

# The Early, Bodiless Jesus

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## Part 1

*The first century Acts of Pilate, docetism, Jesus*

In the last several posts we looked at Marcion's critical role in early gospel formation, and at two recent scholarly views that propose a new synoptic paradigm: Marcion's gospel *predated all four canonical gospels*. This includes the Gospel of Mark which, accordingly, now moves to the mid-second century CE.

Prof. Markus Vinzent, in particular, has proposed that it was Marcion of Pontus who, in the first half of the second century, 'invented' the figure of Jesus of Nazareth (more correctly: Jesus the Nazarene). Vinzent writes:

Marcion created a powerful narrative of a transcendent, pre-existing figure who appeared on this alien earth, in the midst of history, to liberate human beings from these physical chains of ignorance, greed, law, sin, judgement and the need for repentance, to rescue humanity through buying men back by paying the price of death on the cross, through his descent to the utmost depths of hell, in order to save all who wanted to accept this helping hand, and to let them be where and what the Risen is. (Vinzent 2014:135)

Thus, the *Sitz im Leben* of the canonical gospels seems to be this: Marcion's arriving in Rome in 139 CE with his new gospel precipitated (a) first a crisis in the Roman Church; then (b) Marcion's excommunication; and finally (c) a frenzy of Christian writings whose intent was basically to 'rewrite' Marcion's gospel for Catholic purposes. Some of these rewritings (i.e. our four familiar gospels) were

eventually canonized, but others were never accepted, were eventually shunned by the Church, and were forgotten.

One question that now faces us is: If Vincent is correct (and I, for one, think he is), then what preceded the theology of Marcion? And further: Are there any traces of that earlier, first century, theology?

In this post we begin to answer those questions affirmatively. We will find that yes, indeed, there was a vibrant theology of 'Jesus' that preceded the one Christians currently know. And, yes, traces survive of that theology. Some of those traces have been before us all along—in the Pauline epistles. They point to a Jesus who was not of Nazareth/a Nazarene—nor even of flesh—but who (or 'which') was entirely *spiritual*.

The above analysis, if correct, provides us with a powerful tool with which to differentiate *two major stages* in the Christian religion: an earlier, first century stage in which 'Jesus' is a purely spiritual (and also 'mobile') entity; and a later, second century stage in which 'Jesus' is associated with flesh and, indeed, with the flesh of a unique god-man: the 'Nazarene'/person from Nazareth.

Two early and forgotten accounts of Jesus that preserve traces of the earlier stage are the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and the *Gospel of Peter*. The long and sprawling *Gospel of Nicodemus* consists of two halves: the *Acts of Pilate* and *Christ's descent into Hell*. In this post we begin to look at its first half: the *Acts of Pilate*.

### **The Acts of Pilate**

Justin Martyr, writing in the mid-second century CE, refers twice (*First Apology* c. 35 & 48) to documents of the trial of Jesus before Pilate. He must have been referring either to the *Acts of Pilate* or to closely related works that were long ago destroyed. *The Acts of Pilate* (AcPil) survives in Greek, Latin, Coptic, Syriac, and Armenian versions (for critical introduction and text see Schneemelcher, *New Testament*

*Apocrypha* 1991, 1:501 f). Even a cursory reading of the work reveals why it was not admitted into the Church: its conception of “Jesus” is highly unorthodox.

The author of AcPil was clearly familiar with traditions in the New Testament. For example, he knows the (comparatively late) birth story in GMt, including the death of the children of Bethlehem and the flight into Egypt (AcPil 2.3; 9.3). Additionally, the work has many points of contact with the synoptic gospels. These elements may have been added later in order to conform an older text to the new theology of Jesus the Nazarene (‘Nazarene’ and ‘Nazareth’ do not appear even once in the Gospel of Nicodemus). Thus, a clash of theologies is witnessed in the text. Indeed, that clash may have informed its editing, because the AcPil, as we possess it, is uncertain and greatly preoccupied regarding *the nature of Jesus*.

Most of the versions of AcPil that we possess have a prologue stating it was written down in 425 CE by one “Ananias, an officer of the guard, being learned in the [Jewish] law.” Ananias claims he translated the larger work (the *Gospel of Nicodemus*) from Hebrew into Greek and that the original Hebrew text was written by Nicodemus—the same figure who plays a role in the ensuing account surrounding the death of Jesus. Though we have every reason to doubt that any part of the text goes back to c. 30 CE (the putative date of the crucifixion) as Ananias claims, it is very possible that AcPil (and the entire *Gospel of Nicodemus*) was composed in the middle of the second century CE, as part of the wave of rewritings following Marcion’s presentation of his gospel in Rome. It is also possible that AcPil reworked even older traditions, for its concept of “Jesus” has much in common with first century texts—including the Pauline epistles.

In short, the AcPil and entire *Gospel of Nicodemus* may have had a long transmission history before Ananias translated and wrote it down in the fifth century. Elements that obviously harken back to the New

Testament may have been added to a much older work. Some late elements may have been added by Ananias himself.

### **The trial before Pilate**

The *Acts of Pilate* (the online text is [here](#)) begins with the familiar judgement of Jesus before the “chief priests and scribes assembled in council.” Jesus is accused of healing on the Sabbath and of other “evil deeds.” Some naive miracles follow, such as the standards lowering (in homage) by themselves when Jesus enters the praetorium. In this case, “the Jews” accuse Jesus (1) of sorcery and (2) of being born of fornication. We know from other sources (e.g. the views of Celsus; rabbinic writings) that both these accusations were early and common. AcPil seems to combat them, e.g., by having twelve witnesses attest to Pilate: “We were present at the betrothal of Joseph and Mary.”

After extensive cross examination, Pilate finds no fault in Jesus. But at the insistence of “the Jews” he eventually hands Jesus over to them (AcPil 4.4; 9.4). At this point in the narrative a certain Jew, Nicodemus, comes forward and asks for a word with Pilate. “This man does many signs and wonders,” Nicodemus pleads. “Let him alone and contrive no evil against him.” Then, in words surprisingly similar to those Gamaliel spoke in the defense of Christians (Acts 5:38-39; cf. Cl. Rec. 65), Nicodemus says: “If the signs which he does are from God, they will stand; if they are from men, they will come to nothing.”

### **Joseph of Arimathea becomes Jesus**

Jesus is crucified (AcPil 11.1). He “gives up the spirit” and the watching centurion immediately exclaims “This man was righteous.” The “multitudes” who saw the crucifixion then “beat their breasts.”

At this point Joseph of Arimathea enters the account (11.2). Indeed, the focus henceforth is on Joseph, not Jesus. If one thinks that the

account until here was somewhat strange, it now takes on elements that one must find astonishing.

Pilate gives the body of Jesus over to Joseph, who places it in his tomb, "in which no one had ever yet been laid" (par. Lk 23:50-53). Joseph rolls the stone over the mouth of the tomb. [Aside: Archeologically, rolling stones for tomb closure were common only after the First Jewish Revolt. They were extremely rare before that time, per the work of Amos Kloner and other archeologists.] Surprisingly, "the Jews" find Joseph's activity worthy of death, even as Jesus' activity had merited the ultimate penalty. However, because "the sabbath dawns" they seize Joseph "and commanded him to be secured until the first day of the week." They taunt Joseph: "We will give your flesh to the birds of the heaven" (12.1). But Joseph replies haughtily, as if he were divine: "This word is like that of the boastful Goliath, *who insulted the living God ...*"

The Jews shut Joseph "in a building without a window, and guards remained at the door. And they sealed the door of the place where Joseph was shut up." After the death of Jesus, then, *Joseph* was virtually entombed—at the same time (and place?) as the body of Jesus.

