

# THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST AND THE TRIUMPH OF HELLENISM

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## Part 1: WHAT SCHOLARS ARE SAYING ABOUT THE DOCTRINE OF CHRIST

[ All statements cited in the following compilation are presented without quotation marks, but the sub-headings in bold print are my own, and all comments within the square brackets as used here are my editorial comments.]

### **Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth***

[*Dr. Mack, professor of early Christianity at the School of Theology at Claremont*]

**The assignment of names and the arrangement of the New Testament writings are misleading.**

Scholars agree...most of the writings of the New Testament were either written anonymously and later assigned to a person of the past or written later as a pseudonym for some person thought to have been important for the earliest period. Striking examples of the latter are the two letters said to have been written by Peter, both of which are clearly second-century creations.

Thus, over the course of the second and third centuries, centrist Christians were able to create the impression of a singular, monoline history of the Christian Church. They did so by carefully selecting, collecting, and arranging anonymous and pseudonymous writings assigned to figures at the beginning of Christian time...It is neither an authentic account of Christian beginnings nor an accurate rehearsal of the history of the empire church. Historians of religion would call it myth.  
pp.7,8

**The primitive Jesus movement did not think of Jesus as the Christ. It was his teaching rather than his person that was important.**

The way that Luke tells the story in his two-volume history of Christian origins, for instance, is that after his death but before his ascension Jesus announced the establishment of the First Christian Church of Jerusalem by means of the outpouring of God's Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 1-20). We now know that Luke [whoever he really was] wrote his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles in the early second century, seventy-five or more years after the time of Jesus, and that he had his reasons for wanting to imagine things that way...there is not a trace of evidence in any of the early Jesus materials to support such a view. No early Jesus group thought of Jesus as the Christ or of itself as a Christian church...

It is neither possible nor necessary to say very much about the historical Jesus. The first followers of Jesus were not interested in preserving accurate memories of the historical person. Jesus was important to them as the founder-teacher of a school of thought.... the matter of first importance was the teaching, not the historical teacher... p.46

Q [the scholarly symbol which identifies the earliest writings of the Jesus school] will put us in touch with the first followers of Jesus. It is the earliest written record we have from the Jesus movement, and it is a precious text indeed. That is because it documents the history of a single group of Jesus people for a period of about fifty years from the time of Jesus in the 20s until after the Jewish-Roman war in the 70s...they did not need to imagine Jesus in the role of a god or tell stories about the resurrection from the dead in order to honour him as a teacher. The earliest layer of the teachings of Jesus in the Q are the least embellished of any of his sayings in any extant document. That means that the Q puts us as close to the historical Jesus as we will ever be. Thus the importance of Q is enormous. It has enabled us to reconsider and revise the traditional picture of early Christian history by filling in the time from Jesus until just after the destruction of Jerusalem when the first narrative gospel, the Gospel of Mark, was written.

Q is from the German word *Quelle*, meaning "source." The text got its name when scholars discovered that both Matthew and Luke had used a collection of sayings of Jesus as one of the "sources" for their gospels, the other being the Gospel of Mark... A critical edition of the unified Greek text is being produced by the International Q Project under the direction of James Robinson at Claremont.

Q brings the early Jesus people into focus, and it is a picture so different from that which anyone ever imagined as to be startling. Instead of people meeting to worship a risen Christ, as in the Pauline congregations, or worrying about what it meant to be a follower of a martyr, as in the Markan community, the people were fully preoccupied with questions about the kingdom of God in the present and behaviour required if one took it seriously... pp.47,48

### **The cult of Christ began among the Hellenist Jewish believers who fled to Antioch in Syria.**

Beginning somewhere in northern Syria, probably in the city of Antioch, and spreading through Asia Minor into Greece, the Jesus movement underwent a change of historic consequence. It was a change that turned the Jesus movement into a cult of a god called Jesus Christ. At first sight it is difficult to imagine that the Christ cult was at the one time a Jesus movement, for the change was so drastic and appears to have happened so suddenly...

The Christ cult differed from the Jesus movements in two major respects. One was a focus upon the significance of Jesus' death and destiny. Jesus' death was understood to have been an event that brought a new community into being. This focus on Jesus' death had the result of shifting attention away from the teachings of Jesus and away from a sense of belonging to his school. It engendered instead an elaborate preoccupation with notions of martyrdom, resurrection, and transformation of Jesus into a divine, spiritual presence...

...the Christ cult[was] already in existence before Paul encountered it. The Christ people must have been making their presence felt in a way that aroused Paul's hostility when first he encountered

them. And yet, they must have been attractive enough to occasion his later conversion...Because these people were the ones who first used the term *Christ* when referring to Jesus, we must think of them as the first Christians... pp.75-76

And Jesus Christ soon became his proper name. p.91

“The transformation of a Jesus movement into the Christ cult, where the Christ was acclaimed as the lord of the universe, marks an important juncture at the beginning of Christianity. p. 96

**The first Jesus people knew nothing of Paul’s very different kind of teaching.**

...Paul’s conception of Christianity is not evident among the many texts of the early Jesus movements... It is the difference between the picture painted by the Jesus movements and the picture painted by Paul that requires explanation. p.99

### **Lorraine Parkinson, *The World According to Jesus: His blueprint for the best possible world***

*[Dr. Parkinson did her doctoral research of the historical Jesus at the Ecole Biblique et Archeologique francaise de Jerusalem, and continues as a teacher and writer and offering interim ministry in the Uniting Church congregations in Australia.]*

**The doctrine of Christ divides and separates human beings.**

Many Christian scholars are writing about the need to put aside traditional dogma which divides and separates human beings in the name of a Saviour Christ. Such dogma has now been regarded as irrelevant to life by at least two generations of Western Christians, many of whom have clearly voted with their feet...Biblical scholarship ancient and contemporary is as sure as it can be that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s Gospel represents Jesus’ own teaching. Most argue that the contents represent core sayings of the historical Jesus, even though many see the form of the collection itself as a literary creation of Matthew. p.3

**Jesus was not an apocalyptic preacher about the violent end of an evil world.**

I do not subscribe to traditional doctrines of incarnation which understand Jesus to be the divine second person of the triune God... Contrary to expectations inspired by Paul’s writings and passed on by gospel writers, I oppose the idea that Jesus believed his vision would be fulfilled through an apocalyptic eschatological intervention by God at an End-time in history. p.6

**Jesus did not see himself as the messiah figure.**

...Jesus did not see himself as a messiah figure who would soon return after his death when God intervened to save the world... By taking Jesus’ teaching with absolute seriousness, it is possible to see in them enormous potential for the unity of humanity, not only within Christianity itself, but beyond particular religions and cultures... There are several key aspects to this development, including a move away from Christological understandings of Jesus and God. p.8-10

**There is no vision of a perfect world or even a perfect Jesus.**

[1] will not argue for Jesus as an eschatological teacher who believed that the present world would end with the intervention of God to destroy evil and restart the world in the pristine perfect mould of a second Garden of Eden. There is no evidence from history or science that the world ever was perfect... Followers of Jesus do not have the potential to develop a perfect world, but through their change of mind and heart each can help bring about the best possible world in their own time and place. This is the all-inclusive possibility behind the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth. p.17,19

His followers in this age have been freed from the impossible call to follow Jesus the Christ. They have freed Jesus himself from the moribund trappings of Christology. They now recognize that Jesus' teachings come from an imperfect human being whose ideas are specifically formulated for imperfect human beings. p.229

## **Michael Morwood: It's Time: Challenges to the Doctrine of the Faith**

[Michael was ordained to the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church, Australia, but has worked over the last 25 years as an independent author and faith educator]

### **It is time to question Christology.**

It is time to break from the worldview of two thousand years ago with its notions of a Supreme overlord God who lived in the heavens and who disconnected access to "Himself" because of some supposed sin by the first human. It is time to question the Christology that is tied to that outdated worldview and interprets the importance of Jesus – and the institutional Church – in terms of unique access to that heavenly deity. p.21

...an elsewhere overseeing Lord of the universe does not fit anymore. It is too tied to images of earth as the centre of the universe and of heaven as God's dwelling place above the earth, and to the up-down language associated with those images...it is time to take seriously ...that this Mysterious Presence we call "God" is everywhere and it is beyond all our human concepts...to an understanding and appreciation of the Divine Presence always here, always and everywhere active in an expanding universe and in the evolution of life on this planet. p.23

The obvious lesson from Jesus' Jewish background is that the Divine Presence at work in the human community was, is and always will be primarily concerned with life on earth. If we do not place Jesus in this prophetic tradition with Judaism [cited in Jeremiah 7:5-7; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6,8; Isaiah 58:6-8,10; Isaiah 2:2,3], we will not appreciate the central thrust of his teaching and ministry or what he was prepared to die for. Instead, we will be distracted, as the Christian religion has been for two thousand years, by notions that Jesus was really concerned about getting people into heaven and meeting "God" there, rather than experiencing the Divine Presence here, and making the "kingdom of God" evident here on earth. p.39

It is clear that he did not see himself as a mediator between people and a distant God...It is time to ask why doctrines about Jesus winning access to heaven became the dominant theology of the Christian religion and how Christianity became so distracted from the basic message of Jesus. pp. 51, 54

**The focus of the Jesus movement in the first 20 years was the presence of the kingdom of God in the here and now.**

...the focus of the Jesus movement in this twenty-year period [after the departure of Jesus] was on the “kingdom of God”. The movement gathered around the belief that Jesus, the “son of man”, the human one, preached with urgency and intensity the need to establish God’s reign on earth. This movement was a way of life and was radical in its embrace of the preaching of Jesus. It seems highly likely, from what scripture scholarship can ascertain, that in this twenty-year period Jesus was considered by members of the movement to be a Jewish prophetic figure. As in the preaching of Jesus, there is no evidence that the movement was concerned with access to the heavenly realms. The concern was to change this world. The focus was on the preaching a way of life that would express the Divine Presence in human living and loving. pp. 55-56

**Jesus did not participate in establishing a new religion.**

It is important to acknowledge that this was a Jewish movement. It was not a new religion. There is no evidence to suggest that any members of the movement thought they were part of a new religion. There are no written narratives from this time about Jesus’ birth, no annunciation story, no virginal conception. There are no resurrection stories. p.56

**Paul’s writings represent a monumental shift away from the teaching of Jesus.**

Then, beginning mid-century with Paul’s writings, and culminating in John’s gospel at the end of the century, a monumental shift in thinking about Jesus occurred...

...let us keep in mind that the first followers of Jesus were Jews. This was a Jewish movement...The followers of Jesus did not separate themselves from Judaism until after Paul died. [And even then, they did not leave Judaism willingly but were expelled by the controlling rabbis around 85 CE] p.56

**The Christ of Paul was crafted to address the Greco-Roman worldview of attaining immortality in a heavenly realm.**

Paul attributed to Jesus the same titles already bestowed on the Greek-Roman semi-gods and on the Roman Emperors, such as Saviour, Son of God and Lord. Paul used another title, one with a long history in Judaism, to bring his message about Jesus to Jews, pagans, Greeks and Romans. It was “christos”, “the anointed one.” Paul presented Jesus as “the Christ”. As we saw earlier, he bestowed on “christos” a meaning, a role and significance far beyond how Jesus would have applied the word to himself.

