

Skeptical Observations
A Common-sense Analysis of Biblical Claims and
Religious Experiences

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In memory of the love of my life and the ever-attentive mother of my children, Catherine (Kay) Pickett.

Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgements	xi
1 Introduction	1
I In the Beginning	11
2 My Formative Years	13
3 Three Great Questions	21
II The Old Testament	25
4 A Fast-Trip Critique of the Literal Old Testament	27
5 The Old Testament Unearthed	31
6 God's Ethics and Communications with Humankind	39
7 God's New Domain	45
8 The Bible's Unreasonable Stories	47
III The New Testament	51
9 The New Testament's Claims	53
10 What the "Q" Sayings of Jesus Tell Us	57
11 Prophecies as Connectors between Testaments	59
12 Two Groups of Followers, Two Testaments	63

13 Separation from Israel	69
14 Two Religions without a Bridge	71
15 God's New Grand-Plan for Humankind	75
16 The Doctrines of Apostle Paul	79
17 Paul, Indispensable to Christianity	85
18 Too Good to Fail	87
IV A Closer Look at the New Testament	89
19 What the Biblical Scholars Concluded	91
20 What Jesus Actually Said	95
21 An Evaluation of the Jesus Story	99
22 Q and Thomas Refute the Bible's Claims about Jesus	103
23 The Gospel of Thomas Supports the Gospel of Q	111
24 The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke	115
25 The Gospel of John	119
26 The Acts of the Apostles	123
27 Contradictions in Resurrection Stories	127
28 The Early Church Stole Jesus from His Jewish Followers	131
29 Assembling the Testaments	133
30 Can All Gods Be Only One?	137
31 Concluding Comments on Biblical Content and History	139
32 Fundamentalists Respond To Their Critics	143
V Our Minds, Our Beliefs	147
33 Conflicting Beliefs and Resistance to Change	149
34 Mind and Consciousness	153

<i>CONTENTS</i>	vii
35 The Mind of the Bible-Believer	159
36 Science, Naturalism and Faith	169
37 Rationality, Gaining Strength?	175
38 Sensing a Spirit Realm	177
39 Do Miracles Actually Occur?	183
40 Particles to Waves, and Waves to Particles?	189
41 Evolution and Intelligent Design	191
42 Criticisms of Literal Interpretations	197
43 Criticisms of Liberal Interpretations	205
44 Morality	209
45 The Comfort of Faith and Moral Guidance	215
46 My Philosophical Positions and Passions	217
47 Closing Words	219
A Bibliography	221
B A Message for Those Attending My Wake and for Readers Post-Wake	225

Preface

Religious issues have obsessed me since I was snared in my youth by a fundamentalist religion that I soon abandoned for its lack of reasonableness. Now, after a half century of thought and study while enjoying a satisfying life, I am interested in passing on my religious deliberations and discoveries to those individuals who may find themselves in circumstances similar to mine. Readers will be alerted to new understandings among competent theologians regarding how Biblical text was substantially influenced by mythic proclivities operative in the Middle East, even during the time that the New Testament books were being written. Several topics related to religious faith, such as religious experiences, morality, the mind and consciousness, the ability of many people to “believe” even when faced with contrary evidence are included. And I describe my views of what constitutes an adequate basis for believing a proposition.

I have added a summary of my unusual formative years at the beginning of Part One to describe my life and the special circumstances that molded my thinking.

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Lloyd Pickett

Chapter 1

Introduction

In this essay, I feel compelled to express some of my heartfelt concern about the human tendency to accept religious doctrines that often seriously divide people, that lead to beliefs and goals that are logically, morally or scientifically unacceptable, that command great expenditures of resources including time and that can generate unspeakable conflict and cruelty. I have no delusions about converting religious conservatives who have been thoroughly indoctrinated to not listen to people outside of their faith. Neither do I feel that the abolishment of liberal religious practice is necessary, although I do point out many illogical claims and mythical stories found in the Bible that are often assumed to be literally true. I assume that most people who choose to read this essay will already be questioning the Bible's claims and thus be able to cope with the content. It should be of interest to skeptics of all shades and to many liberal Christians as well. I hope that my analysis of Biblical claims will provide many examples of the application of critical reasoning in decision making.

I have lived a contented and moral life without religion by being reasonably well connected to the interconnected natural world and to humanity. There can be potential benefits from moderate religious belief, but in a world of many contradictory religions, any belief system that requires that you not question it tends to result in intolerance for any other view. People who fail to examine their beliefs and who unquestioningly follow their religious leaders often become involved in utterly unnecessary conflicts, including wars. Thus, religions do not warrant absolute belief. I propose that the Bible is saturated with myths that place Christianity among the hundreds of other world religions which involve gods, heroes, tribes and nations in exaggerated or false stories of a traditional or legendary nature. Some of the worst doctrines frighten believers with claims of terrible potential punishments such as burning forever in the fires of hell. Do we humans actually deserve such horrendous threats?

The Bible has generally escaped open and critical evaluation for most of its existence which puts believers, especially literalist believers, in the precarious situation of possibly believing passionately in that which is unreasonable and untrue. Psychologist Edmund D. Cohen in his book, *The Mind of the Bible Be-*

liever, tells a personal story of being an Evangelical for three years, whereupon he abandoned the group after deciding that the ministers had used a bait-and-switch approach on converts such as him. In over-simplification, new converts, and potential new ones, received the sweet love and caring-of-Jesus treatment and those involved longer received the jealous, demanding and even cruel-God treatment stemming from Pauline doctrines that rejected the world and outsiders while emphasizing all-out preparation for the next life. Cohen realized that the New Testament story was far more simplistic and unreasonable than he had expected it to be. He tells us, “we will be astonished to realize how little didactic content is intrinsically there. . . . What I have to tell them [his ex-fellow-believers] is that maintenance of their illusions cannot coexist with an effective response to the retrograde social views and inconspicuous personal misery being spread far and wide by the new conservative evangelicals” (3). Cohen feels, and I agree with him, that the devastating destruction and cultural ruination of Israel and its temple by the Romans in 70 CE “left a situation wherein every kind of constructive, this-worldly activity for Jews in Israel was made completely futile.” He states further, “I contend that the New Testament grew out of a profound sense of spoliation [ruin] of the Jewish identity, when events turned so powerfully against the historic Jewish expectation of God’s special favor. . . . The New Testament is nothing other than a psychological manipulation—a depth-psychotechnology—designed so to knit its people together” (4). I will discuss Cohen again.

As we witness chaotic conflict and division all around our world today that is driven in large measure by absolutist religious belief, all humans should develop themselves educationally and economically so they will be able to function more inclusively, rationally, empathetically and beneficially in the only life that is sure. Throughout history increased knowledge has been a primary means for softening people’s rigid, dogmatic views, including theological ones. In my opinion, it would be a far more peaceful and productive world if no one assumed his or her religion to be the source of absolute truth. If the Christian Bible’s story is largely mythic, as strong evidence indicates, then people’s investment in it ideally should be appropriate for mythical writings, rather than appropriate for literally-true God-sent revelations and intuitions. The proof in the religious pudding is being tested now for all to see in the wanton killing between opposing sects of Islamic followers in Iraq and between Jews and Palestinians in their areas. Christopher Hitchens uses his second chapter and other parts of his book, *God is Not Great* to remind us of dozens of historic examples of the killing of people whose competing religions were deemed to be threatening (15).

One can now observe the beginning of what I believe has become a movement. People like me who have been skeptical of Biblical claims and stories being literally true are at last speaking and writing freely about matters that for centuries were considered to be so personal or so private and sensitive that they were off limits to criticism. I suspect this new openness over the last forty years, even as religiosity may have increased among some conservative groups, is primarily the result of numerous professional theologians finally realizing that Biblical writers were substantially more involved in myth-making than in the

collection of historical evidence, as we would expect from them today. Powerful fresh evidence of myth-making in the Bible seems to be coming primarily from two major sources: 1) from new Archeological discoveries in Israel regarding major errors in Old Testament history and 2) from research about the essence of Jesus and the origins of the New Testament, especially the research by the Jesus Seminar study group (Funk, 7-9). The people doing most of this work are often liberal theologians and Biblical historians rather than humanists, freethinkers, agnostics and atheists. This implies that there is a furthering of the separation between Christianity's conservative and liberal wings in the United States. I will be presenting many quotations that show why even many Biblical scholars, ministers and ex-ministers now believe the Christian Bible should be viewed as being in large-part mythical and factually unreliable. It appears to me that liberal religious faith (the better kind) is crumbling quite rapidly in the United States. On February 26, 2008, our Idaho Falls *Post Register* newspaper carried a news story picked up from the Associated Press saying: "The US. religious marketplace is extremely volatile, with nearly half of American adults leaving the faith tradition of their upbringing to either switch allegiances or abandon religious affiliation altogether, a new survey finds." It also found that "one in four adults ages 18 to 29 claim no affiliation with a religious institution." The study was released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

The rapid flow of people into our Christian world who practice varied world religions may also be increasing our skepticism of all religious claims. And, the public's increased concern about the violence and pandemonium in foreign nations, created in defense of absolutist Islamic, Judeo, Hindu and other faiths has shown Americans loudly and clearly the dangerous and unsupported outcomes of absolutist religious beliefs.

A related question is, will all varieties of religious skepticism, free thought and atheism continue to win social acceptance in the same sense that great cultural changes like racial equality and women's rights have already won? The early observations of mine which lay on a shelf in my mind for fifty-five years and which once seemed risky and perhaps a little avant-garde are already found in many books on the shelves of many libraries. This very day, June 29, 2008, a catalog arrived from Edward R Hamilton Bookseller Company that listed thirty seven book offerings in the "Religion" category of which fifteen were obviously skeptical of the Biblical claims made by conservative Christians. This is an almost unbelievable recent change that I often note.

The argument for liberalizing or tempering religious belief will likely strike many Americans as hyperbole, as they tend to view their faith as a totally beneficial, behavior-controlling, goal-setting, truth-affirming, peace-loving, family-enhancing, soothing, uplifting, aspect of their life, as well as one necessary for salvation. But historically, when a threat has been perceived by a zealous religious group, human subjugation, political infighting or wars have occurred. My mostly nonreligious and naturalistic lifestyle has also provided an abundance of all the foregoing benefits, except obtaining salvation, the mythic condition no one is likely to enjoy.

It may be easier to view tempering of belief as a present need in the Islamic

world where terrible outcomes from absolutist zealotry are very evident. We may not have seen the worst of it yet. One possibility, among many, runs like this: if the rulers of nations like Pakistan, Somalia, Sudan, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia or Egypt would react excessively to an internal act of terrorism by their homeland dissidents, their fundamentalist sub-population could potentially use the opportunity to revolt against their typically unpopular leaders and take complete charge of government via a more absolutist, Shariah mode of governance. Such a new government might cut supplies of oil to the Western World, but much more important, the example set for Muslims, the elation, resentment and fear aroused, could destabilize other Muslim nations, sects or groups and thus prevent the further democratization and modernization that is needed for their economic, political and personal well-being and thus for their long-term peace. It could organize Islamic unity against Western societies as per Bin Laden's hopes; it could throw other Muslim nations or groups into horrendous internal or external wars; it could throw the affected economies into a terrible and long depression and it could stop women's rights from developing further. A loss of female vitality and labor would greatly reduce the chance of modernizing the national economies of Muslim nations.

Many strict Muslims are horrified by the evil that they associate with modernization and with the polluting influence of outsiders on their beliefs, yet modernization and open trade provides their only long-term path to economic and social well-being. In the absence of productive modernization, and eventually in the absence of oil to sell, unemployed young Muslim men might be motivated to join an army of angry terrorists who could carry out continuous destructive acts against their own governments and/or the Western World nations. Such malcontents will claim that if Muslims are faring poorly, then it is because Allah is unhappy and the solution will be to remove that unhappiness by attacking Allah's enemies.

Muslims are especially prone to view their Koran as being absolutely true, perhaps because of Islam's long near absence of internal critics. Their religion is sheltered in their typically all-Islamic nations that allow only one basic faith that is quite all-encompassing. Thus, surrounded by many fanatical true-believers, those who practice religious deviation like non-belief are sometimes punished by death. Suicide bombers are supported by large subgroups of people and are easy to recruit because they "know" that they will be in heaven tomorrow if they die for Allah today.

However, the recent conflicts within the Islamic world seem not to be spreading appreciably, except in the Afghanistan/Pakistan border area. Perhaps many Muslims are enjoying new wealth, and with it, new hope for their worldly future. Such an orientation should increase our cultural mutuality and goodwill with them. It must be ever more obvious to the citizenry that the Islamic warlords and Mullah's have little to offer long term. Let's hope this is so.

Zealotry of all types and in all places, whether religious or nationalistic in nature, can be dangerous. Religious zealotry typically springs from a strongly felt need to preserve old beliefs, old myths and old ways. In Israel, Palestinians and Israelis appear mired in endless conflict. Recent conflict in Ireland,

the Sudan, Somalia, India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Indonesia, the Philippines, Kashmir, the former Yugoslavia and lately Iraq has been partially or primarily over religious issues. Occasional religious flare-ups occur in numerous other places. Even the United States has some problems of a religious nature, where fundamentalist Christian beliefs stand against more rational secular belief and liberal Christianity. I am worried about today's world. It is not comforting to see religious fundamentalism operative in much of the world when one recalls human history. The Old Testament is largely a story of religious wars. There were several religious wars in Europe during the rise of Protestantism, there was much human degradation, cruelty and death that occurred during the several crusades by Christians into the Holy Land and terrible punishments were meted out during the Catholic heresies or inquisition, including burnings at stakes. Michael Baigent in his book shocks us with the statement: "The Inquisition boasted that over the course of 150 years it burned approximately thirty thousand women—all innocent victims of a church-sanctioned pathological fantasy" (103). Readers are also reminded of the appalling history of regional wars between Catholic and Protestant areas in Europe following Luther's split with the Catholic church.

Leaders of fundamentalist religions typically claim that theirs, and only theirs, has the truth about reality, especially about God's grand plan for mankind, so its followers are commanded to assist their God to fulfill his grand plan. Participants are often motivated to participate even when cruelty is required because they are, after all, obeying God and because fabulous rewards, like attainment of eternal life in heaven, are thought to be at stake. Head-on collisions between followers of opposing absolutist religions are bound to occur in an interactive world of mixing peoples and religions. Peoples of mixed cultures who live together must be flexible and accommodative rather than slavish to ancient dogmas in order to live peacefully and productively. The present fighting in Iraq is a prime example of the dangers that underlie nations or states divided by competing religions or religious sects.

As for anti-religious zealotry, I suppose it also could potentially become more confrontational than is desired for the peace, order and tranquility that individuals and democracies deserve. But, I can't imagine skeptics or atheists doing to others what Iraq's Sunnis and Shiites are currently doing to each other. The latter may think they can conquer permanent death, gain salvation and family togetherness in heaven by killing or dying in the name of Allah. Contrarily, as an atheist, Madelyn O'Hare is sometimes accused of having been overly outspoken and angry, but her intensity has not been matched since her heyday, and besides, she never physically hurt anyone.

My intention is to function as a reasonably compassionate critic in this essay. Yet I am not deluded into thinking that my simple act of rigorously questioning a belief system that is commonly thought of as necessary for everlasting life, for centering human lives and for providing moral constraints, psychological support and hope, will be embraced by all readers.

We skeptics and atheists have courteously listened to hundreds of preachments justifying and promoting Biblical claims. I'm hopeful that my readers

will now allow me just one exposition of potentially unwelcome arguments laid out rather forcefully in this essay. I will not strive to balance my argumentation between faith and skepticism, as readers are likely to already know most of the traditional justifications for belief in the Bible, nor will I purposively belittle believers.

It is unpleasant for me to argue against Biblical claims that provide “hope” to believers. My conscience can cope with warring against Biblical unreasonableness, but warring against people’s hope is something else. I argue with my conscience that the good done by promoting rationality compensates for any temporary emotional distress I might cause.

Following a discussion of some introductory topics, this essay will briefly evaluate the Old Testament and will review some recent archaeological discoveries in Israel. From the book *The Bible Unearthed*, a summarization of the authors’ resultant reviews of the Old Testament’s long accepted but apparently inaccurate historical narrative is presented. The New Testament analysis that follows these topics will often quote Biblical experts and will constitute the major topic of my essay. The final section of the essay will consider an assortment of topics related to religious belief such as whether religious experiences can be better explained as natural mental phenomena generated in the brain. Next, a book, *The Case For Christ*, that gives conservative Christian counter-arguments to some of the ideas that I will have presented will be briefly reviewed. In the analysis of the New Testament which follows, I can assure readers that the authors whose writings will be cited are well respected and well known theological scholars.

In this essay’s forthcoming dialog the weaknesses of four major Biblical claims or types of claims will accumulate. These are: 1) the Bible’s specific claims of truth and reason often fail; for example, humans never did live to be 900 years old; 2) archaeological and historical research shows that the glorious history of the earlier Jewish patriarchs, including the Israelite exodus from Egypt, were almost certainly mythic rather than real; 3) the Old Testament does not predict the arrival of Jesus Christ; 4) the titles of Jesus, given by Apostle Paul and the four gospel writers as Christ, Savior, and Son of God are not supported by the early followers of Jesus who remained in Israel and who had actually known him.

To reduce the chance of misunderstandings, I want to explain, before my skeptical opinions lead readers to assume otherwise, that I view religious yearnings to be normal, expected and reasonable considering our human nature, but in an increasingly enlightened period in history, religious beliefs need to be based upon reasonable evidence. To avoid believing in such absurdities as the earth’s being carried on the back of a turtle or created 6000 years ago, we must be initially skeptical of all faith claims and all religious dogma that have not yet been put through a validity filter. The acceptance of a proposition or a religion by millions of fellow believers does not qualify as strong evidence either; rather, study outside of the faith that applies stringent reason and logic to determine the validity of the faith’s claims is recommended. This essay will provide some examples. Unfortunately, many people who are fundamentally religious assume

they already know the truth and therefore they have no need to question their beliefs. But look at the bad logic in this. Following that logic, members of the dozens of current world religions and the hundreds of Christian denominations could all claim their religion to be absolutely true. Is that reasonable? If so I must remember to tell my Mormon friend and my Hindu-believing friend that they both possess absolute, universal truths, regardless of the fact that one religion promises salvation in heaven and one reincarnation over and over.

Why do humans tend to universally believe in religions? It seems to me that the successful religions evolved via trial-and-error to meet a number of psychological, social and political needs. As humans, we are thoroughly mystified, and perhaps even frightened, to realize that we are implausibly, vibrantly alive in a universe of infinite scope and wonder. This level of awe tends to make us vulnerable to the quick and easy magical answers of religions. We may even question whether our multifaceted self awareness is only a dream. We are exceedingly complex biological machines that seem to miraculously make it possible for us to observe ourselves is: an inside front row seat in our bodies. We can contemplate ourselves, our experiences, our knowledge, our thoughts, our voices, and the reactions of others to us. We may even be able to experience our own deaths because we will persist momentarily within the dying body. Our very being as reproducible living protoplasm calls out for explanation as does our consciousness and reasoning powers. The awe is overwhelming. We may feel overwhelmed by all this complexity and need something more powerful than naturalism (natural-law driven processes) to hold onto. If our existence is felt to be mystical (spiritually symbolic), then the traditional God explanation may seem to simplify the questions of our origin, consciousness and vital spark. Eventually we may start to assume communications are taking place between ourselves and our creator Gods.

