

## **THE WORD OF JESUS Distorted**

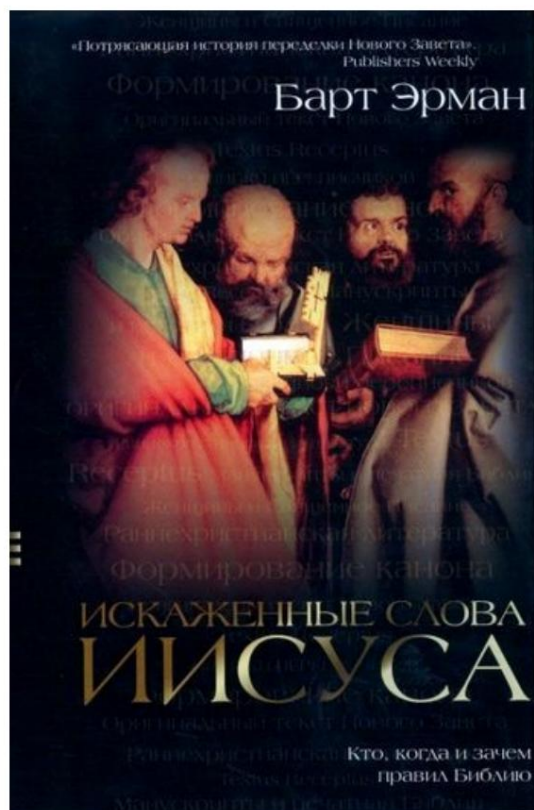
### **WHO, WHEN, AND WHY CORRECTED THE BIBLE**

**Bart D. Ehrman\***

**This book is a must-read for anyone interested in the Bible, whether you consider yourself a believer or not, because the Bible remains the most important book in the history of our civilization. Bart Ehrman masterfully demonstrates the conflicting ideas about Jesus and the meaning of his life that literally fill the New Testament. He reveals the true authorship of many of the books attributed to the apostles, and he also shows why the ma There are no Christian dogmas in the Bible. The author did not invent anything for the sake of sensations: everything written in this book is the result of a huge research conducted by scientists over the past two hundred years. However, for some reason this knowledge of the Bible has been inaccessible to the public until now. Read about the Author himself at the end of the book. Automatic translation from the page indicated below. The text is unedited. At the very end of the text – my modest comment on the Author's view**

#### **Foreword**

I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary in August 1978 as a newly married college graduate. I had read the New Testament in Greek, a thirst for knowledge—it must have been everything. With age I acquired a passionate desire to learn: those who knew me five or six years ago could not have imagined that I would go to school. But at a certain point in my studies I noticed that I was obsessed with the academic itch. I probably caught it at Moody Institute in Chicago, a fundamentalist Bible college that I began attending as a young man, at seventeen. At that time, my research was driven not so much by intellectual curiosity as by a pious desire for certainty.



My studies at Moody Institute left a deep impression on me. I chose this institution because in high school I had been "born again in the faith" and had decided to be a "real" Christian, which meant I would have experience mastering the Bible. During my first semester of school, something happened to me: my need to know the Bible became passionate to the point of madness. At Moody Institute, I not only took all the Bible and theology courses, but I also, on my own initiative, memorized entire books of the Bible. I devoted every free minute to his studies. I read books and studied the notes I had taken during the lectures. I stayed up all night almost every week preparing for the lessons.

Three years of such study can turn your whole life upside down. And, of course, become a hardening of the mind. After graduating from Moody Institute, I went to Wheaton College to get a degree in English literature, but I continued to pay attention to the Bible, took various courses on its interpretation and spoke about it once a week to my children's group at church. And he learned Greek so that he could study the New Testament in the original.

As a devout Christian who believed in the Bible, I believed that every word of it was God-sent—God-inspired. Perhaps that was the reason for the fervor with which I studied it.

For before me were the words of God, the words of the Creator of the universe, the Lord of all, addressed to us mere mortals. Without a doubt, a full understanding of these words is the most important thing in life. At least it was important to me. An understanding of literature in the broadest sense of the word helped me understand this work (for which I specialized in English literature), the ability to read Greek allowed me to know which words the author of the text had chosen.

During my first year at Moody, I decided to become a teacher and professor of Biblical Studies.

Then, at Wheaton, I suddenly realized that I knew Greek quite well. So my next step was predetermined: I would enter a doctoral program, studying the New Testament.

Testament, and especially some aspects of the Greek text and language. My favorite Greek teacher at Wheaton, Gerald Hawthorne, introduced me to Bruce

Metzger, the country's most respected authority on Greek biblical manuscripts, who happened to be a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary. And I applied to Princeton, knowing nothing about it except that Bruce Metzger taught there and that if I wanted to become an expert on Greek manuscripts, I had a direct path to Princeton.

I think I knew *one more* thing about Princeton Seminary: it wasn't an evangelical institution. And the more information I learned in the months leading up to my move to New Jersey, the more nervous I became. I had heard from friends that Princeton was considered a "liberal" seminary, with little emphasis on literalism and a "verbal, inspired" Bible. This meant that the most difficult test for me was not to be the studies that I could demonstrate by earning a master's degree and gaining admission to a doctorate. I had to maintain my faith in the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God.

And I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary, young, poor, but enthusiastic and determined to confront the liberals with their downgraded ideas about the Bible. As befits a good evangelical Christian, I was prepared to defend myself against any attack on my biblical faith. I could explain any apparent contradiction and resolve any possible inconsistency in the Word of God, both in the Old and New Testaments. I knew I still had much to learn, but *I would not learn* that there were errors in such an important sacred text.

Not all plans are destined to come true. What I learned at Princeton led me to change my view of the Bible. I didn't give up without a fight—I struggled and argued hard at first. I prayed for the attitude to change (much and fervently), I fought it (intensely), I resisted it with all my might. At the same time, I thought that if I wanted to be truly devoted to God, I had to be completely devoted to the truth. After quite a while, it became clear to me that my previous ideas about the Bible as an infallible divine revelation were fundamentally wrong. I had to choose: either continue to cling to views that I already realized were wrong, or follow the path that I believed would lead me to the truth. In the end, it turned out that there was no choice. What is true is true, and what is not is not.

I have known people for years who have said, "If my beliefs conflict with the facts, so much the worse for the facts." I was never one of them. In the following chapters, I will try to explain why my study of the Bible has led me to rethink my views.

This information is needed not only for scholars like me, who have dedicated their entire lives to serious research, but also for anyone interested in the Bible, whether they consider themselves believers or not. In my opinion, this information is very important. Whether you are a believer or not, whether you are a fundamentalist, an evangelical, a moderate or a liberal, the Bible is still the most important book in the history of our civilization. Understanding what it is and what it is not is one of the the most important intellectual tasks that our society can set for itself.

Some readers of this book will probably find the information in it embarrassing. All I ask is that if you find yourself in this situation, follow my example, try to accept it with an open mind, and if you need to change, change. If nothing in this book shocks or warns you, just read it with pleasure.

I am indescribably grateful to the many thoughtful and insightful readers who diligently studied my manuscript and actively demanded, I hope not in vain, changes to some passages. These

readers include Dale Martin of Yale University and Jeff Syker of Loyola Marymount University; my daughter Kelly Ehrman Katz; my graduate students Jared Anderson and Benjamin White; one skilled proofreader; and my attentive and invaluable editor at NagregOp, Roger Frith.

I dedicate this book to my two-year-old granddaughter, Aya, perfection in every way.

## 1. HISTORICAL ATTACKS AGAINST FAITH

In Christianity, the Bible is constantly purchased, actively read everywhere, and revered like no other book. At the same time, no book is so incomprehensible, especially among lay readers.

Over the past two centuries, Bible scholars have made great progress in understanding the Bible – archaeological findings, research into Hebrew, Greek, the original languages of the Holy Scriptures, and deep and thoughtful historical, literary, and textual analysis. This is a vast field of scholarship. In North America alone, thousands of scholars continue serious research in this area, and the results of their research are regularly and systematically presented to both graduate students in universities and future priests studying in seminaries and preparing for ministry.

However, the results of modern Bible research are practically unknown to the public. Not only because we devote our lives to Bible study and do not bother to publish it to the public, but also because many priests who studied this material in seminary chose, for various reasons, not to share it with their parishioners once they began working in the church. (Of course, (Churches are the most obvious place to study and discuss the Bible, or at least they should study and discuss it.) As a result, more and more people are not only ignorant of *the contents of the Bible*, but also have little understanding of what scholars have learned about it over the past two centuries.

This book is intended to address this problem. It can be seen as my attempt to reveal the secret.

The views on the Bible presented in the following chapters are not my own inventions. These views have been prevalent for many years among prominent and critical scholars teaching in universities and seminaries in North America and Europe, but they have been largely ignored by the public, especially among Bible readers, who are probably the group most interested. For the sake of all those who seek to become educated, knowledgeable, and knowledgeable about the content of the most important book of our civilization, this situation must change.

### Introduction to the Bible for Seminarians

Many Bible students have studied in theological schools. Each year, many students enter seminary. Most of their exposure to Bible study occurred during their school years, when they attended Sunday school for their children. But most often, they approach the Bible as devout Christians should, reading it to learn what to believe and how to live.

Typically, such students are not interested in the work of scientists and do not encounter discoveries related to with the problems of the Bible that arise when studying it from an academic, especially historical, perspective.

Other seminary students take their studies seriously, but they don't seem to know the Bible well enough to respect the Scriptures as the inspired Word of God. Such students are often

are born and raised in families of believers and feel called to serve - usually in the church, but also to serve in other social areas. In all the major denominations of my country - Presbyterian, Methodist, Lutheran, Episcopalian, etc. - there are now a number of those who I call "liberals". They do not believe in the inerrancy of the Bible and are more devoted to the church as an institution than to the Holy Scriptures; They seek answers to questions of faith and life from Churches: Frankly, many of them know little about the Bible, having only a vague understanding of its religious value.

This situation was not always observed in Protestant seminaries. Until a few decades ago students were expected to enter seminary with a strong knowledge of the Bible, and preparation for ministry meant that students already knew the contents of the Old and New Testaments. Unfortunately, all of that is a thing of the past. In the late 1970s, when I was at Princeton Theological Seminary (Presbyterian), most of my classmates had to work hard to pass what we called the "Little Bible," a test designed to test a student's knowledge of basic Bible information: What is the Pentateuch? What book of the Bible is the Sermon on the Mount in? Who is Theophilus? - information firmly etched in the memory of those who came from a strict evangelical background.

I get the impression that most students in their first year of seminary have no idea what to expect from a Bible study course. Of course, this course is only a small part of the curriculum. Required courses include church history, systematic theology, Christian education, oratory, homiletics (the art of preaching), and church administration.

All this vast amount of knowledge should be mastered in three years. However, every student is required to take introductory and basic courses in Bible studies. Most students expect these courses to be taught in a more or less religious, devotional manner so that they, as future priests, understand how the Bible should be understood and applied to modern people's lives in weekly sermons.

Such students will be sorely disappointed. The country's largest Protestant seminaries are notorious for their efforts to challenge cherished beliefs about the Bible, even if those beliefs are nothing more than a warm, pleasant, but vague feeling that the Bible is a wonderful guide to the world of worship, to be treated with reverence and devotion. These seminaries teach serious, uncompromising Bible study. They do not encourage piety. It is taught by scholars who are familiar with the writings of German and English-speaking Bible scholars over the past three centuries. They seek to impart *knowledge of* the Bible to students, not to explain what is *in it*. In seminary, Bible study is usually taught from a purely historical and academic perspective, which first-year students do not expect and have never encountered before. experienced at home, church, or Sunday school.

Almost all major Protestant (and now Catholic) seminaries use what is called the "historical-critical" approach to Bible study. This is diametrically opposed to the "godly" approach of the church: it focuses on what the Bible says, especially for me personally or in my community. What does the Bible tell me about God? About Christ? About the church? About my relationship to the world? What does it tell me I should believe? What actions should I take? What does it say about responsibility to society? How does the Bible help me draw closer to God? How does it help me live?

The historical-critical method has a different range of problems and therefore raises completely different questions. The essence of this method is the historical question (hence the name) about the Bible.

the meaning of the books in their original, historical context. Who were the true authors of the Bible? Is it possible (possibly!) that some of the books of the Bible are attributed to other authors, or that the authors are not who they claim to be - say, 1 Timothy was not actually written by Paul? or that Moses was not the author of Genesis? When did these authors live? Under what conditions and circumstances did they write? What issues of the time were they trying to address? How did they influenced by the cultural and historical features of that era? What sources did these authors use? When were the springs created? Is it possible that these sources considered this or that issue differently? Is it possible that the authors who used these sources also have a different opinion, different from the opinion of the authors of different sources and those who still use them? Can there be internal inconsistencies in the books of the Bible, based on different sources? Or irreconcilable contradictions? What if in the original context these books had a completely different meaning than is given to them today? And we, when interpreting the Holy Scriptures, take its words out of context, thereby distorting their meaning?

What if we don't have the original text? What if, over the centuries, while the Bible—the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek—was copied by hand, its words were changed by well-meaning but careless or, conversely, deliberate copyists to give them the desired meaning?

These and many other questions are raised by the historical-critical method. It is not surprising that immediately after entering the seminary, students must seriously prepare for the Bible examination before beginning their Bible studies. Such a study presupposes that its topic is known before it is discussed.

A huge percentage of seminarians have not the slightest understanding of the historical critical method. They go to school hoping to learn religious truths from the Bible so they can preach about them, as the priests of the churches they once attended did. It turns out that they are not prepared for historical criticism. To their surprise, instead of material for future sermons, they have begun to study historical-critical works based on the results of centuries of research.

The Bible is full of inconsistencies, many of which fall into the category of irreconcilable contradictions. Moses did not write the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), and Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John did not write the Gospels. There are other books not included in the Bible that were considered canonical at one time or another, such as the other gospels, which should be attributed to Jesus' followers Peter, Thomas, and Mary. The Exodus was probably not at all as described in the Old Testament. The story of the conquest of the Promised Land is most likely based on legend. In addition to numerous discrepancies, the Gospels

There is material that is not historical. It is difficult to determine whether Moses ever existed and what the real Jesus taught. Historically accurate episodes in the Old Testament alternate with legends, and the New Testament book of Acts contains historically inaccurate information about the life and teachings of Paul. Many of the books of the New Testament were not written by the apostles themselves, but by later authors who *pretended to* be apostles. And this is not an exhaustive list.

Some students embrace these new views from day one. Others, among the more conservative, resist for a long time, stubbornly believing that God would not allow distortions in his holy book. But soon, as new evidence comes to light, many of them realize that their faith in the inerrancy and absolute historical reliability of the Bible has been shaken. The evidence is simply too much, and to reconcile all the hundreds of discrepancies in the biblical sources,

It requires so many assumptions, conclusions, and interpretive maneuvers that ultimately their authors give up.

## Problems with the Bible

For students who come to seminary convinced that the Bible is completely, absolutely, 100 percent accurate and without error, the realization that most critical scholars hold very different opinions can be a real shock and a shake-up to the foundation. But when these students allow themselves to admit that errors in the Bible are possible, their understanding of Scripture changes dramatically. The longer they study the text, the more carefully and diligently they do so, the more errors they find, and the more clearly they see that the Bible actually becomes *much* clearer if they admit that there are inconsistencies in it, rather than stubbornly denying them, even when they are noticeable.

Of course, many first-time students are adept at reconciling the differences between the Gospels. For example, Mark says that in the last week of his life Jesus "drove them out of the temple," "overthrew the tables of the money changers and the benches of those who sold doves," saying, "My house shall be called a house of prayer...but you have made it a den of thieves" (Mark 11), and according to John this event occurred at the very beginning of Jesus' ministry (John 2). Some readers believe that Jesus drove the money changers out of the temple twice: once at the beginning of the service, once at the end. But even this means that neither Mark nor John does not tell us the "whole truth," since each Gospel only contains one account of the expulsion from the temple. Furthermore, is this juxtaposition of the two events historically justified? If Jesus caused a disturbance in the temple early in his ministry, why didn't the authorities arrest him even then? If we understand that there can be inconsistencies in the Bible, we can see that the Gospels of Mark and John give different meanings to the episode of the expulsion from the temple, and therefore relate this event to different periods of Jesus' ministry. In this case, it is impossible to reconcile the two narratives from a historical perspective.

The same is true of Peter's denial of Jesus. In Mark's Gospel, Jesus tells Peter that Peter will deny him three times "before the rooster crows twice." In Matthew's Gospel, "before the rooster crows." So which statement is correct—two crows or one crow?

During my college years, I bought a book that was intended to explain such discrepancies. It was called "The Life of Christ in Stereo." Its author, Johnston Chaney, took four gospel accounts and combined them into one larger mega-narrative to show what *the authentic* gospel was like. The inconsistencies in the account of Peter's denial are cleverly avoided: Peter actually denied Jesus six times—three times before the rooster crowed, once, and three more times after the rooster crowed, twice. The same could explain why Peter denies Jesus in front of more than three different people (or groups of people) in various sources.

But again, to get rid of the interpretive streaks of the Gospels, the author had to write *his own* Gospel, unlike any other New Testament. But isn't it absurd to claim that only "my" Gospel, which I have assembled from four New Testament fragments, is true and accurate, while everything else is only partially true?

The same difficulties arise with the accounts of Jesus' resurrection. On the third day after his death, the women came to the tomb to anoint the body. And what did they see there? A young man, as Mark says, or two men (Luke), or an angel of the Lord (Matthew)? This discrepancy is usually

rejected by claiming that the women actually saw "two angels." This could explain everything else: why Matthew writes that they saw one angel (he only mentions one of the two angels, but does not deny that there was a second one), why Mark reports that it was a young man (angels appear in human form, although they remain angels, and Mark mentions only one of them, without denying the presence of a second one), and why Luke says that there were two people (because the angels appeared in human form). However, to explain such discrepancies, it must again be stated that the actual events do not correspond to any of the Gospel accounts, since none of the three evangelists directly states that the women saw "two angels."

As we will see shortly, the New Testament is full of other inconsistencies, including some that are much more difficult (and, in my opinion, almost impossible) to explain than the simple examples above. Inconsistencies are found not only between different books of the Bible, but also within the texts of the same books, a problem that scholars have long explained by the fact that the evangelists used different sources in their work, which sometimes differed from each other.

It is amazing how easy it is to miss such problems when reading the Gospels if we are not aware of them, but as soon as someone draws our attention to them, they immediately become apparent. For example, in the Gospel of John, Jesus performs his first miracle in the second chapter, turning water into wine (a miracle that is especially popular on college campuses), and we are told that "in this way Jesus began to do miracles" (John 2:11). Later in the same chapter, we read that Jesus performed "miracles" in Jerusalem (John 2:23). Finally, in the fourth chapter, he heals the official's son, and the author writes, "This was the second miracle that Jesus did" (John 4:54). Is that right? The first miracle, then miracles, and then the second miracle again? [1]\_\_

One of my favorite glaring inconsistencies—I read the Gospel of John for years before I suddenly realized how strange it sounded—is in Jesus' farewell discourse, his final address to his disciples during their last meal with them, which spans all of chapters 13-17. In John 13:36, Peter asks, "Lord!" A few verses later, Thomas says, "Lord, we do not know where you are going" (John 14:5). And a few minutes later, during the same meal, Jesus rebukes the disciples with the words, "But I am going to him who sent me, and none of you asks me, 'Where are you going?'" (John 16:5). Either Jesus' attention is too distracted, or something has happened to the sources for these chapters, and there is a strange inconsistency.

Such difficulties arise even more frequently when reading the Old Testament from its very beginning. Some people go to great lengths to smooth out all these rough edges, but a close look at them reveals that they are very difficult to reconcile. And why coordinate them? Perhaps they are just different texts. The description of creation in the first chapter of Genesis is strikingly different from the description in the second chapter of the same book. As can be seen from the Hebrew text, not only the choice of expressions and the style of presentation differ, but also the names of God differ in both sections, but the content of the sections also differs in many respects. It is enough to make list the events that occur in the first chapter in the order in which they appear in the text, then the same list for the second chapter and compare it with the first. When were the animals created in the presence of humans, as in the first chapter, or later, as in the second? When were the plants created, before or after humans? Is "man" the first living creature or the last? When were men and women created, at the same time or at different times? Even the text of the chapters is inconsistent: if "light" appeared on the first day of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, why did the sun, moon, and stars not appear until the fourth day? Where did the light come from if not from the sun, moon, and stars? How could there have been "evening and morning" for each of the first three days if the sun had not yet appeared?

And that's just the beginning. When Noah takes the animals into the ark, how many are there in total—seven pairs of "every clean beast," as in Genesis 7:2, or just two pairs, as in Genesis 7:9-10?

In the book of Exodus, God says to Moses, "I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob by the name 'God Almighty,' but by my name the Lord [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them" (Exodus 6:3). How does this fit with the earlier text in Genesis, in which God appears to Abraham as Lord: "And [God] said to him [Abraham], 'I am the Lord [Yahweh] who brought you out of the Chaldeans'" (Genesis 15:7)?

Or take one of my favorite passages, the ten plagues that Moses brought upon the Egyptians to force Pharaoh to "let his people go." The fifth was a plague that "killed all the livestock of Egypt" (Exodus 9:6). How, a few days later, at the hour of the seventh plague, "a great hailstorm" destroyed everything in the field, "both man and beast" (Ex.

9:24-25) What kind of cattle are we talking about?

A careful reading of the Bible, in addition to the many inconsistencies and contradictions, also presents other difficulties. When in which passages does the text reflect negative ideas about God and His people? Do we really believe that that God could order the brutal killing of an entire city? In the book of Joshua, God commands the Israelite soldiers to attack the city of Jericho and kill every man, woman, and child in it. What could they possibly have to do with sinfulness?

Or take a passage from Psalm 136, one of the most beautiful psalms, which begins with the memorable lines: "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." Here is a vivid account of a faithful Israelite dreaming of returning to Jerusalem, destroyed by the Babylonians, image. But at the end of the psalm, his praise of God and the holy city takes a violent turn: the one in whose name the psalm is spoken plans to take revenge on God's enemies: "Blessed is he who takes and dashes your little ones against a stone!" Are these words from the Bible?

The God of vengeance is not found only in the Old Testament, contrary to what some Christians claim. Even in the New Testament, he appears as a God of judgment and wrath, as every reader of Revelation knows. The lake of fire is already burning, prepared for all who rebel against God. The torment therein will continue "*forever and ever*" - eternal punishment awaits even those who have sinned from time to time for, say, twenty years. Twenty trillion years of torment for twenty years of unrighteous living, and that is just the beginning. Is it fitting for God to do this?

It should be emphasized that scholars and students who question such passages are not questioning God Himself. They are not simply trusting what *the Bible* says about God. Some of these scholars and continue to believe that the Bible is in some sense inspired, but others reject this idea. However, even if inspiration was given to the Bible writers, they were not absolutely infallible; they made mistakes. These mistakes include inconsistencies and contradictions, as well as erroneous judgments about God, who He was, and what He wanted. Did He really want His followers to smash the heads of enemy babies into rocks? Did He want unbelievers to be tortured for trillions of years?

Many seminarians have to resolve these issues themselves, trying to distance themselves from religious Bible studies, to which they were accustomed before seminary, and to get the opportunity to study the Bible from a scholarly perspective. Usually these questions arise from familiarization with the historical-critical approach to the Bible, which is characteristic of most large Protestant seminaries and is more or less

less considered "universally accepted" by Bible scholars in the United States and Europe.

According to this view, each author of the books of the Bible lived in a time and place that was different from ours today. Each author relied on cultural and religious assumptions that we do not share. The historical-critical method involves trying to understand what each of the biblical authors might have meant in the original context. According to this view, each author should be allowed to have his or her own opinion, to express his or her own opinion. In the New Testament, the author of Matthew does not say the same thing as the author of Luke. Mark's words do not match John's words. Paul's words do not match

James. The author of Revelation is different from the authors of all the other books. And if we consider the New Testament together with the Old, the confusion will only increase. The authors of the books of Job and Ecclesiastes unequivocally state that there is no life after death. The book of Amos states that God's people suffer because God is punishing them for their sins; the book of Job states that the innocent can suffer; and the book of Daniel states that the innocent not only can but will suffer. All of these books are different, each with its own meaning and subtext that is worth listening to.

### **From the seminary to the preacher's pulpit**

One of the most surprising and puzzling features of Christianity (its main currents) is This is what happens: seminarians who have studied the Bible in a historical-critical manner seem to forget it completely as soon as they become priests. They are taught to think critically about the Holy Scriptures, to learn about the inconsistencies and contradictions of the Holy Scriptures, to recognize various historical errors and inaccuracies, to realize how difficult it is to determine whether Moses really existed, what Jesus really said and did, to learn that there are other books that were once considered canonical but ultimately did not enter the Holy Scriptures (for example, other Gospels and the Apocalypse), to understand that many books of the Bible are signed with pseudonyms (for example, books by those who signed only the name of an apostle, but were not alone), to understand that in fact we do not have the originals of any of the books of the Bible, only copies, copies made after several centuries and changed. The students absorb all this information, but from the very beginning of the church service they seem to put it on a distant shelf. For reasons I will discuss at the end, priests are generally reluctant to share with their parishioners what they have learned about the Bible in seminary. I remember very well when I first realized this. At the time, I had just started teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and was still a Christian. The pastor of the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina a I was invited to give a four-week lecture series on the "historical Jesus." I agreed. In my lectures, I explained why it is difficult for historians to use the canonical gospels as historical sources—not only are there too many discrepancies, but they were written decades after Jesus' time by unknown authors who had obtained the details of his life in the form of oral traditions that had been greatly altered. I also explained how scholars had developed methods for reconstructing the events of Jesus' life, and I concluded the series with a detailed account of all the facts known about him. There was nothing new in my words, just standard seminary material that had been taught for fifty years. I had studied all of this material while I was studying at Princeton Seminary.

After the lectures, a beautiful old lady came up to me and asked, annoyed, "Why have I never heard of this?" I remember looking at the pastor talking to a couple of parishioners at the other end of the meeting room and wondering why the pastor didn't explain anything to my interlocutor. After all, he

also studied at Princeton Theological Seminary in the same program, which means that he knew the same material, having taught in a church adult school for more than five years. Why did he not share his knowledge of the Bible and the historical Jesus with the congregation? Of course, they had a right to this information. Perhaps he believed that his flock was "not ready" to receive it? Such a patronizing attitude is, unfortunately, all too common. Were you afraid of unnecessary difficulties and problems? Was he afraid that the historical information would destroy the faith of his parishioners? Or did he think that the church authorities would hardly approve of the dissemination of such knowledge? Did these authorities require him to adhere to a strictly religious approach to the Bible in all his sermons and teachings? And was he afraid of losing his job? I never found out answers to all these questions.

I don't mean to suggest that churches should become mini-universities and pastors should become professors lecturing from church pulpits. But one thing is clear: ministry is not just about preaching the "good news" weekly, whatever that may mean. It also involves training is provided. Most churches have adult education programs. Why don't adults learn too? The situation at the church where I lectured is far from an isolated case.

Every year, hundreds of students attend my Introduction to the New Testament in Chapel Hill. There are usually 300-350 students in the stream. Of course, I teach this course not from a confessional or religious point of view, to which most students who have received a church education have long been accustomed, but from a historical-critical point of view. The information and concepts that I offer to their attention do not have anything radical. The same opinions are characteristic of critical scholars who adhere to the historical views on the Bible, whether they themselves are believers or non-believers, Protestants, Catholics, Jews, agnostics, etc. I learned all of these views in seminary, and they are taught in theological seminaries and universities across the country. But this is the first time my students have encountered them, although most of them have spent a lot of time in Sunday schools and churches.

My students react to these views in different ways. The more conservative ones are usually the same age as me—convinced of the absolute truth of the Bible and ready to argue with anyone who doubts it. Some of them refuse to listen—they almost plug their ears and start humming to themselves so they won't hear anything that might make them question their beloved faith in the Bible. Others seek to free themselves from the grip of church and religion and absorb the information I provide with such fervor that it gives them the right to disbelieve.

In my opinion, neither total denial nor overzealousness in absorbing new ideas about the Bible is the ideal response. I prefer that students study the material diligently, reflect on it extensively, question its (and their own) claims and conclusions, try to understand how the material will affect the ideas about the Bible and Christianity that they were instilled in them as children, and carefully consider how it might affect them personally. Of course, one of my main goals is to encourage students to absorb the course material. After all, this is historical information about a historical religion, based on historical documents. These lessons are not intended to serve as a theological exercise to strengthen or weaken faith. But since the documents, with

we encounter are, for most students, documents that support faith, the historical-critical method we use in the classroom inevitably influences faith. /.../

## **Recognition of the historical-critical method**

At Princeton Seminary, having appreciated the potential value of the historical-critical method, I, like many other seminary students, began to apply this new (to me) approach—at first very cautiously, not wanting to give in to science right away. But eventually I saw a coherent and effective logic in it and I devoted myself wholeheartedly to studying the Bible from this perspective.

It is difficult for me to determine when I ceased to be a fundamentalist, a believer in the absolute inerrancy and verbal inspiration of the Bible. As I noted in *Misciting Jesus*, the basic fact for me from the beginning was that we do not have any originals of the books of the Bible, but only copies made later, in many cases many centuries later. It gradually began to seem more and more ridiculous to me that God sent these texts from the first to the last word, because we do not actually have these words, because the texts have indeed been changed in many places, and while most of the changes are insignificant, there are many really important ones among them. If God wanted to give us his words, why did he not keep them in their original form?

Around the same time that I began to question the revelation of God's words to the Bible, the historical-critical impact of Bible study began to set in. I began to see inconsistencies in the text.

I noticed that some of the books of the Bible were inconsistent with each other. I was convinced by the argument, that some of these books were not written by those to whom their authorship was attributed. And I gradually realized that many traditional Christian principles that I had long been accustomed to accept without question, such as the divinity of Christ and the Trinity, were not present in the early New Testament traditions, which had developed over time and gradually deviated from the original teachings of Christ and his apostles.

All of these insights left a deep mark on my faith—and, I believe, on the faith of many of my fellow seminarians at the time and today. But unlike most of my classmates, I did not return to a religious view of the Bible the day I received my Master of Divinity degree. Instead, I began studying the Bible from a historical perspective with a new zeal to learn all I could about the Christian faith that I believed the Bible taught. I entered seminary as a “born-again” fundamentalist and graduated as a liberal-minded evangelical Christian who still sees the Bible as a repository of important teachings that God intended for his people, but also

a book full of human concepts and mistakes.

Over time, my views continued to evolve. I didn't suddenly become an evangelical agnostic.

On the contrary, almost fifteen years after I stopped considering the Bible as inspired, I continued to be a convinced Christian—I went to church, I believed in God, I confessed. Gradually

I lean toward liberalism. My own research has led me to question important aspects of my faith. Eventually, shortly after graduating from seminary, I reached a point where I still believed strongly in God, but I understood the Bible metaphorically rather than literally: I believed that the Bible contained inspired texts that could lead to real and valuable reflections on God, but were nevertheless the fruit of human labor, with various errors that could arise from human intervention.

Then came the moment when I lost my faith. It was not because I held a historical-critical view, but because I could no longer reconcile my belief in God with the world around me. I answered this question in my book, *The God Problem: How the Bible Doesn't Answer Our Most Burning Question—Why Do We Suffer?* There is so much pointless pain and sorrow in the world that I can't believe that there is a good and loving God to whom everything is subject.

All this is the subject of another book, but it has some relevance to this one, because the fifteen years during which I abandoned the evangelical faith and became an agnostic were inextricably linked to the historical-critical method of studying the Bible, especially the New Testament. Here I want to emphasize the idea that which I will try to focus on in the final chapter. *I do not believe in any way* that the historical-critical method inevitably leads to a loss of faith.

All of my close (and not-so-close) friends who study the New Testament agree with many of my views on the historical New Testament, the historical Jesus, the formation and development of the Christian faith, and so on. Even if we disagree on some points (and this happens because we are scholars first and foremost), we do not dispute historical methods and the basic conclusions they allow us to draw. Nevertheless, all of these friends remain committed Christians. Some teach in universities, others in seminaries and other theological training institutions. Still others are ordained to the ministry. Most of them play an active role in the church.

The historical-critical approach to the Bible shocked many of them during their seminary years, but their faith withstood the shock. In my case, the historical-critical approach led me to question not only the superficial aspects of my faith, but also its very essence. However, it was not the historical-critical approach to the Bible that led me to agnosticism, but the problem of suffering.

This book is not, therefore, about how I lost my faith. But some questions of faith, especially faith in the Bible as the historically inerrant, inspired Word of God, cannot be unshaken by what we historically critical believers know about the Bible. The views expressed in this book are typical of scholars. I do not know of any biblical scholar who has learned anything new from this book, but some scholars would like to challenge some of its conclusions. In theory, priests also have little to learn from it, since this material is widely taught in seminaries and other theological schools. However,

people from the streets and church pews are new to all this information. This is truly a regrettable circumstance that should have been eliminated long ago.

## **2. A WORLD OF INCONFORMITIES**

When students are introduced to the historical and religious approach to Bible study, the first thing they learn is that the biblical texts, whether Old Testament or New Testament, are full of discrepancies, many of which cannot be reconciled. Some of these discrepancies are mere details, minor discrepancies between books: the number of soldiers, the year of a ruler's reign, the path of an apostle. Sometimes seemingly insignificant differences can make a huge difference in interpreting a book, reconstructing the events of ancient Israelite history, and constructing a biography of the historical Jesus. Finally, there are differences on important issues, where one writer presents one view (how was the world created? why do God's people suffer? what is the significance of Jesus' death?) and another author presents another. Sometimes these views simply differ, and sometimes they directly contradict each other.

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the important and notable inconsistencies in the Bible that come to mind when you study it from a historical perspective. Since I specialize in the New Testament, I will focus primarily on the inconsistencies in the New Testament, but

Believe me, there are similar discrepancies in the Old Testament—in fact, there are even more discrepancies. While the New Testament, consisting of twenty-seven books, was supposedly written by sixteen to seventeen authors over a period of more than seventy years, the Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, consists of thirty-nine books, written by

dozens of authors over at least six hundred years. There is plenty of room for inconsistencies here, and if you look for them, there will be plenty.

I am not simply emphasizing that the Bible is full of contradictions, as will be explained in more detail at the end of this chapter. Sometimes my students think that this is what I am leading them to—that if the Bible has so many contradictions, then it is “unbelievable.” But this is not the final conclusion, although the contradictions in the Bible cause some problems for people associated with the Christian faith (but not for all Christians). Recognizing that the Bible has contradictions is important for other reasons as well. However, it is better to list all the arguments at the end of the chapter rather than at the beginning: it is always good to understand what the data *is* and not jump to conclusions about what they *mean*.

My purpose is not to look for every discrepancy in the New Testament, but to point out only the most striking or significant ones. I will begin with the Gospels, then move on to the writings of the apostle Paul. In this discussion I will not touch upon the crucial question of the true authorship of these books (who wrote them—Jesus’ disciples, the apostles’ companions, later Christians?). That is the subject of a later chapter. For now, it will suffice to note that no matter who wrote these books, they sometimes disagree with each other.

Why do not only inattentive but also enthusiastic readers of the Bible never notice these discrepancies, especially since some of them, if you pay attention to them, become more than obvious? I think it all depends on the method of reading these books. Most people just reading the Bible, a passage here, a passage there, opening it at random, choosing a chapter, reading it and trying to understand what it means.

They make little effort to carefully compare the passage they have chosen with other similar passages from other books. If you read a fragment here, a paragraph there, they will all look like the Bible. But Historical textual research requires careful reading and comparison of texts down to the smallest detail.

However, even diligent readers of the Bible often fail to notice the inconsistencies in its books, again because they choose the wrong way to read. Most readers, unlike those who evaluate the Bible critically, historically, read the books in the order in which they are presented.

This is a reasonable approach, after all, the same way we read *most* anthologies.

Anyone who wants to study the New Testament opens the Gospel of Matthew and begins to read from the first verse of the first chapter to the very end of the book, in order to find out what Matthew tells about the life of Jesus. Then comes the turn of the Gospel of Mark, also read from beginning to end, and it turns out that it is very similar to the work of Matthew. Many episodes are repeated, often the same events are told in the same words, although there are other inclusions here, but in general the books are similar. After that, the Gospel of Luke is studied from the beginning

until the end. And everything repeats itself: the same or similar stories, similar words and sayings.

When you read the Gospel of John, you may notice some differences, but in essence this book looks like the others: it is an account of the words and actions of Jesus before his appearance.

In Jerusalem, a story of betrayal, imprisonment, crucifixion, and resurrection.

Reading any book from beginning to end is the most natural way. I call it "vertical reading." You start at the top of the page and work your way down, from the beginning of the book to the end. There's nothing wrong with reading the Gospels in the same way, because that's what they're meant to be read. But there's another way to read them -

"horizontal." In horizontal reading, the story from one gospel is examined first, followed by the same story from another gospel, as if they were placed side by side on the page, in the form of two columns of text. At the same time, a detailed comparison of all the details is carried out[3].

The "horizontal reading of the Gospels" leads to all sorts of differences and inconsistencies. Sometimes they are simply variations on the same things, in some cases important for understanding what one evangelist or another wanted to emphasize, but not contradictory to each other. For example, if you read the accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke horizontally, you notice that Matthew talks about the wise men who came to worship Jesus, and Luke talks about the shepherds. There are no shepherds in Matthew's Gospel, there are no wise men in Luke's Gospel. This is not a contradiction: Matthew seeks (for important reasons, as it turns out) to talk about the wise men, Luke (for other reasons) about the shepherds.

Then there are differences that, while not seeming to be obvious contradictions, are nevertheless inconsistent with each other. I have already mentioned the expulsion of the merchants from the temple, described in Mark 11 and John 2. In the first source, this event occurs a week before Jesus' death; in the book of John, it is the first event in his three years of ministry to be publicly reported. This is not a contradiction in the strict sense of the word: with the help of creativity, it is easy to find a convincing explanation for the accuracy of both accounts. As discussed in the previous chapter, Jesus could have driven the merchants out of the temple twice: once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end. But such an explanation seems far-fetched, raising the question: why then was he not arrested the first time?

Furthermore, this explanation implies that in order to connect the accounts of Mark and John, it is necessary to construct a new version of the Gospel from them, which would differ from the two readings, since instead of one expulsion from the temple, two would appear.

There are other differences which, many proponents of the historical-critical method believe, simply cannot be reconciled without forcible alteration of the text. We will discuss some of these differences later in this chapter, and I will not spoil the pleasure by giving the most interesting examples in advance. For the point here is that readers do not notice the differences because they are used to them. to read the Bible only one way, vertically, while the historical approach offers another useful way of reading it, horizontally.

If you are interested in finding the differences yourself, it is very easy to do. Take the Gospel stories, for example, stories about Jesus' birth, the healing of Jairus' daughter, the crucifixion, the resurrection – any of these will do. Read the story of your choice in one gospel and make a coherent and detailed list of the events, then read the same story in another gospel and carefully write it down again. Finally, compare the lists. In some cases, the differences are small, but sometimes they make a difference, even if they seem insignificant at first glance. This is also true of my first example. The simple and fundamental question we are facing, Can we say unequivocally: when did Jesus die? In other words, on what day and at what time of day did Jesus die on the cross? It turns out that you can answer that question in different ways, depending on which Gospel you read.

Introductory example: The death of Jesus in the Gospels of Mark and John

This is an example of a discrepancy in the New Testament that I often cite in my conversations with students. It's a textbook example because Mark and John give detailed information about the death of Jesus. And he dies in each Gospel at his own time.

The Gospel of Mark was probably the first of these. Scholars have long established that it appeared about 35-40 years after Jesus' death, probably between 65-70 AD. The first

Ten chapters of Mark's Gospel are devoted to Jesus' public ministry in Galilee, northern Israel, where he teaches, heals the sick, casts out demons, and encounters his Jewish Pharisee opponents. After completing this period of his life, he went to Jerusalem for the Jewish Passover; there he was arrested and executed on the cross (chapters 11-16).

Important contextual information will help me understand the dating of Mark's (and John's) crucifixion, which will now be described. In Jesus' day, Passover, which was celebrated annually, was the main Jewish holiday. It recalled the events of the Exodus that had taken place several centuries earlier, in the time of Moses, as described in the Old Testament book of Exodus (Exodus 5–15). According to this text, the children of Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for four hundred years, but God heard their prayers and sent them a deliverer, Moses. Moses was sent to Pharaoh and declared that God had commanded him to "let my people go." But the hardhearted Pharaoh refused. To convince him, God authorized Moses to unleash ten plagues on the Egyptians, including the last, most terrible of them—"all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast."

The Israelites were instructed to avoid a similar fate for their children. Each family was to sacrifice a lamb, take its blood, and "smear it on the two doorposts and on the lintel" of the houses in which they lived. The angel of death, who appeared at night, was to see the blood on the door and "pass over" (Hebrew "Pesach" - "died", "passed over", hence the name Passover).

In the houses of Israel and in the houses where there is no blood on the doorposts, to kill the firstborn. And so it happened. The grief-stricken Pharaoh ordered the Israelites (600,000 men, as well as women and children) to leave his land. However, after the Israelites left, Pharaoh changed his mind, led his army, and pursued his former slaves. He pursued them all the way to the Red Sea (Hebrew: יַם סוּף, or Yam-Suf, "sea of reeds"), but God performed another miracle: with his help, Moses commanded the waters of the sea to part so that the children of Israel could pass "through the midst of the sea on dry ground." When the Egyptian army pursued them, God commanded the waters to close again, and they drowned the entire army.

Thus Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt. God commanded Moses to celebrate this event from then on with a special meal—the annual Passover (Exodus 12). In Jesus' day, Jews from all over the world would flock to Jerusalem for the feast. On the eve of the Passover meal, Jews would bring a lamb (lamb) to the temple in Jerusalem, or more often they would buy it there and give it to the priests to slaughter. The lamb was then taken home and prepared for the meal. All of this took place on "the Friday before Passover"—the day of preparation.

So the only thing that can cause confusion is the ancient Jewish idea of time - the same as modern Jews. The current "Sabbath" is literally "Saturday", but according to tradition it begins on Friday evening, when it gets dark. The fact is that in traditional Judaism a new day comes when darkness falls, in the evening. (That's why in Genesis,

(When God created the heavens and the earth, we are told that "there was evening and there was morning, the first day"—a day was made up of night and day, not day and night.) Therefore, the Sabbath begins on Friday evening, and each new day begins with the darkness of evening.

On the Friday before Easter, the lamb was slaughtered, and in the afternoon they prepared to eat. It was to begin in the evening, with the beginning of a new day - Easter Day. The meal consisted of symbolic dishes: lamb meat in memory of the first lambs slaughtered during the Exodus; bitter herbs, reminiscent of the bitterness of Egyptian slavery; unleavened bread (unleavened, unleavened bread), because the flight from Egypt was hasty, the dough "had not yet risen", unleavened cakes and several wine spells were baked from it. Therefore, Easter Day begins with dinner and lasts about twenty-four hours, all morning and the next day, after which the first day after Easter begins.

Now let us return to Mark's account of Jesus' death. He and his disciples have come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. In Mark 14:12, the disciples ask Jesus where they should prepare the Passover meal that evening. In other words, it is the Friday before Easter. Jesus gives them instructions. The disciples prepare everything they need, and when evening comes, the beginning of the Passover day, they begin to eat it. It is truly special. By mentioning the symbolic Passover meal, Jesus gives it additional symbolic meaning. He takes unleavened bread, breaks it, and says: "This is my body."

It is believed that his body must be crushed for salvation. After the meal, he takes a cup of wine and says, "This is my blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:22-25), which means that his blood must be shed.

After eating the Passover meal, the disciples go to Gethsemane to pray. Judas Iscariot leads the guards and carries out the betrayal. Jesus is brought before the Jewish authorities. After a night in prison, in the morning he is brought before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, who finds Jesus guilty and "delivers him to be crucified." We are told that Jesus was crucified that same day, at nine o'clock in the morning (Mark 15:25). This means that Jesus dies on Passover day, the morning after the Passover meal.

Everything in Mark's Gospel is clear and understandable, but despite the general similarity, his account does not correspond to the account of the same events in the Gospel of John, which in itself seems just as clear and understandable. John also comes to Jerusalem in the last week of his life to celebrate the Passover, which is followed by the Last Supper, betrayal, trial by Pilate, and death on the cross. Surprisingly, in the Gospel of John, at the beginning of this account, the disciples do not ask Jesus where to prepare the Passover meal. Therefore, he does not give them instructions about it. They eat everything that is cooked together, but in John Jesus does not say anything, that the bread is his body and the wine is his blood. Instead, he washes the disciples' feet, which is not mentioned in any other Gospel (John 13:1-20).

After the meal, they go "across the brook Kidron, where there was a garden." Judas betrays Jesus, he is brought before the Jewish authorities, and after a night in prison, he is brought before Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty. and delivers him to be crucified. And we are told exactly when Pilate uttered this sentence: "Now it was the day of preparation for the passover, and about noon" (John 19:14).

"About noon"? "The day of preparation for Passover"? The day when the lambs are brought to the slaughter? How is this possible? In Mark's Gospel, Jesus lived all day, told his disciples to prepare the Passover meal, ate with them, then was arrested, spent the night in prison, appeared in court the next morning, and was killed on Passover day, at nine o'clock in the morning. But not in John's Gospel. In it, Jesus dies the day before, on the day of preparation for Passover, in the afternoon.

In my opinion, it is impossible to find an explanation for this discrepancy. Of course, people have tried such attempts many times. Some have pointed out that Mark also says that Jesus died Friday (Mark 15:42). Quite right, except that these readers did not notice that Mark immediately clarifies his phrase - "it was the day of preparation for the Sabbath," *not* the day before Passover. In other words, for Mark it is not the day before the Passover meal, but the day before the Sabbath; it is called "the day of preparation" because the Sabbath food was to be prepared on Friday afternoon.

Here is where the contradiction lies: In Mark's case, Jesus eats the Passover meal (on Thursday evening) and dies on the cross the next morning. In John's, Jesus does not attend the Passover meal—he is executed the day before the Passover meal. Furthermore, in Mark's case, Jesus was crucified at nine o'clock in the morning, while in John's case, he was not condemned until noon and then executed.

Some scholars suggest that this discrepancy between the gospels is because not all Jews celebrated Passover on the same day of the week. This explanation sounds plausible—until you look at this information and think about it. Yes, some sects not affiliated with the Jerusalem temple believed that the religious authorities were following the wrong calendar. But in both Mark and John, Jesus is not outside Jerusalem or among sectarian Jews: he is in Jerusalem, where the lambs are led to the slaughter. And in Jerusalem, Passover was celebrated only once a year. The priests of Jerusalem did not adapt to the whims of the calendar of a few marginal sects.

What conclusions can be drawn from this contradiction? Again, on one level it seems relatively insignificant. What difference does it make when and what happened, on that day or the next? The important thing is that Jesus was crucified, right?

Both true and false. Another question arises, but not "Was Jesus crucified?" but "What does the crucifixion of Jesus mean?" The meaning of such trifles, I explain to my students, is that nowadays, when a murder occurs and the police arrive at the scene of the crime, the search for evidence begins, down to the smallest clues, looking for fingerprints or hairs on the floor. Looking You can ask a very reasonable question about what they are doing: "What are you doing? Can't you see that there is a corpse lying in front of you? Why do you need to look for fingerprints?" But even the most insignificant piece of evidence sometimes helps to solve a case. Who killed this person and why? It is the same with the Gospels. Sometimes even insignificant evidence can become an important clue that helps us understand the author's ideas about the events that took place.

I cannot give a detailed analysis here, but I will point out an important feature of the Gospel of John, written in the last canonical Gospel, probably twenty-five years after the Gospel of Mark. Only John says that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, "who takes away the sin of the world." This is stated by John the Baptist at the very beginning of the story (John 1:29) and six verses later (John 1:36). So why did John, the author of the last canonical gospel, change the day and time of Jesus' death? Perhaps because in John's gospel, Jesus is the Passover lamb, whose sacrifice will provide deliverance from sin. Like the Passover lamb, Jesus must die on the same day (the Day of Preparation) and at the same time (shortly after noon) that the Passover lambs are brought to be slaughtered at the temple.

In other words, John changed the historical date to emphasize a theological point: Jesus is the sacrificial lamb. And in order to make this theological point, John had to create a discrepancy between his own and the other accounts.

This preliminary investigation of one small discrepancy leads to several conclusions, which I will argue at the end of the chapter.

- There are inconsistencies in the books of the New Testament.
- Some of these discrepancies cannot be reconciled.
- Mark's and John's accounts cannot be historically accurate because they contradict each other on the issue of Jesus' death.
- To understand what each author is trying to express, you must look at the details of each story and never assume that all stories say the same thing.

The Gospel of John differs from the Gospel of Mark on a fundamental, though seemingly insignificant, point. If we want to understand what John says about Jesus, we should not try to reconcile the differences, otherwise we will miss the meaning of his words.

### **Discrepancies in the accounts of Jesus' birth and life**

Let us now turn to the discrepancies in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' life, beginning with his birth. I have arbitrarily separated the differences that I find particularly important from those that may seem relatively minor or merely interesting. I would like to emphasize again that I am not giving here every possible example of discrepancies: to analyze them would require a whole volume.

#### **The birth of Jesus**

The New Testament tells of the birth of Jesus in only two passages: Matthew and Luke, in the first chapters of the Gospels. Mark and John do not mention his virgin birth, his birth in Bethlehem, or other details of Christmas: in these two Gospels Jesus first appears to us as an adult. The details of his birth are not recorded by Paul or the other New Testament writers. Therefore, everything people know – or think they know – about Christmas they know only from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The story we remember each December is actually a combination of two different Gospel stories, a combination of details from one and the other, creating one large and coherent narrative. In fact, these stories do not always agree with each other. They are not just completely different stories of Jesus' birth: some of their discrepancies cannot be reconciled (and some of the discrepancies do not stand the test of historical reliability, but that is another matter).

The easiest way to identify these discrepancies is to summarize both accounts. Matthew 1:18-2:23 The Christmas story is told as follows: After Mary and Joseph were engaged, it was discovered that Mary was pregnant. Of course, suspecting the worst, Joseph was about to divorce her, but in a dream he was told that Mary had conceived by the Holy Spirit.[8] They married, and Jesus was born. Wise men from the east came to Jerusalem in the star and asked where the king of the Jews was born. King Herod gathered the chief priests and the scribes and learned that the king was coming from Bethlehem. This is what Herod says to the wise men as they go to Bethlehem, again following the star that stopped above the house where Jesus' family lived. The Magi bring him gifts, and then, warned

in a dream, does not return to Herod to report everything, as he had commanded, but goes to his own country. Herod, as king, is afraid of the competition of the newly born king and orders the army to kill all the males under two years old in Bethlehem and its surroundings. However, Joseph is warned in a dream about the danger. Together with Mary and Jesus, he flees the city to Egypt. Later, in Egypt, Joseph learns again in a dream that Herod has died and that now they can return to their homeland. But when they learn that Herod's son Archelaus has become ruler, they decide not to return, but to go north, to the borders of Galilee and the city of Nazareth. Jesus grows up there.

The peculiarity of the narrative in the Gospel of Matthew, which distinguishes it from the narrative in Luke, lies in that the author constantly reminds us of the fulfilled prophecy: "And all this was done to fulfill "that which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet" (Matthew 1:22), "thus it was written through the prophet" (Matthew 2:6), "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophet" (2:17), "that it might be fulfilled which was spoken through the prophets" (Matthew 2:23). In other words, the birth of Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecies of the Holy Scriptures. Luke would probably not dispute this, but he is silent about the prophecies. However, there are two things he agrees with Matthew on: Jesus' mother was a virgin, and he himself was born in Bethlehem. At the same time, Luke's text, where these two points appear, is strikingly different from Matthew's.

Luke's longer version (Luke 1:4–2:40) begins with a long account of an angel announcing that the "barren" woman Elizabeth would give birth to John (the Baptist) - according to Luke, Jesus' cousin (Elizabeth and Mary are related: Luke is the only New Testament writer who mentioned it). Luke writes that Mary was "a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph." Then an angel appears to her and tells her that she too will conceive by the Holy Spirit and give birth to the Son of God. Mary visits Elizabeth, who is now six months pregnant, and the baby in her womb "leaps" for joy because "the Mother of the Lord has come to him." Mary breaks out into song. John the Baptist is born, and his father, Zechariah, begins to prophesy. And then we move on to the actual story of Jesus' birth.

By decree of the Roman Emperor Augustus, every inhabitant of the empire was to be included in the census lists; we are told that at the time of the first census, Quirinius was the Roman governor of Syria. When the census began, everyone had to return to their ancestral homeland. Since Joseph's ancestral homeland was in Bethlehem (he was descended from King David, who was born there), he went there with Mary, to whom he was engaged. While staying in Bethlehem, she gave birth to Jesus, wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, "because there was no room for them in the inn." An angel appeared to shepherds in the field and announced to them that the Messiah (Savior) had been born in Bethlehem; they went to worship the child. Eight days later, Jesus was circumcised. Then he was presented to God in the temple, and his parents offered the sacrifice prescribed for such an occasion by the Law of Moses. The righteous and pious man Simeon and the elderly, pious widow Anna recognized Jesus as the Messiah. When Joseph and Mary "had done everything according to the law of the Lord," celebrating the birth of their firstborn, they returned to Nazareth, where Jesus grew up.

