

A New Account of Christian Origins

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1

John the Baptist in Josephus—Pt. 1

John the Baptist, Josephus, mythicism

A certain “Peter” recently commented on a post on this website where I make the claim that, at an early stage in Christian history, John = Jesus (lit. “Savior”). In his comment Peter poses several questions, including whether I maintain “that the Josephus story of John the Baptist is inauthentic, considering among other factors the time frame with Herod Antipas, contra the article by Peter Kirby?”

The passage in question is Ant. 18.116-119 (Whiston’s chapter 18.5.2). For now I leave aside whether or not the commenter is himself Peter Kirby. [The article referenced](#) is a very long one by Kirby entitled “The Authenticity of John the Baptist in Josephus,” uploaded May 21, 2015. The article offers fifteen arguments for authenticity followed by eleven arguments for inauthenticity. By “authenticity” Kirby means that Flavius Josephus himself penned the passage on John the Baptist in his book *Antiquities of the Jews*.

I am taking up this issue not because it is seminal to early Christian studies, but because it exposes a great ‘shift in thinking’ that must take place in each of us in order to correctly evaluate the evidence from two thousand years ago. That shift in thinking has everything to do with the fact that **Jesus of Nazareth did not exist before his invention, c. 140 CE.**

I respond to Kirby’s article in this and subsequent posts, limiting myself to selected points. For readers short on time, the most seminal passages below are signaled by an asterisk in the header.

Arguments for authenticity

(1) The Textual Witness Itself

Kirby notes that the Josephan passage regarding the Baptist is in all the manuscripts of Josephus. However, the writings of Josephus were preserved by the Church which, for long centuries, had full power to alter, destroy, and interpolate at will. Thus, the presence or absence of a passage in the manuscripts is not telling as regards authenticity, for the Church itself determined what was and was not in the texts and copies.

Kirby continues that the Josephan passage was generally referenced by Origen and “quoted nearly in full” by Eusebius. But Origen flourished c. 200 CE, and Eusebius a century later—long after an interpolator could have inserted the passage into one or two manuscripts of Josephus. That the John the Baptist passage today exists in all the manuscripts of Josephus merely reflects my previous paragraph: the Church for long centuries made sure this would be the case.

**(2) The Unlikelihood of an Interpolation on John Being Inserted First*

It seems highly unlikely that any Christian, whether Jewish Christian or Gentile Christian (it does not matter for this argument), would have interpolated a lengthy passage on John into Josephus, while leaving the text bereft of any passage regarding the much more important figure in Christian belief, i.e., Jesus.—Peter Kirby

In my view, this is a perfect example of why scholars across the board have been utterly unable to sort out Christian origins. Contra Kirby, the Jesus Mythicist must conclude the contrary: it is eminently possible that the Josephan text was “bereft of any passage regarding the much more important figure in Christian belief, i.e., Jesus.” Why can one be so sure? **Because Jesus of Nazareth did not yet exist!**

The only exception would be if the interpolator worked *after* c. 140 CE. In this case, he could have known 'Jesus of Nazareth,' a figure introduced in rapid succession by all four gospels of the New Testament towards the middle of II CE—probably in immediate reaction to Marcion's activities in Rome and elsewhere. However, as I show in another post, the figure 'Jesus of Nazareth' was not a certain or even secure resource for Christian writers until c. 200 CE.

Let's further examine this issue, which is critical. The work of Robert Price, the late Hermann Detering, and myself suggest that the canonical gospels (and the storyline conveyed in them) dates to the second century CE, not the first. I have argued for a more precise dating for the 4G: the decade of the 140s CE.

Together with Price, Georges Ory, and others, I have also argued that the seminal figure associated with Christian beginnings was John 'the Baptist,' not Jesus of Nazareth. This suspicion has existed ever since Bultmann (even before?). The reasons are many: the Fourth Gospel has John firmly established before Jesus (who draws disciples from John); John is lauded by Jesus himself as the greatest of men (Mt 11:11); the words of John are curiously the very words of Jesus (cp. Lk 3:9//Mt 7:19) or very similar (cf. Lk 3:11); John and Jesus are related by blood, and so on. When we research long marginalized works and sects, further evidence arises: the Hebrew Gospel of Matthew (Howard) actually states "John is Jesus" (HebMt 3:10); the Mandaeans venerate John and villify Jesus... etc.

(For discussions of John = Jesus, see on this website: [Price](#); [G. Ory](#); and [Salm](#).)

For obvious reasons, it's very difficult for people today to imagine an early Christianity without Jesus of Nazareth. For those who are, however, successful in resurrecting such an early time—now a full two thousand years ago—it becomes patently clear that any Christian who wrote before the mid-second century CE would have referred not to

Jesus of Nazareth (who was not yet invented) but to John/Johanan/ Yeshu ha-Notsri, a prophet who, I maintain, lived in the early first century BCE. This renders it obvious why, in turn, an early Christian “would have interpolated a lengthy passage on John into Josephus, while leaving the text bereft of any passage regarding the much more important figure in Christian belief, i.e., Jesus” (pace Kirby).

(3) The Unlikelihood of a Christian Interpolation on John Saying Nothing of Jesus

Kirby’s article offers an extensive quote from John Meier (“John the Baptist in Josephus,” JBL 111.2:227):

The account Josephus gives of the Baptist is literarily and theologically unconnected with the account of Jesus, which occurs earlier in book 18 and correspondingly lacks any reference to the Baptist. The passage about the Baptist, which is more than twice as long as the passage about Jesus, is also notably more laudatory. It also differs from (but does not formally contradict) the four Gospels in its presentation both of John’s ministry and of his death. Hence it is hard to imagine a Christian scribe inserting into book 18 of the Antiquities two passages about Jesus and the Baptist in which the Baptist appears on the scene after Jesus dies, has no connection with Jesus, receives more extensive treatment than Jesus, and is praised more highly than Jesus.

With the information given above in ¶12, we must look at this quote in an entirely novel way. First of all, the astonishing praise heaped upon the Baptist loses its mystery—John was the Jesus (lit. “Savior”) for the earliest Christians. Secondly, we can appreciate that the account of John would necessarily differ from the four gospels “in its presentation both of John’s ministry and of his death.” This is because the Christian interpolation into Josephus occurred before the 4G became extant in mid-II CE.

We now have no difficulty contrasting the orthodox view of John the Baptist (as developed after mid-II CE) with that described in the

Josephus passage on John. Kirby cites Robert Webb, a scholar 'in the old way of thinking' who finds multiple problems in the received story:

[I]f this passage was a Christian interpolation, then we would expect an account which would more closely conform to the NT traditions about John. This expectation is reasonable because the probable purpose of such a Christian interpolation would be to confirm the NT account. However, there are a number of significant differences between the Josephus account and the NT. Some of these include the description of John's message, the explanation of John's baptism, and the reason for his arrest and execution. But the most significant difference is the silence of this text on the relationship between John the Baptist and Jesus.

All these problems are now resolved by the Jesus Mythicist. Once Jesus of Nazareth is removed from all history prior to mid-II CE, then John 'the Baptist' emerges as *the* powerful prophet in solitary splendor.

Kirby concludes, quite erroneously:

"The fact that the passage makes no reference to Jesus in its discussion of John the Baptist suggests that it was written from a non-Christian perspective, which speaks against the hypothesis that the passage is interpolated."

In fact, the interpolated passage was written from a Christian perspective—one that we no longer understand today, for that perspective was radically changed with the invention of Jesus of Nazareth. And, yes, the passage is an interpolation—by a person whom we would today not even consider a 'Christian'—for he was a follower of John 'the Baptist' (= Yeshu).

(4) Teaching Attributed to the Baptist Consistent with Josephus' Aims

Here is the closing sentence in this section of the article, drawn from a citation by J. Meier ("John the Baptist in Josephus," p. 234):

If the Synoptic portrait of John the Baptist did not exist, something like it would have to be invented to supply the material that Josephus either suppresses or simply does not know.

Does one detect circular reasoning? Meier is baldly stating that the synoptic portrait of John the Baptist would have to be invented because “Josephus either suppresses or simply does not know” it. In other words, Meier begins with the certainty that the synoptic portrayal of John is historical. He then naturally concludes that it’s omission by Josephus is because the historiographer simply “does not know” it or “suppresses” it. *Oof.*

In fact, the version of John’s activity portrayed by the interpolator may be true to history—within the usual bounds of religious hyperbole, of course. It is the (later) canonical version that is flagrantly under suspicion.

(6) A Poor Chronological Fit with the Timeline of the Gospels

Kirby writes:

If a Christian were interpolating a passage on John the Baptist into the text of Josephus, it would be more expected that the location chosen would be close to the earlier discussion of Herod Antipas and thus just before or during the discussion of Pilate, in accordance with the chronology of the New Testament Gospels.

However, as we now see, “the chronology of the New Testament Gospels” is irrelevant—those texts were not yet written when the interpolator penned the Josephan passage.

Kirby does, however, raise an important point: the interpolator was historically untutored. For him, writing perhaps about 100 CE, the prophet/founder of Christianity—John ‘the Baptist’—lived some generations in the past. The interpolator naively placed the prophet’s ministry in the time of Herod Antipas. The true dating of the prophet Johanan/Yesu one hundred years earlier was either forgotten or

mixed up by the interpolator. (See [HERE](#) on dating the prophet at the root of Christianity.)

**(7) The Reason for the Execution of John in Disagreement with the Gospels*

Emphasis on the criterion of dissimilarity (with the canonical gospels) impels Kirby to place this argument in the “authenticity” column. However, once we jettison the gospels altogether (they were posterior to the interpolator), the criterion of dissimilarity itself evaporates completely—there was nothing yet to be dissimilar to.

In short, the reason that the cause for the Baptist’s death in Josephus is at odds with the cause given in the NT is that the interpolator did not know the NT!

However, as mentioned above in point ¶16, the interpolator may have had some vague knowledge of the prophet’s true ministry and denouement. According to Talmudic records, Yeshu ha-Notsri was executed c. 67 BCE by the Sanhedrin for apostasy and “leading the people astray.” Yeshu was an important figure—himself related by blood to the royal family. And he was successful among the people, preaching a radically un-Jewish heresy imbued with gnosticism—essentially, a version of Buddhism.

The interpolator gives ‘fear on the part of Herod Antipas’ for John’s death. The seminal passage from the interpolation is as follows:

When others too joined the crowds about [John], because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition, for it looked as if they would be guided by John in everything that they did.

This is the typical reaction of a despot fearful of an upstart’s success with the people. All this conforms perfectly with the situation of Jonathan/Yeshu ha-Notsri, a prophet in the time of Janneus-Alexandra

who presented a dual threat to the Jewish establishment. On the one hand, he threatened the king by being himself in the royal family. On the other hand, he threatened the religious establishment by bringing a radically un-Jewish heresy to the masses.

(14) *The Word for "Baptism" in the Passage Uncharacteristic of Christian Usage*

Kirby cites a writer:

[Josephus] uses no other nouns for 'baptism' than those used here [βαπτισμός and βάπτισις], which is quite strange if this text is a Christian interpolation. He never uses the noun βάπτισμα, which is the usual Christian noun for baptism (both John's baptism and Christian baptism), and we would expect that term here if the text was a Christian interpolation.

This argument loses force when one realizes that the Christian gospels were not yet composed when the interpolator penned the passage under consideration. Whether or not the interpolator is termed by us a "Christian," he did not yet know Jesus of Nazareth. He would have been the sort of Christian scholars today dismiss out of hand as a docetist—one for whom Jesus had no body. It is a misnomer, for the "Jesus" of the early Christians was the universal spirit of God that indwells the body of any believer and that indwelled the body of John 'the Baptist.' To say this Jesus 'has no body' is true yet misleading—it is a sneering caricature used by the Church Fathers with malice, a straw man that they knocked down with their awe-inspiring invention, Jesus of Nazareth (see next post).

For the first century Christian, any worthy follower can become 'a Jesus.' This was Christianity *before* the invention of Jesus of Nazareth in mid-II CE, a Christianity suppressed by the Church and now long forgotten. This older and more authentic form of Christianity is evident in marginalized texts such as the **Acts of Pilate** and **the non-canonical acts of various apostles**.

2

John the Baptist in Josephus—Pt. 2

contemporary commentary, Josephus, The first century

Arguments for inauthenticity

By his own admission, Kirby's points are indecisive as regards the authenticity or inauthenticity of the John the Baptist passage in Josephus (Ant. 18.116-119; Whiston's chapter 18.5.2). In this latter half of his article he argues mainly against Frank Zindler (*The Jesus the Jews Never Knew*, pp. 88-99), who raised a number of points against authenticity. Kirby also argues against Robert Price, citing rebuttals by Maurice Casey (d. 2014). This is revealing, for Casey believed "that the documents on Jesus of greatest historical value are the Gospel of Mark and the Pauline epistles." *Right*. The Pauline epistles have next to nothing (or—some scholars have argued—*nothing at all*) to report regarding a historical personage, and the Gospel of Mark is—to put it mildly—an allegorical rewrite of Old Testament (Brodie) and Homeric (MacDonald) templates. That Casey clung to his outmoded views of Mark and Paul being reliable historical sources in the 21st century marks the late Professor Emeritus of New Testament Languages and Literature (Nottingham, U.K.) as decidedly *old-school*.

As noted in the preceding post, however, my interest is not to show whether the Josephan passage on John is authentic or an interpolation, but to highlight the *change in perspective* that must occur before any conclusion can be arrived at regarding Christian origins.

(9) *The Epithet "the Baptist"*

Kirby writes:

The explanation of the term is obvious. John was "called the Baptist" because he performed "baptism." This connection is as obvious in the Greek as it is in the English today, which is why no Gentile today wonders about the meaning of the term "Baptist." (It is particular to John and doesn't really denote anything special in Judaism, in any case. It is quite unlike the term "Christ," where the argument has real validity.)

I find this casual explanation astonishing—and dead wrong. "No Gentile today wonders about the meaning of the term "Baptist"? I challenge anyone—scholar or layperson—to explain in clear terms the meaning and origins of baptism. Like the term "Nazarene" (so beloved by the Markan evangelist), the origin and meaning of baptism rank among the great mysteries of the Christian religion.

Some scholars relate Christian baptism to Jewish ritual purification in *mikvaoth*. There is little doubt such immersion was practiced in Judaism around the turn of the era, including at Qumran. But Christianity downplays purification of the body, e.g.: "Now then, said the Lord, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness" (Lk 11:39; cf. Mk 7:4; Mt 23:26). If anything, these words are an argument *against* ritual water purification.

Normative Judaism does not know ritual purification as an *initiation* ritual, as a sacrament. However, both Christianity and the Dead Sea Scriptures know these meanings (below). To me, this signals a link between the community of the Scrolls and early Christianity.

Water, in the religious context, has been an enduring interest of mine. Religious immersion goes back to the dawn of civilization in Sumer. With the triumph of Christianity, however, the pregnant (read: proto-gnostic) meanings associated with water rituals were lost. There are many relevant posts on this website (key "water" into the search box

above), but here I note in passing: (a) the water god Enki—the all-knowing Lord of Gnosis in Sumer and early Mesopotamia; (b) the presence of a basin of sacred water/wisdom in early temples (including in the mythical First Temple of Solomon); (c) **the sacred lake in Syrian religion**—to mention only a few aspects of sacred water in pre-Christian times.

Long before the turn of the era, dipping into water was a symbol for dipping into gnosis. The concept goes back to neolithic times, when our ancestors considered that water gives life to plants, animals, and humans, and that it also emerges mysteriously out of mountains (springs) and falls equally mysteriously from the sky (rain). Water can nurture or kill (cf. the Flood). When civilization arose in the late fourth millennium BCE, the watery depths were already regarded as *the* sacred dwelling place of the gods. [Incidentally, this view may have been universal.— Water worship has been documented at Stonehenge and at the Temple of the Feathered Serpent in Teotihuacan, Mexico.] This ancient symbolism carried over into Christianity but was deracinated and no longer understood—cf. the sacred fish (e.g. the bishop’s high hat); the sprinkling of holy water in churches today; and the sacrament of baptism.

To return to Kirby’s article, the interpolation into Josephus under discussion conforms surprisingly well with ritual immersion in the Dead Sea Sect:

Anyone who refuses to enter the society of God, preferring to continue in his willful heart, shall not be initiated into the society [Yahad] of His truth, inasmuch as his soul has rejected the disciplines foundational to knowledge, the laws of righteousness. He lacks the strength to repent. He is not to be reckoned among the upright. His **knowledge**, and wealth are not to enter the society of the Yahad. Surely, he plows in the muck of wickedness, so defiling stains would mar his repentance. Yet he cannot be justified by what his willful heart declares lawful, preferring to **gaze on darkness** rather than the **ways of light**. With such an eye he cannot be reckoned faultless. Ceremonies of atonement cannot restore his innocence, neither

cultic waters his purity. He cannot be sanctified by baptism in oceans and rivers, nor purified by mere ritual bathing. Unclean, unclean shall he be all the days that he rejects the laws of God, refusing to be disciplined in the Yahad of His society.

... Through an upright and humble attitude his sin may be covered, and by humbling himself before all God's laws, his flesh can be made clean. Only thus can he receive the purifying waters and be purged by the cleansing flow ...¹

I have bolded the above emphases on "knowledge... darkness... ways of light"—all gnostic locutions. The essence of the passage is that the proselyte must *first* be purified before entering into baptism. Only such inner purification allowed entry into the society/Yahad. The same emphasis on prior purification is found in the John the Baptist passage in Josephus:

[H]e was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. In his view this was a necessary preliminary if baptism was to be acceptable to God. They must not employ it to gain pardon for whatever sins they committed, but as a consecration of the body implying that **the soul was already thoroughly cleansed by right behavior.**

Synoptically comparing the foregoing citations, the suspicion arises that the 'Christian' who interpolated the John the Baptist passage into Josephus may have been an ex-member of the Dead Sea Sect or, at least, may have been familiar with the tenets of the Yahad. If this suspicion is correct, then new possibilities suddenly emerge—cf. the Johannine verse reporting that two disciples (John and Andrew) passed from John the Baptist to Jesus (Jn 1:37). Is this a veiled link, in the Fourth Gospel, pointing to early ties between Qumran and Christianity?

¹ [Community Rule, 1QS col 3, in Wise, Abegg, and Cook, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* (1996) p. 129; emphases added.]

It's time for a new paradigm

In sum, long revered Christian texts must be radically re-evaluated. I believe that scholarship has arrived at a watershed decade—the 2020s. The accumulated evidence against traditional views is now so great that the ancient, august edifice of Christianity must crumble, to endure vestigially among those hopelessly given over to fake news and wishful thinking. Unfortunately, the latter are numerous—Christianity will probably survive some centuries more, but its support among reasoning people is irrevocably on the decline.

Scholarship today is gravely divided. Who wants to be a New Testament professor in the poisoned crosscurrents that exist in non-confessional departments of religion? In the era of genome sequencing, quantum computing, and nanotechnology (all taught in a neighboring university building), who wants to defend the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the massacre of the innocents, and the historicity of a homeless prophet from a non-existent town in Galilee? *Really?* asks the incredulous student of his religious studies professor. *Do you really believe that?*

But the dam has yet to break. The issue is not *When?* but something far more important: *Who will get the credit?* (He he.) The dam will break when the academy—now being pulled away from orthodoxy kicking and screaming—is able to take credit for heroically bringing the world into a new age of reason. (Shrug.)

While Jesus mythicists are still routinely ignored by mainline journals and presses, courageous voices are arising from within the academy—witness, Fr. Thomas Brodie and Dennis R. MacDonald. But much work lies ahead. That work will require the ability to jettison cherished assumptions and to challenge still entrenched religious authority.

At the end of this year 2021, it is primarily mythicists from outside the academy who are showing the way, who are groping towards a new

paradigm for Jesus studies. That new paradigm includes three foundational parameters:

- ▶ (1) earliest Christianity existed without 'Jesus of Nazareth' until the mid-second century CE;
- ▶ (2) the canonical gospels and Acts of the Apostles stem from the [mid-]second century CE, not from the first century (thus removing any possibility of contemporary witness to Jesus, and dramatically impacting the figure and chronology of 'Paul'); and
- ▶ (3) 'Jesus' in the first century CE denoted the saving agency of a divine, mobile, and emphatically *spiritual* entity, one that comes down from heaven and indwells *the worthy human being* (whom I identify as the 'Nazarene' and the one who has been 'baptized' into the new religion).

These points reveal that all early Christians were, in fact, Jesus mythicists. Jesus of Nazareth did not yet exist. For the first century Christians, Jesus did not come in flesh and blood—he 'had no body.' Today, scholars marginalize those early Christians as 'docetists.' The term is misleading and those early Christians were not marginal. They certainly did not view Jesus as an improbable phantom (< Gk. *dokein*, "to seem") who wandered ghostlike about Palestine without a body—as the spiteful Church Fathers lampooned. For the first century Christians, Jesus was the divine spirit. We learn about them from the apocryphal literature, from the Nag Hammadi texts, and from doubters in the physical reality of Jesus such as the apostle Thomas.

The tradition disparages the apocryphal literature (most of which it succeeded in burning), the Nag Hammadi texts, and the apostle Thomas. The deceiving cabal that concocted the Church and amassed power and wealth has managed far beyond the wildest dreams of a Justin Martyr, a Eusebius of Caesarea, a Tertullian... After about 1,850 years, Christianity is now worldwide and deeply entrenched. *Not bad.*

But the clock is ticking.

3

150-200 CE: A 'watch and wait' period in early Christian history

Gospel of Thomas, Paul, The second century logos

In a recent comment, Albert Wubs kindly brought to my attention a work entitled *Ad Autolyicum*, the only surviving writing (in three 'books') by Theophilus of Antioch, a Christian bishop in the latter half of the second century CE. The Greek text and English translation, edited by the late Robert M. Grant, are available via PDF download [here](#).

The problem

Wubs correctly notes that "any reference to the name 'Christ' is totally absent. Maybe Theophilus also knew a 'Christianity' without Christ." This is interesting, for *Ad Autolyicum* (composed c. 185 CE) seems to know the canonical gospels—it names "John" as one of "the sacred scriptures" (and includes two verbatim quotations from the Johannine Prologue) and also has several close parallels to logia known from the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke. So, if Theophilus knew several of the canonical gospels, then he must of course have known Jesus of Nazareth and his ministry. Yet, in sixty pages of Greek, he doesn't mention Jesus at all. Not a single time. He doesn't mention the virgin birth, the ministry, the apostles, the passion, the cross, the ascension... For the Bishop of Antioch, it is as if Jesus of Nazareth did not even exist.

Theophilus also doesn't mention "Paul" or *his* career, though *Ad Autolyicum* has many quotations closely paralleling verses from the

Pauline epistles (including the Pastorals)—a corpus of letters that, we recall, *also make no mention of Jesus of Nazareth*.

Robert Grant writes:

Bishop Theophilus' "understanding of the work of Jesus Christ can be recovered only from allusions, for like other apologists of his time he never openly speaks of him."

Presumably, we are to believe that Bishop Theophilus and a whole slew of Christian writers knew the virgin birth, the ministry, the apostles, the passion, the cross, the bodily resurrection, and yet found the Savior Of The Whole World not important enough to even mention once in their prolix exhortations and defenses of Christianity!

It just doesn't add up.

Or does it? We recall that the dominant first century theology—that of early (**what I have called "Stage II"**) Christianity was in a Jesus ("Savior") that was a *spiritual* entity, the Logos, the "Son" of God (in an abstract sense), divine "power" and "spirit." I've **elsewhere** characterized this emphatically pre-Nicene Christianity as one in which "Jesus" is a mobile spiritual entity that indwells the worthy person. Any worthy person can, in this "mystery religion," become a Jesus. And there were, in fact, many Jesuses—Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Paul himself... (see my post **here**).

But after the appearance of the canonical gospels in mid-II CE all this radically changed. Now civilization had *Jesus of Nazareth*—God appearing in the flesh to save the world once (His "only begotten Son") for all time! This marvelous new message needed an appropriately grand declamation, and that declamation is the canonical gospels with the virgin birth, the ministry, the miracles, the apostles, the passion, the cross, and the bodily resurrection—all grippingly described in dramatic and awe-inspiring detail.

So, how are we to explain Christian writings *after* the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth, writings like *Ad Autolyicum* that *still* simply do not mention Jesus of Nazareth?

The tyranny of the timid multitude

We all know what happens when something radically new arrives on the scene. People don't automatically flock to the new idea en masse—it doesn't matter how *good* the idea might be. People are cautious. First, they look to see if *anybody else* is following what is new... That gives them a little confidence. After all, no one wants to be the first to espouse a *losing* proposition.

The bigger the idea, the more different, the quieter are people. The timid multitude wants to see which way the wind is blowing before it jumps on the bandwagon. People in power, too, are especially cautious. They have the most to lose.

When the over-the-top figure, Jesus of Nazareth, arrived like a bombshell in four great, astonishing gospels in mid-II CE, Christians everywhere were awestruck. By and large they were quiet. For several decades, Christian apologists from Spain to Mesopotamia were very careful how they handled this radical new information, this stunning new Savior of the world. They looked, watched, and listened.

This explains the curious nature of a great deal of Christian writing. For at least a half century—let's say from c. 150 to c. 200 CE—the Christian world was in a 'watch and wait' period. Writings from that period are characterized by:

- (a) demonstrable knowledge of the canonical gospels;
- (b) suppression of the biography of Jesus of Nazareth;
- (c) clinging to the old 'Jesus as spirit' model; and

(d) moving away from the 'mobile Jesus' and (tentatively) towards the divine elevation of a single fleshly Jesus of history.

Implications for dating?

Is it possible to use the above new criteria for dating purposes? A Christian text that does not have parallels to the canonical gospels and that does not know Jesus of Nazareth readily dates sometime before c. 150 CE. On the other hand, a Christian text that *does* know the canonical gospels and yet does not mention of Jesus of Nazareth may well fall into a limited later period: c. 150–c. 200 CE.

Here are some test cases. First: the Pauline epistles. According to the foregoing general schema, what are we to make of those New Testament writings? They do not know Jesus of Nazareth. Do they know the canonical gospels? That is a question for a Pauline expert such as Bob Price, but looking in my Index to the Gospel Parallels, I see only a few parallels between the Epistles (mostly 1 Corinthians) and the 4G. Is it possible—even conceivable—that one or more Pauline epistles *postdate* the canonical gospels? Admittedly, I have never considered such a late dating for those epistles, namely, as late as 200 CE. Of course, the universal view (I know of no scholar who challenges it) is that the epistles preceded the canonical gospels. Maybe, however, that view is (or should be) open to challenge...

I have elsewhere suggested that the Pauline epistles date to the second century. The present argument, then, leaves the door at least slightly ajar that one or more epistles date even after the gospels, namely, post-150 CE. Support for this also comes from an astonishing fact: no reference exists in the Church Fathers to either the epistles or gospels before c. 150 CE!

Another test case: the *Gospel of Thomas*. Again, this text does not know Jesus of Nazareth. However, it has numerous parallels with the canonical gospels. I myself drew up a list of parallels many years ago

(1998) and shared it with the CrossTalk2 list on Yahoo Groups. Two thirds of the *Gospel of Thomas* (62% to be exact) has either accepted or putative (suspected) parallels with the synoptic gospels. That's a very high percentage, and I think it disqualifies the notion that the *Gospel of Thomas* and the synoptic gospels were totally independent of each other, even if they drew from the same fund of logia/parables. Two other possibilities remain: the *Gospel of Thomas* influenced the synoptics (i.e., GTh dates before c. 140 CE), or the synoptic gospels influenced Thomas (i.e., GTh dates after c. 150 CE.).

General scholarly consensus holds that the Gospel of Thomas contains the more authentic form of many logia—the canonical versions are often elaborations. Also, the actual *form* of the *Gospel of Thomas* argues for its greater antiquity. Thomas is essentially a sayings source, while the canonical gospels are sophisticated interweavings of both sayings and narrative elements.

Provisionally, then, I conclude the following:

- ▶ The Gospel of Thomas dates before c. 140 CE
- ▶ The canonical gospels date between c. 140 and 150 CE (see [here](#))
- ▶ One or another of the Pauline epistles *may* date as late as c. 200 CE (!)
- ▶ A number of Christian writings and apologetical tractates that make no mention of Jesus of Nazareth may still date as late as c. 200 CE.

4

The second century: from the spiritual Jesus to the canonization of the New Testament

The second century

Orthodoxy developed gradually

While it is easy to show that many pre-200 CE Christian works (Shepherd of Hermas, Ad Autolycom, Didache, etc.) make no mention of the virgin birth, walking on water, etc., Christian literature reveals a clear increase in the ‘superman’ traits that will eventually coalesce into Jesus of Nazareth. The Savior (‘Jesus’) of the World—an entirely spiritual entity in the first century CE—slowly takes on flesh as the second century progresses—the flesh of an increasingly exalted being. The canonical gospels appearing towards mid-century were not anomalies. They did not suddenly emerge out of nowhere but belong to a stream of orthodox anti-gnostic literature that was gathering impetus for some time. The exalted canonical Jesus does not exist in isolation but rests on an organic, growing, and evolving story (and theology) of Jesus that took generations—if not centuries—to develop.

An example of an early Christian text that is midway between the spiritual Jesus and Jesus of Nazareth (what I have termed **Stage II and Stage III Christianities**) is the Epistle of Barnabas. It is dated by scholars c. 100 CE—too early, according to the theories developed here—to have mentioned Jesus of Nazareth or John the Baptist, who were creations of the canonical evangelists at mid-century. But the epistle indeed knows a generic Jesus *in the flesh*: “For if He had not come in the flesh, how could men have been saved by beholding Him?” (EpBar 4:10-15; cf. 5:6,9; 11:12). Here Jesus is no mobile divine

spirit that grants salvation (through gnosis). *He* is now a unique individual who grants salvation (through belief).

The Epistle of Barnabas calls Jesus “Christ the son of David” (EpBar 11:13). Of course, the messiah son of David was well known from Jewish scripture (Ps 110:1 etc)—he was the *conquering* messiah who would one day liberate the Jews. There was also another messiah, however, the slain **messiah son of Ephraim**. The canonical Jesus seems to be a merging of the two messiahs.

Here the reader will have to (at least temporarily) indulge my theories regarding Yeshu ha-Notsri. For me, only the knowledge of that earlier prophet makes subsequent Christian developments understandable and possible. I consider it no coincidence that the canonical Jesus died on the cross (so did Yeshu, c. 67 BCE), that he was a Jewish prophet who spent time in Egypt, that he had an adversarial relationship with the Pharisees, and so on. These core elements of the *fictional* New Testament Jesus story are in fact *historical* elements of **the Yeshu ha-Notsri story**.

The Epistle of Barnabas does not yet know Jesus of Nazareth or his dramatic ministry as embellished later in the 4G. But it knows a prophet Jesus ‘son of David,’ i.e., a prophet who is of royal lineage. To me, this is very interesting, for (astoundingly) **Yeshu ha-Notsri was himself a member of the royal family of Israel**.

My interpretation of this epistle, then, is twofold: it harks back to a real prophet of history, and it has already begun the separation from the prevailing ‘spiritual Jesus’ theology of the first century. For the author of EpBar (as for other contemporary Christian writers) ‘Jesus’ is becoming more and more exclusive. By the time we come to mid-II CE and the appearance of the canonical gospels, ‘Jesus’ is part of the Godhead indwelling a *unique individual*. He is finally the *Only-begotten* Son of God.

And that Jesus conquered all else. The old notion of a mobile spiritual Jesus who indwells any worthy person is henceforth in the rear-view mirror and quickly disappears. While that spiritual Jesus is still around for another half century or so, after about 200 CE the writing is on the wall: the canonical Jesus of Nazareth has won out, and all other views of Jesus are henceforward heresy.

The appearance of 'Jesus of Nazareth' in mid-II CE

The evidence I gave in the last few posts relates mostly to the content of ancient Christian literature: 'Jesus of Nazareth' and the canonical storyline do not appear before the 140s CE, with the appearance of the canonical gospels. Here I would like to point out that internal evidence from those texts also supports a mid-II CE dating. It has long been noted that Pharisees were not in the Galilee before the Bar Cochba Revolt in the 130s CE. Until the First Jewish Revolt, the center of Pharisaic power was Jerusalem, but after the destruction of the city in 70 CE, Pharisaic power removed to Jamnia, on the coast. As I wrote in *The Myth of Nazareth*, "Jamnia maintained a preeminent position [among the Pharisees] in the years between the two Jewish revolts, after which Sepphoris (Diocaesarea) and Tiberias in the Galilee assumed dominance" (p. 266, with references).

It is also granted by all except conservative scholars that synagogues were not yet in the Galilee at the turn of the era. The indefatigable Israeli archaeologist Mordechai Aviam has latterly claimed to have found remains of as many as ten synagogues in the Galilee dating to the late first century CE. That is still about a century too late to support the Jesus story as reported in the gospels (cf. Lk 4). In short, the worldview of the evangelists is an anachronism.

After the appearance of the canonical gospels in mid-II CE, I proposed in the previous post that a 'watch and wait' period took place for about a half century, a period during which the Christian world slowly

digested this thoroughly new paradigm of 'God made flesh.' In that period, however, the Church struggled with the new information. A forgotten aspect of that struggle was the abortive attempts to reconcile the four gospels into one account. Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165 CE) seems to have been **the first to attempt such a 'harmony.'** Justin knows the synoptic gospels but, evidently, not the Gospel of John. Justin's student, Tatian, followed this up and completed a thoroughgoing harmony known as the **Diatessaron**, c. 160-175 CE. These attempts were rejected by the Church, however, and Tatian (an **encratite**) was eventually denominated a heretic.

The canonization of scripture

The **Muratorian Canon**, written about 200 CE [Schneemelcher/NTA 1992:I.34], gives us the first known listing of 'admissible' Christian scriptures, as handed down from 'Church Central' in Rome, as it were. A major fragment of that document has survived. The Canon admits the following writings:

- ▶ the four canonical gospels [Luke and John are mentioned; Mark and Matthew implied]
- ▶ the Acts of the Apostles
- ▶ 13 epistles of Paul [excludes Hebrews]
- ▶ two letters of John and the letter of Jude
- ▶ the Revelation of John, Apocalypse of Peter, and Wisdom of Solomon

On the other hand, the Muratorian Canon writes: "But we accept nothing whatever from Arsinous or Valentinus and Miltiades, who have also composed a new psalm book for Marcion, together with Basilides of Asia Minor, the founder of the Cataphrygians" (ll. 81 f).

The Canon shows us that, already ca. 200 CE, the ‘Catholic [literally: Universal] Church’ was sufficiently organized and centralized that it could dictate to its far-flung branches throughout the Roman Empire. This is not mere hyperbole, for we read in the Canon itself (l. 56): “It is clearly recognizable that over the whole earth one Church is spread.”

For other Christian groups, the game was up. They could not compete with the superior organization of the Catholic Church, which was ‘top-down,’ essentially urban, and severely hierarchical—with bishops, presbyters, and deacons. The Church was (quite intentionally) organized almost like an army—an astute strategy that it had cultivated over many generations.

Gnostics, Jewish Christians, and other heterodox Christian groups (the *first* Christians) didn’t stand a chance. Gnosticism is individualistic, not corporate. Gnosis is strictly personal. Thus, gnostic ‘groups’—insofar as they existed—were generally ad-hoc, ‘bottom-up’ societies scattered here and there. They were mostly in rural areas, commensurate with a basic theme of gnosticism—namely, flight from the world, as once stated quite eloquently by Jesus (Yeshu): “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven” (Mt 6:19). More pithily, we read at GTh 42: “Become passers-by.”

This played right into the hands of the Church, which—as the Muratorian Canon itself admits—was primarily interested in “the glory of the Catholic Church for the ordering of ecclesiastical discipline” (l. 61). And, indeed, about a century after the Canon was written the inevitable finally took place: Emperor Constantine declared for Christianity and the Roman Empire effectively became both Christian and Catholic.

It is no coincidence that the Pauline epistles are addressed to cities. Those epistles can be viewed as second-century directives *from a*

single center outwards. The Pauline epistles betray an emerging center of Church control (Rome—not coincidentally, also the seat of *imperial* power). In fact, the second-century ‘Paul’ can be considered a cipher for ‘the Church.’ *His* authority is so great that, by its own admission, the Muratorian Canon admitted forging epistles in his name as propaganda against the Marcionites (namely, the epistles to the Laodiceans and to the Alexandrians, ll. 63 f). But, then, all the Pauline epistles were ‘forged,’ as H. Detering remarked: “*all* the Pauline epistles are pseudepigraphic writings from the first half of the second century” (*The Falsified Paul*, 2003:174. Detering also equated Paul with Simon Magus and noted some curious overlappings between Simon and Jesus—*ibid.* pp. 154, 165, 177).

