

In Search of the Rejected Seer

Chapter 14 of NazarethGate by [Rene J. Salm](#) (2015)

Controlling the story

For the last half century Christianity has adopted a defensive posture as regards the archeology of Nazareth. It has been engaged in an extended rearguard action in defense of an iconic story—a protracted attempt to manage the ever rising flood of incoming data, most of it uncongenial. The maturation of the Internet and the general democratization of knowledge are breaking down ancient monopolies over information—from communication, to research, to publication. Demographically, Atheism, humanism, and “free thinking” is on the ascendant in the West. At the same time, the Roman Catholic Church continues to stumble. Pedophile scandals, Vatican Bank irregularities, and a thoroughly opaque administrative mechanism continue to confront an increasingly progressive world. Meanwhile, the Church drags its feet on women’s rights, birth control, celibacy, the right to die, and a host of issues which could—if handled differently—actually make it relevant.

Of course, the Roman Catholic Church wields enormous clout. Without an army, it is in a sense still the largest and most powerful state, for it claims the allegiance of more people than any sovereign nation. The Church is also a significant actor in world affairs. Only a few weeks before this writing the Vatican mediated a historic thaw between Cuba and the United States. It still functions as a seasoned (indeed, the most seasoned) and valuable political ally behind the scenes.

But the Church's grip on power is not firm. Even at rest its hands shake like those of a doddering old man. He receives deference—sometimes begrudgingly—but the honors to which he was once accustomed are no longer proffered. In many places he is now merely tolerated—and eyed with suspicion (if at all) by those children of the modern world who are much more rational and nimble. Some look on him with burning hostility, knowing his sordid past and how he lorded it over all others when he was in his prime. They may forgive, but they refuse to forget.

The Church lives on tradition. Its survival rests on the ability to control the past, and thereby to control the present. Without the power to monopolize learning, to burn books, to even burn heretics, it now is in the uncomfortable position of depending entirely on people voluntarily embracing the faith. That faith is based on a story enshrined in the New Testament, a story in which magic is the principal means of persuasion. The story is now old—and, indeed, it increasingly seems old. The wonder-working Son of Man may still inspire awe and veneration among more naïve folk. To many, however, his (alleged) virgin birth, forgiving of sins, walking on water, and resurrection from the grave are simply absurd.

Christianity claims to derive authority, definition, and sustenance from the crucified savior, Jesus Christ. In fact, however, it derives these from a mythology carefully crafted long ago. The Christian religion was born out of parables, paper, and power. It is no accident, no product of some fortuitous constellation of circumstances two thousand years ago. On the contrary. The religion owes its origins—its very success—to the calculation of the bank heist, to the deliberation of the palace coup. Christianity may be many things, but innocent is certainly not one of them.

The story enshrined in scripture is Christianity's sole remaining weapon. This is not unique, and parallels with Judaism's attempts to control the present through an invented narrative of origins are notable. To attack these narratives—and even to discuss them in terms of myth rather than history—is to attack

the underpinnings of both religions. The existence of the Israeli state today is largely a result of the perceived Jewish claim to the land—itsself the product of a shared (though far from universal, or even defensible) view of history. At stake is much that is hardly abstract. Israeli tourism garnered \$11 billion in 2014, some 4.5% of the country's nominal GDP. Tourism employs 100,000 workers, two-thirds of them in the hotel industry. In short, controlling the story is, in the case of Israel, a simple matter of survival. No patriarchs, no Israel.

Nazareth is ground zero in the Christian narrative of origins. The settlement is more important to the Jesus story than Bethlehem, Capernaum, or even Jerusalem. If Nazareth did not exist at the turn of the era, then the character 'Jesus of Nazareth' immediately falls from the august level of man-god to that of puppet—entirely bypassing the intermediate human (historical) level. With that precipitous fall—the recognition of Jesus' unreality—the religion based upon him must deflate like a punctured balloon.

Let there be no doubt that Christianity is based upon a unique claim—that God entered history not in an abstract or mystical way familiar to religions in general, but by being incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. Hans Küng has observed that the success of Christianity lies precisely in the historical reality of its quintessentially awesome (even miraculous) origins.¹ To deny the historical reality of those origins is to deny Christianity itself:

It cannot be stated too strongly that Christianity is an historical religion, and that it is so intimately tied to history that if the historical credibility of its sources were to be proven false, it would at once collapse as a possible claimant for our loyalty. —C. Anderson²

¹ I am indebted to H. Detering (2011:185) for this reference.

² Anderson 1972:55.

Questioning the historical origins of Christianity—as well as of Judaism—depends on access to recondite information now available in primary and secondary source materials, and also on the freedom to investigate. Neither the source materials nor such freedom existed in the past. Questioning the foundations of the Christian faith (including its historical underpinnings) could—and generally did—result in ostracism, imprisonment, excommunication, torture, or even death.

It is no surprise that doubts regarding the historicity of the Nazarene (“Jesus mythicism”) are today multiplying precisely when the widespread freedom to investigate intersects with the equally widespread availability of information. This auspicious state of affairs is not merely unprecedented in history—it is a signal triumph of civilization.

During the Dark Ages the Catholic Church was the sole repository of knowledge in Western Europe. For long centuries Christianity carefully fashioned the worldview we have inherited, weeding out what it despised and simply making up what it desired. As a result, the West has inherited a fabricated worldview centered on a carefully constructed myth thoroughly unworthy of the modern mind: Jesus of Nazareth. Monks collected manuscripts, preserved them, and wrote ‘history’ according to the wishes of their superiors. They copied some few texts, changed more, and destroyed most. Learning was modest and monopolized. It can be no surprise that with the onset of the Dark Ages previous and competing religions fell into the shade—as if nothing else mattered and the world was simply waiting for the arrival of Jesus Christ! In fact, this is still what many Christians believe.

Regrettably, censorship is not reversible. Once books are burned, once the slate is erased, precious knowledge is gone, in some cases forever—or at least until reason and science laboriously re-invent the wheel.

The enormous wealth of ancient civilizations has been lost, and the loss is not at all limited to the sciences. The so-called “mystery religions” are today little more than an enigma. Two thousand years ago the goal of every aspiring

Roman was to become initiated into secret knowledge—to become transformed through gnosis. Such transformation was freely available to all but actually claimed (or accomplished) by few, in various forms, rites, and places. It carried the promise and potential of becoming divine. This view—so bizarre to us moderns—is in fact as old as civilization. People were divine until materialism cheapened man’s noble spiritual worldview. After all, what is there to live for, if metal and clay are all there is?

In the Sumerian epic of Atrahasis (“Ultra-Wise”) we read of the transformation of man into God. Atrahasis seeks as a mere mortal. He finds, transforms into a divinity, and forevermore inhabits the lofty heights of Mt. Hermon. In another recension Gilgamesh seeks the wisdom of immortality at the distant “Cedar Mountain”—which was also successively Baal’s abode (Mount Zaphon), the place where the Watchers came down to earth (1 Enoch 6:6), and the mount where Jesus was transfigured (Mk 9:2–8).

The rite of transformation enacted at Dan—located at the foot of Mt. Hermon—was a symbolic water ritual: the initiate entered the sacred water and there mingled with the gods, emerging purified (Lucian, *De Dea Syria*, 46–47). Water has been a symbol for gnosis since earliest times—another lost concept. Long ago, immersion in gnosis was the prerequisite for transformation. The symbolism vaguely survives in the Christian rite of baptism—deracinated, of course, of its gnostic essence. It is no coincidence that John baptized in the River Jordan—the sacred river emerging from Mt. Hermon itself.

Sooner or later, those who enquire into the origins of Christianity uncover unfamiliar, even unknown roots. This was originally a mystery religion concerned with formidable seeking, with life-changing gnosis, with self-transformation as the reward of extreme effort. That severe religion can still be detected in a few sayings of Jesus and in certain parables. Finding through seeking, giving one’s all, and loving one’s enemies are teachings that cannot have begun with an invented figure. They must have predated Jesus of Nazareth.

Christianity as we know it is no longer about seeking and finding, loving one's enemies, and giving one's all, but is about belief in the savior from Galilee. Thus, we venerate the finger that points—an invented finger at that. The new religion retained a few older rites, known from the mystery religions, but those rites were now geared to propagating the faith. Baptism no longer consecrated the symbolic descent into gnosis but marked initiation into a fellowship. The old spirituality of transformation became a new code of allegiance:

In the name of the Christian community I claim you for Christ our Savior by the sign of his cross.

The above words lie at the heart of the modern Christian baptismal rite. They are the public acknowledgment of ownership, belonging, and allegiance. Spiritual transformation has disappeared. As the emphasis moved from transformation to belonging the ancient world quietly passed away, to be replaced by a much colder materialism. Accomplishment gave way to membership, as the 'proclamation' (*kerygma*) of 'good news' echoed from village to village: those who believe are saved by the atoning death of Jesus Christ, and no other salvation exists, ever did, and ever will. This proclamation, first enunciated by Paul, became the backbone of a New World Order still regent today.

But the proclamation is false. In this book we have brought forward one proof: Nazareth did not exist 'in the time of Jesus.' Additional proofs for the non-existence of the Prophet from Galilee also exist, and we will explore some of them in the remaining pages of this chapter.

We have compared Jesus of Nazareth to a great puppet. Those who pull the strings—as they have through the ages—are the lilliputian priests, prelates, and pastors of myriad churches. In their hands the puppet teaches, he heals, he raises from the dead, he rises from the dead, and he warns (pre-mortem and post-mortem) that only he has the authority and power to judge our souls

in the end times. Fear and awe cow us into worshipping the Great Puppet from Nazareth.

And maybe that's the whole point.

An early gnostic prophet

We have described two stages in the religion: (1) a gnostic pre-Christian stage in which salvation is the product of man's effort; and (2) a subsequent proclamation in which salvation is produced by faith in the Son of God, Jesus. The former stage is man-centered, the latter God-centered. The former is a religion of achievement, the latter of redemption. The former requires effort ('works'), the other allegiance ('faith'). Both preach salvation, but they define the concept very differently.

Issuing from the same root, these two distinct religious systems have opposed one another through the centuries. The orthodox view—salvation by faith in Jesus Christ—gained the upper hand in Late Roman times and soon branded its gnostic parent 'heresy.'

Signs of the earlier stage exist. Some are controversial, such as the view that the gnostic system now called Mandeism preceded Christianity (Lidzbarski, Bultmann), even as John the Baptist (the 'light-bringer' of the Mandaeans) preceded Jesus (ironically, the 'anti-Christ' of the Mandaeans).

Even in the earliest stratum of the New Testament we encounter signs of an earlier view. Thus, for example, in the Letter to the Philippians (attributed to Paul but in fact a second century Marcionite work), we find an old gnostic hymn in which a spiritual entity descends into the world of matter, experiences humility and death, and then returns to the godhead (Phil 2:6–

11).³ That entity is named Jesus (“Salvation”) after its successful mission is accomplished. The name is an honorific, the reward for a job well done. The naming could hardly have occurred post-mortem if “Jesus” had already possessed the name when a human being and before his task was accomplished. Robert M. Price observes:

As P. L. Couchoud recognized, the hymn predates the process of re-conceiving the god Jesus as a historical figure since “Jesus” becomes his name only after his earthly mission is complete. Those who first sang this hymn never thought of a man named Jesus traveling the roads of Galilee, teaching and casting out demons, much less getting crucified on earth at a Roman governor’s order.⁴

We may grant that the writer of this gnostic hymn had no knowledge of the Galilean prophet, Jesus of Nazareth. However, if “Jesus” was a received name “only after his earthly mission” was complete, does this not imply an earthly existence at some point in time? And if so, then who was the man thus renamed?

Of course, we don’t know. It is little appreciated, however, that this complete ignorance may have been carefully abetted—even fostered—from the start. If another prophet actually existed, his authentic biography would serve to undermine the false biography of Jesus of Nazareth—point for point. Those who knew the prophet of history (and there would certainly have been many) would be on hand to give the lie: “I knew him and he wasn’t at all like Jesus of

³ All that is required for this to become the adoptionist view of Christology is that the spirit ‘adopts’ a human being in order to sojourn on earth. According to Paul, such adoption is open to all those in the flesh who are predestined and “called” to enjoy the status of “many brothers” in Christ (Rom 8:28–29). This early view—which admits a creator God but knows no unique savior figure in human form, and which is “the end and vocation of all men” (Conybeare, *The Key of Truth*, Oxford 1898:vii)—would spawn numerous ‘heresies’ such as the Paulicians, whose name cannot be entirely coincidental. Already the evangelist Mark repudiates this semi-universalist view, however: Jesus is indeed adopted, but he is now unique, and thus the way to self-perfection (through gnosis or any other path) is forever closed.

⁴ Price 2012:460. The internal reference is to P. L. Couchoud, “The Historicity of Jesus: A Reply to Alfred Loisy,” *Hibbert Journal*, vol. 37, no. 2 (1938):193–214.

Nazareth!” (Or: “My grandfather knew him...” etc.) Memories last a long time, and memories of unique people longer still. Hence, the Gospel of Mark adopts what we call the ‘Messianic Secret’— those who knew Jesus in his lifetime (the apostles) didn’t understand him at all. As the Fourth Gospel puts it, Jesus really came for “those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn 20:29). The Church Fathers, too, will combat the mythicist view that Jesus of Nazareth was a fiction, that is, that he didn’t exist in the flesh—a view among the ancients that scholars today ignore by conveniently stuffing it into the category ‘docetism’ (see below).

Paul did not yet know Jesus of Nazareth, as we will now argue. His view of the savior characterized an earlier and fairly universal stage in the religion, namely, that Jesus’ was a purely spiritual entity.

Jesus of Nazareth was unknown to “Paul”

Pauline studies are presently in a state of considerable flux. Even traditionalist scholars admit that some of the epistles are pseudepigraphic. Scholars also generally consider that the Pauline corpus of thirteen New Testament letters represents a pastiche of views from different people, times, and places. The most radical view is that none of the attributed letters is by Paul, and even that Paul himself did not exist as a historical figure (H. Detering, R. Price, the Dutch Radical School). As Price writes:

Protestantism is based on Martin Luther, and Luther’s theology is based on Paul, but Paul stands based on nothing at all. Paul does not have a unitary voice, is not a single author whose implied opinions might be synthesized and parroted. He is not even a single historical figure. He is certainly not a divine apostle who received his gospel, not from man nor through men, but directly from God one climactic day on his way to Damascus. That story, as we saw, is pure fiction, based on 2 Maccabees

and Euripides's *Bacchae*.⁵

I am inclined to agree with this assessment. But even if Paul (I use the name for convenience) did not exist as a “single historical figure,” and even if none of the epistles were written by the Apostle to the Gentiles, the Pauline corpus still manifestly exists. It dates from Middle Roman times (probably produced by Marcionites in the second century—cf. below p. 437), and from it we can extract a good deal of information.

First of all, it can be noted that the Pauline epistles do not know “Jesus of Nazareth.” The words Nazara, Nazareth, Nazarene, or Nazorean do not appear even once in the entire corpus. Such silence can now be partially explained: Nazareth did not come into existence until c. 100 CE.

Secondly, there are many indications in the Pauline corpus that “Jesus” is not a man but a spirit. Admittedly, a few probably late Catholicizing amendments (e.g. Col 2:9; Phil 2:7; 1 Cor 15:3f) seem to have countered the predominant docetist conception of “Jesus” in Paul’s writings. Hence, a blanket statement is not possible. This once again brings up the pronounced pastiche aspect of the corpus—Paul’s epistles are all things to all people, and “Paul” himself is apparently all people to all Christians.

The predominant view described in Paul’s writings is that “Jesus” is a spiritual entity that has the ability to spiritually save. Paul indeed learned from “Jesus,” yet what he learned was “not of human origin” (Gal 1:11). This is an indication (whether or not the Damascus conversion actually occurred) that Paul’s “Jesus” was not human.

Paul enthuses in his epistles about the spiritual entity he calls singly and severally the “Lord,” “Jesus,” and “Christ.” The entity grants grace, peace, comfort, authority (2 Cor 10:8), will slay the “lawless one” at the Last

⁵ Price 2012:535.

Judgment, and will save those who “love the truth” (2 Thess 2:10). Most importantly, the entity has the power to overcome death (see below).

In Paul’s conception, the spiritual “Christ Jesus” has an intimate relation to the godhead (Col 3:1). It is pre-existent and eternal just like God. Indeed, it is ever-present, for Paul himself preaches at any moment “through the Lord Jesus” (1 Thess 4:2). At the same time, Christ is in Paul and in every saint (Col 1:27). This correspondence between saints and Christ Jesus results in the conception that the body of Jesus is, in fact, none other than the Church.⁶ In fact, when Christ comes in glory, those who are a part of his body “will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:4).

In sum, the Lord Jesus Christ is a great, expansive spiritual being which merges with the lives of the saints so that they are absorbed into it. It is our job to “rise up” to that spirit (Phil 3:12 f) and to partake in its being—that is, to be “saved.” For Paul, only the spirit Jesus can resurrect from death. This is the true victory, and by uniting with that spirit we also can overcome death. Thus, baptism for Paul is a passage through death—a transformation. Incidentally, this conception is very close to that which obtained in the mystery religions of the age—it would not have been at all foreign to a Greek or a Roman of the time.

The efficacy of the spirit of Jesus is precisely that it is able to resurrect from death (1 Cor 15:12)—that is, it is able to render physical death of no account (1 Cor 15:51 f). Let us pause to consider this logic, for here is the Pauline conception of resurrection. To render death of no account is (effectively) not to “die” at all. Because the spirit of Jesus lives on with God after death, it

⁶ 1 Cor 12:27; Eph 1:22–23, 4:12; Col 1:18, 24. The evangelist Mark will emphatically repudiate this universalist Pauline position. In a revolutionary leap, Mark reassigns “Jesus” to a single man from Galilee who is both “Son of Man” and “Son of God.” Those (Paulines) who continued to view Jesus as a purely cosmic spiritual entity were now “false Christs” (Mk 13:6, 22) of a gnostic ilk. Cf. Weeden 1971:86–100.

automatically overcomes death—if one unites with it. This is the Pauline view of salvation. Either unite with the spirit Jesus—or perish.

This is why, in Paul's conception, one can be walking about in the body and yet have already "died" inwardly (that is, spiritually—Col 2:20). Thus, one is already "raised" (Col 3:1). All this takes place in the flesh if one has united spiritually with Jesus.

This concept is referred to as "realized eschatology": the resurrection is not at the end times, but has already taken place within the gnostic, and during this very life. Consequently, many gnostic texts from late antiquity report on events that occur in the time between the resurrection and the ascension. This does not refer to a time after the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the grave (as secondarily depicted in the canonical gospels). It refers to a time after the resurrection of 'the Jesus' within oneself—and while the gnostic is still walking on the earth. Thus, the post-resurrection "era" depends upon the situation of each individual gnostic. It is relative.

If, as is generally suspected, a Jewish Christian stage preceded the formation of the Hellenist Christian church, then one could expect this early belief in an immaterial Jesus to also have existed among Jewish Christians. This is precisely what we find:

For certain Jewish Christians, the word Jesus would not have been the name of an earthly person, but rather the title of a celestial being. The Greek Ἰησοῦς [Jesus] is the equivalent of the Aramaic or Hebrew ישוע (Yeshua'), which means savior. Thus, it was not Jesus of Nazareth in whom they believed, but a heavenly Savior. It is likely that gnostic treatises such as Dialogue of the Savior bear witness to communities that did not interpret either the Greek *Iesous* or the Aramaic *Yeshua'* as the name of a man, but rather as a title—The Savior. —Zindler 2003:85 (note)

The foregoing must seem strange to Christians today because it is not at all what one reads in the canonical gospels. This shows that the religion as we know it is not based on pre-canonical traditions, including Paul. Central to

normative Christianity is Jesus of Nazareth—a figure Paul did not yet know. In the canonical gospels one reads of the adventures (for lack of a better term) of Jesus of Nazareth, of his death, and of his (bodily!) resurrection from the grave. This does not at all cohere with Pauline theology. The canonical gospels represent a subsequent stage, one centered not around the spiritual Jesus but around a manufactured hybrid, the divine man (Gk. *theios anêr*) Jesus of Nazareth—the only-begotten Son of God.

The insight that the New Testament epistles had no knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth—apparently broached here for the first time—will, if true, require a wholesale reassessment of the ‘Pauline’ writings. Much that has heretofore seemed strange, or even mysterious, gains clarity. One example is the frequent Pauline use of *kata sarka*, a phrase which both E. Doherty and R. Carrier have pointed out is odd as commonly translated: “according to the flesh.” For, as Carrier writes:⁷

The preposition *kata* with the accusative literally means “down” or “down to” and implies motion, usually over or through its object, hence it literally reads “down through flesh” or “down to flesh” or even “towards flesh.” It very frequently, by extension, means “at” or “in the regions of,” and this is how Doherty reads it... The word *kata* can also have a comparative meaning, “corresponding with, after the fashion of,” in other words “like flesh.”

This perfectly describes the foregoing discussion of a great spirit Jesus that descends (figuratively or literally) to merge with the saints and ‘absorb’ them, not becoming flesh so much as abiding for a time “in the regions of” flesh—which now appears something like a curtain separating man from god. The Pauline writings portray the spirit as withdrawing (resurrecting) again back to the godhead with the spirits of the saints who, as a result, have been ‘raised.’ Essentially, this stratagem of the spirit describes a species of robbery in reverse: giving life by coming down and taking it.

⁷ Carrier’s discussion is found online and in Doherty 2009:162.

While Doherty has perceived the spiritual aspect of Jesus, he argues that the suffering and crucifixion were entirely in the spiritual realm. However, this chapter will present a somewhat different view: a man indeed suffered and died on earth—a man first thought to have been possessed by Jesus.