Paul’s preaching about “the Christ” shifted the focus from Jesus revealing God here-with us to Jesus as the unique pathway to the God who lived in heaven. Paul effectively fit Jesus into a worldview and into concerns Jesus had shown no interest in. Paul’s preaching and writing led the early Jesus movement into concerns about the God who withheld forgiveness for sin and who had denied access to his heavenly home. In using a term familiar to Jews for responding to the Greeks, Paul surely hoped his teaching about “the Christos” would bridge the gap between two significantly different religious worldviews. Unfortunately, the effect was quite different. His Christology ultimately set the scene for the break from Judaism with the claims that only through faith in Jesus “the Christ” could anyone be sure of God’s forgiveness and gain access to heaven. It also set up the centuries of

argument about who Jesus had to be in order to accomplish the task of bridging the chasm between heaven (God) and exiled humanity on earth.

While it is beyond the scope of this book to explore the development of Christology in the Christian Scriptures in any depth, it is imperative to identify how some of its key aspects changed the way Christians came to think about Jesus... pp. 61-62

### **Paul's focus on the death of Christ devalued the teaching of Jesus.**

Paul consistently substitutes "Christ" for "Jesus". This is an extraordinary development. In changing Jesus into "the Christ" who supposedly won peace with and forgiveness from God, Paul effectively devalued Jesus and his preaching. Paul's Christology is totally at odds with how Jesus perceived his role. It is clear that Jesus never told people that God's forgiveness was conditional. It is clear he never told people there was no hope of them being at peace with God unless he sacrificed his life for them. It is clear that he neither believed nor taught that God had disconnected from people. pp. 66-67

### **John's gospel puts words in Jesus' mouth which are a long way from the reality of Jesus.**

John's Gospel, in line with Paul's theology, asserts that only through belief in Jesus as the heavenly "Christ" figure could people receive "power to become children of God"...

Scholars know that the speeches put on Jesus' lips throughout John's gospel are not the words of Jesus. The words are a long way removed from the reality of Jesus, "the son of man" who preached the urgent need to establish God's reign on earth. The speeches call attention to Jesus, not to the kingdom of God.. "I am this...I am that...Before Abraham I...I go to prepare a place for you...Unless I go the Spirit will not come..." These are not the words of Jesus who walked the roads of Galilee. They are speeches composed in the light of Paul's Christology and designed to give the new religion strong institutional identity apart from Judaism. They are composed in a worldview that understood God really lived elsewhere, that this God has "sent" the pre-existent Christ down from the heavenly realm, and that the Christ had to go back to the heavenly realms in order to "send" God's Spirit down upon the followers of Jesus, and only on them!

Thereafter, institutional Christian leadership locked itself into this theological worldview. This theology was then cemented into creeds and doctrines that supposedly can never change.

The reality is that this theology and Paul's vision of "the Christ" on which it depends cannot withstand any realistic scrutiny in the twenty-first century. A God who lives in heaven? A God who locked people out? A world devoid of God's presence? A God who would not forgive? A God who gets angry? God's Spirit waiting in heaven for something to happen on earth before "coming down"? A God who allows access to "Himself" only if people join a particular religion? ... an outright contradiction of Jesus' belief that the Divine Presence was always present and active in people here on earth. pp. 80-81

### **Jesus was not on about getting people into heaven.**

It is time to rescue Jesus from this distracting issue about getting people into heaven. It is time to rescue Jesus from the Pauline "Christ" theology...it is time to stop using "Christ" as Jesus' name.

“Christ” does not elevate Jesus. It distorts his role, distracts from the urgency of his message... pp. 86,87

**Paul did not build his theology on what Jesus said or did in his lifetime.**

Paul never quoted Jesus for any of his theological beliefs. His authority for what he preached about “the Christ” did not come from anything Jesus said or did in his lifetime. The [four] gospels followed Paul. The authors wrote back into the story of Jesus a Christology that Jesus knew nothing about and made it appear he was well aware of it. p.88

**The doctrine of Jesus dying for our sins to satisfy the justice of God did not come from Jesus.**

It did not come from Jesus. Jesus would surely have been horrified that anyone would change his notion of a living and compassionate God into a deity who required a price to be paid before granting forgiveness. He made clear in his parables that his notion of God’s extravagant forgiveness and graciousness exceeded any human concept of justice. The doctrine came from Paul and his notion of “the Christ” winning access to the heavenly home of God. It was Paul who taught that the world was essentially sinful because of Adam’s fall. It was Paul who cemented the belief that there was no possibility of forgiveness from God without Jesus dying for the sins of humanity...It came from Paul who transformed Jesus into a semi-god acceptable to the Greek-Roman world...Jesus did not believe he had to die in order to win God’s forgiveness. pp.114-115

## **Patricia A. Williams, *Doing Without Adam and Eve***

[Patricia Williams has taught philosophy in universities in the United States, Canada and Australia, and is also the author of *Where Christianity Went Wrong*.]

**Jesus was not the Christ who died for our sins.**

According to all the Gospels, John the Baptist proclaims God’s forgiveness outside the Temple, baptizing the penitent in the cleansing waters of the Jordan. Jesus pronounces forgiveness without resorting to any rituals. All the Gospels show John the Baptist and Jesus distaining atoning sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. For Christians, the fact that Jesus dismisses the need for atoning sacrifice should reveal that atoning sacrifices are unnecessary... Jewish prophets cry that the blood of sacrifices avail nothing (Isa. 1:11; Jeremiah 6:20; Amos 5:21-24). Jesus stands in the mainstream of a long and powerful Jewish tradition. Because...John the Baptist and Jesus ignored sacrifice, there is no reason for us to think of Jesus death as a sacrifice. pp. 184-5

## ***The Destructive Power of Religion: Violence in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, Edited by J. Harold Ellen**

[Dr Ellens has been a Biblical scholar, professor of Philosophy, Theology and Psychology as well as being an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church.]

**Jesus was turned into Christ after his death.**

As noted, the all-but universal assumption on the part of contemporary historical critics is that others turned Jesus into Christ and then into God after his death. p. 92 [This comment was made by Jack Miles in his essay, *The Disarmament of God.*]

## **James M. Robinson, *Jesus According to the Earliest Witness***

[Dr. James Robinson is very well known as one of the foremost Historical Jesus scholars of our time. He has led an international group of scholars who have recently reconstructed the compete Sayings Gospel Q, the name given to the earliest writings of the Jesus movement.]

### **Sayings Gospel Q is the earliest witness to the historical Jesus.**

A Sayings Gospel, in distinction from a Narrative Gospel, contains sayings ascribed to Jesus, with hardly any of the stories so familiar to us from the four Narrative Gospels of the New Testament.

The Sayings Gospel Q is even older than the Gospels in the New Testament. In fact, it is the oldest Gospel known! Yet it is not in the New Testament itself – rather, it was known to, and used by, the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke in the eighties and nineties of the first century when they composed their Gospels. But then it was lost from sight and only rediscovered in 1838, embedded in Matthew and Luke. It was nicknamed “Q,” the first letter of the German word for “source (*Quelle*), to refer to the second “source” used by Matthew and Luke, whose first source was Mark...

After all, Q is a product of the Jewish Jesus movement that continued to proclaim his message in Galilee and Syria for years to come, but from which practically no first-century texts have survived. The New Testament is mainly a Gentile collection, and hence only preserves the sources of Gentile churches. p.235

### **Jesus is not mentioned as Messiah or Christ in these earliest writings.**

Nowhere in the Sayings Gospel Q is Jesus referred to as Messiah, “Christ.” As a matter of fact, it is a bit inappropriate to refer to the Jews who produced this Sayings Gospel as “Christians,” since that name emerged not in Galilee, but in Antioch in the Gentile-Christian church of Barnabas and Paul (Acts 11;26). Similarly, other dimensions associated with later faith in Jesus as the Messiah are missing: neither is Bethlehem mentioned, where David was born and hence his successor is to be born, nor is the holy family, much less the genealogies that trace Jesus back to the patriarchs. p.xi

In the earliest layer of Q Jesus claimed no title, and seemed not to have been involved in our Christological reflections at all. (The Gospel of John has misled us into thinking he was obsessed with his own status, which is almost all Jesus talks about there)... Paul provided the core of our Christian faith, not Jesus. pp.230, 231

Perhaps the most striking thing about epithets for Jesus in Q is the complete absence of the title “Christ.” This fits the absence of a birth narrative in Bethlehem, the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah. p.238

### **Sayings Gospel Q was written by eyewitnesses of Jesus, but the canonical NT Gospels were not.**



Furthermore, since Q consists of sayings ascribed to Jesus, it is ultimately based on his Galilean disciples – their memory, reformulation, and reuse of what Jesus had said. On the other hand, none of the canonical Gospels was written by an apostle or eyewitness. p. 174

**The Sayings Gospel Q was excluded from the canon of Scripture because its Jewish authors came to be excluded from the Church as heretics.**

The mutual acceptance of Jewish and Gentile Christianity at the “ecumenical” Jerusalem Council [ in around 50 CE: see Acts 15] had long since broken down, with the successful Gentile Christianity rejecting the unsuccessful Jewish Christianity as heretical, in effect no longer Christian. Thus the exclusion of its older Gospel from the canon was inevitable. p. 8

### **David Galston, *Embracing the Human Jesus: A Wisdom Path for Contemporary Christianity***

[Dr. David Galston has been the Executive Director of the *Westar Institute* and the Executive Director of *The Quest Learning Centre* of the Uniting Church of Canada where he has served as a minister]

**Many theologians are terrified of the historical Jesus.**

It seems that the historical Jesus means the end of Christianity, which is why, perhaps, many theologians are terrified of him. p.4

Jesus needs to be given back his humanity... p.6

When the founding figure of the movement like Christianity turns out to be someone quite different from the one depicted by traditional ideas of the movement, a clash occurs – not only between contemporary thinking and the traditional, but also between the founder and the tradition. This is what happens when the historical Jesus meets Christianity.... Once the individual or a community has accepted that Jesus was human like anyone, it becomes increasingly impossible to engage realistically in Christian worship and language. True, many among such folk continue to go to church because friends remain there. Or perhaps such a person does not go to church, and never did, but there is an even better excuse. p.9,10

**The gospel writers clothed Christ with the garments of Caesar and royal imagery.**

The gospel writers took the imperial garments of Caesar, and inadvertently, if not intentionally, slipped them over Jesus. The problem of the historical Jesus begins with the recognition that while an imperial Jesus became the *sine qua non* savior of the world, this imaginative figure never actually lived. p.14

...the titles used to venerate Jesus were the same titles used to venerate emperors, heroes, and pagan gods...The image of Jesus Christ set against this background is a legend born from the mixture of Roman imperial theology and Jewish messianic history. The point is, how can one retrieve a human being out of that? p.33,34

**Jesus was Jewish and not Christian.**

We can be assured by reason alone that in his lifetime the historical Jesus did not hold confessional Christian beliefs. It is not necessary to offer this conviction for debate. As plainly as can be stated, and absolutely, the historical Jesus was Jewish, and not Christian. p.18

**The four NT gospels were not written during the lifetime of Jesus.**

No matter what scholarship is involved, liberal or conservative, no one claims that the gospels were written during the lifetime of Jesus. The gospels simply are not a verbatim record of what Jesus said; they are a record of what early Christians believed Jesus said. They are the record of early beliefs about Jesus. p.37

Anyone who picks up on the voiceprint of the historical Jesus need not determine exactly what he said or what he did – such cannot be determined anyway – in order to know what he was about. p.48

**Jesus was a wisdom teacher, not an apocalyptic prophet proclaiming the end of the world.**

The apocalyptic Jesus model does very poorly when addressing the main thing to be said about Jesus; that he spoke in parable... it is a very difficult form of language to hold to the one reductive, interpretation that apocalypticism demands. It is impossible to claim that the end of the world is coming with the ambiguities implied in parables...