On the first day of the week "the whole multitude rose up early and took counsel in the synagogue by what death" they should kill Joseph (12.2). They commanded Joseph to be brought, but "*when they opened the door they did not find him.*" Of course, we are reminded of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus and did not find *his* body (Mk 16:6). "And all the people were astonished because they found the seals undamaged, and Caiaphas had the key."

The action then shifts (13.1) to the site of Jesus' tomb, which is on Joseph's property. We learn that at midnight there had been a "great earthquake," women were at Jesus' tomb, an angel descended from heaven, rolled away the stone, and "shone like snow and like

lightning." The angel informs those present that Jesus is risen and is "in Galilee" (Mt 28:5-7).

"The Jews" then engage in an argument with the guards who, having witnessed the above strange happenings, are now 'believers.' The guards insist: "For he *does* live." They taunt the Jews: "We have heard that you shut up him who asked for the body of Jesus, and sealed the door, and that when you opened it you did not find him. Therefore give us Joseph and we will give you Jesus."

*"Therefore give us Joseph and we will give you Jesus"*? What a strange thing for the Roman guards to say... Of course, they would have been able to "give" Jesus only if they had received him first. And how would they have received Jesus if, per their request, they were only given Joseph? (Solution: Joseph is Jesus.)

The parallelism between Jesus and Joseph continues: the Jews say "Joseph has gone to *his own city*." To which the guards retort: "And Jesus has risen... and is *in Galilee*."

The Jews then bribe the Roman soldiers to simply say that they slept through the whole thing. Jesus is subsequently seen in Galilee on Mount Mamilch (14.1). Though the Jews don't believe it, they still bribe those telling the report to keep quiet. Nicodemus then speaks before the Jewish leaders and persuades them to search on top of every mountain for Jesus. At this point appears perhaps the most incredible passage in the entire text:

And they told the elders and the priests and the Levites: "We went about to every mountain of Israel, and did not find Jesus. But Joseph we found in Arimathea." And when they heard about Joseph, **they rejoiced and gave glory to the God of Israel**. And the rulers of the synagogue and the priests and the Levites took counsel how they should meet with Joseph, and they took a roll of papyrus and wrote to Joseph these words. "Peace be with you. We know that we have sinned against God and against you, and we have prayed to the God of Israel **that you should condescend to come to your fathers and your children**, because we are all troubled. For when we opened the door

we did not find you. We know that we devised an evil plan against you; but the Lord helped you, and the Lord himself has brought to nothing our plan against you, honored father Joseph." (14.2. Emphases added.)

Obviously, the attitude of the Jews towards Joseph has suddenly reversed 180 degrees. A day or two before, they wanted to *kill* him! Now, on finding him in Arimathea "they rejoiced and gave glory to the God of Israel"! Most revealing is that the most prestigious Jews in the land admit to having sinned *against Joseph*, someone who a couple of pages earlier (12.2) was merely "a certain man" and "a member of the council"!

## Part 2

*The second century Acts of Pilate, Jesus, Nicodemus*

**"It will certainly be to many a discovery that Jesus was known in the first century as the Wisdom of God."** - Rendel Harris, 1916 (The Origin of the Prologue to St. John's Gospel, p. vi)

In the last post we looked at the *Acts of Pilate* (AcPil)—being the first half of the rather obscure Gospel of Nicodemus, a Jewish Christian work probably of the mid-second century CE. The work betrays a most unusual theology where "Jesus" is partly physical, partly spiritual, and somehow able to pass from one person to another. This ambiguous theology is the author's focus. For example, the setting is scrupulously laid out whereby Joseph of Arimathea is locked into a sealed room (even without windows), and with guards outside. Yet the spirit of Jesus *still* passes to Joseph at midnight, effecting a sacred transformation immediately following Jesus' death. All this has some kind of meaning, and it is no doubt allegorical. On the literal level, however, Joseph's stature is suddenly enhanced from a mere "member of the council" to someone in whom all Israel rejoices:

And when they heard about Joseph, **they rejoiced and gave glory to the God of Israel**. And the rulers of the synagogue and the priests and the Levites took counsel how they should meet with Joseph, and they took a roll of papyrus and wrote to Joseph these words. "Peace be with you. We know that we have sinned against God **and against you**, and we have prayed to the God of Israel **that you should condescend to come to your fathers and your children**, because we are all troubled. For when we opened the door we did not find you. We know that we devised an evil plan against you; but the Lord helped you, and the Lord himself has brought to nothing our plan against you, honored father Joseph." (14.2. Emphases added.)

A day or two before, the "elders and the priests and the Levites" mentioned in the above citation wanted to *kill* Joseph! They obviously underwent some sort of (sudden) religious conversion, witnessed by their radically changed view regarding Joseph. The Jewish leaders continue to defend the "holy scriptures" (15.1), but they also now revere Joseph of Arimathea—who himself reveres Jesus. We are thus dealing here with a *Jewish Christian* work, yet one which has a very unusual view of Jesus, of Joseph of Arimathea, and of the link between them.

The exalted Joseph of Arimathea then "saddled his she-ass and went with [the Jewish elders] to the holy city Jerusalem. And all the people met Joseph and cried: 'Peace be to your entering in!' And all kissed him, and prayed with Joseph, and were beside themselves with joy at seeing him" (15.4). Of course, this is very reminiscent of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday (Mk 11:7-10)! Joseph is then quizzed (15.6) by the elders regarding what happened that fateful night when he was shut up in the house and somehow 'transformed.' He explains as follows:

On the day of preparation about the tenth hour you shut me in, and I remained the whole sabbath. And at midnight as I stood and prayed, the house where you shut me in was raised up by the four corners, and I saw as it were a lightning flash in my eyes. Full of fear I fell to the ground. And someone took me by the hand and raised me up from the place where I had fallen, and something moist like water flowed from my head to my feet, and the smell of fragrant oil reached my

nostrils. And he wiped my face and kissed me and said to me: "Do not fear, Joseph. Open your eyes and see who it is who speaks with you." I looked up and saw Jesus. Trembling, I thought it was a phantom, and I said the commandments, and he said them with me... I said to him: "Rabbi Elijah!" He said: "I am not Elijah." And I said to him: "Who are you, Lord?" He replied: "I am Jesus, whose body you asked for from Pilate"... [Joseph says] "Show me the place where I laid you." And [Jesus] took me and showed me the place where I laid him. And the linen cloth lay there, and the cloth that was upon his face. Then I recognized that it was Jesus. And he took me by the hand and placed me in the middle of my house, with the doors shut, and led me to my bed and said to me: "Peace be with you!" Then he kissed me and said to me: "Do not go out of your house for four days. For see, I go to my brethren in Galilee."

