

III

The Formation of Christianity

1. THE GOSPELS AS HISTORICAL SOURCE

It was at about this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come up out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you." Immediately afterward the Spirit drove him out into the wilderness and he remained there for forty days, and was tempted by Satan. He was with the wild beasts, and the angels looked after him. After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. "The time has come," he said, "and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News."

Mark 1: 9–15.

The story of Christian origins as told by Christians themselves will no doubt be familiar to most of my readers. Jesus, the Son of God and himself God, united with God the Father in substance, but with his own independent functioning consciousness, was born as a fully human being of the virgin Mary through the Holy Spirit. In a brief ministry of no more than three years around 30 CE, he taught his Jewish disciples the true religion, performed miracles, and was crucified by the Romans as a potential insurrectionary at the behest of Jewish leaders hostile to his claim to be the Son of God. He rose from the dead bodily, leaving an empty tomb, and appeared to his disciples for a period of time, after which he ascended to heaven to prepare his second coming, which would mark the end of this world and the beginning of the Kingdom of God. Those who have faith in Jesus as the Son of God will be resurrected themselves at the end of things, and share an eternal life in the Kingdom of God. They are forgiven their sins before God through Christ's sacrifice on the cross in atonement for those sins. Those who do not accept Christ are doomed to an eternity in Hell, as their sins deserve, for they have no way to atone for their sins on their own. This Jesus was the promised Messiah of the Jews, but the Jews rejected him, and so his word was spread to the Gentiles.

For a historian, of course, all this must be regarded skeptically, at least in the beginning, just as claims of supernatural origins in any other religion would be. We must try to determine what the facts of Jesus's life were, so far as we can from the evidence available, and attempt to work out the course of development of the

religious doctrines that surround his career,¹ but this must be done from a secular point of view, without accepting the religious doctrines of Christianity as background information in the assessment of the evidence. It may turn out that the evidence supports these religious doctrines, some of them at least, and so the initial secularism might be superseded, but their acceptance must be based on the evidence, assessed from an initially naturalistic point of view, if we are to do honest history.² It cannot be based on faith. One might despair of the

¹There have been many accounts of the historical Jesus, particularly in the last two centuries. Perhaps the first to broach the subject seriously was Reimarius (1694-1768), a respected scholar in life, whose views on the Scriptures were published only after his death. He separated what the Apostles said in their writings from what Jesus actually said and taught. The Atonement, and Trinity, he thought, were not revealed by Jesus, for Jesus was a Jew who upheld the Law, did not preach to gentiles, and called the Jews to repentance, promising a messiah who would restore the Jewish nation in Jerusalem. He rejected the miracles, and argued that the Christian faith was based on fraud. The disciples stole the body, altered the doctrine when they found themselves disappointed in what he taught. In many points this early effort is where we have ended up, but quite an eventful discussion has intervened. David Strauss in 1846 published *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, in an effort to come to terms with such conclusions as those of Reimarius. He was professedly Christian, inasmuch as he identified Jesus's religious meaning in his consciousness of himself as God, even though he allowed that his apocalyptic expectations and identification of himself as Messiah were delusional. Strauss argued that it is virtually impossible to disentangle myth from historic fact in Jesus's life. This fit post-Kantian notions of the self-development of *Geist*, and the Romantic theme that there is a deep truth in myth that cannot otherwise be expressed. It led to liberal theologians, Renan, Holtzmann, Harnack, taking the message to be the presence of God in us all and the brotherhood of man, essentially ethical in content. These efforts occurred within a liberal, Kantian tradition of theology, and had a clear ideological aim, quite aside from its Enlightenment effort to do genuine history of the sort advocated here. This tradition, following Kant's *a priori* reconstruction of the meaning of the Christian myth, sees Jesus as an ethical teacher. It assumed that Jesus's ministry fell into two periods, one of activity in preaching ethics, broken off by a retreat to the north, the second commencing with a second journey to Jerusalem, where Jesus encountered hostility and death. Rejecting any notion that salvation was achieved through sacrificial magic and taking Jesus to have known the real truth, it assumed that Jesus never intended or anticipated his own passion (Paul supposedly introduced the sacrifice theory), that the Kingdom of God was a matter of ethical service to humanity, and that the passion succeeded if it transmitted a devotion to this aim. Thus, if one could get back to the original shape of the religion, rejecting 'Medieval' accretions, as the Protestant Reformers had hoped to do, one would discover the true religion. (Why one should accept the assumption that Jesus had the truth, other than obedience to a certain cultural momentum and a reluctance to give up the religion of one's fathers, was never explained.) It was **Albert Schweitzer**, who replaced the ethical Christ with an apocalyptic figure who deliberately provoked the authorities to execute him. Albert Schweitzer observes in *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, (1901) and (1906), that 19th scholars had seen a reflection of their own faces at the bottom of a well. This was 19th century Romanticism, not a historically based, first century vision of God. Jesus, he suggests, is unknown to us, but if we are to know him as best we may, we must take the apocalyptic expectations that Strauss dismisses as delusional seriously. He held that when the Disciples returned from their efforts at the end of the first period of teaching, and the Kingdom of God, an anticipated supernatural apocalypse rather than an abstract, perfectly ethical community, failed to appear, Jesus saw that something more was needed. He offered himself as a necessary sacrifice for many to bring on the Kingdom, expecting to come again, revealed as the Son of Man. This took much better account of the historical evidence, and Schweitzer was able to work in his own liberal ideology through an Hegelian/Schopenhauerian interpretation of these events, rather than rewriting history. Christ's ethical dimension was still foremost, for his will, to which we should respond, is found not in his false and disappointed apocalyptic expectations, but in his reaction to the world view of his own time. So we should desire to sacrifice ourselves for others, to do whatever is necessary to bring about reconciliation of the actual with the Ideal. Our will understands Jesus's will, in the endeavor to imitate Jesus a union of wills, a mystical union of sorts, arises. (There are a number of passages in early Christian literature that lend some support to this sort of talk.) Jesus is the expression of the World Spirit, and his own efforts destroyed the mold within which he thought to bring about the Apocalypse, but the world spirit is always transcending itself, breaking its own view of the world apart in its effort to really live that view of the world, and so bringing about a higher synthesis. To be true followers of Christ we should seek, not the apocalypse, but the expression of the world-spirit in our lives. For more information, see Weaver (1999).

²On this point, which applies equally to the assessment of every religious doctrine, see the more extensive discussion in Note 1 to Book IV Chapter 1: Judaism.

task, of course, and retreat to giving an account of the beliefs of Christians at the point where we first have enough evidence to say reliably what they were, without comment on the origin or accuracy of those beliefs, but, as a matter of fact, with a willingness to speculate plausibly on some points, a reasonably probable account of Jesus's life can be constructed, and certainty increases quickly as we leave the life of its founder and enter on the religion's history.³

Our earliest sources for the beginnings of Christianity, the life of Jesus and the period of initial doctrinal formation in the half century following his death, are the letters of Paul.⁴ The three Synoptic Gospels, *Mark*, *Matthew*, and *Luke*, are also generally regarded as early, though they were written after Paul's letters, and

³Perhaps I should apologize for the apologetic character of these remarks. I certainly have not apologized for treating the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism or Buddhism historically. But this book is written within a dominantly Christian culture, and most of its readers will probably be Christian, or have a Christian background. Moreover, there are central tenets of Christian belief which are historical rather than metaphysical in nature, and so Christians are sensitive about a historical approach to their sacred texts. So the apology is to Christians, and those who are not Christians may note that its author is not a Christian either.

⁴Of the traditional letters of Paul *Hebrews*, the letters to Timothy and Titus, and probably *Ephesians*, are not genuinely Pauline (though, of course, once they are dated they still provide valuable historical information)—see Fox (1992) 130–136. I do not deal with Paul's letters immediately, though they are earlier than the Gospels, since they do not attempt any connected account of Jesus's life. In fact, the absence of an account of Jesus's life in them is somewhat disturbing, for it suggests that Paul may have seen Jesus as a prophet who had died a considerable time ago, who had only been seen, by Paul and others, in visions. This absence of biographical interest in Jesus is in fact typical of early Christian texts outside the Gospels. Ellegård (1999) argues with considerable persuasiveness that the Gospels must be regarded as inventions, that the founder of the Christian sect, which evolved from the Essenes, was a holy teacher killed by Jewish authorities around 100 BCE, and that Paul and the other apostles launched the Christian religion when they had visions of the dead teacher, now in heaven at the right hand of God, and received the good news that his death was a sacrifice for our salvation. I'm skeptical about Ellegård's account, though. The teachings of Jesus seem to form a unity at variance with, though dependent on, the apocalyptic thought of the Essenes, and more detail than is plausible must have been lost from the life of the Essene Teacher of Righteousness, who died ca. 100 BCE, if the Gospel tale placing his death 130 years later indeed arose in an attempt to reconstruct that life. Finally, *Mark* seems most easily explained as a work written during the first Jewish Revolt for Diaspora Jews sympathetic with the revolutionaries, and, even though it seems the author may have deliberately made Jesus's life parallel to that of the Teacher of Righteousness, Ellegård's explanation that *Mark* and the other Gospels were written to defend the real humanity of Jesus against the Docetists, as well as his chronological scheme placing *Mark* after the letters of Ignatius, seems to me wrong. So does the account of Doherty (1999), who argues that *Mark* was composed from what was left of a Galilean preacher's teachings in Q, and a passion story made up whole cloth to identify this figure with the Holy Teacher, the Christ of Paul, this taking place about 85-90 CE. If we suppose this, it would seem reasonable that the author of *Mark* thought he was reconstructing what happened. Perhaps the provision of the details to lend plausibility and evidence would have been consistent with Ancient practice of historical writing. In any case, I stick to a more traditional account of the matter. Still, the lack of interest of Paul and other early Christian writers in the details of Jesus's biography, assuming that they knew Palestinian leaders of the movement who had lived with Jesus, certainly Peter and perhaps James, is indeed puzzling. Perhaps, instead of the modern intellectual's passion for accurate biography, these early Christians had an interest in finding the life of their founder as edifying and full of miracles as possible, providing every evidence of divine favor. Such biography contains telling incidents, but consists essentially in a general, idealized picture of its subject, which concrete incidents only serve to illumine. People often write such biography today. For instance, one may look at business biographies of great captains of industry such as Henry Ford, intended for the edification and inspiration of fellow businessmen. Also, of course, Paul was defensive about the matter, insisting that his acquaintance with the risen Christ was just as good as Peter's friendship with Christ in his earthly career. Perhaps his studied disinterest in Peter's personal knowledge of Jesus set the tone for the Gentile Christians, anxious as they may have been not to put themselves in thrall to their Jewish brethren. But there is no explanation of all this that does not seem at some point implausible.

there is some reason to place them into the 2nd century.⁵ The Fourth Gospel, *John*,⁶ is placed there by general agreement. There are reasons to take care in using the Gospels. They are lives of Jesus written to propagate the Faith, and composed in Greek, and so not written among those Jews who had known Jesus personally.⁷ On the other hand, they seem to be rooted in an oral tradition originating with Jesus's disciples, and "the Gospel" is the Good News of Jesus's career taken in the abstract, our four canonical Gospels being *versions* of the Gospel, as in "The Gospel according to Mark." They were written, at the earliest, during and after the first Jewish revolt from the Romans in 66–73 CE,⁸ which is to say, some thirty-five years, or perhaps a good many more,

⁵"Synoptic" means "with the same eye," seen from the same viewpoint. The Synoptic Gospels agree closely in their narrative portions. *Luke* and *Matthew* clearly depend on *Mark*, for each clearly expands on *Mark* using other sources, and, although each occasionally disagrees with *Mark*, when they do, the other always agrees with the earlier Gospel. By the usual account, they both use a collection of Jesus's sayings, dubbed Q (for *Quelle*, "source" in German) by modern scholars, in addition to *Mark*, and each appears to have its own special sources as well, though some find reasons to doubt this. *John* depends neither on *Mark* nor on the collection of sayings used in *Luke* and *Matthew*, but on another, independent early tradition. Only about a tenth of the material in *John* is found in the other Gospels.

⁶For *John*, Fox (1992) 204–9.

⁷Analysis of the language used in the Gospels makes it very unlikely they are translations from any known Jewish dialect. *Mark* and *Matthew* may have been written among Jewish Christians who had split off from the mass of Jews, but if so, they seem to address themselves to Gentile converts as well. Luke was not a Jew, and his Gospel is clearly addressed to a Gentile Church alone. Perhaps none of the Christian writers coming immediately after these Evangelists (the "Apostolic Fathers") were Jews. On the other hand, it seems worthy of note that the Gospels all report the public life of Jesus, things that would have been known to the disciples. They seem based on the disciples' reports. This public account, however, is preceded by a prologue drawn from unknown sources and presented from the omniscient author's point of view, concerning the birth and life of Jesus before the beginning of his ministry. It is noteworthy that the prologues in *Luke* and *Matthew* (not to mention the prologue in heaven in *John*) differ far more from one another than the narrative portions of these gospels do, and seem to be tacked on.

⁸Scholars suppose this in part because the temple was destroyed during the First Jewish Revolt, in 70 C.E., and the Gospels all contain predictions of the destruction of the temple. Of course, this reasoning supposes that real, supernatural prophecies don't occur. Their nonoccurrence is supported by the uniformity with which detailed prophecies in an apocalyptic text succeed up to a certain critical date, presumably the date the text was written, and become wildly inaccurate thereafter. Applying this to *Mark*, in Chapter 13 Jesus predicts the destruction of the temple and "the desolating sacrilege set up where it ought not to be (let the reader understand)," and the dark days of the First Jewish Revolt, in which false prophets and fake messiahs mislead the people. All this happened, of course. Then it predicts, in verses 24–27, the arrival of the Son of Man in glory to take the elect to heaven, with pointed remarks immediately following that when one has seen the previous predictions fulfilled, then this final prediction's fulfillment is at hand. The final prediction was not fulfilled, of course, and so we can date *Mark* shortly after the destruction of the temple, before the end of the war. There would be no dishonesty or imposture on the part of the author of *Mark* here. He would have recalled the missionaries' reports of Jesus's more or less vague predictions as well as he could, and fit them to events. Jesus may actually have made predictions something like those reported. He could have predicted the revolt, the false prophets (which it would be important to warn his people against, since they would lead their followers to death at the hands of the Romans), and the destruction of the temple simply through a wise understanding of human affairs and observation of his own people, and he might well have sincerely expected to arrive in glory after those events. Had he written after the First Revolt, he would have expected later events to fulfill the prophecies of events preceding the apocalypse, and not so confidently quoted Jesus's saying that "this generation will not pass away before all these things take place." (*Mark* 13:30) (The prophecies in *Mark* 13 are echoed in *Matthew* 24 and *Luke* 21.) The dating of the Synoptics is also supported by the clear efforts of all the Gospel writers to dissociate the movement from the Jews and their political ambitions, which seems likely to have been due chiefly to the desire not to appear as trouble makers to the Romans, and so suggests that the First Jewish Revolt had at least begun.

after the events, and they take an urgent interest in dissociating Christianity from any political program. The earlier, Synoptic Gospels display little knowledge of the details of religious life in Israel, or even of its geography, and, though *John* is better informed on this score, it is also considerably later.⁹ All the Gospels speak of Jewish religious life in terms of the Synagogue and the Pharisees, terms more appropriate to the Diaspora, and the period after the First Revolt, than to the time of Jesus in Israel proper.

A second difficulty is the character of the writing. With the best will in the world, the historian has to admit that much in the Gospels is fabricated. This would not have invalidated them in the Ancient world. Historians in Rome aimed above all at a lively, circumstantial account that could have been the way it was, given what we know of human beings. The very word *evidentia* among them means, not our ‘evidence,’ that is, observable data making the accounts they give probably true, but rather ‘lively verisimilitude.’ To write with *evidentia* is to transport the reader back to the events through one’s writing. History was not a science. Everyone knew that, and so to write something like the truth was sufficient. This means that the details of Roman history can never be trusted. They are more often than not made up for effect. Moreover, it means that an incomplete story will be filled in by the writer in a plausible way, explanations of unexplained events provided, and so on. Given this manner of writing, once a plausible and interesting tale had been evolved, and the most obvious sources tapped, a historian was likely to pass on to other concerns. His job was finished.¹⁰ The Gospels, then, given the milieu in which they were written, most especially *Luke* and *Acts*, the most cultured and educated of the Gospels, were probably intended as plausible accounts, fitting what we know, with invented details as needed to make them readable and complete the account. It is not that the Gospel writers employed deliberate imposture. There would have been no need. They told a story which they were sure was something like the truth, and not misleading on any important spiritual point, and were satisfied with that. But, if that is one’s aim, one writes terribly unreliable history.

With all this, as historical sources the Gospels are far from worthless. They depend on accounts, oral and written, handed down from the earliest missionaries, and were composed, probably, no more than fifty years after the events they report, and though the missionaries’ words might have been modified, deliberately

⁹One reason for this lack of detail is that we have a folk tradition here, and folk tales do not typically fill in details unnecessary for the understanding of the actions reported, no descriptions of the scenery or of interesting foreign customs, unless, of course, the description is absolutely essential to understanding the action. Folk tales also eschew character development, focusing rather on the revelation of character in publicly observable actions.

¹⁰For all this, see Wiseman (1993).

or unconsciously, to conform to later thinking, they would not have been altered without cause. Indeed, the Synoptic Gospels, especially *Mark*, are faithful enough to their sources to suggest an embarrassing alternative view of events behind the emerging Gentile Christian tradition about the past.¹¹ Finally, it seems pretty clear that *Mark*, at least, is interested in making the account of Jesus's life accurate, even if it reports events selectively within a narrative structure adapted to its own dramatic purposes.¹²

Mark is the earliest Gospel. The other Synoptics, *Matthew* and *Luke*, incorporate it and its outline of

¹¹I depend especially on Enslin (1938), Grant (1977), Fox (1992), and Pagels (1995) for historical analysis of the *New Testament* and other early Christian texts. A very nice summary is Frances Young (2006). These are only a couple of the more intelligent treatments in an extensive literature on the topic. I reject the central claims of "form criticism" introduced in **Bultmann** (1921). This argues that the *New Testament* is not history at all in our sense, but a construction from all sorts of traditional literary materials, often working in a very different way and with very different aims conflicting with mere accuracy in the recounting of events sought by a modern historian. Bultmann moved one step beyond Schweitzer, who treated the Gospels as straightforward history, then, and, like Schweitzer, he isolates his theological concerns from the historical accuracy of the sacred text, but not through old-fashioned German Idealism. Instead, he argues that the literary form of the stories in scripture is such that they get their points across without regard to their historical accuracy, as the meaning of a myth does not depend on its literal truth, and might be subscribed to even by someone who denied its literal truth. Jesus, according to Bultmann, was resurrected into the *kerygma* (the preaching) of the Christian tradition, the Gospel message declared to all and accepted by the faithful, and this *kerygma* has, as it were, an existence and value independent of any historical facts. In his later work he developed an existentialist theology under the influence of Heidegger. Some of his pupils defended the view that the truth of the sacred text was not only irrelevant, but that truth itself is a suspect notion, establishing the "new hermeneutic." Christians generally want to assert the truth of the faith, unlike Bultmann. More conservative Christian philosophers among those who want to do this, such as Alvin Plantinga, argue that the theological propositions that Christians bring to the interpretation of the sacred text are basic beliefs not rooted in further, but nonetheless just as rational as any opposing, secular set of beliefs one might bring to the text. Thus it is not truth that is jettisoned to preserve the faith, but our usual ideas of evidence. Another interesting and intelligent skeptical treatment of historical criticism of the *New Testament* is found in Evans (1996) Chs. 13 and 14. Evans points out reasonably that our historical approach to the text, and our reasonable estimates what probably happened, must differ if we believe that God may really have revealed himself in history, that miracles really might have occurred, and so on, and argues for the historical reliability of the texts. As for how one might view the texts differently from different background suppositions, I *don't* share his religious views, or see anything in the texts to shake my secularism even a little, so, while I accept his point, I am simply not in his hermeneutic circle. Moreover, there is no way for one employing *reason* and evidence alone to push me into his circle, and I would not be doing history if I argued from within it. But I do share his sense that the texts are trying to provide a true account of Jesus's life and message, and can be trusted, *if approached critically*, to do so. So do most historians advocating "higher criticism." For a fascinating collection of well-argued pieces from various viewpoints on the subject, see Stump and Flint (1993).

¹²Source criticism led to opinion of Bultmann that we can know almost nothing of the life of Jesus, as the effort to tease out preserved fact from fabrication supporting the views of the writers and read into the story seemed to uncover precious little that was not shaped in the tradition for the purposes of the tradition. But we can look for the picture upon which these folks are projecting their stories, what makes the projections possible, and, in particular, try to accommodate for the possibility of the several different projections, and for the elements preserved in these accounts that the writers find embarrassing and in need of explanation. More than the Gospels can be brought into it, Gnostic sources can be examined (though it must be admitted that Gnostics seemed to be able to project their story onto pretty much anything), *Hebrews*, and especially the letters of Paul. In the end, the search ends up as one for a distinctly Jewish fellow on whom it can all be built, and the study of first-century conditions in Palestine comes to the center. If there was a Jesus at all, we can say with certainty that he was a Jewish male, indifferently educated, observant, and taken as a prophet or teacher by some fellow Jews. That has to be the starting point. And he was handed over to the Romans by the Jewish council, condemned and crucified by them, left a set of religious and ethical sayings the core of which we must assume is authentic, and did something that made the apocalyptic reading of the early Christians possible. A minimalist picture is to be sought that fits in those facts, and allows for the development of the later views of Jesus after his death, given the career of Paul.