Apocalypticism, then, is the theology of the early Christian movement but not the teaching of the historical Jesus. pp.74-7

Apocalyptic concerns overrode wisdom teaching within a few decades of his death, and on this rock Jesus became a religion. p.92

To be a follower of the historical Jesus does not require beliefs about him; it requires ears to hear him...

What is found in the parables and aphorisms of Jesus is a biting trinity of satire composed of paradox, hyperbole, and irony. [Galston says that the gospels, especially Matthew, do not always understand Jesus' sense of humour, and turns his parables into apocalyptic allegories illustrating the end-times. We should therefore beware of the Gospel authors attempts to explain the meaning of his parables]. pp.104-109

I will suggest that from its earliest phases to the present, Christianity has been mainly an apocalyptic religion in its theology and worship forms...Christianity as a world religion was born out of and formed with the structures of apocalyptic thinking...the Christian proclamation of salvation is difficult to make without an apocalyptic structure... as a historical being [Jesus] does not really offer a foundation for an apocalyptic model at all. pp.143-147

**The message of the historical Jesus is not about the Christ.**

...the historical Jesus had no idea he would be the Christ within a new religion...The Christ is not the gospel of the historical Jesus, and this disjunction creates some genuine problems...As a teller of parables, Jesus mocked the imperial ideas of God, particularly evident when associating the presence of God with a mustard plant or with yeast... In the Church, Jesus has become Caesar by another name...

The difficulty is that the Christian tradition began with the Christ confession. The confession is the bedrock of Christianity...if the historical Jesus community drops the title Christ, is it still Christianity? pp. 189-192

**There is no mention of Christ in the earliest writings of the followers of Jesus.**

Q holds no Christ language, no crucifixion and resurrection narrative, and only a few hints of miracle lore associated with Jesus. p.219

### **Hugh J. Schonfield, *Those Incredible Christians***

[Dr. Schonfield is a Jewish scholar and a best-selling author who is widely recognized as an authority on Jewish Christianity]

**Pauline Christianity was not the Apostolic teaching.**

We are permitted by the New Testament, dominated by Pauline material, only brief and inadequate glimpses of the very substantial Nazorean movement to which the Apostles appointed by Jesus in his lifetime belonged...In many matters Paulinism was in conflict with native Christianity, and ultimately got the upper hand through its greater appeal to Gentiles and because political conditions made it increasingly difficult for the legitimate Church to exercise an effective corrective influence. In the end the relationships were reversed. Pauline heresy served as the basis for Christian orthodoxy, and the legitimate Church was outlawed as heretical... p.74

**Paulinism triumphed only after the Apostles of Jesus were dead.**

Paul was a remarkable individual and something of a religious genius, so that it came to be assumed that he had the mind of his master as he claimed in addressing his converts. Yet this was not the opinion of those who had known Jesus personally, and they did not hesitate to say so. For the Apostolic Church much that Paul taught was grievous error... Paul never companied with Jesus or heard what he said day after day... What the native Church's emissaries contended was so logical, however, and so convincing, that before Paul's death Paulinism was defeated over a wide area, and many of his converts were won over...Decades elapsed before the teaching of Paul was reinstated and his letters treated as inspired. The writing of the Acts of the Apostles was a contribution to this rehabilitation. By this time the original Apostles had long been dead, and the churches of the West, now predominantly non-Jewish in composition, were almost entirely out of contact with the Nazoreans as an outcome of the Jewish war with Rome. pp.76-78

### **Marcus J. Borg, Essay in *The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels*, [Moderated by Hershhal Shanks]**

[Dr. Borg is a distinguished Lutheran author in what is known as the Third Quest for the Historical Jesus movement. He has been a Professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University.]

**The Christian message was not the message of the historical Jesus.**

To summarize and put it bluntly in three quick statements as I'm going to may seem almost brutal. In all likelihood, the pre-Easter Jesus did not think of himself as the Messiah or in any of the exalted terms in which he is spoken of. Second, we can say with almost complete certainty that he did not see his own mission or purpose as dying for the sins of the world. Third and finally, again with almost complete certainty, we can say that his message was not about himself or the importance of believing in him. p.87

### **Jesus was a wisdom teacher.**

...the greatest consensus among contemporary New Testament scholars is about Jesus as a wisdom teacher, a consensus that has emerged in the last 20 years. The most characteristic forms of Jesus' speech as a wisdom teacher are parables (basically short stories) and aphorisms (short sayings), both of which crystallize insight. Aphorisms are great one-liners. I think it's fascinating that one of the most certain things we can know about Jesus is that he was a storyteller and a speaker of great one-liners. p.100

### **We don't know who wrote the NT Gospels.**

We don't know anything at all about who they were. With almost complete certainty, we can say they did not bear the names by which the gospels are known. None of them knew Jesus while he was alive. They weren't the 12 disciples. That is, John wasn't written by one of the Twelve; Matthew **wasn't** written by one of the Twelve. So in that sense, they are all anonymous documents. p.139

### **Comment by Hershall Shanks, Editor of the *The Search for Jesus***

[Dr. Shanks has served as Editor of *Biblical Archaeology Review* and *Bible Review*]

### **Defining the historical problem: we only have access to reports from the third stage of the Jesus movement.**

A great Catholic scholar, Joseph Fitzmyer...points out that there are three stages in the development of the gospel tradition. In stage one, we have what Jesus said and did in the first third of the first century. Stage two consists of what the disciples and the apostles taught and preached about what Jesus said and did. Stage three is the sequential narratives by the authors of the gospels, what they sifted out from the teachings of the disciples and apostles. Only stage three has been preserved. And this, in a sense, defines our problem. Starting from stage three, how do we get back to stage one, what Jesus said and did? p.4

### **James G. D. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the NT***

*James Dunn(1939-2020) was Lightfoot Professor of Divinity, University of Durham, Member of the Church of Scotland and the Methodist Church of Great Britain. Dr. Dunn did not call the Christology of the Church into question. He is cited here because he makes an important contribution to understanding how that the post-Easter Jesus movement very quickly split into two groups that were known as Hebrews and Hellenists who exhibited some serious differences and tensions with each other.*

**What the Church of the Second Century called "heretical Jewish Christianity" was close to the faith of the apostolic church at Jerusalem.**

[Dunn is cited here to show that the teachings of the apostolic church in Jerusalem did not subscribe to the orthodox Christian teaching about Christ. He identifies three significant characteristics of what the Church of the second century called “heretical Jewish Christianity”: (1) adherence to the law of Moses; (2) the exultation of James and denigration of Paul, and (3) *adoptionism* - the belief that Jesus was a naturally born son of Joseph and Mary, indicating that he was the son of God only by adoption. In the next century this came to be called the heresy of “adoptionism.” (pp. 240 - 242)]

If these are indeed the three principal features of heretical Jewish Christianity, then a striking point immediately emerges: heretical Jewish Christianity would appear to be not so very different from the faith of the first Jewish believers.” p.242

Heretical Jewish Christianity could claim a direct line of continuity with the most primitive form of Christianity...If the earliest church is the norm of orthodoxy, then Ebionism measures up pretty well; if primitiveness means purity, then Ebionism can claim to have a purer faith than almost any other. But Ebionism was rejected – why? Because its faith did not develop as Christianity developed. It clung to an expression of Christian faith which was acceptable at the beginning of Christianity in a context of Judaism.” p. 245 [Dunn’s apology for the church’s departure from the apostolic teaching is not very satisfying! He could have investigated whether the Hellenist Jews who fled to Antioch should have embarked on what turned out to be a speculative 400-year journey in Christology which ended in declaring that Christ was God in the highest sense. That was a journey that no Jew who stood in the tradition of the apostolic church at Jerusalem could ever take].

### **The conflict between James and Paul can hardly be overstated.**

[In 2 Cor. 10-13] Paul also accuses them [the missionaries from the Jerusalem church] of preaching another Jesus, of having a different spirit, of proclaiming a different gospel...the sharpness of the antagonism between Paul and Jerusalem can hardly be overstated. p. 25

[Dunn’s comments on Paul’s last visit to Jerusalem according to Acts 21 are as follows:] Then when Paul was arrested and put on trial, we hear nothing of any Jewish Christians standing by him, speaking in his defence – and this despite James’s apparent high standing among orthodox Jews. Where were the Jerusalem Christians? It looks very much as though they had washed their hands of Paul, left him to stew in his own juice. If so it implies *a fundamental antipathy on the part of the Jewish Christians to Paul himself and to what he stood for*. p.256 [Emphasis by Dunn]

### **In the earliest stage of the Jesus movement two factions emerged - the Hebrews and the Hellenists.**

Whatever the precise facts, the clear implication of Acts 6 is that the Jerusalem Hellenists maintained separate synagogues...Obviously many Hellenists had been converted and identified themselves with the new sect of the Nazarene. One conclusion follows almost immediately: that the earliest Christian community embraced two fairly distinct groups more or less from the first- Hebrews who spoke Aramaic (or Hebrew) as a badge of their Jewishness, and Hellenists who preferred to or who could converse only in Greek. ...the Hellenists must have lived rather apart from the rest: otherwise how could the Christian widows have been so completely neglected (Acts 6:1) – not just some of them but the whole group... p. 268-9

These latent tensions within the earliest Christian community came to a head in the failure of the 'community of goods' – the separateness of the two groups resulting in the Hellenist widows being missed out in the daily distribution from the common fund...But almost certainly the failure to cater for the Hellenists and the subsequent complaints of the Hellenists were only the surface expression of these latent tensions, the symptoms of a deeper division. p.269

**The persecution that was directed at Stephen and the Hellenists was not directed at the apostles or the Hebrew church in Jerusalem.**

Stephen's views [in attacking the temple – see Acts 7] seem to have led directly to an open split with the earliest community of Christians; the differences which first became visible in Acts 6:1 now deepened into a more obvious and clear-cut division. The depth of this division is indicated by the account of Stephen's trial and death. The Hebrew Christians seem to have shown no solidarity with or support for Stephen in his trial...Luke's silence is ominous...Is Luke perhaps trying to cloak the fact that the Hebrew Christians had virtually abandoned Stephen, so antagonized were they by his view on the temple?...Stephen's views had at least lost him the sympathy of the local Hebrew Christians, who may have felt that Stephen had gone too far, and had jeopardized the existence of the whole new sect...

