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MYTHS *of* CHRISTIANITY

A FIVE THOUSAND YEAR
JOURNEY TO FIND THE
SON OF GOD

JEDEDIAH MCCLURE

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JEDEDIAH McCLURE
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THE MYTHS OF CHRISTIANITY

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	vii
SECTION I: CHRISTIANS AGAINST CHRISTIANS.....	1
<i>Chapter 1: Christianity and the Bruce Lee Paradox</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Chapter 2: The Bible and the U.S. Constitution</i>	<i>42</i>
SECTION II: GOD, ANGELS AND THE DEVIL.....	65
<i>Chapter 3: The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob</i>	<i>68</i>
<i>Chapter 4: The Evolution of God</i>	<i>83</i>
<i>Chapter 5: Satan God's Nemesis</i>	<i>106</i>
<i>Chapter 6: Angels and Demons</i>	<i>119</i>
<i>Chapter 7: The Afterlife: Heaven and Hell.....</i>	<i>142</i>
SECTION III: EARTHLY GODS, MIRACLES AND MAGIC.....	161
<i>Chapter 8: Becoming Divine</i>	<i>165</i>
<i>Chapter 9: The Ancient Godmen.....</i>	<i>182</i>
<i>Chapter 10: Magic and Miracles.....</i>	<i>201</i>
CONCLUSION	220
APPENDIX	235

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INTRODUCTION

The subject of this book has been on my mind for well over a decade. Since my tumultuous teenage years, I was fascinated by the ancient history of Christianity: The miraculous life of Jesus and the apostles; the seemingly unstoppable spread of the gospel; and the prophetic development of a world religion. I was always overwhelmingly captivated by the vast complexity, as well as subtle nuances, of this religion.

Two years ago, a particular experience became the turning point and catalyst for this book. Because this subject has been a driving influence throughout my life, I feel it appropriate to begin by explaining why and how this subject became so important to me.

I was raised in a strict Christian home and for the majority of my life I was actively involved in religion. From the time I was little I was awed by the power of God in parting the Red Sea; the majestic fury of Moses as he boldly demanded of Pharaoh, “Let my people go”; and Joshua’s jubilation as the walls of Jericho crumbled under the trumpets’ triumphant blare.

My skin crawled as I learned of the sinister serpent’s insidious deception in the garden and I spent days wondering what it would be like to live inside the belly of a whale. Would there be any light? Would I be able to look out the blowhole on the whale’s back? Would there be other fishermen in the beast’s belly like in the Disney cartoon Pinocchio? Such were the thoughts of an eight-year old boy.

My parents, four siblings and I attended Church every Sunday. As a family, we read from the scriptures together. I can vividly remember summer evenings spent learning about Jesus’ importance at Vacation Bible School while making crafts and singing “This Little Light of Mine.”

Jesus was so important, in fact, that teachers were constantly giving me stickers with His picture on them to help me remember how to act. Countless times I heard the questions, “Young man, would Jesus do that?” or “Would Jesus say that to a friend?” or “What would Jesus do right now?” I was even told, “If He were here, Jesus would be so upset with you right now.”

I learned Jesus made all the rules when it came to how we should act.

As a child, acting “like Jesus” was my noblest aspiration – that is, of course, when I wasn’t trying to save the princess from the evil clutches of Darth Vader with my plastic green light saber or leaping from one piece of furniture to the other as Superman, with my cape (a homemade, patchwork quilt) billowing behind me.

I also learned, in Vacation Bible School, not all Christians are the same. I was confused when told I didn’t need to be baptized to go to heaven because I had

already learned in my own church that I *had* to be baptized to go to heaven – in fact, I was eagerly looking forward to my upcoming baptism that fall.

I was confused when my Sunday school teacher taught me about repentance and that I should try to be a better person and not do bad things, but I had already learned none of that mattered from Vacation Bible School; I just had to love God and He would love me enough to bring me to heaven with Jesus. So which was it? Did I have to do good, or just love God? What did that even mean? How was I supposed to love God when I could not even see Him?

Eventually, I started hearing about the “true” gospel of God. Of course, that was the claim of the church I attended. I was taught that it was important to have the “true” gospel otherwise you could not be part of God’s kingdom. It was a great comfort to me as a child to hear I was a member of God’s “true” Church. In fact, I wanted all my friends to go to it too so they could also be part of God’s kingdom.

Once again, I was confused when my friends all told me they *already* had God’s “true” gospel. I knew that could not be right, because I never saw them at my church and I happened to know some of them went to very different churches and believed very different things.

How could all these churches have the true gospel but teach different things? Didn’t we all believe in Jesus and the Bible? Didn’t the Bible specifically spell out which was the “true” gospel? I assumed at a young age that my friends clearly must be using a different Bible than I used, and that was why we believed different things.

Different beliefs aside, it did not change my friendships. I had friends from many different religions. It did not matter to me if someone was baptized or not or if their minister was a man or woman. What mattered was that they were good kids, that they were not mean and we had fun together.

As I got older, I began to see religious differences did matter to some people very much. From time to time, I was forced to defend my beliefs from the vicious verbal assaults of fellow classmates. On one occasion in high school, when a few students learned of my particular religious affiliation, they invited me to hang out with them after school. Excited about making new friends, I arrived to find several “concerned Christians” gathered together with their Bibles ready in order to convince me that I did not have the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

They attempted to convince me what I believed was a lie; that my God was a false God, that the Jesus I believed in was different from their Jesus and therefore wrong, and that if I did not accept their beliefs I would go to hell and burn forever.

I would love to say I politely listened to their appeals and then courteously turned them down – but I didn’t.

Instead, I got angry and argued with them. I remember my heart racing as if I was being physically attacked. An uncomfortable heat crept down my spine and it

was hard to keep my hands from shaking. They were attacking everything I held dear, and doing it in the name of God!

In the end, we all left the table with tempers flared, shouting insults about each other's parents and cursing each other to all imaginable forms of misfortune.

Rather than turn me away from religion, these experiences galvanized my insatiable desire to discover the truth. If there really was a "true" gospel out there, then I wanted it. But which church had it and would I know if it was really the true gospel? What would it look like?

After a prolonged study, I eventually abandoned the Bible as a source for all of my answers. After all, everyone I knew used the same Bible and quoted the same verses, but their interpretation was always dependent upon what they *wanted* it to mean, and the verses were frequently taken out of context to conform to that pre-determined interpretation.

So how was I to know what Jesus really taught if the Bible couldn't clearly tell me? How was I to know which church truly represented His original teachings and not simply each groups' own interpretations and opinions?

These questions plagued me throughout my high school years, and while I earnestly clung to my family's beliefs, I was consumed with a need to understand as much about Christianity as I could. I would lie in bed at night trying to piece together complex theological concepts with my mind churning out possibility after possibility until I would eventually abandon all pretext of sleep, pull a stack of encyclopedias and books on Christian doctrine from off the bookshelves that crammed the living room, and settle down on the couch, studiously researching idea after idea.

A whole new world unfolded as I began to learn a history of Christianity that I was never taught in Sunday school. In fact, there were two thousand years of Christian history I knew virtually nothing about: Saints, apostolic councils, disputes, wars, political conflicts and doctrinal schisms. I began to see that instead of a single church existing that Jesus established and which subsequently maintained His teachings through the intervening centuries until this point – as I had always believed – there were dozens of Christian sects, each with their own unique brand of Christianity. For centuries, one group after another had separated from each other and formed their own denominations as a way to address various theological problems.

