishnavite groups. It is time that the truth about this Mother and her Son is made known to public at large.

Part II

The Gnostic Gospels

CHAPTER 6

The *Ishaputra* of The Ancients

The One is incomprehensible
Perfectly free from corruption
Not "perfect"
Not "blessed"
Not "divine"
But superior to such concepts.
Neither physical nor unphysical
Neither immense nor infinitesimal

Passage from a Upanishad? No, it is from the Secret Book of John, a ‘*Gnostic*’ gospel! The word *gnosis* will not appear to be unfamiliar to an Indian reader and quite rightly so. It will immediately remind him of the root word ‘*dyna*’ of Sanskrit which has given rise to *dynana* in Sanskrit, *gnosis* in Greek, *znate* in Russian and *knowledge* in English. Its literal meaning in Greek connotes “knowledge” or the “act of knowing”. Gnosticism is the teaching based on *Gnosis*, the knowledge of transcendence arrived at by way of interior, intuitive means. It will immediately be apparent that here it refers to ‘*pradnya*’ or intuitive spiritual knowledge.

We have already come across some references to these gospels in Part One during discussions of the New Testament. In this and the following chapters we shall study them in some detail and then see how they were brutally suppressed by the Church in the fourth century after it was declared as the state religion of the Roman Empire. It may be worthwhile to again repeat that in these discussions Church with capital ‘C’ refers to the Orthodox Roman Catholic Church.

Discovery

Doubts about the historical existence of Jesus emerged after Renaissance when critical study of the Gospels developed in the eighteenth century, and some English scholars towards the end of that century are said to have believed that no historical Jesus existed. Attacks by the early Church on heretic writings lead to a suspicion that alternate gospels also existed in the early days. The first of these emerged in 1769, when a Scottish tourist named James Bruce bought a Coptic (language of Egyptian Christians) manuscript near Thebes (modern Luxor) in Upper Egypt. Published only in 1892, it claims to record conversations of Jesus with his disciples— a group that here includes both men and women. In 1773 a collector found in a London bookshop an ancient text, also in Coptic, that contained a dialogue on “mysteries” between Jesus and his disciples. In 1896 a German Egyptologist, alerted by the previous publications, bought in Cairo a manuscript that, to his amazement, contained the Gospel of Mary (Magdalene) and three other texts which was published only in 1955. Some fragments of other texts like The Gospel of Peter were also discovered.

But it was on a December day in the year of 1945, near the town of Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, that the course of Gnostic studies was radically renewed and forever changed. An Arab peasant, digging around a boulder in search of fertilizer for his fields, happened upon an old, rather large red earthenware jar. Hoping to have found a buried treasure, he smashed the jar open. Inside he discovered no treasure and no genie, but instead books— more than a dozen old manuscripts bound in golden brown leather.

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Little did he realize that he had found an extraordinary collection of ancient texts, manuscripts hidden a millennium and a half before – probably by monks from the nearby monastery of St. Pachomius seeking to preserve them from a destruction ordered by the Church as part of its violent expunging of heterodoxy and heresy.

How the Nag Hammadi manuscripts eventually passed into scholarly hands is a fascinating story too lengthy to relate here. But today, now over sixty years since being unearthed and more than three decades after final translation and publication in English as *The Nag Hammadi Library* (<http://www.gnosis.org/>), their importance has become astoundingly clear: These thirteen papyrus codices containing fifty-two sacred texts are representatives of the long lost “Gnostic Gospels”, which the Church perceived to be its most dangerous and insidious challenge. Subsequently a few other gospels like the Gospel of Judas (yes, Judas!) have been discovered elsewhere.

A discovery of equal importance was made also almost simultaneously in 1947. These were ancient scrolls termed as the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in the Qumran caves at the north end of the Dead Sea. Initially they were cornered by the Church who did not allow others to access them. Eventually after a few decades the Church hegemony was broken and it now appears that they are records of Jews hidden in these caves during the turbulent times when they agitated against the Roman rule. Scholars see in these texts evidences of the apocalyptic, messianic foment from which Christianity arose. Several statements in the New Testament can be traced to these scrolls.

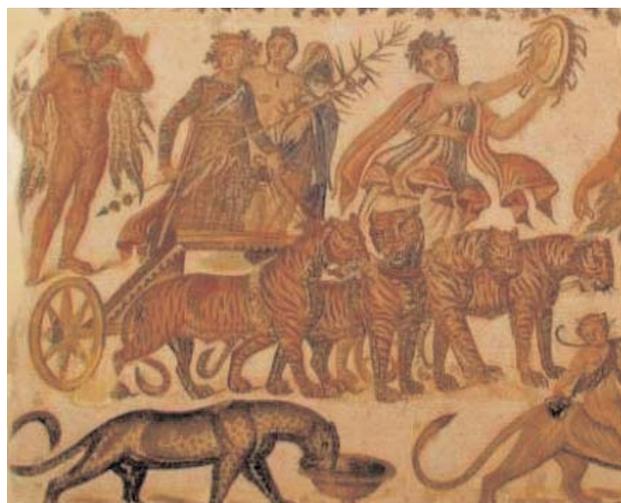
The discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls have fundamentally revised our understanding of both Gnosticism and the early Christian church. But before we take a look at them it will be important to make a brief survey of social and political environment in the Roman empire and regions beyond which had become a fertile ground for various “Son of God” or *Ishaputra* cults.

Ishaputra: The Pagan Son of God

To recapitulate, what does the orthodox Christian doctrine say? It states that the man called Jesus Christ was born of Immaculate Conception to Mary, wife of Joseph; that he was therefore *the only* Son of God; that he died on the cross to redeem mankind from sin; that he was resurrected and that he ascended bodily to heaven. More importantly, anyone accepting Christ as the sole saviour would attain eternal salvation – anyone not doing so, especially idol worshippers, will eternally fry in Hell.

We have already covered in the first Part various theories of modern scholars on historical Christ (and Mary). Most of them have cast serious doubts over a historical Christ who can redeem a believer. Several of them feel that he could have been either a purely mythical figure or a failed revolutionary cum mystic turned into an inspiring legend which was created during a very turbulent phase of Jewish history in which they were defeated and expelled from their homeland by the Roman empire.

To determine which of this is more likely, we will have to investigate the social and political conditions of the region extending from Rome to Iran. Before 670 BC Egypt had been a closed country, but in this year she opened her borders and one of the first Greeks who travelled there in



Dionysus returns from India.
Mosaic pavement, 3rd cent. AD/CE
Sousse, Tunisia (Patrick Hunt)

search of ancient wisdom was the well known Pythagoras. He spent twenty two years in the temples of Egypt, becoming an initiate of the ancient Egyptian Mysteries. He is also believed to have visited India. After his return to Greece his disciples created a Greek Mystery religion modelled on the Egyptian Mysteries. They took the indigenous wine god Dionysus (and later Bacchus), who was a minor deity and transformed him into a Greek version of the mighty Egyptian Osiris, godman of the Mysteries. This initiated a religious and cultural revolution that was to transform Athens into the centre of the civilized world. Other Mediterranean cultures which adopted the Mystery religion also transformed one of their indigenous deities into the dying and resurrecting Mystery godman. So, the deity who was known as Osiris in Egypt and became Dionysus in Greece, was called Attis in Asia Minor, Adonis in Syria, Bacchus in Italy, Mithras in Iran, and so on. Hindus neither conceived nor followed this concept since they already had the concept of *avatara* i.e. Vishnu or another God directly descending on earth in an appropriate form in order to accomplish a specific mission.