After the appearance of the Muratorian Canon, the familiar account from manger to resurrection is championed by the Church, and profusely mirrored in subsequent Christian literature. One early example is the *Didascalia Apostolorum* (“Teaching of the Apostles”). This little known work dates ca. 230 CE. It is part of a later collection entitled the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The *Didascalia* knows the canonical gospels, for it cites them by name (generally Matthew, the other evangelists less often, John least of all). It also knows the Acts of the Apostles and nearly all the Epistles (though the Apocalypse is not cited).

Soon, the Church Fathers take up the pen and begin writing profusely about Jesus of Nazareth, commenting upon the gospels, and interpreting the new Jesus for the Church and for the masses. **Origen**, writing in the first half of III CE, knows Jesus of Nazareth and the 4G and **himself plays an important role** in codifying the new Christian canon.

By the beginning of the third century orthodox Christianity had decisively triumphed over gnosticism.

5

The obliteration of Gnosticism from early Christian history

Christian origins, The first century, Ehrman

The chronology of Christian origins being developed on this website places the appearance of the canonical gospels in the 140s CE, the canonization of the NT c. 200 CE, and the final Christianization of the Roman Empire in early IV CE. Those are three *late* highpoints. Christian chronology, for me, begins before the turn of the era—with the life and ministry of Yeshu ha-Nostri (c. 100–c. 67 BCE). According to this extended chronology a full two hundred years transpired between the crucifixion of Yeshu and the appearance of the canonical gospels. That's a long time and plenty could (and did) happen in those centuries. The Church Fathers—who suddenly begin writing in mid-II CE—witness to a plethora of Christian groups *already* on the ground, many with names that sound very strange to us: **Saturnilians**, **Basilideans**, **Carpocratians**, **Colorbasians**... For the historian, unfortunately, those early Christian centuries and the groups that populated them are a riddle wrapped in an enigma.

The main problem is the assiduous and sustained activity of the later Church in (a) erasing most traces of earlier, pre-orthodox Christianities, and (b) in substituting the false history enshrined in the New Testament.

The thief always leaves clues, however—otherwise, detectives would not exist to afterwards solve the crime. And there are, indeed, plenty of clues, contradictions, and inexplicable facts waiting to be exposed. What are required of investigators today are the motivation to solve the crime and the willingness to jettison preconceived notions and

self-serving agendas. Given human nature, however, that's a pretty tall order.



Some of the fifty miles of bookshelves in the Vatican secret archives.

I suspect that many unknown texts (many more than one might suppose) sit in libraries around the world gathering dust (or even molding away) on shelves that have not been disturbed for centuries. Those texts are *well* protected behind lock and key, many in dead languages. The enormous Vatican Library would probably be the first place to look...

Academics studying early Christianity are expert in Greek—the language of the New Testament—but how many of them know Aramaic, much less Mandaic, Samaritan, Ethiopic, or Armenian? (Since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi Library, a few scholars have learned Coptic.) If, as I argue, the Greek New Testament did not come on the scene until mid-II CE, then scholars of early Christianity are woefully unprepared to deal with the many Jewish Christian and Gnostic Christian movements that flourished *before* that time.

Bart Ehrman—a representative scholar

Bart Ehrman has impeccable academic credentials, has put time and effort into his career, and is an expert in his subfield which is the textual criticism of the New Testament. I might well get along with the man if I met him—after all, we are both atheists and could probably enjoy a good glass of wine together or listening to a Mozart sonata. Due to my views on Christianity, however, were I his student he would surely give me an “F” (I would consider a better grade insulting), and were he my student I would certainly give him an “F” (see below).

Ehrman was **once a born-again Christian**, has journeyed on to become an “agnostic atheist” and—for such independent souls can be quite unpredictable—is actually on a natural trajectory to, umm... *Jesus mythicism* perhaps? 😊 But here I digress. Yet there is precedent. Look at the apostle Paul: at first a persecutor of the Christians, then one of them, and finally their champion. Go figure.

The problem is that the received Christian tradition Ehrman has inherited (from pulpit and school) is insufficient to the task. That tradition was born long ago in the forest of orthodox superstition, of ‘the big lie’—Jesus of Nazareth. That is not Ehrman’s fault. He has inherited the same Christian tradition as have his peers. And like them, he has simply not exercised sufficient insight. That *is* his fault.

There are two sides to Ehrman’s writings. One side is an enormous number of highly successful books directed at the high school graduate, at the general lay public, or (at most) at the undergraduate student not majoring in religious studies. These footnote-free, easygoing volumes populate the relevant shelf of your local lending library. It’s as if his editor told him, “Don’t make your readers think too much. You can upset the apple cart, but just don’t overturn it.” And this strategy has been very successful. Ehrman’s views are found in books, videos, DVDs, cassettes... You name it.



University of North Carolina professor and author, Bart Ehrman.

The other side of Ehrman's output is directed at the college student of religion. Chances are that your New Testament course at the local university uses his ***The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings***, currently in its seventh edition.

Sadly—though he is at the pinnacle of the scholarly world—Ehrman's opinions on Christianity are, by and large, dead wrong. Recently I came across a passage in his book ***The Triumph of Christianity*** (Simon & Schuster 2018, p. 168). In an effort to determine the growth of Christianity 'by the numbers,' Ehrman offers the reader the following:

Egypt is a good example. One of the fascinating studies of the Christianization of Egypt was undertaken by Roger Bagnall, at the time a professor of ancient history at Columbia. Bagnall applied an interesting method for determining how quickly Egypt became Christianized. It had to do with a field called "onomastics," the study of personal names. As Christianity spread throughout the empire, Christians started giving their children Christian names. As an obvious example, Peter was not a common name at all in antiquity before Christians arrived on the scene. The name Peter is based on a

nickname given to one of Jesus's disciples, Simon son of Jonah (John 1:42). It is a word that means rock. We are not sure why Jesus wanted to call Simon "the Rock," but he did and years afterward Christians would sometimes give their children the name of this famous disciple. Non-Christians had no inclination to do so.

Some names are thus definitely Christian, and if enough documents survive from any region—such as tax records, marriage certificates, and land deeds—it is possible to determine what people are named at different periods of time and on that basis to calculate how many of those people were Christian (based, at least, on the naming practices).

As it turns out, we see very few traces of Christianity in Egypt before the middle of the third century...

I winced when reading the above passage. Consider: Peter is a major figure in the Christian New Testament. However, since that corpus of writings did not exist before c. 140 CE, then no Christian would have (or could have) favored the name Peter before that time. So, it is not surprising at all that the name is hardly found in Egypt until the Catholic Church made inroads there in the third century. I have news for Ehrman and Roger Bagnall: the name Peter has absolutely nothing to do with Christianity in Egypt pre-140 CE.

It follows that Ehrman's overall conclusion is terribly wrong: "we see very few traces of Christianity in Egypt before the middle of the third century..." That Mark is reputed to have penned his gospel in Alexandria doesn't seem to phase him, nor the documented existence of Gnostics in the land long before 200 CE. But, you see, it's a matter of definition. For Ehrman, "Christianity" is Catholic orthodoxy pure and simple. He seems to have bought into the notion that Gnostics weren't "Christians." It's a common misconception, even among scholars. Consider **the following typical statement**: "a variety of *Gnostic* communities (e.g., Sethianism, Mandaeism, Hermeticism, Valentinianism) existing alongside diverse *Christian* communities..." (emphases added). This short statement clearly differentiates "Christian" from "Gnostic" and does so reflexively, perhaps

unknowingly. That Gnostics also revered the name "Jesus" doesn't seem to have registered at all! A more accurate—and far more historical—distinction would be between "heterodox Christians" (who came *first*) and "orthodox Christians" (who came *later*).

Christian gnosticism was in Egypt at a very early time, as the voluminous writings of **Birger Pearson** (among others) have shown. It's not a particularly recondite issue. Even a cursory online query "gnosticism in egypt" immediately brings up **the following**:

... Gnosticism was especially prominent in Egypt, first in Alexandria and then spreading into the [hinterland] ... Indeed, the first Christian teachers in Egypt known to us by name were Gnostic "heretics" active in Alexandria in the early second century: Basilides and his son Isidore, Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes, and Valentinus, who moved to Rome ca. 140.

While several forms of Christian Gnosticism existed in Egypt, two were especially prominent, as reflected in our primary sources: "Sethian" or "classic" Gnosticism, in which the heavenly Seth plays an important role as revealer of gnosis and spiritual progenitor of the Gnostic "race"; and Valentinian Gnosticism, which originated as a more specifically Christian adaptation of classic Gnosticism and is reflected in the writings of Valentinus and several prominent pupils of his, such as Ptolemy, Heracleon, Theodotus, and several others.

Heracleon and Theodotus were probably active in Alexandria in the mid-second century. Valentinian Christianity spread to all parts of the Roman Empire and beyond, and persisted in some areas into the seventh century.

Onomastics is probably not a useful tool in determining the spread of early Christianity. All signs suggest that, at an early stage (*before* the hegemony of the Church) the religion was gnostic, ascetic, and encratite. Procreation was not an early Christian value. On the other hand, celibacy (continenence if married) was valued. In any case, only two names would probably have been favored by the earliest Christians: *Yeshu* (Joshua, Jesus) and *Jonathan* (John). But these were very common names among the general populace and little would be gained by tracing their prevalence. Towards mid-1 CE Gnosticism

began to take on mythological traits and many names (including “Seth” in the foregoing citation) became current.

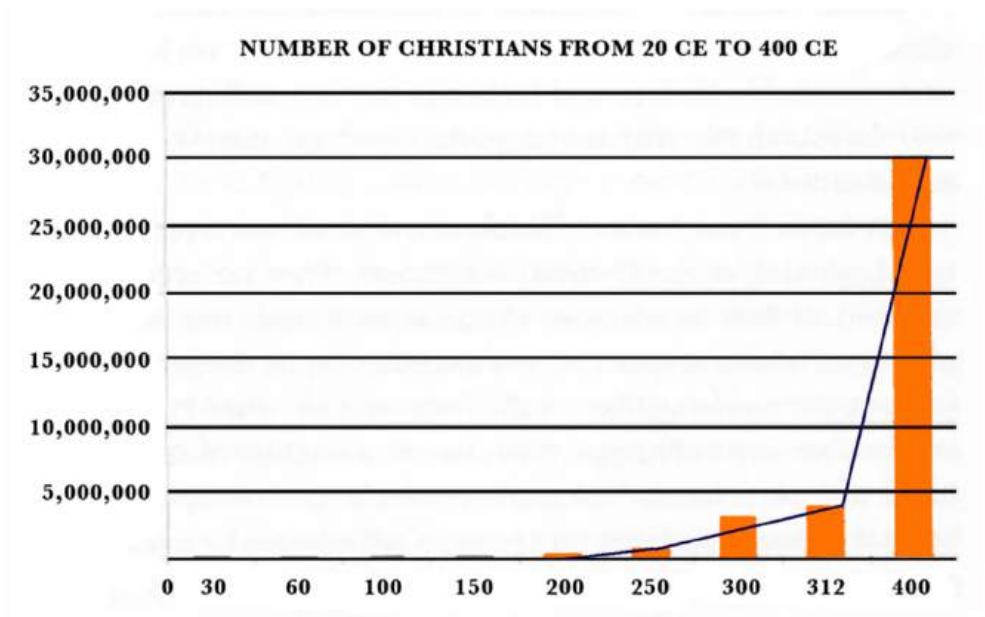
In opposition to Ehrman’s astounding verdict—“As it turns out, we see very few traces of Christianity in Egypt before the middle of the third century”—the Catholic Church itself long ago formulated a complete list of “Patriarchs” of Egyptian Christianity prior to 200 CE:

Mark the Evangelist (43-68); Anianus (68-85); Avilius (85-98); Kedron (98-109); Primus (109-121); Justus (121-131); Eumenes (131-141); Markianos (142-152); Celadion (152-166); Agrippinus (167-178); Julian (178-189); Demetrius I (189-232)...

Though the foregoing list is of little historical value, it attests to the pitfalls that await the researcher. We are dealing with the quicksand of propaganda, with competing agendas, and with an entire lost history of Christianity spanning about two hundred years. Given these crosscurrents, the researcher must be suspicious—and careful.

The growth of Christianity—according to Ehrman

Ehrman offers the reader two charts that, in his opinion, encapsulate the general growth of Christianity. I have combined them below:



From B. Ehrman, *The Triumph of Christianity* (2018) pp. 171 & 172
(combined and redrawn).

The above chart is for Christians in the whole Roman Empire, not merely in Egypt. We see that there are virtually no Christians anywhere until c. 200 CE. Of course, this excludes all the *heterodox Christian groups* that were certainly active before 200 CE (see above).

Ehrman's chart then shows a modest but noticeable increase in the number of Christians between 200 and 312 CE. That period, we recall, is the period between **the canonization of the New Testament** (via the Muratorian Canon) and the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. One would indeed expect a "modest but noticeable increase" in the number of Catholic Christians during that interim period between canonization of scripture and public triumph. Finally, the chart shows a huge increase in the number of "Christians" after orthodox Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire c. 312 CE—entirely consistent with expectation. It's obvious: Ehrman has accurately charted the rise only of Catholic Christianity. He has completely ignored the multitude of *heterodox* Christian groups that existed before 200 CE, whether they believed in Jesus or not. In sum:

he has effectively erased the *entire early history* of Christianity—the stage of the religion *before* the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth.

But, as the saying goes, 'the victor gets to write the history.' In the case of Christianity, the victor was Catholicism. Long ago the Church expunged Christian Gnosticism from the record. Today, the Church's heirs in cathedral and classroom continue to do the very same thing.

6

The obliteration of Gnosticism from early Christian history (cont.)

Christian origins, contemporary commentary

“At Alexandria [before c. 200 CE] it was hard to differentiate between gnostic and Christian doctrines...”

The statement dates to 1986 and is by **Robert M. Grant** (d. 2014), the ‘dean’ of Early Christian History for a whole generation. Grant’s distinction between “gnostic” and “Christian” doctrines has been, and still is, typical of the field—and so wrong! By and large, the Gnostics considered themselves the true Christians:

... There is much evidence to show that in the Roman Empire, at least, the Manichaeans considered themselves to be Christians, nay, the true Christians, while they condemned the Catholics for “judaizing,” and hence for being unfaithful to the true doctrine of Christ. [G. Stroumsa, in: *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, 1986, p. 308]

Had I been one of Grant’s students (I met him once, in fact), I might have impertinently asked him in one of his august seminars: “But, Professor Grant, was not early Christianity itself a form of Gnosticism?”

And that, I suppose, would have been the end of my academic career.

Grant **wrote entire books** based on the above fallacy. One is entitled *Gnosticism and* [note the distinction!] *Early Christianity* (1959). Another title of his is unambiguously pejorative: *Gnosticism: A Source Book of Heretical [!] Writings*. College and church simply loved his writings, published anything that came from his pen, and made Grant the “Carl Darling Buck Professor of Humanities and of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of Chicago.” (*Whew.*)

Moving right along... There's little a lone voice such as mine can do to correct two millennia of *misinformation*. So, I'll just offer an analogy—a parable, if you will: Christianity is like a ship loaded with precious cargo that left a port called "Gnosticism" long ago. As soon as the ship got away from land a group of cutthroats onboard mutinied, threw the crew overboard, changed the ship's flags, and determined never to return to the port from which they came but to enrich themselves by selling the ship's cargo to anyone who would buy it.

That is the history of Christianity, in a nutshell.

And here's an interpretation: the "cutthroats" are the Church Fathers and ancient prelates, the bloodthirsty inquisitioners of the Middle Ages, and the megapastors, church leaders, and academic sycophants of Christian orthodoxy today; the "crew" are the pacifists of the first Christian centuries and thereafter, well-meaning but quite inept at managing a ship; the "changing of the ship's flags" is lowering the flag of Understanding and raising the flag of Pleasure (sorry: my Buddhist leanings are poking through); the "mutiny" is the invention of Jesus of Nazareth and the codification of the canonical gospels; the "selling of the cargo" is the weaponizing and then commercializing of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire and eventually throughout the world; and today's buyers are the naive TV-watchers of The 700 Club and angry Christian conservatives who believe all hell *must* break out before Jesus Christ is able to return in glory on the clouds of heaven.

Unfortunately, things that begin poorly generally do not end well.

Those who, so long ago, produced the Big Lie that is Jesus of Nazareth also produced an organization given over to power, profit, and perversion. It could not have been otherwise—"Jesus of Nazareth" is a mutation that occurred at the very origins of Christianity. That mutation has created a cancer, and that cancer is now metastasizing. The Big Lie seeded in mid-II CE has laid the groundwork for chaos in the western world. Burning down the house. All hell breaking loose.

The ship that once left a peaceful port called "Gnosticism" and was hijacked by cutthroats is speeding straight towards an ugly port called "Destruction."

The Buddha called that *karma*.

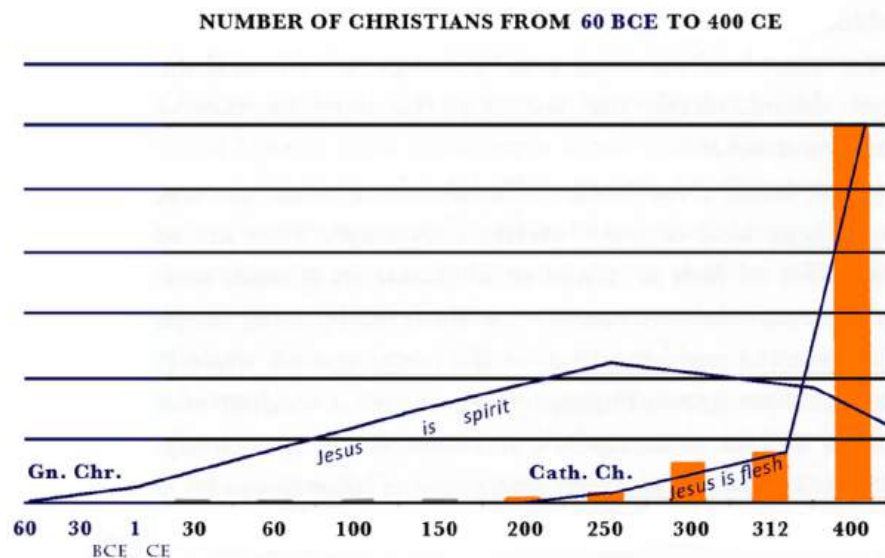
The religions that Christ has produced all accuse one another of lying;
They accuse one another of lying and don't share a single confession;
They don't share a single confession because they issued from the
creation of a lie.

Christ changes the path that the First [Being] set;
He changes the path and brings folly into the world.
The folly that Christ has created will surely come to fruition on the day
of the end.

[Mandean Ginza Rt; Lidzbarski pp. 134-35]

Back to history...

In the preceding post I presented a chart first produced in a book by the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—sorry, I mean a book by Bart Ehrman—that purports to represent the rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire. The chart virtually omits any Christians before mid-II CE. Here I present the chart again, but now with those early (and there were many) "Gnostic" Christians included:



A rough diagram of the growth of two Christianities.

Left: Gnostic Christianity. Right: Catholic Christianity.(Based on Bart Ehrman, The Triumph of Christianity [2018] pp. 171-72, with added elements.)

The reader will note with astonishment that the timescale at the bottom of the chart now extends back to 60 BCE. Indeed, this reflects my view that Christianity began **a few short years after the execution of Yeshu ha-Nostri** in the mid-60s BCE.

There are also *two* lines on the chart. The line to the left denotes Gnostic Christianity—completely ignored by Ehrman. The line is of course an approximation, and its actual height and shape are purely illustrative, not scientific—which is why I have also deleted numbers from the left side of the chart (which, for Ehrman, ranged from 5 million to 35 million Christians in the Roman Empire).

There are many ancient sources witnessing to Gnostic Christianity. They mostly come from the Church Fathers who, in furiously combating Gnosticism, did us the immense favor of establishing their varied existence and profusely describing them—albeit in highly negative and not always accurate terms. Then, too, we have some gnostic texts that survived the Church’s many purges—texts that correct the heresiologists’ skewed assessments and that reveal Gnosticism to

have been early, adaptable, and widespread throughout the Levant. The demise of Gnosticism—as seen in the chart above—began in the third century when the Church gained strength in the civic arena. In the fourth century, after the conversion of Constantine the Great, the Church was finally strong enough to assume the offensive. It did so with relish and official sanction, hunting down gnostics—who were now “heretics”—and burning their books. Henceforth Gnosticism from Mandeism to Manichaeism to Dositheanism to Samaritanism (yes, that was once also a form of Gnosticism) was irrevocably on the decline. Many gnostic groups chose to flee the Roman Empire entirely for the eastern frontier.

Interestingly, the Manichaeans of the fourth and fifth centuries adopted a different strategy—they infiltrated the Catholic Church. G. Stroumsa writes:

... The Manichaeans, who had been outlawed and savagely repressed already by Diocletian at the turn of the fourth century, survived probably longer than is usually thought, since they were able to go underground in the most effective of ways: by keeping their faith secret and appearing to be, for all practical purposes, plain Christians...

At least some Manichaean electi... looked for a hiding-place in the ascetical communities in the [Egyptian] desert, i.e., in the Pachomian monasteries... The Codex Theodosianus [438 CE] mentions “Encratites” as one of the pseudonyms used by Manichees in hiding... Both Popes Gregory I and Gregory II felt obliged to issue warnings against accepting African priests entering Italy without investigation, since they might actually be Manichees...

Augustine [who himself was a convert from Manichaeism] mentions the case of a Catholic [monk] in his own diocese confessing to be a Manichaean catechumen. Elsewhere, he reports that a certain Victorinus, an old man and one of his subdeacons, was recognized as having been a Manichaean auditor for years and having taught Manichaean doctrine throughout his career in the church...

Eutychius reports that in **Timotheus’s** time [late IV CE], the two classes of Manichaeans, the electi and the auditores, were very numerous among Egyptian priests and monks. [He remarked] that “most of the

metropolitans and bishops of Egypt were Manichaeans"... [G. Stroumsa, in: *The Roots of Egyptian Christianity*, 1986, pp. 308-13.]

Gnosticism did not completely die out in the West. Bogomils, Paulicians, Cathars, Albigensians... The holy wars against "the pure ones" (that's what Cathares means) were intermittent and hot. The cutthroats that commandeered the ship in the analogy above now tortured and then burned their betters at the stake. That, too, is the sordid history of Christianity.

7

Christians before the turn of the era

Christian origins, Gnosticism Alexandria, Philo

Birger Pearson

I mentioned in a prior post that the thief always leaves clues. Detectives count on that. It might be a fingerprint, a stray hair that can be genetically analyzed, a tip from a casual passerby... Every crime is different, and every crime leaves clues—if one simply looks long enough.

The thief himself often provides clues. It is said that one lie requires another lie to cover up the first. The second lie requires yet another, and eventually the liar is caught up in a web of contradictions. With a really big crime—something involving many people, several generations (!), and a lot of coordination—there will be many contradictions. Picture Colombo stroking his chin, glancing at the floor, pointing his cigar-stub at the shaking suspect and coolly asking, “But didn’t you say...?”

Game over.

Birger Pearson is a professor emeritus at UC Santa Barbara. He is an expert on early Christian Gnosticism, particularly in Egypt. During a long and active career Pearson has published in the usual academic journals and written several books. However—given his specialty, Gnosticism—his investigations often ventured into controversial territory, territory that does not seem to interest most other scholars. **His 2007 book** presents ancient textual evidence for long marginalized sects like the Mandeans and the Manichaeans. It also

admits an important category: "*Christian Gnosticism*," a locution that better-known scholars such as Robert Grant and Bart Ehrman have assiduously avoided.

One of Pearson's most interesting and provocative articles is tucked away in an obscure journal that publishes annually. In 1973 *Studia Philonica* was only in its second year. I have a library copy beside me and see a basic, very plain booklet with typewritten text and no formatting or graphics at all. Somebody typed up the article, sent the manuscript to the journal, and they simply printed that. In any case, the article is entitled "Friedländer Revisited: Alexandrian Judaism and Gnostic Origins" (pp. 23-39; a scanned PDF of the article is [here](#)).

Pearson begins:

In many fields of human endeavor it sometimes happens that a person sets forth seemingly outlandish theories, his work is dismissed lightly, or perhaps ponderously refuted, and then lies unnoticed by the next generation. At last, however, someone takes notice of what had been proposed many years before, and the earlier work turns out to be exceedingly useful when looked at with new evidence and by a different generation...

[Moritz Friedländer] put forth the thesis that Gnosticism is a pre-Christian phenomenon which originated in antinomian circles in the Jewish community of Alexandria. This Gnosticism, against which Philo polemicizes, came early to Palestine; and the rabbinic polemics against the Minim are directed specifically at such Gnostics. Christian Gnosticism is simply a secondary version of the older Gnosticism, which attached itself to the emergent Christian sect and appropriated for itself the figure of Jesus Christ.

Before going any further let's make sure we understand what "Gnosticism" even means. In the most general sense, Gnosticism is the belief—the conviction—that gnosis is somehow salvific. In other words, "understanding" saves.

That happens to be pure Buddhism—but we leave that point aside for now.

Moritz Friedländer's theory of pre-Christian Gnosticism

According to Friedländer, Gnosticism was a pre-Christian phenomenon. “[H]eretical Gnosticism was an important factor in Palestine already in the time of Jesus” (Pearson, p. 28). It originated “in antinomian circles in the Jewish community of Alexandria.”

Let’s pause here for a moment... “[A]ntinomian circles in the Jewish community of Alexandria” is a rather strange phrase. After all, how can *Jews* be *against* divine law—“antinomian”? Would that not disqualify them from being “Jews” at all? Indeed, that was the inference of the early rabbis who, as Friedländer shows, denominated such **antinomians** as *minim*—“heretics.”

Now, the term *minim* has always been associated with early *Christian* heretics. But Friedländer clearly shows that by *minim* the early rabbis were referring to Hebrew sectarians and, furthermore, that those *minim* existed *before* the turn of the era. He identifies Ophites, Cainites, Sethians, and other gnostic groups traditionally associated with early Christianity as *minim* well known to the rabbis *before* ‘the time of Jesus’ (pp. 25, 26, 32).

Well now, that is indeed interesting...

This revelation, first made in 1898, caused consternation in scholarly circles and was quickly buried, to be resurrected by Pearson in 1971 in his obscure article under present discussion—only to be buried again.

Evidence for pre-Christian ‘Christians’

Friedländer considerably strengthens his case by showing—and quite convincingly—that the Alexandrian philosopher Philo himself polemicized against the very *minim* who were identified as early Christians by the Church Fathers (and as such also by modern scholarship). Philo (d. ca. 40 CE) was, of course, a *contemporary* to the alleged Jesus of Nazareth. So, if Philo wrote about *minim*, those

'Christian' heretics certainly existed before Philo's time, that is, before the time of Jesus of Nazareth—already in the first century BCE!

Pearson writes, "the view of some later Fathers that heresy is necessarily later than orthodoxy... is obviously tendentious" (p. 25). Friedländer shows that Christian heresy is not only earlier than orthodoxy—it also *predates* the turn of the era.

Some Clues

Many smoking guns exist in Christian writings going back to the New Testament, clues that the religion of 'Jesus' not only preceded the canonical gospels but preceded the turn of the era itself. Below I list some of the most obvious ones that I have found to date. Many more surely exist in the voluminous writings of the Church Fathers (anyone care to read through [Migne's hundreds of published volumes](#) in Greek and Latin?) and in other authors of the first Christian millennium.

► **Apollos** in the Acts of the Apostles. The author of Acts gives the game away at 18:24-25:

24 Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John.

How is it possible, one will ask, to teach "accurately the things concerning *Jesus*" yet to know only "the baptism of *John*"? This is a smoking gun in plain sight. It signals the early existence of a theology very different from that of the canonical gospels, for Apollos knew Jesus—but *not* Jesus of Nazareth. This indicates that John possessed a different Jesus—a *spiritual* Jesus. It was the pre-orthodox theology I have elsewhere labeled Stage II—'the Jesus' is the divine wisdom (in Hellenistic terms, either *Sophia* or *Logos*), a mobile, ever-accessible

entity that indwells the saint. This was the prevailing form of Gnosticism in the first and second centuries CE, and it was severely combated by the Church—thus, we read in Acts (v. 26) that Priscilla and Aquila immediately “took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately.” That is, they taught Apollos the *new party line*: Jesus of Nazareth, the savior of the world, was not merely the spirit of God but was also *God in the flesh*.

► **Filastrius** (late IV CE) numbers the Ophites, Cainites, and Sethians among the sects that flourished in Judaism before the advent of Jesus” (Pearson p. 26). The Church expunged this information of Filastrius from later editions (see Pearson 36, n. 9) and replaced it with the words: “*catalogus eorum qui ante adventum Christi haereseos arguuntur*,” i.e. “catalog of those proposed heresies before the advent of Christ.”

► **Epiphanius** (late IV CE) in his Panarion (29.6.1) writes: [The Nazirites] “did not call themselves Nasaraeans either; the Nasaraean [with sigma] sect *was before Christ and did not know Christ*.” Elsewhere Epiphanius devotes an entire section (Pan. 18) to the gnostic heresy of the Nasaraeans, whom some scholars today identify with the Mandeans (see below).

In the Yahoo discussion group Crosstalk long ago (1998) I identified the Nasarenes with the Ebionites (message 3632—apparently no longer available). I may mirror that message again in a future post, for I consider that the Nasarenes/Natsarenes (nun-tsade-resh) were in all likelihood the heresy closest to Yeshu ha-Notsri both in time and in doctrine. That Epiphanius says they were “before Christ and did not know Christ” perfectly conforms with the two-stage development of Christianity proposed in the preceding post: (1) a gnostic Christian movement beginning c. 60 BCE in which ‘Jesus’ was the divine spirit/gnosis that indwells the saint; and (2) a later orthodox Christian movement beginning in mid-II CE. Because the Nasarenes belonged

to the earlier stage, Epiphanius considers that they were historically “before” the savior Jesus of Nazareth and hence “did not know Christ.” In a curious way, Epiphanius was correct: the Nasarenes were before (the invention of) Jesus of Nazareth.

► The enigma of the **Therapeutae** of Alexandria: Since the third century CE all the way up to the nineteenth century, the Therapeutae—a group of ascetics described *only* by Philo of Alexandria—were considered to be Christians. This, of course, immediately presents a problem, because Philo lived at the turn of the era. So, if he was writing about the Therapeutae, and if they *were* Christians—then we have here Christians *before* Christianity.

The modern rebuttal is simple: Church tradition was wrong! The Therapeutae were not Christians! From his description, in any case, Eusebius (fl. c. 300 CE) had no difficulty viewing the Therapeutae as early Christians. And today, scholarship has no trouble highlighting numerous points of contact between the Therapeutae and early Christianity, e.g., their communal attitude towards possessions (Acts 2:44). Furthermore, the Therapeutae also had **numerous points of contact with Buddhism**. In my opinion, the Therapeutae are a link between Buddhism and Christianity, one of the few historical links between Eastern and Western religion provably on the ground at the turn of the era.

► **Mandeism** was pre-Christian in its origins, according to a growing cadre of scholars—and according to Mandeism itself:

One who is honest and firm in belief will not listen to the teaching of Christ and to the false wisdom of the twelve deceivers and will not abandon **this first teaching**. [Ginza Rt; Lidzbarski p. 51, emphasis added.]

Scholarly suspicion that Mandeism preceded the turn of the era goes back several generations to Bousset, Reitzenstein, and Bultmann. More recently, one scholar writes:

“[I]n Mandaic literature we have before us an important witness to the religion of ‘Gnosis’ or gnosticism from late Antiquity, which probably reaches back to the pre-Christian era” (W. Förster, GNOSIS, 1974:125).

There is evidence, too, that Philo, writing at the turn of the era, already knew Mandaean tenets.² Reitzenstein even concluded that aspects of the New Testament gospels are dependent on Mandaean sources—for example, the **Johannine concept of baptism**. Finally—and I hope to post about this fascinating discovery in the future—I have found close (virtually identical) parallels between Mandaean writings on the one hand and the Dead Sea Scrolls on the other.

² R. Reitzenstein, *Die Vorgeschichte der christlichen Taufe* 1929:105; *Das mandäische Buch des Herrn der Grösse und die Evangelienüberlieferung* 1919:39.

8

The late second century and Paul

christology, Paul, The second century

In the preceding post I introduced some evidence that Christianity in fact predated the turn of the era—such as that Philo (fl c. 20 CE) knew ‘Christian’ sectarians including the Sethians and Ophites, that his description of the Therapeutae was of an early Buddhist-Christian group on the outskirts of Alexandria, that ‘Apollon’ in the Acts of the Apostles already knew ‘Jesus’ but not ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ etc.

In this post I jump forward to the late second century CE—just when the New Testament canon was being formulated. The prevalent form of christology was still ‘Jesus is the indwelling spirit of God’s wisdom’—a christology that I have termed Stage II.

I briefly discussed the text *Ad Autolyicum* in [a recent post](#) and return to it here. *Ad Autolyicum* (“To Autolyicus”) is a defense of Christianity and is the only surviving text by [Theophilus of Antioch](#) (c. 180 CE). Theophilus was writing in the ‘[Watch and Wait](#)’ period between the drafting of the canonical gospels (mid-II CE) and their final canonization, evidenced by the Muratorian Canon c. 200 CE.³

Theophilus may well know one or more of the soon-to-be-canonical gospels but—as Robert Grant observed, his “understanding of the work of Jesus Christ can be recovered only from allusions, for like

³ Some scholars argue that the Muratorian Canon is to be dated much later, to the 4th century: ‘The first known list of our twenty-seven New Testament writings,’ notes Robert M. Price, ‘appears in the paschal (Easter) letter of Athanasius to his diocese in 367 CE.’ (The Pre-Nicene New Testament, 2006:xvi.) While this sort of evidence might push the canonization of the New Testament even later, there exists other evidence showing that the canon was ‘determined’ by ca. 200 CE—e.g., Irenaeus (d. ca. 202 CE) writes that there could only be four gospels ‘just as there could only be four winds and four corners of the earth.’ Thus, 200 CE is the rough date for the canonization of Christian scripture.—R.S.

other apologists of his time he never openly speaks of him." The reason is clear when we understand that Christian writers between c. 150 and c. 200 CE were not sure when, if, and in what form the new story of Jesus of Nazareth would be 'approved' in Rome. So, they played it safe. In sixty pages of Greek, *Ad Autolyicum* doesn't mention Jesus at all. Not a single time. Theophilus doesn't mention the virgin birth, the ministry, the apostles, the passion, the cross, the ascension... For the Bishop of Antioch, it is as if Jesus of Nazareth did not even exist.

In *Ad Autolyicum* Theophilus continues to argue the *spiritual* Jesus paradigm. Within a generation, however, this would change, as the older spirit christology gave way to the iconic figure, Jesus of Nazareth.

God is spirit

For Theophilus, God is strictly a spiritual entity and has no bodily form:

1.2] But if you should say, 'Show me your God,' I may reply to you, 'Show me your man and I will show you my God.' You must show me that the eyes of your soul can see and that the ears of your heart can hear. For just as those who see with bodily eyes contemplate the affairs of life on earth and distinguish things that differ [cf. Rom.2:18 & Phil. 1:10], such as light from darkness, white from black, ugly from beautiful, rhythmical and metrical from the unmetrical, beyond the metre from truncated; and similarly with things that fall under the sense of hearing, sounds that are shrill or deep or sweet; just so, the ears of the heart and the eyes of the soul are potentially capable of beholding God. God is seen by those who are capable of seeing him, once they have the eyes of the soul opened.

1.3] You will say to me, then, 'Since you see, describe the form of God to me.' Hear me, man: the form of God is ineffable and inexpressible, since it cannot be seen with merely human eyes.

1.5] Just as the soul in a man is not seen, since it is invisible to men, but is apprehended through the movement of the body, so it may be that God cannot be seen by human eyes but is seen and apprehended through his providence and his works.

1.7] If you know these things, man, and live in purity, holiness, and righteousness, you can see God. But before all, faith and the fear of God must take the lead in your heart; then you will understand these things.

The above citations do not betray an author for whom Jesus of Nazareth was *the* Son of God come in the flesh. Their theology is similarly distant from the (integral) Pauline notions of atonement and redemption—from the saving “cross” of the Lamb of God who gave his life that we all might live. It is almost as if Bishop Theophilus did not know the Pauline epistles... (see below).

More remarkable still is the following passage, in which Theophilus castigates Autolycus:

1.9] The names of the gods you say you worship are the names of dead men.

No person writing the above could himself venerate a God-man who *died* on the cross for our sins! In another passage we learn that Theophilus venerates a different class of persons: prophets who possess the ‘spirit’ of God:

2.10] It was he, Spirit of God and Beginning and Sophia and Power of the Most High, who came down into the prophets and spoke through them about the creation of the world and all the rest...

