

## Chapter 1

### Jesus of History

Christian missionary propaganda in general and the theologies of Fulfillment, Indigenisation (or Acculturation), and Liberation in particular leave the impression as if Jesus Christ was a mighty figure who took the world by storm as soon as he appeared on the scene. Evidential Theology which tells us of miracles which are supposed to have accompanied his birth and death as well as of those reported to have been performed by him in the course of his ministry, has been one of the main weapons in the armoury of Christian missions. I remember very vividly the words of my friend, the Jesuit missionary, who tried to convert me in 1956. "Let me tell you at the very outset," he had said, "that Jesus is no mythological mumbo-jumbo like your Rama and Krishna, and even Buddha. On the contrary, he is a solid historical figure whose miracles were witnessed and vouchsafed by many contemporary people."

The historicity of Jesus Christ as described in the gospels has been for a long time one of the principal dogmas of all Christian denominations. In India where the history of the search for the Jesus of history remains unknown even to the so-called educated elite, the missionaries continue to hawk this dogma without fear of contradiction. The scene in the modern West, however, has undergone a great change. What we witness over there is that this "solid historical figure" has evaporated into thin air as a result of painstaking Biblical and Christological research undertaken over the last more than two hundred years, mostly by theologians belonging to the Protestant churches.

We need not bother about the miracles which are supposed to have accompanied the birth and death of Jesus or to have been performed by him. The subject was dealt with very aptly by Edward Gibbon who wrote towards the end of the eighteenth century. "But how shall we excuse," he had asked, "the supine inattention of the Pagan and philosophic world to those evidences which were presented by the hand of Omnipotence not to their reason but to their senses? During the age of Christ, of his

apostles, and of their first disciples, the doctrine which they preached was confirmed by many prodigies. The lame walked, the blind saw, the sick were healed, the dead were raised, demons were expelled, and the laws of Nature were frequently suspended for the benefit of the church. But the sages of Greece and Rome turned aside from the awful spectacle, and, pursuing the ordinary occupations of life and study, appeared unconscious of any alteration in the moral or physical government of the world. Under the reign of Tiberius, the whole earth, or at least one celebrated province of the Roman Empire, was involved in a preternatural darkness for three hours. Even this miraculous event, which ought to have excited the wonder, the curiosity, and the devotion of mankind, passed without notice in an age of science and history. It happened during the lifetime of Seneca, and the elder Pliny who must have experienced the immediate effects, or received the earliest intelligence, of the prodigy. Each of these philosophers, in a laborious work, has recorded all the great phenomena of Nature, earthquakes, meteors, comets, and eclipses, which his indefatigable curiosity could collect. Both the one and the other have omitted to mention the greatest phenomenon to which the mortal eye has been witness since the creation of the globe. A distinct chapter of Pliny is designed for eclipses of an extraordinary nature and unusual duration; but he contents himself with describing the singular defect of light which followed the murder of Caesar, when during the greatest part of a year the orb of the sun appeared pale and without splendour. This season of obscurity, which cannot surely be compared with the preternatural darkness of the passion, had been already celebrated by most of the poets and historians of that memorable age.”<sup>1</sup> What concerns us here is the question whether a man named Jesus in the gospels ever lived on this earth and, if so, what was he like.

### **Quest of the Jesus of History**

The quest of the Jesus of history commenced when Hermann

<sup>1</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Modern Library Edition, n.d., pp. 443-44.

Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768), Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Hamburg in Germany, subjected the Bible to higher criticism and wrote in secret some 4,000 pages. His work was published in seven fragments by his friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, several years after his death. The last fragment, *The Aims of Jesus and His Disciples*, published in 1778, presented Jesus as a failed Jewish revolutionary whose dead body was stolen from his tomb by his disciples in order to spread the story of his resurrection. A storm of agonised protest blew over the Christian world. But that did not stop the theologians from pressing forward on the path blazed by Reimarus. Today the shelves in libraries all over the Western world are laden with Lives of Jesus. There is hardly a year when some scholar or the other does not come up with a new Life of Jesus. In fact, by now the Jesus of history has become a veritable industry. All available evidence, Christian and non-Christian, has been and is being examined and presented from all sorts of angles.

### **The Jewish Evidence**

Christian tradition tells us that Jesus was a Jew who lived in Palestine during the first 30 or 33 years of the era which is supposed to have commenced from the date of his birth. It is, however, strange that Jewish historians who lived and wrote during the same period or a little later, fail to notice him as well as the religion supposed to have been founded by him. Philo (20 BC-54 AD), who wrote a history of the Jews, knows no Jesus Christ and no Christians. So also another historian of the same period, Justus of Tiberius.

The most remarkable case is that of Flavius Josephus who lived from AD 36 or 37 to 99 or 100. He completed two monumental works — *The Jewish War* in 77 AD and the *Antiquities of the Jews* fifteen years later. The histories mention no Jesus Christ. His first work relates to AD 66-74 when the Romans put down a widespread Jewish rebellion in Palestine, and by which time the Christian church at Jerusalem is supposed to have functioned for 35 years. The work has not a word about Jesus or his followers. Christian apologists point to two passages, one long

and the other very short, which mention Jesus as a wise man and also as Christ. But scholars have proved quite convincingly that both of them are either clumsy Christian interpolations or have been tempered with by Christian scribes.<sup>2</sup> It has to be remembered that none of the manuscripts of Josephus' *Antiquities* is older than the eleventh century, so that Christian scribes have had ample opportunities for tempering with the text.

The vast rabbinical literature of the Jews, composed during the first two and a quarter centuries of the Christian era, contains only five authentic references to Jesus. But they "do not conclusively establish his historicity, as none of them is sufficiently early". Moreover, "they are so vague in their chronology that they differ by as much as 200 years in the dates they assign to him". None of the five Jesuses fits the Christian scheme of Jesus Christ's birth or life or death. The Talmud betrays no knowledge of Jesus independent of the Christian tradition, and it is conceded by most Christian scholars that it "is useless as a source of information about Jesus".<sup>3</sup>

### **The Pagan Evidence**

The Greeks and Romans have left to posterity a vast historical and philosophical literature written in or referring to the time-bracket when Jesus is supposed to have lived. But it is unaware of him. Seneca (2 BC-66 AD), Pliny the Elder (23-79 AD), Martial (40-102 AD), Plutarch (45-125 AD), Juvenal (55-140 AD), Apuleius (d. 170 AD), Pausanius (d. 185 AD), and Dio Casius (155-240 AD) do not mention any Jesus or Christ. Epictetus (50-100 AD) refers to Galileans starting with Judas the Galilean who led the Jewish revolt against Rome in the first decade of the first century, but not to Jesus of Nazareth who is supposed to have come from Galilee shortly afterwards.

<sup>2</sup> William Benjamin Smith, *Ecce Deus: Studies of Primitive Christianity*, London, 1912, pp. 230-37; Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, Part III, *Caesar And Christ*, Fourth Printing, New York, 1944, p. 552; Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity*, Penguin Books, London, 1978, p. 21; Ian Wilson, *Jesus: The Evidence*, Pan Books, 1985, pp. 51-54; Michael Arnheim, *Is Christianity True?*, London, 1984, p. 4; G.A. Wells, *Did Jesus Exist?*, London, 1986, pp. 10-11. Many more critical studies on the subject can be cited.

<sup>3</sup> G.A. Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 12 with reference to J. Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth*, London, 1925, and M. Goldstein, *Jesus in the Jewish Tradition*, New York, 1950.