The "law of the Lord" repeatedly mentioned in this description is Leviticus 12, which states that offerings to the temple must be made thirty-three days after the birth of a child.

Before we begin to analyze the differences between these two descriptions, it should be noted that historians face serious difficulties in studying both. For example, what does the behavior of the star mean? In the Gospel of Matthew, having led the wise men to Jerusalem, first stopping above it, then to Bethlehem

and finally hovering over the house where Jesus was born? What kind of star is this? A star that moves so slowly that the wise men can follow it on foot or on camels, then stops, starts moving again, and stops again? How exactly did the star stop over the house? I invite my students to go outside on a clear, starry night, pick out one of the brightest stars in the sky, and try to determine which of the houses in their neighborhood it ended up over. It is clear that a miraculous event is described here, but it is still very difficult to understand what the author had in mind.

Most likely not a real star, not a nova, not a comet or other astronomical phenomenon.

Speaking of historical authenticity, I will also point out that none of the ancient

There is no information in the sources about the massacre of infants on the orders of King Herod either in Bethlehem or elsewhere. This event is not mentioned by any biblical or other author. Is this detail, like the details of Jesus' death in the Gospel of John, provided by Matthew merely to emphasize some theological point?

Even more serious historical difficulties arise when studying the Gospel of Luke. First, we have a relatively abundant source of information about the reign of Augustus, and none of them mentions a census taken throughout the empire, which required all its inhabitants to return to their ancestral homeland. Is it even possible to imagine such a thing? Joseph returns to Bethlehem, because his ancestor David was born there. But David lived a thousand years before Joseph. Did every inhabitant of the Roman Empire have to return to the place where their ancestors lived a thousand years earlier? If such a global census were announced now and each of us had to return to the homeland of our ancestors a thousand years ago, where would *you* go? Can you imagine how the normal flow of life would be disrupted by such a universal result? Can you imagine that such a grandiose idea would not be mentioned in any newspaper?

There is no information about such a census in any of the ancient sources except the Gospel of Luke. Why does Luke write about it? The answer may seem obvious. Luke wants Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, although he knows about his arrival from Nazareth. So does Matthew, who translates

Jesus was born in Bethlehem differently.

The differences between these narratives are striking. In short, not everything that appears in Matthew is not in Luke, and not everything that appears in Luke is mentioned in Matthew. The visions that appeared to Joseph in a dream and are described in Matthew are not in Luke; Luke writes about the appearance of angels to Elizabeth and Mary, but there is nothing of the kind in Matthew. In Matthew, the Magi, the massacre of the innocent by Herod, the flight into Egypt, the Holy Family returning to Nazareth bypassing Judea: Luke has none of this. Luke writes about the birth of John the Baptist, the census announced by Caesar, the journey to Bethlehem, the manger and inn, the shepherds, the circumcision, the presentation in the temple, and the return home immediately after, but Matthew is silent about all this.

One might assume that Matthew simply tells one part of the story and Luke tells another, so we have every right to include the wise men, the shepherds, the journey from Nazareth, and the flight into Egypt in the traditional Christmas spectacle every December. The problem is different: upon closer examination the stories reveal not only minor differences, but also inconsistencies that are difficult, if not impossible, to explain.

If the Gospels are correct and Jesus was indeed born during the reign of Herod, then Luke was wrong and Jesus could not have been born during the reign of Quirinius in Syria. From many other historical sources,

including the Roman historian Tacitus, the Jewish historian Josephus, and several ancient inscriptions, we know that Quirinius became governor of Syria only in 6 BC, ten years after Herod's death.

A careful comparison of the two accounts also reveals internal discrepancies. To get closer to this problem, one might ask: In which city did Joseph and Mary live, according to Matthew? Of course, you would say: "Nazareth." However, only Luke writes about this, and Matthew does not tell us anything like that. For the first time, he mentions Joseph and Mary in connection with Bethlehem, not Nazareth. The wise men, following the star (probably a long journey), arrive to worship Jesus in his *house* in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary obviously live there. In addition, during the massacre of infants, Herod orders the killing of all male children under two years old. This would mean that Jesus was born before the arrival of the wise men. Otherwise, Herod's orders are meaningless: of course, even Roman soldiers are able to distinguish a child who has already learned to walk from a baby born a week earlier. This means that Joseph and Mary continued to live in Bethlehem for several months or even a whole year after Jesus was born. But how can Luke be right in saying that they came from Nazareth and returned there a little more than a month after Jesus was born? Moreover, according to Matthew, after fleeing to Egypt and returning from there after Herod's death, the family

They gather first in Judea, where Bethlehem is located.

But this is impossible, because Archelaus has become ruler, and the family settles in Nazareth. In Matthew's account, these people are actually not from Nazareth, but from Bethlehem.

But even more obvious is the discrepancy regarding the events after Jesus' birth. If Matthew is correct and the family fled to Egypt, how can Luke be correct in stating that she went directly to Nazareth?

In short, it is incredibly difficult to look at the story of Jesus' birth. The historically inaccurate details and discrepancies are simply impossible to explain. Why is there such a big difference? To some readers, the answer may seem obvious. Proponents of the historical-critical method have long argued that one of the goals of the evangelist writers was to emphasize two things: that Jesus' mother was a virgin and that he was born in Bethlehem. But why did he have to be born

In Bethlehem? Matthew has a clue: in the book of the Old Testament prophet Micah there is a prophecy according to which the Savior will appear from Bethlehem. What did the evangelists deal with the fact of Jesus' coming from Nazareth, which was widely known? They had to find a reason why he grew up in Nazareth, a remote and unknown city in Galilee, although in fact he was born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of King David, the royal ancestor of the Messiah. To make Jesus born in Bethlehem, but raised in Nazareth, Matthew and Luke independently find solutions that must have seemed convincing and convincing to each of them. However, historians have managed to identify the weaknesses of each story, and a thoughtful reader, having collected these stories (using the "horizontal reading" method), will probably notice that they differ on several key issues.

## **Genealogies of Jesus**

Genealogies are passages in the Bible that few readers enjoy. When my students complain that I ask them to read the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, I encourage them to take a Jewish Bible study course and read the genealogy in 1 Chronicles. It runs to nine chapters, with names following names. By comparison, the genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke seem comfortingly short. But the fact is that they are different from each other.

Again, the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are the only two of the four that list Jesus' ancestors. Both presents a genealogy through the line of Joseph and his Jewish ancestors. This is puzzling in itself. As we have seen, both Matthew and Luke emphasize the virginity of Jesus' mother: she conceived not Joseph, but The Holy Spirit. Joseph is not the father of Jesus. But this leads to an obvious problem. If Jesus is not related to Joseph by blood, why would Matthew and Luke have to present their genealogy through Joseph's line? Neither one nor the other answers this question: both gospels contain a genealogy that cannot be the genealogy of Jesus, since he is related only to Mary, whose genealogy is not provided by either author.

In addition to this general problem, there are several clear differences between the genealogies in Matthew 1 and Luke 3. Some of these are not fundamental differences in themselves, only differences in detail. For example, Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy, while Luke presents it after Jesus' baptism. description, in the third chapter (an odd choice of place for the genealogy, as it relates directly to the birth, not the baptism at thirty, but if Luke placed it in the third chapter, (perhaps he had a reason for this.) Matthew's genealogy goes back through Joseph to King David, the ancestor of the Messiah, and then to Abraham, the father of the Jews. Luke goes even further, tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Adam, the father of mankind.

My aunt, a genealogist, is proud to have traced her family's ancestry back to one of the Mayflower passengers. And here we see a genealogy that goes back to Adam, the very first man created with Eve. Wonderful origin.

The question inevitably arises as to why the two authors chose different genealogical results. It is generally believed that Matthew, who sought to emphasize Jesus' Jewish identity in his Gospel, emphasized his kinship with the greatest Jewish king, David, and the Jewish father, Abraham. On the other hand, Luke claimed that Jesus is the Savior of all people, both Jews and non-Jews, as evidenced by Luke's second book, "Acts," which brings Gentiles into the church. Thus, Luke attempts to emphasize Jesus' kinship with us all through Adam.

Another difference between these two genealogies is that Matthew's genealogy starts at the beginning, with Abraham, and goes generation by generation to Joseph, while Luke's genealogy has the opposite direction, starting from Joseph and going back to Adam.

But all of the above are just differences between the two narratives. The main difficulty is that these two genealogies are fundamentally different. The easiest way to determine this is to The difference is a simple question: who is Joseph's father, paternal grandfather, and great-grandfather in each genealogy? In Matthew, Joseph is preceded by Jacob, Matthan by Matthan, Eleazar by Eleazar, Eleazar by Eliud, etc. Luke's genealogy goes from Joseph to Elijah, Moth, Levi, and Melchi. The genealogies are similar only after King David (although they have new problems in the future, as we will see shortly), but they do not agree with each other between David and Joseph.

How to resolve this difficulty? The typical explanation is that Matthew gives Joseph's genealogy because Matthew mentions him more often in the account of Jesus' birth, while Luke gives Mary's genealogy because it is emphasized in his account of Jesus' birth. However, this tempting solution has a fatal flaw. Luke makes it clear that this is Joseph's family, not Mary's (Luke 3:23; see also Matthew 1:16).

And that's not all the trouble. In some ways, Mark's genealogy is more remarkable because it emphasizes the numerological significance of Jesus' lineage. There are fourteen generations between Abraham and David, Israel's greatest king; there are fourteen generations between David's destruction by the Babylonians, Israel's greatest calamity; and there are fourteen generations between the migration to Babylon and Jesus' birth (Matthew 1:17). Three times fourteen, as if God himself had planned it. In Matthew's view, that was the case. A significant and far-reaching event occurred at the turn of the fourteenth generation. This meant that Jesus, a member of the fourteenth generation, was also very important to God.

But the fact is that the harmonious scheme of "three times fourteen" does not work. If we carefully read and count all the names, it turns out that the third group includes not fourteen, but thirteen generations. Moreover, it is very easy to compare the genealogy of Matthew with its source, the Hebrew Bible, from which the names of the genealogy were taken. In doing so, it becomes clear that Matthew omitted several names in the generation group from David to the migration to Babylon. In Matthew 1:8, he writes that Jehoram begot Uzziah. However, from 1 Chronicles 3:10-12 we know that Jehoram was not Uzziah's father, but his great-grandfather. In other words, Matthew omitted three generations from the genealogy. For what? The answer is obvious. If he had included *all* the generations, he could not have claimed that every fourteenth was a significant event.

But why was it so important for him to keep the number fourteen? Why not seventeen and eleven? Over the years, scholars have put forward several hypotheses. Some have said that the perfect The number seven in the Bible. What is fourteen then? Twice seven. This means that the genealogy is "doubly perfect." According to another, perhaps more convincing theory, the genealogy was intended to emphasize Jesus' status as the Messiah. The Messiah must be the "son of David," the most famous A descendant of the king of Israel. It is important to know that in ancient languages, the letters of the alphabet also served as numbers: the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, "aleph," meant one, the second, "bet," meant two, the third "gimel" meant three, and so on. In addition, in Hebrew, vowels were omitted in writing, so the name "David" looked like "DVD". The letter D ("dalet") stood for four, the letter B ("vav") for six. If you add up the numbers corresponding to the letters of David's name, you get fourteen. Perhaps this is why Matthew wanted the genealogy of Jesus, the son of David, the Messiah, to be made up of three groups of fourteen generations each.

Unfortunately, he had to eliminate several names for this purpose. It can also be noted that if Matthew was correct in his "three times fourteen" scheme, then there must be 42 names in the genealogy of Abraham and Jesus. And Luke's genealogy has 57 names. These are different genealogies.

What is the reason for such discrepancies? Each writer had his own goal, or rather several goals, in compiling genealogies: to show the connection of Jesus with Abraham, the father of the Jews (this is especially clear in the book of Matthew), with the great Jewish king David (Matthew), and with all mankind (Luke). These authors probably inherited, and perhaps compiled, various genealogies. None of them, of course, suspected that his story would end up in the New Testament and that supporters of the historical-critical method, who lived two thousand years later, would carefully study it and compare it with other texts. And, of course, the authors did not consult with each other to check the facts. Each wrote according to his own capabilities, so their stories turned out to be different.

### **Other inconsistencies in the life of Jesus**

Now that we have considered some of the notable inconsistencies in the Gospels, I will touch on others, but not so detailed. If desired, most of these discrepancies can be investigated independently. And many other discrepancies can be found simply by reading the Gospels "horizontally", one story after another.

We can address these discrepancies by asking a few simple questions. I will limit myself to five here.

### **What does the voice say at Jesus' baptism?**

It depends on which Gospel we read. Baptism is described not only in the Gospel according to John, but we also see very similar descriptions in the other three. This is to be expected: scholars have long established that Matthew and Luke borrowed several scenes from the Gospel of Mark, one of their main sources, and so they are often almost verbatim similar.

However, there are also differences, as Matthew and Luke changed the source text in some passages. In any case, in all three accounts of Jesus' baptism, the heavens open as he comes up out of the water, the Spirit descends like a dove, and a voice is heard from heaven. And what does it say? In Matthew's Gospel: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Apparently, the voice speaks to the people around Jesus, or perhaps to John the Baptist, and informs everyone who Jesus is.

But Mark's voice says, "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In this case, the voice is clearly speaking directly to Jesus, telling him who he is or confirming his intuitions. In Luke we see a different text (and here new difficulties arise, because the voice pronounces different words in different manuscripts of Luke's Gospel).

The voice says, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Luke 3:22), quoting the words of Psalm 2:7.

Each story has its own voice. The words, their meaning, and their functions change: in the Gospel of Matthew, they identify Jesus with John the Baptist and the people; in the Book of Mark, they confirm Jesus' ideas about who he is; in the Gospel of Luke, they explain that baptism made him the beloved son of God. It remains to find out what the voice actually said. This question so puzzled the early Christians that in a later non-canonical gospel called the Ebionite (Ebionite), it was resolved by indicating that the voice from heaven was heard three times. The first time it uttered the words addressed to Jesus recorded in the Gospel of Mark, then it uttered the text from the Gospel of Matthew addressed to John the Baptist and the people, and finally, the third time, the words from the Gospel of Luke. And if you do not rewrite all three Gospels, the fact remains that the voice in them says different things.

### **Where was Jesus the day after his baptism?**

In the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke—the so-called Synoptic Gospels—Jesus, after his baptism, goes into the wilderness, where he is "tempted by the devil" [13]. Mark is particularly clear that the departure was immediate, and he writes that Jesus was "immediately" led by the Spirit into the wilderness. And John? John does not tell of the devil tempting Jesus in the wilderness. The day after John the Baptist saw the Spirit descending on Jesus in the form of a dove (John 1:29-34), he meets Jesus again and proclaims him the Lamb of God (John clearly states that this happened "the next day"). Then Jesus begins to gather disciples (John 1:35-52) and begins his public ministry by performing the miracle of turning water into wine (John 2:1-11). So where was Jesus the next day? It depends on which Gospel you read.

### **Was Jairus' daughter already dead?**

To support my argument that there are minor and unexplained discrepancies in the Gospels, I will give just one example from Jesus' healing ministry. In Mark's Gospel, the earliest canonical Gospel, a synagogue official named Jairus comes to Jesus and begs him to come to his house because his daughter is dying: "Come and lay your hands on her, that she may be healed." Before they can leave, however, Jesus is confronted by a woman with a flow of blood and heals her. Then servants from Jairus' house arrive and tell them that it is too late—his daughter is dead. Jesus tells them not to be afraid, enters the house, and raises the dead girl from the dead (Mark 5:21-43). Matthew tells the same story (9:18-26), but with one crucial difference. In Mark, Jairus turns to Jesus after his daughter is already dead. He asks Jesus not to heal her, but to raise her from the dead. And Jesus grants this request. The difference may seem insignificant, but it can be considered full of deep meaning, because this is a matter of life and death.

### **Who is with Jesus and who is against him?**

Some of Jesus' words, which at first glance seem similar, are actually different. One of them is  
My favorite examples are the two expressions in Matthew 12:30 and Mark 9:40.

In Matthew, Jesus declares, "He who is not with me is against me." In Mark, "he who is not against us is for us."

Did he say both phrases? Did you mean both? But

How can this be? Or did one of the Gospel writers get something wrong?

### **How long did Jesus' ministry last?**

The earliest Gospel writer, Mark, does not specify the length of Jesus' public ministry, but some notes indicate what it was like. Early in Jesus' ministry, in chapter 2, his disciples are walking through the fields of grain and plucking ears of grain, much to the dismay of the Pharisees, who consider this a violation of the Sabbath prohibitions. This was likely in the fall, near the time of harvest. After this, events move very quickly: one of Mark's favorite words is euthus, "immediately": Jesus does this or that "immediately." In chapter 11, after many events that happened "immediately," we come to the last week of Jesus' life and the celebration of the Passover in Jerusalem. Easter is celebrated in the spring, so there is a clear sense that the service lasted for several months, from the harvest until spring.

A few months? Isn't it generally known that Jesus' ministry lasted three years? The three-year ministry comes not from the Synoptic Gospels—Mark, Matthew, and Luke—but from the last of them, John. Three times John mentions different Passover feasts, and since

they are held once a year, it can be assumed that the service lasted at least two years, maybe three. But which of the terms is more accurate? I would say that this is not a discrepancy in the strict sense of the word, but it is difficult to understand why Mark kept repeating the word "immediately" if he really meant something else.

If we were to look for all the inconsistencies in the accounts of Jesus' ministry, we would find many more. But rather than continue down that same path, I would like to move on to the inconsistencies in the account of Christ's suffering. – in the story of Christ's death and resurrection. Among these discrepancies are some of the most significant.

Inconsistencies in the description of Christ's suffering

We have already mentioned several discrepancies between the Gospels of Mark and John regarding the Passion: the date of the expulsion of the merchants from the temple (Mark 11, John 2) and the day and time of Jesus' death (Mark 14–15, John 18–19). These are not the only discrepancies in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' Passion.

death and resurrection. Here we will discuss three important differences in detail, and then briefly review several others.

### **Pilot's trial**

First, let us compare the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the canonical gospels, and the Gospel of John, the latest of them. In both, Jesus appears before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, who sentences Jesus to death for calling himself the King of the Jews. However, the

There are very significant discrepancies between the Gospels in the description of the trial.

Mark's account is concise and simple. Early in the morning, the Jewish authorities bring Jesus before Pilate, who asks if Jesus is truly the King of the Jews. In the Greek text, Jesus answers with just two words: *su legeis*, "you say so." The Jewish chief priests accuse him of many wrongdoings, and Pilate is surprised that Jesus does not try to justify himself. We are then told that Pilate was a custom  
During the Passover, to release a certain prisoner, whom the Jewish people had requested, and that he asked the people gathered if they wanted him to release the "King of the Jews." But then the chief priests intervene and incite the crowd to ask Pilate to release not Jesus, but the robber Barabbas. Pilate asks the people what he should do with Jesus. They answer him: "Crucify Him!" "Wanting to please the people," Pilate fulfills their request: he releases Barabbas and hands Jesus over first to be scourged and then to be crucified.

If the Gospel of Mark were the only source we have for this event, we would get the impression that the trial was carried out very quickly, that Jesus did not say a word except for those two, and that Pilate, Jesus' Jewish accusers, the people, and Jesus himself were all in the same place at the exchange.

But John's account of the same events (John 18:28–19:14) is quite different. The chief priests take Jesus to Pilate early in the morning, but they do not enter the praetorium "so that they may not be defiled and eat the Passover" that evening (John 18:28; but remember that in Mark's Gospel they had already eaten the Passover meal the previous evening). We are not told why they would be defiled when they enter the praetorium. Is it because it is a pagan place? Is it a building built on the site of a cemetery? Is it for some other reason? But it does make the trial extraordinary. Jesus is inside with Pilate, the Jewish chief priests who accuse him are outside, where the crowd is, and Pilate runs forward and  
back and forth, from the accusers to the accused and back again, and speaks to one and then to the other. During this trial, Pilate leaves the praetorium six times and returns to it again, he conducts conversations with both Jesus and the accusers, warning them, questioning them and persuading them to listen to the voice of common sense.

You can find many other differences in these accounts if you read them horizontally. I will mention only three here and point out their possible significance. First, Jesus is much more talkative in John than in Mark. In fact, he engages in conversation with Pilate, saying that his, Jesus', kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36) and that he came into the world to bear witness to the truth (John 18:37), then declaring that Pilate would have no authority over him except it had been given to him by God (John 19:11). These long dialogues are in complete agreement with other passages in John, where Jesus gives long, drawn-out speeches, quite different from the hundreds of short statements and terse remarks often found in the Synoptic Gospels.

Second, instead of ordering Jesus to be beaten after the trial is over and the sentence is pronounced, which is probably the most appropriate time to carry it out, John Pilate orders Jesus to be beaten during the trial (John 19:1). This detail of John's account has been explained in various ways, perhaps because of what happens next: Pilate leads Jesus out of the praetorium to present him to the Jewish people, beaten, bloody, crowned with thorns and red paint, and says, "Behold the man!" Pilate and his soldiers mock Jesus with a crown of thorns and a purple robe, proclaiming, "Hail, King of the Jews!" For John, Jesus is indeed King, regardless of his appearance.

Finally, it is important to note that in the Gospel of John, Pilate clearly states three times that Jesus is innocent, does not deserve the death penalty, and should be released (John 18:38, 19:6, and by definition 19:12). In the book of Mark, Pilate never proclaims Jesus' innocence.

Why this strong emphasis in John? Scholars have long noted that the author of John's Gospel is most hostile to the Jews (see John 8:42–44, where Jesus states that the Jews are not the offspring of God but the children of the devil). Knowing this, it is worth considering: why is the judgment

The description mentions three times that the Roman governor recognizes Jesus as innocent? Ask yourself: If the Romans are not to blame for Jesus' death, then who is? The Jews. That's what John is thinking.

In John 19:16 we are told that Pilate handed Jesus over to the Jewish chief priests to be crucified.

#### **The Death of Judas**

All four canonical gospels state that Jesus was betrayed to the authorities by Judas Iscariot, who arrested him. The four accounts differ in explaining Judas' reasons for this action.

Mark does not give a reason, although we are told that Judas was promised money for his betrayal, so greed may have been the motive (Mark 14:10-11). Matthew (Matthew 26:14) makes it clear that Judas betrayed for money. However, Luke claims that the reason for Judas's act was the "entering" of Satan into him (Luke 22:3). In other words, he was disturbed or compelled by a demon. In the book of John, Judas himself is called "the devil" (John 6:70-71); he probably betrayed his teacher because he was cruel to the core.

Even more interesting is the question of what happened to Judas after his betrayal. Mark and John do not go into detail: Judas simply disappears from the scene. As in Luke, Luke writes the second volume of his work, the book of Acts. Acts tells the story of what happens to Judas after his betrayal, and a similar story is found in Matthew, but strangely enough, the two passages disagree on many points.

The common belief that Judas "went away and hanged himself" comes from the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 27:3-10). Seeing that his betrayal of Jesus led to his death, Judas repents and tries to return the thirty pieces of silver he was paid to the Jewish chief priests, saying, "I have sinned in betraying innocent blood."

When they do not take the money from him, he throws it into the temple, goes out, and hangs himself. The chief priests then collect the money, but they decide not to return it to the temple treasury, because it is "blood money"—money stained with the blood of an innocent person. The money is used in another way: it is used to buy "potter's land," probably a place where potters got their clay, and to bury foreigners who have died in Jerusalem.

We are told that because this place was purchased with the bloodstained money of Judas, "this land is called 'the land of blood' to this day."

Luke's account in Acts has some similarities to the previous one: Judas' death is linked to the purchase of a field called "the field of blood." However, other details clearly do not match.

The account in Matthew is consistent with and even directly contradicts it. Acts 1:18–19 explains that Judas himself, not the Jewish chief priests, bought "the field for the price of injustice" with the money he received for his betrayal. There is no mention of hanging: instead, we learn that he "fell down" and then "his belly burst open and all his intestines gushed out." In Luke, the field is called "the field of blood" because Judas' blood was shed there.

For a long time, readers have tried to connect these two stories about Judas' death. How could he have hanged himself and "fall" so that his stomach burst and his intestines fell to the ground? Ingenious translators, seeking to combine the two stories into one reliable one, have a great opportunity to show their imagination. Judas could have tried to hang himself, but the rope broke, and he fell to the ground upside down and ripped open his stomach. Or he hanged himself, but failed, and then climbed a high cliff and jumped off it to the ground. Or... In short, the explanation could be anything.

The point is that the two sources speak very differently about how Judas died. However mysterious the words "thrown down, and his belly was split open," they do not mean "hanged himself." In addition, there are disagreements about two other things: who bought the land (the chief priests, as Matthew says, or Judas, as in Acts) and why it was called "the field of blood" (because it was bought with blood money, as Matthew says, or because Judas' blood was shed on it, as in Acts)?

### **Stories of the Resurrection**

In no other story are the differences between the canonical gospels more clearly visible than in the resurrection accounts. I often suggest a simple exercise to first-year students: list everything that each of the four canonical gospels says about the events that occurred from the burial of Jesus to the end of the gospel. It is difficult to imagine a more convenient way to introduce them to the method of "horizontal reading." These four accounts are literally teeming with differences, including inconsistencies that cannot be reconciled. Students appreciate this exercise because

I don't just assure them that the texts are different: the students themselves find these differences and try to make sense of them.

Now is a good time to emphasize what was stated at length in my book, *The Corrupted Words of Jesus*: we have no original Gospels, only copies that appeared much later, in many cases centuries later. All of these copies differ from one another, often in the story of Jesus' resurrection. Based on these later manuscripts, scholars must determine what was said in the originals. In some cases, decisions are relatively easy to make, in others, such attempts are accompanied by heated debate.

One detail of the resurrection narrative is almost indisputable: the last twelve verses of Mark's Gospel are not the original text, but rather an addition by a scribe in later centuries.

Mark ended his gospel with the current verse 16:8, in which the women flee from the tomb and tell no one what they have seen. In my discussion I am making the scholarly assumption that verses 16:9-20 are a later addition to this gospel.

Apart from this detail, what can we say about the resurrection in the four canonical gospels? All four say that on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion and burial, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found it empty. Yet at the same time, the gospels differ in almost every detail of the description.

Who came to the tomb? Mary alone (John 20:1)? Mary and the other Mary (Matthew 28:1)? Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome (Mark 16:1)? Or the women who accompanied Jesus on the journey from Galilee to Jerusalem—perhaps Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “the others with them” (Luke 24:1; see 23:55)? Had the stone already been rolled away from the door of the tomb (as in Mark 16:4), or had an angel rolled it away from the door of the tomb in the sight of the women (Matthew 28:2)? What did they see there? (Matthew 28:5)? A young man (Mark 16:5)? Two men (Luke 24:4)? Or nothing at all (John)? What were they commanded? Tell the disciples to go to Galilee, where Jesus “is going before.” (Mark 16:7)? Or do you remember how Jesus told them, “while he was still in Galilee,” that he must die and rise again (Luke 24:7)? Did the women then tell the disciples what they had seen and heard (Matthew 28:8) or did they tell no one (Mark 16:8)? And if they did, to whom?

To the eleven disciples (Matthew 28:8)? The eleven and all the others (Luke 24:8)? Simon Peter and another unnamed disciple (John 20:2)? What did the disciples do in response? Did they not respond because Jesus had appeared to them immediately (Matthew 20:9)? Did they not believe the women because “their words seemed to them empty” (Luke 24:11)? Or did they rush to the tomb to see for themselves (John 20:3)?

The questions keep piling up. Use the horizontal reading method to compare the events that follow: find out when and to whom Jesus appeared, what he said to these people, and how they responded. And literally in every case, one of the Gospels will differ from the others.

This point seems particularly inexplicable. In Mark's account, the women are told to tell the disciples to go to Jesus in Galilee, but out of fear, the women say nothing to anyone.

According to Matthew's version, the disciples were to be told to go to Galilee, where they would meet Jesus, and they obeyed immediately. Then Jesus appears to them with his final instructions. And in Luke, no one invites the disciples to Galilee: they are told that Jesus foretold his resurrection while *he was still* in Galilee (during his public ministry). They do not leave Jerusalem, which is in the south of Israel, and Galilee is in the north. On the day of the resurrection, Jesus appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35); later that same day, these disciples tell others about their vision, and Jesus appears to all (Luke 24:36-49), leads them out of

Jerusalem to the suburbs of Bethany, gives instructions, blesses them, and ascends into heaven. In Luke's next work, the Acts of the Apostles, we are told that Jesus clearly commanded the disciples *not to depart* from Jerusalem (Acts 1:4), but to wait until the Holy Spirit had come upon them.

On the day of Pentecost, fifty days after Passover. After these instructions, Jesus ascends into heaven. The disciples remain in Jerusalem until the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2). This is a discrepancy: if Matthew is correct and the disciples, having seen Jesus' ascension, immediately went to Galilee, how can Luke be correct in saying that the disciples remained in Jerusalem all this time, saw Jesus' ascension there, and remained there until the day of Pentecost?

### **Other differences in the description of Christ's suffering**

The above are just a few of the major differences between the accounts of Jesus' last week, death, and resurrection. These differences are by no means the only ones, but rather than list them all, I will mention a few of the most prominent ones below so that you can find them if you need a detailed analysis. In this short list, I will help you with five simple questions.

#### **1. How many animals did Jesus ride during the Lord's entry into Jerusalem?**

The answer seems obvious: on one, a donkey or a colt. The same is said in three Gospels, including Mark 11:7. However, in Matthew's Gospel, this triumphal entry is called the fulfillment of the prophet's word—as we have seen, Matthew attaches great importance to the fulfillment of Scripture prophecies, and in 21:5 he quotes Zech 9:9:

*Behold, your king comes to you, meek, and sitting on a donkey, and on a colt, the foal of a donkey. son.*

Hebrew Bible scholars are familiar with poetic prophecies where the third line of the text is worded differently from the second. This is called "synonymous parallelism," where two lines of poetry express the same thing but in different words. However, Matthew, apparently did not understand the poetic conventionality of this passage, which led to unexpected results. In Matthew's Gospel, the disciples bring Jesus two animals, a donkey and a colt, put on their clothes, and Jesus rides into the city, sitting on both (Matthew 21:7). Strange as it may seem, Matthew has Jesus literally fulfill a prophecy in Scripture.

## **2. What did Jesus say to the high priest during his trial?**

It seems to me that it would be impossible to obtain historically reliable information about this moment. Jesus himself and the Jewish chief priests were present at these events, but not Jesus' followers, who wrote down his words for posterity. Nevertheless, Mark provides a clear answer.

The high priest asks Jesus if he is "the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One" (Mark 14:61), and Jesus directly answers, "I am; and you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:62). In other words, in the near future, God will send the supreme judge to earth to fulfill Old Testament prophecies (Daniel 7:13-14). In fact, all of this was expected so soon that the high priest himself was destined to witness these events.

And if nothing happens? What if the high priest dies before the Son of Man appears? Will that invalidate Jesus' statement? It is possible. Perhaps that is why Luke, who wrote his Gospel 15-20 years after Mark, probably after the death of the high priest, changed Jesus' answer. Now he does not say that the high priest will see the Son of Man as a judge with his own eyes: "From now on the Son of Man will sit at the right hand of the power of God" (Luke 22:69).

## **3. Why does Matthew speak of an unsuitable prophet?**

When Matthew writes that Judas betrayed Jesus for thirty pieces of silver, he notes (as one might expect) that the Scripture was fulfilled: "Then was fulfilled what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet, saying, 'And they took the thirty pieces of silver... and they gave them to the potter's field.'" (Matthew 27:9-10). But Jeremiah does not have such a prophecy. This is a freely quoted passage from Zechariah 11:3.

## **4. When was the temple veil torn?**

This temple curtain separated the "Holy of Holies" from the rest of the temple. It was believed that it was behind the curtain that God lived on earth (and, apparently, continued to reign in heaven). No one was allowed to enter the veil - only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), could the high priest enter behind it and make sacrifices - first to atone for his own sins.

sins, then the sins of the people. According to the Gospel of Mark, after Jesus gave up his spirit, the veil of the temple was "torn in two" (Mark 15:38). This event has long been recognized as symbolic, because there is no historical evidence that the veil was ever torn - until forty years later, during a war with the Romans, the temple itself burned to the ground. For Mark, the death of Jesus means that sacrifices in the temple are no longer necessary. The death of the Son of God made God accessible to all people, no longer separated by a thick veil. Through the death of Jesus, people became one with God: it is the atonement for sins.

The Gospel of Luke also states that "the curtain of the temple was torn in two." However, strangely enough, it was not torn after Jesus' death, but, as the text clearly shows, while Jesus was still alive and hanging on the cross (Luke 23:45-46). The significance of this discrepancy will be discussed in the next chapter, as it directly relates to Luke's view of Jesus' death.

### **5. *What did the centurion say after Jesus died?***

The answer may seem obvious, especially to those who remember the biblical film "The Greatest Story Ever Told" and the immortal words of the centurion, played by John Wayne: "Truly this man was the Son of God." The centurion utters the same words in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 15:39). However, it should be noted that in Luke they are reversed. In his account, the centurion says: "Truly this man was righteous" (Luke 23:47). At all times

There were interpreters who proved that it was one and the same thing: of course, if he is the Son of God, then he is also a righteous man. But these are different words and they have different meanings. If the court finds a criminal "not guilty", it is not the same as if he were declared

Son of God. Perhaps the centurion said both? In order to connect the Gospels, we can accept this assumption and thus create a third version of what is happening, which is different from the descriptions of the Gospels of Mark and Luke. But it is better to think about why Luke had to change these words. It was important for him to emphasize that Jesus was completely innocent, despite all the accusations against him. For example, in John, as in Luke, Pilate tries three times to release Jesus, declaring him innocent (unlike in Mark's text). In the end, the centurion does the same.

All the Romans are convinced of Jesus' innocence. Who, then, should be held responsible for his death? Not the Romans, but the Jewish authorities and the Jewish people themselves.

### **Discrepancies in the details of Paul's life and work**

So far in this chapter I have only reviewed the four canonical Gospels, emphasizing the need to read them horizontally if we are to discover something new in them that cannot be seen if we read them "vertically," one after the other. I am not suggesting that the horizontal method is the best or only possible way to study these books. It is clear that the Gospels were intended to be read in the same way as any other book, sequentially, from beginning to end; proponents of the historical-critical approach to the Bible have long recognized its value and have developed a number of noteworthy methods that can help readers who choose to study the books in this way.

But I do not mean to say that the Gospels are the only books of the New Testament that contain discrepancies. As we have seen, the text of the Acts of the Apostles does not correspond to the text of the Gospels in those places where it speaks of the death of Judas (contradicting the Gospel of Matthew), or, for example, in those places where the disciples left or did not leave north to Galilee shortly after Jesus' death and resurrection (again contradicting the Gospel of Matthew).

The entire book of Acts is the story of what happened to the followers of Jesus after he himself ascended into heaven. The content is brief: the apostles first spread the Christian faith among the Jews of Jerusalem, then everywhere, carried their message to Jews in other parts of the empire, and then, most importantly, turned their attention to non-Jews, the "pagans" from cities scattered around the Mediterranean. Of the many converts, none played a more important role than Saul of Tarsus, known as the apostle Paul. About two-thirds of the text of Acts is devoted to Paul, his conversion to Christianity after fierce opposition to the new faith, his missionary journeys to convert others to the faith of Christ, his imprisonment, trials, and finally imprisonment in Rome.

Paul is not only the hero of Acts, but also the legitimate author of the Holy Scriptures. Thirteen of the 27 books of the New Testament are attributed to him. One of the books, Hebrews, was included in the canon because the early Church Fathers believed that Paul wrote it, even though he did not claim to. Modern scholars are almost certain that Paul did not write it. It is believed that from the 13 letters attributed to Paul, six are by other authors. This is the subject of another chapter, in which we will discuss the burning question: "Who wrote the Bible?" For now, it is sufficient to know that Paul is the hero of Acts and the author of at least several books of the New Testament. The seven letters attributed to Paul by almost all scholars are called "undoubtedly Pauline": Romans, First and Second Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, First Thessalonians, and Philemon.

Thus, we can apply the "horizontal reading" method to Acts and compare it with the Pauline letters. In some cases, Acts recounts events from Paul's life that Paul himself mentions in his letters. This will allow us to understand how they fit together. Proponents of the historical-critical method have long disagreed about how reliable and useful the book of Acts is for understanding the details of Paul's life and work.

Personally, I think that Acts describes the life of Paul almost as accurately as Luke's first work, the Gospel, describes the details of Jesus' life: most of the basic information is probably reliable, but it was overgrown with many altered details.

Most Bible scholars believe that Acts was written later than Luke, perhaps between 85 and 90 C.E., 20 to 25 years after Paul's death. In this case, it is not surprising that the information about him in Acts may be historically inaccurate. However, the only way to confirm this assumption is to compare what Acts says about Paul with what Paul says about himself and see if the statements agree or disagree. Here are five examples that I found interesting. Some of them are important for understanding the details of Paul's biography and teaching, while others are clearly minor differences. But together, they prove that Acts cannot be completely trusted when it comes to the reliability of the apostle's life.

### ***1. After his conversion, did Paul go directly to Jerusalem to appear before those who had become apostles before him?***

As already mentioned, before becoming a Christian, Paul was a zealous persecutor of Christianity, therefore, he was not one of Jesus' followers during his ministry and probably did not even know Jesus. Paul lived outside of Palestine, and his native language was Greek, not Aramaic. But at some point, for some reason, he was "illuminated by light" (literally,

(Acts 9:3), and Paul went from being an enemy of the Christian faith to being one of its most loyal supporters. What happened next? In Galatians 1:16–20, Paul himself recalls what happened to him after his conversion:

Then I conferred not with flesh and blood, neither went I up to Jerusalem to them which were apostles before me: but I went into Arabia, and returned again unto Damascus. Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Cephas, and abode with him fifteen days. But of the other apostles saw I none other, save James the Lord's brother. And in the things which I write unto you, before God, I lie not.

This emotional statement that Paul is not lying should give us pause. It is quite clear: after his conversion he did not consult with other people, did not see any of the apostles for three years, and even after that he saw no one except Cephas (Peter) and James, the brother of Jesus.

Therefore, the text from the book of Acts is of great interest. For, according to Acts 9, immediately after his conversion, Paul spent some time in Damascus "with the disciples," and after leaving, he went straight to Jerusalem, where he met with Jesus' apostles (Acts 9:19-30). The book of Acts differs from Paul's letter in every way. Did he spend some time with the Christians immediately after his conversion (Acts) or not (Paul)? Did he go straight to Jerusalem (Acts) or not (Paul)? Did you meet the group of apostles (Acts) or just Peter and James (Paul)?

For those familiar with both Paul's own writings and the Acts of the Apostles, it is easy to understand why this discrepancy has arisen. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul claims that he received the gospel directly from God through Jesus, not through anyone else, not even through the apostles, so anyone who disagrees with his view of the gospel is really arguing not with Paul, but with God himself.

On the other hand, the author of the book of Acts seeks to prove that there was an unbreakable bond between all the true apostles of Jesus, both the original and Paul. They met, talked, and agreed with each other - this is repeatedly emphasized in Acts. But for Paul, it is a question of his authority and the authority given by God himself. He *did not consult with anyone* or meet with the apostles. The two authors had different goals and reported the same events differently, This has created an extraordinary and important discrepancy. What should we believe? In this case I would give my vote to Paul, who not only must know what he is doing, but also swears before God that It's hard to believe that he can lie at the same time.

## **2. Did the churches of Judea know Paul?**

Here again Paul makes this clear. Some time after his conversion, he visited many churches in Syria and Cilicia, but "I was unknown by face to the churches of Christ which were in Judea" (Galatians 1:21-22). Some scholars are surprised by this circumstance. According to the Acts of the Apostles, while Paul was still persecuting the churches of Christ, he was particularly "tormenting" them. In Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1-3, 9:1-2). So why didn't the Christians in the churches that Paul had previously persecuted recognize him by sight? Hadn't he appeared among them earlier with hostile intentions? According to Acts, yes; according to Paul, no.

## **3. Did Paul go to Athens alone?**

Was he alone when he went on a missionary journey and appeared in Athens to convert the Gentiles there? Here again we see a difference. This might seem insignificant if it were not for the fact that Luke again misrepresents some details. In 1 Thessalonians, Paul indicates that after converting them and establishing a church, he went to Athens. However, concerned about the newborn church, he sends his companion Timothy back to see how the Thessalonians are doing. In other words, Timothy accompanied Paul to Athens and then returned to Thessalonica to help the local people establish their faith (1 Thessalonians 3:1–

2). However, the author of Acts is equally clear. We are told that after establishing the church in Thessalonica, Paul, along with Silas and Timothy, founded a church in the city of Berea; then the local Christians “immediately sent Paul away, as if to go as far as the sea; but Silas and Timothy remained there” (Acts 17:14-15). Paul then instructed Silas and Timothy to meet him as soon as possible. He reached Athens alone and did not meet his companions until he arrived in Corinth (17:16–18:5).

#### **4. How many times did Paul travel to Jerusalem?**

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul emphasized that he had not consulted with the apostles in Jerusalem about how to spread the good news. He already knew what this message was: he had received it directly from Christ himself, in a moment of divine revelation. He wanted the Galatians to understand first that when the controversy arose over his message, it was being discussed at a special meeting in Jerusalem. The question was: In order for a non-Jew to convert and become a follower of Jesus, did he first have to become a Jew? Paul categorically stated that he should not. He believed that Gentile men should not be circumcised (the Jewish covenant (a sign) to become followers of Christ. Other Christian missionaries took the opposite position, and a council was called in Jerusalem to consider the matter. According to Paul, this was only his second visit to Jerusalem (Galatians 1:18, 2:1). According to Acts, it was his third, longer visit (Acts 9:11, 15). Again, the writer of Acts seems to have confused Paul's ways, perhaps for his own purposes.

#### **5. Were there Jews and Gentiles in the communities founded by Paul?**

The answer in Acts is clear: yes. When Paul preached in Thessalonica, Jews in the synagogue were converted to Christ, as were Greeks, that is, Gentiles (Acts 17:4). But Paul says  
On the contrary. In his letter to the Thessalonians he recalls the conversion of parishioners to the faith of Christ and speaks of how they "turned to God from idols" (1 Thessalonians 1:9). Idol worship  
only Gentiles. Paul's converts in Thessalonica and Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:2) had been  
Gentiles. That is why he calls himself the "apostle to the Gentiles." There were other missionaries, especially Peter, whose responsibility was to take the gospel to the Jews (Galatians 2:8). However, the churches in Thessalonica and Corinth were made up of Gentiles (Paul), not Jews and Gentiles (Acts).

These are just a few of the inconsistencies that can be found when reading Acts and Paul's letters horizontally. If you compare them closely, you can find others. They argue that Acts cannot be relied upon as a source of accurate details when it comes to the mission of early apostles like Paul.

First of all, it is important to know whether Acts is sufficiently accurate in historical detail, in all  
First, because most of the information people "know" about Paul is borrowed from Acts, and only  
from Acts, because Paul does not mention many details in his letters. Proponents of the historical-critical  
method question many of these details, including the following: that

Paul was from Tarsus (Acts 21:39), that he was raised by the Jewish rabbi Gamaliel in Jerusalem (Acts 22:3), that he was a Roman citizen (Acts 22:27), that his trade was "tentmaking" (Acts 18:3), that when he arrived in a city to convert its inhabitants to Christianity, the first thing he did was go to the synagogue and try to convert the Jews (e.g., Acts 14:1), that he was arrested in Jerusalem and spent many years in prison (chapters 21-28), that he was brought before Caesar's tribunal and therefore ended up in Rome, Acts 25:11.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have examined many inconsistencies in the New Testament, both minor and relatively insignificant, and important for understanding the meaning of the words of individual authors.

Some of the discrepancies can probably be explained by the translator's creative abilities, while others seem like obvious contradictions. However, this is not an exhaustive list of discrepancies, but just a few illustrative examples. I have selected the discrepancies that I found most interesting.

**What conclusions can we draw from this analysis of discrepancies? Three of them seem to me to be the most significant:**

**1. In some ways, these discrepancies are important because they prove that the view of the Bible as a completely infallible source is false.** If we look at the Bible from a historical perspective, perspective, it is flawed. If two accounts of the same event (e.g., the death of Jesus) contradict each other in detail, both should be considered historically inaccurate. Either one or both of them are historically unreliable, but both cannot be true, at least when compared to actual events. Does this mean that the Bible should be dismissed as just another piece of ancient and worthless literature? Not at all. In the final chapter, I will argue that we should continue to read, study, and respect the Bible, but not as an infallible historical source.

Does this mean it is impossible to be a Christian? Only Christians with certain beliefs – many of them in the southern United States—may be thinking such questions. Of course, the answer to that is a resounding "no." A Christian faith based on the inerrancy of the Bible is unlikely to be shocked when it becomes clear how many inconsistencies there are in the holy book. But there are many other forms of Christian faith that will not be harmed by the perception of the Bible's imperfections. About this we will discuss in detail in the last chapter.

**2. Since the words of the various biblical writers differ—sometimes insignificant and unimportant, sometimes significant—it is important to give everyone a chance to speak and not to feel that their opinions coincide with those of other writers.** From the example of differences, we should learn that Mark's views do not coincide with John's, John's views do not coincide with Matthew's, Matthew's views do not coincide with Paul's, etc. Each author should be read for what he says to the reader, so when reading Mark, one should not have in mind the teachings of Matthew. Read Mark for the teachings of Mark and Matthew for the teachings of Matthew. In the next In this chapter we will discuss this issue in detail.

**3. Historical inconsistencies – what did Jesus or Paul say, do, and experience?** It is difficult to understand what actually happened in the life of Jesus or in the history of the early church. These books should not be read as historical evidence, uninteresting. They are not. What would you do if you were

judge in a trial where witnesses give conflicting testimony? First of all, you probably wouldn't think that all of them are 100 percent right. Some or all of them distort some part of the testimony. The task is to figure out who is distorting it and who is telling the truth - if any of them are telling it. The same approach applies to ancient New Testament documents. When faced with conflicting information about historical events, it is important to remember that not all witnesses can be right (historically speaking), which means that our task is to find out as much as possible about the events that were described. We will return to this task in Chapter 5.

### 3. DIVERSITY OF OPINIONS

In the mid-1990s, Oxford University Press commissioned me to write a New Testament textbook for colleges. I was skeptical about whether the work would help my career: I had not yet had time to establish myself and get a permanent job in an educational institution, and university councils did not approve textbooks that had not been subject to long-term research. I wondered: what might the consequences be? trying to explain the basics of historical-critical thinking to nineteen-year-olds who would find it a complete surprise? So I decided to call a few friends who work in the same field and get their opinions. Should I take on this case? And if so, what problems might I encounter in trying to summarize the basics of Bible study for young people who have just graduated from high school?

I received many helpful tips and tricks, but I think the wisest of them all came from my friend Charlie Cosgrove, who helped me with my graduate studies a few years ago (he attended Princeton Seminary two years older than me and often pulled me along).

Speaking about the textbook, Charlie said, "The hardest part is deciding what not to include."

I ended up writing the textbook and found that Charlie was absolutely right. It's easy to decide what to include in a New Testament book because there's so much material. But to make the book user-friendly and accessible, you have to give up a lot of important or favorite topics. And cutting out topics that are near and dear to you can be painful.

That is what happened with this book. When it comes to inconsistencies in the Bible, I find it hard to stop—there are so many, including some that are both noteworthy and important. But I managed to restrain myself and limit the discussion to one chapter, the previous one. The same difficulties arose with the next chapter. Any scholar who adopted the historical-critical method, as I have, could easily write an entire book on the subject, and I had to be content with one chapter.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the differences in the Bible are important in part because they force us to take each author seriously. What Mark says may be completely inconsistent with what Luke says; Matthew and John may have disagreements that contradict Paul's words. But if we look closely at the conflicting meanings of the writings of the various Bible writers, we will notice more than just the details and minutiae discussed in chapter 2. There are more general, systemic differences between these authors and books—not just some details, dates, itineraries, descriptions of actions, and the list of their witnesses. Many of the differences in the texts of the Bible writers are directly related to the very essence of their letters. Sometimes one author's ideas on some important issue differ from another's; yet we are talking about fundamental questions—who Christ was, how salvation is achieved, how followers of Jesus should live.

Differences of this magnitude are not just isolated contradictions, but also extremely important alternative representations. They cannot be understood unless each author is allowed to speak. Most readers do not understand the Bible in this way. They believe that because the books of the Bible are collected under one cover, all their authors are saying essentially the same thing. They believe that the texts of Matthew can be used to understand John's texts, John tells us how to understand Paul's texts, Paul helps us interpret James's books, and so on. This harmonious approach to the Bible, which is essential for religious reading, has the undoubted advantage of helping readers see the unifying themes of the Bible, but it also has very serious disadvantages: it often creates a unity of thought and faith where there was neither one nor the other to begin with. The biblical writers do not agree with each other on everything they discussed; sometimes there are very deep-rooted significant disagreements between them.

The historical-critical approach to the Bible does not mean that all authors include the same elements in their texts. ideas. This allows us to assess the views inherent in each author, his understanding, understanding, understanding of what the Christian faith is and should be. The discrepancies already mentioned are necessary to understand: they are found in the texts of the biblical authors. The important differences, which we will discuss below, will convince us that the differences are not just trifles, but very important issues.

I do not mean to suggest that the historical-critical approach is the only way to read the Bible. Experienced theologians, well aware of the problems of biblical study that the historical-critical method touches upon, have come up with ways to understand the Bible as Scripture, despite all its differences. This will be discussed in detail later in Chapter 8. In the meantime, it is important to understand what the historical-critical approach is and how it can affect the understanding of the Bible.

To some extent, this view is based on the postulate that the "canonical" Scripture, that is, the books, From the perspective of believers with some authority, a collection under one cover is by no means a typical form for the books of the Bible. When Paul wrote his letters to the churches he had founded, he did not think he was writing the Bible. He believed he was writing letters to meet individual needs, when they appeared, relying on his own thoughts, beliefs, and sermons of the time. Only later Someone put these letters together and considered them inspired. The same thing happened with the gospels. Mark, whatever his real name, had no idea that his book would be included in a collection with the other three books and called the Holy Scriptures, and he certainly had no idea that his book would be interpreted alongside texts written by other Christians thirty years later, in another country, and under different conditions. Certainly, Mark wanted his book to be would be read and understood for its own sake, just like Matthew, Luke, John, and all the other New Testament writers.

According to one of the propositions of the historical-critical method, we risk misinterpreting a book if we do not allow its author to express himself, if we try to reconcile the meaning of his words with the meaning of the words of another author, if we perceive all the books of the New Testament as one large one, and not as twenty-seven separate ones. These books were written at different times and in different places, under different circumstances, to resolve different questions; each of their authors adhered to his own ideas, beliefs, assumptions, traditions and sources. In some cases, they present completely different opinions on very important issues.[17]

## **INTRODUCTORY EXAMPLE: THE DEATH OF JESUS IN THE BOOKS OF MARK AND LUKE**

I will begin my comparison of the texts by discussing an example that I find particularly illustrative and striking. Like the discrepancies we discussed in Chapter 2, differences of this kind can only be noticed by a thoughtful "horizontal" reading of the passages, but this time, instead of focusing on minor discrepancies here and there, we will focus on broader issues, on fundamental differences in the way a particular story is told. It is presented in all the Gospels in completely different ways, but for each of them this is the key - we are talking about the crucifixion of Jesus. It can be assumed that in all the Gospels the story of the crucifixion has the same meaning, and the discrepancies simply reflect minor changes of angle, changes of emphasis: one author emphasizes one thing, another another. However, from

The differences are actually much more significant and fundamental than one might think. Nowhere is this more evident than in the accounts of Jesus' death in the books of Mark and Luke.

Since the 19th century, scholars have accepted that Mark's Gospel was written first, around 65–70 AD. Both Matthew and Luke, who wrote their Gospels 15–20 years later, used Mark's Gospel as one of their primary sources. This is why almost all of Mark's accounts are in Matthew or Luke's letters, and for the same reason, all three

The text of the Gospels is sometimes repeated word for word. Some passages are the same in two Gospels, but differ in a third because Mark's words were changed in only one of the later Gospels. This means that if we take the same story, say, from Mark and Luke, and find differences, they exist only because Luke changed the words of the source—in some cases, omitting words and phrases, in others, adding words to entire episodes, and sometimes rearranging sentences.

It is probably logical to assume that if Luke changed Mark's words, he did so because he wanted to give them a different sound and meaning. Sometimes the differences are minor changes in wording, but there are also those that fundamentally change the entire meaning of the story. This is the depiction of Jesus' death.

### **The Death of Jesus in the Book of Mark**

In Mark's version (Mark 15:16–39), Pontius Pilate condemns Jesus to death, and Roman soldiers mock and beat Jesus before leading him to his execution. Simon of Cyrene

carries his cross. All this time Jesus is silent. The soldiers crucify him on the cross, but he is silent.

The thieves crucified with him mock him. Those who pass by curse him.

The chief priests and scribes mock him. Jesus is silent until he finally cries out in a loud and mournful voice, "Eloi, Eloi! lamma sabachthani?", which Mark translates for his readers from the Aramaic as "My God, my God! Why have you forsaken me?" He gives up his spirit.