The human being who keeps God’s commandments becomes immortal and even divine:

2.27] If man were to turn to the life of immortality by keeping the commandments of God, he would win immortality as a reward from him and would become a god...

Those are powerful words. It is clear that, for Theophilus of Antioch, the Sophia (wisdom) and “commandments of God” were available to the prophets of old and are available to anyone who “would win immortality.” By living according to divine will, one can become perfected, immortal, even ‘god.’ With no Jesus of Nazareth, this is of course a very different theology than what Christians know today. It is

the theology that predated the Catholic Church, as I have written about [elsewhere](#). What I find remarkable is that such a theology—with a mobile, spiritual wisdom-savior (“Jesus”)—was still in force in Antioch in the late second century CE.

New suspicion on the Pauline epistles...

‘Bishop’ Theophilus doesn’t mention Paul or his career, though *Ad Autolyicum* has many quotations closely paralleling verses from the Pauline epistles. In other words, Theophilus treats the Pauline corpus with the same ambivalence with which he treats the canonical gospels.

This gives me pause... What, then, prevents one from dating the Pauline epistles *after* the canonical gospels? There seems to have been a grace period of about a half century, c. 150–200 CE, when Christian writers made only general “allusions” to the life of Jesus of Nazareth (as in the Pauline epistles and *Ad Autolyicum*) while the canonical gospels themselves were being ‘vetted.’

A late II CE dating for the epistles is, admittedly, an astonishing proposition. But it would make very good sense in at least one critical sense: the Pauline epistles suddenly appear as an *imprimatur* for the recently-appearing figure Jesus of Nazareth. How? Consider: the main thrust of the epistles is to establish *faith* in Jesus Christ, that is, *belief* in the “cross of Christ.” In other words, *the epistles make the case for the acceptance of the gospels*.

A chronological schema now emerges quite clearly:

- (1) the canonical gospels are ‘drafted’ in mid-II CE
- (2) a “Watch and Wait” period ensues, c. 150–c. 200 CE, during which the gospels are edited and abortive attempts are made to ‘fuse’ them into one (cf. Tatian’s Diatessaron)

(3) during the “Watch and Wait” period the Pauline epistles are drafted by the emergent Church with the purpose of solidifying and buttressing the acceptance of the new gospels

(4) about 200 CE, the Muratorian Canon—including gospels and epistles—shows that the New Testament is now accepted by the Church.

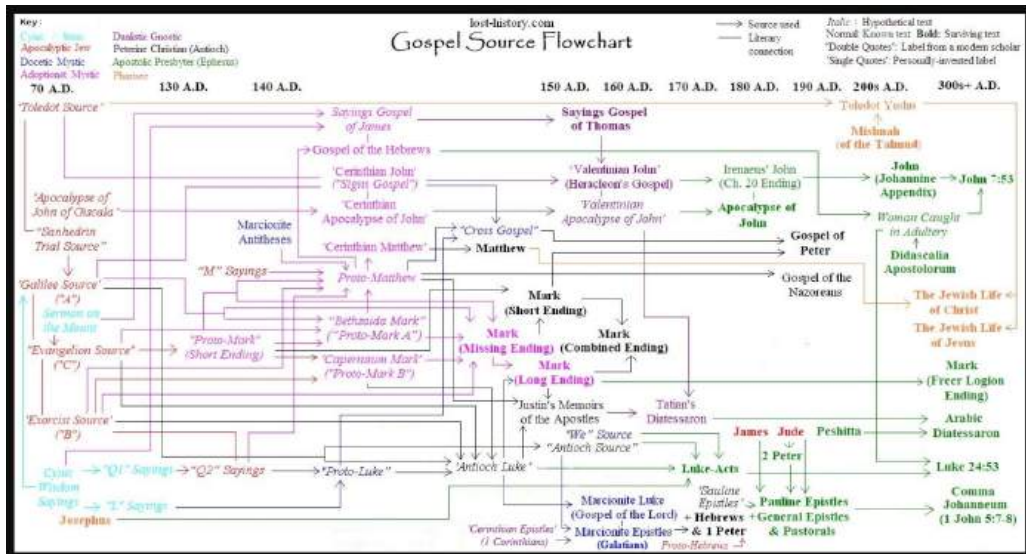
As regards step (3), it would not have been necessary for the Pauline epistles to detail the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, as we see in the actual documents. Not only was that ministry still under ‘review’ by the Church, but the purpose of the epistles would obtain *regardless* of what the Church decided regarding Jesus of Nazareth. The purpose of the epistles is, as noted above, to reinforce faith in the saving cross of Jesus. That is the core of Catholic Christian doctrine. The (invented) details of Jesus’ earthly ministry are entirely secondary.

The Gospels-Epistles sequence is contrary to, say, the one proposed in Tom Dykstra’s insightful book, *Mark: Canonizer of Paul* (reviewed on this website [here](#)). Dykstra concludes (p. 19): “For Mark, what is uniquely significant about Jesus is not his teaching but his passion, crucifixion, and resurrection.” That is, of course, totally Pauline. Perhaps the best way to view the gospels and epistles is not the one before the other, but both corpora in tandem: they arose more or less together in the later second century, working ‘off one another,’ as it were.

In any case, it appears to me that the Pauline corpus fits neatly into the “Watch and Wait” period 150–200 CE. Like *Ad Autolyicum*, the epistles avoid direct mention of Jesus of Nazareth and speak eloquently of the spiritual Jesus of old. They emphasize in first place the “cross of Christ” and thus implicitly betray knowledge of the (forthcoming) figure Jesus of Nazareth.

Though I developed the foregoing schema on my own, I was very pleased to recently discover that another online scholar shares this

'late' chronology. "Bahumoth" (his personal name does not appear on his website) also dates the Pauline corpus c. 180 CE, as we see from the following very detailed graphic (see "Sauline epistles" and "Pauline epistles" at bottom right):



Credit: <https://lost-history.com/> ("Bahumoth")

We note from the above that, like myself, Bahumoth also dates the canonical gospels to the mid-second century CE. Furthermore, his extensive website proposes, as I do, that Christianity **commenced about a century prior to the turn of the era.**

The Christian assimilation of Greek philosophy in late-II CE

In the late second century, Christian doctrine assimilated elements of Greek philosophy.⁴ Theophilus identifies the 'Power of God' with the Logos, the creative aspect of God:

2.10] Therefore God, having his own Logos innate in his own bowels, generated him together with his own Sophia, vomiting him forth before everything else. He used this Logos as his servant in the things created by him, and through him he made all things.

So, for Theophilus, the Logos is the creative agency of God, "innate in his own bowels," as well as "his servant." Theophilus also writes:

Therefore the Command of God, his Logos, shining like a lamp in a closed room, illuminated the region under the heaven, making light separately from the world. [Ad Autolyicum 2.13]

The foregoing is only a step away from the identification of the Logos/ Word of God with a specific person of history, the Savior ("Jesus," cf. Jn 1:4, 9):

John 1:1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God; 3 all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. 4 In him was life, and the life was the light of men. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The foregoing also seems precisely the view of Theophilus:

2.22] What is the 'voice' [of God in the garden of Eden] but the Logos of God, who is also his Son?... always innate in the heart of God. For before anything came into existence he had this as his Counselor, his own Mind and Intelligence. When God wished to make what he had planned to make, he generated this Logos, making him external, as the

⁴ Some scholars may argue that assimilation of Greek philosophy occurred earlier, noting that Ignatius of Antioch (fl. c. 100 CE) in his epistle to the Magnesians writes, 'there is one God, who has manifested Himself by Jesus Christ His Son, who is His eternal Logos, not proceeding forth from silence...' If valid, this would be the earliest Christian mention of the Logos extant. However, it is not valid--I agree with Robert Price that the Ignatian letters are 'almost certainly a late group of forgeries' (The Pre-Nicene New Testament, 2006:329).--R.S.

firstborn of all creation... Hence the holy scriptures and all those inspired by the Spirit teach us, and one of them, John, says, 'In the beginning was the Logos, and the Logos was with god' [John 1:1]. Then he says, 'And the Logos was God; everything was made through him, and apart from him nothing was made' [Jn 1:1-3].

The Johannine Prologue, however, then begins to depart from the theology openly expressed by Theophilus. The gospel places the Logos in a definite and unique historical context:

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. 8 He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light.

9 The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. 10 It was in the world, and the world was made through it, yet the world knew it not. 11 It came to its own home, and its own people received it not. 12 But to all who received it, who believed in its name, it gave power to become children of God; 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Thus far, the Johannine Prologue can still be interpreted with no Jesus of Nazareth. The Logos is still the (abstract) light of the world. There was "a man sent from God, whose name was John," who bore "witness to the light." That man, John, was a prophet—like the Jewish prophets of old.

But then the Johannine Prologue takes a new turn: the light/Logos is no longer an abstraction, but is identified by the Fourth Evangelist with a specific person of history, Jesus Christ:

14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. 15 (John bore witness to him, and cried, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.'") 16 And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. 17 For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.

The Fourth Gospel and the Pauline epistles are on different, but parallel tracks. The former openly expresses the biography of Jesus of Nazareth. The epistles, however, may know that biography but do not commit themselves to the new paradigm. Together with *Ad Autolyicum* and other contemporary Christian writings, all these texts seem to belong to the mid- to late-second century CE, a critical but tentative era when the Christian canon slowly came into being.

9

The birth of Catholic Christianity

Christian origins, The second century

Pre-Catholic Christianity

If we could go back nineteen hundred years, to the year 122 CE, we would find no Christians at all—no one whom we would today call a ‘Christian.’ Yet Jesus followers were around, *lots* of them. But not one of them believed in Jesus of Nazareth—for that figure had not yet been invented. The first century religion of Jesus was much different from the religion that we would recognize today.

The many Jesus followers who existed before the mid-second century CE were what we would call ‘gnostics’ and ‘heretics.’ They believed in a savior (in semitic *savior* is ‘Jesus,’ *yeshua*), but their savior was an invisible and completely ineffable entity—a clarity of vision that rests on an understanding of life, of one’s purpose in life, and of the world. That clarity of vision, that *certainty* of the goal attained, grants peace, an end to struggling, joy and perfect repose.

Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.” The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I may never be thirsty or have to keep coming here to draw water.” (Jn 4:13-14)

In later Greek parlance the ‘ineffable understanding’ was called *gnosis*, and those who believed such understanding exists and is even within the reach of man were called gnostics.⁵ In the conventional

⁵ The gnostic insight is extremely old. The Stone Age shamans knew it, and Buddhism is its relatively

vocabulary of the turn of the era, this ineffable gnosis was the 'Spirit of God.' The spirit was divine, and thus the gnostic was *transformed*.

This locates the early, pre-Catholic religion in the category of Levantine 'mystery religions.' A mystery religion is/was a religion of secret, inner transformation from the human state into the divine state.

Mystery religions were not exceptional in late antiquity—they were the norm. Mithraism, the Oracle at Delphi, the cult of Dionysus, Orphism, etc., contained elements such as the spiritual descent (into the underworld), ascent (to the divine), trance, struggle (Gk. *krisis*), and rebirth. The goal was insight. Hence oracles, wisdom, and secret knowledge are at the core of mystery religions. Once attained, that insight cannot be forgotten. It is permanent and stands forever, like a rock.⁶

The early, pre-Catholic Jesus movement fit right in—it also involved an ascent to the divine, and it was also a religion of saving wisdom, with initiates, transformation, and rebirth. Taking a step back, I view Christianity as the meeting of Buddhist 'enlightenment' and Mediterranean 'mystery.' For me, that is a good way to understand the pre-Catholic religion of (the spiritual) Jesus.

This began to change, however, towards the middle of the second century CE. Something new came into the mix, something powerful enough to eventually derail early Jesuine gnosis and to close the lid on all mystery religions for good. That 'something' was the invention of Jesus of Nazareth.

recent Eastern form. The so-called 'mystery religions' were also an attempt to attain such gnosis and spiritual transformation.

⁶ Cephas/Peter, Jesus' lead apostle in the New Testament, means the 'rock.' His alter-ego in the Pseudo-Clementines is Simon Magus, known as 'the Standing One.' Astonishingly, one root in semitic encompasses 'stand', 'rock/pillar', and 'baptise': AMAD [BDB 763; Payne-Smith 416]. John 'the Baptist' was originally Johanan 'the Standing One/the Rock.' Johanan, incidentally, was the actual name of Yeshu ha-Notsri.

The literary birth of a religion

The birth of Christianity is literary.

Let me repeat that: The birth of Christianity is *literary*. The Christian religion, as known for almost two millennia, is belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God and Savior of the world. But 'Jesus of Nazareth' is a literary figure birthed in someone's imagination in the second century—and then set to paper.

With the background of transformation already current in the mystery religions, as noted above, it was only a small step for someone, somewhere, to conceive that a 'Jesus'-imbued man would become divine here on earth, would strut about dispensing inscrutable wisdom to all, and would perform miracles of breathtaking majesty. In fact, looking through the apocryphal Christian literature, it appears there were *many* people who arrogated to themselves special powers, inscrutable wisdom, and privileged status. The ancient world was full of magicians and charlatans.

So, it is hardly unreasonable to imagine someone in the first half of II CE proposing (to himself or to someone else) that the creator God took the form of a man, worked all sorts of miracles on earth, was full of superhuman wisdom (so profound that it often was not understood), and instead of dying returned to the Godhead. The exercise may appear perfectly pointless and somewhat bizarre, except for one additional, crucial element: the doctrine that *belief* in that god-made-man (or man-made-god) *is the only way to heaven!*

Right there, someone realized, is a mechanism to subdue others. If people can be made to believe that their salvation depends on following *this* doctrine, then all that is required to conquer is to become *the exclusive representative* of this saving doctrine. If as if somebody, in a desert, owned the only well. "If you want to drink," he could say, "then you will have to come to *me!*"

Who that religious 'somebody' was in the second century I do not know. A leading candidate is Polycarp of Smyrna (d. ca. 165 CE?). He, and contemporaries such as Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–ca. 200 CE), quickly understood the power of the written word. After all, if Jesus of Nazareth is a *literary* figure, then his story must be widely disseminated in order to convert others. That story is enshrined in the canonical gospels. It was buttressed by a host of further literary creations from the 'Church Fathers,' namely: the epistles of Paul, Polycarp, Clement, John, Titus, Peter, Ignatius...

It should not be supposed that these epistles were actually ordinary letters, such as I might send to you in order to communicate between the two of us. Propaganda is useless if it is hidden. The epistles of the New Testament and in Patristic literature were designed from the start to be public, not private. Thus, the letters are generally addressed to congregations: to the Philippians, to the Corinthians, to the Thessalonians—even to the entire race of the "Hebrews"!

After all, if you have something to sell—by all means, *get the word out!*

The state of play in the mid-second century

I have described a scenario in which the birth of Catholicism is from a single point outwards. The 'single point' was the invention of the literary figure 'Jesus of Nazareth.' But literature needs readers. Who, then, were the intended first readers of the newly-minted gospels conveying the wondrous story of the Galilean Son of God? Where, in other words, was a fertile field of converts to be found?

The answer is clear: the converts had to come from already established church members. Unlike hard-nosed pagans, at least gnostic Jesus followers were already 'in the club,' as it were. Admittedly, they followed a *different* Jesus—a mystical and spiritual Jesus. So, the challenge for the first Church Fathers was to change

their concept of Jesus. As it turned out, that task was not so simple—but, after about two hundred years, it eventually succeeded.

It is also certain that the gnostic Jesus followers were, in a worldly sense, naive. Consider: these were sincere, self-sacrificing individuals who were ready to give up *everything*, including home, family, money... in order to achieve their personal gnostic salvation. And naive, trusting people are easily duped.

We can imagine the scene, say, in the gnostic Jesus congregation of Philippi, ca. 150 CE. The Reader or First Servant stands before the congregation and says solemnly:

“My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus: there is great news! Even as some of us suspected, the full power of God entered into a man about one hundred years ago. I have his story here, and it has just arrived. Let us say a communal prayer of blessing, and then I will read to you The Good News According to Markus.”

Stunned, wide-eyed silence. The communal prayer was intoned. And then the First Servant proceeded to read *The Gospel of Mark*.

10

The “Christ”

Christian origins, The second century Apollos, Catholic Church, Christ

The preceding post ended as follows:

We can imagine the scene, say, in the gnostic Christian congregation of Philippi, ca. 150 CE. The Reader or First Servant stands before the congregation and says solemnly:

“My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus: there is great news! Even as some of us suspected, the full power of God entered into a man about one hundred years ago. I have his story here, and it has just arrived. Let us say a communal prayer of blessing, and then I will read to you The Good News According to Markus.”

Stunned, wide-eyed silence. The communal prayer was intoned. And then the First Servant proceeded to read The Gospel of Mark.

A sudden hubbub in the congregation followed the reading:

“Can it be true?”

“I have never heard anything like this...”

“What an awesome story!”

“It’s simply wonderful!”

And finally we can imagine someone, moved by the spirit, standing up in the midst of the startled congregation and stating in a loud voice:

“Jesus the Nazarene was indeed the Son of God—the Christ!”

The sensation caused by the Gospel of Mark—in fact, by all four canonical gospels—spread like a wildfire through the Christian

congregations of the mid-second century, within a few years quickly reaching the limits of the Roman Empire.

The essential vehicle for this conquest was not the story of Jesus of Nazareth, nor his miracles, nor his rising from the grave... It was that the hearers learned a radically new meaning of a word: the "Christ." Previously they venerated "Jesus," which to them meant "Savior" (its literal meaning in Semitic) and which denoted the spirit of God. And they also venerated the man who received that spirit—an example for all to follow. Jews naturally associated the combination of human Prophet + spirit Jesus with the old concept of messiah, the "anointed one"—*Christos* in Greek, transliterated as *Christus* in Latin.

Thus, the human prophet Yeshu ha-Notsri was venerated as the Christ/Messiah already in the first century CE. We know this from a letter of Pliny the Younger to the emperor Trajan, dated about 110 CE. The letter (No. X.96) mentions "Christians" many times (not "Chrestians"). This shows that believers in the new messiah were fairly numerous in Asia Minor at the time.

Nevertheless, we must not confuse the first century Christ with the Catholic Christ ca. 150 CE. The former was a *man* imbued with the *spirit* Jesus. Though he was considered the messiah ("Christ") by many, he was emphatically *not* divine. (We find this view also in the Gospel of Barnabas and in Muslim tradition.) The first century Christ was not the Son of God, was not born of a virgin, and did not resurrect bodily from the grave. These astonishing views belong to the later Catholic Christ, Jesus of Nazareth.

So, in the first century there existed a definite distinction between "Jesus" and "Christ." The former was a numinous, invisible, and almost magical entity. One never really knew who had the Jesus—**the gardener, the person passing in the street, the fruitseller**... Thus, anyone with a pure heart and open mind could *become* Jesus, as it were, by receiving the spirit of God. But he could not become the

“Christ”—that august position was already taken by the founding prophet, Yeshu ha-Notsri. Nevertheless, the gnostic Jesus was the spirit of God—an enlightening, transforming, and quite hidden potency. “Jesus” in the first century imparts knowledge of life—it is the knowledge of life:

These are the secret sayings that the living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down. And he said, “Whoever discovers the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death.” [Gospel of Thomas, L. 1]

The word “Christ” does not appear a single time in the Gospel of Thomas nor, to my knowledge, in any other early gnostic text. In the Gospel of Thomas the spirit Jesus speaks through an anonymous person (his name and fleshly existence considered unimportant). It is clear that the concept of the spiritual Jesus arose first, and that it was then linked to the old concept of the Jewish messiah. That secondary linking of spirit Jesus + human “anointed one” (messiah) is the basic meaning of the “Christ” or the “Christ Jesus.” Thus, the Gospel of Mark begins:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Catholic Christ was in a category apart. It was entirely different from the gnostic, numinous Jesus and even from the first century Christ. While the earlier Christ was a human being endowed with the divine spirit, Jesus, the Catholic Christ was a God-Man (or Man-God), the (only begotten) Son of God who graciously came to earth to save sinners, who out of love suffered and died for those who believe in *him*. Previously, belief was in the divine spirit, Jesus. For the Catholics, however, belief is now in the Christ, the inimitable Son of God who died on the cross for our sins in a cosmic act of redemption.

The religion of the Catholics was thus entirely different from that of first century gnostic Jesus-followers. It was no longer a question of personal striving, of gnosis, and of inner transformation by means of a

numinous spiritual Jesus. Faith was now purely a question of *belief* in the Christ, Jesus the Nazarene (Gospel of Mark)/Jesus of Nazareth (Gospels of Matthew, Luke, John).

For the Catholics, then, the Christ is the lynchpin of history, God come in the flesh to redeem mankind. This concept was wholly new in the mid-second century.

We can now understand why Mark brings “the good news of Jesus *Christ*.” He and the other evangelists were not interested in merely bringing the news about Jesus—that was old news, for the Christian congregations were already familiar with the spiritual Jesus and with the wise words of that Jesus. What the Catholics brought was entirely different: *the Christ*, the only-begotten Son of God in the flesh—Jesus of Nazareth.

So we see—from the very beginning of the production of Catholic writings—those texts hammering away at the notion of “Christ,” “Christ Jesus,” and “Jesus Christ.” Often, they even drop “Jesus” and simply enjoin belief in “Christ.”

Soon after the canonical gospels were ‘published’ a barrage of epistles began to circulate—first under the name of “Paul” and soon thereafter under the (equally spurious) name of “Ignatius.” These were letters to the congregations that mirrored and reinforced what the Christ instructs in the gospels. The foremost requirement was *belief* in Jesus Christ—as we read so often in the various epistles. This includes belief in Christ’s atoning death on the cross and in his promise to return at the end of days to rescue (“resurrect”) those who believe in him. The reasoning is in fact circular: those who believe in Christ will be saved by their belief in Christ. That circularity doesn’t seem to have bothered (or dawned on) anyone.

The early Catholic texts

Thus, use of the words "Christ" and "Christian" in an ancient text may signal a *later* date: after the middle of the second century, with the caveat that one or another Church Father later interpolated the word "Christ" into older texts. In these cases, the underlying text may be Gnostic or Jewish Christian, yet it contains later catholicizing interpolations—such as the word "Christ," references to the virgin birth, the resurrection from the grave, the eschatological second coming, etc.

On the other hand, if the text speaks only of Jesus and of 'his' wisdom (Gospel of Thomas) and lacks catholicizing elements, then it may well predate the mid-second century.

Some texts (such as the *Didache*) begin with an ethical section ("The Two Ways") and then continue in a Catholic manner. The Two Ways section has not a single mention of "Christ" or even of "Jesus" (it could, in fact, pass quite well as a Buddhist text). In the remainder of the work, however, we find "Christ," "Christ Jesus," "Son of David," "your Church," instructions on institutionalized sacraments such as the eucharist and baptism, and how to treat itinerant Christian prophets (now deprecated) versus settled Christian "bishops and deacons" (Chp. 15). So, there are at least two layers in the *Didache*.

Thorough-going Gnostic scriptures that the Church could not salvage by interpolation or rewriting were simply destroyed.

After mid-II CE, belief in "Jesus" alone was obviously not enough for "orthodox" Christianity. The emerging Church insisted upon belief in the Christ, the messiah come in the flesh—Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, towards mid-II CE we suddenly witness the emergence of the dual term "Jesus Christ" in the gospels and in ancillary Christian literature. By continually linking the old term *Jesus* with the new term *Christ*, the emerging Church cunningly co-opted many gnostic believers.

Of course there would have been some insightful congregants who questioned the new figure Jesus of Nazareth, the “Christ.” They smelled a rotten fish and perhaps sensed in their bones that the way to salvation is not through belief but through arduous “seeking and finding.” Thus, the appearance of the canonical gospels immediately split the Christian congregations. Profuse evidence for this is found in the many Catholic epistles that have survived. As mentioned above, those epistles were primarily designed to support the new concept of “Christ” first introduced in the canonical gospels. The epistles took no prisoners—they viciously attacked naysayers and backsliders. For example, here is the opening of Paul’s famous letter to the Galatians:

Paul an apostle—sent neither by human commission nor from human authorities, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—and all the members of God’s family who are with me, to the churches of Galatia.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins to set us free from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed! As we have said before, so now I repeat, if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed!

Nothing subtle there. Consider also the following verses:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. (1 Tim 1:3)

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5)

For no one can lay a foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:11)

Additional warnings against Christ-deniers among the congregation are readily found:

I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. (Rom 16:17-18)

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I promised you in marriage to one husband, to present you as a chaste virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by its cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you submit to it readily enough. I think that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. (2 Cor 11:2-5)

This last citation is revealing. The congregants are enjoined to 'marry' Christ for whom they have "a sincere and pure devotion." Here "Christ" has largely replaced "Jesus." And who are the "super-apostles" that get the author's dander up? They are, of course, the already existing and trusted gnostic leaders of the mid- and later-II CE who are actively resisting the new religion of Christ. In the Pauline epistles, these prior apostles are represented by Peter, James, and the "Jerusalem" faction, as well as by "false believers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on *the freedom we have in Christ Jesus*, so that they might enslave us" (Gal 2:4).

The most vindictive passage that I have found in all these epistles occurs in the Letter of Ignatius to the Ephesians. There we read:

Be not deceived, my brethren. Corruptors of houses [i.e. thieves and the like] will not inherit the kingdom of God. If then they who do these things after the flesh are put to death, how much more if a man through evil doctrine corrupt the faith of God for which Jesus Christ was crucified. Such a man, having defiled himself, will go into the unquenchable fire; and in like manner also he who listens to him. (¶16)

And thus, already in antiquity the fires were prepared that would one day consume the (often saintly) “heretics” of the Middle Ages and that would arm the future inquisitors of the Church.

The late second century CE was a time of acrid Christian factionalism as well as of intense literary production. The authors of the new religion—the Church Fathers—tried everything in the book to cajole, threaten, and induce Christians everywhere to accept the new Jesus “who is the Christ.” They did not always threaten naysayers with perdition, however. Sometimes they used a softer touch, as we witness in the Apollos story of Acts:

24 Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, well-versed in the scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue; but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained the Way of God to him more accurately. 27 And when he wished to cross over to Achaia, the believers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. On his arrival he greatly helped those who through grace had become believers, 28 for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the scriptures that the Christ is Jesus. (Acts 18:24-28)

Here we have a sincere believer in *Jesus* who is converted to the view “that *the Christ* is Jesus.” There is no acrimony in this conversion, only enthusiasm, encouragement, and the frank acknowledgment of Apollos’ spiritual prowess. Of course, the slip of the pen in verse 25 is revealing. That Apollos “knew only the baptism of John” speaks volumes, for it tells us that “John” was the original prophet who preceded Catholic Christianity. That is, John was the prophet who taught the earlier divine Jesus of *gnosis*—who taught the spiritual Jesus of individual salvation.

Finally, **John was also the name of the prophet** who lived in the early part of the first century BCE, the prophet known to the Jewish Talmudists as “Yeshu ha-Notsri”—literally, *Jesus the Nazarene*.

“After John, the world will be captive to a lie. The Roman Christ will divide the people.”—Mandean Right Ginza 1.154

11

“Paul”

Paul, The second century Acts of the Apostles

Paul didn't exist. I'm surprised it took me so long to arrive at this conclusion, but I'm hardly the first to do so—Bruno Bauer and Edwin Johnson (*Antiqua Mater*) knew as much in the 1800s, and Hermann Detering more recently.

Let's reason it through, one step at a time:

(1) If Jesus of Nazareth didn't exist (as mythicists quite correctly maintain), then the over-the-top story recounted in the canonical gospels was also invented.

(2) But if the gospel storyline was invented, then the setting (time and place) of the canonical Jesus story is arbitrary.

(3) In turn, given the arbitrary nature of the setting, and the fictiveness of the story, one must conclude that the *subsidiary* figures who populate the gospel stories were also either invented (the twelve apostles) or were convenient props (like Pontius Pilate—probably pilfered from Josephus).

(4) Therefore, all the subsequent church writings 'in the name of' an (invented) apostle must be *forgeries*—what Bart Ehrman technically terms pseudonymous (the authorship is imputed to someone other than the writer) and pseudepigraphic (the imputation is to a noteworthy—even if invented—figure—for example, the claim that Peter, James, John, or some other apostle of Jesus wrote a gospel or an

epistle).⁷

In literature, a made-up character does not stand alone. The make-believe figure affects the situation, the plot, and the other characters that come into contact with the invention. A *real* person cannot shake hands with an *invented* figure. (Just try it.) So, when we read that Peter, James, and John interact with Paul (Gal 2:9 etc), and that Paul operates in the same arbitrary geographic and temporal setting as the apostles (e.g. hunting down Jesus-followers not long after the crucifixion—Acts 9)—then we must conclude that

(5) *Paul was as much an invention as were the apostles.*

By extension, the same applies to

(6) Barnabas, Titus, Clement, and *all the other figures in the New Testament*. They are all as unreal as characters in a novel.

When and why was Paul invented?

Determining when and why Paul was invented is a little more complicated... (In much of the following I am indebted to Detering's *The Falsified Paul*, translated into English by D. Doughty and uploaded by Neil Godfrey [here](#).) We saw in preceding posts that the Jesus story—via the canonical gospels—was birthed towards the middle of the second century CE. Again, I am not the first to arrive at this conclusion, though my pathway to it may be somewhat unique:

(a) Marcion's suspicious role (as alleged) in the formation of the Lukan gospel and also in "finding" the Epistle to the Galatians;

(b) the presence in the canonical gospels of second century features (e.g. synagogues, rolling stones, and Pharisees in the Galilee);

⁷ B. Ehrman, *FORGERY AND COUNTERFORGERY: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics*. Oxford: Univ. Press, pp. 29-30.

(c) the disappearance of Nazareth and Jesus of Nazareth from the first century historical record;

(d) the presence of dispersed, hierarchical churches already in the Pauline epistles; etc.

Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165?) knows the gospel storyline, and thus by about the year 160 CE the synoptic gospels must have been known.⁸

This, however, does not apply to Paul:

E J Goodspeed and Walter Bauer (together with Hans von Campenhausen and others) have maintained that throughout the second century we meet a crashing silence as regards the Pauline Epistles. Justin Martyr, in his voluminous writings, never mentions Paul. When he is mentioned by various writers, Paul has nothing distinctive to say, is a pale shadow and obedient lackey of the Twelve, as in Acts. When Ignatius, Polycarp, and 1 Clement (all much too blithely taken for genuine early second-century writings, in my opinion) make reference to Pauline letters, as Bauer noted, they sound almost like an ill-prepared student trying to fake his way through a discussion of a book he neglected to read. 1 Clement (47: 1) appears to have thought there was but a single Pauline letter to Corinth. Ignatius (Ephesians 12:2) somehow imagined that Paul had eulogized the Ephesians in every one of his epistles. Polycarp thought there were several letters to Philippi (Philippians 3:2) and that all Paul's letters mentioned the excellent Philippians (11 :3). [R. M. Price, **"The Evolution of the Pauline Canon,"** JHC 1997 p. 50.]

Price also notes (*ibid.* p. 49):

Walter Bauer (Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity, 1971:219) had long ago contended that the only Pauline epistle we have definite allusions to among the Apostolic Fathers is 1 Corinthians.

Folks, early Church history is a mess, an absolute mess—just what you'd expect when one invention follows another with no end in sight...

⁸ Earlier Church Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Papias of Hierapolis are unattested save for writings IMPUTED to them by later Fathers like Irenaeus. It is my opinion that Ignatius, Papias, and Clement were invented in order to bridge the later Fathers with canonical first century times--necessary to establish the Church's unbroken authority going back to Jesus of Nazareth. See Detering, *The Falsified Paul*, p. 84.--R.S.

Eventually, there were so *many literary forgeries* that the Christian texts couldn't possibly agree one with another. There are forgeries and counterforgeries, contradictions in date, place, and character, and—when the Church later realized that one or another text just didn't bear scrutiny (or, the ultimate irony, was a tad too truthful)—then the Church anathematized the text and sometimes even declared the author a heretic!

To return to our particular focus... When one considers

(a) the late appearance of the canonical gospels, together with

(b) the silence of the Church Fathers regarding Paul (as well as regarding the *Acts of the Apostles*), then the possibility immediately presents itself (and here is my main point) that the Pauline epistles as well as Acts were composed in the second half of II CE, *after* the appearance of the canonical gospels.

The mere possibility grows into probability when one considers the situation of the fledgling Church at the time: three (or even four, if one includes the Gospel of John) pseudo-biographies of Jesus of Nazareth had been produced towards the middle of II CE. But the Church could not simply continue producing gospels forever—nor did it need to. After all, the purpose of a gospel is to announce the “good news.” But what to do once that news is announced?

We should keep in mind that the delivery of the gospels must have precipitated immediate divisions in the already-existing Jesuine congregations (who still believed ‘Jesus’ was a spirit—the spirit of God). There would have been those who embraced the new gospel “Christ,” and there would have been those who clung to the old gnostic and spiritual Jesus. This is, in fact, precisely the situation of which we read in the epistles...

So, besides announcing the good news, it became absolutely necessary to reinforce the gospel message, the (altogether new)

conception of Jesus of Nazareth as the “Christ,” the atoning and redemptive nature of the “cross,” the claim that Jesus Christ will return as eschatological judge at the end of the age, and (above all) the requirement of all ‘Christians’ to *believe* in all this—to believe the *kerygma*, “proclamation”—which is precisely the focus of the Pauline epistles.

The higher-ups in Rome (which was already the center of Church power) recognized the need for *an authoritative figure whom the various congregations would respect*. For this purpose, after the canonical gospels had appeared in mid-II CE, they invented ‘Paul.’

Putting all the data together—the silence of the Church Fathers, the mid-II CE dating of the gospels, and the nature of the epistles themselves as ‘mechanisms of reinforcement’ (read: propaganda)—then it is clear to me that the various epistles of the early Church (those both inside and outside the New Testament) appeared *after* the canonical gospels and date to the second half of II CE.

Confirmation is found in the epistles themselves. They presuppose an existing Church, one with bishops, presbyters, deacons and, indeed, “congregations.” This situation on the ground could hardly have obtained in the first generation after Jesus—yet most of the epistles have the claimed authorship of either Paul or one or another apostle (Peter the untutored fisherman writing excellent Greek, James, John, Jude...).

The second-century Church was in an impossible position—on the one hand it needed apostolic-era authorship (for upon that rested the *authority* of its entire message) and, on the other hand, that very apostolic-era authorship was historically unrealistic, as noted above. With its poor sense of history the Church characteristically opted for apostolic authorship—perhaps hoping that ‘nobody will notice’ historical discrepancies.

The Book of Acts

We must now go a step further. Once the Church realized that it needed a 'Paul' figure to reinforce the Catholic message (Christ, Cross, and *belief* in Jesus of Nazareth as the Son of God), it also realized that a perfect medium would be that of epistles to the various congregations. Paul, the apostle to the gentiles, answered the Church's need for a prolific, virtually limitless source of propaganda. Before this became possible, however, *the Church needed first to establish Paul's identity and authority*. Hence: the book of Acts.

The *Acts of the Apostles* introduces Paul to the II CE Christian world and establishes his credentials as a familiar of Peter, James, John, *et al.* In conjunction with the various epistles, the Christians would learn all about Paul, including his receiving the mission to the Gentiles from Peter himself:

[W]hen James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars, recognized the grace that had been given to me, they gave to Barnabas and me the right hand of fellowship, agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. (Gal 2:9)

But, as new texts started flying between far-flung Christian congregations, contradictions multiplied and the Church in Rome quickly lost control. The epistles and Acts present contradictory versions of 'Paul.' The epistles are tasked with fully raising Paul to the level of apostle and assigning him the mission to the gentiles. Thus Paul stands up to Peter "to his face" (Gal 2:11) and shrilly asserts that "in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything" (5:6; cf. Phil 3:2). But Acts is much more moderate, papering over any conflict between Peter and Paul in a bid to present a united Catholic front. In Acts, Paul not only admits circumcision but even circumcises Timothy himself (Acts 16:3). He also takes the Nazirite vow

(Acts 21:26).⁹

In sum, *everything* to do with “Paul” is bogus—his epistles, the *Acts of the Apostles*, the numerous later references to Paul in the Church Fathers, etc. The many epistles that populate the New Testament as well as early Christian literature appeared on the heels of the gospels and served several critical functions, as we have seen. To recap:

- (a) they support the new Catholic theology of the “Christ”—the only-begotten Son of God—come in the flesh, in the form of Jesus of Nazareth;
- (b) they spell out correct (acceptable) Catholic theology: the need for *belief* in the atoning and redeeming act of Christ’s death on the cross, the nature of Christ as the only-begotten messiah, and the Catholic Church as the only true and enduring representative of Jesus Christ on earth;
- (c) the epistles condemn those who preach “another Jesus”—laggards who cling to the old spiritual Jesus; and
- (d) they exhort unity, meekness, and subservience to deacon, presbyter, and bishop—thus solidifying the centrality of Rome and the almost military, hierarchical organization of the Catholic Church.