Quite apart from questions regarding the evolving nature of 'Jesus' in New Testament scripture is the critical observation that the Pauline writings betray no knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth. If this be admitted—as it must—then a theological chasm emerges dividing the earlier epistles from the later gospels. With the existence of that chasm comes an astonishing recognition: the 'Pauline' epistles are not Christian in any commonly accepted sense of the term today. This can be rephrased as a question: Is it possible to be a Christian without faith in Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God?

The chronological implications are also great. If the Pauline writings date from the early to mid-second century CE—as is increasingly suspected—then the canonical gospels, being later, date at the earliest to c. 150 CE. Thus the Gospel of Mark—the first canonical presentation of Jesus of Nazareth⁸—dates an entire century later than traditionally thought, shifting from c. 65 CE to c. 165 CE. Such a shift, if valid, would have revolutionary implications for Jesus studies.

A human being

The Epistle to the Hebrews

It was stated above that “the Lord Jesus Christ is a great, expansive spiritual being which merges with the lives of the saints so that they are absorbed into

⁸ J. Crossan has identified possible precursors to the Gospel of Mark in the Jesus tradition. These include the “Cross Gospel” (embedded in the Gospel of Peter) and some surviving fragments of lost gospels. See Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*. New York: HarperCollins 1991:Appendix 1.

it.” This merging requires not only a divine spirit but also human saints. It is the human aspect of this merging which allows the authors of the New Testament epistles to write of the “blood of Christ,” the “suffering of Jesus,” and so on.

The pattern for this fusion of divine and human was evidently perceived as historical. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (certainly not the same person who authored the other epistles) knows of a man “made perfect,” one who was “heard” because of his devotion (*eulabeias*) to suffering (5:7–9). That saintly man belonged to the tribe of Judah (7:14), was tempted, found to be without sin, crucified (6:6), and thus became (now in heaven) “a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” He “passed through the heavens” to be henceforth “Jesus, the Son of God” (4:14–15, 5:10; 8:1b). It is evident in this multi-stage conception that we begin with (1) a man exemplary in holiness, who (2) suffers, and (3) is “heard,” who (4) is spiritually elevated to the status of “High Priest” in heaven, and (5) is subsequently known as “Jesus, the Son of God.”⁹

A human being is clearly intended by the words, “In the days of his flesh, he offered up prayers and supplication, with loud cries and tears...” (5:7). We learn further that the prophet (as he will be called here) “shed his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (Heb 9:12). Hence his high priesthood is superior to the Temple cult where only “goats and calves” are sacrificed. The prophet offered himself “through the eternal spirit” (9:14) and thus became the mediator who enables others to be saved. The actual mechanism of salvation is spelled out at 9:15:

[H]e is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, because a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.

⁹ The critical aspect that separates this theology from the gnostic outlook is that the agency is with God, not man. That is, man unaided does not save himself (Heb 8:2b). He must be “heard” and thus saved.

Thus, the Epistle to the Hebrews portrays a redeemed redeemer. Perhaps the most astonishing element—and what separates it irrevocably from Judaism—is that the prophet fuses with his redeemer. He becomes part of Jesus, the spiritual savior, and thus part of the godhead. More correctly, he is subsumed into the godhead. Absorbed. The man is not important, for everything human seems to disappear (including his earthly biography). In the Epistle to the Hebrews he is called the “Christ”—a fusion of the spiritual Jesus with the holy man of god. Evidently, the theology of the author of Hebrews was sufficiently advanced that even when the prophet was in the flesh he could be referred to as “Jesus”—for he had already been completely co-opted by the spiritual Jesus. In fact, only in this way could the spiritual Jesus have been the “pioneer and perfecter of our faith” who “endured the cross” (12:2), who “suffered outside the city gate” (13:12), and who was “brought back from the dead” (13:20).

The redeemed is assimilated to the redeemer. The holy one is “heard” from on high (5:7) and is able to conquer death. That conquest is then vicariously transferred to others who believe in this mechanism of salvation. They also become redeemed and assimilated to the great redeemer, Jesus.

J. Painter detects a very similar view in the *First Apocalypse of James*, a gnostic text discovered at Nag Hammadi:

In the opening set of dialogues the Lord foretells his passion and the suffering and death of James. This is the gnostic assimilation of the motif of the redeemer and the redeemed. In 24.19–24 the Lord identifies himself with the unnameable One Who Is in the beginning, and James is told that, through casting away the bond of flesh and ascending to Him Who Is, he will no longer be James but the One Who Is (27.1–10). James thus returns to the place from when he came. The crucifixion of Jesus and the death of James are treated as complementary...¹⁰

¹⁰ Painter 2004:171.

The spirit Jesus lowered itself “for a little while” (Heb 2:9) by fusing with a particularly holy man. It will become apparent that the holy man in question may well have been known to history. For now, however, we merely observe that the spirit Jesus “shared the same things [that is, a corporeal body], so that through death it might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (2:14–15).

We read that Christ (“anointed”) “gave his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (9:12), and that Christ “sat down at the right hand of God” (10:12). Thus, it appears that “Christ” and “Jesus” are synonymous in Hebrews, though an original distinction may well have obtained between the two terms. Christ “through the eternal spirit offered himself without blemish” (9:14). Is “the eternal spirit” here Jesus?

The impression, then, is that Jesus Christ and the earthly prophet were for a brief time one and the same, in the sense that the spirit of God took on human attributes. Referring to that short time, the writer of Hebrews can speak of the “blood of Jesus” and “his flesh” as if those physical, human properties are somehow light and insubstantial, like the Temple “curtain” (10:19–20).

The original sacrificial act of the spiritual Jesus alone is efficacious. That spirit ‘came down’ and fused with the holy man of God. It is the energy of the spiritual Jesus which raised the man to the status of Christ the High Priest (5:5) and which enabled him to overcome death. The spiritual Jesus perfected the man (5:9).¹¹

In the same way, the spiritual Jesus Christ can raise others. We can all become High Priests, as implied in the statement “Every High Priest chosen from

¹¹ Even the most scholarly English translations of the epistles (e.g. the NRSV) are, unfortunately, not faithful to the Greek text. Often, “Jesus” or “Christ” is supplied where “he” is written. Thus critical distinctions found in the underlying Greek are often lost in translations.

among mortals is put in charge...” (5:1). Here God once again is the agent. We can become High Priests and join the eternal High Priest (7:24). We can even become divine—if we are “chosen” (or “predestined”).¹²

The other New Testament epistles

The remaining epistles also contain references to a human prophet. The reader is reminded that we are not primarily concerned here with “authenticity.” As mentioned above, even if some of the passages are interpolations, Catholicizing glosses, etc., their content still merits scrutiny as first–second century CE writings. Any echo of a human prophet in these epistles is of considerable interest to us, for we have already established that such a prophet was not Jesus of Nazareth.¹³

(1) Rom 1:1-4:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our lord...

(2) Rom 8:1-4:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the spirit.

¹² The un-gnostic view of predestination is also familiar from the Dead Sea Scriptures (see below, p. 463).

¹³ Above, pp. 406 f. In the following passages, all emphases (in italics) are added.

(3) **Rom 9:3-5:**

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen by race. They are Israelites, and to them belong the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the worship, and the promises; to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ.

(4) **Gal 4:4-5:**

Then in the fullness of time, god sent his son, born of woman, born under the law, in order that he might purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, so that we might attain the status of sons.

(5) **Eph 2:13-16:**

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end.

(6) **Phil 2:5-8:**

Have this in mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with god a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

(7) **Col 1:21-22:**

And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him...

(8) **1 Tim 3:16:**

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.

(9) **1 Pet 2:23-24:**

When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his bruise you have been healed.

(10) **1 Pet 3:18:**

For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit...

(11) **1 Pet 4:1-2:**

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same intention (for whoever has suffered in the flesh has finished with sin), so as to live for the rest of your time in the flesh no longer by human desires but by the will of God.

In summary, the New Testament epistles know a redemptive act in history, one brought about by the godhead. A great, expansive spiritual being—part of God and known variously as the Lord/Jesus/Christ but also as God's son (Rom 1:4, 9, 8:3, etc.) —merged at some point in history with a 'saint'— a human being of exemplary character. This merging (or fusion, or indwelling of the godhead), which occurred in the past, will serve as a perpetual model for the rest of us. It is our job to likewise "rise up" to the spirit (Phil 3:12 f) and to partake in its being—that is, to be "saved."

At the same time, none of the above passages betrays any specific knowledge of this 'suffering redeemer.' No details of his earthly life survived—not even in antiquity. The writer(s) of the Pauline epistles had access to virtually no

information regarding his earthly life. It is also eminently possible that the facts of the prophet's biography were (somewhere along the line) actively suppressed. This would certainly have been the case if his teachings were somehow execrable to his Jewish milieu.

We are thus inexorably led to a view mooted by some scholars, namely, that the prophet in question lived in the distant past for those writing in antiquity. He was not a recent figure, not even someone whom 'oral tradition' could recall. A century ago Arthur Drews signaled this possibility:

Either the Pauline Epistles are genuine, and in that case Jesus is not an historical personality; or he is an historical personality, and in that case the Pauline Epistles are not genuine, but written at a much later period. This later period would have no difficulty in raising to the sphere of deity a man of former times who was known to it only by a vague tradition.¹⁴

Robert Price notes that "Robertson is especially close to Drews when he defines the alternatives this way":

It does not indeed follow that Paul's period was what the tradition represents. The reasonable inference from his doctrine is that his Jesus was either a mythic construction or a mere tradition, a remote figure said to have been crucified, but no longer historically traceable. If Paul's Jesus, as is conceivable, be merely a nominal memory of the slain Jesus ben Pandira of the Talmud (about 100 B.C.), Paul himself may belong to an earlier period than that traditionally assigned to him... The only conclusion open is that the teaching of Jesus of the gospels is wholly a construction of the propagandists of the cult, even as is [Jesus] the wonder-working God.¹⁵

¹⁴ Drews 1912:117.

¹⁵ Robertson 1911:237. Cited at Price 2011:372.

Docetism

Our deliberations regarding the fleshly existence (and non-existence) of Jesus inevitably raises issues modern scholarship has labeled “docetist.” The word derives from the Greek *dokein*, “to seem.” However, the category is strictly modern, and—it is here suggested—is misleading. Docetism is defined as the belief “that Christ had not come in the flesh,” and that he only “seemed to have a physical body.”¹⁶ Contemporary mythicists also use the term this way: docetism is “the position that Jesus only seemed to be an actual man” (Doherty), and “the belief that Jesus did not have a physical body” (Price).¹⁷ The problem is that a clear distinction is not made in these definitions between “Jesus” and “Jesus of Nazareth.” Mainline scholarship admits no distinction, but the foregoing pages have shown that a great distinction indeed exists. Until the invention of the prophet from Nazareth, “Jesus” was a purely spiritual entity—one originally associated with gnosis. In a transitional stage, gnosis was ascribed not to man but to God, requiring its descent and merging with a particular saint, as seems to be described in the Pauline epistles. That saint is a human exemplar. He is not inimitable, but his role as lynchpin of history may be. That saintly “forerunner” (Heb 6:20) could also (rather imprecisely) be referred to as “Jesus.”

Those who invented Jesus of Nazareth in the second century modified this transitional view. They transferred “the saint” to Jesus of Nazareth, retaining his uniqueness as lynchpin of history. But now Jesus is inimitable—only he has seen the Father, he is the “door,” and no one comes to the Father except through him (Jn 6:46, 10:7, 14:6). As such, Jesus of Nazareth breaks direct communication between man and God. Only Jesus can confer salvation (“the Jesus”).

¹⁶ IDB 1.860.

¹⁷ Doherty 2009:210; Price 2012:146.

Unfortunately, the word “docetic” does not discriminate between the above stages. There were those (stage 1) who believed that the ‘savior’ (Jesus/*Ieshua*) had no body. To simply call them “docetists” is insufficient, because it confuses them with others, including with ancient mythicists who denied that Jesus of Nazareth existed and/or that he was some other figure (Celsus supposed that Jesus’ father was a Roman soldier named Pantera).

The various stages of docetism can be summarized as follows:

Stage 1:

The ‘savior’ (Jesus/*Ieshua*) is the abstract gnosis. It has no material body. (This is ‘Primary Gnosticism’ and requires neither God nor a redeemer.) [Until c. 50 BCE]

Stage 2:

The savior/gnosis is associated with “God.” It comes down and merges with one or more saints. The savior has no material body except what it “puts on” while temporarily inhabiting the saint(s) below. (This stage describes the Dead Sea Scrolls, Jamesian theology, and the ‘Pauline’ epistles.) [C. 50 BCE–c. 150 CE]

Stage 3:

The savior, now associated with God, is divorced from gnosis. It assumes the material body of Jesus the Nazarene (Gospel of Mark)¹⁸ and Jesus of Nazareth (Gospels of Matthew, Luke, John). This is the basis of normative Christianity. Ancient Jesus mythicists who affirmed the invention of Jesus of Nazareth would have used docetic-like terms in rejecting this stage: “He didn’t walk on earth,” etc. [Mid-second century CE.]

¹⁸ In the “adoptionist” Gospel of Mark this fusion occurs at Jesus’ baptism.

Stage 4:

Later gnostics assimilated the Catholic figure of Jesus while retaining gnostic theology: Jesus of Nazareth was a ‘phantom,’ without a material body, etc. This is a fusion of Stages 2 and 3 above.¹⁹ [Later second century CE.]

Unfortunately, scholarship uses the term “docetic” only for stage 4. It does not recognize the preceding three stages. To broaden the discussion and include those other stages, of course, very much threatens the traditional view. Such a broadening admits the possibility that there were people in the first Christian centuries who actually denied the existence of Jesus of Nazareth altogether (stage 3). I would suggest, in fact, that the vast majority of references in the Church Fathers to “those who deny the existence of Jesus” are to ancient Jesus mythicists (not references to those who maintained he was a phantom). Such mythicists certainly existed. Memories are long—particularly memories of unique people. Those in Palestine would have had cause to object that neither they, nor their parents, nor their grandparents had recollections of a figure strutting about the Galilean-Judean countryside performing miracles, gathering followers, and generally awing the entire world. Roman records also betray no evidence of such a prophet. At the same time, the educated would immediately have been skeptical. Common sense would have told them that the astounding claims regarding the Christian Jesus were preposterous.

Clues to a lost teacher

It was mentioned above (p. 407) that the false biography of Jesus of Nazareth came with the necessity to obliterate all competing biographies. That necessity would be particularly pressing if a biography enjoyed the high ground of truth—that is, if another story actually took place. Any reference to such a

¹⁹ R. Price devotes an entire chapter to the widespread ancient view that the divine sometimes took on human form but not materiality. (Price 2012:131–71.)

biography would automatically include a severe indictment: Jesus of Nazareth is an invention. Psychology teaches that guilt breeds fear, aggression, and sometimes neurotic defensiveness. If Jesus of Nazareth was an invented figure, we can surmise that all traces pointing to the historical teacher/prophet were expunged from the record as soon as possible.

But clues remain. They are garbled almost beyond recognition, now scattered among disparate and very little known texts. Unfortunately (as they presently survive) it cannot be supposed that the clues are compatible one with another or point to a single well-defined figure of history. Nevertheless, they may have done so at some time in the past.

The paths leading to these texts are themselves largely hidden—especially to New Testament academics who all too often don blinders of orthodoxy and summarily equate what is off the beaten path with ‘error.’ They cannot go where we must now proceed.

Yeshu in Jewish writings

The reader perhaps may say “But, if Jesus Christ was born in the first year of our era, and Yeshu was born ninety years before, how can they have been one and the same person?” To which we reply, that there is no proof of Jesus Christ having been born in the first year of our era, and many indications to the contrary. Christian chronology has been arbitrarily established. There was great uncertainty among the early Christians, who reckoned like all Roman subjects from the reign of the Caesars, not only as to the birth, but also as to the age of their savior. Irenaeus, the first Christian father who mentions the four gospels, maintains that Jesus was fifty years old at his death, and the chronology of Luke is absolutely inconsistent with Roman history, as well as being at variance with that of Matthew.

—G. W. Foote and J. Wheeler, *The Jewish Life of Christ: Being the Sepher Toldoth Yeshu*. London: Progressive Publ. Co., 1885, “Preface.”
(Republished in Zindler 2003, Appendix A.)

The most accessible clues pointing to a prophet behind Christianity who is not Jesus of Nazareth are found in Rabbinic writings. The Mishna and Talmud preserve numerous (understandably antagonistic) references to the founder of Christianity. As Frank Zindler has shown,²⁰ none of these preserve historical value regarding a Jesus of Nazareth. He writes that the “only clear references to the Jesus of Christianity” are those relating to a certain Yeshu ha-Notsri (Zindler 2003:248). But this Yeshu lived in the time of Alexander Janneus (early first century BCE) and obviously has nothing at all to do with the New Testament Jesus.²¹ In fact, we will see that Jewish writings are surprisingly uniform in dating “Jesus” to this earlier time.

The most remarkable passage may be Sanhedrin 107b (partly cited below). There we read of the Pharisaic head (*nasi*) of the Sanhedrin, Joshua ben Perachiah who, during an unsuccessful Pharisaic uprising against Janneus fled to Alexandria with a number of disciples. We know that the uprising began in 94 BCE and lasted six years. It culminated in the infamous mass execution (by crucifixion) of 800 Pharisees by Janneus.²² The king then placed Sadducees in positions of power.

One of the pupils/protégés of Perachiah was Yeshu ha-Notsri.²³ On the return trip to Israel Yeshu was excommunicated by Perachiah on the grounds of lasciviousness (for interpreting an equivocal remark in a sexual way). We can surmise that the return trip took place after the death of Janneus, when his wife and the Pharisee-friendly Salome Alexandra began her reign. There is very good reason Alexandra was friendly to the Pharisees: her own brother,

²⁰ Zindler 2003 is the most comprehensive treatment of the subject. For bibliography, see his pp. 469–77.

²¹ Interestingly, the fourth century church father Epiphanius of Salamis also dates Jesus to the time of Janneus (Pan 29.3.3). Cf. Allegro 1979:38.

²² Josephus, *Antiquities* 13:14:2.

²³ Cf. the flight to Egypt by Jesus and the Holy Family (Mt 2:13–15, par. Hos 11:1)

Simon ben Shetach, was a leading Pharisee. He had been in hiding during the persecution but, on the death of Janneus, sent for Perachiah to return from Alexandria. A glorious few years ensued for the Pharisees—remembered by them as a golden age. On the death of Perachiah, Shetach became *nasi*.

The Talmud records the figurative but joyous words with which ben Shetach advised Perachiah to return to Jerusalem:

What of R. Jehoshua ben Perachiah? When Jannai the king killed our rabbi, R. Jehoshua ben Perachiah fled to Alexandria of Egypt. When there was peace, Shimon ben Shetach sent to him, “From me the city of holiness, to thee Alexandria of Egypt. My husband stays in thy midst and I sit forsaken.” —b. Sanh. 107b.²⁴

The return of Perachiah to Jerusalem would have been c. 75 BCE. Thus, it would appear that Yeshu spent as many as twenty years in Alexandria (c. 94–c. 75 BCE).

As is well known, at the time Alexandria was the intellectual center of the western world. Not even Rome or Athens compared with it. The city was the crossroads of East and West, continually trading with faraway India and (by proxy) even with China. Buddhist monks had been in Alexandria since about 250 BCE, when the Emperor Asoka sent them, together no doubt with a goodly number of sutras written on palm leaves.²⁵

If Yeshu ha-Notsri were of an inquiring mind—and indications suggest as much—he could not have avoided being exposed in Alexandria to the most vital and diverse intellectual currents of the age. An open, well-educated

²⁴ Cited more fully and discussed at Zindler 2003:249–50.

²⁵ This is memorialized in Asoka’s rock edict no. 13. See Dhammika 1993. The king of Egypt who received Buddhist missionaries and their texts would have been the extravagant and cosmopolitan Ptolemy II Philadelphus (d. 246 BCE) who is known to have sent embassies to Asoka in India. Philadelphus founded the Alexandria library and, according to legend, mandated that no ship could dock without bringing texts for its library. Interestingly, Dositheus reputedly wrote on palm leaves (below p. 454).

young Jewish scholar in the great city would have been challenged to acquaint himself with the most far-reaching and provocative insights of the era.

The literary record attests that two decades in Alexandria witnessed a sea change in the young man's thought, for—according to the Talmud—he was excommunicated by his master (under the pretext of a sexual impropriety) upon their return to Israel. The above citation b. Sanh. 107b continues:

[Rabbi Perachiah] came, and found himself at a certain inn; they showed him great honor. He said, "How beautiful is this Acsania!"²⁶ [Yeshu] said to him, "Rabbi, she has narrow eyes." [R. Perachiah] said, "Wretch, do you employ yourself thus?" He sent out four hundred trumpets and excommunicated him.

[Yeshu] came before him many times and said to him, "Receive me." But he would not notice him. One day when [R. Perachiah] was reciting the Shema, [Yeshu] came before him. [R. Perachiah] was minded to receive him and made a sign to him. But [Yeshu] thought that he repelled him. [Yeshu] went and hung up a brick and worshipped it.

[R. Perachiah] said to him, "Return." [Yeshu] replied, "Thus have I received from you, that every one who sins **and causes the multitude to sin**, they give him not the chance to repent."

And a teacher has said, "Yeshu ha-Notsri practiced magic and led astray and deceived Israel."

[Herford 51. Formatting and emphasis added.]

Obviously, a major change took place in Yeshu's thinking during his time in the Egyptian capital—a change which led to his excommunication from Judaism.

²⁶ "Acsania" denotes both inn and innkeeper. Perachiah used it in the first sense; the answering remark implies the second meaning, "hostess."

The now middle-aged²⁷ Yeshu did not simply disappear. He garnered a following in Israel, and this indicates his subsequent activity there as a prophet and teacher. In the words of the Talmud, he caused “the multitude to sin,” and “practiced magic and led astray and deceived Israel.” Evidently, Yeshu was very successful—to the dismay of the now-ascendant Pharisees.

