

Christianity

The Patristic Age

Abstract

The *logos* was an ancient Greek speculation used by the Stoics from Persian *arta*. No modern believer, Jew or Christian, will doubt that the bible preceded the Greek philosophers, but it did not. Heraclitus wrote about *logos* a century before the bible began to be written by the Persians, and even longer before the Ptolemies cast *Genesis* in more or less the shape it is now in. *Logos* remained order and truth, as it was for the Persians (*arta, asha*), but became cosmic reason, reality's shape, natural laws and meaning. Humans comprehended God and reality by the *logos* in them. To Philo, *logos* was the first emanation of God, His "first begotten son" (*De Agric* 57)! Early Christianity was a Gnostic variety, teaching that eternal life is knowledge of Christ and God. Other Church fathers made the Gnostic distinction between simple Christians who just heard and believed, and Gnostics who had a philosophy beside their faith. Whatever the the Church accepted, Christian doctrines have come down to us as Catholic ones. The followers of Jesus were Ebionites whom Paul opposed. Yet, only 100 years after Christians say God walked the earth, saying personally from His own lips to anyone willing to listen what they had to do to enter His kingdom, Polycarp declared that Paul's letter to the Philippians was the foundation of Christian faith! The establishment of the authority of the Church was a key strategy. Tertullian taught the apostles solely had authority. Irenaeus claimed scripture was the ultimate authority, but the authority for that was the tradition of the Church guarded by the Holy Ghost! And vice versa! It meant anything not approved by the Church was deemed unreliable if not wrong, and the Church stuck to this, insisting on approving all pious writing, and censoring whatever it disapproved of, all based on its own assertion that it alone owned the apostolic tradition. Church Fathers accepted scripture as inspired, but its spiritual nature left it needing interpretation. What were the principles, then, of Christian exegesis? Everything in the Jewish scriptures pointed to the coming of Christ. The problem of making everything in the Jewish scriptures refer to Christ was made easier by resorting to allegory, but modern exegetes make a distinction between allegory and typology, mainly finding incidents of the New Testament in the Old. The Jews themselves had seen their scriptures as typologically prophesying future events, and the Essenes were fond of it, calling themselves prophets for their skill at it.

© Dr M D Magee

Contents Updated: Tuesday, 27 May 2008

- [The Foundation of the Christian Myth](#)
- [Hellenization](#)
- [Philo of Alexandria](#)
- [Syncretism in Rome](#)
- [Gnosticism](#)
- [Gnosticism and Persian Religion](#)
- [Essenism and the Gnostics](#)
- [Christian Doctrine as Catholic Doctrine](#)

- Christian Scripture
- Authority and Tradition
- Scripture
- Marcion and the Canon
- Inspiration
- Interpretation

The Foundation of the Christian Myth

The Patristic Age, the period following the Apostolic Age of the Church, was the age of the Church Fathers. The honest Christian has to face up to the fact that these Church Fathers had no consistent or coherent doctrine. By the fifth century, the Christian theologian, Cyril of Alexandria, had a complete theology, but, in the second century, the Apostolic Fathers lacked a mature and sophisticated outlook. The Holy Ghost took its time in formulating doctrine, giving every impression to the unbiased observer that men were inventing and refining it as they went along, just as they would if had no spiritual assistance but made it up on the hoof.

In the second century, a wide variety of opinions existed, even on matters central to Christian belief, such as atonement. Men who were later called heretics were considered orthodox and even respectable, like Origen. The Church Fathers had inherited from believers in the Apostolic Age an outline history of the Christian saviour, suitably modified to avoid offending Romans, and this outline was *all* they had. The theological consequences of the basic story had not come with it, and needed to be elucidated, and so it was, but in a piecemeal and gradual fashion, in different regions of Christendom, and without uniformity or coherent prioritizing, but according to questions from the flock that occurred spontaneously.

In the west of the empire, the Latin speaking bishops were averse to philosophy, and contented themselves with enlarging on the basic faith of the sheep, and trying to defend it against sophisticated classical beliefs and Christian heresies, as they saw them. In the east, where there was more continuity with the earliest followers of Christ, and a more philosophical train of thought, the bishops saw two degrees of Christianity and Christians, only the lower of which simply comprised faith and nothing more. The higher level was one of “*gnosis*”, and attempt to go beyond faith to a more complete understanding of God and salvation. The simple believer was the “hearer”, and the ones with a greater understanding were “perfect ones”. Plainly, this division reflected the division of the Essenes into village Essenes and the holy monks who remained celibate and tried to be perfect like God and His angels as the Jewish scriptures demanded.

Christianity had its own peculiar history in its bowdlerized version of the ministry of Jesus, set down in writing between the years of about 70 AD to 120 AD, half a century to a century after the events they record, but it was growing in a large and sophisticated state, the Roman Empire, a complicated network of different cultures which could not avoid influencing its evolution, despite the unreasonable beliefs of fundamentalists. The rapid expansion of Rome into its neighbouring Mediterranean countries created a soil fertile with religious, liturgical and philosophical ideas. Some of them some Christians abhorred and reacted against, while others, some accepted and gladly adopted.

According to the Christianity that has come to us, its womb was Judaism, a religion set up by the Persians for people who had co-operated with them rather than resisting them, the nations whose gods were not considered by Persians as *daevas*, devils. The gods and religions of people who resisted the Persians were destroyed, and loyal colonists from elsewhere in the empire were put in charge of them in the traditional manner of ANE imperialism. Their remit was to impose the acceptable religion of non-Persian subjects of Persia. Loyal nations were treated to an influx of Persian scholars to help them restore their religion, which the Persians claimed had been distorted by previous wicked kings or conquerors. Either way, a religion acceptable to the Persian administration was imposed, albeit sometimes under the pretence of restoring an ancient tradition.

In Judah it seems that initially the Persians did little. The country was tiny and impoverished, and seems not to have resisted Persian rule, so the *Am ha Aretz* of Judah were allowed to continue as before, with just token colonization by some external administrators. But, in the middle of the fifth century BC, the Judahites seem to have rebelled, either joining the rebellious Egyptians or, soon after, the rebellion of Megabyxos (or Megabazes Greek, Persian Bagabukhsha) against Artaxerxes. The outcome was that a body of colonists were sent into Judah to set up a temple for the Juddin, peaceful non-Persian people, and to raise taxes from them more effectively. Jerusalem was set up as a Vatican City for non-Persians within the empire as a spiritual and financial center of their religion.

The God of the Jews was chosen as Yehouah, a popular local deity in Canaan and the ANE, but he was imposed as an ethical god moulded on Ahuramazda, the Persian High God, not the storm and fertility God he had been to Caananites and Syrians. Judaism was therefore a fairly new religion, but one which successive rulers of Judah, Persians, Ptolemies, Seleucids, Hasmonaeans and Herodians continued to refine and alter. This the Persians began as a mythical corrective history based on the Assyrian annals they had captured, and the Ptolemies and others changed and built on it.

Thus Judaism began as more than the religion of the tiny state, Yehud. It was the religion of a class of subject people under the Persians, and widespread within the Persian empire.

Over 300 years later, at the time of the birth of Christianity, many Jews of Persia were now in Europe, the western satrapies of what once was Persia having been taken over by Rome. So the Jews were not simply a dispersion of people from a tiny state, but *began* as a diaspora across Persia, and, when Rome annexed Asia, Syria and Egypt, millions of Jews became an *ethnos* of the Roman empire.