And two events occur simultaneously: the curtain of the temple is torn in two, and the centurion confesses: "Truly this man was the Son of God."

It is a dramatic and moving scene, full of passion and pathos. Jesus is silent the whole time, as if shocked, only at the end he lets out a cry, as if reciting Psalm 21. As far as I understand, this question addressed to God is genuine. Jesus really wants to know why God has abandoned him in this situation. According to a very popular interpretation of this passage, Jesus quotes Psalm 21:1 because he is actually thinking of the end of the same psalm, where God intervenes and protects the suffering psalmist. I think this reading is an attempt to give too much importance to this passage, which deprives the "cry of God's abandonment," as it is called, of any power.

The fact is that Jesus was rejected by everyone: he was betrayed by one of his disciples, his closest follower. denied Him three times, was abandoned by all his disciples, rejected by the Jewish authorities, sentenced to death by the Romans, ridiculed by the high priests, bystanders, and even the two thieves crucified with him. The Gauls

In the end, he felt that even God had forgotten him. Jesus sinks into an abyss of despair and unbearable spiritual pain and dies. With this image, Mark is trying to explain something to us. He does not want the reader to take comfort in the knowledge that God is really there and can save Jesus from physical suffering. Jesus dies in agony, not knowing exactly why he has to die.

But the reader will learn the reason. Immediately after Jesus' death, the veil is torn in two, and the centurion recognizes Jesus as the Son of God. The torn veil shows that Jesus' death revealed God to all of His people, not just the Jewish high priests who offered sacrifices in the temple. Jesus' death brought redemption (see Mark 10:45). And someone immediately understands this—not Jesus' closest followers, not the Jews in the crowd, but the Gentile soldier who had just crucified him. Jesus' death brings salvation, and that is what the Gentiles are about to recognize. This is by no means an uninteresting account of what "really" happened at the time of Jesus' death. It is theology wrapped in narrative form.

Historians have long believed that in this account, Mark not only explains the meaning of Jesus' death but also writes about it with a specific audience in mind—Jesus' later followers, who were persecuted and tortured by authorities opposed to God. Like Jesus himself, his followers do not know why they are suffering so much pain and suffering. But Mark explains to these Christians that they can be sure that even if they do not understand why they are suffering, God does, and that God is working behind the scenes to turn suffering into redemption. To achieve God's purpose, suffering must be experienced, not avoided, even if that purpose is not clear at the time. Thus, Jesus' death, according to Mark, is an example, allowing Christians to understand why they endure persecution.

### **The Death of Jesus in Luke**

Luke's account is also remarkably remarkable, informative, and dramatic, but it differs greatly (Luke 23:26-49). These are not just discrepancies in some details: the differences are much more significant. They determine the overall nature of the presentation and therefore affect the possible interpretation of the text.

As in Mark, so in Luke Judas betrays Jesus, Peter denies him, Jesus is rejected by the Jewish authorities and sentenced to death by Pontius Pilate, but Pilate's soldiers do not mock or beat him. Only Luke tells us that Pilate in the story of Jesus' birth delivers Jesus to King Herod of Galilee, the son of King Herod, and that none other than Herod's soldiers mocked him.

Jesus before Pilate found him guilty. However, this discrepancy does not affect the overall understanding of the differences between the two narratives that I am drawing attention to here.

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is taken to be executed, Simon of Cyrene is forced to carry his cross. However, on the way to the place of crucifixion, Jesus does not remain silent. On the way, he meets the women who are mourning him, turns to them and says: "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me, but weep for yourselves and for your children" (Luke 23:28). He also prophesies about the coming disasters that await them. Jesus does not seem to be at all shaken by what is happening to him. He is more concerned with the fate of others than with his own fate.

Furthermore, Jesus is not silent while he is crucified on the cross, contrary to Mark's account. Instead, he prays, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

[18]. Jesus seems to have a close relationship with God and is more concerned about those who carry out the death penalty.

punishment, not for himself. Jesus is mocked by the Jewish authorities and the Roman soldiers, but not by the two who were crucified with him, unlike in Mark's text. One of the thieves tries to slander Jesus, but the other humiliates him, rebukes him, and explains that they got what they deserved, and Jesus did nothing wrong (remember that Luke emphasizes Jesus' complete innocence).

Then the thief asks Jesus: "Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom!" Jesus' response is striking: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:42-43). In this story, Jesus is not at all confused by what is happening to him and the reasons for these events. He is completely calm, in control of everything, knows what will happen, and understands what will happen next: he will wake up in the paradise of God, and the thief with him. This is the exact opposite of Mark's description, in which Jesus feels forgotten and abandoned until the very end.

Darkness gathers over the land, and the veil of the temple is torn in two while Jesus is still alive, contrary to Mark's description. The torn veil here does not mean that Jesus' death brings redemption, for he is still alive. It testifies that his death is a "power of darkness," as he had previously said.

said in the same Gospel (Luke 22:53), and it means God's judgment on the Jewish people.

The torn veil appears here as a sign that God rejects the Jewish traditions of worship, symbolized by the temple.

And most importantly, instead of uttering a cry of anguish and despair before death ("Why have you forsaken me?"), in the book of Luke Jesus prays aloud to God and declares: "Father, forgive me! into your hands I commit my spirit." With these words he gives up his spirit (Luke 23:46). Here Jesus does not believe that God has abandoned him, and he does not wonder why he is suffering such agony of loneliness and death. In this case, Jesus feels that God is near, and he is comforted by the thought that God is on his side. Jesus knows perfectly well what is happening to him and why, and he commits himself to the care of his heavenly Father, knowing full well what will happen next. Then the centurion confirms what Jesus himself knows very well: "Truly this man was a righteous man."

It is difficult to convey how vast the difference between these two accounts of Jesus' death is. I mentioned earlier that scholars sometimes believe that Mark's account was intended to provide hope.

to those who have endured persecution and suffering, to explain to them that no matter how this suffering may appear, behind it lies a God seeking redemption. For what purpose could Luke have replaced Mark's story so that Jesus would not die in sorrow and despair?

Some critical commentators have suggested that Luke may have been writing to persecuted Christians, but his words to these martyrs for their faith were quite different from Mark's. Rather than stressing that God is present throughout the scene of Jesus' death, which at first glance is not the case, Luke could be offering Christians an example, explaining how they should endure suffering—how Jesus, the perfect martyr, convinced of his innocence and convinced of the tangible presence of God in his life until his death, remained calm and in control, knowing that this suffering was necessary to receive paradise as a reward, that it would soon be over and another blessed life would begin. Both writers are talking about the same events, however, they attempt to convey very different ideas about the death of Jesus and the resilience of his persecuted followers.

## **TERMINATION**

The difficulty arises when readers combine these two accounts into one comprehensive narrative in which Jesus says, does, and experiences everything that is in both gospels. In this approach, the main ideas of Mark and Luke are inevitably obscured and lost. Jesus

He no longer dies in agony like Mark (because he is confident like Luke), but he is no longer calm and confident like Luke (because he is in despair like Mark). Somehow he manages to combine the two. Moreover, his words take on a completely different meaning because he says everything that is in both gospels. And when they try to combine the gospels of Matthew and John, readers get an even more chaotic portrait of Jesus and mistakenly believe that they have reconstructed *the true course of events*. To look at these stories from this perspective is to deprive each author of the inherent integrity and meaning of his story.

In this way, readers have compiled the famous "Seven Last Words of Jesus," combining the dying words he uttered in all four Gospels, and have decided that they now know the whole story. However, this interpretive device does not allow for the history as a whole. He creates a fifth narrative that is radically different from the four canonical ones - a fifth, which is essentially the result of a rewriting of the four gospels, the fifth gospel. This is not forbidden to do if there is a desire: we live in a free country, no one will interfere with us. However, from the point of view of supporters of the historical-critical method, this is far from the best approach to studying the Gospels.

Overall, in my opinion, both the Gospels and all other books of the Bible are separate, distinct, and independent texts, and should not be read as if they all say the same thing.

This is far from the case, even when the subject is the same (say, the death of Jesus). The Gospel of Mark differs from the Gospel of Luke, Matthew writes differently from John, and this can be seen by studying the crucifixion stories using the "horizontal reading" method. With a horizontal approach, the voices of all the evangelists will be heard, the texts will not be mixed up and form a mega-gospel, inevitably leveling out the emphases of each.

## **SOME ESSENTIAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN AND THE SYNOPTICS GOSPEL**

It is true that the Synoptic Gospels tell different versions of the stories they contain. However, there are similarities between them that distinguish them from the Gospel of John. It has long been known that the reason for this striking similarity is the use of the same sources. Matthew and Luke turned to the Gospel of Mark, sometimes repeating it verbatim, sometimes changing it, and significantly, when it was necessary to present the story in a different light.

Although many casual readers of the New Testament fail to notice, the Gospel of John is quite different. With the exception of the Passion of Christ, most of John's passages are not in the Synoptic Gospels, and most of the stories in the Synoptic Gospels are not in John. And even if they do contain some similarities, John presents them in a fundamentally different way. This can be seen if we compare the entire Gospel of John with the Synoptic Gospels.

### **Differences in content**

If you were to read the synoptic gospels and map out the main passages—the stories that form the basis of the narratives, so to speak—what would they be like? Luke and Mark begin with Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to a virgin. The first major event mentioned in all three gospels is the baptism of Jesus by John, after which Jesus goes into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

After returning from the desert, Jesus begins to preach about the imminent appearance of the "kingdom of God." A characteristic form of his teaching is parables. The Gospel of Mark says that Jesus taught

(Mark 4:11) He also performs miracles. One of the typical of his miracles, the first in Mark, is the exorcism of demons from the possessed. And so his ministry in Galilee continues: Jesus recites parables, performs exorcisms, and in the middle of the journey he takes his three followers, Peter, James, and John, with him up a mountain and is transfigured before them, and then begins to converse with Moses and Elijah, who have come down from heaven. After the transfiguration, Jesus ministers until he goes to Jerusalem in the last week of his life. He drives out the merchants from the temple, then participates in the Last Supper and declares that this is the Lord's Supper (or Communion), the bread on which is his body, the wine in the cup is his blood. Then he is brought before the court of the Jewish high priests and hears charges of blasphemy. Then follows the familiar ending: the gospel writers tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection, each in his own way.

It is striking that there is not a single episode in the Gospel of John that literally forms the basis of the narrative. He does not say that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, he does not mention the virginity of his mother, he does not mention the baptism, he does not describe the temptations in the wilderness. Jesus does not proclaim the coming of the kingdom of God and he never tells a parable. He does not cast out demons. There is not a word about the transfiguration. When he arrives in Jerusalem, he does not drive the merchants out of the temple (as he did in the second chapter, John 2), he does not establish the Lord's Supper (he washes the disciples' feet instead), and he does not appear before any official court of the Jewish authorities.

If the Gospel of John does not contain all these episodes that seem to be integral to the story of Jesus, then what does it contain? Many themes that are not found in the Synoptic Gospels. John begins with a prologue, mysteriously describing the Word of God, who was himself God and through whom God created the universe. We learn that this Word became man, that is, who Jesus Christ is, the Word of God made flesh. There is nothing like this in the Synoptic Gospels.

John speaks of the miracles that Jesus performs during his public ministry, but does not name them. miracles—literally, "powerful works." These are called "signs." What do they mean? That Jesus is the one who came from heaven to give eternal life to all who believe in him. The Gospel of John describes seven such signs, most of which are not included in the miracles of the Synoptic Gospels (except for walking on water and feeding the multitude). John's signs include miracles that have been familiar to Bible readers and have been loved for centuries—the turning of water into wine, the healing of a blind man, and the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In the same Gospel, Jesus preaches not about the kingdom of God but about himself: he tells us who he is, where he came from, where he is going, and how he can bring eternal life. The Gospel of John is characterized by "I am" statements, in which Jesus identifies himself and explains what he can do for people. These "I am" statements are usually supported by signs that prove that Jesus is telling the truth about himself. He says, "I am the bread of life," and in confirmation multiplies the loaves to feed many; he says, "I am the light of the world," and as proof he heals a man born blind; he says, "I am the resurrection and the life," and raises Lazarus from the dead.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus speaks at length and in detail, while in the other Gospels he limits himself to memorable, aphoristic sayings. In chapter 3 he gives a long speech to Nicodemus, in chapter 4 to a Samaritan woman, and his longest speech to the disciples takes up four chapters (13–16) and is accompanied by a prayer for the rest of the chapter. None of these invocations or "I am" statements are found in the Synoptic Gospels.

## Accent differences

Much more could be said about the unique features of John's Gospel; I think it's not just discrepancies between it and the Synoptic Gospels, but also completely different images of Jesus. Of course, the three Synoptic Gospels are not identical, but the differences between any of them and the Gospel of John are particularly striking, as can be seen in the thematic emphasis.

### The Immaculate Conception and the Incarnation of God

The generally accepted orthodox Christian dogma about the coming of Christ into the world, which has been accepted for centuries, states that before his birth he was a divine being, equal but not identical with God the Father, and that he was "incarnate," became human through the Virgin Mary. However, this dogma is not set forth in any of the New Testament Gospels. The idea of Jesus' pre-birth existence as a divine being who became human is found only in the Gospel of John; the idea of his virgin birth is found only in the Epistles of Matthew and Luke. Only by combining these two ideas could the views that gave rise to orthodox doctrine emerge. To the Gospel writers, the ideas of the Immaculate Conception and the Incarnation of God seemed completely different.

Mark's Gospel says nothing. At the beginning of the story, Jesus appears as an adult, Mark does not mention the circumstances of his birth. If we had only one Gospel, the Gospel of Mark—and in the early days of the church it *was indeed* the only Gospel for some Christians—we would have no idea of the particulars of Jesus' birth, that his mother was a virgin and that he himself existed before he came to earth.

The Gospel of Matthew clearly states that Jesus' mother was a virgin, but it does not give any indication of the theological significance of this circumstance. We have already seen that Matthew was careful to emphasize that all the details of Jesus' birth, life, and death are in fulfillment of Scriptural prophecies. So why was he born of a virgin? Because the Jewish prophet Isaiah said that "a virgin will conceive and bear a son, and they will call his name Immanuel" (Matthew 1:23, quoted from Isaiah 7:14). In fact, Isaiah had something else in mind. In the Hebrew Bible, he says that "a young woman" will give birth to a son, but this prophecy is not about the future of the Messiah, but about an event that would soon occur in Isaiah's own time. However, when the Bible was translated from Hebrew into Greek, Isaiah's "virgin" (Hebrew *alma*; in this language there is another

The word "virgin") was replaced with the Greek word "virgin" (*parthenos*), which is the translation in which Matthew read the Bible. And he decided that Isaiah was not prophesying the events of his time, but the coming of the Messiah (despite the fact that there is no such word in Isaiah 7). Therefore, Matthew wrote that Jesus was born of a virgin, believing that this was a prophecy of the Holy Scriptures.

Luke had different opinions. He also believed that Jesus was born of a virgin, but he did not have in mind the prophecy. He found a direct explanation: Jesus is literally the Son of God. Mary conceived by the will of God, which means that her son is also the son of God. As Mary learns from the angel Gabriel (who is mentioned only in the book of Luke): "The Holy

"The Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore also the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). Conceived not by man or any other person, but by the will of God, Mary gives birth to a creature whose nature is partly divine.

So Matthew and Luke tell us differently about the reasons for Jesus' virgin birth, but more importantly, neither Matthew nor Luke mentions that the virgin existed before the birth. For these authors, Jesus only appeared after his birth. Their gospels make no mention of Jesus' existence before his birth. This idea comes from John and John alone.

John does not mention the virginity of Jesus' mother; instead, he explains his coming into the world as the incarnation of a pre-existing deity. The prologue to John's Gospel (John 1:1-18) is one of the most magnificent and expressive texts in the entire Bible, and at the same time one of the most controversial, contested, and misinterpreted. John begins (John 1:1-3) with a grand introduction to the "Word of God" - an entity independent of God ("it was with God"), but in a certain sense equal to God ("was God"). In the beginning he appears with God, through whom the entire universe is created ("all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made").

Scholars have debated the details of this passage for centuries.[20] I personally believe that the author is referring to the creation story in Genesis 1, where everything comes into being through God's word: "And God said, 'Let there be light.' And there was light." By speaking the Word, God created everything that came into being. The author of the Fourth Gospel, like other adherents of the Jewish tradition, believed that the Word spoken by God was an independent entity, related to Him but at the same time separate. He was "with God," but when He spoke, He was separate from God; it "was God" in the sense that what God spoke was part of His essence. His speech only revealed outwardly what was already in His mind. Therefore, the Word of God was the outward manifestation of the inner divine reality. It was with God, and it was God, and it became the means by which all things came into being.

In the Gospel of John, this pre-existent divine Word of God became man: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us... and we beheld his glory" (John 1:14). It is clear from the outset who this man was—Jesus Christ. Here Jesus is not just a Jewish prophet who suddenly appears on the scene, as in Mark, and he is not a god-man who appears at the moment of conception (or birth) in the presence of a woman who conceived by the will of God. He, the very Word of God that God had in the beginning, moved to earth for a time and gave humans the possibility of eternal life.

John does not explain how this Word came into the world. He does not speak of Christmas, he does not mention Joseph and Mary, Bethlehem, the Immaculate Conception. This is where his gospel differs from Luke's: if Luke presents Jesus as appearing at a certain historical moment (conception or birth), then in John Jesus is presented as the incarnation in human form of a divine essence that exists outside of history.

What happens when you try to combine these approaches? Both distinctive emphases are lost at the same time. The main idea of each author is overshadowed by the orthodox dogma of the Incarnation through the Virgin Mary. Readers of the New Testament, by combining these two texts, create their own narrative that coincides with the teachings of Luke and John and contains a teaching that is not found in either of these gospels.

## **DIFFERENCES IN JESUS' TEACHINGS**

The Gospel of John also contains different views on Jesus' words about his public ministry.

Next, I will compare them with statements from the earliest synoptic gospel, the Gospel of Mark.

### **Jesus' Teachings in the Book of Mark**

Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of Mark are in many ways summed up in his very first words: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent, and believe in the gospel."

(Mark 1:15). Anyone familiar with ancient Judaism will notice the apocalyptic nature of this idea. Jewish apocalypticism is a peculiar worldview that arose about a century and a half before the birth of Jesus and was widespread among the Jews in his time. The Greek word "apocalypse" means "announcement", "revelation". Scholars called these views apocalyptic because their adherents believed that God had revealed or revealed to them the highest

secrets that made it possible to understand the meaning of reality, including the lower and unpleasant realities that exist on earth. One of the questions of apocalyptic proponents was: why is there so much pain and suffering in the world, especially among God's people? The suffering of wicked people can still be somehow understood: they simply get what they deserve. But why do the righteous suffer?

Why do the righteous suffer even more than sinners, and at the hands of sinners themselves? Why does God allow this?

Jewish apocalyptics believed that God had revealed secrets to them to help them figure things out. There are powerful forces in the world that oppose God and His people, such as the devil and his followers. For some mysterious reason, God has allowed these forces to flourish in this "age of evil." However, a new age is coming when God will overthrow the forces of evil and establish a kingdom of good, a kingdom of God, where there will be no more pain, sorrow, and suffering.

Supreme authority will be centered in God, and the devil, his minions, and other evil forces that cause so much suffering (hurricanes, earthquakes, famines, plagues, wars) will be destroyed forever.

Mark's teaching about Jesus is apocalyptic: the words "the time is fulfilled" mean that the current "evil age," in terms of time, is almost over. The end is near. "The kingdom of God is near" is a clear sign that God will soon take action to crush the forces of evil and the states they support, such as Rome, and that his kingdom will rule over all.

in the world, a kingdom of truth, peace and justice. "Repent and believe in the Gospel" is a call to prepare for the coming kingdom, to change our lives, to unite the forces of good, to reject the forces of evil and to accept the teaching of Jesus, which will soon triumph.

For Jesus in Mark's Gospel, this kingdom is at hand. As he tells his disciples: "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God come with power" (Mark 9:1); later, after describing the cosmic cataclysms that mark the end of the age, he explains: "Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things happen." (Mark 13:30).

How will this kingdom come about? According to Mark, its founder will be the "Son of Man," the supreme judge of the earth, who will judge people according to whether they have accepted Jesus' teaching: "Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38). And who is this Son of Man? For Mark, it is Jesus himself, who must be rejected.

by his people and their government, be killed, and then rise from the dead (Mark 8:31). Jesus will die, be resurrected, and eventually return as judge, and with him the kingdom of God will come.

But because Jesus reveals the kingdom, for Mark this kingdom is already manifest in Jesus' earthly life and ministry. In this kingdom there will be no demons or unclean spirits, and Jesus will cast them out; there will be no sickness in it, and Jesus will heal the sick; there will be no death in the kingdom, and Jesus will rise from the dead. The kingdom of God is already visible in the ministry of Jesus and his followers (Mark 6:7-13). This is the essence of many of Jesus' parables in Mark: the kingdom is faintly visible in Jesus' actions, almost imperceptible, but soon it will appear in all its glory and splendor. It is like a tiny mustard seed that, when planted in the ground, grows into a tall bush (Mark 4:30-32). Most of Jesus' listeners rejected this idea, but the day of judgment is near, and soon the kingdom of God will be in effect, and then the whole world will be different (Mark 13).

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus does not talk much about himself. He talks mostly about God and the coming kingdom and how people should prepare for it. He always calls himself the Son of Man: he never says, "I am the Son of Man." At the same time, he does not claim to be the Messiah, the anointed ruler of the coming kingdom, and this continues until the very end, when he is questioned by the high priest (Mark 14:61-62).

Although Jesus is recognized in this Gospel as the Son of God (see Mark 1:11; 9:7; 15:39), he himself chooses not to use this title and only reluctantly acknowledges it (Mark 14:62).

It is important to know that for the ancient Jews, the expression "Son of God" had a deep meaning. Hebrew In the Bible, the "son of God" can be called the nation of Israel (Hosea 11:1) or the king of Israel (1 Samuel 7:14). In such cases, the son of God is God's chosen one to carry out his purposes and express his will on earth. For Mark, Jesus becomes such a chosen one, who carries out God's supreme will and for this reason dies on the cross. However, it is striking that in Mark's Gospel, Jesus never mentions his divinity, that he existed before birth, that he is in some sense equal to God. For Mark, he is not God and does not claim this status.

### **Jesus' Teachings in the Book of John**

The situation is quite different in the Gospel of John. In Mark, Jesus speaks mostly about God and the coming kingdom and mentions little about himself, only that he will be executed in Jerusalem, while in John, almost everything Jesus says is about himself: he explains who he is, where he came from, where he is going, how he can give eternal life.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus does not preach about the coming kingdom of God, but about himself, as shown by the constant statements "I am." He is the one who provides sustenance ("I am the bread of life," John 6:33), illuminates life ("I am the light of the world," John 9:5), he is the only way to God ("I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me") "only through me," John 14:6). Faith in Jesus is the way to eternal salvation: "He who believes in the Son has eternal life" (John 3:36). In essence, he is equal to God:

"I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). The Jewish listeners evidently understood what he was talking about: they immediately picked up stones to hit him for blasphemy.

In one passage in the Gospel of John, Jesus claims God's name, telling his Jewish interlocutors: "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). Abraham, who lived 1,800 years

before, is the father of the Jews, and Jesus claims to have existed before him. But his claims do not stop there. He cites a passage in the Jewish Scriptures in which God appears to Moses in the form of a burning bush, commanding him to go to Pharaoh and lead God's people out of Egypt. Moses asks God what his name is, to explain to the Israelites which deity has sent him. God replies: "I am who I am... thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The Eternal [the Lord] has sent me to you'" (Exodus 3:14).

Therefore, when Jesus says "I am" in John 8:58, he is claiming the divine name. And here the Jewish listeners easily understood the meaning of his words. And again they picked up stones.

The Gospels of Mark and John differ not only in that John speaks about himself and identifies himself with divinity, but also in that Jesus *does not teach* what he teaches in Mark—the coming of the kingdom of God.

The idea of a coming kingdom on earth, where God will exercise supreme power and all evil forces will be destroyed, is not found in Jesus' statements in the Gospel of John. Instead, Jesus explains to people that eternal life in heaven can only be obtained by being born again (John 3:3–5). This is what "kingdom of God" means in the book of John on the rare occasions it appears in the text: it refers to life in heaven, above, with God, not a new heaven and a new earth below. Faith in Jesus is what gives eternal life. Those who believe in Jesus will live with God forever, while those who do not believe will be condemned (John 3:36).

Many supporters of the historical-critical method are convinced that the Gospel of John was written by the latter no longer speaks of the imminent appearance of the Son of Man on earth, who will sit as judge on earth and proclaim the beginning of a utopian kingdom. In the book of Mark, Jesus prophesies that these events will occur in the near future, within the lifetime of his generation, so that his disciples will see them (Mark 9:1; 13:30). However, by the time John wrote his Gospel—probably 90–95 C.E.—the previous generation had already died, and many, if not all, of the disciples had died. That is, they had died before the kingdom came. What can be done with the doctrine of an eternal kingdom here on earth if that kingdom never came? Reinterpret the teaching. John interprets it by rethinking its basic ideas.

The apocalyptic worldview reflected in Mark's writings is characterized by the presence of a historical dualism with the present "age of evil" and the future kingdom of God. Our age and the coming century – they can be arranged in a horizontal timeline drawn across the page. The Gospel of John transforms the horizontal dualism of apocalyptic thinking into a vertical dualism. It is no longer the dualism of an era that continues on earth and a new, coming and earthly era: it is the dualism of life on earth and in heaven. We are below, God is above. Jesus, as the Word of God, comes down from heaven so that we ourselves may experience "rebirth" (the literal meaning of John 3:3 is not that "you must be born again," but that "you must be born again" [21]). When we experience this new birth, by believing in Christ who came from above, we will have eternal life (John 3:16). to live with God (John 14:1-6).

We don't have to wait for the kingdom on earth. It's in heaven. And we can get there by believing in the One who came down from heaven to earth to teach and instruct us. This teaching is radically different from what we saw in the Gospel of Mark.

## MIRACLES OF JESUS

Why does Jesus perform miracles? Most readers will probably answer: because he sympathizes with people and wants to save them from suffering. And this answer is confirmed by the Synoptic Gospels. Moreover, the miracles in these Gospels show that the long-awaited kingdom has already begun to be established thanks to the works of Jesus:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because he hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor; he hath sent me... to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind...*

*And he began to say to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-21).*

In another passage, the followers of John the Baptist come to Jesus to find out if he is the one they are talking about who will appear at the end of time, or are they waiting for something else? Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel preached to them. And blessed is anyone who is not offended in me" (Matthew 11:2-6). In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus is the one who has been long-awaited and who will proclaim the kingdom.

However, in the same early gospels, Jesus resolutely refuses to perform miracles, so that to prove to the unbelievers who he is. In Matthew's Gospel, the scribes and Pharisees say to Jesus, "Teacher, we would see a sign from you" (Matthew 12:38). They want proof that his authority comes from God. Instead of granting their request, Jesus bursts out with a fierce rebuke: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matthew 12:39). He goes on to explain that just as Jonah was essentially dead for three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so the "Son of Man" will be "in the heart of the earth" for three days and three nights.

We are talking about the book of the prophet Jonah from the Hebrew Bible, which tells how God sent the prophet Jonah to the sworn enemies of Israel - the Assyrians in the city of Nineveh, to call them to repentance. Jonah refuses and sails in another direction. God raises a storm at sea, during which the ship begins to sink; Having learned that the reason for this is Jonah's disobedience, the sailors throw him overboard. A huge fish swallows Jonah, but after three days vomits him onto dry land. To avoid incurring wrath from above again, Jonah goes to Nineveh, proclaims his message, and proselytizes the city.

Jesus compares his situation to Jonah's. He, Jesus, preaches to the stubborn, and they do not repent. But he miraculously refuses to assert his divine authority.

The only evidence will be the "sign of Jonah," which in the context of Matthew's Gospel means the sign of the resurrection. Jesus will be dead for three days and then rise again. This event, not his actions during his public ministry, will be enough to convince people that he is preaching the truth.

Matthew expresses these views throughout his Gospel, and they help us to understand one of his most mysterious episodes. Before beginning his public ministry, Jesus goes into the wilderness, where he is tempted by the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). Matthew mentions three specific temptations, but only two of them have any obvious significance. In the first, after forty days of fasting, the tempter urges Jesus to turn stones into loaves of bread. Jesus refuses: his miracles are not for himself, but for other people. For the third time, the devil demands worship, and in return promises kingdoms of peace. The temptation is obvious—who wouldn't want to rule the world? But he has a special

a shade for Matthew, who knows that Jesus will still *rule* the world. But first he will have to die on the cross. In this case, the temptation lies in the possibility of avoiding Christ's suffering. Again, Jesus refuses: only God is to be worshipped.

And what is the second temptation? The devil places Jesus on the pinnacle of the Jewish temple and encourages him to jump off: if he is truly the Son of God, angels will pick him up and carry him without letting him hurt a finger. What could be the temptation to jump off a ten-story building? It is necessary to understand where all this is happening: in Jerusalem, the heart of Judaism, in the temple, the center of God's worship, where there are many Jews. Jesus is tempted to jump off in front of everyone so that angels will come and take him. In other words, Jesus is tempted to give people miraculous proof that he is indeed the Son of God. Jesus categorically refuses: "It is also written, 'You shall not tempt the Lord your God.'"

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus does nothing to prove his words. That is why in this Gospel his miracles are called miracles, not signs. They are demonstrations of power designed to help those in need and to confirm the coming of the kingdom of God.

What about the Gospel of John? In John's words, Jesus' impressive actions are called signs, not miracles. They confirm who Jesus is and convince people to believe in him. Calling himself "the bread of life," Jesus makes a sign of bread that is enough to feed "a great multitude" (John 6); declaring himself to be "the light of the world," Jesus accompanies these words with a sign: he heals a man born blind (John 9); claiming to be "the resurrection and the life," he proves this by a sign, raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11).

It is surprising that Matthew's account of Jesus' denial of a sign to the Jewish scribes and Pharisees except the sign of Jonah is not in John's Gospel. But why is that? From John's perspective, Jesus gives signs throughout his ministry. John also omits the account of the three temptations in the wilderness. Again, why? Because he believes that Jesus proves who he is by miraculous signs, not by rejecting the devil's temptations; that is his divine calling.

John's signs are designed to strengthen faith in Jesus. As Jesus himself tells the official who asks to heal his son, "Unless you see signs and wonders, you will not believe" (John 4:48). Jesus heals the son, and his father gains faith (John 4:53). This means that the author of the Gospel of John believed that all these signs confirm the person of Jesus and lead people to faith: "Jesus  
"He did many other miracles in the presence of his disciples, and other signs which are not in this book. These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31). While the evidence for Jesus' supernatural status in Matthew is very limited, in John's Gospel it is the main reason for Jesus' miracles.

## **SOME KEY DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PAUL'S WRITINGS AND EVANGELISTIC WRITINGS**

Significant differences between the texts of the New Testament authors can be found not only in the four Gospels, but also in many other New Testament books, such as the letters of the Apostle Paul. in writings.

Paul's writings were written before all the Gospels. Most of his letters date from the 1950s. and is about 10-15 years earlier than the earliest Gospel, Mark

Gospel. Paul and all the evangelists worked after the death of Jesus, the gospel writers did not just describe for posterity all the "real" words and deeds of Jesus. They told the stories of his words and deeds through the prism of their own theological concepts, which is especially noticeable in some places. Paul also relied on his own theological views. However, many of the views contained in Paul's writings do not coincide with those in the Gospels and the book of Acts, which was written by the author of the Gospel of Luke.

#### Paul and Matthew on Salvation and the Law

An important aspect of Paul's teaching is the question of how we can come to God. At least from Reformation theologians argued that this was a question to which Paul attached enormous importance. Today, most Pauline scholars recognize that this view is oversimplified, ignoring much of the context of the seven unquestionably Pauline letters mentioned in chapter 2. There is no doubt that Paul was concerned with how people, such as those who are ready to be converted, could enter into a right relationship with God, and Paul was convinced that this could only happen through faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, not through obedience to the commandments of the Jewish law.

This teaching contradicts other New Testament views, including those set forth in the Gospel of Matthew. Should Jesus' followers continue to observe Jewish law if they are to be saved? The answer to this question depends on which author we turn to. Is right standing or justification before God directly related to faith in Jesus' death and resurrection? At least one important episode in the Gospel of Matthew differs from Paul's writings on this issue.

#### **Paul's view of "justification"**

"Justification" is what Paul calls a person's right standing with God. Paul's ideas about justification are found primarily in his letters to the Galatians and Romans. In them, Paul explains in various ways how a person can come to God. His most famous and arguably dominant view (found in other letters as well) is that a person is "justified by faith" in the death and resurrection of Christ, not by keeping the Jewish law.

The theological meaning of justification according to Paul can be understood by trying to imagine its logic. To do this, we must start at the beginning, when Paul was not yet a follower of Jesus, but a man who considered faith in Christ to be blasphemy that needed to be suppressed. In his letters, written about twenty years after this period of persecution, Paul nowhere says that he initially strongly condemned the Christian faith, but this is scattered throughout the texts of his letters. He may have been offended by Jesus' claim to be the Messiah.

Before he believed in Jesus, Paul, as a devout Jew, undoubtedly had an idea of what the Messiah would be like. Before the advent of Christianity, no Jew believed that the Messiah would suffer and die. On the contrary, whatever the Jews thought of him, they all agreed that the Messiah would be an embodiment of greatness and power, capable of carrying out God's plan on earth. The Jews did not understand the passages of Scripture that tell of the sufferings of the righteous man of God as references to the Messiah. And in none of these passages (Isaiah 53, Psalm 21) is the Messiah mentioned.

The Messiah was to enjoy special favor from God and be his powerful and powerful representative on earth. And who was Jesus? A little-known traveling preacher who broke the law and was crucified for inciting rebellion against the existing order. For most of the first

The attempt by 1st-century Jews to call Jesus the Messiah would have seemed at best ridiculous and at worst blasphemous. Nothing could be less like the Messiah and more ridiculous than a crucified criminal (see 1 Corinthians 1:23). Paul evidently thought so too. But then something happened to Paul. He later claimed that Jesus appeared to him in a vision after his death. This vision convinced Paul that Jesus had not died at all. But how could this be?

As befits an apocalyptic view of a Jew before the spread of faith in Jesus, Paul was convinced that the end of the "evil age" would be marked by the resurrection of the dead, that God, having crushed the forces of evil, would raise from the dead all people who would be judged, the righteous receiving eternal reward and the sinners receiving eternal punishment. If Jesus was not dead, which Paul "knew" because he saw him alive (say, a year or two later), then God must have raised him from the dead. And if God raised him from the dead, then Jesus *had* special mercy from God. He is probably the Messiah, just not in the way the Jews had previously imagined him, but otherwise.

But if he is truly God's chosen one, the Messiah, why did he die? From this point on, we will begin to discuss with Paul, following the logical chain from the end to the beginning, from Jesus' resurrection to his death and life. Paul reasoned that Jesus did not have to die for any transgressions if he was truly the Messiah and had God's special favor. He also did not have to pay for his own sins. Then for what? Obviously, for the sins of other people. Just as with the sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, Jesus was sacrificed for the sins of other people.

Why did God need Jesus to die for others? Apparently, because human sacrifice is the only suitable sacrifice. The Jewish sacrificial system was hardly adequate to pay for sins. But does this mean that God has a different view of justifying people before him?

Did he not call the Jews his chosen people, or give them a law that set them apart from other nations? Yes, Paul reasoned, that was the case. The Law and the Prophets clearly point to Christ as God's chosen solution to the problem with mankind.

But what is this problem with people? It seems that all people—not just Gentiles but Jews as well—have broken God's laws and needed a perfect sacrifice to atone for their sins.

At the same time, this means that everyone, not only Jews but also Gentiles, must accept the sacrifice of the Messiah, whom God sent to atone for the sins of mankind. Can people not come to God by obeying his law alone? Obviously not. Otherwise, the Messiah's execution on the cross would not have been necessary. The crucified Jesus shed his blood for others and offered the atoning sacrifice for sins. Those who believe in his death (and resurrection, which proved that Jesus' death was part of God's plan) will come to God—will be justified. Those who do not believe cannot be justified.

All of this meant that keeping the Jewish law no longer played an important role in salvation.

Even Jews who scrupulously keep this law cannot be justified before God. What about Gentiles? Should they become Jews and try to keep the law by believing in Christ?

For Paul, the answer is clear: no way. A person's efforts to keep the law would show that he believes that God's mercy can be *earned* as a reason for pride. Who tries to justify himself By keeping the law, he will not be freed from sin, so all his efforts will be in vain.

The only way to justify yourself is to believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Galatians 2:15 Paul says, "We have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."

This is the doctrine that Paul sets forth in Romans 1-3 and Galatians 1-3. Followers of Jesus do not need to strive to keep the law, except to "love your neighbor as yourself" and to adhere to the strong moral principles that God still expects of his people. However, keeping all the commandments and requirements of the law—performing the ritual of circumcision, eating kosher food, observing the Sabbath and other Jewish holidays—is not necessary for salvation, and anyone who thinks (and acts) otherwise risks losing his salvation (Galatians 5:4).

#### Paul and Matthew's View of the Law

I have often wondered what would have happened if Paul and Matthew had been locked in the same room and warned that they would not be released until they agreed on how Jesus' followers should view Jewish law.

If Matthew, who wrote his Gospel 25-30 years after Paul's writings, had read even a few of Paul's letters, he would hardly have been inspired by them, much less would he have considered them inspired. Matthew has a different view of the law than Paul. Matthew believes that followers of Jesus must keep the law. In fact, they must do so even more zealously than most religious people. Jews, scribes, and Pharisees. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says:

Do not think that I have come to destroy the law or the prophets; I have not come to destroy but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one jot will pass from the law until all is fulfilled. Therefore whoever breaks one of these least commandments and teaches men to do so will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:17-20).

Paul believed that followers of Jesus who tried to keep the law risked losing their salvation. Matthew believed that followers of Jesus who did not keep the law or who did not surpass the righteousness of the most religious Jews would never be saved. Theologians and commentators have tried for years to reconcile these two views, and this desire is understandable, since both are in the canonical New Testament. But anyone who reads the Gospel of Matthew and then Galatians will never suspect that there was a reason or a way to reconcile these two statements. In Matthew's view, being great in the kingdom means keeping all the commandments to the very last, and to enter the kingdom one must keep them even more diligently than the scribes and Pharisees. For Paul, entry into the kingdom (in other words, being justified) is possible only through the death and resurrection of Jesus; Gentiles are strictly forbidden from keeping the Jewish law (such as circumcision).

Of course, Matthew also knows about the death and resurrection of Jesus. He devotes a large part of his Gospel to describing these events. And he also believes that there can be no salvation apart from the death of Jesus. But salvation also requires keeping God's law. After all, this law is given by God himself. If he introduced the law once, he is unlikely to change his mind later.

One passage in Matthew's Gospel suggests that salvation is actually a matter of works as well as faith—an idea completely foreign to Paul. In one of Jesus'

The story of the events found only in the Gospel of Matthew speaks of the day of judgment that will come at the end of time. The Son of Man will come in glory with the holy angels, and all the nations of the earth will be gathered before him (Matthew 25:31-45). He will divide them into two groups, "as a shepherd separates his sheep from the goats": he will put the sheep on his right and the goats on the left. Those on the right will be called into the kingdom of God "prepared for you from the foundation of the world." Why will all these people end up in the kingdom?

"For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you welcomed me; I was naked and you clothed me; I was sick and you visited me; I was in prison and you came to me."

But the "sheep" are confused. They do not remember having met Jesus, the Son of Man, much less doing all this for him. And he explains: "Because you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." In other words, only those who care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned, will inherit the kingdom of God.

The "goats" go "into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Why? Unlike the "sheep," they did not care for the Son of Man when he needed it. They are also confused because they do not remember meeting him. But they saw others who needed help and turned away from them: "Inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me." Matthew ends the story with a categorical statement: "And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life." These are Jesus' last words to the people in the Gospel of Matthew.

How do these words fit in with Paul's texts? With difficulty. Paul is convinced that eternal life awaits those who believe in Jesus' death and resurrection. In Matthew's story of the sheep and the goats, salvation is granted to someone who has never even heard of Jesus. It is granted to those who have shown humanity and cared for their neighbor when he or she was most in need. This is a completely different approach to salvation.[23]

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There is another wonderful episode in the Gospel of Matthew. A rich man comes to Jesus and asks: "Good Teacher!" Jesus explains: "If you want to enter eternal life, keep the commandments." When asked what the commandments are, Jesus lists several of the ten. His interlocutor replies that he has already fulfilled them all, what more is required of him? Jesus advises him to give up all your possessions, "and you will have treasure in heaven" (see Matthew 19:16–22). Then Jesus says, "Come, follow me"—and notice that the call to follow Jesus comes only after when the rich man gives away all he has and inherits the heavenly treasure.

If someone had asked Paul how he could gain eternal life, would he have answered, "Keep the commandments"? Not Paul. The commandments have nothing to do with him, unlike the death and resurrection of Jesus. Would Paul advise his interlocutor to give up all his possessions and eventually receive treasure in heaven? No way. Only faith in Jesus can bring eternal life.

Of course, Jesus spoke of salvation before death, Paul spoke of salvation after death, and Matthew's Gospel was written later than Paul's writings. Furthermore, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus speaks of the Last Judgment, which will obviously come after his death and resurrection. And that is the crux of the problem: if Matthew's Jesus is right, and keeping the law and loving one's neighbor as

itself can bring salvation, how can Paul be right in thinking that all this has nothing to do with salvation?

## **SOME MORE DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

There are other significant and minor differences in the books of the New Testament. Providing examples is especially helpful if you are asking targeted questions.

### **Why did Jesus die?**

The death of Jesus occupies a central place in the writings of the Apostle Paul and all the evangelists. But *why did Jesus die?* What does his death have to do with salvation? The answers may differ depending on which author we turn to.

Mark clearly states that Jesus' death brought atonement for sins. As Jesus himself declares in Mark: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus' death was a ransom for people, helping them to settle accounts with God, to whom they were indebted for their sins; it is a ransom sacrifice.

Luke used Mark's Gospel as a source, adding, deleting, and changing Mark's words as he saw fit. And what did he do with this verse? I deleted it completely. Why did Luke treat it that way? Because he had a different view of Jesus' death.

In this regard, it is surprising that Mark's "testimony" to Jesus' atonement is found immediately after his death, when the veil of the temple is torn in two, which means that after Jesus' death, people gained access to God. However, Luke reverses the sequence of events, the veil being torn while Jesus is still alive. Many scholars attach great importance to this detail: the torn veil no longer emphasizes the redemptive meaning of Jesus' death, but indicates that the Jewish temple has been brought before God's judgment. The torn veil is a sign that the temple will be destroyed.

So, what are the reasons for Jesus' death in the book of Luke? This question is clarified in Luke's second book, "Acts," where the apostle proclaims salvation through Christ in order to convert people to faith. None of these missionary sermons say that Jesus' death was an atonement. Instead, the guilt of the people who rejected God's chosen one and killed him is constantly emphasized. The death of an innocent man (Jesus) should cause people to repent of their sins and turn to God for forgiveness (see Acts

2:36–38; 3:17–19) Luke believes that the guarantee of salvation is not an atoning sacrifice but forgiveness received through repentance.

But aren't redemption and forgiveness the same thing? Absolutely not. Let's say you owe me a hundred dollars, but you can't pay it back. There are two ways to solve the problem. Someone else (a friend, a sibling, a parent) can pay the hundred dollars for you. That's a kind of redemption: someone else takes responsibility for paying back your debt. But instead, I can just say, "It's okay, I don't need the money." That's forgiveness: no one pays anything, God just forgives the debt.

The death of Jesus is very important to both Mark and Luke. However, for Mark, his death is atonement, while for Luke it is an opportunity for people to realize that they are sinners and should ask God for forgiveness.

forgiveness. Therefore, the death of Jesus is explained by completely different reasons - depending on which author you read.

### **When did Jesus become the Son of God, Lord, and Messiah?**

The missionary conversions in Acts are not only about salvation, but also about bold statements about Christ and how God will exalt him after his death. Addressing the future Christians in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul speaks of how God exalts Jesus, fulfilling the prophecy of Scripture:

And we declare to you that God has fulfilled the promise made to the fathers to us, their children, by raising Jesus from the dead, as it is written in the second Psalm: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Acts 13:32-33).

In this text, Jesus becomes the Son of God on the day of the resurrection. But how does this fit with the words that Luke repeats everywhere? In the Gospel of Luke, a voice speaks the same words: "You are my Son, today I have begotten you" (Luke 3:22) at Jesus' baptism [\[25\]](#). But even before Jesus was conceived and born, the angel Gabriel had announced to Mary that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore also that holy thing which is to be born of you will be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35). In this example, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God by virtue of his virgin birth: he is physically the son of God. But how can all three statements be attributed to Luke? I am not sure if they can be reconciled; it is possible that Luke drew from different sources different traditions that differ from each other on this point.

The same problem arises with some of Luke's other statements about Jesus. For example, in his account of Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost, Luke speaks of Jesus' death and claims that God raised him up to heaven and exalted him: "Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2:36). Here again, it seems that Jesus is exalted at the time of the resurrection, and it is at that time that God "made" him Lord and Christ (Messiah). What about Luke's account of Jesus' birth, where an angel announces to shepherds "keeping watch over their flock by night" that "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). In this example, Jesus is called Messiah (Christ) and Lord at the time of his birth. How did Jesus become both Messiah and Lord at different times? Apparently, we are again faced with an internal inconsistency in Luke's works, which is explained by an appeal to different sources.

### **Did God really not notice the ignorance of the idolaters?**

We have already seen that the Acts of the Apostles contains discrepancies not only with the Gospels but also with the works of the hero of these stories, Paul. A particularly striking example is found in one of the few fragments of the Acts of the Apostles, in which Paul addresses his pagan listeners and preaches a sermon to the Athenian philosophers on the Areopagus (Acts 17:22-31). Paul begins his sermon by praising his listeners for their extraordinary piety, but then goes on to say that they are dangerously mistaken in thinking that God can be worshiped by worshiping idols, since God "does not dwell in temples made with hands." He created the world and all things in it, being Lord of heaven and earth. However, "having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all men everywhere to repent." This is the key verse of the speech. According to Paul, the pagans worshiped pagan deities out of ignorance. They simply did not know what else to do.

God does not emphasize this and gives them the opportunity to turn to the truth, to believe in it through Christ, who rose from the dead.

This passage is remarkable in that Paul himself, in one of his letters, speaks of pagan religion and states unequivocally that he does not think that the pagans worship idols out of ignorance or that God is willing to forgive them in the hope of repentance. In Romans 1:18-32 Paul points out the opposite - the "wrath of God" is poured out on the pagans because they have willfully and knowingly rejected their natural knowledge of God. "For what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them" (Romans 1:19). They pursued religious plans not out of ignorance, but with full understanding of the truth: "But even though they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God or give thanks... the glory of the immortal God was changed into an image made to look like corruptible man and birds and four-footed creatures and creeping things."

Hasn't God made this sin a big deal? On the contrary: "Therefore they are without excuse" - that is, they have no excuse. And God punishes them not only at some indefinite point in the future, but also in the present, by making them more and more depraved, sinful, and immoral, or by not preventing them from becoming so.

So we have two conflicting testimonies about Paul's attitude toward idolatry and the Gentiles. Do they worship idols out of ignorance? "Paul" in Acts answers in the affirmative, Paul in his letters answers in the negative. Does God ignore their works? According to Acts, yes, according to Paul, no. Are the Gentiles responsible for their idolatry? According to Acts, no, according to Paul, yes. Is God's wrath and judgment now directed against them? In Acts, no, in Paul – yes.

Scholars often try to find a way to reconcile these conflicting views. They usually argue that because Paul is speaking directly to pagans in Acts in an effort to convert them to Christianity, he is not telling them how he really feels about them, so as not to offend them. Frankly, I have always found it hard to believe this. This would mean that Paul was willing to lie for the sake of his new converts, to conceal what he thought was God's view of their religious activities. There is much that can be said about Paul, but I do not think he is a hypocrite or a deceiver.

The real Paul would rather start talking about the torments of hell to bring his listeners to their senses, to make them realize their mistakes; tact is another trait rarely attributed to the historical Paul. The Paul of Acts seems very different from the real one, at least on the fundamental question of the divine response to idolatry.

### **What is the Roman state – a force for good or evil?**

Finally, I will ask a question about a serious difference of opinion that troubled many ancient Christians: what should be the proper attitude of a Christian toward the state? Authors answer this question differently, sometimes their answers are contradictory. The views of the Apostle Paul are at one end of the spectrum:

Let every soul be subject to the higher authorities; for there is no authority except from God, but the existing authorities are instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists the ordinance of God... for the ruler is God's minister for your good (Romans 13:1-2, 4).

All authority comes from God, he established authority for the common good, no one should oppose it, otherwise he would be opposing God.

In Revelation, there are diametrically opposed views, where the rulers are called sinful, subject to the forces of evil; in the end, they will face God's wrath and punishment. Such "ruling authorities" are the Antichrist and his minions. Here the city of Rome is called "the great harlot" and "the mother of harlots and of the abominations of the earth," "drunk with the blood of the saints and with the blood of the witnesses of Jesus." But why is it customary to think that the "harlot of Babylon" in Revelation 17 refers to the Roman government, which Paul so praised? Because the angel explains to us the meaning of the vision of "Babylon the Great." The beast on which she sits has seven heads, symbolizing "the seven mountains on which the woman sits"; she herself "is the great city that reigns over the kings of the earth" (Rev. 17:18). What great city on seven mountains could we speak of in the first century? Of course, about Rome, built "on seven hills."

In the book of Revelation, Rome is not a benevolent institution working for the common good, nor is it a servant of God appointed for the good of its people, as in Paul's. In the book of Revelation, Rome is a terrible, worthless, blasphemous, utterly immoral, oppressive, and cruel government, appointed not by God but by his enemies. However, the day will come when God will crush the Roman state to establish his kingdom of good and wipe the "whore of Babylon" from the face of the earth.

#### **CONCLUSION**

I have taught the New Testament for nearly 25 years in universities, primarily at Rutgers and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In the meantime, I have found that the most difficult thing to do is to get students to understand that the historical-critical method requires that each biblical author be given a chance to speak, because in many cases some authors have something to say on a given subject that others are silent about. Sometimes the differences are in the placement of emphasis, other times in the authors' narrative or logical construction, but sometimes these differences are so profound that they affect not only the details of the text but also the serious issues the authors were considering.

In this chapter I have tried to discuss some significant "serious" differences: Who was Jesus? How did he come into this world? What did he teach? Why did he perform miracles? How did he feel about his death? Why did he have to die? How did humans gain the right to stand before God? What does God himself think about "false religions"? How should Christians deal with government? In any case, these are important, fundamental questions. The New Testament writers answer them differently.

But who were these authors if they disagreed so often and on such fundamental issues? We will discuss this topic later in our historical-critical study of the New Testament Scriptures, raising the question of who actually wrote the Bible.

#### **4. WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?**

Students taking their first college Bible studies course are often surprised to learn that we don't know the authors of most of the books of the New Testament. How can this be? What about the names of the authors of what we are accustomed to calling the books of the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, the letters of Paul, the first and second letters of Peter, the three letters of John? How

Can false names be associated with the books of the Bible? Isn't this the Word of God against us? If someone wrote a book and signed it as Paul, knowing full well that he was not Paul, isn't that a lie? But how can a lie be in the Holy Scriptures?

When I entered seminary, I was fully prepared to resist the attacks on my faith by liberal Bible scholars if they chose to impose such heresy on me. As a student in conservative circles, I knew that similar views prevailed at institutions like Princeton Theological Seminary. But what *these people* could possibly understand is pitiful.  
a handful of liberals?

But I was soon struck by the lack of evidence to support the traditional authorship of the biblical texts, which I had always taken for granted, and the overwhelming evidence that our ideas about the authorship of the books of the Bible were wrong. It turned out that liberals really had something to say and something to support their words, that their arguments were not just a dangerous attempt at daydreaming. Some books, such as the Gospels, were anonymous works, only later attributed to authors who may not have written them (the apostles, the apostles' friends). The authors of other books of the Bible deliberately signed their names with false names.

In this section, I would like to explain what evidence we have.

### **Who wrote the Gospels?**

Although this is not a question that priests usually discuss with their parishioners, over the past century most biblical scholars have concluded that many books of the New Testament were not written by the people with whom these books are associated. If this is true, who wrote them?

### **Introductory Note: The Gospels as Eyewitness Accounts**

As we have just seen, the canonical gospels abound in both minor and significant differences. Why are the four gospels so different from each other? These books are called the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John because they are traditionally believed to have been written by the apostle Matthew, a former tax collector or tax collector; John, the "Beloved Disciple," mentioned in the Fourth Gospel; Mark, the assistant to the apostle Peter; and Luke, who accompanied Paul on his travels. These traditions date back about a century after the books were written.

But if the Gospels of Matthew and John were written by Jesus' earthly disciples, why are these books so different in every way? Why are there so many contradictions? Why do their authors have fundamentally different ideas about who Jesus was? In Matthew, Jesus appears after being conceived or born of a virgin; in John, Jesus is the incarnation of the Word of God, which God had at the beginning of time and through which the entire world was created. Matthew does not mention that Jesus is God; this is emphasized in John. In Matthew, Jesus preaches about the coming kingdom of God and almost never talks about himself (and his divine nature); in John, Jesus teaches almost exclusively about himself, especially his divinity. In Matthew, Jesus refuses to perform miracles to prove his abilities; in John, this affirmation is practically the only reason for his miracles.