In the above passage we note that Perachiah apparently reached out to Yeshu several times after the excommunication and even suggested a reconciliation (“Return”). But Yeshu refused, using the rabbi’s own teaching against him. This may echo subsequent events after Yeshu had met with initial success in his homeland.

Rabbinic literature also preserves some clues regarding the theology of the rebellious prophet. One is in the Palestinian Talmud, Taanith 65b. Though it does not mention Yeshu, “That it refers to Jesus there can be no possibility of doubt” (Herford):

R. Abahu said: If a man says to you ‘I am God,’ he is a liar; if [he says, ‘I am] the son of man,’ in the end people will laugh at him; if [he says] ‘I will go up to heaven,’ he says, but will not perform it.²⁸

These claims are vaguely familiar from the New Testament. The last, however, is especially significant—it reveals the view that man is in command of his own salvation and can ascend to heaven by himself—implicitly without God’s help (or even without a God at all). This view we will term “Primary Gnosticism.” Such views, of course, contrast with normative Judaism and Christianity. Jewish mystical traditions of late antiquity, together with the Hechalot literature, struggle with the desire—eternally suppressed—to cross

²⁷ Irenaeus of Lyon (d. c. 202 CE) writes: “Now that the first stage of early life embraces thirty years, and that this extends onwards to the fortieth year, every one will admit; but from the fortieth and fiftieth year a man begins to decline towards old age, which our Lord possessed while He still fulfilled the office of a teacher...” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Chp. 5. Passage cited in full and discussed at Zindler 2003:127 f.

²⁸ Herford 1903:62.

the chasm separating man and God. Evidently, Yeshu ha-Notsri dared cross that chasm. This appears to have been the cause for his excommunication. Yeshu embraced the gnostic quest, and for that he was anathematized by those highly placed in Judaism.

A second Rabbinic passage does not mention Yeshu but “Balaam.” Zindler has shown that none of the Balaam passages in Rabbinic literature refers to a historical Jesus of Nazareth. At the same time, it is clear that Balaam and Yeshu ha-Notsri refer to one and the same person:

R. El'azar ha-Qappar says, God gave strength to his voice, so that it went from one end of the world to the other, because he looked forth and beheld the peoples that bow down to the sun and moon and stars and to wood and stone, and he looked forth and beheld that there was a man, son of a woman, who should rise up and seek to make himself God, and to cause the whole world to go astray. Therefore God gave power to his voice that all the peoples of the world might hear, and thus he spoke, “Give heed that you go not astray after that man, for it is written, God is not a human being that he should lie [Num 23:19], and if he says that he is God he is a liar, and he will deceive and say that he departs and comes again in the end, he says and he will not perform. See what is written: And he uttered his oracle, saying, Alas, who will live when God does this [Num 24:23]? Balaam said, “Alas, who will live of that nation which hears that man who has made himself God.” —m. Jalqut Shimoni 766

This remarkable passage confirms the basic ‘sin’ of Balaam/Yeshu: he, a mere “man, son of a woman” rose up and sought “to make himself God.” Apparently, he even claimed divinity, as the above passage accuses: the prophet “says that he is God.”

Furthermore, we note that the prophet caused “the whole world to go astray.” This of course means that he had great success in drawing people away from the Jewish religion.²⁹ The observation that Balaam “looked forth and beheld

²⁹ Interestingly, there is also an allusion to the Second Coming: “he departs and comes again in the end.” This is probably a rabbinic echo of New Testament theology.

the peoples that bow down to the sun and moon and stars and to wood and stone” echoes the accusation against Yeshu ha-Notsri, that the latter was an idol worshipper (bowed down to a “brick,” above p. 421).

The second embedded citation from the book of Numbers is used as justification for the execution of the prophet: “who will live when God does this?” Interestingly, the extended biblical passage began with an allusion to the gnostic quest: “he who hears the words of God, and knows the knowledge of the Most High” (Num 23:15). Yet the same passage ends ominously with the words “he also will perish forever” (v. 24b).

It is possible to interpret Balaam’s astonishing closing words above in multiple ways. One is as a declaration of defiance: “Alas, who will live of that nation” which rejects his very message? The verb “live” here cannot carry a literal meaning—Balaam uses it spiritually. This spiritual definition of “life,” in turn, has remarkable echoes in the New Testament and particularly in gnostic and quasi-gnostic texts such as the Gospels of Thomas and John.³⁰

A less aggressive interpretation of Yeshu’s closing (final?) words sums up his ministry as a heartfelt effort to spread the truth, the inner ‘gnosis’ that yields spiritual life. Yeshu asks his brothers and sisters with sincere concern and compassion: “Alas, who will live (spiritually)?” The implied answer is not reassuring: exceedingly few.

It can be noted that the upward gnostic journey (of the self to enlightenment) is thought to represent an earlier stage (“Primary Gnosticism”) than the mythological descent of a redeemer figure, so familiar from the florid Gnosticism of the early Christian centuries. As W. Schmithals observed, “At the beginning of Gnosticism stands no redeemer myth, but rather the redeeming

³⁰ Cf. Mk 8:37; Mt 10:39; Lk 9:60, 17:33; Jn 1:4–5, 12:25, etc. Th 1, 11, 52, 59.

Gnosis as such.”³¹ In another passage he cogently notes that “Gnosis is not oriented to the figure of a redeemer.”³² In fact, the Gnostic systems of late antiquity may have assimilated the redeemer myth from Christianity itself. They are replete with the redeemer myth—but are also very Christian. Even the spiritual Jesus communicated in the Pauline epistles (above, pp. 408 f) is essentially redemptive. It does not reflect the earliest stage of the religion.

* * *

While definite theological affinities are detectable between the words of Balaam and Christian scripture, the biography of Yeshu as outlined above is of an entirely different cast than the story of Jesus of Nazareth presented in the gospels. The renegade Yeshu is from Jerusalem, not the Galilee. He is obviously well educated and, furthermore, is connected to the highest echelon of the Jewish establishment—this, several generations before the turn of the era. Far from being a backcountry schismatic, Yeshu is very much an insider. He is apparently a well connected Jewish legalist, with a promising future in Jerusalem Pharisaic circles. Despite all this, he turns against his entire religious heritage.

But Yeshu comes to an unhappy end. His demise displays remarkable elements in common with the passion of Jesus in the New Testament. According to several passages in the Talmud, Yeshu is hung on a tree (or cabbage stalk). Moreover, this occurs on the eve of Passover.³³ Of course, there is also the virtual identity of names: Yeshu/Jesus (cf. Joshua/*Iesous*).

An important Talmudic passage reads:

³¹ This is, in fact, pure Buddhism.

³² W. Schmithals 1969:121, 126. Cf. also his pp. 118, 122, 132, 133.

³³ Zindler 2003:237, 238, 241, 255. Incidentally, Honi the Circle-Drawer (c. 65 BCE) was also executed at Passover (Ant. 14.2.1.21).

And a herald precedes him, etc.

This implies, only immediately before the execution, but not previous thereto. In contradiction to this it was taught: On the eve of the sabbath and the eve of the Passover Yeshu ha-Notsri was hanged. For forty days before the execution took place, a herald went forth and cried, “Yeshu ha-Notsri is going forth to be stoned because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy. Anyone who can say anything in his favor, let him come forward and plead on his behalf.” But since nothing was brought forward in his favor he was hanged on the eve of the sabbath and the eve of the Passover.

‘Ulla retorted: Do you suppose that Yeshu ha-Notsri was one for whom a defense could be made? Was he not an enticer, concerning whom scripture says, Neither shalt thou spare, neither shalt thou conceal him?

With Yeshu, however, it was different, for he was connected with the government [or royalty, i.e., influential].

—b. Sanh. 43a. (Brackets original. Formatting and emphases added.)³⁴

Here we learn that the death of Yeshu was entirely in the hands of Jews—no Roman involvement is noted. Yeshu was killed by stoning—the religious penalty for sorcery and apostasy—and then he was “hanged.” The forty day wait and public invitation for an ‘ally’ depict a measured effort to fulfill Jewish legal requirements. This is not at all the speedy, over-night trial portrayed in the gospels.

³⁴ The 1994 Schachter-Freedman (I. Epstein, ed.) uncensored translation is cited and discussed at Zindler 2003:238 f. The translation given here adds a few words from older uncensored Hebrew editions as noted by Herford 1903:406. Those editions are the codices Mon., Monac., and Flor. The variant readings are in Rabbinowicz 1967–97: vol. 9. See also Rabbinowicz:1877.

We now consider the astonishing final words of the above citation: for he was connected with the government.³⁵ This is the Schachter-Freedman translation and fully confirms our above observation that Yeshu was “connected to the highest echelon of the Jewish establishment.” In fact, the pertinent words have secular meanings in Talmudic Hebrew. Thus the translation clarifies the word government with the bracketed phrase: “or royalty, i.e., influential.” Jastrow’s Talmudic dictionary translates *malkuth* in this context as “court,” and adds in parentheses: “influential.”

Yeshu’s return to Israel was ostensibly after the death of Janneus, and thus his trial would probably have been by a Pharisaic court in the time of Salome Alexandra. Yeshu is depicted as an important man connected to the affairs of state. Use of the word “government” (*malkuth*) shows that Yeshu’s ties were secular. Nevertheless, the charges were fundamentally religious: “because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy.”

Before his departure for Egypt it appears that Yeshu was a member of the highest circles of the Pharisees in Israel. Yet at that time—during the reign of Janneus—the Pharisees did not have much power. Indeed, they were largely underground. Nevertheless, Yeshu’s teacher and mentor Perachiah may have been the head of the Sanhedrin. Simon ben Shetach would have been a very close associate, probably of Yeshu’s generation and perhaps also a protégé of Perachiah. The reason Simon did not flee to Egypt was surely because he enjoyed the queen’s personal protection—he was her brother! Simon merely went into hiding.³⁶

³⁵ Heb: תוכלמל בורקד. M. Jastrow (p. 791) translates the phrase, “connected with the court (influential).”

³⁶ A famous Rabbinic story survives regarding the wary interaction between ben Shetach and Janneus. When Parthian envoys visited the king’s court, they remarked the absence of the queen’s brother at banquet. Upon the king’s assurance that he would do the fugitive no harm, Salome Alexandra summoned her brother from hiding. Upon his appearance Simon took his place between the royal couple (a most presumptuous gamble, no doubt at the invitation of the queen). This greatly surprised the king, whereupon the confident Simon remarked, “The wisdom which I serve grants me equal rank with kings.” (Recorded in the Yerushalmi Nazir, 54b; Berakhot, 48a.)

Not only the Talmud, but later Jewish lore also records that Yeshu lived in the time of Janneus. Both *The Sepher Toldoth Yeshu* (“The Jewish Life of Christ”) and “A Jewish Life of Jesus”³⁷ record Yeshu as involved with Jerusalem’s aristocratic circles in the time of Janneus’ successor, Salome Alexandra. These two works appear to be variants of one another. They demonstrate clear evidence of reliance on much later Christian traditions, yet at the same time show no intimate familiarity with the canonical gospels. They may themselves be described as “anti-gospels,” perhaps originally deriving from the hostile and ill-informed pen of a Rabbi in post-Roman times.³⁸ These two texts betray particular acquaintance with Syrian traditions, which may be a clue to their provenance. They emphasize the bastardy of Yeshu³⁹ and depict his magical powers as deriving from the theft of the ha-Shem (name of the Lord) from the Jerusalem Temple. The latter, of course, is itself a curious form of magic. It seems to be a desperate pretext to explain Yeshu’s phenomenal success while at the same time relieving it of all validity.

The Jewish Life of Jesus offers a remarkable passion narrative. It recounts that “When the wise saw that so very many believed on [Yeshu] they seized him and brought him before Queen Helene, in whose hand the land of Israel was. They said to her: This man uses sorcery and seduces the world” (Zindler 2003:431). No Queen “Helene” ever ruled over Israel, and this is in all

³⁷ Both works are in full English translations at Zindler 2003, Appendices A and B.

³⁸ As regards dating, the Toldoth writes “And this is the reason why now the hair of a monk is shaved off in the middle of the head” (3:81). It also knows of St. Simon Stylites (early fifth century CE—4:44). The work is familiar in garbled form with the claimed virgin birth, raising the dead, Yeshu in Upper Galilee, the betrayal by Judas, and Simeon Kepha (Simon Peter). H. Schonfield has observed that both lives of Yeshu probably were abridged forms of what we have today, lacking the latest additions (Zindler 2003:446, note).

³⁹ Yeshu’s mother Miriam is portrayed as having been seduced by a Roman soldier, Pandera. If anything of the kind were in fact the case, Yeshu would of course never have enjoyed the status of protégé of the Sanhedrin nasi, Perachiah. The illegitimacy accusation (persistent throughout Jewish depictions of Jesus in his various guises) is a fairly obvious attempt to dishonor the prophet’s memory and ridicule the claim of a virgin birth.

likelihood a reference to Salome Alexandra.⁴⁰

In both the *Toldoth* and *Jewish Life of Jesus* Simon ben Shetach is the principal antagonist. It is Simon who exposes Yeshu's illegitimacy. This is obviously a malicious expansion on the Christian claim that Jesus had no physical father. Nevertheless, it may also reflect the vague recollection that upon Yeshu's return to Israel—that is, after his excommunication—his major antagonist was indeed the future head of the Sanhedrin. This adds some irony, and even drama, to the story, for Yeshu and Simon may well have been close friends in youth but bitter enemies in adulthood. Furthermore, if Yeshu were brought before the Sanhedrin for trial, as appears to have been the case, he would have come before none other than his childhood friend, Simon—now sitting at the head of the Sanhedrin, with power over life and death.

Though Yeshu was raised a Pharisee, it would be entirely incorrect to characterise him as such. Yeshu broke away from the Pharisees, as he did even from Judaism.⁴¹ The break was sufficiently complete and grave that Yeshu was charged with apostasy and paid with his life. At the same time, he took with him the secrets of the Pharisaic guild and inside knowledge of Jerusalem's highest religious establishment. One can imagine that a former insider like Yeshu would have engendered bitter gall among that Jerusalem establishment to which he himself once belonged. An informed, educated rebel like Yeshu could do both Phariseeism and Judaism enormous harm. And, apparently, Yeshu did precisely that.

⁴⁰ Zindler (2003:428, cf. 380–81) notes “the well-known phonological shift of *s* > *h* in Greek,” whereby Selene becomes Helene. “Selene” (Gk. “moon”), in turn, may be a rough approximation in Greek of the Queen's actual Hebrew name, Shalom-Tsion (“Peace to Zion”)—also often shortened to “Salome,” i.e., Salome Alexandra. In addition, the medieval Jewish text may preserve echoes of the first century CE Queen Helen of Adiabene.

⁴¹ This curious pattern is interestingly found also with Paul—a Pharisee (Phil 3:5) “advanced in Judaism” (Gal 1:14) who completely abandoned his religious heritage.

He founded a breakaway sect, one with gnostic roots that would not secure a home within Phariseism nor even within Judaism. Acrimonious interactions between Yeshu and Pharisees, as well as between Yeshu and members of other Jewish sects (Sadducees, “scribes”) probably characterized the prophet’s career. However, if our reconstruction of the state of affairs is near the mark, no one would have been able to best Yeshu in theological argument. Echoes of Yeshu’s skill in such argumentation may still survive in the canonical gospels.

James “the Just”

The theft of the “name of the Lord” from the inner sanctum of the Jerusalem Temple, noted above, implies that Yeshu possessed either the office or the prerogatives of the High Priest, for only that august personage enjoyed access to the Holy of Holies of the Temple.⁴² The “name of the Lord,” however, is obviously metaphorical and the story (composed in hindsight long after the fact) cannot be taken literally. The Talmudic account signifies that (1) Yeshu was remembered as having commanded great religious stature, and (2) he was remembered as having had access to the innermost secrets of Judaism.

Nevertheless, even metaphorical stories can reflect valid historical interpretations. We know of two other figures—living about the turn of the era—who claimed the prerogatives of High Priest but were not the official High Priest of the Jews. One is the so-called Teacher of Righteousness of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The text known as 4QMMT even deigns to instruct the Jerusalem priesthood on correct practice. We will return to the Teacher of Righteousness later.

⁴² A second temple existed in Egypt since the mid-second century BCE, at Leontopolis in the Nile delta, not far from Alexandria. The (ostensibly legitimate line of) High Priests there were of the Oniad family and styled themselves “Zadokites.” Some scholars have posited links between the Oniads and the anti-Pharisaic sect of the Sadducees (Zeddukim).

A second figure is James the Just—known to Christians as an eminently righteous man who (according to the second century Church Father Hegesippus) had access to the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple:

James, the Lord's brother, succeeds to the government of the Church, in conjunction with the apostles. He has been universally called the Just, from the days of the Lord down to the present time. For many bore the name of James; but this one was holy from his mother's womb. He drank no wine or other intoxicating liquor, nor did he eat flesh; no razor came upon his head; he did not anoint himself with oil, nor make use of the bath. He alone was permitted to enter the holy place: for he did not wear any woollen garment, but fine linen only. He alone, I say, was wont to go into the temple: and he used to be found kneeling on his knees, begging forgiveness for the people—so that the skin of his knees became horny like that of a camel's, by reason of his constantly bending the knee in adoration to God, and begging forgiveness for the people. Therefore, in consequence of his pre-eminent justice, he was called the Just, and Oblias, which signifies in Greek "Defense of the People," and Justice, in accordance with what the prophets declare concerning him.

—Hegesippus, *Commentaries*, Bk. V (emphases added).

This is, of course, extremely high praise—sufficiently extravagant to be offensive to Christian ears (and eyes) today. After all, the clause "in accordance with what the prophets declare concerning him" should apply to Jesus (Mk 1:2, 23; Mt 1:22; 2:15, 17, etc). The above recalls the similarly extravagant estimation of James encountered in the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*:

The disciples said to Jesus, "We know that you will depart from us. Who is to be our leader?"

Jesus said to them, "Wherever you are, you are to go to **James the Just, for whose sake heaven and earth came into existence.**"

—*Gospel of Thomas* 12 (emphasis added).

For whose sake "heaven and earth came into existence"? That personage should not be James—but Jesus!

Clarity is gained, however, when we recall the foregoing discussion of “Jesus” as a purely spiritual being.⁴³ No competition exists between James and Jesus—the former is the fleshly vessel, the latter the spirit of holiness. The former rises up in order to capture (or be captured by) the spirit of Jesus.⁴⁴ Thus, at the beginning of the *First Apocalypse of James*, the Lord (Jesus) explains to James: “you are not my brother materially.” As J. Painter observes, “What is denied is the material being of the Lord.”⁴⁵ This entire theology, however, is denied by the tradition, which since Roman times has seen fit to consider James as the blood brother of Jesus!

In the developed gnosticism of later Roman times, however, James himself is the quintessential recipient of revelation. He is the example—evident to history—that others are to follow:

...I am he who received revelation from the Pleroma [of] imperishability.
(I am) he who was first summoned by him who is great, and who obeyed
the [Lord]—he who passed [through] the [worlds...]

—*Second Apocalypse of James* 46.6–14

In texts bearing his name, James is often portrayed as the “gate” or “door” through which others are enabled to find the spiritual Jesus.⁴⁶ Of course, the Gospel of John has co-opted this theology and made a now physical Jesus the

⁴³ On the spirit of Jesus, cf. discussion above p. 409.

⁴⁴ This lends itself to figurative depiction as a meeting in the sky. Such aerial meetings are found in multiple literary traditions, Jewish and Christian.

⁴⁵ Painter 2004:171. Price 2011:336–43 also considers the possibility that “James was understood, like Thomas, to be the earthly, physical counterpart to a heavenly Jesus.”

⁴⁶ Eusebius reports: Some people asked James: “What was the gate to Jesus?” and he answered, “that he was the savior” (H.E. 2.23). The “gate” is a key concept in texts bearing the name of James—cf. *The First and Second Apocalypse of James* (Nag Hammadi Library V.3, V.4), etc. For gate/door symbolism see also *Second Apocalypse* 55.5–14 and Eusebius Hist. Eccl. 2.23.8, 12–13. On parallels with Dositheanism, cf. below p. 460.

“gate” (John 14:6.) Thus, we can trace the deformation of an original gnostic religion in stages:

- (a) gnosis saves (= Primary gnosticism)
- (b) gnosis is objectified as “Jesus” (= “Savior”)
- (c) gnosis descends to earth and is figuratively met by the saint half-way (figuratively: ‘in the air’)
- (d) the savior Jesus is divorced from gnosis and thus placed out of reach of man (= the necessity of a redeemer)
- (e) the savior Jesus is conceived as part of the godhead
- (f) the savior Jesus is anthropomorphized as Jesus of Nazareth, the only-begotten Son of God.

Several trajectories are indicated by the above: (1) “Jesus” transforms from spiritual to material; (2) man no longer saves himself (Primary Gnosticism) but now requires redemption; and (3) gnosis is (entirely) rejected.

Jamesian and Pauline theology correspond to stage (c) above.⁴⁷ It is probable that this stage continued into the late second century CE, that is, until the first canonical gospel (Mark) became current (cf. p. 418 above).

In Jamesian theology (that remained outside orthodoxy and would have been lost to us except for the Nag Hammadi finds), James enables others to “reign, and to become kings” (*Second Apocalypse* 56.4–5). James is the great middle term between man and gnosis. He is nothing less than the lynchpin of history. These gnostic texts depict James as the transmitter (“door”) of hidden

⁴⁷ The overlap between the theologies of James and Paul indicate an original unity. The emerging gentile church needed a mouthpiece, and “Paul” was the answer—an invented figure whose missives reflect an evolving theology—but still no knowledge of Jesus of Nazareth (above pp. 408 f). Paul was the anti-gnostic voice of the Church, a new voice that required separation from James (also an invented figure). Thus literary figures were created (or ‘re-written’) according to the demands of evolving/competing theologies, eventually yielding an alphabet soup of invented characters.

wisdom. The saving gnosis symbolically issues from his mouth (also a gateway/door symbol)—e.g., via a “kiss” (NHL V.4.56:15).