I began to understand the origin of each Christian denomination today represented answers to major religious problems in history: From the earliest "Christian" teachings following Christ's ascension to the First Council of Nicaea in the fourth century, the second Nicaean council in the eighth century, up to and through the Crusades and the split between the Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches prior to the thirteenth century over issues of doctrine and control. The Reformation began in the sixteenth century in an effort to reform

perceived corruption in the Catholic Church; Evangelicalism began in the eighteenth century in opposition to organized religious authority believing such institutions to be corrupt and focusing on personal conversion rather than priestly absolution; and Mormonism in the nineteenth century was believed to have started with a divine restoration of the “true” doctrines of Jesus which had been lost by the other churches over the centuries.

In fact, the roots of all branches of Christianity can be traced to specific historical problems, which their founders attempted to resolve through the creation of new Christian denominations.

Christianity had become a many headed hydra, each new and distinctly fashioned head arising out of the mangled stump of its predecessor.

Clearly, I would never be able to discover the “true” church by studying its numerous offshoots. If I really wanted to understand “true” Christianity, I needed to find its source. I could only do that through understanding the writings and culture of the first, second and third century Christians.

That research has dominated my life ever since!

Some time ago, in the course of my research, I developed an interest in the cultural myths specific to my particular denomination, as well as Christianity in general, and was actively engaged in researching the origins of these myths when I had an epiphany.

Most of these myths are simply faith-inspiring stories or traditions that have been passed along from friend to friend (or modernly via email forwards) over the years. I was not surprised to find that many popular myths seem drastic, yet harmless, embellishments of real events. What I *am* amazed by is the willingness of people to believe some truly incredible – even outlandish – stories so long as those stories supported that person’s own beliefs.

Laughing At Bigfoot

I had come across one such outlandish, yet popular, myth associating Cain, the murderous son of Adam, with Bigfoot! “What’s next?” I thought. “Will the serpent in the garden be revealed as the Loch Ness monster?”

Thinking we would have a good laugh over this, I shared the myth with a devoutly Pentecostal friend of mine. His response surprised me. Rather than laughing at such an innocent, if foolish, myth, he responded, “I can’t believe people at your church are so stupid they would believe something like that.”

For a moment, I was simply dumbstruck by the comment. Did that really just come out of the mouth of my devoutly Jesus-praising friend? What could possibly have generated such a harsh response from a man who would give a beggar the shirt off his own back, and thank the Lord every step of the way?

Then, I had another, more primal response: Did he truly want to start casting stones from that glass house of Pentecostalism in which he so proudly stood? I could not help but find myself becoming defensive. Who among us doesn't have traditions or ideas that deviate from the mainstream, or which could be construed as potentially illogical or irrational?

Christianity itself is founded on the life of a man who was born of a virgin, performed miracles, was raised from the dead and who promised to return to earth in a cloud of both glory and destruction. To non-Christians, such beliefs would seem silly at best, and yet as Christians these very illogical-seeming beliefs form the foundation of our world view.

Apparently, I still hadn't learned the lessons from my youth.

For many Christians, declaring a faith in Jesus Christ is not sufficient – instead we are expected to have a particular kind of faith, and believe in a particular kind of Jesus Christ. When a Baptist accuses me of not being Christian, he isn't talking about a general belief in Jesus; he is speaking about his own personal, denominational beliefs. In other words, he isn't necessarily saying I'm not a Christian, but rather, he is saying I am not a Baptist.

The same appeared to hold true of every group that castigated and criticized other Christian groups. They all were advocating their own brand of Christianity as *the* Christianity – or in other words, the “true” gospel.

So I wondered, what exactly makes one a Christian? Is it simply a belief in Jesus Christ as the Savior and Redeemer of the world? I had learned from personal experience that such a belief was not sufficient in the eyes of my detractors, for many claimed my Jesus was different from their Jesus.

Is a Christian someone who merely accepts the various creeds and councils over the past seventeen hundred years? If so, nearly half of those who modernly consider themselves Christian would be ruled out.

Is a Christian someone who accepts only the various general doctrines of Christianity such as the Trinity, baptism or priesthood authority? What of other more denominationally specific and sectarian doctrines? What exactly does one have to accept or reject in order to be considered Christian? That question has been hotly debated since the death of the apostles and continues to evade consensus.

Does someone have to accept the Bible as the sole source of doctrine? What about religious leaders such as the Pope or a Prophet? What about other potential religious texts? How exactly is the Bible to be interpreted, considering the widespread confusion on this issue among the various denominations?

What about other traditions such as Christmas and Easter, speaking in tongues or exorcism, premarital chastity or the freedom of sexual expression – what exactly defines a Christian?

We each have world views influenced by the specific beliefs of our individual sects or denominations. These world views often determine our own religious expectations and potentially limit our ability to understand each other. For example, one who grows up a Baptist would expect to define Christianity in terms of specific Baptist beliefs rather than the broader sense of historical Christianity and its many facets. The same is true of most denominations.

In a very real way, these expectations can prevent us from understanding the beliefs of others simply because they are called by another name – even when those beliefs are the same as our own.

Two years ago, a friend of mine told me a joke about a man who died and went to heaven. The man had been homeless and on his deathbed accepted Jesus into his heart. He then spent his dying hours witnessing to everyone he saw about his conversion. When he reached heaven, he was ushered into the backseat of a car with a very wealthy televangelist who had made it his life's work to convert millions. After driving for a while in a very wealthy part of town, the cab driver stopped in front of a beautiful mansion and helped the homeless man out. He explained that this enormous and immaculate mansion was his new home. The man was overjoyed.

Even more overjoyed was the minister because if a homeless man who taught the gospel for just a few hours could get that kind of reward, then he could only imagine the reward he would receive. The cab driver continued to drive and after a while, they left the city. The houses became smaller and smaller. Eventually the cab stopped in front of a single room hut. The driver got out and informed the minister that this was his reward. When the minister began to throw a fit, the cab driver reminded him that he already received his reward while on earth in monetary form.

My friend and I had a good laugh, but it reminded me of an ancient doctrine I had been studying in which the ancient Christians believed that heaven was divided into three separate places, depending on each person's worth (each place had a different size mansion). When I related this ancient teaching to my friend, he rejected it declaring that God did not play games like that and once you were saved, that was it; you were saved. Somehow, he failed to see that we were talking about the exact same thing, only using different terminology. He believed that heaven was divided according to how worthy you were, and so did the ancients, they just used different names.

I mention this story because for many of us believers, the issue is not simply the facts, but the way our world view causes us to interpret the facts. The reality is that the dominant worldview for most Christians is limited to his or her own denominational-specific beliefs.

In actuality, many of Christianity's beliefs and traditions historically stem from sources outside of Christianity.

Yes, you read that correctly. Many of the beliefs and traditions so proudly championed by the most vocal fundamentalists were never original tenets of Christianity. Over the last two millennia, Christianity has been greatly influenced by Judaism, Muslim, Monasticism, Persian, Greek and Roman mythology and numerous other myths, legends and folklore. As a result, Christianity has morphed and evolved over time resulting in the vast doctrinal confusion that exists today.

Learning the History of the World

A few years ago, a couple of young men from my church came to our home for dinner. During the course of the dinner, the conversation turned from religion to various world mythologies and we began to play the game of ‘Name That Character.’ To play this game, you pick a category such as famous actors, superheroes or historical characters. In turn, each person describes events in a famous character’s life while everyone else tries to guess who the character is. Strategically you try to describe the deeds of a character in such a way that it might fit any number of characters in that category. After three guesses, if no one knows who your character is, then you win.

Choosing the category of Bible Characters, we played a couple of fairly easy rounds with the typical figures, then it was my turn. Now, knowing these well-meaning young men had very little religious experience or understanding outside of their own religion, I posed a trick question. I said, “Now my character may seem obvious, but please wait until the end of my description to answer.” I took a long breath for dramatic effect, and began, “My character was the son of the King of Heaven and a mortal woman.” Immediately both young men smiled knowingly, but I raised a finger asking them to wait to give their responses.