His forms were many, but essentially he was the same perennial figure, whose collective identity we may term as *Ishaputra* or Son of God. And all of them followed the archetypal pattern below:

- The *Ishaputra* is God made flesh and the Saviour
- His father is God himself and his mother is a mortal virgin.
- He is born in a cave or humble cowshed on 25 December (winter solstice) before three shepherds.
- He offers his followers the chance to be born again through the rites of baptism.
- He miraculously turns water into wine at a marriage ceremony.
- He heals the sick, exorcises demons, provides miraculous meals, helps fishermen make miraculous catches of fish and calms the water for his disciples
- He is surrounded by 12 disciples (corresponding to the twelve signs of zodiac)
- He dies at Easter time (hanged or crucified) as a sacrifice for the sins of the world.
- After his death he descends to hell, then on the third day he rises from the dead and ascends to heaven in glory.
- His followers await his return as the judge during the Last Days.
- His death and resurrection are celebrated by a ritual meal of bread and wine which symbolize his body and blood.

Has not Jesus himself followed this pattern? Only names differ but all incidents in his lifetime are substantially the same. There is also nothing unique about the cross. The cross, a figure probably derived from swastika, was a sacred symbol to the ancients. A drawing of a third-century AD amulet shows a crucified figure which most people would immediately recognize as of Jesus. Yet the inscribed Greek words name the figure 'Orpheus Bacchus', one of the Greek version of *Ishaputra*. The four arms of the cross represented the four elements of the physical world – earth, water, air and fire. The fifth element, spirit, was bound to materiality by these four elements. The figure of a man nailed to a four-armed cross would, therefore, naturally have signified the predicament of the initiate as a soul bound to a physical body. Plato refers to the desires of the body as nails (*kleshas*) that one by one fasten the soul to the body. The nails used to crucify *Ishaputra* through the hands and feet would have been symbolic of our sensual desires which attach the soul to this world of



Source: Cover page 'The Jesus Mysteries' by Freke and Gandy

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

the four elements. It is also a remarkable fact that we have no representations of the crucified Jesus before the fifth century CE.

Jesus, the Jew *Ishaputra*?

If we however accept that the Jews had modelled their Saviour or Messiah using this template we will have to explain what made them do so. We have already seen in Chapter four various theories which are being advanced for a historical Christ. What follows here is an explanation of the process in the Jewish context by which the conversion of a mythical figure into a historical took place.

The Jews strictly adhered to the rigid Law laid down by Abraham and Moses and there should have been compelling reasons for them to deviate from it. The history of the ancient Jews is one of repeated conquest by other nations: in 922 BCE by the Egyptians; in 700 BCE by the Assyrians; in 586 BCE by the Babylonians; in 332 BCE by the Greeks under Alexander the Great; in 198 BCE by the Syrians; and finally in 63 BCE by the Romans, who completely destroyed the state of Judea in 112 CE. As a result of these invasions, integration between Jewish and Pagan culture had been going on for centuries. These conquests inevitably led to the Jewish people coming under the cultural influence of their conquerors as well as Jews becoming dispersed throughout the Mediterranean as slaves, forming the so-called 'Diaspora'. Jews of the Diaspora integrated Pagan spirituality with their own religious traditions and even adopted the Pagan Mysteries. The greatest integration of Jewish and Pagan cultures occurred in the Greek city of Alexandria in Egypt. It is thought that up to half of the original population of Alexandria were Jews. It is also widely known that there were several Hindu/Buddhist centres in Alexandria and other regions. A large numbers of Jews chose to break with their traditions and attempted to integrate themselves into Pagan society. In a remarkably short period, several Jews abandoned their own tongue and adopted the universal Greek language.

In order to make the Mysteries easily accessible to Jews what was needed was an indigenous mythological figure which could be transformed into a Jewish *Ishaputra*. There was only one Jewish mythological figure who could possibly be transformed, the Messiah. The Hebrew word 'Messiah' means 'Anointed', which in Greek is translated as 'Christos' i.e. Christ in English (it is interesting to note that in the ancient Greek dialect Sri Krishna is also referred to as 'Christos'). The term was originally used to designate kings and high priests, who were ritually anointed with oil. In later years, when the Jews were a conquered and defeated people, it came to signify a future redeemer who would come to free them from their oppressors and restore the Jewish state under a king of the line of their great King David.

The construction of the Jesus story suggests that the creators of the Jewish Mysteries took this only option available to them and synthesized the dying and resurrecting godman of the Mysteries with the Jewish Messiah. Jesus is claimed to be born in Bethlehem from the line of David – just as the Messiah must be. The name Jesus is just a Greek rendering of his probable Hebrew name '*Yehoshua*' i.e. 'Yahweh delivers' or 'the one that will bring victory', something similar to our '*Yashodhan*'. Yet Jesus the Messiah is actually only a thin veil concealing the quite different figure of Jesus the dying and resurrecting godman. He is a synthesis of two pre-existing mythical figures– pagan *Ishaputra* and Jewish Messiah.

It is clear from the Gospels that the architect of the present Christian Church was Paul, probably the only historical figure in the New Testament and the most influential Christian of all times. Hence it will be important to check his background. He was a Roman citizen and born in a prosperous Jewish family. It is quite likely that he would have been recruited by the Roman authorities to split the Jew society when its opposition to them became difficult to repress. We have seen sufficient examples of such tactics in our own history. This Paul did quite successfully by first joining the Church and later claiming that he had a vision of Christ on his way to Damascus. He thus adopted the Jew *Ishaputra* symbol to

his own needs and propagated this mystic version in his several *yatras* (54-64 AD) not only among Jews but also among pagans. For this he de-linked the symbol from Jews by insisting on Faith rather on Law. It should however be noted that even he did not regard Jesus as a historical figure.

By 70 CE, when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, many Jews felt completely betrayed by their god Jehovah, who had clearly failed to protect them from their enemies. It was at some point after these disastrous events that the Jesus myth was first put into an historical context by the Gospel of Mark which claims that the end of the evil rulers is to take place soon and replaced by Kingdom of God. Hellenized Jews looked for some way of boosting the morale of their compatriots streaming out of Judea as refugees. To help Jews over the major hurdle of Jesus' ignominious death and obvious lack of military triumph against their oppressors, Jesus was now portrayed as claiming that he will return again. He promises an imminent Second Coming when he will return in glory to smite his enemies and fulfil the expectations of the Jewish Messiah. Yet Jesus could not be said to have existed in the distant past like the Pagan Mystery godman, because such a Messiah could not bring political salvation to his people *here and now*. He would have to be portrayed as coming in the recent past, as this alone would make him relevant. Portraying the Jesus story as a record of actual events would, therefore, had to be fitted into the general style of Jewish scriptures.

Moreover, once the myth had become historicized, the new cult of Christianity had the added appeal that it made a genuinely revolutionary claim – that the Ishaputra had *actually* walked the Earth in the recent past. As we have seen gradually Jesus was now no longer portrayed as coming to save only the Jews, but as coming to save the whole of humanity; not to merely remain a Jewish Messiah but to become a universal Saviour. Since all relevant records of this period have been either destroyed or tampered with by the Church we will never know what actually happened. We only know that in all probability the Jesus of the New Testament is a concocted figure.