An entire catalogue of symbols was developed in gnostic theology, symbols often using intimate sexual language to convey equally intimate gnostic meaning. In the encratite milieu of gnosticism, however, sexuality itself was categorically rejected. Thus, we have texts which are replete with sexual symbolism but have nothing to do with sexuality—a pitfall for outsiders.⁴⁸

The passage known today as *Secret Mark* fits perfectly into a gnostic, Jamesian, and encratite milieu (cf. NTA I.108). It portrays Jesus raising a young man (*neaniskos*, symbolic of the person before enlightenment) from the dead, then “remaining” with him overnight clothed only in a linen cloth (*sindon*)⁴⁹ and “teaching” him “the mysteries of the kingdom of god.”

Thus, *Secret Mark* portrays the sacred transmission of gnosis. That transmission (or, rather, acquisition) is the gnostic salvation, the high point of all life and, indeed, the beginning and seed of true life. It is equivalent to the marriage bed in the profane world—the beginning and seed of the fleshly life. This encratite-gnostic symbolism seeps into the canonical gospels, where we find imagery regarding the “bridal chamber,” but there the underlying gnostic meaning has been quite obscured.⁵⁰

One of the few surviving passages from the (lamentably) lost *Gospel of the Hebrews* is preserved in the writings of Jerome. It reads:

⁴⁸ The Church Fathers were all too willing to portray the gnostics as licentious, not understanding the symbols nor being amenable to gnostic theology.

⁴⁹ The *sindon* (“linen garment”) is the thin tissue symbolic of the flesh (alternately: ignorance) before the resurrection (cf. Mk 14:52; 15:46 and pars.). It is exchanged for the more substantial *stolê* (“robe”) worn after the resurrection and upon receipt of “the mysteries of the kingdom of god” (cf. Mk 16:5; Rev 6:11; 7:13 f; 22:14). The possession (and lack thereof) of the requisite garment is the *krisis* in the parable at Mt 22.11 f.

⁵⁰ Mt 22:1 f; 25:1 f; Lk 12:35 f; and parallels.

The Gospel called according to the Hebrews which was recently translated by me into Greek and Latin, which Origen frequently uses, records after the resurrection of the Savior:

And when the Lord had given the linen cloth [*sindon*] to the servant of the priest, he went to James and appeared to him. For James had sworn that he would not eat bread from that hour in which he had drunk the cup of the Lord until he should see him risen from among them that sleep. And shortly thereafter the Lord said: Bring a table and bread! And immediately it is added: he took the bread, blessed it and broke it and gave it to James the Just and said to him: My brother, eat your bread, for the Son of man is risen from among them that sleep.⁵¹

This is a proof-text for the doctrine of realized eschatology. The *sindon* is the thin linen cloth worn (according to gnostic-enkratite symbolism) before the resurrection/enlightenment. The “Lord” (Jesus) gives the linen cloth to the “servant of the priest” (presumably, he donates ignorance/the physical world to an underling of the Jerusalem temple!) and then he presents himself to James the Just, who has sworn that he will not eat food until he sees the resurrection of Jesus (= gnosis). “Bring a table and bread” is a somewhat humorous way of emphasizing that no waiting is necessary. James has already seen the resurrected Jesus within his own heart/mind.⁵²

From all this, James the Just emerges as the prophet, the one who possessed (or, rather, was possessed by) the spirit of Jesus, even as Paul taught. James

⁵¹ NTA I (1990–91):178.

⁵² In considering this *Gospel of the Hebrews* passage (together with 1 Cor 15:7, discussed above) one influential scholar supposed that “Like Paul, James was converted by a vision” after Jesus’ bodily resurrection (H. Betz, 1979:78). This is the traditional view, but it quickly leads to absurdities. For example, Jesus’ inability while in the flesh to effect conversion of any members of his family (Mk 3:21) vindicates nothing so much as the old adage “familiarity breeds contempt”—even more remarkable since his parents had been informed by angels that their son was conceived by the Holy Spirit and was the Son of God (Mt 1:20; Lk 1:35). Jesus was similarly unable to convert his disciples (according to the Gospel of Mark) and his neighbors in Nazareth (Lk 4:16–30)—that is, essentially everyone who knew him! On the other hand, the gospels relate that Jesus enjoyed stunning success (in effecting prompt belief and other drastic changes) with people not familiar with him. It would seem that the more one knew Jesus, the more unsavory he became!

then passed on the gnosis—the Jesus (“salvation”). James is the lynchpin of history, and Jesus is the treasure of gnosis that is passed on—an eternal attribute of the godhead.⁵³ This is the earliest theology detectable in Christian scriptures, the theology of the first and early second centuries of our era.

The role of James as intermediary was well known:

The Lord imparted the gift of gnosis to James the Just, to John and Peter after his resurrection, these delivered it to the rest of the apostles, and they to the seventy, of whom Barnabas was one.

These are words of Clement of Alexandria (*Institutions*, Book 7) as reported by Eusebius (*Eccl. Hist.* II.1). While John and Peter shared primacy with James in orthodoxy (cf. Gal 2:9; Mk 9:2), the Nag Hammadi gnostic texts accord James alone stunningly high estimation.⁵⁴ “James is the heavenly guide of those who pass through the heavenly ‘door’ and are his (and the Lord’s). He is the ‘illuminator and redeemer.’”⁵⁵ Of James it is said:

You are he whom the heavens bless...

For your sake they will be told [these things], and will come to rest.
For your sake they will reign [and will] become kings.
For [your] sake they will have pity on whomever they pity.

⁵³ James is also a potential candidate for the “Beloved Disciple” of the Fourth Gospel, the most gnostic-leaning of the canonical gospels. Uniformly in the Jamesian tradition Peter yields to James in authority. Painter writes: “Inasmuch as Peter is also named in the *Apocryphon of James*, it is to assert the superiority of James and of the revelation made to him. We are reminded of the subservient role played by Peter in relation to the Beloved Disciple in the Fourth Gospel” (Painter 2004:177).

⁵⁴ Cf. Doresse 1986:236. In the Great Church, the primary role of James in the transmission devolves to Peter (Mt 16:18). No doubt under the influence of orthodoxy, the *Apocryphon of James* includes Peter as co-equal in the reception of secret teaching (1.10; 15.7), but only James appears to understand what Jesus says.

⁵⁵ Painter 2004:174. Despite discovery of the Nag Hammadi texts and existence of the Letter of James, some scholars still maintain the fiction that “Nothing is known about James’ theology” (Betz 1979:78).

—*Second Apocalypse of James* (55.24–25; 56.2–6)

Already in the *Second Apocalypse* we see some overlap between James and Jesus, for the words in the above citation could equally well characterize gnosis/Jesus. Thus, the prophet and the treasure become inseparable. Yet there is a major difference: James dies, but ‘the Jesus’ is undying. A reflection of this distinction survives in the Epistle of James:

James makes no obvious use of any of the narrative traditions concerning Jesus. Most notably, he makes no mention of the death of Jesus. Those seeking allusion to Jesus’ death in 5:6 and 5:11 must strain both the text and their eyesight. Neither is there any clear statement of Jesus’ resurrection⁵⁶... If “Christian” means “Christocentric,” James fails the test.⁵⁷

The *Second Apocalypse of James* from the Nag Hammadi corpus preserves with great clarity the exalted position of James later taken over by Jesus of Nazareth.⁵⁸ The tractate begins: “This is the discourse that James the Just spoke in Jerusalem... He said...” Thus, we are dealing with a gospel (“good news”) of James. And what does James go on say? That is altogether astonishing and includes the following:

I [am the] first [son] who was begotten...
 I am the beloved.
 I am the righteous one.
 I am the son of [the Father].
 I speak even as [I] heard.

⁵⁶ In Jamesian theology, it was James who was resurrected, not Jesus. “Jesus” is the eternal power that accomplishes the resurrection in the saints.

⁵⁷ Johnson 1995:49. Elsewhere Johnson states that “James makes no use of the standard elements of the kerygma: the death, burial, resurrection of the Messiah, and the sending of the Holy Spirit” (p. 55).

⁵⁸ *The Second Apocalypse* has been tentatively dated c. 100–c. 150 CE (NTA I:328). It is thus roughly contemporary with the first Pauline/Marcionite epistles and precedes the Gospel of Mark/invention of Jesus of Nazareth.

I command even as I [received] the order.
I show you (pl.) even as I have [found].

—*Second Apocalypse of James* 49.5–16.

The *ego eimi* [I am] sayings of the first lines show that James is essentially ‘in heaven with God.’ He is the ‘beloved,’ the ‘righteous one,’ and the ‘son of the Father.’ He commands and shows, demonstrating that he is able to stand in the place of God—that is, in heaven. The *Second Apocalypse* reveals that James has risen up to heaven and shares that high place with God.⁵⁹ We recall that this was precisely the accusation leveled against Yeshu.

Rabbinic sources remember Yeshu as the prophet at the source of Christianity—a prophet who made himself into God, gathered followers, and was executed in Jerusalem. On the other hand, Christian gnostic traditions laud the prophet James the Just who stood in heaven, who said “I am the son of [the Father]” and “I command even as I [received] the order.” Like Yeshu, James similarly gathered followers and was killed in Jerusalem by the religious establishment. Thus, Rabbinic and Christian gnostic traditions—differing from each other in so many ways—ultimately converge and point us toward a stunning and ineluctable conclusion: Yeshu ha-Notsri and James the Just are identical.

A chronology corrected

An obvious objection to the above astonishing conclusion will be immediately noted by traditionalist⁶⁰ scholars: Yeshu and James lived in different centuries.

⁵⁹ Parallels with the Qumran Teacher of Righteousness, as well as with the Samaritan prophets Simon Magus and Dositheus are equally compelling. Like James, however, it can be argued that these figures are also reflections of Yeshu ha-Notsri.

⁶⁰ I use the word “traditionalist” to encompass the 99% of academics in the field who do not even admit the possibility that Jesus and/or Paul may be ahistorical. There is still a line in the sand that virtually no teaching professor dares cross. On the other side of that line are recent works of R. Eisenman, F. Zindler, T. Brodie, E.

However, I suggest that the discrepancy is only apparent. To understand this we must first review the evidence for dating “James” to the first century CE. That evidence ultimately rests on two chronological indicators in the ancient texts, both of which are contrived. One is in the *Antiquities* of Josephus. The other is in Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (1:19).

James and the beginning of the Jewish War

We begin with the single surviving mention of James “the brother of Jesus” in the writings of Josephus (*Ant.* 20.200–03). A long-standing and enduring division exists in scholarship regarding the authenticity of the passage, and it appears that disagreement will continue no matter how compelling are the reasons brought forward that the passage is an interpolation.⁶¹ This situation exists—and is even predictable—when a passage is “too big to fail,” that is, when it is so critical to the tradition that it must be defended at any cost.

F. Zindler and H. Detering have considered the lengthy passage *in extenso*.⁶² We cite only one sentence from Josephus:

“Festus was now dead [i.e., in 62 CE] and Albinus was but upon the road; so [Ananus] assembled the Sanhedrin of the judges, and brought before them the brother of Jesus, *who was called Christ*, whose name was James, and some others, and when he had formed an accusation against them as breakers of the law, he delivered them to be stoned...” (emphasis added).

Doherty, R. Price, D. MacDonald, H. Detering, and a few others. Essentially revisionist (as is this work), they point the way to the future.

⁶¹ Those in favor of authenticity include Feldman, Bauckham, Painter, as well as more conservative scholarship. Those opposed include F.C. Baur, Schürer, Brandon, G. Wells, Rajak, Zindler, Detering, Price, and the present writer.

⁶² Zindler 2003:75–88; Detering 2011:22–27.

Detering concludes that the italicized words—a single short clause—must be an interpolation. His principal reason is that Josephus would have taken pains to avoid the title “Christ,” which was highly inflammatory in Roman eyes. After all, “Christ” denotes one who is “anointed” to bring about the freedom of the Jews—both religiously and politically. The Jewish historiographer avoids mentioning the title in relation to other messianic pretenders (Simon of Gamla, Menahem, John of Gischala).

Detering’s argument is well taken, but even more decisive in my view is something numerous scholars have noted: the entire passage in Josephus is about Jesus, the son of Damneus. In other words, the phrase “who was called Christ” simply does not belong—Josephus had neither the Christian James nor the Christian Jesus in mind.

Zindler concludes that Josephus may have made some brief mention of James, but—

More likely, however, the reconstructed text was an interpolation by a Jewish proto-Christian—a Jacobite who revered James the Just and did not know of any historical Jesus. The received text, then, would have been the result of further doctoring by a member of the Great Church.

—Zindler 2003:85

An early believer “who revered James the Just and did not know of any historical Jesus” is precisely the sort of person we have described above—an early follower who believed in the spiritual Jesus (pp. 406 f).

Zindler finds persuasive reasons to doubt the authenticity of the larger context in which the passage is couched (Zindler 2003:86–88). The Josephus specialist Tessa Rajak concurs:

I discount the conflicting verdict on Ananus appearing at AJ 20.199–203, where he is said to be bold and heartless, and held responsible for engineering the death of James, brother of Jesus, through the Sanhedrin. The case for the whole account of James being a Christian interpolation is very strong: not so much, as Schürer argued, because Origen had a

different recollection of what Josephus had said on the subject, but simply because of its startling divergence from the previous assessment (in a case where Josephus is not transcribing a source), and its harsh criticism of the Sadducees, and of the Sanhedrin. Furthermore, the James passage seems to suppose in the reader some knowledge of the man ‘who was called the Christ,’ so that anyone who takes the view, as many do, that Josephus’ reference to Jesus (the ‘testimonium flavianum’) is completely an interpolation, should find difficulty in accepting the account of his brother. Yet it has been unfashionable, of late, to doubt the James passage; but cf. Schürer-Vermes-Millar, vol. 1, p. 430, n.1.⁶³

We now turn our attention briefly to passages mentioning James the Just that have been attributed to Josephus by the ancients. It can only arouse suspicion that not one of these passages appears in any surviving manuscript of Josephus. Nevertheless, many scholars have defended the authenticity of the alleged passages—which attest not only to the existence of “James the brother of Jesus” but (and this factor is equally important for the present argument) also date him to the first century CE.

As Detering (2011:23) points out, Origen claimed in no less than three different places that Josephus explicitly specified a link between the death of James and the beginning of the First Jewish War. Yet no such passage survives in the prolix writings of the first century Jew. Here is one example from Origen’s hand:

Flavius Josephus, who wrote the *Antiquities of the Jews* in twenty books, when wishing to exhibit the cause why the people suffered so great misfortunes that even the temple was razed to the ground, said, that these things happened to them in consequence of the things which they had dared to do against James the brother of Jesus who is called Christ.

—Origen, *Commentary on Matthew 17*

⁶³ Rajak 1983:131. Cf. Price 2011:350–351.

Though these words of Origen are clearly a paraphrase, it is inexplicable that the underlying passage does not exist in any extant manuscript of Josephus' *Antiquities*, for—if it existed—the passage would have been highly advantageous to the emerging Church. Why? Because dating “the brother of Jesus” to the first century CE validates the invented figure Jesus of Nazareth!

The fact that ‘some people supposed that the murder of James was the cause of the First Jewish War’ is of little obvious importance, yet it is assiduously transmitted by multiple Church Fathers. We can now appreciate why: the information serves the critical function of anchoring James in history.

Eusebius, two centuries after Origen, is the first to cite the exact words that Origen paraphrased above. According to Eusebius, Josephus wrote:

These things [i.e., the siege of Jerusalem] happened to the Jews to avenge James the Just, who was the brother of him that is called Christ, and whom the Jews had slain, notwithstanding his pre-eminent justice.

—Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* II.23

It is thoroughly unlikely that Josephus ever penned such words. The only way he could have used the term “Christ” would have been in disparagement (see above). Yet, in this citation—according to Eusebius—Josephus allegedly wrote (in the very same sentence) that the brother “of him that is called Christ” possessed “pre-eminent justice.” While this lauds the brother, it constitutes (by association) a very positive reflection on the Christ—and this is unimaginable from the pen of Josephus.

On the other hand, Eusebius' citation clearly fulfills the Christian purpose at hand: it dates James (and by proxy, Jesus) to the first century CE.

Paul and “the brother of the Lord.”

The Pauline epistles mention James four times, once with the descriptive “brother of the Lord” (Gal 1:19, discussed below). If—as H. Detering and

(before him) the Dutch Radical School have argued—the entire Pauline corpus is a product of the second century and possibly of Marcion and his followers, then of course all four of these references to James are historically suspect.

Here we will not argue the role of Marcion and his school in the authorship of the Pauline epistles. We are concerned more narrowly with the passages in the Pauline corpus which ‘locate’ James chronologically to the first century CE. As it happens, cogent reasons have been brought forward to reject the authenticity of all four Pauline passages that specifically mention James. We briefly consider each passage in turn, basing our observations principally on the arguments of Dr. Robert Price.

[1]

1 Cor 15:3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. 7 ***Then he appeared to James***, then to all the apostles. 8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (Emphasis added.)

The list of scholars maintaining that these verses “constitute an interpolated piece of apologetics for the resurrection” is long (Price 2006:362 note f). Price observes that the “five hundred brethren” post-dates the gospels and is “even later than the rest of the list of appearances.” As regards the italicized words above specifically regarding James, Price remarks:

The notion of James as a believer in Jesus already at the time of Easter is a second-century product, occurring also in the Gospel of Luke and the Gospel of the Hebrews. Earlier sources (Mark and even John) had him indifferent or hostile to Jesus. No New Testament source has him first hostile, then converted by a resurrection appearance; that is a post-

biblical harmonization.⁶⁴

The second Pauline passage that ostensibly places James in the mid-first century CE relates to Paul's first trip to Jerusalem, as reported in the Epistle to the Galatians. Together with the single surviving mention of James "the brother of Jesus" in the writings of Josephus (discussed above), the following is the most important witness to James' existence in the first century CE, for Paul here not only describes James as "the brother of the Lord" but also claims to have actually met the man:

[2]

Gal 1:15 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, 17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to visit Cephas, and remained with him fifteen days. 19 But I saw none of the other apostles except James the brother of the Lord. 20 (In what I am writing to you, before God, I do not lie!) 21 Then I went into the regions of Syria and Cilicia. 22 And I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judea; 23 they only heard it said, "He who once persecuted us is now preaching the faith he once tried to destroy." 24 And they glorified God because of me. (Emphasis added.)

Price cogently argues that the italicized verses above are a post-Marcionite interpolation:

In Tertullian's treatise *Against Marcion*, he does not mention the visit to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18–20), which implies that probably Marcion had not mentioned it either, again marking it as an interpolation. Someone must have inserted the passage precisely to abet the notion rejected here,

⁶⁴ Price 2006:362 note f. Cf. Price 2012:361.

that Paul went to Jerusalem to submit himself to the twelve as soon as he was able to go. Had these verses been available to Tertullian, who was arguing against Pauline independence, there is no way he would have skipped an opportunity to appeal to them; they cannot yet have formed part of the Galatians text.⁶⁵

In other words, there was no first visit to Jerusalem. With that knowledge we must now conclude that Paul never met James in the flesh.⁶⁶

Tertullian (c. 155–c. 240 CE) was active at the beginning of the third century CE. Thus, if the above passage was still not available to him, we can understand how late are some of these Pauline interpolations! A third century dating for the above interpolation, in turn, critically affects the phrase “James the brother of the Lord.” This is the only place that the phrase occurs in the Pauline writings. We must now jettison that phrase, too, recognizing it as a very late interpolation. In short, Paul never referred to James as the brother of the Lord! Robert Price concurs:

...[E]arly Christian tradition seized upon the figure of James the Just, the head of his own sect (perhaps that of the Dead Sea Scrolls), and made him the “brother of the Lord” (long after the fact) in order to absorb and yet honor both the sect and its figurehead, while maintaining the centrality of Jesus (who by this late date had already been historicized).⁶⁷

[3]

Gal 2:1 Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me. 2 I went up in response to a

⁶⁵ Price 2012:415. Cf. Price 2006:317–18.

⁶⁶ Zindler (2003:88) also notes that “Apart from the problem that we can’t be sure if ‘Paul’ was a single individual or a school of theologians, there is the jarring ‘I am not lying’—which makes me think, ‘Methinks he doth protest too much!’”

⁶⁷ Price 2011:349.

revelation. Then I laid before them (though only in a private meeting with the acknowledged leaders) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure that I was not running, or had not run, in vain. 3 But even Titus, who was with me, was not compelled to be circumcised, though he was a Greek. 4 But because of false brothers secretly brought in, who slipped in to spy on the freedom we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might enslave us— 5 we did not submit to them even for a moment, so that the truth of the gospel might always remain with you. 6 And from those who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders (what they actually were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality)—those leaders contributed nothing to me. 7 *On the contrary, when they saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel for the circumcised* 8 *(for he who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles),* 9 *and when 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.* 10 They asked only one thing, that we remember the poor, which was actually what I was eager to do. (Emphasis added.)

Price points out that verses 7–9 “must be an interpolation since they rudely interrupt the sequence of 6 and 10.”⁶⁸ He explains: “This proviso [in v. 10], representing tribute money to be paid the Jerusalem Church as the price of recognition of Paulinism, obviously should follow verse 6.”

Marcion famously made a large financial donation to the Roman Church (c. 125 CE?). It was returned to him—a clear parallel both to Simon Magus’ attempt to purchase the power of the Holy Spirit, and to Paul’s attempt above to purchase the recognition of Paulinism. In his 2012 book Price makes the real *Sitz im Leben* of the Galatians passage clear:

⁶⁸ Price 2006:319, following William R. Walker Jr., “Galatians 2:7b–8 as a Non-Pauline Interpolation.” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 4 (Oct. 2003):568–87.