It was in this large volume of dispersed Jews that Christianity initially spread. Until the revolt of Bar Kosiba, in the second century, Christianity predominantly comprised Jews. Christian thinking was mainly Jewish thinking, and the scriptures mentioned in Christian writing of the time meant the Jewish scriptures, albeit in their Greek form, the *Septuagint*.

Hellenization

Despite this Jewish dominance, Hellenization was strong, even from the outset, and in the second century began to exercise a greater and greater influence. Even in Judaism, aspects or “hypostases” of God were increasingly personified, as they had been in the Persian religion. Wisdom or Sophia is an example, and the Holy Ghost was the direct equivalent of the Persian Holiest Spirit, Ahuramazda in his central aspect, and quite probably identified with Mithras (Mica). Persian *yazatas* became Jewish and Christian angels, allowing the archangel Michael to become the face of God visible to humanity just as Mithras was, it seems, of Ahuramazda. Mithras (Mica) is Michael (Mica)!

Paul used these ideas to explain Christ, and how the hypostasis of the *logos* applied to him. So, Wisdom, Glory (Shekinah), Word (*Logos*) and Spirit were all hypostases of God within Judaism that, in due course, allowed the Christians to justify the Trinity as different manifestations of a single God. The archangels seem to have been the same, there being six or seven of them, as there was in Zoroastrianism, depending on whether the Holy Ghost or Angel of the Lord was included—God’s reason in angelic form—or excluded. This angel was identified with the angel Michael.

Michael was effectively God in a more accessible form, just as Mithras seems to have been an accessible form of Ahuramazda. Otherwise, angels seem to have been considered independent, and so, somehow could get up to mischief and become the devil and his demons, a separate creation in the original Zoroastrianism. Thus, Michael could seem to be an independent

angel who interceded for Jews before God, and as such easily adapted into being Christ and the Trinity. Michael was God, he was an independent angel or spirit, and he became Jesus Christ when the attribute of instituting the Final Judgement was transferred to Christ as his *parousia*.

The focus of Hellenistic Judaism is thought to have been Alexandria in Egypt, though it is a mistake to imagine it was a single species. There were many Jews in the other great African and Asian cities too, and each took a slant conditioned by the local culture. Even so, Hellenistic Judaism as a looser type of Judaism “proved a highly sympathetic channel for introducing Hellenistic culture to the early Church”, according to Canon J N D Kelly (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 1977). What he means was it was an excellent channel for the Essenistic Judaism of Jesus and the Jerusalem Church to be led into the gentile Roman empire.

Philo of Alexandria

Philo was an important contemporary (30 BC to 45 AD) Hellenized Jew of Alexandria whose ideas we have in detail. He was head of the Jewish delegation to the emperor Gaius in 40 AD. Following a trend established by the Egyptian dynasty of Greek kings, the Ptolemies, he claimed everything Greek had been anticipated by the Jews, or rather the God of the Jews in the *Pentateuch*, where God had used inspired men to write down His will. How was it possible to get Greek philosophy from the Jewish *Torah*? By interpreting the *Torah* as allegory!

It is a method of proving anything from anything else—the moon is made of green cheese, or you can get sunbeams from cucumbers! It has long been used to get supposedly hidden meanings from mythical stories. Stoics used it to find Stoicism in *Homer* and *Hesiod*, and the Jew, Aristobulus, used it to find philosophy in the *Torah*. Philo liked it and used it enthusiastically himself. The literal meaning of a text was metaphorically the body, and the hidden meaning was its metaphorical soul, an apt analogy as no one has yet been able to find the soul of anything.

Philo saw God as utterly transcendent, leaving Him with the problem of how He could affect the world. He solved it by inventing intermediate powers between God and the material world. The *logos* was one such power. So God could not directly influence the world because He utterly transcended it, but by a blatant mental conjuring trick, God created the *logos* whereby He could create the material level. This God is not omnipotent but has to use tricks and devices to achieve His aims. Neither Philo nor most Christians notice. Canon Kelly writes that “Philo’s teaching about the *logos* is ambiguous, even inconsistent”.

The *logos* was an ancient Greek speculation taken from Persian *arta*, but was polished by the Stoics at this time. For them *logos* remained order and truth, as it was for the Persians (*arta, asha*), but became cosmic reason and a cosmic blueprint, the rational principle of reality which gave it shape, natural laws and meaning. Humans could comprehend reality because of the *logos* in them. From such notions, *logos*, to Philo, was the senior intermediary of God, the most like Him, and the first to emanate from Him, His “first begotten son”! (*De Agric* 57).

Logos then acted as God’s agent in creating the world, and in permitting humanity to comprehend God. In modern evolutionary terms, this latter is analogous with the accumulated experience early forms of life acquire from their environment which allow them to understand the world in which they live. The *logos*, Philo tells us, is the Angel of the Lord, which appeared to the Patriarchs. In other respects, the Angel of the Lord seems identifiable as Michael, so the *logos* is Michael, who is like God.

The bible had it that God created the world by His word (*logos*), and similarly, by His word revealed Himself to His prophets. No modern believer, Jew or Christian, will doubt that the bible precedes the Greek philosophers, but it does not. Heraclitus wrote about *logos* a century before the bible began to be written by the Persian colonials, and even longer before the Ptolemies cast *Genesis* in more or less the shape it is now in. Philo had *logos* playing the role that others had Wisdom playing. It acted as the source of Plato’s forms. By the *logos*, God, who was Himself transcendent and unable to touch matter, projected His thoughts into it to make the tangible universe.

Syncretism in Rome

The loss of the Republic, civil war, and the institution of the empire had left Romans feeling insecure, and dissatisfied with their traditional religions. In the last two centuries BC, several eastern religions had been imported into Rome, and had enjoyed a deal of popularity. Cybele, Serapis, Isis and Mithras had their own adherents, while the traditional Greek and Roman beliefs faded. Emperor worship was treated as a symbol of patriotic loyalty, like the US flag, and the portrait of the British Queen rather than a serious religion. With these competing beliefs came also eclecticism, called, in religion, syncretism, whereby beliefs and rituals are picked and chosen, and religions adapted to the demands of their customers, like modern Christian cults in the US:

The various cults fused with and borrowed from each other

indiscriminately.

Canon Kelly

One characteristic of the mystery religions, in which new members were initiated by secret rituals, was a sacred meal, and before partaking of it, the initiates had to spend periods in abstention and purification. Moreover, monotheism was getting increasingly accepted even by the lower orders. The Greek philosophers had mainly not believed in the gods of Homer and Hesiod, except as illustrative of various aspects of a supreme God. Thus Plato found the supreme God in The One, the utmost Good in his world of forms. Thereafter, people increasingly saw the polytheistic gods as attributes of one supreme God, or aspects of a unique power, not necessarily conscious, in the cosmos.

Aristides praised individual gods in his speeches, but he regarded them as emanations of a universal father, some knew as Pantheos. When Aurelian, in 274 AD, made Sol Invictus the state God of Rome, it was as a universal God, as a Pantheos. More intelligent and educated people preferred a philosophical approach rather than any type of ritualized religion. The Greek philosophers offered explanations of the world and of the principles that ran it.

At the beginning of Christianity, Stoicism was popular among educated people. Stoics rejected any sort of parallel world that could not be sensed, but accepted that matter was subject to an order (*logos*) which arranged it. This *logos* was airy, and so was pneumatic or spiritual, using the words in their proper sense, but was not spiritual in the modern sense of being immaterial. It was material itself, merely being energetic rarefied matter, a type of fire, like the Persian *asha* which annealed and shaped matter, and, at the End of Time, would consume it. To the Stoics, everything was material, even the spiritual!