Jesus's ministry,¹³ though they revise a number of its stories, making them less disconcerting to later Christians. Coming probably from the end of the First Jewish Revolt, *Mark* lives with disappointment, persecution, death, and apparent abandonment by God. It ends starkly with the death of Jesus and the empty tomb,¹⁴ indicating that the plan, though it clearly was proceeding, for the Lord had risen, had not yet come to completion, and a great deal more suffering must be endured in ignorance of the details of God's plan, and in the absence of God, before it does. Throughout it emphasizes the need to have faith in what seems impossible, and endure, for God is faithful, whatever the appearance, and can do all things. Jesus was probably executed by the Romans for sedition, but *Mark* focuses on the conflict between Christians and the Jews (perhaps, for the author himself, *other* Jews), telling a story of a battle in the war between Satan, who lies behind all the actions of the Jewish establishment against Jesus, and God, a battle in which Satan wins an apparent victory reversed by Jesus's resurrection. Christians, *Mark* makes it clear, are not rebels against Rome, but neither are they unfaithful to the Jewish God. The rebels are mistaken, and it is not in the warfare with external enemies that the victory must be won, for they are only God's instruments to punish the unfaithful,¹⁵ but in that against Satan's internal subversion, whether of the Jewish nation or one's own personality.

Central to *Mark* is the notion that Jesus kept his real mission secret, so that the Jews, or most of them, at least, would reject his deliberately cryptic message. Indeed, even the disciples fail to understand the parables until they are privately explained to them, and cannot make out what Jesus means when he foretells resurrection after suffering.¹⁶ The real meaning of the message became clear, of course, only after Jesus's death.

¹³Enslin (1938) Ch. XLIII, argues this in detail. Most modern scholars think the evidence supports the existence of a common source for the material in *Luke* and *Matthew* not found in *Mark*, which they call "Q" (*Quelle*, that is, "source" in German), and there is considerable agreement that this source would have been written in Greek, and on the content of it. It seems to have consisted of sayings of Jesus, with brief contextual remarks. The *Gospel of Thomas*, among the non-canonical gospels, seems to make use of some source related to Q.

¹⁴*Mark* 16:9-19, an account of the appearances of Jesus after his resurrection apparently picked up from the other Gospels and *Acts*, appears only in some manuscripts, and seems very different in style from the rest of *Mark*. Moreover, a different, briefer, ending appears in some other manuscripts. So it seems the ending was added later, perhaps out of discomfort at the abrupt termination to the story.

¹⁵The story of the Jews' selection of Barabbas to be spared execution over Jesus (*Mark* 15:9-15), which seems clearly unhistorical, may have this symbolic meaning. The Jews chose the rebel, the bandit, not the holy man of God, and so will suffer the consequences in the subsequent Roman occupation.

¹⁶*Mark* 4:13, 34; 8:32-33; 9:32; 10:32-45. *Matthew* and *Luke* modify or omit these stories, *Matthew* even adding to the story of the parables that Jesus asked if they understood, and they said they did. A letter of Clement found in 1958 at the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem mentions several passages from a "Secret Gospel of Mark," which it regards as an expansion, probably Gnostic, of the "real" *Mark* that we have. But it has been plausibly suggested that the *Secret Gospel* was in fact an earlier version of the redaction of *Mark* we now have, from which the stories cited have been omitted. In any case, it seems that our *Mark* is an abbreviated

But why keep the Jews in the dark? Perhaps it is because the end of the present world order will come when the Jews accept the Kingdom, and some way must be found to put off their acceptance to give the Gentiles a chance to come in. This might also explain why the second coming is delayed.¹⁷ Thus we explain the Jews' reluctance to accept Jesus, their Messiah, and perhaps also the divergence of later conceptions of Jesus's mission from earlier notions.

Did Jesus really keep his mission and teachings secret? Perhaps Jesus's secret was that he was to suffer and die, rather than immediately leading God's armies against the Romans, though no doubt his suffering only prepared the way for his victorious return by making him worthy of the honor. He may well have concealed his expectations since they were unlikely to be understood or believed by most Jews, at least until he had accomplished the deed and returned. This is all rooted in *Second Isaiah*, in which the disbelief of the people in God's chosen way of salvation is a recurrent theme. Jesus apparently identified himself with the Suffering Servant of *Second Isaiah*. Gnostics would later hold that the secret was kept from the demons that rule this world, and that things were put in the form of parables so that only the Spiritual could understand them. Of course, it may be that there was no secret at all, and later Christians introduced the notion to defend views of Jesus which had evolved beyond anything that he himself ever said or intended. It seems likely that these later Christians depended on some evidence in the tradition that Jesus really did have a secret of some kind, but it may be that the story of the secret developed only after Jesus's death, when at last people figured out what he was up to. It had to be explained why Jesus did not say these things openly in his public ministry. Some of the disciples might well have convinced themselves that he had obliquely referred to what was to occur, but they had failed to understand his meaning at the time. At several points in *John* we find this line stated quite explicitly, remarking that it was only after Jesus's death, through the inspiration of the Spirit, that the disciples understood the connections between the cleansing of the temple and the entry into Jerusalem and the prophecies of these events.¹⁸

and modified version of the original, and perhaps the stories of the secret teaching, exploited as it was by the Gnostics, was one of the things that needed modification. Of course, it may be that the "secret" allowed a reinterpretation of the purpose of Jesus's mission, but it did that rather too well, in fact, so well that further reinterpretations could be based on it. After a while, in the interests of defending orthodoxy, since the difficulties it answered had evaporated over time, the "secret" became an embarrassment.

¹⁷Mark 13:10, where it is said that, presumably before the Lord comes again, "the gospel must first be published to all nations."

¹⁸John 2:17, 22, 12:16. These would have been odd, prophetic actions, like those of Ezekiel, of course, and the disciples might have noted their oddness without at first realizing that they had a meaning, that Jesus was obliquely indicating that he was the Messiah.

Matthew is the most Jewish of the gospels, careful about the prophecies and endorsing the Law, but also stressing, more than the other Gospels, the crimes of the Jews. Probably Jewish Christians in the Diaspora formed a significant part of its audience, and so we find a respect for Jewish roots joined to an insistence that it was not the Jewish nation itself, but the corrupt, mainstream Jewish establishment, that is, the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Rabbinic establishment that came to rule Jewish life after the failure of the revolt in the 60's, that was responsible for the breach between orthodox Judaism and Christianity.¹⁹ The Gospel relies almost entirely on *Mark* for its narrative material, but is fairly free in introducing revisions, sometimes because the point of *Mark*'s story is not one the author can credit. For instance, the story of Jesus's tolerance of other prophets when he says "he that is not against us is with us"²⁰ is reconstructed to omit the offending sentiment, which is then flatly contradicted later.²¹ In general, *Matthew* seems uncomfortable with the intensely human Jesus in *Mark*, and omits phrases indicating too much emotion, or a need to seek information.²² (This tendency persists in *Luke*,²³ and is much intensified in *John*, which removes any trace of vulnerability from Jesus, depicting him as God, absolutely calm and in perfect, omniscient control of every situation.) The Gospel also softens or removes the not infrequent criticisms by Jesus of his disciples for their lack of comprehension and prideful

¹⁹For instance, in *Matthew* 4:3-11, the offer of worldly power and wealth to Jesus by Satan in the wilderness clearly implies that those who enjoy worldly power, in Matthew's time the Pharisaic Rabbis, may have struck a deal with the devil. (*Mark* 1:13 provides no details of the temptation by Satan, only mentioning that it occurred.) Indeed, the Devil's attempt to ensnare Jesus in debate is a caricature of the attempts of the Scribes and the Pharisees to do this elsewhere in the Gospel. The notion that worldly power and wealth may come from God, and betoken his favor, is rejected here out of hand. In the parable of the sower the weeds are sown by the devil, and are the sons of the evil one. *Matthew* 23 is intensely hostile to the Pharisees, denouncing them repeatedly as hypocrites and children of Hell. Above all, it is in *Matthew* 27:24-25 that Pilate washes his hands of the affair of Jesus, and the Sanhedrin and the entire nation take on the whole guilt of the crucifixion, calling down his blood upon themselves and their children. (To be fair, in *Mark* 15:6-15 Pilate tries to avoid executing Jesus in the Barabbas incident, so *Matthew* is only emphasizing something already present in *Mark*.) But on the other hand, it is in *Matthew* 5:17-20 that we find Jesus has come to fulfill the Law and the Prophets, not to abolish them. The passage, and the rest of the Chapter, clearly insists that the Law must be followed more perfectly than the Scribes and Pharisees follow it, because one must follow not only its letter, but also its spirit. The Gospel is the work of a Jewish sectarian bitterly at odds with the leadership and majority of his community.

²⁰*Mark* 9:38-41.

²¹*Matthew* 12:30, which has it that "he that is not with me is against me."

²²*Mark* 10:17-18 has Jesus rebuke a questioner, "Why do you call me good? None is good save God alone." This suggests much too clearly that Jesus did not think he was God (though it can be read as case of unconscious prophecy, in which the questioner, in calling him good, indicates that he is in fact God), and *Matthew* recasts the answer at 19:16-17 to remove the implication: "Why do you ask me about what is good? One there is that is good."

²³In particular, note *Luke*'s account of the death on the cross, which seems designed to provide an example how a faithful martyr would die. *Luke* has Jesus pray for his tormentors, unlike *Mark* and *Matthew*, omits the cry "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" and the last, loud cry, and substitutes the prayer, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

disputes among themselves, and tends to improve the miracles where it can.²⁴

Luke, in contrast to *Matthew*, is directed exclusively to Gentiles, and cultured Gentiles at that, and contains much not found in the other Synoptic Gospels. It is really only the first half of a two part work, the second half being *Acts*, emphasizing missionary activity with a universalistic overtone, and denying Jesus's exclusive concern with the Jewish nation.²⁵ *Luke* attributes much of Jewish hostility to Jesus to the universality of his message, extending salvation to the Gentiles, and he suggests that this salvation is achieved with the coming of Jesus, not awaited as an event to come some time after Jesus's death. His own viewpoint is obscured, however, by the respect with which he treats *Mark*, not daring to add his universalistic touches to the Marcan material itself. Nonetheless, he trims that material, particularly in the account of the events leading up to the crucifixion, omitting the references to the future destruction of the temple, and abbreviating the story of the cleansing of the temple to leave out Jesus's violent actions. It seems he wants to soften the impression that Jesus precipitated his own crucifixion by confronting the priests, and to emphasize that Jesus was crucified because he claimed to be the Messiah, but not a Messiah of the sort the Jews expected.

John can be dated between about 90 and 120 CE, and is generally thought to be later than the other Gospels. Irenaeus suggests that the gospel was written to confound the Gnostics, especially Cerinthus,²⁶ and Origen certainly uses it to this effect, but it was apparently also at one time attributed to Cerinthus,²⁷ and so it has been supposed that what we have is modification, with the Gnostics in mind, of an earlier version more open to interpretation. Its account of Jesus's life is quite at variance with that of the Synoptics, making the center of his activity Jerusalem instead of Galilee and extending the bare year of ministry in *Mark* into three years. It is generally supposed that *John* is not of much use in reconstructing the actual career of Jesus.²⁸ Indeed, *John* not only writes some time after the events, and for a Gentile audience, he reworks Jesus's sayings, and

²⁴So when *Mark* says that the loaves and fishes fed five thousand men, *Matthew* cannot refrain from adding "besides women and children." (*Matthew* 14:21, 15:38)

²⁵See Enslin (1938) Ch. XVI, Grant (1977) 121 ff. *Acts* ends with Paul's arrival in Rome, not his execution, and so suggests that the point of the story was the bringing of the word to the Gentiles at the center of the Empire. It makes it clear that Paul and the Christians were no danger to Rome, and, indeed, seems patterned in many ways on Greek novels such as Apuleius's *Golden Ass*. *Luke's* Greek is also far more cultured than that of *Matthew* and *Mark*, its author being a physician, an educated man.

²⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 1.26.1 and 3.11.1. See Helms, *Who Wrote the Gospels?*, 162-163.

²⁷Epiphanius, *Against Heresies*, 51.3.6.

²⁸So, Enslin (1938) Ch. XLIV.

the events of his life, in terms of later practices such as the Eucharist, making them fit his own view of what Jesus must have meant and done. He must have written the gospel after the expulsion of Christians from the synagogues. Moreover, his Jesus is an entirely supernatural figure, always in complete control, calculating every action for the delivery of his message.²⁹ But embedded in this work there may be the report of an eye witness, perhaps even one of Jesus's disciples, which the Synoptic Gospels do not know.³⁰ Moreover, John is well informed about the customs of the Jews and the details of geography of Jerusalem and Galilee, and his Greek is that of a Greek-speaking Jew. So it may be well to pay some guarded attention to the *Gospel of John* in reconstructing the events of Jesus's life.

We have almost no early material critical of the Christian movement, and very little from branches of the early movement whose views were later repudiated, for the obvious reason that later Christians, even if they did not destroy such materials deliberately, certainly had no reason to preserve them. A text that ceased to be copied generally ceased to exist in only a few hundred years as the old copies were destroyed, or simply crumbled into dust. So, lacking the control of differing viewpoints, we have to be especially alert to bias and distortion in the Christian tradition.

2. JESUS'S EARLY LIFE

...and so it was that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

Mark 1:4.

Making the best sense we can of the Gospels, then:

Jesus first appears to us in the wilderness, where he had gone to hear John the Baptist preaching in the

²⁹So, for instance, in *John* Jesus dies not after the Passover meal, as the Synoptic Gospels have it, but during the preparation of the meal, as the lambs are being slaughtered. Jesus, for *John*, is not a participant in the meal, but the meal itself. One cannot, perhaps, take this as evidence that Jesus never did share the last supper with his disciples on the Passover, for the symbolism of the Eucharist, conceived, perhaps, in a new way, not a historical report, may shape the story. Nonetheless, Theissen () 166-167 suggests that some telling details in *Mark's* account which seem impossible if the Passion occurred on Passover make sense if it actually occurred the day before, and argues that it is *Mark*, not *John*, that is being creative in its construction of events.

³⁰It may be that the author of *John*, aware that his is a late, minority report of events, drew on some early memoir to lend credence to his reworking of the message. R.M. Grant (1961) 9 suggests that the early source might have been Nicodemus. According to the epilogue, the "disciple whom Jesus loved" wrote the whole gospel.

desert, urging people to turn away from their sins. He was baptized by John, though not, presumably, to cleanse himself of sin.³¹ We purify our souls of sin only by righteousness, John thought, but baptism served to express a new resolve.³² John predicted that a greater prophet would come after him³³ to announce the actual arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven.³⁴ Such preaching was not strikingly original in either content or manner, but John must have been a charismatic personality, and Jesus, when baptized by him, became convinced that he was the one predicted.³⁵ John did not confirm Jesus's notions about himself, nor did he recognize him in any special way at his baptism.³⁶ For the moment, Jesus's growing conviction of his mission remained private.

Since Jesus held John in esteem, and thought himself the one John predicted, Christians had a problem in the Baptist's failure to confirm Jesus's mission. There was no disputing what the views of John's followers were. They are grouped with the Pharisees as opponents of the Christians in *Mark*,³⁷ and clearly distinguished from Jesus's disciples in *Luke*,³⁸ while *The Gospel of John* simply assumes an ongoing dispute between the two men's disciples,³⁹ but it was easy to suggest that John's disciples were not privy to his secret thought. Moreover, John was arrested and executed by Herod to prevent a possible rebellion, and he went through a period of isolation in prison before his execution—so one *could* insist he had recognized Jesus, but only while in prison, after his last contact with his disciples. The stories of John's recognition of Jesus in the later tradition,

³¹Probably Jesus baptized in imitation of John—so *John* 3:22–23. Paul baptized, so we know the custom was present *very* early in the Christian tradition. It was probably developed from ritual cleansing practiced among the Essenes.

³²*Mark* 1:4–5. The Jewish historian Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 18,5,2, reports John as a leader of a popular movement whom Herod slew to forestall an uprising, and who baptized for the purification of the body alone, that is, presumably, not for the purification of the soul, for such purification must come from God.

³³*Mark* 1:7–8.

³⁴*Matthew* 3:2.

³⁵In all the Gospels we are told of the descent of the Spirit on Jesus as he was baptized.

³⁶So *Luke* 7:18 ff. *Mark* is non-committal on the point. *Matthew* has John recognizing Jesus, but he is instructed to keep it a secret. In *John*, which knows nothing of Jesus's secrecy and has him proclaiming everything, and performing miracles, as publically as possible (though people often refuse to understand, which angers Him), the Baptist announces the matter to all present (1:19–34). In both *Matthew* 11:2–15 and *Luke* John sends from prison to inquire if Jesus is the one he predicted, although he has no business doing so in *Matthew*, which has it that he already knows.

³⁷*Mark* 2:18.

³⁸*Luke* 11:1.

³⁹*John* 3:22 – 4:1

then, most likely arose to combat the influence of John's disciples, who refused to admit that their master had ever said Jesus was the one to come after him.

Of Jesus's life before his encounter with John we know very little. His date of birth is unknown, but it was perhaps in the first decade BCE. He was born and raised in Nazareth, a village less than ten miles from Sepphoris, a prosperous Roman-Jewish town, where he probably worked as a young man.⁴⁰ The Gospel stories in *Matthew*⁴¹ and *Luke* about Bethlehem can be discounted, for they contradict one another, as well as known historic facts, and are clearly contrived to square things with passages in Jewish scripture taken to predict the Messiah, and requiring that he be born at Bethlehem. The story of Jesus's birth from a virgin similarly rules out Joseph as his father, in favor of the later doctrine that Jesus was literally the Son of God.⁴² The childhood miracle tales are, of course, the stuff of legend rather than history. Pressing the evidence of the Gospels hard, it seems that Jesus may have been the first-born,⁴³ and that at the time of his baptism his father had died.⁴⁴ He inherited a carpenter's business, perhaps, but never married, and gave up the business to a younger brother for the voluntary poverty of a prophet. Jesus's mother and brothers were alive at the time he was preaching, and seem to have been concerned about him, at least early on, thinking he might be out of his mind.⁴⁵ One relative, James the Brother of the Lord, may later have changed his mind about his crazy brother, and become

⁴⁰Even this is not quite certain. It may be that he was referred to as *naziraios*, "separate" or "holy," and this Hebrew word was later misunderstood in its Greek transliteration by Greek-speaking Christians, who took it that it must mean he was from Nazareth. See Ellegård (1999) 238-241.

⁴¹*Matthew* makes the early career of Jesus parallel to that of Moses, casting Herod in the role of Pharaoh. The use of *Isaiah* 7:14. "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son. . ." as a prophecy of Jesus's birth reveals that the author of *Matthew* used the Greek *Septuagint*, which has *parthenos*, 'virgin,' where the Hebrew has *almah*, 'young woman.' Pagels (1995) 77-80.

⁴²Fox (1992) 27–35. The historical problems with the stories in *Luke* and *Matthew* were decisively laid out by Emil Scheurer in his *History of the Jewish People* in 1885.

⁴³Else the virgin birth story would not have been possible—unless, as seems most likely, the story arose in the diaspora, among people who had little or no information about Jesus's family.

⁴⁴Because Joseph is never mentioned after the birth stories. But Jesus's family is only mentioned in the Synoptics when it is needed to make some theological point. The Gospel writers probably knew almost nothing about his family, and constructed a plausible account where needed.

⁴⁵So *Mark* 3:20–21, 31–35, where Jesus uses the crowd to protect himself from being forcibly taken home by his family. But, as so often happens in the Gospels, it looks as if the saying came first, "who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God . . ." The story seems to have been constructed to provide a context for the saying, and only so much is provided in the story as is needed to do that. If the story is true, it would, of course, throw doubt on the claim that Jesus's mother knew of his mission, but there is no reason to suppose it is.

an important member of the early Church in Judaea.⁴⁶

3. JESUS'S SPIRITUAL MESSAGE

When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites, for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by men. Truly, I say to you, they shall have their reward. But when you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret. . . Do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. . . your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well. Judge not, that you be not judged. For with the judgment that your pronounce you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get. . .

Matthew 6: 2–5, 6:25–7:2

But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together. And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And he said to them, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind (*Deuteronomy 6:5*). This is the great and the first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself (*Leviticus 19:18*). On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”

Matthew 2:34-40⁴⁷

Lying behind Jesus's sayings is a strategy that seems calculated to attain freedom from attachment to security and self, to self-centered aversions and desires. Jesus seems to identify this freedom as a form of personal salvation rooted in the right relationship with God. He presses the virtues of humility and detachment

⁴⁶The evidence for the various James's in the Gospels and *Acts* is very confused, and the reference to “James, Brother of the Lord” in St. Paul, *Galatians 1:19* may mean nothing more than one of the members of the congregation, though it seems most likely to mean Jesus's physical brother. See Ellegård (1999) 235-238.

