

"I would recommend reading *Jesus and the Lost Goddess*. You will get a wider appreciation for the wealth of knowledge that formed early Christianity."  
—Deepak Chopra

# JESUS AND THE LOST GODDESS



THE SECRET TEACHINGS OF  
THE ORIGINAL CHRISTIANS

TIMOTHY FREKE & PETER GANDY

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AUTHORS OF **THE JESUS MYSTERIES**

# JESUS AND THE LOST GODDESS

The Secret Teachings  
of the Original Christians

Tim Freke  
& Peter Gandy

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED  
TO THOSE WHO KNOW  
THEY DO NOT KNOW

T!M FREKE is a spiritual pioneer whose work has touched the lives of hundreds of thousands of people. He is the author of more than 30 books, which have been translated into 15 languages, including a top 6 Amazon 'Surprise Bestseller' and Daily Telegraph 'Book of the Year'.

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## CHAPTER 1. THE GOSPEL OF GNOSIS

I will reveal to you what no eye can see,  
what no ear can hear,  
what no hand can touch,  
what cannot be conceived by the human mind.

Jesus, *The Gospel of Thomas*

Life is a Mystery. A Mystery so awesome that we insulate ourselves from its intensity. To numb our fear of the unknown we desensitize ourselves to the miracle of living. We perpetuate the nonchalant lie that we know who we are and what life is. Yet behind this preposterous bluff the Mystery remains unchanging, waiting for us to remember to wonder. It is waiting in a shaft of sunlight, in the thought of death, in the intoxication of new love, in the joy of childbirth or the shock of loss. One minute we are going about our business as if life were nothing special and the next we are face to face with profound, unfathomable, breathtaking Mystery. This is both the origin and consummation of the spiritual quest.

Although the conditions of life have changed continually throughout history, the Mystery of life has remained the same. This is a book about a remarkable group of men and women who, some 2,000 years ago, were touched by the Mystery and dared to plumb its depths. Revolutionary free-thinkers who synthesized the available wisdom of the world and articulated perennial truths in dynamic, innovative ways. Creative visionaries who encoded their teachings in extraordinary myths. Explorers of Consciousness whose mystical philosophy promised 'Gnosis' — experiential Knowledge of Truth. These forgotten spiritual pioneers could not have conceived of the unparalleled impact they would have on the history of humanity. Who were they? They called themselves 'Christians'.

It was these radical individualists who inadvertently created the most authoritarian religion in history. Their questioning mysticism was distorted, almost beyond recognition, into the dogmatic creed of what they called an 'imitation church'. When this impoverished form of Christianity was adopted as the official religion of the brutal Roman Empire, the original Christians were violently suppressed, their scriptures burned and their memory all but erased. The Roman Church fabricated its own account of the origins of Christianity, still believed today, which dismisses the first Christians as a minor cult of obscure heretics. But it was these brilliant mythographers who authored a story which continues to dominate the spiritual imagination of the Western world.

From the archaic allegory of a dying and resurrecting Son of God they fashioned a new and vibrant myth which has captured the hearts and minds of millions: the fable of a Jewish peasant who saved the world: the story of Jesus the Christ.

## THE GOOD NEWS

For the original Christians, the Jesus story was a myth used to introduce beginners to the spiritual path. For those wishing to go deeper than the 'Outer Mysteries', which were only 'for the masses', there were secret teachings or 'Inner Mysteries'. These were 'the secret traditions of true Gnosis' which, according to the 'Church Father' Clement of Alexandria, were transmitted 'to a small number by a succession of masters'. Those initiated into these Inner Mysteries discovered that Christianity was not just about the dying and resurrecting Son of God. They were told another myth that few Christians today have even heard of — the story of Jesus' lover, the lost and redeemed Daughter of the Goddess.

Amongst the original Christians the divine was seen as having both a masculine and feminine face. They related to the Divine Feminine as Sophia, the wise Goddess. Paul tells us, 'Among the initiates we speak of Sophia', for it is 'the secret of Sophia' that is 'taught in our Mysteries'. When initiates of the Inner Mysteries of Christianity partook of Holy Communion, it was Sophia's passion and suffering they remembered.<sup>[7]</sup> Amongst the original Christians, priests and priestesses would offer initiates wine as 'a symbol of 'her blood'. The prayer would be offered: 'May Sophia fill your inner being and increase in you her Gnosis.' It was Sophia who was petitioned:

Come, hidden Mother; come, you who are made manifest in your works, and give joy and rest to those who are bound to you. Come and partake in this Eucharist which we perform in your name, and in the love feast for which we have assembled at your invitation.

The eradication of this Christian Goddess by the patriarchal Roman Church has left us all motherless children. Women have been denied a sympathetic rapport with the Divine Feminine. Men have been denied a love-affair with a female face of Deity. Spirituality has become part of the battleground which separates the sexes, when it should be the sanctuary of eternal fellowship. The original Christians, however, practised 'partnership spirituality'. They valued men and women equally, as expressions of God and Goddess. They saw the division of the sexes as a correlate of that primal duality which is the

source of creation, a duality that when made one, as in the act of love, brings the bliss of union that they called 'Gnosis'.

For the original Christians the Jesus story appears at the end of a cycle of Christian myths which begins with the ineffable Mystery manifesting itself as a primordial Father and Mother and culminates in the mystical marriage of Jesus and Sophia. The Inner Mysteries reveal these myths as allegories of spiritual initiation, symbolic stories which encode a profound philosophy with the power to transform an initiate from a Christian into a Christ.

For the original Christians the 'gospel' or 'good news' is not a story written in a book. Rather they taught that: 'The gospel is the Gnosis.' The good news is that a complete transformation of consciousness is possible. The good news is that there is a way to transcend suffering. The good news is that there is a natural state of happiness which is our birthright. This is the gospel of absolute freedom. It is not a set of rules which we must follow to become 'good'. It is about discovering our own essential nature, which is good already, so that we can live spontaneously. This gospel holds out the extraordinary promise that those who understand it 'will not taste death'. But immortality is not access to Heaven as reward for living an upright life. It is the immediate realization, here and now, of our true identity, which was never born and so can never die.

## A JOURNEY OF INITIATION

This book is an exploration of the gospel of Gnosis. Our aim has been to present a radical alternative to the traditional picture of who the original Christians were and what they believed. Like all spiritual movements, early Christianity covered a broad spectrum of individuals and schools with differing levels of perception, so we have chosen to focus on what we regard as their best and most enduring insights, which may still be valid for us today.

Why isn't the gospel of Gnosis common knowledge? First, because the Roman Church has spent over 16 centuries systematically destroying the evidence that it ever existed. For much of this time, merely to possess Christian works unacceptable to the established Church was punishable by a cruel death. Thankfully some of these texts have nevertheless survived. In recent decades they have been augmented by fabulous archaeological finds such as the discovery of a library of 'heretical' Christian scriptures in a cave near Nag Hammadi in Egypt. The implications of this find, and the advances in our understanding of early Christianity that it has led to, have yet to be widely appreciated.

Inadequate translation has also played a significant role in disguising the secret teachings of Christianity encoded in the New Testament gospels and alluded to frequently by Paul in his letters. Rendering these works into familiar 'churchy' English lulls us into the reassuring illusion that we have understood what is being said, when in fact we have not even begun to scratch the surface of the real significance of the original Greek. The 'heretical' Christian gospels, on the other hand, are regularly rendered into unfamiliar English, making them sound strange and inaccessible. One translator was even in the habit of remarking that such texts were 'not supposed to make any sense'. Little wonder, then, that an artificial division has been created between the orthodox canon and other Christian gospels. However, when the New Testament Jesus story is understood in its original context, as part of the whole Christian myth cycle, and the 'heretical' gospels are interpreted sympathetically, they can, at last, be seen as expressions of one profound mystical philosophy.

In our examination of these texts we have made one assumption which other commentators often do not make: that our ancestors were not idiots. We have postulated that although they lived in very different physical conditions, they still faced the same great enigmas of existence as we do today and that their answers are potentially as valuable as contemporary views. We have, in short, approached the people we are studying with the respect which they deserve and which they have been denied for nearly two millennia.

Academics have often failed lamentably to understand the spirituality of the original Christians because they have lacked mystical insight. The Gnosis is not an intellectual theory. It is a state of being. It is an inner 'Knowledge' which can never be truly understood from the outside. Trying to comment on the Gnosis without ever having personally experienced its life-changing impact is like writing a travelogue for a country you have never visited. Any native would find it laughably absurd. We approach this work not only with a commitment to rigorous scholarship, but also as lifelong students of experiential mysticism. We are not, however, members of any cult or affiliated to any religious organization. This, we feel, makes us ideally placed to take up the challenge of recovering the ancient Gnosis for modern readers.

New ideas can take decades to travel from scholarly circles to the general public. We have attempted to circumvent this process by making the main text of the book as accessible as possible while offering notes for those who wish to see more detailed evidence in support of our ideas or to check our sources.

For us, putting together this book has been much more than an academic study. It has been a revelation. For the original Christians, the process of initiation involved

meditating on their myths to tease out the allegorical significance. In writing this book we ourselves have had to undertake a similar in-depth study of Christian mythology. This has been an initiatory experience which has left us transformed in ways we did not anticipate.

It has been a philosophical journey of cosmic proportions. Yet at its conclusion we have found that the secret teachings of the original Christians, although seemingly arcane, are actually about understanding the miracle of life just as it is. We have struggled to penetrate indecipherable riddles. Yet we have found that, although seemingly complex, these teachings are in essence astonishingly simple. We have time-travelled back into the ancestral mind. Yet although the gospel of Gnosis belongs to a so-called 'dead' spiritual tradition, we have found it to be as relevant and challenging today as it was two millennia ago. Our hope is that this book allows you to also taste something of the ancient and perennial Gnosis for yourself.

## CHAPTER 2. THE ORIGINAL CHRISTIANS

Much that is written in Pagan books is found also in the books of God's Church. What they share in common are the words which spring from the heart, the law that is inscribed on the heart.

Valentinus, *On Friends*

It's a strange world. At the end of the nineteenth century the influential Hindu guru Vivekananda was sailing across the Mediterranean Sea on a return journey to England when he had a curious dream. A very old and venerable-looking sage appeared to him, saying:

Do ye come to effect our restoration? I am one of the ancient order of Therapeutae. The truths preached by us have been given out by Christians as taught by Jesus; but for the matter of that, there was no personality by the name of Jesus ever born.

This extract from Vivekananda's autobiography was kindly sent to us by a reader of our previous book, *The Jesus Mysteries*, because it endorses the revolutionary view of the origins of Christianity that we presented there.

After years of painstaking research we concluded that the traditional history of Christianity was at best hopelessly inaccurate and at worst a pack of lies. The evidence demanded that we think the unthinkable. Christianity was not the cult of a first-century Messiah, but a Jewish adaptation of the ancient Pagan Mystery religion. We could find no evidence that there had ever been an historical Jesus, because the gospel story was a Jewish reworking of ancient Pagan myths of a dying and resurrecting Son of God. We even ventured an informed guess as to who may have authored the original Jesus myth - a sect of mystical Jews called the Therapeutae.

Is it possible that Vivekananda reached the truth by intuitive means a century before us? Perhaps. The psychologist Carl Jung came to believe that the whole of human history could be reconstructed from the contents of one person's unconscious. Yet it requires substantial evidence to validate such a shocking revision of received history. This we provided in *The Jesus Mysteries*.

The main concern of that book was to uncover the true *history* of Christianity. The main concern of this book is to discern the true *meaning* of Christianity. But before we can embark on an exploration of the gospel of Gnosis we need an understanding of the

historical context in which it was taught. In the light of our latest research, therefore, we will first review, clarify and expand upon the picture of Christian origins which we presented in detail in *The Jesus Mysteries*.

The traditional history of Christianity has managed to survive for so long, in part, because although it is utterly inadequate to the facts, it is fairly internally consistent and easy to grasp. We have found that the best way to open people to the idea that this supposed history is actually a complete fantasy is to present a rival picture of how Christianity and Christian mythology developed, which is more coherent and plausible. In this book, therefore, this is what we will attempt.

Fundamentally all we are suggesting is that we listen to the losers in the civil war that bedevilled Christianity in the third and fourth centuries between the Roman Church and those it branded heretics and did everything in its power to silence. The traditional history was written by the winners, but we have come to believe that the account of the origins and meaning of Christianity given by those dissident Christians is far closer to the truth.

## GNOSTICS AND LITERALISTS

To understand something in a new way, we often need to think using new terms. When writing about the history of spirituality, scholars usually classify people according to the religion to which they are affiliated - Pagan, Jew, Christian, Muslim, and so forth. We would like to suggest that this way of thinking conceals a much more significant classification, which categorizes individuals according to spiritual understanding rather than religious tradition.

From our studies of world spirituality, we have observed that religious movements tend to embrace two opposing poles, which we call 'Gnosticism' and 'Literalism', with particular individuals inhabiting the whole spectrum between the two extremes. This classification is important because Gnostics from different religious traditions have far more in common with each other than they do with Literalists within their own tradition. Whilst Literalists from different religions clearly hold conflicting beliefs, Gnostics from all traditions use different conceptual vocabularies to articulate a common understanding, sometimes called the 'perennial philosophy'. It is not that all Gnostics agree. Different schools argue vehemently with each other, but these differences are minor compared to their shared essential perspective.

To get an accurate understanding of the development of spiritual ideas, we need to view Gnosticism as an identifiable spiritual tradition which transcends the accepted

divisions into regional religions. Those who embrace Gnosticism and have been born into a Jewish culture tend to remain within their national tradition and become Jewish Gnostics, while those born elsewhere tend to become Muslim Gnostics, and so on. But all Gnostics need to be understood as essentially parts of one evolving tradition, whatever their race or culture.