Actually, a supernatural creator/caretaker adds a staggering new layer of complexity and mystery to that already existing. The creator then also needs a creator and explanations for its exceedingly more complex abilities than humans possess. Our human biology, physiology and neurology are now known to function via natural processes, even including consciousness and cognition or thought. Thus, though difficult, the unguided evolutionary descent of humans within a natural universe seems far more simple and probable than does the magical creation by one of the world's many supposed uncaused cosmic spirits called gods.

Religious beliefs are magical by their assumed nature. As an example, a prayer to an unseen and unheard entity in the void of fathomless space perhaps many light-years away or everywhere is said to be instantly transported to the target entity (one's personal God) who then is often claimed to produce a miracle that is typically not verifiable by the reliable means used in science. Also, the prayer would be one among millions requiring internalization and responsive action from God at every minute. That would truly be magical. Such communications traveling at the speed of light might take years just to travel to and fro. And, how could a God ever personally know and assist four billion humans. Yes, I know that with God all things are possible, supposedly, or is

that just wishful thinking?

The problem I note constantly is that many people don't know how to reliably pursue knowledge or how "to know" the truth or falsity of a proposition (epistemology). In summary, the answer is through reasoning and through the collection of adequate and valid evidence, not through relying on interesting stories and feel-good emotions. In the area of mysticism, which includes religious beliefs, the common claim is that "a lot of things are going on out there." There may be a lot of mystical story telling going on but not necessarily miraculous events. The mystical experiences that people claim to have are well known to be highly unreliable. They are a remnant of our past and are always unproven as a phenomenon.

Even praying is a mystical activity, largely practiced for its psychological benefits. Prayers may seem to have been answered but the claims may be based upon nothing more than assumptions. Many are general requests such as "Lord save us from harm" or "help me control my temper." The help with temper represents a lecture to the self as well as a plea to God. Sometimes one feels he or she has had many prayers answered over time, but perhaps failures weren't counted as people tend to readily excuse God for inactions while the God is said to be serving as a wiser parent to his human child. Sometimes the prayer could be said to be somewhat answered but not definitely answered. Much more could be added but readers should get the drift of why this kind of superficial evaluation provides no usable evidence about whether prayers are answered except where very large numbers of samples are involved. Compare this sloppy methodology to scientific experiments where large sample sizes are required, where successes and failures must be explicitly defined and measured, results must be unambiguous, all aspects of experimental control must be carefully designed and monitored, and the results must be tested for the statistical significance of selected differences between treatments and non-treatments. Thus, typical stories of miracles passed on by believers almost always provide little, if any, useful evidence that miracles have occurred. The latter typically rely on feelings; for example, "I felt Jesus saved me from wrecking." Psychological impulses may become confounded with what a subject assumes is the intervention of mystical entities. See the section on science for more discussion of this topic.

When religions claim to have the one true set of answers to the great questions of life, their specific and often contradictory dogmas become fair game for close investigation. I contend that when examined, all theologies are found to be based on little more than the irrational guesses, hopes and myths of human populations, starting long ago. No doubt religious answers to the great questions of life are capable of providing comfort to followers, and this, more than the reasonableness of the answers, may explain their allure and endurance. But comfort has no necessary relationship to facts, truths, or reasonableness; actually it seems to detract people away from these. Would you want to live a lie to gain additional emotional comfort? Most people have obviously convinced themselves that their own poorly evaluated religious beliefs are valid even as they readily admit to the lack of validity for the preponderance of contrary religious beliefs practiced in our world. Is that not terribly risky, even nonsensical?

I have not accepted the answers provided by any denomination, sect or world religion, because when their claims of literal or approximate truth are pitted against objective evidence, reason, logic and common sense, they seem to all show strong evidence of being contrived. This would be in keeping With the ubiquitous practice of nationalistic mythmaking within the tribes and nations of Biblical times as efforts to enhance their comparative prestige, power, smooth functioning and nationalistic identity. My labeling of religions as myths is in spite of their possible psychological benefits, the good intentions of holy-book writers, and any legitimate ethics, history, philosophy, or literature that the holy books may provide. Nor have I taken this position in order to enjoy sinful pleasures, or to puff up my ego, as some know-nothing preachers often accuse skeptics and atheists of doing, but simply to maintain my personal integrity in thought and action. If this seems shocking, remind yourself that if you don't accept Hindu, Islamic, Shinto, Voodoo, or New Age tenets, then you also are an atheist, skeptic or non-believer, in regard to these faiths.

As I have long felt social constraint against open and detailed discussion of my skeptical views, I may be driven to be dogmatic at times. Give my ideas a hearing; you won't be forced to agree, and it may update you regarding some of the recent developments in Biblical analyses.

Part I

In the Beginning

Chapter 2

My Formative Years

In 1933, during the Great Depression and a long drought, my young parents and I moved from a rented dry-land farm in mid-Nebraska to a homestead soon to be opened to irrigation in western Wyoming. I was less than three years of age. In a clunker car, a Whippet coupe with a rumble-seat, and a milk cow tied to the rear bumper, we headed down the Lincoln Highway toward a site 25 miles west of Riverton, Wyoming, some 600 miles away. The cow, a last minute gift from Grandpa Brooks, was intended to provide milk for me, both along the way and later, but bringing her proved to be a terrible mistake. By the time that we reached Cheyenne, Wyoming, the pathetic cow's ankles had failed. A slaughterhouse took what was left of her. Do the arithmetic on the days spent on the road and the nights we spent in a blanket on the grass in town parks during the 290 miles that the cow walked behind the car. The car died soon after our arrival at our homestead site. We lived without one for three years. Upon arriving at the new project, Dad picked a hundred-acre allotment of sagebrush and rocks, too undulating for easy irrigation, as were many other choices available at the time. The project was surrounded by the Shoshone/Arapahoe American Indian reservation, eight miles away at its closest point.

A sheepherder's wagon was offered to us for spring and summer shelter while Dad built a 14 by 20 foot tar-paper shack out of lumber salvaged from an old building that cost him thirty dollars on credit. Our new home had a dirt roof, outer walls of boards with tar-paper over them and inner walls faced with cardboard taken from common boxes. There was no foundation and no insulation. There were two wildly-eroded sandstone rocks standing upright in what became our immediate front yard, one about nine feet and one six feet high. We had fifteen dollars left. I think a relative loaned us a cow when we arrived. At some time during the first or second year Dad obtained a summer job with the Bureau of Reclamation. A couple of years later, he improved his income by buying a team of horses on credit to pull a dirt scoop in the construction of the Bureau's small water-delivery ditches, each supplying a few farms.

By our third year on the homestead, Dad's twin brother and his family

had also moved to Wyoming. In economic desperation, he, his wife and three daughters aged about two, four, and five, moved into our newly dug cellar/shop, a mere trench in the ground with a door in the one small wooden end-wall and with a roof of logs, brush and dirt covering the trench. Even in these dank, dark and primitive quarters shared with salamanders, Santa Claus paid them a visit that winter, as was typical of our support from neighbors. Later my uncle built a small adobe house on his family's own homestead, about four miles away.

For a few years, we barely managed to exist. We usually ate only bread and milk for supper and often also for breakfast and lunch. Occasionally we ate a cottontail rabbit but some of them were not edible due to tularemia disease. There were almost no vegetables in our diet during the first years. We started a garden in the third year, after some land and farm ditches were finally readied. About five years after our arrival Dad started hunting big game in the relatively distant mountains. The quarters were hung high on the north gable of the house to keep the meat frozen and away from dogs.

For heat, we used fast-burning sagebrush for two or more years and then switched to drift-wood collected from the Wind River, located three miles from our farm. After about eight years we changed to coal. Water in our in-house water-bucket froze on most winter nights, especially prior to our use of coal in a potbellied heater. On such nights, all of our heavy winter coats were spread on top of the available two quilts on each bed, making an uncomfortable load to lift as we inhaled breath. As readers can guess, exhaling was very easy.

It's time to tell you how our religious faith brought us through years of difficult times, but that wouldn't be true. I'm sure the struggle to survive dominated my parent's thoughts and actions, but our being religiously uninvolved obviously was due to more than that. Dad had left home at about age thirteen and may have had little religious indoctrination. In my early years, I can't remember him or any neighborhood men ever mentioning God or church. Mom rarely mentioned a childhood affiliation in a middle-road denomination in her youth. I can remember how strange it felt when she told me that there was a God. I wanted to know where he existed and how it was known, but Mom had few answers then or ever. It seemed as unreal to me as would have duck migrations to Heaven each fall. That concluded my religious education until my early teens.

During our first three years in Wyoming the heaviest spring rains leaked through the mud roof of the house soaking our beds and much of the living area. Try drying out a wet mattress; it's very slow. We placed empty tin cans and buckets on the floor to catch the major leaks, providing noisy music of ping, ping, plunks. The heaviest spring rains also typically turned our dirt road into deep ruts and bogs in which our vehicle sometimes became stuck. Then we had to walk a mile or two in the slimy mud to get home to catch and harness a team of horses, return to the stuck car and pull it home. It usually took two or more hours to do this because workhorses, free-ranging within the farm boundaries, were hard to catch. It could only be done with the help of a good dog.

For four years, household water was hauled from a distance of two miles in a 55 gallon oil drum placed on a wagon pulled by our team of horses, or

hauled to us by a neighbor. Winter bathing was rare. During the first several years, clothing was washed by hand on a scrub board. My long-suffering parents handled all of this with little complaint. However, from a very early age I noticed that Dad sometimes exploded with anger that involved supposed enemies back in Nebraska.

Due first to extreme early poverty, then later to World War II shortages of materials and finally to Dad's worsening schizophrenia, our shack remained the family home for seventeen years. However, during the third year after our arrival Dad put lath and plaster on the shack's inner walls and shingles on the roof. As I grew into my teenage years, the then tiny, tattered-and-torn, tar-paper shack became a major source of embarrassment to me. I already felt humiliated about being scrawny, shy, and having poor posture due to a deformed spine. At age fifteen, I collected and sold a load of used iron so that I could buy rolled-asphalt siding material that made the shack tighter and have a better appearance. But to get out of the all-too-small house, which now contained a sister six-and-a-half years younger, I slept during two summers first in our metal granary with a low level of grain in it, then in a bed in the yard and finally in a canvas tent.

My childhood was deprived in many ways, but we were fortunate that there was caring within our family of four. It wasn't stated or shown by hugs and kisses, but actions and tones of voice told us that caring was there. Looking back on it, I am now surprised at how little complaining any of us did about our continuous hardships. We seemed to accept the cold, the poor food and the poverty as being "the way life is right now." It was getting better. Dad did complain every summer, as do I to this day, that he was a month behind in his work. Hard living was viewed as par for the course and eventually solvable. It helped that our neighbors were nearly as poor as we were.

For eleven years, the local Morton school provided my education. As our community grew in population from the arrival of additional homesteaders, the school expanded rapidly. As a five-year-old I spent a day visiting the one-teacher school that was then housed in a small tar-paper shack located in the sage near the one and only store in Morton. A prairie dog that occupied a hole about six feet in front of the school door received most of my attention that day. A year later a larger log building began housing the school at a new site. By my ninth-grade year, there was an ongoing high-school with an estimated total of twenty-five students (nine male) and two teachers plus a principal. The teachers sometimes had to teach subjects for which they were utterly unprepared (like the shop course), or taught subjects that were inappropriate for most students (like the Latin course taught one year because that was what our eastern bred teacher knew.) It shouldn't come as a shock to be told that students were mostly poorly motivated. I once studied 20 to 30 minutes for a rare test, received an unusual score for me, twice as high as any other male student, and was then told angrily by one of them "don't you ever do that again." My education at that time was not just weak, it was very weak. Most parents in our community, having little education, as well as being dirt-poor and very busy, contributed little to their children's knowledge and motivation. Thus, on initiation day, when we freshmen were told to respond to all questions from upperclassmen with "I am

an ignorant freshman” one pathetic girl responded much of the day, unaware of her error, “I am an igernut freshman.” Yes, the poor girl was igernut. Mom, who had taught school one year in Nebraska after brief normal school teacher training program during high school, did read three or four adventure books to us when my much younger sister was finally mature enough to enjoy them. That may not be quite all, given the untrustworthiness of my memory. I only remember the books *Robinson Crusoe* and *Treasure Island*.

Work dominated our lives, in part because in the early years it was accomplished by very inefficient hand labor and horse power. At age five or six I participated in our uprooting of the last sagebrush by shovel, ax and pulling by hand. As a result of such constant experiences, during my entire life, working hard and long became my saving attribute. Dad who entered the work force after dropping out of seventh grade seemed to feel that working seven long days a week during much of the year was quite normal. Soon, he and two neighbors started sharing the hay cutting and hay stacking work on their three farms to make better use of equipment and labor. Mom helped in the fields during some operations. How sad it is that our mother and father died with little reward for their worries and work without end.

It took us several years to change sage-land into cropland, acquire equipment, clear rocks, survey and dig ditches, build fences and outbuildings, get a well and electricity. We had a very shallow well dug when I was about seven years old. Electricity was made available through a Rural Electrification Program when I was ten or eleven, and we acquired a used three-dollar radio a bit later. Initially, the electricity powered only one 40-watt light bulb within our entire farmstead, at the exorbitant cost of almost three dollars per month for those of us in the low-use category. We almost declined hooking-up due to the perceived high monthly cost. Our groceries usually cost less than \$6.00 per month at this time (flour, salt, sugar, lard).

Newspapers, magazines and books were seldom available to us at home, especially for the first several years in Wyoming. A thoughtful aunt living in Casper occasionally sent us a few used magazines plus marbles and trinkets that she had found. I have never forgotten the day—I was about fourteen—that I had an epiphany of sudden awareness while I was reading articles in a give-away *Reader's Digest* magazine about the joy that can come from learning. Then for some time, my only source of very limited home reading material was a few romance magazines that were passed on to us, but even these taught me something about human nature and perpetuated my limited new-found interest in learning. Eventually, we had access to story books from school but due to morning and evening chores robbing our time I rarely used the new service. However, while living and working in our rough natural setting, especially during a period of daily cow-herding in the sage and rock-piles, I absorbed nature's wonder, majesty, mystery and beauty. These engendered an interest in naturalism and science in general.

A new adobe-block house with only its walls completed couldn't be finished in 1942 due to wartime shortages of materials, and after the war, the exposed mud walls had weathered too seriously to be used. But, by 1943 we had made

enough money farming with horses, and later with an old iron-wheeled tractor, to justify a bank loan buy a new tractor and truck so that we could raise dry beans said to be needed for the war effort. Dry beans were suddenly selling for eleven dollars per hundred weight, up more than three times from their previous price I believe. We paid off most of the loan during the next four years. But Dad's emotional health was threatening to collapse.

Another damaging effect on my life-skills, in addition to backwardness and poor education resulted from my developing a substantial prejudice against what I had labeled in my mind "people in the uppity and snobby middle class." A kernel of this attitude must have been picked up from reading-the romance magazines because I don't remember any such talk from my parents or neighbors. They were unlikely to even know anyone in the middle class. I felt that the main identifying symbol of these enemies was their fancy speech and social falsity, so I certainly didn't want to imitate their language or ways. It became increasingly obvious to me as I advanced through college that this prejudice was quite unjustified. But again, it had slowed my development considerably. As good writing seemed to be less of a capitulation to snobbery than was so-called proper speech, I started with a little upgrading of my writing, but not enough to become snobby myself.

My brief religious journey began when I was about thirteen years old. I had received almost no religious indoctrination at home and I have no memory of ever having been in a church prior to that time. Then a series of evangelizing meetings was conducted by a Seventh Day Adventist minister who came to our attention through the aunt then living nearby. Mom became hooked but not deeply so. Having come into religion late in childhood, it never grabbed me seriously. After twelve years of being close to the soil in what seemed to be a completely natural world, talk about spirits, evil forces and cosmic schemes operating in a mystical universe seemed unreal and even surreal. The idea that some events, outcomes and effects that I had assumed and observed to be caused naturally were actually caused supematurally was counter-intuitive. I hadn't observed any of those weird things happening. Does this not tell us that religious experiences require prior indoctrination? Still, I went along with the new ideas, rather superficially. When I was baptized (dunked under in a cold lake in full clothing), I waited for the Holy Ghost to possibly enthrall me, but instead, I felt more like an embarrassed wet rat as I staggered out of the cold lake.

A small adobe-block church was built in the small mud-street town of Pavilion where a visiting preacher began meeting with six to fifteen of us on a typical Saturday. Things were changing. Years earlier, Dad had ridden a horse into this village, some four miles distant, in order to quell his nicotine fit with a self-rolled Bull Durham cigarette costing five cents per bag of tobacco.

I remember that one naughty boy, after church tied the tails of two cows together (as they grazed the church yard) with disgusting results. He said it was even more fun to tie the tails of two cats together and throw one of the pair over a clothes line. That produced a show worthy of the name, he said. Such cruelty for so brief an entertainment was somewhat typical of area farm

boys. One young neighbor showed me how he caught magpies and crows by attaching a kernel of corn to a cord that was in turn staked to the ground so that when a bird swallowed the kernel it was trapped. During the period in which firecrackers were available, he would insert a large red one up the bird's cloacae (anus), light it and throw the bird upward. At about 40 feet height, the bird would explode. It was impressive but not something I wanted to do.

Later, our involvement in the Adventist Church (minus Dad) became yet another embarrassment to me, in that I was not able to play basketball on Friday nights because the Sabbath starts at sundown on Friday. That made me feel that I was different from my peers, perhaps even seen as weird by them. Our small high school had no gym so we practiced occasionally at the Ethete Indian school. We would have been overmatched by a trained 6th grade girls' team. Thankfully my sister was eventually able to join 4-H, and social conditions in general were getting better for her. By then, Mom could sometimes think about more than surviving.

To reduce my emotional stress and crowding at home, I decided to attend the Adventist school in Colorado. I continued in church schools for two years, including the first year of college. There I enjoyed good teaching and a better social life at last, in spite of working a lot to finance my tuition. But, fundamentalist teachings cast a pall of fear upon me associated with their belief in hell, damnation and a thunderous second-coming where most people will not be taken up. It struck me as being a slaughterhouse religion led by good people.

To provide an idea of how isolated and backward I still was, at age seventeen, when I arrived late in the day at the town nearest to the rural Seventh Day Adventist high school in Colorado that I was scheduled to attend my senior year, I needed to telephone the school's staff to come and get me at my hotel. But, since I had never belonged to any youth organizations, never been around important people, including unknown teachers, seldom spoken to strangers and had never placed a telephone call before, the task seemed equivalent to addressing Congress. I spent a full half-hour in my motel room, dialing, then quaking, gasping, sweating and giving up over and over, before I finally made telephone contact. My shyness continued, but in decreasing degree. Pushing through timidity during that period of time seemed too painful to be endured, so I kept avoiding much-needed opportunities to do so. Sheer ignorance also often plagued my life. On my first date at age seventeen, with a girl I liked, I didn't know that kissing during a date was nearly always done on the lips, so I only kissed her on the cheek . . . several times. On a later date she showed me how it should be done. Ah! It was great, and somehow, it provided a little revenge on the world that had caused my backwardness.

During the year spent in the church's college, our Biology class received a week of lectures on the topic of special creation versus evolution. Suddenly it became obvious to me that the professor was advocating the wrong conclusion. After that first suspicion, I rushed to my room and began to read Genesis. It sounded far less plausible to me as a potential new skeptic than it had as a quasi-believer who had had no interest in asking himself: does this or that make sense. This soon led to my suspicion of the whole Bible story and led to

a bit of secular reading about the history of Christianity the next year at the University of Wyoming library where I discovered the writings of Thomas and Julian Huxley, Bertrand Russell and other philosophers. But, I must backtrack to wrap up the homestead story.