How far Paul's esteem for the Jerusalem leaders, or shall we say Marcion's esteem for the Roman leaders, has fallen! In Galatians 2:6 they are merely said to be supposedly something great, pretty much the same disdainful phrase that characterizes Simon Magus in Acts 8:9—not coincidentally, since in Acts we see the other side of this very argument.

... Note that the interpolator slips and calls Cephas "Peter," his more familiar name, whereas in the rest of the discussion he is Cephas. The interpolated passage partakes of the Catholic remodeling of Peter to make him just like Paul, a missionary to the gentiles....

The stipulated collection of alms for the Jerusalem poor (*ebionim*, 2:10), which is to say the Jerusalem saints generally, for whom Paul is depicted in the epistles as having raised money in his churches, is a fictive version of Marcion's own initial gift of a large sum to the Roman church, which they refunded after deciding he was a heretic (Price 2012:418–19).

[4]

Gal 2:11 But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; 12 ***for until certain people came from James***, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of those of the circumcision. 13 And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?" (Emphasis added.)

As Price (2012:419) writes, "It is not that any of this actually happened, of course." We have already concluded that the events narrated in the preceding verses (no. 3, above) relate to a second century *Sitz im Leben*, and that "Paul" may well be a cipher for none other than Marcion. In this light, is it possible to accord any historicity at all to the 'incident at Antioch' between Paul and Peter? The short answer is: no.

The longer answer will require more digging in the scholarly literature. I focus in what follows on the italicized phrase in v. 12, "for until people came from James." If one were to take the entire incident at Antioch literally—as does the

tradition—that phrase becomes problematic. For example, Betz wonders if those “people from James” are to be associated with the “false brothers” of v. 4. He concludes: “Their actions are indeed parallel, but they must not be identical” (Betz 1979:108). Parallel but not identical?

H. Schlier opined that though James may indeed have sent the emissaries to Antioch, they were not “James’ adherents.”⁶⁹

Of course, one can understand Betz and Schlier’s quandary, for identifying the “false brothers” with James would impugn the entire Jerusalem Church—a conclusion simply not acceptable to Christian tradition.

W. Schmithals also wondered greatly, writing: “It is surely impossible that Peter could be afraid of the party of James.”⁷⁰ Schmithals noted that the Jerusalem Church was a rag-tag association with little authority in Jerusalem itself, much less in Antioch. He finally observed that “those of the circumcision” (*tous ek peritomês*) manifestly included Peter—leading to the absurdity that Schmithals is forced to exclaim on p. 55: “Peter cannot after all be afraid of himself!”

Well, you never know... Nothing can be ruled out with people who did not exist.

The account in Galatians was commented upon already in the third century CE. In the so-called Letter of Peter to James (*Epistula Petri*), Paul is “the man who is my enemy” and Peter is a torah-observant Jewish Christian:

For some from among the Gentiles have rejected my lawful preaching and have preferred a lawless and absurd doctrine of *the man who is my enemy*. And indeed some have attempted, whilst I am still alive, to distort my words by interpretations of many sorts, as if I taught the dissolution of

⁶⁹ H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Galater*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971:83.

⁷⁰ Schmithals 1965:53–54.

the law and, although I was of this opinion, did not express it openly. But that may God forbid! For to do such a thing means to act contrary to the law of God which as made known by Moses and was confirmed by our Lord in its everlasting continuance.⁷¹ (Emphasis added.)

In conclusion, we return to the view of Robert Price, who sees much of Galatians in a Marcionite light.⁷² Despite a variety of views, the basic issue underlying the Antioch incident is the relevance of Jewish law (and, in turn, the authority of torah) to Jesus-followers. Table fellowship, permitted food, and circumcision were wedge issues of great sensitivity precisely in Marcion's time, for he essentially pulled Christianity out of a Jewish milieu. These issues were not relevant in the first century—that is, before the Jesus religion significantly moved into Gentile lands.

These pages present a chronology based on documents redated by liberal scholarship to the second or even the third century. It is clear that such late documents can have little—if any—historical value. They are propaganda texts of factions which have already developed. In turn, the figures encountered—Peter, James, Paul, etc.—are effigies. They conform not to history but to the exigencies of each faction. And the figures are malleable—as are all literary constructs. Hence we have different depictions of these 'personae' and conflicting assertions by them.

The entire 'Antioch incident' dramatizes the practical—and potentially very divisive—relevance of torah observance for Jesus-followers in the second century. It does so using the figures of Peter, James, and Paul. Composition of the scene can date no earlier than the time of Marcion.

⁷¹ NTA (1992) 2.494.

⁷² Price 2012:420.

In sum, the “James” of 1 Cor 15:7, Gal 1:19, 2:9, and 2:12 is a literary construct with no demonstrable historical value.⁷³ Like so many figures in the New Testament, he is made to serve functions and purposes of a later generation. He is as fictional as the events which surround him in the texts.

The acknowledgment of Marcionite involvement with the “Pauline” epistles must be considered one aspect of a major redating taking place in our generation—a redating of virtually the entire New Testament from the first to the second century CE. The implications for the historicity of the canonical gospels—and particular that of Jesus of Nazareth—are fatal. As research grapples with the realization that the gospels reflect second century forces and realities, many elements will become more understandable, such as the presence of Pharisees in the Galilee, of synagogues—and of Nazareth.

The later gospel chronology can also reveal much that was hitherto not suspected. For example, in the third century citation above from the *Epistula Petri*, Peter is presented as describing Paul (implicitly) as “the man who is my enemy.” From the Jewish Christian point of view, Paul’s activity was that of sowing tares among the wheat. We may wonder if Jesus’ parable of the wheat and tares (Mt 13:24–30) might not itself be a product of Hellenist Christian activity among the Gentiles in the second century. In that parable we read:

Mt 13: 27 And the servants of the householder came and said to him, “Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?” 28 He said to them, “An enemy has done this.” The servants said to him, “Then do you want us to go and gather them?” 29 But he said, “No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest...

⁷³ The Jamesian literature has assimilated the Catholic chronology of Gal. 1:19 (that Paul met with James in Jerusalem). Jamesian literature consists of (from Nag Hammadi) the *Apocryphon of James*, the *First and Second Apocalypse of James*, the *Gospel of Thomas*, and the *Gospel of the Egyptians*. Outside of the Nag Hammadi library are the canonical *Epistle of James*, the *Protevangelium of James*, the *Ascents of James*, and the *Kerygmata Petrou* of the Pseudo-Clementine writings. We also note the prominence of James in the writings of Hegesippus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Epiphanius (Painter 2004:167).

If the “enemy” above is “Paul,” then the parable must date to a post-Marcion era.

* * *

In the foregoing pages we have argued that “James the Just,” the “brother of the Lord,” is a literary figure with no demonstrable historical anchor in the first century CE. The surprisingly few passages which have been used by the tradition to locate James in history are late interpolations with no historical value. One is from Josephus and four from the Pauline epistles. In the last case (Gal 2:12) the entire story is apocryphal and without historical substance. It serves a theological purpose of importance in the second century when a branch of Jesus-followers (Marcionites) were in the process of separating from Judaism altogether.

There are, of course, rich traditions surrounding the figure of James the Just in the writings of the Church Fathers, in Jewish Christian literature, and in Gnostic texts. All these, however, depend upon the false chronology interpolated into Josephus and insinuated in the Pauline epistles.

Jewish and Christian traditions locate Yeshu ha-Notsri and James the Just in different centuries. We have noted affinities both in historical circumstances (particularly their mutual association with the Jerusalem hierarchy) and theology (emphasizing the gnostic ascent to the ‘divine’). But if these two figures ultimately derive from the same prophet (above p. 430), then one of the chronological and historical settings is false. Which one?

The answer is clear: the later figure of James the Just is not attested in the literature—as we have now seen. The seminal passages placing him in the first century CE are interpolations. They are all late propaganda of the Church.

On the other hand Yeshu is quite well located in history, even though relatively few passages directly attest to him. Yeshu is a protégé of the head of the Sanhedrin, Joshua ben Perachiah, who was a high-ranking Pharisee known

through rabbinic records. The circumstances of Yeshu's flight to Egypt in the time of Janneus make sense. Yeshu was excommunicated upon his return, gathered disciples, was eventually tried before the Sanhedrin, and was executed on the eve of Passover. All these elements of his biography are believable. There is no obvious reason to doubt any of them.

Similar passion accounts

Many descriptions survive regarding the death of James. Space does not permit us to compare them with the canonical passion accounts, nor with the various reports of the death of Yeshu found in Jewish literature. But some common characteristics between the various passages can be noted.

First of all, the death of Yeshu, James, and Jesus all took place in Jerusalem.

Secondly, the temple authorities—that is, the Jewish religious elite—were involved in each case.

Indeed, our above analysis has suggested that Yeshu himself once belonged to that elite. James the Just (*Jacob ha-Tsaddik*), too, seems to have enjoyed privileged religious status, for tradition portrays him as possessing access to the more sacred areas of the temple. Only Jesus of Nazareth is out of step here—perhaps an indication of the astonishing liberty that went into creating him. Jesus is portrayed strictly as an outsider—as a presumptuous Galilean merely 'visiting' Jerusalem.

Both Yeshu and Jesus are tried before the Sanhedrin and then executed. With the death of James there are conflicting traditions. The Pseudo-Clementine literature presents a gang murder in the temple precincts. But the *Second Apocalypse of James* "emphasizes the Jewish legal elements of the trial, making use of traditions now known to us in Mishnah tractate *Sanhedrin*" (Painter 2004:177). Of these two accounts only the *Second Apocalypse* echoes the formal trial and death of Yeshu considered above. It is no doubt the more correct.

Some accounts preserve a lengthy speech (‘manifesto’) by James preceding his death (Hegesippus; *Recognitions* 1.68.3–1.70.8). In this connection, the image of Stephen in Acts 6–7 also comes into play, for H. Schoeps and others have suggested that Stephen is a cipher for James the Just. Acts places Paul at the death of Stephen, but the Pseudo-Clementines have him (under a pseudonym) at the death of James. Stephen is “brought before the council,” he gives a lengthy pre-mortem speech, accuses the religious authorities of being “stiff-necked, uncircumcised in heart and ears, forever opposing the holy spirit, just as your ancestors used to do” (Acts 7:51), and he is then stoned. However, since James the Just was himself an echo of Yeshu, then even less historical credence can be accorded the figure of Stephen.

The invention of the Christian Jesus

The foregoing pages have presented the view that the ‘savior’ was originally a pure abstraction—gnosis itself (above, pp. 418, 430). Secondly, at the Pauline stage, the gnosis became magnified into a great, eternal, and redeeming spiritual entity, Jesus (the “savior”), one that indwells the saints. Finally the savior Jesus took on the body—once and only once—of a single human being. This third stage was presented to the world via a radical new text—The Gospel of Mark. The astonishing new conception also required an astonishing God-man—Jesus ‘the Nazarene.’⁷⁴

We can be quite confident that the miracle-working Jesus of the gospels postdates the epistles of Paul. The epistles do not know anything of the Nazarene’s biography—they couldn’t, because that biography had not yet been invented. As discussed above, the Pauline epistles know only a spiritual Jesus.

This is not the place to expand on the meaning of “Nazarene”—a critical consideration in its own right. However, *Iêsous* is the Greek rendering for

⁷⁴ The Gospel of Mark did not know Nazareth, which was not yet in existence. See Salm 2008:299 f.

“Joshua,” in Hebrew *Yehoshua*. The New Testament name “Jesus” is thus closely related to the name Yeshu of the Talmud.⁷⁵ The link becomes even closer when we consider both names together with their descriptives: *Iêsou Nazarêne* and Yeshu ha-Notsri.⁷⁶

It might be argued by some that the Talmudic Yeshu ha-Notsri is secondary—a very late echo of the New Testament Jesus of Nazareth. Yet this line is thoroughly untenable, for Yeshu has a completely different biography from Jesus. He even lives in a different century. It is not merely a question of the rabbis having gotten all the particulars of Jesus very wrong. One would additionally have to explain how (and why) they gave Yeshu a credible biography in the time of Janneus, one linking him to attested figures.

Leading to our identification of James the Just with Yeshu ha-Notsri above, we uncovered common elements in theology and biography, similarities which link the two figures despite their very different historical settings. Those common elements led to the conclusion that James was invented.

In now comparing Jesus of Nazareth with Yeshu ha-Notsri, the resonances are rarely specific—as might indeed be the case if the biographical details of the earlier figure were largely forgotten (or suppressed). However, a few potential echoes are unmistakable: years spent in Egypt; activity in Jerusalem; conflict with the Pharisees; involvement of Jewish religious authorities in the execution; death at Passover. Though not conclusive, these resonances are nevertheless remarkable. After all, how many prophets went to Egypt and then

⁷⁵ Yeshu and Yehoshua (Joshua) are not precisely equivalent. The former (yodh-shin-vav) is probably an abbreviated form of Yeshu'a (“salvation,” BDB 447). The other has the heh and incorporates the nomen domini: Yeho-shu'a, “Yahweh is salvation.”

⁷⁶ As has long been noted, the voiced Greek zeta in Nazareth, Nazarenos, Nazôraios, does not linguistically correspond to the voiceless tsade of the Hebrew. This demonstrates that the Greek terms are artificial. The Semitic languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Mandaic, Arabic) universally present the tsade—not one has the voiced sibilant (zain).

returned to Israel? How many prophets had deep conflicts with the Pharisees? How many prophets were executed at Passover?

Though we have precious little information regarding the teaching of Yeshu, we know that he was accused of making himself into God and leading Israel astray (above, pp. 422 f). These accusations perfectly fit Jesus of Nazareth. If we interpret “making himself into God” in a gnostic sense—that is, raising oneself up to perfection through gnosis (“Primary Gnosticism”)—then a body of teaching attributed to Jesus (most obviously expressed in the *Gospel of Thomas*) would also resonate with Yeshu’s teaching.

The surprising results of these pages, then, is that both James the Just and his “brother” Jesus of Nazareth are echoes of none other than Yeshu ha-Notsri, a prophet who lived in the time of Alexander Janneus.

Jesus of Nazareth does not enjoy equivalent historical attestation to Yeshu ha-Notsri. We can briefly review the reasons here:

- (a) The town where Jesus was born (Bethlehem) did not exist at the turn of the era (per the work of A. Oshri);
- (b) the town where he was raised (Nazareth) similarly did not exist (Salm);
- (c) no pagan contemporary notes Jesus’ existence;
- (d) the slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem, the opening of the graves at Jesus’ execution, and many other historical impossibilities (and errors such as the false dating for the census of Quirinius) inform the New Testament accounts; and
- (e) the presence of stand-alone synagogues and Pharisees in the Galilee reflect a later time, showing that the *Sitz im Leben* of the gospel accounts is the second century CE.

As for James the Just, once we reject the Josephan account of his death (above pp. 435 f), no other independent witnesses exist and James vanishes entirely from history. Traditions regarding his death at the Jerusalem temple generally

conform to what we know of the death of Yeshu, while his theology—as transmitted by the later gnostic Jamesian literature—also conforms with Yeshu’s gnostic theology as discussed above.

Once it is established that only one person of history can be involved with these three figures (Yeshu, Jesus, and James), it becomes clear that two of the three literary settings are also invented—with all the implications for false biographies in the cases of Jesus, James, as well as all their companions and associates. Indeed, the only literary setting that actually corresponds to history is that of Yeshu ha-Notsri, as we have seen.

It appears, then, that the New Testament gospels are little more than fairy tales.

Simon Magus

It may be that other figures in early Christian literature—including Simon Magus, Dositheus, and John the Baptist—are also to a greater or lesser extent ‘overlapping reflections’ of a defining prophet who lived in the early first century BCE. According to the Pseudo-Clementines (Hom. II.24) Simon and Dositheus were in conflict for the mantle of the Baptist. Yet it is little appreciated that the principal appellation of Simon Magus—the “Standing One”—is based on the Semitic *amad* (אמד)—which in Hebrew means “stand” but in Aramaic carries the primary meanings “baptize,” “plunge.”⁷⁷ Christian Syriac writings—as well as Manichaean literature—employ the root ‘mad with strong gnostic overtones (cf. above p. 405). Thus, all three figures—John, Simon, and Dositheus—had a claim to the epithet “Standing/Baptizing One.” A gnostic thrust underlies these figures.

⁷⁷ Payne-Smith 1999/1902:416; cf. Allegro 1979:181. The root ‘amad in Jewish scripture also requires revisiting in light of this meaning. The term was particularly associated with the sect of the Rechabites (Jer 35:19)—a sect also linked to James the Just (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. II.23.17) and which R. Eisenman has asserted “really does provide a good description of James as he has come down to us” (Eisenman 2006:167).

Unfortunately, there is not space here to delve into the many colorful and conflicting stories regarding the “Magus,” which is a title. “Simon” was a name shared with his nemesis, Peter—a sharing we will find significant. The animosity regarding Simon is patent, and this implies that the message he embodied was eminently threatening to the tradition at an early time. That message has been virtually obliterated from history, though we know that Simon is closely linked to the epithets “Standing/Baptizing One” and “Great Power” (*megalê dunamis*). His many reported conflicts also witness to a vital message that was continually rejected by the tradition.

Simon was clearly a gnostic figure, and he is thus remembered by the tradition. His consort “Helena” was originally simply a philosophical abstraction, *Ennoia* (“the faculty of thought”—Liddell), alternately Sophia or Sapientia.⁷⁸ But under the pens of the Church Fathers “she” descended to the rank of a prostitute whom Simon captivated. He was the author of all heresy (Eusebius), and Simon’s assumption of the entire catalogue of evils suggests that “he” was (like his consort) also a personification, in his case of a much more troubling abstraction, namely, of gnosis itself. Thus the invention and rapid demonization of Simon “Magus” represent early stages in the devolution of the Christian religion away from the gnosticism of Yeshu.

Simon Magus was reputedly born in Gitta (Gath, presently Ramlah—Justin, *Apol.* I.26, 56), a town in Samaria approximately 40 km NW of Jerusalem. Archeologically the settlement has been identified with Lydda (Lod). Now, Lod was where a certain Ben Stada was crucified on the eve of Passover according to Rabbinic writings.⁷⁹ This link between Simon Magus and Ben Stada takes on more force when we realize that “Ben Stada” is probably another

⁷⁸ Cf. Allegro 1979:173.

⁷⁹ Tosefta Sanh. X.11; Bab. Talmud Sanh. 67a. See Zindler 2003:237 f; Herford 78 f.

corruption for [the] ‘Standing One’⁸⁰ —a favorite euphemism of Simon Magus. Finally, Ben Stada clearly refers to Yeshu.⁸¹ Jesus of Nazareth, of course, was also crucified on the eve of Passover.

John the Baptist

The tradition is “unanimous in its declaration that the actual events proclaimed as ‘gospel’ by the church had begun with John.”⁸² Indeed, once we realize that Jesus of Nazareth did not exist, the figure of John must be re-evaluated independently, that is, not as a precursor to anyone but as a prophet in his own right. Only the Mandaeans have preserved this view.

Yet John the Baptist is probably also a cipher. The evangelists are most interested in his birth (Luke 1), his status as precursor and subordinate to Jesus (Luke 3:4, 16 and pars.), and his death (Mark 6). When John’s theology is presented, it is the same as that of Jesus (Lk 3:7–14). The distinction between John’s baptism (with water) and Jesus’ baptism (with fire) is artificial —“water” being symbolic of power over the spirit (i.e. gnosis), and “fire” symbolic of power over the body (i.e. Jesus’ office to “burn with unquenchable fire” those who are unworthy, presumably at the Last Judgment —Mt 3:12).

John’s status as precursor is strong acknowledgement that an important prophet did precede Jesus. If we describe Yeshu ha-Notsri as the lightning illuminating the sky, John the Baptist was the preliminary echo. Jesus of Nazareth was the great echo, the great thunderclap—arriving with most impressive sound, but no substance.

⁸⁰ Eisenman 1997:1018, n. 53.

⁸¹ Herford 1975:37.

⁸² IDB Suppl. p. 487.

In its closing pages, *The Myth of Nazareth* argued that Nazara (Mt 4:13; Lk 4:16) was “the field of activity of John the Baptist” (Salm 2008a:307). Nazara is the earliest of the toponyms, and the *Gospel of Philip* defines it as “truth.”⁸³ An argument can be made that the original “field of activity” of John and Jesus was simply gnosis.

My earlier book also pointed out the Galilean setting for Jesus’ activity was late. Clues remain that the original setting was not Galilee but Judea (Salm 2008a:304). This also conforms with what we know of Yeshu ha-Notsri’s activities.

Robert Price provocatively entitles a chapter from one of his books, “Was Jesus John the Baptist Raised from the Dead?”⁸⁴ He writes:

... Let us for a brief moment think the unthinkable.

Suppose the figure of the pre-Easter Jesus is to be found under the alias of John the Baptist. When we impose this outlandish paradigm onto the gospels, we get some interesting results. A number of things make new sense. —Price 2007:78

Price shows that the transition from “John” to “Jesus” occurred at the baptism of Jesus. In gnostic terms, baptism is the enlightenment experience. The operative symbolism is water = gnosis (above, p. 405). This symbolism occurs across traditions, from Mandaeism to Dositheanism (below)—to Christianity. Price notes that the end of John’s ministry = the beginning of Jesus’ ministry. This makes perfect sense only if one interprets “Jesus” spiritually—as argued above.

Familiar terms necessarily assume unfamiliar gnostic meanings: the acquisition of ‘the Jesus’ is the ‘enlightenment moment’ of ‘baptism’ (Aramaic: *amad*).

⁸³ G. Philip 66.14; 62.8, 15; 56.12.

⁸⁴ Price 2007: Chp. 7 (pp. 75–90).

That is the moment when the saintly John ‘fused’ with the Jesus (above p. 414). In a sense, he ‘became’ Jesus—they are inseparable.

This fusion with ‘the Jesus’ also describes Pauline theology, as well as James the Just’s presentation in gnostic texts (above pp. 411, 433).