The Church achieved all these ends on the basis of a multitude of forged documents in the names of apostles, disciples—and of “Paul.”

“[Bruno] Bauer finally comes to the following conclusion: none of the letters [circulating] under the name of Paul, including the so-called major letters, stem from the pen of the apostle; on the contrary, they are written by various authors, and all are the product of Christian self-consciousness in the second century... For Bauer, [Paul] was obviously not historical, but legendary.”—H. Detering (*The Falsified Paul*, pp. 48-49)

⁹ For a treatment of the contradictions between the epistles and Acts, see the section ‘Two Pauls’ in Detering’s *THE FALSIFIED PAUL*, pp. 61 ff.

12

Encratism and the first-century Jesus religion

The first century encratism

To understand the second-century origins of 'Christ-ianity' (a religion based on the fleshly, miracle-working Christ), we have to go back and understand the competing forces that eventually split the fellowship. Throughout the first century, as we have seen, the "Christ" did not exist –that awesome figure from Nazareth had not yet been invented. What *did* exist was belief in the *spirit* of God, a spirit of wisdom that can save (-> Jesus, "Savior"), sometimes simply referred to as "the Lord":

- 1 ...
- 2 I am putting on the love of the Lord.
And His members are with Him,
And I am dependent on them; and He loves me.
- 3 For I should not have known how to love the Lord,
If He had not continuously loved me.
- 4 Who is able to perceive love,
Except him who is loved?
- 5 I love the Beloved and I myself love Him,
And where His rest is, there also am I.
- 6 And I shall be no stranger,
Because there is no jealousy with the Lord Most High and Merciful.
- 7 I have been united [to Him],
because the lover has found the Beloved,
- 8 Indeed he who is joined to Him who is immortal
Truly shall be immortal.
- 9 And he who delights in the Life
Will become living.
- 10 This is the Spirit of the Lord, which is not false,
Which teaches the sons of men to know His ways.
- 11 Be wise and understanding and vigilant.
Hallelujah.

[*Odes of Solomon* 3, Charlesworth translation]

We are suddenly in a different world, a world marked by an intensely *personal* relationship between the believer and the Lord. The odist gives three commands in the last verse that mark the ode as a gnostic text: "Be wise, and understanding, and vigilant." *Being vigilant, watching* (Gk *gregorein*, from which "Gregory") was a code word in the gnostic language of this community, and that code was also known to the later canonical evangelists¹⁰ who, however, veiled any gnostic meaning. Note also verses 7 and 8: the proselyte is "united" with the Lord as a lover is united with his/her beloved. A relationship does not get any more intense or personal than that. [Note]

For the gnostic encratites of the first century, the great event in life was the union of the human being with gnosis. They expressed this union in a complex symbolic language that mirrored the most personal of human relationships and that was opaque to, and often misunderstood by, outsiders. Thus, the **Secret Gospel of Mark** portrays a youth (Gk. *neaniskos*) spending a night with Jesus. Nothing sexual is intended. The Secret Gospel depicts the spirit of the Lord ('Jesus') as pure love and perfect understanding being 'wedded to' or 'becoming part of' the youth/believer. In fact, it is an intensely personal way of depicting the moment of enlightenment—that is, '**baptism**' or entry into the kingdom of heaven.

Furthermore, the first century Jesus-followers actually replaced an earthly lover (wife, husband) with their Lord. Jesus became the 'bridegroom.' This way of thinking, and the symbolism that accompanied it, characterize what scholars term *encratism*.¹¹

¹⁰ Mk 13:35; Mt 24:42-25:13; Lk 12:35-36; 13:25; also Didache 16:1.

¹¹ The mistaken view that encratism began only in the second century, as is often mooted today, reflects an attempt to make encratism a late (and thus inauthentic) heresy of Catholicism. As so many reversals that must be effected in order to understand Christian origins (gnosis before Catholicism, heresy before Christianity...), the ancient texts themselves show that encratism preceded Catholicism.

Encratism was a key element in the pre-Catholic religion of the divine spirit (*gnosis*, 'Jesus') indwelling the worthy human being. Encratite elements survive in the second-century canonical gospels, as we see in **the parable of the ten virgins** (Mt 25:1 ff) and in the passages referenced above. Encratism continued to thrive side-by-side with Catholicism for many centuries. In fact, the Catholic Church itself betrays such elements (cf. the doctrine of the virgin birth and the celibacy of priests and nuns).

Encratism derives from the Greek *egkrateia* which, in Liddell's lexicon is defined as "moderation in sensual pleasure, self-control... abstinence from or in a thing..." The Greek word itself comes from *enkratos*, "in strength, in might" and yields *egkrates*, "holding fast, stout, strong, not yielding." For the encratites, "not yielding" meant being vigilant, *watching*.

Denying oneself the pleasures of life will appear strange to ordinary folk who shrug and simply ask: "Why?" The answer can only be arrived at through a series of steps. If understanding life is the true goal of man—as the encratites (and also the Buddhists before them) were convinced—then all else must be subordinated to that goal. One cannot shoot an arrow at two targets, and so one must choose between understanding (the "big fish" of Jesus' parable) or the myriad pleasures of life (the "little fish"):

And he said, "The man is like a wise fisherman who cast his net into the sea and drew it up full of little fish. Among them the wise fisherman discovered a fine large fish. That wise fisherman easily chose the large fish and **threw all the little fish back into the sea**. Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear!" (Th 8, emphasis added.)

Related passages from scripture teach that one cannot be partial, tentative, or half-hearted in the quest for salvation—keeping, for example one or two 'little fish' in reserve and hoping, perhaps, that this sleight of hand will not be noticed:

- [Jesus] said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with **all** your heart, and with **all** your soul, and with **all** your mind. (Mt 22:37)
- Jesus said to him, “No one who puts a hand to the plow **and looks back** is fit for the kingdom of God.” (Lk 9:62)
- “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and **sold all that he had** and bought it.” (Mt 13:45-46)
- “But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Mt 5:28) [Emphases added.]

For gnostic encratites—and, indeed, for most Jesus-followers in the first century CE¹²—the commitment required to reach ‘the kingdom of heaven’ was total and extended to the voluntary rupture of social and even family ties:

- If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.
- And Jesus said to them... “Those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage.”
- “For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren, and the wombs that never bore, and the breasts that never gave suck.’”¹³

Later Church Fathers, as usual, were intent on postdating ‘heretical’ currents (and also backdating Catholicism). Thus, Irenaeus (c. 180 CE) postulates that the Encratites originated with Marcion during his own lifetime ([Against Heresies 1.28](#)), a view later taken up by Eusebius. Even after the introduction of the Christ in mid-II CE, encratism, gnosticism, and the ‘spiritual Jesus’ movement did not disappear. In particular, the second-third century apocryphal acts of various

¹² I avoid using the term ‘Christians’ for the followers of Yeshu/Jesus in the first centuries BCE and CE. Strictly speaking, ‘Christian’ is only applicable after the invention of ‘Christ’ in mid-II CE. See post #10 in this series.

¹³ Lk 14:26; 20:35; 23:29. Cf. also Lk 18:29; Mt 5:27-28; 10:11-12.

apostles and disciples (Thomas, Paul and Thecla, Andrew, etc) perpetuate a radical encratism that originated well back in pre-Catholic times:

Blessed are they who have kept the flesh chaste, for they shall become a temple of God;
Blessed are the continent, for unto them will God speak...
Blessed are they that possess their wives as though they had them not, for they shall inherit God...
Blessed are the bodies of virgins, for they shall be well-pleasing to God and shall not lose the reward of their continence.
(Acts of Paul and Thecla 5-6)

Some Church Fathers also endorsed encratism, forgetting that it had been all about the attainment of gnosis:

Gregory of Nyssa dismisses marriage as a "sad tragedy"; Jerome, in his inimitable and scurrilous fashion, expatiates upon its manifold inconveniences and tribulations, and praises it solely because it produces virgins; Ambrose considers it a "galling burden" and bids his brethren reflect upon the oppressive bondage and servitude into which wedded love too often degenerates... On the whole, patristic literature adopts a pessimistic view of matrimony even while it vindicates its goodness, and the Fathers argue from the parable (Mt 13:1 ff) with monotonous frequency that the wedded state produces a mere thirty-fold as compared with the sixty-fold of widowhood or the hundred-fold of virginity. (D. Bailey, *Sexual Relation in Christian Thought*. Harper, 1959:24.)

For the first century *Hebrew* Jesus-followers, the state of total continence and purity represented the state of Adam in the Garden of Eden before the Fall ("pre-lapsarian"). For them, that state represented the vanquishing of the devil and the only state in which God can be apprehended. Adam before the Fall was innocent and *all-knowing*.

Encratism and the acquisition of gnosis were teachings of Yeshu ha-Notsri, yet they were teachings suitable only for very few. Such severe and impossibly strict views could never be popular among the masses. We must fully appreciate the enormous pressure placed upon ordinary Jesus-followers in the first century in order to appreciate the

eventual fracturing of the Jesus movement and, indeed, the birth of Catholicism in the mid-second century. For Catholicism stepped into the breach and offered a far easier way to salvation: *belief* in the Christ Jesus of Nazareth. The Catholic religion is calculated to bring families *together* rather than drive them apart (1 Cor 7), to be *within* society rather than outside of it (Col 3). Catholicism involved a rejection of the severe way of the ascetic, of gnosticism, encratism, and of the entire worldview that could produce a dictum such as “Become passers-by” (Th 42).

It is my belief that the tensions within the Jesus community are reflected (albeit in a veiled way) in the confrontation between Hellenists and Hebrews in Acts:

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” (Acts 6:1-4)

Here we detect an elite cadre of “Hebrews” who wish only to meditate and pray (not unlike Buddhist monks) while the actual physical needs of a subservient community of “Hellenists” are not being met. The writer clearly depicts the arrogance of the Hebrews, for whom attending to starving widows is simply like “waiting on tables.” Furthermore, the Hebrews don’t wish to be bothered in their *personal* prayers. The author of Acts describes a scene in which practical, community considerations confront impractical, personal considerations. That opposition—a reaction to the unacceptably difficult teachings of Yeshu and magnified exponentially in scenes such as the above—eventually exploded in the complete rupture of the Jesus fellowship that produced the birth of the Catholic Church.

13

The early (nonexistent) Church Fathers

Marcion, The first century, The second century Church Fathers, Irenaeus, Jesus

For hundreds of years scholars have been largely relying on the Church Fathers to reconstruct the history of Christianity. The Fathers tell us when something happened, who did it, what the circumstances were, and also the consequences. Regarding the archheretic Marcion, for example, we learn that he was either a *nauclerus* (Lat. “ship-owner” or “ship-builder”) or the excommunicated son of a bishop (there are two traditions), that he tried to buy his way into the Church, that he was a disciple of a certain Cerdo, that he had a distinguished disciple named Apelles, that he came to Rome in 144 CE and/or 155 CE (again, there are two traditions), etc. And now let us carefully note: without the Church Fathers we would know *absolutely nothing* about Marcion—or even that he existed.

As we just saw, the Church Fathers often disagree as to what they write. The modern scholar can use logic, textual criticism, and the other tools at his/her disposal, but often the sources are so flagrantly flawed and tendentiously reworked (Tertullian wrote his “Against Marcion” three times!) that any conclusion must remain tentative. For example, as regards Marcion, it is simply not possible that he was *already* excommunicated before he met with the bishop of Rome. To me, that in turn casts doubt on the entire 155 CE visit to Rome. Again: could Marcion have been *already* excommunicated by his father before he went to Rome in 144 CE? That also seems doubtful to me and so I would suggest the following: the excommunication occurred in Rome c. 144 CE and was erroneously transferred later (by

Epiphanius) to Marcion's father. In any case, *whatever* conclusion we reach in regards to so much relating to early Christian history, we do so necessarily relying upon the Church Fathers.

Who were those Church Fathers? One thing is clear: the further back we go in history, the less we know about them. In fact, the earliest Fathers are known *only through statements made by later Fathers*. This should give us pause! In a modern court of law, of course, relying on third-party testimony is called "hearsay." In our case, however, *the very existence* of the earliest Church Fathers depends on how much faith we are willing to place in *just a few statements* made by later Fathers.

Even conservative scholars admit that the Church Fathers' primary task was to defend the faith. Those ancient heresy hunters could be acidly polemical and not a little biased. Furthermore, ample evidence demonstrates that they could be creative, contradictory, more than a little dishonest, and often downright nasty.

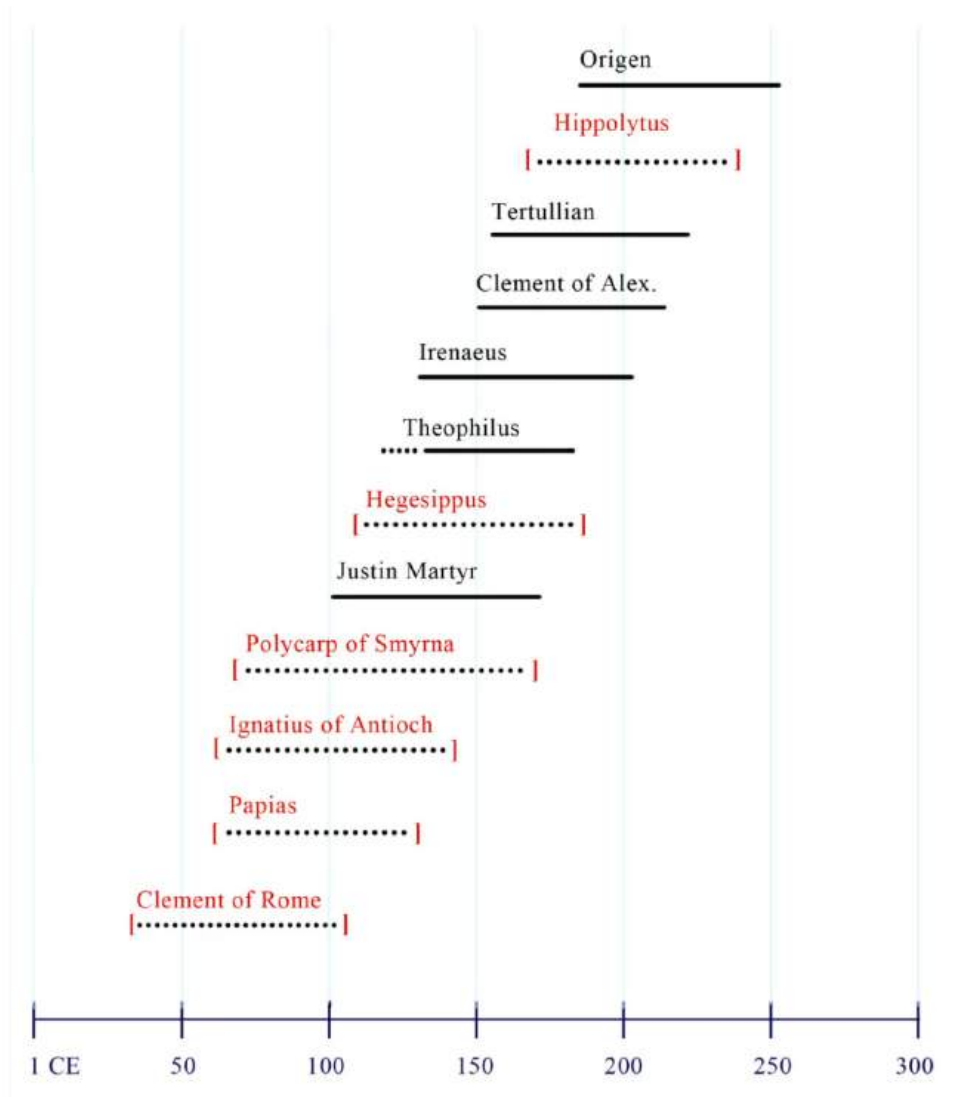
We have seen in these posts that the Catholic religion actually began towards the middle of the second century CE, with the creation of the canonical gospels and the figure of 'Christ.' Before that time, the Church Fathers are nebulous, very poorly attested figures. Very early writings attributed to Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch have been shown to be later forgeries.¹⁴

It is only after mid-II CE that orthonymous works (writings that bear the name of the actual author) actually survive from the Church Fathers, beginning with Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165 CE).

¹⁴ On 1 Clement see R. Price, PreNicNT 329: 'a digest added to over many years.' The Dutch Radical School dated the epistle c. 160 CE, which I consider quite believable. Regarding 2 Clement, the scholarly consensus is that it is a sermon written c. 120-40 CE by an anonymous author. As for the epistles of Ignatius (7 now recognized, but originally 13) Price writes that they are 'very likely pseudonymous and late' (ibid.) in agreement with R. Joly, R. Hübner, M. Vincent, and T. Lenchner who all have forcefully argued that they were forgeries penned during the reign of Marcus Aurelius (161-180 CE).

Forging a whole century

Now for my main point: given the facts that the religion they were defending appeared only in mid-II CE, and that the alleged founder was supposed to have lived over a century earlier, one of the main tasks of the Church Fathers—if not *the* main task—was to produce links going back to the invented apostles and to the equally invented Jesus of Nazareth. *Upon those links rested the Church's entire claim to authority.*



The principal Church Fathers until ca. 300 CE. No authentic writings survive from those in red font. They are known only through one or more statements of later Church Fathers. All surviving Catholic writings credited by some conservative scholars to those figures who flourished before c. 150 CE (Clement, Papias, Ignatius, Polycarp) have been shown to be pseudonymous (false attribution).

Hence, there was the need to backfill the period c. 50 CE–c. 150 CE with ‘Catholic’ figures and texts, all—we can now conclude—being invented and forged, since the figure Jesus of Nazareth was itself fabricated only in the middle of the second century CE.

Thus, authenticating the new religion involved populating the years 50 to 150 CE with early Church Fathers as well as with pseudonymous texts attributed to those invented people. It’s not surprising that no *authentic* texts survive that were penned by Clement of Rome, Papias, or Ignatius (and perhaps by Polycarp)—*because they didn’t exist*.

Besides the frank invention of early Church Fathers and the forging of early Catholic texts, we also encounter a preoccupation with lists of various kinds, lists calculated to establish the continuity of the Church from earliest times—for example, the list of popes (bishops of Rome) going back to Peter the apostle, the list of Christian patriarchs of Alexandria going back to Mark the evangelist, and so on. These manufactured lists—as has long been suspected—are totally bogus.

Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus in the late second century seems particularly implicated in much of this invention and obfuscation, as well as in the codification of the New Testament. He basically canonized the four gospels with the assertion that there could only be four gospels “just as there can only be four winds and four corners of the earth.” He is the first to cite the (obviously forged) Pastoral and Johannine epistles, letters that attack ‘anti-Christ’ views that perpetuated the old ‘Jesus as spirit’ model and that viewed the new gospels only symbolically and allegorically.

Irenaeus also effected a number of strategic linkages: he made the evangelist Mark into a student of Peter; paired Peter with John; turned James the Just into a friend and ally of Paul (this is particularly remarkable, since James was head of the Jerusalem Church!—see Gal 2:12); and also aligned Paul with the Johannine Church in Ephesus. It was likely Irenaeus who linked early bishops such as Clement of Rome and Ignatius of Antioch with the presbyters of Ephesus and Smyrna through apocryphal epistles ascribed to them. In his writings Irenaeus also connected *himself* personally to John the Evangelist through the invented figure of Papias.

To effect some of these linkages, Irenaeus had to resort to inordinately long time spans. For example, the (invented) evangelist John is made to live almost one hundred years—long enough so that (the invented) Papias could be his disciple. Irenaeus describes Papias as an old man “who was a hearer of John and a companion of Polycarp” (AH 5.33.)

Secure attestation is also lacking for Polycarp, whom Irenaeus claims was his teacher. Irenaeus also ascribes an extremely long life to Polycarp (c. 70?–c. 165 CE?). Thus, through various overlaps and connections, Irenaeus establishes multiple ladders of authority from himself back to John the Evangelist.

Irenaeus claimed that Papias wrote the *Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord*—lost apart from brief excerpts in the writings of (you guessed it) Irenaeus himself. This lost work of Papias **has been highly touted**. With the information above, would you be willing to consider it “an important early source on Christian oral tradition and especially on the origins of the canonical Gospels”?

14

Forgery as a means of Christian survival

The second century Detering, Ehrman

“Misinformation works.” – Republican Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky

A few nights ago I picked up Bart Ehrman’s book *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew* (Oxford, 2003). I have been looking through some of his books of late—not for knowledge so much as to check the current heartbeat of American Christianity—which, unfortunately, is undergoing a frightful irregularity. On the one hand are informed Christians—those who read books, who care (at least a little) about facts, and who may have taken a religion class or two in college. They are the target of Ehrman’s more popular books. On the other hand are the legions of unschooled Christians for whom facts can be the work of the Devil and for whom the two testaments are still the absolute and literal Word of God—though not many of these Bible-thumpers have actually read the holy book(s) they so loudly tout. These two groups generally ignore one another, but if that is not possible they oppose one other in what is known as ‘the culture wars.’ The academics—who cater to fact-based Christians—know where the red lines are (for example, don’t say anybody in the New Testament *didn’t exist*), and the more intrepid among them (an Ehrman or a MacDonald) can even push the envelope—as long as they have tenure and a good publisher. For readers of this blog and for mythicists in general they aren’t really pushing the envelope at all but are merely covering territory analyzed by **Baur, Drews, and the Dutch Radicals** long ago.

Ehrman’s reputation rests mainly on pointing out, and fleshing out in several lengthy tomes, the allegation that Christians were sometimes

forgers. Oh, for shame! In polite society the accusation is only whispered, and if Ehrman's *Misquoting Jesus*, or *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture*, or (God forbid) *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* happens to sit on the coffee table, the lady reaching for a cookie may look askance and gingerly ask the hostess, "You mean, Dolly, the Christians *lied*?"

I skipped to Ehrman's chapter on Gnosticism, entitled *Christians "In the Know": The Worlds of Early Christian Gnosticism*. But already in the second paragraph I had to pause. Ehrman writes:

The [Nag Hammadi] library contained a wide array of books... There were new Gospels recording Jesus' words, some of them containing his secret and "truer" teaching, delivered after his resurrection from the dead, Gospels allegedly written by his disciples Philip and John the son of Zebedee, by his brother James, by his twin brother Thomas. Even though forged, these books...

Wait a minute! "Even though forged"? Right off the bat Ehrman is accusing the *gnostics* of being forgers. *All of them*.

Now, a forgery always comes *after* the authentic item. So, included in Ehrman's statement is the implicit understanding that Gnosticism came after Catholicism. This is a sacred cow in Christianity—one of the red lines alluded to above. The critical battle of words over who came first goes way back to the early Christian centuries.

A few pages further on Ehrman seems to contradict himself:

Whatever one might say about this form of Christianity [i.e. Gnosticism], I don't think we can call it insincere or wanting of feeling. It is warm and intense, full of joy and passion. [P. 129]

So, the gnostics were both sincere *and* forgers? Presumably, the reader is to conclude that the gnostics were *sincere forgers*. Whatever. But instead of attaching a label to them, maybe we should recognize the following simple fact: Gnosticism presented a *different* Christianity.

And when there's only room for one truth, *that* can be very threatening.

For their part, the Gnostics accused the Christians of forging texts—many of them. And the gnostics were right. After all, if Jesus of Nazareth did not exist, then *most everything* in Christianity is forged! The accusations hurled between Gnostics and Catholics in the early Christian centuries are on the level of two kids in a sandbox pointing fingers at one another and shouting “You lied!” “No, you lied!” “No, I told the truth!” “No, I did!”—and the two kids, of course, soon start fighting.

We should recognize that from its inception Catholicism has been on the hot seat. Because its foundation is untrue, it has engaged in coverup from the start. The coverup can never end, for as science and scholarly investigation reveal more and more ‘discrepancies,’ those discrepancies will require more coverups. The loop is endless and the Catholics brought it upon themselves beginning in the middle of the second century.

I have personally encountered this deceitful loop in my Nazareth research. For example, a trove of Hellenistic coins was suddenly ‘found’ within months after my first book appeared in 2008. Now, the various claims that sixteen Hellenistic coins were found at Mary’s Well in Nazareth constitute a *forgery*—something produced with the intent, at least on some level, to *deceive*. Here is [the quick online definition of forge](#): “produce a copy or imitation of (a document, signature, banknote, or work or art) for the purpose of deception.” One Israeli archeologist actually itemized the sixteen coins in a catalog wherein all the data was invented (*NazarethGate* 303). In rebuttal, I simply quoted in my second book what the principal archeologist (Y. Alexandre) had written elsewhere, that the coins in question were dredged up from water channels *built in Middle Roman times*. Hence, the deposition of

the coins could not have predated the water channels in which they were found.¹⁵ Hellenistic coins there are impossible. Case closed.

In Christianity, unfortunately, the case is never closed. It's like whack a mole—you take care of one problem and it simply surfaces somewhere else. What I'm getting at is that Christian forgery is *systemic*—it is continuous and unending because *forgery is the only way the religion can survive*.

The ancient accusations of forgery—so commonly invoked against Gnosticism by the Church Fathers (and by contemporary scholars like Ehrman)—demonstrate an innate defensiveness on the part of the religion. Consider the following facts:

- (1) Gnosticism preceded Catholicism;
- (2) Catholicism introduced an invented savior, Jesus of Nazareth;
- (3) Gnosticism and Catholicism are fundamentally incompatible;
- (4) hence Catholicism insisted that *only* it had 'the Truth';
- (5) hence the Catholics rewrote history so that Gnosticism was late and Catholicism *early*; and finally
- (6) since the Catholic version now allegedly came first, then the Gnostic version must be a *forgery*.

There you have it: Gnosticism is a late forgery of the only true faith, Catholicism. What obtains today in church, in scholarship, and among the public is *history in reverse*.

¹⁵ On the development of the Hellenistic coin brouhaha see 'Bart Ehrman and the Quest of the Historical Jesus of Nazareth,' AAP 2013: Chp. 12. On my analysis and rebuttal, see NazarethGate 2015:160 ff & 284 ff.

The unending war against truth

When we understand that circa 144 CE gnosticism was *everywhere* and Catholicism was still *nowhere* (it was just on the verge of being created), then we can understand that the Goliath of Gnosticism was the first and enduring opponent that the fledgling Catholics had to conquer. It's not surprising that paranoia, exaggeration, and shrillness characterize the writings of the Church Fathers. These are sure characteristics of an underdog fighting for survival by *faking it*.

The need to chronologically locate Catholicism before Gnosticism required that the savior figure Jesus of Nazareth, created in the 140s CE, be placed in a considerably earlier time. In turn, placing the Nazarene in the time of Tiberius Caesar necessitated '*ladders of authenticity*' linking the Church Fathers to that earlier time. Once we understand these dynamics, we have a grasp on the main lines shaping the very origins of Christianity:

- ▶ Christianity came *out* of Gnosticism
- ▶ Christianity was *in opposition* to Gnosticism
- ▶ The figure 'Jesus of Nazareth' is late but was transposed into an earlier time
- ▶ The century between the invented 'Jesus' and the Church Fathers (c. 50-150 CE) was filled in with '*ladders of authenticity*.'

Hermann Detering

O du lieber Augustin

**Falsche
Bekenntnisse**

Alibri



These four essential points relating to Christian origins were hidden long ago and many centuries of evidentiary suppression and outright forgery have ensured they stay hidden.

As I delve more and more into this question shocking examples of Christian forgery continue to come to light. They amaze me. The forgery mill that was Early Christianity did not end with the Church Fathers. In the Middle Ages texts were still being forged and retrojected back a millennium. For example, my late colleague Hermann Detering argued in one of his books that Augustine's *Confessions* are a medieval forgery!¹⁶

Detering's book should be much better known. But, as with so many worthy scientific investigations into Christian history, the German monograph remains untranslated, uncited in the scholarly literature, and already quite forgotten. But what a thesis!

In the second century when Jesus of Nazareth was conceived and the canonical gospels were written, the more astute among the ancients were quite aware of the rank fiction at the heart of the "good news":

[Jesus] constructs a ladder between earth and heaven,
He climbs it, descends, and hovers between sky and earth,
And he says, "See, I have come from on high, I am your Savior."
But don't believe it, for the ladder is adorned with lies, magic, and
illusion. [Ginza Right–Lidzbarski, p. 49.]

Who today reads the Right Ginza? Who today has even heard of Mandaism, a gnostic movement that goes back to pre-Catholic times? This is no coincidence. The Church has succeeded by aweing, forging, suppressing, marginalizing, destroying, and even forcing conversions under penalty of torture and death.

And *that* is a story that needs to be told.

¹⁶ O du lieber Augustin: Falsche Bekenntnisse. ('Oh Dear Augustine: False Confessions.'). Ashaffenburg: Alibri 2015.

15

“Marcion” did not exist

Marcion, The second century

On this website six years ago I wrote a series of posts “[Questioning the gospel of Marcion](#).” The thrust of those posts was my novel thesis (not taken up anywhere else, to my knowledge) that there was no “gospel of Marcion”—not as a text, at any rate. My argument still stands, but here I expand it and reject the existence of Marcion himself. “Marcion” was, as I shall describe below, a convenient tool of the Catholics, an invented figure used to establish the (false) priority of their new gospels and epistles and to anathematize all those who believed in the *spirit* Jesus—which, as we have seen elsewhere, was the dominant paradigm among Jesus followers *before* the advent of the Catholic Church. Now denominated “Marcionites,” those pre-Catholics were suddenly “heretics” and were (of course) “everywhere.”

On the eve of the Catholic revolution

Around the year 140 CE Jesus fellowships existed throughout the Mediterranean world. A full two centuries had passed since the death of Yeshu ha-Notsri (c. 65 BCE) and, while numerous divisions now existed within the far-flung movement (Hebrews vs. Gentiles, localized baptist sects, gnostic solitaries, communistic congregations such as the Therapeutae, etc), the common denominator was veneration of the “Jesus,” the *spirit* of God that comes into the worthy human being and effects salvation through union with the Divine. Among the first century texts witnessing to this deep theology are the Odes of Solomon, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Gospel of Thomas. None of those early texts know Jesus of Nazareth, the “Christ.”

Yet, by 140 CE tensions that had been brewing for generations (cf. the post [here](#)) were approaching a breaking point. The severe gnostic and world-denying theology of Yeshu was simply not adaptable to the majority of Jesus followers. Increasingly, the fellowships were split between (a) an ascetic elite that demanded total sacrifice (and subservience to *them*), and (b) an increasing plurality of members that longed for an easier path to salvation and, essentially, for more *freedom*.

It is the latter group—now the majority—that gave birth to the Catholic Church. After all, the Jesus movement had long before moved out of the Palestinian orbit and attempted to accommodate to gentile ways, ways that were unsympathetic to strict Jewish Law and ritual. The elites in the movement were still largely Jewish in custom and tradition, and in [Acts 6:1 ff](#) we see the tensions between an elite cadre of ‘Hebrews’ and a significant group of ‘Hellenists’ (cf. Gal 5:11 ff).

“The situation of the Church in the middle of the second century,” one scholar writes, “is characterized by uncertainty and confusion.”¹⁷

Power struggles were underway at all levels of the fellowship and the future (and nature) of the entire Jesus movement was at stake. It was clear to a few that drastic changes were needed if the religion was to survive. A more catholic (“universal”) approach was imperative, one catering to ordinary folk and endorsing life in society, while also accommodating the more stringent path of the ‘saint.’ *Both* paths were to be valued, and hence a dominant strain after the coming Catholic revolution is the exhortation to peace, unity, and mutual toleration (cf. Eph 5, 6).

¹⁷ G. May, Markion: Gesammelte Aufsätze. Mainz 2005:2.

The Pauline epistles

The general scholarly consensus today is that the Pauline epistles are an uneven corpus. Several letters, including the Pastorals, are universally deemed later forgeries. The majority position holds that seven epistles are 'authentic.'¹⁸ Other scholars say 'four epistles.' A few (including the Dutch Radical School, H. Detering, R. Price, and myself) say 'no epistles at all.'

It is also generally accepted that several Pauline epistles are themselves collections of shorter letters.¹⁹ To complicate matters further, the Pauline epistles represent literary *strata*. Short letters (segments of the present epistles) apparently were written already in the first century CE (base stratum)—thus, Harnack and Schmithals. Since readers of this blog know that, at that time, there was as yet no Catholic faith, then these letters were all gnostic—that is, they reflect the Stage II theology where "Jesus" is a divine spiritual entity. Price (following MacDonald) describes the communities of this base literary stratum as "a motley collection of Encratite Christian radicals" (2012:77). We can slightly modify this assessment: the word "Christian" was not yet applicable (the "Christ" as universal redeemer would be introduced in mid-II CE); and the word "radicals" reflects hindsight from Catholic times, for in the first century *all* Jesus followers were to a greater or lesser degree gnostic, ascetic, and encratite.

Subsequent to the base literary stratum, scholars have proposed at least one revisionary stratum. W. Schmithals detects "anti-Gnostic polemic... in every letter" (Price 2012:75). This anti-gnostic stratum reflects the beginning of the Catholic era—that is, after the middle of the second century.

¹⁸ H. Koester in 1982 posited: Romans, I and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Philemon.

¹⁹ The most radical in 'dividing up' the Pauline epistles is W. Schmithals, PAUL AND THE Gnostics, 259.

Finally, W. Munro identifies a late, "Pastoral" stratum:

Munro draws all these suggestions together, isolates criteria for identifying what she calls a "Pastoral stratum," and uncovers several more passages of the same type. This stratum "does not come from the original collector and redactor of a Pauline letter corpus, but from different circles at a more advanced stage of Christian history." (R. M. Price, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, 2012:76)

Irenaeus cites the Pastoral epistles c. 180 CE, which shows that they were already extant at that time. In fact, I suspect that Irenaeus may himself have been the author of the Pastorals as well as of the Johannine epistles, and possibly also the producer of the epistles of Ignatius of Antioch (certainly forged) and of the Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians (also forged).

Putting it all together, we have:

- (1) short, gnostic-encratite letters addressed to various Jesus fellowships dating to I CE (stratum 1)
- (2) a (probably very selective) collection of the foregoing letters made by Catholics in mid-II CE, together with thoroughgoing anti-gnostic revisions (stratum 2)
- (3) a "Pastoral stratum" dating before c. 180 CE (stratum 3)

The third stratum came quickly on the heels of the second and shows that the middle decades of II CE were a period of frenetic literary production on the part of the incipient Church. According to Winsome Munro, the third stratum was characterized by "textual interpolations across the whole Pauline corpus" and was marked by "pious quietism." At the same time, the Pastoralist opposed "sectarian radicalism" (Price 2012:76). As mentioned above, these characteristics reflect the need of the new Church for peace, unity, and mutual toleration after the sudden—and no doubt extraordinarily divisive—introduction of the

figure Jesus of Nazareth into 'spiritual Jesus' communities around the Mediterranean.

"Marcion"

The genesis of the Pauline epistles, as outlined above, proposes: the writing of gnostic-leaning letters in I CE, their collection by the Catholics in mid-II CE, and their subsequent 'de-gnosticizing' and 'Catholicizing' by Irenaeus and/or others of his generation. It will be noted that these steps have no need at all for the figure of Marcion.

Marcion is one of the most elusive figures in early Christian history—and that may be because the man never existed. Various Church Fathers claim that he wrote a variety of texts: a gospel, epistles, a tractate called "Antitheses," and so on. Yet not a single shred of his voluminous writings has survived—not even a verse. Some scholars seize upon a statement by Tertullian as proof of Marcion's gospel: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (for such is Marcion's proposition) he [Jesus] 'came down to the Galilean city of Capernaum'..." (*Against Marcion* IV.7.) However, this is no proof that Marcion wrote anything. It is proof only that Tertullian made such a claim. It suggests, too, that Tertullian, writing about 200 CE, had the gospel of Mark in front of him, for only in that gospel is Jesus' home Capernaum.

Tertullian agonized over his five volumes *Against Marcion*—he wrote it three times. But if the arch-heretic never existed, why then so much effort? The answer is that the invented figure of Marcion was *very useful* to the emerging church.

Justin Martyr is the first to mention the arch-heretic, about 155 CE. Marcion is then mentioned by just about everyone: Irenaeus, Hippolytus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Ephraim Syrus,

Eusebius, Augustine, and so on.²⁰ The principal thrust of the heresiologists is the accusation that Marcion “mutilated the Gospel of Luke”—this, in one blow, locates Marcion *and his theology after* the Catholic writings. Without clear evidence for the existence of Marcion, I find that Catholic accusation suspicious. In addition, the Church Fathers do not agree in what they have to say about Marcion—neither regarding the history of the heretic nor regarding what he taught.