Logos was also akin to mind, Nature, Providence and even God, though not of the tinkerman kind. Human people could be sure that this Providence had made, and would maintain, the world to their advantage—reminding us of the way evolution tailors organisms to the environment they live in—but it did not interfere in what was ordained by changing its own laws. The Stoics were “stoical” in just the sense we still use the word—they accepted fate as it came to them, gritting their teeth when necessary, and hoping for a change in the future.

Everything that existed was profane matter including the sacred fire or *logos*. Everything therefore had *logos* within it, a divine spark, a notion that the Gnostics took up. These sparks of the universal *logos* were like seeds which gave rise to everything different, and so they were called “seminal

logoi”, and this is just what the human soul was. Compared with the body, it was immortal, but nevertheless died in the general conflagration at the End of Time. The soul, the emanation of the divine “*logos*” in man, consisted of different parts controlled by a ruling element which was reason.

Syncretism was common in these philosophical world views, just as in ritual religions, so that Stoicism and Platonism ran together in the first centuries of the modern era. Neo-Platonism was partly Stoicism and *vice-versa*, and both influenced Christianity. Even so, the schools never merged, but retained their own independence, both inclining towards a variety of monotheism, Platonism absorbing Aristotelianism in some of its offshoots, and leaning towards religion in others by equating Plato’s Good with Aristotle’s Supreme Mind, Forms or Ideals being the thoughts of the resulting God.

The critic of Christianity, Celsus, whom Origen sought to refute at a time when Celsus was unable to reply—he was dead—was in a school of middle Platonism founded by Albinus in the second century. Immiscible phases of being had their own god. The prime God was unmoved and purely spiritual—now in its modern usage—so unable to relate with anything material, but a World Intellect represented a desire for the spiritual God, and allowed Him to influence material being, albeit indirectly. However, the world also had its own spiritual phase, the World Soul, which the prime God *did* control directly.

In *Contra Celsum* 4:52, 54, Origen says Celsus denied that God could have created the material body, or anything mortal. Only the soul belonged to God. For God to appear incarnated on earth, Christians were postulating an impossibility, unless God ceased being purely spiritual. Any such change, if it could happen, must be a change for the worse (*Contra Celsum* 4:14)

Essentially neo and middle Platonists thought God was necessarily entirely transcendental or spiritual, and therefore only glimpsible by humanity briefly and incompletely through the intellect. Today we might doubt that something infinite in extent could compress itself into the finite figure of a man, and albeit with his different concepts, that was Celsus’s view.

It was Plotinus (205-270 AD), an Egyptian Greek, who founded neo-Platonism as it was met by the Church Fathers. Plotinus was a monist, a believer that “all was one”, but differentiated into phases, grades or emanations of being, arranged as a taxonomy. The levels of being all condensed, or emanated depending on your analogy, from “The One”, the highest level or hypostasis of being, and everything was motivated to return to it. In scientific terms, it has some parallels with potential energy—everything seeks to minimise its potential energy. The One can yield

condensates (or emanations), yet it remains itself unchanged, just as the energy of a system is conserved though it appears in different forms. Plotinus identified it with The Good, not because it had Goodness as a mere quality, but that it *was* Goodness.

Then, like the middle Platonism of Albinus, came a second hypostasis—Thought, Intellect or Mind—and then came the third phase, Soul. Mind was a phase constituted of Forms (Ideals) which were intermediate between reality and the absolute perfection of The Good. Mind was the source of the variety in the world, and is equivalent to Plato’s Demiurge or Creator. Soul itself has a higher phase and a lower one, the higher linking Mind to the material world which is the lower, Nature or Physis, the World Soul.

People’s individual souls emanate from the World Soul as a higher and a lower phase, the higher being their mind and the lower their body. The body is material, quite out of touch with the phase of Ideals, and so is dark, The Good being pure illumination. What is dark is evil. Nevertheless, Nature, Matter is still a phase of The One, and that is purely Good, so even what is evil cannot be without merit. It is subject to the hypostases that are above and beyond it, being put in order by a higher soul, and so, unpleasant as it might seem, it is the best of all worlds!

Every level has an urge to return to the original state in The One. The human soul finds this urge in love, the Eros of Plato’s *Symposium*, and through it can begin to climb the intervening levels back to identity with The One. To do so there are three requirements:

1. To eschew the body by foregoing its pleasures in a catharsis, and reducing its demands *via* the senses
2. Adopting mental challenges instead of physical ones, learning all one can of science and philosophy
3. A mystical union with The One by means of “ecstasy”, the loss of one’s sense of the individual, of subject and object, of separation from all else that exists. It is the kinunity of Adelpiasophists.

Gnosticism

Early Church Fathers, like Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian, found themselves confronted with a variety of Gnostic sects, whom they all regarded as types of Christian heresy. It suggests they all had the same Essenic roots as Christianity, or had drawn considerably upon the same Essenic ideas that had emerged as Christianity. Irenaeus and Tertullian both considered Gnosticism as an admixture of Paganism with apostolic Christianity (Essenism), while Hippolytus specifically saw them as mixing

astrology and the mystery religions into apostolic Christianity. Irenaeus blames it on to the Simon Magus of *Acts*, and, if Simon Magus was originally the apostolic name for Paul (Saul), the self-styled apostle to the gentiles, perhaps he was right.

Some kinds of Gnosticism were closer to Christianity than others which were only superficially Christian. In some, Jewish elements of an allegedly unorthodox type were more prevalent than Christian elements, though how anyone can distinguish unorthodox from orthodox Judaism of that time is anyone's guess. It certainly suggests that a non-Christian but Jewish type of Gnosticism existed before Christianity. It was more definitely Persian (Oriental), and perhaps also more Hellenized, than the Rabbinic Judaism that emerged after the fall of Judaism when the rabbis pruned it of those features.

Like the neo-Platonists, Gnostics were fond of the idea of hypostasis, that everything consisted of emanations from God, but some of the Gnostic schools took it to extremes. Among their many emanations were Thought (Ennoia), Monogenes Nous (Born of One—or Only Begotten—Mind), Aletheia (Truth), Logos (Reason), Zoë (Life), Anthropos (Mankind), Ecclesia (Assembly, Church), The Five Aeons (Continuous Time Periods), The Six Aeons, various pairs of Aeons, Sophia, and so on. They add up to thirty and these thirty are the Pleroma (Fullness) of God, but only the falsely called Only Begotten Nous knows, and so can reveal, the Father who is Unbegotten. The guardian of the Pleroma is Stauros (Cross), also called Horos. Nous and Aletheia produced a new pair of Aeons to instruct the Pleroma about the Father. They were Christ and the Holy Spirit. Then, the Saviour Jesus emerged as the Perfection of the Pleroma.

And it goes on! Sophia the lowest hypostasis of the Pleroma eventually becomes the Demiurgos, or Creator of the World, which was made of matter, psyche and pneuma, giving rise to three distinct types of man, the pneumatic or spiritual man, who only needs to be aware of the Saviour to be saved, the carnal or material man, who cannot be saved at all, and the psychic man who has to imitate Christ in life to be saved. It followed that anyone's best bet for salvation was to practice the life of a psychic man! This is what the later Cathar perfects attempted to do.