The goal of Gnostic spirituality is Gnosis, or Knowledge of Truth. We have chosen to use the name 'Gnostics', meaning 'Knowers', because in the various languages used by different religions, individuals who have realized 'Gnosis' or achieved 'Enlightenment' are often referred to as 'Knowers': *Gnostikoi* (Pagan/Christian), *Arifs* (Muslim), *Gnanis* (Hindu), *Buddhas* (Buddhist).

Gnostics interpret the stories and teachings of their spiritual tradition as signposts pointing beyond words altogether to the mystical experience of the ineffable Mystery. Literalists, on the other hand, believe their scriptures are actually the words of God. They take their teachings, stories and initiation myths to be factual history. They focus on the words as a *literal* expression of the Truth. Hence we have chosen to call them 'Literalists'.

Gnostics are concerned with the inner essence of their tradition. Literalists associate their faith with its outward manifestations: sacred symbols, scriptures, rituals, ecclesiastical leaders, and so on. Gnostics see themselves as being on a spiritual journey of personal transformation. Literalists see themselves as fulfilling a divinely ordained obligation to practise particular religious customs as a part of their national or cultural identity.

Literalists believe that their particular spiritual tradition is different from all others and has a unique claim on the Truth. They obsessively formulate dogmas which define membership of their particular cult. They are prepared to enforce their opinions and silence those who dissent, justifying their actions by claiming that they are fulfilling God's will. Gnostics, on the other hand, are free spirits who question the presuppositions of their own culture. They follow their hearts, not the herd. They are consumed by their private quest for enlightenment, not by the goal of recruiting more adherents to a religion.

Gnostics wish to free themselves from the limitations of their personal and cultural identities and experience the oneness of all things. They therefore have no reluctance in adopting the wisdom of other traditions if it adds something to their own. Literalists use religion to sustain their personal and cultural identity by defining themselves in opposition to others. This inevitably leads to disputes with those outside their particular cult. It is Literalists who fight wars of religion with Literalists from other traditions,

each claiming that God is on their side. Literalists' enmity also extends to Gnostics within their own tradition who question their bigotry. Most spiritual traditions have a tragic history of the brutal oppression of Gnostics by intolerant Literalists. Interestingly, it is never the other way around.

We know that we are radically changing accepted terminology and run the risk of affronting some classicists and Christian scholars, but we feel that thinking in these terms enables us to understand the origins of Christianity much more accurately. This way we can circumvent the dead end of looking for a particular 'parent' religion. Christianity certainly adopted many elements from Judaism, as is generally accepted. It was also heavily influenced by Paganism, as is being increasingly realized.' But it is best conceived as a product of neither and a reaction against both.

## THE THERAPEUTAE AND THE ESSENES

We have come to understand the original Christians as part of a disparate Gnostic tradition flourishing across the whole of the Mediterranean with a common mystical philosophy and a common abhorrence of limited Literalist religion. Strictly speaking, there were no 'original Christians', but rather a continuous stream of Gnostics from different cultures with different experiences of life, all producing their own unique variations on the perennial philosophy. Amongst some Jewish Gnostics a school developed which synthesized Jewish and Pagan mythology to produce distinctive new myths. In retrospect we can see that this was the beginnings of what we now call 'Christianity'.

These proto-Christians were probably the Therapeutae and Essenes, who are described by the Jewish Gnostic Philo, himself probably an initiate of the Theraputae, as two parts of a single school of philosophy. The world they inhabited was dominated by cosmopolitan Pagan civilizations which had been trading, conquering and synthesizing with each other for centuries. As early as the fourth century BCE the Pagan Gnostic Plato had described the peoples of the Mediterranean as like 'frogs around a small pond'. A few decades later the empire of Alexander the Great transformed the ancient world into essentially one culture, and Greek became the international language. Pagan, Jewish and Christian Gnostics all wrote in Greek, thus making their ideas readily available to each other and fuelling an explosion of creative eclecticism. It was an ideal environment for Gnosticism to flourish.

By the first century CE huge numbers of Jews in Judaea and throughout the Mediterranean were fully integrated into sophisticated Pagan society, none more so than

Jewish Gnostics, such as the Therapeutae, who regarded themselves as literally 'cosmopolitans' - 'citizens of the cosmos'. Philo writes of being part of an international fellowship of Gnostic philosophers who, 'although comparatively few in number, keep alive the covered spark of wisdom secretly throughout the cities of the world'.

Jewish Gnostics claimed to be inheritors of secret mystical teachings passed down from their own great Gnostic master, Moses. These teachings were so similar to those of Pagan Gnosticism that many Jews claimed that the great Pagan philosophers had originally received their wisdom from Moses. This belief encouraged Jews to enthusiastically embrace the philosophy and mythology of the Pagan Gnostics to augment their own tradition, producing a large number of spiritual treatises which synthesized Pagan and Jewish motifs.

The spirituality of the Therapeutae and Essenes is an example of this fusion of Jewish and Pagan Gnosticism. As well as being followers of their own Jewish master Moses, they were also followers of the great Pagan philosopher Pythagoras, whose disciples had set up communities throughout the Mediterranean world. The Jewish historian Josephus informs us that the Essenes are comparable to the Pythagoreans, enthusing 'all who have tasted their philosophy are attracted to it'. Philo, himself known as 'the Pythagorean', describes the Therapeutae as practising 'the contemplative life', which was a way of describing Pythagoreans. He tells us their wisdom stems from Greece and that 'this kind exists in many places in the inhabited world'.

Following the practice of the Cynic school of Pagan Gnosticism, these Jewish Gnostics called their spiritual tradition simply 'the Way' — a term also adopted by the original Christians. The fourth-century Christian Literalist historian Eusebius saw so many similarities between the Way of the Therapeutae and the Christian Way that he claimed the Therapeutae were amongst the first followers of Christ. But Philo's description of the Therapeutae was written before the time that Jesus is supposed to have been teaching, so he is clearly not writing about disciples of an historical Messiah, as Eusebius believed. Ironically, Eusebius was probably right nevertheless, albeit in an entirely different way from how he intended. The Essenes and Therapeutae did not follow Jesus. They created him!

The idea of some sect 'making up' the Jesus myth may seem strange today, but this is because we no longer think of myths in the same way as our ancestors did. To us myths are irrelevant fantasies, but the ancients regarded them as profound allegories encoding mystical teachings. Mythical motifs represented philosophical principles. They were an archetypal vocabulary with which to think. Creating new myths was a way of exploring new ideas.

Reworking old myths and syncretizing them to create new ones was a major preoccupation of the Gnostics. Philo tells us that the Therapeutae were devoted to 'philosophizing and interpreting their ancestral scriptures allegorically, for they think that the words of the literal meaning are symbols of a hidden nature which is made plain only by the under-meaning'. Imaginative mythologizing is also what the later Christian Gnostics specialized in. One of their critics condemns them for using 'allegorical interpretation' to freely 'recompose' Jewish scriptures and 'Greek epic mythology', which are precisely the two sources used to create the myths of Jesus and the Goddess.

Beginning with the Therapeutae and Essenes in the first century BCE, a body of specifically Christian mythology gradually evolved, passing through many stages and revisions, with different Christian schools developing their own myths or their own versions of common myths. Essentially, all of these myths explore two questions which are fundamental to the human predicament: how did we get into this mess and how do we get out of it?!

Jewish Gnostics believed that answers to these questions were encoded in two allegorical myths from the Books of Moses: *Genesis* and *Exodus*. *Genesis* means 'origination'. It was understood as encoding teachings about the descent of the soul into physical incarnation. *Exodus* means 'the way out'. It was seen as encoding teachings about the initiate's spiritual path back to God. The original Christians synthesized these Jewish myths with Pagan myths which also encoded Gnostic teachings about the fall and redemption of the soul to create their own myth cycle which explained both the 'descent' and the 'return'.

The Christian myth of descent or origination is a synthesis and elaboration of the Jewish *Genesis* myth and *Timaeus*, a Pythagorean treatise by the Pagan Gnostic Plato. In his treatise *On the Creation of the World* Philo argues that, understood allegorically, these two works encode the same doctrines.

The Christian myth of the 'return' is a powerful allegory designed to guide us through the stages of initiation which lead to Gnosis. It was created by synthesizing the Jewish myth of *Exodus* with Pagan myths of the dying and resurrecting Godman Osiris-Dionysus. Originally a simple and abstract myth, it was revised and embellished over the course of the first and second centuries CE to become the most influential myth ever created: the Jesus story.

## SOURCES OF THE JESUS MYTH

Let's examine the various elements from which the Jesus myth was constructed,

beginning, as the original Christians undoubtedly did themselves, with the myth of *Exodus*.

### The *Exodus* Allegory

This famous Jewish myth relates the story of Moses leading his people out of captivity in Egypt by miraculously parting the Red Sea. There follows 40 years of wandering in the wilderness in search of the Promised Land, at the end of which Moses dies. It is his successor, Joshua ben Nun, who miraculously parts the river Jordan to lead the Jews to the destined homeland.

The name 'Jesus' itself comes from *Exodus*: In Greek the Hebrew name 'Joshua' becomes 'Jesus'. Today it is normal practice to use Joshua for the hero of *Exodus* and 'Jesus' for the hero of the gospels, which avoids any comparison of the two. At the time, however, it would have been completely obvious that they shared the same name. This is not a coincidence. The Christian Jesus is a mythic development of the Jesus of *Exodus*.

In Hebrew the name Joshua/Jesus is written with the letters *Yod Heh Shin Vah Heh*. The letters *Yod Heh Vah Heh*, known as the Tetragrammaton, were extremely significant to Jewish Gnostics, as they were used to signify the unpronounceable name of God, usually rendered today with added vowels as either Jehovah or Yahweh. As Philo explains, when the middle letter Shin, known as the Holy Letter, is added, the name means 'Saviour of the Lord'.

The honorary title 'Christ' is also linked to the *Exodus* myth. Paul tells us that, as well as Jesus, Moses was also 'God's Christ'. 'Christ', which means 'Anointed One', is a Greek rendering of the Hebrew word 'Messiah', which was an epithet for a leader, used of Jewish kings. Although today the name 'Jesus Christ' is inextricably linked to the Literalist figure of the supposed founder of Christianity, in the first century CE the name would have been heard as obviously symbolic, meaning 'The Saviour King'.

Jewish Gnostics, and Christian Gnostics after them, understood *Exodus* to be an initiation allegory. Egypt represents the body. Whilst initiates identify with the body they are 'in captivity'. To 'come forth out of Egypt' was understood as leaving behind the idea of being merely a body and discovering the soul. The ignorant Egyptians represent those 'without Gnosis', who remain identified with their physical selves.

Crossing the Red Sea was understood as symbolizing a purifying baptism, which is the first stage of initiation on the path of spiritual awakening for those who are 'conscious'. Explaining that *Exodus* should be understood 'allegorically', Paul writes:

Our ancestors passed through the Red Sea and so received baptism into the fellowship of Moses.

Initiation by baptism begins a process in which initiates must face their doubts and confusion, symbolized by the Jews being afflicted in the desert for 40 years. The next stage of initiation is about the 'death' of the old self, represented by the death of Moses. Moses is mythically reborn as Joshua/Jesus who completes the journey to the Promised Land, representing the 'reborn' initiate who realizes Gnosis.

The basic structure of the *Exodus* allegory, representing the fundamental stages of Gnostic initiation, is the framework upon which the Jesus myth was constructed. The first stage of initiation is one of purification and struggle. In the *Exodus* myth this is the crossing of the Red Sea, which inaugurates 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. In the Jesus story, this stage is represented by Jesus' baptism, followed by his 40 days in the wilderness. The next stage in the process of initiation is the 'death' of the old self which precipitates Gnosis. This is represented in the *Exodus* myth by the death of Moses and in the Jesus myth by the death of Jesus on the cross. The experience of Gnosis is represented in *Exodus* by Jesus crossing to the Promised Land and in the New Testament by Jesus' resurrection from the dead and ascension to Heaven.

Acknowledging their debt to the *Exodus* allegory, the original Christians classified people as 'the captive, the called and the chosen'. Those yet to undergo initiation and still trapped in the idea of being a physical body are like the Jews captive in Egypt. Those who have heard the call to awaken and begun the spiritual journey by being initiated into the Outer Mysteries of Christianity are like those Jews who were 'called out of Egypt' to begin the journey to their true home. Those who have undergone the process of purification and spiritual struggle necessary to prepare themselves for Gnosis and been chosen to be initiated into the secret Inner Mysteries of Christianity are like those 'chosen people' whom Jesus leads across the river Jordan to the Promised Land. Initiates who finally realized Gnosis were known as 'those who have crossed over'.<sup>[39]</sup>

Early Christians were well aware of the parallels between their Jesus Christ and the Jesus Christ of Exodus. Justin Martyr, for example, explains that the Christian Jesus will lead his people to the Promised Land just as the Jesus of *Exodus* led his people to the Promised Land. Justin traces the motif of the cross to Exodus, where Moses holds up a serpent on a cross and says, 'If you look at this image and believe, you shall be saved by it.' This source is made explicit in *The Gospel of John*, where Jesus is made to announce:

The Son of Man must be lifted up as the serpent was lifted up by Moses in the wilderness.

Other, more incidental, mythic motifs found in the Jesus myth also come from *Exodus*. Once he has crossed the river Jordan, the Jesus of *Exodus* selects 12 men to represent the 12 tribes of Israel. After his baptism in the river Jordan, the Jesus of the gospels likewise selects 12 men as his immediate followers. Both motifs refer to the 12 astrological signs of the zodiac. Such a reference is not surprising. The Jews had adopted astrology from the Babylonians whilst in exile in Babylon, eventually becoming renowned throughout the ancient world as astrologers. They even claimed that the Jewish Patriarch Abraham had been the inventor of this ancient science.