⁴⁷The commandment in *Leviticus* seems to enjoin only that one love other Jews, taking no vengeance and bearing no grudge “against the sons of your own people.” But the discussion who one's neighbor is in the parable of the good Samaritan which follows at least extends this status to everyone of good will, whether he be of one's own people or not.

from worldly values, and insists that one love God above all,⁴⁸ and give God what he demands, that is, justice and truth, forgiveness and love for others, who, like oneself, are God's children, without putting oneself and one's needs ahead of them. A continual focus on God and unceasing readiness for the arrival of his Kingdom⁴⁹ frees one from attachment to the things of this life, that is, things actually encountered in experience, by the transference of one's attachment to God and his Kingdom, which stand outside this life.⁵⁰ Jesus no doubt thought that they would soon be part of this life, and conveyed this to his followers, but as the second coming was delayed, in the end indefinitely, just as the Jewish expectation of the Messiah had been delayed indefinitely, the effect of putting all one's trust in God, without expecting any particular outcome in one's own life, was freedom from attachment to anything one actually encounters. Thus, since nothing that happens in this life, that is, in one's experience, can, in Jewish thought, reasonably throw any doubt on God's faithfulness, a perfect faith can be maintained. As a Jew, Jesus was accustomed to viewing such faith in God, in spite of the long delay in the arrival of his Kingdom, as a virtue to be cultivated.

The success of the strategy thus hangs on establishing that no doubt can be raised about God's faithfulness, else anxiety and fear is allowed a place. This means that the tradition that affirms the covenant and God's faithfulness to it must be regarded as an overriding reason for belief. To achieve this, one may have to adopt various *ad hoc* strategies for maintaining this belief in the face of contrary evidence. So, one may take any misfortune that occurs to Israel as a justified punishment sent by God for her faithlessness, and take it that God is so demanding that any degree of unfaithfulness whatsoever is sufficient to prevent the completion of his plans until it is rectified. This could lead to despair over the coming of the Kingdom in one's own lifetime, but such despair is avoided, as it is among the Pharisees, through the assumption that we partake in the Kingdom after our death, being resurrected to partake in it no matter how long it is finally delayed. There may be uncertainty

⁴⁸*Matthew* 4:10, where, in the context of the temptation in the wilderness, *Deuteronomy* is quoted, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve," with the apparent intention not only that Jesus should not worship Satan, but also that he should pursue none of the worldly goods Satan can provide him with, if they interfere with the service of God. Again, *Matthew* 6:19-21, 24, recommends one lay up treasures not on earth, but in heaven, for one cannot serve two masters.

⁴⁹For this theme, read *Mark* 13, or *Matthew* 24, especially vv. 36-44, emphasizing that no one knows the day of God's coming, and so one must always be ready. In the parable of the wedding feast, note that not only those originally invited end up in the outer darkness, but those taken off the street who are not ready, that is, are not wearing a wedding garment (*Matthew* 22:11-14), "for many are called, but few are chosen." Again, *Matthew* 25 and the parable of the wise and foolish maidens. The warning is for those who would follow Jesus's lead, and seek the Kingdom of Heaven. They must not lose their focus, and drift back into worldly ways, but persevere to the end.

⁵⁰*Matthew* 6:25-34, which tells us not to be anxious about what we shall eat or drink, and to behold the lilies of the field . . . and to seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, after which all the rest will be added.

whether we will be allowed a part in God's Kingdom if any fault, however small, is to be found in us, and here we see the crucial importance of Jesus's message that simple faith in God's faithfulness, and a forgiving attitude to one's neighbor, will be sufficient for God to forgive one's sins. Our sin is not all that great a problem, not even the Law is, since God forgives us our lapses, and it is the spirit of the law, not the impossible details, that matters.⁵¹ In one kind of Buddhist practice there is a stage at which all one's grasping has come to be focused on the attainment of Nirvana, and the final step is to see that Nirvana too is empty of Self, so that it does not make sense even to grasp after the extinction of grasping. The breakthrough here often comes with shattering suddenness, admitting one to an entirely new world, and it comes, it seems, despite the efforts of the illusory self, as a spontaneous revelation of underlying Buddha Nature (that is, of emptiness of self). Christian practice, as we shall see it developed in St. Paul, took a similar shape, first focusing everything on a single point, that we should be so perfect in obedience of the Law as to please God, and then suddenly revealing that even this impossible requirement is removed, not by our own efforts, but through God's free forgiveness.⁵² If one cannot, like Jesus, accept God's free forgiveness, one can, with Pauline Christianity, accept that one can be forgiven through Christ's intercession because Christ has satisfied the demands of justice through his sacrifice, but in either case, it is through God, and not ourselves, that the thing happens, and one has to give up attachment to one's self to accomplish it, that is, one must turn away from the pride that insists on placing one's salvation in one's own efforts.

As can be seen most poignantly from *Mark*, one must learn to wait on God patiently, always ready, trusting Him with complete faith even when things seem the least likely to work out as one wants. Thus we become free from the effects of grasping in the same way that a Buddhist seeking enlightenment or *moksha* might, by following strictly a law which has as its spirit helpfulness to others and setting aside one's own concerns, and maintaining a continuous alert attentiveness to the fact that whatever it is that is before one is

⁵¹*Matthew* 6:14-15; 7:1-5, explains that God will not forgive one who does not forgive others. It is rather like a parent who says he will not forgive his children their sins unless they forgive their siblings their trespasses against themselves. Or, one might observe, as long as one sees others as subject to condemnation one will find oneself open to it. It is only by recognizing that others are fundamentally all right as they are (else, would God love them?) that one can recognize that oneself is.

⁵²In both the Buddhist and the Christian case the intellectual understanding of the situation will be in place long before one really sees it or believes it. What is really needed is a final collapse of one's grasping tendencies, a reformation of one's will, not merely of one's intellectual view of the situation, though the rectification of one's beliefs is a prelude to the reformation of will. For a Buddhist, ignorance (*avidya*) has a deliberate obtuseness about it, it is not merely a matter of intellectual error, for one is afraid to accept the final emptiness of all things. It means liberation, but it also means the end of all one's hopes. For a Christian, pride prevents one from accepting God's forgiveness and giving oneself over to Christ. In both cases there is a final clinging to self, glossed over with religious aims identified with the self, which must be overcome before salvation can become complete.

not worth grasping or aversion. The attachment one allows as sensible is to an end which is completely divorced from the empirical world, guaranteed of attainment, so that one need never feel any anxiety about it at all, but never attained, for it is always in the future. Given this analysis of how Christian salvation by faith works, it should be apparent that the insulation of Christian, and perhaps Jewish, theism from any possible empirical refutation, particularly any refutation rooted in the evil to be found in the world, is central to its religious success. As long as any possible doubt about God or his faithfulness can be entertained by a person, his faith is not complete, and the transferral of all his grasping to the desire for God and his Kingdom won't provide the security sought. In practice, many people do attach experiential conditions to their faith, and find it shaken when things go badly. Then they may overcome their difficulties by a more determined exercise of *ad hoc* defenses of their faith, or, perhaps, through their efforts to gain this virtue of faith through means other than reasoning, they may experience an insight similar to the realization of the truth of No-Self—they may see that they are truly nothing in their utter dependence on God. After all, denial of self is as much a strategy here as question-begging and *ad hoc* reasoning is. The Christian whose faith is rooted in works, not merely in intellectual tactics in defense of her belief, may well gain Nirvana, and interpret this sudden security in non-attachment to the world as the long sought perfect trust in God. At this point the intellectual approach of the Apologist no longer seems of any importance, and faith seems to have arisen as by a miracle, as a gift given by God. All of this lies behind later developments and difficulties in Christian thought, including the continuing sense that rational defenses of the faith are somehow wrong-headed and needless, and the view found in St. Paul that all good things, including one's own faith in God, come from God rather than one's own efforts. Whatever difficulties in theodicy arise from such views, they are not merely adventitious to Christian thought, but rooted in doctrines essential to its religious success.

Jesus may have enjoyed enlightenment experiences like that of Nirvana as a result of this practice, experiences in which he became aware of release from the illusion that there is anything in the world of such great importance that it leaves life in a ruin if it be lost. God, the one thing truly needful, cannot be lost.⁵³ The peace that comes from a love of God above all else, exercised in waiting and prayer, is the foundation of later Christian mystical thought. The focus on God, the continuous readiness for the second coming, is like the one-pointed focus of Buddhist meditation, which starves grasping until it wastes away. Or, it may be that Jesus never did enjoy such an experience, but pursued and recommended a strategy likely to produce it in those

⁵³See, for instance, the first book of Augustine's *On Free Choice of the Will*, where he argues that it betrays a lack of wisdom to seek any good that might be lost as long as there is a good which cannot be lost, namely God.

properly prepared for it. Why would he pursue this strategy? In part, perhaps, it was because it provided intimations of Nirvana, even if this end was never fully attained. Buddhists are, for the most part, sustained in their efforts by such intimations and foretastes, even through the whole of their lives, and the common expectation among Buddhists that Nirvana may not come until some later rebirth implies a frank recognition of this fact. In part, perhaps, it was because other aims that Jesus saw as valuable in themselves were accomplished by the practice, a more perfect ethical stance may have been attained, a more perfect practice of the Law, or a more perfect trust in God, each of which would have been sought for its own sake. In fact, most Christians do not aim at Nirvana, even under a Christian understanding of it within a Christian metaphysical scheme, and this even though they may be sustained in their practice by a partial realization of Nirvana. Often one does a thing because it seems to work out or be good, even if one cannot say exactly how it is working out or why it is good within one's explicitly expressible conception of the good. The body has its own wisdom that the mind may not partake of.

In any case, these practices probably led, also, to the experience of action free of a self, without thoughts of gain or loss. Jesus instructs his disciples, "when they deliver you up, do not be anxious what you are to say," for the Spirit will speak through you,⁵⁴ and Paul says that it is not he, but Christ in him, that acts for the good. The experience of action without the presence of concerns about the effects of the outcome on one's self, or what the success or failure might mean about one's self, is naturally valued, and it can be interpreted within Christianity as an experience of the workings of the Spirit, or, later, as the work of Christ within.

Again, one finds the advice to respond to everyone as a child of God, penetrating below the other's, and one's own, anger and hostility, pride and self interest, partiality and antipathy, to help as best one can the human being like oneself afflicted with all those defiling passions.⁵⁵ God expects this of us because we are all

⁵⁴Mark 13:11.

⁵⁵So *Matthew* 5:21-26, 38-48. Here it is said not only that one should not ever be angry with another, and should not resist one who is evil, but that one should love one's enemies, because God makes the sun rise on the just and the unjust. That is, God takes care for all of us, loves all of us, and we must try to adopt his attitude toward our fellows, even when they are attacking us. This is one of the counsels of perfection, coupled with the prohibition against divorce and "adultery in the heart." The point of "You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect," seems to be that one should take the same attitude to the world and one's own affairs as God does. So God loves us all as his children, and we should do the same, rather than doing as the Gentiles do, and loving only those who love us back. Self-centered love is to be set aside for a love like that of God for his creation, a love with no center at all within creation, standing outside and embracing the whole. *Matthew* 18:3-4 suggests that one must become like a child to enter the Kingdom of Heaven—apparently one is to humble oneself before God, and recognize him as father, with everything that entails, and hard on this injunction, at vv. 15-35, we see what this entails, as the necessity of forgiving your brother is emphasized

his children. So Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek, and the Buddha tells us that anger is not destroyed by anger, but only by love.

Again, Jesus suggests that it will be most difficult for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and advises the rich young man to give all he has to the poor, and become his disciple.⁵⁶ The great advantage of this strategy for the individual is that it undermines the illusory sense of self that leads to suffering, something that would be recognized by later Christian mystics, who would claim that it was only the self that separates us from God. But it is also to be noted that there is room left for the rich young man to follow the moral dictates of the Law alone, and yet be saved, and the counsel to give away all he has points out what to do if he would be *perfect*. When the disciples ask “who, then, can be saved?” perceiving how difficult it would be to follow such a counsel, Jesus answers that it is impossible with men, but God can accomplish all things. So one who follows the lower road of morality honestly will be forgiven and saved by God, though he perhaps does not deserve it. This smacks a great deal of the Buddhist distinction between those who become monks (following the Master!) and seek enlightenment, and those who follow the moral rules, seeking only a rebirth in the Heavens. The impression is reinforced by a preceding passage in the same chapter, asserting in response to the disciples’ dismay at the prohibition of divorce that some might become eunuchs (presumably he means they might become celibate) for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.⁵⁷

The pursuit of the Kingdom of Heaven, of course, requires an extraordinary commitment, turning away from the whole system of worldly values that dominates most human life, and underlies most human institutions. The necessity of this dramatic turning is emphasized in many of the parables.⁵⁸ The commitment is justified, according to Jesus, because God is perfectly good and all powerful, and has promised the Kingdom, and so following his commands and seeking his favor, assuming it can be obtained, is surely the best of all possible strategies for one’s life.

It has been suggested that Jesus may have been influenced by Buddhist teachers, given the similarity of his techniques for seeking the Kingdom of Heaven to Buddhist practices. But the difficulties in this

and illustrated with a parable. Again, *Matthew* 20, 25-28, specifies that the one who would be great in the Kingdom of Heaven must be the servant of all.

⁵⁶*Matthew* 19.16-26.

⁵⁷*Matthew* 19: 10-12.

⁵⁸*Matthew* 13: 44-45, for instance, compares the kingdom of heaven to a fine pearl, or a field in which one knows there is a treasure buried, and one should sell all he has to get the money to buy it.

hypothesis, however striking the similarities may be, and however central to both doctrines, are very great. They are perhaps best illustrated in one of the most striking cases. Jesus says that it is what comes out of a man, not what goes into him when he eats, that defiles him. The resemblance here to the Buddha's notion that the outflows defile a man, not anything that flows into him, is striking. Moreover, the point seems to be the same in both thinkers. But the circumstances and the people to whom they are speaking are also similar, and the striking similarity most probably arises from that alone. Both were speaking to people who hoped to earn heaven by following, among other things, a strict dietary code, and both were warning against placing more importance on the letter of their codes than on the spirit lying behind them, and on ritual than on morality and love. It seems that the image could easily have occurred to Jesus quite independently of any foreign influence. In the same way, the rewards of following the spiritual and ethical practices he recommends are wedded indissolubly in Jesus's mind with a recognition of the goodness of God and the acceptance of the plans of God has formed for his people. He does not analyze in any sophisticated psychological way why it is that personal peace and a joyful life follow on these practices, though he seems to regard them as their natural consequences. However similar the practices are to Buddhist practices, the metaphysical background for the practices is thoroughly non-Buddhist. Moreover, it is a striking background, located within Jesus's Jewish tradition, and it really does provide a plausible justification of those practices. It is not just tacked on to them, but is reasonably be regarded as their source. Jesus claims it is reasonable, for instance, not to worry about worldly things, not because of the psychological effects of the strategy, but because God will protect one from any bad consequences of consequent neglect of affairs, as long as the neglect arises from devotion to Himself. Seek God, and all else needful will be added.⁵⁹ So, particularly in the absence of any accounts of Buddhist preachers in the region, we can conclude with great probability that Jesus arrived at the Buddhist prescription for action quite independently, no doubt because it was his experience that it worked, but also because *Jewish* thought seemed to make sense of it. It remains possible that there was some Buddhist influence of an indirect sort, or that Jesus might have imbibed some Cynic philosophy (though that is not so close a match to his teaching) at Sepphoris,⁶⁰

⁵⁹*Matthew* 7:7-12, culminating with the Golden Rule, to treat others as you would yourself be treated, which is the sum of the Law and the Prophets. The rule is perhaps not so good taken strictly as a rule, for we are often inclined to treat ourselves badly, but the underlying idea, that we see ourselves and others equally as children of God works better, for how should we treat ourselves badly (unforgivingly, say?) if we are children of God?

⁶⁰Sepphoris, a fair sized town, was only three miles from Nazareth, and was quite Hellenic, with a theater, for instance. So it would seem likely that a Nazarene, in particular a carpenter seeking work, would have visited Sepphoris, and so encountered Greek culture, with some regularity. It has even been proposed that Jesus might have spoken some Greek, and heard the teachings of Cynic philosophers.

but it is probably best to explain the similarities with Buddhist thought with the suggestion that the reality Jesus dealt with was the same as that Gautama encountered, and both men observed the effectiveness of these techniques aimed at eliminating self-will in attaining to a peaceful and joyous life, while they applied very different metaphysical views to explaining why they should be reasonable or effective.

Jesus is also known for his ethical views. For one thing, like Buddhists, he puts great emphasis on the necessity of friendliness, helpfulness and empathy towards others, never harming others, if one is to accomplish one's spiritual aims. A great deal of what is involved in coming to be free of grasping is simple freedom from selfishness and an awareness of others as of equal importance with oneself, so that one never has reason to harm another.

This was supported, in both the Buddha's and Jesus's case, by the fact that they lived in societies that were economically unjust, and so filled with poor people, landless, without a trade or profession, scraping by on begging and petty theft. In Jesus's case it was expected that a Prophet would denounce the exploitation of the poor and the countryman by the wealthy urbanite, and it was part of Jewish religious belief that such behavior was responsible even for the continuing punishment inflicted on the community for its faithlessness to Yahweh. Jesus is quite emphatic that the poor are the people he wishes to address, and that they are both more likely to understand him, and freer of serious sin requiring repentance, than those well off. This, of course, meant a reevaluation of the common view what constituted a serious sin, and Jesus insisted that disregard for the welfare of others was far more serious than ritual impurity, for instance. Here he simply follows the lead of prophets such as Amos. It is the plight of the poor that his spiritual message answers to most obviously, and those well off might well imagine that the alternative strategy of grasping, and actually getting and retaining that after which one grasps, will work. The good life is attainable and it makes sense to want it. Jesus is critical of those who are wealthy at the expense of the poor, and advises them to give away what they have to the poor. He was raised in those rural areas outside Sepphoris which the great city taxed to support its complement of people in the ruling class, and their immediate allies. Taxes were heavy, and the prospect of slipping out of the class of property-owning peasants and successful tradesmen, and into the mass of the poor, was a real one for many. Buddhism, indeed, is rather more favorable toward the middle classes, recognizing that those likely to have the wherewithal for spiritual practice, in terms of personal discipline and understanding, are more likely to come from the economically successful middle classes than the poor.

Despite this commitment to the poor, though, Jesus did not advocate an institutional or violent solution to economic injustice. He found the problem to be one that must be solved by each individual within

himself, not one to be solved by revolution or government reform. If enough individuals changed, the situation would, of course, but violence only begets more violence, and one must exercise love and compassion even towards one's oppressor, for hatred only begets hatred. This, of course, was also the view of Buddhism.

Jesus, though he thought no one incapable of spiritual growth, had more hope for the destitute and desperate, and, indeed, his spiritual strategy, reliance on God alone, would have made most sense to such people. The Buddha's strategy presupposes a certain intellectual attainment and taste for self-analysis, and it is not at all surprising that it was watered down by a popular Buddhism later, which adopted a practical metaphysics resembling that of Christianity, the compassionate Buddha taking the place of Christ, and being equated with God just as Jesus was. Both religions recognize the intrinsic value of compassion, even given that it inevitably involves suffering, but, in its purer forms, a suffering free of grasping. It is noteworthy that God himself suffers for us in Christianity, so that suffering of this sort is presumably part of his blessedness, just as even in complete enlightenment in Buddhism it remains the case that life is intrinsically unsatisfactory.

4. JESUS AFTER HIS BAPTISM

After John had been arrested, Jesus went into Galilee. There he proclaimed the Good News from God. "The time has come," he said, "and the kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News."

Mark 1:14–15.

Jesus began preaching after a period in the wilderness following his baptism. It seems he did not begin until John was out of the picture due to his arrest by Herod Antipas, and at first he did not teach in Galilee, where Herod ruled, presumably to avoid John's fate. *Luke* says he was about thirty years of age, but he was probably actually in his forties.⁶¹ He adopted a life of voluntary poverty, but did not follow John's habit of fasting. The story about his fasting in the wilderness after his baptism may have grown up as a response to the criticism, perhaps especially from John's followers, that Jesus was insufficiently ascetic (and it parallels spookily

⁶¹*Luke* 3:23. Fox (1992) 27–35 argues that *Luke* is likely wrong, pointing out that *John* 8:57 suggests that Jesus was in his forties, when certain Jews ask Jesus, "Thou art not yet fifty years old, and hast thou seen Abraham?" Through the career of John the Baptist, we can connect Jesus's crucifixion to events recorded by secular historians, and place it on Friday, March 30, 36 CE. His ministry lasted at most three years. The three Passovers mentioned in *John* must be the only three if his ministry began when John was arrested, and ended with the decision of Pontius Pilate. John the Baptist would have been arrested in 34, and Pontius Pilate ended his tenure in office in 36.

the Buddhist story of Gautama's temptation by Mara as the morning of his Enlightenment approached), but in truth he seems, like the Buddha, to have decided that extreme ascetic practices were of no use, and that righteousness was the only way to holiness. For the most part, Jesus preached around, and then in, Galilee, in country towns, and only once did he make the short trip to Jerusalem. His ministry was very brief, probably about three years, as *John* suggests, or possibly, as Origen and Clement believed, relying on the Synoptics for their calculation, but one year.