Within a decade many of the farms in our area had become increasingly unproductive due to alkali and bog developing from irrigation water pooling in the low areas. Nineteen years after homesteading it, the folks sold our farm for \$6,000. By then it had a modest new five-room log home on it, which occasional volunteers and I had built. Unfortunately, Dad's schizophrenia had worsened to the degree that he was given a lobotomy operation that destroyed him as a functional human being. He was a smoker, and in his condition, he accidentally set his easy chair on fire three different times. He was always at risk of becoming lost and he was quite uncooperative. He thus became a major problem to Mom who had joined me in the College town of Laramie and taken a job as a motel maid. Hardship sometimes has no end.

My parents spent their meager income from the farm sale to buy a very old house in Laramie that contained three apartments (plus an additional single room) for both their personal use and rentals. I worked my way through a BS degree with low paying jobs and later also remodeled the apartments. After military service in Germany, I completed an MS degree program and was employed by the Wyoming Cooperative Extension Service. With modest financial help from the peacetime GI bill, I eventually obtained a Ph D degree and still later did a little post-doctoral course work to retool after years of work in Afghanistan.

I'm very pleased to say that my sister and her reliable husband have done very well, as we country folk are prone to say, but my father, who almost never took a day off from work, and who always talked to me in a warm, loving tone was a vegetable at age forty-nine, a calamity exceeding even the earlier hardships he had endured. Mom toiled valiantly as a motel maid for the remainder of her working life in Laramie and Rock Springs, Wyoming, where our parents had followed me and later my sister. She accumulated about \$14,000 of savings during her life, from years of working at minimum wage or very near to it (my sister and I joked that her secret for economic survival was her habit of eating chicken backs on sale). The work became too hard for her as she aged, but she had no other choice until her retirement on very small but much appreciated social security payments, eventually complemented by partially subsidized housing.

After marrying Kay, a high-school teacher, we spent nearly thirteen total years working overseas, excluding my military time. My first assignment was with the University of Wyoming Team, teaching, researching, consulting and physically developing a College of Agriculture in Kabul, Afghanistan, funded by USAID. Our two children were born in Afghanistan. Years later, I served in Tanzania, first as an administrator of a post-secondary Agricultural school, followed by serving as a member of a national agricultural manpower survey team and lastly for four years supervising a farmer-training project, all while employed by West Virginia University. Between the foreign assignments, I worked

as the Supervisor of the Native American Extension program for Montana State University. We had Agricultural and Home Economics agents and aides serving seven tribes and two Community Development projects.

My breadth of practical skills was quite useful in my work in developing countries where problem solving was often vital. As an example, when we were in the bush country of Tanzania, new microscopes arrived at our veterinary school without lights for them, I had a dozen lights made out of coffee cans and other simple materials that worked fine, with no loss of training time. National instability has, as so often happens, largely decimated the substantial physical and educational developments that our USAID/Wyo Team project had jointly created at Kabul University. Our Team of good people was largely staffed by seriously religious people so my skeptical views again needed to be stifled.

Soon after Kay retired it was obvious that she had Alzheimer's disease. Thankfully, during her four remaining good years following her retirement, we took a number of wonderful trips, mostly in the United States. By then it was time to take the car keys from her. We moved to Idaho Falls, Idaho, to be near to our daughter, her husband and children and our unmarried son. It was the best decision of our lives. As an ex-teacher and as a person somewhat prone to anxiety Kay displayed a mind of her own and was very active during her first few years with Alzheimer's disease, sometimes making her difficult to care for. Tragically for a person so full of life, she lived with the disease for twelve years. She died two years ago.

I've written this essay because I strongly believe that religious beliefs should not be exempt from examination and discussion. It is my hope that this essay will promote readers to learn more, think about their beliefs, and participate in honest dialog about religious beliefs with others.

Chapter 3

Three Great Questions

The speaker at my neighbor's funeral, repeating the questions shown in Gauguin's famous painting, said: "Religion answers the three great questions that have plagued mankind over the centuries. Those are: how did I get here? why am I here? and, where am I going?" Many religions claim to have answers to these questions, but their claimed causative agents are so diverse as to make belief in any one of them irrational. In asking "how did I get here?" the originator of the three great questions was suggesting that obviously his or her God created everything. There also had to be a reason or purpose for God's creation of humans, so, he or she added "why am I here?" and "where am I going?" which religion was also assumed to answer.

How did I get here? All explanations for the existence of the physical universe and all that it contains are difficult to imagine. A "god-did-it answer" is a belief that is for me too close to old fashioned magic which assumed a bevy of powerful spirit forces. A naturalistic big bang is probable, but questions remain about it. The issue is utterly mind-boggling. As matter is deconstructed further in particle colliders, it is showing itself to be weird at the subatomic level but its further study could plausibly lead to better understandings of matter/energy's origins. The known laws of nature handle the operation of the universe, but the creation of matter/energy and its related laws, or its existence without creation, remains as our major super-sized mystery. A creating God hypothesis doesn't reduce this dilemma for me.

One aspect of origin that does seem certain is that life-forms have evolved in general, as is clearly evidenced in the occasionally unmixed geological layers of sediments, each representative of periods in which only age-appropriate fossils are found. Probably, the evolutionary process began simply two or three-billion-years ago when some appropriate molecules, including heavy ones, first kept company with each other in earth's warm, moist areas. Religions are claimed to have the answers to our human existence, but do they? Show me some real evidence. First, which of dozens of origin stories, divine purposes and godly histories should one believe? Certainly we humans are mystified by the fact of our existence in a very complex and gigantic universe and many people seem

desperate to find what may appear to be a simple supernatural answer. But even if we accept the premise that one or another God created matter/energy, life forms and consciousness, wouldn't it obviously leave unanswered the even greater mystery of the God's own origin, and the ability of such a spirit entity to create a fantastically enormous and complex universe with a shazzam-like action, out of nothing. If the watch found on the beach had to have been made by someone, somewhere, wouldn't God have had the same need? The origin of matter/energy remains a difficult and perhaps everlasting mystery, even as thousands of other mysteries have been solved via natural means in recent centuries.

Philosophers have been debating the existence of gods for more than 2500 years without notable agreement. Thus, my intent is to avoid that dead-end street as much as possible and to explore the reasonableness of many of the Bible's claims-to-truth, thereby looking for mythmaking in Biblical stories. However, in doing this, the Judeo-Christian God will automatically and unavoidably take continuous criticism from me in the minds of readers, as the claimed causal agent behind the suspect Christian theological propositions. This essay is not intended to evaluate the various gods. It is meant to evaluate the reasonableness of the Bible's many claims and stories under the assumed management of its Biblical God or Gods. If the Bible stories fail these tests, their God or Gods will fail with them.

The Christian Bible, like the many other so-called holy books of our world, is a leftover from humankind's more primitive past when the truth of a matter was of much less concern to storytellers than it is today and mythologizing via storytelling was common. Then, stories didn't need to be carefully verified by evidence and reason so the door was open wider to story expansion. Mythmaking is a simple and natural process of gradually embellishing a story, often purposively. After many minor changes over time, collective changes can become major. As an example, mythmaking within the Four Gospels developed rapidly during their sixty-year writing period, post-Jesus, spurred by the ever present competitive rumors, stories, written materials and refined assumptions reached by both individuals and community discussion groups. Thus the Jesus that is presented in the final Gospel of John is not the Jesus of the earlier Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke. That's mythmaking at its rapid best as will be shown.

Mankind seems to long for the order, continuity and simplicity which a God may seem to provide, but the order and simplicity depicted in Genesis doesn't exist. In Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, he states that there are about 100 billion galaxies in our universe (137). Thus there may be trillions of cosmic bodies that are crashing into each other, gathering new matter or losing matter at every moment. Stars explode, cosmic material is drawn into black holes, bodies drift apart or are violently drawn together with other bodies and suns/stars/planets/gases expend their finite energy. On our planet, much degeneration occurs from catabolic processes like oxidation. Surface heat and atmosphere may be lost or gained; terrains erode or push up; continents drift; weather patterns change and species come and go, along

with ecotypes. Change is ceaseless and everywhere and most of it is quite explainable by natural laws. Until scientists find cases where nature's laws have unambiguously been suspended by divine acts in the midst of such chaos, no mystical explanation should be accepted. There simply isn't a well-evidenced answer to cosmic origin, natural or godly. Note though that the real universe is perhaps a trillion times larger than the one God created in Genesis. This is an example of the application of reason; the Genesis story as told has to be invalid and thus be suspected of being the invention of humans.

Could the matter/energy of the universe have existed eternally in some form? If so, it would counter the human experience of everything requiring a beginning and would probably counter the amount of entropy (homogeneity) of matter/energy which an endless timescale would seem to demand. String theory and multiple universes offer some interesting possible scenarios but are not uniformly accepted or necessarily pertinent to this dilemma. We may unsuccessfully face the existence mystery forever. Right now we don't even understand the massive amount of dark matter in our universe that is thought to weigh more than the total of observable matter.

Is it any wonder that we humans have created gods in all cultures, at all times and places, in part to answer this great, great mystery? Humans seem to abhor a major void in knowledge and many quickly gravitate toward simple magical explanations. Let's avoid false answers to the cosmic origin mystery by allowing this unknown and perhaps permanently unknowable mystery to remain simply unknown. Our human experience is so puny and so brief, that we cannot hope to deal with the all-that-is, and that holds equally for the oft-claimed and never verified supernatural explanations. Unfortunately, leaders of fundamentalist religions claim their specific religion is factual rather than a mere possibility among many.

So, "how did I get here?" If I include the crucial origin of the universe as part of my getting here, my answer is, I don't know and I propose that neither does anyone else. Secondly, "why am I here?" I evolved along with my species. Nature blundered into a means for species change, an evolutionary process that over eons of time yielded thousands of small beneficial changes for a given species of organism. This will be discussed more fully under the heading "evolution." "Where am I going" is answered by my observation of many dead-animal carcasses as they enriched the soil upon which they died. I expect blissful and permanent rest from my sleep of death and I am truly peaceful in contemplating it. Such a death is not horrible or frightening to me in my seventy-seventh year of life. What would be infinitely more horrible is existence in the everlasting fires of hell that the Bible, taken literally, seems to promise for all but a faithful few people. That can't stand as an example of a moral God's supposed love for humans. I believe that the Jews designed their God to be cruel, in part to reduce bad human behavior. That required that Old Testament writers make the absent manager of the earth stern and threatening with his human subjects. Salvation in an afterlife was the New Testament God's carrot and hell was his stick.

Part II

The Old Testament

Chapter 4

A Fast-Trip Critique of the Literal Old Testament

I stated earlier that the lack of reasonableness in many Biblical stories and claims was one of the Bible's four major shortcomings. Compared to our universe's size, with its probable trillions of celestial bodies, the "Biblical universe" of one planet is the equivalent of one speck of dust in comparison to the size of the earth (the stars, sun, and moon were thought to be lighted holes in an earth-covering mantle). Thus, our earth is by a factor of perhaps trillions of trillions too insignificant for our cosmic God's special focus and favors. How can the humans occupying such a comparatively dust-speck-sized piece of cosmic matter ever imagine themselves to be important enough to justify the attention of a grand cosmic God? The earth-centered and young-earth assumptions of the Bible further imply strongly that it was written without divine guidance. As a result of such content, some Christians wisely accept Biblical Old Testament stories metaphorically, rather than literally. We will later see that the New Testament stories require such a perspective as well.

I am suspicious that the Hebrew writers had the Serpent coax Eve to eat the forbidden fruit to justify the presence of evil among humans that were embarrassingly said to be newly created by an all-powerful and moral God. I noted that the Bible asks me to believe that our Christian God created the universe, including man, about 4000 to 6000 BCE, with an apparent original intent for man to live forever. But Eve's eating of the forbidden fruit ended that and mankind became cursed by death, pain, and labor, forever. Taken literally, this was strange behavior for an omniscient, omnipotent and loving God who surely knew his rule about the tree of life was going to cause the fall of mankind, and knew that cursing innocent future generations of offspring with resultant penalties was immoral. I know it's just a little myth that should be ignored, but once I allow it, how will I know when the truths start or end.

Next, and much later, I noted that God became remorseful about creating wicked humankind, and felt it necessary to wipe out almost all living people and

animals on earth via a world-wide flood. Isn't such a flood both terrible planning for an all-knowing and future-seeing God and an absolutely evil solution, or are we still in myth mode? Later still, God used Abraham and his descendants as the means of originating the tribes of Israel, wherein he then supposedly functioned as a tribal God to the Israelites for about 2000 years prior to Jesus, and did so in contradiction to his apparent original intent to serve as a worldwide God. Then, God sometimes assisted the Israelites in slaughtering their enemies, including children, women and animals. Doesn't this fly directly into the face of the claim that God loves us, his human subjects? Ah yes, at this time he was the God of the Jews and he apparently had only to love them. It's obvious why some Christian denominations downplay the Old Testament.

Then, according to Christians and their New Testament writings, God switched to his third plan for mankind, deciding to again serve "all" people on earth by sending his Son, heretofore unknown, to earth to die a terrible death, so as to save believers-in-the-son from the everlasting deaths that God-the-father otherwise apparently had to carry out. For most of the next 1800 years CE after Jesus, even God the father was not yet known by many people of the world. What is to be the fate of the majority of all people who have ever lived, having no awareness of the Judeo-Christian God or his Son, as required for salvation? Is this Biblical tale about a cosmic, all-knowing, all-powerful, and future-seeing God, who claims to love his subjects, not more than a little unreasonable? To me, God's frailties leap out of the story, as though they are the unassisted work of primitive humans. I am sorry to be so blunt, but the story itself demands it. God's supposed omniscient, omnipotent and übermoral nature is incompatible with his actions. This could certainly serve as a reason to mellow one's surety in Biblical claims.

Members of some conservative Christian denominations believe that when Jesus returns as king, he will take back control of our world from Satan who now controls it. That does not seem to fit an omnipotent God. These Christians may also say that Christians don't believe in religion but rather believe in God or Jesus. Any such dogma is a religion to me. I leave these last two claims for the readers to decipher. But, could Jesus have been God the Father incognito? That gets rid of the three entity godhead problem, but one then has to ask oneself why the ruler of a trillion bodied universe would be willing to spend thirty-two years carpentering and wandering about the rural areas of Palestine, just to gain a few Jewish followers before his death and to gain less than forty percent of the earth's people after 2000 years of spreading his message. The number of people who were never gained as converts over the past 2000 years is several times larger collectively than the ones gained.

John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." His verses 1:2-5 further describe this Word which obviously refers to Jesus. But in all of Genesis, I found nothing to support Saint John in his claim. Don't allow a conservative minister to convince you that the word "Word" as found in John 1:1-5 stands as legitimate evidence of Jesus' existence in heaven at the time of the earth's creation. My view is that this claim originated from desperation on the part of the Gospel writer

John who needed to show that Jesus existed before his birth on earth in order to bind Christianity to the Old Testament and to make God appear to have had a rational plan for Jesus from creation onward. Some modern theologians place John's writing as much as 125 years after Jesus' birth, a very late date to make the claim that Jesus' origin paralleled that of God the Father from the beginning. The Old Testament wasn't aware of this. Why wouldn't God's "word" have referred to "the words of God?"

The human motives for God-belief are very transparent. Beyond the obvious personal rewards sought, humans have aggrandized themselves by being worthy of the attentions and purposes of a cosmic God, and the same is also true for the United States and Israeli nations. God's personal association with the Jews provided prestige, identity, and community to them, plus a stick that their rulers and prophets used to maintain social order and political control. Tribal leaders felt themselves and their nation to be more secure given their God's assistance and prestige. That's powerful motivation. Further, the prophets had an uncanny message-sharing line of communications with God that made it possible for them to pass predictions and warnings to the kings and the nation. Their main motive was likely to help the Israelites become a viable, cohesive, proud, and motivated group in order to endure in their hostile world. Psychologically, a personal God may have filled the holes in people's souls, slackened their fears, and answered the mystery of their existence. This short overview of the Old Testament leaves hundreds of other incongruities unexamined, but a more important one follows.

Chapter 5

The Old Testament Unearthed

First, isn't the idea of a cosmic God catering to only one group or tribe, among many in the world, quite ridiculous? Then, note what has happened to the Promised Land and its "Chosen People" over the past 1900 years? The Promised Land turned into a hellhole for the Jewish tribes who were gradually forced to largely abandon it in the 70's CE for nearly 1800 years. If the sinfulness of the Jews was at fault, and God knew this in advance, what was the saving grace in his having a special tribe in the first place? And, if the world is actually managed by Satan, can the Jews still be God's Chosen People? Some people insist that the Jewish God was the first monotheistic God generated historically, even though the Jews worshiped several other Gods until about 500 BCE. And, where does Jesus fit into this scheme? Yet, the Jews did describe and follow a more reasonable God than did the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Greeks and the Romans.

Recent archaeological and historical evidence shows that the early Old Testament stories were put into writing or rewritten in the seventh century BCE by prophets and others in Judah to create an aura of grandeur and grand history that would strengthen the tribes' relationship with God. It would also strengthen the will of the people to support their religion, improve the national image of Judah, a small, poor and vulnerable country within an area that tyrants trod, and strengthen the potential for confederating with the tribes of Israel. Reliable evidence has been found that makes the more ancient stories of Moses, King David, Solomon and the exodus, impossible as told. We may logically assume these stories to be folklore. The Old Testament writers may have needed them so much that they convinced themselves that the stories were history. A very interesting book on these topics is discussed below.

The following material is extracted from a single source, a book entitled *The Bible Unearthed—Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*, by Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman. These

authors/scholars, a Biblical archaeologist and a historian respectively, make a strong case against the reliability of the Old Testament's historical record of the Israelite tribes. They offer in lieu a shockingly new tribal history that other archaeologists working in Israel are apparently moving toward. They venture to explain why Old Testament writers took extreme measures to lengthen, glorify and glamorize the tribal history of Israel and its God. The authors rely on abundant archaeological and historical evidence in drawing their conclusions, en route to telling a fascinating and very professional story. Finkelstein is an active archaeologist in Israel and Silberman is Director of Historical Interpretation for the Enam Center in Belgium. They are solid mainstream researchers who are worthy of being taken very seriously. I hope my few pages of condensed information and numerous quotes will adequately represent the views of the authors of this excellent book. I will quote a few comments taken from the authors' introductory material before looking briefly at a sampling of their evidence.

We are first reminded about what the Bible's Old Testament is. In the authors' view:

It is a divine drama played out before the eyes of humanity... It offers a complex yet clear vision of *why* history has unfolded for the people of Israel—and indeed for the entire world—in a pattern directly connected with the demands and promises of God. The people of Israel are the central actors in this drama. Their behavior and their adherence to God's commandments determine the direction in which history will flow. (8)

But the history in the Bible is not always clear or reliable. In Genesis there are two partial stories of creation, two different genealogies of Adam's offspring and two spliced and rearranged flood stories, according to the authors.

The early books of the Bible were first codified and in part composed in Jerusalem in the seventh century BCE, say the authors (5). The contents at that time were sometimes in scraps and pieces and were designed to fit the political and religious needs at the time of each Biblical author's writing. God was referred to as YHWH or Yahweh in some stories and as El or Elohim in other stories by different composers writing in different times, showing an evolution of doctrine rather than godly revelation (12). The 5th Book, Deuteronomy, stood out as being very different, having a transcendent God, and a requirement that worship be restricted to the temple in Jerusalem. The next several books of the Bible carefully followed Deuteronomy's theological lead (13). Then, the important historical books of Chronicles were written in the fourth or fifth century BCE, long after the events they describe supposedly occurred (14).