Readers familiar with the "Secret Gospel of Mark" will recognize parallels to the above. Both present a sacred interaction between Jesus and an initiate at night after "death." The midnight timing of the meeting with Jesus (revealingly symbolized by the "bridegroom") is also familiar from the New Testament (Mt 25:6; cf. Mk 13:35; Lk 11:5; Acts 16:25 f). All these passages witness to a critical event: a spiritual transformation of some kind involving "Jesus" and an initiate who is present after a death. In Secret Mark it is Lazarus who was raised from the dead and who undergoes some sort of conversion. Parallelism would suggest, then, that Joseph of Arimathea is himself being raised from the dead in a spiritual conversion. From the change that Joseph of Arimathea experiences, and from his subsequent exaltation, the reader is invited to understand that *Joseph becomes Jesus*.

### **Nicodemus**

And what of Nicodemus? Why are the *Acts of Pilate* found in a "gospel" under his name? The answer quickly takes us to the Fourth Gospel, where Nicodemus appears several times. We recall the third chapter of John's gospel, where Nicodemus comes secretly at night to converse with Jesus. He is there described as "a man of the Pharisees... a ruler of the Jews." Jesus himself calls him "*the* teacher of

Israel" (Jn 3:10)—clearly implying that Nicodemus was not of any mean standing. Indeed, being a "ruler of the Jews" (v. 1), we can confidently infer that Nicodemus was a member of the powerful Sanhedrin—the religious body that centralized Jewish power in Jerusalem.

In my book *Nazareth Gate* (Chp. 14), I argue that the subject matter of the canonical gospels must be transposed back several generations into the time of Alexander Janneus (early 1st cent. BCE). It is *then* that Jewish records relate concerning a certain Yeshu ha-Notsri, "Jesus the Natsarene." This Yeshu was himself a promising Pharisee, being groomed for the Sanhedrin. However, he fled to Egypt when Janneus persecuted the Pharisees. It was during his long tenure in Alexandria (as much as twenty years) that Yeshu had a change of heart. He rejected not only his Pharisaic calling, but the entire fount of his Jewish heritage. Upon his return to Israel he was excommunicated. After teaching a 'new Way,' gathering many followers, Yeshu was hounded, tried by the Sanhedrin, and executed by stoning and then hanging "on a tree."

The above, of course, is entirely hidden from the reader of the gospels, texts that present an entirely *different* Jesus—a remarkably unrealistic force from backcountry "Nazareth," one who works miracles that now seem more childish with each passing year, a life form that was born of a virgin and that "arose" bodily from the grave...

On the other hand, the Yeshu ha-Notsri that I described above was a man of flesh and blood, a remarkable religious rebel whose activities caused great commotion in Israel, a man of history recorded multiple times in the Talmud—and with great animosity.

The reader of this website is advised that henceforth I will presume informed knowledge of this Yeshu, for it is not possible to explore the critical data of history without such historical knowledge—knowledge now publicly available. For example, a member of the Sanhedrin visiting *Yeshu* by night takes on added dimensions thoroughly hidden

to the reader of the canonical gospels. Even if Nicodemus was a literary invention of the fourth evangelist, he was probably based on the facts of history. In the original setting, “Nicodemus” may have *known* Yeshu, perhaps from youth. The two may even have fled to Alexandria together... The fact that one of them broke away from Judaism, but not the other, is knowledge that was once available to the tradition—perhaps also to the John the evangelist—but no longer to his readers, because John was creating a *different* Jesus!

We must begin to look at the canonical gospels through new lenses, through knowledge of the *earlier* Yeshu ha-Notsri. Scholars accept that Nicodemus was sympathetic to Jesus—for he bothered to visit him, evidently at risk of his reputation (“at night”). In fact, Nicodemus was made a saint in the Church. The knowledge that he was originally a member of the Sanhedrin *that condemned Yeshu to death*, however, adds an entirely new dimension to their surreptitious meeting in the Fourth Gospel. In fact, readers of my book will recall parallels between Nicodemus and the head of the Sanhedrin in the time of Yeshu, the powerful Simon ben Shetach. As a sympathetic member of the Sanhedrin that would shortly put Jesus to death, the position and motives of Nicodemus/ben Shetach become particularly poignant.

The true background to the Johannine scene is thus entirely hidden to the reader of the Fourth Gospel. Knowing that background, however, reveals the deep resources upon which John the evangelist was drawing. And he, too, deserves our attention, some sympathy, and perhaps even admiration. For the evangelist was in an impossible position. He had knowledge of a seminal prophet whom he greatly admired, and yet whose biography he had to hide. *Why? Because he was creating a new Jesus—a Jesus for the masses.* This colossal ambivalence explains the heroic foundation of the gospels, and also their fundamental flaw.

Nicodemus appears again in the Gospel of John. After the crucifixion...

Joseph of Arimathea, who as a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him leave. So he came and took away his body.

Nicodemus, also, who had at first come to him by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds' weight. They took the body of Jesus, and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb where no one had ever been laid. So because of the Jewish days of Preparation, as the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there. (Jn 19:38-42)

In the prior post we saw that, in the Acts of Pilate, Joseph of Arimathea actually *becomes* Jesus following the crucifixion. In that remarkable text, the spirit of Jesus comes to Joseph at midnight, while he is in a sealed room. From the above citation, however, we now see that Joseph was not alone. Nicodemus was with him—another friendly figure taking care of the body. Furthermore, we note that the tomb was located “in the place where he was crucified.” Though the gospels portray all this as literal, if we take a step back and consider the language metaphorical, then we see that “the place where he was crucified” was nothing other than his body. The place where he was *buried* (being at the same location) was also nothing other than his body. And the place where he would be *raised* was nothing other than his body.

In other words, all this activity could originally only have been *spiritual*, not meant to be taken literally. Furthermore, in the Acts of Pilate, it is *Joseph* who is honored after the death of *Jesus*! In another marginalized text (to be considered in future), *Judas* was crucified in the place of *Jesus*, while in Islam Jesus entirely survives the ordeal... All this reveals that at its root the death-resurrection of Jesus was a *spiritual* event—what we might call a transformation. Only such a non-material event could give rise to such astonishingly diverse *material* interpretations. And if the event is spiritual, then it is replicable.

Indeed, this is made explicit in the sequel to the Acts of Pilate, a text entitled "Christ's Descent into Hell," where Joseph asks: "Why then do you marvel at the resurrection of Jesus? It is not this that is marvelous, but rather that he was not raised alone, but raised up many other dead men who appeared to many in Jerusalem" (AcPil 17.1).

Among the dead raised by Jesus was Joseph of Arimathea—and Nicodemus, too, a figure who acts in tandem with Joseph through the text. Twice the AcPil explicitly state that Nicodemus also received Jesus' "truth and *his portion*" (5.2 and 12.1).

In the next post we will look more closely at the spiritual Jesus manifesting as a shape-shifter.—R.S.

### **Part 3**

*Christian origins, Gnosticism, Paul, The first century Detering, Jesus, Price*

#### **The spiritual Jesus**

At an early stage of Christianity, according to the foregoing analysis, Jesus was a spiritual entity. This was a pre-canonical stage, to be dated to the first century CE—before the invention of Jesus the Nazarene and *before* the writing of the canonical gospels. The spiritual Jesus is evident, for example, in the epistles of Paul, works that do not know Jesus the Nazarene ("Nazarene" or "Nazareth" do not occur even once in the Pauline epistles). As I wrote in *NazarethGate* (p. 409):

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

In sum, the Lord Jesus Christ is a great, expansive spiritual being that 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.