The disciples of Valentinus elaborated this speculative mythology, though the original scheme of Valentinus seemed simpler, and had much in common with the Christianity of *John*. The common stock of ideas among the Gnostic sects include:

1. Dualism—Good and Evil are opposites, the material world being evil and the spiritual world being good

2. The prime God, being purely spiritual, could have had no role in making the material world. A lesser and evil God, the Demiurge, was the Creator, and, as the Jewish scriptures said their God was the Creator, the Demiurge was the God of the Jews
3. Mankind, or at least the best among them, have a spiritual spark, a spark of the divine, within them. It is distraught in its alien, material, environment and yearns to return to the spiritual level and be with God
4. A Saviour had to descend from higher levels of hypostasis to show the souls of spiritual humanity how they can return to heaven. This is what the “*gnosis*” or “knowledge” in Gnostic religions is.

Gnosticism and Persian Religion

The first and fourth of these four are unquestionably Persian, as is the notion of emanations or aspects of God. Ahuramazda had at least seven forms, but we must remember that 90% of Persian literature has been destroyed forever, so other oriental, philosophical and Gnostic ideas quite probably came from lost details of Zoroastrianism, and the even lesser known Zurvanism. Judaism has Persian roots, and the different systems of Greek philosophy were inspired by Persian religion, so it cannot be discounted that the main aspects of Gnosticism were also originally Persian.

The conquest of Persia by Alexander not only destroyed the literature of Zoroastrianism, but left the large Persian caste of the Magi, the administrative and religious caste of old Persia, unemployed and destitute. These men were clever and well educated, and, left to their own devices, made their way in the changed world they found themselves in the best way they could, by becoming teachers and religious gurus—*Goëtae*. But the lack of any central church meant they were free to do as they liked, tailoring their teachings to the likes and dislikes of their audiences, so Persian Zoroastrianism became adulterated and spallated. The world had become Greek, and Greeks had put their own emphases on the Zoroastrian speculation they had met. So the Magi were able to make use of the bits of Greek teaching they saw as compatible with their own beliefs.

Much of Judaism was already compatible with Magian ideas, Judaism having been set up by the Persians as a religion suitable for the subjected nations of the Persian empire, the Juddin. It gave the Magi another acceptable source for their attempts to reconstruct a working religion from what they remembered of the Persian religion. These were the reasons for and the sources of Gnosticism. The *gnosis* being taught was the knowledge the Magi had of their old religion.

In the Patristic Age, four hundred years after Alexander, *gnosis* of the

Persian religion survived in a much distorted form in the various schools of Gnosticism and Greek philosophy competing with each other for an audience of “hearers” mainly in Asia Minor, Syria and Egypt. Christianity was only one of them, but it is a truism that history is the story of the victors, and it is because Christianity was eventually adopted by the Roman state that it was ultimately successful above the others, and so that they can now be depicted as incidental distractions from what was always the superior form.

Christians say that salvation is by faith (*pistis*) not knowledge (*gnosis*), but it is self evident that no one can be saved by the Christian theory unless they *know* it! They have to know that faith saves them before they can have faith in it. Christianity is a type of *gnosis*, and John and Paul are clear about it. The whole idea of the *New Testament* was to spread *gnosis*—the Good News is *gnosis*—*gnosis* of *pistis*! As in *gnosis*, so in Christianity, the pneumatic or spiritual man is saved, while the rest remain Godless.

The Gnostic teacher, Basilides, said that “the gospel is knowledge of otherworldly things”. Once anyone knows their situation and what is required of them to escape it, then they can begin to do it, but it is not easy, as merely professing faith is. It was set forth by teachers as a long journey, even after death, like Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, full of hazards to be overcome at the various hypostatic levels *en route*.

Modern Christianity in the USA is successful because salvation is a cinch. All they have to do is be “born again” and be a good giver to the redeeming church, and that is it. Christ, the supposed God of the Christians, in the Christian holy books called *The Gospels* said something quite different. It was hard avoiding perdition. Modern Christians are cash cows to be milked by insincere scheming evangelists.

Essenism and the Gnostics

Much of early Christianity was a Gnostic variety, as *2 Clement* and *John* show, teaching that eternal life is knowledge of Christ and God. Other Church fathers made the same distinction between simple Christians who just heard and believed, and Gnostics who had a philosophy beside their faith. Many teachers accepted as Gnostics in the early years of Christianity were preaching Christ as a salvific figure, but sought to place the whole notion of salvation in a more “scientific” context. They were seeking the roots of the idea, which was Zoroastrianism, *via* the Greeks rather than *via* the Jews.

The Jewish religion was originally a version of Mazdayasnaism much

simplified to be easy to grasp and proselytize among people ruled by Persia, but the original Zoroastrianism itself was a considerably philosophical system of broad compass. Alexander acted untypically, vandalously destroying the Persian books because he realized the indebtedness of Greek philosophy to them. Alexander's teacher was Aristotle.

We have seen that the destruction of the bulk of Zoroastrian teaching and simultaneously the social and economic system that maintained it gave rise to the large class of travelling preachers and magicians that brought magic to Hellenism, and fresh mysteries to religion. When the earliest converts of the Nazarene emerged from Judaea with stories of a crucified redeemer, it was natural that some Gnostic *Goëtae* attached the tale to the story of a redeemer they already had, and gave the Jewish redeemer the characteristics they expected of him. Gnostics saw the world as evil, and out of touch of God.

Many of the Essenes, scattered by the Roman victories in Judaea were ready to accept the same view. Had God, who had declared the Jews and Judaea as His own, abandoned the Jews, and even His Chosen Ones, His Elect, the righteous remnant of Israel, the Essenes? The answer was, "Yes!". Rome was contrary to the good God, but the tool of the wicked God of this world, determined to harm, torture and scatter those who were truly good. Rome kept on defeating the True God's children, and the wicked God of the Jews was indifferent. The Jewish God had indeed abandoned them, so was not the True God. The Gnostics were right.

Gentile Christians had the same argument but blamed the neglect of God for His own people on God having changed His mind, having repented about his Elect, who had been so faithless and wicked themselves. Now God had appointed the Christians as His new Elect, and so they still suppose until this day. The Gnostics said the Jews had mistaken the wicked Demiurge as the True God, and He had taken advantage of them, punishing them gratuitously like a small boy picking the legs off of a fly. The Jewish Creator God was a rogue hypostate of the Truly Spiritual God. The world was therefore Satanic, and the influence of this idea on Christianity remains.

Christian Doctrine as Catholic Doctrine

Protestants are faced with a problem that few of them are clever enough to notice. Christian doctrine comes down to us as the doctrine of the Catholic Church, yet they label the Catholic Church as a shocking hybrid of "true faith" and Hellenistic Paganism. How then do they know what "true faith" is? Paradoxically, they themselves venerate Paul, and cite his epistles endlessly, but Paul was the earliest named person to have mixed Hellenistic

concepts with the Jewish Christianity of the Jerusalem Church. Proof is that he decried as “Judaizers” the envoys of James who sought to stop his Hellenizing antics.

What we have, in the Christian story, is that the Christian Saviour, Christ, God Himself, came to earth as a man, selected a group of men as apostles and witnesses to his message, and these apostles passed on the message to the Church. Thus we read of:

The actual original tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church, which the Lord bestowed, the apostles proclaimed, and the Fathers safeguarded.
Athanasius

So, the Church, the Roman Catholic Church, was the guardian of the message of God, and this message is now embodied in the books of Christian scripture, the *New Testament*, which the Church published, and in its own *corpus* of tradition and expertise through its “doctors”, all inspired by the “Apostolic Succession”, the spirit notionally passed from generation to generation. That is the outline of the transmission of the Holy *Kerygma* of Christ. The Church is indeed the guardian of this tradition, so it, the Catholic Church, has passed to the Protestants whatever they know about doctrine.