Price is not the only scholar to suspect that John ‘became’ Jesus at the baptism. Ross S. Kraemer has concluded that the gospel narratives about the death of John are a defensive response “to early ‘Christian’ concerns about the vexing relationship between John and Jesus, most particularly the unnerving possibility that Jesus might have been John raised from the dead.”⁸⁵

Like James the Just, John the Baptist has been ‘fixed’ to the first century CE by the writings of Josephus—in fact, via a single critical passage at Ant. 18:109 ff. Majority opinion holds the passage to be authentic, but such a view raises serious problems. Kraemer observes simply: “It is not impossible that this passage represents a Christian interpolation into the text of Josephus, since Josephus is transmitted by Christians, not Jews.”⁸⁶ One problem that has drawn much scholarly ink is the obvious conflict between the dating of the activity of John in Josephus (c. 34 CE) and in the Gospel of Luke (28 CE, cf. Lk 3:1).⁸⁷ Both datings cannot be correct, and majority opinion has sided with Josephus on this question. But Frank Zindler has questioned the authenticity of the Josephan passage entirely, pointing out that elsewhere the historiographer gives a different account of why “god punished Herodias and Herod”:

A second non-contextual reason for concluding paragraph 2 [of the Josephan passage] is an interpolation is that in it Josephus cites—without indicating he believes otherwise—the supposed Jewish view that Herod

⁸⁵ Kraemer 2006:322. Emphasis added.

⁸⁶ Kraemer 2006:325.

⁸⁷ Tromp 2008:137.

came to a bad end because of his execution of the Baptist. Elsewhere [18:7:1; 18:255], however, Josephus gives his own—differing—view of why his god punished Herodias and Herod: “And so God visited this punishment on Herodias for her envy of her brother and on Herod for listening to a woman’s frivolous chatter.” —Zindler 2003:98

In my view this is decisive, for Josephus would not present two very different explanations of the same event. Zindler offers additional reasons to suspect a Christian interpolation, one being that the Baptist passage is intrusive—the preceding and following paragraphs dovetail perfectly when it is removed.⁸⁸ In all, it appears that the Josephan paragraph regarding John the Baptist is an inexpert Christian interpolation, one that does not even cohere with the dating provided by Luke, and that also conflicts with another passage in Josephus.

Once the Josephan witness for John is rejected, no independent historical attestation for the Baptist’s existence in the first century CE remains.

Luke 3:15 reports that there were some who “wondered in their hearts whether John himself were perhaps the Christ.” This view is even more explicit in the little known Hebrew Gospel of Matthew, a medieval manuscript that its editor, George Howard, claims preserves early Christian readings of that gospel. The Hebrew Gospel states at HebMt 3:10: “And all the people were thinking and reckoning in their circumcised heart: John is Jesus.”

This is astonishing. There, in black and white, a document explicitly states that John is Jesus! To be inferred from this statement is that Jesus was a spiritual entity. Only in this way could a person (John) also be ‘the Jesus.’ Was this the belief of very early followers—reflecting a gnostic stage in the religion predating the invention of Jesus of Nazareth? All avenues appear to lead in this direction. At an early stage of the religion, then, John is gnosis. He is enlightened, and he has merged with ‘the Jesus’ (= gnosis). Subsequently

⁸⁸ Zindler 2003:97.

John stands as a human example for the rest of us—as a guide for emulation, not worship (i.e., in the guise of Jesus of Nazareth).

The figure of Apollos in Acts enters into consideration. As Price notes, Apollos is confusingly said to have preached accurately the things concerning Jesus, yet he knows only the baptism of John! Priscilla and Aquila set Apollos straight in unspecified ways (Acts 18:24–28), but the passage is obviously window-dressing to steer the reader away from John and to Jesus. Price concludes with a question: “[W]hat if Luke’s source preserves the fossil recollection that to know accurately the things about Jesus was precisely to know the baptism of John, since ‘Jesus’ was none other than the resurrected John?”⁸⁹ We might paraphrase by saying that ‘John’ is the imperfect body, while ‘Jesus’ is the perfect spirit.

It can be noted that, strictly speaking, the Greek *Iwannês* corresponds to the Hebrew *Yochanan*, “Yahweh has been gracious.” This is the more obvious etymology. However, an ancient and quintessentially gnostic link exists to the Mesopotamian fish-man *Oan/Oannês*. Robert Eisler noted in 1931:

As early as the end of the eighteenth century C. F. Dupuis put forth the conjecture, since revived by Drews, that the Baptist’s name ‘Iwannês may be no other than that of the strange Babylonian god of revelation who emerges from the water, according to the account of Berossus... Such a possibility is quite conceivable. For not only does the form Joannes, attested by Chaeremon in the time of Nero, exactly coincide with the New Testament name for the Baptist, but according to the view expressed in the Fourth Book of Esdras (xii.25; xiii.51 sq.) the Messiah is thought of as concealed in the deepest ocean, from which he is to emerge in the end. Similarly, according to Berossus, under the first dynasty of the antediluvian kings of Babylon, the ‘Oannês, (J)oannes, being the first of a series of such antediluvian ‘sages,’ emerged from the sea to teach the people all manner of wisdom, including politics and law. —Eisler 1931:241

⁸⁹ Price 2007:85.

The “deepest ocean” home of Oannês is the Babylonian *abzu*, the realm of gnosis, i.e. “truth,” and the dwelling place of the god Ea/Enki. We are now far anterior to New Testament times—indeed, in the Bronze Age. It would appear that John ‘the Baptist,’ the gnostic revealer, is none other than a reincarnation of Oannês, the Sumero-Babylonian demigod.⁹⁰ At a very rudimentary level this seems to have been transferred to Jesus of Nazareth for, as we have noted, “Nazara” in the earliest tradition is the field of activity of both the Baptist and of Jesus, a region that the *Gospel of Philip* interprets as “truth.”

John Mark

A very obscure Greek work called the Acts of Mark has been extant for half a century, yet to this day no translation exists in any modern language.⁹¹ The manuscript was discovered at Mt. Athos. The text contains astonishing declarations, including that Mark was a disciple of John the Baptist (5.1), was a Levite, was baptized by Peter, and went “to the West, to the Gauls.”⁹² Also remarkable is the statement that “Now at first this blessed apostle [i.e. Mark] was called John” (4.1)!

This author commissioned a scholarly translation of the *Acta Marci* in 2012, but as of this writing only the first 5 chapters (of 35) have been professionally rendered into English.⁹³ Thus, the comments that follow restrict themselves to those few initial chapters.

⁹⁰ In this writer’s opinion, the “Jonathan” of Judg 18:30 who founds the gnostic priesthood at Dan is also an echo of Oannês.

⁹¹ The Greek text is found in Halkin 1969. A note on the work is at NTA (1989) II:464–65.

⁹² Cf. the ultra-heretical Marcosians of Southern Gaul (Acts of Barnabas 5; Acts of Andrew 2.293:25–27). The natural inference is that the apostle Mark = the heretic Marcus—a figure generally dated to the second century CE.

⁹³ At the time of this writing, the first five chapters are available in English on the author’s website at <http://www.mythicistpapers.com/2012/10/02/translation/>

Space does not permit us to untangle all the novel threads the *Acta Marci* presents. Already, however, we note the equivalence John = Mark. The two names are indeed combined in the canonical Acts, where we read of “John whose other name was Mark” (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:37). It must come as a surprise, however, that this Mark is now reported to have been a disciple of the Baptist before becoming a disciple of Jesus (cf. Jn 3:26).

We also note in passing that John Mark’s mother bore the same name as Jesus’ mother: Mary (Acts 12:12). In the Acts of Mark, Mary’s role is curiously evocative of the mother of Jesus: she is “truly blessed and honored” when she receives the “only-begotten son and word of god” (Jesus Christ) into her house—an uncanny echo of the Annunciation (AcMk 4.7).

The status of Mark as a Levite also merits note. The Levites are little understood, but it is clear that they were eclipsed when the priestly Aaronides arrogated power to themselves with the finalization of the Pentateuch.⁹⁴ This revolution in the Israelite religion involved the categorical subordination of the earlier Levitical priesthood—a subordination emphatically written (by the Aaronides themselves) into the Pentateuch.

The Levites predated the Jerusalem Aaronides. Nielsen has shown that Moses, a Levite (Ex 2:1–2), was a devotee of the gnostic moon religion indigenous to North Arabia, which he learned from the *kâhin* (priest) Jethro in Midian.⁹⁵ There are some suggestions (in Jewish scripture and elsewhere) that the Levites continued to perpetuate proto-gnostic traditions in an underground fashion after the Aaronides took power. For example, in Judges 17–18 a Levite priest from Bethlehem of Judah is responsible for nothing less than founding the (odious) gnostic priesthood at Dan in the north. On the surface the story is nonsense—the sanctuary at Dan had been long established and was famous

⁹⁴ E. Rivkin, “Aaron, Aaronides” in IDB (Suppl.) pp. 1–3.

⁹⁵ Nielsen 1904:139–142.

already in the Bronze Age, attracting even Gilgamesh to the fabled “Cedar Mountain.” But the story does reveal a gnostic-Levite link. Perhaps more interesting for our present purposes is that the name of the priest who went northwards to Dan from Bethlehem was none other than Jonathan (Judg 18:30), son of Gershom, son of Moses.

Gnostic vocabulary pervades the Acts of Mark. The apostle brings “the light of the knowledge of god”, “hidden and obscure meanings”, “divine illumination”, and “perfection.” Mark is known as a “speaker of mysteries” (*mystolektês*). He is “clear-sighted,” and has reached “the highest degree” of excellence/perfection (cf. James the Just). In short, he appears to be a holy and “enlightened” herald of gnosis.

The Acts of Mark shows the strong presence of a southern (Judean) tradition. It quite ignores Galilee, mentioned only once in chapters 1-5. Jesus performs miracles “many years” in and around Jerusalem. Then he journeys “from Jerusalem into Galilee”—a reversal of the canonical trajectory.

The Acts of Mark is violently anti-Semitic. It mentions “the baseless and lie-plastered betrayal of the all-brazen Jews,” and “the accursed Jews” (Chp. 5). This surely betrays a time when the religion was moving out of the Jewish ambit—i.e., the second century CE—also the time of Marcionite activity and of the composition of the New Testament (above p. 442).

Dositheus

While the Greek *Iwannês* in the New Testament transcribes the Hebrew *Yochanan* (“John”), it also loosely corresponds to *Yehonathan/Yonathan* (“Jonathan”) with meaning “Yahweh gives” or “Gift of Yahweh.” Synonyms include “Matthew” (*Mattanya*, “Gift of Yahweh”), Nathanael (“Gift of God”),

and Dositheus (Gk. “Gift of God”).⁹⁶

Dositheus does not appear in the New Testament. Scholars are aware of him primarily from the Pseudo-Clementine writings, the Church Fathers, and obscure Samaritan texts—all hostile sources. “Dositheos” is also the eponymous author of an intensely gnostic tractate discovered at Nag Hammadi and entitled *The Three Steles of Seth* (NHL VII.5).

The first section of *The Three Steles of Seth* (that is, the ‘first stele’) is a meditation on the meaning of stand/*amad*—a term generally associated with Simon Magus, not Dositheus. This ‘borrowed attribution’ is our first hint that the Magus and Dositheus may be reflections of one another—neither one a real person of history. We learn from the Nag Hammadi text that “stand” signifies the unchanging and the perfect. That which is created does not stand—only that which is self-begotten (“unconceived”) stands. Enigmatically, however, only that which is unconceived is also eternal.

In the second section of *The Three Steles of Seth* we learn that perfection entails the gaining of gnosis (understanding, wisdom, knowledge).

The third section is a paean to “the unconceived”—that is, to the perfected one(s). Knowledge of the unconceived is salvation, and it is self-taught. No external savior exists (cf. “Primary Gnosticism”).

Turning our attention now to the Pseudo-Clementine literature, we read (Hom II.24) that both Dositheus and Simon Magus are disciples of John the Baptist. On the death of John the two disciples vie for leadership of the sect, and the Magus wins. John thus is effectively the precursor to the “father of all heresy” (Simon Magus). This is truly ironic since in the gospels John is the precursor to none other than Jesus of Nazareth!

⁹⁶ A resumé of ancient sources mentioning Dositheus is at Isser 1975:168 f. An important treatment of the conflation of personalities (including John the Baptist, Simon Magus, and the Teacher of Righteousness) with Dositheus is at Allegro 1979:185–89.

The issue at stake in the Simon-Dositheus conflict was the question of who is the Standing One—known to be one of the major epithets of Simon Magus. We have discussed the meaning of “stand” and its Semitic form *amad*, which primarily means “baptize” in the Aramaic/Syriac language of the early Christian centuries. In a gnostic context, then, the issue between Simon and Dositheus was: Who is the baptized one? Figuratively one can rephrase the question: Who has thoroughly plunged into gnosis (“water”)? In other words: Which of the two could claim to be enlightened?

The only text to preserve an extended account of Dositheus is a little known, garbled, medieval Samaritan work entitled the *Chronicle of Abu'l Fath* (fourteenth century).⁹⁷ “Simon the wizard” appears only in passing.⁹⁸ The Chronicle relates that Dositheus (*Dusis*) was an educated prophet, an author of “sinful books” who “altered much of the law.”⁹⁹ His writings were on palm leaves,¹⁰⁰ and his followers “baptized in” or “plunged into” (*amad*) water. They also prayed “in water,” confirming that “water” is here a symbol of gnosis (above p. 405).

Furthermore, the books of Dositheus were smeared with “blood”—another symbol, this time probably of self-sacrifice/suffering. It is unclear from Abu'l Fath's account whether the baptizing/plunging was metaphorically into water/gnosis, into blood/self-sacrifice, or intellectually into the ‘texts’ Dositheus had written—or perhaps it was a combination of all these.

⁹⁷ Text at Bowman 1977:162–72.

⁹⁸ Bowman 1977:168.

⁹⁹ Bowman 1977:166, 167. Altering the scriptures was a major complaint of the Church against the Ebionites, as also against the Samaritans.

¹⁰⁰ This is a curious medium for writing in the Levant. Palm leaves were, however, the standard medium of written communication in India until Late Roman times.

Abu'l Fath relates that the Samaritan High Priest (“Akbon”) sent a number of influential people (including his nephew Levi) to apprehend Dositheus “who deserves to be killed.” However, they encountered some of the prophet’s writings and read them. This represented “taking the plunge” and they were converted on the spot—that is, they were baptized/rendered ‘enlightened.’ Of course, this surprising turn of events represented a great embarrassment to Akbon who had sent them on a rather different mission, for they were now openly exclaiming to everyone: “My faith is in you, Yahweh, and in Dositheus your prophet” (Bowman 165)!

While one might dismiss such a late and clearly embellished account as worthless, it may yet preserve a historical kernel. We have here an account of a schism among the Samaritans. Indeed, ‘Dositheanism’ was apparently a powerful but heterodox Samaritan sect. Bowman writes that “The chief opponents of orthodox Samaritans were the Dositheans.”¹⁰¹ By “orthodox” is meant the Samaritan priestly hierarchy centered at Mt. Gerizim—also self-styled “Zadokite.”¹⁰² The Dositheans were a lay and anti-clerical movement. The two factions had opposing messiahs, each differently interpreting the Taheb (the “star that will come” of Num 24:17—cf. below, p. 458). The priestly faction anticipated and venerated the messiah son of Joseph of the tribe of Ephraim (the northern province including Samaria), a warrior who would fight, conquer gloriously, but succumb in the end and be killed.¹⁰³ The lay faction, however, venerated Joshua (“Jesus”), the messiah son of David of the tribe of Judah (southern province). He would come in the end times, and none is greater.

¹⁰¹ Bowman 1975:26.

¹⁰² Though Zadok was King David’s priest (1 Kgs 1:32 etc), he impugned David for having many wives and not observing the law. The Samaritan Zadokite priesthood was inveterately anti-Davidic/anti-Judahite. Cf. Kohler 1911:410 f—now dated but still useful. The equivalence Zadokites = Sadducees bears reevaluation.

¹⁰³ Torrey 1947:270. The following is drawn particularly from the first-century CE work Second Esdras (“IV Esra”) 7:28–31, as analysed by C. Torrey 1947:259 f.

We must now make two critical observations. The first is that Dositheanism, though eventually dubbed “heterodox,” in all likelihood preceded the priestly faction in Samaritan history. A. Crown writes: “[T]he priestly tradition as a whole is secondary and is based on an alternative to an older heterodoxy.”¹⁰⁴ Crown then notes that the heterodoxy in question was probably founded by Dositheus. Elsewhere he writes that “Jewish sources place the Dositheans at the earliest level of Samaritanism.”¹⁰⁵ Bowman considers that “the Dusis heresy was the formative force in Samaritanism.”¹⁰⁶ Finally, K. Kohler dates Dositheus as the founder of the Samaritans to the time of Janneus/Simon ben Shetach.¹⁰⁷ If these scholars are correct, then Dositheus was none other than the founder of the Samaritans (*shamerim*)¹⁰⁸ —the “keepers” (cf. *notsri*, “keepers, watchers”).

The second observation is theological. It appears that Dositheus/Dositheanism interpreted the messiah spiritually. This was not a person of flesh at all—and here we probably have the great revolution in thinking that “Dositheus” brought¹⁰⁹ —a view we have argued characterized Pauline thought and

¹⁰⁴ Crown 1968:197.

¹⁰⁵ Crown 1967:81.

¹⁰⁶ Bowman 1975:187. The irony of an original anti-priestly view becoming heterodox (heresy) at the hands of later priests is not uncommon in religion. We will encounter a similar development at Qumran, where the gnostic view (and the founder) was apparently rejected in a conservative retrenchment (below).

¹⁰⁷ Kohler 1911:406–07. This scholar also proposes that Dositheus “had some relationship to the mythical founder of Sadduceeism.” Zodikites were in fact one self-reference of the priestly branch of Dositheans.

¹⁰⁸ This is the preferred name of the Samaritans, as opposed to shomerim, i.e. “inhabitants of Samaria” (IDB 4:191).

¹⁰⁹ As we are learning in these pages, personal names are misleading and almost interchangeable. “Dositheus” probably is a reflection of some other prophet. “Simon Magus” had a similar claim—he was the Megalê Dunamis (“Great Power”) which “clearly does not denote a personal being” (M. Edwards 1997:72). This observation could equally well be applied to Dositheus’ conception of the messiah. In fact, the Simonian concept of Megalê Dunamis has long been known to be rooted in Samaritan theology (Kippenberg 1971:328 f.; cf. Fossum 1985:59)..

gnostic Jamesian literature. Indications of this view are scant but clear enough also in Samaritanism. In its oldest tradition, “The Taheb is a vague figure, at times similar to the preexistent Son of Man; he is *not* a human prophet at first”¹¹⁰ (emphasis in original). It was only in the fourth century that the Samaritan priesthood (*Marqah*) first associated the Taheb with a human (Moses)—an association made “in order to undermine the position of Dositheus” (Isser 1975:173).

In Samaritan eschatology the Taheb was to be a prophet like Moses (Deut 18:15, 18). It is important to note, however, that Moses was conceived as the fullness of divine light (a gnostic concept) and his son Seth as “a special transmitter of the Light Image from Adam.”¹¹¹ Indeed, “the Samaritans alone are the children of light” (Bowman 1975:188). One could be forgiven for thinking we are speaking here of florid “Sethian” gnosticism. We are in fact describing original Samaritan theology. That theology was apparently much obscured by the later Samaritan priesthood. We thus can infer the revolutionary origin of Samaritanism as a gnostic breakaway from Judaism.

According to T. H. Gaster, the Samaritans view Moses as

...an utterly unique being. He is a distillation of the primordial light, itself none other than the holy light of God which illumines the saints. As such, he is the “light of the world,” and all other lights derive from his. He therefore existed from the dawn of creation, and was only later incarnated as the offspring of Amram and Jochebed. The whole world was created for his sake¹¹² (*Marqah* 67b). He intercedes for the deserving and leads the prayers of the celestial congregation. He is the future prophet foretold in Deut 18:18... —IDB 4:193

¹¹⁰ Isser 1975:172.

¹¹¹ Fossum 1985:59, n. 109. Seth himself “built the city of Damascus,” with clear implications for the interpretation of “Damascus” in the DSS..

¹¹² Remarkably, this precise view is reported concerning James the Just in the *Gospel of Thomas*, logion 12.

All this implies that at the very beginning of Samaritanism a (gnostic) rewriting of the Pentateuch must have taken place. Dositheus was accused of precisely such rewriting.¹¹³ The followers of Dositheus justified this for they considered him the ‘second Moses’ as predicted in Deut 18.¹¹⁴ A revisionist Samaritan priesthood, however, later rejected this view.

We recall Abu’l Fath’s description regarding the sending of a highly-placed contingent (including the High Priest Akbon’s nephew Levi)—but instead of arresting Dositheus they converted to his religion. This describes a secession at a high level and is reminiscent of Yeshu’s secession from the Pharisees in the time of Janneus, for Yeshu was also highly placed in religious circles. We will shortly see that a similar religious secession also may have occurred in the Dead Sea Sect as well.

If one draws blunt comparisons between the accounts of Yeshu and Dositheus, then Yeshu would fulfill the role of Levi in the Samaritan account, while “Dositheus” = gnosis. Indeed, one possible description of gnosis is “Gift of God”—Dositheus. It is possible, then, that what we have been considering a person of history may to a certain extent be viewed simply as a hypostasis of gnosis.

The tendency to hypostatize in the ancient texts bears note. For example, was Simon Magus a person or was he “the Standing One,” that is, a hypostasis of that which stands (is eternal, etc). Was he a person or the “Great Power” of God (*Megalê Dunamis*)? Was his consort Helena a person or “wisdom”? Was Peter/Cephas a person or the “rock” upon which Jesus would build his church? When viewed in this way, the texts can be seen as not dealing with people at all, even though they may explicitly appear to do so. They are—at least partly

¹¹³ Isser 1975:177.