Of course, with the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth in the second century, the above theology became heresy... Then why, one may ask, did the Pauline epistles survive—even to become among the most venerated texts of the Church? The reason is that they were very effectively *supplemented* in the second century: by the canonical gospels and (let us not forget) by the Acts of the Apostles. This latter work essentially ‘rewrote’ Paul, supplied a new biography for him, and transformed him from a proto-Gnostic into “a ringleader of the sect of the Nazoreans” (Acts 24:5). When we add subtle (and not so subtle) interpolations into the epistles, it was no longer necessary to jettison the Pauline epistles. They were co-opted for the Church. Their deep spirituality and wonderful imagery were effectively transferred to the new savior, Jesus of Nazareth. Ever since, Christians have read the Pauline epistles through thick lenses colored by the God-man from Nazareth.

The Church did its utmost to rid history of all traces of the purely spiritual Jesus. But those traces have survived, to be hunted down in very obscure literature known as the Christian apocrypha. That literature is much vaster than might at first be suspected. When one begins to read in it, all sorts of strange notions regarding Jesus crop up—most pervasively, that Jesus did not have a body. Scholars call this view “docetist” and simply laugh. “How could anyone be so stupid as to think that someone who traveled around Galilee and Judea in the time of Pontius Pilate did not have a body? Just look at the gospels!”  
*Ha ha ha.*

Yes, there’s a little circular reasoning there... One cannot *look at the gospels* to prove the gospels. The shoe is on the other foot, because when we take Jesus of Nazareth out of the equation (as a pure

invention), then the docetist view of Jesus suddenly emerges. It explains not only the Pauline epistles, but also why docetists were *everywhere*. Indeed, the Church Fathers spilled a great deal of ink combating them!

In the prior posts we looked at an apocryphal writing, the *Acts of Pilate* (part of the *Gospel of Nicodemus*). In that work, Joseph of Arimathea receives the Jesus in a completely sealed room—showing beyond any doubt (which is exactly what the author wished to show) that the Jesus he is writing about is spiritual and has no body. Thus it is that *Joseph of Arimathea* (not Jesus of Nazareth!) enters Jerusalem in triumph on a donkey and is lauded by all of Israel. This is explicable only if Jesus is a spirit that has come *into* Joseph. Jesus is a shape-shifter. He (or more properly: *it*) enters the body of *any* worthy initiate.

Signs of this spiritual, shape-shifting Jesus are visible even in the canonical gospels. Immediately after the “death” of the initiate (originally: the death of one’s corporeal attachments), “Jesus” appears in bodily form but is not recognized:

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. (Lk 24:13-16)

In his 2012 book, *The Amazing Colossal Apostle*, Robert Price devotes a whole chapter to the shape-shifting Jesus (“The Original Gnostic Apostles,” pp. 131-71). It all goes back to the centrality of the spiritual Jesus in Gnostic theology. “As Schmithals showed,” writes Price (p. 133), “pure, original Gnosticism would have understood the fact of self-knowledge as sufficient to effect post-mortem liberation.” In other words, self-knowledge was *originally* the Jesus. (In *Nazareth Gate* I term this view Primary Gnosticism, as opposed to the later, Secondary Gnosticism characterized by mythology, aeons, and a savior figure.) “Schmithals envisioned Gnostic apostles,” Price continues (p. 134),

“who did not preach a historical individual called Christ but rather an invisible cosmic Christ... the universal Man of Light who dwelt in the souls of the elite among the human race...” We detect a similar view in Paul’s epistles. After all, the Apostle asks (1 Cor 9:1): “Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?” But from Gal 1:11–12 we know that what Paul saw was “*not of human origin*” and was through a *revelation* of Jesus Christ.” Viewing the passages synoptically, one must conclude that Paul’s Jesus was emphatically *spiritual*. Price writes, “The Gnostic Christ, [Elaine] Pagels and Charles H. Talbert observed, was a subjective and unverifiable inner voice,” and “Jesus was a heavenly revealer *within* one’s heart” (p. 137).

### **Jesus the shape-shifter**

It’s clear that if Jesus could indwell people, then Christians could be “virtually Christs in their own right” (Price p. 142). This is the key to unlocking the mystery of Joseph of Arimathea’s exaltation in the *Acts of Pilate*. Because Christ could indwell many people, he had a “many-formed countenance” and was “Jesus of many forms... appear[ing] in the guise of our poor humanity” (*Acts of Peter* 252–53). Thus, Price remarks, “In the apocryphal Acts, the apostles are regularly taken for gods walking the earth. John even mistakes himself for a deity!” Of course, it was no mistake. In Gnostic symbolism, having a divinity inside you makes you a divinity, “a god in a human body” (Price, p. 157). So, in the *Acts of John* (242) we read: “Now I know that God dwells in you, blessed John!” In the *Acts of Peter* (321), Jesus himself is “being crucified again” when Peter is on the cross, while in the *Acts of Paul* (381) Paul’s death is a second crucifixion of Christ. These examples show us that the line between the saint and the Jesus was blurred. Indeed, no real line existed, for the Jesus was in the apostle, and the apostle in the cosmic Christ.

Thus Jesus appeared in the guise of multiple human beings. He was a shape-shifter—sometimes recognized, sometimes not. Price (p. 165) offers a series of admirable examples that I mirror here:

- But Thecla sought for Paul, as a lamb in the wilderness looks about for the shepherd. And when she looked upon the crowd, she saw the Lord sitting in the form of Paul. (*Acts of Paul* 358)
- Maximilla, the Lord going before her in the form of Andrew, went with Iphidamia to the prison. (*Acts of Andrew* 414)
- And he saw the Lord Jesus in the likeness of the apostle Judas Thomas. (*Acts of Thomas* 448)
- Drusiana had said, “The Lord appeared to me in the tomb in the form of John and in that of a young man.” (*Acts of John* 224-25)

These citations are from writings that were immensely popular in Roman times. Once the Church gained ascendancy in the early fourth century they came under the ban and were marginalized, so that today the apocryphal acts are known to hardly anyone except scholars of early Christianity. There are, however, even lesser known works of which scholars themselves have scarcely heard, writings that survive in only one or two copies or that may be unpublished even today. For the heresiologist, a productive working presumption is: the *less known* a Christian writing, the *more important* it is. This attitude yields good results, for it makes copious allowance for fifteen hundred years of assiduous Christian suppression. In the next (and last) post in this series we will look at scarcely known Christian writings, texts that not only *explain* the theology of an early, spiritual, and shape-shifting Jesus (who is available to all), but texts that also aggressively *deny* the monstrous conception of the God of the universe incarnated, once and for all time, in the form of a unique human being.—R.S.