Could two earthly followers of Jesus really have had such different understandings of who he was? It is very likely. Two members of the George W. Bush administration may have had radically different ideas about him (but I doubt anyone would attribute divinity to him). This leads to an important methodological point, which I want to emphasize before discussing the evidence for the authorship of the Gospels.

Why did the belief eventually spread that these books were written by the apostles and their companions? Some parts of the book were attributed to witnesses and companions of witnesses to reassure readers that the witnesses could be trusted to know for sure what was happening to Jesus.

However, in cases where historical accuracy is required, witnesses should not be trusted. They were not reliable in ancient times, and they do not deserve to be trusted now. If witnesses had never distorted details, we would not need courts. To find out how a particular crime was committed, we would only have to ask one of the witnesses. However, in reality, many witnesses are questioned during a trial because their testimonies differ. If two witnesses in court had given testimonies as different as those of Matthew and John, one can imagine how difficult it would have been to establish the truth.

It is also necessary to take into account that all the Gospels were written by unknown authors, and none of them claimed to be an eyewitness. Certain titles are associated with the Gospels (for example, "The Gospel according to Matthew"), but these titles were given to the books much later by editors and copyists, giving readers an idea of who they thought was the author of a particular work. The fact that the modern titles of the Gospels are not original is confirmed by a little reflection. The author of the Gospel according to Matthew did not call his book "The Holy Gospel according to Matthew" "The Gospel according to Matthew." The people who gave it this title tried to explain who they thought wrote it. It is unlikely that the authors themselves would have written "the holy gospel of so-and-so" in their books.

Furthermore, the Gospel of Matthew is written only in the third person about what "they" did - Jesus and the apostles - but never about "we", that is, Jesus and us, everyone else. Even when this Gospel speaks of Matthew's calling to be an apostle, it speaks of "him", not "me".

Read Matthew 9:9. Nothing in this text indicates that the author is writing about himself.

The case of John is even more obvious. At the end of this Gospel, the author mentions the "Beloved Disciple": "This disciple also testifies of these things, and wrote these things; and we know that his testimony is true" (John 21:24). Notice how the author distinguishes between his source of information, "the disciple who testifies," and *himself*: "We know that his testimony is true." "He" and "we": This author is not a student. He claims to have received some information from the aforementioned disciple.

As for the two remaining gospels, Mark is called neither a disciple nor an apostle, but a helper of Peter, while Luke is called a helper of Paul, who was also not a disciple or an apostle. And even if they were apostles, this fact would not guarantee the objectivity of their accounts.

and authenticity. But in reality there were no eyewitnesses among the authors of the Gospels, and none of them pretend to be one.

## **WHO WROTE THESE BOOKS THEN?**

### **Gospel writers**

First, let's ask ourselves a simple question: What do we know about Jesus' followers?

The earliest and most reliable information about them is taken from the Gospels themselves, as well as from the book of Acts. In other books of the New Testament, such as the Pauline epistles, the twelve apostles are mentioned only in passing, and these references usually confirm what can be read from the Gospels themselves. All we have, apart from the New Testament, are traditions that developed many decades and centuries later, such as the famous Acts of John, which tells of John's miraculous missionary works after the resurrection. No historian considers this source to be reliable.[27]

We know from the Gospels that Jesus' apostles, like himself, were poor peasants from a village in Galilee. Most often they – Simon, Peter, Andrew, James, John – were hired for daily work (for example, fishing); Matthew is called a tax collector, but it is not clear what his rank was – he exercised general leadership and was directly subordinate to the authorities involved in tax collection, or, most likely, he simply came to knock on the doors of debtors, knocking money out of them. In the latter case, he did not need to have an education.

The same can be said for the rest. We have some information about the life of poor peasants in the villages of Palestine in the first century AD. It is clear that the people who lived such a life were almost certainly illiterate. Jesus himself is a rare exception, for he could read (Luke 4:16-20), but there is no evidence that he could also write. In ancient times these were two entirely different skills, and many people who could read were not taught to write.

How many people could read? Illiteracy was widespread throughout the Roman Empire. At best, no more than 10% of the population could be considered literate. This 10% belonged to the leisure classes - they were wealthy people who had the time and money for education (slaves and servants were taught to read so that they could later serve their masters in various fields of activity). Everyone else worked from an early age and could not afford to get an education: they had neither the time nor the money[28].

There is no indication in the Gospels or Acts that Jesus' followers could read, much less write. On the contrary, in Acts Peter and John are called "unlettered men" (Acts 4:13), which in ancient times meant illiteracy. Being Jews from Galilee, Jesus' followers, like him, spoke Aramaic. They lived in the country, so they were almost completely ignorant of the language. Greek, and if he knew it, it was only in the most primitive form, because he spent all his time in the company of other illiterate peasants who spoke Aramaic and tried to get food somehow.

In short, who were Jesus' disciples, the apostles? Poor, illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants from Galilee.

And who were the authors of the Gospels? Although their real names are unknown, we can infer from the books they wrote draw certain conclusions. At the same time, their differences from Jesus' disciples are immediately apparent. The authors of the Gospels were highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians who probably lived outside Palestine.

Their education and knowledge of Greek are evident. Although there are occasional scholars who believe that the Gospels may have been originally written in Aramaic, the vast majority

Bible scholars are now convinced that all the Gospels were written in Greek, and are prepared to present many linguistic arguments. As already mentioned, at best only 10% of the Roman Empire could read, fewer could write complete sentences, fewer could produce primitive texts, and few could undertake the extensive and serious literary work required to produce works like the Gospels. Of course, the Gospels are by no means the highest quality and most perfect books to have appeared in the Empire, far from the best. Nevertheless, they are coherent texts written by experienced and educated authors who knew how to construct a narrative and skillfully carried out their literary tasks.

Whatever these authors were, they were extraordinarily talented Christians of later generations. Scholars continue to debate where these authors lived and worked, but judging from a poor understanding of Palestinian geography and Jewish customs, they worked elsewhere in the empire, probably in large cities, where they could have received a proper education and maintained contact with a sizable Christian [community](#).

These authors are not poor, illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants from Galilee. But is it not possible to assume that John, for example, wrote his Gospel when he was old? That in his youth he was an illiterate day laborer who knew only Aramaic, that from a young age he fished, learned to cast nets, and then wrote his Gospel in his old age?

I think that *might have been the case*. This would mean that after Jesus' resurrection, John decided to take up education and learn to read and write. He learned to read, write a little, and learned Greek so well that he could speak it perfectly. Is that likely? Probably not. After Jesus' resurrection, his followers, including John, had many other concerns. They believed that the first thing they had to do was to convert the whole world to their faith and establish a church.

### **The testimony of Papias**

Despite the evidence that none of Jesus' disciples wrote the Gospels, we must face the early church tradition, which states the opposite. How should such testimonies be dealt with?

The earliest source of this tradition, an early Christian writer and apostolic [father](#) Papias of Hierapolis, had only two sources: the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Matthew. Papias is a mysterious figure, the author of a five-volume work "Explanation of the Sayings of the Lord" (or "Exposition of the Sayings of the Lord"). Scholars reliably date it between 110 and 140 AD, 40 to 70 years after the first Gospel [was written](#). [Papias' works have not survived](#): later church authorities considered his views odious or insufficiently thought out, so they were almost never copied [for posterity](#). All the knowledge we have about [Papias' books is derived from quotations found in the writings of later church writers](#).

Nevertheless, Papias is often cited as a valuable source of information for the discovery of early Christian tradition, partly because he usually explained how he received some information. In some surviving quotations from the Commentaries, he states that he personally interviewed Christians whom he called "elders" and learned that they knew

some of the apostles, and then passed on the information they received. So when we read Papias, we get information from people who knew the apostles' helpers.

In the often-quoted passage from Papias, preserved by Eusebius of Caesarea, this information is described in a third or fourth hand, which names Mark and Matthew as the authors of the Gospels.

Here is what the elder said: "Mark was the interpreter? literally?] of Peter; he wrote down exactly everything he remembered from what the Lord said and did, but not in order, because he himself did not hear the Lord and did not walk with Him. Later he accompanied Peter, who taught as circumstances required, and did not intend to arrange the words of Christ. Mark did not sin in the least by writing everything down as he remembered; he only took care not to omit anything and not to misrepresent it."

#### **Then he writes about Matthew:**

"Matthew wrote down the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew, translating them as best he could" (Eusebius Pamphilus, Ecclesiastical History, 3.39).

Does this mean that Matthew actually wrote the Gospel according to Matthew and Mark wrote the Gospel according to Mark?

There are very serious difficulties in trying to assess the historical value of Papias' testimony. Let us begin with Matthew. First, unlike Mark, we do not know from what source Papias got his information about Matthew, and we do not even know whether he had any source. Was it third-hand information? Fourth-hand? Fifth-hand? For example, if Papias wrote in 120-130 AD, that means that this occurred 40-50 years after the appearance of the Gospel of Matthew, written by an unknown author. Written by an unknown author, the Gospel had already existed for decades at that time. Could the tradition Papias speaks of have developed during this period?

In this regard, it should be noted that two reliable pieces of information that Papias gives us from the Gospel of Matthew, does not refer to "our" Matthew. Our Gospel of Matthew is not just a collection of sayings of Jesus, and it was probably written in Greek, not Hebrew. Did Papias simply misunderstand this information? Or is he referring to some other book written by Matthew, for example, a collection of Jesus' sayings that has not survived to this day?

If Papias is unreliable as a source about Matthew, can he be reliable about Mark? In this example, he indicates that we are given information at third or fourth hand.

Again, one of the things he says is clearly false: Papias claims that one of Mark's two main purposes was to recount everything he heard from Peter about Jesus.

But this statement simply cannot be true. It takes about two hours to read the entire Gospel of Mark aloud. Peter spent many months and years with Jesus, and Mark listened to Peter's stories about Jesus day and night. Was everything he heard enough to read in just two hours?

In any case, there is no information from Papias that we can trust. In this regard, it should be noted that scholars have rejected almost all other information from Papias found in surviving references to his works. Let us consider another example of fourth-hand information:

Likewise, the elders, having seen John, the Lord's disciple, said that they had heard from him how the Lord taught about those times, and said: "The days will come when vines will grow, and on each vine there will be ten thousand vines, on each vine ten thousand branches, on each branch ten thousand twigs, on each twig ten thousand tassels, on each truss ten thousand berries, and each squeezed berry will yield twenty-five meters of wine. And when one of the saints takes a brush, the other (the brush) cries out: "I am the best brush, take me; bless the Lord through me" (Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 3.39.1)[35].

No one believes that Jesus actually said this. Or that John, a disciple of Jesus, attributed such words to Jesus. Did the elders who knew John really say this? [36]

If theologians tend to reject almost every other claim of Papias, why do they sometimes appeal to his testimony to confirm the early tradition linking Matthew to one of our gospels and Mark to another? Why do these scholars trust some but not all of Papias' words? I suspect it is because they need confirmation of their own views ("Matthew wrote the Gospel of Matthew"), and they choose to trust Papias when his views coincide with theirs, and to disbelieve him when there is no such coincidence.

To sum up this superficial reference to Papias, I think we may assume that he transmitted what he heard and attributed the words to people who knew other people from whom he heard certain statements. But in cases where he can be checked, he turns out to be wrong. Can he be trusted in cases where he cannot be checked? If you have a friend who is always wrong about getting to places you know, will you trust him if he tells you how to get to a place you do not know?

It is nowhere said that Papias mentions Luke or John. I don't know why. But the point is this: we have any significant, reliable (e.g., that the author is actually writing about our Matthew and Mark) references to the authors of our four Gospels until the end of the second century, almost a century after these books by unknown authors appeared in circulation.

### **The Testimonies of Irenaeus and Others**

The first undoubted mention of our four Gospels is by the Church Father Irenaeus of Lyons. In his five-volume work attacking Christian heresies, he lists the four gospels of the church: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. It is not surprising that at the time Irenaeus wrote (180 CE), the Church Fathers were eager to know who the author of these anonymous writings was. As we will see in the next chapter, many other gospels circulated in the early church communities, most of which were attributed to Jesus' disciples, such as Peter, Thomas, and Philip. How was it possible to determine which of the gospels was to be believed as written by the apostle? The question seemed delicate, since almost all of the "other" gospels contained theological ideas that Irenaeus and others like him called heretical. How can we know the true teachings of Jesus? Only from the gospels that were actually written by his followers or close associates of those followers.

However, the gospels, widely accepted in the circles of authoritative sources, to which Irenaeus belonged, were originally anonymous. The solution to the problem of authenticating these texts was obvious: they had to be attributed to true and unshakable authorities. For decades

Matthew was believed to have written the Gospel, which is why it was recognized as the first and entered the canon. Mark was considered Peter's assistant, and our second Gospel is associated with him, as it contains Peter's account of the life of Jesus. The author of the third Gospel wrote two books, the second of which, Acts, chose Paul as the hero. Church leaders argued that the book must have been written by Paul's assistant, and therefore attributed it to Luke. Finally, the fourth Gospel, which clearly indicates that it was not written by an eyewitness, was nevertheless attributed to one of them, John, one of Jesus' closest friends. disciples (in fact, he is never mentioned by name in the fourth gospel).

None of the gospels have been attributed to a true author. None of the gospels were written by Jesus' followers, who were poor, Aramaic-speaking people in Galilee, rather than the well-educated, Greek-speaking Christians of later generations.

So we have the answer to the last question: why are the Gospels so different from each other? These gospels were not written by Jesus' companions or associates. They were created decades later by people who did not know Jesus, lived in another country or countries, and spoke a different language. The Gospels differ in part because their writers did not know each other and used different sources of information (although the authors of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke relied on the text of the Gospel of Mark), and also changed the narrative to fit their ideas about Jesus.

The fact that the Gospels were not actually written by apostles does not set them apart from the other books of the New Testament. On the contrary, they are quite typical. Most of the books of the New Testament are signed by people who are not their authors. This has been well known to scholars for most of the last century and has been a constant topic of discussion in major seminaries and other theological schools across the country. Therefore, this information is well known to priests. But to many parishioners and laypeople in general, it is news.

### **Are there forged texts in the New Testament?**

Of the 27 books of the New Testament, only eight were almost certainly written by the authors whose names they bear: the seven undoubted letters of Paul (to the Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, and Philemon) and the Revelation of John (although we do not know exactly who this John was).

### **The remaining 19 books belong to three groups:**

- *Misattributed works.* As we have seen, the Gospels are likely to be misattributed. The apostle John did not write the Gospel of John, and Matthew did not write the Gospel of Matthew. Other anonymous works have been misattributed to some well-known authors. Hebrews does not identify Paul as the author, and it was almost certainly not written by Paul. Nevertheless, this letter eventually became part of the canon of Scripture (see chapter 7) because the Church Fathers believed that Paul was its author.
- *Works by authors with the same name.* We are talking about works written by authors who were the names of other, more famous personalities. For example, the Epistle of James was probably written by a man named James, but it is not known which one. This name is incredibly common. Later Church Fathers included this book in the canon of Holy Scripture because they declared that its author, James, was the brother of Jesus, also James. The book itself does not mention this.

- *Pseudepigraphic works.* Some New Testament books were signed under the names of people who did not actually write them. Scholars have known about this for over a century. This phenomenon has been called "false attribution" or pseudepigraphy (literally, "a text signed in someone else's name"). Scholars use this term quite broadly to avoid negative connotations associated with the words "fake" or "fake." But regardless of the terminology, biblical scholars have long known that there are books in the New Testament whose authors deliberately pretended to be people they were not.

## **Pseudepigraphy in the Ancient World**

Some information about true and false authorship in the ancient world will help us understand this situation.

### **Definitions**

First, let's define the terminology. The term "pseudepigraphy" can refer to any text signed under a false name. In this case, both false attribution and the authors' desire to pass off their text as someone else's are possible.

There are two types of misattributed texts. These are books by unknown authors that are later misattributed by readers, editors, or scribes to some famous person, and books written by famous people. In the ancient world, most people did not have surnames, so the name John could have belonged to any one of hundreds or thousands of people. If an author named John wrote a book and someone in later generations claimed that this John was actually John, the son of Zebedee (as some readers of the Book of Revelation have claimed), this may have been a misattribution due to the similarity of names.

There are also two types of texts written under pseudonyms or "fake names". Pseudonym is a fictitious or common name. When Samuel Clemens wrote "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" and signed it as Mark Twain, he didn't intend to mislead anyone, he just decided to publish his book under a literary pseudonym. Very few such pseudonyms are known in the ancient world, but they have also been found. The Greek historian Xenophon published his famous work "Anabasis" under the pseudonym "Themistogenes". However, in the ancient era we often encounter a different kind of pseudonym, when the author takes the name of another, well-known person, so that readers conclude that the text was written by this prominent personality. Such use of pseudonyms is literary forgery or falsification.

The prevalence of forgery in the ancient world

Literary forgery was widespread in the ancient world. We know this from numerous statements by ancient authors themselves. Discussions of forgery can be found in the works of some of the most famous authors from antiquity, including such Greek and Roman authors as Herodotus, Cicero, Quintilian, Martial, Suetonius, Galen, Plutarch, Philostratus, and Diogenes Laertius.

Among Christians, such debates were led by such prominent figures as Irenaeus, Tertullian, Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, Rufinus, and Augustine.

Sometimes New Testament scholars argue that forgeries were so common in the ancient world that no one took them seriously: the deception was usually easy to detect, so no one could be [deceived](#). I have spent the past two years researching ancient arguments

about forgeries and came to the conclusion that only people who had not read ancient sources could make such an argument.

Forgeries are taken seriously in ancient sources. They are condemned almost everywhere, often in the strongest terms. How widespread was this condemnation? Strange as it may seem, the practice of forgery is sometimes condemned even in documents that are examples of forgery. Furthermore, the claim that it is impossible to deceive anyone is completely false: people have been victims of forgery all along. That is why forgeries exist – to deceive people.

I need not describe in detail the ancient arguments about forgeries: many works have been devoted to this problem, but, unfortunately, the most detailed of them were published [in German](#). I will give just one particularly illustrative case as an example.

In the 2nd century, a famous physician and author Galen lived in Rome. He tells how once, walking along the streets of Rome, he passed by a bookstore. And I heard two buyers arguing about a book for sale and signing it with the name... Galen himself! One buyer claimed that it was actually written by Galen, while the other no less vehemently argued that this could not be, because the real Galen had a completely different writing style. Of course, this scene pleased Galen, especially since he didn't actually write the book. At the same time, he was troubled by the fact that someone was trying to sell books signed in his name, Galen. When he returned home, Galen wrote a short essay called "How to Identify the Books of Galen," which has survived to this day.

Forgery was widely practiced, designed to deceive people, and often proved effective.

The fact that this was not a universally accepted method is evidenced by the terminology of ancient authors. Most often in Greek, forgery was called "pseudo" - "lie" and "noton" - "bastard". The second word in Greek has the same coarse and obscene connotation as in English (bastard). Often the term "gnesion" served as an opposition, which meant something true or legitimate.

### **Reasons for forgery**

Based on numerous ancient sources, it can be concluded that literary forgery was used to mislead readers, convincing them that a book was written by anyone but its true author. But what prompted the authors to take such action? Why couldn't they simply sign their names?

### **Pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers had many reasons to resort to literary forgery. Here are ten of them.**

**1. Profit.** The two largest libraries in the ancient world were located in the cities of Alexandria and Pergamum. In ancient times, books were purchased for libraries in a completely different way than they are today. Because books were copied by hand, there could be different copies of the same book, sometimes quite different from each other. Therefore, renowned libraries preferred to acquire originals rather than later copies of a book, which could contain errors.

According to Galen, this encouraged enterprising people to produce "original" copies of classical works and send them to the libraries of Alexandria and Pergamum. Since the librarians were willing to pay well for the original treatises of the philosopher Aristotle, his

"originals" of the tracts began to multiply at an astonishing rate. As far as I know, selfish motives had no influence on early Christian literature, as it only began to be in demand much later.

**2. *Fighting the enemy.*** Sometimes literary forgery was used to present a personal enemy in an unflattering light. The Greek historian of philosophy Diogenes Laertius writes that a certain philosopher named Diothom committed a forgery by publishing fifty obscene letters signed by his sworn enemy, the philosopher Epicurus. They clearly did not benefit Epicurus' reputation. Sometimes I wonder if this can explain the well-known forgeries in early Christian literature. The 4th-century persecutor of heretics Epiphanius mentions a book he read that was allegedly used by a sect of extremely immoral Christian heretics, the Thebionites. This book, "The Questions of Mary," supposedly contained a strange story about Jesus and Mary Magdalene, in which Jesus takes Mary to a high mountain, pulls a woman out from her side in front of her (just as God created Eve from Adam's rib), and has sexual relations with her. But before he reaches climax, he withdraws, collects the seed in his palm, and eats it, explaining to Mary, "This is what we must do to live." Mary, who is perfectly understandable, immediately loses consciousness (Epiphanius, "Panarius," book 26). This wild story is not mentioned anywhere else except by Epiphanius, who is known for his penchant for inventing details about the lives of heretics. I have often wondered if he had not invented all this and then passed it on

as the contents of one of the Thebian books. If so, then he committed a forgery and, by attributing it to Mary, The fictitious book of Thebion, made his heretical opponents look very bad.

**3. *Fighting a particular view.*** If I am correct about the questions of Epiphanius and Mary, then he was partly motivated by a desire to oppose the Thebionite heresy, which he considered harmful. A similar motivation can be found in examining many other cases of forgery in Christian literature. In addition to First and Second Corinthians, the New Testament also contains a Third Corinthians, which is not included in it [43]. This book was undoubtedly written in the second century, as it condemns certain heretical views of the time, whose adherents believed that Jesus was not a man of flesh and blood and that his followers would not actually be resurrected in the body. According to the author of this letter, they will be revived, as he categorically states, calling himself the Apostle Paul. The attempt to oppose false teaching with a false name may seem strange, but it was done nevertheless. There are many such forgeries in the early Christian tradition.

**4. *Protection of their traditions, which are considered divinely inspired.*** "The Oracles of the Sibyl" is the name of a collection of ancient works. The Sibyl is an ancient pagan prophetess who communicated with the Greek god Apollo. However, the oracles that have come down to us were mostly written by Jews. In them, a prophet who probably lived long before the events she foretold recounts the subsequent development of history—and always proves to be correct, since the original author lived after the events described—and also affirms the value of important Jewish beliefs and customs. Not wanting to be left out, later Christians added interpolations to some of these oracles about the coming of Christ, so that now the pagan prophet accurately foretold the coming of the Messiah. What more convincing proof of the truth of a divine religion could there be than prophecies supposedly uttered by an opponent of that religion under divine inspiration?

**5. *Modesty.*** New Testament Bible scholars generally agree that some schools of thought may have written treatises in the place of their teachers and, in a show of humility and humility, signed these treatises in the names of their teachers, believing that their thoughts were merely an extension of their sayings. This applies primarily to the Pythagoreans, the great Greek philosopher

to the Pythagorean school. However, there is considerable debate as to why the Pythagoreans signed themselves in Pythagoras' name: it is unlikely that they were motivated by modesty, and this is not mentioned in their writings, unlike in works written [centuries later](#). Perhaps the Pythagoreans' actions are explained differently.

**6. *Admiration of authority.*** Similarly, the willingness of an ancient author to sign his works in someone else's name can be understood as a sign of love and admiration. This is an extremely rare situation in which the author of the forgery was caught red-handed. This is told by the third-century church father Tertullian, who reports that the well-known stories of Paul and his disciple Thecla, which served as a model during the Middle Ages, were actually written by a church leader from Asia Minor, who was exposed and exiled as a result. In his defense, the impostor said that he wrote this work "out of love for Paul" [\[46\]](#). What he meant is unclear, but perhaps his devotion to Paul led him to write a story and sign it under Paul's name to set out the apostle's most important teachings and views. In fact, the teachings and views contained in the surviving Acts of Paul and Thecla do not coincide with Paul's own: among other things, we learn from this account that Paul supposedly preached eternal life not to those who believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus (as the real Paul did), but to those who follow Jesus in the path of sexual abstinence, even if they are married.

**7. *The desire to know if you can get away with deception.*** In ancient times, there were swindlers who signed their works with other people's names just to see if they could fool someone. This phenomenon is called "deception." The most famous example of mystification was told by Diogenes Laertius: Dionysius decided to deceive his sworn enemy Heraclides of Pontus and signed his play with the name of the famous tragedian Sophocles. Heraclides fell for this bait and considered his tragedy to be real. Then Dionysius exposed the deception, but Heraclides refused to believe him. Then Dionysius pointed out that if you take the first letters of several lines of the text and write them as one word (an acrostic), you get the name of Dionysius's lover. Heraclides objected that this was just a coincidence, until Dionysius showed him two more acrostics in the text, one of which was: "There are no traps for old monkeys." "There are also on them: give them time, and they will be caught," and the other: "Heraclides cannot read or write, and is not ashamed of his ignorance" [\[47\]](#). I know of no obvious cases of mystification among early Christian authors.

**8. *Addition to tradition.*** Especially in early Christianity, there are frequent examples of "authoritative" texts being created to fill imagined or real gaps in tradition. For example, in Colossians 4:16, the writer (Paul?) advises readers to also read the letter sent to the Christians in the city of Laodicea. However, we do not have the original letter of Paul to the church in Laodicea. It is therefore not surprising that in the second century a couple of such letters appeared, forged and signed in Paul's name, in order to fill the gap. Another example: it is well known that the New Testament gospels give little account of the early life of Jesus. This puzzled the early Christians, and in the second century one after another of the accounts of Jesus' childhood began to appear. The most famous of these is attributed to a certain

Thomas, whose name means "twin." This may be a reference to the Syrian Christian tradition that Jesus' brother Jude was actually his twin, "Judas Thomas." In any case, it is a fascinating account of the adventures of the young Jesus, beginning at the age of five.

**9. *Combating Other Forgeries.*** One of the least studied phenomena of early Christian forgeries is the creation of forged texts designed to counteract the positions set forth in other forged documents. At the beginning of the 4th century, according to the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, an anti-Christian pagan forgery called the Acts of Pilate (also known as the Acts of the Apostles or the Pilate Inscriptions) appeared. It seems to have examined the trial and execution of Jesus from a Roman perspective and to have shown that Jesus got what he deserved. This document was widely known: the Roman emperor Maximinus Daia (Daza) issued a decree that this document should be made compulsory reading in schools (Eusebius, Church History, 9.5). However, a Christian text of the same name soon appeared. In it, Pilate treats Jesus with all compassion and earnestly demands that all charges against him be dropped. The Christian version was apparently written in opposition to the pagan version. The phenomenon of Christian "fighting against forgery" was apparently very widespread. In the 4th century, a document called "Apostolic Constitutions" appeared, supposedly written by the twelve apostles after the death of Jesus, although by the time it appeared, the apostles had been dead for three hundred years. Among the many notable features of this book is an exhortation to Christians not to read books that are handed down as written by the apostles (Apostolic Constitutions Constitutions, 6.16). This exhortation is similar even in the New Testament: the writer of 2 Thessalonians asks his readers not to be ashamed of a letter that appears to have been written by Paul (in other words, forged and signed in Paul's name; 2 Thessalonians 2:2). However, as we will see shortly, there is good reason to believe that 2 Thessalonians itself refers to pseudepigraphic books supposedly written by Paul.

**10. *Giving authority to one's own views.*** I believe this reason is most characteristic of early Christian forgeries. In the early centuries of the church, many Christians held various views, most of which were recognized as heretical. However, all of these Christians claimed to share the views of Jesus and his disciples. How do you prove that you are preaching apostolic views, for example, to convince potential converts? The simplest way is to write a book, pass it off as the work of one of the apostles, and put it into circulation. Every group of early Christians had access to works supposedly written by the apostles. Most of these works were forgeries.

## **EARLY CHRISTIANITY FORGERIES**

There is no good reason to doubt that many of the early Christian literary sources were spurious. For example, in addition to the New Testament, we know of a number of gospels supposedly (but not actually) written by prominent early Christian figures: Peter, Philip, Thomas, James, the brother of Jesus, Nicodemus, and many others; along with the New Testament Acts, there are the works of various apostles, such as John, Paul, and Thecla; there are letters, such as the letter to the Laodiceans, the third letter to the Corinthians, Paul's correspondence with the Roman philosopher Seneca, a letter supposedly sent to James that contains Peter's speeches against Paul; there are a number of apocalypses, such as the Apocalypse of Peter (which almost entered the canon) and the Apocalypse of Paul. We will discuss some of these writings in chapter

Early Christian writers had a lot to do, and their usual activity was to create forged documents signed in the names of the apostles. This raises an important question: Did any of these forged documents make it into the New Testament?

Historically, there is no reason to doubt that some forged documents could have entered the canon. We know of numerous spurious texts that are not part of the New Testament. Is

should we assume that such documents are not in it? It is hardly possible to claim that the Church Fathers from the 2nd century onwards knew which books were actually written by the apostles and which were not. How could they have known this? And, more importantly, how do we know?

As strange as it may sound, it is easier for us today to uncover ancient forgeries than it was for people who lived in the ancient world. We use the same methods as they did.

Like Galen, we pay attention to the style of the text. Does it match the style of the same author in other sources? If so, how much? Is it slightly different or very noticeable? Could the author have change the style of the letter? Does this style have features that are strikingly different from the stylistic features of other texts by the same author, in particular, from features that we are accustomed not to think about (the use of conjunctions and copulations, the construction of complex sentences, the use of infinitives and participial phrases)? In addition, we take into account the choice of words and expressions: does this text contain words from the vocabulary that the author constantly uses? Or did the vocabulary found in it appear only in later periods of ancient Greek history? The most important are theological ideas, views and attitude to the text. Are they the same throughout the book, do they correspond to the content of other texts by the author, do they have at least an approximate similarity to them? Or do they surprise with their originality?

The reason we are more likely to make such decisions than ancient people is because we are actually better prepared for it!

Ancient critics who tried to identify forgeries did not have databases, information retrieval systems, or computers to analyze vocabulary and style in detail. They had to rely heavily on common sense and intuition. We have common sense, intuition, and a wealth of information.

However, despite technological advances, there are many reasons for doubt. There is not enough space here to examine in detail all the questionable passages in the New Testament.

Instead, I will list the most compelling reasons to believe that Paul was not the author of the six canonical letters signed in his name. I believe that all of these books are forgeries. Perhaps their

The authors had the best of intentions. They may have believed they were doing the right thing. They may have felt their actions were completely justified. But somehow, they passed off their writings as someone else's, probably to force their readers to listen to those words.

### **Pseudepigraphic Letters of Paul**

In none of the examples given here can I fully present all the possible arguments concerning the authorship of these letters. For my purposes, it is sufficient to indicate a few of the main reasons why scholars agree that these letters were not written by Paul, although they are attributed to him.

Since I have already mentioned 2 Theses, I will begin with it—in any case, it is a good starting point, since its authorship is the most hotly debated, in contrast to the other five controversial Pauline letters. Many prominent scholars occupy positions on both sides of the barricades (while the so-called Pastoral Epistles of Paul, or Second Peter, are considered by the vast majority of critics to be pseudonymous). In any case, there is good reason to believe that Paul did not write this letter.

### **Second Epistle to the Thessalonians**

The authorship of 2 Thessalonians is widely debated, in part because it is so similar in style, style, syllables, and vocabulary to another letter that Paul almost certainly wrote, 1 Thess. In fact, there is so much in common between the two letters that some writers have suggested that the pseudonymous author used 1 Thess as a model for composition but brought to it his own content that differed significantly from the model. The similarity of these two accounts illustrates one of the problems that scholars face when trying to determine whether an ancient document is a forgery or not. Of course, anyone skilled enough to forge will do their best to make their work look exactly like the work of the author they are imitating. Some forgers succeed better than others.

But if the author of the forgery is truly talented in his field, it is very difficult to reveal the forgery, at least by the method of stylistic analysis.

But why would anyone want to imitate Paul's style by presenting theological views that differ from his own? There are many supposed reasons: as the situation in the church changed, the author could try, so to speak, to call Paul out of the grave to solve new problems; the author may have misunderstood Paul, misinterpreted some essential points (Paul himself writes that this happened in his life, for example, in the Letter to the Romans; see Romans 3:8); the author may sincerely believe that his readers have misunderstood the true meaning of Paul's words, and try to clear up the misunderstanding, not suspecting that the readers are actually right.

My methodological idea is this: a good imitation of Paul's style should look like his own Paul's style, that's what's expected of him. No one expects her to deviate from Paul's style. When studying 2 Thessalonians as a non-Pauline document, it is important to remember that its main thesis contradicts what Paul himself says in 1 Thess.

2 Thessalonians was written in opposition to these views, probably based on an early, a now-lost, forged letter signed by Paul and claiming that "the day of Christ is at hand" (2 Thessalonians 2:2). It seems that the Christians to whom the author is addressing believed that the end of time and the coming of Jesus in glory were near. The author seeks to correct this false impression. Therefore, in the second, most important chapter of the letter, the author indicates that several events must first occur. First, there will be something like a general rebellion against God, then there will be the Antichrist, who will sit in the Jewish temple and proclaim himself to be God. This wicked one will perform signs and lying wonders to deceive people (2 Thessalonians 1-12). Only after all this will the finale finally come. The end is not yet so close, it will have to be waited for, before it there will be clear and obvious signs so that Christians who know about them will not be surprised.

This is an intriguing and impressive idea, but it does not match Paul's own words in 1 Thessalonians. 1 Thessalonians was also written as an answer to the question of what will ultimately happen when Jesus will return from heaven in glory. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18) Paul wrote this because the Thessalonians had already heard from him that the end was imminent. And they were perplexed and confused because several members of the congregation had already died before Jesus returned. Will they be deprived of the reward that Jesus will bring at the Second Coming? To comfort the survivors, Paul writes that at Jesus' second coming, the dead will first be resurrected and then receive their due blessing.

Paul continues to repeat what he told the members of the community when he visited them (1 Thessalonians 5:1-2) – that Jesus will come suddenly and unexpectedly, "like a thief in the night" (1

(1 Thessalonians 5:1) Then "sudden destruction will come upon them" (1 Thessalonians 5:3), so the Thessalonians must be constantly alert so that the Second Coming will not surprise them.

If Paul really meant everything he wrote in 1 Thessalonians, and if he **believed** that Jesus' return will be sudden and unexpected, and it is hard to imagine how he could have written 2 Thessalonians, which says that the end is far from over and that it will be preceded by clear and unambiguous signs that have not yet appeared. The author of 2 Thessalonians writes, "Do you not remember that, while I was still with you, I told you these things?" (2 Thessalonians 2:5). If this is true, why did the deaths of some members of the community frighten the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians)? They must have known that the end would not come quickly, that the Antichrist and other signs would precede it.

Apparently, neither letter was written by Paul. Perhaps the anxiety with which Christians were awaiting the end of the first century prompted an unknown writer in the church Paul founded to write 2 Thessalonians to give them some reassurance, to make it clear that the end would indeed come, but not immediately. First, some events will occur.

### **Colossians and Ephesians**

A similar argument is that Paul did not write to the Colossians and Ephesians. Scholars These letters and 2 Thessalonians are called "Deuteronomy-Pauline" letters, believing that they were not written by Paul, and noting their secondary nature in the corpus of Pauline texts.

Most scholars believe that the case for an unknown author writing to the Colossians and especially to the Ephesians under a pseudonym is even stronger than that of Thesis 2. First, the style of both letters is not typical of Paul. It is impossible to consider this argument without going into the details of the construction of the Greek phrases. But the gist of the evidence is this: the writers of the two letters in question, unlike Paul, were prone to long and complex sentences. Colossians 1:3–8 is a single sentence in Greek, terribly long and completely unlike typical Pauline phrases. Ephesians 1:3–14 is even longer, running to fourteen lines, an unprecedented occurrence in Pauline texts. Almost 10 percent of the sentences in Ephesians are longer than 50 words, a length that is unusual in undisputed Pauline letters. Philippians, which is almost as long, has only one sentence that is as long; The Epistle to the Galatians is much longer, but it contains only one long sentence[52].

Furthermore, much of the material in Ephesians and Colossians (e.g., Colossians 1:15–20) is theologically more complex than in Paul's letters. More importantly, however, on some issues the two authors, if they differ, disagree with Paul. Both the authors and Paul speak of the changes that occur in the lives of believers in Jesus after baptism. However, they express themselves quite differently on this issue.

In the early church, infants were not baptized, only adults who believed in Christ were baptized. For Paul, baptism was an important element of the ritual, not just a symbolic act.

At the time of baptism, something really *happened to the man*. At the time of his death, a mystical connection was established between him and Christ.

Paul develops this idea with particular care and thought in his letter to the Romans. He builds on an apocalyptic foundation. There are evil forces in the world that enslave people and alienate them from

from God, and the power of sin belongs to these forces. Sin is a demonic force, not some mistake. Everyone is subject to this power, which means everyone is hopelessly far from God. The only way to escape the power of sin is to die. That is why Christ died, to free people from the power of sin. Therefore, in order to be saved from this power, a person must die with Christ. This happens during baptism. Being under water (in Paul's churches they practiced total immersion), the believer unites with Christ in his death, as if lying in the grave, also dying to the forces to which this world is subject. Baptized people are no longer slaves to sin—they have "died with Christ" (Romans 6:1-6).

At the same time, Paul argued that despite dying with Christ, these people had not yet been resurrected with him. Jesus' followers will be resurrected with Christ only when he returns in glory from heaven. Then there will be a physical resurrection. Those who have already died in Christ will be resurrected, and those who are still alive at that time will undergo a physical transformation, during which their mortal shell will become immortal, impervious to the sufferings of life and death.

But whatever Paul says about the resurrection with Christ, it is always presented as a future event (see, for example, Romans 6 and 1 Corinthians 15). In Paul's churches, some converts took a different view, believing that they had already experienced a kind of spiritual resurrection with Christ and were already "kings" with him in heaven. Paul strongly protests against such views in his First Letter to the Corinthians, the key moment and climax of which is the finale, in which Paul emphasizes that the resurrection has not yet come, it is yet to come - a real, future, physical resurrection of the body, not a past spiritual resurrection (1 Corinthians 15). In Romans 6:5 and 6:8 Paul emphasizes that those who have been baptized have died with Christ, but have not yet risen with him (note the future tense - "let us be with him").

Him"):

For if we have been united with Him in the likeness of His death, *we shall certainly also be united with Him in the likeness of His resurrection...* If we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also *live* with Him (italics added).

However, the authors of Colossians and Ephesians have a different opinion. Here is what the author of Colossians says on the same topic:

Buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised through faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead, Col 2:12.

Careless readers will not notice much difference between these positions - after all, in both cases the author is talking about death and resurrection with Christ. However, Paul attaches great importance to precision. Death with Christ was in the past, while the resurrection was in no way in the past. It is expected that this will happen in the future. Paul devoted much of his First Epistle to the Corinthians to justifying this idea, precisely because some converts had made a mistake with this idea, and it greatly disturbed Paul. Colossians presents the same position that Paul opposes in 1 Corinthians.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is more eloquent than the Epistle to the Colossians. Speaking of the spiritual resurrection of the past, the author, unlike Paul, states that "God [...] He made us alive with Christ... and raised him up with him and seated him with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:5–6). All this has already happened. Believers already reign with Christ. This is what we are

which Paul's converts in Corinth and the writers of Colossians and Ephesians, who also belong to Paul's churches, misunderstood.

There are other important points in which Colossians and Ephesians differ from Paul's historical writings. texts, including differences in vocabulary and the use of some terms specific to Paul's letters.

But my goal is to provide a general understanding of why most critical scholars doubt the attribution of these books to Paul. Like 2 Thessalonians, they appear to have been written after Paul's death—perhaps a decade or two—by writers from Paul's churches who wanted to help the Christian community and resolve problems that had arisen after Paul's death.

To do this, authors pass off their texts as letters from an apostle to mislead readers.

### **Pastoral letters**

The so-called pastoral letters, 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, are even less controversial among scholars than Colossians and Ephesians. Scholars in North America, Britain, and Western Europe, where the most serious biblical scholarship is conducted, have long agreed that Paul did not write these books.

They are called pastoral letters because in them "Paul" gives instructions to Timothy and Titus, who should serve as priests in Ephesus and on the island of Crete, and explains how they should carry out their pastoral duties in the church. These books are rich in pastoral advice for Paul's followers on such matters as governing the congregation, how to resist false teachers, and how to choose church leaders.

Could Paul have written these letters? Of course, theoretically he could, but the arguments against This seems very convincing to most scientists.

It is generally accepted that all three letters were written by the same person. Reading 1 Tim and Titus supports this assumption: they deal with the same topics in the same or similar language. 2 Tim is very different, but if you compare its opening verses with the opening verses of 1 Tim, they will appear almost identical.

Scholars have found that their author is in no way Paul, in terms of the lexical composition and style of the letters. They use 848 different Greek words, 306 of which are not found in any of the letters written by Paul in the New Testament (including 2 Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Colossians). This means that more than a third of the words are not in Paul's vocabulary. About two-thirds of these words that are not in Paul's vocabulary were used by second-century Christian writers. In other words, the vocabulary of these letters appears to be more developed, characteristic of later Christianity.

Some of the significant words used by the author are also found in Paul, but they are used in a completely different way. Take, for example, the word "faith." For Paul, faith means the acceptance of Christ's death in order to stand before God. It is a relational term, meaning something like trust. In the Pastoral Epistles the same word has a different meaning—the set of beliefs and convictions that make up the Christian religion (Titus 1:13). It is no longer a relational term: it defines Christian teaching, its content, the way in which it is to be believed, that is, it is used in the same sense as in the later Christian context. This is thus an example of the growth of the Pastoral Epistles from later, non-Pauline conditions.

It is well known that arguments based on lexical analysis seem unconvincing when trying to determine whether a particular book belongs to a particular author: people's vocabulary changes depending on the circumstances. But in this case, the differences are undeniable. But an even stronger argument is that the entire position of the church implied in the pastoral letters differs from what we know about the church in Paul's time.

We have a fairly detailed understanding of the church in Paul's day thanks to First and Second Corinthians, where the author discusses the inner workings of the congregations, their organization, structure, and operating principles. But when we move on to the pastoral letters, they all change dramatically.

Paul's churches did not have a hierarchical structure. There were no leaders or groups of leaders. Churches were communities of believers operating under the direction of the Spirit of God, working through each member of the community.

It is important to remember that Paul's views were completely apocalyptic. He believed that the resurrection of Jesus indicated that the end of time was near. It could come any day with Jesus' appearance from heaven; the dead would be resurrected, and living believers would become immortal and live forever in the coming kingdom.

And what will happen before that, while believers await the coming of the Lord? They should gather to worship, to learn, to learn, to support one another. What should be the organization of these communities? Paul believed that they were organized by God himself through the Holy Spirit; this is stated in 1 Corinthians 12-14. At baptism, believers in the Christian church not only "die with Christ" but are also clothed with the Holy Spirit, signifying God's presence on earth until the end of time. At this time, everyone receives a kind of "spiritual gift" through which they can help other members of the community. Some people receive the gift of knowledge, others receive teachings, and still others receive offerings, prophecies, revelations in foreign or angelic languages that are incomprehensible to most people ("speaking in tongues"), interpreting these revelations ("interpretation of tongues"). These gifts are intended for the common good, so that the community of believers can exist peacefully and harmoniously until the end of time.

But often things did not go as planned, for example in the church at Corinth. More specifically In other words, everything was mixed and confused there. Some spiritual "leaders" claimed to be more spiritually gifted than others and created their own groups of followers, which led to schisms in the church. The situation finally got out of control: some church representatives persecuted each other in court. Immorality flourished: some members of the community visited immoral women and boasted in church, and one man lived with his stepmother. Church services became a real chaos, as the "more spiritual" Corinthians decided that the true sign of spirituality was the ability to "speak in tongues," and during the services they competed with each other to find out who could speak louder and more often than the others. At the weekly community meals—real meals, not waffles and a sip of wine—some came early, ate and drank too much, while others (perhaps members of the lower classes and slaves forced to work long hours) came late and received nothing. Some members of the community were so confident in their spiritual superiority that they claimed to have already been resurrected with Christ and were ruling with him in heaven.

(similar statements are made much later by the writer to the Ephesians).

Paul addresses the church's problems by appealing to the entire church and pleading with all members to turn from the dangerous path. Why doesn't he go to the bishop or the church's senior priest? Why doesn't he send a letter to its leader and order him to restore order in the church? Because there is no head of the church. There are no bishops or senior priests. In Paul's churches, during the short period between the resurrection of Jesus and the resurrection of all believers, the community was governed by the Spirit of God working in every member [of the community](#) .

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What happens when there is no formal hierarchy, no appointed leaders, no one to take the lead? That is basically what happened in Corinth. Chaos reigns. How can this chaos be controlled? Someone has to be in charge. Eventually, this is what happened in Paul's churches.

After he left, his churches took on a hierarchical structure: some were at the top, others began to give orders, some were above lower-ranking leaders who maintained order, the correctness of religious teachings, and warned those who behaved inappropriately.

There was no such church structure in Paul's day. However, it is described in the pastoral letters. These letters are addressed to the elders of the two congregations that Paul founded. The letters tell us how to curb false teachers; they give instructions for appointing bishops who clearly exercise spiritual oversight of the church, and deacons who are responsible for offerings and caring for the physical needs of the community; they give instructions on how people from different social groups (husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves) should behave in order for the church to survive long enough.

Moreover, from Paul's perspective, this period *should not* have been long. Paul believed that the end would come very soon. But the end never came, and his churches had to deal with organizational issues in order to survive. The community became organized, and in this new situation the pastoral letters were written—probably two or more decades after Paul had left the scene. In this new context, a certain author wrote three letters, signing them in Paul's name, thus giving the texts his authority.

But these are the thoughts of an unknown author, not Paul. Paul lived at a different time.

## **WHO WROTE THE OTHER BOOKS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT?**

Much of what has already been said is true of the rest of the New Testament books. Some are anonymous writings, namely the Epistle to the Hebrews and the three books called the Epistles of John. As many understood in early church history, there is no reason to believe that Paul wrote Hebrews, but it was eventually included in the canon by the Church Fathers, who claimed it to be Paul's work. In fact, it is quite different from Paul's writings; the main themes of this letter are not raised in Paul's other letters, and the arguments are constructed in a way that is not typical of him. In any case, how could anyone have thought that Paul wrote this letter?

Unlike his other works, it is not signed with his name.

The so-called letters of John also cannot claim authorship from John: the second and third letters was written by a man who calls himself an "old man," while the author of 1 John never mentions himself. He may have been a church leader who lived at the end of the first century.

Other books were written by authors who were famous personalities. The author of the Epistle of James does not in any way indicate what kind of James he is, much less does he call himself James, the brother of Jesus.

The Epistle of Jude was written by a man who called himself "the brother of James," which could be interpreted as indicating that the author was Jesus' brother, since Mark's Gospel records two of his brothers as James and Jude. However, it is curious that the author did not directly call himself Jesus' brother, in order to give his text authority. Jude and James were common Jewish names in ancient times, as well as in the Christian church. Later Christians who compiled the canon claimed that the two were related to Jesus, although they themselves did not mention this.

Moreover, it is hard to believe that two poor peasants from Galilee, who spoke Aramaic, were able to write these letters (it is unknown whether their famous brother knew how to write, much less write complex works in Greek).

The same argument that was previously made for the Gospel of John applies here: it is theoretically possible that Jesus' brothers, who grew up in a Galilean village, earned their living by hard physical labor, never having had the time or money for education, decided to learn Greek and literary skills as adults and thus were able to write rhetorical and relatively complex books. However, this seems unlikely.

The same can be said of 1 and 2 Peter. However, these books, unlike Deuteronomy, The Acts and the Pauline Epistles (2 Thessalonians, Colossians, and Ephesians) and the Pastoral Epistles claim authorship from someone who did not write them. They are certainly signed under a pseudonym and appear to be forgeries.

Whoever wrote the second letter of Peter, it is clear that he did not write the first letter of Peter: style and style. The differences are too striking. Early in the history of the church, there were Christian theologians who claimed that Peter did not write the second epistle of Peter. Today, there is less debate about this than about the pastoral epistles. The book, entitled 2 Peter, appeared long after Peter's death and was written by a man who was concerned about some attempts to deny that the end times were approaching (it is easy to see why such doubters became more numerous as time went on). This author sought to make people think, to turn them away from false ideas, and for this purpose he called himself none other than Simon Peter, a close associate of Jesus.

The book called 1 Peter is much more controversial in scholarly circles than 2 Peter.

Again, how likely is it that a simple fisherman from a village in Galilee suddenly mastered the art of writing texts in Greek? It is sometimes objected that Peter could have commissioned someone else to write him a letter, such as Silvanus mentioned in the text (1 Peter 5:12). But there is not a word about this in the message itself. And if someone else wrote it, is he not the real author, and not Peter? The extensive references to the Old Testament in this book indicate that the one who wrote it was well-educated, experienced and literate, unlike Simon Peter. It should also be noted that since the times of early Christianity, a number of books have come down to us that are supposedly written by Peter, but in fact have nothing to do with him, such as the Gospel of Peter, Peter's letter to James, several of Peter's "Acts" and three different apocalypses of Peter. Forging books signed in the name of Peter the Great was literally a handicraft.

## **CONCLUSION: WHO WROTE THE BIBLE?**

Returning to the original question: who wrote the Bible? Of the 27 books of the New Testament, only eight are almost certainly written by those traditionally credited with their authorship:

The seven undisputed letters of Paul and the Revelation of John are known, but it is not known which of John was its author - this was acknowledged even by the early church.

My ideas about the authors of the New Testament are not radical in scholarly circles. Of course, scholars sometimes argue about this or that book. Some prominent scholars believe that Paul wrote 2 Thessalonians, that the author of James was the brother of Jesus, or that 1 Peter was written by Peter. However, most critical theologians have long questioned the implied attribution of these texts, and so disputes over some New Testament books (e.g., 1 Tim or 2 Peter) are very rare. These books were not written by their alleged authors.

Doubts about the authorship of the canonical texts were expressed early in church history, but in modern times, starting in the 19th century, the arguments of scholars seem much more convincing. However, even now, many scholars are averse to forgeries.

Calling New Testament documents forgeries is, after all, the Bible. But in reality these are forgeries, no matter what definition we give to the term. Many of the early Church books were written by authors who presented their texts as apostolic so that readers would believe in their truth and accept the views expressed in them.

The fact that the New Testament contains books whose authors signed under false names is taught in virtually every theological school except the conservative Western evangelical schools. These views are in all the best New Testament textbooks taught to students at these institutions. Teachers express these views in seminaries and theological schools. Future priests will become acquainted with them in preparation for ministry.

Why is the dissemination of this knowledge so limited? Why are parishioners not suspicious of it, let alone people who don't attend church? Like you, I can only speculate.

## **5. LIAR, MADMAN OR LORD? THE SEARCH FOR THE HISTORICAL JESUS**

A couple of years ago I started receiving unusual letters from Sweden. I had never been to this country and I didn't know the senders of the letters. They all wanted to know if I really believed that Jesus never existed. The question surprised me. A few years ago, I had written a book about the historical Jesus, in which I described the ancient sources from which we had gathered information about his life and discussed what we could say about his words and actions. Not only was I convinced that the historical Jesus existed, but I also believed that we could draw historically accurate conclusions about his life. So why was I asked if I really believed that it never happened?

These letters were not aggressive attempts to convince me of the existence of Jesus. On the contrary, the senders did not believe in the existence of Jesus and had heard that I, as a specialist in the New Testament, shared their opinion. This opinion may seem strange to American readers: most people in the United States are convinced not only that Jesus really lived, but also that he was and is the Son of God. And in Scandinavian countries, many believe that Jesus is a completely fictional character who never existed, that is, he was simply invented by a group of people who decided to start a new religion.

I spent weeks wondering who could have thought of putting me in the same camp and why, until I finally realized what had caused the confusion: a misinterpretation of a Washington Post article about me in March 2006.

The newspaper decided to publish information about me, my work, and how I came to agnosticism in connection with my recent book, "The Distorted Words of Jesus." The editors sent an observant and impartial reporter, Neely Tucker, to Chapel Hill, who followed me for several days. We would sit in my office, he would come to my house, we would have lunch together, and he would attend one of my senior classes. Having met me in this way, he wrote and published an article called "Barthes' Book." I read it as soon as it came out, found it quite funny, and quickly forgot about it.

However, there was a paragraph in Neely's article that was very easy to misinterpret, which caused problems in Sweden. Neely attended my New Testament lecture the same day. The day I taught the graduate students about the Gospel of John. That day, I pointed out to the audience, as I have done several times in previous chapters of this book, that the Gospel of John was the only one that directly spoke of the divinity of Jesus. Of course, in all the Gospels he is called the Son of God. But to the ancient Hebrews, being "Son of God" did not mean being God personally; such a person simply has an intimate relationship with God, and God works His will on earth through him. But the Gospel of John does more than that. In him, Jesus is the pre-existent Word of God through whom the universe was created; it became flesh (John 1:1-14) and became one with God (John 10:30); was called by God's name (John 8:58); and became God (John 1:1; 20:28). John's Gospel is the only one that features this exaltation of Christ.