¹¹⁴ Isser 1975:173.

—dealing with abstractions, perhaps mingled with some echoes of one or another historical person or event.

“Dositheus” may represent such a mixture of a reified abstraction (“gnosis”) and a human being. Some biographical details have been transmitted which indeed point to a man of flesh and blood—though the person’s actual name is lost to us. For example, the Samaritan Tolidah writes that Dositheus was “the son of Falfuli; he was not of the Samaritans but of the mixed rabble which came out of Egypt.”¹¹⁵ This echoes Yeshu’s sojourn in Egypt and suggests a real person.

The twelfth century Arab historiographer Shahrastani dates Dositheus to “the century preceding Christ.”¹¹⁶ This was suspected already a century ago by K. Kohler who implicated Simon ben Shetach in the life of Dositheus. Kohler even thought the latter “had some relationship to the mythical founder of Sadduceeism.”¹¹⁷ It would appear, then—if we look closely enough—that Dositheus is implicated in many heterodox movements of the late Second Temple Period (often negatively). Whether this is owing to his activities during his lifetime or owing to his eventual position as “gnosis” hypostatized is uncertain. It could be both.

Dositheus/Dusis was known in hostile Samaritan (priestly) texts as Ibn Falfuli, Fufali, Pilpuli, Palti, and Pilpul. Shahrastani wrote that he bore the name Ilfan (“teacher, master”—Payne-Smith 278) which makes it all but certain that the above variants are corruptions of the Aramaic *ilfan*. Evidently Dositheus was a teacher and a learned man.

¹¹⁵ Bowman 1977:204 n. 228.

¹¹⁶ Kohler 1911:413.

¹¹⁷ Kohler 1911:406–07.

Interestingly, the Samaritans substitute “Pilti” for the biblical Balaam character (whom we have also identified as a cipher for Yeshu ha-Notsri, above p. 422). They describe Pilti as “an Egyptian sorcerer, diviner, magician, and prophet.” Zindler notes that on the birth of a great prophet, Pilti declares, “A star showed his glory in the heavens, and the Egyptians were astonished at this appearance.”¹¹⁸ Thus, we see striking allusions in Samaritan texts between traditions surrounding Yeshu ha-Notsri, Jesus of Nazareth, and Dositheus (also known as “the Star”).

The star was associated by the Samaritans with their Taheb—the prophet like Moses who will return (Deut 18:15, 18). He is the prophesied “star [that] will come out of Jacob” (Num 24:17). The star (Heb. *kochav*) assumed strong messianic connotations towards the turn of the era and thereafter (e.g., Bar Kochba = “Son of [the] Star”). It is hardly surprising that the evangelist Matthew has a star at Jesus’ birth (2:1 f). The Dead Sea Sect also makes explicit use of the star prophecy (below).

A Rabbinic source reports that “Rabbi Dositai was born in a town named Kochaba.”¹¹⁹ Interestingly, Julius Africanus locates the relatives of Jesus in the “Jewish villages of Nazara and Cochaba.”¹²⁰ According to Epiphanius, however, “Cochaba” near “Damascus” was where the Ebionites were centered (Pan 29.7.7; 30.2.7).

Epiphanius also tells us that Dositheus had “excessive desire for wisdom,” was vegetarian, abstained from marriage, enjoined celibacy, and “detested every

¹¹⁸ Zindler 2003:211. See also Bowman 1977:285–90. The same Samaritan account has a version of the slaughter of the innocent children, but instead of Herod killing the babes of Bethlehem, the Pharaoh drowns the children of the Israelites in the Nile.

¹¹⁹ Pesikta rabbati 16 (see Taylor 1993:38). In South Arabia Kaukabta was the morning star (Venus), worshipped as the Son of God (Haussig 1965:476; cf. 497 f, “Attar”).

¹²⁰ Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 1.7.14.

man.”¹²¹ He was “originally from the Jews” where “he sought to be among the foremost, but failed.” After the Jews rejected Dositheus “he went over to the Samaritan people.” Epiphanius adds that Dositheus eventually starved himself to death in a cave. Abu’l Fath’s later account mirrors many of these elements.

One more element can be gleaned from the relatively few reports regarding Dositheus. Isser writes: “He wrote books dealing with the Pentateuch, in which he made alterations of the text; i.e., he possessed the authority to do so.”¹²² The “authority” referred to here must be that of Moses, and shows that Dositheus considered himself (and/or was considered to be) of equal stature—a Moses *redivivus*. This recalls Deut 18:18—“I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who will speak to them everything that I command.”

We can surmise that Dositheus’ (gnostic) ideas and alterations to scripture were unacceptable in Jerusalem (“to the Jews”). He thus went elsewhere. Changing the text of the Pentateuch is, of course, a major accusation leveled by Jews against the Samaritans. We recall, however, that this accusation was also leveled against the Ebionites, who “do not accept the entire Pentateuch of Moses; some passages they reject.”¹²³ Epiphanius further tells us that the Ebionites were similarly vegetarian and encratite.¹²⁴ Ebion means “poor one,” and we have now, quite innocently, thus strayed from Dositheus directly into the world of James the Just—a vegetarian, encratite,¹²⁵ and leader of “the

¹²¹ Panarion 13.9 f. Cited in Isser 1975:168–69.

¹²² Isser 1975:177.

¹²³ Epiphanius, Pan. 30.18.7.

¹²⁴ What Epiphanius reports regarding the Ebionites conforms closely with what he also writes about the sect of the Nasarenes “who existed before Christ and did not know him (Pan 29.6.1). Cf. Panarion 18, Anacephalaeosis I. The name Nasaraioi (with sigma) is the only Greek cognate that reflects the Semitic tsade, e.g., Mandaic Natsuraia, “guardian of mysteries” or priest (Drower and Macuch 285).

¹²⁵ “In the past [the Ebionites] boasted of virginity because of James the brother of the Lord” (Epiph. Pan.

poor ones” in Jerusalem (Gal 2:10).¹²⁶ Epiphanius dubbed the leader of the Ebionites “Ebion,” considered him a “teacher” and even that he wished to “become like God”—descriptions with which we are now quite familiar:

But if you want to be like the master, Ebion—that is, if you want to be like the teacher—you are very wrong... You cannot become like God, for you are a mortal man, and under a delusion... —*Panarion* 30.34.3–4

The Dositheans considered the biblical Joshua (“Savior”) to be a cipher for Dositheus himself. After all, Joshua succeeded Moses and entered (indeed, conquered) the land of Israel. The list of positive Dosithean figures includes Joshua, Judah, and David. On the other hand, the anti-Dosithean Samaritan priesthood deprecated these while endorsing Joseph, Ephraim, and Zadok.

The Dositheans conceived of their prophet as the great gate: Baba Rabba.¹²⁷ Only through that gate does one find salvation. This immediately recalls Jn 14:6—“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (cf. Jn 10:7). In Dositheanism the gate is gnosis and it is directly accessible to all. This bears striking resemblance to Jamesian gnostic theology (above pp. 429–30).

Of course, the Samaritan priesthood rejected this Dosithean view— one which renders them (and all priesthoods) entirely superfluous. When the Christian Church began to organize it likewise rejected gnosticism, and we can surmise

30.2.6).

¹²⁶ J. Crossan observes: “Why would the Christian poor of Jerusalem be in any worse straits than the Christian poor of any other city? I am inclined, therefore, to consider that the collection [of Paul] was primarily for the Jerusalem community itself and that they called themselves ‘the poor ones’” (J. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*).

¹²⁷ Crown 1968:198. Baba Rabba (alternately translated “Great Father”) was apparently also a noted Samaritan High Priest of the third–fourth century.

for the very same reason.¹²⁸ The reader may take note of an essential law operative in all religions and in all eras: organized religions exist in opposition to individual empowerment. The one simply negates the other.

It would appear that the Dositheans were an enduring sect that found a home—of all places—in Alexandria. Could this have anything to do with Yeshu ha-Notsri’s extended stay there in the early first century BCE? The Dositheans were a significant presence in that city for many centuries. Kohler observes: “According to Photius, the Dositheans in about 600 CE held a dispute with the Alexandrian bishop Eulogius, with the result that they were expelled from Egypt.¹²⁹ We wonder what that “dispute” involved. From the foregoing, we can be sure it concerned the nature of “Jesus.” The Dositheans would have insisted that Jesus was not a human but a spiritual being. He was gnosis and the “great gate”—immediately accessible to anyone and everyone without any priesthood, church, or religion. Jesus was “Light”—and a prophet had brought them this great lesson towards the turn of the era.

The foregoing presentation of the Samaritans will perhaps strike many readers as unprecedented, perhaps even willful. However, few realize how little is actually known of Samaritan origins. One specialist admits:

[T]here has been no certain statement in modern [scholarship] as to the number of Samaritan sects, their nature, or even a reasonable determination of whether sects listed as Samaritan were, in fact, Samaritan, Jewish, Christian or Gnostic. It is probable that differences between even the broader religious divisions of Jew, Christian and Samaritan, were, at various stages of their parallel development, minimal.¹³⁰

¹²⁸ If Baba Rabba (“Great Gate”) was associated with gnosis, it was rejected by the Great Church in favor of salvation through Jesus Christ. Perhaps this has something to do with the exchange of Barabbas (= Baba Rabba?) for Jesus in canonical accounts of the Passion (Mk 15:15 and parallels).

¹²⁹ Kohler 1911:433.

¹³⁰ Crown 1967:70.

A. Crown goes on to note that Samaritan Gnostics were among the numerous sects rife in the early second century CE, before the time of Valentinus and Marcion. He then notes that Origen associated the Dositheans with the Simonians,¹³¹ and on the same page observes “there is an apparent contact with the Covenanters of Qumran.”

The Clementine Recognitions (I:54) note that the Samaritans rightly “expect the one true prophet, but by the wickedness of Dositheus they were hindered from believing that Jesus is He whom they were expecting.” Here we witness an early statement acknowledging that some people (the Dositheans) refused to accept Jesus of Nazareth—they preferred the older theology that Jesus = gnosis.

Modern readers should not allow the arbitrary (and irresponsible) assignment of (varying) names in antiquity to obscure the fundamental issue: theology. Each ancient author had a special agenda, and no two agendas matched. The writers invented characters, changed names, and assigned motives and outcomes according to their own theologies. Thus, each text represents an independent view of the contemporary religious landscape from the author’s vantage point. The result has little to do with what we would call history.

Our previous observations regarding Yeshu leaving high pharisaic position in Jerusalem to form a new religion parallels what Epiphanius tells us of Dositheus: he was “a leading Jew who had failed to make a mark amongst his own people but had gone over to the Samaritans among whom he had founded his sect, eventually retiring into hermit-like seclusion and dying in a cave” (Crown 1967:75–76, cf. above p. 358). Some traditions mooted that the body of Dositheus was never found. The view became extant that he was still alive—presumably as an eternal spiritual entity (cf. a spiritual Moses/Jesus/

¹³¹ Crown 1967:72.

gnosis ever available). This recalls Paul's view of a the ever-present spiritual "Jesus" (above p. 409).

Qumran

Two theologies.

Famously, some sectarian texts in the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) use a number of monikers to identify individuals: the "Teacher of Righteousness" (or "Just Teacher," *moreh ha-tsedek*), the "Man of the Lie," the "Wicked Priest," etc. Scholars have varying theories regarding the identities of these figures, yet no consensus exists today, more than fifty years after discovery of the scrolls. This may owe to the fact that over-riding issues have not yet been solved: the date(s) the scrolls were written, who authored, them, their purpose, provenance, etc. Because numerous fundamental issues in DSS research remain unresolved, historical identities do as well.

No attempt will be made here to match the above monikers with people of history. It can be noted, however, that majority opinion increasingly dates events surrounding the Teacher of Righteousness to the early first century BCE. Michael Wise, for example, places the Teacher's death precisely in 72 BCE.¹³² This would align with what we have surmised regarding Yeshu ha-Notsri, for according to our calculations he returned to Israel about 76–75 BCE (above p. 420).

Yeshu was active in Judea in the 70s BCE and seems to have had significant interactions with the temple priesthood. The same can be said for the Dead Sea Sect. Furthermore, Yeshu was charged, tried, convicted, and executed "because he has practiced sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy" (above p. 422). If Wise is correct, a similar succession of unfortunate events may have

¹³² Wise 1999:213–19. Allegro (1957:99; 1979:196) dates the death to 88 BCE.

befallen the Dead Sea Sect's leader. Wise proposes that the sentence was commuted and the prophet sent into exile. This agrees with what Josephus tells us:

But the principal of those that were in danger [from the Pharisees] fled to Aristobulus, who persuaded his mother [Salome Alexandra] to spare the men on account of their dignity, but to expel them out of the city, unless she took them to be innocent; so they were suffered to go unpunished, and were dispersed all over the country. —Josephus, Wars I.5.3

This may have been the time the founding prophet fled to Qumran and there instituted a new community. Evidently he had considerable initial success. Eventually, however, the Jerusalem authorities came after him, found him, and executed him.

The prominent pharisee Simon ben Shetach was active during Yeshu's career. It was Simon who recalled Yeshu's master, Perachiah, from Alexandria (above p. 420). Wise identifies Simon with 'the man of the lie'—so often noted in the Dead Sea Scrolls.¹³³ Ben Shetach, as brother of Queen Alexandra, was probably the most powerful man in the land, the head of the Sanhedrin, and perhaps the man ultimately responsible for the execution of Yeshu ha-Notsri (above p. 427).

The foregoing are some historical elements that suggest a link between Yeshu and the founding prophet of the DSS. Theology also offers clues. Our particular interest is in elements of the DSS that reflect the gnostic path to the divine—thus echoing the accusation leveled against Yeshu ha-Notsri. As we have seen, a similar accusation can be extended to the figures of Simon Magus ("the Standing One," "the Great Power"), James the Just (the "gate"), and Dositheus ("plunging into" whose writings confers enlightenment).

¹³³ Wise 1999:72, 172; Wise, Abegg, & Cook 1996:31.

The DSS contain pronounced gnostic tendencies. This is denied by no one. Such tendencies are particularly detectable in the Thanksgiving Hymns (*Hodayoth*), the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, and in a number of sapiential (quasi-gnostic) writings.

It is generally admitted that gnosticism lies outside the normative Jewish worldview which insists upon a chasm between man and God. Such a chasm permits worship. Gnosticism, on the other hand, places the quest for understanding above the need for worship. In doing so it rejects the chasm or attempts to ‘cross’ it. This is impossible and abhorrent in normative Judaism and is tantamount to the arrogance (a key accusation) of wishing to make oneself divine. This was precisely the accusation leveled against Yeshu as well as against Dositheus. It is also the attitude reflected in some gnostic Jamesian works (above, p. 433).

Thus, two theological poles can be identified—not merely in Judaism but in virtually every organized religion. One pole is gnostic and places happiness and ultimate fulfillment in the hands of man himself. This can be described as the ‘ultra-liberal’ end of religion, wherein the freedom of man is maximized.

At the other extreme is the conservative worldview in which man is entirely dependent upon an external power—generally called “God.” This pole is characterized by obedience, scrupulous adherence to rite and ritual, and—in its ultimate form—the belief in predestination (determinism), that is, the view that man has no say whatsoever in his fate.

One can summarize the two contrasting worldviews in a word: agency. In gnosticism, the agency is with man. Indeed, extreme forms of gnosticism (“Primary Gnosticism”) do not even require a God (nor, nota bene, a priesthood). What saves is gnosis/understanding. That is enough.

On the other hand, in the ultra-orthodoxy of conservative religions agency is with God. God decrees, commands, and receives (indeed, he insists upon) worship. It is no coincidence that this worldview requires a strong priesthood,

one that not only worships God but also considers it necessary to interpret him for the masses.

In Judaism, a small ‘grey area’ has historically existed between the two poles, an area at the limits of what is permissible—one that is approached with great trepidation (even as is God). This intermediary area is traditionally known as ‘Jewish mysticism’ and includes the so-called *hechalot* and ascent literature.

The DSS are rife with ascent theology. Furthermore, we will see that they contain unmistakable clues of an even more extreme gnosticism.

Curiously, the opposite pole also exists in the scrolls—and in no small measure. The presence of these two contrasting theologies side-by-side has not yet been appreciated in Qumran scholarship. Two major and very different theologies influenced the Yahad. Furthermore, the theologies are fundamentally incompatible. The DSS may be viewed as a struggle to reconcile these two opposing worldviews—one traditionally Jewish, the other outlandishly heretical. This is revealed by internal evidence (that is, the expressed content of the writings themselves) which, as Eisenman has insisted, trumps external considerations such as carbon dating and paleographic theories.¹³⁴

Of the two theological poles, the conservative is by far the better represented in the DSS. In fact, signs suggest a later conservative editing-out of originally gnostic material. We cannot detail the evidence for such editing, an important task that may devolve to another book. A historical framework to explain the resulting complex presentation of the texts can, however, be suggested.

¹³⁴ Eisenman 2006:484–85.

Two hymns.

Much attention has been focussed on the identity of the Teacher of Righteousness, whose name immediately brings to mind James “the Just.” The identity between the two has, in fact, been made by at least one contemporary scholar—Robert Eisenman (and, before him, Robert Eisler).¹³⁵ In a previous section (pp. 428–34), however, it was argued above that James the Just is not a figure of history but the reflection of a prophet who lived in the early first century BCE—the prophet Rabbinic writings refer to as Yeshu ha-Notsri. Accordingly we would date the Teacher of Righteousness and associated figures to the first century BCE.

It cannot be automatically assumed that the Teacher of Righteousness—as described in sectarian texts—was the founder of the Qumran sect. The Damascus Document mentions a twenty year period of groping prior to God’s raising up a Teacher.¹³⁶ We must defer more specific data relative to the Teacher, but regardless of who he was there appears to be room in the chronology for a founding prophet who may be virtually lost to history. The scrolls indeed champion the Righteous Teacher, but there are signs that he led a conservative retrenchment against a prior gnostic theology. The next few pages will attempt to clarify this surprising view.

The principal accusation against Yeshu, we recall, was that he ‘made himself God’ (above pp. 419–20). The discovery of this very element in the DSS constitutes one of the most astonishing revelations in the texts. Here is the well-known “Self-Glorification Hymn” from the *Hodayoth*:

I am reckoned with the angels
my dwelling place is in the holy council.
Who has been regarded with scorn like me,
and who has borne oppression like me?

¹³⁵ Eisenman 2006:712.

¹³⁶ 4Q266, 2.13 (DJD 18, p. 35); 4Q268, 1.16 (DJD 18, p. 120).

Who is like me, lacking evil,
 so that he can compare to me?
 I have never been instructed,
 yet no teaching compares to my teaching.
 I sit on [high, exalted in heave]n...
 Who is like me among the angels?...
 The utterance of my lips, who can endure?
 Who can challenge me in speech
 and so compare with my judgment?
 [I] am beloved of the King, a companion of the Holy Ones,
 and none can oppose me.
 [To my majesty and my glory] can none compare,
 for my station is with the angels.
 Neither glory [nor majes]ty have I laid up as treas[ure]
 at the price of gold, neither of fine gold.
 None can compare with me,
 and no [iniquity] has been reckoned against me.

—1QH26:2–10 (formatting added).¹³⁷

Contrary to so much Jewish scripture, the writer of this hymn is center stage. The first person pronoun is frequent. God is not even mentioned. Indeed, there are oblique jabs at Yahweh: Who “can compare to me?” asks the writer. “Who can challenge me in speech and so compare with my judgment?” He supplies the astonishing answer: “To my majesty and my glory can none compare.” This view is thoroughly humanist.

This hymn presents no external power. Only the clause “I am beloved of the King” may echo a more traditional theistic mindset. At the same time, the hymn hints at a personal, familial relationship with that King—a relationship familiar from the New Testament. The writer is in the same family as the King. He is of the same nature.

¹³⁷ Wise 1999:223. “The translation is of the reconstructed 1QH 26:2–10, with lacunae filled in where possible from the other witnesses. Brackets indicate only reconstructions attested in none of the witnesses” (Wise 1999:323, n.5).

The hymn also presents no redeemer figure. The writer has done all the work necessary for his own salvation. This shows in his self-characterization. After all, he is “lacking evil,” and “no iniquity has been reckoned against me”—implying that he has thoroughly purified himself spiritually.

The fact that he has done this spiritual work himself is implied by another line: he has “never been instructed.” At the same time the writer is peerless in knowledge: Who can “compare with my judgment?” he asks. “Who can challenge me in speech?” He concludes simply: “none can oppose me.”

We recall (above p. 421) that both the ascent of man to gnosis and the descent of a redeemer figure are portrayed in the ancient texts. Of the two, it was suggested that the ascent trajectory is primary. It requires no redeemer or mythology—only gnosis. It does not even require a god. We have termed this Primary Gnosticism. Its most familiar surviving form today may be the Theravada school of Buddhism. The ascent trajectory has probably been in existence, in one form or another, since the very dawn of civilization. Primary Gnosticism is fundamentally humanist.

The developed systems of gnosticism familiar to scholars of early Christianity have a redeemer figure who descends from on high (or is sent from a king in a far country—cf. the Hymn of the Pearl).¹³⁸ The figure reveals gnosis (the “pearl”) or helps the gnostic initiate rise up to gnosis/salvation, often by negotiating fearful obstacles or powers. The descent and return to gnosis were often presented in the form of complex mythologies which characterize “Secondary Gnosticism,” in that the aspirant has the aide of an external or unknown power (which could also simply be one’s original nature) to attain truth, gnosis, the godhead, or ‘unity.’ Christian scholarship has studied Secondary Gnosticism at length, but it has virtually ignored the possibility that gnosticism can thrive without any mythology at all.

¹³⁸ The Acts of Thomas 108–13 (NTA II.380–85). In the Hermetic and Orphic literature one “remembers” his true nature and calling.