Questions remain, of course. What happened to the apostles? Of the original ones only the fate of Judas is certain, if we are to believe the gospels. Peter is partially remembered in *Acts*, but otherwise it is exclusively about Paul, a belated and self-appointed apostle, apparently an afterthought of God because the others were all lazy skivers who were not up to the job. God had gone through the inconvenience of appearing as a man to transmit His message in person to a chosen twelve, but then had to appear again after He had ascended to heaven because his twelve appointments were inadequate. This late appointment was, it turned out, keen on preaching, travelling and writing letters, so was up to the task, except that the message he told was not the one God had told Himself.

Paul extemporized doctrine on the hoof. To what extent did the early bishops of the gentile church do the same? Did their extempore musings come to represent Church tradition? Tradition is the doctrine of the Church besides that written in the scriptures, and sometimes apparently contradicting them. The Trinity is the most obvious example. How did such traditions arise?

So far as we can judge, the gospels were written from about the time of the Jewish War (*Mark*) to some time early in the second century (*John*), but

they were not published or generally available until after the middle of the second century. So, for well over a century after the crucifixion, Christians relied on tradition—what *Clement* called “the rule of our tradition”, and what Justin Martyr called “following God and the teaching derived from Him”. The source of the teaching was said to have been the apostles, but many of the characteristics of Christ were derived from the Jewish scriptures—and called prophecy whether it was meant to be or not—as exemplified by *Matthew*.

Thus, Polycarp urged the acceptance of Christ himself with “the apostles who preached the gospel to us, and the prophets who announced our Lord’s coming in advance”. For the whole of nigh on a century and a half, the Jewish scriptures in the form of the *Septuagint* were the only scriptures most Christians could access, and so were essential to the spread of Christianity. Christians blatantly stole the scriptures of the Jews calling them their own. Justin Martyr stated as accepted truth that the Jewish scriptures belonged to Christians not Jews (*1 Apol* 32:2, *Dial* 29:2).

The prophets were all concerned with prophesying Christ, Christians were led by the Church to believe. Despite the conviction of early believers like Justin and Tatian, who said they converted merely from reading the Jewish scriptures, many of the supposed prophecies in the Jewish scriptures are plainly not prophecies, and more plainly not prophecies of Christ. They obviously had been predisposed to see prophecies of Christ when there were none, and so must have experienced Christian teaching. Many modern converts make a similar claim—that Christ appeared to them spontaneously, yet they must have been primed even to think it.

Another Apostolic Father, Barnabas, admits it and even calls it *gnosis*. This *gnosis* was a particular kind of exegesis whereby any vague association was construed as prophecy, and prophecy could be constructed from different passages, rather as modern evangelists pick passages to make up their own doctrines. The apostles used this method, and so did Jesus, according to Justin (*1 Apol* 50:12). This exegetical method used by the early Church was that used by the Essenes! It was loose and eccentric, and far removed from being logical, but it allowed Essene and Christian exegetes to get what they wanted, and claim it was the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Whatever messages the apostles had transmitted about Christ’s own teaching were allegedly confirmed by Papias because he made it his objective to interview “Elders”, old men of the Church who had known the apostles. Protestant sectaries have always claimed this was what they exclusively had done, or at least first did properly. By so doing, they and only they knew “the Truth”. Yet all they are doing is examining the texts and

doctrines that the Catholic Church has seen fit to transmit. It includes the darling of the Protestants, Paul, who curiously is a darling of many Catholics too.

Yet Paul's enemies were the Ebionites, the early Christian sect that the Catholics declared heretical. The Ebionites were "the Poor", the Jewish sect that included Essenes, if they were not exactly the same people, and evidently included Jesus and the apostles too, judging by their advocating poverty and sharing. Only 100 years after Christians tell us God walked the earth, speaking His own words from His own lips, explaining personally to anyone willing to listen what they had to do to enter His kingdom, Polycarp declared, in a letter to the Philippians, that Paul's letter to them was the foundation of Christian faith. Doubtless he was being sycophantic, but Christians have believed it ever since, while the true founders of Christianity and even God Himself Christians ignore.

Christian Scripture

It was not until the second half of the second century that apostolic testimony to Christ began to supersede the authority of the Jewish scriptures. The continued Jewish rebellions in Palestine, often accompanied by fanatical Jewish messianism elsewhere in the empire, meant that Jews were unpopular with Romans, and innocent Jews were themselves often victimized for the intransigence of their co-religionists. Inasmuch as Christianity was seen as a Jewish religion, Christians had remained unpopular, not least because some Romans remembered they were followers of an earlier Jewish rebel themselves.

The desire to play down Christian origins, and the reliance on the Jewish scriptures, were understandable. After the rebellion of Bar Kosiba, the movement against Judaism and the Jewishness of Christianity became irresistible as the gentile Church sought to break free of its Jewish roots. Some, such as Marcion, wanted a complete severance, but others in the Church saw the importance of depicting Christianity as the culmination of God's plan revealed over a long timescale.

The antagonism towards Christians as disciples of a minor and unsuccessful Jewish rebel was fading as more serious and successful ones hit the headlines, and the true events of the career of Jesus were denied and reinterpreted by the Christians. So, as the second century progressed, the Church decided to publish reinterpreted testimonies of some apostles. Most scholarly opinion is that these were already extant works, but their actual date of composition is unclear.

Mark is considered the earliest gospel, from about the time of the first Jewish War, and the others followed around the turn of the first century. Some scholars think the gospels are second century, and so too the epistles of Paul, though most put the epistles earlier than the gospels because Paul shows no sign of knowing any gospels. If Paul's epistles are really second century pseudepigraphs then the gospels are later still. And, if the gospels are compositions of the late first or early second century then they were kept secret for around half a century before they were published.

None of them were publicly available, so to most Romans Christianity was a mystery, and the bishops will have wanted it that way because they had the secret of Jesus as a Jewish rebel to be kept until catechumens had received enough “teaching” to prepare them for “the Truth”! Once they had been prepared and submitted to baptism and the eucharistic meal, they had “the Truth” revealed to them in the form of a gospel, doubtless *Mark*. So, Christianity began as a mystery religion, the awful secret to be revealed being that God had appeared on earth and been crucified as the king of the Jews. Knowing and accepting this, they were confirmed as Christians, and swore to keep it a secret.

Authority and Tradition

But the Catholics were engaged in a controversy with the Gnostics who themselves knew “the Truth”, and alleged that it was the Church that was keeping it hidden—a secret! Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria and Epiphanius all tell us that the Gnostics claimed a different, secret apostolic tradition. If it were the true tradition of the apostles, it was a secret all right—one the Church did not want revealing. These pages have demonstrated a major skeleton in the ecclesiastical cupboard—Jesus was indeed an anti-Roman rebel who had actually briefly taken command of Jerusalem by defeating a substantial division of a Roman cohort. The bishops had to keep this a secret to have a chance of winning over Roman converts, so had to accuse anyone who revealed it themselves of holding to a secret, and false, tradition.