As I explained this to my students, with Neely sitting in the back row of the auditorium, I was reminded of my days as an evangelical Christian. I was taking a course at Moody Bible Institute on Christian apologetics, the rational defense of the faith (from the Greek *apologia*, "speech in defense"). In those classes, we studied the apologetic writings of the famous English scholar CS Lewis, especially his arguments for the divinity of Jesus. Lewis put it this way: since Jesus called himself God, there are only three logical consequences: he was either a liar or a madman, or Lord. Lewis believed that if Jesus was wrong in his claims, if he was not really God, he either knew it or he did not know it. If Jesus knew he was not God but called himself God, then he was a liar. If he was not God but thought he was, then he was a madman, a madman. There remains only one possible explanation: he was telling the truth and therefore was really Lord.

Lewis goes on to argue that there is reason to believe that Jesus was neither a liar nor a madman. It follows inevitably that he must be what he said he was. Jesus was the Lord God.

When I was at Moody, I found this logic quite compelling, and for years I used it to try to convince people of Jesus' divinity. But that was a long time ago, and my thinking has changed dramatically since then. (All of this—Moody Bible Institute, Christian apologetics, CS Lewis, the essence of Jesus, my own changes in thinking—flickered through my mind in a split second as I was giving a lecture at Chapel Hill on the Gospel of John.) Over time, I came to realize that the very premise of Lewis' argument was flawed. The argument that Jesus was either a liar, or a madman, or Lord was premised on the premise that Jesus called himself God. And I long ago realized that he did not. It is only in our last Gospel that

In the Gospel of John, which is more prominent than any other, Jesus draws attention to his divine nature. I realized that none of our earliest traditions mention that Jesus did anything said something similar about himself. And if Jesus had really called himself God, first in Galilee, and then in Jerusalem, *all* our sources would have reported it. In other words, if Jesus claimed to be a deity, it is strange that Matthew, Mark, and Luke do not mention it in a single word. Did they simply forget such an important detail?

I realized that the divinity of Jesus is an element of John's theology, not a teaching of Jesus himself.

When all this flashed through my mind during a lecture, I immediately decided to present my thoughts to the students (I usually follow different outlines for lectures on John), especially since I knew that many of my listeners were members of Christian groups at the university and had heard the argument that Jesus must be either a liar, a madman, or the Lord.

I thought it would be useful for them to hear not only the views of Christian apologetics but also the historical perspective. And I laid out the essence of CS Lewis's apologetics in Neely's presence, and then I pointed out the historical problem: Jesus probably never called himself God. In defending my view, I thought that there were actually not three but four options: liar, madman, God, or legend. Of course, I chose the fourth word in such a way as to preserve alliteration (English liar, lunatic, Lord, legend). But that doesn't mean I thought Jesus was just a legend. Of course not! I firmly believe that he existed and that we know something about him. Therefore, he did not have to be a liar, a madman, or the Lord. He could have been a first-century Palestinian Jew who spread doctrine but made no mention of his divinity.

Neely described this part of my lecture on the very first page of the Washington Post article, and in a way that *could* be interpreted in any way, such as what I consider to be a legend about Jesus himself. It is impossible to imagine an assumption that could be further from the truth.

But how can I, or any other New Testament scholar or historian, know what Jesus actually said about himself or anyone else? This question is clearly part of a larger question—who Jesus really was, what he taught, what he did, what he experienced. This is the subject of many books, some of them extremely detailed, and has been the subject of much debate. I cannot cover the entire subject in this chapter, but I can discuss the most important questions, which are discussed by historians of early Christianity, and to help readers form a general understanding of what I think we know about Jesus as a person—not just a personality as depicted in the Gospels, but also as a historical person, the historical Jesus.

### **Our early sources of information about Jesus**

Most people who are not familiar with Bible studies probably think that the question of the historical Jesus is a fairly simple one. There are four Gospels in the New Testament. To find out what Jesus did and said, you have to read these Gospels.

They say what he said and did. So what's the problem?

In part, there are many inconsistencies in the gospels, and they were written decades after Jesus' ministry and death by authors who did not witness any of the events in his life.

To put the issue in perspective, it's helpful to think about the various sources scholars rely on when writing historical works about a famous figure from the past, whether it's Julius Caesar, William the Conqueror, or Shakespeare. The only way to learn about any of these figures is to look at the sources of information about them.

It is impossible to intuitively understand what Julius Caesar or Jesus was like. So what sources do scholars need to reconstruct events from the life of a prominent historical figure?

If scholars were willing to do so, they would have many sources, and the more the better, because some or all of the events may be distorted. These sources should be relevant to the time of the events described, and not rely on hearsay from later periods. They should contain the accounts of impartial eyewitnesses, not biased accounts. The best sources are independent of each other, so that one can be sure that their authors did not conspire with each other and did not invent the whole story. At the same time, the sources should be consistent with each other, confirm each other, serve as additional evidence, and not the result of a joint work.

What sources do we have for studying the life of Jesus? Much of the information is in the New Testament Gospels. That is good. But they were not written by contemporaries who witnessed the events they describe. The Gospels were written 35 to 65 years after Jesus' death by people who did not know him, did not see his works, did not hear his teachings, did not speak his native language, and lived in a different country. Their writings are biased, but they were written by Christians who truly believed in Jesus, so they were able to distort the stories to suit their own priorities. In part, this work was a collaborative effort, as the Gospel of Mark became a source for the writers of the Gospels of Matthew. But instead of being completely consistent with each other, their texts differ greatly, inconsistencies fill the pages, and contradictions can be traced both in the details and in the general idea of who Jesus was.

**Is it possible to reconstruct the life of the historical Jesus using such sources? It is not easy, but there are ways to do so.**

First of all, we need to understand as much as possible how the Gospel writers worked with them. If they lived 30 to 60 years after the events they wrote about, from what sources did they get their information? The short answer is that the evangelists got their information mainly from oral tradition, reworking traditions about Jesus that had been passed down from mouth to mouth from his death until the time the evangelists wrote them down. In trying to understand how sources of this kind—conflicting accounts written down after decades of existence as oral traditions—can help historians establish the truth with some degree of certainty, it is necessary to learn more about the oral traditions concerning Jesus.

### **Oral tradition**

Although the Gospels are difficult to date, scholars generally agree on the accepted date range for various reasons. Without going into too much detail, I will just say that we can say with some confidence from his letters and Acts that Paul was active in the 50s AD.

He traveled extensively from one Christian community to another, and nowhere in his writings did he mention that he knew of the existence of any gospels, even from unreliable sources.

From this we can conclude that the Gospels were probably written after Paul. Furthermore, the Gospel writers were aware of some later historical events, such as the Jerusalem

destruction in 70 CE (perhaps Mark 13:1; almost certainly Luke 21:20–22). Therefore, these gospels were likely written after 70 CE.

There is reason to believe that the Gospel of Mark was first written, probably during the war with Rome, in 70 CE. If the authors of Matthew and Luke used Mark as a source, then both were written after Mark's work had appeared outside the community for which it was intended, say 10 or 15 years later. 80–85 CE The Gospel According to

John gives the impression of a most theologically complex message, and it was probably written even later, at the end of the first century, between 90 and 95 AD.

This means that the earliest surviving written accounts of Jesus' life appeared 35 to 65 years after his death.

What happened during this interim period? It is clear what happened to Christianity: it spread far beyond the great cities of the Mediterranean. If the Gospels and Acts are correct, immediately after Jesus' resurrection he had 15 to 20 followers, men and women, who were with him in Galilee and believed that he had risen from the dead. By the end of the first century, thanks to the missionary work of the apostles and converts like Paul, the religion had spread to the villages, towns, and cities of Judea, Samaria, Galilee, and Syria; Christianity had moved north and west, into Cilicia, embracing all of Asia Minor (modern Turkey), as well as Macedonia and Achaia (Achaia; modern Greece); it reached the imperial capital of Rome and perhaps spread as far as western Spain. It also moved south, probably reaching North Africa and perhaps part of Egypt.

This does not mean that thousands of people converted to the new faith at once. However, over the years, dozens, if not hundreds, of converts appeared in major urban centers. How did Christians convince people to abandon their old, mostly pagan religions and believe in one God, the God of the Jews, and in Jesus, His son, who died to atone for the sins of the world?

Christians could only tell stories about the life of Jesus—what he said, what he did, how he died, and how he rose from the dead.

When they converted to Christianity and joined the church, the converts also began to tell the same stories. The people they converted retold them, as did those who followed them. And and so it continued, religion spreading along with oral traditions in a world without media.

But who told the story about Jesus? It was almost always people who did not know Jesus himself or those who knew him personally. Let us illustrate this conclusion with a hypothetical example. Let us imagine that I am a coppersmith living in Ephesus, Asia Minor. A stranger comes to town preaching about the miraculous life and death of Jesus. I listen to his stories and decide not to worship the local pagan deity Athena but to become a Jew.

A follower of God and Jesus, His son. Then I tell these stories to my wife, and she accepts the same faith. My wife tells her neighbor about the life of Jesus and converts her to Christianity, the neighbor tells his stories to her husband, a merchant, and he also becomes a convert. While traveling on business to the city of Smyrna, he shares the stories he has recently heard with a merchant he knows. He is converted to his new religion, and then he tells his wife about it and converts her.

The latter knows the various traditions about Jesus. And from whom did she hear them? From one of the apostles? No, from my husband. And from whom did he hear them? From a merchant from Ephesus. And the merchant? From his wife. And she? From my wife. And my wife? From me. And from whom did I myself hear these legends? From an eyewitness? No, from a stranger who came to the city.

And so Christianity spread year after year, decade after decade, until finally someone wrote down all these traditions. What do you think happened to all these stories over the years, when they were told and retold not just as eyewitness accounts, which are of little interest, but as legends of a spiritual nature, designed to spread the faith and convert people to it, especially if this faith was told by people who had heard its legends at fifth, sixth, or even nineteenth hand? Did you ever play "broken telephone" at birthday parties as a child? Children sit in a circle, one of them whispers something into the ear of their neighbor, who retells his words to the neighbor on the other side, and so on, until the story goes around the circle and returns to the first storyteller, but completely different, changed. (If the story didn't change, the game wouldn't make sense.) Now imagine the same game of "broken telephone," but no longer with peers from the same socio-economic group, living in the same neighborhood, students in the same school, speaking the same language. Imagine that this game has been played for more than forty years in different countries, under different conditions, in different languages. What happens to the stories that the participants share with each other? They will inevitably change.

Is it any wonder, then, that there are so many discrepancies in the Gospels? John heard a very different tradition than Mark, and even if the traditions were the same, his listeners received them differently.

It is clear that the Gospel writers themselves altered the stories they took from their sources (remember how Luke reinterpreted the description of the hours of Jesus' death read in Mark). If a text can change so dramatically even from one author to another, imagine how much it was altered from word of mouth.

In such chaos, trying to figure out the historical truth about Jesus inevitably leads to a sense of despair. What can we learn about the historical Jesus if these are all we have?

But it is too early to despair at this stage. Perhaps there is a way to apply scrupulous analytical methods and eliminate problems with sources. One such way is to look for sources other than the Gospels to complete the picture. And indeed, such sources exist, although they are of little use.

### **Other sources for reconstructing the events of Jesus' life**

If you've ever watched a Hollywood movie about Jesus, you might get the impression that there was nothing to talk about in the Roman Empire except him. It's obvious that the Roman authorities were so afraid of his influence that they rushed to get rid of him, this man of God among the people. The order to punish him probably came from above, from Rome itself.

Unfortunately, all this is pure fiction. Next, we will talk about something that will certainly surprise most readers, because by all modern standards, Jesus is one of the most famous figures in the history of Western civilization. However, during his lifetime, he was not widely known. On the contrary, almost no one knew about him.

What do Greek and Roman sources say about Jesus? Or perhaps we should ask the question right away: if Jesus lived and died in the first century (around 30 CE), what do Greek and Roman sources say about him from the time of his life until the end of the century (say, up to 100 years ago)?

The answer is astonishing. Jesus is completely absent from these sources. He is never discussed, challenged, attacked, belittled, or recounted in any form or by any surviving pagan sources of the period. Nowhere are there any records of his birth, no accounts of his trials and death, no reflections on his meaning, no disputes over the meaning of his teachings. In fact, his name is not mentioned in any of the pagan sources. And we have many Greek and Roman sources of the period: the works of theologians, historians, philosophers, poets, naturalists; there are thousands of private letters, there are inscriptions on public buildings.

However, Jesus is not listed anywhere in first-century Greek or Roman (pagan) texts.

Scholars have not reached a consensus on what conclusion to draw from this. Most simply believe that Jesus played no significant role in his day. But whether they are right or not, the fact remains that when it comes to learning about Jesus' words and actions, we cannot rely on what is said about him in sources created by his enemies. Moreover, as far as we know, they say nothing of the sort.

Jesus is first mentioned in a pagan source dating back to 112 AD. Its author, Pliny the Younger, was the governor of one of the Roman provinces. In a letter to the emperor Trajan, he tells of a group of people calling themselves Christians who were organizing illegal gatherings, and asks what he should do about them. These people, he wrote to the emperor, "worship Christ as a deity." That is all that Jesus mentioned. Nothing of value to those who want to know anything about him as a historical figure.

A little more information can be obtained from the writings of Pliny's friend, the Roman historian Tacitus. In his Roman History, written in 115 AD, Tacitus mentions Nero's fire in Rome in 64 AD and the emperor's blame for it on "the Christians." Tacitus explains that Christians were called "Christus [...] whom Tiberius had killed by the procurator Pontius Pilate" (Annals, 15.44).

Tacitus goes on to say that Christianity, a "malignant superstition," originated in Judea and then reached Rome, and here we see at least some confirmation of what we already know from the Gospels about the death to which Jesus was handed over by Pilate. But Tacitus, like Pliny, gives us no facts on which we can rely to ascertain what Jesus' words and actions were.

If we continue our search through all the surviving Greek and Roman (pagan) sources dating back to the first century after the death of Jesus (30-130 AD), [we will find](#) just these two [short links](#).

In addition to the first century pagan sources, we have non-Christian Jewish sources, although not as numerous. However, Jesus is mentioned in only one and only one of them, the famous Jewish historian Josephus.

Around 90 CE he wrote a twenty-volume history of the Jewish people from the time of Adam and Eve to his own time. At one point he simply states that a certain James was "the brother of Jesus who is called Christ" (Antiquities of the Jews, 20.9.1).

The next reference is more detailed, but equally problematic. In it, Josephus apparently admits that he was a Christian, but we know from his other writings that he did not adhere to the Christian faith (he wrote an autobiography, among other things). Scholars have long established that Josephus's books were not copied by Jews in the Middle Ages, considering him (probably correctly) a traitor who sided with the enemy in the disastrous war with Rome that destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE. On the other hand, the works of Flavius Josephus were copied by Christians. In the passage where Josephus speaks of Jesus, the Christian scribe apparently made several interpolations to clarify who Jesus really was. The fragments that were probably added by a copyist will be given in square brackets:

About this time lived Jesus, a wise man [if He could be called a man at all]. He did wonderful works and became a mentor to those who willingly accepted the truth. He attracted many Jews and Greeks. [This was Christ.] At the instigation of our influential people, Pilate condemned Him to the cross. But those who loved Him before did not stop doing so now. [On the third day He appeared to them alive again, as the inspired prophets had declared concerning Him and many other of His miracles.] To this day there are still so-called Christians who call themselves that name after His name (Antiquities of the Jews, 18.3.3).[55]

It is both gratifying and helpful to know that the most prominent first-century Jewish historian knew something about Jesus, especially that he was a teacher, performed miracles, gathered many followers, and was condemned to be crucified by Pontius Pilate. This account confirms some of the most important facts about Jesus. details of his life and death in the Gospels. However, it is impossible to judge from this passage the words and actions of Jesus, as well as the circumstances leading up to his trial and death, even if we take into account all the fragments in parentheses.

He is not mentioned in other non-Christian sources, both Jewish and pagan, dating from the first century after Jesus' death.

Of course, there are later (2nd-3rd century) Christian sources, such as the numerous non-canonical gospels. We will turn to them in the next chapter. There we will see that these sources are extremely interesting and deserve reading. However, they usually do not contain reliable historical information. All of them were created later than the New Testament gospels and are full of interesting but legendary stories about the Son of God.

One might think that additional information about Jesus could be found in other books of the New Testament, but this information is again too insignificant. For example, the apostle Paul discusses Jesus' death and resurrection in detail, but he tells us almost nothing about his life—the words and deeds he did before his death. In several passages, Paul confirms what the Gospels say: Jesus was a Jew and ministered to the Jews, he had brothers, including one named James, and twelve disciples. Paul mentions Jesus' words at the Last Supper and two other sayings: that his followers should not divide and that they should pay their preachers. Beyond that, Paul tells us almost nothing, and the other New Testament writers tell us even less.

The gist of this brief overview is clear: if we want to know about the life of the historical Jesus, we must turn to the four canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But these sources are by no means impartial eyewitness accounts. These books were written decades after Jesus' death by authors who had heard oral traditions about him, stories that

changed and even reinvented during this period. There are many inconsistencies in these stories, the evangelists themselves changed them as they saw fit. How can one use such sources to find out the true course of historical events? In fact, such methods exist. Scientists developed methodological principles that, when applied rigorously and scrupulously, allow us to understand who Jesus really was.

## CRITERIA FOR DETERMINING THE RELIABILITY OF HISTORICAL MATERIAL

These principles are not overly complicated: they are common sense and consistent with all the gospel traditions we already know. The first principle may seem obvious:

**1. *The earlier the better.*** Since traditions about Jesus changed over time, the stories and in telling stories about him, adding to and correcting written sources, it is reasonable to assume that earlier sources are more reliable than later ones. In general, the gospels of the 8th century are not as historically reliable as the gospels of the first century (although the first ones are fun to read).

The Gospel of John is the latest of the canonical accounts and is less historically reliable than the others. It contains information about Jesus that reflects ideas about him that developed much later, such as that he was the Passover lamb who died on the same day that the lambs were slaughtered at Passover, or that he claimed to be equal to God. However, this does not mean that we can completely ignore everything we have learned from the Gospel of John; on the contrary, these accounts meet other criteria. But in general, the earlier the source, the better.

The earliest surviving gospel is the Gospel of Mark, which may contain more reliable information than the Gospel of John. However, the Gospel of Mark was not the only source of information. source for writers of later books. There was probably another gospel source, written around the same time as Mark's Gospel, but which has not reached us.

In the first chapters I pointed out that Matthew and Luke borrowed several things from Mark. stories that they used as a source. However, many other traditions about Jesus that are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are not found in the book of Mark. Not all of these traditions, but most of them, are the words of Jesus, such as the Lord's Prayer and the commandments (which Matthew and Luke have, but not Mark). Since the writers of the later Gospels could not have borrowed them from Mark, where did they come from? There is reason to believe that Matthew could not have taken them from Luke, and Luke could not have taken them from the Gospel of Matthew. Since the 19th century, scholars have held that both authors used a different source. German scholars who came to this conclusion called it the word "source". This unknown document is called the "Q source".[57]

Thus, Q is the source of information in Matthew and Luke, but not in Mark. Apparently, some of the material was borrowed from a lost gospel available to two later authors. We do not know what information was in Q (and what was not), but when Matthew and Luke find direct parallels in stories that are not in Mark, it is generally accepted that these stories are taken from the Q source. In writing his gospel, Matthew used one or more written and oral sources, which we call "Matthew" or M-sources. We call the sources of material that are unique to Luke as L. This means that there were four sources before Matthew and Luke:

Gospel of Mark, sources Q, M, and L (perhaps M and L refer to more than one document).

This is the earliest [material](#) for reconstructing the details of Jesus' life.

**2. *The more the better.*** Let's say the story of Jesus is in only one source; It is quite possible It is possible that the author made up the story himself. What if it is in more than one independent source? Neither author could have made it up because the sources are independent; therefore, the story existed before either of them came into existence. This means that stories found in multiple independent sources are likely to be old and possibly true.

(Note: If the same story is found in the books of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, then it does not have *three* sources, but one—Matthew and Luke took it from the Gospel of Mark.)

For example, Matthew and Luke independently claim that Jesus grew up in Nazareth, but their accounts of how he got there differ, meaning that one is from source M, the other from source L. Mark makes the same claims. As does John, who did not use any of the Synoptic Gospels or their sources. The conclusion? These texts independently confirm that Jesus was probably from Nazareth. Another example: Jesus is mentioned with John the Baptist at the beginning of Mark, at the beginning of source Q (Matthew and Luke partially preserved John's words that Mark does not), and at the beginning of the Gospel of John. The conclusion? Jesus was probably associated with John the Baptist early in his ministry.

**3. *If there are contradictions, so much the better.*** We have seen time and again that the discrepancies in the stories of Jesus' life arose because storytellers and writers adjusted the traditions to better suit their own views. How can we explain the existence of oral traditions about Jesus that clearly *do not fit* into the "Christian framework," that is, do not reflect the views and ideas of the storytellers? Such legends were not invented by Christian storytellers, so they are likely historically accurate. Sometimes this phenomenon is called the "non-coincidence criterion", which introduces confusion into the conceptual system. Any traditions about Jesus that do not coincide with what is said about him the early Christians would have said, are certainly true. Let's take the two previous examples. It is understandable that Christians would be tempted to say that Jesus came from Bethlehem, where the Son of David came from (Micah 5:2). But who could have invented the story of a Savior coming from Nazareth, a remote town that no one had even heard of? This detail of the tradition does not fit into any Christian framework. Therefore, it is probably historically accurate, however paradoxical it may sound. Or take John the Baptist. In the Gospel of Mark, the earliest, John baptizes Jesus. Could Christians have invented this? Let us recall that in the early Christian tradition it was believed that a person of a spiritually superior standing would spiritually baptize a person of a lower standing. Could Christians have deliberately emphasized that Jesus was baptized and therefore superior to him? Furthermore, Jesus was baptized "for the forgiveness of sins" (Mark 1:4). Would anyone argue that Jesus needed to be cleansed of his sins? That is highly unlikely. What is the conclusion? It is likely that Jesus was indeed associated with John the Baptist early in his ministry and may have been baptized by him.

**4. *There must be a fit for context.*** Since Jesus was a Jew and lived in first-century Palestine, any tradition about him that fits the historical conditions of his time seems plausible. Many of the later gospels, written in the third and fourth centuries in other countries, contain information about Jesus that makes no sense in context. These details can be dismissed as historically implausible. But such implausibility is also found in the canonical gospels. In the third chapter of the Gospel of John, in the famous conversation with

To Nicodemus, Jesus says, "You must be born again." The Greek word translated "again" actually has two meanings: it can mean not only "a second time" but also "from above." Throughout the Gospel of John, it is used precisely "from above" (John 19:11, 23). This is what Jesus means in John 3 when speaking to Nicodemus: a person must be born again in order to have eternal life in heaven. But Nicodemus does not understand him; he thinks that Jesus is using this word in a different sense and is saying that he must be born a second time. How is it possible, he asks in exasperation, "to enter into his mother's womb a second time?" Jesus corrects him: he is not talking about a second physical birth, but about a heavenly birth from above.

This conversation with Nicodemus is developed by the fact that the Greek word has two meanings (ambiguity). If it were not for them, the conversation would not have made sense. The problem is that Jesus and the Jewish leader in Jerusalem did not speak Greek, but Aramaic. However, the Aramaic word for "above" does not mean "a second time." The ambiguity arises only in Greek. This means that such a conversation could not have taken place, at least not in the way it is written in the Gospel of John.

These are some of the criteria that scholars use when studying the various traditions about Jesus, especially those found in the New Testament gospels. The thoughtful and careful application of these criteria can yield positive results. We can actually learn something about the historical Jesus. So what do we know about him?

## **JESUS – THE PROPHET OF THE APOCALYPSE**

For over a century, since the publication of Albert Schweitzer's masterpiece, "The Search for the Historical Jesus," most biblical scholars in Europe and North America have accepted Jesus as a Jewish apocalyptic prophet. Much has been written on the subject since Schweitzer's time, although he did not, of course, adhere to the scrupulous application of the criteria listed above (they were developed later).

But his intuition did not disappoint him.

### **Jesus' teachings**

Like other apocalyptic thinkers of his time, Jesus perceived the world in a dualistic way, seeing in it a struggle between the forces of good and evil. In his era, the forces of evil reigned: Satan, demons, diseases, disasters and death; but soon God had to intervene, to put an end to this sinful time, to crush the forces of evil and establish his kingdom of goodness, the kingdom of God, where there would be no pain, sorrow, or suffering. Jesus' followers could expect this kingdom to come in the near future, indeed, in their lifetime. It would be brought to earth by the supreme judge, whom Jesus called the Son of Man (referring to the Hebrew Scriptures, Daniel 7:13-14).

When the Son of Man appears on earth, judgment will begin, in which sinners will be punished and the righteous will be rewarded. Those who have endured pain and oppression will be exalted; Those who have been on the side of evil and prospered will be destroyed. People must repent of their sins and prepare for the coming of the Son of Man and the kingdom of God that will follow him, and this will happen very soon.

They don't talk about Jesus in Sunday school or church. But it has been taught for years in the largest seminaries and other theological schools. There are strong and convincing arguments for perceiving Jesus through the prism of apocalyptic ideas. According to the first and most important of them, the traditions in which Jesus is presented in this way are found in the New Testament gospels and meet all our criteria for authenticity.

We have already found evidence that these are among the earliest views found in the Gospels. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, it is in the Synoptic Gospels that Jesus announces the coming of the kingdom of God. This kingdom of God is not "heaven," a place where a person goes after death (as in the later Christian tradition; we will discuss this in more detail in chapter 7). It is the real kingdom here on earth, which God will rule through his Messiah, a utopian kingdom in which the first will be last and the last first. It is only in the last canonical Gospel of John that Jesus no longer announces the imminent coming of this kingdom. Why are these sermons not in the last in the canonical gospel? Of course, because the kingdom never came, the writer of John's Gospel had to reinterpret Jesus' words. However, in the early gospels, Jesus' words are given meaning: he is proclaiming the imminent coming of the kingdom.

In fact, this idea is not only present in our early sources, but it is central to the earliest ones, the Gospel of Mark and Q. In Mark, Jesus says:

For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man will also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels... Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God in power (Mark 8:38-9:1).

But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light. And the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken. And then shall they see the Son of man coming in the clouds with power and great glory. And then shall he send forth his angels, and shall gather together his elect from the four winds, from the uttermost part of the earth unto the uttermost part of heaven... Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled (Mark 13:24-27, 30).

The Son of Man is coming, he will judge the world, and those who are on Jesus' side will be rewarded, the rest will be punished, and this will happen in the lifetime of the generation to which Jesus himself belongs. This apocalyptic idea is found in all the early accounts of Jesus' teachings.

Let's look at what Jesus says in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew - this information is not taken from Mark, so from source Q:

For as the lightning flashes from one end of heaven to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day... As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be in the days of the Son of Man: they were eating, they were drinking, they were marrying, they were being given in marriage, until the day that Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all. So it will be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed (Luke 17:24; 26-27, 30; cf. Matthew 24:27; 37-39).

Be ready, for at an hour you do not think the Son of Man is coming (Luke 12:39, Matthew 24:44).

### **Similar ideas about Jesus are found in the material of Matthew from source(s) M:**

Therefore, as they gather the tares and burn them with fire, so it will be at the end of this world: The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of stumbling and those who do evil, and will throw them into the furnace of fire. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matthew 13:40-43).

If one of our criteria requires us to seek independent confirmation of traditions about Jesus in various sources, then the evidence that Jesus preached the appearance of the Son of Man to judge the earth stands the test.

No less important is the fact that these statements, which have received independent confirmation, also meet the criterion of non-coincidence. Take, for example, the statement quoted in Mark 8:38: "For whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." It is no secret that the early Christians saw Jesus himself as the future heavenly judge of the earth, as we read in Paul. And it is natural for Christians, when faced with this passage from Mark, to believe that Jesus is speaking about himself. But let us look more closely. Jesus is not identifying himself with the Son of Man. At first reading of these words (considering such arguments requires abandoning an already formed opinion), one might think that he is actually separating himself from the Son of Man: whoever does not listen to Jesus will be judged by the Son of Man who came from heaven.

Would later Christians, when they invented stories about Jesus, have invented this one that clearly distinguishes Jesus from the Son of Man? It is unlikely. If Christians had decided to put this idea in his mouth, they could have phrased it differently: "Whoever is ashamed of me, the Son of Man, I also, the Son of Man..." This means that Jesus' statement may be true.

Or take another example. In words taken from source Q, Jesus says to his disciples: "Truly I say to you, in the future, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matthew 19:28; see also Luke 22:28-30) These words about God's future judgment and future rulership are almost certainly true, actually spoken by Jesus. Why? Note who he is addressing. The twelve disciples. Along with Judas Iscariot. After Jesus' death, no Christian would have said that Judas Iscariot would be one of the twelve rulers of God's kingdom. In other words, later Christians could not have thought of it.

This means that these words were spoken during Jesus' lifetime. He believed that his disciples would become rulers of the earthly kingdom of God in the future.

The final instance of inconsistency concerns the judgment, when the Son of Man, seated on a high throne, separates the sheep from the goats (this is the source M material from Matthew 25). The "sheep" are allowed to receive eternal reward from on high for all good works: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick; the "goats" are condemned to eternal torment because they did not do good. Could a late Christian have created this particular tradition? After the death of Jesus, his followers claimed that a person would be justified before God and receive eternal reward by believing in Jesus' death and resurrection, and not because he had done good. So this story contradicts the teachings that good works will be rewarded. Therefore, it must belong to Jesus himself.

In short, Jesus taught that the Son of Man would soon come from heaven to execute judgment, and that people should be determined to do so, that they should reform and live as God calls them, including self-sacrificing love for their neighbor. For example, Jesus quotes the Scripture: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39; quoted in Leviticus 19:18). In his formulation, this principle becomes the so-called "golden rule" - "Do to them as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). It is difficult to express the moral

The requirement of God's law. Those who follow the rules of Scripture will be rewarded in the coming judgment, the rest will be punished. And when will this judgment take place? In the lives of disciples:

"There are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God in power" (Mark 9:1); "This generation will not pass away until all these things happen" (Mark 13:30).

The importance of these views in the context of first-century Palestine is obvious to any historian familiar with the period. Jesus was not the only one who preached the end times and the imminent appearance of the Son of Man. Other Jewish prophets expressed similar apocalyptic views, although they differed in detail—among these prophets are the Jews of Jesus' day who left behind the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are rich in Jewish apocalyptic teachings.

Even more significant is the fact that John the Baptist spoke against Jesus. Luke 3:9 (from the Q source) records John as saying: "The axe is already laid to the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." This is an apocalyptic picture of judgment. People are likened to trees that are cut down and burned if they do not serve their purpose—they do not bear good fruit. And when will this destruction begin? Inevitably, the axe (axe) is already ready for work, for "it lies at the root of the trees." The time has come for people to begin to "bear good fruit," that is, to do what God has commanded them to do, or they too will be destroyed.

That is why it is so important to know, despite the many confirmations and contradictions, that Jesus began his ministry in connection with John. From the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus held apocalyptic views. That he remained faithful to them is clear from our sources. Our earliest traditions are full of apocalyptic sayings and warnings. More importantly, even after Jesus' death, his followers continued to focus on the apocalypse. Therefore, they believed that the end times would come in their lifetime, that Jesus himself would soon come from heaven to execute judgment on the earth.

06 This is stated in the writings of Paul, the earliest Christian documents that we have. The early Christians, like Jesus before them and John the Baptist before him, were apocalyptic Jews who expected the coming end times.

Jesus' moral teaching must be seen in this apocalyptic context. Many people think that Jesus is a great moral teacher, and of course he was. But it is also important to understand *why* he thought people should behave properly. Today, ethicists generally argue that moral behavior is essential for people to get along in the long run, forming a happy and prosperous society. But in Jesus' view, the coming period *could not be* long. The end was near, the Son of Man was to come from heaven to judge the earth, and the kingdom of God was not far off. To enter that kingdom, when it finally came, required a change in behavior. This is not a command to create a society that will live happily in the near future. The future is miserable for all who are not on Jesus' side and do what he says.

asks, therefore cannot expect a reward when God intervenes in the course of history, crushing the forces of evil and creates his kingdom of goodness on earth, which will happen very soon.

### **The works and activities of Jesus**

By understanding Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who foretold the judgment of the world and the imminent advent of the kingdom of God, we will be able to understand the meaning of his works and activities in general, as well as recognize among them those that are most likely from a historical point of view and meet our criteria.

### **Baptism**

It is almost certain that Jesus began his public ministry by being baptized by John the Baptist. This is confirmed by numerous independent sources, both early and later; it is unlikely that such a thing could have been invented by later Christians. I believe that the meaning of baptism can only be understood in an apocalyptic context. Jesus, like other Jews of his time, had a variety of religious paths open to him. Some Jews joined the Pharisees, who tried to fulfill God's law as diligently and assiduously as possible (for this reason God gave the law to be observed); others joined monastic communities such as the Essenes, who created the Dead Sea Scrolls and preserved their purity from the corrupting influence of the outside world; still others were associated with the Sadducees, an aristocratic and influential group in Palestine, who controlled the Temple and established the order of sacrifices therein. Some, especially zealous defenders of the Holy Land, participated in religious and military resistance to Rome to regain Israel's sovereignty over the land that God had given them.

Jesus was not a member of any of these groups. Instead, he sided with John the Baptist, the prophet of the apocalypse, who was urging people to prepare for the coming day of judgment. Why did Jesus choose John? Because I agreed with him and not with others. Like John before him and his followers after him, Jesus was an apocalyptic believer.

### **Twelve disciples**

There is no doubt that Jesus chose twelve disciples and drew them close to him. These twelve are mentioned in various Gospel sources, as well as in Paul and Acts. Furthermore, one statement about twelve ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel in the kingdom of God meets the criterion of inconsistency. But why did Jesus choose twelve disciples? Why not nine? Or perhaps not fourteen?

It was hardly a kind of "one student per month" club. Clearly, Jesus was making a symbolic gesture. According to the Hebrew Bible, God's people, Israel, were originally made up of twelve tribes. According to Jesus, these twelve tribes would be restored in the coming Kingdom of God, when twelve apostles would rule over God's true people. By choosing twelve close disciples, Jesus made it clear that his followers, the followers of his teachings, would enter into the coming Kingdom of God. However, not all Jews would be allowed to enter it. Only those who would come to their senses and remain faithful to Jesus' teachings, will survive the coming judgment. In other words, the choice of the twelve disciples was a kind of coded apocalyptic message.

### **Jesus as a doctor and exorcist**

Later in this chapter I will discuss another problem: whether historians can say anything concrete about the miracles that Jesus performed (or did not perform). In the meantime, it is sufficient to emphasize that *the belief* that he performed miracles—healing the sick, casting out demons, raising the dead—is widespread. Traditions about Jesus' miracles are found in many independent sources. Of course, these traditions do not meet the criterion of disagreement: early church storytellers sought to convince converts that Jesus was no ordinary mortal, that God had given him power for a special public ministry. Of course, stories about his amazing miracles were constantly being told, created, as evidenced by the later gospels that are not included in the New Testament, where the miracles of Jesus himself and his followers are astonishing. However, such stories were very common in the past, so it is important in this chapter to note how these miracle stories can be interpreted in the context of the apocalypse.

In the coming kingdom there will be no evil forces. Jesus is already defeating evil. There will be no demons, Jesus will cast them out. There will be no sickness—Jesus is now healing the sick. There will be no natural disasters, because Jesus calms the storms; there will be no famine, because Jesus is already feeding the hungry. There will even be no death—Jesus is rising from the dead.

When John the Baptist sent messengers from the prison where he was being held and told them to ask Jesus if he was the prophet who was to come at the end of time or if he should wait for another, Jesus (according to the source Q) replied: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are given food." Jesus proclaims the Gospel. And blessed is he who is not offended in me!" (Luke 7:22-23). The kingdom of God is coming soon, and it is already beginning to manifest itself little by little in the works of Jesus. The work of Jesus must be viewed through the prism of the apocalypse.

### **Arrival in Jerusalem**

If any Christian theologian were asked why Jesus went to Jerusalem in the last week of his life, the answer would be: to be crucified for the sins of the world. But what could his motivation be in a historical perspective? If Jesus is seen as a harbinger of the apocalypse, his actions take on a different meaning. According to our earliest sources, the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus spent most of his ministry preaching to the rural people of Galilee. It is clear that he spent little time in the major cities, but he visited towns, villages, and hamlets throughout the north of the country.

But he had to urgently announce to everyone that the kingdom would soon come with the coming of the Son of Man, and people must prepare for it.

Why did he go to Jerusalem? Obviously, to spread this message to the heart of Judaism, to the capital, where the temple stands, where important social and political figures are, where many ordinary people live. And why did he choose Passover for this trip? Because many flocked to the city for this holiday. As we saw in the previous chapter, the Passover was a significant event in Jerusalem. This was the main pilgrimage time of the Jewish year, these days the city was full of crowds of people.

During Passover, Jews remembered the significant events of the Exodus under Moses and honored God who had interceded for them. Certainly, many Jews had a premonition of a new intervention when God would crush the current rulers (the Romans) just as He had crushed the rulers of the past (the Egyptians). Some Jews believed that this would occur during a political and military uprising. Others believed that a cataclysm of cosmic proportions will begin and God himself will destroy those who oppose him. Jesus held to this last belief. He had come to Jerusalem to spread his message. The kingdom of God was at hand, the time for people to repent and believe in the joy that was to come.

It is not surprising that in the earliest sources—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—Jesus spends his last week in Jerusalem actively preaching apocalyptic ideas (see, for example, Mark 13 and Matthew 24-25). This is historically reliable information. This is how the last week of Jesus' life passed. But first, immediately upon arriving in the city, he performed a significant act—a symbolic act that expressed his apocalyptic message.

### **Expulsion from the temple**

Mark, of course, was written earlier, and for him this event probably takes place at the end of Jesus' life, not the beginning. From Mark's perspective, the events in the temple ultimately led to Jesus' crucifixion.

The temple was the center of Jewish worship, according to the Hebrew Scriptures. In Jesus' day, Jews from all over the world would come to Jerusalem to offer animal sacrifices, as the law required; such sacrifices were offered only at the temple and nowhere else. Of course, people who came from afar could not bring animals for sacrifices, so they had to buy them locally. However, they could not be paid for in ordinary Roman coins: they were minted with the emperor's image where he was revered as a deity in the empire. The Jews had only one God, so they did not bring Caesar's image into the holy temple. Moreover, Jewish law forbade to use any images of "idols", which means that Roman coins were also unsuitable for this reason. Some other money was needed, so it was necessary to carry out a "currency exchange" - exchanging Roman coins for temple money, which did not have images of Caesar. This temple money was used for animal sacrifices.

Money changers were engaged in money exchange. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem, he saw money changers and the selling of animals, and he was clearly indignant: he overturned several tables of the money changers and drove the animal dealers out of the temple. It is not known how thoroughly he carried out this "expulsion from the temple." It is hard to believe that Jesus did his work: the temple area is the size of twenty-five football fields, a huge space, and the Gospels do not portray Jesus' actions as a miracle. Moreover, if Jesus caused such a disturbance, it is almost impossible to explain why he was not arrested immediately, on the spot, but only a week later. Apparently, some of the details in our early sources are exaggerated.

It is also not easy to understand what Jesus was objecting to. Sacrifices were offered according to God's law, the Jews needed sacrificial animals, and they could not pay for them in Roman coins. Was it repugnant to Jesus to think that anyone would benefit from worshipping God? At least that is possible, and that is how the Gospel writers interpret this event.

However, modern commentators argue that this is far from the only reason. One of the most attested statements of Jesus, found in many independent sources, is the prophecy that at the end of time, during great battles, the temple itself will be destroyed (Mark 13:2; 14:58; 15:29). The temple? The center of worship of the God of Israel? Isn't this blasphemy?

Apparently, some Jews thought so. This got Jesus into trouble. However, Jesus himself mentioned the prophet Jeremiah, who also believed that the temple and the activities within it were corrupt. Like Jesus, Jeremiah experienced fierce attacks in the temple, for which he also paid dearly (see Jeremiah 7:1-15; 20:1-6).

Jesus was certain that the temple would be destroyed on the day of judgment, which was soon to come. So why did he turn the tables and create a mess himself? Most critical scholars now agree, that Jesus performed a symbolic act – a parable, if [you will](#). The turning of the tables in miniature symbolized what was soon to happen on a grand scale when the judgment of the Son of Man began. God's enemies would be destroyed. Like many of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible, Jesus believed that God's enemies were some of the Jewish rulers who ran the temple, who were corrupt and powerful. But the hour of reckoning was near.

## **The arrest of Jesus**

For all the reasons mentioned above, it is not surprising that the authorities saw Jesus as a threat that needed to be eliminated. Why was Jesus not arrested immediately, but only a week later? It seems to me that the episode in the temple was insignificant in itself, but when the rumor spread about what Jesus had done, he came under the supervision of the authorities. What they saw and heard did not improve their opinion of him, and more and more people gathered to listen to Jesus' apocalyptic teachings about the coming judgment. Eventually, the authorities began to fear that the situation was getting out of control.

Moreover, the Passover was approaching, and crowds of people from all over the country were flocking to Jerusalem, including zealous traditionalists who were ready to do anything to end the miserable circumstances in which they found themselves under the Roman yoke. The Jewish authorities ordered Jesus to be arrested.

The story of the betrayal of Jesus by one of the twelve apostles, Judas Iscariot, is well attested in early sources, and it does not seem to be an episode that could have been invented by later Christians (so Jesus was not an authority *even* for his closest followers?). Many speculations have been made about the reasons for Judas' actions. Was he seeking to cause a political uproar and was disappointed when he found that Jesus was not interested? Was he hoping to persuade the disciples to encourage the crowd to rush to Jesus' rescue and thus cause a riot? Was Judas in urgent need of money? Or was he a scoundrel, a black sheep from the start?

But the more interesting question is: what was Judas' betrayal really about? And we get to the heart of the matter: could Judas have done more than just tell the authorities where Jesus could be alone, away from the crowd? Surely the authorities could have found out without his help, simply by watching Jesus and thus saving the thirty pieces of silver. Did Judas give them any other information, for example, that would allow us to bring charges against Jesus and get rid of him once and for all? The answer to this question lies in one of the main tasks of the chapter with which I began my discussion: what did Jesus' teaching say about himself?

## **WHAT JESUS TEACHES ABOUT HIMSELF**

In this chapter I argued that Jesus did not mention his divinity in his teachings. He spoke primarily about God, not about himself, namely, that the kingdom of God would soon appear. at the coming of the Son of Man, who will execute judgment. Jesus declared that all this would happen during his lifetime. He explained to his listeners that in order to enter the coming kingdom, one must accept his teaching, that is, turn to God with all one's heart and love one's neighbor as oneself.

What did Jesus say about himself? One reason this question has long intrigued many scholars is that when Jesus was finally arrested and brought before the Roman authorities, he was accused of claiming to be the King of the Jews. (Mark 15:2) And that is strange, because in our earliest sources Jesus never says anything like this about himself when addressing a crowd of listeners. Why did the Roman authorities assume that he said this if he didn't actually say it? And why didn't Jesus simply deny the charges and be saved at trial?

It is understandable why the authorities took such statements so seriously: claiming the title of king when a Roman Caesar or a Roman protégé had the right to rule was considered political disobedience. For this, Jesus was executed for inciting rebellion against Rome.

But judging from our early sources, he had nothing to do with political unrest. So how do we explain this information?

The answer lies in the apocalyptic teachings of Jesus. He explained to his disciples that they, all twelve (along with Judah) will be rulers of the "twelve tribes of Israel" in the kingdom that is about to come. But who will rule over *the disciples*? Each kingdom has its own king. Who will be the king in the coming kingdom, after the Son of Man has destroyed all who oppose God? will he establish his rule over the earth? Of course, God will be the supreme ruler, but through whom will he rule? With the help of Jesus, he called disciples, and Jesus led them. But will he lead them in the new kingdom?

I do not believe that Jesus publicly proclaimed himself king during his ministry. That would be too dangerous an act, even a crime. He did not consider himself a king at that time. However, it is confirmed that he taught the twelve disciples for a long time, staying with them face to face. And, among other things, he taught them that they would be rulers of the coming kingdom.

Everything falls into place when Jesus personally explains to his disciples that he is their leader, not only now, but also in the future. When the kingdom comes, he will be king. In ancient Israel, future kings were called "Messiah," meaning "God's anointed one."

Jesus did not publicly call himself the Messiah, although he may have been considered one. However, when Jesus spoke of himself as the Messiah privately, alone with his disciples, he did not mean that he would drive out the Romans and restore Israel's sovereignty. He meant that God would crush the forces of evil and make him, Jesus, king.

That is why after Jesus' death, his disciples continued to call him the Messiah. At that time, the Jews did not believe that The Messiah would die and then rise from the dead. Therefore, even if Jesus' followers believed in his resurrection, they would not call Jesus the Messiah. Therefore, they must have considered him the Messiah before his death. Why? Because that's how he taught them.

Why did the Romans kill Jesus because he claimed to be the King of the Jews but never mentioned it publicly? Because they found out: he considered himself to be one. But contrary to the futuristic and apocalyptic meaning that Jesus wrote into his words, the Romans interpreted them politically, decided that they were talking about the present tense, and therefore rushed to execute the criminal. But how could they know who Jesus thought he was if he only told the disciples? Someone had to report it to the authorities, and that someone had to be someone who was privately with Jesus.

Therefore, one of the twelve apostles.

Judas not only told the authorities where to find Jesus. He reported that Jesus called himself the (future) Messiah of the Jews. king.

The authorities needed this. Problem solved. The Jewish leaders, whom Jesus had persecuted with his apocalyptic sermons and threatened to shake their power, interrogated Jesus and then brought him to trial before Pilate. He asked Jesus if he was really the King of the Jews, and Jesus could not simply deny it. Pilate ordered him to be executed, and the sentence was carried out immediately.

## **DEPARTURE: THE RESURRECTION AND OTHER MIRACLES IN THE LIFE OF JESUS**

I have said nothing fundamentally new or unusual in this chapter, except for suggestions about what exactly Judas' betrayal was, which do not fit into the framework of traditional interpretations. In any case, the opinions expressed here are quite common. Of course, some theologians will certainly try to argue against this

real things. That is why the study of this material continues. But I learned the idea of Jesus as a prophet of the apocalypse while I was still in seminary. Most Bible scholars in the North America and Europe have held the same view for almost a century. From this perspective, teaching takes place in the country's largest institutions of higher education, including seminaries and other theological schools. These views are explained to most priests of the main Christian denominations during their studies, although priests are reluctant to share the knowledge they have acquired with their parishioners.

I would like to end this chapter with a very important point for both casual Bible readers and scholars of early Christianity: According to the Gospels, the story of Jesus ends not with an execution, but with the accounts of his resurrection from the dead.

There is nothing surprising about the cross as such. Many people were crucified throughout the Roman Empire, such executions probably took place daily. The death of Jesus is surprising only because of the theological interpretation that Jesus died "for the sins of the world." The historian cannot evaluate this interpretation. We have no historical evidence why, from God's point of view, Jesus died. Historians do not have access to God, unlike events that take place on earth and are recorded in historical documents. And from a historical perspective, the crucifixion of Jesus is not a problem.

But the historical problem is his resurrection from the dead. It is a miracle, and the very nature of the profession does not allow historians to discuss miracles. This is my main thesis in this last part of the chapter. To some this may seem counterintuitive: isn't everything that happens, even if it is a miracle, a subject of historical inquiry? Isn't the refusal to consider the very possibility of a miracle a prejudice against the supernatural? Are only atheists allowed to be historians?

The answer to all these questions will be negative. I want to show one thing: the historical record itself. The nature of the disciplines is such that historians cannot prove that miracles have ever been performed. Anyone who disagrees with me and thinks that historians can prove that miracles have occurred will have to arm themselves with impartiality. There were many people in Jesus' time who supposedly performed miracles. There are well-known Jewish saints, such as Hanina ben Dosa or Honi, who drew miracle circles, and pagan saints, such as Apollonius of Tyana, a miracle-working philosopher who supposedly healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead. He was supposedly born under supernatural circumstances and supposedly ascended to heaven at the end of his life. Familiar descriptions? There are also pagan demigods, such as Hercules, who are also able to rise from the dead. Anyone who wants to believe that Jesus performed miracles, should recognize that others could perform miracles, both in the time of Jesus and in all ages until now, in all religions, such as Islam, and in the indigenous beliefs of the peoples of Africa and Asia.

But let's get back to Jesus' miracles. His resurrection was not the only miracle. According to the Gospels, Jesus' entire life was filled with amazing events. He was born of a woman who was innocent. As he grew up, he performed one miracle after another: he healed the blind, the lame, the deaf, the paralyzed, cast out demons, and raised the dead. And at the end of his life, he performed his greatest miracle: he rose from the dead and gained immortality.

While miracles are important in the gospel tradition, I don't think historians can prove that any of these miracles, including the resurrection, actually happened. And this is not a prejudice against the supernatural. I don't mean to say that miracles can't happen according to

definition. Many people hold this opinion, but I am not going to talk about it now. Discussions for all purposes, I am prepared to agree: what we call miracles really do happen.

I don't mean to say that we can't confirm the possibility of miracles simply because our sources of information are not as reliable. Of course, that's also true. The earliest accounts of Jesus' miracles were written 35 to 65 years after the events themselves, by people who weren't eyewitnesses, and were based solely on oral traditions passed down over decades by people who were trying to convince others to believe in Jesus. These accounts are full of inconsistencies, especially the resurrection accounts themselves. None of the accounts of Jesus' miracles meet the criterion of consistency.

However, scientists cannot prove that miracles, including the resurrection, did not actually happen because of this. This is the reason. The real reason lies in the limitations of historical knowledge. A miracle cannot have historical evidence.

We can understand the reasons for this phenomenon by looking at the working methods of historians. They are different from the methods of natural scientists, who repeat an experiment to show how a certain phenomenon occurs, changing one variable at a time. If the same experiment gives the same results over and over again, they can be predicted with a certain probability: the same result will be observed in the next experiment. If I need scientific evidence that a bar of soap floats in warm water and a bar of iron sinks, it is enough to conduct an experiment with a hundred basins filled with warm water and a hundred bars of soap and iron. When I start throwing the bars into the basins, the soap will always float, and the iron will always sink. So it is reasonable to say that I will achieve exactly the same result the hundredth and first time.

Historians do things differently. They don't prove what is happening or will happen, but they find out what has *already* happened. In history, the repetition of experience is impossible. What happened once has already begun and ended.

Historians work with a variety of evidence to determine what most likely happened in the past. It's impossible to know for sure, although in some cases the evidence is so compelling that it's beyond doubt. Personally, I have no doubt that the basketball team I support, the Carolina Tarheels, lost to the Kansas Jayhawks in the Final Four last month. I'm very uncomfortable admitting it, I'd love to be wrong, but the evidence (video footage, newspaper reports, eyewitness accounts) is indisputable. In Kansas, some may consider the outcome of the game a miracle, and in Carolina, the intervention of hostile cosmic forces, but the essence of the results does not change.

What if the match took place a century ago? There may be enough evidence about it, but it is not as convincing as the facts that speak of the loss of the Tarheels. What if the "match" took place during the Roman Empire, two thousand years ago? It is much more difficult to determine what score it ended with. There is almost no evidence.

Because of the nature of historical events, some evidence supports them better than others, and historians only need to determine the degree of probability. Some events can be considered indisputable (for example, the Tarheels' loss in the Final Four). Others seem equally indisputable to most people, such as the Holocaust. Why do some people claim that the Holocaust did not happen? They believe that all evidence of it is false. I agree, this is complete nonsense. But since there are otherwise intelligent and sane people who claim such things and are even able to convince others, we can only conclude that it is possible.

Many other historical events are far from indisputable. Did Lincoln really write the Gettysburg Address on an envelope? Did Jefferson really have a long-term relationship with one of his slaves? Did Alexander the Great really get drunk and die, shocked by the death of a loved one? Was Jesus really born when Quirinius was governor of Syria? There are billions of such questions that could be asked – continue the list yourself if you wish.

There is nothing inherently improbable or implausible in any of these events: the only question is, whether they happened or not. Some are more likely than others. Historians are able to classify past events according to their relative probability. All historians can do is figure out what *probably* happened in the past.

The same problem applies to miracles. By definition, miracles are events that are practically impossible. Some people believe that miracles are literally impossible because they violate the laws of nature: a person cannot walk on water the way an iron rod can swim. Others seek precision and argue that there are actually no laws in nature that cannot be violated, but nature itself is highly predictable. That is why science is possible. We call a miracle an event that disrupts the unchanging or nearly unchanging course of natural phenomena, making the event practically or literally impossible. The probability of a miracle occurring is infinite. Otherwise, it would not be a miracle, but just an oddity. And strange and unusual events happen all the time.

I hope you now understand the inevitable problem that historians face when faced with miracles. Historians can only determine what probably happened in the past, and miracles are by their very nature the least likely explanations for what happened. This truth is immutable, it doesn't matter whether you believe it or not. Out of the six billion people on the planet, there is not one who could walk on warm water that fills a swimming pool. What are the odds that there will be at least *one* person who can do that? Less than one in six billion. Much less.

If historians can only determine what most likely happened, and miracles are by definition the least likely events, then again by definition historians cannot determine whether miracles could have been likely events.