Much has been made by Christian apologists of a few words or stray passages referring to “Chrestus” or his worshippers in Pliny the Younger (60-114 AD), Tacitus (55-120 AD), Suetonius (70-120 AD) and Sulpicius Severus (d. 400 AD). But critical scrutiny has shown that all these references either do not relate to Jesus of Nazareth, or are influenced by Christian tradition, or are clever Christian fabrications. Ian Wilson concludes that “in all this there is scarcely a crumb of information to compel a belief in Jesus’ existence”.<sup>4</sup> Paul Johnson comments that fabrications “occur throughout the history of Christianity up to Renaissance and even beyond”.<sup>5</sup>

The word “Chrestus” which occurs in some of these Pagan sources and which has provided grist to the mill of Christian apologetics, did not mean in the ancient world the same as the word “Christus” or “Christos”. This appellation simply meant “good” or “agreeable” and was claimed by characters belonging to several sects which practised initiation by anointment. That alone can explain the attempt by a Christian scribe to scratch the “e” in Chrestus and replace it by an “i” in a manuscript of Tacitus.<sup>6</sup> What clinches the argument is that the word “Christian” does not appear in the Christian literature itself before 140 AD. On the other hand, anti-Christian polemics which appears for the first time around 160 AD, starts by questioning the existence of a character called Jesus Christ.

The Roman philosopher Celsus is quoted by Origen (185-254 AD), the great Christian theologian from Alexandria, as saying in 178 AD that “you [Christians] relate fables and do not even give them verisimilitude”. Typho, another Roman polemist, wrote to Justin Martyr, the Church Father from Palestine (100-160 AD), that “you follow a vain rumour and are yourselves the makers of your Christ”, and that “even were he born and lived somewhere none would know of him”. As late as the last quarter of the fourth century, St. Jerome (340-420 AD) was complaining

<sup>4</sup> Ian Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp 26-27.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Ory, *An Analysis of Christian Origins*, London, 1961, p. 33 and fn. 38.

that the Gentiles doubted the very existence of Jesus, and that “in the time of the apostles even, when the blood of Jesus Christ in Judea was not yet dry, it was pretended that the body of the Lord was merely a phantom”.<sup>7</sup>

Gibbon confirms that Christians were little known in the first two centuries of the Christian era, or, if known to some notables in the Roman Empire, were despised as dismal fanatics. “The name of Seneca,” he writes, “of the elder and the younger Pliny, of Tacitus, of Plutarch, of Galen, of the slave Epictetus, and the emperor Marcus Antonius, adorn the age in which they flourished, and exalt the dignity of human nature. They filled with glory their respective stations, either in active or contemplative life; their excellent understandings were improved by study; philosophy had purified their minds from the prejudices of the popular superstition, and their days were spent in the pursuit of truth and the practice of virtue. Yet all these sages (it is no less an object of surprise than of concern) overlooked or rejected the perfection of the Christian system... Those among them who condescend to mention the Christians consider them only as obstinate and perverse enthusiasts who exacted an implicit submission to their mysterious doctrines without being able to produce a single argument that could engage the attention of men of sense and learning.”<sup>8</sup>

### **Evidence of the Gospels**

All languages which have been influenced by Christianity contain the expression, “gospel truth”. But truth is exactly what we find completely missing from the gospels when it comes to the life and teaching of their hero — Jesus of Nazareth. In fact, the gospels violate one of the Ten Commandments — thou shalt not bear false witness — and can be easily caught in the act.

1. *Year of Birth*: “Both Matthew and Luke assign Jesus’ birth to ‘the days when Herod was the king of Judea’ — consequently before 3 B.C. Luke, however, describes Jesus as ‘about thirty years old’ when John baptised him ‘in the fifteenth year of

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pp. 35-36.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Gibbon, op. cit., p. 442.

Tiberius' i.e., A.D. 29; this would place Christ's birth in the year 2 B.C. Luke adds that 'in those days there went out a decree of Caesar Augustus that all world should be taxed... when Quirinius was the governor of Syria.' Quirinius is known to have been legate in Syria between A.D. 6 and 12; Josephus notes a census by him in Judea but ascribes it to A.D. 6-7. We have no further mention of this census. Tertullian records a census of Judea by Saturninus, Governor of Syria, in 8-7 B.C.; if this is the census Luke had in mind, the birth of Christ would have to be placed before 6 B.C."<sup>9</sup>

John's gospel states that Jesus was not fifty years old when he died, so that Jesus must have been born around 22-15 BC. Eusebius places his death in 22 AD, which takes his birth to 9 BC if he was 30 when he died, to 12 BC if he was 33, and to 28 BC if he was nearing 50. The year 1 AD as the year of his birth was assumed by the sixth century Roman monk, Dionysius Exiguus, when he worked out the chronology which has prevailed since then.<sup>10</sup> It is significant that neither the gospel of Mark nor that of John bothers to mention his birth. They start with his baptism by John the Baptist. Modern scholars think that the nativity stories in the gospel of Matthew and Luke have been added later. The interpolators were either unaware of one another's doing, or did not care to cross-check. They contradict one another at several important points.

2. *Date of Birth*: "We have no knowledge of the specific day of his birth. Clement of Alexandria (*ca.* 200) reports diverse opinions on the subject in his day, some chronologists dating the birth April 19, some May 10; he himself assigns it to November 17, 3 BC. As far back as the second century the Eastern Christians celebrated the Nativity on January 6. In 354 some Western churches, including those of Rome, commemorated the birth of Christ on December 25; it was already the central festival of Mithraism, the *natalis invicti solis*, or birthday of the unconquered sun."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Will Durant, *op. cit.*, pp 557-58.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p.7.

<sup>11</sup> Will Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 558.

Other sources give other dates. “As for the *date* of Christmas, the chances are no better than 1 in 365 that Jesus’ birthday fell on 25 December. A number of different dates have contended for the title — including 20 May, 19 April, 17 November, 28 March, 25 March and 6 January — and it took nearly five hundred years before 25 December came to be generally accepted. The reason for the choice of this date owes nothing to historical evidence but a great deal to the influence of other religions. It was no accident that 25 December happened to be the birthday of the ‘Unconquered Sun’ (*Sol Invictus*), the chief festival of the Mithraic cult, a popular mystery religion of the late Roman Empire which shared quite a number of elements with Christianity, notably its emphasis on rebirth and salvation.”<sup>12</sup> Ian “Wilson concludes, “Not only the date but also the year of his birth are unknown, and on present evidence unknowable...”<sup>11</sup>

3. *Place of Birth*: “Jesus was born at Bethlehem. Or was he? It is one of the best known ‘facts’ of Christianity, on the strength of which the town of Bethlehem has developed a thriving tourist trade. But is it true? Was Jesus *really* born in Bethlehem? Unfortunately, even the Christian scriptures disagree among themselves. Matthew and Luke both say yes, while John (7: 41-2) and Mark (1:9 ; 6:1) give the impression of never even having heard of Jesus’ supposed birth at Bethlehem but assume that his birthplace was Nazareth, a small town in the northern region of Galilee, at the opposite end of the country from Bethlehem.”<sup>14</sup>

When we come to details, however, even Matthew and Luke part company. For Matthew, Jesus is conceived and born in Bethlehem straight away. Luke finds his parents in Nazareth at the time of his conception, and drags them to Bethlehem so that they may be counted in a census. Even if we forget the fact that there was no census when Jesus is supposed to have been born, the story does not make sense. Firstly, neither Nazareth nor Bethlehem was under Roman jurisdiction in 1 AD. Secondly,

<sup>12</sup> Michael Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ian Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

unlike Joseph, Mary did not belong to Bethlehem and there was no reason for her to travel to that town all the way from Nazareth, particularly in a state of advanced pregnancy. The only reason for Bethlehem being presented as Jesus' place of birth is the prophecy in the Old Testament (Micah 5:2) that the Messiah will be born in that place.