As I wrote [elsewhere](#), we learn that Marcion was either a *nauclerus* (Lat. “ship-owner” or “ship-builder”) or the excommunicated son of a bishop (there are two traditions), that he tried to buy his way into the Church, that he was a disciple of a certain Cerdo, that he had a distinguished disciple named Apelles, and that he came to Rome in 144 CE and/or 155 CE (again, there are two traditions). The ‘associated characters’ Cerdo and Apelles are themselves not attested, except in a very few (suspicious) passages by the Church Fathers²¹ —and this also does not increase our confidence in Marcion’s historicity.

It is not possible that Marcion was already excommunicated before he met with the bishop of Rome (in 155 CE). This, to me, casts doubt on the entire visit to Rome. Then too: could Marcion have been already excommunicated by his father before he went to Rome in 144 CE? That also seems questionable.

Several Church Fathers write that already in his lifetime Marcion had phenomenal success in proselytizing ‘throughout the world.’ And yet, no texts by this widely venerated figure survive? Compare this with Mani who, a couple of generations later, also had phenomenal success

²⁰ The list with further bibliography is at: J. Knox, *MARCION AND THE NEW TESTAMENT*, 1942: p.1 n.1.

²¹ The most extensive report on Cerdo is Tertullian’s *AGAINST ALL HERESIES* 6. There T. credits Cerdo with precisely the same tenets elsewhere assigned to Marcion. In the same chapter T. reports on Apelles, whom the heresiologist credits with tenets elsewhere ascribed to Valentinus and/or Marcion. T. also claims that Apelles wrote a book entitled ‘Syllogisms’—which to me seems eerily similar to the ‘Antitheses’ ascribed to Marcion. In *THE PRESCRIPTION AGAINST HERETICS* 30, T. claims that Apelles spent time in Alexandria, ‘resorted to the company of women,’ and that he then abandoned Marcion.

“throughout the world.” But Mani is well attested—both his person and his writings. For Marcion, however, there is *nothing*.

Furthermore, the Church Fathers claim that Marcion’s success was enduring. Epiphanius (late IV CE) writes:

The sect [of Marcionites] is still to be found even now, in Rome and Italy, Egypt and Palestine, Arabia and Syria, Cyprus and the Thebaid—in Persia too, moreover, and other places. (Panarion 42.1.1)

Epiphanius is describing a phenomenally successful figure who left absolutely no clues. It doesn’t add up.

“Marcion” appears to be a larger-than-life figure. When we look at the doctrines ascribed to him, we come up with the following:

- he was a gnostic
- he was an encratite
- he disparaged the flesh/the creation
- he taught two gods (an inferior god of the creation, and a superior, distant, loving, and entirely spiritual God)
- he considered Jesus to be from the loving God
- he rejected the Jewish creator god and also Jewish scripture

The above list quite adequately describes the predominant religion among Jesus followers (Stage II) preceding the advent of the Catholic Church. Gnosticism, encratism, and belief in the spirit ‘Jesus’ (from the loving God) were the predominant tenets of those pre-Catholic Jesus-followers. And so was anti-Jewishness (among the disaffected gentile Jesus followers, at least). “Marcionite” seems to denote a number of tenets that were fatal to Catholic theology yet that were current *before* that new theology took hold. In other words, “Marcionite” may be a catch-all basket of heresies that denominates the many pre-Catholic Jesus followers *who refused to convert to Catholicism*. It seems to me

that in one stroke the Church anathematized all the laggards and die-hard gnostics who refused to come on board. The Church conveniently (and vaguely) denominated them “Marcionites” and their leader, “Marcion.”

The invented figure “Marcion” would also have proved useful in establishing a number of false textual traditions. By accusing “Marcion” of “mutilating the Gospel of Luke” (Tertullian, etc.) the Church could explain away all the competing gospels that not only were extant but that also had *bona fide* claims to being older (and thus more authentic) than the canonical gospels.

Similarly for the Pauline epistles. The Church Fathers claimed that Marcion “found” the Epistle to the Galatians. That accusation not only establishes that the catholicized version (see above) was *first*, but also that any other version that differs from the catholicized version (“Marcionite”) is a bastardization of the Catholic text. All these things are readily effected by manipulating the invented figure “Marcion.”

Following is a passage from a sixth century Catholic:

The Gospel of John was revealed and given to the Churches by John whilst he was still in the body, as Papias, called the Hierapolitan, the beloved disciple of John, has reported in his five books of Exegetics [lost]. But he who wrote down the Gospel, John dictating correctly the true evangel, was Marcion the heretic. Having been disapproved by him for holding contrary views, he was expelled by John. (Bishop Fortunatus’ preface to the Gospel of John, cited in R. Price, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle* 2012:227)

To me, the above is further proof that Marcion was an invented figure. Here **Bishop Fortunatus** claims that Papias (another invented figure!) asserted that Marcion “wrote down the Gospel of John” (which gospel, incidentally, has significant “Marcionite” [read: pre-Catholic] features—Price, *ibid* p. 227). But the historical context is impossible, and for several reasons:

(a) The evangelist John's timeline would have him "dictating" his gospel to the adult Marcion no later than the 90s CE—but this is too early for the future heretic, who was active in Rome (per the Church Fathers) in 144 CE and/or 155 CE.

(b) Readers of this blog know that John the Evangelist did not exist—the cast of characters associated with Jesus of Nazareth are inventions. Hence, Marcion in the above account is also fictive.

(c) Readers of this blog also know that the Gospel of John was written not before the 140s CE, with the invention of Jesus of Nazareth, the "Christ." Thus, the involvement of "Marcion" in the above episode is clearly bogus.

Similarly Tertullian places Marcion in the first century when he writes of "the Marcionites, whom the Apostle John designated as antichrists, when they denied that Christ was come in the flesh..." (AM 3.8). Chronologically this is an impossibility.

Folks, Marcion did not exist.

16

The two Christian messiahs

christology, Samaritans, The first century, Yeshu ha-Notsri Bethlehem, Jesus, Joseph

Some readers may notice that occasional entries on this weblog change after the initial posting. This is because—when new information requires—I go back and revise passages in older posts to conform to new discoveries. I used to keep the older post in an ‘archive’ section of this site, but I rarely do that anymore because my capacity to revise prior entries is limited by time and energy—after all, there are now over 300 posts on this site! If a book ever results from all this material, that will be the time to revise and put this “New Account of Christian Origins” into proper order.

Thankfully, I’ve not yet had to take down a post entirely—all my major propositions (while admittedly quite recent) still stand: **the second century appearance** of the New Testament (gospels and epistles), as well as the non-existence of **Paul**, of **Marcion**, and of **the earliest Church Fathers** (Clement of Rome through Polycarp of Smyrna)...

Nevertheless, in some cases the new information requires more than a mere revision, and the older post merits expansion with a new entry. For example, I now offer a major refinement of views that I recently presented in a post on “The Christ.”

Pliny’s letter to Trajan

My initial impression was that the terms “Christ” and its cognate “Christian” were part and parcel of the Catholic proclamation of Jesus of Nazareth in the middle of II CE. I proposed that the Greek

equivalent of the Hebrew *meshiach* ("anointed one")—*Xristos*—arrived along with the astonishing proposition of God-In-The-Flesh, Jesus of Nazareth. Thus, the words "Christ" and "Christian" (as opposed to "Jesus") could be used for general dating purposes—texts that mentioned "Jesus" and not "Christ" were early (e.g. Gospel of Thomas), while texts that did mention "Christ" referred to the new savior, Jesus of Nazareth, and postdated the Catholic revolution of mid-II CE.

The foregoing, however, is only a first approximation. A reader, **Danila Oder**, alerted me to **the letter of Pliny the Younger to the Roman emperor Trajan** (X.96) which mentions "Christo" and "Christiani" many times. The Latin letter is doubtless authentic and dates to about 110 CE. To clear up a side issue, in consulting the editorial apparatus I verified that, in all the copies that were made beginning already in the second century, Pliny exclusively refers to "Christo" etc. and never to "Chresto" ("good"). For Pliny these were Christians, not Chrestians.

This is significant. It shows that Jesus followers in the early second century viewed the prophet at the origin of their religion as the Jewish messiah, the *meshiach*, "anointed one"—with all the religious implications (whether of **Davidic or Ephraimite descent**, etc) that entails. Though Pliny's Christians were no doubt primarily Gentiles living in Asia Minor (Pliny was the **Roman governor** of Bithynia and Pontus), by their self-designation "Christians" we see that they were still under Jewish influence. But Pliny nowhere calls them "Jews." This suggests that the Christians of that time and place also did not call or consider themselves "Jews." We can, in turn, doubt that these Christians practiced circumcision or even regarded the Jews as the chosen people of God.

However, we cannot suppose that the term "Christians" had the same meaning ca. 100 CE as it did a century later. The difference is in fact colossal, for in the intervening century the Catholic Church came into

existence. The Christians that Pliny referred to did not worship a God-man who mandated the Great Commission—something Trajan would certainly have considered fatally seditious:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.** Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to **obey everything I have commanded you.** And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20, emphases added.)

Pliny writes that his investigations revealed only harmless practices and "depraved, excessive superstition" on the part of the Christians. This corresponds with my view of pre-Catholic Christianity: "Jesus" was still the *spirit* of God that entered a man (now in the remote past), a man whom the Christians venerated as an especially wise prophet and ethical example. Trajan's reply to Pliny reveals no alarm: "Christians are not to be sought out... they shall obtain pardon through repentance."

Spirit and flesh

The contrast between the earlier and later Christians is stark: the earlier Jesus followers venerated a spiritual entity, while later Catholic Christians venerated a God-man. The texts also reflect this contrast. The word "Christ" does not appear a single time in the Gospel of Thomas nor, to my knowledge, in any other early gnostic text. In GTh the spirit Jesus speaks through an anonymous person. His name and fleshly existence are considered unimportant.

Because of the early self-designation "Christian" (evident from Pliny's letter), it is clear that believers in the spiritual Jesus had, already in the first century, associated the prophet whom they venerated with the Jewish messiah. That linking of human "anointed one" (messiah) + spirit "Jesus" is, I suggest, the original pre-Catholic meaning of the "Christ." There is no theology of the cross here, no atonement, no redemption, no man as God. The Gospel of Mark betrays echoes of

this early conception: GMk lacks the virgin birth and the bodily resurrection, and the divine spirit ("Jesus") enters the human prophet at baptism (1:10) and abandons him prior to his crucifixion (14:52 & 15:34).

To review: for the first century followers, the "Jesus" ("savior") was a numinous, divine spiritual entity, and for them the "Christ" ("anointed one") had two components: divine spirit + human prophet. That early combination of man + divine spirit was by no means God or inimitable Son of God. For the early Christians, 'Christ' was simply a man imbued with the Holy Spirit—as we read, say, in the much-ignored **Gospel of Barnabas**.

The later Catholics, however, made that Christ into "God"—the only-begotten God-Man (or Man-God), the Son of God who graciously came to earth to ransom sinners and who, in a cosmic act of redemption and out of pure love, suffered and died for those who believe in him.

The religion of the Catholics was thus entirely different from that of first century gnostic Jesus-followers. Their religion was no longer a question of personal striving, of gnosis, of inner transformation by means of the "Jesus" (= what later came to be called the "Holy Ghost"). Faith was now key, and entry into the kingdom of heaven was purely a matter of belief in the Catholic Christ—Jesus of Nazareth.

We can trace the rough development of Christology:

- ▶ a Jewish prophet teaches the gnostic way to salvation in the early first century BCE;
- ▶ after his death, the divine wisdom leading to eternal salvation is termed the Jesus ("Savior")—that is, Jesus = gnosis;
- ▶ the Jewish followers identify the Jesus endowed prophet with the long-standing Davidic messiah ("anointed one"), the Christ;

► later Gentile followers redefine the “Christ” by making the prophet inimitable, the Son of God, and the ruler of the world who will return in judgment at the end of time. Whereas the designations were once distinct, for the Catholics “Jesus” and “Christ” became synonymous: Jesus Christ.

The two messiahs

(Important background is [here](#).)

We have seen that the trajectory from Jesus to Christ around the turn of the era is a trajectory from *spiritual* redeemer (gnosis) to *fleshly* redeemer (God-man). However, it is also a trajectory from the suffering messiah Son of Ephraim to the conquering messiah Son of David:

According to Isa 53, God’s servant or the Messiah clearly must suffer and die for his people. This could hardly be expected (or only with difficulty) from the Son of David. Hence, another messiah of lesser stature needed to precede him, a messiah through whose death the sins of Israel are expiated and atoned, as well as a messiah who would open the way for both the Kingly Messiah and for his people to attain the kingdom of glory. [G. F. Moore, *Judaism II*:371. My translation from the German.]

We are now approaching a number of nebulous elements that attach to the birth of Christianity and signal its emergence from the Jewish matrix. I simply list these curious (and sometimes contradictory) elements here:

- Ephraim and Manasseh were the two sons of the biblical Joseph. Jesus of Nazareth, too, was the ‘son of Joseph.’
- According to Jewish tradition, the Josephite messiah Son of Ephraim would fight valiantly, but (in contrast to the Davidic messiah) would be finally killed by Gentile armies at the walls of Jerusalem.

- ▶ The “field of Joseph” (where the patriarch Joseph’s bones were buried) is at the center of Samaritan religious tradition. That field is located at Sychar between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal.
- ▶ Jesus “came to a Samaritan city called Sychar, near the plot of ground that Jacob had given to his son Joseph” (Jn 4:5). This is the field of Joseph, where Jesus had his fabled discussion with the Samaritan woman at the well.
- ▶ The author of Acts 7:16 erases the patriarch Joseph from his account by writing that Jacob was buried at the tomb in Shechem (it was Joseph–Jacob was buried in Hebron), while Jacob (not Abraham) purchased the field of Joseph where the tomb under discussion is located (Gen 33:19; 50:13; Josh 24:32).
- ▶ In Samaritan tradition, Levi was killed at the Field of Joseph.
- ▶ The Levites first settled in Bethlehem of Judea (Goulder, *Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, p. 56)
- ▶ According to my researches, Yeshu ha-Notsri was **a Levite priest of the Hasmonean royal family**. (All male Hasmoneans were Levites and priests.)
- ▶ In Samaritan tradition, the light of the world manifest in Moses had been transmitted through the tribe of Levi. (Miller, *Molad Mosheh*, p. 250: “And of them [i.e. the twelve sons of Jacob], Levi became the portion and lot of God, for he was the bearer of the ray of light for the sake of prophecy. In him [God] placed His glory.” See also: J. D. Purvis, “Joseph in the Samaritan Traditions.”)
- ▶ The Testament of Levi has outright gnostic mythology, with Levi’s ascension through various gates “to gather heavenly secrets” (R. Kugler, *From Patriarch to Priest: The Levi-Priestly Tradition from Aramaic Levi to Testament of Levi*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996, p. 48.)

- ▶ In my opinion, the Samaritan Dositheans in all probability constituted the very first Christian sect.
- ▶ “Dositheus” (Gk: “Gift of God”) is a locution of Jonathan/Jehonathan (“Gift of Yahweh”)–“John” (i.e., “the Baptist”).
- ▶ Jonathan (or perhaps Johanan) the Hasmonean was the name of the person whom the Talmudists later styled “Yeshu ha-Notsri”–Jesus the Nazarene.

I don’t expect anyone to connect the dots between all the above—or even to perfectly understand them (I don’t). They show the way forward, however, and indicate that the received history must be rewound, as it were. In the second century, the received tradition gave the world Jesus Christ, the conquering messiah Son of David. Going backwards in time, however, we recover another messiah: the suffering messiah Son of Ephraim.

The received tradition gave the world the Christ of the New Testament. Going backwards in time, we recover the spiritual Jesus.

The received tradition gave the world the Pauline kerygma. Going backwards in time, we ultimately recover the theology of salvation through gnosis.

17

Pliny on Christians ca. 110 CE: A forgery? (Detering's view)

The second century Detering, Pliny

Adieu Pliny!

June, 2011

by the late Dr. Hermann Detering

Translated from [the German](#) by R. Salm with light editing for style.

Note: In the comments below I play the 'devil's advocate' and intentionally give Dr. Detering's argument a hard time.—R.S.

It's been a good 35 years since I first read the two so-called "Christian letters of Pliny" (Book X, nos. 96 and 97—in English [here](#)). At the time, I was—along with other graduate students—sitting in a New Testament seminar whose topic I have forgotten. I do remember the November rain prattling against the windows and, of course, the lecturer Dr. Walther Schmithals, who read the Latin text of the letter to us, amiably translating as he went along. Not that we couldn't translate it ourselves, mind you. It was just his way. Maybe he just wanted to avoid any possibility of embarrassing someone, or maybe he simply wanted to conduct the lecture himself.



Dr. Schmithals' manner of lecturing was a tad solemn, full of gravitas. He made sure that even the sleepest student was aware we were dealing here with an important historical document—one of the earliest proofs for Christianity dating from the beginning of the second century! A document not even from the pen of a Christian, but by the Roman governor of Bythynia, Pliny the Younger (61/62–ca. 113/115 CE)!

For Schmithals, this was a text that enables us to bore down deeply into to the beginnings of Christian thought and community building. Sentence by sentence, here was authentic proof of the existence of early Christian communities, early Christian worship services, heroic martyrs—further evidence that our age-old Christian faith is in a *real* way solidly based in history.

Well, that was more or less my impression. The deep conviction settled in that we were dealing with two seminal pillars supporting the reliability of the received Christian tradition—and the need to respect documents of this high calibre.

Respect is good... But science is better. When I re-read the two 'Christian letters' last summer, I still remembered my initial impressions. But in the interim I had been busy with myriad critical

issues, issues that had been of no concern when I first considered these much-touted epistles. And somewhere along the line I also had occasion to look more closely at the reception history of these texts.

I thought detailed studies existed, but such was not the case.²² So I carried out such work myself, and with the help of various Latin concordances arrived at some surprising conclusions:

- 1] Except for Tertullian, the epistolary exchange between Pliny and Trajan is not mentioned by any second century Christian writer, though it could have been readily at hand.²³
- 2] Even more curious: All the later Church Fathers depend on Tertullian's citations.²⁴ Not one of them (including Jerome, Prosper of Aquitaine, Frechulf Lexovensis, etc.) possessed his own edition of these letters. Jerome even writes: "Thus Tertullian cites in his *Apologeticum*" (*Tertullianus refert in Apologetico*).²⁵
- 3] The question now arises regarding the reliability of Tertullian's 'witnesses.' Did Tertullian actually see the two letters under consideration? Were they actually on his desk? Or do his 'citations' merely reflect his spontaneous invention [*seine spontane Erfindung*]?²⁶

The suspicion is not so absurd. I have learned that Tertullian spouts a lot of nonsense. There is scarcely another Church Father as suspicious. He claims to know not only the epistolary exchange between Trajan and Pliny, but also a series of other documents for whose authenticity hardly any historian will vouch—such as a proof for the resurrection of Christ, which only the most fundamentalist of Christians will approve. And that resurrection-proof originated from no less a personage than Pontius Pilate, who "being already a Christian in his heart, informed the then

²² I find this debatable. E. Merrill penned 'Zur Früheren Überlieferungsgeschichte zwischen Plinius und Trajan' (Wiener Studien 31:250-58) in 1909; and E. Rand authored a three-part series on the letters in Harvard Studies in Classical Philology in 1923/24/25; among others.

²³ The entire ten volumes of his correspondence fell into obscurity after Pliny's death, only to briefly resurface in the late fifth century. The interest of Tertullian in the Pliny-Trajan exchange is a historical exception that might be explained as does E. Merrill (1909:251): 'The questions of Pliny to Trajan about the correct treatment of Christians could well have seized upon the attention of Christian apologists of the second century and produced their comments.'

²⁴ Is this certain? Pliny's letters were, after all, in circulation. See below.

²⁵ I wonder how much weight we can place on this. Certainly, Jerome credits Tertullian here. But does this mean that ALL his information about Pliny's letter came from Tertullian, or that Jerome did not have access to Pliny's letter at any time?

²⁶ I can see no reason to raise this accusation. Tertullian's paraphrase of Pliny's letter is a quite accurate summary of its contents and clearly displays direct knowledge of the letter—whether he had it in front of him or was relying on his memory of its contents. If Pliny's letter (and Trajan's reply) was later forged on the basis of Tertullian's description, then we must answer the question: How did the Pliny-Trajan correspondence come to be included in the two collections of Pliny's letters that survived c. 1500 CE?

Caesar Tiberius about Christ" (Apol. 21.24). In Book IV of his *Against Marcion* (4.7), Tertullian seeks to show that Christ did not come down from heaven (as Marcion maintained) but was born on earth. The Church Father goes on to describe the registration of Jesus in the census as "most reliable testimony" (*testem fidelissimum*). These examples are already sufficient to show of what cloth Tertullian is made. As a rule, his citing of a text demonstrates neither that he correctly cites nor that he has read the text—or even that it exists. [The information in this paragraph is well taken.—R.S.]

- 4] Most remarkable, however, is the following: Differences arise when comparing Tertullian's received statements with those of Jerome and later Church Fathers. In describing the accusations against the Christians, Jerome mentions *furta* (theft) and *latrocinia* (robbery)—two words lacking in Tertullian's account.²⁷ Apparently, Tertullian's passage underwent some change and Jerome added the two words *furta* and *latrocinia*.²⁸

But why—and this is the deciding question—do these two accusations of *furta* and *latrocinia* even appear in the letter of Pliny to Trajan?

How was it possible? And how could Jerome have known the original content of the passage? Did Jerome divine the original wording of Pliny's epistle under the influence of the Holy Ghost?²⁹ That would be rather difficult to believe—least of all if one adopts a scholarly approach to the matter.

The Church Father [Jerome] staunchly claimed that it was from Tertullian that he received his information regarding the exchange of letters between Pliny and Trajan. At the same time Jerome clearly did not have access to a proprietary copy of the epistolary exchange from which he could have gained his knowledge.³⁰

²⁷ I don't find this diagnostic at all. Tertullian's report is a summary and paraphrase, not an exact dictation. Pliny's letter has six substantial paragraphs. Tertullian's precis has one paragraph. Obviously, there will be many words in Pliny's letter that are not in Tertullian's synopsis.

²⁸ Another possibility is simply that Jerome had himself seen Pliny's letter.

²⁹ Jerome may simply have seen the letter.

³⁰ I know not on what basis Hermann claimed this. Even though Pliny's letters were in obscurity, they were not unknown. One specialist writes: 'For about 375 years after the death of Pliny the Younger, which probably occurred in AD 113, his *Epistulae* were circulated in two corpuses, one containing the nine books of the *Letters to His Friends* and the other containing in a single book the correspondence between him and the Emperor Trajan.' (S. E. Stout, *Scribe and Critic at Work in Pliny's Letters*. Bloomington 1954, p. 1.) Admittedly, the fact that Jerome was indebted to Tertullian

Only one reasonable solution to the puzzle exists. The small discrepancy [the additional two words *furta* and *latrocinia* in Jerome's reading] can only be an indication that the two epistles were not authentic documents from the first half of the second century. They were later Christian texts whose author looked back not only on Tertullian, but also on Jerome and subsequent Church Fathers.

Paradoxically enough, it is worth noting that the epistle of Pliny did not precede its synopsis and its reporters but followed them and, so to say, [what should have been] an endpoint signaled a development that began with Tertullian, a development during which ever new variations and paraphrases came to be cited—not variations on Pliny's letter, but variations on Tertullian's description.

Additional details confirm this supposition—in an apparent slip of the pen, for example, from *quasi* to *et*. In the letter, Pliny states that the Christians venerate Christ in their hymn “as if” (*quasi*) he were a God. According to Tertullian they venerate Christ “and” (*et*) God. According to Jerome they venerate Christ “as” (*ut*) God. It is clear that the development could only have been from *et* to the (similarly written) *ut*, and from there to the (similar in meaning to *ut*) *quasi*. Thus: *et* > *ut* > *quasi* and not *quasi* > *et* > *ut*.³¹

[Detering continues:] What followed was a closer study of the literary history of the 10th book of the Pliny letters, in which the ‘Christian’

does not explain how the words *furta* and *latrocinia* are in Jerome's description but not that of Tertullian. Detering sees a sure sign of forgery in this. But is that necessary?

³¹ I am not convinced. The difference in time between Pliny's writing and Tertullian's writing was almost one century (c. 112 CE-c. 207 CE). Pliny—who had no proper knowledge of the Jesus religion—understandably writes that they 'venerate Christ LIKE a god.' It is a catch-all, imprecise description, quite understandable given there were numerous gods in Roman times. A century later, Tertullian—very well acquainted with Christianity—writes that 'they venerate Christ AND God.' This reflects Tertullian's view of the two natures of Christ: 'In his *Adversus Praxean*, Tertullian wrote of Christ's two substances (*substantiae*), a twofold mode of being which made him both divine and human (2.10-11).' [G. O'Collins, *Christology*, 1995:167]. But by Jerome's time (fl. 400 CE) the Arian crisis had taken place and Catholic theology had consolidated firmly around the concept that Christ was co-eternal and con-substantial with the Father, 'Christ AS God.' In other words, for me, the sequence *quasi* > *et* > *ut* makes good sense.

epistles appear. The result not only confirmed the verdict of forgery [*Unechtheit*] but made that confirmation a clear certainty [*festen Gewissheit*]. Not only did the two 'Christian' letters prove to be later forgeries, but the whole tenth book of the Pliny-Trajan correspondence was under suspicion of forgery.³² This suspicion is actually not new—it was enunciated by scholarly contemporaries at the time the [collected] correspondence first appeared. [When?]

³² I find this suspicion incredible, given the enormously varied contents of the tenth book of epistles and their manifest knowledge of local events and official matters that have been independently confirmed by scholars.

Hermann Detering

Falsche Zeugen

Außerchristliche Jesuszeugnisse
auf dem Prüfstand



The single existing manuscript [of book 10 of the letters] was completely unknown before the sixteenth century. It was brought forward towards the beginning of that century by the alert Dominican monk, engineer, and antiquarian Fra Giocondo [c. 1433-1515 CE], only

to quickly disappear again into obscurity. It is now considered lost. In fact, it appears to never have existed.³³

Whoever wishes to learn more about the adventurous history of the two “Christian epistles”—as well as about other “classical” witnesses to the existence of Jesus—will find copious additional information in my book, *Falsche Zeugen: Ausserchristliche Jesuszeugnisse auf dem Prüfstand* [False Witnesses: Extra-Christian Witnesses to Jesus Put on Trial]. It should appear in September 2011 from Alibri-Verlag.

Originally, I intended the book to be an introduction to a book about Jesus. During the writing, however, it developed into a full-blown monograph of its own. It is, in fact, the only book from a German theologian that is exclusively concerned with the question of witnesses to Jesus. In contrast to a few Anglo-Saxon precursors, I have arrived at a negative verdict in all six cases where classical witnesses [to Jesus] are concerned.

In the final analysis, with the aid of this information comes the sobering conclusion that neither the historical figure ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ nor the existence of early Christianity in the first century CE is demonstrable. Hence, not only ‘Adieu Pliny,’ but ‘Adieu Josephus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Mara bar serapion, and Thallus’!

Perhaps also: Adieu Jesus? My book “False Witnesses” will offer an answer.

³³ In fact, two medieval manuscripts exist that contained Book 10 of Pliny's letters. The Parisinus ms. of Fra Giocondo descended from them. See my next post.

18

Pliny on Christians ca. 110 CE: Authentic (My view)

The second century Detering, Pliny

I have finished reading Hermann Detering's chapter "Pliny the Younger –Christian persecution in Bythynia" from his book *Falsche Zeugen* ("False Witnesses"), and have also surveyed the rather copious literature on this seemingly obscure topic—at least, the literature readily available at my university library and online.

While I have immense respect for the late Dr. Detering's work, I have to disagree with him regarding these two Pliny letters (Bk. 10:96–97). Of course, few things are 100% certain in history, and Detering marshals evidence for his argument that the letters in question are forgeries. Uncharacteristically, however, he used outdated (19th century) references that became obsolete when newer evidence came to light in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, Detering does not appear to have consulted that newer evidence—he doesn't discuss it in his chapter on the Pliny letters, and the extensive writings of E. Rand, in particular (numbering several hundred pages) are not listed in his bibliography. I consider this a major flaw.

I have already dealt with some of Detering's arguments in a prior post (e.g., the *quasi-et-ut* sequence, which I find unpersuasive). Here I look at the real nub of the matter—the manuscript history of the tenth book of Pliny the Younger's letters, which includes the two epistles in question.

Before proceeding, we can all agree that this issue is of some significance, for Pliny's letters regarding Christians are an oasis in an evidentiary desert. There are very few (many mythicists would say 'not

even one') extra-Christian attestations for the existence of Christianity before c. 150 CE. In fact, the purpose of Detering's book *Falsche Zeugen* is to invalidate the six principal, non-Christian early witnesses and to demonstrate that they are either forgeries or completely without force: the "Christ" passages in Josephus; the Tacitus reference to Christians and the burning of Rome; Pliny the Younger on Christians; Suetonius on "Chrestus"; Mara bar Serapion on the "wise king"; and Thallus on the sun's darkness (interpreted by later Christians as accompanying Jesus' crucifixion).

If they are authentic, then Pliny's letters offer 'hard' data. They date precisely to 111 CE and we know their geographical and social context—they come from northern Asia Minor (Bythynia and Pontus) and are correspondence between the provincial governor and the Roman emperor. If those two letters are authentic, they arguably constitute the first *demonstrable* mention of "Christ" and "Christian(s)" anywhere.

This tells us a lot. It indicates, for example, that Jesus-followers quite removed from Palestine had, by that time, associated their founding prophet with the Jewish meshiach, "anointed one"—Christ. Approximately 175 years had already passed since the death of the movement's founder, Yeshu ha-Notsri, ca. 65 BCE. That is indeed ample time for the Jesus-followers to have associated their founding prophet with the Jewish messiah. Recall that I have proposed three general christological stages:

- ▶ Stage I (the saving 'Jesus' = gnosis);
- ▶ Stage II (the saving 'Jesus' = the gnostic spirit of God indwelling the saint); and
- ▶ Stage III (the saving 'Jesus' = Jesus of Nazareth)

The reference to "Christo" in **Pliny's letter** shows that we are already between Stages II and III. Not only is the founder of the movement

viewed as a (very human) prophet indwelled by ‘the Jesus’ (Stage II), but he is now the messiah/Christ—the liberator who showed the way to salvation for *those who believe* in the indwelling divine power—namely, for “Christians” (cf. the Gospel of Barnabas). The messiah is not yet divine (*that* came a few decades later with Stage III), but we are well on the way to that christological revolution.

It goes without saying that I am writing here as an ‘ultra-heretical’ Jesus mythicist. Mainstream Christians (including almost all academics in the field) will have none of this. They hold that the canonical gospels and Pauline epistles *date to the first century*—well before Pliny the Younger’s time—and that the founding prophet was (of course) *Jesus of Nazareth*, not the earlier Yeshu ha-Notsri. Yet readers of this blog and of the writings by Robert M. Price, etc., know better—Jesus of Nazareth was a fiction and the New Testament was a product of the second century (here and here).

If authentic, the two Pliny letters may be the earliest unbiased witness to the spread of Christianity, and possibly also the earliest attestation for the loaded theological term “Christ” as applied to Jesus/Yeshu. Determining the authenticity of those two letters is indeed an issue worth carefully considering.

Background

The Letters of Pliny the Younger exist today in a collection of ten books. The first nine books consist of Pliny’s personal correspondence and offer a lively and detailed view on aspects of provincial Roman life in the early second century. Pliny himself collected them while he was alive but died before their publication. Apparently, the nine-book corpus was published shortly thereafter and recopied periodically, either in toto or in the form of selected letters. Many of these handwritten manuscripts are lost, as is typical. Those that survive date

from the ninth century onwards.³⁴

Book 10 of Pliny's correspondence seems to have had a separate existence from the very start, when Pliny himself decided to gather his official correspondence into a separate corpus. He may have thought that these administrative letters would have a different readership and, perhaps, be of less interest to the wider public. History seems to have borne out his view—while the nine-book corpus had an independent existence in a number of (full and partial) copies, Book 10 surfaced for the first time only in 1502 CE, when it was discovered in Paris by **Fra Giocondo** (aka *Lucundus*, theologian, philosopher, engineer, and builder), in a 'complete' manuscript that also contained Books 1–9. This manuscript—known as the *Parisinus*, or 'P'—was very ancient in character. The famous printer **Aldus Minutius** of Venice, who received the manuscript on loan from Fra Giocondo in 1506, enthused about the great antiquity of the manuscript and even opined that it might go back to the time of Pliny himself.

But P raised some suspicion, particularly Book 10 which caught the literary world by surprise. Not only were its 121 letters previously unknown, but the character of those letters (being administrative) differed from the character of the larger nine-book corpus. Already in 1506, one editor (*Catanaeus*) wondered in print if Book 10 (or part thereof) was forged.

Those of suspicious mind also pointed to the fact that Book 10 was attested only by the manuscript P. Nothing less than the discovery of a second, earlier, manuscript of Book 10 would allay such suspicions. Lacking such an earlier manuscript, there was simply no way to prove that forgery did not take place.

³⁴ For a list of copies and editions see S. Stout, *Plinius, Epistulae: A Critical Edition*. Bloomington, 1992:ix-xi.

One might think that—if Book 10 were forged—then it would be a simple matter for an expert to compare Book 10 with Books 1–9 to confirm whether the two corpora of letters matched as regards script, paper, binding, etc. But adding to the mystery surrounding Book 10 is the fact that within a few years of its discovery, manuscript P—the *only* manuscript attesting to the existence of Book 10—was ‘lost.’

EPISTULARUM

Siscat. uale
 C. PLINIUS CORELLIAE SALUTEM.
 CUM PATRE OPTIMO CRASSISSIMO ET SAN-
 CTISSIMO VIRUM SUSPEXERIM MACIS
 ANA MAUERIO DUBITE ANTE Q. IN MEMO-
 RIA MEI US ET IN HONORE OPTIMI IN DICE-
 DILICIA ME CURIAM NECESSE EST ATQ. EUX
 QUANTUM IN ME FUE RITE NITAR UT FILIUS
 TUUS MAOSIMILIS EXSISTATE QUID EM
 MALO MATERNO QUAM Q. AMILLI PATER-
 NUS ET IAM CLARUS SPECTATUS CONTICE-
 RIT PATER QUOQ. ET PATRUIS IN LUSTRI MA
 DE CONSPICUI QUIB. OMNIB. ADE MUNI-
 SIMILIS ADOLESCETS IN BUPTUS HONES-
 TIS ARTIBUS FUERIT QUAS PLURIMUM REFE-
 R MA QUO POTISSIMUM ACCIPIAT ADHUC
 ILLUM PUE RITIAE RATIO INTRA CONTUBER-
 NIUM TUUM TENUITRAECEPTORES DOMI
 HABUIT UBIE ESTE RORIB. MODICAE ESTE TIA
 NULLA MATERIA AN STUDIA EIUS EXTRA
 LIMEN CONFERANDASUNT IAM CIRCUOSPI-
 CIENDUS RHETOR LATINUS CUIUS SHO-
 LAE SEUERITAS PUDOR IN PRIMIS CASTITAS
 CONSTET ADESTE NI MA DULESCEN TI NOS
 TRO CUM CETERIS NATURAE FORTUNAE Q.
 DOTIB. EXIMIA CORPORIS PULCRITUDO
 CUM HOC LUS RICO AETATIS NON PRAE CEP

A page from the Morgan Fragment of Pliny the Younger's letters. The script is continuous majuscule, which went out of style in the Middle Ages. E. Rand argued that this is in fact a page from the famous Parisinus manuscript. (Lowe & Rand, pl. VIII.)

Book 10 is authentic

In 1910 the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York City purchased six leaves (= twelve pages) of a very early (sixth-century) manuscript of the Letters of the younger Pliny. This manuscript, called the "Morgan Fragment" (MF) contains letters from the end of Book 2 and the beginning of Book 3. Two scholars analyzed and published on the MF in 1922—E. Lowe and E. Rand.³⁵ The script of this manuscript is 'continuous uncial'—that is, all the letters are in capitals and there are no spaces between words (see illustration). This type of writing went out of style in the Middle Ages and demonstrates that the manuscript is indeed very old.

While Lowe studied the physical nature of MF, Rand compared the text (including errors, omissions, additions, etc.) to other extant manuscripts. He concluded not only that the text is very old, but that MF belongs to the same family of manuscripts as two already known ninth-tenth century copies, B and F. In fact, MF is the ancestor of B and F. All three of these manuscripts contain only parts of Pliny's letters. MF, as we have seen, contains twelve pages. For their part, B and F—which are by the same hand—contain only Books 1–6 (F has a few more letters of Book 6).