Aside from John, we know of a number of other Galilean holy men. One of them, Hanina ben Dosa, born about 20 CE, lived a life of poverty, preached the coming of the Kingdom of God in the countryside, and was regarded as the prophet Elijah come to warn of the eminent appearance of the Kingdom of God. He performed miraculous cures through his prayers, and was supposedly commended as a Son of God by a heavenly voice.⁶² Indeed, Galilee was known as a good place to find fanatical prophets given to unclean practices, and the orthodox had little use for such Galilean holy men.⁶³ Jesus began in a manner typical of a holy one of his countryside, and he shared many of their beliefs—in the apocalyptic arrival of God in the last days, in the necessity of an individual moral reformation for salvation, in the war between God and Satan, with his army of demons tempting and corrupting the human heart, so prominent in all the Gospels. But he differed from the others in his unique conception of his own mission and relation to God.

The stories of miraculous healing probably reflect some genuine cures of psychosomatic illness, which may have been more prevalent among people who believed in demonic possession.⁶⁴ Jesus himself said they depended on the faith of the healed, that no signs are given to the unfaithful, and they usually seem to involve the casting out of demons. (Later the remark about signs was used to argue that the Kingdom was being kept secret from those who would not follow Jesus.) Only those who entrusted themselves to God in faith would

⁶²Geza Vermes discusses Hanina and others in his many books. "Son of God" could be applied to any Jew, but here would have indicated a recipient of God's special favor. The evidence for Hanina and others of his ilk comes from Jewish writings well after the 1st century, and is no more reliable than Christian texts.

⁶³Grant (1977) 75, citing Vermes, *Jesus the Jew* (Collins, 1973), p. 54. Galilee, it should be noted, was recently converted to Judaism, and the orthodoxy of Galileans in general tended to be suspect. Like most converts, Galileans no doubt had a tendency to concentrate on the spirit of the thing and give too little attention to tradition, and to show a zeal and interest in reform that seemed rather overheated and presumptuous to the established adherents of the faith.

⁶⁴This belief was typical of Galilee, no doubt, but is not to be attributed to the ancient Mediterranean in general. The Gentiles would have learned it from Christian Scriptures. The image of a demon infested world is not a characteristic of Pagan religion, but of Jewish sectarianism, and has its deeper roots in Zoroastrianism.

receive his protection from demons. Miracles not related to healing have to be accounted for otherwise.⁶⁵ But at least some of the miracles may reflect the honest recollections of participants, and, assuming they did not happen as depicted, would have to be accounted for through coincidence of events (the stilling of the storm), impressionable and suggestible witnesses, false and reworked memories, and plain good story-telling, which never hews too close to the truth, particularly when the story one has heard can be improved.⁶⁶ There are plenty of stories of marvelous events in religions other than Christianity, in the Pagan religions of the Roman Empire, for instance, to which a Christian would apply such techniques of explanation.⁶⁷

Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was at hand.⁶⁸ His hearers were to believe, repent their sins, and rejoice at the announced coming of the Lord. Those who repented would be saved, and apparently those only were doomed who rejected the Spirit of God, presumably the spirit of prophecy and its prophetic message.⁶⁹ The message was directed to all Israelites. Jesus's association with known sinners, which scandalized some, dramatized his conviction that all men were sinners, and that those, and only those, who confessed their sins openly, seeking forgiveness, would be restored to God's fellowship. It was a prophetic action in the

⁶⁵Some have suggested the stories crept into the tradition by way of Jewish hyperbole and holy story-telling of the kind later to be observed in the *Talmud*. To a Jew, the doctrine illustrated by the story was the point, not the story itself, which was not to be taken too literally, but a Gentile might well accept the story literally, and take the events it related to demonstrate the Lord's divinity, or at least his closeness to God. See Grant (1977), Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of this matter. The Gentile temptation to hold to the literal sense of a story would have been reinforced by the warning of Philo and other Jewish interpreters of Scripture not to set aside the literal sense of the *Old Testament*, and their experience of the wildly allegorical readings of Scripture among the Docetists and Gnostics, discussed below.

⁶⁶Jesus's miracles are of the same sorts associated with Jewish holy men at the time in Jewish texts, healing through prayer, control of the weather, the production of food. In essence, the holy man would earn God's favor, becoming, perhaps a "son of god," and then his prayers would be answered, helping us in our ordinary human concerns and pursuits.

⁶⁷David Hume's famous argument against believing any miraculous narrative points out that the probability of some such explanation's being true must be greater than the probability of the miracle itself. This would only be true, of course, for someone who did not believe miracles very likely to occur in the first place, who demanded proof that they ever occurred at all. If we thought miracles did occur, perhaps frequently, then the antecedent probability of a miracle tale must be rated much higher, and we might well decide that the chances of a mistaken account are low enough in a particular case so that this is an actual miracle. If one assumes that only the true religion is favored with miracles, though, all other reports being imposture, and tries to use miracles to prove the religion, rather than the other way around, he will be disappointed with the result. He will find very little difference in the evidential quality of the reports of the different religions in the absence of the presupposition that a certain one is the correct religion. Ancient Christians tended to think that honest reports of marvels worked by adherents of other religions were accurate enough, but that the marvelous events in question were produced by demons. They had a problem coming up with a good way to tell demonic works from the works of God, and as a result they rested very little on miracles, holding that the prophecies were what really proved their religion true, for the demons could not duplicate those. Jesus himself is supposed by the Gospels to have been accused of working his marvels through the cooperation of demons.

⁶⁸Mark 1:14–15. *Matthew* has "Kingdom of Heaven."

⁶⁹Mark 3:28–29.

tradition of Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Despite the attempts by Gentile Christians to make it out otherwise, it remains clear from the Gospels that Jesus did not try to carry his message beyond the Jews, and a number of his remarks about Gentiles are quite hostile, though he may have hoped the Gentiles would someday convert to Judaism. The coming of the Kingdom that Jesus preached was a cataclysmic and apocalyptic event, expected before the end of his generation.⁷⁰ This was enough to make him a radical, for the religious establishment (those who ran the temple, and the Scribes and Pharisees who dominated the synagogues) did not generally entertain such apocalyptic expectations, at least in the near term. Their chief concern was to keep apocalyptic hopes in check, to prevent the sort of disaster that actually occurred in Israel with the First Revolt. But Jesus, whatever his expectations, eschewed political activism and waited on the actions of God, and so was tolerated, for a while, and allowed to preach (in the Synoptics, out of doors and in private homes, in *John* and at places in *Luke*, in the Synagogues).

Eventually, however, the establishment turned against him. The Gospels suggest this was at least in part because of his prophetic contempt for rich sophisticated hypocrites proud of their adherence to the Law, but the Pharisees were probably more tolerant of criticism than that.⁷¹ The Pharisees and teachers of the Law were bound to react negatively to personal attacks, and perhaps to Jesus's association with sinners, but even the self-righteous would have been used to being taxed for their short-comings by holy men, just as they are used to being taxed for them by preachers today. Jesus's conviction that all men are sinners made him especially hard on the self-righteous, but he did not, in his own mind, at least, reject the Law—indeed, he claimed to have come to complete it, not to abolish it. He emphasized the spirit of the Law, and showed a willingness to break the more ceremonial portions of it, particularly, perhaps, relating to the Sabbath and to diet, and he insisted on much stricter standards than the Law prescribed in areas such as divorce and charity to the poor.

Jesus seems to have taken a loose attitude to Sabbath rules, no doubt an attitude the poor, without the resources to spend an entire day each week neglecting their work in ritual observances, would have

⁷⁰*Mark* 9:1. The urgency of this message, and of the preparation for the coming of the Kingdom, may lie behind the extreme morality of Jesus, though real pacifist convictions may also be present. Perhaps Jesus thought the spiritual preparation required simply left no time to pursue law-suits, or one's business, or even to resist evil, and besides, evil would be dealt with quite effectively soon enough. So one must sell all he has and give the money to the poor, and learn to suffer evil without retaliating, like the suffering servant of *Second Isaiah*, in order to spread the word and prepare the Kingdom while there is still time. Jesus's morality, on this view, was an interim morality with the Kingdom in prospect, and it demanded that one aid Jesus in proclaiming the Kingdom. On the other hand, the proponents of this reading of Jesus's morality may be over anxious to avoid the application of "counsels of perfection" to the present day, and it is far from impossible that Jesus meant his extreme counsels as radical but reasonable, and permanent, departures from business as usual, which had demonstrated its inability to preserve justice, advance human happiness, or please God.

⁷¹See D. Flusser, *The Crucible of Christianity*, edited by A. Toynbee (Thames & Hudson, 1969), p. 225.

appreciated.⁷² He also took a stricter attitude than the Law required about divorce, banning it entirely, and required far more charity to the poor than most people in the upper classes would have considered reasonable.⁷³ These references to the loose sexual habits of the wealthy, suggesting an assimilation to Hellenic culture, and to their selfishness, would, again, have been attractive to peasants and the urban poor. Jesus accused the rich of using their excess leisure for useless ritual while ignoring the real intent of the Law, that we love our neighbors (including the poor and unfortunate) as ourselves, and held that it is very hard for them, given their attachment to their wealth and position, to do what is needed to please God and perform their real duty to their fellows.⁷⁴

But Jesus's criticism of the religious practice of the upper classes, though it might have been an underlying cause of the hostility in the religious establishment, very probably did not precipitate the direct attacks on him and his followers that led to the crucifixion. That was part of the religious game, and, if it was borne with ill temper on occasion, would have been borne nonetheless. The real problem seems to have been, as *John* and *Mark* both make clear, that one could raise real theological objections to Jesus's developing view of himself and his mission. What bothered the Scribes and the Pharisees was not that they had been accused of hypocrisy, but something they perceived as blasphemy.

5. JESUS'S DEATH AND HIS VIEW OF HIS MISSION

... As scripture says in the first psalm [*Psalms* 2:7]: You are my son, today I have become your father. The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to return to corruption, is no more than what he had declared . . . My brothers, I want you to realize that it is through him that forgiveness of your sins is proclaimed. Through him justification from all sins which the law of

⁷²*Mark* 2:18-28 on Sabbath breaking, where Jesus is made to claim that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and that the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath, an assertion of authority that would have been regarded as blasphemy by the Jewish establishment. The rejection of the ritual Law is coupled with the message of the forgiveness of sins in Paul, who says it is impossible to follow the Law, and so God has provided it to prove to us our weakness, so that we might seek his forgiveness in Christ. It has sometimes been supposed that the rejection of the Law grew up in Christianity as Gentile converts were sought, and was not rejected by Jesus himself. Certainly we see this in *Acts* in connection with table fellowship and circumcision. But it seems very probable that Jesus himself provided some ground for this rejection of the Law. By the way, the Essenes seem to have emphasized the absolute necessity of Sabbath observance, so this point puts a little distance between Christians and at least the general run of Essenes.

⁷³*Mark* 10.

⁷⁴*Mark* 12.

Moses was unable to justify is offered to every believer.

Acts 13:32–39:

Given the later Christian views that inform our sources, it is hard to tell just what Jesus thought of himself and his mission. It seems clear that the view that Jesus was God, as well as the sacrificial account of his death on the cross, only developed over time within the Christian community. Jesus says nowhere in the Synoptic Gospels that he is divine.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, the later Christian doctrines concerning Jesus must have arisen from something Jesus said about himself. In view of the texts, it seems best to grant that he saw himself as the suffering servant of *Second Isaiah*, taking that figure to be an individual rather than the Israelite nation, as the author intended it and Jewish exegesis interpreted it. He probably thought that his sufferings would have some redemptive power for others, so that he could suffer for Israel, and that he would become the Son of God, having earned the right to that status through his patient endurance for the sake of Israel's redemption.⁷⁶ This view is a product of despair over the possibility of the whole nation keeping the Law sufficiently well to satisfy Yahweh and bring his Kingdom. If there are always backsliders, or worse yet, no one can keep the Law perfectly, then perhaps someone who is at least pure in intent can, by voluntarily accepting suffering on behalf of the nation, do appropriate penance and satisfy Yahweh. Given *Mark*, it seems hard to deny that Jesus thought of himself as the Son of Man of *Psalms* 8 and 80, *Daniel* 7:13, and *Enoch* 62, a man by himself weak and insignificant, but made strong by God and given the highest authority, second only to God Himself, including the authority to forgive sins.⁷⁷ Jesus may have referred to himself as the Son of God as well, though this is less

⁷⁵Indeed, he even denies that he is God, or for that matter, good, in *Mark* 10:18, an embarrassing passage altered in *Matthew*. Apparently Jesus did not think himself any more free from sin than anyone else. In *Mark* 11 Jesus claims that it is not through his own power that he withers the fig tree. In *Mark* 5:19 he disclaims having cured the demoniac by his own power—the Lord did it.

⁷⁶So *Mark* 1: 9–11: “It was at this time that Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized in the Jordan by John. No sooner had he come out of the water than he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit, like a dove, descending on him. And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my Son, the Beloved; my favor rests on you.’” The text is based, perhaps, on Jesus's own account of his selection as the Suffering Servant of *Isaiah*. Compare *Isaiah* 42 1-2, “Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom my soul delights. I have endowed him with my spirit that he may bring true justice to the nations.”

⁷⁷A son of man might be any human being, but “the son of man” referred to the Suffering Servant, emphasizing his humanity. In *Second Isaiah* the idea is that Israel will redeem and come to rule all nations through its suffering, and since Jesus identified himself personally with the suffering servant, he naturally might have expected to be resurrected and made ruler of the whole earth. So *Isaiah* 45:14, 23-24, 49:6. As for the necessity that he actually die, see especially *Isaiah* 54:4–12, 50:4-6. For the apocalyptic nature of Jesus's return, see *Isaiah* 51:6, and for the withdrawal of God from his people before the second coming, see 55:6. As for the “secret” in *Mark*, the blindness of God's people is a theme in *Second Isaiah*. So *Isaiah* 42:18–20. *Mark* 4:11-12 quotes *Isaiah* 6:9–10: “He told them, ‘the secret of the kingdom of God is given to you, but to those who are outside everything comes in parables, so that they may see and see again, but not perceive; may hear and hear again, but not understand; otherwise they might be converted and be forgiven.’” The point

certain. The Son of God might be the divinely appointed King of Israel, who is, of course, an *adopted* Son of God, and has been given His authority, but sometimes the phrase seems to have been used for any peculiarly holy person in favor with God, so that his prayers would be attended to. Jesus did not call himself Messiah, possibly because he did not see the coming of the Kingdom in the terms that this would suggest, or, more likely, because he had not yet earned the title, which he could only gain through his death. He had no expectation of the immediate arrival of a military leader to conquer the Gentiles. But as the future Son of Man he claimed the authority to forgive sins on earth.⁷⁸ According to Mark, this was blasphemy enough to the Pharisees, who held that God alone can forgive sin, and they saw their worst suspicions unpleasantly confirmed in Jesus's claim to a special relation to God, perhaps even a sort of equality. It seems that this blasphemy had led the Jewish authorities to seek Jesus's death, which they eventually arranged by representing him as a security threat to the Romans. This would also explain the Jewish persecution of Christians in the years following his death.

According to the Synoptics, Caiaphas, the high priest, apparently in an informal meeting of the Sanhedrin, judged Jesus as a false prophet who deserved death for blasphemy, but handed him over to the Romans not to infringe on their authority (only the Romans could condemn a prisoner to death). The

is that *premature* conversion is to be avoided. All will be made right when the correct time comes. Even the disciples are blind: see *Mark* 6:52, 8:17–19, in connection with the miracle of the loaves and fishes. Here the secret is unclear. Is it that Jesus is God, or is the Logos of God? It seems unlikely, for this is *never* said in *Mark*. Presumably it is that he is the one chosen by God, who will feed God's people, that is, that he is the predicted Suffering Servant. Finally, at *Mark* 8:29–30, Peter gets it, and announces that Jesus is the Christ, and is admonished not to tell anyone else. This is immediately followed by the first prophecy of the passion, and Peter thinks Jesus ought not to get himself put to death, whereupon Jesus rebukes him. "The son of Man himself did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life as a ransom for many." *Mark* 10:45 Compare *Isaiah* 53:11. *Mark* actually opens with a quotation from *Isaiah*, asserting that now is the time when the Lord will save his people.

⁷⁸*Mark* 2:5–12, *Matthew* 9:2–8, See Grant (1977) 157–160. In the Synoptics, which report a trial before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish religious court, another charge against Jesus was that he had said he would destroy the temple, a charge *Mark* 14:56–59 says could not be proved. Probably Jesus did say that the temple would some day be thrown down (in the coming of the Kingdom, perhaps) (see *Mark* 13.1 ff.), meaning that it would not last forever, being the work of human hands, unlike the Kingdom of God, or perhaps in prediction of the coming troubles with the Romans. Possibly the High Priest thought he meant to say that the temple worship would cease with the Kingdom of God, which would suggest that some prophets held to such a view, though Jesus seems to have approved of temple worship. Jesus was also accused of claiming to be the Messiah, not in itself normally treated as blasphemous, but something to be indicated to the Roman authorities later as evidence that he was a dangerous political force. In the Synoptics Caiaphas tore his clothes when Jesus did not deny that he was Son of God and prophesied he would return in glory, a formal act of judgment convicting the accused of blasphemy, and perhaps this was because of the equality with God and the right to forgive sins which this suggested (*Mark* 14:61-63, *Matthew* 26:63-65, which adds that 'they themselves had said it,' that is, that they are unconsciously prophesying, and *Luke* 22:66-71, which omits the tearing of his clothes), Jesus, by the way, neither denied nor affirmed any of the charges brought against him, perhaps because he refused to recognize the legitimacy of the court or the proceedings, or perhaps because he thought that, like God Himself, as the Son of Man he stood above any merely human judgment of his actions. Again, for the High Priest this would be a sign of his blasphemous belief in his equality with God.

Sanhedrin, if this is not a later, anti-Jewish improvement to the story, had difficulty convincing the Romans that there was any seditious activity, Jesus defending himself by referring to his apolitical approach, and Pilate was unwilling to execute a man for purely theological sins. But he carried it through under pressure, after, according to *Luke*, attempting to get the advice of Herod Antipas, Prince of Galilee and Peraea, who was in Jerusalem for the Passover. Pilate might have been afraid that complaints of his lukewarm prosecution of potential rebels would get to Rome. Governors could be removed if their provinces complained of them. Besides, Jesus had not denied that he claimed to be King of the Jews, and that sounded like treason. (The Barabbas story is generally disbelieved by historians for a number of good reasons. It points a neat antithesis, of course, the Jews choosing to save a militant revolutionary seeking political power for Israel, rather than their own, pacifist Messiah pursuing only the Kingdom of God. Much of the story is embroidery to point up the Jews' rejection of their birth right.) In *John*, which is likely closer to the truth, there is no Jewish trial of Jesus. He is condemned at the urging of the priests, but in a Roman trial, for sedition. He is declared an outlaw and a warrant is put out for his arrest, and all this occurs, not in Jerusalem at Passover time, as the Synoptics would seem to have it, but in the third year of his ministry after his teaching at the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus goes into hiding back in Galilee, but then confronts the authorities again with his teaching in the Temple at the Feast of Tabernacles. He once more goes into hiding, apparently barely escaping stoning for his blasphemy, but comes out of hiding again to perform the raising of Lazarus. The search for him is intensified, and Jesus disappears into the wilderness to avoid arrest. So when he comes to Jerusalem for the final confrontation, he is already under interdiction, though he cannot be arrested when he makes his public entry, because of the friendly crowds. Judas betrays his whereabouts to the High Priest, who arrives with Roman troops to take him alone with his disciples, asks a few questions but conducts no trial, and hands him over to Pilate. Pilate is loath to condemn him, but is pushed into doing so by the priests when they threaten to complain to the Emperor, and arrange a mob demonstration.⁷⁹

The story is probably an attempt to let the Romans off the hook and show them that the execution of

⁷⁹Fox (1977) 283–304, citing Elias Bickerman, “Utilitas crucis,” in *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* III (1986) 82 (a reprint of an article published in 1935). For all this, see also Grant (1977) 157–160, who tries to work from the stories in the Synoptics. If Jesus was executed simply for sedition (as the inscription on the Cross, “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews,” suggests), it would have been in the interests of later Christians to place the onus of the execution, as far as possible, on the Jewish authorities rather than the Romans, to prevent Christians being identified by the Romans as a seditious movement following a dead leader condemned for seditious activity. There may well have been a standing arrangement between the Sanhedrin and the Romans to quell potential trouble arising from the preaching of apocalyptic cultists before it could get started, and that collusion with the Romans would have provided the basis for constructing the stories we see in the Gospels, in which the central element is the handing over of Jesus to the Romans by the Sanhedrin.