I continued, “While he was just a baby, a jealous rival attempted to kill him and he was forced into hiding for several years. As he grew older, he developed amazing powers. Among these were the ability to turn water into wine and to control the mental health of other people. He became a great leader and inspired an entire religious movement. Eventually he ascended into heaven and sat with his father as a ruler in heaven.”

Certain they knew who I was describing, my two guests were eager to give the winning answer. However, I held them off and continued, “Now I know adding these last parts will seem like overkill, but I simply cannot describe this character without mentioning them. This person’s birthday is celebrated on December 25th and he is worshipped in a spring festival. He defied death, journeyed to the underworld to raise his loved ones from the dead and was resurrected. He was granted immortality by his Father, the king of the gods, and was worshipped as a savior god by entire cultures.”

The two young men were practically climbing out of their seats, their faces beaming with the kind of smile only supreme confidence can produce. Deciding

to end the charade I said, “I think we all know the answer, but to make it fair, on the count of three just yell out the answer. One. Two. Three.”

“Jesus Christ” they both exclaimed in unison – was that your answer as well?

Both young men sat back completely satisfied with their answer, confident it was the right one..., but I remained silent. Five seconds ticked away without a response, then ten. The confidence of my two young friends clearly began to drain away. It was about this time that my wife began to shake her head and smile to herself. Finally, one of them asked, “It is Jesus Christ, right? It has to be!”

Shaking my head, I said, “Actually, I was describing the Greek god Dionysus.”

Both young men looked utterly confused. Most likely, neither had ever heard the name of Dionysus. I told them that the story of Dionysus was very similar to the story of Jesus Christ, not identical by any means, but similar.

I explained that the life of Jesus was very similar to the life of Dionysus described above. Jesus was the Son of God, conceived by a mortal woman. Similarly, He was forced into hiding as a baby to avoid King Herod’s slaughter of the innocent children. During his ministry, he performed countless miracles including turning water into wine and casting out demons, thus curing the insanity brought on by demonic possession. He died, went to the underworld, and was resurrected. As a result, he became immortal and a fully divine god. While in the underworld, he liberated the souls of thousands of the righteous. His birthday is celebrated on December 25th and he is honored during a spring holiday known as Easter.

I could see the confidence slowly start to come back into the faces of the two young men when one smugly said, “Well clearly, the Dionysus story is an obvious rip-off of the Jesus story.”

Rubbing my chin and nodding in consideration, I said, “You could definitely be right, especially given all the similarities, huh? Except, of course, Dionysus was worshipped hundreds of years before Jesus was born.”

“In fact, if you were to study the ancient myths of most Mediterranean religions you would discover a whole host of similarities to what we believe as Christians. Almost every ancient culture believes there is a god, or group of gods, living somewhere up in the sky controlling the fortunes of man. These gods each created the earth and the universe, then the animals and mankind, and ironically, they are all constantly threatening to destroy mankind for wickedness. And if that weren’t enough, most of these ancient gods had children with mortal women, half-god children who grew up to become great heroes with incredible powers such as the ability to battle supernatural foes, heal the sick and even defy death.”

Initially the young men answered me with expressions of mute disbelief and shock; after all, there is only One True God and Savior of the world, Jesus Christ, right? Well, as it turned out, instead of being defensive or offended the two astute young men took the opportunity to ask questions and broaden their understanding

of ancient cultures and beliefs a little bit that night. It also helped them to view the beliefs of others a little less narrowly as well.

As humans, we tend to view the world through the narrow lens of our own expectations. For example, one who grows up a Baptist would expect to define Christianity in terms of specific Baptist beliefs rather than the broader sense of historical Christianity and its many facets. The same is true of members of all denominations, whether they be Catholic, Reformed, one of the Protestant churches, Jehovah's Witness and so on.

In a very real way, these limited beliefs create a glass ceiling, a limitation on our religious understanding and tolerance, while clearly drawing a line in the sand as to how a Christian is defined. It can also determine whether what we believe is religiously possible.

Sadly, this mindset also has the potential to severely limit who we allow ourselves to become!

The Greatness of Christianity

Some of the greatest and most influential scientific thinkers in history are part of a very long list of influential Christians who were instrumental in laying the groundwork for our modern society. Here are just a few:

- ❖ **Bede, the Venerable** (c.672–735): He advanced the knowledge of nature, specifically the nature of tides during the medieval period.
- ❖ **Leo the Mathematician** (c.790–a.869): He composed a medical encyclopedia and was hailed as 'the cleverest man in Byzantium in the 9th century.'
- ❖ **Pope Sylvester II** (c.950–1003): A scientist, teacher, and later Pope; he promoted mathematics and astronomy throughout Europe and raised the cathedral school at Rheims to the height of its prosperity.
- ❖ **William of Conches** (c.1090–a.1154): He was a scholastic philosopher who expanded Christian humanism by studying secular works, fostering empirical science and teaching an atomistic explanation of nature.
- ❖ **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098–1179): Venerated as a Catholic Saint and possibly prophet, she was the first female Christian physician who conducted and published comprehensive studies on natural science and medicine.
- ❖ **Robert Grosseteste** (c.1175–1253): As Bishop of Lincoln, he was the central character of the English intellectual movement in the first half of the 13th century and is considered the founder of scientific thought in Oxford. He wrote numerous texts on the mathematical

sciences of geometry, optics and astronomy. He was a strong believer that theory should be tested through experimentation.

- ❖ **Roger Bacon** (c.1214–1294): A Franciscan monk, he was also an English philosopher who emphasized empiricism and was one of the earliest advocates of the modern scientific method. Bacon contributed to areas of Mechanics and geography and was responsible for popularizing the concept of the “laws of nature.”
- ❖ **Thomas Bradwardine** (c.1290–1349): His studies led to important developments in mechanics.
- ❖ **William of Ockham** (c.1285–c.1350): A Philosopher who invented ‘Occam’s Razor.’
- ❖ **Nicole Oresme** (c.1323–1382): This Bishop of Lisieux made the discovery of the curvature of light through atmospheric refraction.
- ❖ **Nicholas of Cusa** (1401–1464): A Cardinal who developed the concepts of the infinitesimal and of relative motion, paving the way for Copernicus’ heliocentric world-view.
- ❖ **Nicolaus Copernicus** (1473–1543): A Catholic, he introduced our modern heliocentric world-view that the earth and planets revolve around sun.
- ❖ **William Turner** (c.1508–1568): The ‘father of English botany.’
- ❖ **Bartholomaeus Pitiscus** (1561–1613): A Calvinist theologian who introduced the word trigonometry into English and French.
- ❖ **John Napier** (1550–1617): Scottish mathematician who invented logarithms, Napier’s bones, and popularized of the use of decimals.
- ❖ **Johannes Kepler** (1571–1630): Created the famous model of the cosmos known as Kepler’s laws of planetary motion.
- ❖ **René Descartes** (1596–1650): A key thinker of the Scientific Revolution; the Cartesian coordinate system used in plane geometry and algebra were named after him.
- ❖ **Blaise Pascal** (1623–1662): Famous philosopher known for Pascal’s law (physics), Pascal’s theorem (math), and Pascal’s Wager (theology).
- ❖ **Robert Boyle** (1627–1691): A scientist and theologian who believed that the study of science could improve the glorification of God.
- ❖ **John Wallis** (1616–1703): Calvinist mathematician who introduced the term “Continued fraction” and helped develop calculus.
- ❖ **Isaac Newton** (1643–1727): One of the greatest scientists and mathematicians in history.