In the myth of Moses, at his birth the evil Pharaoh, fearful of a prophecy that Moses would be the cause of his downfall, commits mass infanticide in an attempt to kill him. In the gospel myth of Jesus this becomes the 'slaughter of the innocents' perpetrated by the evil King Herod who, fearful of a prophecy that the true King of the Jews has been born, attempts to kill the infant Jesus. Mary the sister of Moses becomes Jesus' mother Mary, a correspondence pointed out in many Christian texts, as well as in the Muslim Qur'an.

Like the Jews in *Exodus*, in the gospel story Jesus is called out of Egypt, where he has been in hiding, like the soul within the body. *The Gospel of Matthew* explains that this is to fulfil the prophecy 'Out of Egypt I have called my Son.' Here, as elsewhere in the gospels, we should read 'fulfil the prophecy' as a coded reference to the source of the symbolic motif and its intended allegorical meaning. This is prophecy in retrospect. Jesus fulfils Jewish scriptural expectations precisely because the Jesus story has been constructed from them.

Piecing together previously existing mythological material in a new way was a traditional Jewish technique known as *midrash*. It has long been known to scholars, for example, that the entire passion narrative in the gospels has been created from motifs taken from *Psalms* 22, 23, 38 and 39 and from the depiction of the 'suffering servant' in *The Book of Isaiah*.

The Essenes taught that in ancient times the Jesus of *Exodus* had hidden secret teachings, so only those who were worthy could discover them at the appropriate time. They developed a contemporary mythic Christ figure called the 'Teacher of Righteousness', whom they identified with the Jesus of *Exodus*. This figure eventually became the Jesus of the gospels, a mythical reincarnation of the great hero of the most

important of all the Jewish Gnostic myths. The secret teachings hidden by Jesus the Christ of *Exodus* are finally made public by the reworked figure of Jesus the Christ in the gospels. This is the 'secret not revealed in former times' but 'now disclosed' of which Paul writes in his letters.

## JEWISH MESSIAH AND PAGAN GODMAN

These Jewish mythological motifs were syncretized with motifs borrowed from the initiation allegories of the Pagan Mysteries. All of the great Pagan Gnostics, such as Pythagoras, Socrates, Plato and Plotinus, were initiates of one or more of the Mystery cults that were ubiquitous throughout the ancient Mediterranean. Each Mystery tradition consisted of exoteric Outer Mysteries, which involved religious practices in which anyone could participate, and esoteric Inner Mysteries, to which access was gained by undergoing a process of initiation. In the Inner Mysteries the rituals and myths of the Outer Mysteries were revealed as allegories encoding mystical teaching which could lead an initiate to the experience of Gnosis.

The most important characters in these allegorical initiation myths were the lost and redeemed Goddess and the dying and resurrecting Godman. Regional variations on these two mighty figures are found throughout the ancient world. In Egypt they were known as Isis and Osiris, in Greece as Persephone and Dionysus, in Syria as Aphrodite and Adonis, in Asia Minor as Cybele and Attis, in Mesopotamia as Ishtar and Marduk, in Persia as the Magna Mater and Mithras, in the area around Judaea as Asherah and Baal. The Pagan Gnostics were aware that all these different Goddesses and Godmen were essentially two universal mythic archetypes. They sometimes used the general name 'Great Mother' to denote the Goddess and 'Osiris-Dionysus' to denote the Godman.

The myths of the Pagan Godman describe a 'Son of God', born to a virgin on 25 December, who dies at Easter through crucifixion, but who resurrects on the third day. He is a prophet who offers his followers the chance to be born again through the rites of baptism. He is a wonder-worker who raises the dead and miraculously turns water into wine at a marriage ceremony. He is a saviour who offers his followers redemption through partaking in a meal of bread and wine, symbolic of his body and blood. These and many more mythic motifs, as we explore in detail in *The Jesus Mysteries*, were incorporated by the original Christians into their myth of Jesus.

The Therapeutae, whom Philo describes as 'like those initiated into the Mysteries of Dionysus', were based in Egypt not far from a lake where there had been major

celebrations of the Mysteries of the Egyptian Godman Osiris for centuries. The Essenes were based in Judaea, near the place where Jesus ben Nun was said to have crossed into the Promised Land. From these mythically charged sacred sites, Jewish Gnostics combined the *Exodus* initiation myth of the Jewish Christ Moses-Jesus and the initiation myths of the Pagan Godman Osiris-Dionysus to create a unique synthesis we know as the gospel story of Jesus Christ.

These two sources are made explicit in the two incompatible accounts of Jesus' birth. On the one hand we are given long genealogies tracing the ancestors of his father Joseph to show that Jesus is born in the line of King David, as the Jewish Christ/King was expected to be. Yet on the other hand we are told that actually Jesus' father is God and his mother a virgin, motifs taken from the Osiris-Dionysus myth. By placing these contradictory accounts side by side, the gospel writers made clear, for 'those with ears to hear', the dual mythic identity of Jesus.

By combining the Jewish Messiah with the Pagan Godman, Jewish Gnostics must have felt they were creating the ultimate mystical superhero. They were also, as is characteristic of Gnostics, openly challenging their own Literalist tradition. Jewish Literalists were anxiously awaiting an historical Messiah, who was expected to be a warrior king sent by their tribal deity Jehovah to free them from domination by the Romans. By syncretizing the figure of the Jewish Messiah with the Pagan dying and resurrecting Godman, Jewish Gnostics were not only making Pagan wisdom more readily available to Jews but were also presenting Jews with an entirely different vision of their Messiah.

The Gnostic Jesus does not come to bring political salvation, but mystical enlightenment. He does not lead victorious armies, but dies as a common criminal, which to Jewish Literalists was offensive heresy. Like the Gnostics themselves, he is a free-thinker who breaks the rules, embraces society's outsiders and ridicules the ecclesiastical authorities for their ignorance. By creating and popularizing the Jesus myth, Jewish Gnostics were doing what Gnostics always do — they were confronting the status quo and presenting their own radically alternative vision of life as a journey towards Gnosis.

## THE SAVIOUR KING

At the heart of the perennial philosophy of Gnosticism is a simple but powerful idea, the implications of which we will be exploring throughout this book. It is the idea of God as a Big Mind which contains the cosmos and which is becoming conscious of itself

through all conscious beings within the cosmos. The purpose of Gnostic initiation is to awaken in us a recognition of this our shared divine essence.

The Pagan Gnostics mythically represented the idea of the one Consciousness of God that is conscious in all by the image of the 'King'. Plotinus, for example, writes:

Consciousness is the King. And we are also the King when we are transformed into the King.

Based on this Pagan image the original Christians created the image of the 'Christ' which, as we discussed previously, is equivalent in meaning to 'King'. Paul describes Christ as 'the consciousness of God' and teaches that we are all Christ's body. When we are 'baptized into union with him' through Gnostic initiation, 'there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and freeman, male and female; for we are all one in Christ Jesus'.

If we replace the word 'King' in the previous passage from Plotinus with the Jewish synonym 'Christ', we can see just how similar Pagan and Christian teachings are:

Consciousness is the Christ. And we are also Christ when we are transformed into the Christ.

Pagan and Christian Gnostics imagined the initiatory journey to be about awakening the King within. In the Pagan Mysteries, the initiate was 'enthroned' as a king as part of the initiation ceremonies. Pagan Gnostics of the Cynic school called the realized initiate a 'King' in the 'Kingdom of God'. Likewise, Christian Gnostics taught that when we realize Gnosis we will become 'self-ruled' kings in the Kingdom of God and 'reign over the All'. They imagined the triumphant Christian initiate crowned with a halo of light, declaring: 'The light has become a crown on my head.'

## THE EVOLVING JESUS MYTH

The Jesus story as we now know it was not created all at once, or by only one person. Nobody sat down surrounded by big piles of books containing Jewish and Pagan myths and proceeded to 'cut and paste' the new myth of the Saviour King together. Rather, it developed bit by bit, as different Gnostics added new motifs and refined old ones, fashioning a progressively more complex allegory in the form of an ever more colourful and emotive story. Later the Jesus story fell into the hands of those with a more political agenda and became distorted and confused, but the underlying initiation allegory which

is its foundation remains.

The earliest Christian texts we possess are the genuine letters of Paul written in the first half of the first century. Paul quotes older hymns to Christ, which suggests that he is developing a Joshua/Jesus cult that may have already been in existence, perhaps for centuries. Unlike the New Testament gospels, written some 50-100 years later, Paul does not teach a quasi-historical narrative about Jesus. Paul's Jesus is a clearly mythical figure who does not inhabit any particular time or place. Paul never quotes Jesus and does not portray him as a recently deceased Jewish master. Indeed, he doesn't treat him as someone who had actually lived at all. He writes, '*If Jesus had been on Earth, he wouldn't have been a priest,*' not, '*When Jesus was on Earth, he wasn't a priest.*'

When Paul reveals to us 'the secret' of Christianity, it has absolutely nothing to do with an historical Jesus. The secret he declares is the mystical revelation of 'Christ in you' - the one Consciousness of God in all of us. His Jesus is a mythic figure whose story teaches initiates the path they must follow to realize the Christ within. The only narrative elements of the Jesus myth important to Paul are Christ's baptism, death and resurrection, which he understands as symbolizing the stages of initiation. By identifying with Jesus' baptism initiates are washed clean of their past and begin the quest for Gnosis. By vicariously sharing in Jesus' death and resurrection, they symbolically die to their 'old self' and resurrect 'in Christ'.

In the writings of Paul, then, we find the basic Jesus myth as a three-stage initiation allegory, adapted from the three-stage initiation structure of the Exodus Moses-Jesus myth: baptism (crossing Red Sea), the death of Jesus (death of Moses), resurrection (Jesus arrives in the Promised Land). Later Christians will expand this simple allegorical foundation to create the complete Jesus story.

Christian gospels began to be written down at around the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century. These include *The Sophia of Jesus Christ*, *The Dialogue of the Saviour*, *The Gospel of Thomas*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Exegesis of the Soul*, *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, *The Apocryphon of John*, *The Secret Gospel of Mark* and *Pistis Sophia*, all now rejected as heretical by the Roman Church.

It is currently accepted amongst most scholars that also written at this time were the anonymous gospels that were later attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which turn Paul's timeless Christ myth into a pseudo-historical drama. The evidence for dating these gospels so early, however, is very flimsy. Once we have jettisoned the untenable idea of these texts being eye-witness reports, it seems likely that future scholarship will date them later and later into the second century — and even then with no certainty as

to just how similar the gospels of that time were to the versions with which we are familiar today.

*The Gospel of Mark* is thought to be the earliest of the New Testament gospels, but scholars have shown it to have been created from pre-existing fragments which contain sayings and a non-time/place specific Jesus story to which someone has added a geographical and historical context. Matthew and Luke based their versions of the Jesus myth on Mark, copying sections of it right down to the same Greek particles, while *The Gospel of John* presents a significantly different version of the myth. All of the New Testament gospels contradict each other in many important details! This is because the Gnostics saw their scriptures as initiation allegories and so had no compunction about adapting them to suit their own particular requirements.

The Pagans had for centuries expressed their myths in the form of plays. The Jews had no dramatic tradition, but did write the first Greek historical novel — an allegorical story which portrays Judaism as a Mystery religion! It should not surprise us, therefore, that some 200 years later the Jesus allegory, the central myth of the Christian Mystery cult, was likewise written in the form of a quasi-historical novel.

Historical myths were the Jews' speciality. The *Exodus* initiation allegory, which also appears to have no basis in actual history, is written in the form of a pseudo-historical narrative. When Jewish Gnostics developed their new myth of Jesus the Jewish dying and resurrecting Godman, it was inevitable they would eventually also set this allegory in an historical context. As with the *Exodus* myth, the creators of the Jesus story mixed together mythical figures, such as Jesus and Mary, with a handful of historical figures which were also used to play symbolic roles in the initiation allegory. Unlike *Exodus*, the new Jesus myth could not be set in archaic times, because it was portrayed as a revelation of a new Messiah. It was set, therefore, in the recent past and incorporated figures who were important to Jewish Gnostics, such as the much revered John the Baptist and the much hated Pontius Pilate, the Roman ruler of Judaea.

At the end of the first century CE, when the original Christians were casting the Jesus myth in an historical setting, Israel was in deep crisis. Jews needed an explanation for the terrible events which were befalling them. In 70 CE the Jerusalem Temple, the very heart of Jewish Literalism, had been torn down by the Romans. By 135 CE the whole of Israel would be laid waste and cease to exist for 2,000 years. Jewish Gnostics deliberately set the Jesus story in the years in which the crisis began.

It was precisely at the time that Jesus was portrayed as being born that Rome imposed direct taxation on Judaea, forever ending its independence, and Pilate signalled the irrelevance of Jewish culture by desecrating the Temple in Jerusalem. It was a

defining moment in Jewish history, which reached its terrible crescendo in the holocaust of 70 CE. In Israel and the Diaspora, the first century felt like the 'end days', as indeed it was for the Jews as a sovereign nation. The original Christians therefore really had no choice about when they set their Jesus myth. If the Messiah didn't come at this time, when he was most needed, he just couldn't be the Messiah.

The original Christians portrayed their Gnostic hero Jesus as a harbinger of these turbulent times who came to offer mystical liberation as an alternative to the futile attempts at political liberation which, in retrospect, the Jews could see had destroyed them completely. The Gnostic Messiah Jesus offered defeated and dejected Jews meaning and new hope.