Finally we may note that the persecution following Stephen's death seems to have affected only or principally the Hellenist Christians...Luke maintains that the whole church was scattered abroad, 'except the apostles' (Acts 8:1); but that persecuting authorities would concentrate on the numerous followers and ignore the leaders of any proscribed movement is very hard to accept and contrary to sound pogrom strategy....the fact seems to be that the Hellenists were almost wholly driven out of Jerusalem... pp.273-4

**Paul's persecution was not directed at the apostolic church of the Hebrews, but only at the Hellenists who were first to be called *Christians* at Antioch.**

[Calling one faction the Hebrew Christians as James Dunn does above is a little bit misleading because the Hebrews of the apostolic church in Jerusalem led by James were not Christians but Jews. They had no Christology and did not call themselves *Christians*. The label of *Christians* was given to the Hellenists after they had fled to Antioch, a city in Syria not far from Damascus (see Acts 11:26). Saul, who was called Paul in Greek, set out to arrest and haul Christian converts in Damascus back to Jerusalem for trial before the Sanhedrin. If Paul wanted to arrest the Hebrew believers, there were already a few thousands of them in Jerusalem that he could have arrested. The Pharisee Gamaliel, at whose feet Paul had been instructed in the Law, had already counselled the Sanhedrin to stop persecuting the apostolic church in Jerusalem (Acts 5:34-39). So Paul was obviously not trying to arrest members of the apostolic church in Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). According to Acts 9:31, a new era of peace and growth opened up for the apostolic church led by James, the brother of Jesus. We have to conclude that Paul's persecution was directed only at the Hellenist Christians. It was to this group that Paul was dramatically converted].

## **Helmut Koester, *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age***

[Helmut Koester was the Chairman of the Editorial Board, Harvard University, for this publication in 1982]

Indeed, Christianity, which had its beginnings in the early Roman imperial period, was rapidly Hellenized and appeared in the Roman world as a Hellenistic religion, specifically as an already Hellenized Jewish religion. p. 40

Christianity, after all, became a Hellenistic movement through and through, largely because Judaism had already marked the path into Hellenistic culture. pp. 97,98

All the books of the New Testament without exception were originally written in Greek; there is no early Christian Greek writing which can be shown to have been translated from Hebrew or Aramaic...Christian authors normally quote from the Septuagint... p.110

Christianity became deeply enmeshed in the syncretistic process, and this may well have been its particular strength. Christianity began as a Jewish sect with missionary ambitions, but it did not simply arise out of Judaism, nor directly out of the ministry of Jesus. On the basis of these beginnings, however, Christianity, more than any other religion of the time was able to adapt itself to a variety of cultural and religious currents and to appropriate numerous foreign elements until it was ready to succeed as a world religion- thoroughly syncretistic in every way. pp. 166-167

The myth of Dionysus dying and revivication was widely known. p.183

Mary, the mother and goddess of heaven in Christianity, is little more artistically than a copy of Isis. p. 188

Parallels with Christian statements abound in this narration of the into a mystery religion. One should not deny that the New Testament and the mysteries speak the same language. p.191

...Christianity was deeply in a process through which it became one with the Hellenistic world and its religious concepts. p.201

To claim, therefore, that Christianity was specifically the religion of the poor and underprivileged is nonsense and can be easily refuted. p.201

## **PART 2: THE TRIUMPH OF HELLENISM**

Robert D Brinsmead

The word *Christ* is not Jesus' second name. It was a title that was bestowed on him after his death. It was a title in the same way that words such as Caesar, Emperor, Governor or President are titles rather than personal names.

*Christ* was the Greek word used to translate the word *messiah* which literally meant *the anointed one* in the Hebrew scriptures. While the anointed one could refer to any person such as a prophet, priest or king, the word was mostly used in the Hebrew scriptures as a title for an anointed king (Psalm 2:1). Even a Persian king by the name Cyrus the Great could be called God's *messiah* (Isaiah 45:1). In

Jewish apocalyptic writings of the second century BCE, however, the messiah begins to take shape as some kind of warrior king who would defeat and punish Israel's oppressors in an end-time conflict and be given dominion over the nations (Daniel 7: 13:28). That was the most common expectation which prevailed among the Jews in the time of Jesus.

When the title of Christ was at first bestowed on Jesus by some of his Hellenist followers, it simply meant that he was this apocalyptic messiah. In calling Jesus the Christ, Saint Paul nowhere said that he was God. It would be another 400 years before the Christian Church was able to draw up a whole series of Creeds to elevate the status of Christ to become God in the highest sense and co-eternal in the Blessed Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Constructing this high Christology was not completed until the Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE finally declared that Jesus Christ was both fully God and fully human in one hyperstatic union of two natures in one person.

These Creeds of the Church which were drawn up by the Greek-speaking Fathers of the Church from the second to the fifth century were all about Christ. They said nothing about the teachings of the historical Jesus, and they didn't sound anything like the teachings of Jesus. For almost two thousand years, the deity of Christ as expressed in the Creeds remained like the immovable rock of the Christian religion. It remained unmoved when the Roman Catholic church went through the break with the Eastern or Greek Orthodox Church in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, or its break with the Protestant churches in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. For almost two millennia, no branch of the branch of the Church considered as genuinely Christian challenged the Christology established by the Apostles Creed (second century), the Nicene Creed (fourth century), the Council of Chalcedon (fifth century) and the Athanasian Creed (sixth century).

In the beginning of this third millennium of Christian history, however, there are voices everywhere in all branches of the Christian church that are calling Time-up on this central teaching of the Christian religion. As the foregoing compilation of statements from a wide variety of scholars and churchmen indicate, the trend towards calling the doctrine of Christ into question transcends all the old religious boundary lines. This is not a matter of being Catholic or Protestant, Conservative or Liberal, Jewish or Christian – or even non-Christian. It is a matter of putting the evidence of critical enquiry above the authority of (1) who said it, (2) how many have said it, or (3) what authority has said it. When the Enlightenment of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century rejected these three arguments as a valid foundation for what is true or false, it freed the human mind from centuries of enslavement to dogmas and myths that were heretofore unquestionable.

As a fruit of that Enlightenment, over the last two-hundred years a movement has been afoot that has been dubbed the *Quest for the historical Jesus*. It has unearthed a wealth of historical information - information about the early Jesus movement, about the apostolic church led by James, the brother of Jesus, about Paul's conflict with James and Jerusalem in conflict with Antioch, about Jewish Christianity being rejected by the great church as heretical, about the first writings of the Jesus movement called Sayings Gospel Q, about the identity and influence of Apocalyptic writings as a genre of literature that is different to ordinary prophetic literature, and about a wagon load of heretofore unknown Gospels and other documents dug up from the sands of the Middle East in recent times.



When the Christian Church was drawing up its Creeds about the divinity of Christ, the Church Fathers kept insisting that this was the original apostolic faith which Jesus passed down to his disciples and which they in turn passed down to the church as an unchanged and unchangeable package of truth.

With a great deal of certainty, we can now say that this view of church history is a complete myth.

It can now be said with a great measure of historical certainty that the doctrine about the divinity of Christ does not go back to Jesus and does not go back to the church that was founded by the apostles in Jerusalem. It goes back to some Jewish Hellenists who fled to Antioch where they cradled the beginnings of this doctrine about Christ.

**The Apostolic Church at Jerusalem was not a Christian Church. Its Jewish members were not called Christians but Nazarenes.**

The apostolic church that formed in Jerusalem after the death of Jesus was not a Christian church. It was called *apostolic* because the apostles who had been disciples in the school of Jesus were among its founding members. James, the brother of Jesus, was its leader, and its people were not called Christians but Nazarenes or people of *the Way*. Its members were Aramaic-speaking Jews who still worshipped at the temple in Jerusalem as “the house of prayer for all people,” and continued to observe the Jewish customs such as circumcision, sabbath observance and eating kosher (see Acts 21:20). The only exception was that following the example of John the Baptist and Jesus (and before them, the Essenes and the Hebrew prophets) they did not bring any animals to be sacrificed at the temple because they rejected the sacrificial cult of the priesthood. They had no intention of departing from Judaism or the network of Jewish synagogues to form another religion, much less one that was hostile to Judaism.

We need to bear in mind that in that time any group of Jews could form a synagogue to exist within the network of almost 400 synagogues which existed in Jerusalem at that time. Any new group could either be called a *synagogue* or a *church* as both words simply meant a *congregation* or an *assembly*.

Under the leadership of James, this apostolic group grew to include thousands of Jews (Acts 21:20). Far from forsaking Judaism, their vision was for Judaism to become that light on Mount Zion which would attract people from all nations to the worship of the one true God (See Isaiah 2: 2-4; Micah 4:1-3).

**Apostolic teaching was focused on the teaching of Jesus rather than his person.**

*Sayings Gospel Q*, the existence of which was first understood in the 1830's, was written by the earliest followers of Jesus. Although it was written some years after his death, Q had nothing to say about a Christ figure, and very little to say about the person of Jesus. It was Q which first reported that Jesus taught in parables and used wise and witty sayings called aphorisms. The apostolic church and the so-called *Jewish Christianity* (a misnomer) that sprang from it did not believe that Jesus was a divine being or virgin born.

The death of Jesus as an atonement for sin is so central to the Christian religion that it may come as a shock to us that Q has nothing to say about the death of Jesus, even though Q was written after that event. It was as if the authors were thinking, “Why dwell on the death of our teacher rather than his

most memorable sayings which bring to us the spirit and life of his teachings?" These early witnesses never reported that Jesus did any great miracles except refusing to do any to prove the authority of his teaching. Like a true man of the Age of the Enlightenment, Jesus claimed no authority for what he said other than what he said.

The absence of any teaching about the death of Christ as an atonement for sin was consistently maintained in all subsequent Jewish Christian writings such as a catechism written around the turn of the first century called *The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles*, or the Gospel of the Ebionites which cited words from Jesus condemning the cult of sacrifice. Apostolic teaching never attached any saving significance to the death of Jesus because Jesus, like the Hebrew prophets before him, taught that God's loving kindness was the sole basis of forgiveness without the need of any animal or human sacrifice (Micah 6:6-7; 7:18-19; Matthew 5:9:13).

After the apostolic church experienced some initial persecution, the Jewish Sanhedrin was counselled by Gamaliel to leave the apostles alone (Acts 5:34-39; 8:1). Although the church in Jerusalem suffered some sporadic persecution after this, it was soon able to settle into a period of peace which enabled it to grow in number and influence within Judaism until it numbered several thousand Jews (Acts 9: 31: 21:20). Far from intending to leave Judaism, the goal of James was to convert Judaism to the teachings of Jesus. *James the Just*, as he was widely known, became such a highly respected figure in the whole Jerusalem community, that his death at the direction of the High Priest in 62 CE caused such a flood of protest to Rome that the High Priest was dismissed from the office he had held for only three months.