Joan Taylor, a historian from New Zealand, has shown (*Christians and the Holy Places*, OUP, 1993) that the Nativity Church at Bethlehem was built after demolishing the Pagan temple of an ancient God, Tammuz-Adonis. As Arnheim has shown, the Christians claim to Bethlehem was a fraud from the very beginning.

Nazareth fares no better as the place of Jesus' birth. There is no positive proof that this place existed at the time when he is supposed to have been born. It does not occur in any Roman maps, records or documents relating to that time. It is not mentioned in the Talmud. It is not associated with Jesus in any of the writings of Paul. Josephus who commanded troops in Galilee does not mention it. It appears for the first time in Jewish records of the seventh century. Scholars of the subject think that Nazareth was brought into existence and became hallowed simply because of a mistake in translating the term "Nazarene" found in the Greek versions of the two gospels as well as in the Jewish literature of that time. The word denoted a Jewish sect to which Jesus is supposed to have belonged. The Quran and early Islamic literature know the Christians as the Nasara, but are not aware that Isa Masih came from the town of Nazareth. But in Latin and other translations "Jesus the Nazarene" became "Jesus of Nazareth". New translations of the gospels have corrected the mistake but retained the story unchanged.

4. *Genealogy and Parentage*: Of the four gospels, Matthew and Luke alone provide Jesus' family tree in an effort to trace him back to King David and even to Abraham and Adam. But there are huge and irreconcilable differences in the two genealogies, not only in the names of Jesus' ancestors but also in the number of generations. There are only three names that are common in the two family trees. Even the name of Joseph's father

and Jesus' grandfather is not the same. Matthew accommodates 28 and Luke 41 generations of Jesus' ancestors in the same span of time. It seems that the writers of the two gospels share nothing in common except their zeal to prove that Jesus was descended from King David.

The biggest puzzle, however, takes shape when both of them announce in the next breath that Jesus was the Only-begotten Son of God born of a virgin! In fact, Matthew (1.23) quotes Isaiah (7.14) from the Old Testament in order to fortify this announcement — “Behold! A virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.”

Will Durant comments, “The virgin birth is not mentioned by Paul or John, and Matthew and Luke trace Jesus back to David through Joseph by conflicting genealogies; apparently the belief in the virgin birth rose later than in the Davidic descent.”<sup>15</sup>

5. *The Virgin Birth*: It is the conflicting versions of virgin birth we find in Matthew and Luke, which give away the game.

Matthew says that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was betrothed to Joseph but they had not lived together when Joseph discovered that she was pregnant. He was a kind man, and did not want to expose Mary to death by stoning, the standard punishment for adultery under the Jewish law at that time. He, however, made her leave his home. It was then that an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, and informed him that Mary had been impregnated by the Holy Spirit. The angel added that Mary's son would save his people from their sins, and was to be named Jesus. It is at this point that Matthew quotes the prophecy from Isaiah in order to confirm the angel's announcement. Joseph awoke, took back Mary into his house, and she gave birth to Jesus. It is only then that Joseph had conjugal relations with her, that is, Mary did not remain a virgin after the birth of Jesus. All this happened in Bethlehem.

Luke, on the other hand, informs us that the angel visited Mary in a waking state, and announced the birth by her of a son whom God would give the throne of David. Mary wondered how that could happen because she was still a virgin. The angel as-

<sup>15</sup> Will Durant, op. cit., p 559.

sured her that she would be visited by the Holy Spirit, and that her son would be the Son of God. Luke does not invoke any Old Testament prophecy in support of this assurance by the angel. And he makes all this happen in Nazareth, months before Mary travelled to Bethlehem with Joseph in an advanced state of pregnancy. Nor does he confirm that Mary and Joseph had conjugal relations after Jesus was born at Bethlehem. They were only betrothed when they travelled to that city. "In other words, so far as Luke is concerned, Mary appears to be an 'unmarried mother'."<sup>16</sup>

Matthew's citation from Isaiah can be dismissed straight away as a clumsy attempt at cover up. As a Jew conversant with the Hebrew Bible, he must have known that the word "*almah*" used by Isaiah did not mean "virgin" but "young woman", and that the correct Hebrew word for "virgin" was "*betulah*" which Isaiah had used five times but not in this context. He chose to cite from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible, because there the word "*almah*" had been wrongly translated as "*parthenos*", the Greek word for "virgin".

New translations of the Bible have corrected the mistake. It is only the Catholic Church which continues to stick not only to the dogma of the virgin birth of Jesus but also to the myth of Mary's permanent virginity, and refuses to face the fact that Matthew, who floated the myth, himself mentions Mary as having conjugal relations with Joseph only a few lines later. Elsewhere in the gospels we find Mary being mentioned as the mother of several children besides Jesus. The Catholic Church, however, has extended the dogma of Mary's virginity to her and her female ancestors' immaculate conception *ad infinitum*. This ridiculous exercise provoked Anatole France to write a story in which a prostitute in Paris kneels before a statue of Virgin Mary and prays, "Holy Mother! You conceived without sinning. Let me sin without conceiving."

It is also significant that all the four female ancestors of Mary mentioned by Matthew in his genealogy of Jesus happen to be fallen women. "Tamar was a temple prostitute; Rahab was

<sup>16</sup> Michael Arnheim, op.cit, pp. 20-21.

the madam of a brothel; Ruth, the most moral, indulged in some pretty shameless sexual exploitation; and Bathsheba committed adultery with King David. Was the author of the Matthew genealogy implying something about the only other woman mentioned, Mary herself?"<sup>17</sup> In any case, a clear reference to the circumstances of Jesus' birth is found in the gospel of John (8.41) where, in a heated debate between Jesus and the Jews on the Mount of Olives, the latter fling at him the taunt that "we were not born of fornication".

The real reason for floating the myth of virgin birth seems to be that "there had always been a question mark hanging over Mary's sexual morality" and that "it was clearly a subject which caused the early Christians acute embarrassment".<sup>18</sup> In fact, there has been a long-standing tradition among the Jews that Jesus was the fruit of an adulterous union between Mary and a Roman soldier named Panthera. The story had also spread to the Pagans in the ancient world. Origen found the Roman philosopher Celsus referring to it in his anti-Christian polemics around AD 178.

Christians have tended to dismiss the story as a malicious piece of invention, suggesting that Panthera may have been a corruption of '*parthenos*' meaning virgin. "Intriguingly, their interpretation fell a little flat with the discovery at Bingerbruck in Germany of the tombstone of one Tiberius Julius Abdes Panthera, a Roman archer from Sidon in Phoenicia. Although it would be fanciful seriously to suggest that Panthera was Jesus' real father, the tombstone does happen to date from the appropriate early Roman Imperial period."<sup>19</sup>

This "unfortunate circumstance" of Jesus' birth may explain his hostility to his mother and lack of enthusiasm for his brothers. In John (2.3-4) we find him giving short shrift to his mother at the marriage in Cana. In Luke (11.27-28) there is more than a hint that Jesus did not consider his mother among those "who hear the word of God and keep it". In Matthew (12.46-50), Mark (3.31-35), and Luke (8.19-21) he shows no warmth for Mary and

<sup>17</sup> Ian Stephens, op. cit., p. 56.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Arnheim, op. cit., p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ian Wilson, op. cit., pp 55-56.

his brothers who come all the way from Nazareth to Capernaum to pay him a visit.<sup>20</sup>

I may comment at this point that as a Hindu I do not consider Jesus' unconventional birth a reflection on his character as a worthy teacher, assuming that he was one. Marriage is after all only a social convention, and it does not necessarily put the stamp of nobility on those who are born "legitimately". Nor does birth outside wedlock detract from the moral or spiritual worth of a person. I have discussed the dogma of virgin birth at some length simply because Catholic theologians insist on presenting it as a historical event. It is a different question altogether whether Jesus was endowed with moral and spiritual qualities such as can distinguish him as a great teacher. I shall take up this question at a later stage in this book.