CHAPTER 7

The Gnostic Gospels

*Some say that Mariam was impregnated by the Holy Spirit *. They are confused, they know not what they say. Whenever has a female been impregnated by a female? ... And the Lord was not going to say 'my Father [in] the heavens', unless indeed he had another father— but rather he said simply ['my Father']*

(Considered feminine by the Gnostics)*

(The Gospel of Philips, 18)

Those who say that the Lord first died and then arose, are confused. For first he arose and (then) he died. If someone first acquires the resurrection, he will not die

(The Gospel of Philips, 22)

Before we commence discussions of these gospels we should point out a serious weakness of Indian scholarship. Our scholars entirely rely on the English translations of the original works and have never read the Greek, Coptic, Hebrew or Arabic originals so as to get the nuances and meanings relevant to us. A simple example will suffice: the original Egyptian word for what is known as pyramids in English to us is MRU (the vowel 'e' is not written in this language). A Hindu will immediately link it to Meru, a mountain sacred to all Indian faiths. This immediately changes our whole perspective of these structures. Hence when we attempt to fathom the significance of the Gnostic gospels to us, we really can not do full justice in linking them to Indian philosophical thought. What is done below is only a superficial survey of this literature. In a few places our analogous terminology and references are pointed out.

A partial list of the available Gnostic works is given in Appendix A. Surveying all of them is not possible here and we only give a broad picture of its contents by quoting a few passages from some of them. We should also remember that the literature unearthed in Nag Hammadi is a Coptic translation of the original Greek works and hence it is quite likely that some of the original flavour is lost in translation. Another important point to note is that all Christian literature including the New Testament (except the seven genuine letters of Paul) is 'pseudonymous', i.e. forged in the name of an apostle or group of apostles. Obviously the Gnostic literature also falls in this category.

The Philosophy of Gnostics

The Gnostics truly were 'psychonauts' who like the yogis and Vedic rishis boldly explored the final frontiers of inner space, searching for the origins and meaning of life. These people were mystics and creative free-thinkers. There were several schools of thoughts among the Gnostics with differing viewpoints. Such diversity of thought was not looked down upon although it infuriated the Church (Orthodox Roman Catholic Church). In general their worldview can be summed up as follows:

- The Gnostics posited an original spiritual unity that came to be split into a plurality. In many of the Nag Hammadi Gnostic texts God is imaged not just as a duality, or dyad, but as a unity of masculine and feminine elements (our Shiva and Shakti)
- A female emanation of God was involved in the cosmic creation.

- Our world was created by a leader possessing inferior spiritual powers and who resembled the Christian and Jew God. Gnostics called him by many names— many of them deprecatory— names like “Saklas”, the blind one; “Samael”, god of the blind; or “the Demiurge”, the lesser power.
- For man, the universe is a vast prison. He is enslaved both by the physical laws of nature and by such moral laws as the Mosaic code. He may be personified as Adam, who lies in the deep sleep of ignorance, his powers of spiritual self-awareness stupefied by materiality.
- Within each natural man is an “inner man”, a fallen spark of the divine substance. Since this exists in each man, we have the possibility of awakening from our stupefaction.
- What leads to the awakening is not merely obedience, faith, or good works, but knowledge. Gnosticism asserts that “direct, personal and absolute knowledge of the authentic truths of existence is accessible to human beings,” and that the attainment of such knowledge is the supreme achievement of human life.

It will immediately be apparent how similar is this to Indian thought and how different from the dogma of the Church! We will see below examples illustrating these points. But before doing that we should first see how the Gnostics have classified human beings. Both Pagan and Gnostic philosophical systems describe four levels of human identity: physical, psychological, spiritual and mystical. Gnostics called these four levels of our being the body, the counterfeit-spirit, the Spirit and the Light-power. The body and the counterfeit-spirit (*annamaya* and *pranamaya koshas*) make up the two aspects of the Eidolon or lower self. The Spirit and Light-power (our spiritual and mystical identities) make up the two aspects of the immortal Daemon, the individual Higher Self and the Universal Self, or *atma* and *paramatma*.

The Gnostics called those who identified with their body ‘Hylics’, because they were so utterly dead to spiritual things that they were like unconscious matter, or hyle. Those who identified with their personality, or psyche, were known as ‘Psychics’. Those who identified with their Spirit were known as ‘Pneumatics’, which means ‘Spirituals’. Those who completely ceased to identify with any level of their separate identity and realized their true identity as the Christ or Universal Daemon experienced Gnosis. This mystic enlightenment transformed the initiate into a true ‘Gnostic’ or ‘Knower’.

These levels of awareness were symbolically linked with the four elements: earth, water, air and fire. The initiations leading from one level to the next were symbolized by these elemental baptisms.

- *Hylical: Physical: Earth* – Mundane, physical existence which is the lot of humanity in general and is symbolised by the earth
- *Literal: Psychic: Water* – Refers to Christians who had experienced the first baptism by water and been initiated into the Outer Mysteries of Christianity. They understood the story of Jesus as an historical account of a person who literally returned from the dead. The Church and its Bible was meant for such people
- *Mythical: Pneumatic: Air* – These Christians had experienced the second baptism of air (holy breath or holy spirit) and been initiated into the secret Inner Mysteries of Christianity. They understood the Jesus story as an allegorical myth. The Gnostic literature was meant for such seekers. Apart from these writings the students were also taught in secret by their teachers.
- *Mystical: Gnostic: Fire* – Gnostics in due course experienced the final baptism of fire (Geeta: 4.37) and realized their identity as the Christ (the Logos or Universal Daemon). They transcended the need for any teachings, including the Jesus story since when one becomes ‘mature’, one no longer needs any external authority.

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Techniques of attaining gnosis

Now the question arises: how can one attain gnosis? In other words what are the techniques to be followed. Great secrecy surrounds in the way in which the teacher taught his student. But we get a few hints here and there. *Zostrianos*, the longest text in the Nag Hammadi library, tells how one spiritual master attained enlightenment, implicitly setting out a program for others to follow. *Zostrianos* relates that, first, he had to remove from himself physical desires, probably by ascetic practices. Second, he had to reduce “chaos in mind,” stilling his mind with meditation. Then, he says, “after I set myself straight, I saw the perfect child”, a vision of the divine presence. The disciple who comes to know himself can discover what even Jesus cannot teach. *The Testimony of Truth* says that the Gnostic becomes a “disciple of his [own] mind,” “discovering that his own mind “is the father of the truth.” He learns what he needs to know by himself in meditative silence. Consequently, he considers himself equal to everyone, maintaining his own independence of anyone else’s authority: “And he is patient with everyone; he makes himself equal to everyone, and he also separates himself from them.”

Other gnostic sources offer more specific directions. *The Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth* discloses an “order of tradition” that guides the ascent to higher knowledge. Another extraordinary text, called *Allogenes*, which means “the stranger” (literally, ‘one from another race’), referring to the spiritually mature person who becomes a “stranger” to the world, also describes the stages of attaining gnosis. But much of gnostic teaching on spiritual discipline remained, on principle, unwritten. For anyone can read what is written down, even those who are not ‘mature’. Gnostic teachers usually reserved their secret instruction, sharing it only verbally, to ensure each candidate’s suitability to receive it. Such instruction required each teacher to take responsibility for highly select, individualized attention to each candidate. And it required the candidate, in turn, to devote energy and time, often years, to the process. Obviously such a program of discipline, like the higher levels of Indian teachings, would appeal only to a few.