In all, there was nothing distinctively Christian about the apostolic church. Contrary to the claim of the Church Fathers that the Creeds of Christendom were apostolic, there is nothing in the Creeds of the Christian church that is compatible with apostolic teaching. There was never such a thing as *apostolic Christianity*. The very term is an oxymoron. It is even preposterous to claim that that the Jerusalem church could have continued within the network of Jewish synagogues for more than fifty years, or that its leader could have been so highly regarded in the wider Jewish community, if it had been preaching a Christology declaring, contrary to the Jewish Shema, that Jesus was God (Deuteronomy 6:14).

The claim that the Christology of the Creeds was handed down to the Christian Church by the apostolic church was an enormously misleading fabrication. The only way the so-called Fathers of the Church could make the claim look credible was to bury the real identity and teaching of the apostolic church and to compose books to which they attached apostolic names. It is amazing how the church was able to cover the tracks of this great cover-up for the best part of two-thousand years.

We can say this now with a great deal of confidence based on a massive amount of historical information available on James the Just and so-called Jewish Christianity (See *What the Scholars are Saying, Part 1, The Identity of the Apostolic Church, bobbrinsmead.com*).

**If the doctrine of Christ did not begin with the apostolic church at Jerusalem, where and under what circumstances did it begin?**

As James Dunn points out in our forgoing collection of scholarly statements, “two fairly distinct groups more or less from the first” appeared in the post-Easter Jesus movement. In Acts 6, these two groups are clearly identified as Aramaic-speaking Jews called *Hebrews (Ebraious)* and Greek-speaking Jews called *Hellenist (Elleniston)*.

The Hebrews were the primary group which founded the apostolic “church” in Jerusalem – bearing in mind that this was only a gathering that still existed within the Jewish network of synagogues. The Hellenists were a secondary group composed of Greek-speaking Jewish converts who had joined the Jesus movement. Jewish Hellenists had existed as a significant faction within the Jewish nation for over two hundred years.

The mention of any conflict between the Hebrews and the Hellenists is first mentioned in Acts 6 in the context of an incident which on first blush looks like some minor friction about Greek-speaking widows being neglected in the food distribution. As Dunn points out, since the Hellenist widows were being neglected as a group, this indicated that the Hellenists had separate synagogues. That would be consistent with them having a different language. Then Dunn goes on to point out that this friction in the matter of food distribution was a “symptom of a deeper division.”

According to Acts 6-7, the apostles of the Jerusalem group acted to resolve the matter of the food distribution by ordaining seven deacons from among the Hellenists to wait on the tables in the food distribution. This indicates that the apostles were the recognized leaders in the Jesus movement. It appears almost hilarious that the ordained “table waiters”, led by Stephen, became such flaming evangelists that they appeared to be creating more impact among both Jews and Gentiles than the apostles who had ordained them.

However, rumours soon spread that the teaching of Stephen seemed to be undermining the temple and the law of Moses (Acts 6:14). This created some tension between the Hebrews who were led by James and the Hellenists who were led by Stephen. While James never opposed a mission to the Gentiles, he wanted all Jews within the Jesus movement to be seen as loyal to the Jewish law (see Galatians 2:12,13; Acts 21;20,21).

The preaching of Stephen not only made the Jerusalem apostles apprehensive (for they were still worshipping at the temple and were loyal to the Law), but it raised the ire of the Jewish Sanhedrin which acted by calling Stephen to answer before its Council. Stephen’s speech to the Council was taken to be so blasphemous in its attack on the temple that he was summarily stoned to death without obtaining a required approval from the Roman authorities.

It appears that the Jerusalem church led by the apostles had kept a cool distance from the trial and execution of Stephen. To cite Dunn again, “Stephen had gone too far, and had jeopardized the existence of the whole new sect.” There was an unavoidable political aspect to this tragic incident. James did not want the success of his mission within Judaism to be jeopardized by reports that the movement he led might lead his Jewish converts to become slack in their observance of the law or do anything that could form a breakaway movement from Judaism.

Acts 7 concludes by saying how Saul of Tarsus (or Paul in Greek) was present to approve of Stephen’s execution. Paul followed this up by launching a crusade to persecute the Hellenist group. The persecution did not include the Hebrew group led by James (Acts 8:1). Gamaliel, under whom Paul

had trained as a Pharisee, had already counselled the Sanhedrin not to harass the Jerusalem church (Acts 5:24-38). Soon after this, this Hebrew faction began to enjoy a period of peace in which it grew in both numbers and in good standing within the Jewish community (Acts 9:31; Acts 21:21). On the other hand, the Hellenist faction whom Paul was zealously pursuing, fled to Antioch in Syria to evade the persecution which followed the martyrdom of Stephen. It was here at Antioch that these Hellenists began to be called Christians (11:26) When we look at Stephen's closing remarks to the Council, it seems that his repudiation of the temple was based on his conviction that Jesus had become the Messiah according to Daniel 7: 13-28. The Hellenists began to be called Christians in the city of Antioch because their gospel was now all about Christ - proving it, defending it, and explaining it. It was Antioch rather than Jerusalem which became "the cradle of the [Christian] church." Encyclopedia Biblica, Vol 1, p. 186

It was to this faith which the Hellenists had cradled at Antioch that Paul was suddenly converted after trying to destroy it. It was to these Hellenist Christians to whom Paul returned after his conversion rather than to the apostles at Jerusalem (Galatians 1:17,18), and it was by the church at Antioch that Paul was ordained to preach to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-4). The conversion of Paul did not end the tension which had developed between the Hebrews at Jerusalem and the Hellenists at Antioch. It continued as a tension between James and Paul. In his letters to the churches in Galatia and Corinth, Paul accused his Jerusalem opponents of preaching "another gospel" and "another Jesus." This tension between the church at Jerusalem and the church at Antioch was never resolved.

The primacy of the Jerusalem church and its influence within the growing Jesus movement ended with the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE. Then the growth of the Hellenist church which was focused on the doctrine of Christ blossomed among the Gentiles. On the other hand, by the end of the first century, the Hebrews whose roots were in that original Jerusalem church, found themselves expelled from Judaism and rejected as heretics by the church of the Hellenists. Having no home in either the synagogue or what had become the Church of the Gentiles, they became known as *Jewish Christians* or *Ebionites*. Among them were the descendants of Jesus' own family who were called the *Desposyni*.

### **The Phenomenal Spread and Influence of Hellenism**

*Hellenism* is derived from the word *Hellenic* which simply means *Greek*. It was an international movement which spread the Greek language and culture throughout the Greek Empire, beginning with the reign of Alexander the Great in 336 BCE. The movement thrived not only for the 300 years of the Grecian Empire, but it also dominated civilization during the rule of the Roman Empire which followed.

Alexander was more than a military genius who in the twenty years of his reign was able to establish an empire which stretched from India to Greece. He was inspired by a vision to spread the Greek language and culture throughout all the nations within the orbit of his empire. During his teenage years and before he ascended the throne of his father Phillip of Macedon, Alexander had been taught by none other than Aristotle, the famous Greek philosopher. Aristotle had been taught by Plato, and Plato had studied philosophy at the school of Socrates. These three, who were to become the fathers of Western philosophy, played a huge role in this international movement called

Hellenism. Alexander's vision to spread the Greek language and culture throughout his empire proved to be far more successful than his military exploits. To this day Western civilization is still called Greco-Roman civilization.

From the beginning, Hellenism was well-received by most nations within the Greek Empire. They benefited by its wide range of cultural interests which included art, sculpture, architecture, theatre, poetry, rhetoric and oratory, medicine, science, gymnasiums, mathematics, and more. Hellenism was like a BCE-Age of Enlightenment which led to the formation of all kinds of Associations and Clubs, some of which created impressive public buildings such as theatres, auditoriums, gymnasiums, libraries, museums and meeting halls to accommodate a great range of activities including theatres for the performing arts, gymnasiums which included libraries to cultivate the mind as well as body, schools of philosophy and religious gatherings. There were so many features of Hellenism which appeared to enrich and advance the human condition.

We must not, however, confuse the international movement of Hellenism with the era of classical Greece which came much earlier. The origins of Greek democracy happened in Athens a century before the rise of Hellenism. That eminent trio of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle who played a significant role in the dawn of Hellenism, were not the fathers of democracy. Socrates said that democracy was the worst form of government because it was the government of the least qualified. Plato taught that the ideal government would be a government of the wise elite who were the only ones fit to govern. Plato's idea was more like the kind of government envisaged in our day by the World Economic Forum that meets in Davos to dream of an elite cabal qualified to make decisions for the great mass of people "who will own nothing and be happy."

A most important feature of Hellenism, therefore, was its vision for the ideal kind of ruler or government. This is why Hellenism is reckoned to begin with the reign of Alexander the Great. He became the embodiment of the ideal king by virtue of being considered a divine man. According to the legend of his birth, his mother Olympia was engaged to be married to Phillip of Macedon, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through a mysterious divine encounter. This meant that Alexander would have a divine father and a human mother. Alexander himself claimed that he was the son of the Greek god Zeus, and he acted in confidence of this belief. It was said that he never suffered a military defeat in his 20-year reign which created the largest empire that his age had ever seen. His extraordinary prowess seemed to prove he was the divine man he was claimed to be.

This belief and expectation of a divine man ruler would become the hallmark of Hellenism for centuries to come. When Alexander's successors eventually divided the Empire into the Seleucid Empire centred in Syria and the Empire of the Ptolemies centred in Egypt, the rulers retained their divine status in the tradition of Alexander. It was not that the Greek rulers had originated the cult of the divine man ruler, because this kind of ruling cult had already existed during the reign of the Egyptian Pharaohs. It was, however, made a core feature of Hellenism that was eventually passed on to the emperors of Rome.

This core Hellenist belief in the divine man was not confined to those who became kings or emperors. It was extended to a whole range of persons who were regarded as exceptionally gifted or charismatic, whether male or female. Plato, the philosopher, was seen as one of these divine men. According to legends which developed about his birth, he too was a virgin-born divine man.

Something similar was claimed for Asclepius, an exceptionally great healer. The stories of his compassion for the poor and miraculous healing of the sick are not unlike the stories told about Jesus the Nazarene some centuries later. Hellenism was chock full of stories about heroes who had a divine and human parents or were otherwise divinely gifted to be more than human. Apollo and Hercules were among the great heroes of Greek mythology who were also revered divine men. It was said that Zeus, the father of the Greek gods, had from time of time consorted with at least a hundred women, some of whom were virgins, to conceive godmen who were sons of Zeus.

Not inclined to be exclusively Greek, Hellenism embraced ancient gods from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Asia Minor and Rome. Hellenism had a rich variety of religious tales and mystery religions to appeal to all tastes, and it was always ready to add more. Central to each, whether it was the cult of a ruler, a philosopher, a healer or one who became a hero (always after their death), was the cult of a divine man. In Hellenism, the distance or distinction between the world of the gods and the humans was small enough to mingle or be conflated. Here was a culture where the great mass of people would expect that those who governed them had the credentials of a divine man. Wide credence was given to reports of miracles and legends to endorse this status.