It follows that the establishment of the authority of the Church was a key strategy, and it countered its detractors by emphasizing the authority of its own tradition as being that bestowed by Christ on it alone *via* the apostles. Irenaeus and Tertullian wrote of it vigorously. Tertullian (*de praescr* 6) sought to deter converts from considering Gnostic belief by telling them they could not pick and chose what they believed, the apostles solely having authority, and having passed it directly to the Church. Today, Christians pick and choose not only among the *New Testament* but also among the

Mosaic law of the Jews, even though they simultaneously say Christ had abrogated the Jewish law. So, now, they ignore what Christ (God!) told them to do, but accept what He told them to ignore!

The tradition of the Church was doctrine Irenaeus considered it had received from the apostles agraphically, without written texts. Proof that there was an agraphical tradition was that the barbarians had received “this faith without letters”. As early as Irenaeus, the barbarians had been converted to Christianity, but Christians then blame the fall of Rome and the dark ages on to the barbarians. Both were largely the responsibility of Christians on both sides. Anyway, it was, for Irenaeus, proof that the Church had a living tradition that kept it on the straight and narrow.

The Church, via its spokesmen like Irenaeus, said their tradition was open, but the Gnostic one was secret. What then could have been the point of *gnosis* if it was to be kept secret? It could have been no more secret than the Church's own mysteries—they must have been revealed to those who enquired and were willing to accept tuition. The advantage of the Church was that it kept a united front while the Gnostics were split. It was a propaganda advantage in distinguishing Catholicism from the broad category of gnosticism, even though it was, in fact, another Gnostic sect. Effectively, the Church depicted all its detractors as disunited, but itself as united. It is the same tactic as modern politicians use in claiming their party is united when the others are disunited. It holds good when one party succeeds in projecting an image of unity over the others, whether it is or not. Gnostics did not, and so could be depicted as having various false doctrines, which, as they were not commonly held, could be presented as mysteries or secrets to the others.

Thus the united voice of the Church, for Irenaeus, showed that its “tradition”, its oral teaching, now distinguished from scripture, was what was public, as the “canon of the truth”. It seems to have been what scholars call the “*kerygma*”, a concise set of fixed beliefs expressed fluidly. Irenaeus also used as proof, the succession of bishops right back to the apostles—the Apostolic Succession—safeguarded by the Holy Ghost. For Irenaeus, it made them all into spiritual men endowed by the Holy Ghost with a *carisma veritatis certum*, an infallible gift of truth. So, in those days, everyone in the apostolic succession was infallible, not just the pope, another source of the Christian conviction that it is impossible for them to lie.

Irenaeus used the same standard for written works—they had to have been by apostles, or those in the apostolic succession. It meant that anything not approved by the Church was deemed unreliable if not wrong, and the Church stuck to this, insisting on approving all pious writing, and censoring

whatever it disapproved of, all based on its own assertion that it alone owned the apostolic tradition. It is plainly true that it owned the traditions that it invented, but these fictions are not true—they are not history, but mainly a deliberate obscuring and mystification of it. The Church is doubtless right that it has the key to the interpretation of its own inventions, but no one should be fooled into thinking even scriptures are unspoiled history. Far from it. Effectively, Irenaeus claimed scripture was the ultimate authority, but the authority for that was the tradition of the Church guarded by the Holy Ghost! And *vice versa*!

Tertullian's view was similar. Tradition was the faith of the apostles, and was enshrined in scripture, which is necessarily true, but, if scripture were to be set aside, the Church could proclaim correct doctrine. So, the unwritten tradition of the Church was identical with “the rule of faith”, and indeed he preferred this *regula fidei* in his disputes with heretics for it could show whether anyone was a Christian or not, and guided exegesis of scripture. Only the Church possessed this canon or rule of faith, and so it was necessarily always right.

The point is laboured here to emphasize the utter circularity of Christian reasoning, and that the doctrine that came through the filter of the Church's rule of faith is what all Christians, Catholic or otherwise, have today. Typically, Tertullian accused the Gnostics of saying whatever they liked because they did not have a rule of faith, ignoring that the Church was free to say whatever it liked because it had one. He thought it useless arguing with gnostics from scripture because they were so good at finding what they wanted in it by cunning exegesis—just like modern fundamentalist pastors and apologists. It follows he thought that the Church was the ultimate authority.

By the fourth century AD, when the Gnostics were no longer rivals to the Church, scripture was instituted as the central authority, it being the testimony of the apostles of Christ's revelations, but even earlier, Origen had no qualms about citing scripture as his authority. The parallel tradition of the Church still remained, and worthies of the Church like Clement of Alexandria and Origen himself now admitted to a secret tradition, even calling it *gnosis*! Only the highest ranks of the Church knew it.

Otherwise, for Origen, tradition was the “ecclesiastical preaching”, the *kerygma*, which was independent of the bible, and, indeed, included the principles of biblical interpretation. Ultimately, it became the magisterial authority of the Catholic Church, expressed through the growing number of synods and councils that were being called, the best known of which was held at Nicaea in 325 AD. Eusebius submitted the creed that was accepted at

Nicaea, explaining that it was based on the teaching of the bishops, the instructions given to catechumens, and the bible. Again, the Church claimed a succession of authorities to back up its claims, Hegesippus, Irenaeus, and so on, whereas their opponents, the Arians, had no witnesses to their doctrines.

The claim was that the Nicene Council had ratified the teaching bestowed on to the Church by Christ and proclaimed by the apostles, and we can be sure that had the Arians won the vote, they would have made the same claim. Anyone who demurred was not a Christian. The decision of the Nicene Council was unimpeachable. Even so the construction of new theological concepts was justified by reference to scripture, though it need only to have been “implied”, and, of course, that is entirely a matter of interpretation, a function only the Church was equipped to do, it said. What Tertullian had seen as a problem in debating with the Gnostics was now an advantage. The Church could justify anything by reference to the scriptures.

By the fifth century, the leading Fathers of the past were being cited as having inherited and preserved the faith of the apostles. Anyone who deviated from their teachings were enemies of the truth—so said Theodoret of Antioch. Vincent of Lérins explained that correct understanding would come sufficiently well from scripture, but being subject to such a variety of interpretation, tradition—“what has been believed everywhere, always and by everyone”—was needed to distinguish what was correct from what was false.

Scripture

In the middle of the fifth century, Vincent of Lérins declared that Catholic truth was distinguished from heretical falsehood by the authority of the bible as interpreted by the tradition of the Church, and the latter was *quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, “what has been believed everywhere, always and by everyone”. If ever these criteria left any doubt, then the synods of the Church would decide, so that doctrine could not be confused by idiosyncratic opinions. Doctrine could gradually evolve under the Church’s authority, but only subject to what proper interpretation of scripture permitted. Scripture was therefore established as the authority for belief, provided that the Church approved the interpretation of it, and this was to remain the rule for a thousands years until the reformation, the holy Church defending it by torture and murder in the name of God.

What then were the scriptures? Until the middle of the second century, the only scriptures that were at all accessible were the Jewish scriptures written in Greek as the *Septuagint*—the scriptural quotations used in the *New*

Testament are from the *Septuagint*. By then, the gospels and the epistles had been written but were only narrowly circulated among the senior hierarchy of the Church because they were evidence that Christ had been crucified as a bandit, and therefore that Christianity was a subversive terrorist organisation. In this period, therefore, Christianity was presented as a mystery religion, the truth only being revealed to catechumens when they had been adequately prepared for it. The preparation consisted of readings from the *Septuagint* showing prophecies of the coming messiah, and Isaiah's suffering servant.