Influence of Hindu/Buddhism

It is well known that there were active Buddhist monasteries in Alexandria when these gospels were composed. It is also believed that Pythagoras visited India. And, according to tradition it was in India that he received the final word of wisdom. Apollonius (born c. 4 AD), ‘the wise man of Tyna’, a contemporary of Jesus and perhaps the greatest saint of the Hellenistic world visited the wise men of India and was highly satisfied.

Hippolytus, who was a Greek-speaking Christian in Rome (c. 225), knows of the Indian Brahmins and includes their tradition among the sources of heresy which he condemned:

‘There is ...among the Indians a heresy of those who philosophize among the Brahmins, who live a self-sufficient life, abstaining from (eating) living creatures and all cooked food . . . They say that God is light, not like the light one sees, nor like the sun nor fire, but to them God is discourse, not that which finds expression in articulate sounds, but that of knowledge (gnosis) through which the secret mysteries of nature are perceived by the wise’.

Basilides, an Alexandrian, was reputed to have written 24 books of commentaries. He was also said to have written a gospel himself as well as a book on Hindu teachings. The Greek Mysteries celebrated at Eleusis in honour of the Great Mother goddess and the godman Dionysus were the most famous of all the Mystery cults. At the height of their popularity people were coming from all over the then known world to be initiated: men and women, rich and poor, slaves and emperors and even a Brahmin priest from India. Another Brahmin priest Zarmaros went as an ambassador to Emperor Augustus from King Poros of India. Augustus, initiated himself in 31 BCE, decreed that the Eleusinian Mysteries should be

celebrated out of season to initiate his guest. At the climax of the Mysteries, when the sanctuary opened and the great fire blazed forth, Zarmaros astonished onlookers by walking directly into the flames.

We can see the similarity with Indian teachings in what a Gnostic teacher, Monoimus, says:

“Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for Him by taking yourself as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, “My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.” Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will find Him in yourself.”

The Katha Upanishad echoes: ‘The intelligent one, knowing through concentration of mind the Self that is hard to perceive, lodged in the innermost recess’ (1.2.12). Sri Ramana Maharshi has also laid great emphasis on the enquiry, ‘Who am I’.

The Gnostic Teachings

The teachings are diverse and extensive and here we shall only take a look at a few passages which illustrate the similarity of their philosophy with ours. The currently available translations from Greek and Coptic have been done by leading Western academicians who obviously are unable to grasp their spiritual significance. Often their word to word translations are rambling and vague. Hence until our own scholars with a spiritual bend of mind do the translation from original sources we cannot get the full flavour and significance of these teachings

The Secret Book of John describes the creation as follows:

The Universal Daemon (Brahman, Shiva)

The One rules all. Nothing has authority over it.

It is the God.

It is Father of everything,

Holy One

The invisible one over everything.

It is uncontaminated

Pure light no eye can bear to look within.

The One is the Invisible Spirit.

... It is eternal.

It is absolutely complete and so needs nothing.

It is utterly perfect

Light.

...He apprehends himself in that light

[which is the pure spring of the water of life
that sustains all realms].

...He is enamored of the image he sees in the light-water,

The spring of pure light-water enveloping him.

His self-aware thought (ennoia) came into being.

And what is this ‘Light’? Probably the same which Hippolytus above speaks of the Brahmins, ‘They say that God is Light...’

Barbelo (Shakti)

Appearing to him in the effulgence of his light.

She stood before him

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

This, then, is the first of the powers, prior to everything.
Arising out of the mind of the Father
The Providence (pronoia) of everything.
Her light reflects His light.
She is from His image in His light
Perfect in power
Image of the invisible perfect Virgin Spirit.
She is the initial power
glory of Barbelo
glorious among the realms
glory of revelation
She gave glory to the Virgin Spirit
... She is the universal womb
She is before everything
She is:
Mother-Father

Does not this account remind us of Geeta 9.10 and 14.3-4? The Book then describes various divine powers (called aeons) that emanated from her. And one of them, Sophia or Wisdom decided to reveal an image of herself without the consent of her masculine partner. This resulted in creation of a misshapen being Yaldabaoth with a dragon's (or serpent's) body and lion's head! It is he who in his ignorance has said "I am a jealous God, and there is no other God beside me" and created this (imperfect) world. He is the Lord God of Jews and Christians! The Gnostics have called him "Saklas", the blind one; "Samael", god of the blind; or "the Demiurge", the lesser power.

A similar Shiva-Shakti interpretation is given by another author of *The Great Announcement* who explains the origin of the universe as follows: From the power of Silence appeared "a great power, the Mind of the Universe, which manages all things, and is a male . . .the other . . .a great Intelligence. . . is a female which produces all things."

We shall next take a look at the *Gospel of Thomas* (considered by some as the most important in the Nag Hammadi find) as well as a few other books and see passages which interpret Jesus in a totally different manner. This Gospel has only 114 sayings of Jesus and no biographical details as in the canonical gospels. Some of these sayings are similar to those in the canonical but others are totally different. For example his Jesus advises his followers to 'be passersby'(Saying 42) and not get embroiled in the world of those who do not have the ears to hear the word of gnosis, and who busy themselves by proclaiming their own apparent righteousness. But then, '... there are many around the drinking trough, but there is nothing in the well'(Saying 74)! A few more such sayings are:

(2) Jesus said, "Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over the All."

(29) Jesus said, "If the flesh came into being because of spirit, it is a wonder. But if spirit came into being because of the body, it is a wonder of wonders. Indeed, I am amazed at how this great wealth has made its home in this poverty."

(56) Jesus said, "Whoever has come to understand the world has found (only) a corpse, and whoever has found a corpse is superior to the world."

(77) Jesus said, "It is I who am the light which is above them all. It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood, and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there."

(108) Jesus said, “Whoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him.”

(113) His disciples said to him, “When will the kingdom come?”

[Jesus] said, “It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying ‘here it is’ or ‘there it is.’ Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.”

Similar sentiments are echoed in other Gnostic works. For example:

Those who are living shall die. How do they live in an illusion? The rich have become poor, and the kings have been overthrown. Everything is prone to change. The world is an illusion!

Therefore, do not think in part, O Rheginos, nor live in conformity with this flesh for the sake of unanimity, but flee from the divisions and the fetters, and already you have the resurrection. (*The Treatise on Resurrection*)

Another important gnostic work, *The Gospel of Philip* says:

Those who sow in winter reap in summer. Let us sow in the world to reap in summer. Winter is the world, summer the other realm. (7)

The light with the darkness, life with death, the right with the left are brothers one to another. It is not possible for them to be separated from one another. Because of this, neither are the good good, nor are the evils evil, nor is the life a life, nor is death a death. Therefore each individual shall be resolved into his origin from (the) beginning. Yet those exalted above the world are immortal (and) are in eternity (9)

A donkey turning at a millstone did a hundred miles walking. (When) it had been released, it found itself still in the same place. There are persons who take many journeys and make no progress anywhere. (56)

Do not fear the essence of the flesh, nor love it. If thou are accustomed to fear it, it will become thy master; if thou are accustomed to love it, it will devour thee (and) strangle thee. (67)

God created mankind and men created gods. This is how it is in the world— the men create gods and they worship their creations. It would have been (more) appropriate for the gods to worship mankind! (92)

It should be noted that – much to the chagrin of the Church, women also participated in these mysteries and in fact gospels like *The Gospel of Mary(Magdalene)*, *The Thunder, Perfect Mind* and *Pistis Sophia* have been composed by women. A passage from the gospel of Mary says:

‘What binds me is slain, what surrounds me is destroyed, my desire is gone, ignorance is dead. In a world I was freed through another world, and in an image I was freed through a heavenly image. This is the fetter of forgetfulness that exists in the world of time. From now on I shall rest, through time, age, and aeon, in silence.’