## THE CHRISTIAN GODDESS

The myth of the Godman Jesus can only be properly understood alongside the myth of the Goddess Sophia. After so many centuries of patriarchal Christianity it is both shocking and reassuring to discover a Goddess at the very heart of Christianity. She is, like her son/brother/lover Jesus, a syncretic figure created from both Pagan and Jewish sources.

Sophia, whose name means 'wisdom', had been the Goddess of the Pagan philosophers for centuries. Indeed, the word 'philosopher', first used by Pythagoras, means 'lover of Sophia'. Although often pictured today as dry academics, these brilliant intellectuals were actually mystics and devotees of the Goddess. Parmenides, for example, is usually remembered as the founder of Western logic, yet his masterwork is a visionary poem in which he descends to the underworld to be instructed by the Goddess.

Sophia was also an important mythical figure for Jewish Gnostics, such as Philo. Although later rejected by Jewish Literalists, there had always been a Jewish Goddess tradition. At one time Israelites had worshipped the Goddess Asherah as the consort of the Jewish God Jehovah. In the fifth century BCE she was known as Anat Jahu. In texts written between the fourth and first centuries BCE, such as *Proverbs*, *The Sophia of Solomon* and *The Sophia of Jesus the Son of Sirach*, she becomes God's companion and co-creator Sophia.

The Jewish Sophia is the lover and inspiration of the good and the wise. She is 'an initiate in the Mysteries of God's Gnosis' who teaches her followers to become 'friends of God' — the ubiquitous name used by Pagan, Jewish and Christian Gnostics. *The Sophia of Solomon* assures us:

Sophia shines brightly and never fades. She is readily discerned by those who love her, and by those who seek her she is found. She is quick to make herself known to all who desire her Gnosis.

The Sophia literature talks of a 'Good Man' — no one in particular — who is the Goddess' envoy on Earth. Moses was pictured as such an envoy. According to the Exodus myth, when he passes on his authority to Jesus ben Nun, Jesus also receives 'the Spirit of Sophia'. For the Christian Gnostics, their Jesus is likewise Sophia's envoy, coming to reveal her wisdom which leads to Gnosis. Hence 'the secret' that Paul proclaims is 'Christ in whom is hid the treasures of Sophia and Gnosis'.

In the Sophia literature the Good Man is persecuted by his own people for preaching Sophia's wisdom and condemned to a 'shameful death'. But he is vindicated afterwards and confronts his persecutors as their judge in Heaven, where he is one of the 'Sons of God'. In the hands of Christian Gnostics this Good Man is transformed into Jesus the 'Son of God', who comes, according to the original Christians, 'so that Sophia might be proclaimed' and is murdered by his misguided kinsmen, but is vindicated by his resurrection and ascension to Heaven, where he becomes the divine judge.

As well as basing their version of the Jesus myth on *The Gospel of Mark*, the authors of *Matthew* and *Luke* drew on a now lost gospel, which scholars call *Q*. *The Gospel of Q* portrays both Jesus and John the Baptist as messengers sent by Sophia. It contains sayings attributed to Sophia, which in the gospels are put into the mouth of her envoy Jesus. Most of these sayings are not Jewish in character, but heavily influenced by the Cynic school of Pagan philosophy.' In *The Gospel of Luke* one of these sayings remains attributed to Sophia herself. Referring directly to the myth of Sophia and the Good Man, and so insinuating that he is Sophia's representative on Earth, Jesus attributes to Sophia the pronouncement 'I will send them prophets and messengers and some of these they will persecute and kill.'

Philo describes Sophia as the 'mother of the *Logos*'. The *Logos* is a Pagan philosophical concept with many meanings. For Philo, the *Logos* is the Guide on the path which leads to Sophia and her Gnosis. Philo describes Moses as embodying the *Logos* and as a child of Sophia. Later Christian Gnostics describe their Jesus in the same way. In the Christian Gnostic *Acts of John* Jesus announces: 'In me know the *Logos* of Sophia.'

The concept of the *Logos*, usually translated by the misleading term 'Word', is most familiar from the opening lines of *The Gospel of John*, in which Jesus is described as an

embodiment of the *Logos*. This passage, written in the form of an antiphonal hymn, is clearly a quotation from an older work. Everything it says of Jesus the envoy of Sophia had already been said of the Goddess herself in the Sophia literature.

Philo was based in Alexandria in Egypt, the cultural centre of the ancient world and an eclectic melting-pot of different spiritual traditions. Here, taking as his mythological models the Pagan figures of Osiris-Dionysus and the Great Mother, this Jewish Gnostic created his own mythic figures of the *Logos* and Sophia. A little later these same figures would appear as Jesus and Sophia, the central figures of the myths taught by thriving schools of Christian Gnosticism operating throughout the Mediterranean.

## SCHOOLS OF CHRISTIAN GNOSTICISM

By the first half of the first century there were already three distinct schools of Christian Gnosticism, which suggests, once again, that in some form or another Christianity had been in existence for some time. These schools are the Simonians, Paulists and Ebionites. The issue which divided them was the relationship of Christianity to traditional Jewish religion. The Simonians were radical internationalists who rejected Judaism and its tribal deity Jehovah as redundant Literalist nonsense. The Paulists were also internationalists who wanted to free Christianity from close ties with Judaism, but took a more moderate view, seeing Christianity as fulfilling and therefore surpassing Judaism. The Ebionites were nationalists who saw Christianity as a specifically Jewish cult and wanted Christians to conform to traditional Jewish religious customs.

These schools can be considered as different wings of early Christianity. The Simonians were the left-wing revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow Jewish Literalism. The conservative Ebionites saw Christianity as a movement of reform within Judaism. The Paulists, in the centre, considered Judaism to be superseded by Christianity and therefore obsolete.

None of these Christians were practising Christianity as we would recognize it today. Christian Literalism, from which nearly all forms of modern Christianity have evolved, didn't begin to appear until the middle of the second century.

### Simonians

The man vilified by later Christian Literalists as the 'father' of Christian Gnosticism was an early first-century Samaritan known as Simon the Magus. Because we have inherited a version of the Jesus myth in which the hero dies in Jerusalem, we assume that

Christianity was originally an exclusively Jewish cult. Actually, many early Christians, such as Simon, were Samaritans and there is no evidence to suggest that they set their Christ myth in a Jewish setting. Today only a small number of Samaritans survive, but at the time they far outnumbered the Jews. Samaria had its own distinct religious traditions, also based on the Books of Moses, which rivalled the Jewish Temple cult based in Jerusalem. Writing in the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr, who was himself a Samaritan, tells us that Simon was 'regarded with great reverence by nearly all Samaritans'. This is an amazing testimony to Simon's influence from a source which is nothing but hostile to him.

Simon is said to have been the most outstanding disciple of John the Baptist. The story goes that when John died Simon was in Alexandria, where he had received a Greek education, so another Samaritan Gnostic, Dositheus, became John's successor. When Simon returned home, however, he became the acknowledged master. John, Simon and Dositheus were probably linked to the Essenes, either as envoys or founders of a breakaway school. John teaches in the wilderness, close to where the Essenes were based. Dositheus is said to have come from the same area. Essene teachings show the influence of Persian Zoroastrianism, which would explain why Simon was called 'Magus', a Zoroastrian term for a sage.

Simon was also known as 'Faustus' or 'Honoured One' and described himself as a 'Christ'. His followers regarded him as an embodiment of the 'Great Power', the male aspect of the Mystery of God. He travelled with a spiritual partner called Helen who was seen as an embodiment of the Goddess.

Many important later Christian Gnostics are part of Simon's lineage, including the first-century Samaritan master Menander, the second-century Alexandrian masters Carpocrates, Epiphanes and Basilides, the Syrian master Cerdo, who taught in Rome, and Saturninus of Antioch. The Christian Literalist Irenaeus complains that 'from Simon a multitude of Barbeloites has arisen'. These Gnostics developed myths in which the Goddess, called by them 'Barbelo', was prominent.

The Simonians were enthusiastic eclectics who sought out Gnostic wisdom wherever they could find it. The Literalist Hippolytus tells us that Simon interpreted the words of Moses and the Pagan poets. His followers continued this tradition of open mindedness. Basilides even wrote a book on Hinduism. They had no time for nationalistic Jewish Literalism, whose complex religious rules and regulations they regarded as unnecessary mumbo-jumbo. Faith and love were the only pre-requisites to being saved through the experience of Gnosis.

Simonians waged war on the Jewish Literalists' anthropomorphic image of God as the

jealous and despotic tribal deity Jehovah, requiring their initiates to ritually declare their rejection of this false god. These Jewish Gnostics opposed the Jewish Literalists' personification of God for the same reason that Pagan Gnostics mocked the personified gods of Pagan Literalists. For Gnostics, God is the Great Mystery which is the source and essence of all that is. Any idea of God is just that — an idea. Confusing the idea of God with the true ineffable nature of the Mystery is idolatry. The image is mistaken for the essence. To Simonians, the Literalist interpretation of the Old Testament portrays the Mystery of God as a Jewish monarch, which is ridiculous nationalist nonsense. Cerdo asserts:

The God proclaimed by the law and the prophets is not the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. The God of the Old Testament is known, but the Father of Jesus Christ is the Unknowable.

## Paulists

Of all early Christians, Paul was the most revered by later Gnostics. He was the primary inspiration for two of the most influential schools of Christian Gnosticism, set up by the early second-century masters Marcion and Valentinus. Christian Gnostics calling themselves 'Paulicians' ran the 'seven churches' in Greece and Asia Minor that were established by Paul, their 'mother Church' being at Corinth. The Paulicians survived until the tenth century and were the inspiration for the later Bogomils and Cathars.

Marcion was originally a student of the Simonian Gnostic Cerdo, but when he set up his own highly successful school it was Paul he placed centre-stage as the 'Great Messenger'. Even his later Literalist critics acknowledged that Marcion was 'a veritable sage' and that his influence was considerable.

Valentinus tells us he received the secret teachings of Christianity from his master Theudas, who had in turn received them from Paul. Based on these teachings, Valentinus founded his own influential school of Christian Gnosticism, which survived as a loose alliance of individual teachers until it was forcibly closed down in the fifth century by the Literalist Roman Church. The number of second and third-century Valentinians that we can still name is testimony to Valentinus' importance: Alexander, Ambrose, Axionicus, Candidus, Flora, Heracleon, Mark, Ptolemy, Secundus, Theodotus and Theotimus.[

Paul was such an important figure in the Christian community that at the end of the second century the newly emerging school of Christian Literalism could not simply

reject him as a misguided heretic but felt compelled to reshape him into a Literalist. They forged in his name the (now thoroughly discredited) 'Pastoral Letters', in which Paul is made to spout anti-Gnostic propaganda. Throughout his genuine letters, however, Paul uses characteristically Gnostic language and gives Gnostic teachings, a fact that is deliberately obscured by Literalist translators.

Like later Christian Gnostics, Paul addresses his teachings to two levels of Christian initiates, called psychics and pneumatics, describing the latter as 'having Gnosis'. Of himself he writes, 'I may not be much of a speaker, but I have Gnosis.' He sees his mission as awakening in initiates an awareness of 'the Christ within' — the one 'consciousness of God' — by 'instructing all without distinction in the ways of Sophia, so as to make each one an initiated member of Christ's body'.

Paul tells us that when he personally experienced Christ it was as a vision of light on the road to Damascus. 'Damascus' was a code word used by the Essenes to refer to their base in Qumran, which suggests that Paul, like Simon, had Essene affiliations. He uses the same language as the Essenes, for example when he describes human beings as being enslaved by the powers of fate, imagined as 'the elemental rulers of the cosmos', the '*archons* of this dark cosmos', from which 'Christ has set us free'.

Paul, like Simon, was an internationalist who wanted to liberate Christianity from any baggage it had inherited from Jewish Literalism. He writes dismissively of the traditional Jewish Law:

I count it as so much dung. All I care about is knowing Christ, experiencing the power of the resurrection, sharing his sufferings, in growing conformity with his death, so that I may finally arrive at the resurrection from the dead.

Again like Simon, Paul is adamant that the true God is the ineffable Oneness, not the national Jewish deity:

Do you suppose God is the God of the Jews alone? Is he not the God of the Gentiles also? Certainly of the Gentiles also, if it be true that God is the One.

For Paul, Jewish Literalism divides Jews from Gentiles. It is a 'curse' which could be healed by the syncretic figure of the Jewish Messiah/Pagan Godman Jesus. He explains that Jesus 'has broken down the enmity that stood like a dividing wall' between 'Gentiles and Jew', creating 'out of the two a single humanity in himself, thereby making peace. This was his purpose, to reconcile the two in the Oneness of God.'

However, although Paul wants to dump Judaism, he doesn't completely condemn it, as Simon did. He accepts that it is appropriate for those Jews who wish to maintain their indigenous traditions, but maintains that it is irrelevant to Gentiles and Jewish initiates who wish to leave the old ways behind. For Paul, Jesus *fulfils* the laws and the prophets, precisely because he takes us beyond them.

Of Paul's later followers, the Valentinians maintained this more liberal approach. Marcion, however, amplified Paul's criticism of Judaism. He wrote a famous treatise called *Contradictions*, setting out all the differences between the God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament. As a way of distancing Jesus from the figure of the Jewish Messiah, Marcionites, and others with a similar perspective, claimed to follow 'Jesus Chrestos' (Jesus the Good) rather than 'Jesus Christus' (Jesus the Messiah). From as early as the middle of the first century through to the fifth century we hear of those calling themselves 'Chrestians' rather than 'Christians'.

## Ebionites

The other school of early first-century Christian Gnosticism was the Ebionites or 'Poor Ones'. They were based in Jerusalem, where Paul says he visited them. Ebionites wanted Christian Gnosticism to retain its ties with traditional Jewish religion. They emphasized that Christianity was for Jews and that if Gentiles wanted to embrace it they would have to undergo circumcision and keep all the Laws of Moses.