5. *Ministry*: The gospels tell us very little about the life of Jesus between his birth and his baptism by John the Baptist. Matthew informs us of Joseph's flight to Egypt along with Mary and Jesus in order to escape the massacre of infants by King Herod, and his return, after Herod's death, to the land of Israel where he withdrew himself to Nazareth in Galilee. Luke mentions no flight to Egypt. He keeps Jesus in Bethlehem all the time so that he is circumcised when he is eight days old, and taken to the temple at Jerusalem where he is hailed as the saviour by Simeon and Anna the prophetess. Another detail which Luke adds is that Jesus gave a slip to his parents when he was taken to the same temple at the age of twelve, and that he stayed back to converse with the priests who were charmed by his intelligence. That is all we are told about his life during the seventeen or more years before he begins as a preacher.

Obviously, the gospel writers are interested only in his ministry as the Messiah. But here too the accounts differ. If we leave out the miracles and the parables, the biographical data we are left with is very meagre indeed. The total record of his doings covers only eight days. About the duration of his ministry also there are two traditions. One tradition says that it lasted for three years, another says for one year. The only points which emerge

<sup>20</sup> Michael Arnheim, op cit, p 26.

with some prominence are that he preached to some gatherings of people at a few places on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, was arrested and tried, and crucified along with two bandits.

6. *Trial by the Jews*: All the four gospels say that Jesus was tried for blasphemy by the Jewish authorities at Jerusalem before he was handed over to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea. But they differ materially on details.

Matthew tells us that he was brought to the palace of Caiaphas, the chief priest, when the Sanhedrin, the supreme Jewish Council, was gathered in a night session. Witnesses were produced to give testimony against him, including the one who said that Jesus had threatened to destroy the temple at Jerusalem. Jesus remained silent about all these accusations, but replied in the affirmative when he was asked if he was the Messiah. The death sentence against him was, however, passed when the Sanhedrin met again in a morning session next day. Then the Jews handed him over to Pontius Pilate.

Mark repeats the same story with the difference that the death sentence is awarded in the night session itself.

Luke says that the Sanhedrin met not in the night of his arrest but next morning, and Jesus affirmed before it not only that he was the Messiah but also that he was the Son of God. The Sanhedrin, however, passed no sentence, the judges saying merely that their suspicions about Jesus had been confirmed by his confession. Another point on which Luke differs from the other three gospels is that after Jesus was handed over to Pontius Pilate, the latter referred his case to Herod Antipas because as a Galilean Jesus came under Herod's jurisdiction. Herod asked Jesus to perform miracles and plied him with questions. But when Jesus remained silent, he also joined the Jews in pouring contempt on Jesus and handed him back to Pontius Pilate.

In John's gospel there is no Sanhedrin in session. Jesus is produced before Anna, the father-in-law of the chief priest. It is, however, the chief priest himself who questions Jesus about the latter's disciples and teaching. Jesus replies that there was nothing secret about either as he was going about with his disciples all over the place and preaching publicly. He is then handed over

to Pontius Pilate to whom the Jews declare that they had no power to put anyone to death.

Jewish scholars have examined the gospel accounts in the light of Jewish laws and administration prevailing in Palestine at the time Jesus is supposed to have been tried by the Jewish authorities. They have come to the conclusion that the whole story of Jesus being tried by the Jewish authorities for blasphemy sounds spurious. Firstly, they hold that in terms of the Jewish law it was not blasphemy for any Jew to claim to be the Messiah or the Son of God. Secondly, they point out that sessions of the Sanhedrin could not be held at the times and in the ways mentioned in the three gospels. Finally, they maintain that if Jesus had been found guilty of blasphemy for saying something which is not mentioned in the gospels, the Jewish authorities at Jerusalem were quite competent to get him stoned to death, the penalty prescribed by Jewish law, and were not at all called upon to hand him over to the Roman governor for getting him crucified. The very fact that Jesus was crucified and not stoned to death goes to prove that he must have violated a Roman and not a Jewish law.<sup>21</sup>

Interestingly, the Pontius Pilate of history we meet in authentic Roman accounts is not at all the kind-hearted character we meet in the gospels; he was a cruel and blood-thirsty man who seldom stopped from committing gruesome atrocities.

“All the four gospels,” observes Michael Arnheim, “agree in pinning the blame on the Jews and in exonerating Pontius Pilate, but disagree on practically everything else. In other words, their conclusions agree, but not the evidence adduced in support of those conclusions... In short, it would appear that the gospel writers first reached their conclusion (namely, that Jews were guilty of Jesus’ ‘murder’) and only afterwards put together a story to support this conclusion.”<sup>22</sup> James P. Mackey remarks, “Finally, we are reminded by more than one exegete that we dare not ignore the increasing apologetic tendency of the gospel writ-

<sup>21</sup> Paul Winter, *On the Trial of Jesus*, Berlin, 1961, is one of the major studies which present the Jewish point of view.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Arnheim, op. cit., pp 83-84.

ers to shift the blame for the death of Jesus from the Romans, whose empire the Christians by this time were trying to win for the faith, to the Jews. This apologetic interest, undoubtedly, would certainly account for the addition, as time went on, of more and more narrative details to the Jewish involvement in the death of Jesus and hence to the Jewish trial or hearing.”<sup>23</sup> “In other words, by means of suppression on the one hand and invention on the other, they [the gospels] create the impression that the ‘Jewish trial’ was the real trial.”<sup>24</sup>

It is, however, not the historicity of the so-called Jewish trial but the theology to which it gave birth, which invites greater attention. It is because of this spurious story that all through nearly two thousand years of Christian history, Jews have been accused of deicide and subjected in practically all Christian countries to cruel pogroms which culminated in the Nazi Holocaust. The gospel writers can, therefore, be held guilty of committing one of the greatest crimes against humanity in inventing this history. John (8.44) goes to the extent of labeling the Jews as sons of the Devil!

The less said about the ridiculousness of the theology itself, the better. If Jesus was the Son of God who was sent down specifically for the purpose of washing the sins of mankind with his blood by mounting the cross, knowingly and willingly, the Jew should have been glorified for helping the divine plan, even if unknowingly, assuming that they did connive at his death. On the other hand, Pontius Pilate should have been condemned in the strongest language for trying to frustrate what God had himself designed in his supreme wisdom. But what we find in Christian theology is the other way round. The Jews have been painted in the darkest colours, while Pontius Pilate “missed canonization” because “the Edict of Milan (312) made it unnecessary for the Church to have in Pilate a witness that ‘found no guilt in this man’.”<sup>25</sup>

7. *The Crucifixion*: All the four gospels agree that Jesus was

<sup>23</sup> James P. Mackey, *Jesus the Man and the Myth*, London, 1979, pp. 63-64.

<sup>24</sup> Michael Arnheim, op. cit., p. 92.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Winter, op. cit., p. 6.

awarded a typically Roman punishment, crucifixion. But they differ in details.

According to John, the day on which he was arrested was the day before the Passover (14th Nisan). According to the other three gospels, it was the day after the Passover (15th Nisan).

According to Matthew and Mark, it was the Roman soldiers who carried him to Golgotha and crucified him. According to Luke and John, he was carried there and crucified by the Jews.

In Matthew and Mark, it is the Jewish soldiers who mock at and molest Jesus on the way to Golgotha. In Luke, it is a multitude of people, particularly women, who weep and wail at his fate and whom Jesus asks to weep for themselves and their children as he sees an imminent doom descending on them. In John, the scene on the way to Golgotha is not mentioned at all.

Again, in Matthew, Mark and Luke, the cross is carried by Simon of Cyrene, while in John it is carried by Jesus himself.