The title of manuscript B, however, is significant. It reads: "PLINI SECUNDI EPISTULARUM LIBRI DECEM"—that is: "The Ten Books of Pliny the Younger's Epistles."³⁶

³⁵ E. Lowe and E. Rand, *A SIXTH-CENTURY FRAGMENT OF THE LETTERS OF PLINY THE YOUNGER*. Washington: Carnegie Institution, 1922.

³⁶ Detering was aware of this unwelcome early evidence implying ten books. On his p. 120 (cf. n. 312)

In other words, the tenth century manuscript B originally contained *all ten books* of Pliny's letters.

On the bases that MF is of venerable antiquity and is of the same family as the 10-book manuscript B, Rand further concluded that the MF was itself part of the lost Parisinus manuscript (Lowe & Rand: 40, 57)!

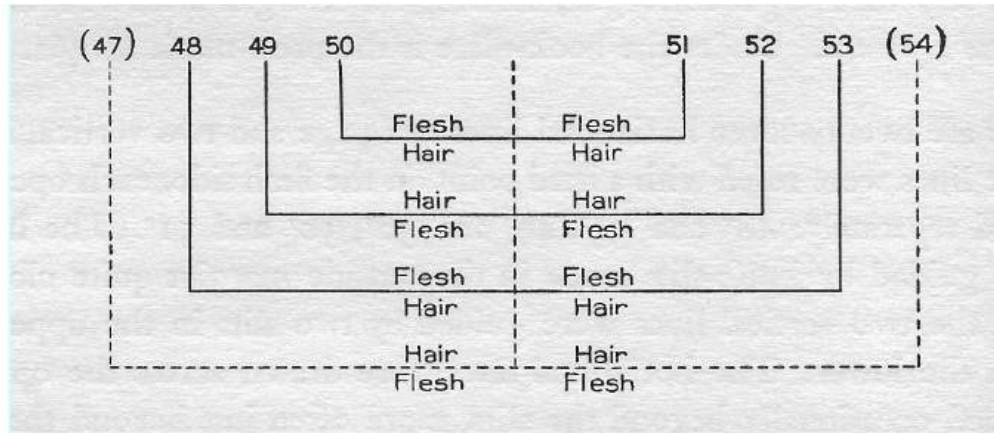
Letters 10.96 and 97 are authentic

The discovery of a tenth century manuscript of Pliny the Younger's letters puts to rest—or should put to rest—all suspicion that Book 10 was forged in the early sixteenth century. But what about the two letters dealing specifically with Christians? Could it be that they were forged and inserted into the Parisinus manuscript in the early 1500s?

Detering thinks so, but I consider such nefarious activity to be well-nigh impossible. After all, how does one insert two letters into a very old manuscript without the insertion being detected? Aldus—who was himself an expert, humanist, scholar, and printer—had the manuscript P in his possession for at least a few months, during which time he not only transcribed the Latin text word-for-word but obviously had occasion to examine the manuscript at leisure and very closely. Aldus enthusiastically described P as “exceptionally fine,” “with epistles not heretofore known,”³⁷ “most correct, and of a marvelous and venerable antiquity” (Lowe & Rand 38). This is entirely contrary to what one would expect from someone who detected a forgery!

he cites outdated scholarship from 1886--namely, T. Stangl, who simply dismissed the words 'LIBRI DECEM' as a 'grammatical whimsy.'

³⁷ The 'epistles not heretofore known' refer to Book 10. The fact that Aldus was unaware of ms. B (which had the 10 books) shows that ms. B was lost in obscurity and perhaps already contained only Books 1-6.



Disposition of the surviving (innermost) leaves of the Morgan Fragment.
(Lowe & Rand p. 4.)

It is also impossible to insert one or more additional sheets into a manuscript that is made up of quires—as is the Parisinus. A quire is a group of four vellum leaves folded and separately bound. The codex itself is made up of a number of quires bound together in a cover. Above is a sketch of the Morgan Fragment (which was part of the Parisinus itself—see above). The outermost leaf of this quire has disappeared, and only three leaves remain.

Vellum was expensive. Scribes wrote continuously and on both sides of the leaf (hair and flesh). How, then, does one insert two letters into a quire that is continuous and already full of writing? In a modern three-ring binder we can easily add a page. But with a bound quire, additional text means that the entire quire will have to be rewritten. And if one quire is rewritten, then *all the other quires* to the end of the codex must also be rewritten to accommodate the overflow of text.

In addition, the Morgan Fragment shows that each book was preceded by a 'table of contents.' If a forger added two letters to the collection, then he would also have to change the table of contents—an impossibility given that the TOC had no empty lines (cf. Lowe and Rand: Plates II, III).

In sum, I am confident that no forgery relating to the Parisinus manuscript took place (as Detering maintains) involving the two 'Christian' letters of Pliny the Younger. My confidence rests on the above-described two considerations:

(1) Aldus examined the Parisinus manuscript and said nothing about an anomaly, insertion, or possible forgery.

(2) The construction of codex P, with quires, renders impossible the insertion of two additional letters (taking 2-3 pages); as does the presence of a table of contents to each book.³⁸

Other considerations

Mendacity? Aldus claimed to have received the Parisinus manuscript from Fra Giocondo around 1506. Detering, however, doubts this, noting that a learned contemporary by the name of Budaeus claimed that manuscript P was in Paris in 1508 and was still there a decade later. Detering writes: "one of the two men was not telling the truth" (p. 83). However, there is no need to impute mendacity here. The manuscript P was evidently *loaned* to Aldus in 1506 for the purposes of printing his edition, and then the precious manuscript was returned to Paris.

One-sided research. E. Rand not only contributed to the seminal study of the Morgan Fragment discussed above, but also penned several hundred pages of scholarly analysis regarding the Pliny letters in three installments in the years 1923/24/25.³⁹ Yet Detering cites none of

³⁸ One could, perhaps, propose that the forger looked for and found a couple of empty pages in Book 10 of the Parisinus manuscript. He then opportunistically 'wrote' the letters 96 and 97 into the empty space. The letters of Parisinus are not numbered, so this would be theoretically possible. Even were this unlikely situation the case, however, would such a forgery have escaped the trained gaze of Aldus and of others who saw P?

³⁹ E. Rand, 'A New Approach to the Text of Pliny's Letters.' *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 1923, 1924, 1925.

Rand's works in his bibliography. His chapter on the Pliny correspondence does not even mention the Morgan Fragment.

Internal considerations. Detering offers no less than ten points (pp. 86–94) in which he contends that Pliny's letter to Trajan "raises questions." In point (1) he sees Pliny as a "caricature of an administrator"; in point (2) Pliny is "clueless" (*Ahnungslos*); nevertheless (point 3) Pliny has a definite plan for persecution; in point (4) Detering wonders why Pliny took so long to ask advice of Trajan; and so on. I find none of these points particularly persuasive. In point (6) Detering wonders how, in the early second century, Christianity could have made such "inconceivably quick growth" as to present a problem in northern Asia Minor. The problem disappears, however, when Christianity is seen to begin a century earlier than is customarily thought, namely, with Yeshu ha-Notsri.

Point (9) cites the antiphonal singing reported by Pliny:

[The Christians] asserted, however, that the sum and substance of their fault or error had been that they were accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god...

Detering writes (p. 92) that "antiphonal singing is not attested for so early an era." However, this report by Pliny resonates strikingly with what Philo wrote about the Therapeutae:

And after the feast they celebrate the sacred festival during the whole night... they all stand up together, and in the middle of the entertainment two choruses are formed at first, the one of men and the other of women... Then they sing hymns that have been composed in honor of God... they join together, and the two become one chorus... [A]nd standing there until morning, when they see the sun rising they raise their hands to heaven imploring tranquillity and truth, and acuteness of gnosis. (Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 83–88)

To me, (a) the antiphonal singing, (b) between men and women, and (c) before dawn, is no invention. We have here an authentic report of early Christian worship.

19

The 'Watch and Wait Period'–II

Gospel of Mark, The second century Irenaeus

Readers may not be aware that the traditional view of Marcion was my principal reason for fixing the authorship of the canonical gospels to the middle decades of the second century. However, in [a recent post](#) I proposed that Marcion was an invention of the Catholics, a useful tool in the fledgling church's efforts to paint naysayers (those who rejected Jesus of Nazareth as the savior) as heretics ("Marcionites"). Now that 'Marcion' is gone, the dating of the 4G to the middle decades of II CE loses a good deal of force.

Here I briefly summarize the reasoning that originally led me to connect Marcion's presence in Rome to the dating of the canonical gospels:

- 1) Marcion came to Rome about 140 CE with a large monetary donation for the Church. The money was first accepted but then returned. Marcion was excommunicated in 144 CE.⁴⁰
- 2) Marcion brought with him a 'gospel' (theology) that was thoroughly unacceptable to the incipient Catholics. His gospel included two gods, disparaged the creation as well as Judaism, and was essentially gnostic—proposing that escape from this world of matter was possible only through gnosis, self-negation, encratism, and the rejection of ordinary social and family ties.
- 3) It was in *reaction* to Marcion that the Catholics 'rewrote' his gospel, thus producing the Gospel of UrLuke (= GMk). Then, the Catholics

⁴⁰ A. Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, English edition 1921:18).

claimed that their gospel(s) came first and that Marcion and all those of his ilk were *later* heretics.

By the foregoing logic, then, the canonical gospels are to be dated from the middle of the second century.

Capernaum and Nazareth

With 'Marcion' gone, however, there is a little more leeway in dating the 4G. How can we find an alternate 'anchor' for the Gospel of Mark (which was, IMO, the first canonical gospel)? Let's begin with a well-known quote from Tertullian, in his *Against Marcion* (Bk. IV.7):

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius (for such is Marcion's proposition) he [Jesus] 'came down to the Galilean city of Capernaum'...

Tertullian, writing about 207 CE, of course knew that Jesus' 'city' was Nazareth, not Capernaum.⁴¹ So he writes in the next section of his book:

The Christ of the Creator had to be called a Nazarene according to prophecy; whence the Jews also designate us, on that very account, Nazarenes after Him. For we are they of whom it is written, "Her Nazarites were whiter than snow;" even they who were once defiled with the stains of sin, and darkened with the clouds of ignorance. But to Christ the title Nazarene was destined to become a suitable one, from the hiding-place of His infancy, for which He went down and dwelt at Nazareth, to escape from Archelaus the son of Herod. **This fact I have not refrained from mentioning on this account, because it behooved Marcion's Christ to have forborne all connection whatever with the domestic localities of the Creator's Christ...** (Against Marcion IV.8, emphasis added.)

⁴¹ I leave aside the interesting question of why Jesus 'came down' at the baptism, and here note only that in the Marcionite version 'Jesus' seems to be a spiritual divine entity coming down into the seeker at 'baptism' (my Stage II). Thus, the Gospel of Mark is an adoptionist work containing a pre-Catholic core that echoes the spiritual 'Jesus.'

Naturally, Tertullian identifies Jesus' hometown as Nazareth.

Nevertheless, I argued in my first book that the word "Nazareth" at Mk 1:9 is an interpolation:

The settlement is named only once in the Gospel of Mark, at 1:9 (other instances in the Greek text read Ἰησοῦ Ναζαρηθε). The passage as it stands demonstrably conflicts with the remainder of the gospel, which locates Jesus' home in Capernaum. (The Myth of Nazareth xiii)

So, what Tertullian reports about Marcion seems to agree with our earliest canonical gospel, Mark,⁴² *but to conflict with the information about Jesus' hometown given in the other three gospels.*

An innocent mistake?

Now let's consider the following passage by Irenaeus of Lyon, writing a generation earlier than Tertullian, that is, about 180 CE:

Wherefore, when Joseph was convinced beyond all doubt, he both did take Mary, and joyfully yielded obedience in regard to all the rest of the education of Christ, undertaking a journey into Egypt and back again, and then a removal to Nazareth. Those who knew not the Scriptures nor the promise of God, nor the dispensation of Christ, at last called him the father of the child. **For this reason, too, did the Lord Himself read at Capernaum the prophecies of Isaiah:** The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me; to preach the Gospel to the poor has He sent Me, to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and sight to the blind. At the same time, showing that it was He Himself who had been foretold by Isaiah the prophet, He said to them: This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears. (Irenaeus, Against Heresies IV.23.1, emphasis added.)

A couple of points can be noted:

(1) Irenaeus knows the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt, and the return to Nazareth—which occurs only in Matthew 2:13–15 & v. 23.

⁴² Not only does Nazareth not appear in UrMark, but the family of Jesus is domiciled in Capernaum (6:1–6), and the movement of the Holy Family from Nazareth to Capernaum is unknown until we come to GMt. Also note that the parallel verse Mt 3:13 lacks 'Nazareth'—further support that the toponym was a later interpolation into Mk 1:9.

(2) Irenaeus knows the account of Jesus reading in the synagogue, an account that takes place only in the Gospel of Luke. But, according to Irenaeus that reading took place in *Capernaum*, not Nazareth.

What are we to make of this discrepancy? Long ago, on the internet forum CrossTalk 2, I pointed out that the evangelist Luke has a strident anti-Capernaum stance. Luke roundly curses Capernaum: “And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades” (Lk 10:15 // Mt 11:23). In a lengthy message (#3857, Dec. 2, 1998) I analyzed the account in Lk 4:16–30 as an expansion of Mk 6:1–6 and Mt. 13:53–58, passages where Jesus is unable to do many wonders “in his own country.” In Luke’s hands, any notion that Jesus hailed from Capernaum is quashed—not only does Luke curse Capernaum, but at Lk 4:24 (while in Nazareth!) Jesus famously says “No prophet is acceptable in his own country.”

Irenaeus got it wrong. He has Jesus reading in the synagogue of *Capernaum*—which defeats Nazareth as hometown of Jesus and supports the older notion of Capernaum as hometown of Jesus. I don’t believe Irenaeus made a simple mistake, but that he was still working, ca. 180 CE, from the *older Capernaum tradition*.

Conclusion: the Lucan pericope 4:16–30 had evidently not yet assumed its final form.

We have here, then, evidence of the gospel story in flux—exactly what one would expect in the ‘Watch and Wait’ period of the later second century. The Nazareth synagogue account occurs only in Luke 4, subsequent to parallel accounts in Mark and Matthew, and sufficiently late that the passage had not yet taken final form when Irenaeus penned his *Against Heresies*.

Multiple lines of evidence thus show that Capernaum was—in the *first* gospel recension—the hometown of Jesus, and that Nazareth belongs to a *second* layer of Catholic tradition.

Irenaeus himself seems deeply implicated in all this. He is, as it were, writing ‘from both sides of the fence’ for he is represented in both layers of the Catholic tradition. Thus, one has to wonder whether Irenaeus was not himself the author of the pericope in Luke 4—or, at least, of its revision.

“Watch and Wait”

In a previous post I termed the half-century ca. 150–ca. 200 CE as a period of flux, a time when the gospels were brand new and indecision prevailed in Catholic circles over which gospel account was true. ‘Jesus of Nazareth’ and ‘Christ’ are hardly mentioned in that half century. In the former post I discussed these lacunae with reference to *Ad Autolyicum*, a work dating to about 185 CE. Its author, Theophilus of Antioch, knows the 4G, but (in sixty pages of Greek) he doesn’t mention Jesus a single time! He doesn’t mention the virgin birth, the ministry, the apostles, the passion, the cross, the ascension... For the Bishop of Antioch, it is as if Jesus of Nazareth did not even exist. The historian Robert Grant observed that Bishop Theophilus’ “understanding of the work of Jesus Christ can be recovered only from allusions, for *like other apologists of his time* he never openly speaks of him” (emphasis added). I offered an explanation for this striking silence:

When the over-the-top figure, Jesus of Nazareth, arrived like a bombshell in four great, astonishing gospels in mid-II CE, Christians everywhere were awestruck. By and large they were quiet. For several decades, Christian apologists from Spain to Mesopotamia were very careful how they handled this radical new information, this stunning new Savior of the world. They looked, watched, and listened.

Irenaeus put a stop to the indecision by (as if from on high) essentially canonizing four gospels with the assertion that “just as there can only be four winds and four corners of the earth” there can only be four gospels. (For more about Irenaeus, see [here](#).)

When were the canonical gospels written?

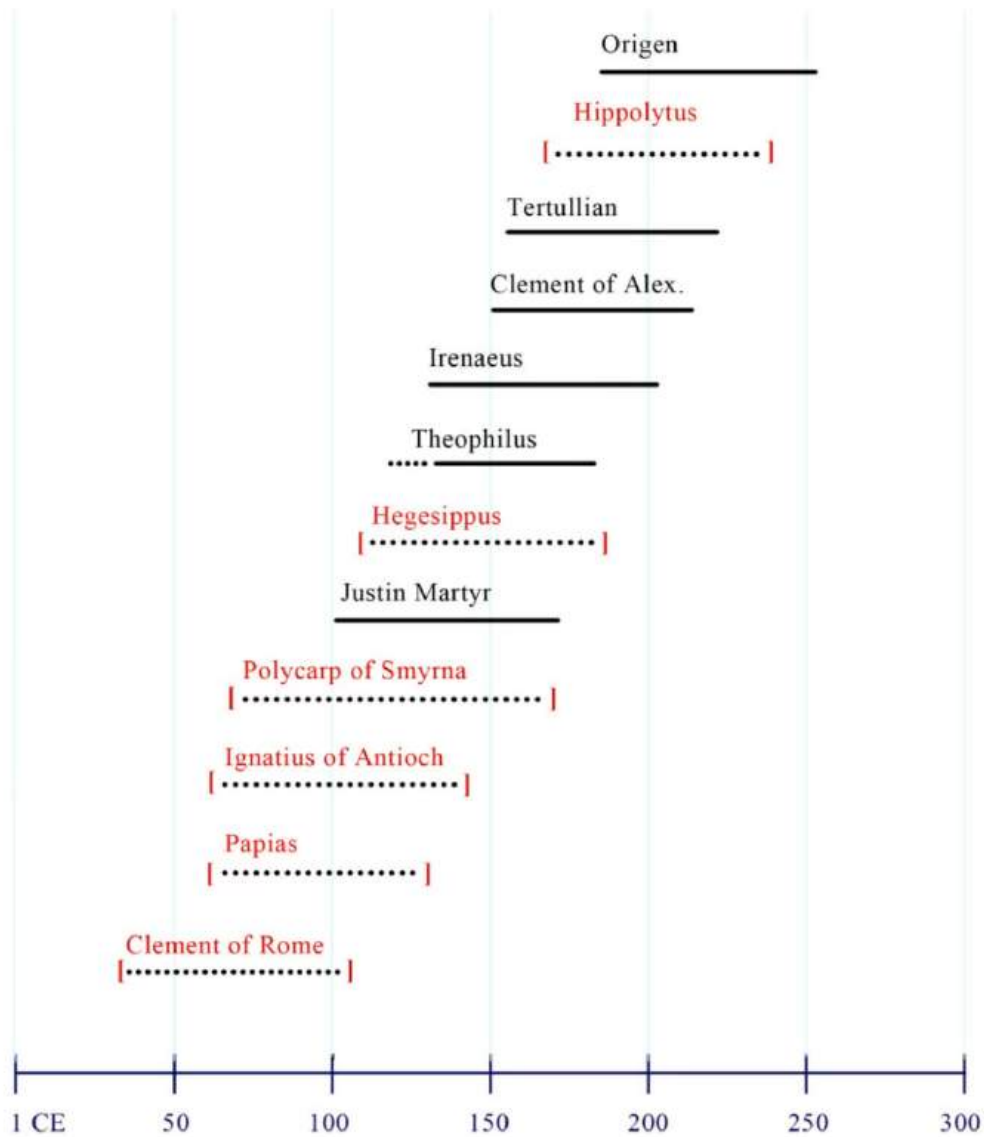
It is possible, from the foregoing, to see that finishing touches were still being put on the gospels in 180 CE. At that time, Irenaeus seems to know the gospels of Matthew and Luke—and, by implication, their predecessor, the Gospel of Mark. His verdict concerning the “four winds” shows that he also knew the Fourth Gospel.

According to the lists drawn up long ago by J. Hoh, in his *Adversus Haereses* Irenaeus quotes 626 times from all 4 Gospels.⁴³ But was the heresiologist himself putting ‘finishing touches’ on one or more of those gospels?

My impression is that the beginning of canonical gospel formation already signaled in these posts (“the 140s CE”) cannot be far wrong, even without ‘Marcion.’ If anything, with Irenaeus’ activity ca. 180 CE, that beginning moves later by a decade or so. In any case, I now view c. 180 CE as a provisional *terminus ante quem* for canonical gospel formation. That was certainly the date for ‘canonization’ of the Four Gospels by Irenaeus in his *Adversus Haereses* (see above).

As for the *terminus post quem* for the writing of the canonical gospels (which I consider equivalent to the writing of GMk), that can no longer be pegged to Marcion’s mythical activity in Rome in the 140s CE. We have no real anchor... However, Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165?) knows the gospel storyline, and thus by about the year 160 CE one or more of the synoptic gospels must have been known.

⁴³ Hoh, J. 'Die Lehre des hl. Irenäus über das Neue Testament.' Neutestamentliche Abhandlungen. vii. Münster i. W. 1919. pp. 189-197.



The principal Church Fathers until ca. 300 CE. No authentic writings survive from those in red font. They are known only through one or more statements of later Church Fathers. All surviving Catholic writings credited by some conservative scholars to those figures who flourished before c. 150 CE (Clement, Papias, Ignatius, Polycarp) have been shown to be pseudonymous (false attribution).

So, we have an incrementally more nuanced chronology for the formation of the canonical gospels:

- 140-160 CE: The writing of GMk (and possibly other NT gospels)

- 160–180 CE: The completion of all four canonical gospels
- 180–200 CE?: Final alterations, additions, etc.
- ca. 200 CE: The Muratorian Canon sets out, for the first time, the ‘accepted’ texts of the Catholic Church.

Irenaeus of Lyon is the Church Father most associated with the second half of the second century. His role in the codification of the canon seems seminal. Surprisingly, only two writings survive from his pen: the *Against Heresies* (in a Latin translation—the original Greek is lost) and his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (in an Armenian version). In the latter work Irenaeus sets out his views on Christ (beginning ¶162) which closely mirror the theology of both the canonical gospels and the Pauline epistles. The Pauline epistles, however, don’t know the biography of Jesus of Nazareth. (More correctly: they may know that biography but don’t express it due to the indecision still obtaining in the ‘Watch and Wait’ period—see comments below.) Irenaeus does express that biography, and he reviews it in detail—probably for the first time—and also links Jesus’ biography to the Old Testament.

As noted [in another post](#), earlier Church Fathers such as Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Papias of Hierapolis are unattested save for writings *imputed* to them by later Fathers like Irenaeus. It is my opinion that Ignatius, Papias, and Clement were invented in order to bridge Irenaeus and later Fathers with canonical first century times—necessary to establish the Church’s unbroken authority going back to Jesus of Nazareth.

Besides having a hand in inventing earlier Church Fathers, Irenaeus constructed a second **ladder of authenticity** between himself and the apostles by claiming that he was a student of Polycarp (also invented?) who was himself a “hearer” of the Apostle John, the fourth evangelist (certainly invented).

20

A review...

*Christian origins, John the Baptist, mythicism, Salm, Yeshu ha-Notsri
Jesus*

Below is my summary of the birth and development of Christianity in the first three centuries. Of course, just about everything regarding the points below differs from the 'received tradition':

- ▶ I begin ca. 100 BCE rather than at the turn of the era;
- ▶ I propose a different prophet than Jesus of Nazareth (namely, Yeshu ha-Notsri);
- ▶ for me neither Paul nor Marcion existed—nor did the earliest Church Fathers until Justin Martyr;
- ▶ the 'Pauline epistles' came after the canonical gospels, not before;
- ▶ the canonical gospels themselves are products of the second half of the second century.

The tenets above are fleshed out in slightly greater detail in the 22 points below, each provided with a link (sometimes two). Incidentally, an entirely separate introduction to my views of Christian origins can be found in the '[Detering Commentaries](#).' That series of 38 posts has background on pre-Christian religion going back to the Bronze Age and is valuable in understanding the ancient origins of gnosticism.

Let me just say that all science is provisional. The points above and below are, of course, all subject to adjustment and ongoing evidence...

And don't worry—there is no exam! 😊

(1) John (Yochanan or Yehonathan) the Hasmonean was a **renegade Pharisee** of royal lineage.

(2) Ca. 86 BCE, when Alexander Janneus began an intense pogrom against the Pharisees, **the young John fled to Egypt** with his mentor, Joshua ben Perachiah.

(3) While in exile in Alexandria, John came under Buddhist influence. **He abandoned his Jewish religion and became a gnostic**, one who believes that the goal of man is to find understanding, "enlightenment."

(4) John returned to Palestine after the death of Janneus (76 BCE) and went to Samaria, where he had more freedom to preach. **He taught his subversive new religion** which essentially entailed the overthrow of Judaism.

(5) For his followers, the gnosticism of Yeshu/Buddhism was considered arcane, 'higher' wisdom. In Hebrew, the higher wisdom was associated with **the Semitic root NTsR** (BDB 666) = "secret things" (Isa 48:6), also: "watch, guard, keep, protect." This Semitic root has an august and ancient pedigree going back even to Akkadian times (ca. 2000 BCE), when such higher wisdom was already venerated, and when secret gnosis was symbolized by "Water."

(6) Perhaps already during his ministry, and certainly after John's execution by the Pharisaic Sanhedrin (ca. 65 BCE), the gnostic followers of John **dubbed him "John the Baptist."** For them, the acquisition of gnosis (= enlightenment) was symbolized by the dipping into water (baptism).

(7) The prophet was also known as "Yeshua" ("Savior") for showing the way to Truth, and ha-Notsri (< NTsR), **"the One with Secret Wisdom."** Thus, Yeshu ha-Notsri = Jesus the Nazarene = John the Baptist.

(8) An early gnostic offshoot of the early Jesus followers called themselves “those with secret wisdom”—**Mandaeans** (< *manda* = “knowledge”). They called their teachers/leaders *Natsraia* (Nazarenes < NTsR), holy “Keepers of secret knowledge” (Drower, *Mandaic Dictionary* p. 306). This meaning was known to the markan evangelist, who at 1:24 defines “Nazarene” for the reader: “the holy one of God.”

(9) The original theology of Christianity was a **philosophy of gnosis: understanding saves**.

(10) The (originally Hebrew) Natsarenes embraced a severe, world-denying, ascetic, and encratite way of life directed at personal spiritual liberation through gnosis. Aspects of this are found both in the **Dead Sea Sect** (in which Yeshu is implicated—though negatively) and in the *Therapeutae* of Alexandria.

(11) Simon Magus (the “Standing One” and the “Great Power”) was probably a **personification of the spiritual Jesus** that indwells the saint (**Stage II christology**).

(12) The ascetic way to gnosis was **too difficult for ordinary people** who wished to accommodate to family life, to society, and to the ethos of gentile Hellenism. Thus a cultural and religious split developed in the Christian fellowships: Hellenists vs. Hebrews (Acts 6:1-6).

(13) About 100 CE Christians were already in Asia Minor in considerable numbers (cf. **Pliny’s letter to Trajan**). Their theology had developed from the pure gnostic liberation (Stage I) into a theology where the spirit of God, Jesus (“Savior”) enters into the saint and ensures salvation (Stage II). John was now venerated as the Christ, “the anointed one,” messiah. The prophet was, however, emphatically not divine (cf. the **Gospel of Barnabas**). Anyone could possess “the Jesus,” and thus **there were many “Jesuses.”**

(14) The ‘Hellenists’ **revolted against the Hebrews** towards the middle of the second century. They overthrew the gnostic theology

with a new savior, Jesus the privileged Son of God, in whom all must believe in order to be saved.

(15) The first Hellenist gospel, **the Gospel of Mark, is adoptionist**: Jesus receives the spirit of God at baptism (Mk 1:10; Stage II). Due to his ability to work miracles, Jesus is somewhere between human and divine.

(16) In GMk Jesus hails from Capernaum (Mk 3:31; 9:33; etc.—Except for the interpolation at 1:9, “**Nazareth**” is not mentioned once in this gospel). Echoes of this first canonical gospel stratum can be detected in the writings of both Irenaeus and Tertullian.

(17) The Hellenists rejected the concept of the gnostic Nazarene, “the holy keeper of secret knowledge” (point 8 above). They redefined “Nazarene” by making it an inhabitant of **a mythical town called “Nazareth.”** Their savior, Jesus, now came from Nazareth (Mt 2:23).

(18) However, Jesus hailing from Nazareth caused problems: it now conflicted with the older tradition of his coming from Capernaum. Therefore, the Catholics interpolated “Nazareth” **into the verse Mk 1:9**. More importantly, the problem that the messiah must hail from Bethlehem was finessed by Matthew at 2:23 and then by Luke via the census of Emperor Augustus.

(19) Because GMt and GLk are dependent on GMk, a great deal of Jesus’ activity takes place according to the first gospel stratum—by the sea and in Capernaum. So, it certainly *seemed* that Jesus’ home was Capernaum (as in GMk). Matthew solved the dilemma by having Jesus’ family move (relocate its hometown) from Nazareth to Capernaum (**Mt 4:13**) and he also introduces a curse on Capernaum (Mt 11:23). The evangelist Luke took a different strategy—he pointedly denies that Capernaum is Jesus’ hometown (despite *appearances*) and emphasizes Nazareth via the passage **4:16-30**, and he also retains the curse on Capernaum (Lk 10:15). These complications were necessary

so that Nazareth could be (at some point) Jesus' home, and all this was to avoid the original *gnostic* meaning of "Nazarene."

(20) The new gospels, which were non-gnostic, were so astonishing to the Christian fellowships that they immediately caused a split: Catholics vs. gnostics. **The latter were dubbed "Marcionites"**—those who believe in a God above/beyond the world (that is: immaterialists, gnostics).

(21) In order to propagate their new theology of belief in the saving cross of Jesus of Nazareth, the Catholics penned **the epistles of "Paul."** They made Paul into a figure whose activity took place during the apostolic generation.

(22) There was a '**Watch and Wait**' period in the second half of II CE, when the canonical gospels and Pauline epistles were penned. This was a period of great creativity and also of indecision, when no one was certain (a) how history would play out, (b) which gospel would be favored, or (c) which version of the new "Jesus" would be successful. And there were several different Jesuses to choose from: the human Jesus (GMk); the Son of God born of the Virgin Mary (GMk and GLk); and the Son of God pre-existent from the beginning of the world (GJn).

21

A note on the Toldoth Yeshu

Nazarene, Other

I have been studying the **Toldoth Yeshu** (Hebrew: “Generations of Yeshu”) for several weeks in the hope that this unusual work might shed some light on Christian origins. However, I have been disappointed and conclude that the TY is a rather poorly-written, scurrilous, and late anti-gospel composed, I suspect, by a disenchanting rabbi in distant Babylonia. Here is some of what the insightful Robert M. Price writes concerning the work:

The Toledoth Jeshu (Generations of Jesus) is the title of several variants of an anti-gospel text portraying Jesus as a false prophet and magician... The wide distribution of various language versions and manuscript fragments, together with the numerous parallels with second-century Jewish-Christian polemic preserved in Tertullian, Celsus, and elsewhere, imply... an original date of about the fourth century with numerous underlying traditions going back even further. [Hugh] Schonfield even suggests the Toledoth was based on a prior Hebrew gospel circulated among Jewish Christians. The reason for this is that the text treats Jesus with much more respect than one would expect. [Schonfield even argued that the Toldoth was so closely connected to the Gospel of the Hebrews that he attempted to reconstruct GHeb from the Toldoth.-RS]...

When we think of messianic proof texts and testimonia, we are bound to think of Matthew’s gospel, and there is probably more than fortuitous similarity between Matthew and the document presented here...

One of the chief points of interest in this work is its chronology, placing Jesus about 100 BCE. This is no mere blunder, though it is not hard to find anachronisms elsewhere in the text. Epiphanius and the Talmud also attest to Jewish and Jewish-Christian belief in Jesus having lived a century or so before we usually imagine...

Our document not only parallels the Christian gospels but goes on to add a kind of “Acts of the Apostles,” with various odd traditions that are

extremely fascinating, perhaps even, one could say, valuable... [From: R.M. Price, *The Pre-Nicene New Testament*. Signature books, 2006, pp. 239-41. Used with permission.]

There are many versions of the TY. The version Price offers in his *Pre-Nicene New Testament* includes chapters 9 and 10 (missing from the online version linked above). While I agree with Price on the existence of “odd traditions” in the TY, I don’t find them particularly valuable or early. The author of the TY seems to have drawn on his fertile imagination—and to have been loosely acquainted the following:

- ▶ one or more canonical Christian gospels (including GMatthew)
- ▶ portions of the Babylonian Talmud (including Tractate Sanhedrin)
- ▶ elements of the Pseudo-Clementine literature

In the final two chapters, the author (or a later redactor) also knows:

- ▶ Nestorius (TY 9:6) who lived c. 386–450 CE
- ▶ Simon Stylites (TY 10:11 ff) who lived c. 390–460 CE
- ▶ Eleazar ben Kalir (TY 10:15 ff) who lived c. 570–640 CE

I am not sure how much weight to place on Price’s (and Schonfield’s) view that the original stratum of TY goes all the way back to the second century (Celsus flourished ca. 175 CE). However, the existence of such early parallels—even if valid—would not require an early dating for the work as a whole, or even for the *Grundshrift* of the document.

The TY is full of magical accounts such as one finds in the apocryphal infancy narratives of Jesus. The author is passionate in defending Israel (10:20) and misses no opportunity to call Yeshu a “Bastard” and his followers “fools”, “radicals”, and (occasionally) “Natsarenes.” Besides all the invective, the author is, unfortunately, not a gifted writer. He repeats himself (well, so did the evangelist Mark with the two feedings: 6:35 ff and 8:1 ff) by having Yeshu enter Jerusalem *twice* on a donkey, having Judas (then Gehazi) betray Jesus *twice in the*

same manner, etc. Perhaps more egregious is that the author fails to observe simple logic. For example, what are we to make of the following astonishing passage?–

So the president of the Sanhedrin was named Simeon Cephas. And why was he surnamed Cephas [= “Stone”]? Because he used to stand upon the stone Ezekiel had stood on as he prophesied by the **River Chebar** [in Babylonia. Simeon travels to Jerusalem, and when he] saw the dire situation of Israel, he sought out the Natsarenes... [and] made them promise to build a high tower for him to serve as a retreat in which he should eat neither meat nor anything else except bread and water. He would let down a hook on a cord and they would raise up to him a basket...

So, the president of the Sanhedrin, Simeon Cephas (who lives in Babylonia), becomes **Simon Stylites**! This is head-spinning stuff, for sure...

While the author employs considerable artistic license, confuses sources, and apparently worked from memory, the TY does support an early first century BCE dating for Yeshu ha-Notsri—as does the Talmud (which the author specifically mentions at 1:22). The main personages in the Talmudic Yeshu saga also figure largely in TY—including Alexander Janneus, Salome Alexandra, and Simon ben Shetach. I am provisionally working on the hypothesis that the TY is dependent upon the Talmud for its knowledge of Yeshu ha-Notsri.

One point, however, is of great interest to me—and, to my knowledge, it does not occur in the Talmud. It is the mention by the author of TY that Queen Salome “was a blood relative” of Yeshu (3:2). My research has **independently arrived at this conclusion**, but I have until now not found independent confirmation of it. Queen Salome Alexandra and Yeshu being related would largely explain why the Queen was sympathetic to Yeshu and his ministry (TY 3:2, 11, 20–22; 3:32). If the “Salome” mentioned in the Gospel of Thomas is to be identified with the Queen, then a case can be made that she was even his disciple:

(61) Jesus said, "Two will rest on a bed: the one will die, and the other will live."

Salome said, "Who are you, man, that you ... have come up on my couch and eaten from my table?"

Jesus said to her, "I am he who exists from the undivided. I was given some of the things of my father."

<...> "I am your disciple."

Other points

The principal complaint that the author of TY has against Yeshu is that he follows another God (4:7). That contravenes the first commandment and merits death (1:27, 40).

The places mentioned in TY are towards the East (Tiberias, Antioch, Babylonia) which suggests the known trajectory of heretical Jesus-movements (e.g. the Mandaeans) in the early Christian centuries. Antioch is considered the "principal city of the Natsarenes" (8:16).

In the TY, Yeshu is executed in Jerusalem by "the sages" (6:9 & 15). The Romans are not implicated at all. (They are not even mentioned in the work.) Yeshu is presumably stoned and then "hung on a tree." This and other elements suggest that the author of TY cleaves to the account from the Talmud (familiar to him) and ignores many elements in the Christian gospel storyline.