Homer's classic tales called the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, were often used as primary readers for those who wanted to learn Greek. Although they were mythic tales based on a smattering of some historical events, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not without some timeless insights and lessons about human behaviour.

Being open to so many divine man rulers, heroes, teachers, and healers, Hellenism was both polytheistic and pagan. With its enormous variety of divine man myths and mystery religions, it had to be tolerant in view of its diversity. People could choose which gods or heroes appealed to them just as in our time people are free to choose which celebrities they are inclined to adore or admire. Historically, it has generally been the great monotheistic religions that have tended to be intolerant of the differing others or even aggravate others by claiming to be in exclusive possession of the truth. This is what seems to have happened when the Greek emperor Antiochus 1V, calling himself Antiochus *Epiphanes* (*the manifestation of God*), invaded Israel in the 160's BCE. When he was not accorded the deference that his divine title demanded, he was not amused but tried to force the Jews to abandon the most essential features of Judaism. A similar issue arose between the Roman Emperors and the Jews over a hundred years later.

This brings us to think about the stark difference between Hellenism and the Hebrew faith that was always going to provoke conflict. The core of the Hebrew faith rested in what Judaism called *the Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord." (Deuteronomy 6:4) This meant that any person anointed to be the king of Israel was a "son of God" only by adoption (Psalm 2:1). God alone was divine. There was no prophecy or expectation in Hebrew scripture of a divine man becoming king or a person born of divine and human parents. While Hellenism was chock full of virgins or other women giving birth to divine men, there was no such thing in Hebrew scriptures, despite the mistranslation and misinterpretation of Isaiah 7:14 which appears in that Hellenist version of scripture called the Septuagint.

**This stark distinction between what is Hebrew and what is Greek should not to be missed.**

Hellenism did not die when the Greek Empire was replaced by the Roman Empire. The influence of the Greek language and culture penetrated and dominated Roman civilization. Rome was able to sweep away the political structures of the disintegrating Grecian Empire, but it could not destroy the language, the worldview and culture of Hellenism. The Greek language and culture remained the common language and culture throughout the Roman World.

Rome did not produce philosophers to replace Socrates, Plato and Aristotle whose influence lived on to become the fathers of Western philosophy. Rome had no dazzling array of myths to outshine the Greek myths with its pantheon of gods, divine man heroes and mystery religions. Rome did produce some of its own virgin-born heroes such as Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome, and a new divine man such as Augustus and the cult of Caesar worship. Yet the new gods were only the old Hellenist gods dressed in new garments. The Caesars of Rome donned the old Hellenised garments of divine man rulers in the tradition set by Alexander the Great.

We must now proceed to see how Rome was conquered not only by the old forms of Hellenism, but by a new form of Hellenism which was first crafted at Antioch.

### **Jewish Hellenism**

From the time Alexander set out to spread Hellenism throughout the Greek Empire, the Jewish nation could not avoid being penetrated by Hellenist influences. During the 300-year reign of the previous Persian Empire, the Jewish nation had adopted the Aramaic language of the Persian Empire, and as the apocalyptic book of Daniel indicates, it absorbed some of Persia's Zoroastrian worldviews. It is hardly possible to adopt a language without being influenced by its associated worldview and culture.

From the beginning of Alexander's empire, a significant number of Jewish people lived abroad in what was called the *diaspora*. Most of these would have learned to speak Greek, or in some cases, Greek would have become their only language. When some of these returned to their homeland, a Greek-speaking faction would have formed within the Jewish nation. Whether they lived abroad or in their homeland, the Greek-speaking Jews always tended to be more affluent, more educated, more cosmopolitan, more liberal and more open to Hellenist influences than the more conservative Aramaic-speaking Jews. This difference between the Hellenists and the more conservative Jews who were called Hebrews tended to create some tension between these two Jewish factions.

In the third century BCE, the Jewish Hellenists undertook a Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures which became known as the Septuagint version. It was called the LXX for short due to the legend that it was miraculously translated by seventy scholars within 70 days. In reality, the task of translating all the books in the LXX took over a century to complete. The legend, however, helped formulate the view that all the books in the LXX, including the translation, were supernaturally inspired. Having a book created by men who were divinely inspired was consistent with the Hellenist expectation of having a ruler who was a divine man.

As Helmut Koester writes in his impressive volume, *History, Culture and Religion of the Hellenistic Age*, "It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the LXX for Hellenistic Judaism ...the LXX became the source for the theological language of Judaism and thus also of early Christianity." p.253.

To support their doctrine of Christ, the Hellenists not only used the LXX, but they also needed a method of interpreting it according to the conventional wisdom of Hellenism. That was provided by Plato who was given the status of a divine man philosopher. The influential scholar who provided the Jewish Hellenists with a vital link to Plato was a Hellenist Jewish philosopher by the name of Philo of Alexandria. He was by far the best-known writer of Biblical commentary in the era when the church at Antioch was getting established. Believing that Moses and Plato were equally inspired, Philo's aim was to harmonise the Law of Moses with the teachings of Plato. To do this, he used a method of interpreting the LXX allegorically, figuratively or typologically.

To understand how Philo's interpretive methods were based on Plato, we need to know something about Plato's dualism of Forms and Patterns. By Forms he meant those eternal or heavenly Realities which he said were meta-physical. By patterns he meant that the things of this earth which, being physical, were transitory and inferior, mere shadows, types, patterns or allegories of the Forms. This dualism of Plato came to dominate Western thinking for so long that most Western thinking came to be dubbed "footnotes to Plato."

What Philo did in his Biblical commentaries was to use Plato's dualism to interpret the scriptures in an allegorical, figurative, or spiritual way. It became a method of interpretation that reduced the value of the present creation to something that was inferior, temporary, or even a worthless prison for what Plato called the immortal soul. Everything that happens in this present created order, according to this dualism, was said to be a mere shadowy pattern, type, figure or allegory of the meta-physical Realities.

This denigration of the created order in Hellenism was as profoundly incompatible to the Hebrew faith as the Hellenist view of the divine man. In Hebrew thinking, the created order is said to be "good," and all its material blessings like sowing and harvests, eating and drinking, making love and raising families, were to be celebrated as real gifts given in real history. This same appreciation of both the goodness of creation with its life cycle of birds and lilies in the here and now, rather than being denigrated, is powerfully reflected in the teachings of the historical Jesus.

When Philo, however, applied Plato's dualism as a method of interpreting the LXX, he demeaned its entire history as having no meaning except to exist as types, figures or allegories of some heavenly Reality. It was this method of reading scriptures which provided the Hellenists at Antioch with a way of finding types, figures or allegories of Christ all over what came to be called *the Old Testament*.

A prime example of turning the Old Testament into a mere "shadow of good things to come" is provided in the NT book of Hebrews. It turns the entire sacrificial system of the Jewish priesthood into a type, pattern or allegory of the sacrificial death of Christ. Using this Hellenist method of interpreting Hebrew scripture (using the Greek LXX version of it) one was able to run through the entire Old Testament and find figures and patterns to represent Christ everywhere. As for instance, Paul can say that Adam was a figure of Christ (Romans 5: 12-18), the seed of Abraham was the promise of Christ (Genesis 15-17; Galatians 3:8), the rock that followed Israel in the desert was a figure of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:4), or the lamb sacrificed on the eve of the Jewish Passover was a figurative depiction of Christ's sacrificial death on the cross (1 Corinthians 5:7). As Paul wrote to his church in Corinth, "Christ died for our sins, according to the scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). Yet he declines to cite any scripture to support his claim. Then Paul goes on to say, "On the third day he rose from the dead, according to the scriptures." Again, Paul does not cite any scripture which prophesied



that Christ would rise from the dead on the third day unless he was using the OT story of Jonah in the belly of the fish as an allegory. Or perhaps it was the comment in Hosea 6:2: "In the third day he will raise us up." In context, this is only talking about the nation of Israel.

Using the same figurative or allegorical method of interpretation, the unknown author of the Gospel of Matthew cites a whole series of events recorded in the Old Testament as being prophecies of Christ. For example, he cites the prophet Hosea saying, "Out of Egypt have I called my son" as if that was a prophecy of the parents of Jesus fleeing to Egypt to escape the murderous Herod and then returning with the child when the king had died. In context, however, Hosea is simply writing of Israel's Exodus from Egypt. Matthew turns that history into a figurative prophecy of the Christ.

The number 1 exhibit for this figurative method of finding Christ in the OT, is Matthew's story of the virgin birth of the Messiah, citing Isaiah 7:14, "A virgin shall conceive and bear a son." In context, this passage is not remotely a prophecy about the birth of a future Messiah, but the prophet Isaiah's own wife who is called an *almah*, or young woman in the Hebrew language. Before this son would be old enough to know the difference between good or evil, the kings of both Israel and Judah would be deposed by the invading Assyrians (See Isaiah chapters 7,8).

Hebrew scriptures know nothing about a future king of Israel being a virgin-born divine man after the manner of a Hellenistic king.

Christians need to face up to the embarrassing fact that there are no proof texts that can be drawn from the OT which prove that Jesus was the Christ. The historical Jesus never claimed to be the Christ, and the first church of his apostles in Jerusalem, being Hebrews, made no such claims for their teacher. It was the Hellenists in the church at Antioch who interpreted the OT scriptures as if it was all a shadowy figure, type, pattern or allegory about the coming of Christ. It was a mode of Biblical interpretation that was developed by Philo and based on Plato's dualism of eternal Forms and temporary patterns, figures, and types. The Hellenist converts at Antioch read the OT, the only scriptures then in existence, as if its only purpose and meaning was to provide a shadowy pageant of the coming of Christ and his subsequent rule at the right hand of God.

By interpreting the Hebrew scriptures figurately, typically or analogously, the Hellenist Christians found proof-texts for their doctrine of Christ all over the Scriptures. Given their Hellenist glasses (made courtesy of Plato and Philo) they could begin at almost any piece of Scripture and preach Christ from it just as the first Hellenist evangelists did with the Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 53(Acts 8: 30-35). This passage in Isaiah 53 is part of series of Songs about the faithful remnant of Israel who is called the Servant, which the context defines as being a remnant of Israel who remained faithful to Yahweh during their 70-year captivity in Babylon. Phillip, an early Hellenist evangelist, interprets the Song of the Suffering Servant as being prophesy of Christ. In its historical context, however, Isaiah 53 is not a prophesy about some person who would appear 500 years in the future. It is a song in Hebrew verse to honour those Jews who had patiently endured their captivity in Babylon.

### **How the Hellenists developed their Christology Step by Step:**

As we have already seen, the doctrine of Christ did not begin with the Hebrew church in Jerusalem but in the Hellenist church at Antioch. It was not the Hebrews of the apostolic church in Jerusalem

who embarked on a 400-year journey of turning the humble Nazarene teacher into God Almighty, but it was the Hellenists who were first called Christians at Antioch.