In Addition to this incredible wealth of influential people, without whom our modern understanding of science would not exist, Christianity continues to make a significant difference in the world. There are more than 2.1 billion Christians in the world. That is roughly one-third of the world's population. Today there are countless missionaries scattered around the world helping to improve the lives of others (the Latter-day Saint Church itself boasts more than 52,000 full-time missionaries serving two-years at a time). Christian missionaries are spreading the word of god, building homes, schools, roads or other infrastructure. They are teaching skills, providing medicine, aid and shelters for those who have none.

I am immensely proud to be part of this incredibly resourceful and giving group of people. As a whole, Christianity is an amazing institution and religion!

However, sometimes it also has its ugly side. In fact, despite all the good it has done, and continues to do, Christianity has its fair share of blame for atrocities committed across the globe through the centuries. Even today, we sometimes see the ugly side of our beliefs—specifically, the reactions of Christians who hold views different from their own.

The Accusation

We have all heard it before: The quarreling, the accusations, the name-calling, and inevitably the condemnations. Sometimes they come in the form of a subtle yet aloof snootiness—eyebrows raised, nose pointed slightly upward with a disdainful, smugly superior expression: “You really *believe* that?”—“That just doesn’t make any sense”—“No logical person could ever accept those ideas”—“I wish you could see the *truth*.”

Sometimes they come in the form of outright, self-righteous anger—red-faced and voice raised with an accusatory finger jabbing the air, emphasizing the terrible damnation to be heaped upon the offender: “Don’t you know what you’re doing?”—“You’re gonna burn in hell if you don’t change your ways”—“That’s not what you *should* do”—“How can you call yourself a Christian?” and of course “Go to hell!”

People say these things all the time. It is not just the fiery, overzealous YouTube evangelist calling down curses from heaven upon the wicked and shouting for repentance. We *all* do it: The religious and non-religious alike, the educated as well as the uneducated, and children as well as adults.

What is most interesting about this phenomenon is what it says about our society. The person making such comments is not simply saying he disagrees with the offender’s behaviors or beliefs, but also that there is a better set of beliefs, which the offender is expected to accept and pursue.

What generally follows comments such as these is a justification for the behaviors or beliefs in question, both sides neither listening to the other nor

persuaded. Accusations, justifications and counter-accusations are hurled back and forth, each word only solidifying the defensive position of the other until both individuals abandon the dispute feeling frustrated, slighted and maybe even angry, and resolved not only to continue in their questioned belief or behavior with a newfound determination, but with a corrosive sense of animosity toward the other party.

This happens every minute of every day, in every country across the world. Whether religious, political or personal, we have all been questioned, criticized and even condemned for our personal opinions and beliefs. Moreover, with few exceptions, we all have been the perpetuator of such indecent behavior.

A perfect example of this came during the 2008 Presidential primaries. I watched as Florida evangelist Bill Keller declared on national TV, “*If you vote for Mitt Romney, you are voting for Satan!*” The Evangelical minister was condemning presidential hopeful Mitt Romney’s Mormon affiliations in contrast to his own Evangelical Christian views. His statement really wasn’t very surprising though, Evangelical Christians have been at war with Mormon Christians over nuances in their varying beliefs for a century.

Intrigued by Keller’s comments, I did a quick Google search for the phrase “anti-Mormon” and came up with 548,000 sites attacking or defending Mormonism. I searched again using the phrase “anti-Catholic” and came back with 3.3 million sites. There were 4,350,000 for the phrase “anti-Baptist,” 1,550,000 for “anti-Lutheran,” and 385,000 for “anti-Pentecostal.”

Most of these sites were written by Christians vilifying other Christians with whom they disagreed, attempting to prove, often illegitimately through slander, innuendo and misinformation, why the other Christian denominations should not be considered *Christian*.

In fact, as I thought about it, I realized the history of the world is largely guided by religious differences, often leading to war, death and destruction *in the name of God*. Not surprisingly, most of these attacks came from larger, more established organizations against newer or less established ones.

What is it about an alternate belief that we, as a people, find so threatening? Is it not enough that people come together from multiple Christian denominations to confess a belief in Jesus Christ and a desire to live a good life? Why is it that we feel the need to thrust our own beliefs, sometimes violently, upon others?

Then I had a thought. What if some groups had secrets that the other groups did not like, or worse yet, did not want to be known? At first, this line of thought seemed ludicrously conspiratorial. After all, it is the basis of countless novels and movies. But then as I thought about it, things started to make more sense. As a religious organization becomes bigger and bigger it would have to dedicate more and more of its time and resources to governance and those teachings (the milk of the gospel) which would be most acceptable to the masses. As a result, less and less

of its time could be devoted to the more esoteric teachings (the meat of the gospel) that may have originally set Christianity apart.

It started as just an intriguing idea. However, the more I thought about it and the more I studied, the more that idea began to take hold. What if there really were secrets about the origins of Christianity that still existed? Furthermore, what if it was only through these smaller groups that we could gain access, or at least clues, to these secrets and long forgotten parts of our Christian heritage?

For example, what if Dan Brown and others were right when they asserted that Jesus Christ was married? What if he had children? Who were they and where would they be (could they be the fabled *Desposyni* – the bloodline of Christ who ruled the Church for the first two centuries after Jesus’ ascension?)

Better yet, what if God himself was married? And not just married but had divine children – just as ancient Hebrew tradition teaches?

What if Jesus was not the only Son of God and, what if regular men – mortal men – could become divine gods just as Jesus had?

What if the Christian religion we have always worshipped does not have its roots in ancient Hebrew culture as we have always been taught, but instead was taken from one of the Hebrew’s most hated enemies?

What if the serpent, the ancient biblical symbol of evil and deceit, originally represented both God and salvation, and was even used by Moses?

And, what if one of today’s most influential texts, the *Book of Revelation*, was regarded as little more than a fictional joke for nearly six hundred years?

The answers to these questions could forever alter the way we view Christianity, and it is this quest that has guided my life for the last two decades.

The Featureless Statue

The Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau had an analogy that might help me explain this situation. He compared the true nature of man to a huge statue standing on the beachfront facing the sea. Over the years, the salty air and foaming waves began to corrode away the statue’s details. Rust, salt deposits, barnacles and fungus covered its surface further deteriorating the statue’s appearance.

After hundreds of years, the statue was no longer recognizable and after a thousand years, people had entirely forgotten what the statue was meant to be. Every so often, a group would take it upon themselves to “restore” the statue by scrubbing away the corrosion and re-etching the details, but without a clear remembrance of what those details were, the sculptors were left to create their own designs as they saw fit. In the end, the original sculpture was lost forever and replaced with new interpretations.

While Rousseau was speaking of the nature of man, the analogy as I have described perfectly applies to the evolution of Christianity. Over the years, disputes, corruption and conflicting tradition have worn away the important “details” of Christianity.

We must understand that every single Christian denomination today began as an attempt to “re-sculpt” the lost details with their own interpretation of what Christianity should be.

Like the sculptors in the analogy, my objective with this book is also to strip away the rust and corrosion of pagan tradition and reinterpretation, but instead of replacing it with a new interpretation, my hope is to eliminate the unnecessary mysticism that is the hallmark of Christianity today and re-discover its true purpose. Only then can we be liberated to pursue a clearer understanding of God.

This may be a shocking and uncomfortable idea for many, and without question, there are many people, and possibly groups, who will reject my work out of hand as an attack on Christianity.

However, please let me be crystal clear here: This book is in no way, shape or form, an attack or criticism of Christianity. Nor do I endorse or advocate any particular denominational beliefs. Instead, it is my goal to demonstrate that many of the modern traditions tending to divide us as a faith have their origins in foreign myths and legends instead of in Christianity itself. I believe if we truly understood the history and evolution of our own religion we would not be so critical of the beliefs of others.