Yeshu is buried (6:21), but his tomb is soon found empty (7:8). An elaborate run-around takes place (as in some apocryphal Christian texts) turning on whether the body arose from the grave (thus proving the Resurrection and divinity of Yeshu) or was merely hidden through an elaborate reburial by a gardener. The author of TY, of course, espouses the latter possibility.

In a final twist of the knife, the author of TY describes how "Paul" (originally called "Simeon" in the text) was actually sent by the Jews to

the Natsarenes to effect a separation between the two groups, in order to "restore peace to Israel" (8:39-41).

In sum, it may yet be proven that some elements of the first eight chapters of the TY go back to very early, pre-canonical times. If so, this rather bizarre work would merit a more thorough investigation by Jesus mythicists.

22

The Protevangelium of James

John the Baptist, The second century Catholic Church

It may surprise you that the **Protevangelium of James** is a work uniquely positioned in Christian history for its capacity to shed light on the origin of the canonical gospels. However, that capacity is hardly admitted by the tradition, which classifies PrJames with the New Testament Apocrypha (lit: 'hidden')—biblical or related writings not accepted as scripture, i.e., not considered genuine or 'true.'

Terms such as *orthodox, apocryphal, canonical, accepted* are self-serving and ultimately depend upon a circular argument: if the Church approves a work (that is, if the work agrees with its theological positions), then the work is 'admitted.' But if the work conflicts with the Church's position then it is 'not genuine,' 'apocryphal,' 'not accepted,' 'false,' and so on.

Thus, we must continually keep in mind that the scholarly classification of Christian texts is specious and holds little scientific, historical, or probative weight. In fact, when it comes to setting the historical record straight, I aver that the Christian apocrypha are generally of *more* value than forged (yet 'approved') works such as the two letters of Clement, the dozen or more letters of Ignatius of Antioch, the so-called 'Martyrdom of Polycarp,' and a host of other works (essentially propaganda) that the Church wishes to pass off as historical, genuine, and 'authentic.'

Mind you, apocryphal Christian works are also propagandistic to a greater or lesser degree. The Protevangelium of James amounts to what many would today dismiss as a 'fairy tale'—angels speak, the ground opens, time stops... By *modern* standards the work is literally

incredible. However, like the canonical evangelists (who also penned yarns amounting to fairy tales), the author of PrJames intended his work to be believed. And while no modern reader believes what the author of PrJames recounts, an amazing number of our contemporaries persist in believing what the evangelists recounted long ago in their equally fantastic canonical gospels.

In the nineteenth century, Adolf Harnack proposed that PrJames is a fusion of three separate writings. Harnack's proposal has never been seriously challenged. The three subtexts making up PrJames are:

- ▶ Chapters 1-17: A biography of Mary, dealing with her miraculous birth and holy infancy and childhood, her engagement to Joseph and virginal conception of Jesus;
- ▶ Chapters 18-20: The birth of Jesus, including proof that Mary continued to be a virgin even after the birth;
- ▶ Chapters 22-24: The death of Zacharias, father of John the Baptist.

These three subtexts have not survived independently, showing that they were fused together at an early time. A great many versions of PrJames exist, and in numerous languages, for the work was at one time exceedingly popular among Christian readers. The original title was certainly that of the first seventeen chapters: "The Birth of Mary" (Γενεσις Μαρίας), as evidenced from important early witnesses, including one known as the Bodmer Papyrus. Other titles such as the "Revelation of James," "Protevangelion of James," etc., are clearly late.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion of the form of the text and its title, see E. de Strycker, *LA FORME LA PLUS ANCIENNE DU PROTEVANGILE DE JACQUES* ('The Most Ancient Form of the Protevangelium of James'). Brussels 1961: Chapter One and pp. 208 ff. Though Strycker (a Jesuit priest) would violently disagree with my conclusions in this and other posts, I rely upon his book for a great deal of the primary evidence relating to PrJames.--R.S.

The association of “James” with the authorship of this work owes to the final paragraph of the text—tacked on, as it were, to lend weight and credence to the text: “And I, James, who wrote this history in Jerusalem, decided to retire to the desert when the troubles began upon the death of Herod...” The “James” here is the mythical elder brother of Jesus, the son of Joseph by an earlier marriage—that is, “James the brother of the Lord.”

A critical issue: dating

The date of PrJames has never been seriously contested: the middle decades of the second century CE—thus Strycker (*op. cit.* 412 ff). One scholar (O. Cullmann) writes: “The work cannot have been written before 150” (NTA I:423). Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 215 CE) knew the work, and so did Origen (d. ca. 253 CE). More to the point is that Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165 CE) “shows very close contacts with its ideas (birth in a cave, Davidic descent of Mary)” (NTA I:423). Thus, we have a short window for the writing of PrJames—essentially the 150s CE.

That dating is entirely non-threatening to the tradition, for PrJames appeared decades after the canonical gospels and thus in no wise challenges the New Testament canon.

Or so it has been thought... The foregoing assumptions have force *only if the canonical gospels are first century works*. However, **I have argued on this weblog** that the canonical gospels appeared in the mid-second century CE. Thus, it appears that all of these works were created at roughly the same time—in the twenty years between c. 140 and c. 160 CE. The canonical gospels may *not* have been penned earlier than PrJames.

This revised chronology allows new questions to arise. We can perceive the mid-second century as a time when new religious texts were rapidly appearing and were jockeying for influence and acceptance. The texts doubtless influenced one another. Thus, *which*

text came before another is a matter of great significance to the historian.

Of course, the academy will have none of all this. A first century dating for the 4G is universal among academics and represents a red line that cannot be crossed. Not a single working academic has, to my knowledge, proposed a second century dating for the canonical gospels—as have I. The first century dating of the New Testament effectively keeps all such questions as those posed above at bay.

Understandably, Strycker and *all* other scholars dealing with PrJames, from Harnack to Ehrman, have blithely assumed that the work simply borrowed from the 4G in myriad ways.

Yet I propose here that the situation was much more complex.

The New Testament and the Protevangelium of James

For the markan evangelist, the divine spirit comes down into Jesus at his baptism (in the form of a 'dove') and leaves Jesus before his crucifixion—hence, the anguished cry, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15:34.) In this sense, Mark is **adoptionist** and continues what I have termed **Stage II Christology**, in which the founding prophet was indwelled by the divine spirit.

It may well be that the original UrMark contained an account of the birth and childhood of Jesus, one that was later snipped away. The surviving gospel does indeed seem to begin abruptly, with no introduction and (the already adult) Jesus at his baptism. Now, if GMark *did* originally contain the pre-baptismal history of Jesus, that lost account would necessarily have been consistent with the evangelist's portrayal of Jesus as reflected in the surviving gospel—that is, of a *man* indwelled by the spirit of God (Stage II).

This adoptionist theology, however, was unacceptable to the nascent Catholic Church, for which it was necessary that Jesus be *both* God

and man. It is understandable, then, that the Catholics would have snipped away the beginning chapters of Mark (if they existed) from his gospel—chapters that would have dealt with the conventional birth and normal youth of a very *human* Jesus.

In any case, the Catholics needed an account that reflected *the birth of a God*. And that is precisely what they got with the Protevangelium of James.

In theology, the PrJames is more Catholic than GMk. It is my suspicion that the author of PrJames knew GMk (probably recently written) but was not satisfied with its adoptionist theology. The author of PrJames set about to rewrite Mark's gospel and to do so from a fully Catholic perspective. He reviewed the ancestry of Jesus, his relation to John (the Baptist), and the birth of both figures, but he only got as far as the childhood of Jesus.

The author of PrJames' main task was to exalt Jesus from the status of human to divine. PrJames has the earmarks of a sketch, of a quickly written and poorly thought-out template intended for revision. It never received that revision, probably because it was quickly put aside by the Church—yet picked up by the Christian rank and file, ordinary folk who loved this story of Mary.

Nevertheless, PrJames did give the engineers of Catholicism some important elements: the Davidic descent of Jesus (and thus his identification with the Messiah son of David), Jesus' birth in the **mythical town of Bethlehem** (ancestral home of David and fabled gateway to the gods since ancient times), the Matthean slaughter of the innocents (XXII.1 // Mt 2:13-23), and the virginity of Mary (= the divinity of Jesus).

Joseph, the ostensible 'father' of Jesus, can have nothing to do with impregnating Mary—that is accomplished by the divine Logos:

And now an angel appeared before her, saying, "Fear not, Mary, for you have found grace before the Lord of All. You will conceive by his Word [Logos]." And she, Mary, having heard [these things], hesitated within herself, saying, "Shall I conceive, even I, by the living Lord God, as every woman conceives?" And here [another?] angel appeared, saying to her: "Not thus, Mary, for the power of God will cover you with his shadow; it is why the holy [fruit] that must be born will be called Son of the Highest. And you will give him the name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (PrJames XI:23.2-3)

Note that the foregoing theology is fully Catholic. The female that brings *God* into the world must, of course, be of impeccable purity. So, the author of PrJames logically portrays Mary as being raised from her childhood in the Jerusalem temple! "And Mary lived in the temple of the Lord like a dove and received nourishment from the hand of an angel" (VIII.1). In these and other ways, we see that the author has not only abandoned common sense but also shows little knowledge of the Jerusalem temple (which was destroyed in 70 CE) or of its customs. As pointed out above, he is writing a *fairy tale*.

23

Resurrection & Incarnation in the second century

Marcion, The second century Justin Martyr

Evangelical Christians view the bodily resurrection of Jesus as “**the most important event in the history of the world.**” For them, Jesus’ resurrection from the grave is proof positive that He was the Son of God, that He was God in the flesh, and that He was the Lynchpin of history.

Of course, the bodily resurrection means that Jesus overcame death (point #2 in the above link). That’s a very powerful message, for the fear of death is a basic instinct in both man and animal. The Christian promise is that since Jesus overcame death, we can too, for “we have died with Him and will also live with Him” (point #3 above and Romans 6:8).

Astonishingly, this was also the gnostic message *before* Catholic Christianity took the field in mid-II CE. In gnosticism properly so called (that is, gnosticism lacking the *later* mythological elements of aeons, planets, and intermediaries) Jesus also overcame death, and the gnostic follower of Jesus can likewise overcome death (GTh 1). The huge difference between the gnostic and the Catholic was that, for the gnostic, ‘Jesus’ was a *spiritual entity*. It didn’t have flesh. For gnostics, in fact, the flesh was evil. The idea that God would take on human flesh was a complete non-starter in gnosticism. That is why the existence of Catholicism represents the radical denial of gnosticism. The two were opposed from the beginning.

The Church Fathers (and their descendants—academic defenders of Christianity today) caricature(d) the gnostic denial of the fleshliness of

Jesus by portraying gnostics as “docetists”—those who denied that Jesus of Nazareth had a body. Gnostics never had such a quaint view, still much popularized. Gnostics asserted that Jesus was *spirit*. They maintained that Jesus could not have a body and, hence, that Jesus of Nazareth was pure fiction. In other words, what academics pejoratively label “docetists” were none other than the Jesus-mythicists of ancient times. Such gnostic-Jesus mythicists were *everywhere* in the second century, for Catholicism was then just getting started.

Hand-in-hand with the gnostic denial of Jesus’ flesh was the disparagement of the creator god, of the creation, and of materiality in general. In my opinion, the Church Fathers conveniently labeled this entire worldview “Marcionite” and asserted that it was a late and despicable heresy that postdated Catholicism. Thus Justin Martyr:

And there is Marcion, a man of Pontus, who is even at this day alive, and teaching his disciples to believe in some other god greater than the Creator. And he, by the aid of the devils, has caused many of every nation to speak blasphemies, and to deny that God is the maker of this universe, and to assert that some other being, greater than He, has done greater works. All who take their opinions from these men... (First Apology, Chp. 26)

Note the words “who is even at this day alive.” It was important for Justin that ‘Marcion’ be a latter-day figure, someone whose tenets by no means antedated Catholicism (and thus could be claimed as more authentic than Catholicism). In his other citation regarding Marcion (there are only two), the same late dating is carefully included in Justin’s diatribe:

And, as we said before, the devils put forward Marcion of Pontus, who is even now teaching men to deny that God is the maker of all things in heaven and on earth, and that the Christ predicted by the prophets is His Son, and preaches another god besides the Creator of all, and likewise another son. And this man many have believed, as if he alone knew the truth... (First Apology, Chp. 56)

Justin's First Apology was written in mid-II CE. But if Marcion were teaching at that time, then how can Tertullian place Marcion in the apostolic age? Tertullian writes: "the Marcionites, whom the Apostle John designated as antichrists, when they denied that Christ was come in the flesh..." (AM 3.8) The Apostle John (also an invented figure, of course) was accorded an exorbitantly long life by the Church Fathers (extending even to 120 years) precisely so that he could be made to validate later Catholic doctrine. Even with a lifespan of 120 years, however, John (if born ca. 1 CE) would have died about 120 CE –still decades too early to be "teaching" when Justin was writing.

Similarly, Papias asserted (according to the sixth century **Bishop Fortunatus**) that "he who wrote down the Gospel, John dictating correctly the true evangel [Gospel], was Marcion the heretic."⁴⁵ So, Marcion wrote down the Gospel of John?! Oh well. (I recently discussed the non-existence of Marcion [here](#).)

But I digress and would like to return to my opening topic, namely, that Evangelical Christians view the bodily resurrection of Jesus as "the most important event in the history of the world." This is a convenient and expedient shortcut to vindicate the many astonishing claims of Christianity. After all, if Jesus of Nazareth resurrected bodily from the grave, then Jesus must indeed be/have been God's Son, must be part of the holy trinity, and Christianity must be *The One True Religion*.

The second century Catholics were well aware of the compelling power of the *bodily* resurrection—which is one reason they invented that astounding notion. Already, the **Gospel of Peter** (which, in all likelihood, preceded the Gospel of Mark)⁴⁶ focusses on the bodily resurrection and on machinations by "the scribes and Pharisees and elders" (vss. 28-29, 45) to have soldiers guard Jesus' tomb, in order to

⁴⁵ R. M. Price, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, p. 227.

⁴⁶ See: J. D. Crossan, *The Cross That Spoke*. Polebridge Pr. 1988.

prevent the claim that Jesus is raised from the dead. The [Toldoth Yeshu](#) (an early Jewish anti-gospel)—which, incidentally, places Jesus in the time of King Alexander Janneus—goes even farther (6.21, 7.28, etc) in describing involved machinations between Jews and Christians to hide and find the body of Jesus (see [here](#) on this website).

However, an earlier stratum preceded the Catholic focus on the bodily resurrection of Jesus, a stratum that is today all but forgotten. That stratum can lead us to the genesis of Christianity itself. Consider: before a divine Jesus could be made to resurrect bodily from the grave, God had to be *born* in flesh and blood. *That* problem had first to be solved, before attention could be given to the resurrection.

The solution taxed the incipient Catholics—M.R. James' 1924 book, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, contains over a dozen nativity accounts! More have been discovered since that time. Scholars date some of these accounts far back into the second century CE. This makes sense, for—as noted in the preceding paragraph—the Catholics had to pay attention to the problem of the Incarnation at a very early time. In contrast to current scholarly opinion (which holds that the early chapters in GMt and GLk were later additions), I maintain that elements in the fabulous and wide-ranging nativity stories reflect early and profound attempts to grapple with the awesome challenges of making God into man.

Ask yourself: How would you solve this problem? We will see in a forthcoming post that the incipient Catholics struggled with a number of colorful 'solutions,' most of which were quickly rejected but which survive in obscure and long marginalized texts ranging from Armenia to Ireland.

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The evolution of the infancy narratives

The second century Catholic Church, docetism, infancy narratives, Jesus

As noted in prior posts, the evangelist Mark holds an adoptionist point of view. For him, the spirit of God indwells Jesus the Nazarene (“The Savior, the Holy One of God”—Mk 1:24). Mark’s adoptionism conforms with what I have called ‘Stage II’ christology, the conception of the spiritual Jesus dominant in the first century CE.

The spiritual Jesus was incompatible with the Catholic conception of God becoming man—the Incarnation. The two christologies are mutually exclusive. If Jesus is a spirit, then it cannot be one particular man, Jesus of Nazareth. The earlier, pre-Catholic conception of a mobile Jesus (the saving spirit of God) entering into worthy people, now here, now there, resulted in polymorphy—**Jesus appearing in multiple guises**. Anyone indwelled by this mysterious Spirit of God was a ‘Jesus’—perhaps the humble fruitseller at the corner, perhaps the itinerant tinkerer who came to the village one day and was gone the next, perhaps the lady who always seemed to have a special connection to children and to animals... Such was the predominant Christian view of the first century. It survived into later times until the Catholic view (“Jesus of Nazareth,” the Incarnation, redemption, vicarious atonement, salvation by faith...) became dominant and percolated into the hinterlands where Catholicism came only later. Thus, we find polymorphy in the noncanonical acts of several apostles, in the so-called Gospel of Nicodemus, and in other apocryphal Christian works dating as late as the fifth century.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is now a particular human being—but not yet God. GMk can be described as semi-Catholic: on the one hand, the mobile spiritual Jesus no longer exists (for Mark, other people cannot be 'Jesus'). On the other hand, Jesus the Nazarene is not God, unlike the more pronounced Catholic theology of the other three canonical gospels. Rather, GMk's Jesus is an exemplary wonderworker who is designated, somewhat ambiguously, as the 'Son' of God (9:7). Mark the evangelist was still oblivious to the doctrine of the incarnation, as we see for example in him blithely enumerating the brothers and sisters of Jesus (6:3). Yet GMk was quite revolutionary—'Jesus' was now defined as a single individual rather than as the Holy Spirit/Spirit of God. This is a giant step in the direction of Catholicism. In the evangelist Mark's view, the spirit of God is no longer entirely mobile: the sonship of Jesus emphatically does not belong to anyone else, never did, and never will. The old equality (wherein anyone could become a "Jesus") has been rejected, and Jesus the Nazarene is now the unique Son of God. Within the Christian fellowship, this was altogether revolutionary.

Thus the Gospel of Mark accomplished two principal objectives: it provided incipient Catholicism with a powerful, compelling biography of Jesus the Nazarene; and it rejected the mobile, spiritual Jesus—which had been a democratic, 'equal-opportunity' view that was an impediment to Catholicism. For the mobile spiritual Jesus (of 'Stage II' christology) made the exclusivity of Jesus of Nazareth impossible and, as a result, the Catholic Church impossible. After all, no follower would obey the local bishop if s/he claimed to possess a direct connection to God via the mobile, spiritual Jesus. From the beginning the christology of the spiritual Jesus was abhorrent to Catholics. They needed to become *the exclusive conduit* for the salvation of people. In other words, they needed a monopoly on salvation.

Thus, it was absolutely necessary to the Catholics that Jesus not only be (1) a singular human being, but that he also be (2) a manifestation

of God Himself. The Gospel of Mark provided the former but not the latter. The Jesus of GMk is a wonderworker and Son of God, but he is not the exclusive or only Son of God—at least, neither emphatically nor even explicitly, as in the other canonical gospels. In other words, GMk did not go far enough for the Catholics. His gospel offered too weak a basis upon which to build a church: revisions in the first gospel were necessary.

When Mark's "Jesus the Holy One of God" (Jesus the Nazarene) morphed into the divine "Jesus of Nazareth" with GMatthew, the Catholics came into possession of a literary figure fully commensurate with their global designs. In the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John, Jesus of Nazareth is the only Son of God. Furthermore, the latter three canonical gospels also depicted the Catholic Church as the only designated and approved vehicle for salvation. Thus we read that Jesus gives the principal apostle, Peter, the "keys to the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 16:19; lacking at Mk 8:29)—and Peter then becomes the designated head of the incipient Church. The Gospel of John is even more explicit: Jesus of Nazareth is "the way, the truth, and the life—no one comes to the Father except through Me" (Jn 14:6).

The challenge of the Incarnation

In order for Catholic gospels to be written, the problem of the Incarnation had first to be solved: God becomes man. The Gospel of Mark was an early, pre-emptive attempt at Catholicity that ignored the issue. In that gospel Jesus is still man, yet he is raised to the status of "Son" of God, with all the power of God to command nature, to raise people from the dead, to heal, etc. But GMk does not tackle the thorny question: How did God become man? Believers would want to know this astonishing "good news" and to be convinced of its truth. The Catholics needed a compelling and convincing scenario for the Incarnation.

It's a tall order. Certainly, it is conceptually impossible (or at least mind-boggling) that a human female would/could give birth to the God of creation! In this conception resides something not only obscenely irreverent but also backwards: after all, the God of creation creates humans, not the other way around.

Greek religion offered little help—there we find gods occasionally begetting other gods (by copulating amongst themselves), and sometimes gods begetting demigods (by copulating with humans). But the Christians did not have a pantheon of gods to draw upon—they had only one God, the Creator of the universe.

The Jewish tradition was also of little use, for in Jewish scripture Yahweh cannot even be seen by unworthy humans (cf. Ex 3:6, 33:23), much less reified—again, a conceptual obscenity. When the cosmic order in Judaism is broken—as when angels copulate with humans in Gen 6:1-4 and in 1 Enoch 6—the result is that they produce monsters.

The Catholics needed two things. Firstly, they needed a man who was all-good, all-knowing, and all-divine. Secondly, they needed this God-man to give his divine authority to them—that is, to the Church. This was the impetus for the birth of Christianity (as we know it) and remains the ultimate core of Catholicism. In the second century CE, these two simple steps constituted the revolutionary Catholic masterplan.

To have Jesus born in the normal manner would not work for several reasons: (1) Joseph would be the 'father of God'; (2) Joseph and Mary would *choose* (or not choose) when and if God would appear on earth (i.e., Jesus' parents would be in the position of *creating* God); and (3) Jesus would be the product of lust/concupiscence.

These problems took time to resolve. A number of very early (100-150 CE) apocryphal Christian texts survive that describe the birth of God/Jesus in ways foreign to the canonical stories—which were still some

decades in the future. These obscure and long-marginalized nativity stories reveal ways in which the early Catholics struggled with the concept of the Incarnation.

The pre-canonical Christian infancy narratives

The earliest depiction of God becoming man may also be the simplest. It is found in the [Ascension of Isaiah](#). This apocryphon can be viewed as either: (1) a first century heterodox *Jewish* text; or (2) a first century pre-canonical Jewish-Christian text. The document depicts the Old Testament prophet Isaiah 'rising up' through the heavens to God. This is the gnostic elevation of man -> divine, as opposed to the Catholic descent of God -> man. Regardless of how we categorize the original document, the Ascension of Isaiah was quickly interpolated by proto-Catholics:

[Isaiah relates his vision.] "And I saw a woman of the family of David the prophet whose name was Mary, and she was a virgin and was betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, a carpenter... And when she was betrothed, she was found to be pregnant, and Joseph the carpenter wished to divorce her. But the angel of the Spirit appeared in this world, and after this Joseph did not divorce Mary; but he did not reveal this matter to anyone. And he did not approach Mary, but kept her as a holy virgin, although she was pregnant. And he did not live with her for two months. And after two months of days, while Joseph was in his house with Mary his wife, but both alone, it came about when they were alone that Mary then looked with her eyes and saw a small infant, and she was astounded. And after her astonishment had worn off, her womb was found as it was at first, before she had conceived. And when her husband, Joseph, said to her, 'What has made you astounded?' his eyes were opened, and he saw the infant and praised the Lord..." (Asc.Is 11)

And there you have it: Mary opens her eyes and sees an infant; Joseph's "eyes were opened" and he also sees the infant; both 'parents' are duly astounded. And in that simple way, *God becomes man!*

The passage above is a scaled-down, almost shorthand description. It reads not like a fully-elaborated scene, but as if the writer were simply jotting down notes for his peers to consider as a way to solve the problem of the Incarnation. It has core elements later found in the gospels: the lineage of David, Mary and Joseph, and (especially) the virgin's pregnancy by the divine spirit.

Interesting, pre-canonical views of the Incarnation also survive in obscure Christian texts from faraway Ireland, Armenia, and Ethiopia. It is not surprising that early elements relating to the Incarnation are found at the very frontiers of Christendom. After all, through the centuries the Church exercised maximum control where it was most organized—around the Mediterranean basin. In contrast, heretical notions had the greatest chances of survival in remote regions far from Rome. Modern researchers should not despise texts from the frontiers of Christendom, which had much greater chances of surviving early Catholic purges than did more familiar texts worked over by prelates for long centuries.

A very early, precanonical depiction of the Incarnation occurs in a lost text embedded in several Irish infancy narratives that date to medieval times. M. R. James first identified this text in 1927 and dubbed it the "New Source." A specialist in the Christian infancy literature, Brent C. Landau, dates the embedded account to the early second century CE. He maintains that the New Source was composed before the much better known Protevangelium of James.⁴⁷ He also writes: "Since scholars now generally date the Prot.Jas no later than the second half of the second century, the 'New Source' is apparently a quite ancient infancy gospel." It survives in Latin as well as Irish versions and reads as follows:

⁴⁷ Brent C. Landau, *THE SAGES AND THE STAR-CHILD*. Dissertation, Harvard Univ., 2008, p. 205.

[Joseph speaks.] "When therefore the hour drew near, the power of God revealed itself [Lat: *processit*] openly. And the girl [Mary], standing gazing at the heavens became white as snow. For the goal of good things [*terminus bonorum*] was already revealing itself.

"When, therefore, the light had come forth, she adored him whom she saw she had brought forth.

"The child himself was indeed radiating light round about in a unique manner, extremely clean and beautiful to look at, because he appeared alone as peace, bringing everything into a state of peace.

"Indeed, in that hour in which he was born, the voice of an invisible multitude was heard, with one voice saying 'Amen.'

"And I made bold and bent down and touched him, and lifted him up in my hands with great fear, and I was thoroughly frightened, **since there was no weight in him** as there would be in the case of a newborn person.

"And I observed him and there was no defilement in him, but was as if in the dew of God the most High, all shining in his body, light to carry, bright to look at.

"And while I was amazed greatly in that he did not cry as newborn children are wont to cry, and while I held him looking into his face, he smiled at me with a most pleasant smile and, opening his eyes, he looked at me intently.

"And suddenly there came from his eyes a great light like a great flash of lightning."⁴⁸

The gnostic overtones of the New Source's infancy account are evident: Mary brings forth 'light,' and that light becomes reified in the form of a weightless infant. Here we trace another stage in the embryonic Catholic tradition as it grappled with the mammoth task of translating God into man. According to the dating schema presented on this website, all this took place about a half century before the accounts in the canonical gospels. Even Raymond Brown, the late

⁴⁸ M.R. James, *LATIN INFANCY GOSPELS: A NEW TEXT WITH A PARALLEL VERSION FROM IRISH*, 1927; rpt. Wipf & Stock 2009; text from McNamara et al., *APOCRYPHA HIBERNIAE*, Turnhout: Brepols, l.i, pp. 106-112. Punctuation and formatting added.

Catholic scholar, admits that “the tradition of birth at Bethlehem is considerably more ancient than its present context in the Gospels.”⁴⁹

In the foregoing ways, the christological **Stages I and II** began to give way to Stage III—Jesus in the form of a (fleshly) human being. This insight adds context to the question of GMk’s (and perhaps GJn’s) omission of an infancy narrative. During the first half of the second century the concept of the Incarnation was not yet fully defined and was still in the process of development.

In the next post we will continue our exploration into the interesting birth of Catholicism as revealed by the earliest infancy narratives.

⁴⁹ R. E. Brown, *THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH*. Doubleday, 1993 p. 515.

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Infancy narratives II—The Revelation of the Magi

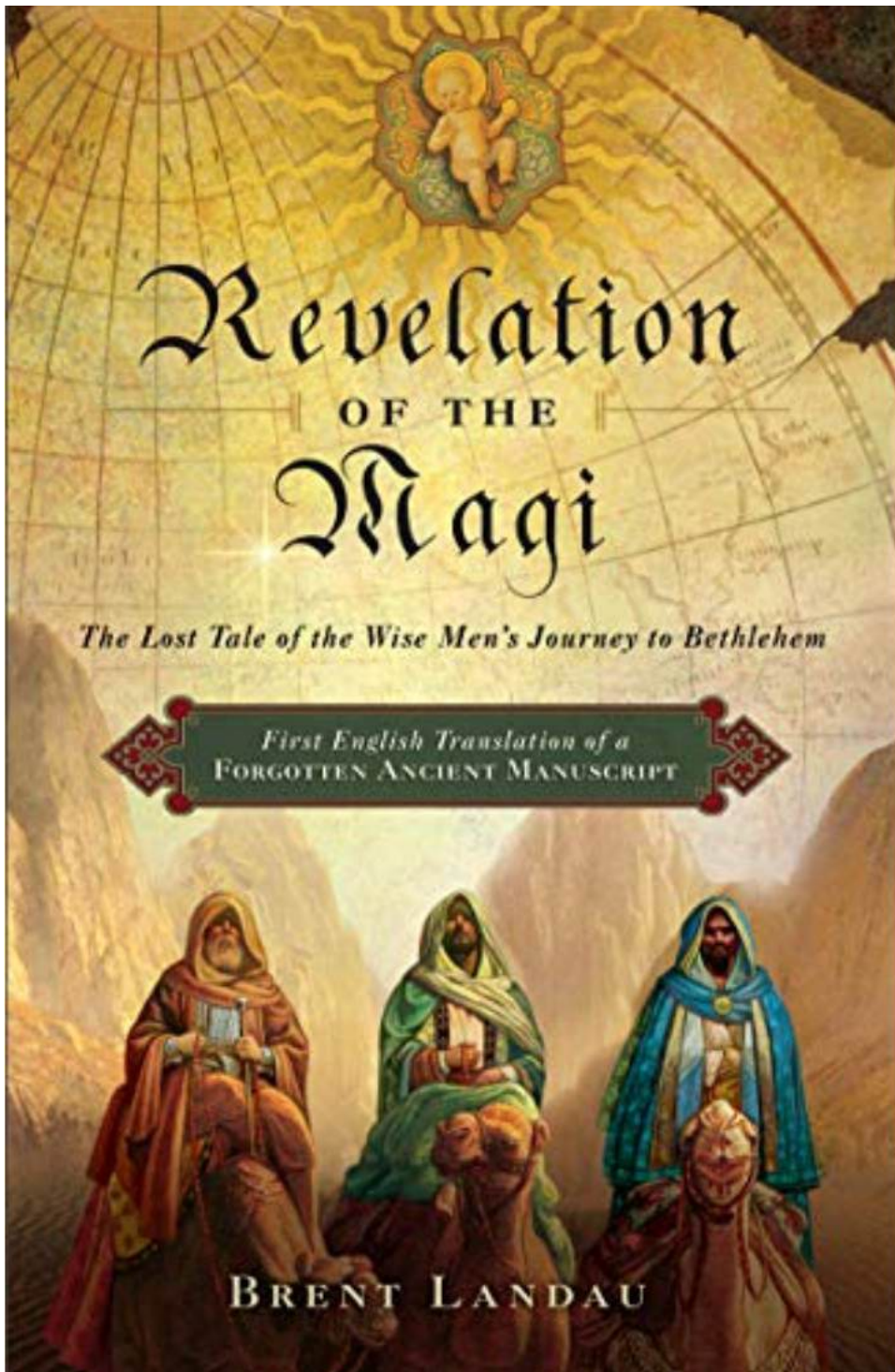
The second century

In the preceding post we looked at two obscure infancy narratives embedded in Christian apocryphal works: the *Ascension of Isaiah* (**chp. 11:1-10**) dating ca. 100 CE, and the 'New Source' (73.1-3) dating to the early decades of II CE.⁵⁰ The passage in Asc.Isa is an early Christian interpolation into a Jewish work. Post-canonical Catholic interpolations were also effected (probably dating to late II CE), as we read from references to the passion of Jesus, his Ascension, sitting at the right hand of God, etc. Yet we recognize the earliness of this nativity account through its utter simplicity and its radical variance from the canonical accounts: the birth takes place "in Joseph's house" (not in a cave at Bethlehem), the period of Mary's gestation is two months, and no one else is present.

In the so-called New Source (introduced in the preceding post), we similarly read an early account of the nativity: Mary is transfigured (she becomes "white as snow"), she gives birth to "light," and that light/infant has no weight. I consider it inconceivable that an author could pen such an account if he already knew the canonical nativity stories.

⁵⁰ Text and dating in McNamara et al., *APOCRYPHA HIBERNIAE*, Turnhout: Brepols, l.i, pp. 106-114.

The Revelation of the Magi



The nativity of Jesus is depicted in another very early Christian apocryphon. "There is less a birth in RevMagi," writes B. C. Landau,

“than a metamorphosis from one form, a star, to another, a child.”⁵¹ As virtually all scholars of Early Christianity, Landau ascribes to the conventional first century dating of the 4G, and thus the possibility does not remotely occur to him that RevMagi could have *preceded* the canonical gospels. Yet the traditional dating creates problems. With a literary shrug, Landau asserts that “an interest in harmonizing these divergent stories of Jesus’ birth [i.e., the Matthaean and Lucan infancy narratives] seems not to be a hermeneutical concern of the RevMagi.” And so Landau assumes that the author of RevMagi knew the canonical infancy narratives yet somehow penned a thoroughly independent account. He also notes a remarkable similarity in language between RevMagi and GJn. In this regard he similarly assumes that RevMagi “relies heavily on the Gospel of John” (Star-child 233–34), without considering for a moment the reverse possibility—that the fourth evangelist was acquainted with traditions expressed in the Revelation of the Magi.

According to Landau, RevMagi consists of three major parts, in this order: (1) a Magi “we-source”; (2) a revelation of Adam to Seth; and (3) a concluding “Judas Thomas episode” (= JTE; Star-child 13). Landau emphasizes that “in the third or fourth century, the RevMagi underwent a significant redaction” (Star-child 175). It must have been at this time that the Catholics heavily interpolated the text. The JTE section is certainly a late “redactional addition to a more archaic section of the RevMagi” (Star-child 18).

The Christology of RevMagi is most interesting and has strong Johannine affiliations. “For the RevMagi, the star of Bethlehem is actually the pre-existent Christ, the literal representation of the Johannine ‘light of the world’” (Star-child 20). The Christ figure is also not yet fully Catholic—he is the universal light that can “reveal himself

⁵¹ THE SAGES AND THE STAR-CHILD. Harvard Univ. diss., 2008 p. 235. Hereinafter: ‘Star-child’.

to individuals in the far reaches of the earth without any human mediation" (Star-child 20). This is, of course, the Stage II christology familiar to readers of this website. Thus, RevMagi lives at the interface between the Stage II (spiritual Jesus) and Stage III (Jesus of Nazareth) christologies, with one foot in each world. There is, thus, a tension between the universal (spiritual) Christ of RevMagi and the specific Christ of the 4G and of Catholicism.

The birth

The first account of the Incarnation (there are two) in RevMagi is given below. In this passage, note that *no mention at all is made of Joseph or even of Mary!* (I shall have more to say about this remarkable observation in the next post.) The only characters here are the Magi and "a small and humble human"—the Star-child:

[The magi speak.] [a] "And when we bathed in the Spring of Purification with joy, and we ascended the Mountain of Victories as we were accustomed, and we went up and found that pillar of light in front of the cave, again a great fear came upon us. And we knelt upon our knees and we stretched out our hands according to our ancient custom, and we praised in silence the vision of its wonders.

[b] "And again, we saw that heaven had been opened like a great gate and men of glory carrying the star of light upon their hands. And they descended and stood upon the pillar of light, and the entire mountain was filled by its light, which cannot be uttered by the mouth of humanity.

[c] "And something like the hand of a small person drew near to our eyes from the pillar and the star, at which we could not look and it comforted us. And we saw the star enter the Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries, and the cave shone beyond measure. And a humble and kind voice made itself heard by us, which called out and said to us: 'Enter inside without doubt, in love, and see a great and amazing vision.'

[d] "And we were encouraged and comforted by the message of the voice. And we entered, being afraid, and we bowed our knees at the mouth of the cave because of the very abundance of the light. And

when we rose at its command, we lifted our eyes and saw that light, which is unspeakable by the mouth of human beings.

[e] "And when it had concentrated itself, it appeared to us in the bodily form of a small and humble human, and he said to us: 'Peace to you, sons of my hidden mysteries.' And again, we were astonished by the vision, and he said to us: 'Do not doubt the vision that you have seen, that there has appeared to you that ineffable light of the voice of the hidden Father of heavenly majesty.'

[f] And again, 'do not doubt that it appeared to you to concentrate its light in its rays, or that it appeared to you in the form of a small, humble, and unworthy human, because indeed the inhabitants of the world cannot bear to see the glory of the only Son of the Father of majesty, unless it appeared for them in the form of their worlds.'"

[B. C. Landau, *The Sages and the Star-Child*, Harvard diss. 2008 pp. 98-100; formatting added.]