Her Jesus instructs his disciples to go and preach the gospel, reminding them not to be led astray by false teachers and to heed the gnosis that they already have: ‘The Son of Man is within you. Follow him!’ In a typically Gnostic fashion, Jesus also tells them to ‘not establish laws... so that you will not be bound by them’.

All these passages clearly show that the Gnostics looked upon Jesus Christ in an entirely different manner. Often their views were close to the Indian philosophical thought. In the next part we shall see how the Church with the support of the Roman Empire emerged victorious in the fourth century and how they ruthlessly destroyed all alternate beliefs and enquiries including those of the Gnostics, plunging Europe into a thousand year Age of Darkness.

CHAPTER 8

The Victory of the Church

[The Saviour said] “And there shall be others of those who are outside our number who name themselves bishop and also deacons, as if they have received their authority from God. They bend themselves under the judgement of the leaders. Those people are dry canals.”

But I [Peter] said “ I am afraid because of what you have told me, that indeed little (ones) are, in our view, the counterfeit ones, indeed, that there are multitudes that will mislead other multitudes of living ones, and destroy them among themselves. And when they speak your name they will be believed.”

The Saviour said, “For a time determined for them in proportion to their error they will rule over the little ones. And after the completion of the error, the Never-Aging One of the Immortal Understanding shall become young, and they (the little ones) shall rule over those who are their rulers.”

The Gnostic Apocalypse of Peter

Contrary to the conventional depiction of the first centuries of Christianity as a time of harmony and unity, early Christians disagreed about everything like the nature of God, the roles of men and women and the way one finds enlightenment. Ultimately the Church (Orthodox Roman Catholic Church) which sought to control spirituality and to restrict personal relationships with God, gained prominence within the first centuries of the Christian era. In this concluding chapter we shall see how this took place.

The Early Churches

We have earlier seen that in the first century, the battles in the Christian community were over the relationship of the ‘Jesus Mysteries’ to traditional Judaism. By the middle of the second century they were between Gnostics and the Church. Starting with the apostle Paul from the middle of the first century, Christianity started appealing to Gentiles (pagans or non-Christians) by preaching that they did not have to become Jews in order to accept the salvation brought by the Jewish God. In fact Paul himself went further: a person is made right with God completely by faith in Christ’s death and resurrection alone and not by doing the works prescribed by the Jewish law. Paul, the only known historical Christian of the first century, made several journeys and set up churches in many regions of the Roman empire.

This brought Paul’s interpretation into bitter conflict with the Ebionites, an early Jew Christian sect who maintained their Jewish beliefs, practices, and identities while believing that Jesus was the messiah. These Jewish-Christians had sacred books supporting their points of view, one of which was very much like the present Gospel of Matthew. Like several other sects we know about them only from the writings of the Church fathers, who branded them as one of the “heresies” of the church. They kept Jewish customs and strictly followed the Jewish laws, but also believed that Jesus was the messiah of God. As a consequence, they tried to convert other Jews to their faith in Jesus, and if they converted Gentiles, they insisted that the Gentiles also convert to Judaism. But they also denied that Jesus was himself divine. Instead, he was fully human, born of the sexual union of Joseph and Mary and only adopted to be God’s son at baptism (Mk 1.11). Jesus himself was Jewish in every way, as were his earliest followers. From a historical view, the Ebionite understanding of Jesus as a Jew Messiah was probably correct, but the Church eventually liquidated them.

With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by Romans in 67-70 AD a new phase of Christianity began. We have seen in Chapter 6 how the Jews dispersed all over the Roman empire and along with the local Gentiles they now sought for a Messiah who would save the whole world, and not only the Jews, from all evil forces then rampaging the world and herald a *Satyayuga* on earth. Here tales of a historical person who had actually lived among them recently, resurrected after crucifixion and who had promised an early return to destroy all evil gave everyone a new ray of hope.

From now onwards apart from various groups of Gnostics, numerous sects like Docetism, Adoptionism, Dynamic Monarchianism, Sabellianism, Arianism, Marcionism, Apollonarianism, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, and Monothelitism arose at various times and places. Each sect had its own way of looking at the historical authenticity of Jesus, his divinity, his resurrection and his second coming. It was then when several gospels and other works were written by anonymous authors in the name of apostles incorporating the philosophy of their sect in order to guide their followers.

It will thus seen that the early Christian movement was very confused about where exactly they stood. Different groups of Christians had different beliefs: about the nature of God and about how many gods there were; about who Jesus had been – whether he was human, divine, or something else; about the world we live in – whether it was inherently good, the creation of God, or inherently evil, the creation of a malevolent deity; about what humans are, about how they can understand the world and be right with God and so on. This struggle involved, among other things, deciding which books should be counted as sacred Scripture and how these books ought to be interpreted. It also involved deciding who should be in control of the churches and make major decisions about church life, worship, and belief.

The second century of our era was the age of definition for Christianity. Now that it realised it was no longer Judaism nor a form of Judaism, it had to figure out what is it exactly? What is Christianity? What makes it not Judaism, what makes it not Jewish? How is it able to somehow at the same time hold on to the Jewish Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament, and still not be Judaism, and still not be Jewish? This was one of the major questions confronting Christian thinkers, writers, church leaders in the second century. This was the great age of Christian diversity, sects, schools, ‘heresies’ of all kinds, confronting Christian thinkers, and it was only in the latter part of the second century that we begin to see the emergence of what we have called the Church here, as a kind of uniform body of doctrines, organisation and a text, the forerunner of today’s New Testament.

The Roman Church

The Church in Rome was one such sect formed in the capital of the Empire around the middle of the first century. Functioning in an imperial setting and familiar with the ways of its power and bureaucracy it incorporated several of their organisational features in its working. It could also raise substantial financial resources from its rich and influential sympathisers and hence in due course could exert influence over other churches.

One of the things that made this Church so unusual in the ancient world was its insistence, from the outset, that what a person believed mattered religiously. In none of the other religions in the pagan world theology or proper belief figured at all so prominently. Judaism is a partial, but only partial, exception. Being Jewish was far more about doing God’s will than belief. The Church was different from the beginning in stressing the importance not only of belief but of *correct* belief. This insistence was rooted in two major factors. It insisted that a person was put into a right standing with God *only* by accepting what God had done by having His Son die on the cross. It was not a religion merely to appease God but of accepting in faith what God had done. Moreover, Christianity uniquely insisted that its understanding of the relationship with God was the only true one; there was no other way to salvation.