Jesus was a mistake, and to dissociate Christians from the Jews—it is very likely that Jesus was executed by the Romans as a Messianic revolutionary. Such firebrands would have been quite dangerous in a Jerusalem crowded with religiously excited pilgrims celebrating the Passover, and Pilate was present in town with a full complement of Roman troops to keep order during the festival. The Sanhedrin, of course, would have had an arrangement with the Romans to deal with such trouble, and Jesus need have been suspected of no blasphemy for them to have allowed the Romans their way in the matter. Given the brutal way in which the Romans dealt with revolt, and the presence of so many apocalyptic revolutionaries in Judea, it was no doubt a matter of settled policy that it would be better that one man should die to save the people. Moreover, the Pilate of *Mark*, a just official intimidated by the threat of mob violence ordering the execution of a man he knows may be innocent, is apparently a fabrication. Josephus and Philo describe Pilate very differently, as a brutal man, contemptuous of his subjects and given to executions without due process, particularly when Jews were suspected of sedition.⁸⁰

Jesus was not afraid of alienating the powers that be. Indeed, however unhappy he might have been over his failure to bring very many Jews to repentance, he had expected to suffer and be rejected. Indeed, the early “exaltation Christology” of *Acts* suggests that he expected to suffer to the death, and to return only afterwards as the Son of God, having earned that privilege through his faithfulness.⁸¹ The suffering servant of *Deutero-Isaiah* lies behind this, but also the fate of the prophets, held in popular belief, at least, to be in the habit of suffering execution in Jerusalem.⁸² It is reasonable to suppose that Jesus actually did predict his martyrdom

⁸⁰Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 301-302. For the evidence of Josephus and other sources of the time, see Pagels (1995) 30-33. In general, Pagels’s treatment of *Mark* in (1995) Chapter 1 seems quite solid.

⁸¹So *Acts* 2:32–36: “God raised this man Jesus to life... Now raised to the heights by God’s right hand [an echo of *Psalms* 110], he has received from the Father the Holy Spirit, who was promised, and what you see and hear is the outpouring of the Spirit... for this reason the whole house of Israel can be certain that God has made this Jesus whom you crucified both Lord and Christ.” *Acts* 2:22 says Jesus is a man commended to the audience by God. (The reference to *Psalms* 110 is authorized by *Mark* 12:35–37, where it is argued that Jesus, not David, is the Christ—*christos* = “the anointed one”—for *Psalms* 110:1 says “The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand. . .,” and so God was speaking to David’s Lord (David being the author of the poem), and the Christ of the *Psalms* is therefore Jesus, not David. This is a stretch, for the psalm would have been recited by, and may have been written by, someone other than the King, so that the sense is, “the Lord [God] says to my Lord [the King] . . .”) The same Christological view occurs at *Acts* 13:32–39, quoted at the beginning of this section. This is not a sacrificial account of the crucifixion. Rather, Jesus gains the authority to forgive sins, it seems, through his suffering and consequent exaltation, and this perhaps prepares the way for the arrival of the Messiah, probably Jesus himself in a second coming. Later, the exaltation of Christ to the position of Son of God was moved to the baptism, so that he was the secret King after that, the Christ or anointed one of the Lord, the baptism serving as his anointment. This view we find hinted in *John*, though for *John* Jesus is God already at his birth, so that the investment with authority at his baptism is *pro forma*.

⁸²*Luke* 11:47, 13:33–34.

to his disciples, and he did much to bring about his own execution. He was deliberately provocative to the High Priest in Jerusalem, for the driving of the merchants from the Temple was a prophetic act accusing Caiaphas of mishandling Temple affairs. On the other hand, his entry into Jerusalem was probably staged in accord with *Zechariah* in such a way as to underline his freedom from designs (at least for the moment) on secular power. He apparently intended no challenge to Rome.⁸³ Jesus must have known, nonetheless, that in directly attacking the Sadducee leadership of the Sanhedrin he was provoking his own execution. On this view of Jesus's actions and beliefs about himself we can explain the disciples' failure to disperse upon the master's execution. Peter's charismatic leadership is important here, but his explanations of Jesus's death must have had some basis in Jesus's teaching. Peter's problem was to convince the disciples that the coming of Jesus as Son of God was delayed for some good reason, not to convince them that the death of Jesus was part of the plan.⁸⁴ That they knew already.

6. THE STORY OF THE RESURRECTION AND THE JEWISH CHURCH

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the Apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Paul, *I Corinthians* 15: 3-8.

It was now evening, and since it was Preparation day (that is, the vigil of the Sabbath), there came Joseph of Arimathea, a prominent member of the

⁸³Again, we may be too trusting of the Gospels here, and Jesus may have predicted an apocalyptic destruction of the Romans, at least by implication, of the sort that John probably had in mind. In that case, his arrest at the time of Passover, in a capital city crowded with pilgrims, would have been a routine measure of crowd control.

⁸⁴The stories of Jesus's death on the cross, and his ordeal in Gethsemane before his arrest, attest to his doubts and anguish concerning his mission and its apparent failure. Even if his suffering was to lead to victory his isolation and rejection by the Jewish community must have created doubt. The stories were preserved as they are, no doubt, in part because the best original accounts included them, but it is also to be noted that the suffering, if it was to lead to Jesus's exaltation, had to be real, and the Jews were given to hyperbole in their story-telling, not understatement. Jesus's suffering must represent the suffering of Israel, and for that reason, it must include even the suspicion of God's desertion.

Council, who himself lived in hope of the seeing the Kingdom of God, and he boldly went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus... he granted the corpse to Joseph, who bought a shroud, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the shroud and laid him in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of Joset were watching and took note of where he was laid. When the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices with which to go and anoint him. and very early in the morning on the first day of the week they went to the tomb, just as the sun was rising. They had been saying to one another, "who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" But when they looked they could see that the stone, which was very big, had already been rolled back. on entering the tomb they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right-hand side, and they were struck with amazement. But he said to them, "There is no need for alarm. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified: he has risen, he is not here. See, here is the place where they laid him. But you must go and tell his disciples and Peter, 'he is going before you to Galilee; it is there you will see him, just as he told you.'" And the women came out and ran away from the tomb because they were frightened out of their wits; and they said nothing to a soul, for they were afraid.

Mark 15:42–16:8.

The later Gospels seem to be aware that the testimony of women would not carry much weight, and so introduce men into the picture to verify the women's discovery of the empty tomb, in flat contradiction to *Mark*, which says that the women did not tell the disciples at the time of the event, even though they were instructed to do so by an angel, because they were afraid.⁸⁵ It seems likely, then, that Mary Magdalene, a converted prostitute who traveled with Jesus and his disciples, and perhaps other women with her, may have told the story some years after his death.⁸⁶ The Jews would not have needed or expected a bodily resurrection

⁸⁵*Mark 16:1–8.*

⁸⁶*Mark 16:9-19* is generally regarded as a spurious appendix to the Gospel. It reports that Mary Magdalene was the first to see the risen Lord as a spiritual being, and suggests there was a standing tradition that Mary was the first to report that Jesus was alive. In *Luke* the women do tell the disciples, but no one believes them, and they have to go to the tomb to verify it. The story in *Matthew* is the most elaborate, and seems designed to counter our suspicion of grave robbery. *John* has Mary make the discovery alone, and then bring two disciples to verify it. The disciple that Jesus loved, the primary source for this Gospel, was one of the two, so the story was probably in the author's primary source, and this may well provide independent corroboration for *Mark*. Paul says in *I Corinthians 15:3–8* that Christ was raised to life again on the third day, according to scripture, and depends on a report that must be within a decade or two of the event, but it is probable that he did not conceive a bodily resurrection of any sort that entails an empty tomb. (On his view one received a new, heavenly body, after resurrection, for which, see *I Corinthians 15:35–53*. Paul was particularly concerned to reassure those fearful that they could not be resurrected once their earthly body decayed, while avoiding a purely

to convince them that Jesus could return, but among the Gentiles, so accustomed to spirits of the dead, something perhaps was needed to set Jesus's resurrection apart. The spiritual appearance of Jesus to Peter, the other disciples, and then Paul, would not have convinced them of the truth of the extraordinary claims for Jesus, since they did not accept that a dead man's spirit inevitably goes down to the Underworld. What impressed the Jews would have looked like just another ghost story to a Greek. So there had to be something only God could pull off. Mary Magdalene's story, though it was not intended for that purpose, may have struck people as the very thing to answer Greek doubts.⁸⁷ The Jews could accept such a story, if they did not need it, for in the time of Jesus the Pharisees generally accepted that in the Last Days the bodies of the dead would return to life,⁸⁸ and it was popularly accepted that exceptional men might be resurrected in advance of the Last Days. The tradition that Jesus spent three days in the Underworld before his resurrection seems to be very early, for Paul reports it in *I Corinthians*, but perhaps not the earliest view, for in *Luke* Jesus tells the criminal next to him that "this day you shall be with me in paradise." Perhaps the tradition arose to provide time for the body to be deposited out of the way where only a few could witness the resurrection, but it may also have been

spiritual conception of survival of the sort a Greek might form.) *Mark* reports that Joseph of Arimathea, a member of the Sanhedrin who did not agree with the condemnation of Jesus, and "himself sought the Kingdom" (though *John* says he kept his seeking a secret out of fear) arranged to have Jesus buried privately, rather than suffering anonymous interment in the common burial ground for criminals. No disciples were present at the crucifixion or burial. (Mary Magdalene and some other women are the only witnesses *Mark* gives for the crucifixion.) Presumably the disciples were lying low, something they were later ashamed of, while the women, who, unlike the men, would not have been threatened with arrest for sedition, handled things. Only Mary Magdalene and the other women are said in *Mark* 15:47 to have seen where Jesus was laid. The site of the tomb was unknown to the disciples, then, or so it would seem (certainly no anti-Christian writer was able to point it out), and the story of the burial itself, as well as the story of the empty tomb, is ultimately from Mary Magdalene. If all this is right, was Mary's story true? One can imagine any number of reasons why she might have made the story up. She might have wanted to lay some claim to the prestige that the Apostles were receiving with their stories of visions of the risen Christ. She might have hoped for greater acceptance within the community, because she was held in some contempt, at least by a few, due to her old profession, and was now without her protector, Jesus himself. She might have followed an impulse to be helpful to her discouraged companions by corroborating the visions of the Apostles, and affirming a better burial for Jesus than most would have suspected. People often lie (or at least say what seems suitable to the situation without regard for its truth or falsehood), and good people often lie for noble reasons. So if the resurrection story is antecedently improbable, we can scarcely say we have good evidence for its truth.

⁸⁷So we have the tradition of the bodily return of Christ, and his bodily actions during the forty days before the ascension. This is emphasized especially in *Acts* 1:31, where it is underscored that his body was never corrupted, and again where the Ascension is described at 1:6–11—for Jesus to get to heaven he must travel there bodily. In *Luke* and in *John* we are told that the disciples were able to touch Jesus, but in both Gospels these stories follow presumably older, well established tales about the first appearances of the Lord in which he either vanishes into thin air, or orders people *not* to touch him, the stories of Christ's appearance on the road to Emmaus, and the story of the appearance in the garden to Mary Magdalene. Note that Paul's list of early appearances of Christ in *I Corinthians* 15:3–8 treats the appearances to Peter, the disciples, and the five hundred on a par with the appearance to Paul himself, which was clearly a spiritual appearance, and would not support a risen Jesus in an earthly body that could be touched, or partake of food.

⁸⁸W. Forster, *Palestinian Judaism in New Testament Times* (Oliver & Boyd, 1964). S. Sandmel, *We Jews and Jesus* (Oxford: 1973).

intended to complete Jesus's sufferings, and later adapted to another purpose.

The events immediately after Jesus's death are difficult to reconstruct, but we can narrow the possibilities down to two competing and equiprobable accounts. On one of these accounts, the discouraged disciples, having expected an immediate return of Christ victorious, flee to Galilee when it doesn't happen, and there receive their mission, through Peter's visions, and faith in Jesus's resurrection.⁸⁹ *Luke* and its continuation, *Acts*, gives the other account, suggesting that the disciples kept the faith and stayed on in Jerusalem, since the master had predicted that the way to victory was through suffering. Perhaps *Luke* is right, and the story of the flight arose because it fit Jesus's words at *Mark* 14:27, "I shall strike the shepherd and the sheep shall be scattered," and so one more prophecy was added to the Master's credit. Or *Luke's* story is wrong, and is part of the progressive revision of those parts of the tradition critical of the Apostles.

In any case, shortly after Jesus's death the disciples were in Jerusalem, and were confident that his death was part of the plan. This confidence was surely due to remembrance of Jesus's own predictions of his suffering, and the visions, first, Peter, and then others enjoyed of the risen master.⁹⁰ Jesus had earned messiahship, and a second covenant for the Jewish nation,⁹¹ by his redemptive suffering, and was in heaven preparing the second coming. The rich hypocrites leading the Jewish nation had earned their own condemnation by their actions, for God was known to the Jews for giving people the freedom to destroy themselves, if they were determined to do so. But why did Jesus not reappear immediately as Messiah? In the early days the second coming was expected moment to moment, and as it was delayed Christians prayed for its appearance. The arrangements of the early church in Jerusalem seem to be temporary arrangements set up

⁸⁹*Luke* 24:17–21 and *Mark* 16:10 support the discouragement of the disciples, and *Matthew* 28:10, 16–20 and *Mark* 16:7 report the journey to Galilee. The journey is also reported in the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter*. Of course, the disciples may have feared they themselves would be, uselessly, arrested, however they felt about Jesus's second coming, and have withdrawn to Galilee for that reason.

⁹⁰*Luke* 22:34, and *I Corinthians* 15:3-8, the latter being the earliest, and easily the most authoritative, account of Christ's appearances after his death. The latter passage, by the way, is silent regarding the empty tomb, though later in the Chapter Paul takes the resurrection to involve a renewed, spiritualized body. This suggests that the old body must be available to be changed into the new, and will no longer be found in the old state after the transformation, and surely that would imply an empty tomb, though it also suggests that the new body *might* not be the sort of thing that one touches, or that takes food and drink, but this is left obscure in the text.

⁹¹*Jeremiah* 31:31-34.

by people awaiting the Kingdom.⁹² Jesus had been convinced of the swift completion of events, initially he probably expected it even before his death,⁹³ and it has been argued that his extreme ethics of non-resistance to evil and holy poverty is an interim morality, not intended for practicality in the long run, but sound advice anyway because no long run was to be expected, and all efforts were to be bent toward preparation for the Kingdom.⁹⁴

Given this reasonable expectation of the immediate fulfillment of events, how could one account for the delay? Perhaps the Jews must first have faith in Jesus as the Messiah before he would come.⁹⁵ It was already a common Jewish belief that every Jew must keep the law faithfully before the Messiah would come, and Jesus had said often when he healed that faith was required, so it was not too far out of the way to imagine this further requirement. Moreover, the notion occurred pretty quickly to someone, presumably Paul or one of his associates, that the failure to convert the Jews was because the Gentiles must first be brought in.⁹⁶ The point of the Pentecost story is that God miraculously provided the Christians, through the Holy Spirit of Prophecy, with all the linguistic knowledge they would need to preach to the Gentiles.⁹⁷ This belief in God's delay to

⁹²*Acts* 4:32 - 5:11. The idea seems to have been to devote all one's time to preaching the kingdom, as Jesus had advised, but the sale of real property and (presumably temporary) neglect of gainful employment led to the impoverishment of the Jerusalem church. Paul warns against similar practices in I *Thessalonians* 4:10-12, 5:14, and II *Thessalonians* 3:6-12.

⁹³*Matthew* 10:23. There are many passages throughout the Synoptic Gospels suggesting that the Kingdom could arrive at any time, and certainly before the end of this generation.

⁹⁴One finds something like this quite explicitly stated in Paul at I *Corinthians* 7:25 ff., where he recommends (on his own authority, not Jesus's) that those who are married (to unbelievers?) remain married, and those who are not remain unmarried, those who are married should act as though they are unmarried (i.e. refrain from sex), those who mourn as though they do not mourn (that is, they expect to be reunited with their loved ones very soon), and so on, all because the time until the end is so short. A little extra purity in preparation for the end is not out of order, and not so much trouble, for one doesn't have long to wait. By the way, Paul's anti-sexual bent might be explained in part by the fact that it does add a little purity to refrain, and it won't be *much* trouble, give the time is so short. He allows, characteristically that those who are *very* distressed by self-restraint should go ahead, and indulge themselves with their spouses.

⁹⁵*Romans* 11:25-26.

⁹⁶*Romans* 11:11-12. *Mark* 13:10. *Acts* 3:19 is a little hard to interpret, but seems to fit in with these views. In the second century, Tertullian's *Apology* 39.2 describes Christians praying for the Caesars and their ministers, the prosperity of the commonwealth, peace, and *the delay of the end*. This is an apology, of course, but it seems unlikely that Tertullian would have made the thing up. There was work yet to be done, people to be brought to salvation, and one prayed for the time to do it.

⁹⁷*Acts* 2. Note that Paul confirms the story at I *Corinthians* 15:6, where he says that most of the people involved are still alive, so it seems something really happened. If the account in *Acts* is right, it must have been mass glossolalia. Glossolalia is an ecstatic outpouring of nonsense utterances by people who take themselves to be possessed by the Spirit of God. Paul reports glossolalia in individuals possessed of the spirit as a regular part of church meetings. These individuals required interpreters to make out what they had said, so they clearly did not understand their utterances themselves. It was supposed that they were speaking in foreign tongues unknown to their audiences. Paul regards it as excessive to indulge in glossolalia in public without an interpreter, so that it merely

allow all nations to come in made Christianity, for as long as the belief persisted, a powerful proselytizing religion. Every convert turned to preaching to assure the rapid receipt of the reward of faith.

The church in Jerusalem was not at first persecuted by the establishment, which expected it would break up soon enough now that its leader was dead, though the Sanhedrin did instruct the Christians not to preach publicly. So the Christians did not flee the city until Stephen's outspoken preaching got him stoned for blasphemy, an event witnessed and approved by Paul, who joined in the persecution that followed.⁹⁸ The church seems to have adopted a lower profile in the city after that, and to have moved its chief efforts into the countryside, where it was left alone, and Philip extended its preaching even into Samaria.⁹⁹ There was no doubt a party in the church fed up with the orthodox Jews, which would happily extend the message beyond the Pale. But perhaps this extension of the preaching should not be over-interpreted, for proselytizers among the Hellenistic Jews were often willing to go easy on difficult points in the law, especially circumcision, for the sake of their converts. They were quite capable of separating the spirit from the letter, and of emphasizing the moral content of the law as its real point, using allegory to interpret ritual requirements as an expression of morality. So there was probably not yet any intention of establishing a universal religion. It would have been expected that a Gentile, and possibly even a Samaritan, would convert to Judaism in converting to Christ.

7. PAUL AND THE RISE OF THE GENTILE CHURCH

I know a man in Christ who, fourteen years ago, was caught up—whether still in they body or out of the body, I do not know—right into the third heaven. I do know, however, that this same person . . . was caught up into paradise and heard things which must not and cannot be put into human language... In view of the extraordinary nature of these revelations, to stop

magnifies oneself as a possessor of spiritual gifts, edifying no one. Paul distinguishes "speaking in tongues" from prophesying, which was done in comprehensible language. He asserts that prophets (and this seems to apply to speakers in tongues as well) have control over their prophetic spirits, so that they can behave with proper decorum, prophesying in turn, during a meeting. (1 *Corinthians* 14:26–40) Concerning the mission to Gentiles, later ecclesiastical theory reflected in Eusebius's *History of the Church* had it that the Twelve were sent out to the whole world, and has each apostle dying in a different, distant place.

⁹⁸*Acts* 5: 34–42 for events before Stephen, 6:8 – 7:60 for Stephen's preaching. One of the accusations against Stephen was that he predicted that Jesus would return and destroy the Temple, but the words of blasphemy that immediately provoked his stoning, as the story goes, were "I can see heaven thrown open, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." Jesus's claim of equality with God was the central issue. For Paul, see *Acts* 8:1–3.

⁹⁹*Acts* 8:5–8. At first Philip went, apparently alone, but later his preaching seems to have attracted the approval and authorization of Peter and John, that is, the leaders the church.

me from getting too proud I was given a thorn in the flesh, an angel of Satan to beat me and stop me from getting too proud. About this thing, I have pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me, but he has said, “My grace is enough for you; my power is at its best in weakness.”

II *Corinthians* 2–5, 7–9.

Christianity might have remained a Jewish sect had it not been for the Apostle Paul. Paul was a Pharisaic Jew, reasonably well off financially, and possessed of good Greek.¹⁰⁰ A member of the Anti-Christian party, he was present at the stoning of Stephen, but within a year of the crucifixion, while on his way to Damascus with instructions from the Sanhedrin to persecute the Christians, he suffered a spiritual crisis and conversion, saw the risen Jesus, and was struck blind for three days.¹⁰¹ He insisted he had been called to convert the Gentiles to the new sect. One envisions a person familiar with the teachings of the group, but convinced that they were in error, indeed, blasphemers, in their views concerning both Jesus’s equality with God and the free forgiveness of sins. In his conversion experience he worked out intellectually how Jesus might really be the Son of God, despite his death on the cross, while simultaneously resolving, in favor of the Christian view of grace, an intense personal crisis over the impossibility of obeying the law. He must have been very strongly attached to the Law, but, as a Pharisee, already prepared to some degree to give up his attachment to the salvation of the Jews as a people in favor of individual salvation.