This account is, of course, altogether different from that of the canonical gospels. As regards the metamorphosis of the light into the "small and humble human" [e], we note an uncanny resemblance to the account in the early second century New Source discussed in the preceding post. In the New Source, Mary brings forth "light" in the form of a weightless child. In these accounts we witness the tentativeness of the proto-Catholic tradition in reconciling opposing (and ultimately incompatible) elements, namely (a) the transcendence and perfection of the Godhead, and (b) the inherent corruptibility and finiteness of materiality. Indeed, the irreconcilable problems associated with the Incarnation would famously bedevil the Church for centuries and eventually be accounted quite beyond human comprehension, described—in complete frustration, as it were—simply as the *Mysterium Verbi*. The contradiction at the root of Christianity has endured to this day:

... Here Schleiermacher saw with penetrating insight the weakness of the two-natures doctrine. This insight was previously formulated as early as Apollinaris of Laodicea: two beings complete in themselves cannot together form a single whole. In distinction from the formula *vere deus, vere homo*, the effort to conceive the unification of

originally independently existing divine and human natures into a single individual in whom both natures nonetheless remain distinct lead inevitably to an impasse from which there is no escape.—W. Pannenberg, JESUS-GOD AND MAN, 1977:287

Returning to the Revelation of the Magi, we learn that the incarnated light-being “will perfect the love of the Father, even unto the death of a cross [cf. Phil 2:8] if they shall believe in me without doubt, and give thanks, and glorify through me the Father of that glorious majesty who sent me for their salvation” (Star-child 100). The light-being will give “perfect salvation to its believers.” In the following remarkably Thomazine-Johannine passage, we also read:

“For there is no one who can know all the mysteries of singleness [cf. GTh 23] except the one who is issued from the thought of the hiddenness of the Father. And no one knows the Father except the voice bringing forth the word of salvation, revealing the depth of hiddenness of the thought of the Father, in whom he is forever.”⁵²

Catholic theology is not yet fully developed in RevMagi. As we see, the infant is essentially a being of light—not the fleshly being demonstrated to the apostle Thomas in Jn 20:27. While the light-being will “die on the cross” (on earth, *nota bene*, not in a celestial realm),⁵³ will be “the salvation for believers,” and was announced by “the prophets [who] preached about me” (Star-child 101-102)—all very Catholic tenets—RevMagi also declares the astonishing views that “I am everywhere” (cf. GTh 77) and that Christ “has been the wellspring for the faiths of people throughout the entire inhabited world.” As history has borne out, the latter inclusive, tolerant theology did not find a home in Christianity.

⁵² Cf. Jn 1:18; 10:38; 14:6. Landau notes: 'This verse of the RevMagi uses several terms--singleness, thought, voice--that are relatively rare in early Christian literature and have their closest parallels in writings from Nag Hammadi. [Star-child 105 note f.]

⁵³ Contra E. Doherty. The death on the cross was certainly inherited from the crucifixion of Yeshu ha-Notsri ca. 66 BCE.--RS

In its assertion that “I will be born like a human being,” the Christ of RevMagi is summarily dubbed “docetist” by scholars. That scholarly view, however, obscures what I have called Stage II christology—namely, the belief that the universal *spirit* of God is everywhere and everywhere available. This universalist view is found in the Gospel of Thomas, in the Revelation of the Magi, and in pre-Catholic Christianity. It should be noted that the Christ of RevMagi is ambivalent, neither pure spirit nor pure flesh. In one passage we read: “And you will see a great and amazing sign, God appearing in the bodily form of a human being,” while only a few sentences earlier we read that “the Son of perfect mercy is the ray of light of the glory of the Father of ineffable majesty” (Star-child 85).

‘Christ as spirit’ goes hand-in-hand with what is known as polymorphy—that the spirit can assume any number of forms. The polymorphy of the light-being is fully credited in RevMagi, where we read that the visions of the Magi “did not resemble each other” and “I saw an infant who had unspeakable forms” (Star-child 103-04).

To summarize the essence of this discussion: the Christ was originally conceived as a “light-being” before he took on the flesh of the Matthaean, Lucan, and Johannine gospels. The metamorphosis of the Christ from a being of light to a being of flesh and blood was complex, challenging, and occurred in the first half of the second century CE.

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Infancy narratives III–The Magi

The second century Incarnation

In the preceding post we considered a work routinely ignored by scholarship and virtually unknown, *The Revelation of the Magi* (RevMagi). The bulk of this work dates to the early second century CE—about a half century before the writing of the canonical gospels—and reveals the evolving thinking in proto-Catholic circles regarding the Incarnation of Jesus. RevMagi depicts not a birth, but a metamorphosis of the universal Jesus spirit, that “appeared to you to concentrate its light in its rays, [and] that it appeared to you in the form of a small, humble, and unworthy human.”⁵⁴

The initial “we-source” itself is divisible into two parts: (a) an incarnation account in which the principal figures are the Magi on the one hand, and the star-child on the other; and (b) a second incarnation account with Joseph and Mary. The latter more detailed account is clearly later, while the original account of the Incarnation involved only the star-child and the Magi.

Most readers will be perplexed and surprised that the insignificant Magi play a leading role in the first accounts of the Incarnation of Jesus. Christians, of course, learn of the Magi from the familiar account in Matthew 2:

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, magi [Gk: *magoi*] from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, “Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we

⁵⁴ A discussion of RevMagi, together with synopsis in English is found in Burke and Landau, *New Testament Apocrypha* (2016), vol. 1 pp. 19 ff. Landau's PhD dissertation is entitled: *The Sages and the Star-Child* (Harvard 2008). Landau has also published a book directed at the layperson, *The Revelation of the Magi* (2010).

observed his star in the east and have come to pay him homage.” 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him, 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it has been written by the prophet:

6 ‘And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah,
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.’ ”

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.” 9 When they had heard the king, they set out, and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen in the east, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The RevMagi offers a good deal of information about the nature and identity of these “Magi.” They are not merely the “wise men” or “kings” of tradition but something much deeper—the preservers of secret wisdom traditions going back to Adam, the first man:

The Magi’s revelatory knowledge ultimately comes from Adam, who told his son Seth the prophecy of the coming star before his death. This incident, of course, is not present in the book of Genesis, but it does have some commonalities in the wealth of extrabiblical speculation surrounding the figure of Seth. Seth’s knowledge survives throughout the ages until the time of the generation of Magi who experience Christ’s coming and serve as the narrators of the RevMagi. The books of revelation, passed down within the Sethian family from father to son for generations, escape the catastrophe of the great Flood through Noah’s custody of them in the Ark. The generation of Noah, however, is the RevMagi’s final link with the events of Genesis; at that point the narrative departs from the scriptural record. As a result, the race of the Magi has only the most distant connections with the

people Israel, and they become witnesses to God's revelation independent of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets.
(B. C. Landau, THE SAGES AND THE STAR-CHILD, Harvard diss. 2008:239-40)

Thus, the Magi were *Sethians*. Landau remarks that Seth finds mention in Gen 4:25-26 and 5:3-8, "however, the proliferation of legends about Seth in antiquity was vast" (diss. 239). Before proceeding we should carefully note what Landau fails to realize—as bearers of secret wisdom, the Magi were none other than *Nazarenes*. The word derives from the Semitic root N-Ts-R with the meanings "guard, keep secret, observe, watch over, protect."⁵⁵ Landau writes: "[The RevMagi] envisions the Magi as central participants in a drama that encompasses the whole of salvation history as contained within the biblical narrative. Their [Sethian] lineage has its origins at the world's beginning, and the members of this ancient order become witnesses to the ultimate fulfillment and perfection of the Scriptures of Israel" (diss. 238-39). Furthermore, not only do the Magi possess the first books ever to be written (RevMagi 3:3-4), but those books "contained instructions for Seth's offspring to wait for the appearance of a star, which would signal the birth of God in human form" (RevMagi 4:2-10; cf. Landau, diss. 7).

Traditions of the Sethian Magi

- "On the 25th of every month the Magi purify themselves in a sacred spring" (Landau diss. 7).

This is baptism, a rite that ultimately goes back to the age-old notion of **water as a symbol of gnosis**. The "25th" day signals the end of lunar light, when that primordial symbol of gnosis (only the moon, and its minions the stars, are able to shine in darkness) disappears for

⁵⁵ The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, 2003:665-66. In Mandaeism, the *naturaiia* are 'guardians of mysteries' and 'those skilled in esoteric knowledge' (Macuch, Mandaic Dictionary p. 285).

three days of complete darkness—a time of fear for prehistoric man during which the darkness of night was total.

- “And then on the first day of the next month they ascend their country’s most sacred mountain, the Mountain of Victories, to glorify God in silent prayer (5:2-7). After praying in silence upon the mountain’s pinnacle for two days, on the third of the month they enter the Cave of Treasures of Hidden Mysteries, where Seth’s books were kept” (ibid).

The two days of silent prayer correspond to the monthly period of lunar darkness. The “third day” (cf. the resurrection of Jesus) corresponds to the reappearance of the moon’s light—a great celebratory event in ancient times and one **still honored in Muslim traditions**, where the month begins with the first light of the new moon and the moon’s crescent (= first light) is to be found on many flags of Islamic nations.

- The Magi were meditators.

According to RevMagi (1:2; 2:1), the Magi were so called due to their practice of silent prayer. This immediately recalls Buddhism, the quintessential religion of meditation. Support comes from two sources: (a) The word “Magi” does not etymologically trace back to Syriac, Greek, or Latin (Landau diss. 272)—however, in Pâli (the earliest language of Buddhism) *maggati* means “track, hunt for, trace out, follow, seek” (cf. Sanskrit *margayati*).⁵⁶ These meanings aptly describe the Magi. (b) In a related apocryphal Christian text about the Magi—one from Ireland (to be discussed in a forthcoming post)—we read that the Magi “come from the eastern part of India.”⁵⁷ Combining these clues (meditators, MAG-, “from India”) the suspicion is justified that the Magi were Buddhists, now assimilated to Jewish Sethian traditions. In this regard, precisely in the first centuries of the common era

⁵⁶ Davies & Stede, Pali-English Dictionary, p. 513.

⁵⁷ M. R. James: Latin Infancy Gospels (1927). Reprint, Wipf & Stock 2009 p. 113.

Buddhism came to the West via the *overland* route (as opposed to via the southern sea route to Egypt, **known since III BCE**). Buddhism, thus, would have had to first transit Persia (Bactria)—hence, the common notion in the West that the Magi hailed from Persia.

27

Infancy narratives IV: The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy

christology, Gnosticism, Gospel of Mark, John the Baptist, The second century Protevangelium of James

In the last several posts I have been building the case that the concept of the Incarnation was a seminal turning point—not only in the ‘birth’ of Jesus of Nazareth, but also in the birth of the Christian religion. In my view, the revolutionary conception of the Incarnation first occurred towards the middle of the second century CE. Before that, a diffuse range of non-incarnational Christianities existed. This pre-Catholic stage, before the invention of Jesus of Nazareth, was characterized by belief in a *spiritual* Jesus (‘Stage II’ christology). These early Christianities focussed on the aspirant, not on God or on a Son of God. These first century CE religious movements were gnostic, encratite, and ascetic Christianities of transformation and personal empowerment. In nature, they were closely related to the so-called Mystery Religions which predominated in Late Antiquity, and which were also religions of transformation and of personal empowerment. At its core, pre-Catholic Christianity belonged to the family of mystery religions.

A vast literature dealing with the transformation of the spirit Jesus into the man-God, Jesus of Nazareth (Stage II -> Stage III), exists. At one time this literature was exceedingly popular. But because they present views of Jesus incompatible with the canonical gospels, the many so-called ‘infancy narratives’ were marginalized and eventually quite forgotten. However, this literature is critically important, for it preceded the canonical gospels, whose own infancy narratives (Mt 1-2 and Lk 2)

draw from the library of infancy literature current in the mid-second century CE.

If the same criteria of form criticism were applied to the infancy literature as has been applied (e.g. in the age-old attempts to elucidate the Synoptic Problem) to the canonical gospels, then it would become quite apparent that the nativity stories in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke drew upon already-existing narratives. Traditional dating roundly excludes this possibility, however, for ‘the tradition’ (= church cum academe) clings to the standard first century dating for the New Testament. But when that dating is moved approximately one century later—as I have argued in these pages (see [here](#) and [here](#))—then new possibilities arise and a whole new set of interrelationships between the Christian texts obtains.

The early infancy literature deals not only with the birth of Jesus as a human being, but also with the births and childhoods of John the Baptist, Mary, and even of Joseph. We discover considerable confusion and overlap of characters—especially between John and Jesus, John’s parents (Zacharias and Elizabeth) and Jesus’ parents (Joseph and Mary), not to mention also Mary’s parents (Joachim and Anna). For example, in the long Armenian Gospel of the Infancy:

[Herod] sent soldiers to Zechariah to demand the child John, saying to him: ‘As for you, Zechariah, I have heard from many that your son will reign over Israel...’⁵⁸

Here we see that Herod seeks John, not Jesus, and furthermore that John, not Jesus, “will reign over Israel” (cf. Jn 19:3, “King of the Jews”).

A study of the Christian infancy literature shows that Jesus (literally, ‘Savior’), originally a divine light-spirit (that is, gnosis), gradually became anthropomorphized. Under the pens of the Catholics, the

⁵⁸ A. Terian, *THE ARMENIAN GOSPEL OF THE INFANCY*, Oxford 2008:64.

prophet of history who had the light-spirit (John the Hasmonean, aka John the Baptist, aka Yeshu ha-Notsri) became God. The prophet of history was John, but he was burdened with a gnostic theology anathema to the Catholics. In replacing John's theology with the Pauline kerygma (belief in the atoning sacrifice of the only Son of God), the Catholics also invented a new prophet with a tailor-made, awe-inspiring biography—Jesus of Nazareth.

The process of God becoming man was messy. It has left a literary record at the fringes of Christianity. Some once-important elements (from a gnostic perspective) were reduced to Gospel incidentals—including the star, the magi, and the flight into Egypt.

In the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* (AGI), Jesus is likened to a “star.” Anna, the mother of Mary, says to her young daughter: “From you shall dawn the morning star, light like the moon, brighter than the stars, a sunbeam at the break of day, from the rising of the sun in the east” (Terian 12). This coheres with three works that we have recently considered on this blog in separate posts: the [Ascension of Isaiah](#) (with its simple infancy narrative), the so-called ‘New Source,’ and the Revelation of the Magi. In all three of these accounts (which I maintain are pre-canonical) Jesus is a being of light, commensurate with its status as a spiritual divine entity of ‘Stage II’ christology. Jesus is not yet the flesh and blood creature of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, texts that emphasize Jesus’ humanness by providing him with full-fledged genealogies going back to Adam.

The emergence of Jesus from a background of Jesus-as-spirit must certainly impact any discussion of ‘docetism’ in early Christianity. Evidence is mounting—as now presented on this website—that prior to the mid-second century ‘Jesus’ was emphatically a *spiritual* entity. This cannot be stressed enough.

In the text known as The Revelation of the Magi, [we saw that the Magi](#) were Sethian gnostics, believers in secret wisdom traditions

handed down since Adam, the first man. "Believers in secret wisdom traditions" is merely an elocution for the Hebrew *notsri* = Greek *Nazarene*. Here we are, then, once again inexorably led back to **Yesu ha-Notsri** = "Jesus the Nazarene," a prophet attested in the Talmud as having actually lived in the first decades of the first century BCE.

In the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, not only did the three Magi follow the star to Jesus' birthplace, but they were also accompanied by entire armies:

At that same time the angel went forth to the regions of Persia and announced the good news to the Magian kings, that they should go and worship the newborn child. And the star led all their armies for nine months, and they came and arrived for the birth from the holy Virgin...

[On] the 23rd of the month Tebeth and 8 January, behold the Magi from the east, who had left their land with many armies, arrived in the city of Jerusalem within nine months... And heading their armies, there were twelve men who were appointed commanders. And the armies that accompanied them numbered 12,000 men, a thousand under each commander...

When Herod saw the multitude of mounted troops encamped around the city, he feared them greatly... He summoned his princes and magistrates... [They] said to the king: 'Command that the city be watched carefully, lest they should seize it by surprise and take it by force and engage in taking captives.' (Terian 26, 48-50)

In one astonishing passage, Joseph and Mary actually abandon the baby Jesus out of fear of the oncoming Magi!

And when Joseph and Mary saw all these things, they feared the kings and all their armies; and being terrified, they left the cave and fled from that place. And the child Jesus Christ was left alone in the cave, sitting in the manger for brute animals. When all the princes [of the Magi] saw Joseph, they said to him: 'Elder, why are you startled with fear and fleeing? Fear not. Are we not people like you? Joseph said: 'Where have you come from and who are you looking for here?' The Magi said: 'We have come from a distant land—from the land of Persia—with many gifts, and we desire to see the newborn child, the king of the Jews, and to worship him. Now, if you happen to know where he is, tell us the truth that we may see him. Upon hearing this, Mary entered

the cave joyously and with gladness of heart took the child into her lap.
And she glorified God with thanksgiving. (Terian 54)

Nazareth in the Christian infancy narratives

In a whole range of this early infancy literature—including the AGI, the Protevangelium of James, and the History of Joseph the Carpenter—Nazareth is located not in the Galilee but within walking distance of the Jerusalem Temple, for Mary and others go between Nazareth and the Temple “as if going from Nazareth to Jerusalem was [like] walking up the garden.”⁵⁹ Incidentally, I argued in my first book that the Southern (Jerusalem-Qumran) Tradition preceded the Northern (Galilee) Tradition (The Myth of Nazareth 300–07).

The infancy literature now under review coheres with this chronology. These apocryphal infancy narratives know Nazareth, but not Nazareth in Galilee. However, because a settlement of Nazareth never existed in Judea, we have here extra-archeological evidence that the town of Nazareth was purely an invention of the early Catholic tradition.

The fact that the Gospel of Mark also does not know Nazareth (see Myth of Nazareth xiii; NazarethGate 444), while the remaining three canonical gospels do, suggests that GMk and this Christian infancy literature belong to the same literary stratum. I provisionally date that stratum to the mid-second century CE.

The birth of Jesus in AGI

The passage regarding the birth of Jesus in the Armenian Gospel preserves elements that are rudely noncanonical and, I maintain, must be earlier. I cite here the relevant account in its entirety:

⁵⁹ B. Bagatti, EXCAVATIONS IN NAZARETH, 1969:11-12. Passage discussed in Salm, THE MYTH OF NAZARETH, 2008:296.

(8.9) Joseph looked far away and saw a woman coming from a distance and carrying a large sheet on her shoulder; and meeting her, he greeted her. Joseph said: 'Woman, where you coming from or where are you going?' The woman said: 'And what do you want that you are asking me?' He said: 'I seek a Hebrew midwife.' The woman said: 'Who has given birth in the cave?' Joseph said: 'Mary, who was nurtured in the temple and was given by lot to be my wife, not according to the flesh—as far as I am concerned—but a spouse by name [only], and her pregnancy is of the Holy Spirit.' The woman said: 'You have spoken well. But tell me, where is she?' Joseph said: 'Come and see.'

(8.10) And as the two went together, Joseph asked her on the way and said: 'Woman, tell me your name that I may know who you are.' The woman said: 'Why are you asking me? I am Eve, the foremother of all, and I have come to behold with my own eyes the redemption that is wrought on my behalf.' Upon hearing this, Joseph marveled at the wondrous things that he saw.

(8.11) And when they arrived from far away and stood by the entrance of the cave, they saw the beams of heaven open up and abundant light pour all the way down from above. And a pillar of fire, comprised of cloud, stood above the cave. And they heard the voice of the bodiless hosts of heaven singing songs with ceaseless voice and glorifying God.

(9.1) When Joseph and the foremother heard and saw this, they bowed down and fell prostrate, and raising their voices they blessed God saying: 'Blessed are you, Lord God of Israel, who today wrought salvation to the children of men by your coming.' [Eve added:] 'And you restored me from that fall and established [me] in my former glory. Now my soul has been magnified and my hope has been gladdened in God my Savior.'

(9.2) And as the foremother Eve was saying this, she saw the cloud being lifted up into heaven and moving farther from the cave. And the holy child was revealed openly, seated in the manger of irrational creatures. And he came and took the breast of his mother, as he was fed with milk, and returned to his place. And when Joseph and the foremother saw this, they marveled with amazement and gave glory to God with thanksgiving and said: 'Has this ever been heard by anyone, or has anyone every seen with his eyes all these things that took place?'

(9.3) And the foremother entered the cave and took the infant into her lap, hugged him tenderly and kissed him and blessed God... And she

wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger of the oxen... (Terian pp. 43-45)

Where to begin commenting on this remarkable passage? First of all, let us confirm that it is radically *non-canonical*. The few canonical elements include Joseph, (very marginally) Mary, the cave, and the manger. The midwife Eve dominates the account and plays the principal role. Mary is scarcely mentioned at all. Note that it is the midwife Eve who wraps the infant in swaddling clothes and lays him in the manger—not Mary. In fact, if we delete one sentence from ¶18.9, Mary disappears completely. This suggests to me that the original account turned on the conception (made explicit at ¶18.9 and 9.1) that Jesus came to earth to redeem/restore Eve from ‘the Fall.’ We see here how the authors of this text are under the heavy influence of the Genesis narrative. In their conception, Christ is figuratively if not literally the son of Adam and Eve—the Son of Man as well as the Son of God.

But the narrative plot was obviously poorly executed by the author(s). For example, at ¶18.9, Joseph seeks a midwife. But the midwife Eve says: “Who has given birth in the cave?” This makes no sense, for if the child has *already* been born then there is no longer need of a midwife.

The Catholic theology of the nativity literature

Scholarship reflexively dismisses these stories as trite, nonsensical, and fabulous—which, admittedly, they often are (e.g. the outrageously puerile miracles in the *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*). But such hasty dismissal overlooks a deceptive aspect of the nativity stories: their theology is already fully-formed, explicit, and thoroughly Catholic. From reading this literature, we quickly recognize what the proto-Catholics *wished* to express—that God became man in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, that He did so in order to save Adam’s progeny from the Original Sin, that Jesus accomplished this feat through his sacrificial death on the cross, and that Jesus will return as

eschatological judge. These elements are in the infancy literature. It is clear, however, that the proto-Catholics had difficulty fashioning convincing stories that would effectively convey these majestic doctrines. Stories that are more convincing belong to the next stage of the Catholic tradition—the canonical gospels.

As regards the Armenian Gospel of the Infancy, the following passages reveal the theology that the author(s) of the work *intended* to convey through the narratives:

- [The High Priest speaks] "The virgin shall conceive without a man and shall give birth to a male child; and he shall become a great ruler, king of Israel." (Terian 10)

- For the Word of God was to come and take body from the immaculate and undefiled holy Virgin, and in body to appear as a man wandering on earth. (Terian 17)

- [The angel Gabriel speaks to Mary] "Behold, you shall conceive and shall bear the Son of the Father Most High. And he shall become a great king over all the earth." (Terian 21)

- [Mary speaks to the angel Gabriel] "I am greatly amazed and astonished! To envelop the deity whom heaven and earth cannot contain; nor could the full ranks of the heavenly hosts, the bodiless, spiritual, and fiery beings dare to look upon or behold his glory! How then shall I be able to bear patiently and to endure the infinite Fire and to have him tabernacle in my body? Or how would I be able to support and to lift him bodily into my lap, or to touch him with my hands? Your word is impossible and beyond all human imagination to ponder and to comprehend!" (Terian 22)

- [Gabriel replies to Mary] "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you, and God the Word shall become embodied in you, and you shall give birth to the Son of the Father Most High. Your virginity shall remain pure and undefiled." (Terian 23)

- [The High Priest Zechariah speaks to Mary] "From you shall be the salvation of all the earth." (Terian 28)

- [Salome speaks] "O newborn child of the mighty Father, you child Jesus, Messiah, King of Israel. You, Savior and anointed Lord, have been revealed in the city of David.

You, Light to the ends of the world, have been revealed for the salvation of the world." (Terian 46)

- [The Magi read from the document written by God and passed down from Adam and through Seth's descendants.] "Since Adam first desired to become divine, God condescended to become human because of his abundant compassion and love for humankind. Through his intercession God vowed and swore to the forefather [Adam] to write a document and to seal it with his finger, that 'in the 6,000th year, on the sixth day, I shall send my Only-begotten Son, God the Word, who shall come to take body from your progeny; and my Son shall become Son of Man. And I shall restore you to your former glory. Then shall you, Adam, become bodily immortal, divine, united with God as one of us, knowing good and evil.'" (Terian 58)

With the arguable exception of man becoming "divine," the above doctrines are unambiguously Catholic. Yet they do not reveal the emphasis on the passion and resurrection of Jesus that will come with the canonical gospels. The infancy literature simply presents the basic case: God became man, how this occurred, and why it is important. The gospels would soon take the theology embedded in the infancy literature and would marvelously elaborate it, improving that element in the infancy literature that is weakest: the narrative component. They would reduce the emphasis on the Incarnation (the gospels of Mark and John omit the Incarnation entirely), and would add dimensions familiar to us all today: the ministry of Jesus, his passion, and his resurrection from the grave.

28

The infancy narratives-conclusion

Christian origins, Nazareth, The second century

In this post I'd like to wrap up my survey of the Christian literature devoted to the birth of Jesus. As mentioned in a prior post, this literature is surprisingly extensive. In fact, it was once as popular as it is now obscure. The reasons are that the infancy literature gave scope for endearing domestic scenes, to portray the family of Jesus, and to bring a common touch to the otherwise exalted messiah, the awe-inspiring Son of God.

In modern times, the only infancy gospel to have been accorded a modicum of scholarly attention is the so-called Protevangelium of James (PrJ).⁶⁰ It was once a very popular work, surviving in many different editions. In 1924 one scholar described and cited about twenty infancy gospels that may ultimately descend from PrJ. It may be that two or more of these works once constituted part of a single longer account—the first (entirely fabulous) 'Catholic' gospel. After all, the PrJ is made up of three distinct parts that scholarship has determined were later slapped together, as Harnack first perceived (see preceding post). But the exact original form and extent of that early gospel is not known.

I recently suggested that the *Protevangelium of James* had its inception after the Gospel of Mark but before the Gospel of Matthew, that is, towards mid-II CE. I arrived at this hypothesis from the fact that PrJ is more Catholic (and hence later) than the adoptionist GMk, and also because PrJ shares several themes with the subsequent canonical

⁶⁰ M.R. James, *The Apocryphal New Testament*. Oxford, pp. 38-89.

tradition—including the birth in Bethlehem, the magi, and the star. These latter themes are also lacking in GMk.

At the back of his short book, *The Armenian Gospel of the Infancy* (Oxford 2008), A. Terian presents “Three Early Armenian Versions of the Protevangelium of James.” In significant respects, these supplementary versions differ from one another and from the ‘standard’ edition of PrJ (which was published by E. Strycker in 1961). Only two of these three supplementary Armenian versions of PrJ have birth stories relevant to Jesus. Version **A** depicts his ‘birth’ (actually, his transformation) as follows:

[Joseph and the midwife] paused outside the cave. And a bright cloud overshadowed the cave. The midwife said: ‘My soul has been magnified today, for I have seen a new miracle with my eyes. For God has given salvation to Israel.’ And right away the cloud was lifted up from the cave there, and a great light appeared within the cave, so that the eyes could not gaze at it or bear it. Soon, after a moment, the light was drawn aside, until the infant was seen. And he took the breast of Mary and began to feed. (Terian 157)

As we saw in the simple birth account from the *Ascension of Isaiah*, in the foregoing there is also a cave, a cloud, a great light, and—presto!—an infant. No description is given of an actual birth which, in any case, does *not* involve Mary. Nevertheless, the author underlines the physical nature of the new infant with his final line: “he took the breast of Mary and began to feed.” In sum, depicted here is the transition from a being of light into a being of flesh (Stage II -> Stage III christology; Gnosticism -> Catholicism). This transition reveals both the dating (mid-II CE) and the theological *Sitz im Leben* (emerging Catholicism) of this account. Note that Jesus is not yet born of Mary. He is born of *light*—i.e., directly from God.

Supplementary version [B] is similar to versions we have already considered. Here, light also transforms into the infant Jesus. The central role is, once again, not played by Mary. But in this version another female assumes the principal role: the midwife who, as we

saw elsewhere in the Armenian Gospel of the Infancy, is explicitly identified as Eve, the mother of all humanity. Hence, in version [B] Eve is the “midwife” to the baby Jesus:

[Joseph and the midwife] stood at the entrance of the cave. And behold, a bright cloud overshadowed the cave. The midwife said: “My soul has been magnified, for today I have seen miracles with my very eyes—this very day. For God has given salvation to the sons of Israel.” And right away the one who was born appeared, as the cloud departed from that cave. A great light appeared within the cave, so that they could not look at it with their eyes. After a minute the light also was drawn aside, until the infant was seen. (Terian 165–66)

Once again, light transforms into a human. The vegetative ‘**Magnificat**’, so important to later Catholic liturgy, is here uttered by the midwife Eve—not by Mary. Thus we see here the origins of the Magnificat: the foremother of humans gives thanks to God for Jesus, who would redeem us all from Original Sin. We also note the great theological transformations taking place: Mary the mother of *Jesus* would take the place of Eve, the mother of *humanity*, even as Jesus of Nazareth would become the *only* Son of God, instead of *all* the sons and daughters of humanity becoming Sons of God.

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas

The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (James:49 ff) offers an account of the boyhood of Jesus. This text was once immensely popular and exists in a bewildering number of variants and in numerous languages.⁶¹ The work is full of awe-inspiring miracles (no doubt its primary reason for existing). Though we can quickly put those aside as pure invention, it is noteworthy that in the so-called Greek version C, the writer (“I, James”) notes:

⁶¹ For discussion and one version in English translation, see Ehrman and Plese, *THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS*, pp. 3 ff.

[The Holy Family is in Egypt] An angel of the Lord met Mary and said to her, "Take the child and return to the land of Judea; for those who were seeking the child's life have died." Mary arose with Joseph and Jesus, and they came to Capernaum, in the region of Tiberias, in their own homeland. When Jesus knew he had come out of Egypt, he withdrew into the wilderness after the death of Herod, until the disturbance in Jerusalem had died out.

Several elements in this passage merit comment:

(a) The angel commands the Holy Family to return to "Judea" but they return to Capernaum, "in the region of Tiberias." This shows confusion between the southern and northern traditions and recalls a statement attributed by Eusebius to **Julius Africanus** (whose date is uncertain): "...Of these were the above-mentioned persons, called *desposynoi*, on account of their affinity to the family of our Savior, these coming from Nazara and Cochaba, villages of **Judea**, to the other parts of the world..." (Cf. *The Myth of Nazareth* pp. 295 ff). As in the *History of Joseph the Carpenter*, the *Armenian Gospel of the Infancy*, and the *Protevangelium of James*, Nazareth is located not in the Galilee but in Judea (even within walking distance of the Jerusalem Temple).

(b) For the author of InfThomas, the eventual home of Jesus is *Capernaum*. Frank Zindler, myself, and others have long argued that this is the view reflected in the Gospel of Mark (see *The Myth of Nazareth* 298, etc).

(c) In InfThomas, Jesus "withdrew into the wilderness." This motif would be transferred to John the Baptist in the later canonical gospels.

The InfThomas continues as follows:

And I myself, James, began to glorify God, who gave me the wisdom I found before him to write his story. Amen! I also thought it necessary make known to all the brothers from the Gentiles all the things done by our Lord Jesus Christ. He was born in our region of Bethlehem and in the village of Nazareth...

(d) The writer claims to be “James.” This reflects an early stratum when the Jewish-Christian James was the primary authority figure in the Jesus tradition (cf. GTh 12; PrJ; Pseudo-Clementine literature, etc).

(e) However, the writer directs his text not to Jewish-Christians but explicitly to “Gentiles.” This suggests a very early date when James was still an authority figure but Gentiles in the Church were breaking away. The wording “all the brothers from the Gentiles” categorically excludes Jews and betrays some tension with the latter, as if Jewish Christians were not “brothers” and would not be receptive to the author’s text.

(f) Note the locution: “our Lord Jesus Christ.” This would become standard in Catholic/Pauline literature.

(g) Jesus was “born.” The doctrine of the Incarnation is accepted and not a matter to be disputed (e.g. by laggard Jewish Christians for whom “Jesus” continued to be a spiritual entity).

(h) Jesus “was born in our region of Bethlehem and in the village of Nazareth.” This astonishing declaration furnishes some back-story to Mt 2:23. It is important to the author of InfThomas that Jesus be from *both* Bethlehem and Nazareth. We can appreciate why: (i) Bethlehem was the mythical ‘home’ of the Jewish messiah, son of David (Mic 5:2-5; 1 Sam 16:1 ff); (ii) “Nazareth” reveals that the author already seeks to redefine the odious term Natsarene (= gnostic ‘keeper’ of hidden wisdom) into a place name—the (invented) *village* of Nazareth.

Spirit, man, or God-man?

The PrJ may be the first text to have made the conceptual leap from the *spiritual* Jesus to the God of flesh and blood (Stage II to Stage III). Once again I note that the Gospel of Mark—probably known to the author of PrJ, as intimated in the preceding post—has an adoptionist theology. In GMk, Jesus is not yet fully divine—he is in an intermediate position. That is, GMk’s Jesus is an especially worthy prophet who is

designated the Son of God at Mk 1:11: “Thou art my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (cf. Mk 9:7). The designation is somewhat ambiguous. Others can, presumably, *also* be designated “Sons of God.”

A similar christology—where Jesus is intermediate between man and God—obtains in the so-called Gospel of Peter (*aka* the Akhmim Fragment). GPet may well have influenced the passion account in GMk, for the account in GPet seems more primitive, as Crossan observed.

In both GPet and GMk Jesus cries out from the cross, but in GPet the cry is, “My power, O power, you have forsaken me!” This power can only be the indwelling spirit of God (Stage II). *Before* Jesus cried out, however, GPet states that he “felt no pain” (4.10). How the evangelist would know this is of course a mystery, but my point is that for the author, when the power that indwelled Jesus departed, Jesus was in anguish. Clearly, for the author of GPet, Jesus is still a man and the power of God is a *separate* entity.

Gospel of Peter

Jesus is a human prophet indwelled by the divine spirit (adoptionist)
The setting has moved from the time of Janneus/Salome to Augustus/Herod

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Gospel of Mark

Jesus is a human prophet indwelled by the divine spirit (adoptionist)
John the Baptist is a subsidiary figure to the prophet Jesus

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Protevangelium of James

Jesus is THE God-Man (Catholic)
John the Baptist is a subsidiary figure to THE God-Man Jesus

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Gospels of Matthew, Luke, John

Jesus is THE God-Man (Catholic)
many elements of the PrJ birth stories are retained but undergo revision

The Gospel of Mark followed the Gospel of Peter and manifested a critical separation: the sundering of Jesus from the Baptist into two separate figures. This was new, for previously the prophet (and any worthy person) was indwelled by the divine spirit (Stage II). Though they were two different entities, the divine spirit Jesus and the human vessel were not two separate *people*. But GMk has now made the spirit Jesus into a *person*, and has at the same time reduced the original prophet, John (the Baptist), into a *subordinate* of Jesus.

Therein lies a colossal yet subtle change in focus, for with GMk the focus moved from man to God. Consider: the preceding gnostic worldview was man-centered, and the initiative and agency lay entirely with the individual—life was about seeking and finding (GTh 1: “He who finds the meaning of these words will not taste death”); the goal required breaking family ties; social marginalization (“Become passers-by”); giving one’s all; self sacrifice; unconditional love...

But the ensuing Catholic worldview was God-centered, and the initiative and agency lay with God. This change in focus also permits a

move away from works, seeking-and-finding, and 'enlightenment' (man-centered) to the doctrines of redemption, atonement, belief, and worship (God-centered).

The worldview of gnosticism (Stages I and II) was not acceptable to the Catholics, for in the gnostic quest anyone could be 'indwelled' by the spirit of God—anyone could be 'a Jesus.' And with **multiple Jesuses running around**, it was impossible for the Catholic Church to amass power, to assert exclusivity, to claim that it *alone* possessed the way to salvation. This is why the Catholics needed one Jesus ('Savior')—*their* Jesus. By making *their* Jesus God, and by mandating worship of *their* Jesus, they could rule the world. And, as we know, their plan worked. The Catholic Church teaches us that (in the guise of Peter) it is God's only approved representative on earth (Mt 16:18), and that the only way to salvation is via *their* savior: "Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'" (Jn 14:16).

The Protevangelium of James laid the groundwork for these head-spinning concepts by ensuring that Jesus' birth was *the birth of a God*. This was absolutely essential to Catholicism. The stories in PrJ were quickly reworked by Matthew and Luke in the mid-second century and form the basis for the creeds of the later Church, for the incessant speculation, interpretation, and infighting that characterize later Christian history, and for the unique claim of Christianity that *God became man* in Jesus of Nazareth.