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

In the second century, a set of beliefs called the *regula fidei*, ‘the rule of faith’, developed, which included the ‘basics’ that *all* Christians were to believe, and which the Church claimed were taught by the apostles themselves. Typically, it included belief in only *one* God, the creator of the world, who created everything out of nothing; belief in His Son, Jesus Christ, predicted by the prophets and born through Virgin Mary; belief in Jesus’ miraculous life, death, resurrection, and His second coming when there would be a final judgment in which the righteous would be rewarded and the unrighteous condemned to eternal torment. This is why the Church theologians from the earliest of times have insisted that the ultimate truths of the faith are to be understood as divine mysteries, mysteries that must be acknowledged as true, but that defy full understanding. Bishop Irenaeus (AD 130-200), one of the earliest ideologue of the Church, cautioned not to seek answers ‘such as every one discovers for himself’ (like the Gnostics), but rather to accept in faith that which the Church teaches and which ‘can be clearly, unambiguously and harmoniously understood by all.’

When the Church insisted upon ‘one God’, they simultaneously validated the system of governance in which the church is ruled by ‘one bishop’. When Gnostics and the Church discussed the nature of God, they were actually debating the issue of spiritual authority. Just as God and His Son reign in heaven as master, lord, commander, judge, and king, so on earth he delegates his rule to members of the church hierarchy—bishops, priests and deacons, a hierarchical order that mirrors the divine hierarchy in heaven. As there is only one God in heaven so there can be only one bishop in the church. ‘One God, one bishop’ became the orthodox slogan. Ignatius (AD c. 50-110) warns ‘the laity’ to revere, honour, and obey the bishop “as if he were God”. For him, as for Roman pagans, politics and religion formed an inseparable unity. He believed that God became accessible to humanity *only* through the Church.

Obviously such a doctrine went against the very grain of Gnostic thought and it is no surprise that acute controversies arose between the two groups. It should be also remembered that contrary to what the Church claims, Gnostic groups were quite widespread all over the empire as shown by the recent archaeological finds. Gnostics like the well known Valentinus (AD 100-160) tried to bridge the gap by seeking a *via media* when he suggested that the rules of the church apply to the commoners or laity but those who are spiritually ‘mature’ should pursue their own path. For this heresy he was expelled from the Church.

One reason for the increasing patronage to Christian churches in general was the increasing urbanisation in the empire in this period along with the associated strife and insecurity faced by the individual. Persons migrating into cities had lost all their traditional social links and hence became vulnerable and lonely. The church promoted brotherhood and camaraderie amongst its members. Social services like offering solace to widows and orphans and help when there was illness, death or celebrations increased its usefulness to the community.

The Roman church along with churches in the empire affiliated to it obviously excelled in such activities due to its better organisation and resources. The Church also gradually developed rituals to sanction major events of human life like the sharing of food, marriage, childbirth, baptism, sickness, death and funeral. The Church also insisted on vitally important ethical responsibilities. The believer heard church leaders constantly warning against incurring sin in the most practical affairs of life like cheating in business, lying to a spouse, tyrannizing children or slaves and ignoring the poor. Even their pagan critics noticed that Christians appealed to the destitute by alleviating two of their major anxieties – providing food for the poor, and burying the dead. While the Gnostic saw himself as “one out of a thousand, two out of ten thousand,” the orthodox experienced himself as one member of the common human family, and as one member of a universal church. To digress a bit, Hindus and their spiritual leaders and organisations are like these Gnostics of the past – each ploughing his lonely furrow. Hence it is not at all surprising that they cannot withstand assaults of organised faiths.

THE VICTORY OF THE CHURCH

By the dawn of the third century the Church had considerably consolidated itself all over the empire. But now a new threat, persecution by the Roman Empire, arose. Actually persecutions started from the reign of Nero but they could have been later blown out of proportion by the Church. Nero blamed the Christians for the massive fire in Rome in 64 AD and is said to have put several Christians to death. But Eusebius (AD 260-340), the fourth century bishop and an important figure of the early Church in his 'The History of the Church' states: 'In fact, up to the persecution under the Emperor Decius (250-51) there had been no persecution of Christians ordered by the Emperor on an imperial scale'. The early Christian fathers, Acts and apologists like Justin and Origen, all say little or nothing about the Christian persecutions of Nero, because the victims were predominantly Jews. In fact the Acts conclude by saying that Paul was not forbidden to teach in Rome, he did it with all boldness, and the year was around 65 AD. Cases described as Christian persecution often seem to be simply punishment of illegal acts. The justice of the punishment can be argued but mostly Christians were not persecuted for being Christian but for breaking the law.

In 250 CE, however, plague swept the ancient world, decimating whole populations. The Empire was on the verge of collapse. The Emperor Decius ordered his citizens to offer animal sacrifices to the gods for the health and well-being of the Empire. The Church refused declaring that such sacrifices to other gods were forbidden by their religion. This resulted in their persecution and lasted for about a year. They were again persecuted by Valerian in 257-9 and again under Diocletian in 303-5. It has also been said that many Christians wanted to emulate Christ and some like today's Muslim jihadis welcomed a bloody death since it ensured them of eternal heavenly rewards. The bitter Gnostic critic Tertullian (160-225 AD), for instance, declared that he desires to suffer 'that he may obtain from God complete forgiveness', by giving in exchange his blood.

The Church becomes supreme

The dawn of the fourth century blessed the Church with an enormous bonanza. Emperor Constantine (272-337AD) became emperor of the western Roman empire in 306 and the whole empire from 324. Constantine had family connections to the Christian Church as his mother Helena was a devout Christian but – more importantly, he saw orthodox Christianity as serving his interests as a uniting force in the Empire torn by conflicts. It was the Church's insistence upon uniformity that appealed to Constantine. He saw in Christianity a pragmatic means of bolstering his own military power and uniting the vast and troubled Roman Empire.

The Romans needed a Mystery religion because they were always popular with the people. But Mystery religions were led by mystics and philosophers, who had the audacity to question and undermine the authority of the state. The Church however, was a Mystery religion that had purged itself of all its troublesome intellectuals and mystics. It was already an authoritarian religion which encouraged the faithful to have blind faith in those holding positions of power. It was exactly what the Roman authorities wanted – a religion without mystics! Henceforth all public charity was routed through the Church which thereby considerably increased its hold over the masses.

Moreover Constantine himself allegedly 'converted' to Christianity (just before his death) because it offered a 'quick fix' to all of his heinous crimes, including gruesome murders of several family members. These would be forgiven simply by confession and 'believing unto the Lord', a pardon which he could never have obtained from pagan faiths.

But the Church itself was divided by numerous factions at loggerhead with each other. Hence in 325 AD Conatantine convened a council in Nicaea in which all the factions were compelled to participate. Under his stewardship the Council drew up a statement of belief in the Nicene Creed which set out once and for all the beliefs of the Christian Church. The worldwide Christian Church still uses this creed

BIRTH OF CHRISTIANITY

today. In addition to this, the Council also tackled issues like divinity of Christ and the Holy Trinity (Father, Son and the Holy Ghost) which were *decided by vote*. All the bishops like Arius who voted against the majority were declared as heretics and expelled.