The first step in the whole process of constructing what was to become an elaborate Christology was taken when the Hellenists bestowed the title of Messiah or Christ upon the post-Easter Jesus. As Paul was later to write, "He was declared to be the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead." "God...has raised up Jesus again, as it is also written in the second Psalm, You are my Son, this day have I begotten you." (Romans 1:3; Acts 13:33). In these early beginnings, this was still the Hebrew concept of becoming Son of God by adoption as it was with David when he was anointed king of Israel (Psalm 2:1).

The NT letters of Paul, written in the 50's CE, never say that Christ was God or suggest that he was a virgin-born son of God. Neither does the first NT Gospel called Mark which was written in the 70's. We need to keep in mind that up until the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, the apostolic church of the Hebrews at Jerusalem and the church of the Hellenists at Antioch were still existing within an accord despite some tension between them (see Acts 15 and 21; Galatians 2). Any accord with the Hebrews would have been impossible if the Hellenist churches were teaching contrary to the Hebrew Shema which declares that God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4). As for the teaching of the virgin birth, that never appeared while members of the family of Jesus remained alive.

Yet bestowing the illustrious title of Christ on the post-Easter Jesus was the most significant of all the steps to be taken on the journey of turning the humble Nazarene teacher into the ruler of the Universe. Giving him the title of Messiah was the most decisive step of all because it changed the focus of the gospel away from the teachings of Jesus to the teacher himself. **The messenger now became the message.** In giving the teacher this celebrity status, the Hellenists had turned the teachings of Jesus into the cult of an illustrious person as it was with all the old Hellenist cults. From this point forward, it remained only to embellish and raise the status of Christ higher and still higher until there was no higher place to go.

It would take some time before the enormous implications of changing the message *of* the man into the message *about* the man would be realized. When the Creeds of Church were drawn up between the second and the sixth century, they were all about the person of Christ. Not a thing was said about the teachings of Jesus.

This was like having the followers of the Buddha forming a cult of his person and losing sight of his teachings. Or forming a cult of Einstein that bypassed what he said about Relativity.

When the Hellenists had bestowed the title of Christ on the post-Easter Jesus, it raised the question of how being crucified could possibly fit the job description of the promised Messiah. Under Roman Law, only a person of the lowest class could be crucified, and under Jewish Law anyone who was hanged on a tree was cursed. The Hellenists' apology for a crucified Messiah consisted in raising the bar of Christ's exaltation even higher. They said that his death was no ordinary death, but one that was ordained in the foreknowledge of God to be an atoning sacrifice for human sin. This elevated the death of Jesus to being the supreme apocalyptic, end of world, Judgment Day event in which Christ was offered up by Almighty God to bear the punishment for human sin.

No one who was there to witness the crucifixion of Jesus, of course, could have seen it as the reconciliation of the entire cosmos to God taking place in this crude and ghastly Roman execution. If a crucified Messiah appeared to be an impossible oxymoron, the *apologia* of the Hellenists glorified it as the centrepiece of the gospel according to Saint Paul and the centre-piece of the Christian religion for centuries to come.

It has been an enormous shock to finally discover, as the *Quest for the Historical Jesus* has discovered, that neither the original apostolic church at Jerusalem, led by the brother of Jesus, nor the earliest writings of the Jesus movement, viewed the death of Jesus as any different than the death of John the Baptist or any other prophet. More than that, they knew firsthand that both John and Jesus were against the offering of any sacrifice for the forgiveness of sin. They did not, as the Hellenists did, invest the killing of animals at the temple with the sacred significance of being a type or allegory for the death of God's son. John and Jesus revived the teachings of the Hebrew prophets who taught that forgiveness of sin was based solely on the loving kindness of God rather than any animal or human sacrifice. (Isaiah 1; Amos 5 and Micah 6-7). In his baptism for the forgiveness of sin, John had substituted the water of baptism in the Jordan River for blood shed at the temple. Jesus went further by requiring neither a ritual of blood or water as necessary for the forgiveness of sin, citing the words of the Hebrew prophet, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice."

The Hebrews of the apostolic church had no need to develop any *apologia* for the death of Jesus as the Hellenists had done.

The Law had stipulated that an animal offered at the temple for sacrifice had to be without blemish. Since all the sacrifices were interpreted by the Hellenists as being as an allegory or figure of the death of Christ, this led the Hellenists to develop a doctrine of the absolute sinlessness of Jesus. If he was to become "the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world," this seemed to suggest that he must have been the only sinless person who had ever lived upon the face of the earth.

The absolute sinlessness of Jesus was to become a dogma of the Hellenists, but its full flowering required time to develop. When the NT Gospel called Mark was written around 70 CE (at least 40 years after the death of Jesus), the author begins his Gospel with the baptism of Jesus at the hands of John the Baptist. This baptism was called "a baptism for the forgiveness of sin." (Mark 1:4). According to Mark, it was after Jesus arose from the cleansing waters of the Jordan, that "a voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased.'" (1:11-12). After this event, Mark relates how a man kneeled before Jesus, saying, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life." To which Jesus replied, "Why do you call me good? There is none good but God alone." (Mark 10:17,18).

Then around two decades after Mark was written, another Gospel appeared called Matthew. Although this author copies Mark, he also wants to correct some things in Mark's presentation. For instance, Matthew adds an *apologia* for the baptism of Jesus lest an impression is left that Jesus might have needed any kind of forgiveness. Matthew also changes Mark's story where Jesus declines to be called good, saying, "Why do you ask me about what is good?" (Matthew 19:17 NIV) Most of all, rather than starting his Gospel with the baptism of Jesus, as Mark does, Matthew begins with a narrative of Jesus' virgin birth. This was something about which neither Paul, who wrote in the 50's, nor Mark, who wrote in the 70's, had anything to say. For that matter, no teaching about a virgin birth arose while the family of Jesus was still alive and while the apostolic church in Jerusalem still

existed to exercise some restraint on the Hellenist churches. Those restraints were removed after Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE and the Jerusalem church was almost wiped off the map.

With his narrative of the virgin birth, Matthew was able to upgrade Mark's account to portray Jesus as an absolutely impeccable, all-knowing divine man, who unlike the Jesus of Mark, did not need to ask questions about what others were thinking or saying. He moved Mark's account of Jesus being adopted as son of God at his baptism to becoming Son of God *substantially* by means of a virgin birth. More than anything else, the virgin birth narrative of Matthew was pure Hellenism whose entire history was chockful of myths about divine men who were born of women who bore sons who were sired by the gods - Alexander the Great, Plato, Asclepius, Apollo, Heracles, Dionysus and a host of other godmen in the Hellenist pantheon of gods. Some of these Hellenist gods were believed to be divinities who had died and risen again. Many of these myths existed throughout the Middle East in the first century. (See Tryggve N.D. Mettinger, *The Riddle of Resurrection: "Dying and Rising God's in the Ancient Near East"*) The newly minted myth of the virgin-born Christ was able to surpass the old Hellenist myths that were losing their lustre and appeal. Nothing could stop this Christian Hellenism from penetrating and conquering the Roman world that was ripe and ready to embrace the new myth of a virgin born ruler and Saviour.

Around the turn of the century another NT Gospel according to an author called John elevated the status of Matthew's Son of God still higher by moving this Sonship back to his pre-existence in heaven. This gave him the status of being God incarnate. Unlike his portrayal in the other three Synoptic Gospels where Jesus hardly says anything about himself, the Son of God in John's Gospel gives a series of long monologues calling himself the Bread from heaven, the Water of life, the Light of the world, the good Shepherd, and the pre-existing Son who was one with the eternal Father before the world began.

With all this, was there any higher place for Christ to go beyond John's Gospel? Yes, there was, and taking this next step would take another two hundred years to achieve.

Early in the fourth century CE when Emperor Constantine became a Christian, there was a Presbyter by the name of Arius and a Bishop called Athanasius who were embroiled in what became the mother of all disputes about the Son of God's relationship to the eternal Father. Since Christ was said to be "the only begotten son of God" (as in John 3:16), this indicated to Arius that the eternal Father must have preceded the Son and be greater than the Son. It is certainly not hard to find statements in the NT that might appear to support the teaching of Arius. This would have been the view of most Christians up until this controversy arose.

Athanasius fought the teachings of Arius tenaciously until the whole Christian Church was seriously embroiled in the controversy of whether the Father was in any sense before or greater than the Son. Athanasius argued that if the Son was not God in very essence or substance, having existed eternally with the Father, then Christ could not have bridged the infinite gulf that existed between God and man. Therefore, he said, our eternal salvation was at stake in being correct in this very heady flight into the realm of high Christology.

If Christianity was to become the official religion of the Roman Empire, Constantine wanted the church to be confessing one united faith. So, he called the bishops of the universal church together in the Council of Nicaea in 325 to settle the Arian controversy. The emperor himself presided. He placed

armed guards around the venue to prevent the participants from escaping until the Arian controversy was settled. Most of the bishops supported drawing up the Nicene Creed which supported the Christology of Athanasius. Constantine immediately issued an Edict declaring that anyone teaching contrary to the Nicene Creed would be put to death. The faith that had been worth dying for had now become the faith that was worth killing for. The victory over Arianism, which took another 400 years to eradicate from all the Barbarian kingdoms, was won by the edge of the sword more than by the power of persuasion.

In the Nicene Creed of 325 CE, Christ was given the ultimate status of being the eternal Son of God, "God of very God" with no higher place to go. Yet some things remained to be clarified. Was he two persons living in a single nature, or was he one person who had two natures, one divine and the other human? Was he half-God and half-man or fully God and fully man? The Council of Chalcedon in 451 finally decreed that Jesus Christ possessed two natures - perfect God and perfect man - in a hyperstatic union in one person called Jesus Christ. The wording used in drawing up this clarifying Formula relied heavily on Greek philosophical reasoning that saddled the Church with a contradiction as profound as the Church's doctrine of the Trinity. Not a few Christian scholars would now prefer to call the Formula of Chalcedon a *myth* rather than a *mystery*.

After drawing up its Creeds about Christ, the Church found that the best way to stop any further arguments about Christology was to put dissenters to death. An absolute intolerance of any further dissent about Christology settled over Christendom for centuries. This tyranny of thought was neither removed by the Renaissance nor the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It continued until the Enlightenment of 18<sup>th</sup> century gave birth to the age of free inquiry and religious tolerance. This triggered the beginnings of an unfettered research into (1) how Christology was developed over a period of some centuries, and (2) how the Christology which developed was made to look Apostolic.

### **How Hellenist Christianity Made the Doctrine of Christ Look Apostolic:**

It can now be said with a great deal of confidence that the apostolic church in Jerusalem that was led by James, the brother of Jesus, did not believe that Jesus was a virgin-born divine man. Even a conservative scholar and churchman such as James D. Dunn has frankly said that the apostolic church in Jerusalem never taught that Jesus was divine.

How then did this Hellenist Christology get passed off as apostolic teaching for two thousand years?