After his conversion Paul himself became a target of persecution and an attempt was made to arrest him, but he escaped, being let down from the wall in a basket to avoid the guards at the gates, and hid out in

¹⁰⁰His Greek is the Greek of the Hellenistic world he lived in, no classical training being apparent in his writings. The Pharisees were generally much more tolerant of the Christians than the Sadducees, and are attacked less strongly in *Acts* (4:1 f., 5:17, 23:7 ff.).

¹⁰¹*Acts* 9 gives the details of his conversion experience, and its testimony is, of course, not from Paul himself. It is in fact quite conceivable that the story is false or at least, in keeping with the usual practice of historians at the time, furnished with invented circumstantial detail to give it impact and interest. It would have served the interests of the gentile Church by substantiating Paul’s claim not to have been taught by men, but commissioned by Jesus himself to spread the Gospel. That claim is made in the autobiographical sketch at *Galatians* 1:12 – 2:14, our most important source for his life. See also II *Corinthians* 12:1–4, 7–10, traditionally take to refer to this conversion experience, where he says he was caught up, whether in the body or out of it he does not know, into the third heaven, and provided there with revelations he could not and ought not to put in words. Moreover, to prevent his becoming too proud, he had been given a thorn in the flesh, apparently sexual temptation, which, though he had three times prayed to have removed, remained, so that he would know he was nothing except what God’s grace made him. (There is nothing here that suggests that Paul gave way to temptation, and at I *Corinthians* 10:13 he insists that God allows no temptation to beset us that is beyond our strength to resist with the aid of his grace.) The reality and intensity of his experience cannot be doubted, but, of course, even on the account from *Acts*, cases of hysterical blindness, an intense sense of revelation, perhaps inexpressible in words, and breakthrough religious experiences involving visions occur in all religions, and are subject to psychological explanation. It does not prove that his religious doctrines are true.

Arabia about three years.¹⁰² (Somewhere around this time Cornelius, a Roman centurion in Caesaria and a Jewish semi-convert who sympathized with the religion but did not follow the Law in its ritual sections as a Jew would, was converted to the new faith by Peter.) Paul then went home to Tarsus, where he remained for perhaps five years, until about 45. In that year there was a famine, due to a failure of the crops in Egypt, and Paul went to his fellow Christians in Jerusalem with aid from the countryside, where food would have been more plentiful. There, he received authorization from Peter and James to preach abroad, and in 47 or 48 set off for Cyprus with Barnabas, where he won over the Roman governor, Sergius Paulus. He then proceeded to Antioch in Syria, where Sergius had family and connections. Antioch soon became a more important center of Christianity than Jerusalem. When Paul returned to Jerusalem in the Spring of 49 with Barnabas and Titus, a dispute over circumcision arose. Titus got himself circumcised to save the situation, but Paul insists in his letters that he did not give in on principle, and it seems likely that he received permission to omit circumcision for Gentile converts in return for financial contributions to the impoverished Jerusalem community. The gift to the poor in Jerusalem replaced the annual gift to the temple owed by every Jew.¹⁰³ But even though the issue of circumcision was settled in Paul's favor, as it might have been in any Jewish group, the issue of table-fellowship was not, at least not definitively, and Paul and Barnabas split over the question in Antioch. Peter took Barnabas's side, and after that the Jerusalem group got in the habit of sending out missionaries to Paul's new churches to correct his errors.

The situation was a difficult one. The Jerusalem group itself was cast out from the company of other Jews, as the termination of the temple offerings, the mark of a good Jew in the Dispersion, indicated. Willing Gentile converts must have been hard to turn down. Moreover, the Antiochene church was more vigorous and wealthy than the church in Judea, because it was not persecuted, if for no other reason, and the Jerusalem group depended on it for financial support. And the universalist tendencies of the *Deutero-Isaiah*, together with the usual practices of liberal Jews with Gentile converts, would have suggested that only the moral part of the law, not the ritual part, need be insisted upon.¹⁰⁴ But Jesus had not been so loose, and many Christians adhered

¹⁰²*Acts* says he was in Antioch, but Paul himself says Arabia. Throughout this discussion I follow the reconstruction of Paul's movements in Fox (1992) 304–310.

¹⁰³The testimony of *Acts* is confusing, and glosses over the dispute, but this seems the most reasonable reconstruction of events. *Luke* and *Acts* seem to be written for a Roman audience, for it is favorable to Roman officials, and ends in the mission at Rome.

¹⁰⁴So Paul in I *Thessalonians* 4:1–8, *Galatians* 6:7–10 for the retention of the moral part of the law, and I and II *Corinthians*, *Galatians* 3:19–26.

to the law, viewing themselves as the Jewish remnant of the faithful. Moreover, Paul would not have been free of self-aggrandizement in his wish to lead a Gentile community in which *he* would be the apostle.¹⁰⁵ He bore all the earmarks of a successful provincial commander with dreams of bigger things. Moreover, it might have been thought, given the short time left, that all attention should be devoted to converting Israel.¹⁰⁶ However Jewish Christians felt about Gentiles, they mostly regarded it as *their* duty to follow the law, and probably continued to regard Christ as primarily the Jewish Messiah, and to think of Gentile converts as converts to Judaism.

Partly, no doubt, to get away from the situation, Paul set out for the North about 49, traveling through Asia Minor and Greece. Barnabas went off to Cyprus. Paul was in Corinth in 50-51, imprisoned in Ephesus in 52-54, released in the winter of 54, and returned to Antioch and Jerusalem, collecting a gift for the congregation there as he traveled. He seemed to get along with the Jewish Christians reasonably well, since, after all, he had brought a token of good faith with him, and had not only spread the Faith, but suffered for it in prison. But he got in trouble with the Synagogue, who took advantage of his reputation as one who ate with Gentiles, and accused him of bringing a Gentile into the Inner Temple. This was the crime of *maiestas*, and he could be executed for it under Roman law. The Roman governor rescued him when Paul revealed he was a Roman citizen, and got him out of town into a prison in Caesaria, where he remained for two years. When it looked as if he would be tried in Jerusalem, on charges now expanded to include disloyalty to the Emperor, Paul appealed to Caesar on the basis of his citizenship.¹⁰⁷ He was ship-wrecked on Malta during the transfer to Rome, but arrived by about 60, and spent some years there. There were already Christians in the port cities and even in Rome itself before Paul arrived there. We do not know how he died.

It seems that the authority of Jerusalem was strong in the years from 50 to 70, but with the Jewish Revolt this authority was lost. The Gentile groups wished to dissociate themselves from Judaism as much as they could, and not only did they downplay relations with Jerusalem after that, but they made a point of rejecting the Law, and used Paul's theology—which commended itself for its high intellectual quality, anyway—to support their rejection. The Church thereafter was Gentile, and Pauline.

¹⁰⁵Paul always claimed the authority of an apostle, since he got his mission from Jesus himself. He needed this authority among his own to stand up to Jerusalem, though it seems likely that the Jerusalem group did not really recognize it.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. *Matthew* 10:5-7, 23.

¹⁰⁷The right of appeal to the Tribune had belonged to citizens from the time of the Republic, and Caesar held the Tribune's powers.

There is evidence that many Jewish Christians continued to keep the Law, and opposed themselves to Paul's ministry to the Gentiles. The Ebionites are the most important such group. The name, taken from the Hebrew for "the poor" (for which, note Paul's collections among the Gentiles for "the poor" in Jerusalem), is applied to two Jewish groups, one more or less orthodox, the other rather less so.¹⁰⁸ They used *Matthew*, but not the other gospels, and the less orthodox group repudiated Paul as an apostate from the law, and held that Jesus was a man, not God, with a human father.¹⁰⁹ The less orthodox seem to have split off from mainstream Jewish Christianity, perhaps over the issue of Paul's ministry, and to have become associated with the Essenes, from which they borrowed vegetarianism and other ritual practices. They represent a conservative reaction against what they viewed as the Hellenization of their religion. Jerome translated their *Gospel according to the Hebrews* into Latin, though the translation has not survived. It was close to the traditional gospels, it appears, but magnified James the Brother of the Lord, perhaps at the expense of Peter, who was viewed as the leader of those Hellenizing Jewish Christians who accepted Paul's converts.

As one scholar has remarked, though the question of the status of the Law, and of continuity in general with the Jewish tradition, was a question of the relation to their mother for Jewish Christians, for Gentile Christians it was a question of their relation to their mother-in-law.¹¹⁰ Very few Gentile Christians wished to become Jews, and as the Gentile movement grew, resentment against the claims of Jewish Christians to be somehow better, and closer to Jesus, merging with the anti-Semitism already endemic in Roman society, and with the need of the Gentiles to assert their independence, led to a complete breach with their Jewish coreligionists. When Justin Martyr, about 160, allowed that it is all right to keep the law if one wishes, but that one must not require it of others if one does so,¹¹¹ he had to admit that this was a liberal view, and many held that one who kept the law could not be saved. After Irenaeus's condemnation of the Ebionites, about 180, they

¹⁰⁸Pelikan (1971) I 24. Tertullian had so lost track of the origins of the group that he imagined an Ebion as its heresiarch, and later heresiologists even cite Ebion's writings (*On the Flesh of Christ* 14.5). Three Jewish-Christian gospels have been identified (though none survive, of course) *The Gospel of the Twelve*, *The Gospel of the Nazareans*, and *The Gospel of the Hebrews*. For Jewish Christians, see Ch. 4 in Mitchell and Young (2006), "Jewish Christianity," by Joel Marcus.

¹⁰⁹So says Epiphanius of Salamis about the Cerinthians, *Against Eighty Heresies* 28.5.1–3. At 30.16.3–4 he states that Jesus was elected to be the son of God and that Christ, an archangel, descended upon him at his baptism, as he had descended on Moses and other prophets. Like Irenaeus, Epiphanius seems to confuse the Gnostic group with the Jewish Christians, chiefly because of the way they distinguish Jesus and the Christ. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.1–2, also says they denied the virgin birth. Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.61, claims there were two sects of Ebionites, one of which denied the virgin birth, the other of which adhered to it.

¹¹⁰Pelikan (1971) I 14.

¹¹¹*Dialogue with Trypho*.

were treated simply as heretics.¹¹²

The conflict between Gentile and Jew within Christianity was exacerbated, it seems, by the question how one should view Christ. The first epistle of *John* (100-125) contains passages directed against Jewish Christians who held the view of the “exaltation Christology” in *Acts*, i.e. that Jesus and the Christ were distinct, and the Christ (i.e., the Kingship or Messiah-hood) descended on Jesus at some point.¹¹³ Irenaeus assigns this view to Cerinthus,¹¹⁴ and it is expressed in the *Gospel of Peter*, so it seems to be the property of Jewish Christians. But it may not be their exclusive property. The *Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. 65)¹¹⁵ states that Christ pre-existed, but also says that Jesus is the adopted Son of God, due to his virtue and his faithful discharge of the task appointed him. This is, of course, the older Christology, which Jewish Christians, without the break in memory entailed in transferring the gospel to another language and another culture, retained long after its abandonment by the Gentiles. To the Gentiles, that God became man so that man might return to God was a powerfully attractive idea—more attractive by far than the view that a man, through his virtue, gained the authority to intercede for us and gain forgiveness for our sins. But, to assert this view of things, it was necessary for the Gentiles to repudiate the older view, and with it their Jewish brethren, and so their Jewish brethren were, in the end, repudiated.

8. PAUL’S THEOLOGY OF GRACE

I have been crucified with Christ, and I live now with my own life, but with Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake. I cannot bring myself to give up God’s gift: if the Law can justify us, there is

¹¹²To keep the record straight, Irenaeus, with orthodox Christianity in general, also rejected Antinomianism, the view of certain enthusiasts that the Spirit of Christ makes us free from all obligation to follow even the moral requirements of the law, leaving us pure no matter what we do. Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho* is only the first of a chain of writings attempting to convince Jews that the Law had been set aside out of their own scriptures, and that this and the coming of Christ had been predicted by the Prophets. Tertullian’s *Answer to the Jews* and Cyprian’s *To Quirinus, Three Books of Testimony Against the Jews* are well-known examples, and we shall have occasion to look at a few others produced in the Middle Ages.

¹¹³*I John* 4:2, 2:22, 4:15.

¹¹⁴Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I 26.1. Origen, *Against Celsus* 5.61, states that there were two sects of Ebionites, one taking the orthodox view of the virgin birth, the other holding that Jesus was conceived like other men.

¹¹⁵*Similitude* 5.6. The dating of the *Shepherd* is disputed. It is traditionally placed about 150 CE because of a notice in the Muratorian Fragment, but since the reliability of that source has come under fire it seems better to place it in the 60’s, where its doctrine and style seem at home. See Ellegård (1999) 45-50.

no point in the death of Christ.

Paul, *Galatians* 2:19–21.

He is the image of the unseen God, and the first-born of all creation, for in him were created all things in heaven and on earth: everything visible and everything invisible. Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignities, Powers—all things were created through him and for him. Before anything was created he existed, and he holds all things in unity. Now the Church is his body, he is its head. As he is the beginning, he was first to be born from the dead, so that he should be first in every way; because God wanted all perfection to be found in him and all things to be reconciled through him and for him, everything in heaven and everything on earth, when he made peace by his death on the cross.

Paul, *Colossians* 1:15–20.

Paul was convinced, like Jesus, that all men are sinful. He also thought this was no accident, for the Law cannot be followed without God's special help, God's grace, due to tendencies toward sin within our very nature (arising from the trespass of Adam) that we cannot keep under control without outside help. Paul's great difficulty was seeing how grace could be freely given us by a just God despite our sins, merely on account of our repentance. The root of sin would still be there, surely, and we would sin again after repentance—there would be no genuine reformation of character, which, indeed, seems impossible to human beings. If God steps in and aids us in avoiding sin, then it is not *our* reformation of character that is responsible for our good actions, even if a certain cooperation with God's grace might be credited to us. The solution, he thought, lay in a sacrificial account of Jesus's death rooted in Jesus's own conviction that his suffering would help redeem Israel from her sins, that he could somehow do atonement for Israel, in her place, because of his special status as Son of Man. Paul's account adds, first, that Jesus's sacrifice eliminates the uncontrollable addiction to sin which made it impossible to escape from it before, and, second, that it is universally efficacious, saving Gentiles as well as Jews.

On the first point, Paul came to think that the acquisition of faith provides a magical identification of the believer with Christ, who dies and is reborn with him in the process of religious conversion.¹¹⁶ The old

¹¹⁶*Galatians* 2:19–20. In 2:21 Paul says that Christ's death has no point if the law can make us just (compare *I Corinthians* 15:12–19, where he turns it around and says we are still in sin if Christ was not raised from the dead). The argument was directed at Jewish Christians. Following the law ceases to have a point after Christ's death, and its only point beforehand was to bring us to recognize our own helplessness before sin, or (*Romans* 3:9–29) to leave us without excuse (presumably because even though we should

person is dead and one is resurrected clean and new, a new person with Christ living in him, his free will restored.¹¹⁷ Henceforth, one can act rightly, though with the help of Christ.¹¹⁸ Our enslavement to sin, which renders us unable to live rightly, is ended when we become Christians, so that we are capable henceforth of proper behavior, and no temptation will find us after this that we cannot resist.¹¹⁹ The Christian attributes his virtue not to himself, out of pride in his ability to be righteous, but to God. He is made just by faith in God and Christ, not through his own works. This conception of the thing is very much in the Jewish tradition. We are to be reconciled to God, who will forgive us our sins, just as the nation has been reconciled to God after apostasy so often in the past, but then we must and can remain faithful thereafter. Hence, although he seems to allow a certain probationary period, and the possibility of minor sins which one can sincerely repent, Paul orders that those who willfully indulge in serious misconduct be expelled from the Church.¹²⁰

But if this is a development of Jewish ideas, the new salvation is not restricted to Jews. The requirement for our availing ourselves of God's grace is faith in Jesus, not membership in the Jewish nation.¹²¹ The old Law served to point up our weakness, our inability to keep it through our own efforts without God's

know by reason where our duty lies, once we are also told this outright we are left without even a bad excuse). So no Christian need follow the law. See also II *Corinthians* 5:21, where the sinless Christ identifies himself with us, "becoming sin," to make the sacrifice work. In *Hebrews* (ca. 60) Christ is also explicitly identified with the lamb of the atonement, purifying the Spirit instead of the body, as his baptism is of the spirit and not of the body. The author (who is not Paul) insists there can be no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood.

¹¹⁷It should be noted that this is contrary to the view, later attributed to Paul by Augustine, that one cannot avoid sin even after baptism due to the corruption of human nature in the sin of Adam. Baptism not only guarantees us the forgiveness of past sins, it heals the effects of sin, leaving us once more free to do as we ought. In a critical passage, *Romans* 7:15-18, Paul says, "I do not what I will but the very thing I hate... it is no longer I who do it, but the sin that dwells within me... I can will what is good, but I cannot do it." Augustine reads this as an assertion of his doctrine, but only a few lines later he says, "the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free," and earlier Christian thinkers referred the later lines to the former, insisting that baptism freed one from slavery to sin, and took the former words to refer to Paul's state before he became a Christian. See Pagels (1988) Chapter 6. On the other hand, the doctrine of predestination does seem to find a place in Paul's thought. So at *Romans* 9:14-33 he insists that God will choose to save some and harden the hearts of others. At the same time, here, in *Romans* 10:1-5 and *Romans* 11, he also seems to argue that those who are not saved earn their fate through their pride and their insistence on doing it themselves without reliance on God. So it is presumably their fault, even though they can only escape from such behavior if God offers his grace. Here Augustine is closer to Paul than most of the thinkers in the centuries separating him from the Apostle.

¹¹⁸*Romans* 7:18-25 and 6:6 ff., which asserts that we are no longer "enslaved by sin" after we become Christians, and 6:14, which asserts that we can refrain from sin after Baptism. This is an account that cannot easily survive the excision of its metaphysics. The participation in the death of Christ and the arrival of the Spirit within us must be genuine events, not mere psychological metaphors, for a genuine incapacity is removed, and genuine freedom to behave rightly is restored.

¹¹⁹I *Corinthians* 10:13.

¹²⁰I *Corinthians* 5, and the warning at *Romans* 11:17-24 that one can lose salvation again after having gained it.

¹²¹*Romans* 3:25.

help, and for Christians who see that point and are saved from his prideful reliance on themselves the purely ritual parts of it are no longer in force—they are reborn to a new Law.

The doctrine of conversion appeals powerfully to a common religious mentality which feels itself helpless to adopt the way of life demanded by faith, and something serving its function can be found even in religions with a very different metaphysics. So in Buddhism there is the doctrine that one attains enlightenment only by non-action, not by any action originating in the illusory Self. Receiving the Spirit, and learning how to act without acting, may come to very much the same thing. In both cases a reliance on one's Self is given up, and a faith in something beyond steps into its place, and at that point one finds oneself miraculously capable of living the ideal. An abandonment of pride in one's own will power, aided by a general attempt to escape the Self-centeredness of our usual way of life, not only through prayer and meditation, but also through the practice of a morality of love for others and an ascetic denial of self-serving desires, is seen as the key to the good life. The despair of our usual life, with its frustration and anger toward others, is attributed to an attachment to self that must be abandoned.

The effects of Jesus's sacrifice and our participation in it are clear, then, but why is it that those effects occur? For Jesus to be able to serve as such a sacrifice of atonement, he must have a special relation to God. but what relation is that? Paul goes beyond the Adoptionist Christology of the Jewish Christians, and claims that Jesus was in the form of God and equal to him, and that he "emptied himself" to take on the form of a human being.¹²² Why so? Well, if one assumes that all mankind is involved in unavoidable sin, and that the one who takes on our sins and atones for them must himself be sinless, then a mere human being can never be found to serve as a pure sacrifice for the others, and the adoptionist account of the atonement becomes impossible. It seems that Christ must not be simply a human being, but something more. Rather than a human being who takes on a special relation to God, Christ must be the Logos, and *take on* humanity. He pre-existed his human birth.¹²³ Moreover, Jesus is called the first-born of all creation, the image of the unseen God, through whom

¹²²*Phillipians* 2:6–11.