The first wave of archaeologists to explore the Biblical lands was motivated to find evidence to validate the ancient stories in the Bible. For a while it seemed to be working, these authors say. For example, many ancient sites or towns named in the Bible were found to have existed (14). In more recent decades, meaningful findings utilizing new archaeological knowledge and techniques of excavation revealed enough contradictions with the stories in the Bible's Old Testament

to suggest that the Biblical history of Israel was not completely reliable (9-23). The authors point out that a society sophisticated enough to produce well written materials such as those found in the Torah also exhibits distinctive pottery and architectural styles, record keeping, state formation, centralization, economic specialization, networks of communities and more. But they say that archaeology has shown no such development whatsoever in Judah until toward the end of the eighth century BCE or about 250 years after the rule of Kings David and Solomon. The authors also say:

Archaeology can show that the Torah and the Deuteronomistic History bear unmistakable hallmarks of their initial compilation in the seventh century BCE. Why this is so and what it means for our understanding of the great biblical saga is the main subject of this book. . . . Much of what is commonly taken for granted as accurate history—the stories of the patriarchs, the Exodus, the conquest of Canaan, and even the saga of the glorious monarchy of David and Solomon—are, rather, largely the creative expressions of a powerful religious reform movement that flourished in the kingdom of Judah in the Late Iron Age. (23)

The other major error of the Bible's tribal story is that of making the split-off northern tribes, called Israel, seem to be far more inclusive with the tribe of Judah than was true. The separation of these tribal groupings was clearly great and was permanent, according to archaeological and historical findings. The authors tell us that the story of the Israelite nation is actually a story of two kingdoms, not one, divided by circumstances. The following long quote explains this:

One kingdom—the kingdom of Israel—was born in the fertile valleys and rolling hills of northern Israel and grew to be among the richest, most cosmopolitan, and most powerful in the region. Today it is almost totally forgotten, except for the villainous role it plays in the biblical books of Kings. The other kingdom—the kingdom of Judah—arose in the rocky, inhospitable southern hill country. It survived by maintaining its isolation and fierce devotion to its temple and royal dynasty. These two kingdoms represent two sides of ancient Israel's experience, two quite different societies with different attitudes and national identities. Step by step we will trace the stages by which the history, memory, and hopes of both kingdoms were merged powerfully into a single scripture, that more than any other document ever written, shaped—and continues to shape—the face of western society. (24)

Verification of the stories of the patriarchs, beginning with Abraham's settlement in Canaan in about 2100 BCE, failed for a number of reasons. There was no Amorite migration of people into Canaan at this time, as some scholars had once thought. The camels that the Bible speaks about had not yet been

domesticated as beasts of burden in the 2100 BCE period. Rather, camel bones (nearly all from adult camels used in caravan trade) were first noted to appear in large numbers in Canaan in the seventh century. And, the Philistines whom Isaac encountered had not established their settlements, including that in Gerar, until after the year 1200. Finkelstein and Silberman conclude, “All the clues point to a time of composition [of the Bible’s first books] many centuries after the time in which the Bible reports that the lives of the patriarchs took place” (38). The authors suggest that the eighth and seventh centuries are more likely periods of origination of patriarch stories.

The logic behind the Jews’ earlier-than-fact historical claims, as presented in the Bible, will be further developed later, but it can be said now that in claiming a long and glorious national past, writers hoped that the Jewish people would be more zealous than they had been previously in trying to please their ever-unhappy tribal God. Thus, they reasoned, God would in return be more zealous in assisting Judah to finally enjoy a true promised land in their otherwise very insecure situation of being a tiny nation, located among a mix of peoples and caught in the crossroads of stronger nations. Apparently, the patriarch stories could therefore be seen as necessary fabrications. They were probably based upon vague memories of ancient local traditions, say the book’s authors. The Bible’s history of the patriarchs certainly can’t simply be delayed until the eighth or seventh centuries BCE. That late period had its own unique history which is well verified by research, leaving no time in history for the early patriarchs presented in the Torah.

After the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrian empire in 720 BCE, Judah, its smaller and much weaker pastoral neighbor to the south, finally grew rapidly in population, complexity and wealth during a period of relative peace. Finkelstein and Silverman suggest that “it saw its very survival as evidence of God’s intention, from the time of the patriarchs, that Judah should rule over all the land of Israel” (44). It needed a powerful way to express this hope and a plan for pan-Israelite unity, with Judah acting as its center. The stories of Abraham and his family, the Exodus, King David’s exploits and more, were therefore a way to pretend an idealized joint history of the two traditions in furtherance of Judah’s never-dying hope of unification. This is not intended to deny some ancient sharing of bloodlines, but only to deny past unity of the kingdoms. The book’s authors say, “both J of the Pentateuch and the Deuteronomistic History were written in the seventh century BCE in Judah, in Jerusalem, when the northern kingdom of Israel was no more” (46).

Was there an exodus out of Egypt? Finkelstein and Silberman point out that Egypt’s borders were closely controlled by 1300 BCE, that there were numerous Egyptian security forts en route to and along the border, that there has been no archaeological evidence of Israelites living in Egypt and none of their multi-year encampment sites found in the Sinai. Most importantly, there is no evidence of Israelites living in Egypt in the well-kept Egyptian records of the time, as there were of other immigrant groups once living there. Lastly, it would have been improbable for thousands of people to survive for 40 years in the hostile Sinai, if manna and water from God are discredited. The book’s authors believe “the

Israelites emerged only gradually as a distinct group in Canaan, beginning at the end of the thirteenth century BCE” (57). They were as yet few in number, very poor, mostly a scattered group of pastoralists.

Readers must keep one fact in mind. The people who wrote the Bible were concerned principally with theology and thus the promotion of theology was deemed to be more important than was the validity of their tribes’ historical record. In the minds of their prophets and priests, all events and outcomes were according to the will of God. And man was at the center of God’s concern. God functioned as their good spirit only when people pleased him, and he could punish people individually or collectively when displeased. This put pressure on Old Testament writers to inspire their fellow citizens to please God so that the Israelite nation would survive and prosper. Stories of heroes and a glorious past might inspire tribal members to behave appropriately by their internalization of a proud tribal heritage. The more lawless persons within the nation might best be controlled by developing a sense of pride, dignity and an ethos of responsibility. Yet in spite of the constant badgering by the priests and prophets, according to the Old Testament there is much historical and physical evidence that the Israelites were quite uncontrollable. Our authors say they worshipped other gods rather casually until approximately the time of King Josiah in the sixth century and the Babylonian exile in the fifth century BCE. It is now known that the first books of the Bible were not fully developed until as late as the fifth century BCE during the Babylonian captivity of Israel’s leaders.

Finkelstein and Silberman discuss several archaeological discoveries that had been previously used to verify the older biblical stories. These included impressive city gates and temples in several sites once thought to be the work of the great builder Solomon. The authors say that many of these archaeological props are now being called into question:

Digging in Jerusalem has failed to produce evidence that it was a great city in David and Solomon’s time. And the monuments ascribed to Solomon are now most plausibly connected with other kings. Thus a reconsideration of the evidence has enormous implications. For if there were no patriarchs, no Exodus, no conquest of Canaan—and no prosperous united monarchy under David and Solomon—can we say that early biblical Israel, as described in the Five Books of Moses and the books of Joshua, Judges, and Samuel, ever existed at all? (124)

Therefore, could one not also ask whether their God ever existed at all? Note God’s unfulfilled promise to David in 2 Samuel 7:16: “And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established for ever.” Also note the grandiose mythmaking in 1 Kings 10:23-24: “Thus King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind.” This definitely sounds like mythmaking as does the kingdom of David being made sure forever.

Much of Judah had rough, unproductive land. Moisture was scarce, so until about the seventh century, the sparse inhabitants were mostly very poor herders. The towns were small, poor and shabby. The authors say, “David and Solomon’s homeland of Judah was conspicuously undeveloped—and there is no evidence whatever of the wealth of a great empire flowing back to it” (140). Further, the palaces in Syria that were said to be the prototypes for those of Solomon in Megiddo are known not to have been in existence in Solomon’s time. Carbon-14 dating of wood in the ruins from the gates and palace of Megiddo show them to be constructed in the mid-ninth century, again long after Solomon. The gates and stables of Gezer, Megiddo, and Hazor, once thought to be built by Solomon following the conquests of David and Joshua in Canaan are also known to be products of the ninth century BCE (137). The authors suggest that Jerusalem may have been no more than a small village in the tenth century BCE. They state:

There is absolutely no archaeological indication of the wealth, manpower, and level of organization that would be required to support large armies—even for brief periods—in the field. (134)

Tenth century pottery shards found in Jerusalem also show the simplicity one finds in backward societies (133).

In 622 BCE, during the reign in Judah of the righteous King Josiah, a miraculous discovery was made that led to sweeping religious reforms and renewed dedication to God. A book called Book of the Law was said to be suddenly discovered in the temple. The authors of *The Bible Unearthed* condense several pages of discussion into these thoughts, “To sum up, there is little doubt that an original version of Deuteronomy is the Book of the Law mentioned in 2 Kings. Rather than being an old book that was suddenly discovered, it seems safe to conclude that it was written in the seventh century BCE, just before or during Josiah’s reign” (281). Also stated was “The discovery of the Book of the Law was an event of paramount significance to the subsequent history of the people of Israel. It was regarded as the definitive law code given by God to Moses at Sinai, whose observance would ensure the survival of the people of Israel” (281). My comment is that it obviously didn’t work during the long and troubled period 85 to 1950 CE.

My personal observation is that those Israelites taken hostage to Babylon in the fifth century BCE, obviously very sad and confused, eventually began to look for an explanation for their God’s lack of support, to look for solace and to look for redemption. They turned again to studying and rewriting their holy books. Once again their religion united and motivated them. And so continues the evidence of story enhancement and story fabrication in the Jewish scriptures as demonstrated in Finkelstein and Silberman’s book. The results of numerous digs, of carbon dating of artifacts, of historical writings from surrounding nations and of analysis of Old Testament content, continue to show that the historical facts of life for ancient Israel varied greatly from those described in their holy writings. In summary, the tribes of Judah produced a book (the Old Testament)

that has inspired and intrigued the peoples of many nations and that became a major component of the world's most influential book (45).

Our final question about the history found in the Old Testament should be whether it is inspired by God or is just a mythic story about ancient life and beliefs in Israel. The tremendous amount of historical inaccuracy now known to exist in it does not give me confidence in the validity of its romantic tale. Rather, I feel it stands as a classic example of mythmaking, something that was common, if not ubiquitous, among the nations and tribes of the region in those times. Another prominent feature of the area in the 500 BCE era was its multitude of gods, one real and all others false, we are asked to believe. Regardless of historical inaccuracy, I recognize the Hebrew Bible as being a comparatively well reasoned and very well written story that codified its religion and tribal history, whether accurate or not.

Chapter 6

God's Ethics and Communications with Humankind

In liberating Christianity, it would be helpful to identify some of the Bible's major shortcomings and absurdities as well as some of the Biblical Gods' harmful requirements. It will be almost impossible to discuss the following three topics gently, so if my bluntness becomes intolerable, pass over the topics. First, I conclude God had no reasonable excuse for instituting his original-sin policy where all people are said to be paying for the original sin of Adam and Eve. It's morally wrong, wrong, wrong. And, if the population of angels in heaven is exempt from sin, suffering and death, why not the human one on earth? The excuses for God seem feeble. The Bible's usual explanation, especially in the Old Testament, seems to be that every immoral or unhelpful act of God was made necessary by the horrible sinfulness of human beings. If so, who was it that created us with this nature and then turned the Great Deceiver loose on us? The supposedly sinful and free-will status of mankind doesn't excuse its creator, in my view. This claim strikes me as being the result of Biblical writers' grasping for straws to explain their God's obvious bumbling management of the universe and its human subjects. Worse yet, it seems that the Judeo-Christian God must have had criminal-like intent when he created, and then allowed, a proselytizing evil force (Satan and helpers) to operate freely among his supposedly-much-loved-but-sin-prone people; and when he designed raw nature, with its premature death, pain, suffering, starvation, parasites, diseases, deformities, mental deficiencies, animals eating live animals and natural disasters randomly ruining the lives of saints as well as sinners. And, God's afterlife policy, stating that only a chosen few will be saved, seems out of character for a loving God. Readers should note that the claim of those Christians who maintain that Satan is in control of this world, until the second coming of Jesus, dodges my complaint about unreasonable circumstances but makes the

supposed Supreme Ruler of the universe very weak and utterly out of character. If Satan is in full and constant control of the earth's people until such time as Jesus returns, what happened to God's omnipotence and omniscience? And, why would God suddenly gain the power or gumption to dispose of Satan upon Jesus' return to earth? This is nonsensical. Furthermore, the penchant for the God of the Old Testament to be highly jealous of other gods and his need for constant supplication, praise and servitude from humans strikes me as being egotistical and weak; yes, as being very ungodly. Lastly, if angels have avoided an evil nature and the subsequent risks of Hell that humans face, doesn't that establish an unfair class system against humans? Yes, I am bringing supposedly inferior human judgment against my supposed God or his fabricators. That judgment is good enough to note reasonableness and fairness, and that's all the proposed God gave me, if such exists.

One would expect God to approve of human reasoning given humankind's practical need for it in its struggle to survive. Yet, Richard Dawkins in *The God Delusion* tells us, "Martin Luther was well aware that reason was religion's arch-enemy, and he frequently warned of its dangers: He quotes from Luther, 'Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but more frequently than not struggles against the divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God. . . . Whoever wants to be a Christian should tear the eyes out of his reason. . . . Reason should be destroyed in all Christians' " (190). As a result, this line of thinking has promoted the subtle smothering of the use of intellect.

In regard to God's communications with mankind, my question and my great frustration with the Bible's fabulous claims is this: if there is a fantastic mystical power manipulating the all-that-is, and if that power (God) is greatly concerned about mankind's ability to join him in an eternal paradise, why are we humans still divided over whether he even exists, and over which God is the true one? There is something very, very wrong in this plot. If he exists, the Christian God's communications to all of mankind have been very weak and slow but understandable if viewed as part of a mythic tale concocted and written about by human groups two to three thousand years ago. Wouldn't a God be able to, and wish to, forcefully and unambiguously make his presence, identity and plan for humankind known to every human on earth from day one via spectacular proclamations and miracles? Why was the Biblical God revealed to humans so terribly late historically, revealed to so few people at any one time in history, and employing such a slow scheme for informing people? Abraham is said to be the founder of the Israelite tribes, which places him, according to *Asimov's Guide to the Bible*, at about year 2000 BCE within the approximate 300,000 year sojourn of Homo sapiens on earth. Why did the Christian God, using the name of Jehovah, make his presence known to Jews only, until about 35 CE, and then very slowly up to only thirty or forty percent of the World's population today? This is an unpardonable lapse for a caring and omnipotent God. And since the time of Jesus, God has supposedly required that humans accept and follow the son in order to gain everlasting life. Are those people born pre-Jesus to be denied salvation due to Jesus' late arrival? Is it fair for

anyone's salvation to depend on his or her continent, nation or village being evangelized by missionaries, on the historical time in which he or she lives, or on an accidental visit by an evangelist? Is it fair that the Christian God provides such limited evidence for his existence that millions of people ignore him? If you argue that God did communicate adequately with humankind, why hasn't the world had one religion instead of several hundred, and had it long, long ago? It's such a small task for an omnipotent, universal God. Christianity has been expanding of course, and to its credit, it has rapidly become one of two dominant world religions. Yet only a small fraction of the human beings who have ever lived have truly known the Christian God until recently. For a God so majestic that he was supposedly able to create this gigantic, incredible, fantastic, stupendous, superlative universe, his very weak performance in alerting human beings about his grand plan for them, can best be judged as a monumental shortcoming. Consider that the first human beings appeared about one and a half million years ago on our earth of about four-and-a-half-billion years of age, making the earth almost 4,500 times older than *Homo sapiens*. What could account for God's wait of 4,498,500,000 years for humans to finally appear? Genesis needs a rewrite, badly.

If humankind is responsible to a God, then I expect that God to be responsible to humankind by clearly revealing him/her/its self to all humans, either communicating to individual minds or perhaps broadcasting from the heavens loudly, clearly, and often, in all languages, or, first promising, and then carrying out great miracles. The Christian God supposedly expects humans who don't know him to make the first move toward connection; to come to God first, and if this doesn't happen for any reason, including ignorance, God doesn't seem to actively attempt to get in contact with each human. This backwards system leaves most of the world's population out of contact with the Christian God and supposedly subject to being sent to a place other than Christian heaven. How many readers of this page have been contacted by Allah or Brahma? That zero is probably the same number as the Muslims and Hindus that have ever been contacted by Jehovah. It is my guess that none of the world's gods have ever reached out on their own initiative to new people, in spite of what their mythologies may say. For sure, no God had contacted me prior to my being accidentally introduced to Christianity at about age thirteen, nor after I quit the religion.

Skeptics like me exist because we see the evidence for the Bible's "inspired status" as weak or negligible, and its entire scheme as illogical. It is the absence of God in worldly events and affairs that causes many nonreligious people to doubt his existence. In his "Slant Press" newsletter my friend Frank Skiles sometimes referred to the Christian God as "the god who sleeps a lot."

I view the universally ubiquitous existence of religions as evidence of humanity's overwhelming desire to escape death and obtain mystical connection and support. I view the existence of many contradictory religious dogmas as an invalidation of all world religions, or at least as providing very poor odds in choosing one true one. I become weary of being fed evidence for God that doesn't qualify as evidence, especially for a God that is proclaimed to be all

knowing, all powerful, ethical and loving. A deistic type of God or cosmic spirit who created and then left the scene would be far more logical.

I mentioned earlier that the worship of many different gods tends to invalidate them all. But readers may assume all gods are obviously only one God. That seems at first brush to be logically reasonable, but gods are individually known only as defined. Their definitions and claims as found in their holy books/legends are all we know of them, unless there are reliable phone lines between gods and humans. Each is claimed to have a unique nature, history, plan for humans, set of powers, set of requirements, and communications systems with humans. But, Brahma has almost nothing in common with the Christian God or Jesus. Each person's mystical religious experiences reflect the theology of the sect he or she belongs to. How could this be possible if there is only one God? How could the single universal God supposedly tell several incompatible stories about him-, her-, or itself and ask for contradicting beliefs and behaviors from varied groups of people in his domain? Wide variations among assumed gods tend to spoil the claims for all gods being only one. Although Jehovah was supposedly the God who created and controls a trillion cosmic bodies plus all peoples on earth, we find him in the Bible fussing about the trivial matter of Joshua's actions in Canaan in support of one tribe on one planet. Does that sound like a cosmic God? And the assumed ability of varied gods to receive messages from and respond individually to thousands of people at every moment of every day is another claim that goes far beyond common sense and the capability of the natural laws that we humans know. Most of the world's gods are said to vary dramatically from each other. The limited commonalities that Christianity, Islam and Judaism share are due to their common area and time of origin plus the nature of humans to borrow ideas from those they contact. There is almost no commonality between Christianity and all other religions other than Judaism and Islam, and both of the latter are irredeemably different in a few ways, having no redeeming son for example.