UFOs in Great Britain

For several years, I taught Sunday school in my church. As an object lesson, I distributed several excerpts from recent news articles. I had students read the excerpt and then explain to the class what they believed was happening. One news excerpt stated:

The huge black triangular-shaped flying object came silently out of nowhere over the treetops and was gone in seconds. The lights – three on each side – were huge, seemingly as big as cars and bright yellow....After the craft flew over the Laurie area around 8:30 p.m. Oct. 5, a handful of Laurie area residents questioned what this unidentified object flying in the night sky could be.¹

A second excerpt from another article read:

The UFO was spotted by hundreds of witnesses with many believing it was the work of an ‘alien’ craft. One saw orangey-yellow spheres skimming across the sky. Another reported a ‘massive ball of light’ with ‘tentacles going right down to the ground.’ Then witnesses told of an earsplitting bang at 4 a.m. Come dawn the plot thickens. At the nearby

wind farm one of the 60ft blades from a 200ft turbine was found ripped off. Another had been left twisted and useless....the strange goings on at a wind farm in Conisholme, Lincolnshire, can be explained by a flying saucer crashing into the turbine in a close encounter that could, at last, provide the evidence of other life forms they have been waiting for all their lives.²

After reading the excerpts, I asked the students to explain what the article was about. Hesitantly, the students said the articles were about a UFO sighting and crash; after all, that is specifically what the excerpt said. I then held up a printout of the actual news articles, which were titled respectively, “*UFO over Laurie ID’d as stealth bomber*” and “*Unmanned Stealth Bomber Could Have Been UFO Responsible for Destroying Wind Turbine.*” The whole article described a US military exercise with the Stealth bomber. The aircraft crashed into a turbine on the wind farm. The local residents were unfamiliar with the Stealth Bomber and some believed it to be a UFO.

The problem in accurately interpreting the news excerpts, for my students, was that I did not give them the full article. They did not understand the background or the whole story so they were left to fill in the gaps with their own ideas and interpretations. Sadly, we often do this same thing when interpreting the Bible. Very few of us are well versed in the customs and traditions of the ancient Jews during Jesus’ time. That background provides a context in which the books of the Bible were written. It is a context that shaped the very foundation of Christianity and it is a context that without, we cannot possibly hope to truly understand what the Bible’s authors were trying to teach us. My goal with this work is to provide, at least in part, that cultural context which has so effectively shaped our beliefs today.

Methodology

I organized this book into three sections. In the first section, I examine the various Christian groups that existed during the first and second century AD, and how their competing beliefs later influenced the creation and need for the numerous Ecumenical councils and Creeds (ecumenical meaning “involving or promoting the unity of different Christian churches and groups”). I also trace the formation and development of the Bible, as we know it today, giving special attention to those religious texts that were widely accepted but eventually cut from the Bible canon.

Rather than tear down Christian assumptions regarding the Bible and Christian roots, I will be emphasizing how these rival groups came together to merge their often competing and contradictory doctrines into an established orthodoxy, which was decided by men, not God, usually through rigorous debate, conflict and dissension.

I go to great lengths not to characterize any of these proto-Christian groups as heretical or orthodox because, as you will see, the doctrines of many of the so-called “heretical” groups eventually made their way into mainstream orthodox doctrine – which was constantly in flux, depending on who was in charge at the time.

Section two is an examination of our foundational beliefs in God, angels and the Devil. It examines the ancient history from where we derive our most fundamental beliefs about the nature of God and the Devil, and suggests sources of foreign influence in the shaping of these ideas in ancient times.

Would you be shocked to discover that in the Old Testament God repeatedly refers to himself in the plural? Or that the name Lucifer only appears once in the Bible – as a mistranslation in the Latin? Or that the word “devil” never actually appears in the ancient Hebrew texts?

These, and many other ideas, are explored in depth during this section with the hope of shedding light on the age-old Trinitarian conflict regarding the nature of Christ and His relationship to God the Father.

Section three then examines the specific historical culture from which Christianity emerged. It is my belief that biblical texts cannot be understood outside of the cultural context in which they were written. Too often, I have heard scriptures quoted and interpreted by individuals who had no clue as to the context of the verse, chapter or text itself.

To understand these texts, we need to examine them on their own terms – meaning that we study them with respect to what they say and not what we want them to say. We also need to understand the apocryphal lore and traditions prevalent during the times of the ancient Christians that shaped the beliefs of the people – For example, on numerous occasions, Paul actually references an ancient magical text that has long since been rejected by mainstream Christianity, but without the proper context, we misunderstand an important belief system that influenced Paul’s writings.

I also examine the prevalent culture of deification (becoming a god). For the ancients, gods were men who came down to earth from time to time, and men could become gods. I explore the ancient dying/rising god-man pattern. No, Jesus was not the only god to die and then rise again offering salvation to His followers. Rather, He was one in a long tradition of dying/rising gods. I also examine the prevalent belief in magic in a practical context as the ancients would have understood magic: As a fundamental law of nature through which one demonstrated his divinity or godliness.

With this background, I believe that rather than discredit the life of Jesus, one will be able to understand more clearly His mission and the cultural expectations that molded who he would become in the eyes of his followers.

While many of my claims might be shocking and unfamiliar compared with most modernly accepted Christian beliefs, they are not new. In fact, everything I

write about has been known and studied for centuries. It is predominantly mainstream scholarship, often tedious scholarship, but mainstream nonetheless (with a few newer and developing theories thrown in), most of which can be found in your very own encyclopedias.

As a result, I have no interest in bogging you, the reader, down with endless footnotes and references to books you will probably never read. Instead, I want to create an entertaining narrative of early Christian history and the possible origins of our own peculiar beliefs.

It is my hope that we Christians will be able to recognize there are parts of our own beliefs that can be construed as irrational or which are not purely *Christian* in origin. Maybe, as a result, we will realize religion is about building each other up, about brotherhood and love and charity and striving to be the best person one can be: In other words, as my Vacation Bible school teacher admonished: Act as Jesus would act.

Being Christian is about heeding the Savior's call: Come Follow Me. It is about living by His example. When He said to feed the poor and clothe the naked, he intended for us to do exactly that. When he taught virtue, charity and love for one another, he actually expected us to treat each other with virtue, charity and love.

Our religious belief system as Christians, when exposed to contradictory facts from history, biblical studies and science, must in the true spirit of Christ, be flexible enough to change: to strip away the years of corrosion and re-sculpting and embrace the true meaning of this amazing religion.

It is my hope that this narrative will be compelling, highly inspirational and will act as a clarion call to Christians everywhere to de-emphasize conflicting, sectarian differences and revive the true meaning of being "Christian."

¹ Wilson, Amy. "UFO over Laurie ID'd as stealth bomber," October 8, 2009. Published in Lakenewsonline.com.

² Wilkes, David. "Unmanned Stealth Bomber Could Have Been UFO Responsible for Destroying Wind Turbine," January 9, 2009. Published on www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1108973/Unmanned-stealth-bomber-UFO-responsible-destroying-wind-turbine.html#ixzz1h7Z6a8ew.

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SECTION I:
CHRISTIANS AGAINST CHRISTIANS:
COMPETITION AND COMPROMISE
IN THE EARLY CHURCH

CONFUSION AND COMPETITION

In 2010, President Barack Obama signed into law an historical yet very controversial health care reform bill. The debate over health care reform faced bitter opposition from the very first day the bill was introduced, stirring the country into an uproar that continues to this day. Political pundits and supporters from both sides of the isle hurled angry and slanderous accusations like whipped cream pies at a clown convention, but the true hard facts were scarce to be found.