## Part 4

*Christian origins, Gnosticism, Nag Hammadi, The first century*

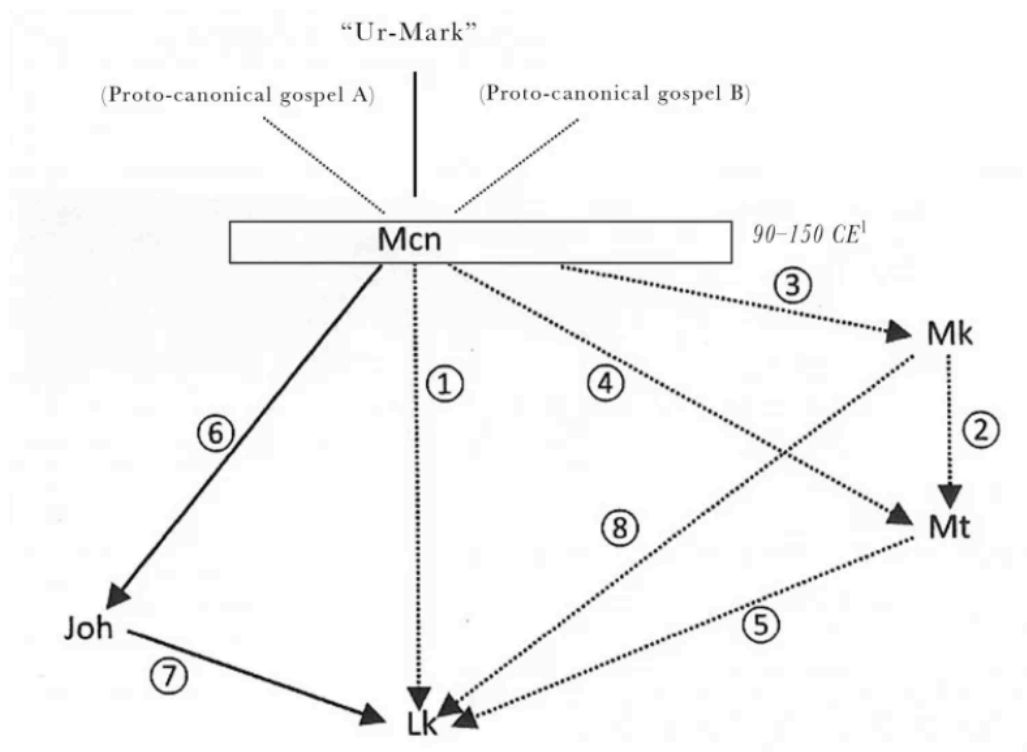
Outside the familiar terrain of twenty-seven New Testament books lies a vast, virtually unexplored expanse of so-called “apocryphal literature.” The word *apocrypha* derives from Greek and literally means “from [that which is] hidden” (*apo*+*crypto*). Well, let me say up front: the only reason most of this literature is hidden is because the Catholic Church *has done everything it could* to hide it. In short, these texts contain what is threatening to the Church—what it *doesn’t* want you to read.

The Church’s suppression of the apocryphal literature was pretty successful during the fifteen or so long centuries when European scholarship was either conducted by the Church or approved by it. Increasingly, however, secular modern scholarship has broken the Church’s monopoly on religious investigation. One result is the liberation of the Christian apocrypha. Already in 1820 W. Hone compiled an *Apocryphal New Testament*, subsequently much improved and enlarged by M. R. James’ volume in 1924. This in turn has been superseded by the various editions of E. Henneke and W. Schneemelcher, now consisting of two bulky (and indispensable) volumes. But “Schneemelcher” is still incomplete, contains predictably conservative views on the various texts, and needs to be used with caution. Like Wikipedia (I use the analogy deliberately) it offers only an introduction that must be augmented.

### **The earlier conception of Jesus**

When we begin to explore the apocryphal literature, one of the first things we discover is that the “Jesus” described is *very different* from Jesus of Nazareth. As a rule, in the apocryphal literature Jesus has no body!

It's true. Anyone who begins to explore the vast terrain of non-canonical Christian texts is soon swimming in works describing a *spiritual Jesus*, a *shape-shifting Jesus*, and what scholars today call a "docetic" Jesus. The massive presence of this spiritual Jesus in the apocryphal Christian literature is nothing less than embarrassing to the tradition. No wonder it was all hidden! But liberal scholarship is now realizing that the non-fleshly Jesus was, in fact, the *dominant* view before the second century. Heresy preceded orthodoxy, and not the other way around. This conclusion is based on several factors, not least of which is that the corporeal "Jesus of Nazareth" of the canonical gospels belongs not to the first century, but to the second. We know this from recent work on Marcion of Pontus, work that proves Marcion's gospel *predated* the gospel of Mark. Amazing, indeed...



The synoptic schema elucidated by M. Klinghardt (adapted from his 2015 volumes, I:272). Klinghardt postulates one or more pre-Marcion gospels. 1. The dating of Mcn (per Klinghardt) is 90-150 CE (I:378).

It is even possible that Marcion of Pontus invented the figure “Jesus the Nazarene.” At the current breathtaking pace of research, I think we will have clarity on this question within a few years. Marcion’s gospel dates *not before* 90 CE (and as late as 150 CE). Personally, I have serious reservations that there was a written “Gospel of Marcion,” also known as the *Evangelion*. I suspect his “gospel” was a teaching, doctrine, or dogma—i.e., “gospel” in merely the general sense. I discuss this important question in a series of posts beginning here.

In any case, the question is whether Marcion’s “gospel” (whether as teaching or actually written down) was or was not dependent on an earlier “gospel.” The German researchers M. Klinghardt and M. Vinzent have recently shown that the gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are all *later* than Marcion. If they are correct, then the bulk of the New Testament must leave the first century. It is fair to say that the thousands—nay, millions—of books on Christian origins written prior to the year 2000 are now obsolete. For with this colossal redating comes a paradigm-changing realization: Jesus of Nazareth was not the original Jesus. He was a late-comer—and a *fake*.

We are all conditioned to read the apocryphal Christian writings through *later* lenses, a mis-reading that has been systematically encouraged by the tradition. Even the Pauline epistles, when read without preconceptions, seem to describe a spiritual Jesus. The jury is still out on how much of those epistles was actually written in the first century (see discussion here)—and this is another question that should be clarified soon—but it is becoming increasingly clear that “Paul” (including his biography in Acts) is an invention of the second century.

The Pauline epistles make no mention of Nazareth and hardly any mention of a human Jesus. A multitude of apocryphal writings also make no mention of “Nazareth” or “Nazarene”—yet they speak exhaustively about a “Jesus.” In fact, the entire Nag Hammadi gnostic library (52 tractates) contains not a single mention of “Nazareth,”

though the Gospel of Philip mentions “Nazara” once (62:14)—but it defines that not as a place, but as “the truth.” These are telltale signs that the Nag Hammadi library is concerned with a “Jesus” different from the Jesus of the canonical gospels. It is entirely valid to ask: does the NHL know Jesus of Nazareth at all?