Matthew, Luke and John do not mention the time at which, Jesus was raised to the cross. Mark says that it was nine in the morning.

In Matthew, the two bandits crucified with Jesus make fun of him. In Luke while one of the bandits pleads that Jesus should save him from death, the other seeks from Jesus a promise for the life after death.

In Matthew and Mark, Jesus cries loudly on the cross, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” but does not die immediately. In Luke, he cries “Father! Into your hands I commit my spirit,” and expires. In John, he says simply that “it is now completed”, and dies.

The time of Jesus’ death is also different in the two sets of gospels. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, it occurs at three o’clock in the afternoon when darkness falls on the whole land, and it is late in the afternoon when Joseph of Arimathea takes down Jesus’ body from the cross. In John, it is already evening when a Roman soldier is ordered to break Jesus’ legs in order to expedite his death, and finds him already dead.

There are some other details also on which the gospels differ. Some scholars have doubted the whole story of Jesus’ cru-

cifixion. They point to Acts 5.30 and 13.29 which say that Jesus was hanged on and taken down dead from a tree.<sup>26</sup> An apocryphal Christian apocalypse, *The Ascension of Isaiah* composed in stages during the first and second centuries, also says that he was “crucified on the tree”. This is in conformity with the Jewish tradition which tells us that Jesus was first bound to a pillar and scourged, then stoned to death, and finally hanged on a tree.<sup>27</sup>

The Jewish tradition acquires weight when we find that the cross appears quite late as a Christian symbol. The Roman cross on which Jesus is supposed to have been crucified was not at all like the one represented by Christian painters. The Christian cross, in fact, is patterned after the mystic cross which we find in Egyptian hieroglyphics dated to an era long before Jesus is supposed to have been crucified. We do not meet this Christian cross among Christian symbols till Helena, the mother of Constantine, travelled to Jerusalem in 337 and “discovered the true cross”. And it was not until the Council of Constantinople held in 692 AD that the Church pronounced the cross as real and not symbolic. The story that the cross had appeared to Constantine in 312 AD on the eve of the Battle of the Mulvian Bridge is pure fiction.

Joan Taylor to whom we have referred earlier in this chapter, finds that the Holy Cross Church at Jerusalem has been built after demolishing a temple dedicated to Venus, a Pagan Goddess of ancient Greece and Rome. The crime was committed at the behest of Constantine, the Roman emperor who converted to Christianity, simply because his mother, Helena, saw in a dream that Jesus had been crucified at that place. Constantine’s minions had no problem in “unearthing” a cross and claiming the site. We have many instances of such crosses being “unearthed” in South India, particularly at places where St. Thomas is supposed to

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<sup>26</sup> The Authorised Version of the Bible contains the word “tree” in both Acts 5.30 and 13.29. It is only in latter-day translations that “tree” has been replaced by “gibbet” or “cross”. One wonders whether the replacement is not another piece of jugglery for which Christian scribes are famous.

<sup>27</sup> *The Jewish Life of Christ Being the Sepher Toldoth Jeshu or Book of the Generation of Jesus* translated from the Hebrew by G.W. Foote & J.M. Wheeler, 1982, III. 30-49.

have built the first seven churches.

8. *Resurrection*: We are entitled to dismiss the gospel stories of Resurrection like the rest of Jesus' miracles. We are entitled not to treat it as history at all. But as Resurrection happens to be the core of the Christian creed, we will better see what sort of puerile invention it is. Inventors of falsehood enjoy an advantage over tellers of truth, especially when the inventors become powerful and wield big guns and/or weapons of big propaganda. Tellers of truth are forced to discuss the fictions floated by the inventors of falsehood.

Scholars who date some epistles of Paul as earlier than the gospels regard this man as the first propounder of Resurrection. "Now if Christ is preached," he wrote to the Corinthians in 49 AD, "as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; *if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain*. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised."<sup>28</sup> The ifs and buts used by Paul in this statement go to show that for him Resurrection was the starting point of a story which had yet to be concocted and that to start with there were few buyers for this starting point.

Some theologians have tried to interpret Paul as saying that the risen Christ was not a being of flesh and blood but a spiritual being. But that would mean dismissing the whole of the New Testament and well-nigh two thousand years of Christian tradition. In fact, Paul himself seems to repeat the gospel accounts when he says earlier in the same epistle that Jesus appeared after his death first to Cephas, then to the twelve disciples, then to more than five hundred people, then to James, then to all the apostles, and lastly to him.<sup>29</sup>

Before we take up the gospel accounts of Resurrection, we may point out that, according to scholars, Jesus' appearance after his death (16.9-20) formed no part of the original gospel of Mark

<sup>28</sup> 1 Cor. 15 12-15, emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.3-8.

and has been appended to it later. “This is in itself peculiar. If Jesus *had* been raised from the dead and *had* appeared to some of his chief disciples, then surely Mark could not have failed to record it. The fact that this had to be tacked by someone else also indicates that Jesus’ appearance and ascension were *not* known to Mark, whose Gospel, it is generally agreed, was written about thirty years after Jesus’ death. In other words, the story of a raised Jesus appearing to his disciples and others and then ascending to heaven was only invented a generation or more after the events were supposed to have occurred.”<sup>30</sup>

Now we can take up the accounts of Resurrection as we find them in the existing four gospels.

Matthew presents only a brief account in his Chapter 28. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus go out to the tomb where Jesus had been buried by Joseph of Arimathea. Suddenly, there is an earthquake, an angel descends from heaven, he rolls away the stone from the mouth of the tomb, and he sits down on it. The guards appointed to look after the tomb are terrified and become like dead. But the angel assures the ladies and tells them that Jesus has risen and gone to Galilee. He also invites them to enter the tomb. The ladies, however, rush back to inform the disciples. Jesus appears to them on the way and instructs them to tell the disciples to meet him in Galilee. Meanwhile, the guards recover their wits and report the matter to the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem. The Jewish chiefs bribe the guards to spread the story that Jesus’ disciples have stolen the body. The disciples, however, rush to the mountain in Galilee and meet Jesus. They are in a repentant mood for having run away while he was being arrested. Jesus tells them that he has absolute authority on earth and in heaven, that they should baptise all nations in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that he is with them till the end of the world.

Chapter 16 in Mark is equally brief. Here the two women become three, with Salome added. They go to the tomb with spices in order to anoint Jesus’ body but are worried about the heavy stone at the mouth of the tomb. They are surprised when

<sup>30</sup> Michael Arnhem, op. cit., p. 74. Emphasis in the original.

they find the stone rolled back. They enter the tomb, but get frightened when they see a young man dressed in white sitting where the body should have been. The young man reassures them and tells them to inform the disciples that Jesus has risen and proceeded to Galilee as he had promised before he died. They run out of the tomb panic-stricken, and do not say a word to anyone. This is the point where the original Mark ends. In the interpolation, Mary Magdalene is alone and Jesus appears to her but gives her no instruction about informing the disciples or telling them that he is going to Galilee. She goes on her own to inform the disciples who refuse to believe her. Meanwhile, Jesus meets some travellers who get back to inform the disciples. Once again, the disciples refuse to believe the story. Finally, Jesus himself appears before the eleven disciples and rebukes them for their want of faith and hardness of heart. He instructs them to go out into the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation. He imparts to them the power to perform miracles such as driving out the demons, speaking in new tongues, picking up serpents, drinking poison, and curing the sick so that people may believe in their Master who alone can save. Jesus then starts rising aloft to heaven till he gets seated at the right hand of God.