This is true of the miracles of Muhammad, Hanin ben Dos, Apollonius of Tyana, and Jesus.

What about the resurrection? I'm not saying it didn't happen. Some people think it did, others don't. I think not. But if you believe in the resurrection, it's not from a historical point of view, even if you are a historian, but as a believer.

There can be no historical evidence for the resurrection due to the nature of historical evidence.

Some evangelical Christian scholars argue the opposite: the empty tomb and the eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection are strong evidence that he was indeed resurrected. But to claim this is to fundamentally misunderstand what historians can and cannot do. Historians can only establish probable events in the past. They cannot prove that a miracle, the least likely event, happened with the greatest probability. The resurrection is the least likely, and anti-Christian prejudice has nothing to do with it.

This is the least likely, because people do not come back to life and become immortal after they die.

actually dies. What if this was the case with Jesus? This means that this is a miracle for which historical confirmation is impossible.

Many Christians don't even want to hear about it, but there are actually many other explanations for what happened to Jesus that are more plausible than the resurrection of the dead. None of these explanations are particularly likely, but they are historically *more* plausible than the resurrection explanation.

You can probably come up with dozens of implausible (but not impossible) explanations yourself. I will give just two examples.

Why was the tomb supposedly empty? I say "supposedly" because, frankly, I have no idea if it was actually empty. The first mention of Jesus' empty tomb is in the Gospel of Mark, written 40 years later by a man living in another country who had heard from someone that the tomb was empty. How could he have known for sure? In any case, let's say it was really empty. How did this happen? Let's say that Jesus was buried by Joseph of Arimathea in the family tomb of Joseph, and then two of Jesus' followers, who were not among the twelve, decided that night to move the body to another place that seemed more suitable to them. Only Matthew says that there was a guard at the tomb; what if there was not one? Let's also say that two Roman legionaries passing by noticed that these two followers were carrying a corpse wrapped in a shroud somewhere. Suspicious, that something was wrong, the legionaries stopped the followers, who took up arms like the disciples in Gethsemane. The battle-hardened legionaries finished them off on the spot. Now there are three corpses in front of them, and they have no idea where the first one came from. Not knowing what else to do with them, the legionaries take someone else's chariot, take the corpses out of the city, into the Valley of Hinnom (Gehenna) and leave them there. Within three or four days, the corpses decompose beyond recognition. Jesus' tomb is empty, and no one knows why.

Is this scenario plausible? Absolutely not. But can I assure you that this is exactly what happened? No way. Is this turn of events any more likely than Jesus' miracle and ascension from the tomb to heaven? Absolutely! From a strictly historical perspective, a highly improbable event is still much more likely than a literally impossible one.

Why did some disciples claim to have seen Jesus alive after the crucifixion? I have no doubt that there were disciples who claimed this. We have no written accounts of them, but Paul, who wrote about these events 25 years later, indicates that this is what they claimed, and it seems unlikely to me that he made it up. Furthermore, Paul knew at least two disciples who agreed just three years after Jesus' death (Galatians 1:18-19). But does the fact that some people claimed to have seen Jesus alive mean that he actually rose from the dead? Is that the most likely outcome? It can't be: by definition, it's the least likely. And what would be more likely? Almost any explanation you can think of.

Let me give you another example. After the death of loved ones, people sometimes see them - this phenomenon is widely known and very well documented. A man sees his wife in the bedroom a month after her funeral; a woman sees her dead daughter; a girl sees her dead grandmother. This happens all the time. This is confirmed by a lot of documentary evidence[63]. In many cases, a person who sees a deceased relative can talk to him, hug him, feel his touch. There is documentary evidence that such visions happen to many people at the same time, and they can see not only loved ones. The Blessed Virgin Mary constantly appears

groups of people, confirmed by thousands of witnesses. Do I think it really happened? No. Or that the grandmother actually came out of the grave to visit her granddaughter's bedroom? No. Maybe it really is. It happens. But it's unlikely. In fact, from a historical perspective, it's literally impossible. But people say it happens all the time.

Jesus' closest followers, and later Paul, claimed to have seen him alive after his execution. Does this mean that he actually rose from the dead? No, it means that they, like thousands of other people, had the plausible tactile experience of meeting a dead person. The disciples did not do any research on the experience of after-death visions. They lived what they experienced and interpreted the event as they could: Jesus is alive. He must have risen from the dead. Where is he now? He is not here, which means he must have ascended to heaven.

Does my explanation for these claims seem very convincing? No. But it is entirely possible. From a strictly historical perspective, it is more likely than the resurrection.

*I am not* saying that Jesus did not rise from the dead. I am not saying that the tomb was not empty. I am not saying that Jesus did not appear to his disciples and did not ascend to heaven. Believers are convinced that all of this is true. But they do not believe these events because they are supported by historical evidence. Believers accept them on faith, not on evidence. There is no such evidence and there can be no such evidence. Historians can only determine what might have happened in the past, and miracles are by definition the least likely of all possible events.

## **6. HOW WE OBTAINED THE BIBLE**

When I arrived at Princeton Theological Seminary in the late 1970s as a conservative evangelical Christian, I was not an ignorant fundamentalist trying to ignore the obvious. I had a good general education, a bachelor's degree in English literature, and had studied history, ancient literature, languages, and philosophy. I also had a general understanding of the world and did not believe that everyone who disagreed with me on some theological point was doomed to burn in hell. I know more conservative Christians.

Nevertheless, he himself was very conservative.

Among other things, I continued to believe that the Bible was not simply a collection of authoritative books to guide a Christian in what to believe and how to act. I was convinced that the Bible was nothing more than the Word of God, infallible in everything it taught. These views had been instilled in me at Moody Bible Institute, where I majored in "Biblical Theology," and despite the advanced degrees and general education I received at Wheaton, I continued to hold the same views. At least for a time.

Various aspects of New Testament study gradually began to undermine these ideas. Among other things, I was confronted with a fundamental question that is deadly in its simplicity—a question that sooner or later confronts anyone who believes the Bible is "oral, inspired."

God's Word: Which Bible Are We Talking About?

Is the Bible we use inspired? The King James Version? Some still insist that despite the obvious absurdity of such claims: does this mean that during the centuries that the King James translators continued their work, Christians did not have access to the inspired Word of God? What was God thinking? What about other modern translations? And with

the Hebrew and Greek texts from which these English translations were derived? And if we choose Hebrew and Greek, what about the fact that we do not have any original Bible books in these languages, only later copies, each of which is full of errors?

At Moody Institute, I was taught that the inspired words were the words of the originals, the so-called autographs. Yes, over the years, interpreters of the Scriptures have changed these words, but they were originally the fully inspired Word of God. As I explained in *The Corrupted Words of Jesus*, I eventually realized that such views caused too many problems. Why did God send the words of the Bible if He did not want them to remain intact for future generations? Or, in other words, why should I believe that these words were inspired from the beginning when I know for sure (and I did) that God did not preserve them? All of this created serious problems in trying to figure out which Bible I considered inspired.

Another difficulty I didn't address in *The Corrupted Words of Jesus*. If God sent some books decades after Jesus' death, how do we know that the later church fathers chose the right books to include in the Bible? I could accept that on faith—God would not allow uninspired books to be included in the canonical Scriptures. But as I began to study the history of early Christianity, I realized that there were many Christians around the world who were convinced that other books should be included in the Holy Scriptures; conversely, some of the books that eventually made it into the canon were rejected by individual church leaders for centuries.

Some churches categorically rejected the Apocalypse of John (the Book of Revelation) as false, but accepted the Apocalypse of Peter, which ultimately did not make it into the New Testament. There were Christians who accepted the Gospel of Peter, as well as others who rejected the Gospel of John. Some Christians considered the abridged version of the Gospel of Luke (without the first two chapters) to be correct, while others argued that the now non-canonical Gospel of Thomas should be included in the canon. Some rejected the three pastoral letters (1 and 2 Timothy and Titus), which made it into the New Testament, while others were convinced that the Letter of Barnabas deserved to be canonized.

If God cared that His church inspired books, and only those and no others, why have there been so many bitter disputes and conflicts for more than three centuries? Why didn't God make sure that these disputes lasted only a few weeks, not centuries, and ended unambiguously? [64] \_\_\_\_\_

In this chapter I want to talk about the difficulties I have encountered regarding the Bible as inspired. The Word of God. The first is that we do not have any original New Testament texts (since I have already devoted an entire book to this subject, I will not go into it here). The second difficulty is related to the final formation of the 27-book canon.

### **The "Original" Text of the New Testament**

While "The Corrupt Words of Jesus" stirred up a hornet's nest, or at least stirred up conservative evangelical Christians, almost all of its general points were not controversial. In summary, they can be presented as follows.

- We do not have the original of any of the books of the New Testament.

- The copies we have were made much later, in many cases many centuries later.
- We have thousands of such copies in Greek, the language in which all the books of the New Testament were originally written.
- All of these copies contain errors – accidental omissions or intentional changes made by copyists who wanted to give the text a certain meaning (or, in their opinion, to emphasize the meaning inherent in the text).
- We do not know how many errors there are in the surviving copies, but it is clear that there are hundreds of thousands. The easiest way to express this is not in absolute terms, but in relative terms: there are more discrepancies in our manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament.
- The vast majority of these errors are completely insignificant and only testify to the fact that ancient copyists wrote no better than many of our contemporaries.
- However, some errors are important, and they are huge. Some affect the interpretation of a verse, a chapter, or even the entire book. Others indicate the reasons why copyists sometimes changed the text, taking into account the disputes and contradictions that arose in their environment.
- The task of a textual critic is to find out what the author of the text originally wrote and to understand why the copyists changed his words (to understand the conditions under which they worked).

Despite three centuries of hard work in this direction, scholars still disagree and engage in heated debates. Among prominent scholars, there are those who deny the authenticity of some passages and claim that they were not in the original text. In some cases, it is impossible to guess what the original text was about.

The reaction to my book from the conservative evangelical community has surprised me somewhat. The Corrupted Words of Jesus has been criticized for “misleading people,” as if the facts I presented could lead anyone to ruin. Some critics have not appreciated my tone. And many have said that the facts I listed do not mean that the Bible should not be believed as the inspired word of God.

I will start the discussion with the last point: there are different views on the inspiration of Scripture, and the one that was instilled in me until I was twenty does not coincide with the textual facts. Most Christians who do not hold conservative evangelical views, like me, will find the facts about the text interesting, but they do not threaten a faith that is based on more than just the words about the inspiration of the Bible. I never intended to encourage anyone to abandon the Christian faith; critics who think I stopped being a Christian when I realized that there were discrepancies in the manuscripts of the books of the Bible are simply wrong and [ridiculous](#).

In any case, as I have already mentioned, there is almost nothing contradictory in these theses. Who would think of denying that we have thousands of manuscripts?

Or hundreds of thousands of variant readings? Or that many of these discrepancies reflect spelling differences? Or that scholars continue to argue about which text was the original in a particular passage? All of these statements are factually correct.

One of them has caused controversy - my claim that among these discrepancies there are very significant ones. For this some conservative evangelicals objected, but not much else, as far as I know. It got me thinking: why does criticism come from people with certain theological views?

The typical reaction was twofold: critics claimed that (1) the vast majority of the changes in the text were completely irrelevant, and that I was deliberately misleading people by saying otherwise; and (2) there was *none of the* important variant readings, all of which had been known for a long time, and none of which had received any noticeable attention.

I'm not entirely sure how to respond to the first statement, as I've always said that most discrepancies in the text are insignificant (e.g., "The Corrupted Words of Jesus" on page 26).

Perhaps the whole point is that I did not repeat it convincingly enough and, by discussing significant discrepancies, simply misled readers, making them think that the situation was much more serious than it actually was. I get the impression that critics would like me to write mainly about minor changes in the text that do not make much sense. But would such a *book be* interesting?

I would like to respond to the second objection in more detail. In my opinion, the claim that none of the textual inconsistencies are not really important, they are just wrong. Some biblical inconsistencies mean a lot.

In response to the argument of conservative evangelicals that textual inconsistencies do not affect any important Christian doctrine, I note:

a. To speak of a lack of influence on important teachings is simply wrong. For example, the only place in the entire New Testament where the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly stated is a passage that is included in modern translations (1 John 5:7-8), but is not in most Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. I believe that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is very important. It is commonly objected that the doctrine of the Trinity is in the Bible without reference to 1 John 5:7-8. And I reply that the same is true of every Christian dogma. As far as I know, theologians do not call a doctrine what occurs in just one verse; one can remove almost any verse from Scripture and still find the Christian teaching contained therein in another passage—if one looks carefully, of course . [68]

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In my opinion, it is wrong to assume that textual inconsistencies are ultimately unimportant because they do not affect to basic Christian ideas, is to use a strange criterion of significance. Why is this criterion Christian teaching? Suppose we find a manuscript of the Gospel of Matthew that is missing chapters 4-13 for some reason. Is it significant? In my opinion, yes. But will it affect any teaching? Absolutely not. Or, taking the examples to the extreme, suppose we wake up tomorrow morning to find that from all the New Testaments on the planet, the Gospel of Mark, the Epistle to the Philippians, the Epistle of James, and the Epistle of 1 Peter have disappeared without a trace. Is this case significant? Yes, and huge! Will it affect any Christian ideas? Not in the slightest.

c. And most importantly, certain textual inconsistencies have a lot to say about more than just "basic Christian ideas."

**1. Some reading variations are important in interpreting entire books of the New Testament.** Let us examine some reading variations in the Gospel of Luke. First, is Luke

believed that Jesus met his death in agony, or that he was calm and in control, depends on how one interprets the discrepancy in the text of Luke 22:43-44, where Jesus sweats beads of blood before being arrested. Let us leave these verses where they are, as in some manuscripts, and see that Jesus' suffering is real. Deleting these verses would remove the anguish not only from this passage but from Luke's entire account of the Lord's suffering, as we saw earlier, noting that Luke removed all references to Mark's pain and uncertainty leading up to his death. Second, did Luke view Jesus' death as an atonement for sins? That depends on how you deal with Luke 22:19-20. Throughout the text, as in chapter 3, Luke has gotten rid of Mark's reference to Jesus' death as an atonement. The only

An echo of this teaching is found in some manuscripts, in the episode of the Last Supper, where Jesus says that the bread is his body, which is given "for you," and the cup is his blood, which is shed "for you." However, in our earliest and best preserved manuscripts, these words are missing (most of verse 19 and all of verse 20). They were apparently added by the exegetes to make Luke's account of Jesus' death consistent with Mark's and Matthew's accounts. In my opinion, this is of course very important, except that Luke's view on the matter is irrelevant.

2. Some readings, including those just mentioned, are very important for understanding the early Christian traditions about Jesus. Did Jesus really meet the adulterous woman and her accusers, saying, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her," and after the accusers had left, he said to the woman, "I do not condemn you; go and sin no more"? That depends on which manuscript of the Gospel of John you read. Did Jesus really tell his disciples after his resurrection that those who believe in him will be able to pick up snakes and drink any poison, and it will not harm them? That depends on which manuscript of the Gospel of Mark we turn to.

3. Some of the discrepancies play a crucial role in understanding the events that took place in the communities in which the copyists who copied these texts lived. For example, some of them omitted Jesus' prayer at the time of his execution: "Father, forgive them! Forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Early Christians saw this as a prayer to forgive the Jews who did not understand what they were doing. It is not surprising that some scribes, in the context of Christian anti-Judaism in the second and third centuries, when many Christians believed that the Jews knew what they were doing and that God had not forgiven them, omitted these verses. Or, to take the example of It seems that the apostle's command for women to be silent in the churches and to submit to their husbands was not originally included in 1 Corinthians 14 (verses 34-35), but was later added by exegetes to show women their place. Is this important or not?

Finally, I must confess that I do not believe conservative evangelicals when they say that the discrepancies in the New Testament text are of little importance. If they are, then why do conservative evangelical seminaries—such as Dallas Theological Seminary, which is headed by one of my most vocal critics on this subject, or New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary—spend millions of dollars studying the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament? If the differences in the manuscripts are not important, why bother studying them?

If they're not important at all, why would you dedicate a career to researching them? If they're insignificant, why would they spend millions of dollars? I wonder why these people are raising funds for their projects: "We're proposing to invest five hundred thousand dollars to study the New Testament manuscripts because we don't think they're important at all"?

I think the significance of these manuscripts is obvious. They are important for interpreting the New Testament, gathering information about the historical Jesus, and understanding the history of the Christian church after his death. Those who talk about irrelevance are either trying to appease all those who are concerned about the disclosure of historical facts, or they are deceiving themselves.

## FORMATION OF THE SCRIPTURE CANON

But the problem with ideas about the content of God's own words in the Bible goes beyond the fact that we do not always know these words. Furthermore, it is not clear whether the books that God originally intended for the Bible ended up in the Bible. How do we know that the Bible contains only those books that were meant to be included? How can we be sure that the Bible contains all the inspired books? [69]

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Some of my students tend to believe that the Bible simply came down from heaven one July day, shortly after Jesus died. The New Testament is the New Testament. It always has been and always will be. You can go to any store in any part of our country or any other Western country, buy a New Testament, and you will see the same collection of 27 books: the four Gospels, then Acts, then the Epistles, and finally the Apocalypse. It always has been, there is no doubt about that.

But in fact, this was not always the case. On the contrary, there were long and heated discussions about which books should be included in the Bible. Hard as it may be to believe, a final decision on which all the churches of the world would agree was never made; throughout history, in various countries (Syria, Armenia, Ethiopia), there have always been churches in which the canonical Scriptures differed somewhat from ours. Even the canon of 27 books, with which we are all familiar, was not adopted by any church council or assembly until the 16th century, until the Catholic Council of Trent during the Counter-Reformation, which also established the canon of the Old Testament, in response to the widespread rejection of these books as non-canonical in Protestant circles. Strange as it may seem, the canon, which was formed without much certainty and far from overnight, appeared without any vote.

But that doesn't mean it came about by chance. The canon was formed through long debates and conflicts over which books should be included in it. These debates fueled not only a general debate and a desire to know which books were considered authoritative, but also a real threat to the early Christians. In the early centuries of the church, many different Christian groups held a variety of theological and spiritual views. Their opinions differed greatly on key questions: How many gods are there? Was Jesus a man? Did he have

divine nature? Is the material world inherently good and evil? Does salvation come during the period of human existence in the body or after the body is abandoned? Does the death of Jesus have anything to do with salvation?

The problem with forming the canon of Scripture was that virtually every competing group of Christians—all of them insisting on the correctness of their teachings, all of them competing for the attention of potential converts—relied on the holy books to support their views. Most of these books were attributed to the apostles. So who was right? The canon that emerged from the dispute contains the books that the winning group favored. But it didn't happen overnight. The process took centuries.

## **The astonishing diversity of views in the early Christian church**

When looking at the canonization process in context, we must imagine how marked the diversity of views within the early Christian movement was in the first centuries of its existence. One might think that Christianity was a complete phenomenon from the beginning – a religion founded by Jesus, expounded by Paul, that survived the Middle Ages and has survived to this day. But it is not that simple. Already 150 years after Jesus' death, there were many different groups of Christians who claimed to practice the religion of Jesus and his disciples, but who saw it from very different perspectives, differing from each other more sharply than the sources, some of which eventually found their way into the New Testament.

### **WHAT WERE THESE GROUPS?**

#### **Ebionites**

The Ebionites were a group of Jews who converted to Christianity; they adhered strictly to Jewish customs, the laws given by God to Moses and set forth in the Hebrew Bible, and yet they believed that Jesus was the Messiah sent by God to save the world. We do not know where their name came from. Most scholars believe that it is a derivative of "evion" ("ebionim"), the Hebrew word for "poor". Perhaps these Christians listened to Jesus' instructions, left everything for the gospel, and voluntarily condemned themselves to poverty for the sake of religious service, like the early followers of Jesus mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 2:44–45; 4:32).

The Ebionites almost certainly claimed to be the spiritual successors of these early followers and, like them, believed that belief in Jesus did not represent a break with Judaism, but rather a correct interpretation of it as the religion that God revealed to Moses on Mount Sinai.

Some scholars believe that the Ebionites were in many ways similar to early followers of Jesus, such as his brother James or the disciple Peter, who led the Jerusalem church for many years after Jesus' death. James seems to have been a particularly zealous advocate of the continuing value of Jewish law for all followers of Jesus. Apparently, like the later Ebionites, he saw Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, sent by the Jewish God to the Jewish people, fulfilling Jewish law. Therefore, anyone who wanted to follow Jesus had to be a Jew. To be converted, a Gentile had to be circumcised, because circumcision was always mandatory for people seeking to profess faith in the God of the people of Israel, as God himself required in the law (Genesis 17:10-14).

However, the apostle Paul argued the opposite: that the God of Jesus is the God of all people and that Gentiles do not need to become Jews to be followers of Jesus. In Paul's view, keeping the requirements of the Jewish law cannot justify a person before God, and attempts to keep this law are futile when it comes to salvation. Paul ultimately won the argument, but for centuries there were Christians who disagreed with him, including the Ebionites. They did not consider Paul a great apostle of the faith: for them he had completely misunderstood the foundations of the faith.

The Ebionites strictly adhered to Jewish monotheism and therefore did not believe that Jesus was of divine nature. There can be only one God. And Jesus was a man chosen by God to be the Messiah. Jesus was not born of a virgin: his parents were Joseph and Mary, he was blameless

a righteous man whom God recognized as his son and commanded to die on the cross to atone for the sins of people.

It may seem strange that the Ebionites simply did not read the New Testament and did not learn that Jesus was born of a virgin, that he himself had a divine nature, and that he abolished the Jewish law that Paul had proclaimed. However, the Ebionites could not read the New Testament, because it did not yet exist at that time. Along with the Hebrew Bible, the Ebionites had their own sacred books that set out their views, including the Gospel, which largely coincides with ours.

The Gospel of Matthew (the most "Jewish" of the canonical ones), but without the first two chapters, which speak of the Immaculate Conception.

## **Marcionites**

On the opposite side of the theological spectrum were the Marcionites, followers of the famous second-century theologian and preacher Marcion. He was originally from Asia Minor, spent several years in Rome, was excommunicated, and returned to Asia Minor, where he founded numerous churches in various cities.

Unlike the Ebionites, Marcion considered Paul to be a great ascetic of faith, the only apostle who correctly understood Jesus and his relationship to the Jewish law. As we have seen, Paul distinguished between the Law of Moses, which could not provide salvation, and the Good News of Jesus, which could.

Marcion considered this distinction to be absolute: the Jewish Law and the Gospel of Jesus had nothing in common. The Law was one thing (for the Jews), the Good News was something else entirely (for the Christians).

Marcion wrote a work called "Antitheses" (literally "opposite statements"), in which he proved the complete separation of the God of the Old Testament from the God of Jesus. The God of the Old Testament is a vengeful, angry God of judgment; the God of Jesus is a loving and merciful God of salvation. How do these two gods differ from each other? Marcion drew a logical conclusion: they are two different gods.

The God of the Old Testament created this world, made the people of Israel his chosen people, gave them His law and condemned them and other nations to eternal punishment for disobedience. The God of Jesus had nothing to do with creation, Israel, or the law; he came into this world to save people from the wrath of the Old Testament God. And he did this by commanding Jesus to die on the cross and take the wrath of God upon himself. Therefore, those who believe in Jesus will be saved from the vengeful Jewish God.

According to this interpretation, Jesus was not and could not be human. In it he appeared as a material being, part of the material world, a creation of God the Creator. According to Marcion, Jesus appeared only as a man, but in reality he was simply a deity. Marcion's opponents called such ideas about Christ "Docetism" from the Greek *dokeo* (to appear, to look). Jesus appears in the form of sinful flesh, as Paul says (Romans 8:3); in fact he does not become flesh.

Therefore, according to Marcion, followers of Jesus should have nothing to do with Jews or Judaism. They should be followers of Jesus and Paul, the only apostle who understood Jesus.

Marcion had his own list of sacred books, which was clearly different from the Ebionite list. His canon consisted of ten letters of Paul known to him (all thirteen of ours, excluding the pastoral letters) and one version of the Gospel of Luke. However, these books did not so much support Marcion's views as they caused problems, since they quoted the Old Testament (the book of "another" God) and made it seem as if the true God had created creation. Marcion believed that all these books had been changed by interpreters of the Scriptures, who copied them but did not understand the true meaning of the Gospel. And Marcion created his own version of eleven books of the Holy Scriptures (of course, he did not include the Old Testament in his canon) - an abridged version, without passages that, due to the changes made by interpreters of the Scriptures, spoke of Jesus' relationship with God the Creator.

### **Different Gnostic groups**

Scholars debate whether the Christians known as Gnostics belonged to a single group or sect, to several similar groups, or to several groups with little in common. I will not go into the details of the scholarly debate here, but will simply point out that, in my opinion, the basic theological views of the different Gnostic groups were similar, and that it is heuristically useful to consider all these groups together, under the general name "Gnostics." (Of course, there were differences among them, otherwise these groups would not be distinguished.)[71]

They were called Gnostics, from the Greek word gnosis (knowledge), because of their basic claim that knowledge, not faith, was necessary for salvation. But what kind of knowledge? Knowledge about how this world came to be, and more importantly, who humans are. Namely, it was necessary to know who we are, where we came from, how we got into the world, how we could return.

Representatives of various Gnostic groups believed that some of us did not come from here, not from earth, and that we do not belong here. We came from another world, from heaven, and we are trapped by evil in the prisons of our bodies.

The Gnostics believed that this world was not at all the creation of the one true God. In fact, the heavenly worlds are inhabited by many divine beings, although they all originated from one deity, and the earthly world was later invented by lower, less powerful, and more ignorant deities. The creation of this world was a kind of cosmic disaster, the result of a catastrophe in the divine realms. In part, the earthly world was created to serve as a place of imprisonment for divine powers. Some of us carry these divine sparks within ourselves. We need to learn the truth about the earthly and higher worlds, find out who we really are, escape and return to our heavenly home.

What does all this have to do with the profession of faith in Christ? In Christian Gnostic teachings (there are also non-Christian varieties), Jesus is a deity who appeared from the divine realms to convey secret knowledge of salvation to spiritual beings imprisoned in the material world. This knowledge includes information about how the divine realms themselves came into being, how the catastrophe occurred and the material world came into being, and how the divine particles were locked within it. He is truly the savior of our souls.

Of course, Jesus himself could not have been an imprisoned spirit being. Some Gnostics agreed with Marcion that Jesus was a deity who appeared only to be human. He came to earth to impart a secret teaching. However, most Gnostics held a different view: according to them, Jesus himself was a man in whom the divinity of Christ temporarily resided for public ministry between his baptism, when

Christ entered into it in the form of a dove, and death. That is why on the cross Jesus cried out, "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?" Then the divine Christ left Jesus to die alone. But then he raised Jesus from the dead so that he could continue to convey the secret messages. to his close disciples, and then ascended to the heavenly realms.

These views are not like the Christianity taught in Sunday school, but they were popular in many early church communities. Salvation was not provided by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus, but by understanding the secret knowledge he revealed.

Because the knowledge was secret, Jesus' public teachings were not his true message, and if they were, they were carefully coded so that only the initiated, who possessed the divine spark, could truly understand them. His true message was the revelations given to his closest followers. Many Gnostic books are devoted to this divine knowledge.

We have been fortunate to see a number of these books found in modern times, especially when in 1945 a repository of Gnostic texts called the Gnostic Gospels was discovered in Egypt near the city of Nag Hammadi. They present Christianity in a completely different way than we are used to seeing, we have never heard anything like it. The reason for this is obvious: the Gnostics lost the battle for the right to decide which Christianity would become the "correct" and official one for all subsequent generations.

### **Proto-Orthodox Christians**

Ultimately, only one group of Christians won the battle for the right to receive converts. This victory was probably secured in the third century. The Roman emperor Constantine, who converted to Christianity in the early fourth century, joined this victorious faction.

Later, when Christianity became the official religion of the empire about 50 years after Constantine's reign, almost everyone followed this trend - with many variations, of course.

Alternative views in religion have always existed.

After the victory, this Christian movement declared not only its righteousness at that time, but also the whole This "correct" or "accurate teaching" is called "orthodoxy" (from the Greek *orthos*, literally "straight," and *doxa*, "opinion"). The "orthodox," that is, the victorious Christians, called all other competing views heresies, derived from the Greek word for "choice." Heretics came to be called people who wanted to hold to incorrect, unconventional beliefs.

Until that victory is secured, what do we call the group of Christians who held the views that ultimately won? I usually call them "proto-orthodox" and consider them the spiritual predecessors of those whose views later became orthodox.

The Proto-Orthodox are the Christians of the second and third centuries whose activities we know best because their texts, rather than those of their opponents, have been preserved for posterity. These texts include authors such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons, Tertullian, Hippolytus of The writings of Romans, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, all of whom are familiar to students of early Christianity. Thanks to these authors, views were formed that eventually became orthodox. This success was largely achieved by arguing with all opponents at once, which led to paradoxical statements of a certain nature. For example, these writers agreed with the Ebionites that Jesus was a man in the full sense of the word, but they disagreed when the Ebionites denied his divine nature. Proto-orthodoxy agreed with

Marcionists when they asserted the unquestionable divinity of Jesus, but contradicted him when they tried to deny that he was human. How could the proto-orthodox defend both views? By claiming, that Jesus was both God and man. These ideas became orthodox.

The main orthodox ideas are those that eventually turned into Christian dogmas: God is one, He is the creator of everything in the world, therefore all His creation is characterized by goodness, despite such a flaw as sin. Jesus is the son of man and the Son of God, he is not two beings (like the Gnostics), but one; He brought salvation not by secret knowledge, but by pouring out your true blood.

Like all their opponents, the proto-orthodox used books they considered sacred and authoritative to support their beliefs. Some of these books eventually became canonical. The main debate within proto-orthodox circles was over which of the proto-orthodox books should be recognized as canonical, but all participants in these disputes agreed that none of the heretical books could have been written by any of the apostles and therefore should not be included in the canonical Scriptures.

## **SOME NON-CANONICAL WRITINGS**

All Christian groups had books that were considered Holy Scripture. Most of the books that were venerated by individual groups at one time or another have not survived, but a few dozen have survived and have been discovered in modern times. Here are some examples of texts that were revered in the early centuries of the church's existence but were not included in the canon.

### **The Gospel of the Ebionites**

The Ebionites can be called adherents of not one but several Christian sects or groups. Three gospels have come down to us, which seem to have been used by different groups of Ebionites. One of them is an abridged version of the Gospel of Matthew mentioned earlier. The other is known simply as the "Gospel of the Ebionites." It has not been preserved in its entirety, but we know about it from quotations from the works of the heretic Epiphanius. Its descriptions are quite remarkable: apparently, the group of Ebionites in question believed that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for sins, which meant that Jewish sacrifices in the temple were no longer necessary. This means that Jews no longer had to believe in Jewish sacrifices, but they still had to keep other laws.

In the ancient world, a person would usually only have the opportunity to taste meat when an animal was ritually killed by a priest, offering it to a god or gods. Since this group of Ebionites no longer believed in sacrifice, they became vegetarians in principle. These food choices are reflected in their evangelical traditions. For example, when the disciples ask Jesus where they could prepare the Passover meal for him, in this Gospel he replies: "I do not want to eat the meat of this Passover lamb with you." Even more interestingly, in this Gospel even John the Baptist's diet changes. The canonical Gospels say he ate locusts and wild honey. By changing one letter in the Greek word "akrids," the Ebionite Gospel records John eating cakes with wild honey—some believe he has nothing to lose.

### **Coptic Gospel of Thomas**

Among the non-canonical texts discovered by archaeologists in our era, there is no more important find than the Gospel of Thomas, which was preserved in the Nag Hammadi library along with Gnostic documents. Like other books found at the same time, the Gospel was written in Coptic, or ancient Egyptian. It is particularly valuable for two reasons: both because it stands out from the general series and because of its relative antiquity, making it one of the oldest non-canonical gospels to have come down to us. It was most likely composed a few decades after the Gospel of John.

Unlike the New Testament gospels, which tell of Jesus' words and deeds before his death and resurrection, the Gospel of Thomas contains only a few of Jesus' words.

The Gospel consists of 114 (118) separate statements. Most begin with the words "Jesus said...". Many of these statements are similar to the words of Jesus in the New Testament Gospels. For example, here the parables about the mustard seed and the words about the blind leading the blind are presented in a slightly different form. And almost half of all the statements (depending on the how the calculations are performed) differ from the canonical ones. Most often, these non-canonical statements sounds strange to people who were raised according to the teachings of Jesus according to the Bible. For example, in Tome he says: "The dead are not alive, and those who are alive will not die. In those days you ate the dead, you made him alive. When you are in the light, what will you do? This day you are one, you have become two. When you become two, what will you do?" (Proverbs 11-12).

What conclusion can be drawn from the unusual statements in the Gospel of Thomas? Over the past 10-15 Scholarly debates on this issue have flared up repeatedly over the years: some scholars believe that these statements are perfectly logical if viewed in the context of one or another form of early Christian Gnostic thinking, while others argue that these texts are not Gnostic at all. Personally, I support the former. These statements do not confirm the Gnostic myth, However, this does not mean that a Gnostic context is not the best way to understand them, just as the principles of Marxism are not set out in all Marxist works. Much in this Gospel is explained in terms of a Gnostic concept [73].

In the Gospel of Thomas, Jesus indicates that his listeners have a spark of divinity within them, which comes from a heavenly origin. The world we live in is a place of suffering, which Jesus calls a corpse. The inner essence of man (the light within him) has tragically entered this material world, has become stuck in it (stuck in "poverty"), and in this state has forgotten its origin (become "drunk"). It must be awakened by learning the truth about this world and the heavenly origin of the being. Jesus is the one who conveys this truth. When the spiritual being learns the truth, it will shed its material body (symbolized by the shedding of its clothes), leave this world, and return to the divine realms from which it came.

The most striking feature of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas is that it does not tell of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Salvation is not achieved by believing in Jesus' death, but by understanding his secret teaching: "Whoever accepts the interpretation of these words will not taste death" (Prologue to the Proverbs).

### **Tekla's works**

According to the proto-Orthodox theologian and apologist Tertullian, the head of the church who forged Thecla's Acts was exposed and severely punished by being dismissed from office. However, these disastrous consequences did not significantly affect the success of his attempt. Stories about

Thekla became famous for a long time after the "first publication of the book" around the second half of the second century. For centuries after that, Thekla was known throughout the Christian world, in some places, she competed with the Virgin Mary for the title of most revered saint.

However, the forger could not have invented all these stories completely. It is clear that he used oral traditions known at the time about the apostle Paul and his most famous follower. The book of Acts of Thekla tells the story of their communication.

It says that the girl Thekla belonged to a wealthy family from the upper classes of society and was engaged to one of the influential citizens of the city. Thekla lived near the house where Christians met, and when Paul came to the city, he preached a sermon that Thekla heard from the window of her house. As if bewitched, she sat at the window for several days. On that occasion, Paul preached the good news of fleshly denial: that people must remain virtuous in order to inherit the kingdom of God.

These speeches convinced Thekla to convert to the new faith, much to the horror of her fiancé, who had dreamed of a long and happy married life. Thekla broke off the engagement and became a follower of Paul, which led to a series of extremely intriguing and bizarre episodes in which Thekla was saved from martyrdom only by the supernatural intervention of God. Perhaps the most remarkable is cases where wild beasts tear her to pieces for her Christian faith; despair of being baptized before death (Paul postponed it), Thekla jumps into a pond with "man-eating seals" and is baptized in the name of Jesus. However, God kills the seals with lightning, Thekla escapes and has many other adventures.

Thekla's works are now part of the collection of traditions of Paul's missionary work known as the Pauline Acts.

### **Third Letter to the Corinthians**

The Acts of Paul also contain two non-canonical letters, one written to the apostle by converts from Corinth, the other his response to them.

The Corinthians explain what prompted them to write to Paul: Two men, Simon and Cleobius, appeared in the city, calling themselves Christian teachers, saying that God did not create the world, that the Jewish prophets were not from God, that Jesus did not appear in the flesh, and that the resurrection of the body of believers was impossible. (These teachings seem to reflect the views of some Gnostics.) How should the Corinthians understand these teachings?

In his response, Paul examines one heretical view after another, proving that they are incompatible with the true gospel. He emphasizes that the material world was indeed created by one God, who spoke through the prophets and now sent Jesus into the world in the flesh, "that he might come into the world and redeem all flesh in his own flesh, and raise us in the flesh from the dead."

It is a proto-orthodox and anti-gnostic text. Little known to most Christians.

In the West, it spread astonishingly to other parts of the world. In Armenia and parts of Syria, it is included in the canon of Scripture, despite the fact that scholars know full well that the text was written at least a century after Paul's death.

### **The Letter of Barnabas**

According to the apostle Paul and the book of Acts, one of his closest companions in the apostolic ministry was a man named Barnabas, about whom we know almost nothing.

About seventy years after the deaths of Paul and Barnabas, an anonymous author wrote an "epistle"—actually more of a theological treatise—that was eventually attributed to Barnabas, no doubt to improve his reputation among Christian readers. Some proto-orthodox Christians have argued that this book deserves a place in the canonical Scriptures and that it is indeed part of the New Testament—one of the earliest complete New Testament manuscripts we have is the Codex Sinaiticus, dating from the mid-fourth century.

Christians today should be glad that the Epistle of Barnabas was ultimately excluded from the canon of the holy books. This letter is characterized by bitterness and openly anti-Jewish views, far more pronounced than in any other book of the New Testament. In fact, this message is a discussion of Judaism and the Jewish Scriptures.

The general idea of the message is that the Jews are not God's people because they rejected the covenant between God and Moses on Mount Sinai because they continued to worship the golden calf at its foot. As a result, God rejected the Jews. The laws he gave to Moses were misinterpreted by the Jews and they ceased to be a covenant people. The Mosaic Law is still misinterpreted, believing that it should be understood literally. In fact, these are symbolic laws that indicate how people should live. For example, the prohibition of pork does not mean that no one should eat it, it simply means that people should not live like pigs. Moreover, according to Barnabas, all these laws prophesied the appearance of Jesus, whose followers are the true people of God.

So, Barnabas concludes that the Old Testament is not a Jewish book. This book is Christian. And the covenant that God made with the Jewish ancestors is not actually a covenant for the Jews. It is a covenant for the followers of Jesus.

### **Peter's Apocalypse**

Another book that was considered canonical in some proto-Orthodox circles was the Apocalypse of Peter (or Revelation). It is not found in any of the surviving New Testament manuscripts, but it is mentioned in several early church texts as belonging to or potentially canonical. Whatever the canonical status of this story, it is interesting in part because it is the first surviving story from early Christianity, the author of which was credited with a journey through heaven and hell.

We are almost all familiar with this plot from Dante's "Divine Comedy." However, Dante did not come up with it himself - it had many predecessors, and as far as we can judge from written evidence, the first of them was Peter with his Revelation.

The story begins with a conversation between Jesus and his disciples on the Mount of Olives, discussing events that will occur at the end of time (Mark 13, Matthew 24-25). Peter asks Jesus about life after death, and Jesus gives a detailed explanation. There is a lack of clarity here: either Jesus' explanations are so vivid and expressive that Peter imagines everything he hears, or Jesus is actually leading him through the places he is talking about. Either way, the reader is presented with a figurative description of the kingdom of the blessed, heaven, and the world of the damned, hell.

The most wonderful part of the excursion is the description of hell. It is difficult to talk at length about the ecstasy of people who have found bliss: they are infinitely happy, and there is almost nothing to add. On the other hand, it is easy to excite the reader's imagination with pictures of the tortures of those who are destined to live forever in hell. And this book is distinguished, first of all, by its artistry.

Those condemned to eternal torment are punished according to the sins they have committed many times during their lives. Persistent liars are hung by their tongues over an eternal flame; women who combed their hair, making themselves attractive to men and tempting them, are hung over the fire by their hair; men who have defiled themselves with them in adultery are hung... by another part of their body. As might be expected, they exclaim, "We did not think that we would be condemned to eternal punishment!"

The story continues in the same vein. Its meaning is obvious: anyone who wants to be blessed in heaven and avoid the suffering of hell must live a righteous, honest, moral life. The rest await the fiery hell.

### **The Coptic Apocalypse of Peter**

There is another, certainly not proto-orthodox Apocalypse of Peter. Rather, it is a Gnostic text found with the Gospel of Thomas in Nag Hammadi and is a direct account of the crucifixion of Jesus. To those familiar with the New Testament accounts of the same subject, this text will certainly seem wild.

After Jesus' secret revelations, Peter had a vision the meaning of which he could not understand. He stood on the mountain and talked with Jesus, and as he did so he saw Jesus being arrested at the foot and crucified. And the most amazing thing was that Peter saw a figure laughing joyfully above the cross. He asked Jesus, who was standing nearby, what vision had come to him, and Jesus explained everything. The one who is crucified by the soldiers is actually an outer shell, above the cross is his true, spiritual essence, which hates.

This strange image is closely related to the already mentioned Gnostic ideas about Jesus: the divine Christ temporarily lived in the human Jesus. In Peter's vision, Jesus laughs precisely because the people who crucified him do not understand what they are doing. They simply kill the body, the earthen vessel in which the divine essence has taken possession, but they cannot harm the real Christ. He is incorporeal, he is above all pain and suffering. He laughs at the ignorance of his enemies.

It is not surprising that such a text had no chance of entering the canon of Orthodox proto-language: it exalted precisely those ideas about Christ that the proto-Orthodox categorically rejected as heretical.

### **Controversies that led to the creation of the canon**

There were also many other books sacred to groups, all of which I cannot give here. Some were proto-orthodox, some were not; among the books were the Gospels, which set forth the views of, or were supposedly written by, James the brother of Jesus, Philip the disciple, Mary Magdalene, Judas Iscariot, and others. The various books of Acts detail the missionary exploits of John, Andrew, Peter, Thomas, and others. There were letters of Paul supposedly addressed to the Christians of Laodicea, correspondence with the Roman philosopher Seneca, letters supposedly sent by Peter and James

letters, letters of Clement, one of the first bishops of Rome, the apocalypses and secret revelations of Paul, John, James and the Roman Christian Hermas. The texts discussed here provide some insight into what Christians wrote and read.

### **The fate of the Gospel of Peter**

Since there were so many such texts and they presented such a wide range of theological ideas and views, how did the proto-orthodox decide which of these texts to include in the canon of Scripture?

An instructive story is told by the 4th-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea. Eusebius tells the story of the second-century bishop Serapion and how he came across a gospel supposedly written by none other than Jesus' closest follower, Simon Peter.

Serapion was bishop of the great church of Antioch in Syria. One of his official duties was to periodically visit the cities and villages under his jurisdiction.

According to Eusebius, Serapion once visited a Christian church in the village of Rosso and learned that Christians were arguing about the Gospel of Peter. Having not read the book, Serapion reasoned that if it was written by Peter, it must be worth reading, so he ordered the parishioners to read it.

However, upon his return to Antioch, he discovered that it was a heretical book, held in high regard by Christian Docetists such as Marcion and some Gnostics, who denied that Jesus was a real person and claimed that he only appeared to be one. Serapion obtained a copy of the book so that he could personally evaluate its teachings. In his opinion, the book was generally orthodox, except for a few controversial passages that allowed for a Docetist interpretation.

He burst into a letter to the church, in which he examined the book's shortcomings in detail and concluded that it could not have been written by Peter because of its ambiguous passages. And he forbade the church from using the text.

Eusebius tells of this event and quotes Serapion's letter. Unfortunately, he does not quote Serapion's selected passages from the Gospel, which were recognized as heretical. This is also unfortunate, since fragments of the Gospel supposedly written by Peter have been found in modern times, and it seems that Serapion was talking about this. But since Eusebius' book does not contain a single quotation from Gospels, we cannot know if this is the text in question.

In the winter of 1868/69, French archaeologists, while excavating an ancient cemetery at Achmim, Egypt, found the tomb of a man, probably a monk, buried with a book. The 66 pages of this book contained fragments of four texts, something like a small anthology. One of these texts turned out to be a Greek version of the Apocalypse of Peter, but it was not this version that became a sensation, but a Gospel written in the first person, probably by Simon Peter.

Unfortunately, the text found is fragmentary. It begins in the middle of a sentence, with the story of how Jesus appeared before Pontius Pilate, and ends in the middle of a sentence, with the story of how, how Jesus appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. Between these two fragmentary sentences is the story of Jesus' trial, execution, death, and resurrection.

In many ways it is similar to the New Testament Gospels. But just as they differ from each other, so too does this account differ from each of them. First of all, the Jewish leaders and

people are much more negative than in the canonical texts. Jesus was sentenced to death not by the Roman governor Pilate, but by the Jewish king Herod. The Jewish priests are guilty of Jesus' execution. The Jewish people understand that they are facing God's judgment and that the city of Jerusalem may be destroyed (later Christians interpreted the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE as God's punishment for the murder of the Messiah).

Perhaps the impressive nature of this story is primarily given by the episode with the resurrection.

The four New Testament gospels say that Jesus was buried and that on the third day the women found the tomb empty, but nothing is said about how Jesus left it.

The Gospel fragments that have been found provide a wonderful description of these events. In the middle of the night, two angels descend from heaven, and the stone rolls away from the entrance to the tomb by itself. Angels enter and exit, casting their faces back to heaven and supporting a third figure. It is evident that that it is Jesus, reaching his head to heaven. Behind them, a cross emerges from the coffin. A voice is heard from heaven, asking if this gospel was preached to those who "sleep" (the dead). And the cross answers, "Yes!"

Giant Jesus walks and talks the cross. It's hard to believe that such a gospel could be lost for centuries. Perhaps Serapion learned about it? Most scholars agree with this assumption.

This Gospel is believed to have been written by Peter. It is largely theologically acceptable to proto-orthodox Christians, but some passages can be interpreted in the spirit of Docetism. For example, the resurrection of Jesus' body does not seem truly human, and we are told that earlier on the cross Jesus "kept silent, as if he felt no pain." Perhaps he certainly did not feel it. Perhaps this is a Docetist statement. And even if it *is not* Docetist, it is not difficult to see how this text could be interpreted in accordance with Docetist ideas, as Serapion emphasized. My intuition tells me that this is a fragmentary copy of the same text that came to Serapion at the end of the 2nd century.

However, in this case, it is more important for us to understand how Serapion decided whether a book was acceptable to the church or not, whether it should be considered an authoritative book of Scripture. Since, in Serapion's view, the book provided the basis for Docetist interpretations, it was potentially heretical. It could not have been written by Peter, who would certainly never have held theological views that contradicted the proto-orthodox position. If the author was not Peter, then there can be no question of canonization. Serapion believed that a book could be included in Holy Scripture only if it taught orthodox doctrine and if the book was written by an apostle.

These two criteria were emphasized by proto-orthodox Christians when deciding which books would constitute the canonical New Testament.

### **Early Attempt at Canonization: Muratorian Canon**

The decision about which books would be included in the canon was not made suddenly. It was not until the late 4th century, about three hundred years after most of the New Testament books were written, that evidence emerged that someone had to compile the New Testament from the 27 books we know today, rather than from others.

At that time, the disputes continued for an unimaginable length of time. The very first known attempt to compile a canon was made by an anonymous author who lived during the time of Serapion. His fragmentary

The copy was named the Muratorian Canon, in honor of the 18th-century Italian scholar LA Muratori, who discovered the copy in Milan.

His find is a list of books with separate comments by the author. It is written in terribly broken Latin, which most scholars have considered an unsuccessful attempt to translate the text from Greek. The fragment itself dates from the 8th century, but it is believed that the list was compiled at the end of the 2nd century, probably near Rome. The beginning of the list is lost. After a few words that complete a sentence describing one of the Gospels, the author continues to speak about Luke's Gospel as the "third book of the Gospels." Then he calls John's Gospel the "fourth" and continues the list. If Luke and John are called the third and fourth, it is almost certain that Matthew and Mark opened the list.

An unknown author lists 22 of the 27 canonical books, excluding Hebrews, James, 1 and 2 Peter, and 1 John. In addition, his canon included the Wisdom of Solomon and the proto-orthodox Apocalypse of Peter. The author notes that the Apocalypse known as the Shepherd, attributed to Hermes, is acceptable to read, but not as the Church's part of the Holy Scriptures. He then rejects two letters supposedly written by Paul, the letters to the Alexandrians and the Laodiceans, calling them forgeries invented by the followers of Marcion. The author then mentions other false texts written by other heretics, including some which gnostics.

The special value of the Muratorian Fragment lies in the fact that it was actually written in the second century,<sup>[76]</sup> and therefore shows that at least one proto-orthodox author was concerned with the question of which books should be canonical. This means that an attempt was made to remove from the Holy Scriptures all forged and heretical documents, and some of the books that later became canonical were already accepted in some circles, although two were added to them that are not now included in the canon.

But the disputes continued for several centuries. Some of them we know from the New Testament manuscripts. By the 6th and 7th centuries, manuscript collections of books considered to be the New Testament usually no longer contain any other books, but this phenomenon is not typical of earlier periods. For example, in the Codex Alexandrinus, a famous 5th-century manuscript, the New Testament includes the First and Second Epistles of Clement, probably written by a certain Peter who was appointed Bishop of Rome. The 4th-century Codex Sinaiticus includes both the Epistle of Barnabas and the Shepherd of Hermas. The earliest surviving copies of the Epistles of First and Second Peter and the Epistle of Jude date from an earlier period, found in manuscript P72, the seventy-second catalogued New Testament manuscript. In addition to the three books mentioned above, the manuscript contains several others, including the Gospel attributed to James, the "Nativity of Mary", more commonly called the Proto-Gospel of James, the Third Epistle to the Corinthians, and a Paschal homily of Melito.

What were the power dynamics that influenced the decision to include or exclude certain books? To take a closer look at the formation of the canon, we need more information about how proto-orthodox Christians won the struggle for supremacy among other groups in the early church. Therefore, we come directly to the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy.

## **ORTHODOXNESS AND HERESY IN THE EARLY CHURCH**

From the beginning of the conversion contest, there have been Christian groups claiming to represent the "truth" taught by Jesus and his apostles. Our earliest Christian writer, Paul, discusses at length Christian missionaries preaching "another gospel"—a false one, of course, from his perspective (Galatians 1:6-9). Naturally, his opponents thought they were right and Paul was wrong. They believed they were preaching the true teachings of Jesus and his early disciples. And, no doubt, they confirmed this with their messages. But all of these texts have been lost to future generations. Only Paul's letters survive, in which he contradicts his opponents' views.

What were the relationships between various Christian groups from the time of Paul and during the second and third centuries of Christianity? Much of the history of Christianity and inter-Christian relations can be understood from the perspective of the 4th century Orthodox church historian Eusebius. His work "Church History" contains a wealth of information about the development of Christianity from its founding to the period of Constantine.

### **Eusebius' ideas about orthodoxy and heresy**

Since Eusebius's Church History is the only source of information about what was happening in Christianity in the second and third centuries, it is not surprising that Eusebius' writings shaped Christian scholars' understanding of the relationship between orthodoxy and heresy during this period.

As a representative of a Christian group that triumphed over others, Eusebius believed that his views and those of his companions, the leaders of the 4th-century Christian communities, were not only correct (Orthodox), but also the same as those preached by Jesus and his apostles from the beginning.

Of course, there were dissidents, heretics, who deliberately tried to distort the meaning of Jesus' ideas. Eusebius claims that all those who promoted alternative views (including the Ebionites, Marcion, various Gnostics) were demon-possessed and played no significant role in the great cause of the spread of orthodox Christianity. Certain beliefs were and remain orthodox for Eusebius: for example, that God is one, the Creator of all things, that the material world is inherently good, that Jesus, the Son of God, was both man and God. All of these original dogmas of the church have always been held by the majority of believers.

Therefore, heresies were considered side branches of orthodoxy, arising from the attempts of demons to achieve their vile goals, influence the church and distort the truth. Heresy is always secondary (in comparison with orthodoxy), is derivative (a change in orthodox views) and is characterized by distortions. However, God still triumphed, the truth overshadowed the heretical movements, and Orthodox Christianity became a powerful force during the reign of Emperor Constantine.

### **Walter Bauer's sensation**

By the early 20th century, literally every theologian agreed with these views. Everything changed with the publication of one of the most significant books written about early Christianity in modern times, Walter Bauer's "Orthodoxy and Heresy in Ancient Christianity" (published 1934 in German). Bauer disagreed with Eusebius on many fundamental points and rethought the events surrounding the struggle for theological supremacy in the early church.

Bauer looked at early evidence of the spread of Christianity in several geographical areas of early Christianity, such as Egypt, Syria, Asia Minor, and Rome. He

found that a careful examination of the sources revealed that the information they contained did not fully support Eusebius' words. In many parts of the early Christian world, forms of Christian belief that were later recognized as heretical had existed since the time of Christianity. dawn, and in some parts of the church the so-called heretics outnumbered those who held the orthodox faith. In some areas Marcionite Christianity prevailed, in others Gnosticism.

Moreover, some Christian groups did not see a fundamental difference between what was later called heresy and what became orthodoxy. The clear theological boundaries of Eusebius' time were not inherent in the faith from the beginning, but were created later, when the main lines of confrontation were drawn. People who were later recognized as heretics were perceived as clearly orthodox in their time.

Bauer argued that the church of the second and third centuries was not at all an interaction between a powerful and dominant central current (Orthodoxy) and marginal heretical groups. Initially, the Christian movement included various groups and sects, whose views on various issues differed. Of course, each of these groups called its views correct, and its beliefs orthodox.