The Council of Jamnia at the end of the first century was a meeting of Pharisees to establish Pharisaism as official Judaism, closing the door on messianism and apocalyptic Jewish sects—indeed all other sects of Judaism besides the Pharisees—thus giving birth to the Rabbinic Judaism that has prevailed ever since, so successfully in fact that many people, even clergymen and Christian “scholars”, think that Judaism was ever thus! It had also closed the canon of Jewish scripture, excluding many texts that Jewish sects like the Essenes had revered, and, of course, also excluding novelties like the Christian gospels. It proved useful to the Church in defining what it was not, and thereby helping to separate itself from Judaism, which it was keen to do, especially after the rebellion of Bar Kosiba in 132 AD.

Because the Christians had emerged from the Essenes, who opposed the Pharisees and who called themselves “Israel”, the Christians felt justified in appropriating the name, calling themselves the new Israel, and claiming the Jewish writings as their own. Early Christians, like Paul, Barnabas, Clement and Justin mean, when they speak of “scriptures”, the Jewish scriptures and not the Christian *New Testament*. As we can see from the gospels, notably *Matthew*, the first Christians saw prophecy of the messiah throughout the Jewish scriptures by reading them not merely as history, but typologically and allegorically, so that messianic prophecies appeared in quite absurd places. This kind of exegesis came from the *peshar* method of exegesis used by the Essenes.

The earliest Christians to cite scripture included in their citations books which did not find their way into the set of books accepted by the Pharisees (“the Jews”) at the Council of Jamnia, so the first Christians had a wider, or different tradition than the Pharisees, who had decided to stamp out contrary and problematic beliefs that were causing dissension among Jews, and making them unpopular among gentiles. *Wisdom*, *Esdras*, *Ecclesiasticus*, *Susannah*, *Bel and the Dragon*, *Baruch* and apocryphal books generally had been quoted by Christians, but were rejected by Jews.

Later, the discrepancy between the Jewish canon (a Christian term) and the books considered scriptural by Christians led to reservations then doubts, until eventually the authorities of the eastern churches banned the use of the *Apocrypha* except in private. The western churches, however, remained more favourable to them. Even Jerome, though favorable towards apocryphal books, decided they were for edification only, and not for establishing doctrine. The main early authority of the Roman Church, Augustine, made no such distinction, defying the Jewish canon, and allocating 44 books as ancient scripture. The synods of Hippo (393 AD) and Carthage (397 AD) took the same view, and before long so did the pope (Innocent I, 405 AD).

Marcion and the Canon

Irenaeus was the first to speak of the “new” testament, and acknowledge writings and scripture like the epistles and the gospels as equal to the “old” testament in sacred value, though others had occasionally spoken in the same terms, unless they were later editors’ improvements, or false interpretations of an innocent phrase, on the face of it, like “it is written” as implying a holiness that was never intended. Tertullian (c 150-230 AD) openly accepted the two testaments as equal in status. The Christian writings had become holy scripture by then.

Marcion, a wealthy man raised by Christian parents, was sick of the bad feelings for Christianity generated by its association with the Jews, yet he was a fundamentalist. He took the bible as being literally true, refusing to use allegory in interpreting it. He could not reconcile the love advocated by Christ with the harsh “justice” and legalism of the god of the Jewish scriptures. He proposed therefore to abolish the latter from books acceptable to Christians. The Jewish scriptures, he took to be true, and not allegory, so the god in them could not have been the same one as the Christian god of love in the *New Testament*. He concluded the Jewish creator god was the Demiurgos of Plato, not the true God, who was revealed through Christ. He considered the apparent anti-Jewish attitude of Paul to be justified.

For Marcion, anything that was excessively Jewish could not be a testament to the true God, and so had to be rejected. He therefore drew up a canon of acceptable works, around 140 AD, comprising an edition of *Luke* and ten of Paul’s epistles, all with any passages that were too redolent of Judaism or its Demiurgos removed. This selection of approved works was, according to Adolf von Harnack, the eminent German scholar, the beginning of the Catholic canon. Within a couple of decades, Justin and Irenaeus were

writing about the four gospels, and Tatian had put together his *Diatessaron*, a harmony of them, no doubt intended ultimately to replace them. Paul's epistles were similarly put together in a collection, though they had been mentioned already by Ignatius.

With the severe measure taken by Rome consequent of the rebellion of Bar Kosiba, the popularity of the Jews fell to a low ebb, but Christians had succeeded in casting off their association with Judaism. Jews but not Christians were barred from Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem), and Marcion was keen to take advantage of it to distance Christianity totally from Judaism. By 160 AD, Christians were introducing more open practices to get rid of Roman accusations that they were a clandestine, and therefore illegal, organization. Justin says gospel readings were being made at weekly services, so Christian origins were slowly coming out of the closet. It no longer needed to defend itself as a mystery religion based on a long preparation for the revelation of the shocking truth that God had incarnated as a Jewish terrorist.

Judaism, which itself, in some of its aspects—the admission of proselytes, though not those brought up as Jews—had been a mystery religion requiring preparation and initiation, had virtually closed its ranks to proselytes, significantly changing its nature under the rabbis. Meanwhile, Christians had established the Jews as perfidious murderers of the Christian God. So, after the destruction of Jerusalem, Christianity was seen as independent of Judaism, and free to do its own thing in the Roman world.

Though Marcion was parted from Christianity, only a decade later Montanism became an heretical threat to the Church, claiming a new revelation, and the bishops saw the value of following the Jews and Marcion of defining a canon of acceptable literature. The *Muratorian Fragment* from the late second century defines just such a canon. Of the present *New Testament*, *Hebrews*, *1* and *2 Peter*, *James* and *3 John* were omitted, but *Wisdom*, the *Apocalypse of Peter* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* were included. For another three centuries the canon was variable at the edges. Athanasius, in 367 AD, prescribed the 27 books now contained in the *New Testament*, but not everyone agreed with him for over a century.

Inspiration

The simple mindedness of Christians is perfectly illustrated by their belief that the bible is the word of God. Ask them how they know it is, and their answer is that the bible says so!

All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, reproof,

correction.

1 Timothy 3:16

Then their bible tells them that God's inspiration of it is by His Holy Spirit:

No prophecy ever came by the will of man, but men spoke from God,
being moved by the Holy Spirit. *2 Peter 1:21*

Not one in a hundred Christians sees any problem in this, and nor did the sages of the early Church, after all, some of them must have written it! God wrote using a human agent inspired by the Holy Ghost. The immediate problem is why an almighty being has to use such a dubious procedure. God created the universe in only six days, but cannot find a reliable way of communicating with His top creation, man. Instead the almighty and putatively perfect being invents a mechanism as malleable as plasticine, a mechanism that slimeball crooks and clergymen can freely change and interpret any way they find convenient to rob the poor, with their consent. Surely an omniscient God has to be aware enough to realize what would happen, and did. After all, He is to judge us all at the End, we are told. Is His judgement that sound?

Moreover, surely a being able to make the universe and everything in it also makes language and can fully comprehend that imperfect men cannot be relied upon to understand it properly themselves. Many parts of the bible are obscure, even to clerical theologians who make a career out of interpreting it. Irenaeus had noticed it and excused it because the bible was "entirely spiritual". So the Christian God is not intelligent enough to render it in concepts that material beings can understand.