The Church reaped enormous gains by compromising its ideology and aligning with the Imperial state. In 319 AD Constantine passed a law excusing the clergy from paying taxes or serving in the army and in 355 AD bishops were exempted from ever being tried in secular courts. In 380 AD Emperor Theodosius passed a decree that read: *We shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians. The rest, however, whom We adjudge demented and insane, shall sustain the infamy of heretical dogmas, their meeting places shall not receive the name of churches, and they shall be smitten first by divine vengeance and secondly by the retribution of Our own initiative, which We shall assume in accordance with the divine judgement.*

The Theodosian laws made it illegal to disagree with the Church. And a 388 AD prohibition forbade any public discussions of religious topics. The ancient, multidimensional Pagan worship was prohibited in 392 AD and considered a *criminal* activity. In 410 AD the emperor Honorius decreed: *Let all who act contrary to the sacred laws know that their creeping in their heretical superstition to worship at the most remote oracle is punishable by exile and blood, should they again be tempted to assemble at such places for criminal activities.* The Church monks lead hordes which pillaged and destroyed Pagan temples and many of them were converted to churches. By 435 AD a law threatened any heretic in the Roman Empire with death. Judaism remained the only other legally recognized religion. The Church adopted Augustine's idea that people are inherently evil, incapable of choice, and hence in need of strong authority. The Church burned enormous amounts of literature. In 391 AD Christians burned down one of the world's greatest libraries in Alexandria, said to have housed 700,000 rolls. Ancient academies of learning were closed. Education for anyone outside of the Church came to an end.

Reincarnation was officially condemned as anathema by the Fifth Ecumenical Council in 553 CE. Also known as the Second Council of Constantinople, this council was a highly political one, headed by the emperor Justinian, which Pope Vigilius did not even attend. It decreed, "Whosoever shall support the mythical doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul and the consequent wonderful opinion of its return, let him be anathema". It was so besieged with political interests that it lacked the theological scrutiny to properly deal with the issue. Hence several present-day Christian scholars rightly question whether its prejudices should still bind the conscience. When the issue reappeared in medieval times, the Council of Lyons (1245-1274 CE) and the Council of Florence (1438-1445 CE) took for granted that reincarnation had already been discarded. Each held to the already familiar scheme that human beings live once only and upon death go immediately to an eternal heaven, hell or purgatory.

A bubonic plague, beginning in 540 AD, struck with a virulence unknown at any time in human history either before or since. The sixth century plague is thought to have taken 100 million lives. The Roman Empire never recovered. But the plague had quite a different impact upon Christianity. People flocked to the Church in terror. The Church explained that the plague was an act of God and a punishment for the sin of not obeying Church's authority. It declared the field of Greek and Roman medicine to be heresy. While the plague assured the downfall of the Roman Empire, it strengthened the Church! The thousand year Dark Age tyrannising humanity had now truly begun.

One can only hope that the words of 'the Saviour' quoted in the beginning (and reminding us of Geeta 4.7-8): *'For a time determined for them in proportion to their error they will rule over the little ones. And after the completion of the error, the Never-Aging One of the Immortal Understanding shall become young, and they (the little ones) shall rule over those who are their rulers'* come true soon.

APPENDICES:

Gnostic Literature and Books of the New Testament

Appendix A: A Partial List Of Gnostic Literature

Gospels of Disciples

1. Thomas
2. Philip
3. Judas
4. Mary Magdalene

Apocryphon (Secret Book)

1. James
2. John
3. Mark

Apocalypse (Revelation)

1. James (I & II)
2. Paul
3. Peter
4. Adam

Acts

1. Peter and the Twelve Disciples
2. Thomas

Other Books

1. Treatise on Resurrection
2. On the Origin of the World
3. Sophia of Jesus Christ
4. Dialogue of the Saviour
5. Three Steles of Seth
6. Gospel of Truth
7. Authoritative Teaching
8. Book of Thomas the Contender
9. Gospel of Egyptians
10. Interpretation of Knowledge
11. Letter of Peter to Philip
12. Prayer of the Apostle Paul
13. Teachings of Silvanus
14. Teachings of Truth
15. The Thunder, Perfect Mind
16. A Valentinian Exposition
17. Zostrianos
18. Tripartite Tractate
19. Hypostasis of Archons
20. Exegesis of the Soul
21. Eugnostos the Blessed

22. The Concept of Our great Power
23. Discourse on the Eighth and Ninth
24. Teachings of Silvanus
25. Second Treatise of the Great Seth
26. The Thought of Norea
27. Marsanes
28. Allogenes

Appendix B: Books of The New Testament

Gospels

- 1 Matthew
- 2 Mark
- 3 Luke
- 4 John

History

- 5 Acts of the Apostles

Pauline & Other Letters

- 6 Romans
- 7 1 Corinthians
- 8 2 Corinthians
- 9 Galatians
- 10 Ephesians
- 11 Philippians
- 12 Colossians
- 13 1 Thessalonians
- 14 2 Thessalonians
- 15 1 Timothy
- 16 2 Timothy
- 17 Titus
- 18 Philemon
- 19 Hebrews

Catholic Letters

- 20 James
- 21 1 Peter
- 22 2 Peter
- 23 1 John
- 24 2 John
- 25 3 John
- 26 Jude

Apocalypse

- 27 Revelation

Appendix C
Map 1: Palestine in First Century



http://www.bible-history.com/maps/palestine_nt_times.html

References

General

A good summary and classification of recent scholars of various categories, their theories and their books have been provided by the following website which has been updated until about 2002. It also provides links to the relevant Amazon.com books site. Many more books on this subject listed below have been written since then.

<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/theories.html>

Part I

The topics covered in Part 1 are dealt with in detail by the noted scholar Prof. Bart D. Ehrman in the following recent three books:

- *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*, Oxford University Press, 1999
- *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2005
- *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (and Why We Don't Know About Them)*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2009

His lucid easy-to-follow style of writing even for a complex subject like this will be welcomed by the lay reader as well as a scholar. And what makes it more interesting is that he entered into seminary as a fundamentalist youth eager to prove that every word in the Bible was inspired by God. Imagine his disillusionment when he discovered the facts elaborated in these and several other books of his! They have in fact led to his becoming first an agnostic and then an atheist.

The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration (4th Edition), Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, Oxford University Press, 2005

On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians, Celsus and R. Joseph Hoffman, Oxford University Press, 1987

Jesus the Man: Decoding the Real Story of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, B. E. Thiering, Atria Books, 2006

The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ? Challenging the Existence of an Historical Jesus, Doherty Earl, Age of Reason Publications, 2005

The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold, Murdock D. M. (Acharya S), Adventures Unlimited Press, 1999

Who Was Jesus?: Fingerprints Of The Christ, D. M. Murdock, Stellar House Publishers, 2007

The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity, James D. Tabor, Simon & Schuster, 2006

Part II

An excellent site for reading and downloading the gospels as well as other relevant material on this subject: <http://www.gnosis.org/>

- The Nag Hammadi Library in English. 3rd ed.*, Robinson, James M. ed., San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1988.
- The Gnostic Gospels*, Pagels Elaine, New York: Random House, 1979.
- Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*, Ehrman, Bart D., Oxford University Press, 2003.
- The Jesus Mysteries: Was the "Original Jesus" a Pagan God?*, Freke Timothy & Gandy Peter, Thorsons, 2000.
- The Gnostics: The First Christian Heretics*, Martin Sean, Pocket Essentials, 2006
- The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ? Challenging the Existence of an Historical Jesus*, Doherty Earl, Age of Reason Publications, 2005
- The Christ Conspiracy: The Greatest Story Ever Sold*, Murdock D. M. (Acharya S), Adventures Unlimited Press, 1999
- The Dark Side of Christian History*, Ellerby Helen, Morningstar Books, 1995