At this point in a religious debate one is typically told what the believer considers to be the perfect and final alibi for God, that "we humans can't know God's reasons, and therefore criticisms of God are meaningless." The implication in this statement is that "therefore, nothing in the Bible can be used to disclaim or depreciate God." In this manner, reasoning is made useless, which turns humans into fools without a crutch. Wouldn't a loving God that is in competition with other gods have avoided such poor interaction? Again, I remind readers that I am especially interested in countering literal or conservative belief, even though I have embarrassed myself by going beyond that here and elsewhere. But there must be some readers of these words who are so indoctrinated with the inferiority of human reasoning that any criticism of God's word is seen as both useless and stupid. That is BS; when well done, reasoning is a very useful tool in searching for truth—our best tool. If one is not open to the use of reason, he or she has no weapon to employ against believing in anything or everything. Besides, I have been and will be referring to Bible writers words, not God's words.

I can almost hear some people saying "if you need evidence for God's exis-

tence, open your eyes, note your neighbor's many answered prayers, notice the work of God and Satan everywhere, search for God and you will find him, open your heart and mind to him, ask him to come into your life." I agree that these steps can work for people who are open to indoctrination in any religion. But such is not the route to truth. First, don't all gods supposedly require these? Second, long immersion in a theology could condition me and set me up to fall into the usual trap where the mind produces the experiences naturally that God has been asked to produce, and third, reaching out fervently itself requires some prior belief. Could you, the reader, right now, open your heart and reach out to contact Allah or Sakti? Such openness, effort and need on one's part, in the absence of evidence, could trap one into invalid belief. Believers in many of the world's religions have deep religious experiences with their gods. Does this prove that all or any of such gods exist and promote truthful dogmas? Obviously not. Perhaps all that is evidenced is that religious experiences are generated and displayed solely within human minds and need no empowerment from a God.

The promoters of the Voodoo spirits of Haiti, the Snake, Hindu, and Shinto Gods of Africa, India and Japan; the ancient tribal shamans and witch doctors; the crystal gazers of New Ageism and hundreds more claimants also say their deities or spirits have special powers. I ask in return, which one shall I open my heart to in this hopeless task? To naturalists like me it seems logical that some of the same psychological processes are at work in all instances and that should be the end of the search for the truth about spiritual connections and causations. Let me repeat one more time, I believe that many appropriate scientists would support my contention that great mental concentration coupled with beliefs and rituals, are able to produce powerful religious experiences, including a sense of becoming one with a God, but these might occur from appealing to any God or artifact on whom one has a major fixation and trust, making belief in any one of them irrational. Evidence shows that minds create religious experiences not Gods

What seem to be miracles also happen naturally (often as rare or unexpected events), and especially in matters of health, where natural regressions of illnesses are very likely to be claimed to be miracles. The millions of people who are convinced that they regularly observe prayers' being answered seem to feel that this proves God's existence beyond all question. How would such people explain my many improvements from illness that involved no prayers? Historically, humans have been "believing creatures," believing in magic, superstitions, legends, myths, taboos, curses, spells, folk tales, fairy tales, astrology, ghosts, demons, gremlins, witches, devils, spirits and spirit possession, medicine-bundle healing, rain-making, reincarnation, souls, talismans, sacrifices, rituals, totems, charms, fortune telling, channeling and much more. Most of our ancestors thought that the human experience is lived-out in a mystical or spirit existence, and many of today's religious people still do. But let's be done with all these claims and counterclaims that are only "could-be's." When, via prayer, soldiers can replace their missing arms or legs, when a mother's long-dead child is brought back to life or when a crashed auto or a ruined house is proven to be made whole again, even atheists will believe. When a channeler can correctly

obtain replies from a dead loved one by answering ten or more highly specific questions about that dead person and do it without the usual fishing for help, then I will believe. If such claims are true then non-disputable results or proofs should often be possible. That's all I ask prior to accepting any mystical claims. It is so very simple. If Gods have the unlimited power that their followers claim them to have why can't they provide solid or non-ambiguous proofs of their existence and power to us? But beware of the methodology employed in comparative research studies. Slightly better health on the part of church goers, versus non-goers in a study should not stand as evidence of the power of such attendance if the chronic drunks, jailbirds, and the poor were joined with the wholesome non-believer test group. Rather, only compare the health of committed non-believers to Christians, assuring that both groups would represent people who are in control of their lives. Samples must be similar in all ways except that involving the experimental variable, in this case church attendance versus none.

The "epic stories" of the Bible, including those of creation, the flood, the virgin birth and perhaps the resurrection of Jesus as a risen-Savior and Son of God are not only magical but are suspiciously similar to those of some of Israel's neighbors at similar periods, suggesting copying, as opposed to actual acts of the Jewish God. As an example, the flood story of the Bible may have been suggested by the Assyrian Epic of Gilgamesh flood story. Several emperors of the region were also thought to have had virgin births and to have been divine. Lastly, as already discussed, there is no secular evidence of the great exodus of Jews from Egypt, either in the well-kept written histories of the Egyptians, or in archaeological evidence from Egypt, the Sinai and Israel.

Chapter 7

God's New Domain

At the Bible's start, Yahweh is God of the world, but after his world-wide flood kill-off of people, his human contacts were nearly all gone, and he soon chose to use Abram/Abraham as a means to a new start with humankind. Then supposedly, for 2000 years pre-Jesus Yahweh (now referred to as Jehovah) served as the God of only one small group, the Israelites. The transition to a tribal God is exactly what historians would have expected to find. Tribes everywhere in the BCE period had their own gods and myths (about 200 gods plus Idols). The Israelites also flirted with worshipping other gods over much of the period of Old Testament history.

Christianity, an offspring of Judaism, did not become one of the world's predominant religions by accident or miracle. The role of Jesus provided its impetus. Robert Funk tells us in his book, *Honest to Jesus*, "This simple formulation, [Jesus' role] was suggested by fragments of certain 'prophetic' texts—Isaiah 53 and Psalm 16—and by the myth of the dying and rising lord of some Hellenistic mystery cults" (39). Of course Christianity was spread by vigorous missionary effort, but its spread was probably an outcome of a combination of other important factors. Among them might be its reasonableness in claiming to be a universal religion, where people worship a universal God. Christianity promised fabulous rewards such as the ability of families to rejoin again in heaven. It presented a Son of God in Jesus who had tremendous personal appeal and who preached God's forgiveness of sins and continuous attention to followers. It cleverly presented the new Jesus story as a continuation to the Old Testament's inspiring tribal story. It offered some assurance that its God is a loving, forgiving and helpful God in spite of the limited possibility of followers attaining Heaven. For a more enlightened period in history, missionaries needed such a single, believable, powerful, cosmic God. What New Testament developers ignored was why the Bible's Jewish God, Jehovah, had not continuously revealed himself to other tribes and nations in past centuries. In fact, Jehovah supposedly even assisted the Israelites in slaughtering their neighboring tribes. But, most of God's Chosen People (the Jews) remained unacquainted with the new Pauline doctrine or skeptical of it, and thus theoretically, they became inel-

igible for its salvation through Jesus. Is that a reasonable outcome for Jehovah's Chosen People, living in the Promised Land, or is it a cruel betrayal to them? With the new Christian religion providing an opportunity for any or all people to be saved and enter heaven, God's dividing of humanity into just two polar groups at the pearly gates became utterly absurd—those bound for heaven and those bound for hell or purgatory (yes, I know there are no pearly gates). But, humans, when evaluated for either their good works or their strength of devotion to God and Son, would display their worthiness somewhat as a normal curve when graphed, with most people bunched toward the middle and impossible to separate fairly into two polar groupings. And what happens to the seventy percent of today's world citizens that are non-Christian and little aware of its offerings? The Bible implies that it's "tough luck" for them, as the only route to heaven is through acceptance of Jesus Christ as one's Savior. If billions of people are ignorant of Jesus' role, a moral God cannot escape the responsibility to either inform them or to forgive their ignorance by allowing them into heaven. There is a monster-sized management problem here.

I wondered why a heavenly afterlife is available according to the New Testament, but not until very late, if ever, in the Old Testament. Some scholars think the Jews picked up interest in an afterlife from neighboring Zoroastrianism. New Testament writers developed the Christian heaven in association with Jesus' expected return to earth to collect the saved. There was also some discussion about multi-heavens, as per neighboring countries. Gospel writers have Jesus say that he will return to earth "before this [his] generation has passed away." (Acts) But, the Q and Thomas followers of Jesus in Israel, still Jews at heart and in practice, seemed to be expecting only the reinvigoration of an ongoing Kingdom of God on earth that eventually would have the assistance of a messiah (perhaps Jesus?). It would be a political, cultural and religious event wherein a God-assisted messiah would appear as the leader of the movement. Also important, the destruction within the nation of Israel, including its temple, by the Romans in 70 CE, coming just as gospel writers were developing New Testament doctrines, created a great need for a new source of hope for the Jewish people in Israel and the whole Diaspora (the Roman controlled area where Jews became dispersed). An afterlife in heaven provided that potential replacement of hope but most Jewish people have not converted to Christianity and are thus supposedly ineligible to enter heaven. If true, this would be an unfair tragedy.

Chapter 8

The Bible's Unreasonable Stories

Why would many glaringly false claims and implausible stories be present in a God-inspired holy book? Do good Christians actually believe that people once enjoyed 900-year life-spans and that animal pairs from all corners of the earth came together in one spot from thousands of miles away, to be loaded into an ark which would be far too small to hold them? My guess is that the very long lives of people were helpful to Old Testament writers in bridging the assumed gap in time between Adam and the era in which the Pentateuch stories developed. Also, it added to the power and mystery of God. In further false claims, one finds the earth-covering flood that wasn't so, and the 6000 plus year age of the earth that isn't so. (The earth is known to be about 700,000 times older than is the God-created one found in the Bible.) Finally, there are many magical acts and superstitions in the Bible that are contradicted by reason and human experience. Don't these obviously false stories make all Biblical stories suspect? Did Lot's wife actually turn into a pillar of salt? Did Jonah survive three days in the stomach of a whale? Did manna fall from heaven, and did the rock touched by Moses' staff gush water? Was Jesus conceived immaculately and raised to heaven miraculously? One could list hundreds of such supernatural events. All modern religions came out of our primitive past where fear, danger and ignorance drove our ancestors to devise unlikely postulations to explain nature and to glamorize their tribes. Most of our ancestors assumed that good and evil spirits existed and could be influenced. After thousands of years, most people are still trying to influence the spirits. They beg their God to help them (if it is his will), while shunning Satan, in an effort to win rewards. Will we ever learn?

Some people say that Bible stories are not meant to be taken realistically or literally; they were only meant to be taken metaphorically or allegorically. If so, the people that did the writing, the people doing much of the preaching, and many of the people doing the believing seem not to have been informed of

this. The Bible is obviously mythical in large part, but many people still seem to presume that all parts are true because the Bible's content was inspired by God. How can the absurdities just listed be accepted in a modern world? If a Christian believer claims these are truths rather than absurdities, then how does he or she explain the fact that several similar stories were told in the legends or holy writings of other religions? The contents of Islam's Koran are said to have been passed directly to Mohammed by Allah, like Yahweh had passed the Ten Commandments to Moses.

People tend to feel comfortable with the dogmas learned in their childhood and thus few change from one world religion to another. They typically find the other world-religions in which they have not been indoctrinated to be utterly unbelievable (sometimes excluding the more philosophical religions including Buddhism and New Ageism). This indicates to me that humans became comfortable with the religion of their youth via indoctrination, socialization and acculturation. By starting early in life, one can accept and then lazily maintain impossible holy-book claims, such as raising dead people to life. Stories and dogma learned in one's youth may not have been seriously reevaluated since then. If you heard a rumor about a person who was known to have been dead for several days coming alive today and then being swept up into heaven, would you believe it? I think not, because most people realize that magical events don't occur today. Surely, they never did.

One excuse for any fault found in the Bible is that God didn't write the Bible; humans did. This is a slippery-slope argument. Taking the Bible to be fully developed by humans would make people reluctant to follow any of its dictates. But, if God truly inspired Bible writers to lay out his grand plan for mankind, including the actions necessary for human salvation, then it would be immoral for God to allow errors or omissions in his holy book that might dissuade acceptance of scripture. I am sure protestors are about to say, "Well, God could have inspired the critical parts like Jesus' divine role and man's salvation, in spite of less important errors and contradictions elsewhere?" In my view, that would be suspicious to readers, it would require humans to choose their beliefs and it wouldn't fit the claim that God is all-powerful, all-knowing and completely moral. Any errors in the Bible should bring suspicion on it; a lot of errors should bring a lot of suspicion on it. Any God that can design and manage the unfathomable "all-that-is" surely could find an inerrant way to inform the alleged objects of his affection, human beings. And why wouldn't the most powerful God rid his subjects of the confusion caused by numerous supposedly false gods?

One of my proofreaders reminded me that Christians don't believe in religion and that religion is a curse against God. Such Christians say they believe in God, not religion. Further, Satan is currently the God of the world, and the New Jerusalem will soon come so that the seed of Abraham can inherit the earth. Yes, I remember similar doctrines from long ago. Such claims at this point in time strike me as being nonsensical. Had I been indoctrinated with them constantly since age two, just maybe they would ring true or reasonable today. But, even that I find difficult to accept. For about 2000 years a universal God, Yahweh, is

said to have assisted only a single tribe while all other tribes/peoples apparently went to rot? It won't wash clean. And now that members of that single tribe have generally shunned belief in the Christ-status of Jesus, as is claimed to be required for salvation, most of Jehovah's Chosen People are doomed. Again, it won't wash.

Part III

The New Testament

Chapter 9

The New Testament's Claims

In the New Testament, the Bible story again becomes unbelievable. Let me briefly summarize my personal understanding of Christian beliefs before getting into the opinions of Biblical experts. A newborn baby, Jesus, is said to have been created on earth as the potential Savior of humanity and as the Son of God, via an impregnation of a virgin, Mary of Nazareth, by the Holy Spirit. This mind-boggling part of the tale, told only by Matthew and Luke, resembles somewhat those told within the pagan mystery religions of the period. Christian doctrine claims that this Jesus later ministered to the Jews, was crucified and raised back to life, so that God the Father would forgive the sins of all humans on earth who believed in and joined with the son in his salvation mission. The Jesus story then became a corrective add-on to the Old Testament story of God. Does this not make God fallible? An all-knowing God must not change the rules of his game at halftime.

If the Judeo-Christian God cared greatly about humanity, why has he allowed an estimated seventy percent of all humans who have lived since Jesus' time, to die ignorant of the Christian message, even given the burst of zeal, post-Jesus, by the few New-Way evangelists, (as they referred to themselves). Also puzzling, the Old Testament promotes only one God, but the New Testament now offered a Son of God, making two Gods it would seem, or three if the Holy Ghost is added. In fact, the Son is the star of the New Testament. In the Gospel of John Jesus is said to say, "No one comes to the Father but by me." But this doesn't sound like a statement that Jesus would make, he the modest cynic-sage who avoided talking about himself in the reliable sayings of Jesus within the Q and Thomas Gospels. I reject the "comes to the father but by me" comment and similar others as being what Gospel writers wrote later, not what Jesus said. I also reject the claim in the Gospel of John 1:1-14 where Jesus is proclaimed to be a God. Yes, it seems to be a fact that Gospel writers created much of Jesus' dialog to fit their own needs, as we will soon see

again and again. The main point I wish to make is that the New Testament made drastic changes in the Old Testament's plot, in narrative, promises, and characters. It's a new religion. But wouldn't one assume that an all-knowing God would have been utterly consistent in his plans for humankind? I find the actions and the nature of this God to be much too alike the nature of humans. The combined Old and New Testaments depict a God who is very inconsistent, bumbling and unrealistic. Note also that the Jesus quote in the Gospel of John, "no one comes to the father but by me," presumes no salvation for the already dead, outsiders, and Jehovah's Chosen People who continued practicing their Judaism.

I realize that many Christians claim that Jesus himself is the bridge between the two Testaments in the Bible and certainly the Gospel of John makes many statements claiming this, but John was utterly caught up in his mystical fantasy or delusion. His Jesus was incompatible with the Jesus of the other Gospels. The researchers of the Jesus Seminar, a group that embarked upon a multiyear project with the intent of better understanding Jesus, have agreed that Jesus neither claimed nor suggested such a bridge. His grandiose role in the four Gospels and in John in particular, was obviously developed via exaggeration upon exaggeration (mythmaking). My comments here must also be shocking to lifelong believers. Hang in there until a more complete picture develops.

Step one in introducing the New Testament should be Jesus' birth, but of such, and of his childhood, we know nothing reliable because the birth stories in Matthew and Luke are almost surely inventions, say some Jesus Seminar scholars. From obscurity, Jesus had an active ministry of only one to three years before he was crucified following a Roman edict.

About three days after Jesus' death, stories of his body's absence from its sepulcher began to circulate, plus stories of his being seen by disciples, and in Acts, he is said to have been seen by hundreds of people forty days later during his ascension into the heavens. These stories should be suspected of being rumors or fabrications because Jesus' own friends and followers in Israel (the people of Q and Thomas) make no such statements. Jesus died in 32-34 CE and the Q sayings' had to have been appropriated (used) by Matthew and Luke and probably Mark before about 74 CE, when their Gospels were completed. Scholars now think that Mark made some use of Q materials, incorporating the ideas found in Q. Thus the maximum gap in time for the Q writings to have been written would seem to be only about 40 years, well within the life spans of a few friends of Jesus. But there is not a word in either the Gospel of Q or in the early and therefore probably more reliable (less Gnostic) part of the Gospel of Thomas that suggests a Christian-like role for Jesus. We should also be skeptical of claims in the Book of Acts because: 1) there was an apparent tendency for its author Luke to construct his much-needed Jesus-stories so as to be compatible with those of Apostle Paul; 2) because Luke claims that a great many fantastic miracles occurred prior to the ascension of Jesus during the forty days after his resurrection and; 3) because Gospel writers probably never met Jesus nor lived in Israel; rather, they were probably people who lived relatively far away in the Diaspora. Matthew could have lived somewhere in Israel as his

writing is said to reflect a Jewish background.

The many Biblical scholars who participated in the Jesus Seminar at some point have in recent decades applied very scholarly and extensive historical-research procedures in searching for the real Jesus of the New Testament. The effort took many years. The scholars had noted that Jesus in his sayings appeared to be two different persons within the gospels of Matthew and Luke, one somewhat worldly (concerned with life here and now) and one more otherworldly (directed toward human attainment of salvation). This is thought to reflect in the first case the contributions of the Q people, and in the second case the contributions of Pauline evangelists.

Although many critical scholars went before them during the Enlightenment period, the most recent Jesus scholars made even larger waves via their many published books, their participation in TV productions and the weight of their numbers. Most seem to have been professors of Religion or Religious History who participated voluntarily. In general, they, and other researchers, found that the New Testament is mythologized to the point that what the four Gospel writers say are Jesus' words are often only the words of the Gospel writers. The earliest sayings of Jesus that are found in the material collected by Q people and some of the sayings in the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas are thought to maintain good original purity as the real words of Jesus. The research methodology used by the Jesus Seminar group and their conclusions will be discussed later.