Paul vehemently attacks Ebionite leaders, calling them 'evil' and 'dogs'. He complains that they 'proclaim a different Jesus' from himself. He ridicules them for arrogantly regarding themselves as 'super-messengers' because of their Jewishness, dismissing them as 'axe-wielding circumcisonaries' who might as well 'go the whole way and make eunuchs of themselves!' Ebonite letters, attributed to Clement of Rome, retaliate with similar ferocity, attacking Paul as inspired by Satan.

Paul's internationalist Christianity flourished amongst Gentiles, but was largely unacceptable to Jews. He reports that only four Jewish Christians worked with him and that he was often attacked by Jews for preaching his heretical vision of the mystical Messiah Jesus. Ebionite Gnosticism, on the other hand, due to its ties with Judaism and insistence on circumcision, made little impact beyond the Jewish community, although it did-survive for hundreds of years and influenced the creation of Islam (see Appendix II: 'Gnostic Islam').

The real importance of the Ebionites is not who they were, but the fantasies which were later created about them. Because they were based in Jerusalem, later Christian

Literalists claimed that they were the original disciples of the historical Jesus. However, in the second century, when the Christian Literalist Melito of Sardis went to Jerusalem hoping to find the descendants of the original disciples, he found only Ebionite Gnostics, whose Christianity was inspired by 'heretical' scriptures such as *The Gospel of the Ebionites*, *The Gospel of the Hebrews*, *The Gospel of the Twelve Apostles* and *The Gospel of the Nazarenes*.

Paul happens to mention the names of some Ebionites in his letters. He refers to a particularly conservative leader called James as a 'brother of the Lord'. Later Literalists took this literally and became convinced that not only was there an historical Jesus, but that Paul knew his brother. Actually the title 'brother of the Lord' was used by Christian Gnostics to refer to each other and is not specific to James. The Gnostic *Apocalypse of James* categorically tells us that James was not literally Jesus' sibling.

Paul also mentions a Cephas. Because the Hebrew name 'Cephas' means the same as the Greek name 'Peter', Literalists assume Paul to be talking about the Simon Peter of the gospels, but actually at the time that Paul was writing, the gospel story as we know it had not been created. Christ was a mystical, timeless figure, not yet the hero of a historical romance set in Judaea, and the character of Simon Peter had yet to be invented. Paul is definitely not writing about the Peter of the gospels. He is extremely critical of the Cephas he mentions, to an extent that would not be credible if he were talking about the historical Jesus' right-hand man — especially when Paul had never met Jesus himself. Paul never mentions any of the gospel events to do with Simon Peter or the times that Jesus is portrayed as being hostile to Simon Peter, even when simply mentioning one of these criticisms would clearly clinch his argument with Cephas.

## Free Spirits

What sort of people were the original Christians? Much of what we know of them is recorded by later Christian Literalists. From their critical testimony it seems that, apart from more conservative groups such as the Ebionites, they were characteristically eclectic, egalitarian, rebellious free spirits with a wickedly irreverent sense of humour.

Their attacks on the 'sacred cows' of Jewish Literalism are deliberately provocative. Some schools rework Jewish mythology, recasting all the goodies as baddies and the baddies as goodies. Traditional biblical villains, such as Cain, Esau and the Sodomites, become fearless heroes for standing up to the oppressive Jehovah. The evil snake in the traditional reading of the Genesis myth becomes the 'Serpent of Light', an embodiment of Jesus, who encourages Adam and Eve to eat of the Tree of Gnosis. Poking fun at

sanctimonious Literalists, Marcion writes:

When Jesus descended into Hell, the sinners listened to his words and were all saved. But the saints, believing as usual that they were being put to the test, rejected his words and were all damned.

Other Christian Gnostics took a less combative approach, which Christian Literalists found even more infuriating. They viewed the Literalist understanding as a stage that initiates sometimes needed to pass through on the path to Gnosis and, as Gnosis itself could never be expressed in words anyway, saw no problem in simply going along with whatever Literalists said. The Literalist Irenaeus complains that it is impossible to argue with such people because they keep on agreeing with him, although he is sure that in secret they believe something else entirely. When Literalists asked initiates of the Messalian school of Christianity if they believed one thing or another, they would always answer 'Yes', whatever the question. The Literalist Epiphanius records with dismay the following conversation: 'Are you Patriarchs?' 'Yes.' 'Are you Prophets?' 'Yes.' 'Are you angels?' 'Yes.' 'Are you Jesus Christ?' 'Yes.' If nothing else, you have to admire their sense of fun!

## Eclectics

Christian Gnostics were enthusiastic eclectics. The Naassene school taught that there was one spiritual system underlying the mythology of all religions. These Christian initiates were also initiated into the Pagan Mysteries of the Great Mother. They praised the great Pagan poet Homer as their prophet and equated their Jewish Godman Jesus with the various mythical faces of the Pagan Godman — Osiris, Attis, Adonis, Pan, Bacchus, and so on. For them the Son of God was 'many-named' and known by different cultures in different ways.

The Sethian school of Christianity practised an adaptation of the Pagan Mysteries of Orpheus. When the Roman emperor Hadrian visited Alexandria in the first half of the second century, he encountered Christians who practised the local Pagan Mysteries of the Godman Serapis and who studied Pythagorean mathematics and astrology. When the Valentinian teacher Marcellina came to Rome, she brought with her 'painted icons, illuminated with gold, representing Jesus, Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle'. The Literalist Hippolytus wrote that whatever variations there may be between the systems of the Simonian and Valentinian Gnostics and that of Pythagoras 'was in name only'.

Alongside the Christian gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi were found works by Plato and works attributed to the mythical ancient Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus. The Pagan master Plotinus, who taught in Rome in the middle of the third century, treats Christianity as a rival school of philosophy which, like his own, had developed from the teachings of Plato. Much to his consternation, members of his own school were also initiates of Christian schools. Plotinus writes of 'some of our own friends who fell in with this doctrine before joining our circle and, strangely, still cling to it'.

The closeness of Christian and Platonic Gnosticism is also obvious from the fact that the influential Christian Gnostic Origen and the great Pagan Gnostic Plotinus were both pupils of the Platonist Ammonius in Alexandria. Indeed, if Christian Gnosticism had triumphed instead of Christian Literalism, the Christian, 'Old Testament' (as it were), would probably have been the works of Plato, instead of the largely banal Jewish texts we have actually inherited as holy scripture.

Gnostics are eclectics because they understand different spiritual traditions as using different conceptual languages to point us beyond words altogether to the realization of Gnosis. All philosophical ideas are relatively true or false expressions of the Absolute Truth, which is by its nature inexpressible. If we become fixated with the words, as Literalists do, we mistake the message for the meaning and end up eating the menu, not the meal. *The Gospel of Philip* cautions us:

Names are very deceptive because they turn the heart aside from the real to the unreal. Whoever hears the word 'God' doesn't think of the reality, but of what is unreal. Likewise with words such as 'Father', 'Son', 'Holy Spirit', 'life', 'light', 'resurrection', 'church', and so on.

## Egalitarians

Following in the tradition of Pagan philosophers such as Antiphon, Epicurus, Diogenes and Zeno, Christian Gnostics were political radicals who preached liberty, equality and fraternity centuries before the French Revolution. Epiphanes, the son of Gnostic master Carpocrates, although he died at the young age of 17, wrote an extraordinary treatise called *On Justice*, in which he condemned property and social authority and declared that all have divinely ordained rights, whether they be free or slaves. 'Where does Justice lie?' he asks. 'In a community of equals,' he answers. He proposes a mystical anarchism which urges us to discover the natural goodness within ourselves and live according to our own essential nature. Being constrained by unnatural manmade laws stops us living

in communion with the divine Laws of Life. Anticipating Proudhon's slogan 'Property is theft', he argues:

When man forgot that community means equality and deformed it by laws, on that day, the thief was born.

Creating visions of social utopias has always been a part of the Gnostic tradition. Gnostics are 'Idealists' both in the philosophical and political sense of the word. Pythagoreans lived in egalitarian communities, in which property was held in common and women were treated as equal, which inspired the first Christian monasteries. The Stoic school of Pagan Gnosticism developed the idea of the '*Politeia* of Zeus' or 'Commonwealth of God', a community of equals living naturally in harmony with the divine order of things. Christian Gnostics from Paul onwards also talk of the 'Commonwealth of God' and the 'Kingdom of God' as an ideal state to which we should aspire.

Christian Gnostics followed the dictates of their own hearts and rejected any external authority. They called themselves 'a generation which knows no tyranny' and 'a kingless generation', addressing each other as 'brother' or 'sister'. They did not develop a fixed ecclesiastical hierarchy, like the Literalists, but cast lots to select who would take leadership roles, such as priest, overseer, reader, and so on. This prevented power from being consolidated in the hands of any one person, as happened later in the Literalist Roman Church, with disastrous consequences.'

Much to the horror of misogynistic Christian Literalists, Christian Gnostics dared to treat women as equal to men. Epiphanes writes:

The Father of All gave us eyes to see with, and his only law is justice, without distinction between man and woman.

Pagan Pythagorean Gnostics were also famous for treating women as equals. In the Jewish Therapeutae school of Pythagoreanism, women were particularly honoured for their 'love of Sophia' and Christian Gnostics continued this tradition. Some schools were named after women, such as Helen, Salome, Mary, Marcellina and Martha. In fact the Pagan philosopher Celsus, writing about Christianity c.170 CE, only knows of gospels written by women or sects named after women!

The Literalist Irenaeus regrets that women were particularly attracted to Gnostic Christianity and is appalled that the Gnostic sage Marcus encouraged women to become

priestesses and officiate at the Eucharist celebration. The bigoted Tertullian is enraged that women Gnostics dare to teach and engage in discussion' and horrified at the idea of them baptizing and acting as bishops.

Paul tells us it was the accepted practice for male Christian Gnostics to travel with a female spiritual partner, whom he calls a 'sister-wife'. Paul himself travelled with a woman called Thecla and he mentions other women — Prisca, Junia, Julia and Nerueus' sister — who worked and travelled in missionary pairs with their 'husband-brothers'. Other man/woman Gnostic teams we know of include Simon and Helen, Dositheus and Helen, Apelles and Philumene, and Zosimos and Theosebeia. The Gnostic sage Montanus, who was renowned for his following of ecstatic women, travelled with two women, Priscilla and Maximilla.

## Libertines

Gnostics deliberately violated social norms as a way of deconditioning themselves from their social personae and so becoming aware of their true spiritual identity. For some, such as the Cainite school, this was done through ascetic abstinence. For others, such as the Carpocratian school, this was done through libertine indulgence. Sometimes both of these approaches were adopted by different individuals within the same school.

Carpocrates taught that our ideas of good and bad conduct are only matters of human opinion, not divine decree. He taught his students to enjoy life, including the pleasures of sex that are so often condemned by religious Literalists. His son Epiphanes writes:

God created the delights of love equally for all humankind. But men have repudiated the very thing which is the source of their existence.

Such Gnostics saw sexuality as a celebration of the union of God and Goddess, from which all of life springs. They are said to have sometimes practised sacramental nudity in church and even ritual intercourse. The Literalist Epiphanius describes his experience as a young man of 20, meeting two pretty young Gnostic women who invited him to one of their *agapes* or love feasts, which turned out to be an orgy. With the horror characteristic of the deeply repressed, Epiphanius is outraged that these Gnostics believed that they 'must ceaselessly apply themselves to the mystery of sexual union'.

These allegations, which may well be exaggerated, have led to Gnostics being portrayed as completely immoral. Carpocrates was accused of promoting the idea that we should deliberately commit as many 'sins' as possible. Paul complains of such a

misrepresentation of Gnostic doctrine even in the first century. Probably referring to the conservative Ebionites, he writes, 'Some libellously report me as saying, "Do evil so that good may come of it."' Actually liberal Gnostics are teaching that moral laws are unnecessary social conventions, because we are actually good by nature. Someone who, through the experience of Gnosis, has discovered their true identity, can live a spontaneous and natural life motivated by the good within them. For conservative Literalists, then as now, such teachings are irresponsible and depraved.

Rejecting the Gnostic idea of 'original goodness', Literalists preached the absolute opposite — the pernicious doctrine of 'original sin'. The Literalist Timothy writes with disgust about the shameless naturalness of the Christian Gnostics:

They eat whenever they are hungry. They drink when they are thirsty, at any hour of the day, without regard for the proscribed fasts. They spend their time doing nothing and sleeping. In summertime, when night falls, they lie down to sleep in the open air, men and women together, and they say that this is of no consequence.

## SUMMARY

The original Christians were Jewish Gnostics who were part of an international Gnostic tradition flourishing across the whole of the Mediterranean. Like all Gnostics, they encoded their mystical teachings in the form of allegorical myths. Out of previous Jewish and Pagan myths they created the Christian myth cycle, of which the Jesus myth is a part.

The original Christians synthesized elements from the Jewish allegorical myth of the Christ Moses-Jesus with Pagan myths of the dying and resurrecting Godman Osiris-Dionysus to create the Jesus myth. In its earliest form, found in the writings of Paul, the Jesus myth is a simple initiation allegory. Paul is not concerned with an historical man, but with the mystical 'Christ in you'. Later the Jesus myth was fleshed out as a more complex allegory in the form of a pseudo-history.

None of the early schools of Christianity resemble the Literalist Christianity with which we are familiar today. The original Christians were characteristically eclectic, egalitarian free spirits who treated women as equals and rejected organized religion.

What happened? How did a disparate group of libertine anarchists end up creating a religion that would come to dominate the world by force? How did an allegorical myth composed by imaginative mystics come to be understood as a literal account of the most important events in history?