To absolve themselves of problems, the Church Fathers, like modern fundamentalists, persuaded Christians that the scriptures were free of errors despite their obscurity, and contained nothing that did not mean something. It can be seen quite plainly in Origen and Jerome. Christians make their God an idiot out of the need to preserve the man made scam they promote. Yet a perfect God cannot be an idiot, and a nonexistent God can be neither idiot nor genius. It is the believers in Him who are the idiots, and the professional clergy depend upon it being so.

Not all Christians thought the Jewish scriptures were free of error. A Valentinian Gnostic Christian wrote about 160 AD explaining that they were partly good and partly imperfect. They were not inspired by a perfectly good God as much of his behaviour and instructions to the Jews prove on reading them without any need of persuasion. But nor are they inspired by an evil Demiurgos as other Gnostics said. Rather they had three sources:

1. an image of God, also good but not perfect—a good Demiurge
2. Moses, a man inspired as a legislator
3. elders of the Jews, worthy men trying to do their best.

The part attributed to the good Demiurge was itself not perfect because he was not, but part of it was perfect, divine precepts like the *Ten Commandments* that Christ came to fulfil, mixed ordinances that needed to be seen as types or metaphors for Christian injunctions, and bad ordinances that Christ came to supersede.

The Catholic Church explained the difference between the *Old Testament* and the *New* in the view of Irenaeus, that the earlier one pertained to an earlier stage of human development, a view still held by liberal Christians who will not be held to any doctrine of infallibility. Christ fulfilled the whole of it with his simpler commandment to love others as yourself. No Demiurge, good or bad was needed to explain the difference. The prophets were inspired by the only God, but the imperfections and obscurity of their vision was caused by the difficulty humans have of seeing the future, even though inspired. Eventually, Augustine summarized the Catholic position succinctly as:

In the *Old Testament*, the *New* is concealed. In the *New Testament*, the *Old* is revealed.

The inspiration of the Holy Spirit was thought as being a kind of demonic possession, using demon in its original sense of a god (*daimon*). Philo explained that prophets spoke God's words through their own mouths, having no idea what they were saying, though, unlike the joke of speaking in tongues, what they said was meant to be comprehensible, otherwise what was the use of it? Jesus extended the notion to every Christian when he told them to proselytize with no thought as to what they said, making any Christian lie into God's truth. Modern Christian leaders like Bush and Blair take full advantage of God's directions to them, having evident difficulty knowing what truth is. The Church fathers, though, thought a state of ecstasy was needed, so not everything that a Christian said was necessarily God's words.

Interpretation

So, scripture was accepted as inspired, but its spiritual nature left it needing interpretation. What were the principles, then, of Christian exegesis? First, the content of the Jewish scriptures was entirely Christian. Everything in them pointed to the coming of Christ. In a noncanonical Christian work, the

Preaching of Peter, the apostles claim to say nothing that is not in scripture concerning Christ, “scripture” here being the *Old Testament*. Justin Martyr said to Tryppho, the Jew:

The scriptures are much more ours than yours, for we let ourselves be persuaded by them, while you read them without grasping their true significance.

The problem of making everything in the Jewish scriptures refer to Christ was made easier by resorting to allegory, Barnabas saying that the mistake made by the Jews was to take the scripture too literally, though Philo, a Jew, had recommended allegorical interpretation of the scriptures at about the time of Christ.

The Church Fathers took it from Paul the apostle that allegorically was a proper way to interpret scripture. He said the story of Abraham’s two sons was an allegory of the two testaments. In allegorical exegesis, the contents of a scriptural passage are considered to symbolize something accepted as a sacred truth. Plainly, it is simply a question of fervid imagination and eager explanation to turn any scripture into any such imagined truth. By using it, Philo found Platonic philosophy in the Jewish scriptures, proving that you can find anything you like by this method.

Modern exegetes make a distinction between allegory and what they call typology, which usually boils down to finding incidents of the *New Testament* in the *Old*. People and events in the Jewish scriptures were types that later happened in the *New Testament*. The Jews themselves had seen their scriptures as typologically prophesying future events, and the Essenes were fond of it, calling themselves prophets for their skill at it.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the Jews expected a prophet of the type of Moses, who had led the Jews from oppression in Egypt. “That Prophet”, Moses himself had prophesied, was expected of the same type to lead the Jews from oppression by the Romans. One such type was Jesus! Joshua had then actually led the Israelites into the Promised Land described in the biblical myth, and another Joshua was expected to lead the Jews into God’s kingdom on earth—heaven on earth, the kingdom of god. Jesus also had that role too, and from it probably came his supposed name, really a title—Joshua, the meaning of Jesus. This leader typified by Moses and Joshua was also typified by David, the first successful king of the Israelites in biblical mythology. All of these types were rolled into the messiah, which Christians say Jesus was.

The church Fathers used both allegory and typology—if they are different—

the Alexandrian Fathers inclining to allegory, whereas the Antiochene Fathers preferred a more literal interpretation, and so typology. The distinction is far from precise. Origen was keen on allegory, arguing that scripture had three faces or levels corresponding to the body, the soul and the spirit. Simple believers read it literally as history, more sophisticated ones saw a bit deeper taking moral lessons from it, while the most advanced readers took from it spiritual truths and knowledge of the mysteries of Christ and the Church. Using such methods, largely derived from Essenic exegesis, the readings possible were unlimited, but Jerome concurred, insisting that allegory was necessary because of the inconsistency, incongruity and opaqueness of the bible.

The greatest theologian of the early Roman Church, Augustine, delighted in allegory, expanding Origen's three levels to four. He laid down the rule that, if a biblical passage taken literally, was inconsistent with doctrine, then it was to be read as allegory. It assumes doctrine is known, and naturally the Church knew it. More broadly still, Augustine thought nothing in the scriptures could be interpreted as being contrary to the love of God or *the love of man*. At least with this exegetical rule, the Christian could not use scripture to foment hatred between people. Even so they did. They just discarded the rule!

At Antioch, where a more literal interpretation was preferred, the Fathers sought spiritual insight (*theoria*) as well as the simple literal meaning. Severian of Gabbala (c 400 AD) disdained "to force allegory out of history" instead preferring "to preserve the history while discerning the *theoria* over and above it". Diodore added that it was important that the insight must not exclude the simple historical reading because then it was merely allegory. A simple example would be Jonah and the whale which was literally true but was at the same time a type of Christ's three day entombment, and his resurrection.

-oOo-

Dr Michael David Magee

Michael D Magee was born in Hunslet, an industrial suburb of Leeds, Yorkshire, in 1941. He attended Cockburn High School in South Leeds. He won a studentship to the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, where he graduated with an honours degree in natural science in 1963. He went on to obtain a PhD degree from the University of Aston in Birmingham in 1967 and a teaching qualification, a PGCE, from Huddersfield before it was a university.

He carried out research at the Universities of Aston and Bradford, and at the Wool Industries Research Association, taught in a Further Education College in Devon for seven years and for ten years was an advisor to the UK government at the National Economic Development Office in London.

He has written three books, and, mainly in collaboration with Professor S Walker, a dozen scientific papers on the structure and interactions of small molecules investigated using microwave radiation. Working for the government he has written or edited some forty publications on microeconomic issues, and very many discussion papers and reports for the Sector Working Parties (SWPs) and Economic Development Committees (EDCs)—Wool Textiles, Man Made Fibres, Footwear and Electronics—of which he was secretary at various times in the 1980s.

He was brought up by Christian parents but was never indoctrinated into one dogma and was able from an early age to make his own judgements about the Christian religion.

<http://askwhy.co.uk/index.php>