Gospel writers were obviously enchanted by Apostle Paul's new claim that the resurrection and ascension of Jesus potentially redeems all of mankind into salvation and eternal life. Paul's letters to his congregations were filled with the development of the new doctrine for his people of "The Way." His doctrines were supposedly validated by the truths he learned during his several encounters via visions with the heavenly Jesus, to which he alone was privy, of course. (This is a good reason to be very suspicious of his claims.) But even more suspicious, the earliest-written collection of sayings of Jesus now known as the Gospel of Q presents an alarmingly simplistic and humanistic perspective of Jesus. Its verses were only fully identified and classified as a separate source and a separate body of original materials in the 1900's. Obviously, conservative Christians can't tolerate a humanistic Jesus, so the Q Gospel and the somewhat similar Gospel of Thomas are often ignored or are under conservative attack, much as is the evolution of species.

Following Jesus' death, some Jews formed follower-groups in Israel. Apostle Paul, formerly known as Saul of Tarsus, says he tried to destroy such new groups that had formed, until he met the Heavenly Jesus in a vision on the road to Damascus (during an epileptic seizure perhaps) three years after Jesus' death. Soon, Paul turned into a dogged evangelist and developer of a new religion first known as The Way, apparently relying mostly upon his supposed new knowledge obtained via visions rather than on in-depth researching of the experiences of acquaintances of Jesus living in Israel. He only visited Jerusalem twice, briefly, during the rest of his life, and seems to have been quite ignorant of the life that Jesus actually lived. Meanwhile, we estimate from the Gospels of Q and Thomas

that Jesus' followers in Israel continued to be unaware of Jesus' being a Savior. They also remained practicing Jews, as Jesus had been, maintaining: exclusion of non-Jews at meals, Jewish dietary practices, circumcision and attendance at the synagogue. Luke in Acts of the Apostles describes much of this, and many if not all of the theologians of the Jesus Seminar agree that evidence shows it to be true. Very few Jesus-groups are identified in the Bible as existing in Israel in Apostle Paul's time, rather, nearly all existed in the Diaspora. Even the group in Jerusalem that is described in The Acts of The Apostles did not view itself to be a church. Christianity, as a religion, was born in the Diaspora.

Chapter 10

What the “Q” Sayings of Jesus Tell Us

The Jesus sayings collected and put into writing by the community of people called Q have been sorted out in the last 70 years from their hiding places in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke by their unique content, style, words used, simplicity, and more importantly, Q's double tradition in Matthew and Luke while, being mostly absent in the earlier book of Mark. Many readers will not even have heard of Q people or of a hypothetical Gospel of Q and will suspect I am attempting to lead them astray. The fact is that a separate Q content in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke was first suspected by a few highly respected German scholars about 200 years ago. The sayings ascribed to Jesus were noted by these theologians to show Jesus as both a Pauline-type of savior and as a humble Jew who only promoted living one's life on earth well. The latter type of sayings, consistently evidencing a more humanistic Jesus, was suspected to have come from a separate source, as both the language used and the topics pursued by that Jesus were notably different from those of the Savior-like Jesus found in all four gospels. These progenitors of the unveiling began the work that led to the Q theory late in the Enlightenment period. It has continued to this day, perhaps culminating tentatively in the work of some of the more than 100 Jesus Seminar scholars. The letter Q abbreviates the German word “quelle” that translates as “source.” The importance of Q's “Sayings of Jesus” is that they had to have been compiled early enough to be included in the Books of Matthew and Luke by followers of Jesus in Israel who had known him best, The significance of the Q writings is that they do not support Christianity's claim that Jesus is The Christ, a Savior or The Son of God. The sayings of Jesus written in Q and in the Gospel of Thomas seem to provide us with the earliest collection and therefore the most reliable words and ideas of Jesus. The four Gospel writers, probably all living in the Diaspora, seem not to have known Jesus personally, and the Disciples of Jesus left no writings, according to Jesus Seminar experts whom we will visit soon. The Diaspora consists of that area

along the Northern, Eastern and southern Mediterranean Sea into which large numbers of Jewish people fled or were taken, especially during the Assyrian and Babylonian captivity periods and after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE. A Jesus Seminar participant, Burton L. Mack, in his book *Who Wrote the New Testament? The Making of the Christian Myth* makes these startling observations about the Q materials:

What a surprise it was, then, when a few scholars got curious, started to reconstruct a unified text, and took a close look at Q as a piece of literature all its own, a piece of literature that had sustained a Jesus movement for half a century before Matthew and Luke ever thought to merge it with Mark’s story of Jesus. Voila. An entirely different world of Christian beginnings came into view.

Q brings the early Jesus people into focus, and it is a picture so different from that which anyone ever imagined as to be startling. Instead of people meeting to worship a risen Christ . . . the people of Q were fully preoccupied with questions about the Kingdom of God in the present and the behavior required if one took it seriously It is a picture of life in the public arena of the first-century Galilee, life defined as the encounter with other human beings in their various social roles. (48)

What an important piece of evidence this is for showing that the people who actually knew Jesus, as opposed to Paul, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, show Jesus to have viewed himself to be nothing more than a Jewish preacher/teacher extolling an invigorated Kingdom-of-God on earth. Meanwhile, the Pauline evangelists apparently ended up expanding their Jesus schools of thought so many times that the real Jesus ceased to exist in their writings. Such a situation is commonly found where a founder-teacher like Jesus is the inspiration to form a new sect.

The somewhat similar Gospel of Thomas, thought to be written in the late first century, was found in Egypt in about 1945 in a large clay container with a number of other manuscripts. Thomas’ sayings of Jesus are in part similar to identical to those in Q, confirming the validity, source, age and content of Q sayings. Thus, the Q and Thomas followers both expose a humble and human-like Jesus in their writings. They had no reason to lie or exaggerate. But Gospel writers did have a great reason to fabricate. They assumed that they had salvation and eternal life to gain as per Paul’s claims. If Jesus now resided in heaven as Apostle Paul claimed, that required a lot of explanation. Paul and Gospel writers tried to fill that need.

Chapter 11

Prophecies as Connectors between Testaments

Sometime after the crucifixion, evangelists with Pauline persuasions obviously began to search the Jewish sacred writings, now called the Old Testament, for prophecies foretelling the arrival of Jesus, plus something about him and his purpose. Only some widely scattered verses, or scraps of verses, were found that could be twisted from their original intent and made to imply that Jesus' pre-existence in Heaven was known, and his visit to earth was pre-planned. But these verses are very, very unconvincing to anyone who is judging them without preconceived biases. I see no foretelling of the arrival of Jesus or the future life of Jesus on earth in the Old Testament. The Gospel Writers, however, made use of every scrap of potential foretelling they found in the Old Testament, by adding them to their New Testament Jesus-story, where they reappear as prophecies fulfilled about Jesus. Thus, Matthew writes that Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a young donkey in fulfillment of Zech. 9:9, when in fact, many gospel scholars think that Matthew's story of Jesus' riding a young ass is one purposively concocted to serve as a fulfillment of a possible Old Testament prophesy. However, a reading of the whole of Chapter 9 in the book of Zechariah shows that Jesus as Messiah, Savior, or Son of God is not the topic being discussed and thus its verse 9:9 was invalidly used out of context.

I have read the eighty-three Old Testament references that supposedly contain prophecies concerning Christ and Christianity. Such connections were of vital importance to Christianity because the New Testament made tremendous changes in the pre-existing Yahweh/Jehovah story and its doctrines. That seemed unreasonable for an all-knowing God who should never have to change his mind. The claimed ties to the Old Testament are in fact useless, because the Old Testament situations have no direct relationship to Jesus or Christianity. In my judgment, not one of the writers of these eighty-three Old Testament prophecies had Jesus in mind when they wrote. The chapters where predictions are said to appear and the verses that surround the claimed predictions are talking

about other topics, times, places, and people. Also, followers of Judaism, with which we share our God-the-Father and his Old Testament, deny that there was a prediction of such a heavenly person coming. And, Judaism continues to reject the idea of Jesus' being a son of Jehovah and a savior to the peoples of the world. Thus Paul, an outsider in several ways, claimed to possess truths about a follower of Judaism (Jesus) and about a grand new plan of the Jewish God that no one within God's historic religion of Judaism predicted, accepted or acclaimed, pre-Paul. What a strange situation and how unfair and uncaring it would have been for Jehovah to suddenly claim Jesus to be a Savior and Son of God and in so doing promote an all new set of doctrines and processes of worship that weren't at all well received in Israel. Again, only Satan's being in control on earth could justify such a situation, but that also is nonsensical.

Two examples follow of the more rational of the eighty-three Old Testament prophecies I read that supposedly foretold Jesus' arrival. But first, you need to know that Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4, "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures [the allegedly-foretelling Old Testament scriptures]; and that he was buried and that he rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures." So, what Jewish Scripture predicted this? Apparently none, but the guess of some scholars is that Paul was depending on Isaiah 53 and possibly Psalms 16. But Isaiah 53, although at least discussing death, is telling about how Jehovah's anointed persons suffer, with no awareness of Jesus. Isaiah 53 is thought to contain several Old Testament predictions regarding Jesus but I failed to find any. Psalms 16 says nothing that is related. The second example, Isaiah 7–14, is claimed to foretell the virgin conception of Jesus, but though the verse says, "Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel," the chapter is about King Ahaz, not Jesus, and the more correct translation is not "virgin" but "young girl." (See "The Birth of Jesus," by Jon Meacham, September 2004 issue of *Newsweek*.) Of course Matthew and Luke record long after the fact that Jesus was born of a virgin and was called Immanuel; that is what one must do to fulfill an earlier-made potential prophesy. These two examples demonstrate what one finds with the Old Testament prediction claims for Jesus. Some alleged prophecies, randomly selected for readers to read on their own are said to be found in: Ps 110:1, Jer 31:15, Ps 69:9, Ps 40:6–8, Isa 62:11, Ps 118:22, Zech 13:7, Ps 22:15, Joel 2:28–32 and 3:1–5

Gospel writers speak of a human messiah's coming, but a messiah is no Christ or Son of God and Jesus probably never claimed to be the Messiah either. The Messiah that a few Jews may have hoped Jesus to be would have been the human leader of a Kingdom-of-God on earth so any such hopes were also dashed by the death of Jesus. A case could be made that Jesus tried to revitalize the people's relationship with God so that Jehovah would be willing to assist the nation more forcefully in a rehabilitation of the social/political order, make it free of the hated Roman rule and free of special privileges within Jewish society. This would lead the Jewish nation into a period of much improved honor, harmony, and peace reminiscent of the rule of King David. It would be the Kingdom of God in the real Promised Land, with a Messiah as its earthly leader. Jesus

seems to have never claimed to be this Messiah in spite of his supposed hinting response to a disciple's question about it in the Gospel of Mark 8:29. Old Testament writers seem to be utterly unaware of the coming of a Christ figure. If Jehovah had actually told an Old Testament prophet that a Savior and Son of God was soon to come to earth to offer salvation to all peoples of the world, wouldn't there have been a whole book devoted to it in the Old Testament? Wouldn't the Jewish tribes have been ecstatic with excitement or have been furiously angry? In fact, Jesus didn't even gain fame for being a Jewish messiah, along with several claimants to that title. In contrast, Jesus lived and preached primarily but not exclusively among the poor, the powerless and the outcasts. His was certainly not a base of power in the usual sense. Even the claimed large crowds of followers are considered by Jesus Seminar Theologians to be greatly exaggerated. A cult of Christ is thought to have created symbolic Biblical sites and stories with little in common with the religion preached by Jesus. Thus the Historical Jesus is different than the earthly Jesus.

Chapter 12

Two Groups of Followers, Two Testaments

Writers of the Bible's New Testament were given the task of joining two very different rivers of thought and two very different testaments/religions into a seamless flow of God's long-term plan and expectations. It was a nearly impossible task, because there are dozens of incompatibilities between them. First, as was just noted, there is no valid awareness of a coming Christ, Savior or Son of God in the Old Testament to tie the testaments together as a continuous story. The New Testament Gospel of John (1:1–3) says: "In the beginning was the word . . . All things were made by him . . ." Apparently, desperate to find a son of God expectation in the Old Testament, John has Jesus be "the word" that empowered creation when in fact there is no basis for this representing Jesus. Many modern Biblical scholars don't accept the claim that the Old Testament predicted Jesus, or that Jesus claimed himself to be the cosmic creator and a Savior/Son of God. Gospel writers certainly do make this case over and over, writing 40 to 70 myth-making years after Jesus' death. The Creator claim for Jesus seems to be a fabrication by John, and the Savior claim seems to be a delusion of Paul, without a shred of valid evidence for the claims from the earthly Jesus during his years of ministry, as evidenced by his sayings in the Gospels of Q and Thomas as well as by the Israeli people's typical rejection of Christian theology. Q sayings are very important because they were written by followers of Jesus before the New Testament writers did their writing and apparently before any Pauline doctrines were known to or accepted by the earlier Q writers.

In switching to a new testament and a new religion, the New Testament writers had to transfer from dealing with a tribal God to a universal God, from no Son of God to a Son of God, from an expected earthly messiah to a heavenly Savior, from no end-of-days apocalypse to a second coming, from no everlasting life to an everlasting life, from an only recently-postulated minimalist Heaven to a spectacular Heaven, from God's judgment on the basis of good works to

salvation through the addition of God's grace (unmerited approbation of God), and from a jealous, active God involved intimately in the affairs of humans to a more remote and more apocalyptic God the father.

There are several facts to keep in mind about the followers of Jesus and their role in the development of the new religion of Christianity. Most important, there were two early groupings of Jesus' followers holding two very different theologies. The much larger grouping was composed of scattered Pauline-doctrine converts in the Diaspora, along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea, and the other, of a few Jesus followers (including Q and Thomas people) in what is now Israel.

In the Diaspora, the converts of Paul and his helpers developed the fledgling theology we know as Christianity. In Israel, a group of friends and followers of the earthly Jesus put Jesus' verbal sayings as remembered into writing, and eventually this Q collection became available to Matthew and Luke who used 62 of its sayings in their Gospels. These sayings fail utterly to substantiate any of Paul's and the gospel writers' grandiose mystical claims for Jesus. The sayings deal with living according to Jehovah's earthly expectations and mundane matters of daily living. This surprising divergence of belief makes the new Gospel preached mainly in the Diaspora highly suspect, literally destroying the core tenants of Christianity if fully accepted as evidence of Jesus' human nature and his absence of grandiose roles. It seems obvious that the Jesus followers in Israel would have known Jesus far better than would have Paul's followers living in the nations along the Mediterranean Sea. The two groups show themselves to have been largely isolated from each other, as their writings read as separate religions, in spite of centering on the same person.

Some readers must be thinking that the twelve apostles/disciples who knew Jesus very well did missionary work in the Diaspora where they could have told Paul all about Jesus, his messages and purposes. It seems to not be so. Very strangely, the 62 Q sayings of Jesus and the 114 Gospel of Thomas sayings, both compiled in Israel by Jesus' friends and acquaintances soon after his death, never mention his having disciples. The activities of apostles/disciples reported by Luke in his Acts of the Apostles book may be fabrications or at least exaggerations necessitated by the essential need for a confirmation of Paul's claims regarding Jesus' status and purpose. If readers feel such casual rejection of Luke's stories in Acts is unwarranted, refresh yourself by rereading Acts. You will note that he lives in a consistently magical world far removed from the one you and I live in today, yet laws of the universe never change.

We must keep in mind that Paul initiated the utterly new Christian dogma following his visions with Jesus in Heaven wherein Jesus is said to have exposed his heavenly role and plan (if one believes that humans can actually converse directly with a God). Paul's glorious "Good News," obtained via several visions must have been very intoxicating to many of those who heard the news. One can imagine a frenzy of excited imaginations that began to build a full story or dogma worthy of belief. The Q and Thomas friends of Jesus, then living within Israel, were obviously quite out of the loop of Pauline Good News that was circulating in the Diaspora.

The congruence of Jesus' supposed heavenly messages to Paul via visions needed to be verified against those stated by Jesus while on earth. Disciples and other friends of Jesus could theoretically provide this perfect verification link and only they could do so. But there seems to have been no substantial source of such verification. Luke and other Gospel writers tell tall-tales including supposedly confirming stories about the disciples' work post-Jesus, but much of this strikes me as being far less reliable as evidence than are the sayings of Jesus found in the Q and Thomas collections. It is not that the Q writers would be free from error or exaggeration but that they would have been very proud to be able to relate any confirmations they had had from the disciples of Jesus about the latter's role as a Savior or as the Son of God. They obviously related no such information to the Q or Thomas writers.

Gospel writers desperately "needed" to provide evidence that Jesus had indicated to his disciples that he was sent to earth by his Father in Heaven but Jesus' followers in Jerusalem only believed that Jesus had risen after death. Nevertheless, we find the Pauline evangelists calling Jesus a Savior and a Son of God. Modern Christians, of course, argue that "sayings" such as those in Q and in the similar Gospel of Thomas aren't able alone to serve as evidence of Jesus' Godhood which would normally be found in more narrative dialog rather than in sayings. But, if Jesus was actually the "Savior" of humanity, wouldn't he definitely have insured that his disciples understood his true status so that they could pass it on after his death in writings like Q and Thomas? Some churchmen later justified this failure by claiming that the disciples were hopelessly ignorant. The absence of confirmation directly from Jesus himself about this supposed biggest news item in all history makes one exceedingly suspicious of Paul's and the Gospel Writers strange and unlikely alternative tale. A Son of God could not have been so incompetent. The Q sayings do talk about relationships between Jehovah and humans, so any heavenly status of Jesus as a savior or as one sent by God the Father surely would also have been implied in his sayings, if true.

Yes, some claimed sayings of Jesus, other than those taken from Q, that appear in the four Gospels do show Jesus to be aware of his savior role. But such verses have a different style and content than is noted in Q and Thomas sayings of Jesus. These are suspected to be the mythical additions of gospel writers themselves, a practice common among writers in general at this time in history. Read chapter six of the Gospel of John to see Jesus speaking uncharacteristically boldly and often about his connections to God the Father. Note Jesus' bold and egotistic type of speech found there and note John's manic dedication to confirming Paul's doctrines. If the Q and Thomas followers of Jesus in Israel didn't know all-important facts about Jesus, why should we assume that those writers in the Diaspora did know them? In the parables and aphorisms of Jesus, found in the sayings of the Gospel of Q, the historical and very Jewish Jesus proclaimed only an ongoing Kingdom-of-God on earth, or God's domain, and a proper way to live one's life by emulating this simple advice. To me, this stands as a definite proof of fabrication by Paul, John and the other Gospel writers.

Some ministers suggest that the real nature and role of Jesus finally seeped

into the disciples' consciousnesses via the assistance of the Holy Ghost. A better reason for their naiveté than disciple stupidity would be that Jesus never told them that he originated in Heaven and would return soon. The Q friends-of-Jesus remaining in Israel were smart enough to quote Jesus' humble sayings realistically and intelligently about sixty-two times in The Gospel of Q. If we approve the ignorance excuse for disciples and friends of Jesus, we must accept that the cosmic son of God (Jesus) was so inept in selecting and teaching his disciples about his purpose on earth, that the purpose had to be made fully evident after his death in visions sent to Paul from Heaven, or await the writing of the gospels. Sorry, the Pauline story of Jesus makes no sense, except as a myth. And what a myth it was.

The Gospel of Thomas, written in about the mid to late first century CE, was found in a large partially-buried clay urn near Nag Hammadi Egypt in 1945. It promoted Gnosticism, especially in its latter-written content, but it also contained many sayings of Jesus nearly identical to those in Q, removing the ability of critics to claim that the "Q verses" were purposefully and unfairly selected out of Matthew's and Luke's gospels by recent theologians who promoted a human Jesus, rather than a redeeming Son-of-God-type of Jesus. Both the Q and Thomas sayings of Jesus had to have originated in Israel during the first century CE.