This debate sparked national outrage as protestors and supporters hit the streets, picketed the capital and held prayer vigils coordinated by the White House. And why shouldn't the public be enraged about this reform bill? After all, according to the accusations (and countless email forwards), Obamacare, as it has come to be known, is a fascist governmental takeover of the insurance industry. It forces ALL citizens to choose the inferior public health care option (except for politicians who are free to choose other options, and Muslims who are exempt from the *individual mandate* requiring all citizens to be insured.) It requires citizens to be implanted with RFID microchips which would have tracking capabilities and be linked to their bank accounts. Senior citizens will be required to attend Euthanasia counseling every five years. Death Panels will be established to determine health care rationing for seniors. It also affects our private property by imposing a 3.8% sales tax on the sale of all homes. The bill even includes a "Poison Pill" amendment which would make it impossible for anyone to amend the bill in the future.

According to public claims, this bill is a nightmare for all those who cherish freedom!

But does Obamacare really contain these provisions? Sadly, very few people in the *general public* really know! The original 1,017 page bill was introduced in July 2009 and was voted on just months later. It underwent numerous changes and amendments, but how many people actually read those bills? In fact, how many people in the general public even had access to the actual health care reform bills and all their revisions? Instead, the public relied on the interpretation (and/or misrepresentation) by both politicians and media outlets, none of which were unbiased.

Republicans screamed about the destruction of core American values as a result of inferior, socialist-styled health care rationing, Big Brother government interference into personal lives and suicide committees for the elderly. Sarah Palin bashed the reform bill as a 2,700-page Bolshevik plot, which included the ominous death panels. In apocalyptic fashion, Representative Paul Ryan claimed the reform bill would lead to the downfall of the United States. And, Congressman Joe Wilson disrespectfully (and disgracefully I might add) shouted "You Lie!" to the President during a congressional speech about health care reform.

Democrats, on the other hand, behaved no better. News sympathizers and politicians accused the Republicans of neglecting the poor, sick and needy, abandoning our country's children and waging a war against women's rights. Congresswoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz claimed that without the health care reform bill millions of Americans would be hurt because "*insurance companies would be able to drop people when they get sick,*" deny "*children with pre-existing conditions*" and limit coverage with "*devastating annual and lifetime caps.*" Senator Barbara Boxer slammed Republican opposition as an "*attack on women's health care*" while MSNBC host Ed Schultz went one step further by insisting that Republican's had declared a "*war on women.*"

Sadly, most of these people were acting on their own agendas. Politicians battled for political control while news shows vied for ratings and catered to their audience by providing the propaganda their audience wanted to hear. And behind closed doors countless lobbyists made small fortunes in secret deals between politicians and pharmaceutical companies that would force all Americans to purchase health insurance, known as the individual mandate amendment.¹ Insurance companies stood to make billions on all the new people who would now be forced to buy insurance with continually increasing premiums.

In the end, the battle over health care reform was not necessarily about improving the standard of living for Americans, but a national positioning for power, political control and wealth. Most politicians voted directly down party lines and news pundits' arguments were based on propaganda and distortions. Everyone, it seemed, had their own agendas, and they were not generally in the best interest of the public.

After countless alterations, amendments and compromises, the final version of Obamacare was signed into law in March 2010. Since then, public opinion has turned increasingly negative. In the November 2010 midterm congressional election, Democrats faced an enormous backlash for their support of Obamacare, losing more seats in Congress than any party in any midterm election in more than 70 years! Some Democrats even attempted to salvage their careers by running political ads highlighting their "no" votes on the bill. Twenty-eight states have filed lawsuits against the federal government to overturn various portions of the law. Additionally, a February 2012 poll showed 72% of voters believed the individual mandate clause was unconstitutional, while 50% of Americans say the Supreme Court should overturn the entire statute.²

With public unrest increasing, we can expect there will be more changes, more pundit propaganda and more compromises before we finally arrive (if ever) at an acceptable reform bill. Debate, slanderous accusations and change constitute Obamacare's only foreseeable future.

But what if early Christianity developed in the same way? What if religious doctrines were not created by prophets or apostles receiving revelation from God or promoting His direct teachings, but rather by politicians and religious leaders jockeying for their own power and control while the vast majority of the general public was unaware of what constituted true doctrine or how that doctrine was changing?

Remember that the vast majority of people during the time of Christ could not read, and even for those who could, access to legitimate writings by the apostles was very limited. Instead, the public was at the mercy of whatever their religious and/or political leaders told them. And these leaders were not always in agreement about doctrines or practices. In fact, as you will see, these leaders were rarely in agreement.

- ❖ What if I told you that during the first and second centuries AD, there were dozens of Christian groups, but only a few of them believed that Jesus was the Christ?
- ❖ What if some groups viewed John the Baptist, not as the forerunner of Christ, but as the Christ himself?
- ❖ What if Jesus was not the only “Messiah” to perform miracles in the first century AD?
- ❖ What if the apostles argued about doctrine and separated to teach their own versions of Christianity?
- ❖ What if Christian leaders corrupted the “Christian” concept of God by accepting Greek philosophy as a way to appease Rome?
- ❖ What if religious texts were intentionally altered by egotistic theologians in order to gain their own following?
- ❖ What if one of today’s most respected and revered biblical texts was actually rejected by Christians until the sixth century AD?
- ❖ What if important Christian teachings were changed in political councils in an effort to find common ground among competing religions?
- ❖ What if Christian leaders were routinely excommunicated, slandered and even killed for teaching ideas contrary to those voted on and established by the majority?
- ❖ What if the very Gospels we rely on for details on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ were not written by His apostles recounting their first-hand, eye-witness testimonies, but by strangers who never knew Jesus Christ decades after His death and resurrection?

All these questions and more will be answered in this section as we explore just how similar the creation of Obamacare was to the development of early Christianity.

¹ Kirkpatrick, David D. (August 6, 2009). “White House Affirms Deal on Drug Cost.” The New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/06/health/policy/06insure.html>.

² “American Voters Hum, ‘happy Days Are Here Again,’ Quinnipiac University National Poll Finds; But Confidence Does Not Lift Obama.” Quinnipiac University. February 23, 2012. <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/institutes-and-centers/polling-institute/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=1709>. Retrieved April 1, 2012.

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CHRISTIANITY AND THE BRUCE LEE PARADOX

In the 1960's, a dynamic young Chinese-American made his debut on the international stage, and forever changed the world of martial arts. His name was Bruce Lee. Lee introduced a new philosophy of martial arts called *Jeet Kune Do*. Through Lee's own legendary martial abilities and his dynamic charisma, both he and *Jeet Kune Do* rapidly gained recognition and respect throughout the world.

As an actor, Lee swiftly became an international sensation. He single-handedly made martial arts a global pastime. Everyone wanted to be like Bruce Lee. Shirts and posters with Lee's face and chiseled abs were everywhere. Nunchakus first introduced in film by Bruce Lee, became the symbol of the exotic and lethal prowess of the martial arts (let's face it, the very sight of a pair of nunchakus invokes images of Bruce Lee systematically – and elegantly I might add – clubbing the heads of hordes of nefarious assailants). Who could ever forget the famous cat-like, yowling war cry that became synonymous with Bruce Lee's epic film battles? Many of today's great martial arts movie stars such as Jackie Chan, Jet Lee and even Pat Morita's "Mr. Miyagi" from the *Karate Kid* owe a debt to the legacy of Bruce Lee.