¹²³Jews had a tendency to accept the pre-existence of all sorts of sacred things, for instance, the Torah, the Tabernacle, and the temple vessels. Some (not many) thought the Messiah pre-existent, though this was not seen as denying his humanity. The more educated made the pre-existence a matter of residence of the Idea in the Logos. John's apocalypse mentions a pre-existent heavenly Jerusalem (21:2) (the capital of the world after the second coming), as does Paul's *Galatians* 4:26 (and *Hebrews* 12:22, not by Paul). A determined Platonist might find the ideal *polis* of the *Republic* here. I *Peter* 1:18 (95–115) attributes pre-existence to Christ with no apparent Platonic influence. It is tempting to connect I *Thessalonians* 5:9 and similar predestinarian remarks to this sort of pre-existence—God has it all planned out and everything is prepared. If Christ pre-exists with God, why shouldn't he be active before he comes to Earth?

and for whom all things were created, and in whom the fullness of God was pleased to dwell.¹²⁴ He is to be identified, it seems, with the Philonian Logos, although Paul does not explicitly use the term, and this goes beyond anything Jesus claimed for himself—but there is no evidence that Paul identified Jesus with God. Paul apparently found it especially suitable for creation to be reconciled to God through the Logos in which it was created. In all things the Logos, which fully expresses God, so that God can be said to be in Him, serves as an intermediary between God and creation.¹²⁵ But, we can also note, all this seems to fight shy of announcing that Jesus or the Logos *is* God, even if it comes as close as may be to this while still denying it.

The Logos also plays the role of intermediary when it comes to our knowledge of God. Jewish thought did not, before acquaintance with Hellenism, lay much emphasis on acquaintance with God as a religious aim. It is the Greeks, above all the Platonists, who sought this, and, as Justin Martyr noted, made it the highest religious aim. Paul's interest is in the vision of *Christ*, and it is only if we take it that Jesus *is* God is this a vision of God. He claims to have had such a vision, and to have been caught up into the third heaven, which is mysterious enough, but neither claim entails a vision of God. Remarks like that in *Galatians*, that believers have come to know God, or rather to be known by him,¹²⁶ and that “now we see as through a glass, darkly, but then,” that is, after one's resurrection, “face to face,”¹²⁷ do not necessarily suggest anything beyond a vision of Christ, and the sure knowledge it imparts, either. Important things are accomplished through this vision, but Paul does not make it the highest religious aim, and perhaps he does not even value it for its own sake. *John*

¹²⁴*Colossians* 1:15-19, 2:9. Christ is described here as the image of the invisible God, and it became the usual view that Christ was God adapted to us so that we could know him. It was a Christian commonplace that no one has ever seen God himself. (The author of *Hebrews* says Christ is far above the angels, as though someone, Gnostics, no doubt, had put him on a level with them.) If *Corinthians* 5:19 says that God was in Christ when he died. Apparently this was required for the sacrifice to work. Perhaps, also, the suggestion is already being made that God left Christ while he was on the Cross, it being unworthy that God should suffer, and his connection to Christ being an accidental one. Paul presumably rejects both of these reasons.

¹²⁵Another early view of Jesus's redemptive work, which does not seem to depend on his being the Logos, makes him give his life “as a ransom for many,” in the words of *Matthew* 20:28. Origen, commenting on *Matthew* here, remarks that he could not have been given as a ransom to God, so it must have been the Devil, who already had possession of us, to whom his soul was given as a ransom. Perhaps the Devil accepted the bargain, and then found that he could not hold his prisoner. We shall see later that this idea of the meaning of Christ's death was eventually given up, for, after the work of Gregory Nazianus and St. Anselm it seemed it could not be coherently defended while maintaining the honorable behavior of God. Avoiding any imputation of deceptive practices to God, perhaps God takes on our suffering and his sharing in it somehow transforms its nature and we are freed from the compulsory element in it once we recognize his action on our behalf. In the same way, in Buddhism, the meaning of our suffering is transformed if we take it on in compassion to aid others, or simply recognize that a Buddha has done so. See the reflections of Adams (1999).

¹²⁶*Galatians* 4:9. Paul hesitates to say that believers in this life have come to know God, and so adds the qualifying phrase. When *John* says that no one knows God, he adds that nonetheless God dwells in some, as love. Presumably we recognize God in the love we encounter, in the comfort we are given, and in Jesus, even if we do not know God in his proper form, as it were.

¹²⁷I *Corinthians* 13:12.

takes a similar view, despite making Jesus and the Logos identical to God, and tells us “No one has seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”¹²⁸ Here, apparently, the vision of God is identified as the vision of the Father, and it is denied that anyone has it. Paul and John alike see Christ as the image of God through which we come to know God.

The mystery religions of the Pagan Empire probably also cut a figure here. Certainly Paul would not have consciously accepted any Pagan influence, but it nonetheless seems reasonable to posit a non-Jewish root of some of his ideas, for however we read the Jewish notions about atonement in *Deutero-Isaiah* that influenced Jesus himself, they do not involve the sacrifice of a divine being, but only of some element of God’s creation that has special favor with God. Given his new universalism, Paul was forced to find something other than the king’s right to stand in for his people to justify Jesus’s right to offer himself as a sacrifice for human sins. The Messiah is King of the Jews, perhaps, but not of all mankind. The divine Logos that rules the universe, however, would be another matter. And there is also the matter of the purity of one who stands in for us. No merely human being is without sin. Paul does not make Jesus God, but his insistence on making him as divine as possible while still created reveals the pressure of the Greek mysteries, which would hold no sacrifice other than the god himself to be sufficient.¹²⁹

This new Christology stands at odds with the exaltation Christology in *Acts*. One does not raise the question here how a man can become the Logos in the way one might ask how a man can become the Messiah, the adoptive Son of God. Rather the question is how the Logos becomes man, and the adoption, if that is the way it is to be conceived, is a fact from eternity, not something that happens in time. Once the new view was established, it was bound to push the old view out, rather than giving it new content, and scriptures reflecting the old view were bound to become difficult passages requiring clever interpretation. And the problem was not to end there, for Paul’s view very quickly began to look insufficient. If the sacrifice was to work, Jesus needed to be not merely the Logos, but God himself, as Ignatius already asserted in his *Epistles* in the 2nd century. As this view gained in strength, becoming orthodox in the 3rd century, a reinterpretation of the now obsolete Logos theory was required. The twin problems of Jesus’s dual nature as man and God, and the correct understanding of the Trinity, the God who was both three and one, and the place of Christ and the Spirit in this triune God, came to dominate theology in the 4th century.

¹²⁸ *John* 1:18.

¹²⁹ Mithraism cannot possibly have influenced the origins of Christianity, for it was virtually non-existent in Christian areas of the Empire until around 150 CE. There is some evidence of mystery thought among the devotees that Paul addresses.

The ground was fertile for controversy, then, and the controversy could not be hid. Most mystery religions left the devotees in the dark about the meaning of their ceremonies. Only the inner circle would receive an explanation, the Psychics, not the mere Hearers. Moreover, the Psychics were generally more speculators than preservers of a tradition. The ritual was older than any reading of its meaning, and only the ritual was something one could be sure of. The split between Psychic and Hearer threatened now and again in Christianity (for instance, at the end of the 2nd century), but most Christians took it that the doctrines behind the ceremonies were to be made available to all participants, were rooted in a reliable tradition, and were as certain as, and more important than, the correct form of the ceremonies. This was because Christianity was a new religion that had to take account of traditional forms and doctrines only in the shape of Jewish (and increasingly, its own) scriptures. It was not a religion based on ancient practices poorly understood. The interpretational practices of the mysteries were necessary only in dealing with the Jewish scriptures, though even there Christians resisted the formation of an internal elite, or of any important body of doctrine that was not universally understood. The Christian openness about their doctrine must have been attractive to many pagans, but it made impossible any compromise rooted in the notion that many different understandings of the holy mystery were possible and legitimate. The exact account of the mystery of Christ's death had to be made public and available to all, and there could only be one account. All other views would be dangerous and heretical. The theological warfare of the 4th century was, perhaps, already inevitable.

9. CHRISTIAN INTOLERANCE

Our contest is not against flesh and blood but against powers, against principalities, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly places. . .

Ephesians 6:12

For Paul idolatry, apostasy involving the worship of created things and cult images in the place of God, was the source of all sin. The notion is Jewish, idolatry originally being a betrayal of the Jewish nation, whose God stood above the natural world and had no image. Such an idea can most easily be supported, of course, if it is obvious who God is and that he, and no creature, is to be worshiped. So Paul argues in the opening of *Romans* that all men know, or should know, if they display any epistemic responsibility, that there is one God not identical to any of his creatures, and that immoral and unjust behavior is in fact forbidden. The state of the

unbeliever is one of deliberate ignorance of the truth, self-deception fostered by an addiction to sin.¹³⁰ Idolatry is mere perversity, as is unbelief, and both are forms of apostasy. Faith is the opposite of apostasy because it is faith in Jesus that establishes one as a member of the Church, and all men should be members of the Church. Hence faith is the source of all virtue, and those who have faith are reborn in the Spirit.¹³¹ These convictions about faith are the chief source of Christian intolerance and anti-intellectualism. They condemn all who differ from Christians on the nature and existence of God as dishonest, or at best self-deceived, and make out any reasoning used to support differing opinions to be a mere cover-up rooted in stubborn pride and foolish self-reliance in the face of obvious and conclusive evidence of one's weakness and inability to avoid sins of the flesh.

Competing religions Paul saw as sects headed by demons, a Jewish notion which, oddly enough, found a congenial home among Roman ideas. Philosophers and intellectuals, at least, often considered the many Pagan gods to be somewhat earthly, and often ignorant and prideful, but still good, semi-divinities, *daemones*, a category of beings with their own cults, traditionally recognized in Paganism. Paul, of course, made out the *daemones* to be evil beings, Satan's minions, who deliberately and pridefully trying to replace God, angels (messengers = *angelloi*), who were in no way to be worshiped. Given that twist, the friendly borrowing and mutual recognition one found among pagan state and mystery cults was not possible for Christianity. Christian hostility to the other religions of the Empire reveals itself especially in the transformation of the rather unsatisfactory afterlife of the Mediterranean world from a natural state for a dead mortal, to be escaped by supernatural means through the mysteries, to Hell, an inescapable supernatural punishment for our sins to

¹³⁰The same kind of view is found in Buddhism, where deliberate ignorance, with anger and self-centered desire, is one of the three poisons which make us miserable. Here, though, the truth one refuses to see is not one's moral duty or the depraved nature of one's desires, nor the existence of God, but rather the non-existence of the Self.

¹³¹*Romans* 1:18–32. Compare Philo, *On the Making of the World* VII, for the obviousness of God's existence, given his creation. The punishment for unbelieving perversity, Paul says, is being given over to lust. Perhaps the idea, as Augustine would have it, is that one has denied his reason, given by God, out of prideful ingratitude toward God, and so for that ingratitude God makes one subject to the irrational part of his nature. Or perhaps God simply refrains from aiding those who have rejected him in their fight with their irrational lusts. Probably it was seen as a matter of taking back what one was not grateful for receiving. Death is the wage, or suitable punishment, of sin, that is, sin shows ingratitude to one's author for one's very existence. (But, then, is a parent justified in slaying an ungrateful child?) *Romans* 9:14–21 bears on the problem how God could allow evil to occur. God is asserted to have full rights over men to do with as he will, just as a potter has rights over his clay, so that he could even predestine men, as it seems, to be sinners, and then punish them for their sins, and do no wrong. One has no right to question God's actions, either. *Job* seems to lie behind the passage, but Paul is alert to none of the book's irony. The passage need *not* imply, taken alone, that any man is not free to accept Christ's sacrifice, but only that men cannot freely avoid sin without accepting it. But *Romans* 8:28–30 has already asserted foreknowledge and predestination of the elect, and does imply that. Even if Paul's attention focuses entirely on the predestination of the elect, still the predestination of the damned, at least a predestination by non-choice, is impossible to avoid once that much is granted.

which we are all subject unless we accept Jesus.¹³²

Of course, this view of other men's deities placed the Christian at odds with the Roman state and Ancient society. Christians thought themselves naturally good citizens, since only Christians were free from the natural tendency to bad behavior rooted in unredeemed sin, and Jesus himself had enjoined obedience to the state. But this passive obedience betokened, not respect for the civil authorities or civil values, but a submission to God's judgment. God had always punished the Israelites by subjecting them to foreign nations, and the true Israelite, the Church, suffered the same fate. But in truth Christians, though they submitted to the state as their God ordered them to, no longer needed the state to rule them, nor did they merit any further punishment. They were freed from selfishness and other manifestations of sin through baptism, and so needed no human direction to live well, and they had been forgiven their sins and were no longer subject to God's wrath. So they lived in the world, and neither resisted nor interfered with its powers, but they were not of it—they were only waiting a little while here, a wayfarer in a foreign land, until they could go home to the new world of their savior.¹³³ Indeed, great care had to be taken that the new Christian not contaminate the community he was joining. Catechumens were carefully screened, sometimes required to change their professions or give up old contacts. They were instructed for several years before baptism was allowed, and underwent repeated exorcisms to assure that the demons that might have infected them were left outside the church. In the early church, membership required that one divorce oneself from Pagan society.¹³⁴ Thus did the other-worldly Christian make his truce with the world. The world, though perhaps pleased that violent rebellion had been avoided, would naturally be displeased by the insolent rejection of its values implicit in this truce, but there was a preexistent model for the isolation of the Christian community within the social structure of the city. Ancient city-states always had resident aliens, merchants and such who generally lived in their own part of town, following their own customs and religions, who followed the laws of the city (though they were not citizens and so had no vote in the Assembly), and even provided contingents in the city's army. Jews

¹³²Paul says that those who remain in sin die, and that the faithful live, or have gone to sleep (rather than dying) and will be resurrected. He does not seem to think that the dead Christian suffers in Hell up to the time of resurrection. The later doctrine of purgatory may be rooted, however, in a common conviction that even those dead that will be resurrected reside in Hades (Sheol) until the resurrection. (*Philippians* 1:23–24 suggests that Paul expects to be with Christ immediately, but *I Thessalonians* 5:13–18 seems to intend that the faithful dead will rise up at the second coming. The conflict is to be resolved in favor of the second view.)

¹³³The attitude is captured quite faithfully in the African American spirituality revealed in the old American Spirituals, which were created, of course by a people alienated from their government and society, just as the Christians before Constantine were.

¹³⁴Meeks (1993) 32-33, drawing on Hippolytus's *Apostolic Tradition* for its information about practices of the early third century, before, of course, the Christianization of the Empire.

formed a peculiarly isolated group of resident aliens in most cities, and Christians modeled their communities on such groups, and seem at first even to have laid claim to privileges parallel to those of the Jews.¹³⁵ Of course, the true home city of the Christians was not Jerusalem or Athens, but the heavenly city of God.¹³⁶

After the Empire itself became Christian, Christians no longer exceeded their pagan neighbors in the moral virtues which bound their community of resident aliens together. The Christian community now *was* the city, and a new view of the Christian freedom from the sins of this world was necessary. Augustine held that even baptized Christians were inevitable sinners, in need of despotic worldly power both to keep them in line, and to punish them as they deserved. Christians came to be thought of very much as part of the world, and the world and its government as part of God's dispensation for the discipline of the Church.¹³⁷ Christians could no longer rely on unbelievers to run the world for them, and they had to provide a civic religion for the whole society, sinners and all.

The exclusivity and intolerance of Christianity must have been one of its drawing cards for many of its adherents.¹³⁸ For most it is easier to believe wholeheartedly when the validity of other viewpoints is flatly denied, and those who can see the sense in religions other than their own are often lukewarm believers at best. Tolerance, it is supposed, arises chiefly from lack of conviction, and for those who seek wholeheartedness intolerance provides a deceptively easy road to the goal.¹³⁹ Moreover, Christianity, at least in the beginning, took a very serious view of life, expecting the end of the world momentarily, whereas its Pagan competitors generally regarded this life as no mere training-field, but something good on its own, and had no expectation

¹³⁵This image of a city within a city should be especially noted. It eventuates in Augustine's image of the two cities, and even the Greek name for the church, the *Ekklesia*, was originally the name for the Assembly of citizens. A community of resident aliens would have its own *ekklesia*, to conduct its private affairs, and indeed, even its own courts and magistrates, with the right of handling its internal affairs. All of this is pregnant with consequences for the development of the Church as an institution paralleling the state, with its own courts and magistrates, in later Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

¹³⁶*Philippians* 3.20.

¹³⁷On this sea change in Christian thought, see Pagels (1988) Chapter 5.

¹³⁸For the reasons for Christian growth before Constantine, see Dodds (1965), esp. the last chapter, and Fox (1986).

¹³⁹So Dodds (1965) 133 remarks on the multiplicity of cults to which a single Pagan sometimes gave devotion. If any one of them really worked, would the others be needed? To balance things, he also observes that intolerant devotion to a single cult provided an escape from an anxiety provoking freedom. But this may all be overdrawn. An alternative escape was provided by "philosophy," which viewed the various cults as 'lower' expressions of its truth, and so displayed its own sort of intolerance. And philosophy only expressed the common opinion here. Most of those who belonged to many cults at once probably took them all to be expression of some single underlying truth, a move we have observed to be characteristic of the polytheistic cults of the Mediterranean.

of a cataclysmic completion of history, but rather thought the world destined to go on indefinitely just as it is now. This seriousness, played off against Pagan light-heartedness, with the rejection of the Pagan world and its values, and acceptance of the eschatological hope of Christians, provided a chance to act out a role that could prove quite attractive to those who saw themselves as failures in life. Many people like to think that they are the only ones in the right, and anticipate the punishment of those more successful than they. Resentment can be a powerful force in the formation of one's world view, and in the Christian expectation of the End it was combined with a nobler yearning for a promised just, peaceful and virtuous society utterly unlike that of the urbanized Mediterranean. So despite the fading hope in the immediate return of Christ, apocalyptic imagery remained frequent in Church writings through the third century, and the ancient liturgy prays at the Eucharist, "let the Lord come and the world pass away."¹⁴⁰

10. CHRISTIAN MORALITY

While he was at dinner in the house it happened that a number of tax collectors and sinners came to sit at the table with Jesus and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, "Why does your master eat with tax collectors and sinners?"¹⁴¹ When he heard this he replied, "It is not the healthy who need the doctor, but the sick... I did not come to call the virtuous, but sinners."

Matthew 9:10–13.

¹⁴⁰Pelikan (1971) I:124-126. This, of course, from reflections on Nietzsche. In particular, see his *Beyond Good and Evil*. Christian apocalyptic hopes could not be maintained at a white heat forever. The expectation of the eminent end seems to have survived especially in "millenarianism," the expectation of a thousand-year reign of the returned Christ. This expectation is rooted in *The Revelation to John* 20:1-10 (ca. 70), which speaks of "a new heaven and a new earth" in which God shall reign personally, and *Hebrews* 4:5-9 (60's), which speaks of a Sabbath rest for the faithful. These texts are elaborated with the Babylonian astrological assignment of 1000 years to each planet in the world cycle in view, taken together with the seven days of creation and *Psalms* 89:4 "a day with the Lord is as a thousand years." *Revelation* is the only apocalyptic work to make it into the Canon, which suggests a certain reserve about such works even early on. Perhaps they were associated from the beginning with Gnostic and Jewish sectarians. Irenaeus and Justin accept the Millenarian view, and Irenaeus attacks those who take the Millenium as a mere symbol for Heaven for their failure to attend to the literal sense of scripture. He identifies Papias, who had heard John the author of *Revelation*, as the first to hold to this interpretation of the book, based on an unwritten tradition. Augustine identified the thousand years of Christ's rule with the history of the Church (*City of God* XX 7), giving rise to a new wave of millenarian expectations some centuries later. The Ancient prayer that the Lord come is transformed in some later liturgies to a prayer that the end be delayed, so that the Church can complete its work.

¹⁴¹The sinners here would have been social outcasts, who had broken religious laws or pursued forbidden professions, and so were unclean.

Those who summon people to the other mysteries make this preliminary proclamation: “Who has pure hands and a wise tongue.”... But let us hear what folk these Christians call. “Whoever is a sinner,” they say, “whoever is unwise, whoever is a child, and, in a word, whoever is a wretch the Kingdom of God will receive him.”

Celsus, *True Doctrine* (ca. 170)¹⁴²

But however hard-headed and realistic we wish to be about motivations here, Christianity had another, more presentable advantage. The ethical drive behind the Christianity of many should not be underestimated. In particular, the insistence on obedience to ethical norms, rooted in its Jewish past, would have been attractive to a high-minded person with a distaste for magic, a person of the type of Origen and Clement. The insistence that the baptismal ceremony was effective only if one had faith repudiates the sympathetic magic that many Mysteries indulged in, involving, as it does, a purely ritual identification with the god, rather than a conversion of the soul. Moreover, its insistence on the connection between faith and morality,¹⁴³ and its monotheism, allied the religion with Philosophy, with its contempt of the lower *daemones* and emphasis on the ethical.

Although Christianity probably took morality the most seriously of any religion, it was not only Christianity that valued it in the Ancient world. Conversion to Philosophy was closely associated with moral reformation, and in Lucian’s second century account of *The Wisdom of Nigrinus*, language like that of Paul is used to describe the renewal following conversion—once a slave, he now is free, once poor, now rich indeed, once

¹⁴²Cited in Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.59. Translation from Pelikan (1971) I.29.