However, only one group, especially in Rome, won the battle for converts. Other churches were also influenced by Roman Christianity; being at the center of the empire, the Roman church was larger, wealthier, and better organized than other Christian groups.

This Roman group succeeded in attracting more converts than any other, and eventually they suppressed all competition, declared their views orthodox, proclaimed them the true teachings of Jesus and the apostles, which most Christians had always held, and finally, as a final blow, rewrote the entire history of the conflict. The evidence that emerged characterized Christianity as specific to the Church of Rome. This was Roman Christianity—Roman Catholic (i.e., universal) Christianity.

Eusebius joined this process at the very end. It was his rewritten history that convinced all later historians that the Christian group to which he belonged had always been in the majority. But in reality, nothing of the sort happened.

### **Echoes of Bauer's senses**

Without any further ado, it is clear that Bauer's work has sparked a storm that has not subsided to this day. Many scholars, especially those who consider themselves heirs to the Christian orthodoxy of Eusebius, have rejected Bauer outright. However, some people were moved by his arguments.

and continued to [listen to them](#).

It is widely believed among modern critics that Bauer erred in many details of his analysis, or at least went too far. In some cases he presents dubious arguments, in other cases he attacks the surviving sources with the misplaced zeal of the Inquisition.

Rome may not have played as important a role in this process as Bauer claimed.

But overall, Bauer's portrayal of Christianity in its early centuries is convincing. Indeed, there were many Christian groups. All of them claimed the truth of their teachings. All

They were supported by books that were supposedly written by the apostles and therefore contained the views of Jesus and his early disciples. The victorious group did not follow the teachings of Jesus or his apostles. For example, none of the apostles claimed that Jesus was "both God and man in the full sense of the word" or that he was "begotten, not made, of the same substance as the Father," as the 4th-century Nicene Creed states. The victorious group called themselves Orthodox. However, they did not profess the original form of Christianity and won only after many fierce battles.

These assumptions are confirmed by almost all archaeological finds since Bauer's time. Of course, they are most often found in Egypt, but only because of the climatic conditions: in the dry Egyptian sands, documents can be preserved almost forever. The finds were brought from different parts of Egypt, without any guarantee that these documents originated there, especially since we know about frequent travels and the constant exchange of books throughout the empire.

This is surprising: literally every newly discovered document turns out to be not "proto-orthodox" but "heretical"[79] - the unorthodox Nag Hammadi works, found in 1945; a book called "The Gospel of the Savior", discovered in Egypt and rediscovered in a Berlin museum in the 1990s; and finally, one of the most recent (1970s) finds is the Gnostic Gospel of Judas, first published in 2006. Why haven't proto-orthodox (non-canonical) texts emerged yet? Perhaps only heretics wrote religious works? Or was heresy much more widespread and important than Eusebius believed or sought to believe?

It seems that at certain times and places alternative views of Christianity prevailed, most likely in Egypt, but perhaps in many others. They were eventually eradicated. How did this happen? What weapons did the Orthodox proto-orthodox use to attract converts, oust opponents, and give their teachings the status of orthodoxy?

## **Weapons of conflict**

A detailed examination of the ancient debates about Orthodoxy and heresy reveals that in the fight against Christian views that were considered distorted, the main weapons of the proto-Orthodox were the clergy, faith, and canon.

## **Clergy**

Unlike some other Christian groups, proto-orthodox Christians believed that the church should have a strict hierarchy, with a single leader, the bishop, given authority over the entire community. Under the bishop were lower-ranking priests: elders (presbyters), apparently directly concerned with the spiritual needs of the community, and deacons (literally "servants"), who primarily cared for the physical needs of the community, such as such as collecting alms, etc. At the beginning of the second century, the proto-Orthodox writer Ignatius of Antioch could loudly declare that members of the church community "must look upon the bishop as upon the Lord himself" (Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians, 6.1).

Anyone with that much power would certainly be able to dispose of the church as they pleased. Other Christian groups, such as many Gnostics, had no interest in centralizing power. The Gnostics claimed that in the true church, every person carried a divine spark within them and could acquire secret knowledge that promised salvation. As a result, many Gnostic communities were egalitarian. But not proto-orthodox. On the path,

which had already been outlined in the pastoral letters, the Proto-Orthodox argued that they needed responsible leadership, capable of making decisions. Much depended on which person was at the top of power. The Proto-Orthodox used their influence at every opportunity, making sure that the bishop did not deviate from the chosen course theologically, and at the same time closely monitoring the mood in the church. An example of such power for the Russian Church by Serapion is given above.

## **Credo**

The proto-orthodox Christians increasingly asserted that there was only one true faith, of which they themselves were supporters. At the same time, their views sometimes took on a paradoxical character, since they believed that, for example, Jesus was a deity in the full sense of the word (against the Ebionites) and a man in the full sense of the word (against the Marcionites), but at the same time he remained one man, not two beings (against the Gnostics). In their opinion, there was only one God. However, he himself Jesus was also God. According to the proto-orthodox, the true God created everything, although sin corrupted the world.

In the next chapter, I will examine in more detail the development of several important theological views. In the meantime, I would like to emphasize that over time, the proto-orthodox developed a set of beliefs that every member of the church was required to adhere to. The first mention of this process can be found in the writings of the late second and early third centuries by Church Fathers such as Irenaeus and Tertullian, who argued that a "rule of faith" derived from the apostles should be accepted by all Christians. This rule included important principles and concepts that excluded other views. and formed the core of orthodoxy: God is one, He is the Creator, the nature of Christ, both human and divine.

These views eventually crystallized into creeds, or beliefs, written down by Orthodox Christians in the 4th century. These include the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, which are still used in the church today.

By forming a set of beliefs to be accepted by all, under the supervision of the bishop, the proto-Orthodox sought to eradicate those whose beliefs they considered false. But on what basis did they make their theological decisions? At least in words, they claimed that their views were based on inspired texts, the canonical books.

## **Canon**

In a sense, the Christian church, with all its diversity, began with the corpus of Scripture. Jesus was a Jewish teacher who taught his Jewish disciples a certain way to understand the Hebrew Scriptures. The Hebrew Bible was the original Christian canon. We do not know exactly which of the books that later became the Old Testament appeared in the Scriptures in Jesus' time, but it almost certainly included the first five books, the five books of Moses, the books of the prophets, and a number of other books, such as the Psalms. The Jews formed their canon at the same time as the Christians.

However, soon after Jesus' death, Christians began to turn to other authoritative books, by comparing them to the Holy Scriptures. The very words of Jesus were a lesson to his followers. And writers like Paul, even though they did not know that he was writing the Bible, believed that their own writings were

are authoritative for their church meetings. Eventually, two sets of Christian authorities emerged: the Gospels, with the words of Jesus and many other teachings, and the texts of the apostles.

From the very beginning, the proto-Orthodox had to deal with the problem of the abundance of books attributed to the apostles. How can we determine which of them were actually written by the apostles and therefore have weight? No one in the early church dared to establish criteria for evaluation, but when reading If you look at ancient sources such as Eusebius' account of Serapion or the Muratorian Canon, you will understand that special attention was paid to four criteria:

- **Antiquity** . In the second and third centuries, it became clear to many proto-Orthodox that, despite all the significance, usefulness, and reliability of all the newly produced texts, they could hardly be considered Scripture. The books of Scripture must be old, dating back to the first decades of the Christian church.
- **Universality**. Only those books that were widely circulated throughout the proto-orthodox church could be recognized as Scripture. Books that were well-known in certain circles might have been valuable, but they were not considered part of the canon.
- **Apostolicity**. This is one of the most important criteria. For a book to be considered part of the Holy Scriptures, it must have been written by an apostle or one of his companions. This is why the Gospels were attributed to specific authors: they could not become part of the Holy Scriptures if their author was a layman or if the author was completely unknown. The books had to be of apostolic origin. In many cases, this was difficult to prove. Serapion decided that the Gospel of Peter was not actually written by Peter, despite all the claims. This conclusion was not based on the historical analysis that a modern historian would resort to. The decision was made on the basis of existing ideas: the book appeared to be insufficiently orthodox, so it could not have been written by Peter.
- **Orthodoxy**. The application of Serapion's theological criteria is indicative of how such decisions were usually made. Whether a book could be considered part of Scripture was usually decided by determining how clearly it contained theologically acceptable proto-orthodox ideas. Unorthodox books were not considered apostolic, and if they did not belong to the apostles, then they could not be part of Holy Scripture.

As the canonical debates dragged on, proto-orthodoxy had no difficulty in rejecting books that were not sufficiently orthodox, including, for example, all the Gnostic Gospels. Despite the fact that their authorship was attributed to Thomas, Philip, Mary Magdalene, and others, this circumstance played no role. The result was clear a priori: the books were heretical, and the apostles would never have written heresy.

There were many other, lesser-known books that seemed entirely orthodox and attributed to the apostles, and so were not clear candidates for exception. These include the Apocalypse of Peter, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Book of Clement.

For the first time in ancient Christianity, our 27 books were included in a single list and called canonical in 367 AD. The author of the list was the famous bishop from Egypt, Athanasius of Alexandria. A few years earlier, Athanasius had played an important role in the Council of Nicaea, the first church council convened by the Roman emperor.

Constantine to resolve important theological issues of the church. As head of the great church of Alexandria, Athanasius wrote an annual letter to the communities under his jurisdiction, informing them of the dates of the feasts to be celebrated in the current year.

Christian Easter (at that time, holiday calendars were not compiled in advance, like they are now). In his thirty-ninth "Easter Letter," Athanasius, as was his custom, gave his readers detailed instructions and additional pastoral advice, including a list of books suitable for church reading. He listed all the books of our New Testament.

Two things should be noted. This list of Athanasius did not completely end the controversy. For centuries, the churches continued to adhere to their own canonical lists. The Armenian Church still considered the Third Epistle to the Corinthians to be canonical. Even in Athanasius' own church in Alexandria, there were Christian clergymen whose views differed from those of the bishop. But in general, from the 5th century onwards, the Athanasian Canon became the canon of the entire Orthodox Church. These and only these books were copied by the copyists who reproduced the Holy Scriptures throughout the Middle Ages. And although no ecumenical council for more than a thousand years approved the Athanasian list, its widespread use ensured its de facto approval until the invention of printing. After it became possible to print the Bible, with the invention of movable type in the 15th century, the question of the canon was resolved. From now on, there was no longer any doubt about which books should be included in it and in what order. No matter in which English-speaking country you buy a New Testament today, the sequence of books in it and the books themselves will be the same everywhere.

The second point is obvious. It took at least three hundred years of debate before the question of the canon was finally settled. After all, decisions were not made by decree from above, nor did they emerge overnight. The canon was the result of a slow and often painful process, during which many conflicts arose, and various views were expressed, challenged, accepted, and rejected.

Despite all the efforts of Christian theologians and believers to explain the canonization of Holy Scripture as a divine call and guidance, it is clear that this process was very human in nature and that it developed under the influence of various historical and cultural factors.

## CONCLUSION

Sometimes, when I give lectures on the formation of the Christian canon, I hear questions about whether I would like to remove or add any books to it. This can be discussed at length and with pleasure, but my first impulse is always the same: I say that the canon will never change, regardless of the wishes of theologians. There are 27 books in the New Testament and there will always be only 27 books, throughout the ages.

If the audience insists, I admit that I am not inclined to remove a few books from the canon. At the top of my list would probably be 1 Timothy, which was signed by a later writer in Paul's name, who vehemently rebelled against women's active role in the church, telling them to be silent and "not to have authority over their husbands." If women are to be saved, he emphasizes, it can only be done "through childbirth." Amazing: women are supposed to be silent, submissive, and pregnant. Not a very liberal view that has done much harm over the years. I will not be sorry if it is removed from the canon.

What would I add to the canon? As charming as the story of the giant Jesus and the walking cross of talking is, the Gospel of Peter is too loaded with other ideas, including a frightening dose of anti-Judaism. Perhaps I would add one from my childhood to the canon.

The Gospels[82], in which Jesus, from the age of five, uses his miraculous powers, often with a sinister undertone. But this may alarm some readers. In any case, the canon is the canon, so it is pointless to speculate on how we would like to change it. It is better to imagine how it can be interpreted, so that these interpretations do not lead to sexism, racism, bigotry, fanaticism and all forms of oppression.

In my youth, when I began to study the Bible with passion rather than knowledge (enthusiasm was more than enough, knowledge was not), I naturally believed that this book was given by God. My first Bible teachers encouraged my faith and strengthened it with increasingly complex explanations of how the Holy Scriptures were sent by God as a guide for my life, what to believe, how to act, and what to expect when the world suddenly ceased to exist with the appearance of Jesus.  
among the clouds in the sky.

I now perceive the Bible very differently, that is obvious. I consider it a purely human, not a divinely inspired book. Of course, some of its fragments are encouraging and inspiring, but I no longer see the hand of God behind them. We do not have the originals written by the Bible authors, only copies, which have been changed everywhere by human hands. The books that we consider to be Holy Scripture entered the canon several centuries after they were written. In my opinion, this is in no way the result of divine activity, but the fruits of the actions of the clergy (all of them are human) who made every effort to make the right decision.

Most Christian believers and Christian theologians understand this process differently, claiming that God's hand was constantly at work behind the scenes in this protracted process. As a historian, I cannot assess the validity of this claim. All I can say is that for all its divinity (or lack thereof), this process was certainly human, and human decisions were  
are accepted on the basis of various factors. They sought church unity in the face of external opposition. They wanted all members of the church community to agree among themselves on important issues of Christian doctrine. They did not need unrest within their ranks. And they longed to know that they professed the one orthodox doctrine that Jesus had transmitted to the apostles and to future generations. They wanted to affirm their own righteousness.

Their thirst for certainty did not correspond to historical realities. There were other people who also wanted to confirm their own righteousness, and these other people's beliefs certainly contradicted the beliefs of the first. So who is right? The formation of the canon was in a sense a step towards solving this problem. The final decisions were not predetermined. For centuries there had been Christians who argued that a book should rightfully take its place in the canon. However, by the beginning of the 4th century, the field of choice in proto-Orthodox circles had finally narrowed, and then the possibility of choice itself disappeared. Under the influence of many historical, cultural, political and social factors that shaped and guided the polemic, a single canon of Holy Scripture finally emerged; this happened several centuries after the beginning of the process.  
The canon is with us to this day and will remain the canon of the church as long as the church exists.

## **7. WHO CREATED CHRISTIANITY?**

In the southern United States, where I live, Christianity is inseparable from the Bible. Most Christians attend churches that preach the Bible, study the Bible, and follow the Bible strictly (according to them). In this part of the world, there is an unwritten rule among Christians: anyone who does not believe the Bible is not a Christian.

To Christians elsewhere, as to the vast majority of Christians throughout the history of the church, this unwritten rule would seem ridiculous. For most Christians, their religion is primarily faith in Christ and the worship of God, not faith in the Bible. When I talk about this in churches, I see that they listen to me with obvious incredulity, not understanding how so many Christians can make mistakes. Nevertheless, it is true. Let us remember the Christian faith confessions that are repeated all over the world to this day—the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. They contain not a word about the Bible. In traditional Christianity, the Bible itself has never been an object of faith.

In fact, Southerners read the Bible more than they read it. This became clear to me a few years ago when I first decided to ask my students about their views on the Bible.

Every year I see the same reaction. When I meet with over three hundred people in the audience, I ask, "How many of you agree that the Bible is the inspired Word of God?" Almost everyone in the audience agrees. Then I ask, "How many of you have read at least one Harry Potter book?" Every one. And I ask a third question: "How many of you have read the entire Bible?"

It's easy to count the hands raised.

I usually explain, laughing, "Listen, I'm not saying I believe God wrote the Bible.

You yourself said that you believe the Bible was written by God. I understand your desire to read a book written by J.K. Rowling. But if the author of the book is God himself... Don't you wonder what he wrote?" To me, this is one of the wonderful mysteries of the universe: how can so many people respect the Bible, believe it to be a revelation from God to his people, and yet know so little about it?

In this book I have discussed the problematic results of historical-critical Bible studies: the detailed contradictions, differences of opinion on important issues, attempts by authors to impersonate apostles, historical difficulties in reconstructing the details of Jesus' life, etc. I did not invent them and did not discover them personally: scholars have been discussing these problems for two hundred years. years, university and seminary professors have been telling students about them almost since they began to teach, most priests study them in seminaries. These problems are well known to anyone who does in-depth research in the field of Bible studies, but the average person on the street or in church has never heard of anything like it.

My main thesis is that the Bible, my subject and area of expertise, is all too human. But I have devoted the last twenty years to another, though related, topic: the development of Christianity in the second and third centuries, after the writing of the New Testament books.

In this chapter I would like to go further and look not only at the New Testament (although that will also be included in our study) but also at the formation of the Christian religion in a broader sense. I propose the following thesis: not only is the Bible a very human book, but Christianity, as it has developed and come down to us, is a purely human religion.

The Christian claim that their religion is also inspired by God is a theological position that historians cannot assess; historians have no access to God, they only know what is happening on earth before our eyes or the eyes of someone else. I no longer hold this view myself (although I once did), but as you will see in the last chapter, the historical discoveries I discuss here do not necessarily lead to my personal agnostic conclusions. Nevertheless, they

should help all readers see the human factor in the development of the Christian religion.

In the previous chapter, we saw that the canon of Scripture is the work of human hands: Christians decided which books to include in the New Testament, and the struggle over these decisions was long, difficult, and often accompanied by heated debates about which form of faith was true (orthodoxy) and which was false (heresy). What else did Christians do before Christianity became the religion we know today? In this chapter, I will review some of the main aspects of the Christian religion and how they emerged historically. All of them are extremely important distinguishing features of the established Christian religion.

## **The Suffering Messiah**

Belief in the suffering of the Messiah is central to the Christian religion. The term "Messiah" is simply the Hebrew equivalent of the Greek word "Christ." I have to explain this to my students because some of them believe that Christ is the name of Jesus: Jesus Christ, born to Joseph and Mary Christ. Jesus is so often called "Christ" that the word **has actually** been understood as his first or last name, although in reality the expression "Jesus Christ" means "Jesus is the Messiah."

## **Christian Concepts of the Messiah**

When Jesus is called the Messiah, it seems so natural and obvious to many Christians that they do not understand why the Jews did not recognize him as the Messiah. According to Christian tradition, the Hebrew prophets of the Bible constantly predicted what the Messiah would do, what he would be like, what events would be associated with his coming, and Jesus fulfilled all of these prophecies. He was prophesied to be born of a virgin (as in the Christian view, this is what happened to Jesus), to be born in Bethlehem (as in Jesus), that he would be a great healer (Jesus was), that he would ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (like Jesus), that his people would reject him (like Jesus), that he would be killed and die in terrible agony (like Jesus), and that he would rise from the dead (like Jesus).

Because Jesus fulfilled all these prophecies of the Old Testament prophets, it seems obvious to many Christians that he is the Messiah. And they are surprised that the Jews refuse to believe it. How can the Jews not recognize the truth of Christ's words? Why do they not believe in him? Out of stubbornness? Because they think? Maybe because they cannot read? Or are they stupid?

### **The Jewish expectation of the Messiah**

Why on earth did the vast majority of Jews always deny that Jesus was the one whose coming had been prophesied, the Savior sent by God, ready to suffer for people, bring them salvation, and rise from the dead?

Actually, the answer is quite simple. Before the advent of Christianity, Jewish tradition did not include the expectation of a suffering Messiah.

But isn't there a constant reminder in the Bible that the Messiah would have to suffer? It turns out not. From the very beginning of the Christian faith, Christians have often referred to certain passages in the Old Testament as clear prophecies of a coming suffering Messiah, such as Isaiah 53 and Psalm 21, in which someone experiences terrible suffering, sometimes emphatically at the expense of others.

sins. Christians claimed that these passages were clear evidence of what the Messiah would be like.

However, Jews who do not believe in Jesus have always had a strong objection: the Messiah in these passages is not mentioned once. You can check for yourself by reading Isaiah 53 and Psalm 21 (I will quote the relevant verses later in this chapter). The word "Messiah" is not in them. According to Jewish tradition, these passages are not talking about the Messiah, but about someone else (or many others).

Before the advent of Christianity, there were no Jews known to us who were waiting for the Messiah, knowing that he would suffer and die for the sins of others, and then be resurrected. How did they see the Messiah? From Jewish documents dating from around the time of Jesus, we know that there were various ideas about the future of the Messiah. But nowhere does it say that a man like Jesus would come.

The word "Messiah" literally means "anointed one." It was applied to various Old Testament figures, for example, priests and kings were ceremonially "anointed" with oil as a symbol of divine favor, indicating that God had chosen them for a particular task (1 Samuel 10:1; Leviticus 4:3, 5). Classical Jewish ideas about the Messiah derive from ancient Israelite traditions related to kingship.

According to ancient Israelite tradition, God promised King David that his descendants would sit on the throne of Israel forever. (2 Samuel 7:14-16) However, due to historical events, this promise was not fulfilled. The people of Judah, who had been ruled by David's descendants for over four hundred years, were destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C.E. From that time on, David's descendants no longer sat on the throne. But God promised that they would rule forever. So how do we reconcile this promise with historical facts?

Some Jews believed that God would keep His word and appoint an anointed king over Israel when He had finished punishing His people for their disobedience. The Messiah, the new anointed one, a great king and warrior like David, would defeat Israel's enemies and restore her to independence. This hope faded and was rekindled over time, with the Babylonians being succeeded by the Persians, then the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Syrians, and then the Romans, all of whom ruled the land of Israel, and no descendant of David ascended to the throne until the appearance of Jesus.

Many Jews in Jesus' day probably did not think about the coming Messiah, just as most Jews today do not. However, those who were waiting for the Messiah believed that God would fulfill his promise, as found in such messianic passages as Psalm 2:1–9 of the Hebrew Bible:

Why do the nations rage, and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth rise up, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed [literally, "Messiah"]. "Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords." He that dwelleth in heaven shall laugh, the Lord shall mock them: and then shall he say unto them in his anger, and trouble them in his fury, I have anointed my king upon Zion, upon my holy mountain; I will proclaim the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you; Ask of me, and I will give the nations as your inheritance, and the ends of the earth as your possession. You shall rule them with a rod of iron; you shall dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel."

This is a clear expectation of a great and powerful king from the line of David, who would be the Son of God, as would David's descendants (see 2 Samuel 7:14). The fact that the future political Messiah was remembered and awaited in the time of Jesus, as evidenced by Jewish texts of that time. One of the most unambiguous statements about the expectation of the Messiah is found not in the Bible, but in the Psalms of Solomon

in a book written several decades before Jesus was born. Notice what the Messiah was supposed to be like:

Look upon them, O Lord, and raise up for them a king, the son of David, in the time that thou knowest, O God, that he may reign over Israel thy servant. Thou shalt gird him with strength, that he may subdue the rulers of the wicked. May he cleanse Jerusalem from the heathen, that tread the city down to destruction. By wisdom and justice may he drive out sinners from your inheritance; may he root out the pride of sinners like earthen vessels, and with a rod of iron shall he break all their stubbornness. May he destroy the nations with the words of his mouth... He will gather a holy people and lead them in righteousness... He will take the nations under his yoke to serve him, and glorify the Lord in the sight of all the earth, and will cleanse Jerusalem, sanctifying it as it was at the beginning... and the righteous king himself will be instructed by God about them. And in his days there will be no unrighteousness among them, for they are all holy, and their king is the Lord's anointed (Psalm 17:23-36).

In Jesus' time, many Jews expected a Messiah who would be a powerful king.

But there were others who had other hopes for the future deliverer of Israel. Especially in the apocalyptic tradition of Jesus and his followers, it was widely believed that the future Savior would be more than just an earthly ruler. He would be the supreme judge of the world, sent by God to crush the forces of evil and demonstrate his power. This divine messenger is referred to in the texts in various ways, including as the "Son of Man" (see Daniel 7:13–14). Let us turn to these two Hebrew texts, dating from around the time of the birth of Christianity:

They (the righteous) were overjoyed, and they glorified and glorified, because the name of the Son of Man had been revealed to them. He sat on the throne of his glory, and all judgment was given to him, the Son of Man, and he allowed sinners and those who deceive the world to come and perish from the face of the earth. They are bound for a price and imprisoned in the gathering places of their fornication, and all their works perish from the earth. And from now on there will be nothing corruptible, for He, the Son of Man, has appeared and sat down on the throne of His glory, and all evil will pass away and pass away in His presence (Enoch 11:61-64).

Behold, a wind arose from the sea to stir up all its waves. I looked, and behold, a strong man came out with the army of heaven, and wherever he turned his face to look, all that was visible under him trembled... And after this I saw: behold, a great multitude gathered from the four winds of heaven to overcome this man who had risen from the sea... But when he saw the onslaught of the crowd coming, he did not lift up his hand, nor did he hold a spear or any weapon of war, but only, as I saw, he emitted from his mouth as it were a breath of fire, and from his lips as it were a breath of flame... And he fell upon the crowd that was preparing to fight, and burned them all, so that nothing was visible of the innumerable crowd except dust and only the smell of smoke (Fourth Book of Ezra, 13:1-11).

A great and powerful warrior king or an even more powerful supreme judge over all the earth—this is how some Jews imagined the Messiah. Others held a different view of the future savior.[83] However, one thing united the expectations of all Jews: the future Messiah would be a majestic figure, possessing real power and authority, capable of crushing God's enemies, demonstrating his power to continue to rule God's people and other nations of the earth with a rod of iron.

And who was Jesus? An unknown wandering preacher from the desert of Galilee, a rebel who broke the law, for which he was executed. Jesus did not overthrow the Romans.

The Romans crushed him like a dwarf. Trying to call Jesus the Messiah would have made most Jews laugh or seem blasphemous. **Is Jesus** the Messiah? A preacher executioner? **Is this man** God's Messiah? Well, yes, of course.

When I try to explain to my students how absurd these claims must have seemed to most Jews, I often use an analogy. The instinctive reaction of the Jews to the words of Jesus the Messiah could be compared to the reaction of my students if I seriously assured them that David Koresh, the leader of the Davidian sect who was killed by the FBI in Waco, was the Lord God. David Koresh? Yes, the savior of the world and the Lord of all! Oh my! Are you crazy? (I get in trouble every semester for this analogy - there's always someone among the students who writes on their teacher's and course report cards, "I can't believe Ehrman thinks David Koresh is God!")

### **The Basis of Christian Claims**

If the Jews did not expect the Messiah to suffer and die for their sins, why did Christians believe in a suffering Messiah? This question can be considered from a historical perspective. Before Jesus' death, some of his followers apparently believed that he was the Messiah. But it is clear that when they called Jesus the Messiah, they meant the messiah in the traditional Jewish sense—they meant that he would be a king who would once again sit on the throne of Israel and rule over his people. (Let us not forget that Jesus himself probably had a different, apocalyptic meaning for the word "messiah.")

The hope that Jesus was indeed the Messiah was dashed by historical events: Jesus never led an army, drove the Romans out of the Promised Land, or made Israel a sovereign state. Instead, he was crucified. As a result, his followers saw that their faith in Jesus was unfounded.

But then they, at least some of them, began to believe that God had raised Jesus from the dead. This event reaffirmed their previous assumptions: Jesus was indeed God's chosen one! He is the Son of God! The one in whom God is especially pleased, his anointed one, our savior. He **is** the Messiah!

This new statement led the early Christians to rethink their ideas about the Messiah. Their logic was ironclad: Jesus is the Messiah. Jesus suffered and died. This means that the Messiah must suffer and die.

What about the fact that no Jewish prophecy shows the Messiah hating or dying? The early Christians began to study the Scriptures to confirm their new faith, and they found them not in the passages that spoke of the Messiah, but in others that described the sufferings of the righteous man of God. Christians concluded that these passages were indeed about the Messiah, even though he himself was not mentioned and no one had previously thought that these texts were addressed to him. However, for Christians, passages such as Isaiah 53:3–6 were clearly messianic prophecies:

He was despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and we hid our faces from him; he was despised and we esteemed him not. But he took upon himself the

our infirmities and carried our sorrows; yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten and despised. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

The suffering and death of Jesus were foretold by prophets. Early Christians believed that there were passages in Scripture that even described the Messiah's crucifixion, such as Psalm 21:2-19:

My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?... But I am a worm and not a man, a reproach among men, and despised by the people. All who see me mock me; they speak with their lips, nodding their heads... I am poured out like water; all my bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax, melted within my inmost parts. My strength is dried up like a potsherd; My tongue sticks to my throat, and You bring me down to the dust of death.

For dogs have surrounded me, a multitude of wicked men have surrounded me, they have pierced my hands and my feet. I could count all my bones. They look at me and make a spectacle of me, they divide my garments among themselves and cast lots for my clothing.

Initially, this passage had nothing to do with the future Messiah, and the Jews did not attach such an interpretation to it. But when Jesus' followers began to believe that he was the Messiah, they naturally began to see in such passages references to what would happen to the Messiah. Controversies arose over Jesus' messiahship. The Jews claimed that these passages did not speak of the Messiah (and they were right, since the Messiah is never mentioned in them); the Christians, what exactly about him.

What about all the other prophecies that Jesus was to fulfill—his mother was a virgin, he was born in Bethlehem, he rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, and so on? It is important to remember that everything we know about the actions and events of Jesus' life comes from the Gospels, written many years after his death, based on traditions that were passed down orally over decades. The storytellers were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. Some knew him well, so they told stories about Jesus in a way that confirmed the prophecies of the Scriptures. Jesus' Birth, Ministry, Entry into Jerusalem, the Lord's Passion, and Resurrection were told in accordance with the prophecies of the Holy Scriptures, and the storytellers believed that Jesus had justified them all.

For example, both Matthew and Luke state that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but both use various contradictory tricks to make him born there. Why did they both need him to be born in Bethlehem? Because the Old Testament says that the Savior will come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). But isn't it common knowledge that he comes from Nazareth? Yes, Matthew and Luke say that Jesus did grow up in Nazareth. But he was born in Bethlehem, and that's what happened. Unfortunately, their accounts contradict each other. What does this prove? That Christians told stories about Jesus according to their faith and were convinced that he fulfilled the prophecies of the Holy Scriptures in every aspect of his life, because he was the suffering Messiah.

In fact, the concept of Jesus as the suffering Messiah was an invention of the early Christians. It is no wonder that the apostle Paul, decades after Christians had introduced this concept, wrote that it was the greatest "stumbling block" (or obstacle) to the Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23). Despite being the foundation of the entire Christian faith, many Jews found it ridiculous and ridiculous.

Paul considered this idea valuable precisely because of its absurdity (1 Corinthians 18:25). God's ways are not man's ways. God saved the world through the crucified Messiah, whom no one expected and could expect. For Paul, this idea was central and key to the salvation that God gave to the world (1 Corinthians 15:3–5; Romans 1–3). Through the death of the Messiah, God made salvation available to all people, both Jews and Gentiles. Paul even developed this idea: **only** through the death of the Messiah can a person be justified before God, and the Jewish law has nothing to do with it.

However, Paul did not invent the idea that the Messiah would be crucified. It had come much earlier, when the first followers of Jesus believed that God had raised him from the dead.

Paul inherited this idea when he converted to Christianity and became a follower of Jesus. It was this idea that ultimately led Christianity to separate itself from Judaism and become an independent religion in direct opposition to Judaism, the religion of Jesus himself.

### **CHRISTIANITY AS A SEPARATE RELIGION OF ANTI-JUDISM**

One of the most intriguing and pressing questions facing historians of early Christianity is the speed with which the purely Jewish religion of Jesus was transformed into a pagan religion. How did Christianity manage to transform itself from a Jewish sect into a clearly anti-Jewish religion in less than a century?

#### **The religion of Jesus and his early followers**

We have already seen that Jesus' teachings and activities did not extend beyond Judaism. He was a Jew, born into a Jewish family, raised in Jewish culture; he became a teacher of Jewish law, gathered a group of Jewish followers, and taught them what the true worship of the Jewish God should be.

Jesus was an apocalyptic Jewish prophet. He foretold that the Jewish God would soon intervene in the course of history, crush the forces of evil, and establish his kingdom of good on earth. Jesus explained to his Jewish listeners that in order to enter this kingdom, they must keep the Jewish law that God had given them. First of all, he spoke of the two greatest commandments of the law: to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength (a reference to Deuteronomy 6:4-6) and to love your neighbor as yourself (a reference to Leviticus 19:18). "On these two commandments," Jesus urged, "hang all the law and the prophets" (Matthew 22:40).

When trying to reconstruct the authentic words and deeds of Jesus, it turns out that they all fit perfectly into the framework of Jewish apocalyptic concepts. Only later did Jesus' followers begin to consider him the founder of a new religion. Apparently, he himself did not intend to lay its foundations. He adhered to the Jewish religion, correctly interpreted (of course, his interpretations differed from others, for example, the Pharisees and Sadducees).

Some of Jesus' later followers retained a Jewish character in his teachings. However, as the Christian religion developed in other directions, these followers came to be considered heretics. The real irony of the early Christian tradition is that the original form of this religion was eradicated and rejected.

The followers of Jesus, known as the Ebionites, argued that Jesus did not intend to abolish the law; and since he was the Jewish Messiah, sent by the Jewish God to the Jewish people to fulfill the Jewish law, and

since he himself had wholeheartedly accepted the Jewish law, his followers had to be Jews—and keep the law. If the law says that God's people must be circumcised, then they must be circumcised. If it says that God's people must keep kosher food, then they must eat kosher food. If the law commands the observance of the Sabbath, then it must be the Sabbath. According to the Ebionites, the spread of such views was facilitated by Jesus' brother James, the head of the Jerusalem church. Scientists admit that the Ebionites are right.

Similar views are reflected in the Gospel of Matthew. Of course, this source presents the belief that Jesus' death and resurrection are the key to salvation, as the Ebionites claimed.

However, the text also states that Jesus taught his followers to keep the law if they wanted to enter the kingdom of heaven. In fact, they had to surpass the scribes and Pharisees in keeping the law (Matthew 5:17-20). Jesus is portrayed in Matthew as a teacher of the law who explains its true meaning to his followers. He never encourages them to break any of the commandments, but rather persuades them to follow him in keeping the law.

### **Anti-Jewish teachings of later followers of Jesus**

These concepts of what it means to follow in the footsteps of Jesus were destined to lose the battle for a place among the basic tenets of the early church. The apostle Paul's views differed from those of the Ebionites (who considered Paul a sworn enemy), Matthew, and Jesus himself. Paul publicly declared that Jewish law had nothing to do with justification before God. A Gentile who came to the church did not need to keep Jewish law. Paul believed that if a Gentile were to be circumcised, he would not only be committing an unnecessary act but would also be forfeiting the grace of God, who had offered salvation as a gift through the death of Jesus, not through keeping the law and circumcision. Such a person risks "falling from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

Did Paul and Matthew share the same view of keeping the law? Certainly not. Were Paul and Jesus advocates of the same faith? This is a fundamental historical question that is difficult to deny. Jesus taught his followers to keep the law because God commanded that those who would enter the kingdom do so. Paul taught that keeping the law was not necessary to enter the kingdom.

For Paul, only the death and resurrection of Jesus mattered. The historical Jesus taught the law. Paul to the teachings of Jesus. Or, as some scholars argue, *the religion of Jesus* had already become a religion *about* Jesus by the time of Paul (although, as I mentioned, Paul did not invent a new view of Jesus himself, but borrowed it).

Later Christians made Paul's boundary clear. And as we have seen, Marcion argued that Paul's distinction between law and gospel is absolute. The law has nothing to do with the gospel. The law was given by the God of the Jews to the Jewish people, and he can give it to that people (and to all for others) only eternal suffering. The good news comes from the God of Jesus, it is the way to salvation through the death of Jesus, liberation from the wrathful God of the Old Testament. For Marcion there are literally two gods, and the God of the law has nothing to do with the God of Jesus. The Old Testament belongs to the wrathful God of the Jews. It is a Jewish book and no one else's. It is not part of the Christian canon and must be rejected completely.

Other Christian thinkers of Marcion's time held diametrically opposed views, which, paradoxically, led to the emergence of even more militant forms of anti-Judaism. A good example is the Epistle of Barnabas (see Chapter 6). For Barnabas, the Old Testament is a Christian book, not a Jewish book. The Jews had misunderstood its teachings from the beginning, and even in the time of Moses they were

callous, ignorant, selfish, and stubborn people. According to Barnabas, the Jewish people broke a special covenant with God, as soon as it was made. When Moses broke the first tablets of the covenant, the Jewish covenant with God was ended. God did not renew the covenant with them. He made a "new covenant" with the followers of Jesus.

In his letter, Barnabas writes to Christian readers (Barnabas 4:6–7):

I ask you to be attentive to yourselves and not to be like those who multiply their sins and say, 'The Jewish covenant is ours too.' It is only ours, because they have lost forever what Moses received.

Because of this, Barnabas continues, the Jews have always misinterpreted their law, thinking that it should be understood literally, including the rules about what can and cannot be eaten. They were not to be understood literally, but as an allegorical description of the spiritual life as it should be. The Jewish religion is based on a false understanding of the law.

Barnabas was remarkable for his ability to find Christ and Christian ideas in the pages of the Old Testament. To give just one example: he argued that circumcision, the sign of the covenant with the Jewish father Abraham, had always been misinterpreted by the Jews as meaning that male infants should be circumcised. But this was about something entirely different. Circumcision meant that a person had to believe in the cross of Jesus. How did Barnabas prove his point? He recalled that in the Old Testament, Abraham led an army of 318 slaves into battle and, in order to prepare them for victory, circumcised them (Genesis 14:14; 17:23). What does the number of circumcised slaves—318—mean? When asked this question, Barnabas replied that it was a symbolic number.

Let me remind you that in ancient languages, letters of the alphabet could replace numbers: the symbol for the first letter of the Greek alphabet, "alpha," was one, "beta," two, and "gamma," three. (Barnabas based his comments on the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Bible.) The number 318 is made up of the Greek letters "tau," "iota," and "eta." Barnabas noticed that the shape of "tau" resembles a cross, and "iota" and "eta" are the first two letters of the name Jesus. Circumcision does not refer to the foreskin, but to the cross of Jesus.

What happens when a Christian writer declares that the Jews never understood their religion and that the Old Testament is not a Jewish book but a Christian one? This is a clear attempt to denigrate Judaism. This was the goal that Barnabas set for himself. His book is completely saturated with anti-Judaism.

Over time, Christian anti-Judaism only grew stronger, and Christian writers began to accuse the Jews of all sorts of evil deeds, not just misinterpreting their own writings. Some Christian writers claim that the Romans destroyed Jerusalem, the center of Judaism, in 70 CE, and that this was God's punishment for the Jews for killing the Messiah. Eventually, the process reached a point where Christian writers took the next logical step. Since they considered Jesus to be a deity, some believed that the Jews responsible for Jesus' death were actually guilty of killing God.

This accusation of murder first appears in the writings of Melito, a late second-century writer and bishop of Sardis. Melito's homily for Easter, written in an unknown year, was discovered in the mid-20th century. In Melito's church, Easter was celebrated at the same time as the Jewish one, and the sermon was called "A Word on Easter." It

Melito discusses the guilt of the Jews for killing Jesus, their God, in a rhetorically expressive and at the same time disgusting style:

He is killed. And where are they killed? In the midst of Jerusalem. Why? Because He healed their lame and cleansed their lepers, He brought the blind to light and raised the dead. For this He suffered (chapter 72).

Why have you committed a new iniquity, O Israel? I have despised him who honored you. I have despised him who praised you. I rejected him who confessed you. I denied him who preached to you. I killed him who gave you life. What have you done, Israel? (Chapter 73.)

He should have suffered, but not by you. I should have been dishonored, but not by you. I should have been condemned, but not by you. He should have been hanged, but not by your hand (Chapter 75).

But listen, trembling before Him before whom the earth trembles. He who hangs the earth is hanged. He who stretches out the heavens is stretched out. He who established all things is fixed on a tree.

Vladyka was offended. God was killed. The king of Israel was taken by the right hand of Israel (95-96 chapters).

### **Reasons for the rise of Christian anti-Judaism**

How did this happen? How did it happen that the exclusively Jewish religion of Jesus became the militantly anti-Jewish religion of his followers?

The information presented in this chapter can help us to trace the logical development of Christian anti-Judaism. The schism arose spontaneously as soon as Christians began to assert that Jesus was the Messiah, that the Messiah must suffer for their sins, that the Messiah's death was the opportunity for people to be justified before God, that the law no longer played a role in salvation, and therefore Jews must believe in Jesus as the Messiah, or God will reject them. Those who believe in Jesus are justified in God's sight, while others, including those who keep the Jewish law, will be punished. We find these views in Paul, but he did not invent them himself - they were already widely held during his ministry. It is not surprising that Paul, while still a Jew, had such hostility toward the followers of Jesus.

The logic of this position led Christians to claim, in one way or another, that by rejecting God's Messiah, the Jews were rejecting God. And the natural consequence was that God rejected them.

Christian thinkers have argued that the Hebrew Scriptures themselves say that God rejected the Jewish people. The Old Testament prophets repeatedly warned the ancient Israelites that because they had ignored God's will and law, He would bring His judgment upon them. Prophets such as Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah said that God had rejected His people because of the way the Jews lived.

The early followers of Jesus took these words and made them a general principle. The culmination of the Jews' callousness and selfishness was their denial of their own Messiah. To God this was the last straw. The Jews were no longer God's chosen people. The followers of Jesus had taken their place.

None of this happened because God did not keep his word and did not take back his promise. The Jews themselves are to blame. We see this anti-Jewish sentiment already in the pages of the New Testament. Paul discusses the Jewish denial at length, although he believes that Israel will eventually realize that their

The chosen path is wrong, will believe in Jesus and be saved (Romans 9-11, especially 11:1-26). However, other authors have doubted this. In the Gospel of John, the "Jews" are directly accused of denying and killing Jesus (chapters 19-20), and in one ugly passage the author clearly states that the Jews are not children of God, but of the devil (John 8:42-44). For a man whose father is Satan, it is difficult to be saved.

From the middle of the second century onwards, the poisonousness of texts increased rapidly. Christian writers such as Justin Martyr and Tertullian, write treatises against the Jews and their religion. They argue that the Jews misunderstood the meaning of their religion and law, did not recognize what the prophecies say about Jesus, rejected their God-sent Messiah, and ultimately denied God himself. According to Justin, circumcision was never intended to distinguish the Jews as God's people: it was to show who deserved [to be](#) Such anti-Judaic tracts appeared long after the [end of the second century](#) and were known to Christians for many centuries.

Some readers are surprised to learn that such anti-Judaism was not observed in the Roman, Greek, or other pre-Christian worlds, and that it emerged with the advent of Christianity. Of course, some Roman and Greek writers criticized Jews for actions they considered barbaric, such as mutilating boys' genitals, refusing to eat pork, and refusing to work all day on the Sabbath. But Roman and Greek writers condemned **anyone** who was not Greek or Roman, not just [Jews](#). This was the case until the advent of Christianity. After that, Judaism began to be perceived not as a set of strange and ridiculous [rituals](#), but as a perverted,

evil religion. The Jews became not only foreigners but also evildoers. At the same time, they rejected God, and in response, He rejected them.

Such views may have seemed harmless enough in the days of Paul, Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, and even Serapion. At that time, Christianity was little known in the vast empire. The Jews were many times more numerous than the Christians, who had neither social nor political power. In those days, rhetorical attacks against Jews did not lead to physical attacks.

Everything changed when Christianity developed, spread, and eventually became the religion of the Roman Emperor Constantine. At the beginning of the 4th century, when Constantine converted to Christianity, Christians already had a numerical advantage over the Jews and made up about 10% of the population of the Roman Empire. However, unlike the Jews, who were never persecuted as a people of the empire, Christians were still a persecuted minority. Constantine's adoption of Christianity changed the situation. [The Christian faith](#) became popular and prestigious. Mass conversions to the new faith began. By the end of the 4th century, almost half the population of the empire was Christian, and the Roman Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the empire.

This turn of events played a key role in Jewish-Christian [relations](#). From the earliest days of [the church](#), antipathy toward Jews began to be expressed in words, and soon in deeds.

The Roman government, which had already adopted Christianity, took the rhetoric of its predecessors seriously and began to view the Jewish people literally as enemies of the truth who should be punished for denying Jesus. Official imperial policy in the 4th century did not call for the persecution of Jews, but those in power, such as the Christian governors of the Roman provinces, either turned a blind eye to these persecutions or secretly encouraged them. Synagogues were burned, property was confiscated, Jews were publicly ridiculed, and sometimes attacked by mobs.

So before us is one of the greatest paradoxes of the early Christian tradition.

The purely Judaic religion of Jesus and his followers became an openly anti-Jewish religion in later times, leading to horrific persecutions in the Middle Ages and, more recently, pogroms and attempted genocide. Anti-Semitism, as we know it today, is the result of a specific Christian reaction to Jews. It is one of the least good intentions of the early church.

## The Divine Nature of Jesus

When I started college, I believed for many years that Jesus was God, and that this position has always been one of the most important and fundamental in the Christian tradition. However, after completing When I started studying the Bible in high school, I realized that neither the first followers of Jesus nor Jesus himself had such faith.

## When did Jesus become the Son of God?

We know that the New Testament gospels, three of which do not call Jesus God, were written many years after Jesus' life and death. Some of the New Testament books appeared earlier. Scholars have long believed that the speeches in Acts reflect the views of Jesus' early followers before Luke wrote them down; in other words, fragments of these speeches had been passed down orally for decades before Luke wrote them down.

wrote the Gospel and Acts. In none of these speeches in Acts does Jesus call himself a god. Strange as it may seem, it is an extremely primitive belief that it was at the time of the resurrection that God gave Jesus a special status. To the Christian narrators who gave these speeches long before Luke wrote them, Jesus was a man in the flesh and the blood that was exalted when God raised him from the dead.

For example, let us recall Peter's speech on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). He speaks of "Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God did through him." Here Jesus appears as a miracle worker, endowed with divine power, but not God. According to Peter, the Jews of Jerusalem rejected and crucified Jesus, but God raised him from the dead. And then comes the keynote, the culmination of the speech:

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ, Acts 2:36.

Only after his death and resurrection did God make Jesus Lord and Messiah. In Acts 13, Paul says that Jesus was rejected by the Jews in Jerusalem, who "asked Pilate to have him killed." But then God "raised Him from the dead." In Acts 13:32–33 Paul goes on to declare, "What God promised to the fathers he has fulfilled to us, their children, by raising Jesus from the dead, as it is written in the second Psalm: 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you.'"

When is Jesus "born" as the Son of God? At the resurrection: "**Today I** have begotten you."

This is probably the oldest form of the Christian faith. Jesus is a man who was empowered by God to do wonderful things; he was rejected by the leaders of the Jewish people, he was killed, but God interceded for him, raised him from the dead, and exalted him.

It was not difficult for Jesus' followers to determine that he was indeed the Son of God, not only after his resurrection but also during his public ministry. It was not the resurrection that made Jesus the Son of God, but baptism. Thus, in the earliest of the canonical gospels, Mark, Jesus is immediately baptized by John; when Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens open and the Spirit descending upon him. a dove descending upon him, and then he hears a voice from heaven: "You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Mark 1:11; Mark has no birth narrative).

To the ancient Jews, being a "son of God" did not imply divine nature (see chapter 3). In the Old Testament, "sons of God" can refer to a variety of people, including the undoubtedly human king of Israel (2 Samuel 7:14) and his entire nation (Hosea 11:1). Being a son of God usually meant a human role as a mediator between God and the earth. The Son of God had a special relationship with God, as one whom God chose to carry out His will. In Mark, Jesus is the Son of God because God anointed him to be the Messiah who would die on the cross to be a human sacrifice and make atonement. However, this gospel does not say a word about Jesus actually being God.

If the early Christians believed that Jesus became the Son of God (as well as Messiah and Lord) at the resurrection, then it is clear from the Acts of the Apostles that some eventually believed that he received the status of Son of God through baptism.

But the development of the idea does not end there. A few years after the Gospel of Mark was written, the Gospel of Luke appeared; in it Jesus becomes the Son of God not only at the resurrection or baptism, but also throughout his life. Moreover, in the book of Luke, unlike Mark, we see the story of Jesus' birth from a virgin. As we have mentioned

In the early chapters, Luke believes that Jesus becomes the Son of God at the moment of conception—God literally impregnates Mary with his Spirit. Mary learns of this from the angel Gabriel in the Revelation:

The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore also the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

The word "therefore" plays an extremely important role in this sentence (one should always ask: "therefore" is "by what"?). It is precisely because Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit of God that Jesus can be called the Son of God. At this point, for Luke, Christ's existence begins. He is the Son of God because God is literally his Father. Therefore, Jesus becomes the Son of God not only after the resurrection or during his public ministry, but for his entire life.

In the latter's Gospel according to John, the author goes even deeper into the eternal past, addressing the question of Jesus' filial relationship. John's Gospel is the only one that speaks of Jesus' divine nature. For John, Christ is not the Son of God because God raised him from the dead, baptized him, or impregnated his mother: Jesus is the Son of God because he existed with God from the beginning, even before the creation of the world, as the Word of God, and then appeared in the world in the flesh (became "incarnate").

And we read a great story about this at the beginning of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-14):

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. In the beginning it was with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not anything made... And the Word became flesh and

He lived among us, full of grace and truth; and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father.

These concepts became standard Christian dogma, according to which Christ was the pre-existent Word of God made flesh. He was with God in the beginning of all things and was God, and through him the universe was created. However, Jesus' followers did not immediately accept these views. The idea of Jesus' divinity is a later Christian teaching found only in the Gospel of John.

### **The Divine Nature of Christ in the Community of John**

What led to the emergence of such views among Christians? The Gospel of John does not reflect the views of a single individual, an unknown author, but rather the views he received from oral tradition, just as the writers of the other Gospels recorded traditions they heard that had existed in Christian circles for decades before they were written. However, the Johnic tradition is clearly unique, for no other Gospel has such a high view of Christ. Where did they come from?

Scholars have long puzzled over this question, and in the past 25 to 30 years, interpreters of the Gospel of John have finally reached some consensus. This has been facilitated by the theories of two experts in New Testament interpretation who worked in the late 20th century, one Protestant and one Catholic, who taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York. J. Louis Martin and Raymond Brown believed that the grand Christology of the Gospel of John was John's a consequence of the change in the Christian concept of Christ even before he wrote the Gospel. Such changes arose under the influence of the social experience of the community<sup>[89]</sup>.

This hypothesis is based on the theory that every community – whether it be a family, a close-knit town, a monastic brotherhood, a nunnery, a civic organization, or a church – has traditions that tell the story of itself and contribute to its foundation. Communities share common stories. And the ways in which these are presented are related to the events that take place within the communities.

Let me give you a simple example. Let's say you have a real troublemaker in your family - your younger brother. He is always involved in stories and is mischievous. Twenty years later, when you talk about what he was like as a child, you will always change your stories depending on what happens later. Let's say Tommy grew up to be a successful investment banker, the pride and joy of the whole family. When you tell your brother what he was like as a child, you will surely smile: "Oh, this Tommy! He had more than enough problems. Remember, one day?.." Now let's say that events took a different turn. What if Tommy grew up to be a serial killer? Then you will tell the same stories in a completely different way - with tears in your eyes: "Oh, Tommy, Tommy... This kid was impossible to deal with, he had more than enough problems. Remember, one day?.."

The way a community tells its traditions reflects the events that happened to it over a period of time. What if you know the traditions of a certain community and the ways they tell about them, but there is no way to find out what historical events took place in the life of this community?

Theoretically, we can look back at the traditional way of telling stories and go back to the starting point, to find out what prompted the community to choose this particular way of telling stories. This was done

Louis Martin and Raymond Brown, studying the traditions of the Gospel of John, reconstructed the history of the Johnic community to explain why the stories about Jesus were told in a certain way.

The Gospel of John is remarkable in that, for example, some accounts of Jesus, for example, at the very beginning (John 1:1-18), reflect an unusually high idea of him as the possessor of divine nature (the so-called "high Christology"), while in others he appears fully human, not at all as the possessor of divine nature, but as a man chosen by God to fulfill his purposes on earth ("low Christology"; see, for example, John 1:35-

52). Why does the Gospel of John contain both concepts? It can be assumed that John considered Jesus to be both man and God. It is surprising that different passages speak of him differently.

Martin and Brown argued that the passages in which Jesus appears as a human being ("low Christology") are echoes of the oldest traditions set forth in the Gospels, while the passages in which he is exalted ("high Christology") emerged later, as events in the life of John's community led Christians to perceive Jesus as an extra-mundane being who came from God's world.

We don't have enough space to go into detail here, so I'll just add that Martin and Brown showed what these events were. It seems that the community of John began as a Jewish sect in the Jewish synagogue, where Jesus was considered the Jewish Messiah. Because of this belief, the community eventually had to leave the synagogue and become a separate group of believers in Jesus. Its members had to explain these events to themselves: why were we rejected? Why did our family and friends not accept the truth about Jesus? Why didn't they understand him?

Based on the general knowledge of the formation of new communities, Martin and Brown suggested that this new group came to the following conclusion: the truth is known only to them, and others do not understand it. Why? Because this truth came from heaven, and those who did not belong to the community thought only in earthly categories. Jesus, who is the truth, himself came from above, and those who are deceived by their earthly nature did not recognize him as having come down from heaven. Only the community of John knew the truth. The rest are mired in delusion. The light was illuminated only in the community of John. Everything else exists in darkness. Only the community of John recognized the one who came from heaven. The rest saw only what was happening on earth.