## CHAPTER 3. CHURCH OF THE ANTI-CHRIST

That which is called the Christian religion existed among the ancients, and never did not exist, from the beginnings of the human race until Christ came in the flesh, at which time the true religion, which already existed, began to be called Christianity.

Augustine, *Retractions*

It is a common pattern in the history of spirituality that dissident, non-conformist Gnostics find they have unwittingly inspired an authoritarian Literalist religion. Religions characteristically begin with charismatic masters who share their personal understanding of the Gnosis with small groups of spiritual enthusiasts, teaching the perennial philosophy in their own unique way. Over time the number of students grows, until there are too many for them to all have personal access to the teacher. It becomes impractical to carry on as a disparate band of anarchic mystics and those with a more authoritarian nature start to organize things. Before you know it, a new religion has been born. But the more the student/master ratio becomes unbalanced, the more the general level of understanding diminishes. Subtle allegorical teachings become understood in superficial, literal ways. The trajectory is one of inevitable degeneration from the simple but sophisticated teachings of Gnosticism to the shallow but often complex teachings of Literalism. This is exactly what happened with Christianity.

### THE LITERALIST HERESY

Once the Jesus myth had been set in an historical context, it was only a matter of time before a group of Christians began to interpret it as a record of actual events. By the middle of the second century a Literalist school of Christianity had begun to emerge in Rome, with autocrats such as Irenaeus as its spokesmen. The Gnostics' understanding of the Jesus story as an initiation allegory leading to salvation through Gnosis was replaced by the Literalists' idea of salvation through belief in an historical Messiah.

Literalists did not claim Christian teachings to be radically different from Pagan philosophy and were well aware of the similarities between the story of Jesus and the Pagan myths of Osiris-Dionysus. But they had one unique eye-catching selling-point — the other Mystery cults had myths that may or may not have referred to actual events in the archaic past, but Literalist Christians claimed that their myth of the dying and

resurrecting Godman had recently been realized in real life. This is Literalist Christianity's one claim to uniqueness, which is made by Augustine, the great spokesman of Christian Literalism. As someone who had been a follower of both the Pagan Gnostic Plotinus and the Christian Gnostic Mani before becoming a Catholic, Augustine knew there was nothing exceptional about Roman Christianity but this one incredible idea: 'Christ came in the flesh.'

Christian Literalism was destined to dominate the West with an iron fist for nearly two millennia, but it began as an insignificant sect with a macabre enthusiasm for the imminent end of the world. The Gnostic myth that Jesus would appear at the culmination of time was an allegory expressing the idea that when all souls were reunited with the Consciousness of God there would be a return to the primordial state of Oneness and the cosmic drama would be over. Literalists took this myth literally, developing the grotesque idea that Jesus was about to arrive to destroy the world, rescue a small group of Christian Literalists and condemn everyone else to eternal torment. Thankfully, they turned out to be wrong.

However, replacing the mythical sacrificed Godman with an historical martyr led to Christian Literalism becoming a sort of 'suicide cult' which, much to the horror of the Gnostics, encouraged its members to imitate Jesus by also seeking out a sacrificial death. In the Literalist version of Christian history the Roman authorities are pictured as singling out the Christians for terrible persecution. Actually they were often appalled at Christian Literalists' eagerness to be martyred.

Literalism replaced the enlightened Gnostic sage at the centre of a small group of initiates with a hierarchy of bishops at the head of an expanding evangelical cult. The whole purpose of Gnostic initiation was to bring initiates to spiritual maturity, where they would experience themselves to be completely free of any external authority and become their own 'Christ' or 'King'. Literalists, by contrast, wanted to enlarge their religious powerbase and worked hard to keep their flock securely in the fold. Despite the fact that in *The Gospel of Luke* Jesus teaches, 'Everyone when his training is complete will reach his teacher's level,' the Gnostic idea that Christianity was about oneself becoming a Christ became branded as blasphemous heresy.

The role of the Gnostic master was to undermine all of an initiate's opinions and encourage them to directly confront the Mystery of Life. The role of the Literalist bishops, on the other hand, was to tell people what to believe and to discipline those who disagreed. Free intellectual inquiry was actively discouraged and blind belief became exalted as a spiritual virtue. As long as the Jesus story was understood as myth, Christians were at liberty to interpret it and change it as they felt appropriate. Once it

became seen as a biography, the development of intolerant dogmatism was inevitable. Literalists would argue vehemently for centuries over what Jesus actually did and said, as they still do today. But, as the argument is about supposed historical events, they all agree that there is only one accurate version of what really happened. And if only one version is right, that means everyone else must be wrong.

### Forged Lineage

From the large number of Christian scriptures in existence, Literalists selected four gospels to form the canon of the New Testament. These gospels were then declared to be the only authentic gospels and all of the other Christian scriptures were denounced as heretical. The four New Testament gospels are variations on the Jesus myth originally used by different schools of Christian Gnosticism. Putting them together created the illusion of there being four (albeit contradictory) eye-witness accounts of the same historical events. The later triumph of Literalism has left us with the distorted impression that these gospels were always the most popular Christian scriptures, but this is not true. In fact we don't hear anything about *Matthew, Mark, Luke* and *John* until the late second century!

To endorse their authority, Literalist bishops fabricated a lineage connecting themselves back to the fictional disciples of the gospels. They turned Paul from the 'Great Messenger' of the Christian Gnostics into a bastion of Literalism by simply forging letters in his name which make him condemn their Gnostic rivals. It's a simple trick, but it worked. It was not until the last few centuries that scholarship became sophisticated enough to see through it.

Literalists also co-opted to their cause later Christian philosophers, such as the second-century writers Athenagoras of Athens, Theophilus of Antioch and Minucius Felix of Africa. These writers actually promoted a philosophical Christianity based around the mythical figures of the *Logos* and *Sophia*. Not only were they not Literalists, they were not even particularly interested in the figure of Jesus. Athenagoras claims to go 'minutely into the particulars' of Christian doctrine, yet never mentions Jesus at all. Neither does Minucius Felix, even when an adversary asks him to name someone who has actually returned from the dead. Instead he gives a list of diabolical beliefs and practices that have been wrongly attributed to Christians. These include (along with drinking the blood of sacrificed children and worshipping the genitals of priests!), 'worshipping a man who suffered death as some criminal as well as a wretched piece of wood'. As he comments:

These and similar indecencies we do not wish to hear. It is disgraceful to have to defend ourselves against such charges. When you attribute to us the worship of a criminal and his cross you wander far from the truth.

Indeed, Minucius condemns Pagan Literalists who 'choose a man for their worship' and Theophilus ridicules Pagan Literalists for believing that Hercules and Asclepius had actually come back from the dead.

Why did Literalists try and adopt to their cause writers who were so obviously promoting something quite different? Because there are no early Christian writers who defend the idea of there literally being an historical Jesus. There were no historical disciples. There were no early Literalists. They all had to be invented. The earliest Christian whose writings suggest he was a Literalist was Justin Martyr, c.150. But even Justin still saw Christianity as a branch of philosophy and set up his own philosophical school in Rome. After Justin's death, his pupil Tatian abandoned his master's Literalism, suggesting that it was seen as something of an innovation, and regarded the Jesus story as comparable to Greek myths, urging his Pagan readers:

Compare your own stories with our narratives. Take a look at your own records and accept us merely on the grounds that we too tell stories.

### International Christian Gnosticism

The traditional history of Christianity is that Literalism took the world by storm, whilst Christian Gnosticism remained a minor heretical fringe movement. This is nonsense. Christian Literalism was initially a minor school of Christianity which developed in Rome towards the end of the second century. By this time Christian Gnosticism was an international movement which had spread throughout much of the Mediterranean, flourishing in cosmopolitan cities such as Alexandria, Edessa, Antioch, Ephesus, and Rome.

In Egypt the first Christians we hear of are the Gnostics Valentinus, Basilides, Apelles, Carpocrates and his son Epiphanes. There is no sign of any form of Christianity which resembles Roman Catholicism in Egypt until Bishop Demetrius at the end of the third century. In Antioch the Gnostics Saturninus, Cerdo and Menander had established schools at the beginning of the second century. The Literalist Justin Martyr regrets that in Edessa, eastern Syria, to be a Christian means to be a follower of Marcion. *The*

*Chronicle of Edessa* notes the birth of Marcion, Bardesanes and Mani before it mentions Roman Christianity. Even Rome itself was full of different schools of Christian Gnosticism, such as the Marcellites, Marcionites, Archonites, Valentinians, Sethians, Barbeloites, Montanists and Ophites.

Literalists complained that in Persia all Christians were members of the Marcionite school of Christian Gnosticism. Tertullian bemoaned the fact that Marcion's followers filled 'the whole universe'. At the beginning of the third century the Christian Gnostic sage Bardesanes initiated into his school a Syrian ruler who made Christian Gnosticism the official state, cult. The forged *Second Letter to Timothy* has its phoney Literalist Paul complain, 'All Asia has turned against me,' which tells us that in the late second century 'all Asia' was dominated by Gnostic Christianity. *The Epistle of Polycarp* laments that 'the great majority' of Christians embrace the idea of Jesus not existing in the flesh.

The school of the third-century master Mani became a world religion in his own lifetime. Eventually reaching, from Spain in the West to China in the East, Manicheism flourished for 1,000 years. Mani was a great eclectic who synthesized the Gnosticism of different religious traditions in an attempt to create a truly international form of spirituality which would 'embrace all humanity'. His followers taught that 'Judaism, Paganism, Christianity and Manicheism are one and the same doctrine.' Mani himself is said to have travelled to India and believed that he was teaching the same Gnostic doctrines as the Buddha. A king of Mongolia and an emperor of China honoured him as the successor of both the Buddha and the Taoist sage Lao Tzu.

## The Growth of Christian Literalism

Over the course of the third century, despite the flimsiness of its claims to be the authentic Christian lineage, Literalism grew in popularity in Rome and the West, though Eastern Christianity remained overwhelmingly Gnostic. Eventually, however, it was inevitable that the simplistic certainties and offer of vicarious atonement of Christian Literalism would attract more adherents than Christian Gnosticism, with its puzzling promise of Gnosis through mystical transformation.

As Literalists grew more powerful, so did their vitriolic attacks on all other Christian schools. In response, Christian Gnostics condemned Literalists for establishing an 'imitation Church' which no longer taught the secret Inner Mysteries. Some Gnostics, such as the Valentinians, tacitly went along with Literalism in an attempt to heal the ever-growing rift. Other Gnostics, such as Clement of Alexandria and his successor

Origen, embraced the idea of an historical Jesus, but remained Platonists aid continued to teach the Gnosis in their Christian school of philosophy.

Christianity grew in popularity as part of a general upsurge of interest in Mystery cults, such as the Mysteries of Mithras. Over a period of 350 years Mithraism developed from a little-known Persian cult into the dominant religion of the Roman Empire, until at the end of the second century CE it was adopted by the emperor Commodus. The Jewish Jesus cult followed in the footsteps of the Persian Mithras cult, growing in popularity from its conception at the beginning of the first century until 350 years later, in the middle of the third century, it had large numbers of followers throughout the Roman Empire and was adopted by the emperor Constantine. Within 50 years Christian Literalism was the party line of a totalitarian state which dictated to its citizens the one religion that they were permitted to follow.

A common Literalist reaction to the idea that Jesus is a mythical figure is the question 'How do you explain the rise of Christianity without it being founded by an inspirational leader?' Mithraism provides us with the answer. Christianity became the dominant religion in the ancient world without there being an historical Jesus in exactly the same way that Mithraism, a few decades earlier, had become the dominant religion in the ancient world without there being an historical Mithras. Mithraism was inspired by charismatic leaders, but none of them was Mithras. In the same way Christianity was inspired by charismatic leaders amongst the original Christians, but none of them was Jesus. In fact the myth of Jesus was partly based on the myth of Mithras. The two stories are so similar that Literalist Christians claimed that in an attempt to confuse the faithful, the Devil had created the Mithras story by mimicking the life of Jesus in advance of his birth!

It seems extraordinary that the Roman world embraced the Mysteries of Rome's enemies, the Persians and Jews. But the vast majority of inhabitants of the empire were not Romans, of course, and had little sympathy for them. The cults of Mithras and Jesus spread so successfully precisely because they fed on conquered peoples' resentment of the Romans and represented a form of acceptable dissent. Roman emperors were concerned above all with uniting their disparate colonies. Mithraism, Christianity and other popular Mystery cults were adopted by the state, regardless of their national origins, in an attempt to bring coherence to a fragmenting empire. Christian Literalism was an ideal candidate for the job. It was exactly what a Roman despot like Constantine required — a populist and authoritarian religion which had freed itself of Gnostic radicals.

Although Christian Literalists rejected the Gnostic Inner Mysteries of Christianity,

they continued to portray Christianity as a Mystery cult. Phrases such as 'This is known to initiates' continued to be routinely used, but they were now little more than empty words. As Christian Literalism grew in power it adopted more of the trappings of the Pagan Literalism it replaced. Its ritual processions were identical to those of the Pagan cults. Although Jesus had specifically said, 'Call no man "father",' Christian Literalists adopted the Mithraic practice of calling priests 'father'. In imitation of the Mithraic bishops, Christian bishops wore a 'mithra' or 'mitre' and carried a shepherd's staff. Eventually the Bishop of Rome took up the title Pontifex Maximus, the ancient name for the Pagan high priest, a title still held by the Pope today.