Luke's Chapter 24 is much longer. Here there are several women including those who are named — Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of Jesus. They go with spices to anoint the body of Jesus. They find the stone rolled back, and enter the tomb. They see two men sitting there, dressed in dazzling clothes. They feel frightened but are reassured and told that Jesus has risen and gone to Galilee as he had promised in his lifetime. The ladies go back and inform the eleven disciples, all of whom except Peter dismiss them as fools. But Peter runs to the tomb, and is followed by the rest. They find nothing there except some linen cloths. Two of the disciples then travel towards the town of Emmaus the same day, and meet and converse with Jesus on the way without recognizing him. They tell him of his death, and of the report brought back by the women about the disappearance of his body from the tomb. Arriving near the

town, they invite him to be their guest. It is only when he breaks bread in their home and passes portions to them that their eyes are opened. But he vanishes. The two rush back to Jerusalem and report it to the others. While they are still talking about the event, Jesus walks in. He shows them his hands and feet and asks them to feel his body in order to find out that he is flesh and bones and no ghost. They continue to disbelieve him till Jesus asks for food and starts eating the broiled fish they offer to him. He then preaches to them about the prophecy which has been fulfilled, and instructs them to start preaching the same. It seems that he stays with them for a few days because the account says that one day he led them to Bethany, blessed them, and then ascended into heaven.

The account in John's gospel is the longest and covers two whole chapters, 20 and 21. At the end the writer identifies himself as an eye-witness to what he has described.

To start with Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb all alone and, finding the stone rolled back, rushes back to Peter and John with the report. Both of them go to the tomb and enter it only to find nothing except some linen cloth at one place and a scarf which Jesus had wrapped round his head at another. But Mary Magdalene who is waiting outside the tomb and shedding tears, sees two angles in white robes as soon as she peeps in. The angles ask her why she is weeping. She tells them that her Master's body has disappeared, and finds Jesus standing by her side as soon as she turns back. She recognises him only when he speaks to her in Hebrew. He instructs her to go back and inform the disciples as there is still some time before he ascends to heaven. Apparently, Peter and John had gone back by this time.

Mary carries the message to the disciples who are sitting in a room bolted from the inside for fear of the Jew. All of a sudden Jesus himself walks in without knocking or the door being opened. The disciples are delighted. He tells them that they are his ambassadors and invests them with the Holy Spirit. Thomas is not among them at this time, and when he is told about Jesus' appearance he refuses to believe till he has touched with his own finger one of the wounds caused by nails driven into Jesus'

hands at the time of crucifixion. Eight days later Jesus walks in again into their bolted room. Thomas is present and Jesus asks him to touch a wound with his finger. He is reported as giving them many other proofs of his presence in flesh and bones but these are not detailed in the gospel.

“On a later occasion” Jesus meets the disciples on the Lake of Tiberias where they have gone fishing. Their nets remain empty till the morning when Jesus fills them with fish. They find him sitting with them for breakfast. But all except Peter fail to recognize him till he distributes pieces of bread and fish among them. Breakfast over, Jesus asks Peter thrice if the latter really loves him. Peter assures him thrice and gets appointed as the shepherd of his sheep. Jesus asks Peter to follow him, but as Peter does so he finds John doing the same. Peter does not like it, and refers the matter to Jesus. He is told by Jesus to let it be because John is to stay till Jesus’ next return. What happened next is anybody’s guess. John ends the story with Peter and himself following Jesus.

“There seems even less prospect,” observes James P. Mackey, “of arriving at a concordant account of the details of the appearances of Jesus than there is in the case of the empty tomb stories, when at least Mary Magdalene is consistently a principal character. That has to be recognized at the very outset. Apart from the major discrepancy amongst the gospels as to whether the appearances of Jesus took place in Galilee or in and around Jerusalem, all the appearance stories have different settings, details and messages. As Reumann, I think, it was, pointed out, there is not even, as in the case of passion narratives, an agreed framework for the appearance narratives within which discrepancies of detail occur and by comparison to which they could reasonably be counted as negligible...”<sup>31</sup>

“The embarrassment,” comments Michael Arnheim, “which Jesus’ death occasioned his disciples must have been acute, and it comes through very clearly in Paul’s creed in which he twice specifically links Jesus’ death with Jewish prophecy ‘Christ died for our sins *in accordance* with the scriptures’ and ‘he was raised

<sup>31</sup> James P. Mackey, op. cit., p. 108.

on the third day *in accordance* with the scriptures' (my emphasis; 1 Cor. 15: 3-4; cf. Acts 13:27-9). Which scriptures is Paul referring to? There is this verse in the prophet Hosea: 'after two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him' (Hosea 6:2). But the reference here is not to resurrection at all, but rather to God's reconciliation with the Jewish people after punishing them. Hosea, it must be stressed, was writing some seven hundred years before the time of Jesus and his prophecy must be understood in terms of the circumstances of his own day, a time when there were still two independent Jewish kingdoms, Judea and Israel, but when their independence was threatened from without by powerful foreign states and, as the prophet saw it, by moral and religious decay from within."<sup>32</sup>

The Jewish tradition also confirms that Resurrection and Ascension were only stories invented and spread by the disciples. According to this tradition, Judas, the resourceful Jew, who had captured Jesus, the evil magician, and helped the Jewish elders kill and bury him, became suspicious when he saw Jesus' disciples sitting round the tomb during the night. So he removed the body from the tomb and buried it elsewhere. Next morning the disciples came to the tomb again and, finding it empty, started crying out that Jesus had risen from the dead and ascended unto heaven. Judas produced the body from its hiding place so that it was tied to a horse's tail and dragged around for some time. But Paul, the apostate disciple of Rabbi Gamaliel, took the false story of Resurrection to Rome and spread it there.<sup>33</sup>

The Jewish tradition is also confirmed by Acts 13.29 which states quite clearly that Jesus' body was buried by the Jews themselves and not by Joseph of Arimathea who appears like a *deus ex machina* in the gospels.

9. *Character of the Gospels*: The writer of John's gospel declares at the end of his account (21.24) that "This is the disciple who is both witness of these facts and the recorder of these facts; and we know that his testimony is true". The same claim

<sup>32</sup> Miachael Arnhem, op. cit., p. 78.

<sup>33</sup> *The Jewish Life of Christ*, op. cit., III. 51-81, IV. 46-55.

of being eye-witness accounts is advanced by Christian apologetics on behalf of the other three gospels, though the gospels themselves do not say so. We have, however, seen that the gospels contradict and cancel out each other when it comes to the salient features in the story of Jesus — the date and year and place of his birth, his ancestry and parentage, his ministry, his trial and death, and his resurrection. This claim on behalf the gospels, therefore, falls to the ground.

In fact, this claim was dismissed most forcefully by David Friedrich Strauss who published his two-volume work, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, in 1835-36. “Because of the discrepancies he found, he cogently argued that none of the gospels could have been by eye-witnesses, but instead must have been the work of writers of a much later generation, freely constructing their material from probably garbled traditions about Jesus in circulation in the early Church.”<sup>34</sup>

The gospel of Luke provides a first-hand refutation of this claim when it says (1.1-4) that many attempts have been made to present the story of Jesus “so as to accord with the tradition which the original eye-witnesses and ministers of the gospel have handed down to us”. He informs Theophilus that his own account conforms to the “oral instruction you have already received”.

Even the names by which the gospels are known today have been found to be later inventions. “Few realize, for instance, that despite the fact that the canonical gospels bear the names of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, these names are mere attributions, and not necessarily those of their real authors. The earliest writers who referred to the gospels significantly failed to mention names of authors, it being apparent that each gospel, both those surviving and those that have failed to survive, was originally designed as *the* gospel for a particular community. A canon of the four ‘recognized’ gospels only gradually came with general usage, at the same time acquiring associations with specific names from Christianity’s earliest years, though the connection was not necessarily legitimate.”<sup>35</sup> For all we know, Matthew,

<sup>34</sup> Ian Wilson, op. cit., p.33.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

Mark, Luke and John may be mere names rather than real characters who actually lived and wrote in the remote past.