The Jesus of the gnostic texts is disembodied, eternal, within, from on high, sometimes a “name” or “word” of God (*Gospel of Truth* 21–23), and generally communicated to us *after* “death.” The latter shows, critically, that Jesus has the power to conquer death. However, because Jesus is a spiritual entity, we are dealing here with a long-forgotten definition of “death”—not death of the body, but death of something immaterial. To the gnostics, this would be death to ignorance, that is, acquisition of the all-saving gnosis. “Death,” then, for the gnostic is a variable concept. It can be positive—as in the passage to life, enlightenment, even *baptism* (its earliest celebration, where **water is a symbol of gnosis**). “Death” can also be negative, meaning the *lack* of life, enlightenment, gnosis... The subtle ways gnostic texts use the concepts “death” and “life” are signs of the richness of their repertoire. We find in gnosticism a deep, well-articulated worldview. These rather advanced concepts inform earliest Christianity and *predate* the canonical stratum of the second century CE.

As in virtually all religions, what begins as a spiritual teaching becomes materialized, as the masses eventually demand a religion announcing not merely *spiritual might* (an oxymoron, some worldlings may claim) but *manifest material might*—something the masses well understand, venerate, and before which they are taught to bow. So, the overcoming of spiritual death (“ignorance”) through secret knowledge (gnosis) carried little truck with the common people. It gave way to something they could worship (though hardly understand): a quasi-human phenomenon born of a virgin, resurrected from the grave, who walked on earth (as also on water) raising the dead, multiplying fish,

curing the infirm, stilling the storm, and resurrecting bodily from the grave. As we read in Mk 9:1, *that's* Jesus coming with power!

On the other hand, the *name* of God, the *word* of God, and the *truth* of God—all abstract gnostic definitions of Jesus—have little to recommend them for the masses. But those who embraced such abstractions saw through the sham of the late-comer, the corporeal Jesus. They doubted the existence of Jesus of Nazareth from the start. The gnostics insisted: “Jesus has *no body*.” Today, we call them “docetists,” not realizing that they had an older and far more subtle conception of “Jesus” than did the later Church.

According to the gnostic, the spiritual Jesus is available to all. Though an abstraction, it is quite real—for its attainment (and that alone) bestows true happiness. To find this Jesus (“the truth,” according to the *Gospel of Philip*) we need only foray off the beaten path into the voluminous literature rejected by Catholic Christianity. *The Repose of Saint John the Evangelist and Apostle* is one such work. This virtually unknown Coptic Christian text announces:

Christ our Lord... has never made himself manifest to you through the eyes of the body, neither have you heard him through the ears of the body, but he has made himself visible to you through the integrity of your heart, and by visions, and by works which are holy. (Brit. Mus. MS. Oriental, No. 6782. See E. Budge, p. 233 [online [here](#)].)

One might ask: How can “integrity” of heart, “visions,” and “works which are holy” (that is, *your* works, or *my* works) lead to the manifestation of “Christ our Lord”? The answer must be: he/it is nothing other than the *result* of such good works. The conclusion: through integrity, through seeing (i.e. gnosis), and through meritorious conduct, we *become* Christs—we enter Nazara, what Philip defines as “the truth.” This early and surely authentic theology has ever been anathema to the Catholic Church, which since its birth has offered

mankind a savior and little more. Without any need of a savior, however, no one has need for the Church either...

*The Repose of Saint John the Evangelist and Apostle* also writes of “your majesty that is invisible,” of “you who have spoken words in our hearts,” of “you who made yourself to be apprehended by every person of reason,” and of the soul “worthy of your gnosis.” We have here an alternate path to salvation (reason), an alternate conception of (the spiritual) Jesus, and even an alternate conception of God (gnosis). Obviously, this text was anathema to the Church. No wonder that today it is entirely unknown!

The Nag Hammadi library, too, was unknown to the world until its almost miraculous discovery in 1945, buried in the sands of the Egyptian desert. Most of its works—including the *Gospel of Thomas*—exist in no other manuscript, showing the astounding efficiency of the Church’s destructive efforts. What a debt of gratitude we owe to that nameless monk who, one dark night about 362 CE, loaded his donkey with precious manuscripts and ventured out into the starry desert, dug a deep pit, and there deposited his single earthen jar containing the entire Nag Hammadi library! Margaret Mead said, “Never doubt that a single thoughtful, committed person can change the world; indeed, that’s all that ever has” (my edited version of her great saying). Well, that nameless monk changed the world. His midnight ride colossally influenced history. The monk knew that the texts he was burying would almost certainly never be seen again. But he buried them anyway, unwilling to simply destroy them. And, as it happens, his treasure constitutes the only copy of many seminal scriptures that we possess today. I have to digress here and say, his act is an astonishing example of the exhortation to do the right thing—*especially* when no one is looking! When Athanasius, the archbishop from Alexandria arrived a few days later, rounding up heretical manuscripts to destroy, he no doubt found none at the Pachomian monastery of Chenoboskion and conferred upon the monastery his fulsome praise. Little did the

famous archbishop know that he had been foiled by the actions of a lowly monk.

If one opens the Nag Hammadi library to virtually any page, one reads of a spiritual quest leading towards perfection, liberation, or some sort of divinity. *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth* (NHL VII.2.57-58), for example, speaks of the soul that is liberated when it “becomes free and when it is endowed with nobility in the world, standing before the Father without weariness and fear.” This liberation occurs already *in the world*—not in some future life. And the liberation occurs through being “endowed with nobility.” That nobility, for the gnostic, is emphatically *self-attained*, the product of *effort* and *wisdom* (gnosis, secret knowledge).

One might signal here also the *Ascension of Isaiah*, a work popular in gnostic traditions from the Manichaeans to the Cathars of the Middle Ages. The *Ascension* essentially blurs the line between man and God, chronicling the change of God into man and man into God. All this was rank heresy (and impossibility) in both Jewish and Christian eyes—though such transformation was the very heart of the so-called “mystery religions.” Bart Ehrman writes:

The *Ascension of Isaiah* contains certain motifs otherwise widely associated with Gnostics, in particular, the ascent and descent of the Beloved, who changes into a new shape in each realm of the heavens and delivers the passwords necessary to be granted passage. (B. Ehrman, *Forgery and Counterforgery*, Oxford Univ. Pr. 2013, p. 398.)

The initiate changing “into a new shape in each realm” is shape-shifting, in this case on the way to full divinity. This concept is unacceptable to modern man mostly because we have a different concept of God than did the ancients. Gods (of which there generally were many) were not *creators* of the physical realm (the primary attribute of God to us today) so much as *potencies*. The physical creation was merely their lesser manifestation, a byproduct of their various potencies. Mankind, too, is merely an ephemeral byproduct of

those potencies. If he wishes to reach divinity (and his full realization), he must rise above his carnal, physical limitations—no easy task. This mindset already underlies the religiosity of the Bronze and Iron Ages. It is extremely old. The hard separation between man and the divine is comparatively recent. In ancient times, man was a form or manifestation of divinity—albeit a more-or-less *corrupted* manifestation. This was the problem. Mankind was not manifesting his and her full potential. The secret to salvation, then, was emphatically to rid oneself of corruption. This is a *transformation*, one eventually enshrined in various notions ranging from baptism, to resurrection, to enlightenment. Man *could* become divine. In fact, this is the goal of life, whose main purpose is to transcend this short, unsatisfactory, and bestial *carnal* existence.—R.S.

## Comments

Balázs Iványi on 01/14/2022 at 1:24 am said:

Hello René!

I agree that there is no Jesus of history in the scriptures. However, I think Jesus can't be disembodied because Jesus is portrayed as a person in scripture, though a fictional person.