Lee's martial arts philosophy became enormously popular, but as Lee became more and more involved in his film career he eventually delegated the instruction and management of his martial arts schools to three of his students; the only three people Bruce Lee ever certified as *Jeet Kune Do* instructors. But before his death, Lee had a change of heart regarding the instruction of *Jeet Kune Do* and ordered his *Jeet Kune Do* schools to be "dismantled."

Interestingly, within just a few short years of Bruce Lee's death in 1973, hundreds of *Jeet Kune Do* schools popped up across the country. Despite the fact Bruce Lee only certified three *Jeet Kune Do* instructors, hundreds of martial arts instructors claimed to have been personally taught and/or certified by Bruce Lee. In some instances, unscrupulous opportunists even went so far as to claim they taught Bruce Lee.

The fact is there was big money to be made and everyone wanted to capitalize on the phenomenon that was Bruce Lee.

The problem was, the vast majority of these self-proclaimed *Jeet Kune Do* instructors had never met Bruce Lee, and they certainly were not qualified to teach authentic *Jeet Kune Do*. Suddenly a host of pseudo-authorities emerged followed by vast confusion regarding what *Jeet Kune Do* actually was.

What about those people who truly did learn directly from the hands of Bruce Lee? Unbelievably, the authentic experts actually made matters worse. Several of Bruce Lee's personal friends and former students such as Dan Inosanto, Ted Wong and Larry Hartsell (all of whom trained with Bruce Lee quite extensively) added to the problem by teaching their own versions of *Jeet Kune Do*.

Over time, the name *Jeet Kune Do* evolved from a specific philosophy accompanied by precise martial arts techniques to a generic term referring to any combination of mixed martial arts systems, all attempting to draw legitimacy through the Bruce Lee association.

Herein lays the Bruce Lee paradox: The original and legitimate teachings of a man who publicly plied his trade on the silver screen for all to see are shrouded in controversy and confusion.

Today, nearly four decades after Bruce Lee's death, there is still dispute as to what constitutes authentic *Jeet Kune Do*. Nevertheless, the impact of *Jeet Kune Do* philosophy has forever changed martial arts and given rise to the enormous popularity of Mixed Martial Arts competitions all over the world. Bruce Lee is still regarded as a cultural icon and one of the most influential people of the 20th century.

So how can the Bruce Lee paradox help us understand early Christianity?

The Christian Model

Today, many people believe in the *Christian Model*: That Jesus established a clear and concise doctrine (gospel) that was universally accepted by his followers. Those teachings then survived two thousand years of political and social evolution but miraculously remained essentially unchanged to this day.

The problem is that every modern Christian sect, despite their many theological differences, claims their doctrines are the original teachings of Jesus Christ.

The reality is that the establishment of Christianity in its infancy was very similar to the evolution of Bruce Lee's *Jeet Kune Do*. No one really knows what Jesus originally taught because his teachings were not recorded until *decades* after his death, and by people who did not actually know Jesus. To make matters worse, countless internal and external conflicts plagued the early Church as numerous

rival groups and charismatic leaders established their own doctrines as they competed for followers.

Those doctrinal rivalries are evidenced by the many schisms that have divided the Christian world over the last two millennia.

Today, every non-Catholic Christian sect is built upon the idea that at some point the “orthodox” church had gone astray, become corrupted or in some fundamental sense had simply *gotten it wrong* and therefore a new, *reformed* church was needed in order to reassert correct *biblical* truth.

But who were these potential usurpers who caused so much confusion among the early followers of Jesus?

A Prophet is Never Accepted in His Own Hometown

This might come as a great shock – it runs contrary to everything we were taught in Sunday school – but Jesus was largely ignored during his life. In fact, there is no contemporary record of the life of Jesus Christ, Christian or otherwise. In other words, we have no records that anyone ever wrote about Jesus while he was living. Nor did they write about any of the miraculous events and miracles that have become the center of Christian theology.

Yes, believe it or not, you did read that correctly. No author during the time of Jesus ever mentioned the new star of Bethlehem that heralded his birth or the *Massacre of the Innocents* where Herod slaughtered the baby boys. There are no written references to crowds gathering to hear Jesus teach, no references to anything he said, did or anywhere he traveled. Most importantly, there is no historical record or written reference during the time of Jesus mentioning his miracles, his trial, his crucifixion or his resurrection. Simply, no one living during the life of Jesus is known to have ever written about him or even referenced him (this will be discussed more fully in chapter two.)

However, what about the New Testament – you might challenge, as I did when I first heard this claim – isn’t it based on the four gospels: Eyewitness accounts of Jesus’ life?

As it turns out, the accounts of the life of Jesus we do have (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), despite popularly accepted tradition, were not written until at least forty years after the death of Jesus. Moreover, these gospels were not even written by the apostles to whom the accounts are attributed, or, for that matter, anyone who actually knew Jesus personally (this will also be discussed further in chapter two.)

In fact, during the time of Christ, we discover historically that he was largely rejected by the Jewish communities, hence his betrayal and execution. Though the authors of the synoptic gospels refer to various prophecies of the messiah, it does not appear that many of Jesus’ peers considered him to be *The* prophesied messiah.

For example, after his baptism and forty day fast in the wilderness, Jesus traveled to Galilee to begin his ministry. Having grown up in this area, he was familiar with the traditions and customs of the people. He began his ministry by standing in his hometown synagogue on the Sabbath day and reading aloud a scripture prophesying of the coming messiah. After reading the verses, Jesus then proclaimed himself to be the promised messiah of whom the verses prophesied.¹

How did the people react to this divine declaration? Well, there seems to be truth in the saying “*a prophet is never accepted in his own hometown.*” For Jesus, the experience could not have gone worse. First, they questioned him by declaring, “*Is not this Joseph’s son?*”² Then they became enraged and attempted to kill him for blasphemy.³ Clearly, Jesus’ own neighbors did not recognize him as the messiah.



Jesus teaching in the Synagogue.
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn.

Perhaps this lack of messianic acknowledgement is one reason why we have so little information regarding the life of Jesus Christ aside from the Bible and Christian tradition – both of which pose serious problems regarding reliability (discussed further in chapter two). We really do not know what the population at large actually thought of him. In fact, we know almost nothing about his life prior to the start of his ministry.

According to the Bible, Joseph and Mary fled to Egypt with the young Jesus, though it is not clear how long they stayed. When Jesus was twelve, he confounded and impressed the temple priests with his knowledge of the scriptures. But who had so thoroughly educated this twelve year-old boy? No answer is provided in the scriptures. In fact, we hear nothing more about his life until he reaches the age of thirty, is baptized and begins his ministry.

I have tried to imagine where he was for those missing eighteen years. Was he whittling the years away in the backroom of a carpenter’s shed or was he traveling the countryside quietly performing miracles? What amazing events must have transpired that led him to his ultimate destiny? Most importantly, from whom did he learn the scriptures and his divine role? Did he, as the Son of God, have an innate understanding and knowledge of the scriptures, or is it possible the Great Teacher was taught by another great teacher?



The Savior as a child teaching in the temple. William Holman Hunt, 1860.

Who Taught the Great Teacher?

It is traditionally believed John the Baptist, a great prophet and one who had his own following, recognized Jesus as the promised messiah, and after his arrest and death, John's followers became Jesus' disciples. Despite this tradition, there are several biblical accounts indicating this was not necessarily the case.

After his arrest, John sent two of his disciples to question Jesus as to whether or not he was truly the promised messiah.

And John calling unto him two of his disciples sent them to Jesus, saying, Art thou he that should come? Or look we for another?⁴

This verse has caused problems among theologians, for how could John have been the forerunner of Christ, paving the way for his ministry, yet question his divinity? According to the *Gospel of Luke*, Jesus performed several miracles as evidence of his divine status and then sent John's disciples back to report what they had seen.