Mark's gospel is now supposed to be the earliest of the four. But no scholar today concedes that it was written soon after the supposed lifetime of Jesus, or in the country where Jesus is supposed to have functioned. "The Evangelist betrays in 7:31 an ignorance of Palestinian geography hardly compatible with the assumption that he lived anywhere near the country. The Christian community for which he wrote is so remote from Jewish ideas that he has laboriously to explain Jewish practices... Such passages also betray that in Mark's day, the freedom of gentile communities from the Jewish law was taken for granted, and that he wrote considerably later than Paul for whom this matter was still a burning issue."<sup>36</sup> This remoteness from the Jewish environment is even more manifest in the gospel of John. "Throughout the fourth gospel Jesus speaks of the Jewish law as if he himself is not a Jew and had no connection with it (8:17; 15:25). For John he is no Jew, but a divine personage who existed before the Jewish nation came into being..."<sup>37</sup>

It is significant that Christian writers before 100 AD quote the Old Testament quite often but never the New Testament. Obviously, the material of the New Testament including the gospels was either in a formative stage, or was not deemed authentic enough to enjoy the prestige of scriptural authority. In any case, the existing codices of the gospels do not "take us further back than the days of Jerome and Augustine, still leaving a huge 300-year gap".<sup>38</sup> The original compositions that might have existed at earlier dates were thus "exposed to two centuries of errors in transcriptions, and to possible alterations to suit the theology or aims of the copyist's sect or time".<sup>39</sup>

The gospels cannot, therefore, be accepted as reflecting the time and clime in which Jesus is supposed to have lived and functioned. What they represent are the beliefs held by certain Christian communities in the middle of the third century AD.

<sup>36</sup> G.A. Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 78.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, p. 92.

<sup>38</sup> Paul Johnson, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>39</sup> Will Durant, *op. cit.*, p. 555.

There is also plenty of evidence that the gospels have been subjected to considerable editing in course of time. Passages have been interpolated as well as expunged. It is now well known that Mark 16.9-20 referring to Jesus' appearance after death and the world mission of Christianity, have been added at a later stage. The original gospel comes to an end at 16.8 in the ancient manuscripts. The most scandalous instance of an expunction came to the notice of Professor Morton Smith of the Columbia University while he was staying at Jerusalem in 1958. He discovered in a monastery the correspondence between Bishop Clement of Alexandria who lived at the end of the first century AD and a contemporary character, Theodore. It concerned a passage that followed immediately after Mark 10.46 which makes Jesus arrive at and leave Jericho. Scholars were puzzled for centuries as to what happened at that place, but there was no clue. The correspondence between Clement and Theodore contains the passage which had been censored out of Mark for fear of raising a scandal. The passage says that Jesus spent several days and nights with Lazarus, both of them remaining naked. It seems that homosexuals in the first century Christians churches were citing this passage in support of their practice, as homosexuals in the churches are doing today.

The New English Bible version of the New Testament published jointly by Oxford and Cambridge universities in 1961 mentions many instances where passages have been inserted or taken out. The most significant example is that of John 8.11 which tells the story of how Jesus saved from being stoned a woman caught in adultery. "This passage, which in the most widely received editions of the New Testament is printed in the text of John 7.53-8.11, has no fixed place in our ancient manuscripts. Some of them do not contain it at all. Some place it after Luke 21.38, others after John 7.36 or 7.52, or 21.24."<sup>40</sup> In any case, the story does not occur in any manuscript prior to the end of the fourth century. Scholars are now agreed that it is an interpolation. Similar is the case of Luke 23.34 where Jesus is made to cry from the cross, "Father, forgive them; they do not know

<sup>40</sup> The New English Bible, New Testament, 1961, p. 184n.

what they are doing.” Incidentally, these are precisely the two statements, apart from the Sermon on the Mount, which the Hindu admirers of Jesus quote most frequently. No Christian missionary or theologian is known to have informed them that they form no part of the authenticated teachings of Jesus.

What scholars have come to suspect the most, apart from the miracles, are the Old Testament prophecies which abound in the gospels. Almost every event in Jesus’ life, from birth to death, is presented as fulfillment of some prophecy. Michael Arnheim has devoted a whole chapter (the Sixth) of his book to this subject. “One of the chief concerns — if not *the* chief concern — of the Gospels is to ‘prove’ that Jesus was the Messiah *as prophesied* in the Jewish *scriptures*. There are essentially two ways in which they set about doing this, depending upon the need of the case ... either to bring your story into line with the prophecy or to interpret the prophecy in such a way as to bring *it* into conformity with the story.”<sup>41</sup> He has analysed the various prophecies in order to show which of the two ways has been followed in which case. He has also found instances in which both the ways have been used.

In one case the misinterpretation of a prophecy (Zechariah 9.9) has created a ludicrous scene — that of Jesus riding into Jerusalem not on one but on two asses simultaneously! It seems that the gospel writers did not understand the device of parallelism so often employed in Hebrew poetry. Zechariah never meant that the Messiah would ride on two asses at the same time. In the words of Morna Hooker, “They tear passages out of context, use allegory or typology to give old stories new meanings, contradict the plain meaning of the text, find references to Christ in passages where the original authors never intended any, and adapt or even alter the wording in order to make it yield the meaning they require.”<sup>42</sup>

Still more curious is the case of a prophecy which cannot be found in the Old Testament. Mathew (2.23) says that Jesus will

<sup>41</sup> Michael Arnheim, *op. cit.*, p. 101. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>42</sup> Cited by G.A. Wells, *op. cit.*, p.204, note 20, with reference to Morna D. Hooker, ‘Beyond the Things that are Written? St. Paul’s Use of Scripture’, in *New Testament Studies*, 27 (1985).

be called a Nazarene in fulfillment of a prophecy. Commentators on this verse have searched the Old Testament for centuries but have so far failed to locate the prophecy!

James P. Mackey has shown that it is the passion narratives which make more use of Old Testament prophecies than any other part of the gospels. "Are we to take it," he asks, "that concrete details just mentioned actually took place in the course of the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus, and then it was found that Old Testament passages anticipated them with astounding accuracy? Or are we to take it that the followers of Jesus, wishing to show their fellow Jews that Jesus in his passion fully fitted the character of the obedient servant of Yahweh... used the techniques of subliminal persuasion and painted the picture of Jesus' passion in terms literally reminiscent of the composite Old Testament character so that concrete details like those briefly recorded above were carried into the passion narrative by these techniques? There can scarcely be any doubt that in many cases of detail, if not in most, the latter is the less naive explanation..."<sup>43</sup>

No responsible theologian or historian is now prepared to construct the life-story of Jesus from material provided by the gospels. Will Durant who has done so has nonetheless, this to say: "Matthew relies more than the other evangelists on the miracles ascribed to Jesus, and is suspiciously eager to prove that many Old Testament prophecies were fulfilled in Christ... The Fourth Gospel does not pretend to be a biography of Jesus; it is a presentation of Christ from the theological point of view, as the divine Logos or Word, creator of the world and redeemer of mankind. It contradicts the synoptic gospels in a hundred details and in its general picture of Christ... In summary, it is clear that there are many contradictions between one gospel and another, many dubious statements of history, many suspicious resemblances to the legends told of pagan gods, many incidents apparently designed to prove the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, many passages possibly aiming to establish a historical basis for some later doctrine or ritual of the Church."<sup>44</sup> According to some

<sup>43</sup> James P. Mackey, op cit., pp 61-62.