¹⁴³I *John* 3:4-24. The epistle was written 100-125 C.E. The passage in question suggests that the faithful cannot sin, for sin is a sure sign that Christ is not in a person. That is a hard doctrine, if it is not simply over-stated, as most interpreters take it to be. I *Thessalonians* 4:1-8, for instance, suggest the trouble converted pagans had with chastity. It must have generally been held that sin occurred after conversion to the faith, but that it was forgiven, since it arose from old, bad habits rather than the innermost soul of the new person, now ruled by the Spirit. I *John* 3:19-24 may mean to suggest this, and Paul says outright in *Galatians* 2:16 that faith and not the law justifies us (makes us to be regarded as just) even if our actions are bad. 3:18 makes it clear that God was not required by justice to forgive us our sins, or regard us as just, but does so only because of his mercy. Does God’s regarding us as just make us just? One must deny it or fall into latitudinarian notions. No doubt Paul’s view had given rise to the idea that the faithful need not attend to the moral law, since whatever they do is just, and *John* speaks out against this error. Paul’s suggestion at *Galatians* 6:7-10, that those are lost who do not live by the spirit, allies him with I *John*, though it is not clear if such a failure brings about the loss of the Spirit or simply indicates, as I *John* seems to suggest, that one never had it in the first place. (*Romans* 6 makes the latter choice.) *Galatians* 2:17-21 raises the question whether Christ who is in the faithful sins when they do, and denies that he does. The sin must arise from the residual old person. (Also relevant is II *Corinthians* 7:9-10, which distinguishes between godly and worldly grief for sin, the latter being ineffective for making us turn away from sin. The faithful alone are capable of the godly grief.) Paul does not say, or apparently conceive the question, whether the Spirit is given freely or somehow earned by an autonomous choice to have faith, though he is clear that it is given to faith and not human reason (I *Corinthians* 1:26-31), and that all that follows on the acceptance of the Spirit is the work of God, not humanity (*Romans* 3:9-29).

confused, now sane and sensible.¹⁴⁴ The Word produced such conversions, as well, though the word was the word of the Philosopher in a protreptic discourse, rather than the word of God delivered by a preacher,¹⁴⁵ though the example of the philosopher was held to be more powerful than his words, and true conversion was often attendant on a life with the philosopher, so that one could see and live his life at first hand.¹⁴⁶ A first century tract, the *Tablet of Cebes*, provides a tour guide's talk on a picture found in a temple in Athens. The road of life is depicted, with many people wandering on it, attempting to find Happiness, a lady enthroned at the end. The lady can only be reached through the intercession of another lady, Conversion.¹⁴⁷ Often this conversion is represented, in Lucian, for instance, as a matter of reform in accord with the usual standards of Ancient society. But philosophy always contained a critique of ordinary ways, and in some cases a radical critique, so that turning away from a normal life, even a relatively virtuous one, might be necessary to pursue the philosopher's life. The most extreme turning away was required, of course, by the Cynics, who did *not* claim to be good citizens, but all the schools, Stoicism, Epicureanism, and Platonism, required a certain isolation from common practices, and living together in an intimate community of fellow philosophers devoted to higher ethical standards than were commonly recognized.

The mysteries liked to ally themselves with Philosophy, regarding themselves as a more or less concrete, lower expression of philosophical truth for the ordinary man. One should compare to this the view that the Logos was made flesh so God could communicate with us, found in the Christian Platonism of the second and third centuries. Moral requirements are imposed on their adherents by Mithraism¹⁴⁸ and Manichaeism. The role of faith in the worship of Isis is apparent in Apuleius's *Golden Ass* (2d century C.E.), which tells a comic and allegorical tale of the conversion of Lucius. There the ritual is needed, but Lucius's faith in Isis is necessary to make the ritual effective. The cult of the Cabiri at Samothrace involved a confession of sins, and Apuleius makes Lucius set aside the sins of his youth upon his conversion, though the celibacy required of him as a lay devotee was only for a brief period of purification in preparation for initiation. Isis was

¹⁴⁴*The Wisdom of Nigrinus* 1.

¹⁴⁵So *The Wisdom of Nigrinus*, 35-37, and Epictetus, *Discourses* 3.23.

¹⁴⁶See Seneca, *Epistle* 6 on this theme.

¹⁴⁷For this reference and much else in this paragraph, I rely on Meeks (1993) Chapter 2. For *The Tabula of Cebes*, see John Fitzgerald and L. Michael White, ed. and tr., Chico, California: Scholars, 1983.

¹⁴⁸According to Tertullian, *On the Crown*, Ch. 15, not only the Christians refused to wear a crown in military celebrations, but adherents of Mithras also, and for the same reason, that it was involved in cult practices that entailed betrayal of their God.

particularly attached to sexual purity, and, like Christianity, made a great deal of celibacy and virgins.¹⁴⁹ But there is a certain amateur aspect to the moral conversion required by the Mysteries. Celibacy and asceticism was restricted to the professional priest, and although lay initiates might be expected to meet certain lower standards, and to purify themselves for special ceremonies and festivals with bouts of celibacy and other ascetic practices, a real repudiation of their old ways was not pressed upon them. That repudiation was far more characteristic of philosophy. Thus, in the career of Augustine, we find him first adopting a religion, Manichaeism, which made excuses for its lay followers, permitting them to remain largely attached to their old secular values and vices. Then he converted to Philosophy, adopting a new moral virtue, even celibacy, and withdrawing from corrupt Roman society into a tightknit community of fellow enthusiasts on his private estate. Christianity, of course, inherited the viewpoint of Judaism, which laid on every member of the faith the duties of the priest. Conversion to Judaism required the adoption of the Jewish law, a real conversion to a new way of life, entailing real isolation from most of the culture of the Gentiles. In this it was more like the Philosophy than the religions of the Ancient world.

The Christian rejection of sexuality requires special comment. It was rooted not only in the notion, shared with other sects, that a peculiar power could be gained through continence, but also in the *Old Testament* image of apostasy as a form of adultery. Biblical imagery clearly associated sexual license of every kind with the unholy and the apostate. This would seem to rule out sex outside of marriage, but some influential Christian moralists went even further, and held that intercourse should not be indulged in for the sake of pleasure at all, even within marriage, but only for the sake of offspring. Moreover, Jesus and Paul had been celibate, preserving the sort of sexual purity exercised, for instance, among the Essenes, to wage holy war. They provided a model for priests and monks thereafter. Even for the common believer, prostitution and divorce were to be rejected, and abortion and infanticide, both commonplace in the Ancient Mediterranean, were forbidden as well. In the fourth century, Augustine carried the matter yet further, and insisted, not entirely without scriptural support, that sexual desire, even without action, was sin already, and unavoidable sin arising from the original sin of Adam. A philosophical justification for this view could be given, for sexual desire is fundamentally immune to reason, and for that very reason a kind of idolatry is involved in it, for one finds the gratification of sexual desires set before one's rational devotion to God.

Even before Augustine's final tightening of the screws, virgins received high honor among Christians.

¹⁴⁹For the earliest Christian evidence, I *Corinthians* 7. See the discussion of Apuleius in Meeks (1993) 27-28.

Indeed, there were certain worldly advantages to celibacy. A woman maintained much more control over her affairs, as well as evading the very real dangers of pregnancy, and a man avoided the distractions and burdens of a family, while either would receive more honor and respect than otherwise might be their due.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, the Christian ideal of seeking a reality and a self beyond the social constructions of one's fellows might almost seem to specify celibacy, for nothing draws one more firmly into the world and its concerns than marriage.¹⁵¹ Paul's letters are quite insistent about the superiority of celibacy, and some of the pseudo-Pauline letters seem intended in part as antidotes to his hostility to marriage. *I Timothy* even urges that Bishops ought to be married,¹⁵² while *Hebrews* insists that "the marriage bed is not polluted,"¹⁵³ and *Ephesians* goes so far as to liken marriage to the mystery of Christ and the Church.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, these letters even suggest there is something wrong with the ideal of virginity for women, for women are naturally gullible (witness Eve's temptation by the Serpent in Eden) and need the steadying influence of a husband's rationality, and *I Timothy* contradicts Paul's advice in *I Corinthians* in urging that younger widows remarry, to avoid scandal.¹⁵⁵ In the second and third centuries the leading theologians picked up on these themes and defended marriage, though Clement, for instance, still thought that celibacy *within* marriage was superior to the usual custom if it could be managed.¹⁵⁶ But the passion for monasticism grew in the course of the third century, and when Augustine's conviction that sexual desire was intrinsically sinful came to dominate the scene, Clement's marital celibacy came even more to be preferred to the usual custom, and marriage itself was henceforth allowed no purpose beyond

¹⁵⁰Of course, there are very real disadvantages as well, but the advantages of celibacy can appear great particularly when marriage and child rearing, and the economic and political life that goes with them, goes badly. Pagels (1988) Chapter 4 discusses Athanasius's *Life of Saint Anthony*, Gregory of Nyssa's *On Virginity*, the anonymous *Clementine Homilies*, the *Symposium* of Methodius, and finally Jerome's *Against Jovinian* for the ideal of celibacy in the fourth century and earlier, and all these works extol many advantages of the celibate state other than the freedom it provides for devotion to God. One finds the same perhaps irrelevant reference to the worldly advantages of celibacy, in Buddhist discussions of the life of a monk.

¹⁵¹This was an especially touchy issue among the Romans, who took attention to one's duty to one's society as the mark of a good man, and so considered marriage and children a central duty. To pursue a celibate life was to ignore this public duty, unless one had priestly duties that required it. As heir to the Shamanistic tradition, Christianity at first rejected this public view of the good almost entirely, and only after the Empire became Christian did it make some sort of peace with it. Before the fourth century, to be a Christian meant to reject society. See Pagels (1988) Chapter 4.

¹⁵²*I Timothy* 3:2-5.

¹⁵³*Hebrews* 13:4.

¹⁵⁴*Ephesians* 5:32.

¹⁵⁵*I Timothy* 5:14 for remarriage; 2:11-15, *Ephesians* 5:23-24, for a woman's need for a husband to rule her.

¹⁵⁶Pagels (1988) 23-31 for the pseudo-Pauline letters and Clement's use of them.

procreation, while the celibate state was held to be entirely superior.¹⁵⁷

This view reflected the depth of the Christian commitment to other-worldly aims, pursued within a celibate and ascetic way of life led by religious specialists, spiritual descendants of the pre-civilized Shamanistic religion of personal salvation. The center of religious practice was no longer to be the civic religion characteristic of the Mediterranean civilizations that grew from the valleys of the Euphrates and the Nile. The stone which had been rejected, the Shamanic enthusiast, the adherent of private Mysteries, the outsider with his purely personal life and religious aims, had become the religious cornerstone. The civic religion survived as well, of course, though its character changed. The religious leader was no longer a member of the community elevated to a merely ritual function for the conciliation of the gods on behalf of the community.¹⁵⁸ The conciliation of God now required that the community make its peace with an ascetic morality of universal love, and the priest was as much a critic of the community, urging God's requirements on our lives, as an intercessor with God. Thus the conflict between civic and personal religion, civic duty to family and society and personal salvation through prayer, a meditative knowledge of God, heroic morality, and ascetic celibacy, would continue.

If anything in early Christian morality was meritorious by our present-day standards, it would be its requirement of universal love.¹⁵⁹ Although this was close to Stoic doctrine,¹⁶⁰ and had its echoes in philosophical Paganism, it seems Christians were considered odd in the Ancient world both for their pacifism and their aid to the poor and unfortunate. For the Pagans, love was for the deserving, the admirable and wise. It was an extension of friendship, possibly cosmopolitan in scope, extending to all those who were wise and shared in one's picture of the ideal person, but it was hard for a Pagan to conceive that God would require, or that it would be reasonable, to become friends with the foolish and venial. Christian love had definite limits, too, of course. There was no program for social reform, and advocacy of governmental reform was ruled out by a

¹⁵⁷When a copy of a book by the monk Jovinian, arguing that marriage was just as holy as celibacy, came into Jerome's hands in Rome, he wrote at length against it. Ambrose and Augustine also attacked Jovinian's view, and his defense of it only served to provide an occasion for its general rejection, at least in the West. See Pagels (1988) 89-96.

¹⁵⁸No longer *in principle*, I should say. In practice, of course, the religious leader was often precisely that, but that was because practice fell short of the accepted ideal.

¹⁵⁹For an eloquent account of what Christianity required here, see *Romans* 12, and *Romans* 14, which presses the claim that one must not take pride in one's virtue or judge and criticize others, for one has no right to pass judgment on another's servant. Even when Paul allows that a serious sinner must be driven from the congregation, in I *Corinthians* 5, he does not presume to say whether he may not be restored by Christ in the last days.

¹⁶⁰Though Stoicism has little in it of Paul's insistence on abandonment of the Self.

deliberate and principled acquiescence in the rule of whatever powers may be. Political and social reform were not rejected in principal, be it understood, but it had to wait upon the Millennium. This acquiescence was general in the Roman Empire, though. Philosophical utopianism existed, but real reform of the state was held universally to hang either on the accomplishment of national independence from Rome, so that one's own elite could run their own affairs, or on reform from above. The right of the upper classes and the monarch to rule was never questioned, nor was the advisability of the arrangement seriously in question, except when a hereditary nobility questioned the rights of a foreign nobility, or the rights of a small number of their companions who were hoarding all the offices and power for themselves. In a society in which slavery was all but universally accepted, and all were jealous of their positions above whatever others they happened to be above, reform based on the notion of a universal right to self-rule, or universal human worth, was impossible. One might allow that an exceptional person could have the misfortune to be a slave, and such a person should be freed, but most wanted to see nothing wrong in principle with slavery, or with the rights of the conqueror in general to exploit the conquered. Those who did see something wrong here realized they had to wait for supernatural intervention, living in a world flawed in its depths until God himself set things right.

Christian charity might also seem to have been limited because it was very much a matter of love for one another within the community, that is, they took care of their own, something Pagan burial societies and religious associations did as well, of course. A general concern for those outside one's own social organizations and social class is not often encountered in Greek and Roman culture. Even the Greek democracies of the 5th century were limited associations of citizens which claimed the right to rule and exploit others because of conquest, the theoretical basis of the essential institution of slavery. But, of course, the Christian community was open to all who wished to enter it, and this is essential background to understanding the call to let others see how Christians loved one another. To love one another meant, in practice, both extending one's love to those outside the community to attract them as recruits, and extending it beyond one's own social class even within the community. Christians were odd in the Pagan world because they admitted the down and out, and even slaves, into their company freely, and so they took on a burden of charity avoided by Pagan groups, which generally limited their membership with an eye to social and economic status.¹⁶¹

But it must be observed that Christian charity was rooted in practice in a stronger motive than love. The contribution of one's surplus wealth to the Church and its poor was the most effective form of penance,

¹⁶¹Here, again, the career of Lucian prevents over-generalization. The cult of Isis clearly was willing to accept repentant, lower class sinners into its ranks.

continuously emphasized in the preaching of the hierarchy. And penance was always necessary, of course, for one was always drifting away from the levels of virtue required by the Scriptures. It was especially necessary for the wealthy, for whom the mere fact of their wealth might be enough to constitute sin, for all knew with what difficulty a rich man entered the Kingdom of Heaven. Thus the Christian sense of sin, and the view that sins would be pardoned those who gave to the Church and its causes, produced a reliable income for the Church, much of which would be channeled into charity, contributing to a reliable program of recruitment.¹⁶²

As for Christian pacifism, it seemed socially irresponsible to many, since Christians not only eschewed violence against the persecuting government, which made sense given Roman military might, but also often refused service in the army¹⁶³—pacifism had to be repudiated by the Christian hierarchy after Constantine's conversion. It was bound to fade, in any case, as the religion became a majority faith, and it ceased to be useful in fighting persecution. Pacifism in practice is usually a way of overcoming more powerful opponents that one cannot successfully oppose with violence. It appeals to the persecutors' sympathy and sense of fair play. Once the group is in control, pacifism will seem, to most, only a hindrance to the effective application of power, and so it loses favor. Moreover, pacifism, like the asceticism one finds espoused in Christian scriptures, was originally part of a morality for the itinerant preacher (a familiar type to urban Pagans, accustomed as they were to Cynic philosophers and other deliberately homeless Shaman figures).

The more ascetic moral demands of Jesus in the Gospels are addressed to his disciples, and among the Orthodox, at least, it was assumed reasonably that this was a special morality for the religious specialist. Perhaps at first there was a notion that every Christian should become a wandering preacher spreading the word, but as the expectation of the immediate return of Christ faded Christianity fell into conformity with the usual pattern exemplified in other organizations. The preacher had special ascetic duties, as far as the average Christian was concerned, for a number of reasons. He needed to be especially pure and acceptable to God to perform his function, and that meant moral purity, of course. He had to be a diplomat and get along with everybody, and was supposed to be the servant of all, and so extremes of pacifism and self-sacrifice were

¹⁶²See Brown (1996) 29-31.

¹⁶³Tertullian, in both *The Crown of the Soldier* 11 (written in 208), and *On Idolatry* 19, argues that no Christian should become a soldier, for in so doing (1) one deserts the army of Christ, swearing allegiance to another which does not recognize the Christian's obligation, (2) for one is obligated under military discipline to engage in all sorts of Pagan cult practices, and finally, (3) in Scripture it is said that he who lives by the sword dies by the sword, which seems to outlaw the profession of soldiering due to the violence involved. The avoidance of Pagan cult practices pretty much ruled out any civil service position for a Christian, and indeed, even most official legal acts, as *On Idolatry* makes clear. Pacifism was characteristic of Montanism and similar movements, which adhered to the primitive morality and saw the Church as the body of the truly faithful, not as the organization led by the Bishops.

reasonably expected from him. Not that the average Christian was not in a way subject to similar requirements, but as the initial expansion of the religion passed, Christianity ceased to be a prophets' guild, if indeed it ever was one, and most Christians, however much they were practitioners of the Faith, came to be only occasional missionaries, and so the average Christian came to see these requirements as ideals they could not be expected to live up to completely, as counsels of perfection. Even now a reason often given to Christians for taking the counsels of perfection more seriously than they are accustomed to is that others won't be attracted to the religion if they see that Christians are in no way different from ordinary folk. Of course, among a minority, and in some more committed groups that drifted away from the Orthodox, the ascetic ideal came to have a charm of its own. There are always some who think they have to live the ideal themselves to live well, that merely recognizing and honoring it, attending to it within the limits of practicality, and honoring those specialists who make unreasonable sacrifices to adhere to it more closely, is not enough for a good life. And when one practices them one sometimes discovers reasons for universal love even of sinners, pacifism and self-sacrifice, which go beyond the effectiveness they lend one as a preacher. Later, such people could become monks, professional outsiders specializing in wisdom and criticism of the commonplace, compromised way of life, to whom a layman might come for advice and spiritual aid in times of crisis, or for assistance in self-formation during a retreat. We shall attend to these matters later, when we examine the writings of Christian ascetics.¹⁶⁴

Despite any shortcomings ordinary Christians may have had, then, Christianity's focus on an ascetic and other-regarding morality, and the problems presented by the demands of this morality on erring human beings, gave plausibility to the view advanced by later Christian apologists that this was a peculiarly philosophical religion, centered on a philosopher's God, eternal and transcendent like the God of the Platonists, and demanding moral perfection in the way that a philosopher's God would, but traditional Pagan gods generally did not. But in the end the greatest advantage of Christianity remained its appeal to the lower elements of society. Here was a religion that not only provided material assistance to its members when they most needed it, and a strong sense of communal belonging, but also an opportunity for people with no conventional source of self-esteem to gain a sense of self-worth and importance. In time, it even offered to the more capable an ecclesiastical career in which they could, in principle, at least, rise high on ability alone, regardless of their social status before entering the Church. Moreover, it provided a chance for sinners to start

¹⁶⁴These remarks arise out of reflection on Meeks (1986) Chapter 4, but also owe a good deal to Nietzsche, and something to Brown (1978).

over, reforming their lives within a caring community convinced that all alike must confess themselves sinners, and experienced in the dynamics of conversion and spiritual rebirth. Particularly in the cities, where we know Christianity was most successful, there were lonely, disconnected people—discharged soldiers, countrymen come to town to make their fortune, the unemployed looking for work, freed slaves—who would find in the community of the Church, and perhaps nowhere else, not only a kind of vindication and a material refuge, but a sense of connection and a new home.¹⁶⁵ All in all, Christianity was well adapted to grow and establish itself in the cities of the Empire in the second and third centuries.

¹⁶⁵For this very significant suggestion, see Dodds (1965) 136–138. Brown (1978) 2-4 argues against this suggestion that it was the claustrophobic intensity of small town life, where everyone knows everyone’s business, that made people unhappy in the Empire, even in a Roman city, which consisted of a multitude of intensely communal enclaves. Rootlessness is not a problem that reveals itself in the literature of the time, but rather something we project back into it from our own urban environment. Nonetheless, Dodd’s suggestion seems to have some value. Brown, for one thing, seems not to see how, before Constantine, Christianity would have worked at the margins of society. A decided minority of rootless people would still have provided nourishment to the movement, and his own suggestion, that there was a shift in central importance from the civic religion, with its communications from the gods supporting communal values, to individual traffickers with the Divine, addressing individual concerns, seems to presuppose the disintegration of larger communal structures and the shift of emphasis to private life and private ambition that is generally taken to have occurred after the age of the Antonines.