After John's disciples depart, Jesus makes a potentially controversial statement. He declares himself greater than a prophet and that John, whom many saw as a prophet, was a messenger sent to prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus then appears to praise John, "*For I say unto you, Among those that are born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist...*"⁵ However, this compliment is then followed up with an interesting qualifier: "*but he that is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he.*"



John the Baptist identifies Jesus. Ottavio Vannini, 17th century.



John the Baptist in the Wilderness. Geertgen tot Sint Jans, 15th century.

Is it possible that this praise is actually evidence of a religious rivalry? The phrase “*born of women*” may have been intended as an insult, implying weakness. Despite John’s apparent greatness, Jesus states that even the lowest of those who follow Jesus are greater than John. In other words, Jesus praises John but declares himself as the greater of the two, and anyone who follows Jesus would therefore be greater as well.

Was Jesus attempting to distance himself from the man who had baptized him? Is it simply a coincidence Jesus began his ministry after hearing John had been arrested? Is it possible Jesus was a disciple of John the Baptist, the forerunner, but then stepped up to lead only when John was removed?

Historically, John the Baptist was a very influential leader with a great following. Some even regarded him as the promised Messiah. Scholar Hugh Schonfield declared,

*We are made aware of Christian sources that there was a considerable Jewish sect in rivalry with the followers of Jesus, who held that John the Baptist was the true Messiah.*⁶

We find evidence of John’s popularity scattered throughout the synoptic gospels. When Jesus’ authority to teach is questioned in the *Gospel of Matthew*, Jesus counters his detractors with his own trick question, asking from what source the baptism of John came, heaven or of men. The priest and elders “*reasoned with themselves, saying, If we shall say, From heaven; he will say unto us, Why did ye not then believe him? But if we shall say, Of men; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet.*”⁷

According to the *Gospel of Mark*, when Jesus' teachings began to take hold, King Herod Antipas, who feared John, believed Jesus was actually John resurrected.

*And king Herod heard of him; (for his name was spread abroad:) and he said, That John the Baptist was risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do shew forth themselves in him. Others said, That it is Elias. And others said, That it is a prophet, or as one of the prophets. But when Herod heard thereof, he said, It is John, whom I beheaded: he is risen from the dead.*⁸

Clearly, there was a popular belief that John the Baptist was a prophet, and among some groups the Messiah – he performed miracles and had enough similarities with Jesus' followers for Herod to have made this comparison.

However, Jesus Christ and John the Baptist were not the only people associated with Christianity who would be performing miracles and competing for followers. The early Christian texts also spoke of Simon the Magician. The early Church Father's regarded Simon as the father of all heresies and quite possibly, although erroneously, the founder of Gnosticism. In the *Acts of the Apostles* 8:9-11 it states,

*But there was a certain man, called Simon, which beforetime in the same city used sorcery, and bewitched the people of Samaria, giving out that himself was some great one: To whom they all gave heed, from the least to the greatest, saying, **This man is the great power of God.** And to him they had regard, because that of long time he had bewitched them with sorceries.*

In this biblical account, a sorcerer named Simon Magus had bewitched the people of Samaria by performing miracles and calling himself "*The Great Power of God*." However, when the Apostle Philip came to town preaching Christianity, the people flocked to Philip and were baptized. Simon Magus was amazed by the miracles Philip performed, specifically the casting out of demons and the healing of the lame and sick. According to the Bible, Simon also converted.

At some point Peter and John traveled to Samaria but seeing the Holy Ghost had not yet fallen upon any of the new converts, they bestowed upon the people the Holy Ghost through the laying on of hands. It's not clear what this specifically meant or what happened when the people received the Holy Ghost. Did they shine with a new light or power? Were they then able to perform miracles



Simon Magus and his demon helpers. Basilica of Saint Sernin. Toulouse, France, c.1110-1115.

themselves? Perhaps they entered a state of ecstatic frenzy and spoke in tongues or prophesied?

The scripture simply does not say, but it must have been something pretty amazing because it led Simon to attempt to buy that same power from the apostles. Peter rebuked him declaring the gift of God cannot be purchased with money and that Simon was a wicked man. Consequently, this account would later become the background for the word Simony, which refers to the buying or selling of position, office or influence within the Church (in the medieval period forms of Simony became institutionalized within the Orthodox Church, earning one of the lowest levels in Dante's version of Hell and playing a significant role in the eventual Reformation.)

However, not all of the early accounts attributed to Simon Magus paint the same picture. Though he was rebuked as a sorcerer by Peter in the above account, he was revered by the Samaritans, and later in Rome, as a God (*The Great Power of God*.) In fact, in Rome it is possible, though debated, that a statue was erected in his honor. Simon publicly declared his own divinity, proclaiming "*I am the Word of God, I am the glorious one, I am the Paraclete, the Almighty. I am the whole of God.*"⁹

He also performed miracles and amazing feats of magic and some accounts claim he had the ability to levitate and fly. Allegedly, he was able to turn rocks into water and on one occasion, he fed five thousand people from five loaves of bread and two fishes. Other accounts have him healing the sick and raising the dead, though some Christians later accused Simon of being possessed by a devil through whom he worked his magic (the same accusations Jesus himself faced.)

The title Magus, which is rendered as sorcerer or magician in the *Acts of the Apostles*, actually refers to a priestly class of the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism (see chapter four.) Generally, it refers to someone who has the divine ability to read the stars and predict the future. Some magi were even believed to have the ability to manipulate the fate foretold by the stars. Among the people of the east, the title magus was not a condemnation but a distinction of authority and ability.



Simon Magus flying over Rome with the help of demons.

Interestingly, although the word magus is rendered as sorcerer to disparage Simon, the same word was rendered as "wise men" in Matthew's account of the nativity. In other words, the

term magus or magi was translated either as “wise men” or as “sorcerer” depending on how the translators wished to portray the characters, good or evil.

Simon, in the Bible, and later by many Christian leaders, was demonized because he was a rival to the fledgling Christian religion. He claimed to be God incarnate, the Messiah or Christ, and his miracles were often compared to those of Jesus to such an extent that Hippolytus was moved to emphatically clarify, “*He [Simon] was not Christ.*”¹⁰

Of Simon’s influence, Epiphanius wrote:

*From the time of Christ to our own day the first heresy was that of Simon the magician, and though it was not correctly and distinctly of the Christian name, yet it worked great havoc by the corruption it produced among Christians.*¹¹

Aside from claiming to be the true Christ and performing miracles, he may have shared something else in common with Jesus: He was formerly a disciple of John the Baptist! Not just a disciple, but according to at least one ancient text, he might have been John’s favorite student. The third century *Clementine Recognitions* states:

*It was at Alexandria that Simon perfected his studies in magic, being an adherent of John, a Hemerobaptist, through whom he came to deal with religious doctrines. John was the forerunner of Jesus...of all the disciples, Simon was the favourite [sic], but on the death of his master, he was absent in Alexandria, and so Dositheus, a co-disciple, was chosen head of the school.*¹²

It is possible the *Clementine Recognitions* was merely a pro-Gnostic text written to legitimize Gnostic claims, but whether propaganda or historical, it demonstrates that a rivalry did indeed exist and attempted to legitimize itself in the public eye. Specifically, this text asserts that not only was Simon a powerful magician and the rightful successor of John the Baptist, but that John himself was also a magician who taught magic to *both* Jesus and Simon, students who later separated and went on to found rival, yet profoundly similar, religions. Additionally, John the Baptist is portrayed not as the ascetic hermit living in the woods and baptizing men, but as a powerful religious leader with an organized following centered in Alexandria that continued long after his death.

End of this sample of the *Myths of Christianity*.

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