The Self-Glorification Hymn is an outlier text among the DSS. Yet, four incomplete copies of the hymn were discovered in the caves, according to Israel Knohl. He notes that one copy was found in a condition that clearly betrayed deliberate mutilation in antiquity. This copy was separate from the rest of the Thanksgiving Psalms, was ripped to shreds, and the pieces then crumpled into a ball.¹³⁹ No other DSS scroll was discovered in such an obviously abused condition.

All four copies of the Self-Glorification Hymn were accompanied and immediately followed by another hymn, suggesting that the two texts were paired. Knohl labels them Hymn 1 and Hymn 2. We note that the theology of the second hymn is entirely contrary to that of the first, as if it was intended to ‘cancel out’ the former. For example, Hymn 2 explicitly defines the “King” as God: “ascribe greatness to our God and glory to our King” (line15). Though Hymn 1 enjoins reliance on the self, Hymn 2 describes worship of God who alone acts, reveals, and lifts up:

...worship in the common assembly. Bless the one who wonderfully does majestic deeds and makes known his strong hand, sealing mysteries and revealing hidden things, raising up those who stumble and those among them who fall by restoring the step of those who wait for knowledge, but casting down the lofty assemblies of the eternally proud...

—4QHab frg. 7, col. 1, lines 18–20 (Knohl 2003:78).

Here, agency is entirely with God. The aspersions of casting down the “lofty” and the eternally “proud” are standard anti-Gnostic canards, for the Gnostic has the arrogance to think agency is with him, that he can venture across the aforementioned chasm separating man and God. Hymn 2 also declares: “Proclaim and say: Great is God who acts wonderfully, for he casts down the haughty spirit so that there is no remnant” (col. 2, line 7). Such writing is pointedly anti-gnostic.

¹³⁹ Knohl 2000:13. A photograph of the crumpled mass in situ is at Knohl 2000:14.

Hymn 2 also threatens. It reaffirms the age-old fear of God: “Bless the one who judges with destructive wrath” (line 21); “Blessed is God who works mighty marvels, acting mightily to make his power appear” (col 2, line 12).

How could two such contrasting hymns have existed side-by-side?

Numerous texts in the DSS are wisdom-oriented. They consider the “secrets” of God, his “mystery” (or “mysterious ways”), and they laud the “understanding one who rejoices in the inheritance of truth.”¹⁴⁰ These texts are ‘gnostic-leaning.’ While they enjoin the gnostic quest, they (quite ungnostically) also ascribe all agency to God. He is the “God of knowledge.” He alone is “the foundation of truth... He expounded for their understanding every deed so that man could walk in the inclination of his understanding. And He will expound for man...”¹⁴¹ Many more examples could be cited of this incompatible fusion between (a) man’s unaided journey to gnosis and (b) God’s indispensibility (i.e. his absolute pre-eminence as creator, ruler, and source of knowledge). Herein resides the basic theological conflict between gnosticism and theism.

A revolt in the community.

The Thanksgiving Hymns preserve curious passages in which the writer—in a very personal style—accuses members of his own community of having turned against him. He feels like a “bird banished from its nest.” The fact that a bird makes its own nest is but one clue that the writer of those words is the founder of the Yahad. Yet he has been made *persona non grata* by that very community. Furthermore, the writer is extraordinarily accusatory towards his one-time “friends and acquaintances.” He accuses them of having “plotted

¹⁴⁰ 4Q416, frg. 4:3. For the DSS sapiential texts, see Parry and Tov 2004, vol. IV.

¹⁴¹ 4Q417, frg. 1, col. 1:8–11. Emphases added.

wickedness against me,” of being “mediators of a lie and seers of deceit,” and of being “pretenders”:

6 [T]hese Your people go astray...

7 For they flatter themselves with words, and mediators of deceit lead them astray, so that they are ruined without knowledge,

8 For their works are deceitful, for good works were rejected by them. Neither did they esteem me; even when You displayed Your might through me. Instead, they drove me out from my land as a bird from its nest.

9 And all my friends and acquaintances have been driven away from me; they esteem me as a ruined vessel.

10 But they are mediators of a lie and seers of deceit. They have plotted wickedness against me, so as to exchange Your law, which You spoke distinctly in my heart, for flattering words directed to Your people.

11 They hold back the drink of knowledge from those that thirst, and for their thirst they give them vinegar to drink, that they might observe their error,

12 behaving madly at their festivals and getting caught in their nets.

13 But You, O God, reject every plan of Belial, and Your counsel alone will stand, and the plan of Your heart will remain forever.

14 They are pretenders; they hatch the plots of Belial, they seek You with a double heart, and are not founded in Your truth. A root producing poison and wormwood is in their scheming.

15 With a wilful heart they look about and seek you in idols. They have set the stumbling block of their iniquity before themselves, and they come

16 to seek You through the words of lying prophets corrupted by error. With mocking lips and a strange tongue they speak to Your people

17 so as to make a mockery of all their works by deceit. For they did not choose the way of Your heart nor attend to Your word,

18 but they said concerning the vision of knowledge, “It is not sure.”

—1QHab, col. XII:6b–18a. (Formatting and emphases added.)

We do not have space here to explore all the facets of this revealing passage. We take note, however, that it is Your people who have gone astray (v. 6). These are the same people who saw God’s might displayed through me. They drove me out from my land, and all my friends and acquaintances... esteem me as a ruined vessel (vss. 8–9; on sectarian renegades cf. Allegro 1957:137).

The meaning is clear: the head of the community has himself been exiled by his own people. He is no longer their leader. He has been deposed.

For what reason? The answer is also plainly supplied above: they drove “me” into exile “so as to exchange Your law, which You spoke distinctly in my heart, for flattering words directed to Your people” (v. 10). In other words, the rift was over the “law” [torah]. But this is not the Mosaic law. It is a private law, a revelation, an insight “which You spoke distinctly in my heart.” Perhaps it could even be termed an ‘enlightenment.’

For whatever reason, the Yahad was no longer receptive to the theological message of its leader. Concerning his vision of knowledge, they now said: “It is not sure” (v. 18). The implication is that the speaker was not only leader of the community but also its founder, for how else could they “exchange Your law, which You spoke distinctly in my heart”? It is evident that the speaker originally gathered a community around him, led it for a time, and was then rejected.

It would appear from the evidence that the founder of the community penned the Self-Glorification Hymn and inspired many of the surviving sapiential and gnostic-leaning texts of the DSS. However, his thoroughly humanist approach was later rejected. The contrary doctrine of predestination was adopted (perhaps for the first time in a Jewish milieu) and all power (‘agency’) was emphatically returned to God. The writings of the founder were then revised, rewritten, and some possibly destroyed. This successful conservative rebellion indicates that strong opposition to the founder arose from within the

community itself. Wisdom/gnosis could still be the royal road to salvation, but God would henceforth be the determining role in that salvation. The result is works such as the Thanksgiving Hymns, the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, and many sapiential writings which present an uncomfortable fusion of the two theological poles described above.

Thus, the DSS are somewhat schizophrenic. They present a mixing of traditional and non-traditional elements. The vast bulk of the sectarian texts portray Yahweh as in command and with full control of what happens here below—even to the point of his having predestined success and failure. Yahweh alone provides and chooses, even in the numerous sapiential texts. Yet those texts also preserve unmistakable signs of a gnostic mindset: they exalt the acquisition of wisdom/understanding, members of the community who acquire such understanding are similar to “angels,” and the community is already in heaven.

The citation on the facing page betrays evidence of revision. Obvious markers that would identify the “mediators of a lie and seers of deceit” within the community itself have been removed. At the same time, elements have been added that emphasize the agency of God, e.g.: “But You, O God, reject every plan of Belial, and Your counsel alone will stand, and the plan of Your heart will remain forever” (v. 13).

It is important to note that the Teacher of Righteousness may not have been the founder of the sect, nor even a single person. He may have been the leader (perhaps in an elected position) of the later conservative faction. We cannot affirm categorically that the Teacher was also known by the titles “Interpreter of the Law” and “the Star,” but such inferences are possible when considering passages such as the following:

And the star is the Interpreter of the Law who came to the land of Damascus, as it is written, “A star will come forth from Jacob and a scepter from Israel.” The staff is the prince of the whole congregation, and when he arises “he will smite all the sons of Seth.” —Dam. Doc. (4Q 269:2–4)

“Sons of Seth” definitely refers to gnostics. The above appears to be part of a hostile and aggressive retrenchment—one that emphatically rejected the original founder of the sect and his gnostic ideas.

Links between Samaritanism and Qumran are patent, for in Samaritan tradition (Asatir II.3) Seth founded “Damascus”—the metaphorical locale of the Yahad. Seth was known as a special transmitter of the light (secret gnosis) from Adam. The DSS invite us to view “Damascus” as the place of light (= heaven). Ironically, while the Yahad retained the toponym “Damascus” for their spiritual locale, they apparently eventually rejected the gnostic worldview that toponym originally designated.

The radical view that has been here presented—of a rebellion and complete about-face in the Qumran community—is of course provisional and even tentative. It betrays two strong personalities fighting for control of the Yahad. This is not entirely without precedent, and we detect remarkable allusions to such high-level feuding elsewhere in the early records—e.g., Simon Magus and Dositheus feuding for the mantle of John the Baptist:

...[Simon], on meeting Dositheus, did not demand of him his post, much as he desired it for himself, for he knew quite well that the man who had forestalled him in this office could not be removed against his will. For this reason [Simon] made a pretense of friendship and for a while rested content with the second place after Dositheus. When, however, after a time he met his thirty fellow-disciples, he began to circulate slanders against Dositheus. This man, he asserted, hands down the doctrines incorrectly, and does so less because of an evil intent and more out of ignorance. Dositheus observed that Simon’s well-calculated slanders were shaking his own standing among the great multitude so that they no longer regarded him as the Standing One; then on one occasion when Simon arrived for the ordinary meeting, [Dositheus] struck out at him with indignation. The stick seemed to go through Simon’s body as if it were smoke. Affrighted at this, Dositheus shouted at him, “If you are the Standing One, I also will pay homage to you.” As Simon answered in the affirmative, Dositheus—knowing that he himself was not the Standing One—fell down and did homage to Simon and, associating himself with the twenty-nine others, set [Simon] in his own place. Then Dositheus died

a few days after Simon had attained to standing but he himself had suffered downfall. —Ps. Cl. Hom II.24 (NTA 1992 II:513).

The above may be an echo of what took place at Qumran, in that the founder of the Yahad was apparently deposed by his own community. According to the present thesis, he lost control of the community and went into exile, perhaps because his views were simply too radical. Thenceforth, the writing of the Dead Sea Sect are rigidly conservative. Indeed, this would not be the first nor last example of a ‘palace coup’ that produces a sharp change in the theology of a religious sect.

The canonical gospels may themselves preserve echoes of such developments. After all, Judas (an insider) betrays Jesus—who then loses not only control of his movement but even his own life.

* * *

We have now seen that Jesus of Nazareth was an invention. It is quite likely that Paul of Tarsus was also, for the New Testament epistles ascribed to him are in large part—if not wholly—products of the second century. John the Baptist, Simon Magus, Dositheus—they may also be literary constructs. James the Just, Simon Peter, John, Judas, Mark, Thomas, Barnabas—the whole cast of New Testament characters populate not history, but literature deceptively written as history.

The word “deceptively” is apposite, despite predictable objections of Christian apologists that the ancients did not have modern concepts of history, that factual accuracy was never the point, and that the gospels were conveying a message, ‘and the message is true.’

In such a sense, however, mythology is also true. Perhaps, then, all will agree that “mythology” better characterizes the New Testament than the grossly inaccurate term “history.” After all, mythology constructs a story using metaphor, parable, fantasy, and figurative language in order to convey some universal truth that transcends the mere events of history.

However, even “mythology” is an inaccurate term for the New Testament, because the term does not include the undeniable element of deception. In mythology the narrative events are not constructed in such a way as to deceive the reader/hearer into thinking the events actually took place in history. The myth of Jason and the Argonauts has gods, a golden fleece, and a cyclops. No one (except children) ever thought these were historical, or supposed that Jason and the Argonauts actually existed. On the other hand, the gospels populate their narratives with people and places known to history. For example, Luke writes:

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea, and Herod being tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother Philip tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene, in the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John... (Lk 3:1-2)

Obviously, the evangelist wants the reader to believe this is history. But it is not history, for Nazareth did not exist and the acts of Jesus of Nazareth were invented. But neither is Luke’s writing mythology. The evangelist might readily have found the above factual particulars in the writings of Josephus. However, though the events described by Josephus are generally known to history, the events described in the canonical gospels are not.

Deception is at the heart of Christianity because the evangelists confabulate events, people, and even places, and at the same time they attempt to convince the reader that what is written actually took place. Thus the Christian scriptures are neither mythology nor history but simply a hoax.

The essential to Christians has always been that God miraculously entered into history. Believers accept the miraculous—indeed, they insist upon it. Faith affirms: Because the events really happened, Christianity is valid—regardless of how incredible those events might seem. Reason, however, points out: Because the events never happened, Christianity is invalid whether it seems incredible or not. Thus, each position hinges on whether the events really

happened. Faith does depend upon the gospels being historically valid documents!

It is useless to contest claims of the miraculous, for no one can disprove a miracle. At the same time, however, it is often quite possible to prove that a miracle never occurred in history.

And therein lies the problem with the miracle known as Jesus of Nazareth—he never existed in history. That much is now proven beyond any reasonable doubt. The non-existence of Nazareth at the turn of the era—amply confirmed in these pages—is but one of myriad details witnessing to the colossal deception that informed the figure of Jesus and simultaneously gave wings to the Christian message. As mentioned before, Jesus is an effigy. His marvelous feats are as fictive as those recounted in a James Bond novel. With this deflating recognition, Christianity's long-held pretensions emerge into the light of day as being stunningly vacuous.

Nevertheless, this author maintains that a thread of truth is to be found woven among the innumerable false strands of Christianity. In this chapter we have detected signs of another teacher—not Jesus of Nazareth. This does not replace one false religion with another. Far from it! All signs point to a teacher who believed not in God but in the man's supreme capability for happiness emphatically based on correct reasoning and good will. What might best be termed good philosophy thus replaces false religion.

We are thus speaking of a very human teacher and a very human philosophy—of humanism, not religion.

We have argued that the teacher in question lived in the early part of the first century BCE, was probably a learned Pharisee, spent time in Egypt, and then repudiated his entire Jewish heritage in favor of a thoroughly heretical gnostic worldview. He evidently returned to his native land, began teaching, and became a formidable adversary to his former Pharisaic colleagues as well as to

every established form of religion. This was not a religious man but a supremely practical man.

The rabbis remember this figure under the name Yeshu ha-Notsri. But that is probably only a cipher—Yeshu signifying “savior” and ha-Notsri “the watcher/keeper/guardian” (alternately: the “branch”).¹⁴²

Kernels of the teacher’s view survive—ironically, principally in the canonical gospels themselves. More revealing heretical texts have been systematically destroyed by the Church through many long centuries. Nevertheless, a number of disparate logia and parables in the canonical gospels, when viewed together, witness to a coherent gnostic philosophy, one that is profound and meaningful, and one that also cannot be merely accidental.¹⁴³ They witness to a remarkable spiritual figure who taught the possibility of complete happiness in this life, a happiness not to be gained from riches and things either material or transitory.

Thus Christianity is, in the final accounting, a mixture of much falsehood with a little truth. We may wonder why it came into existence at all. The explanation is clear if we simply ask an obvious question: Who has gained through the centuries from the existence of the religion? The answer is not far to seek: an extraordinarily wealthy and powerful religious elite has benefitted, together with a sprawling establishment composed of thousands of clerics, all more or less insulated from the insecurities of ordinary life. Let no one suppose this is mere hyperbole. In the present era the most reprehensible

¹⁴² Scholarship is divided as to whether the Christian term “Nazarene” and its cognates derive from the Hebrew verb *natsar* (“watch, guard, keep”) or from the Hebrew noun *netser* (“sprout, shoot, branch”). Arguments can be advanced for either derivation.

¹⁴³ The author has collected the sayings and refers the reader to the following, as numbered in J. D. Crossan’s *Sayings Parallels* (1986): 9, 3-7, 13, 15-21, 25, 27, 33, 36-41, 45, 52-57, 59-68, 70, 74, 76, 78, 81, 85, 87, 103, 121-23, 140, 134, 152, 155, 159, 170, 172, 176-89, 203, 205-07, 209, 217-22, 225, 227-29, 235, 236, 250, 254, 272, 276, 281, 286, 287, 291, 292, 293, 313, 318, 319, 328, 348-50, 352, 357, 361, 364, 429, 430, 454, 482, 486; Jn 4:24; 6:63; 8:23b, POxy 840. All these sayings and parables have Buddhist parallels.

conduct on the part of priests and prelates goes largely unpunished and even unacknowledged, simply because the perpetrators are functionaries of the Church and still largely ‘outside the law.’

One could say that—as with other organized religions—Christianity is ultimately a self-serving special interest. It thrives through membership and donations—which, at one time, were coerced at the point of the sword. Priesthoods, of course, claim to derive authority from God, and some who call themselves religious claim the right from God to coerce and even to break every commandment in the holy books. They claim to be the ultimate and indispensable intermediary of our salvation. Yet, if there is one lesson to be taken from these pages, it is that priesthoods everywhere are both self-serving and hostile to the free search for truth, a search that tolerates no intermediary. Gnosticism, in essence, requires no intermediary.

In both Samaritanism and Qumran we have argued that a conservative priestly rebellion took place, one which annulled and (almost) eradicated an original gnostic message. Christianity did similarly. In all three cases an original gnostic message apparently can be traced back to a single teacher. It is also probable, in this author’s view, that Mandaeism, Manicheism, and other (now forgotten) sects similarly trace their roots to one and the same teacher. In each case, however, a self-appointed priestly organization coalesced in order to assume control, eventually declaring some variation of this basic message: “If you wish to know the truth, I will explain it to you. You cannot find it on your own. You need me.”

At the beginning of this third Christian millennium we are able to scientifically evaluate the genesis of Christianity, bringing to bear the results of two centuries of scholarship. The religion now emerges as principally a literary development (Brodie, MacDonald) with manifest manipulative intent (Zindler, Salm, Ehrman). Once the Gospel of Mark is seen as a second century text (Detering, Price)—as scholarship is increasingly admitting—it becomes clear that the evangelists had access to the first century writings of Josephus as well

as to the legends surrounding the peripatetic philosopher-magus Apollonius of Tyana, famous already in his lifetime (c. 15–c. 100 CE). Drawing from Josephus' prolix oeuvre, it would have been easy to place the birth of Jesus in the time of Herod the Great and his death in the time of Pontius Pilate, borrowing, changing, and adapting historical names and details as necessary. At the same time, the evangelists used subtle techniques of mimesis to draw from the Old Testament as well as from the Homeric epics.

However, the evangelists had a unique agenda not shared by the Old Testament, Homer, or Josephus. Their overriding goal was to create a God-man able to command awe and allegiance from ordinary people. In pursuit of this goal they often overstepped the bounds of credulity, as we see (for example) in reports of the slaughter of the babes of Bethlehem, the daytime darkness before Jesus' death (Mk 15:33), the opening of the graves immediately after (Mt 27:52), and the astonishing miracles of Jesus—besides his virgin birth and bodily resurrection. In addition to all these obvious signs that the New Testament is fictive, historical inaccuracies also intrude, such as Luke's misdating of the census of Quirinius, the placement of Pharisees and synagogues in first century Galilee, and the premature existence of the town of Nazareth.¹⁴⁴

Multiple lines of scientific inquiry are now powerfully converging on one conclusion: Jesus of Nazareth is a fiction. To any sensible person, this intersection of archeology, literary criticism, and historical analysis is persuasive.

Yet, for the greater part of society, fact still yields to faith. This is, unfortunately, unlikely to end soon, for humans appear more readily disposed to hope rather than to reason. And, from the very beginnings of Christianity,

¹⁴⁴ Frank Zindler has also cogently argued that many other New Testament towns are fiction (Zindler 1997). In addition, the archeologist A. Oshri has determined that Bethlehem of Judea did not exist at the turn of the era (Archaeology, Nov.–Dec. 2005, pp. 42–45).

the figure of Jesus gave great scope to man's propensity to hope. Jesus Christ our savior may defy credulity, but the miraculous aspects attached to him are (and have ever been) welcome confirmation to the pious that God simply suspended the laws of nature precisely in order to effect their salvation. That is hope indeed, amply validated in holy writ. So, what matters to the pious, in the final analysis, are not the scientifically demonstrable facts of this life but the promise of an eternal life with Jesus in the beyond.

As is now becoming increasingly clear, however, Jesus Christ—the “savior” who made that remarkable promise—never existed.

Many have placed their final hope in Jesus Christ and in the empty promise of eternal life in return for faith in him. Often, little else remains. Christianity has always appealed to those of us who need to be saved, who look one day in the mirror with disillusionment and see only the wreckage of lives gone very much awry. Then we turn to Jesus. Such is the typical model of Christian conversion. First comes the admission of powerlessness, then conversion.

Who would wish to take away the hope of a better life? Is that not like taking candy away from a desperate, irascible, and unreasoning child? The predictable outcome is a tantrum. Far better is another course, one taught by the gnostic sage detectable behind so many ciphers discussed in this chapter—John the Baptist, James the Just, Dositheus, even Jesus Christ. That course is the exhortation to live a better life now, so that we can unburden ourselves of the desperate need to hope in a better life to come. This is ultimately a philosophy of empowerment, of raising ourselves to our full potential, of seizing the day, and of seizing the moment. In so doing we will find no need at all of a savior, of a redeemer, of a future life, or even of a god.

“We are the world,” intones the chorus of a 1985 song. “We are the children. We are the ones who make a brighter day.” To make that day brighter, however, we can no longer be dependent, guilt-ridden children, but must grow into reasoning, empowered, and content adults.

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