In any case, there are scholars who believe that the Ascension of Isaiah / Isaiiah (Ascensio Isaiiae) in the Old Testament apocryphal apocalypse was discovered by Paul.

The second part of the AI describes Isaiah's journey through the 7 heavens and, in the meantime, the revelation from God of the birth, death, and second coming of the Son. What happened in the apocalypse may also provide the basis for the Philippian anthem. In both writings, "form-μορφῆ-morfi" plays a major role. In the hymn, the pre-existing being (the son) replaces the "form" of God (Phil. 2: 6) with the "form" of the servant (Phil. 2: 7). In the vision of Isaiah, he follows the form of the inhabitants of the lower five heavens. (Isaiah 10:20: "He formed the form of angels in the fifth heaven, and they did not praise him, for his form (μορφῆ-morfi) was like theirs.") So the change of form is a kind of metamorphosis. From one form to another form. From the form of God to the form of men, the heavenly form, which until the change of form is transferred from the state of likeness to the "human form," and is then embodied in death by God, thus becoming Christ. The dead and the incarnate Son are none other than Christ.

René Salm on 01/15/2022 at 2:47 pm said:

Hello Balazs! Thanks for your comment.

As you know, the Ascension of Isaiah is a composite work—parts are pre-canonical (esp. to 3.13)—and some scholars think this part may have Qumran origins (NTA II:605). The rest of the work is full of long and short Christian interpolations. In re-reading the work I see that the Christian interpolator knew the canonical story, but not the Lukan or Matthean birth narratives (which were the last parts of those gospels to be added). The clue is at AI 11:2-21—a Christian interpolation into the Jewish work. Here the interpolator knows of the virgin birth, Bethlehem, and Nazareth, but the baby Jesus occurs in a different way than in the canonicals: "And after two months,

when Joseph was in his house, and his wife Mary, but both alone, that Mary straightway beheld with her eyes and saw a small child, and she was amazed. And when her amazement wore off, her womb was found as it was before she was with child." No angel Gabriel, no Annunciation, no manger in a cave, etc. This tells me that the interpolator was writing in late II CE, between the writing of the 4G (mid-II CE) and the canonical birth narratives (c. 190 CE?).

When you write: "I think Jesus can't be disembodied because Jesus is portrayed as a person in scripture, though a fictional person," I have to disagree. There was plenty of time (about two centuries) before the appearance of the 4G for a stage of Christianity in which 'Jesus' was a spiritual entity that came into the worthy human being. We have evidence of this concept from many early Christian writings that do not refer to a human Jesus but that do refer to a spiritual Jesus. I write about that here: <https://www.mythicistpapers.com/2016/09/03/3-stages/>.

Sekto on 11/04/2022 at 3:56 am said:

"Margaret Mead said, 'Never doubt that a single thoughtful, committed person can change the world; indeed, that's all that ever has'" (my edited version of her great saying). Well, that nameless monk changed the world. His midnight ride colossally influenced history. The monk knew that the texts he was burying would almost certainly never be seen again. But he buried them anyway, unwilling to simply destroy them. And, as it happens, his treasure constitutes the only copy of many seminal scriptures that we possess today. I have to digress here and say, his act is an astonishing example of the exhortation to do the right thing—especially when no one is looking!"

I didn't know I need to hear this but this really touched me. Thanks!

*Addendum*

## **Before Jesus of Nazareth**

*christology, Gospel of Barnabas, Gospel of Thomas, Paul, The first century Detering*

The first half of the second century was a watershed time in Christian history. By mid-century all four canonical gospels had been written (below), and the bulk of the Pauline epistles were 'collected' and published. At the beginning of the second century, however, it seems that only some elements of Paul's letters (short epistles) were known, and probably not to many people.

It is difficult for us to imagine a Christianity without Jesus of Nazareth. But we must do so, for the colossal God-man arrived not before the second century. The Pauline epistles do not know such a Jesus. On the other hand, the gospels do.

The period of greatest ferment in Christianity can be dated to the two centuries c. 125 CE–c. 325 CE. Before 125 CE there were no 'Church Fathers,' and many Christian texts that have been claimed for that early period (from the letters of Ignatius to the canonical gospels) are spurious, being later creations of the church. On the other hand, the Christian texts that survive from that early period (the Didache, Odes of Solomon, Gospel of Thomas) know Jesus, but not Jesus of Nazareth.

All the evidence suggests that earliest Christianity was a chaotic time, with a plethora of religious groups and beliefs. Today Christianity, despite all of its sects, is like a manicured French garden—there are indeed many paths, but they are tended and clear of debris, the hedges are trimmed and straight, the weeds have been pulled... Early

Christianity, however, was a state of complete wildness. No gardener existed. No paths. Wild animals roamed freely.

Beginning in the second century, pruning the unruly garden of belief begins. The ante-Nicene Church Fathers brought everything into conformity with their new savior, Jesus of Nazareth. The catholic tradition rehabilitated and incorporated ('co-opted') the Pauline epistles, purging them of the most obvious elements of an earlier Jesus-as-spirit christology (but, interestingly, failing to update them with information regarding Jesus of Nazareth—perhaps it was too late). As for the large mass of Christian 'apocrypha,' those works would be expelled into the expanding deserts of 'heresy' and eventually consigned to the fire. And one more thing: during that whole process—between c. 125 and 325 CE, the Church Fathers assiduously constructed a false history (under continual revision and refinement) to make it appear that the latecomer Jesus of Nazareth was original:

- "Paul" (though early) was made into a very late follower of the savior—he even joined the movement after the death of Jesus;
- heresy was routinely deemed "later" and orthodoxy "earlier"; and
- an authoritative lineage back to the twelve canonical (and invented) "apostles" was forged in various church "histories".

### **Christology: three stages of Jesus**

It is possible to suggest three general stages of christological development—Jesus as gnosis, Jesus as prophet, and Jesus as Son of God:

Stage 1: Jesus is the purely abstract gnosis [GThomas]

Stage 2: the Jesus spirit indwells a saint, producing a spirit imbued prophet [GHeb, GBar, Odes of Solomon, early Pauline epistles]

Stage 3: Jesus, and he alone, is at once man and God [Canonical gospels]

The above is only a working hypothesis, of course. It is how I personally view the development of early Christianity—the evolution from a religion teaching the acquisition of gnosis to one teaching faith in a divine being. According to the above, the earliest Christian gospel known to us would almost certainly be the Gospel of Thomas. In that gospel, after all, Jesus is little more than the voice of the immaterial gnosis. GTh offers no biographical information, and one can suppose that the Gnosis itself spoke: “Jesus said...”

Yet, even the Gospel of Thomas attaches some human attributes to Jesus. In L28 Jesus says “in the flesh I manifested myself to them.” In L61, Jesus comes up on Salome’s couch and eats at her table. Thus, Jesus is both spiritual entity and human being—a “spirit imbued prophet” as we see in Stage 2 above. Quite aware of this fusion of elements, the unknown author/compiler of GTh makes a critical distinction between the human and the spiritual ‘sides’ of Jesus. In L52 where his disciples say that the prophets spoke of “him,” Jesus responds in a way that separates the “one living” (the spiritual gnosis) from that which dies (the fleshly body). In L99, the brethren of Jesus are not of the flesh at all (cf. Mk 3:32–35). The gnosis that Jesus gives is profoundly immaterial (LL 15, 17). The christology conveyed by GTh is generally that of the spirit Jesus speaking *through* the human prophet.