One of the most significant ways this was done was to ascribe apostolic names to the authors of the four Gospels of the New Testament. Two hundred years of literary scholarship has shown that no names were originally attached to the four Gospels. They were all written in Greek by unknown authors after 70 CE and after the leaders of both factions of the Jesus movement, Hebrew and Hellenist, had died. The process of attaching names to the Gospels did not start until the end of the second century. The name of the apostle Matthew was attached to the first NT Gospel and the name of the apostle John to the fourth Gospel. The names of two associates of the apostles, Mark and Luke, were attached to the other two Gospels.

This made it look as if the very first Gospel of the NT, which teaches that Jesus was a virgin-born divine man, must have been apostolic teaching. That, of course, is a complete myth. The real authors

of the four Gospels were, in fact, unknown Hellenists who neither lived in the generation of Jesus nor in the land where the language of Jesus was spoken.

Associated with attaching apostolic names to the four Gospels was the order in which the Churchmen arranged the NT canon. In making Matthew the first book of the NT, this tended to destroy any true sense of how the history of the early church unfolded. To start with, the first NT writings were the letters of Paul which were written in the decade of the 50's, about a generation after the death of Jesus. All the other documents of the NT were written after 70 CE.

Putting Matthew as the first book of the NT makes it all too easy to assume that Paul learned about the birth, life, Last Supper, death and resurrection of Jesus from the apostolic witness of Matthew. This Gospel, however, was not written until a generation after Paul had died. When the correct order in which the NT documents were written is understood, it becomes easy to see that Paul did not get any information from Matthew about what Jesus said at the Last Supper. Paul did not copy what Matthew wrote, but Matthew copied what Paul wrote.

Paul said nothing about the virgin birth of Jesus, and neither did Mark. Mark was the first Gospel, and it was written around 20 years after Paul wrote his letters to the churches. Matthew not only copied Mark to derive much of his basic material to write his Gospel around 85-90 CE but was the first NT writer to introduce the story of the virgin which neither Paul nor Mark knew anything about.

By discarding the order in which the NT documents were written, rather than clarifying the way the history of the church unfolded, the arrangement of the NT documents tends to obscure or even bury the real history of the Jesus movement. By putting the story according to Matthew first, this creates the desired effect of placing his nativity story as the starting point of the Christian movement. The account of the virgin birth, however, came near the end of the first century.

Matthew was written at a time when the Hellenist faction of the Jesus movement was beginning to create a burgeoning Gentile Church within the Roman Empire. That world was already a Hellenist culture in which its heroes and gods were divine men of miraculous birth. How could the claims about a Jewish Messiah be given a serious hearing in this kind of world unless this Messiah also had some spectacular birth credentials? Matthew provided Jesus with those credentials. Matthew also did this at a time when the family of Jesus had passed on and the influence of Jerusalem Church post-70 had seriously waned due to the utter destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans.

The Fathers of the great Gentile Church which grew from its beginnings in Antioch could never have made the Creeds of Church look apostolic unless its NT documents had largely written James, the brother of Jesus, out of the story. It is only in recent years that a massive amount of research and some excellent publications have restored James to be seen as the towering figure of the mother Church of Jerusalem for the first 32-years of its history. If any later titles such as Bishop or Pope are to be used, then it is correct to call James rather than Peter the first Bishop or Pope.

It was less than thirty years ago that an ossuary or bone box of the first century turned up in a collector's warehouse in Jerusalem. Carved on the ossuary were words in Aramaic saying: *James son of Joseph, brother of Jesus*. The discovery caused a sensation on realizing this could be the only piece of extant evidence for the existence of Jesus. Most Christians were not even aware that Jesus had a brother called James because the NT mentions this almost subliminally.

In his 900-page tome called *James, the Brother of Jesus*, the Jewish scholar Robert Eisenman tells us that outside of the NT, far more is known about James than is known about Jesus. He points out that James is the strongest piece of evidence we have that Jesus ever existed. Known as James the Just, he was the leader of the first church in Jerusalem for 32 years.

Much is now known about James's extra-ordinary way of life. He was so widely respected in the general Jewish community that when he was put to death at the direction of the High Priest in 62 CE, there was such an uproar of protest among the Jews that the Roman authorities intervened to have the High Priest dismissed from office. According to Josephus, it was widely believed that the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans came as result of killing James.

Why then is the NT so silent about the leading figure in the first generation of church history?

It was not an accident that James was written out story of the apostolic generation. After the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, the influence of the Jerusalem church waned, but the Hellenist church at Antioch moved ahead to become the great Church of the Gentiles. The victors wrote up the history. They could never claim that their doctrine of Christ was apostolic unless James was written out of the story. Who could be more apostolic than James who had drank of the same mother's milk as Jesus and who became the leader of the apostolic church in Jerusalem for the first 32 years?

If James had to be written out of the story to make the Church's doctrine of Christ look apostolic, what could be done with the apostle Peter who had that falling out with Paul at Antioch (see Galatians 2)? Instead of trying to write him out of the story, in the early part of the second century two epistles appeared that were said to be written by Peter. NT scholars generally recognize that 1 Peter and 2 Peter were written long after Peter was dead. Bart D. Ehrman sums up the evidence saying, "Modern people would simply call it a forgery." (*Forged*, p.77). Its obvious purpose was to re-create Peter into an apostle who commends Paul, talks like Paul and sounds like a Hellenist Christian. Despite Peter being an illiterate fisherman, whose native tongue was Aramaic, 1 Peter was written in some of the most advanced Greek of the NT and cites passages from the LXX version of the Old Testament—in Greek, of course! Having written James out of the story, a legend was created which put this re-made Peter in the chair of James as the first leader or Pope of the Jerusalem church.

It required legends like this and a re-writing of history to make the Church's doctrine of Christ look apostolic. The claim was as outrageous as re-writing history of Karl Marx to make him look like an advocate of Adam's Smith's free enterprise capitalism.

### **Cracks in the Wall of Christendom**

It was the Hellenist faction of the Jesus movement who turned Jesus into Christ and then into God after his death. Jesus said nothing about Christ and neither did the apostolic church.

The doctrine of Christ is a Hellenist myth from beginning to end.

In a recent publication called *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Yuval Noah Harari presents an astonishing account of the existence and power of myths. He shows how humans are different to

other animal species in that they can be held together in large communities such as nations and international movements because they have imaginative faculties that live by stories or myths that bind them together. Joseph Campbell's life's work was to compose a whole series of volumes about the myths of mankind.

The human mind tends to adhere to myths and believe in them more strongly than observable realities. As Montaigne put it, "Nothing is so firmly believed as that which we least know."

In the Christ myth, the Hellenists "forged the most compelling myth in the history of mankind." (Maccoby) It conquered the Roman Empire and became a dominant force in Western civilization. The myth of Christ inspired the human spirit to do both bad and good things. On the negative side, devotion to the myth of Christ inspired a lot of book burning, including the destruction of the great library of Alexandria, and a dreadful amount of intolerance and persecution in pogroms against the Jews, crusades against the innocent Cathars in the North of France and the Muslims in the Holy Lands, the burning of heretics at the stake and the terrors of the Inquisition – all crimes against humanity done in the name of Christ. For more than a thousand years, the rule of Christendom (which means the domain of Christ), was among the greatest totalitarian regimes of mind and body control that this world has ever seen. During this period the Church made far more martyrs than it ever produced from its own ranks. During this reign of the Church as the servant of Christ, the most unforgivable crime, punishable by death at the stake, was to question any facet of the doctrine of Christ.

On the other hand, Christ also inspired the human spirit to enrich the culture with great music, art, architecture, institutions of education, health and human wellbeing, most of which appeared after a dreadful era of ignorance and superstition called the Dark Ages. The positive side of the Christian influence drew much of its inspiration from the teachings of Jesus which the Church had preserved in the NT to accompany its central doctrine of Christ.

Paul, the brilliant Hellenist theologian of the Christ myth, neither referred nor deferred to the teachings of Jesus. He obviously thought that the earthly revelation of Jesus had been surpassed by the heavenly revelation of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17) that came directly to him in visionary episodes (12:2-4). Following the example of Paul, none of the great Creeds of Church, developed between the second and fourth century, had a thing to say about the teachings of Jesus. Preoccupation with the Christ myth as the centrepiece of the Christian faith seriously downgraded the importance of teachings of Jesus. Or at best, those teachings could only be partially understood when they were read through the glasses of the Christ myth. Despite all these factors which tended to subordinate the teachings of Jesus to the basement of the Church, the Church always had its thinkers who seemed to be moved by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount more than they were moved by Paul's preaching of Christ.

What has happened in the last two hundred years is that the *Quest for the Historical Jesus* has gone into that basement, besides a lot of other historical "basements", to look at the teachings of Jesus in their true historical context.

**The overwhelming consensus of the *Quest* is that the historical Jesus is not the Christ of faith.**



This means that the teachings of Jesus are not supportive of the Christ myth or compatible with the Christ myth. We may have assumed, as the Church has generally assumed, that the teachings of Jesus and the Christ myth belong together like twins from the same mother, but this is not what the *Quest* has found.

The very term *Jesus Christ* is an oxymoron. Jesus is an historical person; Christ is a Hellenist myth.

*Jesus* and *Christ* present us with entirely different images of God.

This stands out starkly in Jesus' teaching about a kind of love that rejects violence, pay-back justice and dominion over others.

We only need ask, How many people did Jesus kill when he was here on earth? None of course, because he was non-violent. How many people will Christ kill when he comes to earth "in flaming fire to take vengeance on all them that know not God"? (2 Thessalonians 1:6-8) This event is presented as the mother of all holocausts. Jesus and Christ confront us with entirely different images of God.

Is divine violence destined to be the *final solution* to human violence? Do the violent images of Christ throw some light on why so much of Christian history was violent?

In the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:36-48), Jesus rejected any "eye for an eye" pay-back justice in favour of a restorative and redemptive justice of unconditional forgiveness (see also Luke 6: 28-36). Yet the Christ of Paul is said to propitiate the wrath of God with an atoning sacrifice for sin (Romans 3), and a forgiveness based on punitive justice. The whole book of Revelation, said to be "an apocalypse of Jesus Christ", is about pay-back time, vengeance, and retaliation from beginning to end. So, a violent atonement and a violent end of the world are just two parts of the one myth!

The students in the school of Jesus were taught to renounce achieving dominion and control over others because true greatness is found in serving others rather than in controlling them (Matthew 23:13). On the other hand, Christ is frequently presented as having dominion over all and ruling all nations with a rod of iron (Revelation 2;17; 19:15). The God we see in the real man called Jesus is very different to the kind of God who is revealed in the Christ myth which re-enforces all those unfortunate images of a domineering, controlling kind of God.

That is why so many serious cracks are now appearing in the doctrine of Christ. No myths last forever, not even "the most compelling myth in the history of mankind." All is not lost because there is so much to be gained. What remains in the New Testament documents without the Christ myth has always been its real treasure. Thomas Jefferson likened the teachings of Jesus to diamonds that are scattered among the dung of inferior minds. He even suggested it was not too hard to pick out the diamonds from the dung.

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