Postscript

The importance of referring to Wikipedia for obtaining information was realised only towards the end. Wikipedia, an open source encyclopedia, is a rich source of text, figures, pictures and maps. All these are edited by experts as well as public and hence the information is generally reliable. Several references of articles, papers and books, many with online links, are given at the end of the subject. The text also contains links for more details

Credits for figures and maps

Ch 1: Tracing the original Texts

Papyrus 46; 2; Corinthians 11:33-12:9; dated c. 175-225 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus_46

Ch 3: Contradictions and Discrepancies

Palestine in the first century AD; *The Cambridge History of Christianity Vol 1; Origins to Constantine*; Ed Young & Mitchell, Cambridge University Press, 2006

Ch 5: Mary- The Virgin Mother of Jesus

Madonna of Humility- Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Angelico,_madonna_col_bambino,_pinacoteca_sabauda.jpg

Ch 6: The Ishaputra of The Ancients

Dionysus returns from India- The ZEITGEIST Sourcebook Part I- Peter Joseph and D.M. Murdock; downloaded from www.StellarHousePublishing.com/zeitgeistsourcebook.pdf

Appendix C

Map 1- Palestine in First Century

http://www.bible-history.com/maps/palestine_nt_times.html

Map 2- Centres of Jewish Population in First Century

The Cambridge History of Christianity Vol 1; Origins to Constantine; Ed Young & Mitchell, Cambridge University Press, 2006

Glossary

Apocalypse: A cosmic catastrophe in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil

Apocalypticism: A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil, but that these will be destroyed at the end of time, when God intervenes in history to bring in his Kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

Apologists: Group of second- and third-century Christian intellectuals who wrote treatises defending Christianity against charges leveled against it

Apostles: One of the original 12 disciples chosen by Christ to preach his gospel; also Paul

Canon: A collection of books accepted as holy scripture especially the books of the Bible recognized by any Christian church as genuine and inspired

Coptic: The language of Egyptian Christians

Cynic: A member of a group of ancient Greek philosophers who advocated the doctrine that virtue is the only good and that the essence of virtue is self-control. They used to wander from town to town preaching to the people, and hammering in their platitudes. Both Cynics and early Christians wore the same rough garments and both called their religion 'the Way'

Dead Sea Scrolls: See Essenes; their records discovered in Qumran

Diaspora : The body of Jews (or Jewish communities) outside Palestine or modern Israel

Docetists: The view that Jesus was not a human being but only "appeared" to be, from a Greek word that means "to seem" or "to appear."

Ebionite: A sect who strictly maintained Jewish practices and Jewish forms of worship.

Ecclesiastic: A clergyman or other person in religious orders; usually Christian

Essenes: A community east of Jerusalem in the wilderness area near the western shore of the

Dead Sea, in a place that is today called Qumran. Believing that the Jews of Jerusalem had gone astray, these Essenes chose to start their own community, in which they could keep the Mosaic Law rigorously and maintain their own ritual purity in the wilderness. They did so fully expecting the apocalypse or the end of time to be imminent.

Exodus: The second book of the Old Testament: tells of the departure of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt led by Moses; God gave them the Ten Commandments and the rest of Mosaic law on Mount Sinai during the Exodus

Genesis: The first book of the Old Testament: tells of Creation; Adam and Eve; the Fall of Man; Cain and Abel; Noah and the flood; God's covenant with Abraham; Abraham and Isaac; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his brothers

Gentile: Pagan, Kafir; one who does not belong to the faith and is an outsider

Gnosticism: A group of ancient religions, closely related to Christianity, that maintained that sparks of a divine being had become entrapped in the present, evil world and could escape only by acquiring the appropriate secret gnosis (Greek for "knowledge") of who they were and of how they could escape. This gnosis was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary descended from the divine realm.

Heresy: A belief that rejects the orthodox tenets of a religion; noun Heretic

Holy Spirit The third person in the Trinity; Jesus promised the Apostles that he would send the Holy Spirit after his Crucifixion and Resurrection; it came on Pentecost

Hylics: Those who identified with their body, because they were so utterly dead to spiritual things that they were like unconscious matter or hyle.

King James Bible (KJV) : The first standard Bible in English commissioned by James I in 1604 and completed in 1611. Several revised versions of the Bible have been published later because of several errors in this version

Liturgy: From the Greek word for “service,” used to refer to any communal act of worship, including, for Christianity, the rituals of baptism and the Eucharist.

Logos: The divine word of God; the second person in the Trinity (incarnate in Jesus); the First Thought of the great Mind of God, through which he created the universe.

Marcionites: Followers of Marcion, the second-century Christian scholar and evangelist, later labeled a heretic for his docetic Christology and his belief in two Gods, the harsh legalistic God of the Jews and the merciful loving God of Jesus— views that he claimed to have found in the writings of Paul.

Messiah: The Hebrew word ‘Messiah’ means ‘Anointed’, which in Greek is translated as ‘Christos’ i.e. Christ in English. It was originally used to designate kings and high priests, who were ritually anointed with oil; the awaited king of the Jews; the promised and expected deliverer of the Jewish people

Midrash: An ancient Jewish practice of interpreting and enlarging on individual or combinations of passages from their Bible. One way to do this was to embody them in new stories with present-day contexts

Nag Hammadi: Village in Upper (South) Egypt, near the place where a collection of gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, was discovered in 1945

Old Testament: The collection of books comprising the sacred scripture of the Hebrews and recording their history as the chosen people; the first half of the Christian Bible

Orthodoxy: Literally, “right opinion”; a term used to designate a worldview or set of beliefs acknowledged to be true by the majority of those in power. Opposite of heresy or heterodoxy.

PassionThe suffering of Jesus at the Crucifixion
Passover: A Jewish festival celebrating the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt; feast of the Unleavened Bread

Pericopes: Units of oral tradition linked together

Pharisees: A group of devout Jews intent above all else on following the entire will of God rather than accepting the culture and religion of the pagan Greeks

Pneumatics: Christians who had experienced the second baptism of air (holy breath or holy spirit) and been initiated into the secret Inner Mysteries of Christianity. They understood the Jesus story as an allegorical myth. The Gnostic literature was meant for such seekers.

Pseudepigrapha: Literally, “false writings”; commonly used of ancient non-canonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written pseudonymously.

Psychics: Those who identified with their personality, or psyche

Sadducees: Generally the Jew aristocrats and priests who believed only in the five books of Moses i.e. Torah as the only authoritative text. They did not accept the oral traditions formulated by the Pharisees

Synoptic Gospels: Mark, Luke and Matthew are called synoptic gospels since their arrangement and content is broadly similar

Therapeutae: A pre-Christian ascetic Jewish sect (probably linked to Buddhism) like Essenes which flourished in Alexandria and other parts of the Diaspora of Hellenistic Judaism.

Trinity: Key doctrine of orthodox Christianity, which maintained that the godhead consists of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who are all equally God, even though there is only one God

Vulgate: The Latin edition of the Bible translated from Hebrew and Greek mainly by St. Jerome at the end of the 4th century; as revised in 1592 it was adopted as the official text for the Roman Catholic Church