A second probable example of mythmaking in the first hundred years after Jesus occurred when the church claimed that the twelve disciples became apostles of the church. This was essential to create a continuous line of authority from Jesus into the new church. The gospel writers Luke and John are even claimed by some conservative denominations to have been disciples of Jesus. From what is known now, this seems to be exceedingly improbable, even impossible. First, fishermen of the period would not have had the vocabulary, the cultural and religious education to write these two gospels. Actually, most of the twelve disciples almost disappeared from the Christian foundational story about mid-Acts. Peter is an exception. He is mentioned often for some time and then disappears, except for a glamorous absentee rumor of his becoming the first Pope in Rome, but seven other of Jesus' supposed disciples apparently quickly faded back to Jerusalem (Acts 8:25) where there was no Church, the Synagogue being used for worship.

Gospel writers were probably also members of Pauline-type discussion groups in the Diaspora which could account for a substantial amount of mythologizing of their Jesus story over time. The Q and Thomas people, in what is now Israel, gave little, if any, evidence of evangelizing others or of feeling responsible to do so. Thus it appears that the man Jesus, whom followers knew, was usurped in the Diaspora by Christ the Heavenly Savior and Son of God. As a group, the followers of the very human Jesus in Israel (Q and Thomas people) also seem to have disappeared from notice by about 70 to 80 CE. One could assume that the Roman attacks against Jerusalem in that period killed or scattered many of them. The new religion called The Way seems to have been a total dud within what is now Israel. Even the friends of Jesus left in Jerusalem apparently continued to practice Jewish rituals and visit the synagogue.

After Jesus' death and supposed ascension, people of The Way expected him to return to earth very soon to take the righteous to Heaven for eternity, even though Jesus had only predicted an ongoing and enhanced domain or kingdom of God on earth. Paul's apocalyptic version of Jesus' mission obviously won rather quickly. It offered eternal life and it was promoted by a far more vigorous evangelization effort than was produced in Israel. Several years of group storytelling, singing and eating together by Pauline followers of Jesus in the Diaspora eventually would build group traditions and religious doctrines that were ready for commitment to writing. The missionaries were in a rush to spread the new gospel to be ready for Jesus' return, which was expected very soon. Apostle Paul's early-written doctrinal letters to his convert groups, mostly along the margin of the Northern and Eastern Mediterranean Sea, appear in the New Testament. About forty years passed after the death of Jesus prior to completion of the Gospel of Mark, usually held to be the first of the four gospels. The Q materials became incorporated into Matthew's and Luke's Gospels and seem to have influenced Mark's Gospel. This makes Q and Thomas materials the earliest found to date about Jesus' final one or two years of life, thus also making them the most reliable. The Jesus story reached its full mythic condition in the final Gospel, that of John.

The hanging and dying of a savior initially appeared to contradict Jesus' Godhood and may have been an embarrassment to some of Jesus' original promoters. Perhaps this was the reason that Paul showed little interest in the earthly life of Jesus prior to his crucifixion, but rather zeroed in on his supposed exalted position in heaven and what that status means for humans. The Jewish Old Testament's lack of anticipation of the arrival of the type of Savior that Paul and the Gospel Writers were proclaiming Jesus to be may also have been an embarrassment that propelled the evangelists to find linkages quickly. However, as has already been noted, there seems to be neither clear Old Testament linkages nor trustworthy statements among those said to be made by the earthly Jesus to evidence Paul's claims. Thus, the evidence left to justify the initial core Christian belief for more than a billion people today consists of Paul's claim of his becoming enlightened via messages he received from Jesus Christ during several visions or messages from Heaven. The four Gospel writers, who remain unknown to this day, built on this, obviously even putting supportive words into the mouths of Jesus and his disciples. Yes, this is a heavy load of skepticism against a complex belief system that involved many contributors to its New Testament. Evidence from appropriate experts will soon follow.

My assumption in the preceding topics, that will no doubt be rejected vociferously by dedicated Bible believers, is that all statements in the New Testament that tell a story more grandiose than those told by the people of Q and Thomas are likely to be mythically contrived. The New Testament is filled with mythic stories. After all, dozens of mythic gods flitted across the lands of the Middle-east during the time of Jesus and the writing of the New Testament. Yes, I support such a well evidenced and common sense proposition. Would that make all New Testament Writers liars? Judged by the standards of their time in history and by their mode of arrival at conclusions—maybe not. The

Jesus story of resurrection likely circulated via rumors for forty to sixty years before the Gospels were completed. Such titillating stories would grow to accommodate even more desirable outcomes. Paul fueled the new Jesus story by claiming redemption and everlasting life for believers in Jesus' new roles. Gospel writers and numerous discussion groups searched for meaning in the claims that were circulating. Voluminous new written materials appeared constantly leading to several Christianities in the earliest centuries CE and dogmatic church fathers were only beginning to direct the whole show. We are dealing with a very confused and complicated situation in which much more is unknown than is known.

Chapter 13

Separation from Israel

Apostle Paul and other outsiders grabbed the Jesus-story football and ran for a touchdown with it in the Diaspora. Why were religious beliefs and practices followed by Jews in the Diaspora so different from those practiced by Jesus-followers in Jerusalem post crucifixion? A combination of reasons seem likely: 1) the significant incompatibility of the new religion with Judaism; 2) the fact that most New Testament writers and evangelists lived outside of Israel; 3) the heavy influence of Paul's spectacular new theological beliefs flowing from his visions rather than from an investigation of Jesus' life on earth; 4) Apostle Paul's liberalization of several religious requirements for non-Jews in his belief groups; 5) the intoxicating effect of the promise for a glorious heavenly future and 6) many differences between Israel's and the Diaspora's governments, cultures, physical locations, types of converts and types of evangelists. Paul, of course, was the most important of the original players in the Diaspora where Greek and Roman mysticism prevailed. Jesus Seminar scholars seem to confirm that Paul and three or even all four gospel writers were living in the Diaspora, scattered and quite isolated from what is present-day Israel, where their Jesus-story unfolded and where relevant memories of Jesus still existed. Apostle Paul worked largely on doctrine and church-group motivation, quite out of touch with a group of Jesus-followers in Jerusalem who had actually known Jesus. He seemed to know almost nothing about Jesus the man and didn't seem to care, apparently because his self-developed (or received) "good news" about redemption, salvation, and a second coming was what mattered to him. Paul already had his religion and seemed not to be interested in obtaining information or advice. Luke's Acts of the Apostles describes numerous miraculous events in the Diaspora which had increasingly become a separated area for the development of Pauline Christianity.

All gospel writers were obviously cognizant of the need to build Jesus up as the savior of mankind and to make him and his disciples appear to be the originators of Christianity rather than Paul, so in Acts, Luke had Jesus remain on earth for 40 days after resurrection, engaged in the production of signs and wonders. Luke paints an unreal scene of miracles happening everywhere and

all the time to the point of their appearing to be purely fabrications. He also had the disciples of Jesus seem to play more important roles in Paul's new religion than seems justified. In the gospel of Q, Jesus had been concerned mainly with how to serve God in everyday life. Gospel writers deemed it to be essential that they follow Paul's lead in mystifying and aggrandizing Jesus. Pauline evangelists/writers collectively did this by embellishing both the deeds and language of Jesus. They did it in particular by glorifying the stories about the crucifixion and its aftermath. They did it by adding The Book of Acts, which served as a much needed single compilation of the religions early history and as an excellent propaganda piece for it. The Gospel of John provided an important final expansion of Jesus' status including a role in Heaven previous to the one on earth.

The topic which follows introduces scholars who feel Jesus would not have supported the Christ-religion that later centered in Rome. The Jesus-of-Faith dialog in the New Testament they say reflects the desires of gospel writers and their communities who saw Jesus as a Heaven-sent savior, while the earlier writers, Q and Thomas, lacking this idea, were focused on Jesus' actual words, as remembered. It is obvious that the Q and Thomas communities in Israel had not yet been influenced by Paul and his evangelistic helpers at the time of their compilation of the sayings of Jesus. Note also, that one can observe the four gospel writers involved in mythmaking as each tended to exceed the previous gospel writer in the grandiosity of their Jesus story. The Gospel of John excels at this.

Chapter 14

Two Religions without a Bridge

In my view, there is no bridge between the Old and New Testaments that leads to a Savior/Son-of-God. There are portions of Old Testament narrative that are irrelevant to Jesus that are purposively placed into the New Testament where they are claimed to be fulfillments of prophesy. It's clever trickery. Today, we would call this a scam, but it seems probable that the New Testament writers felt justified, given their belief that Jesus miraculously had risen, and given their great enthusiasm for Paul's "good news." To help explain the yawning gap between the doctrines of Paul and the expectatons found in the Old Testament, the new evangelists stretched non-relevant wording to take on new meaning and repositioned verses to fill their needs as much as possible.

While we may give gospel writers the benefit of the doubt in most contrived prophesy cases, "scam" seems to be too kind a word in the case of the Malachi bait-and-switch event. This is well described by Burton Mack in his fascinating book, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*:

Mark used the Malachi citation (Mal. 3:1) [about God sending a messenger] in combination with a forceful prediction from Isaiah about a voice crying in the wilderness (Isa. 40:3) to introduce John [the Baptist] at the very beginning of his story. Matthew and Luke undid this combination, using the Isaiah prediction to introduce John at the appropriate point toward the beginning of their stories, while reserving the Malachi prediction for its proper annunciation by Jesus, just as Q had it (Mat. 11:10; Luke 7:27). We can now make the observation that these references to Malachi helped to determine the structure of the Christian Bible. (242)

Note following astounding manipulation that Gospel writers carried out to tie their very new religion to the ancient religion of the Hebrews, thus making the latter their own. They desperately needed a continuous history of divine

intention so they tried to create one by a new juxtaposition of scripture. Quoting Mack again:

Thus the Christian appropriation of the epic of Israel became an issue of fundamental significance for the church. It had to be read as a story that somehow anticipated the Christ, and it had to be arranged to interlock with the New Testament. . . . Of great significance is that postexilic histories of Ezra, Nehemiah and the Chronicles were placed among the writings at the very end of the [Old Testament] collection [in Christian Bibles]. Thus the Jewish epic ends with the edict of Cyrus about building a house for the Lord in Jerusalem and the call for “all the [Lord’s] people” to “go up.” Christians reversed the order to end with Malachi. Eureka! One reads the Hebrew epic to the end, reads about the messenger to come, turns the page and hears the voice of John (or Jesus) saying that Malachi’s prophesy is coming to pass. What a neat connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament. (242-43)

Thus, it becomes clear to me that two distinct and largely separate religions are described in the Bible, rather than one continuous religion. In the Old Testament, an involved, often brutal tribal-god-of-war, was, for me, made too much in the image of man; often angry, demanding, petty, jealous, self-centered, sometimes cruel (as with the flood), bumbling and earth-centered in his cosmology, as he walked and talked with mankind. In the New Testament, a more remote and more apocalyptic God the Father supposedly made very big changes in his plan for mankind. He now again became a God of all peoples of the world. But more importantly, a Son of God is unveiled, unless you view Jesus as being God-the-Father incarnate. And finally, God is said to offer salvation to all people, but strangely, only through belief in, and acceptance of, the Son whom God’s own Chosen People (the Jews) had never expected, and whom most humans on earth, then and now, never get to know. Thus we find that if Jesus is the Christ and the maker of the universe, as the Gospel of John says, that God has pulled the rug from under the Jews (God’s people). How could the Jews accept Jesus in order to attain Heaven, when their lifelong religion of Judaism, its doctrines and necessary commitments, had been largely replaced, suddenly and without warning? What happened to God’s perfection and infallibility?

The separation between Judaism and Christianity is again substantiated by the statement of the Jesus Seminar scholar, Robert W. Funk, in his book, *Honest to Jesus*, when he says, “As far as we know, none of the original followers of Jesus wrote books. Those ascribed to the first disciples or to relatives of Jesus are actually pseudographs” (116). In a pseudograph, the real author claims the document is written by some more famous person than himself or herself, in order to gain acceptance and creditability. As an example, Mack thinks the two pseudo-Peter letters/books of the New Testament were intended, first, to encourage church leaders to accept what they say about bishop qualifications and heresy, and secondly, churchmen thought that getting Peter accepted as

the author, and therefore as the representative of Jesus, would accomplish the crucial church goal of making Jesus the originator of Christian theology through Peter (232). Couldn't a God follow a better scheme than this? Mack believes the letters ascribed to Peter are almost certainly written by two well-educated bishops many years after the death of the illiterate Galilean fisherman (232). Pseudographic authorship was commonly used in this period of time.

The Jesus Seminar scholars, a group of nearly 200 theologians who met at one time or another over many years, obviously found most dialogs in the New Testament to be incompatible with Jesus' image as revealed in the earliest-in-time gospels of Q and Thomas. Increasingly, as time passed, they find Jesus using egoistic speech in the four gospels that is not at all consistent with his earlier non-egoistic language, humble purpose and lifestyle. These scholars also note language in the Gospels that was inappropriate for Jesus to use in his time, place and historical situation in Israel. Notably, as time passed, the gospel writers had Jesus speak much less in the parables and aphorisms that he had used heavily in the earlier Q writings. The preaching type of dialog of the Christ-of-Faith in the Gospel of John was strikingly different from that of the never boastful or even self-referential Jesus of the parables. John is thus exposed as a fabricator of Jesus' speech.

Many scholars appear to verify what seems clear to me—that the inception of the New Testament's doctrines resulted solely from Apostle Paul's claims about Jesus, followed by his marathon efforts to spread them. But the gospel writers made the worldwide spread of the new religion possible.

Surely, Jesus did not harbor knowledge about possessing a stupendous mystical nature if none of his actual sayings indicate it. When Paul visited followers of Jesus in Jerusalem they had continued to practice Judaism in the synagogue and strongly resisted Paul's new ideas about circumcision and the sharing of meals with outsiders. A number of scholars feel that the conflict between Paul and those in Jerusalem who truly knew Jesus was likely much more intense than was described in Luke's Acts of the Apostles.

Readers of this essay will note over and over that New Testament text will tell very different stories than my sources and I am telling here. I am proposing that the stories told in The Gospels of Q and Thomas would be far more reliable than those told by Gospel writers, in part because Q and Thomas writers initially had no motive to mythologize. A myth is generated in large part because its developers had objectives to achieve that were more important to them than was showing the true facts. Facts were likely in short supply and exuberant story telling in long supply in the area of the Holy Land two thousand years ago. And, a new and exotic set of events such as was claimed for Jesus would likely have generated several contradictory versions for a writer to choose from—compare the books of Mark and John. If myths typically grow to meet human needs better, what needs did Bible writers have? To name a few, an escape from death, an everlasting life, gaining family togetherness in Heaven, gaining support in daily life and having the prestige of being a writer and a change agent for God. The Jews already had their religion, so Christianity eventually gravitated to or was pushed to the less-Jewish communities that had only a

pathetic stew of primitive gods that weren't emotionally competitive with the Pauline god/gods.

Chapter 15

God's New Grand-Plan for Humankind

The New Testament writers tell us that Jesus, who in Christianity often commands center stage instead of God the Father, provides redemption and salvation to believers among us sinful humans, by sacrificing his life to his father, who apparently had to be bribed into giving all of humanity a chance for salvation (some theologians may argue this point). This puts God in the role of accepting the sacrifice of Jesus' life to himself, needlessly it would seem. If God and Jesus are separate entities, as Jesus' statements in the Gospel of John indicate, then this is utterly unbelievable. After his vision on the road to Damascus, Apostle Paul's new role for Jesus as risen Lord and Savior snatched glorious triumph from the claws of defeat—the death of the could-be messiah. Thus, the New Testament presented a new grand-plan-for-humankind after a hundred or more generations of Jewish people had already died, and the other tribes of the world had yet to be introduced to Jehovah in any meaningful way. So, the tribal God that here has to greatly expand his stature to move up to being a world God, must in modern times move up yet again to being the cosmic God of endless, fathomless, space and matter/energy. Is the God of the Jews who toiled personally to assist Adam, Abram and Moses, compatible with this super-gigantic cosmic task?

Following his first vision with Jesus, Apostle Paul alone obviously initiated the core theology that we now find in Christianity with the idea that Jesus' death by crucifixion, combined with his supernatural resurrection and ascension to heaven, demonstrated God's plan to redeem humans and usher them into eternal life through his grace. Such ideas were quite alien to the Jews, say scholars. They believe that these ideas and others in Christianity were influenced by Grecian and Roman pagan mysticism. Most of the New Testament writers, if not all, lived in and wrote in the Mediterranean areas so influenced. Apostle Paul's writing is especially noted for its Hellenistic influence. The passion parts of the gospels, and the Gospel of John in particular, also morphed Jesus into

a celestial being. Standing against this version of the meaning of Jesus is the humanistic Jewish-sage-and-healer version found in his more reliable sayings.

The very-early-written Gospel of Thomas, discovered in 1945, contains the type of humble sayings of Jesus found in Q writings with an increasing Gnostic underlayment. As already noted, 114 of these sayings exist in Thomas, without any hint of Jesus' being a savior, a redeemer, or a Son of God. It also contains no hint of the phasing out of the Judaic God Jehovah, his plan, or his holy book that Christianity intends largely to replace. The writers of the Gospel of Thomas are thought to have veered into Gnosticism after meeting together in Israel for some time, a fact that is apparently used by conservative Christians to depreciate the whole of the Gospel of Thomas, even though its earliest sayings of Jesus are little contaminated with Gnostic ideas (intuitively having knowledge of spiritual matters).

All gospel writers brought their own and their community's religious, political, and social situations, their histories, beliefs, fears, and their moment in time into their writing. The Jewish rebellion against Rome and the resultant destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 70 CE may have dramatically changed the attitudes and the situations of Gospel writers. Jews in general may have become more apocalyptic and more zealous. The gospel of John, written in about 80 to 100 CE, considered by theologians to be fourth in time of composition, certainly took a turn toward a more mystical and apocalyptic world view than did the other three gospels. Such changes fit with what we should expect following a hopeless war with Rome that fatally damaged the nation of Israel and threatened its claim of having a special tribal relationship with their God.

A. N. Wilson in his book, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*, says that Christianity "invented the idea of hell and eternal torment" and that it "was founded on a set of anti-humanist principles" (12). Wilson further states:

In the Acts of the Apostles, a book which reached its final form in perhaps the year 80, fifteen or twenty years after Paul's death, there are several accounts of Paul's conversion. Already the author [Luke] writes as if it is perfectly clear that Jesus had started a new movement (called by the author, The Way), which was destined by divine providence to become available to gentiles. As we shall see, this idea of things betrays the bias on the part of the author rather than giving an accurate account of the historical facts. The truth of what happened in the very early days—in the lifetime of Jesus and in the days following his death—is historically irrecoverable. (15)

We do have early period statements by Jesus that contradict the idea of opening the Jewish God's realm to all people, as Paul promoted. Taken from Wilson, Jesus is said to say, "that his mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; that he has no desire to throw the pearls of his wisdom before the Gentile pigs; and that the Gentiles are dogs" (18). This implies that Jesus supports Judaism as is. Quoting Wilson again, "Jesus' closest friends and followers, and

indeed his family (post death) seemed to know nothing about the ‘fact’—taken for granted by so many of us—that Jesus, or ‘Christ,’ was the ‘originator’ of the religion of Christianity” (18). Jesus was probably the originator only in the sense that his existence was necessary to Paul’s message, but without Paul and his helpers, there would surely have been no Christianity. Paul had found his means to a life in heaven—salvation through Jesus’ supposed willing acceptance of his own crucifixion. What a strange process and what a senseless justification that whole story demands.