Thus, the Gospel of Thomas belongs to an early ‘spiritual Jesus’ stratum of Christianity. In fact, we can locate it between Stage 1 and Stage 2 above. In Stage 2, Jesus is no longer primarily the disembodied gnosis—he now has a biography, with narrative elements framing many sayings. Jesus is now a distinct personality. In this stage the notion “Jesus” is potent yet nebulous: the voice of gnosis *with* anonymous human attributes... This was a new being in the western world. The dual nature of Jesus invited much confusion, for one could

speak of Jesus as spirit (gnosis) or Jesus as man (the prophet uttering the gnosis). The critical concept, though, is fairly simple: the spirit Jesus and the human Jesus were simply two sides of a *spirit-imbued prophet*. Anyone could be a Jesus if s/he were imbued with the spirit. It was not enough to simply look at someone, or even to talk to him/her—for the gardener, the fellow traveler on the road, or the vendor of vegetables could be a ‘Jesus.’ The apocryphal Christian texts show that this conception persisted well into the second century, until it was **pushed into oblivion** by the ‘one and only Jesus,’ that is, by the arrival of the colossal figure, Jesus the Nazarene (c. 125 CE).

*The Gospel of the Hebrews* (of which very little survives) and the lengthy *Gospel of Barnabas* reflect Stage 2. In them, Jesus interacts with others as does a man. Yet these two gospels carefully maintain a clear distinction between the spirit and the man. It is the spirit element that heals, saves, and is divine. The human element can do nothing on its own. The *Gospel of Barnabas* is especially emphatic in this regard. It repeatedly reminds the reader that Jesus is not God, that Jesus is a human being like you and me. Unlike us, however, the Jesus of GHeb and GBar knows how to pray to God, how to engage God’s divine power, how to transmit the life-saving gnosis, how to effect remarkable healings, and how even to raise people from the dead. The Church would build on this view (Stage 3), making Jesus of Nazareth the *exclusive embodiment* of God—indeed, transforming him into God on earth.

The christological transition from Stage 2 to Stage 3 was apparently effected in the second quarter of the second century. The ‘logos christology’ sometimes encountered in scholarship describes this period of transition. A. Klijn notes four works that he associates with early Egyptian Christianity, all of which equate ‘Jesus’ with the logos: the *Epistula Apostolorum*, the *Sibylline Oracles*, the *Testimony of Truth*,

and the *Apocalypse of Peter*.<sup>1</sup> A tension exists in these works regarding the nature of Jesus: spirit or flesh? Jesus is still the gnosis, the revealer of secret knowledge that takes away ignorance (incidentally, this is very Buddhist). The *Gospel of Thomas* also comes to mind in this regard: "Jesus said..." (not "Jesus did..."). As Klijn says, "The knowledge gives life to those who accept Jesus' teaching... The Logos itself remains unaffected by the flesh." In other words, it is the *teaching* that saves, not faith in the divinity of Jesus. But this was about to change as Gnosticism gave way to Catholicism.

The next step was the divinizing of the man who possessed the Logos. Unsatisfied with purely spiritual transformation, ordinary people imagined that the Logos/gnosis imparts the ability to effect miracles. And so (even in the aforementioned works) we encounter Jesus' healings, his exorcism, his walking on water, and his feeding of the multitude. This is because people supposed that the Logos imparts the ability to act as God even in the flesh. All this is arguably *before* the *Gospel of Mark*, a work now not long in the future.

As regards the creation of the synoptic gospels, M. Vinzent writes:

From the reports about Marcion we gain as terminus ante quem for the creation of our Synoptic Gospels (and a first stage of John) the years between 138 and 144 AD... Further stages of John may have followed very soon... If Justin knew of John, then this text must have been finished before 151 AD. [M. Vinzent, *Marcion and the Dating of the Synoptic Gospels*. Leuven: Peeters 2014, p. 139.]

A *terminus ante quem* of 138-44 CE means that all these gospels were composed before then. On p. 138 of the above-cited book, Vinzent writes that Marcion "published" his Gospel in Rome in the summer of

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<sup>1</sup> A.Klijn, 'Jewish Christianity in Egypt,' in THE ROOTS OF EGYPTIAN CHRISTIANITY, 1986:168.

144 CE, but that an earlier draft of his gospel dates before that time. Even earlier may have been the Gospel of Peter.

[NOTE: In a series of posts beginning [here](#), it is argued that Marcion's "gospel" was not a text at all. It was a doctrine, theology. This redefinition of Marcion's "gospel" does not affect dating so much as the stemma of gospel formation, discussed [elsewhere](#). In other words, Marcion's gospel was neither a textual "mutilation" of the Gospel of Luke nor a textual predecessor of the canonical gospels. In fact, it is my contention that a textual gospel of Marcion never existed. –R.S.]

## Paul

The Pauline epistles do not yet know the gospels. They do not know Jesus the Nazarene/of Nazareth. They clearly represent Stage 2 above. They know a cosmic-*spiritual* Jesus, and in Paul's eyes we should all be possessed by Jesus and should all go up the "the third heaven" as he did (2 Cor 12:2). But when we go up to heaven it is *not* in the flesh.

It is important at this point to emphasize the contrast between Stage 2 and Stage 3, between the Pauline view and the view soon to appear in the gospels. Though the Church later harmonized these christologies, they are completely opposite. We see this in the contrary views regarding the flesh. For 'Paul,' the flesh of Jesus was not resurrected. It was of no importance. As H. Detering writes, "[I]n 2 Corinthians Paul explicitly describes a knowledge of Christ 'according to the flesh' as an entirely false knowledge" (Detering 1993:114). And further: "That Christ gave up his blood to the Demiurge and his powers as a ransom was obviously not first fully formulated in words by the Marcionites, but by 'Paul'" (ibid. p. 116). Once again, then, we have an opposition between the 'docetic' (Christ as spirit) view of Marcion and the view of the gospels—including the Gospel "of Marcion."

Of course, for the Church the flesh of Jesus was indeed resurrected and is of consummate importance: Jesus *became* incarnate, and the doctrines of the virgin birth, of the eucharist, and of the bodily resurrection all stem from the view that Jesus was God both in spirit and in flesh.

Interestingly, in 1 Cor 15:35 f, Paul seems to already know the emergent Catholic view—and he combats it. “You foolish man...” he writes. “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body... flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God.” We have an indication here of the two christologies in conflict. The Stage 3 christology already existed in Paul’s time—though the gospels didn’t yet exist.

Paul’s view did not survive, of course, while that of his opponents (those who argued for the resurrection of the flesh) did—and theirs became the backbone of the Catholic Church. That Paul—the onetime enemy of the Church—would become Christianity’s champion is a true lesson in the power of pen and propaganda. What happened is clear enough: the Catholics co-opted Paul’s epistles and (imperfectly) sanitized them. They then attached Paul’s Marcionite-sounding epistles to the gospels and formed the “New Testament.”