### The Suppression of Women

Literalist Christianity took as its scriptural backdrop the Jewish Old Testament, with its patriarchal monotheism. It therefore vigorously suppressed the idea that there was a Christian Goddess. But the people's need to relate to the Divine Feminine was too strong to be ignored and the void was quickly filled. In 431 CE a Christian council met at Ephesus, previously the chief site for the worship of the Pagan Goddess, and bestowed the titles of the ousted Goddess upon Mary the mother of Jesus, honouring her as 'Queen of Heaven' and *Theotokos*, 'Mother of God'. Protestant Literalists would later condemn this elevation of Mary, but ironically it was actually a demotion. For the original Christians, Mary had always represented the Goddess Sophia, Queen of Heaven. For the Literalists, she was merely a mortal woman, special only because her son Jesus was divine.

Literalists put an end to Gnostic ideas of equality between the sexes. They interpreted the Jewish Genesis myth as literal history, with terrible consequences for women. Women were no longer seen as spiritual partners with men, but the descendants of the evil Eve, because of whose sin 'even the Son of God had to die'. Augustine wrote to a friend:

What does it matter whether it is a wife or a mother, it is Eve the temptress we must beware of in any woman.

Literalists played down the importance of women in the gospels to endorse their policy of making them second-class human beings. This reversal of attitude towards women in Christianity is symbolized perfectly by the retitling of the fourth gospel. Known to us now as *The Gospel of John*, if it is to bear any name at all it should be *The Gospel of*

*Mary Magdalene.* This gospel claims to be written by an unspecified 'Beloved Disciple'. It is attributed to John solely on the basis of the Literalist Irenaeus, at the end of the second century, claiming he had a childhood memory of being told that the gospel was written by the disciple John. According to the Gnostics, it was written by the Gnostic master Cerinthus at the end of the first century. Modern research suggests that the 'Beloved Disciple' he makes the narrator of the story is not John, but Mary Magdalene. Mary is clearly identified in other Gnostic sources as 'the beloved disciple', 'the disciple that Jesus loved', 'the companion of Jesus', and so on. As scholars have noted, The Gospel of the Beloved Disciple has been modified, creating obvious structural flaws, in order to turn the 'Beloved Disciple' Mary into the male figure of John, who was more acceptable to misogynist Literalists.

### Attacks on Gnosticism

As their confidence grew, Literalists' attacks on Gnostics became ever more virulent, creating the distorted picture of Christian Gnosticism still prevalent today. In a classic case of psychological projection, the Gnostics were misrepresented as the diabolical heretics that the Literalists had actually become. Although it was Literalists themselves who were preaching an exclusive religion and arrogantly condemning all other faiths as evil, they accused the Gnostics of being 'puffed up' sectarians and named themselves the 'Catholic' or 'Universal' Church. Although Gnostic philosophy teaches 'All is One' and Literalists preach an irreconcilable war between God and the Devil, Literalists portrayed themselves as 'mono-theists' and the Gnostics as 'dualists'. Although it was Literalist Christianity that had begun as a suicide cult, teaching its adherents that the way to salvation was to actively seek a martyr's death, its later followers vilified the Gnostics as world-haters.

Christian Literalists turned their caustic polemics equally against Paganism, which was denounced as a barbaric cult of bloody sacrifice. This is deeply ironic given the Christian Literalist belief that God had sacrificed his only Son as the sole way of getting the rest of us off the hook. When taken literally, it is difficult to imagine a more barbaric idea than that! And for all the undoubted barbarism of Pagan Literalists, it was Christian Literalists, not the supposedly primitive heathens, who presided over the collapse of Western culture into the aptly named Dark Ages.

This disastrous collapse was precipitated at the end of the fourth century when Christian Literalism, now the only legal religion in the Roman Empire, launched a brutal crusade to completely eradicate its old rivals, Christian Gnosticism and ancient

Paganism. In an orgy of violence, armies of fanatical Christian Literalists tore down the architectural wonders of the Pagan world. They built infernal bonfires of books containing the spiritual-wisdom and scientific knowledge of the ages. They subjected to grisly torture and a painful death philosophers, priestesses and scientists — anyone who disagreed. They did not stop until they had cut the head off Western culture, leaving it to wander like an amnesiac in an ignorant stupor. They did not stop until they had cut the heart out of Western spirituality, bleeding it dry of its mystical vitality. The corpse of a religion which remained offered nothing but hope of a better afterlife in return for blind belief in its irrational opinions and unquestioning allegiance to power-crazed popes. This tyrannical empire of the soul extended the arm of the state right into the inner sanctum of every individual, denying the right to spiritual autonomy and compelling all to acquiesce or burn.

Yet despite this ruthless persecution, Gnosticism survived. It can be suppressed but never eradicated. It is the spontaneous expression of the natural inquisitiveness and enthusiastic exuberance of the human soul. It is the unquenchable thirst for truth and the undeniable urge to enjoy. It is the spirit of liberty, equality, love and insight. It is the force of life. It always reasserts itself.

## THE GNOSTIC HERITAGE

Whilst by the fourth century the Roman Church in the West had condemned anything Gnostic as heresy, in the Eastern Church, based in Constantinople, the original Christian spirit survived a little longer. Sages such as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzum, Evagrius of Pontus and Diodochus of Photice continued to teach the oral tradition of 'private secret teachings' to those initiated into the Inner Mysteries of Christianity. They understood the Bible allegorically, explaining that, ultimately, the secrets of the scriptures can only be revealed 'thanks to the Gnosis'. They emphasized devotion to Mary as the manifestation of Sophia and taught that the goal of Christianity was 'to become God'.

In the West, the spirit of Christian Gnosticism was smuggled back into the mainstream Church via mystical writings attributed to Dionysius, a co-worker of Paul. Today these treatises are generally thought to be the work of an unidentified sixth-century monk who deliberately took the pseudonym 'Dionysius' to claim authority for what would otherwise be condemned as heretical works. The writer is thought to have been a pupil of the Pagan Gnostic Proclus, the last master of the Platonic Academy, which the Christian emperor Justinian had forcibly closed down in 529, ending a

prestigious 1,000-year history. However, in the light of our thesis that the Gnostics were the first Christians, it is possible that this view will come to be seen as mistaken and that these texts are at least based on the works of a first-century Gnostic master, as they claim to be.

Dionysius is unconcerned with an historical Jesus. His Jesus is a symbolic representation of the *Logos*. According to Dionysius, there are two Christian gospels, the familiar teachings of the Church and a secret gospel, which is 'symbolic and presupposes initiation' and 'must never be divulged to the uninitiated'. He eulogizes the wonders of the 'divine enlightenment into which we have been initiated by the secret tradition of our inspired teachers'. The narratives and symbols of Christianity have one meaning to the uninitiated and another to the initiated:

Don't suppose that the outward form of these contrived symbols exists for its own sake. It is a protective clothing, which prevents the common multitude from understanding the Ineffable and Invisible. Only real lovers of holiness know how to stop the workings of the childish imagination regarding the sacred symbols. They alone have the simplicity of mind and the receptive power of contemplation to cross over to the simple, marvellous, transcendent Truth the symbols represent.

These writings were extremely influential. No other works were so frequently translated or had so many commentaries written on them, apart from the Bible and *The Consolations of Philosophy* by Boethius, which was another text through which the spirit of Gnosticism survived in the Dark Ages of Literalism. Condemned for heresy by the Christian emperor Theodoric, Boethius describes languishing in prison, where he is visited by Sophia herself, who instructs him in philosophy. Despite his vision of the Goddess and never mentioning Jesus once, due to the immense popularity of his writings Boethius was later claimed by Christian Literalists as one of their own. As for the man himself, Theodoric had him tortured and then bludgeoned to death for heresy.

Despite the Literalist Church's unrelenting attempts at suppression, some 'heretical' schools of Christian Gnosticism continued to teach. Paulicians survived into the tenth century, Manicheans into the thirteenth and Simonians into the fourteenth. In the Balkans, from the tenth to fifteenth centuries the Paulicians flourished as 'Bogomils', meaning 'Friends of God' — the traditional name for Gnostics first used by the Pythagoreans. The Bogomils even had their own Gnostic Pope. At the anti-Bogomil council of 1211 they were accused of performing 'unholy mysteries like the Hellenic Pagan rites'. One of their Literalist opponents writes with disgust:

They denounce wealth, they have a horror of the Tsar, they ridicule their superiors, condemn the nobles and forbid all slaves to obey their masters.

In the twelfth century the Bogomils developed into the Cathars or 'Purified Ones'. Catharism was for many years the prevalent form of Christianity in large areas of France, Spain and Italy. The Cathars called themselves 'the Friends of God' and condemned the Literalist Church as the Church of the Anti-Christ. They claimed to be the living inheritors of the true Christian heritage that had persisted in secret and which still had large numbers of adherents 'throughout the world'.

Like the original Christians, the Cathars were vegetarians, believed in reincarnation and considered the Old Testament god Jehovah to be a tyrant. *Pistis Sophia*, an early Christian gospel, explains that Christ taught 'through the mouth of our brother Paul'.

The Cathars maintained this tradition, claiming that Jesus was 'not ever in this world except spiritually in the body of Paul'.

The Cathars were respected for their goodness, even by their opponents. The Catholic Bernard of Clairveaux writes:

If you interrogate them, no one could be more Christian. As to their conversation, nothing can be less reprehensible, and what they speak they prove by deeds. As for the morals of the heretics, they cheat no one, they oppress no one, they strike no one.

Despite this, the infamous Inquisition was set up by the Literalist Church specifically to eradicate the Cathars, which it did with ferocious enthusiasm, burning alive men, women and children. From 1139 onwards the Roman Church began calling councils to condemn the heretics. Pope Innocent III declared that 'anyone who attempted to construe a personal view of God which conflicted with Church dogma must be burned without pity'. In 1208 he offered indulgences and eternal salvation, as well as the lands and property taken from the heretics, to anyone who would take up the crusade against the Cathars. This launched a brutal 30-year pogrom which decimated southern France. Twelve thousand people were killed at St Nazair and 10,000 at Toulouse, to give just two examples.

The inquisitor Bernard Gui instructed that no one should argue with the unbeliever, but 'thrust his sword into the man's belly as far as it will go'. At Beziers, when asked how to tell who was a Cathar and who was not, the commanding legate, Arnoud, replied,

'Kill them all, for God will know his own.' Not a child was spared. In 1325 Pope John XXII observed that many Cathars were fleeing to Bosnia, where the Bogomils were still thriving, as if to the 'Promised Land'. In a grotesque prefiguring of the Nazi terror, Cathars who converted to Catholicism were obliged to wear a yellow cross sewn on their clothes and lost all civil rights, and in eastern Europe the Inquisition used ovens to burn heretics, who were rubbed with grease and roasted alive. If ever proof were needed that the Gnostics were justified in calling Roman Catholicism the Church of the Anti-Christ, here it is.

Yet despite the persecutions, the Gnostic free spirit could not be extinguished. It inspired the great German master Eckhart, who wrote about Sophia and taught that at the heart of Christianity, Judaism and Paganism there were the same mystical doctrines. It inspired the Rhineland mystics Tauler, Suso and Ruysbroek, who also called themselves the 'Friends of God'. It inspired countless groups of non-conformists, such as the Brothers and Sisters of the Free Spirit in Europe, who taught: 'The gospel contains poetical matters which are not true.' In England it inspired the Levellers, Ranters, Diggers and Quakers.

It also inspired many of the great cultural heroes of the West — Dante, Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Pico and most of the great minds of the Renaissance, who set up a new Platonic Academy; the Protestant Gnostic Jacob Boehme, who received visions of Sophia; poets such as Blake, Milton and Goethe, who created their own Gnostic myths; scientists such as Galileo, Copernicus and Kepler, who revived Pythagoreanism; philosophers such as Descartes, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, who was accused of being a Valentinian Gnostic.

Christian Gnosticism was reinterpreted for the twentieth century by Carl Jung, who along with Sigmund Freud founded psychoanalysis. Jung wrote to Freud that the Gnostics' Sophia was 'a re-embodiment of an ancient wisdom that might appear once again in modern psychoanalysis'. He asserted, 'It is clear beyond doubt that many of the Gnostics were nothing other than psychologists,' and began to view mental illness as a failed initiation. He wrote:

All my life I have been working and studying to find these things, and these people knew already.

In his forties, using as a pseudonym the name of the second-century Christian Gnostic Basilides, Jung wrote his own Gnostic scripture called *Seven Sermons to the Dead*. This remarkable text is addressed to the disquieted dead, who have been failed by Christian

Literalism and who appear to Jung, wailing, 'We have come back from Jerusalem where we have found not what we sought.' Jung regarded this work as the wellspring of all his later insights, but although he circulated it amongst his friends, he prohibited its publication until after his death, fearing it would discredit him in the eyes of the scientific establishment.

When the Nag Hammadi library of Christian Gnostic texts was discovered in 1945, Jung's foundation bought one of the collections, now known as the Jung Codex. When translated, these works proved that many of his intuitions about Christian Gnosticism had been remarkably correct. Towards the end of his life he appeared on a television chat show, in which he famously replied to the question of whether he believed in God with the perennial Gnostic assertion: 'I know that God exists. I don't need to believe, I know.'

## THE LITERALIST LEGACY

The triumph of Christian Literalism was a spiritual and cultural disaster from which we are still recovering. After the civilized exterior of 'Christian' culture in Germany had been ripped open in the twentieth century by Hitler's Nazis, Jung wrote:

Christian civilization proved hollow to a terrifying degree: it is all veneer, but the inner man has remained untouched and therefore unchanged. Yes, everything is to be found outside — in image and in word, in Church and Bible — but never inside!

When Literalist Christianity exiled the Gnostic Inner Mysteries, it lost its soul. It became a bastion of the 'hypocrites' which the Gnostics portrayed Jesus as mocking in their gospel story — ecclesiastical autocrats who imposed their dogmas with threats and maintained their power through violence, politicians dressed up as priests who justified the laying waste of whole continents and the enslaving of millions.