The community was spreading noble ideas about Jesus, explaining the break with the synagogue. Communities The members began to argue that in order to be justified before God, one must accept a person who came from God. A person must be born again, "born again." All who are not part of the community are dead and will never receive life. They are not children of God, but children of the devil.

As these views developed, the community increasingly exalted Jesus. Working with the Gospel, The author reflected both the traditions that initially existed in the community, according to which Jesus was a real man, and those that developed later and spoke of Jesus as the possessor of a divine nature. Thus the concept of Jesus as God emerged.

## **OTHER PATHS TO THE SAME GOAL**

The path of John's community, until it finally believed in the divinity of Jesus, was different from other communities that had accepted the same belief. Here I can only briefly describe how the situation might have developed in a particular community.

As we have seen, the concept of Jesus as the Son of God has existed from the beginning. However, different groups give different meanings to these words. Some Jews who believed in him believed that Jesus was inseparably connected to God, like King David and other great sons of God, that he was a man through whom God worked to accomplish His will on earth. But what did these same words mean to pagans who converted to the new faith? In pagan mythology, there were many characters called sons of the gods. They were considered half-human, half-god, because some of their parents were mortal and some had immortality. In former pagan communities, parallels were drawn between Jesus and pagan traditions. An example is the Greek demigod Hercules (Roman Heracles; compare with the birth of Jesus according to Luke). Demigods were often believed to be able to perform amazing miracles (compare with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' ministry) and to have moved to the gods in heaven at the end of their lives (compare with Jesus' ascension into heaven). Anyone who came to the Christian faith with such ideas about what it meant to be the son of God could easily imagine Jesus as a demigod, not a man, the son of God according to the traditional Jewish view.

Another path to the idea of Jesus' divinity begins not with Jesus as the Son of God, but with Jesus as the Son of Man. Jesus himself speaks of the coming of the Son of Man, the supreme judge of the earth, who will execute judgment according to Daniel 7:13-14. But once Jesus' followers believed that he had risen from the dead, they assumed that he was the one who would come down from heaven and sit on the judgment seat. This is Paul's view, expressed in 1 Thessalonians 4-5. Paul is not speaking to Jews but to Gentiles, so he does not use the phrase "Son of Man." However This is what he sees in Jesus, the future judge who will descend from heaven. If the Son of Man is a kind of divine figure, and Jesus is the Son of Man, then he has a divine nature and lives next to God.

Or consider a third way. During Jesus' lifetime, his followers considered him a teacher and called him lord, master, as slaves of masters or workers of masters do. However, after his followers believed in his resurrection, the word "Lord" took on a different connotation. God exalted Jesus. He became a ruler, not an earthly one, but a heavenly one. He became "Lord." Soon the Christians decided that he was the Lord of all things, ruling the world from heaven. And who could rule from heaven if not God? Moreover, the early Christians understood that God himself was called Lord in the Old Testament. And they decided that Jesus had exalted himself and achieved divine status, and then they reasoned that if he had divine nature, then he must have existed before appearing on earth.

These views are also found in the writings of our early writer Paul, who speaks of Jesus as a man who was with God before he came into the world and who was equal to God, but who chose to come into the world and die for others, after which God exalted him again, raised him to heaven and "gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." In the Old Testament every knee bows only to God (Isaiah 45:23). And now also to Jesus (Philippians 2:6-11).

The idea of Jesus as divine in Christian communities did not develop at the same time, the process proceeded at different paces. For centuries there were communities that did not hold such beliefs, for example, the Ebionites. In some communities such views appeared particularly early (apparently in the Pauline community). The emergence of these views in other communities is not fully supported (in the communities of Matthew or Mark). Third, the process dragged on for several

decades (the community of John). However, in the second and third centuries this teaching became generally accepted as the communities changed their views. Jesus was not just a Jew, the Son of God, exalted by God through the resurrection. He was God himself. This is one of the most persistent theological products of the early Christian church.

### **The doctrine of the Trinity**

Belief in the divinity of Jesus posed a clear problem for early Christian theologians, who sought to distance themselves from pagan polytheism and adhere to the monotheistic traditions of Judaism. As the Hebrew Scriptures state: "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel... I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6).

But what must Christians who believed in the divinity of Christ have thought? If Christ is God and God is God, then there are only two gods?

#### *How many gods are there? Possible answers*

As with all theological questions concerning the early Christians, there are many ways to answer this question. The Judeo-Christian Ebionites firmly believed that since there can be only one God, Christ is not God. If Christ is God, then there are two gods. For the Ebionites, Jesus is the Messiah (the Messiah was *never* considered God in Jewish circles), the man chosen by God to carry out his will on earth and die for their sins. Therefore, God gave him a special place, made him his son. But in other respects, Jesus is a man and only a man, with nothing divine in him.

The Marcionites held the opposite view: Jesus was not human at all, precisely because he was God. God cannot be human – a human can just as easily be a stone.

Divinity and humanity are distinct things that should not be confused. However, the Marcionites clearly did not believe that Jesus and God the Father were two different gods. For them, there was the God of the Jews, the wrathful God of the Old Testament, and the God of Jesus, the God of love and mercy. It is difficult to see how Jesus is related to this latter God, since neither of them The Church Fathers who quoted Marcion's texts never mentioned this. However, judging by some indications, Jesus can be considered to be God himself who came down to earth.

Various groups of Gnostics did not hesitate to proclaim Christ as the possessor of a divine nature. In their opinion, there are many such divine beings, and Christ is one of them. The God who declared that he alone is God, "and there is no other God" (Isaiah 45:18), is not the true God. He is a lower, secondary deity who created the world. Above him, jealous and ignorant, are higher divine spheres in which other deities live.

All these alternative approaches to the problem were ultimately rejected as heretical. But as was Has the problem itself been eliminated? How could believers who sought to preserve monotheism as proto-orthodox and at the same time insist on the divinity of Christ reconcile both views without questioning either of them?

#### *Two heteroorthodox solutions*

In the history of early Christian theology, orthodoxy ("the correct opinion") is sometimes contrasted with "heterodoxy" ("a different opinion"). Simply put, heterodoxy is the same as heresy. Of course, as already mentioned, everyone considers themselves orthodox - everyone is convinced that

have the right opinion. People who believe their beliefs are wrong change them to make those beliefs right. Or, as one joker put it, orthodoxy is my "doxia" ("opinion"), and heterodoxy is your "doxia."

As Christianity developed, attempts were made to explain how Jesus could have a divine nature if there is only one God. Most of these attempts were considered acceptable at a certain place and time, but were ultimately found unacceptable. Some proto-orthodox thinkers considered them impeccable, others heretical. I have coined the term "hetero-orthodox solutions." The most famous of these are Patripassianism (as its opponents called it) and Arianism.

### ***Patripassianism***

We know from the writings of the second and third century Church Fathers, such as Hippolytus and Tertullian, that at one time a belief that uncomfortably and aggressively asserted the unity of God was the most popular among Christian thinkers and church leaders. According to this belief, there is only one God, and Jesus is the incarnation of God on earth. In other words, God the Father and God the Son are not two separate entities. God the Son is God the Father in a material body.

This belief has gone down in the history of theology under various names. It was sometimes called modalism because it taught that one God has different modes of existence. Example: I am a son to my father, a father to my son, and a husband to my wife. I am one person, not three, but in each relationship I act in my own role. God was the creator of all things and became man; These are not two gods, but one.

The same belief is sometimes called Sabellianism, named after Sabellius, a notorious but historically insignificant figure who was eventually excommunicated for his adherence to this belief. An ironic term coined by the "exterminator of heresy."

Tertullian, sometimes used to describe the essence of the faith: Patripassianism literally means "The Father suffers." Tertullian ridiculed such views because they implied that God the Father himself died on the cross in the form of the Son.

Tertullian explains that in his day, at the end of the second century, this belief was held by two bishops of Rome (the first two popes) and by the majority of the Roman Church. In response, Tertullian and his associates began to develop the idea of God the Father, who is not identical with God the Son. Both are gods, but there is only one God. How can this be? After all, it is a mystery. In any case, this became the orthodox doctrine, which was refined and improved after Tertullian. Christ is God, as is God the Father; but the two are one.

Furthermore, since Jesus in the Gospel of John speaks of the Holy Spirit as coming to earth as "another Comforter" (John 14:16) after Jesus himself had returned to heaven, the Spirit is also God. And he is not the same as God the Father and God the Son. Therefore, God is "trinitarian." Three hypostases, one God.

All these explanations may seem confusing, but in any case, Tertullian was firm.

In attacking the proponents of Patripassianism, he first proved that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are distinct. As he wrote:

One is the Father, the other is the Son, and the other is the Holy Spirit... The Father and the Son are not the same, or One differs from another only in the way of its being (Tertullian, Against Praxeas, 5.9).

He continues his reasoning, the logic of which many still consider impeccable:

For the Father to be Father, He must have a Son, and for the Son to be Son, He must have a Father. For it is one thing to have, and another to be. For example, to be a man, I must have a wife, because I will not be my own wife (Tertullian, Against Praxeas, 5.10).

Then he throws down the gauntlet again to the supporters of Patripassianism and concludes with the slander for which he was famous:

If you want me to believe that He is both Father and Son, show me this statement somewhere else: The Lord said to Himself: I am My Son. I have now begotten Myself (Tertullian, Against Praxeus, 5.11).

However, Tertullian argues that, despite all their separation, these hypostases are not fundamentally different. They are all God. And he speaks of a "trinity" and claims that they differ "in person, not in essence, by the difference of another, not by division... I represent one essence in three interconnected areas" (Tertullian, Against Praxeus, 6.12).

Over time, such nuances of distinction became more and more formal. It is significant that already in response to the claims of the modalists of his time, Tertullian spoke of the Trinity - one God in three different hypostases.

### ***Arianism***

However, in some cases Tertullian openly states that despite his belief in God the Father and God the Son, who are one God, there is nevertheless a hierarchy between them. Father is greater than the Son, although in essence they are one and the same. Otherwise he would not be Father.

For more than a century, theologians debated the relationship between the Father and the Son. Arius, a prominent Christian teacher from the early 4th century, played a leading role in this debate. Alexandrian center of theological thought. Until the time of Arianism, the proto-orthodox had largely succeeded in to eradicate or at least completely marginalize such early Christian heretics as the Ebionites, Marcionites, and various Gnostic groups. Almost everyone who entered the Christian church agreed that Jesus had a divine nature, but that there was only one God. How did this happen? How Can they both be God?

Arius found a very simple solution, for which he turned to the New Testament and early Christian thinkers: Christ was a deity, but inferior in power and essence to God the Father. In the beginning there was only one God, but in eternity God begat the second divine essence – his son Christ. Through Christ God created the world, Christ became man in the incarnation.

According to these views, Christ did not exist throughout eternity. He appeared at a certain moment. Despite his divine nature, he was not equal to God the Father: as the Son, Christ was subordinate to him. They were not "one entity," but in some ways they were "similar" in [essence](#).

These views were very popular at the time, but they were opposed by a number of Christian theologians. The most famous opponent was Athanasius, a young deacon from the Church of Alexandria, which we have already mentioned as the canon of the New Testament in chapter 6. Athanasius and his companions maintained that Christ is of the same essence as God the Father, that they are perfectly equal, and that Christ has always existed.

All of these objections may seem trivial to modern readers, but at the time they sparked heated debates between supporters and opponents of Arianism. Almost the entire Christian church was divided over the question of whether Jesus was of the same substance as his Father, in Greek homoousias ("substantial"), or whether he was merely "of a similar substance," homoiousias.

As later historians have noted, all disputes came down to the letter i. However, at that time much depended on this letter. As a result, a split occurred in the church.

All of this was important in part because the Roman Emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity and wanted to unite the divided empire with a new religion. A divided religion did not bring unity. Religion had to be unified first. The emperor called

The most influential Christian bishops of the empire were summoned to Nicaea to discuss issues and make decisions binding on all Christians. Thus, in 325, the famous Council of Nicaea took place.

In the end, the audience agreed with Athanasius' position. Despite the widespread belief that the votes were almost evenly split, the decision was made almost unanimously.

Nevertheless, even after this, the disputes continued, and in the 4th century it seemed that victory for the supporters of Arianism was guaranteed. However, the position of Athanasius was recognized as orthodox. The Triune God is three hypostases. They are different from each other, but each of them is equally God. All three are eternal beings. All are of the same essence. Thus the doctrine of the Trinity arose.

All this seems to be a clear development of the ideas of the New Testament, which does not contain such explanations. Even the Gospel of John, which speaks of the divine nature of Jesus, does not mention the substantiality of the three hypostases. As might be expected, later New Testament writers were so disturbed by this circumstance that they inserted explicit words about the Trinity in at least one place (1 John 5:7–8). The Trinity is a later Christian dogma, based on the arguments of Athanasius and others, as well as on passages from Scripture, but was not originally found in any of the books of the New Testament.

Over the course of three hundred years, Jesus went from being a Jewish apocalyptic prophet to becoming God himself, one of the hypostases of the Trinity. In any case, early Christianity is a distinct religion.

### ***Heaven and hell***

In some parts of Christianity, especially in communities I was once associated with, religion is primarily concerned with the afterlife. On a purely personal level, people seek to experience the joys of heaven and escape the torments of hell. Most Christians, whom

Today, I agree, they are convinced that after death the soul goes either to heaven or to hell.

I have never been able to fully understand all the inconsistencies in such beliefs. On the one hand, souls life after death appears as liberation from the body, because the body remains in the grave; On the other hand,

People believe that physical pleasure or pain is possible after death, that it is possible to meet and know ancestors. All of this requires you to have a body.

The early Christians, starting with Jesus, did not believe in heaven and hell as places where souls follow death. This concept also applies to later Christian ideas.

### *Early apocalyptic ideas about the afterlife*

Many scholars believe that Jesus and his followers were Jewish apocalyptics.

Apocalyptic views began to take shape more than a century before Jesus appeared, as a solution to the problem of theodicy, or "justification of God." (The term was not in use at the time; it was coined by the German philosopher Leibniz in the 17th century.) The question of theodicy is how to explain that God is just when there is so much suffering and pain in the world. Given how much suffering there is, how can we believe that the world is governed by a kind and loving God?

The apocalyptic current of ancient Judaism did not address this problem in modern philosophical terms, but ancient and modern approaches to this issue were very similar.

Several centuries before the apocalyptic movement emerged in Israel, there were thinkers who believed that God's people endured such suffering, both collectively and individually, because of sins against God for which they were punished. Such views are sometimes called prophetic, because they are found on every page of the Old Testament prophets. [92]

But what happens when people listen to the prophets' calls, return to God, stop breaking His laws, live as He commands, and still suffer? Prophetic views explain the suffering of sinners—they get what they deserve. But these views cannot explain the suffering of the righteous. Why do sinners prosper while the righteous suffer?

The ancient Israelites gave different answers to this question, the most famous – or rather, the most famous – being in the book of Job. The apocalyptic worldview takes a different path. For apocalyptics, suffering is only a temporary situation. For some mysterious reason, God has lost power in this world, giving it to the higher forces of evil, which have created chaos in the world. However, soon, in the near future, God will intervene in the course of history and correct everything that has happened. He will crush the forces of evil, defeat the evil states that supported these forces, and establish a new kingdom on earth - a kingdom of peace and justice. The sinful rulers of this world and all who were on their side will be destroyed, and the poor and oppressed will be exalted.

Such views first appear in the Bible in the Old Testament book of Daniel, written as the last book of the Hebrew Bible, around the middle of the 2nd century BCE. The same views are found in many Jewish texts written after the book of Daniel, including the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus also expresses a similar view.

Jesus adds that at the end of time, when God finally intervenes in the course of history, there will be a resurrection of the dead. Belief in the resurrection is inextricably linked to ancient questions of theodicy. How did it happen that God's followers were tortured and killed? Where was God himself? How did the supporters of the forces of evil become richer and more powerful, and then die? Impunity? Where is justice?

From the apocalyptic point of view, justice will prevail. Not in this life, not in this age, but after the resurrection, in the ages to come. God will resurrect all people, give them back their bodies, and they will receive eternal reward or eternal punishment. No one will escape judgment. Evil will not have the last word—that word will be with God. Death will not be the end of history.

This is what the early Jewish apocalypics taught, and this is what Jesus taught. The kingdom of God will come with the coming of the Son of Man. People must prepare for it, make amends, come over to God's side, even though they will have to suffer for it for the time being. But a new age is coming when God and His ways will triumph and the kingdom of God will appear here on earth. In the end, everything in the world will be set right. That's right, everyone will return to physical life, see and feel.

This was the teaching of the apostle Paul and, as far as we can tell, of all early Christians.

The main difference between Paul's teachings and Jesus' was Paul's belief that Jesus himself would establish a kingdom on earth when he returned in glory (1 Thessalonians 4–5). Furthermore, for Paul, the resurrection at the end of time had in a sense already begun. It is for this reason that

Paul gave this meaning to the resurrection of Jesus. Since the resurrection was to occur at the end of time, and Jesus had already risen from the dead, we were to expect the end times. That is why Paul is speaking to those who live in the end times.

But what will happen to someone who dies *before* the end of time? Paul clearly believed in some kind of intermediate existence with Christ for those who die before his return. That is why he wrote to the Philippians: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). He likely believed that believers in Jesus would receive some kind of temporary body in paradise, but only for a time. When Christ returns in glory, "the dead in Christ will rise first," and then those who are still alive, including Paul himself, will be miraculously changed so that their bodies will become immortal. (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:50-57) They will then live forever on earth.

So for Jesus, Paul, and the early Christians, eternal life was life in the flesh, not in paradise, but here on earth, where we are now. Paul emphasizes this very much in 1 Corinthians. Jesus' resurrection from the dead testifies to what the future resurrection will be like: physical bodies will be resurrected and become immortal. Paul is mocking his opponents in Corinth who believe that they have already experienced a spiritual resurrection and can now fully enjoy the benefits of salvation. The resurrection was to be physical, so it has not yet come. The world is still ruled by evil forces, and only at the end of time will they all be destroyed, and Jesus' followers will be justified, transformed, and rewarded with eternal life.

This is also stated in the Book of Revelation. After all the cataclysms that will befall the planet at the end of time, after the catastrophes that the author describes in detail, emotionally and meaningfully, devoting one painful chapter after another to them, a "new heaven and a new earth" will appear.

Then the dead will be resurrected, and a new, heavenly Jerusalem will come down from heaven, replacing the old, fallen into sin and therefore destroyed, and will become the city of God. It will have pearly gates and golden streets. In this city the saints will live on earth forever (see Revelation 21).

### ***Transformation of apocalyptic ideas***

What if this predicted end does not come? What if the apocalyptic scenario that Jesus anticipated in the life of "this generation" does not come true? What if Paul's assurance that he would await the second coming of Christ negated death? What if the resurrection of the dead is postponed indefinitely, as if mocking the popular belief that it will happen "soon"?

One consequence is inevitable: some people will start laughing. This is stated in the New Testament book, the Second Epistle of Peter, where the author states that when God says that all these things will happen very quickly, he is referring to divine, not human, chronology.

It is always important to remember that "with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day" (2 Peter 3:8). By this logic, if the world ends next Thursday, it will happen on a Thursday four thousand years from now.

Without waiting for the end of the world, people who want to follow the teachings of Jesus and his disciples firmly are forced to accept that some essential elements of their ideas were wrong. Of course, it is unlikely that believers will say that Jesus was wrong. On the contrary, he was misunderstood. Thus begins a long and important process of reinterpretation, during which the original ideas are transformed, become less tangible, less material, so that they are not so easily refuted. Namely, the doctrine of a future resurrection of the body, in which the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked punished, becomes the concept of heaven and hell, where judgment takes place not only at the end of time, but also at the end of a person's life. His soul goes to one of these places.

In Chapter 5, I emphasized that Jesus' words, like other apocalyptic views, can be understood as a kind of horizontal dualism: an age here on earth and an age to come on earth. I call it horizontal because it can be visualized as a horizontal time line divided in half. At the end of this inevitable age, judgment will begin, and we will enter into a new age, crossing the dividing line.

However, convinced that the end was not coming, Christian thinkers reconsidered this timeline and has literally turned it around its axis, so that now the idea of "the end" is associated not with a horizontal, but with a vertical dualism. Now we are no longer talking about two epochs, the present and the future, but about two spheres - our world and the higher world. There is no longer talk about a physical resurrection, it is not even believed in. Now only the earthly world of suffering and the world of bliss in heaven are important.

This dualism was reflected in the idea of heaven and hell. Why above and why below? Because the dualism was preserved, but it became not temporal, but spatial. God is above, and the soul goes there after death, if its owner was devoted to God and believed in Christ; below is a place where, by definition, God cannot be. Only evil reigns there, the devil himself and his evil entourage. There the soul goes to eternal torment, if its owner was not devoted to God and rejected your Christ.

Such views on the eternal and disembodied existence of the soul do not appear in early Christian texts, but appear later. For example, they are set forth in the Apocalypse of Peter (discussed in Chapter 6). In this text, Peter describes his journey through the worlds of the blessed and the damned. In the higher world, some souls rejoice, while in the lower, others.

Eternal life is presented not as a physical existence on earth after resurrection, but as a spiritual existence, where the soul is condemned to go to a lower or higher world after death. It is an eternal spiritual existence with eternal rewards or punishments, depending on how one lived one's earthly life and how one accepted God's salvation.

In short, over time, apocalyptic ideas about the resurrection of the body were transformed into the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Belief in heaven and hell emerged,

not mentioned in the teachings of Jesus or Paul, but later invented by Christians who realized that that the kingdom of God will never come to earth. This belief has become standard Christian teaching throughout the ages.

## CONCLUSION

Traditional Christianity, as we know it, did not fall from the sky, for it matured and developed shortly after Jesus' ministry. And it did not arise directly from his teachings. In many ways, Christianity represents a series of quite significant departures from Jesus' teachings. Proponents of the historical-critical method have long recognized that Christianity is *a religion about Jesus*, not a religion of Jesus *himself*.

All the aspects of traditional Christianity that I have discussed in this chapter can be seen as products of the early church. In looking at their development, some scholars see a clear continuity between these aspects and the ideas of Jesus that underpin them. Christian theologians see divine intervention at all stages of this development. Other scholars focus on the lack of continuity and are surprised by how "orthodox" Christian views emerged, rather than as necessary consequences of the teachings of Jesus and his early followers.

and as dogmas, heavily influenced by the historical and cultural factors of the environment that later Christians found themselves in. These views gradually spread and became "universally accepted" in later periods of church history (regardless of God's involvement in this process).

But whatever continuity or lack of it we may observe in examining the development of early Christianity, it is clear that the beliefs and attitudes of Jesus' followers differed from his own religion. Paul is not the only one who introduced a number of theological innovations: it is these innovations that we consider Christian doctrine. It is not even to Paul that we owe the transformation of the religion of Jesus into the religion of Jesus. Many Christians participated in this transformation, whose  
The vast majority were lost in the mists of antiquity; these obscure Christian thinkers and preachers interpreted the traditions of Jesus in their own way, taking into account their time, and their interpretations were shaped by historical and cultural factors that we, who have lived long enough, can just guessing.

In any case, Christianity as we know it today did not emerge suddenly. It developed over a long period of time, in struggles, disputes, and conflicts over competing views, teachings, dogmas, canons, and rules. The result of this process, the established Christian religion, is a human creation that is perhaps the greatest invention in the history of [Western civilization](#) in terms of historical and cultural [significance](#).

## 8. IS FAITH POSSIBLE?

At the end of my graduate New Testament course, I give my students a writing assignment for the last class. All semester we have discussed the historical critical approach to New Testament studies, the many approaches to major theological questions, historical issues, internal differences, the fact that many of the books were not written by those to whom they are attributed, and so on. My students, who have grown up in conservative Christian environments, have shown a variety of personal reactions to this material. But I have not given them a break all semester,

teaching a historical approach to the study of early Christianity rather than the religious approach to which they were accustomed.

At the end of the course, I want them to think about everything we've done and decide on their own opinion. So I ask students to write a two-page essay in response to a deliberately provocative question raised during a hypothetical discussion. Here's what the assignment looks like:

You are talking to someone about religion and, as sometimes happens, your interlocutor becomes furious. "Listen," he says, "the New Testament is full of contradictions; we have no idea what Jesus actually did; the apostle Paul turned Jesus' simple sermons about the coming kingdom into a complex theological system involving sin, judgment, and redemption; most of the New Testament writers seriously believed that the end times would come in their lifetimes. This book is full of misogyny, anti-Semitism, and homophobia, and all kinds of atrocities have always been justified with its help, and if you listen to what the preachers say on television! This book is simply dangerous!"

### **What will you answer him?**

The last discussion of the semester is based on the notes prepared by the students. As one might expect, their answers are varied. Several students tell their future interlocutor that all his words are complete nonsense: there are no contradictions in the Bible, Paul and Jesus preached the same thing, etc.

Few agree with them (although they certainly would have at the beginning of the semester) because everyone has seen the evidence and knows the historical problems that arise when studying the New Testament.

Other students hold completely opposite views, arguing that their interlocutor is absolutely right, that the Bible is a product of its era, that it does more harm than good, and that it leads people to despicable actions when trying to achieve personal goals or defend their ideology.

Still others agree with the interlocutor in many ways, but add that for them the Bible is still inspired by God, that it contains important recommendations that help build life.

Most of these students do not believe that the Bible is inerrant, and they do not believe that it can be viewed in isolation from its first-century context or in our own context, as if we were accepting the views and ideas of different authors. They are willing to admit that there are inconsistencies and even contradictions in the books of the Bible, even on important issues. They believe that it is necessary to analyze the various ideas of the Bible and to see which of them are particularly relevant to the conditions of American Christians in the 21st century, as opposed to the Jews of Palestine in the first century.

Students are often surprised to learn that I fully agree with this view. The goal of my course is not to attack the Bible or destroy students' faith. I try to get them to think about issues that concern them, which are also very important to many people.

### **Historical criticism and faith**

In many ways, the above applies to this book as well. Some readers may

You may be surprised to learn that I do not consider the material in the previous chapters to be an attack on Christianity or an agnostic's attempt to prove that faith, even if it is a Christian faith, is meaningless and ridiculous. I did not think of it that way, I did not seek to.

Instead, I have tried to make serious scholarship on the Bible and early Christianity accessible and understandable to people who may be interested in the New Testament but, for one reason or another, are unfamiliar with the biblical scholarly approach to it.

One of my secondary tasks is to point out that this information is not new to theologians and their students, many of whom attend the best seminaries and other theological schools throughout North America and Western Europe. Each of them teaches a historical-critical approach to the New Testament. Of course, many scholars and educators would disagree with me on one point or another—whether Luke disagrees with Mark, whether the Gospel of John contains historically accurate accounts of an event, whether Paul should be considered the author of 2 Thessalonians, etc. But in general, the views I have described are widely known, taught, and accepted by New Testament scholars, and studied by their students, including students who have graduated from seminaries and are becoming clergy.

Why do these students so rarely acquaint their parishioners with the information they receive, why do they demand a religious approach to Bible studies, rather than a historical-critical one, and not only from the church pulpit (where it is logical to demonstrate a religious approach), but also in church adult schools? This question haunted me all the time I worked on this book.

Of course, some priests try to share their ideas about the Bible with their parishioners, based on a historical-critical approach to the Bible, often with varying degrees of success. Some parishioners are ready to absorb everything that scholars say about the Bible, while others simply do not want to hear anything because the material seems too complicated or, more likely, threatens their faith.

But I feel that most priests are forced to understand that the study of historical and critical material is not a priority, given other pressing concerns in the community. Or perhaps priests simply do not know where to begin. Perhaps this is because of the way they themselves were educated in seminary, where they studied the Bible in a Bible studies course, theology in a theology course, and pastoral responsibilities in a corresponding course, without receiving any information about how the material from all three courses could be combined. Most prospective priests are not taught in seminary how the historical-critical approach learned in one class can be related to theology, a subject in another.

And this is unfortunate, because the historical-critical method is extremely useful in studying theology, and it is worth using it.

Or perhaps priests are afraid to tell their parishioners what theologians think about the Bible, lest it lead to a crisis of faith and even a loss of it. Personally, I believe that a historical-critical approach to biblical studies does not necessarily lead to agnosticism or atheism. On the contrary, it can lay the foundation for to a more rational and thoughtful faith, which is much more intelligent and thoughtful than the approach to the Bible that rejects all the problems that have been solved for years by historical critical method.

These views may surprise those readers who know that I myself have converted from evangelical Christianity to agnosticism. Yes, the historical-critical method more or less destroyed my original ideas about the Bible. But it did not motivate me to become an agnostic. It was

another reason, many years after I abandoned the evangelical understanding of the Bible: I could not understand how a kind and loving God who rules the world could allow most people, including believers, to endure so much suffering.

A few years ago I stopped believing in the Bible as the inspired Word of God, and for completely different reasons. Once I fully understood that we do not have the authentic inspired words of God, because the originals were not preserved and in some cases we did not know what they said, the idea came to me that the Bible is a purely human book. This gave me the opportunity to examine it from a historical and critical perspective. **In this book we have seen where this led.**

- I have come to realize that there are obvious discrepancies in the books of the New Testament. Sometimes they can be reconciled, especially if you think about it and let your pious imagination run wild; other times the differences are impossible to reconcile, despite the most elaborate explanations. (Jesus dies on different days in the books of Mark and John).
- Then I realized that the differences lie not only in small textual details. Sometimes writers have very different understandings of serious questions: was Jesus overcome by doubts and despair on the way to the place of execution (in Mark), or was he restrained and calm (Luke)? Was Jesus' death Was there atonement for sins (Mark and Paul) or not (Luke)? Did Jesus perform "signs" to prove who he was (John), or did he refuse to do so (Matthew)? Do Jesus' followers have to keep Jewish law to enter the kingdom (Matthew), or is it completely unnecessary (Paul)?

I also noted that many of the New Testament books were not written by those to whom they are attributed (Matthew and John) or by those who claimed to be their authors (2 Peter 1 Timothy). Most of these books appeared after the death of the apostles themselves; only 8 of the 27 books are almost certainly written by the authors to whom they are attributed.

- Most of the Gospels do not contain unbiased factual information about Jesus, but stories that were passed down orally for decades before they were written down. This makes it very difficult to know what Jesus actually said, did, and experienced. Scholars have come up with ways to get around these problems, but the fact remains that the Gospels (at least in the book of John, where the divine essence becomes human) present Jesus according to later conceptions of him, not according to historical reality.

There were many other gospels in early Christianity, as well as letters, Acts, and apocalypses. Many have called them the apostolic writings, but in fact this attribution is no more convincing than the books that eventually entered the New Testament. This raises the question of who made the decisions about the formation of the New Testament canon, and on what basis they were made. Is it possible that books that were not written by the apostles were included in the canon?

list simply because church leaders had no other choice? Is it possible that books that should have been in the canon were not included in it?

The Christian canon was not the only creation of the early church. Many theological teachings did not originate in the life of Jesus or even his apostles, but later, as the Christian church grew, one of the Jewish sects became a new religion. The most important Christian ideas belong to the inventions of the church, for example, about the suffering Messiah, the divinity of Christ, the Trinity, the existence of heaven and hell.

Once I realized that the Bible is a human book, I realized that Christianity is also a very [human religion](#). It didn't come down to us from heaven. It was created by Jesus' followers here on earth, in the decades and centuries that followed his death. But none of the above has made me an agnostic.

## HISTORY AND MYTH

It would seem that those who understood that Christianity was created by humans should abandon the Christian faith, leave the church, and find another occupation for Sunday morning. But it was different with me, as with many other scholars who, like me, initially adhered firmly to the evangelical tradition, then realized the persuasiveness of historical-critical approaches to the New Testament, but remained believers. Some of my closest friends teach in theological schools, training future Christian priests. They completely agree with almost all the ideas I have expressed in the previous chapters. Many people teach introductory courses in my textbook "The New Testament", a book that contains many of the opinions presented in these pages.

When I realized that Christianity was man-made, I felt the need to analyze my thoughts about this religion. And I noticed that it resonated strongly with me, along with my own view of the world and my place in it. I perceived Christian concepts about God, Christ, and the salvation he brought as a kind of religious "myth" or group of myths - a collection of stories, views, opinions, unconfirmed and unprovable, but at the same time irrefutable - that could make me do something teach. direct in life and thinking.

I continued to believe in God, although I gradually lost confidence in what could be said about him (or her). I continued to believe in the existence of Jesus. However, as I saw, the religion built around God and Jesus was based on various myths, not historical facts. The death of Jesus was not a myth, unlike the idea of salvation it brought. This can neither be historically confirmed nor denied, but I thought that this tragic story should and could influence my ideas about the world and my life. For me, the death of Jesus was an act of self-sacrificing love. According to this myth, Jesus sought to live and die for the good of others. This idea seemed noble and noble to me. I felt that Christ should be honored for such an example of sacrifice, and I thought that he was worth following.

But not because I could confirm this sacrifice as a historical fact, but because it resonated with me personally.

The resurrection of Jesus is not a historical event that can be confirmed or denied, because historians, by the nature of their science, cannot confirm a miracle. The resurrection is a bold mythic statement about God and the world. The world is not just everything that surrounds us. There is also life. The atrocities of the people who crucified an innocent man are not the end of the story. Evil will not be allowed to have the last word - the last word will remain with God. Death is not the end. God triumphs even before death itself.

Salvation was no longer an issue for me, I didn't care where I would go after death, to hell or to heaven. I realized that these concepts are also, in a sense, a myth. There is no eternal suffering. places where God or demons doing his will would torture the souls of the poor for 30 trillion years (and then all eternity) for the sins committed in thirty years. Who then would God be—an immortal, eternal Nazi? Paradise is associated with justification before God and the assurance that ultimately after death we will become one with him to some extent. Therefore, we

There is no need to fear death. Hell is not a literal torture chamber, but alienation from God and the inability to know true peace.

God himself was a kind of myth to me. I had no doubt that he existed, but his existence could neither be confirmed nor denied. He was a benevolent force that inspired awe and fear. He was higher than anything else, much further than we can imagine when we look up at the night sky with its billions of stars and galaxies. He is above all that and above everything, as the force of goodness and good in the world.

It would take another book to describe how my theological views have developed over time. I will only say that I have come to the conclusion that the historical-critical approach to the study of the New Testament has not destroyed my faith, but has deepened it, complicated my ideas and conversations about God, His world, His Christ, His salvation. Yes, these ideas about the world are human creations. *Can any of our ideas be called human? Are we not human?* Of course, we think as befits humans. No one can think otherwise, not even those who claim that God has revealed his thoughts to them. Even this thought is truly human—a thought that arises in humans because it once arose in other people who lived before, since man first invented it.

## **Farewell to faith**

So, I left the Christian faith not because of problems inherent in the faith itself, nor because I realized that the Bible is a human book and Christianity is a human religion. All of this is true, but it was not these thoughts that prevented me from accepting the Christian myth in the future. I lost my faith for a reason that, in my opinion, has nothing to do with all of the above: the suffering that the world is filled with.

There came a point in my life when I realized that myths no longer made sense to me, no longer resonated with me, no longer had anything to do with my worldview. I had reached a point where I could no longer see how core Christian beliefs, even if they were perceived as myths, could be "right" for me in the face of the overwhelming, overwhelming reality of human suffering in the world. That is [the subject of another book altogether.\[98\]](#) Suffice it to say that it was precisely because of this particular shift in my thinking (and not because of my historical-critical views of the Bible) that I left the church. Most of my friends did not. Almost all of them are scholars who agree with me when it comes to the historical understanding of the Bible and the Christian faith. But for them the myth continues to work, it evokes a response in them. These friends find support and comfort in their faith. They appreciate the rich historical heritage that Christian thinkers and theologians of past centuries have left us. They enjoy Christian hymns, liturgies, and devotions. They believe that the truth is much deeper than anything that can be said historically about the Bible or the development of the Christian religion in the first four centuries.

Now, as I write these lines, I am resting by the sea with two of my closest and dearest friends, people whom I love with all my heart; they are ready to do anything for me, as I am ready for them. As it turned out, both are smarter than me, more well-read, more philosophically sophisticated (not everyone is an intellectual superstar). They do not have and are unlikely to have problems with the historical information presented in this book. Both do not hesitate to call themselves Christians. Ask them if they believe in God, and they will answer in the affirmative. Do you think that

Is Christ God? Yes. Do you believe he is Lord? Yes. Faith is not determined by intelligence.

### **The theological value of the historical-critical method**

I firmly believe that a historical understanding of the Bible does not necessarily lead to the kind of agnosticism that I have embraced. I felt it was necessary because there are many other people, especially among evangelical Christians, to whom my thoughts will be new.

At the same time, I would like to emphasize that those who have retained the faith should not forget the theological significance of the historical approach to the New Testament. Rather than assuming that the historical-critical method is not directly related to faith, scholars, teachers, and their students should examine more fully the theological significance of the historical-critical method. I will give just two examples, one more obvious, the other much less obvious.

An obvious example from the negative categories is that if the conclusions of the historical-critical method are correct, then some theological positions should be considered unfounded and erroneous. I think it is impossible to claim that the Bible is a single whole, infallible in all its constituent elements, inspired by God in every respect. This cannot be. There are too many discrepancies, inconsistencies, contradictions in it; There are too many alternative views on the same subject, often incompatible with each other. The Bible is not a unity, but a huge crowd. It was not written by God, but by men. Many of them acted under inspiration, in the sense that they tried to inspire others to think about great and important things, to do great and significant things. But this inspiration was not inspiration, God did not inspire them to write what they wrote.

A less obvious example is the positive side of the previous one. There are many opinions in the Bible. Each is written in a specific historical and cultural context, each is shaped by the context in which it was written. None of these views can be viewed in isolation from their original context, in another context, such as 21st-century America, and accepted as an infallible revelation for us today. But since the Bible

There are so many thoughts, often on the same subject, that the reader can assess the importance of one or the other and understand how it relates to modern life. Some thoughts are more appropriate in a particular context than others. Bible readers need not be afraid to preach one over another.

I hope everyone will agree that Jesus' words about children ("let the little children come to me") are a more useful instruction than Psalm 136 ("Blessed is he who takes your little ones and dashes them against the stones!"). Likewise, some biblical views of women are superior to others. This is Paul's view of women, who believed that they could and should be leaders in Christian communities, as evidenced by the fact that in his communities women were church leaders, deacons, and even apostles (Romans 16). This view is much better than the one inserted by a later scribe in 1 Corinthians, which says that women should always be silent in church (1 Corinthians 14:35-36); a better view than the forged and signed First Letter to Timothy, which says that women should be silent, submissive, and childbearing (1 Timothy 2:11-15).

When considering which Bible passages are relevant in the current context, it is important to remember a historical premise: the Bible writers lived in a different world than ours, and expressed their

people's beliefs and convictions. Their world had no ideas about homosexuality that matched ours. In other words, homosexuality did not exist in that world. Why? Not because men did not have sex with men (they did) or women did not have sex with women (and they did), but because the concept of sexual orientation did not exist until Western thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries created it. Therefore, the very premises of the apostle Paul's attacks on same-sex relationships are strikingly different from those of the modern world. We cannot fully accept Paul's teachings on same-sex relationships, separate from Paul's ideas about

sex and gender and adapt them to other assumptions.

This is true of the entire Bible. It was written in a different world, under different conditions. The idea of Jesus' return is based on another idea, according to which there is a place above us, in heaven, beyond the clouds, where God lives and where Jesus went to live with him. He ascended in the flesh and will also return in the flesh. No one thinks that God and Jesus live somewhere beyond the clouds.

Beyond the clouds are the upper atmosphere, beyond them is space, beyond them are billions of stars, and that's just our galaxy. The very idea of Jesus "descending" implies that he will appear from somewhere "above" - how does this fit with the idea of our universe, in which there is literally no up or down, except for the position we occupy at a given moment? Obviously, this idea needs to be translated into some modern language to make sense. Or, in other words, we need to re-mythologize the myth of the new coming of Jesus. Otherwise, we will have to come to terms not only with the idea of Jesus' descent to earth, but also with the cosmology on which it is based.

The same is true of all the teachings of the Bible: about women, about same-sex relationships, relationships, about sex outside of marriage, about the death penalty, about wealth, about slavery, about disease, about... about almost everything.

Some may think that this approach to the Bible is dangerous, risky, choosing only what you want to accept and rejecting the rest. I think everyone already chooses from the Bible what they are ready to accept. [accept\[100\]](#). The most egregious examples of this phenomenon can be found among people who claim to have no choice or no choice. I have a young friend whose evangelical parents were alarmed because she wanted to get a tattoo because the Bible forbids it. In the same book of Leviticus, the Bible also forbids wearing clothes made of two different types of fiber and eating pork. And it says that children who disobey their parents should be stoned to death. Why should we follow the Bible's rules about tattoos and not about clothes, pork chops, and stoning?

I believe that people should use their reason to analyze what they think is right or wrong in the Bible. That is how we should build our lives. Everything we see and hear should be analyzed, whether it is the inspired words of the Bible or the inspired words of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, George Eliot, Gandhi, Desmond Tutu, or the Dalai Lama.

### **Why study the Bible then?**

This is probably the question I get asked more often than any other question – I hear it from people who know I am an agnostic and a New Testament teacher. Why do I continue to study and teach the New Testament if I no longer believe in it?

This question has never made much sense to me. The Bible is the most important book in the history of Western civilization. It is purchased more often than any other, studied more extensively, revered, and misunderstood than any other book—and all the time! Why don't I study it?

I have friends who teach medieval English. They don't believe in Chaucer, but they value him highly and devote their time to studying, teaching, and writing about Chaucer. The same is true of my friends who teach classical literature—those who specialize in Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, Livy, Martial, and Plautus. These are all great writers whose works deserve close study throughout a scholar's lifetime, regardless of his personal beliefs. The same can be said of my friends who study and teach Shakespeare, John Donne, Charles Dickens, or TS Eliot.

The same is true of Bible study. The only difference is that many people in our world actually believe the Bible. I am not trying to belittle those who continue to view it as inspired.

text, but I will add that not only a religious, but also a historical approach to Bible studies is valuable. Yes, a historical perspective can reveal many flaws in the Bible—inconsistencies, contradictions, false claims, unimaginable claims, and dangerous ideologies. However, historical reading can open up entirely new perspectives on understanding the Bible and its ideas.

Moreover, even those who do not believe in the Bible can learn a lot from it. This book is worth reading and to study it not as a document of faith, but as a historical record of the thoughts, beliefs, experiences, actions, loves, hates, prejudices, and opinions of people who stood at the very origins of our civilization and culture. It can help us understand the important questions of life—why we are here, what we should do, what will happen to our world. It can inspire us with examples or warn us. It can motivate us to seek truth, to fight oppression, to seek justice, to seek peace. It has the power to move us toward the fullness of life that we can still live. It can stimulate our desire to live for others, not just for ourselves. There is hardly a time in human history when such lessons will become obsolete, when the views of the great religious thinkers of the past will lose all meaning for those of us who live and think now, in the present.

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Read in Lithuanian:

[Read Jesus, the Interrupted Word: How Christianity Really Began \(Bart D Ehrman\) online full version without abbreviations](#)

Read the book in Russian:

<https://mirbukv.net/kniga/iisus-prervannoe-slovo-kak-na-samom-dele-zarozhdalos-erman>

<https://www.maldos.lt/bartas-ehrmanas>

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**\*About Bart D. Ehrman**

**Bart Denton Ehrman** (born October 5, 1955) is an American New Testament scholar whose research focuses on New Testament textual criticism, the historical Jesus, and the origins and development of early Christianity.[1] He is **the James A.**

**Gray Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies** at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.[1] He is the author or editor of more than 30 books, including six New York Times bestsellers, and has created nine lecture series in conjunction with The Great Courses.

[5][6] **Ehrman also maintains a membership blog, the proceeds of which support charities fighting hunger and homelessness.** As of March 2025, the blog has reportedly raised over \$3 million.[7]



Bart Denton Ehrman

## Early life and education

Ehrman was born and raised in Lawrence, Kansas.[1] He attended **Moody Bible Institute**, where he completed a three-year diploma, and later transferred credits to Wheaton College.[8] He received his bachelor's degree from Wheaton College in 1978, his **medical degree in 1981**, and his **doctorate in 1985 from Princeton Theological Seminary**, where he studied **under textual critic Bruce Metzger**.<sup>[1]</sup> His dissertation on the quotations from the Gospels of the Great Blind Man inspired him to write his first scholarly monograph, *The Great Blind Man and the Text of the Gospels*.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Career

Ehrman taught at Rutgers University from 1985 to 1988, then joined the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he taught from 1988 and served as chair from 2000 to 2006. <sup>[1]</sup> In 2003, he was named the James A. Gray Professor Emeritus.<sup>[1]</sup> **In 2025, he announced his plans to retire from UNC** at the end of the year.<sup>[10]</sup> He has written numerous courses with The Teaching Company, including a series on the New Testament and the Historical Jesus.<sup>[6]</sup> He is the author of widely used textbooks, including **The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings**.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Scientific activities and writings

Much of Ehrman's early research examined **the Greek manuscript tradition of the New Testament** and how theological controversies shaped the transmission of the text. In his book

**"The Orthodox Distortion of Scripture"** argues that some of the scribal changes reflect early Christological debates.[12] In his book **"Forgery and Falsification"** analyzes literary fraud and ancient accusations of pseudepigraphy in early Christian polemics.[13]

Ehrman wrote for a wider audience about the historical Jesus and the development of the Christian faith. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* presents Jesus as a first-century Jewish apocalyptic preacher.[14] **Did Jesus Exist?** defends the historical existence of Jesus against mythological claims.[15] *Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife and Journeys to Heaven and Hell* examine ancient afterlife traditions and their reception in early Christianity.[16][17]

The book *Armageddon: What the Bible Really Says About the End* examines the Book of Revelation and its modern apocalyptic interpretation.[18] Simon & Schuster mentions a forthcoming book, *Love Thy Stranger*, to be published in March 2026. 24th[19]

## Public engagement

Ehrman regularly lectures to the public and appears in the media. He has recorded several series of shows with The Great Courses and maintains a membership blog, **The Bart Ehrman Blog**, which donates all membership fees to charity and is expected to raise over \$3 million by 2025.[6][7] A 2020 Time magazine essay summarized the main claims about heaven and hell for the general public.[20]

## Awards and honors

In 2011, Ehrman received **the American Humanist Association's Religious Freedom Award**. [3] In 2009–2010 and 2018–2019, he received grants from the National Center for the Humanities for projects on ancient forgery and early Christian afterlife narratives.[4] He has received numerous university teaching awards at UNC, including the Pontifical Center for Research in the Spirit Teaching Award and the Undergraduate Student Teaching Award.[1] In 2018, he was named a Guggenheim Fellow in Religion.[21]

## Religious views

Ehrman has stated that he has moved from evangelical faith to agnosticism, **seeing the problem of suffering as crucial**. He wrote, **"the problem of suffering became a problem of faith for me"**[22] and said, **"I don't go to church anymore, I don't believe anymore, I don't consider myself a Christian anymore"**. [23] In a 2008 interview, he said, "I just didn't believe there was a God," a view he had adopted around 2000.[24]

Ehrman has said that **he is both an agnostic and an atheist**, but that "I usually confuse people when I tell them I am both." "Atheism is a statement about belief, and agnosticism is a statement about epistemology," he said.[25][26]

Ehrman argues that Jesus of Nazareth existed historically, and he sums up this claim in the popular phrase, "he existed whether we like it or not." [27] **His position on Christology is historical, not confessional.** In his review of *How Jesus Became God*, NPR recorded his assessment that "Jesus himself did not call himself God or consider himself God."

[28] He also wrote that **Jesus did not teach about reward and punishment after death** in the popularly understood sense. [29] In a 2020 essay, he argued that **Jesus preached resurrection and a coming kingdom, not eternal torment.** [30]

## Reception

Scholars have praised Ehrman's publications for their effective outreach and polemical tone. Daniel B. Wallace, in his review of "Quoting Jesus from Misquotation" in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, called the first chapters a "very good" introduction to New Testament textual criticism, and then stated that the book **"draws a very 'a bleak picture of the scribes' activities"** and that Ehrman "overstates his argument". [31] Larry Hurtado assessed *How Jesus Became God* as being aimed at laypeople "generally unfamiliar with this scholarly work", and warned that "the polemical agenda may encourage lively discussion, but it also somewhat diminishes its ability to present a balanced historical picture". [32] Luke Timothy Johnson, reviewing the same book, described Ehrman as practicing "counter-apologetics" and questioned the validity of resurrection experiences. treatment, recognizing the clarity of the exposition. [33]

The reviewers also provided specific arguments for the inerrancy and falsification of the Bible. Michael J. Kruger wrote in *Themelios* that **Ehrman was "absolutely right that early Christians simply did not see [pseudonyms] in this way.** For them, forgery was a simple and clear lie." [34] The scholarly monographs *Forgery and Counterforgery in the Novum Testamentum*, *The Journal of Religion*, and *The Journal of Theological Studies* Academic reviews have discussed the scope of the book and definitions of forgery from 100 to 400 AD. AD, praising the documentation and discussing the scope of the term "forgery" and individual decisions of cases. [35][36][37]

The reception of the later trade books has been mixed, but their accessibility is generally notable. The *Washington Independent Review of Books* called *The Triumph of Christianity* "solidly grounded in top-notch scholarship". [38] *Kirkus Reviews* called the book "accessible and intriguing, but not groundbreaking". [39] Alan Kirk argues that in *Jesus Before the Gospels* Ehrman selectively cites memory research, ignoring the fact that Frederic Bartlett's experiment revealed that stories take on a stable, "schematic" form relatively quickly, and that Ehrman also overemphasizes

individual rather than communal transmission, thus making the "fatal mistake" of Jan Vansin, whom he cites as evidence of the distortion of the Jesus tradition, changing his view to claim that the information was transmitted through a community that established control rather than through easily modifiable chains of transmission. Kirk agrees with Ehrman that an appeal to memory cannot automatically guarantee historicity. [40] Evangelicals

scholars Andreas J. Köstenberger, Darrell L. Bock, and Josh D. Chatraw **challenged Ehrman's portrayal of scientific consensus, saying:** "Only by defining scientific activity on his own terms, and without involving scientists who disagree with him, Ehrman can claim to be supported by all other scientific activities." [41] However, scholar and Christian apologist Michael R. Licona notes that **Ehrman's "positions are those that are largely supported by mainstream skeptical scientific activity."** [42]

Ehrman's popular work has attracted organized rebuttals and widespread attention. Gary Kamiya wrote that evangelicals "attacked him as exaggerated, dishonest, and irreligious," noting that no fewer than three books were published "in response" to *Misquoting Jesus and Jesus, Interrupted*. [43] In 2014, Zondervan published a response to **How Jesus Became God**, titled **How God Became Jesus**, written by five scholars who challenge aspects of Ehrman's reconstruction on historical and theological grounds. [44]

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[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart\\_D.\\_Ehrman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bart_D._Ehrman)

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**\*\*My humble comment is about ED Barth's religious views**, not about the book and the argumentation, as that is the responsibility of the scholar. Why E.

D. Barth became/chose/ the path of an atheist at the end of his long-term sincere Bible studies and it led the Author to agnosticism?

In my opinion, the Author confused the arguments of reason (facts, concepts when collecting material for books) with spirituality. Jesus Christ did not declare himself to be God. He said that HE was sent by GOD THE FATHER, which is something completely different. He emphasized the PRESENCE OF THE FATHER. He stated that: **"GOD IS SPIRIT"**, that man is also endowed with spirituality. Jesus Christ called his disciples **to BE IN HIM**, because He is the son of God the Father, and **UNITY (SPIRITUAL)** will be achieved. A person can actually be convinced of this through the total "surrender" of his self to God-Spirit. So, on the basis of what arguments can one affirm or deny the Existence of the Spirit? SUCH arguments simply cannot exist if there is no experience of spiritual practice. The realization of God-Spirit comes through the deep "death" of one's self (ego). This was claimed by many Christian and Buddhist mystics. It is simply impossible to refute their spiritual experience with rational arguments.

**Regarding the problem of suffering.** Yes, physical or spiritual suffering does exist. But is it necessary/mandatory/for everyone? No. That suffering can be eliminated by following the spiritual path. This has also been proven by many enlightened people, and in general, people who lead a healthy and virtuous lifestyle.

There is no record in ED Barth's biography (or I don't have any) that he practiced meditation. Contemplation is a slightly different spiritual practice, however, because the mind is not "erased" during it.

If ED Bart had followed, for example, Ken Wilber's path (after all the disappointments Bible), perhaps the conclusions would not have been so negative and even atheistic.

Indeed, **religiosity and spirituality follow different paths towards God**, as I have repeatedly emphasized.

**Regarding the Trinity formula** (1 John 5:7–8). It is very good that the scholar was able to establish that this is a late 5th century addition, which is not found in the early Greek manuscripts. This change strengthened the orthodox doctrine of Christianity, but distorted the very essence of Jesus' Teaching, and theological disputes led Christianity into a crisis. ED Barth recognized that these changes in the New Testament, although sometimes minor, had a great influence on Christian theology, especially on the formation of Christology and the doctrines of the Trinity. Indeed, even a deeply religious person cannot understand these deductions about the Trinity.

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