<sup>44</sup> Will Durant, op. cit., pp 556-57.

critics, “Jesus has become a bin into which a theologian can cast his own notions.”<sup>45</sup>

Paul Johnson observes, “When we turn to the earliest Christian sources, we enter a terrifying jungle of scholarly contradictions. All were writing evangelism or theology rather than history, even when, like Luke in his gospel, they assume the literary manners of a historian and seek to anchor the events of Jesus’ life in secular chronology. Moreover, all the documents have a long pre-history before they reached written form. Their evaluation was a source of acute puzzlement to thoughtful Christians even in the earliest decades of the second century and probably before...”<sup>46</sup>

In the case of Mark, he finds that “The text was much altered and interpolated during the earliest period” and he feels that John is “more of a theological exercise than a historical narrative”.<sup>47</sup> He concludes that the gospel texts are full of fabrications. “The earlier they were inserted, the more difficult it is to detect them. And, of course, beyond a certain point, which occurs in the second century, there is no longer any possibility of clearing up the text. Moreover, even if we were to have the perfect and original texts of the gospels, they would not protect us from the efforts to create ‘constructive truth’ made by the evangelists themselves, and their oral sources. These are particularly obvious when the evangelists are engaged in aligning or shaping events in Jesus’ life to fit Old Testament prophecies: there the temptation to create and so to falsify is obvious, and we are on our guard...”<sup>48</sup>

In the considered opinion of Ian Wilson, a practising Catholic, “it does not need anyone with a Ph.D. in theology to recognize that the Christian gospels can scarcely be the infallible works fundamentalists would have us believe”.<sup>49</sup> This is exactly what St. Augustine had meant when he said in the fourth century that “only on the authority of the Church could he believe the

<sup>45</sup> Georges Ory, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Johnson, *op. cit.*, 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>49</sup> Ian Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

gospels”.<sup>50</sup>

### Summing Up

This being the character of the gospels, the search for a Jesus of history in them has had to be given up. It may be noted that the search was started and continued not by atheists or anti-Christians of any type but by pious theologians whose aim was to install Jesus on the firm ground of recorded history and thus fortify the fundamental Christian belief that Christianity is a historical and not a mythological faith. They cannot be blamed if the results of Christological research have turned out to be disastrous for Christianity, as we shall see.

Albert Schweitzer, the world famous theologian and missionary, has traced in a well-known book published in 1906 the progress of Christology from Hermann Samuel Reimarus, who wrote in the middle of the eighteenth century, to Wilhelm Wrede whose book on this subject was published in 1901. “The study of the Life of Jesus,” he says, “has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found Him it could bring Him straight into our time as a Teacher and Saviour...”<sup>51</sup> Coming to the “Results”, he mourns, “There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus. The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the Kingdom of God, who founded the Kingdom of Heaven upon earth, and died to give His work its final consecration, never had any existence. This image has not been destroyed from without. It has fallen to pieces, cleft and disintegrated by the concrete historical problems which came to the surface one after another, and in spite of all the artifice, art, artificiality, and violence which was applied to them, refused to be planed down to fit the design on which Jesus of the theology of the last hundred and thirty years had been constructed and were no sooner covered over than they appeared again in a new form...”<sup>52</sup> He concludes, “We thought that it was

<sup>50</sup> Georges Ory, op. cit., p. 39.

<sup>51</sup> Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906), English translation, London, 1910, Reprint, 1945, p. 397.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., p. 396.

for us to lead our time by the roundabout way through the historical Jesus, as we understood Him, in order to bring it to the Jesus who is a spiritual power in the present. This roundabout way has now been closed by genuine history.”<sup>53</sup>

James P. Mackey confirms Schweitzer. “It was just about two centuries ago,” he says, “that people began to pride themselves on the bringing at last to academic Christology the scientific methods of the historian. Previous to the eighteenth century, it was felt, people had built their portraits of Jesus from all kinds of unscientific assumptions. Small wonder if false Christs had appeared in Christian devotion and Christian literature. Small wonder if different Christs had appeared at different times and places or in different Christian traditions. The modern quarters set out with the calm confidence that by the use of the trusty methods of scientific history the real Jesus could at last be made to stand up. And with the same calm confidence they produced first one portrait of Jesus... and then another... and then another, each disturbingly different from the one before... Pessimism spread far beyond the confines of professional scholarship: the ‘real Jesus’ could not really be found...”<sup>54</sup>

Pope Leo X had confessed in the early sixteenth century that “It has served us well, this myth of Christ”.<sup>55</sup> Now that the myth was getting exploded, Pope Pius X condemned in 1907 the Modernists who “were working within the framework of the Church” and “an anti-Modernist oath was introduced in 1910”.<sup>56</sup>

But that did not stop the Modernists. The last nail in the coffin which carried the Jesus of history was hammered home by Rudolf Bultmann, Professor in the Marburg University of Germany and acknowledged as the greatest New Testament theologian of the twentieth century. “I do indeed think,” he concluded in 1958, “that we can now know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and legendary.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 398.

<sup>54</sup> James P. Mackey, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Baigent et al, *The Messianic Legacy*, Corgi Books, London, 1987, p.14.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>57</sup> Cited by Ian Wilson, op. cit., p. 37.

Bultmann was only endorsing what another German theologian, Bruno Bauer, had said a hundred years earlier. According to Albert Schweitzer, Bauer had concluded in 1850-51: “The question which has so much exercised the minds of men — whether Jesus was the historic Christ (= Messiah) — is answered in the sense that everything that is said of Him, everything that is known of Him, belongs to the world of imagination, that is, of the imagination of the Christian community, and therefore has nothing to do with any man who belongs to the real world.”<sup>58</sup>

The story has not changed in the years since Bultmann gave his verdict. Pastor J. Kahl pronounced in 1967 that “nothing at all is known of Jesus beyond the bare fact that ‘he existed at a date and place which can be established approximately’ and that both his teaching and manner of death remain unknown so that ‘the name of Jesus is bound to remain cryptic and meaningless, indistinguishable from a myth’.”<sup>59</sup>

Professor W. Trilling came to the conclusion in 1969 that “not a single date in his life can be determined with certainty” and wondered why “with modern scientific methods and enormous labour and ingenuity, so little has been established”.<sup>60</sup>

Summarizing the surveys of Christology since Bultmann G.A. Wells observed in 1986: “During the past thirty years theologians have come increasingly to admit that it is no longer possible to write a biography of him, since documents earlier than the gospels tell us next to nothing of his life, while the gospels present the ‘kerygma’ or proclamation of faith not the Jesus of history. Many contemporary theologians therefore regard the quest of the historical Jesus as both hopeless and religiously irrelevant — in that *the few things which can, allegedly, be known of his life are unedifying and do not make him an appropriate object of worship.*”<sup>61</sup>

There is now no dearth of scholars who think that the Jesus

<sup>58</sup> Albert Schweitzer, op. cit., p. 156.

<sup>59</sup> G.A. Wells, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., with particular reference to *The Church and Jesus* (London, 1969) by Rev. F.G. Downing and *In Search of the Historical Jesus* (London, 1970) edited by H. McArthur. Emphasis added.

of the gospels never existed in history. H. Raschke wrote quite some time ago that “the historical existence of Jesus need not be denied as it has never been affirmed”.<sup>62</sup> G.A. Wells has continued to examine the arguments of those who are still out to prop up a Jesus of history. He has written three challenging books in 1971, 1982 and 1986. In his latest book he concludes that “The existence of strongly divergent Christologies in early Christian times is a strong argument against Jesus’ historicity”, and that “if he had really lived, early Christian literature would not ‘show nearly everywhere churchly and theological conflicts and fierce quarrels between opponents’ nor disagree so radically as to what kind of person he was”.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Georges Cry, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> G.A. Wells, *op. cit.*, p. 120 with particular reference to Prof. E. Kasemann’s articles on the historicity of Jesus.