Literalist Christianity is often credited with inspiring positive social reforms in Western society. But the truth is that the driving impetus for humanitarian change has come from humanists and non-conformists. The conservative forces of the established Churches have resisted every step towards greater compassion, from the ending of slavery to the abolition of the death penalty. In recent decades, unable any longer to simply bully us into submission, Literalist Christianity has developed a gentler, more attractive face. Yet its darker side continues to be a nefarious force in the world. A

recent report estimated there are at least 8,000 'missionaries' active in Guatemala alone, many of whom openly collaborate with the brutal secret police and the military in their oppression of the indigenous people. Typifying the spirit of Christian Literalism throughout the ages, one preacher from the missionary group El Verbo justified this with:

The army does not massacre Indians. It massacres demons and the Indians are possessed by demons.

In many European countries, however, the power of Literalist Christianity is finally waning. Congregations are dwindling dramatically and churches are being sold off as houses. Science is fast becoming the dominant worldview. This has provoked two very different reactions from those unwilling to consign Christianity to the rubbish bin of history - 'Fundamentalists' are desperately endeavouring to retreat to the old certainties, whilst others are attempting to rework the figure of Jesus to fit new times.

## Fundamentalism

Fundamentalism is a Protestant continuation of the intolerant and dogmatic traditions of Roman Christianity. Heretics are no longer burned at the stake, thank God, but we have still endured the wrath of Fundamentalists for daring to publish our ideas about the origins of Christianity. Whilst we have escaped death threats, we have received many 'after-death threats'. According to Fundamentalists, Jesus has an eternal torture camp set up specifically to get even with blasphemers such as ourselves.

Fundamentalism emphatically insists that the Bible is literally the word of God and cannot be questioned. This is an attitude that goes right back to the beginnings of the Roman Church at the end of the second century, when Tertullian included 'thirst for knowledge' amongst his list of vices, to be replaced by the virtue of blind faith in scripture. But this fixation on the written word is a form of idolatry. It mistakes the garment for the naked Truth. It confines living insight within the concepts of the past. As Paul says, 'The letter kills, but the spirit gives life.'

Although fanatically concerned about a supposed decline in moral values, Fundamentalists hold up the barbarous Old Testament as a divinely inspired account of the works of the one and only god Jehovah. Let's just have a quick look at the sort of god they are worshipping. In *The Book of Genesis* Jehovah destroys all living things on the Earth by flood, but somehow manages to also find the time to specifically execute

one individual man for letting his semen spill on the ground when having sex. In *The Book of Exodus* he inflicts hideous plagues on Egypt for not letting the Israelites leave, despite the fact that it was he himself who 'hardened Pharaoh's heart'. He also kills all the firstborn Egyptian children, assists the Israelites in slaughtering an entire tribe of Amalekites, makes it allowable to beat a slave to death and, after rumours that Israelites have worshipped a rival god, orders faithful Israelites to kill their friends and relatives, leading to the death of 3,000 people.

Not content with this, in *The First Book of Samuel* Jehovah takes vengeance on the people of Gath by giving all the men a fatal dose of haemorrhoids. In *The Book of Leviticus* he condones human sacrifice. In *The Book of Deuteronomy* he orders the Israelites to utterly destroy the people of the cities that he bequeaths to them as their 'inheritance', commanding them 'not to leave anything that breathes alive'. In *The Book of Numbers* he orders a man to be stoned to death for gathering sticks for a fire on the Sabbath, and sends a plague which kills 14,700 people. He also gives the Israelites power to utterly destroy the Canaanites and exterminate the people of Og, advising with regard to captured women and children:

Kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known a man intimately. But keep alive for yourself all the young girls who have not known a man intimately.

You can see why the Christian Gnostic Marcion nicknamed Jehovah 'the exterminator'. And when it's not being gruesome, the Old Testament is so culturally foreign and outdated it is just plain daft. *The Book of Leviticus* tells us that we must have no contact at all with a menstruating woman, but it's fine to buy slaves from neighbouring states. Eating shellfish is out, however. That's apparently an 'abomination'. *The Book of Exodus* insists that anyone who works on the Sabbath should be put to death, which I guess means most of us deserve to die. The Book of Deuteronomy decrees that a son who will not obey his parents is to be stoned to death by the whole town outside the city gates, so if you're male, and your dad's a Fundamentalist, and you're reading this, you're in big trouble!

If you do literally believe that God wrote or personally inspired certain infallible books, as Fundamentalists do, then this is the sort of ridiculous mess you end up in. You can see why Paul regarded the Old Testament as so 'rickety' that it wouldn't 'be around for much longer'! It's a shame he was so completely wrong.

## Fantasists

At the other extreme to Fundamentalists are what could be called 'Fantasists'. Fantasists are keen to reject traditional forms of Christianity as misconceived, out of date and redundant. They see the gospels as the work of fallible human authors and therefore feel free to dismiss those elements in the Jesus story which they dislike, filling in the gaps from their own imagination to create a 'pick 'n' mix' Jesus who fits their own fantasies.

In recent decades such fantasies have reached epidemic proportions. We have had Jesus going to India and Tibet, Jesus getting married and founding a dynasty of European kings, even Jesus the spaceman who wants us to commit suicide in order to join him on the great Mothership in the sky. You name it, someone out there believes it!

The very first time we gave a lecture on the ideas contained in *The Jesus Mysteries*, we were confounded when a young woman at the back of the audience confidently announced that, impressive as our research was, we couldn't possibly be right because she vividly remembered being Mary Magdalene in a past life. Since then we have come across several more Mary Magdalenes, a man who is sure he lives in a house once inhabited by Jesus when he visited England, and an elderly gentleman whose 'spirit guides' have reliably informed him there were in fact five Jesuses.

Actually there are thousands of Jesuses, because everyone has a different one. And the extraordinary thing is everyone's Jesus looks suspiciously like them. Fire and brimstone types have a fire and brimstone Jesus. Nice liberal pacifists have a nice liberal pacifist Jesus. Jews have a rabbi Jesus. Buddhists have a Buddhist Jesus. Hindus have an avatar Jesus. The great German theologian Rudolf Bultmann called this the 'deep well effect'. Looking for the 'real' Jesus is like looking down a well — all we see is our own reflection.

This is not just an affliction of flaky New Agers — it applies equally to respected historians. In his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, Albert Schweitzer describes scholars as practising plastic surgery on Jesus, who always emerges looking like the surgeon who operated on him.

## Docetism

This proliferation of Jesuses is not a new situation. According to the Literalist Hippolytus, all Gnostics had 'their own particular Jesus'. But this was not a cause of conflict and controversy because, for the Gnostics, Jesus was a mythological figure who appeared in the imagination in a form appropriate to the individual, according to their

level of spiritual awareness. *The Gospel of Philip* explains:

Jesus does not show himself as he really is, but he shows himself as people are able to see him. He shows himself to all. To the great he appears great. To the small he appears small. To the angels he appears as an angel, and to men as a man. Hence the Logos conceals itself from all. Some indeed see him and realize that they are seeing themselves.

In *The Acts of John*, John and his brother James see Jesus beckoning to them, but one sees a beautiful man and the other a little child. Later, for one of them the figure becomes 'rather bald-headed but with a thick flowing beard' and for the other 'a young man with an immature beard'.<sup>[137]</sup> In *The Acts of Peter*, Peter relates, 'I saw him in such a form as I was able to take in.' He teaches a group of widows how to see Jesus:

See with your mind what you do not see with your eyes. And though your eyes be closed, yet let them open in your mind within you.

The widows become 'senseless with bewilderment' and all experience Jesus in a different way. Some say they saw 'an old man who had such a presence we cannot describe it to you'. Others say, 'We saw a growing lad,' and others, 'We saw a boy who gently touched our eyes and they opened.' Peter remarks:

God is greater than our thoughts, as we have learned from these aged widows who have seen the Lord in a variety of forms.

According to Theodotus, Paul recognized that 'each one knows the Lord in his own way and not all know him alike'. Paul himself famously experienced Jesus as a vision of light. In *The Apocryphon of John*, John also experiences Jesus as light, but in this case containing a metamorphosing image:

I saw in the light a youth who stood by me. While I looked at him he became like an old man. And then he changed his appearance again and became like a servant. There were not many before me, but an image with many forms in the light. And the image appeared through each. And it took three forms. He said to me, 'John why do you doubt? Why are you afraid? You are not unfamiliar with this image, are you? Don't be nervous. I am the One who is with you always.'

The Gnostics' doctrine that Jesus is a symbolic visionary figure is known as docetism. It is misunderstood by Christian Literalists as the bizarre claim that Jesus was some sort of disembodied spook that miraculously appeared to be a man who lived the life described in the gospels. But this crazy idea is just the product of Literalists taking the Gnostics literally. Docetism actually teaches that Jesus is a mutable figure who represents the archetype of the Self and appears in different ways to initiates with different levels of understanding. As *The Gospel of Philip* says with startling clarity, some 'realize that they are seeing themselves'.

The problem is that at first when someone experiences a relationship with their particular version of Jesus they 'recognize him as their brother and regard all the rest as bastards', as Hippolytus puts it. Their Jesus is the real Jesus, everyone else's is an impostor. But once the idea of an historical man is abandoned, competing Jesuses are not a problem. Everyone can look down the well and come up convinced that Jesus looks just like them, and that doesn't conflict with everyone else doing the same. We can all have a different Jesus. The whole point of a mythological figure is that it can be adapted to suit different people and changing times.

What unites Fundamentalists and Fantasists is their obsession with the idea of an historical Jesus. We are suggesting a radical alternative: freeing ourselves from the futile preoccupation with history and returning to the original Christians' understanding of Jesus as the hero of a powerfully transformative allegorical myth.

## THE REAL JESUS IS A RED HERRING

We fully understand how difficult it is to doubt the existence of someone whom millions believe to be the most important human being ever to have lived. Many of us have been brought up since childhood with a vivid picture of the historical Jesus. Mention his name and we can almost see him in his rough white robes with long flowing hair and beard. Yet the earliest representations of Jesus actually portray him beardless, with short hair, wearing a Roman tunic. Paul explicitly writes that 'Flowing locks disgrace a man,' so presumably he did not share our modern image of the Christ!

The now ubiquitous image of the bearded long-haired Jesus did not become established until the eighth century, when the Eastern Church in Constantinople suddenly produced a 'self-portrait' which had been miraculously created when Jesus wiped his face on a cloth. Not to be outdone, the Roman Church turned up a portrait of a bearded Jesus painted by Luke and later completed by angels. Pilgrims still kneel

before this absurd fabrication in the Vatican today, hoping it will in some way bring them to the Truth. The truth is, however, that the picture we have of Jesus is a product of the imagination — our own and that of others before us.

Was there an 'historical' Jesus? The evidence suggests there was not. But to us this emotive issue is really not important. What is important is to realize that the Jesus we relate to in our imagination is a mythical 'archetype' through which we can reach the 'Christ Consciousness' within ourselves, because if we are unable to get enough distance from our own fantasies and opinions to see that our picture of Jesus is an imaginative construct, we will never have the self-knowledge necessary to grasp the Gnosis. However, we have to be spiritually ready before we can hear this message as positive rather than negative, as giving us what we have been really looking for rather than taking something away. The teachings of 'the Christ within' are an open secret that only someone who is ripe can really hear.

Many people desperately want to believe in a miraculous saviour who has literally incarnated to rescue them. There is nothing wrong with this. The miracle worker is a stock character of ancient myths, used to inspire hope of something more than the mundane in those unable to see that the whole of life is a staggering miracle. The image of the divine Godman was deliberately designed to appeal to spiritual beginners who have yet to discover that this mythical figure represents their own true identity. Those who are not ready cling to their 'real' Jesus like a life-buoy in the tempestuous sea of existence. To suggest they let go sounds like madness. But the secret teachings of the original Christians were not designed to maliciously deny comfort to simple believers. They are actually offering something infinitely more reassuring than blind belief in historical events. They are offering Gnosis — immediate experiential knowledge of the Truth. The message is not 'Look out, you are clinging to an illusion.' The message is:

Relax. You are not drowning. You can let go, because life is actually completely safe. Just experience Gnosis and all your ignorance will be dispelled. Just know who you really are and you will have absolutely no fear ever again. Discover the Christ within yourself and you will be always One with God.

## SUMMARY

Christian Literalism developed towards the end of the second century as a minor cult with the unique claim that Jesus had literally lived out the Pagan myth of the dying and resurrecting Godman. Literalists fabricated a lineage to link themselves

back to the supposed disciples and forged letters of Paul to make him appear anti-Gnostic.

Mirroring the success of the Mysteries of the Persian Godman Mithras, Christian Literalism gradually grew in popularity, becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century. With the full might of the Roman state behind them, Christian Literalists waged a barbaric war against Paganism and Christian Gnosticism, pulling down temples and libraries, burning books and dissidents, and plunging Western civilization into the Dark Ages.

The legacy of Christian Literalism has been a misguided obsession with the historical Jesus. The original Christians, however, taught that Jesus is a mythological figure who appears in the imagination in different ways, according to the understanding of the individual.

If the Jesus story is an allegorical myth, what does it mean? If we have lost the secret Inner Mysteries of Christianity, can we rediscover them? By understanding Christianity as part of the broad Gnostic tradition that flourished throughout the ancient world, we have been able to discover the true origins of Christianity. Let's now see if, by examining Christian myths and doctrines in the light of Pagan and Jewish Gnostic philosophy, we can recover the gospel of Gnosis.

This is a sample of *Jesus and the Lost Goddess* by Tim Freke and Peter Gandy. To purchase the full book please go to -

<http://timfreke.com/Books.aspx>

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