We should note that if Paul started his ministry shortly after Jesus’ death, it was another 30 to 35 years until the first gospel was written; therefore, there would have been time to search the Jewish scriptures for predictions about Jesus, time for incubation of Paul’s dogma and time for developing informal worship/discussion groups that surely included the gospel writers. A question we must ask is, should one trust Paul’s visions, which were likely delusions, or trust Jesus’ own approximate words as found in the Gospels of Q and Thomas to tell us who Jesus really was? Obviously, we must give Jesus clear priority. Paul is holding an empty sack without more reliable evidence from Jesus. But, with a faith as deliciously spiced as was Paul’s would not the temptation to concoct, stretch, and even falsify stories about Jesus and his mission on earth become irresistible to gospel writers? Obviously, yes, given the evidence one finds, the time in which they lived and their need. They appear to have been very high on Paul’s powerful new wonder-drug: “heavenly salvation” during this chaotic and sad time in history.

Chapter 16

The Doctrines of Apostle Paul

Apostle Paul's writings tend to emphasize the evil nature of man, setting the tone for other New Testament writers and for today's literalist ministers while more liberal ministers seem to find it possible to preach about God's love, his concern and support for humans. The human-support emphasis is very commendable. Everyone needs to be inspired and refreshed about how to be a better human being and everyone needs a psychological lift here and there. What humans don't need is a load of guilt, a constant reminder of the difficulty of attaining heaven, or worse, of avoiding hell's fires. Thus, I feel the need to counter the literal claims of the New Testament that lead to a crippling takeover of mind and body. To become fully liberated and rational, one may need to switch from a salvation quest to a better-human quest. Rather than stressing living so as to enter a contrived heaven, religion should assist people in living well and living joyfully. I am pleased to note that more churches are emphasizing the latter recently. I have included in a section near the end of this essay named "The Mind of the Bible Believer" after the book by the same title, the personal story of the author, Edmond D. Cohen, a psychologist, awakening to what had happened to him while he was a fundamentalist. He definitely had not been joyful. I feel that the only harness that a human should have to wear is the one pulling for good citizenship, including a lifestyle and a set of values designed to maximize human well-being and happiness, rather than one designed to please the supposed gods.

Since Paul planted the seed that grew into Christianity, we should know as much as is possible about him and his work. Thus, I am providing some additional quotes that show Paul rather than Jesus to be the originator of Christian claims about Jesus. All of the quotes which follow in this topic are from Hyam Maccoby's book, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*:

The idea of "being in Christ" . . . is entirely without parallel in Jewish literature. . . . It means a kind of unity with, or sinking of the

individuality, into the divine personality of Jesus, and a sharing of his experience of crucifixion and resurrection. . . . The idea of “being in Christ,” however, can be paralleled without difficulty in the mystery cults. (63)

As for the idea that Jesus removed a curse from other people by taking a curse upon himself, this too is alien to Jewish thinking, but this, of course, belongs to Paul’s central theology. (68)

The authority of Paul as the great interpreter of Jesus’ role is much strengthened by the belief that he was an expert in traditional Jewish religion who was able to see the continuity between the new covenant and the old, and to guarantee, by his own bridging of the gap, that his interpretation of Jesus provides the true fulfillment of Old Testament religion . . . That he had a Pharisee training is a mere self-deception on the part of scholars who have persuaded themselves into finding what they were looking for. (72)

The case of Stephen [stoned to death in Acts] has thus been strongly urged by all concerned to argue that Paul was not the originator of Christianity as we know it; that the deification of Jesus and the abrogation of the Torah were doctrines held by the Jesus movement before Paul came to the scene . . . A careful examination of the Stephen episode, however, reveals many unhistorical features, and shows how it has been built up by the author of Acts precisely for the purpose of providing a link between Paul and Jesus. (73)

When we get to the discussion of the Book of Q, note that the earliest followers of the crucified Jesus never spoke of Jesus as being the savior or the son of God and never spoke about an abrogation of the Torah. This again confirms Luke to be a fabricator of Stephen’s pro-Pauline comments at his trial, so easily done 40 to 50 years later and far removed from the scene of action. Jesus simply did not claim the status of savior given to him by Paul. So why would Stephen do so?

Speaking of the death and resurrection myths of pagan deities that Paul seems to have borrowed, Maccoby offers the following:

Bound up with the worship of this ubiquitous deity was a deeply emotional experience: that of dying and being reborn together with the deity, as his *agon* [conflict between two antagonists] was enacted in dramatic and ecstatic ceremonies. (101)

The Jesus movement in that time . . . had turned into the Christian Church, which had adopted the ideas of Paul, but was concerned to derive these ideas from Jesus himself and therefore to deny Paul’s originality . . . The myth now was that all the Apostles, including Peter and James, had believed. (105)

The aspect that differentiated Paul from all the other mystagogues of the time and ensured that his religion, unlike theirs was not for-

gotten ... was Paul's determination to connect his new religion to Judaism and thus give it an historical basis going back in time to the beginning of the world. (107-8)

Regarding the Eucharist, Maccoby points out:

The earliest assertion of this is to be found in Paul's Epistles ... the idea that there is salvic power in the body and blood of Jesus. (112)

To admit that Paul was the creator of the Eucharist would be to admit that Paul, not Jesus, was the founder of Christianity. It means that the central sacrament and mystery of Christianity, which marks it off as a separate religion from Judaism, was not instituted by Jesus. (113)

Paul's expression "the Lord's Supper" was so redolent of mystery religion that the early fathers of the church became embarrassed by it, and they substituted for it the name "Eucharist," which had Jewish, rather than pagan associations. (116)

He [Paul] gave authority to this new institution [the Eucharist] ... by adducing a vision in which he had seen Jesus at the Last Supper, giving instructions to his disciples about performing the Eucharistic rite. (118)

Describing the Gospel's heavy criticism of the apostles, Maccoby asks:

Which is more likely, that Jesus' closest disciples failed to understand his most important message, or that Pauline Christians, writing Gospels about fifty years after Jesus' death, and faced with the unpalatable fact that the "Jerusalem Church" was unaware of Pauline doctrines, had to insert into their Gospels denigratory material about the Apostles in order to counteract the influence of the 'Jerusalem Church'? (129)

The following hard hitting summary is made by Maccoby:

We have seen that Christianity, as a new religion distinct from Judaism, with a doctrine of salvation through the divine sacrifice of Jesus Christ and with the new sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, did not arise through the "Jerusalem Church," which was indeed not a "Church" at all, but a monarchical movement within Judaism, with a belief in the miraculous resurrection of a human Jesus. (139)

Out of his own despair and agony, Paul created his myth. His belief that he received the myth from the heavenly Jesus himself has obscured Paul's own role in creating it. (205)

The first New Testament writer, Paul [via his letters], never met Jesus and only twice spent a few days in Palestine after his conversion. He seems to have

had little or no access to Jesus' sayings and actions. But on the other hand, all of the gospels show evidence of being influenced by Paul's epistles to his converts in the Diaspora. In the early years of Paul's letter-writing and doctrine development he is shown to have had little contact with supposedly knowledgeable disciples of Jesus, except Peter, and even that may be a myth. The book of Acts says that, during his visits to Jerusalem, Paul met and conferred primarily with James the group's leader and the brother of Jesus, rather than with disciples. The sudden introduction of James as a major new Jesus-supporter after the latter's death is itself surprising and strange.

Paul's monumental contribution to Christianity was built on the foundation of his mystical visions. He appeared to feel he already knew everything he needed to know. It was enough to deliver his proclamation. Paul himself seemed to have had a deep psychological need for his Jesus story. A. N. Wilson, author of *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle* commented that "Jesus . . . would have been astonished by the turns and developments which the Christian religion was to take . . ." (239). Paul's doctrinal and psychological distance from the friends, family and followers of Jesus in Jerusalem with whom Paul visited very briefly only two times, and not happily, shows important gaps between the theologies, the styles, and the cultures represented. Judaism's association with Christianity was apparently almost totally within the Diaspora, especially after the war with Rome in 70 CE. The people in Israel who wrote the Gospels of Q and Thomas seemed to be oblivious to Pauline theology during the period in which they did most of their writing.

A. N. Wilson compliments Paul by saying: "The genius of Paul and the collective genius of the 'early church,' which wrote the twenty-seven surviving books that we call the New Testament, was to mythologize Jesus (72). "He suggests that Paul's Christ Myth . . . by becoming an interior thing, an imagined thing and at last a written thing, was able to withstand the passing away of those who had known Christ 'according to the flesh' " (73).

Many of Paul's doctrines were degrading to mankind and would not be compatible with those of Jesus. To Paul, all humans are sinners. Only the complete surrender of will, mind and heart to God provides hope. Righteousness is a quality possessed by God alone but is dispensed to humans as God sees fit. God can love his chosen people but man can't love God. Paul claimed that humans have no free will, so it is foolish to pursue good. Wilson sees Paul's poem as showing "a sheer terribleness of God's justice, the absolute ruthlessness of it and its arbitrariness was set against the cross" (84). For Paul, flesh and spirit are fundamentally opposed, so one must struggle constantly to push down urges of the flesh, which is both a non-Jewish and a non-humanist premise. The soul, Paul says, is imprisoned in the flesh or body where it is always led into trouble by the body. This exaggerated assessment has been a problem for Christians ever since Paul concocted it. Paul added that Satan represents matters of the flesh (like sex), whereas God represents matters of the spirit. He recommended that missionaries, and sometimes members of his faith-groups, not marry, and also that women maintain a subservient attitude with men. Augustine of Hippo, whom Christians refer to as Saint Augustine, much later abandoned his wife,

in part to avoid the sinfulness of the flesh, in this case sexual intercourse. Both men complained about their hardship in fighting the desires of the flesh. Paul doesn't seem to be a happy man. The soon-to-come end of the world may have sustained him-so short a time away that those who have wives should be as though they had none, he wrote to the Corinthians. Why should Christians be more prone to believe Paul's religious prognostications of long ago any more than those of the recent prophets, Joseph Smith, Mary Baker Eddy or Ellen White?

Noting the many forgoing admonishments and policies of Paul, how can it be said that Jesus was the initiator of Christianity? Jesus himself never mentioned having a plan to develop churches, say Jesus Seminar writers (Funk, 311). During the first thirty-five years following the death of Jesus, information about events and doctrines within the fledgling religion called The Way seem to have been least available and least reliable. We have only Paul's letters, Q's and Thomas' sayings of Jesus, and later, a backward look provided in The Acts of the Apostles with its likely very unreliable history of the period. Churchmen took the reins of Christianity during the generations of evangelists and bishops that followed Paul and the gospel writers. They were vital in fleshing out doctrine, policies and procedures for the new religion which was plagued by the fact that several versions of Christianity were practiced for about 300 years.

Chapter 17

Paul, Indispensable to Christianity

Paul made two visits to the Jerusalem followers of Jesus, but strangely the talks seemed to have been conducted primarily with the brother of Jesus, James of Nazareth who had been previously unknown to exist. Keeping elusive about parts of his newly formed dogma, Paul argued heatedly with James about whether his non-Jewish converts in the Diaspora needed to practice Jewish religious rituals, especially circumcision, exclusive meal sharing, and Jewish dietary restrictions. Paul had contended that these were no longer necessary, apparently because Christ's death and ascension brought forth a new covenant with God that potentially atones for the sins of all mankind. Those Jesus-followers remaining in Jerusalem who had actually known Jesus (called Nazarenes by Churchmen) did not agree with some of Paul's new doctrine that rumor had spread to them. Paul had to leave Jerusalem, secretly and quickly the first time, and leave with a price on his head the second time, some 20 years later. The Nazarenes obviously thought that Jesus and his teachings belonged inside of Judaism. The joint consensus of Jesus Seminar scholars was that there is no reason to believe that Jesus had an intention of starting a new religion (Funk, 311).

In discussing the disciple Peter and the mythological process, G. A. Wells, in his book *Can We Trust The New Testament?* says

In all of this we can see a good example of the mythological process. In the earliest documents Peter and Paul are in conflict (in Galatians Paul calls him a hypocrite). The next stage was to allege in Acts that the activities of the two ran on parallel lines without conflict, as in Acts, thus reflecting the idyllic unity of the early church. Next we find allegations of active cooperation between them (the joint founding of Christian communities). Finally, Peter is made the sole founder of the Roman church and its first Bishop—against the fact that monarchical episcopacy was actually developed at a later date.

(139)

So, it was clearly Apostle Paul who invented Christianity, not the humble Jesus. Following his self-described mystical vision of the heavenly Jesus received while on the road to Damascus, Paul became totally obsessed with developing and promoting his “good news,” a gospel of salvation to all believers through Christ’s redeeming crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. He did this without ever meeting the earthly Jesus. He did claim to have had additional contacts with the heavenly Jesus via subsequent visions. Paul’s letters to groups of his converts show him developing the new religion’s theology at the same time that he was spreading it. Scholars agree he was the indispensable initiator and promoter of the new religion, later called Christianity. Hyam Maccoby makes a meaningful opening statement in his book, *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*:

At the beginning of Christianity stand two figures: Jesus and Paul. Jesus is regarded by Christians as the founder of their religion, in that the events of his life comprise the foundation story of Christianity; but Paul is regarded as the great interpreter of Jesus’ mission, who explained, in a way that Jesus himself never did, how Jesus’ life and death fitted into a cosmic scheme of salvation, stretching from the creation of Adam to the end of time. (3)

Readers should re-read this quote. It says that Jesus never did explain how his life fit into a cosmic scheme. But Paul certainly did, and that explains why gospel writers felt a great need to help Jesus substantiate what Paul claimed he had learned in visions about this purpose of Jesus. The gospel writers Matthew and Luke must have noted that the sayings of Jesus that they had received from Q people did not substantiate Paul’s claims that Jesus is a Savior and thus also couldn’t support the ongoing beliefs of the new converts in the Diaspora. But even so, they chose to support and strengthen the glorious cosmic mission of Jesus as promoted by Paul. A. N. Wilson says in his book, *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*, “[Jesus’] death on the cross was a sacrifice for sin, is wholly a creation of Paul” (258). A splinter group of Christians called Ebonites blamed Paul for distorting Jesus’ message in claiming that Jesus is a Lord and Savior who saves gentiles as well as Jews.

Chapter 18

Too Good to Fail

The “good news” story, now loose among a few people, was too good to fail. It offered followers: 1) an escape from permanent death, 2) everlasting life, 3) the rejoining of loved ones in heaven; 4) a supreme friend who loves me and you; 5) a constant miracle-working supporter in Jesus; 6) forgiveness of sins; 7) an explanation for man’s existence, purpose, and destiny; 8) a much more credible God that serves “all” humans, not just Jews, and 9) enhanced personal status from being a partner with a powerful God and being a part of his great plan for all of the world’s people.

The potential psychological power of these benefits is tremendous. When I speak of “need” providing the motivation for religious belief, I am talking about such needs. If these are true, the benefit to mankind is fantastic, wondrous, magnificent, beyond words. But, we must remember that when the Bible was started, the writers assumed that God’s universe consisted of a single earthly body with lights shining through holes in a tarp-like mantle over the earth, all created and managed for the sake of humans. Pauline discourse wouldn’t have seemed irrational then, but today, to assume that we humans personally justify the major attention of the cosmic power behind our utterly unfathomable universe of a possible billion galaxies seems extremely irrational and egotistical. Thus, many people today cannot accept the existence of the ancient God (and his son) that is presented in the Bible. It is interesting how New Testament Writers humanized God the Father by giving him a son just like humans have. And, the many other illogical gods claimed to accomplish similar ends for human beings should have turned down our belief thermostats by now.

Part IV

A Closer Look at the New Testament

Chapter 19

What the Biblical Scholars Concluded

The modern Biblical scholars/historians of the Jesus Seminar group whose writings I have studied prior to my own writing of this essay included: Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Robert W. Funk, Helmut Koester, Burton L Mack, Hyam Maccoby, Elaine Pagels, John Shelby Spong, G. A. Wells, A. N. Wilson and Ian Wilson. Most, if not all of these authors are theologians or ex-theologians who participated in the Jesus Seminar study group and some are affiliated with universities.

The Seminar participants, after very lengthy study asked for group votes on many issues. In their joint deliberations the scholars concluded (as I interpret them collectively but not specifically for every person on every issue): 1) that the real Jesus of history likely didn't utter up to eighty percent of the words attributed to him in the four gospels (for this powerful statement see Robert W. Funk's, *Honest to Jesus*, p. 41); 2) that the early followers in Israel that proclaimed Jesus to be the messiah did not predict the coming of a savior or son of God, as worshipped by Christians; 3) that Jesus' Kingdom of God referred only to an already existing, unbrokered (direct contact) relationship with God; 4) that the Kingdom of God did not imply a heaven, nor would the title of messiah have provided god-status to Jesus; 5) that Jesus did not expect history to come to an end in his own time; 6) that a good deal of mythmaking took place as succeeding gospel writers portrayed an increasingly supernatural Jesus; and 7) that Jesus' self-definition, found within those sayings that were deemed by the experts as most likely to be his, did not justify the more fantastic claims and images portrayed by gospel writers. Funk adds to the preceding list of Jesus Seminar conclusions "that he [Jesus] did not initiate what we know as the Eucharist" (42).

"The Jesus Seminar concluded, on the basis of the evidence, that, while Jesus enjoyed good companionship, he did not deliberately collect disciples, and he did not select 'twelve' special followers or appoint leaders among them. Further-

more, he did not commission his followers to establish a church or inaugurate a world mission,” according to Robert Funk (311).

Funk also tells us that the Pauline storytellers soon turned “the focus from Jesus’ vision of God’s domain to Jesus himself—from the proclaimed to the proclaimer—and Jesus becomes the one who authorizes the kingdom, who guarantees that it is God’s will” (250). Thus, the historical Jesus, whom the Jesus Seminar scholars identified, varied drastically from the mystical and mythical Christ image given him by Paul, the gospel writers, and other New Testament writers. In hard language, Jesus did not claim to be the Christ we know today, and one could assume that none of the characteristics given him in the Apostles’ Creed were facts. In other words, in the New Testament, Paul and other early evangelists perverted the image of Jesus the itinerant-sage-to-Jewish-peasants, by building a resurrection rumor into a glamorous new religion that was never Jesus’ intent, and they did it by grossly distorting Jesus’ messages, often even fabricating his words, deeds and meanings to fit pre-existing dogma. We will soon briefly investigate the lengthy and meticulous methodology of the Seminar group as well as more of their conclusions.

Many readers may be shocked by the preceding claims. How could such deviant and seemingly outrageous statements be made by theologians and ex-theologians against a religion that has functioned very well for 2000 years, and has more than a billion believers? Well, very importantly, the main Bible claims are irrational, and voluminous research over many years has made that even more clear to Seminar participants. Any shocked believers reading this page need to realize that they also justify their own disbelief in the other world religions practiced by more than sixty percent of the world’s people. But, questioners deserve a full response. This essay will briefly summarize, or quote several of the Jesus Seminar scholars’ additional arguments and thus allow them to explain why they dare to make such radical, shocking and out-of-the-mainstream statements (radical mainly to those who have been sheltered in a conservative church).

Readers would be justified to suspect the validity of new ideas if they were not the result of high quality research or reasoning. But the claims which follow are well supported by a rapidly growing tide of lifelong thinkers among biblical scholars and other intellectuals who are coming out of the closet while the sun is shining on a new enlightenment of the last fifty years. Such biblical criticism did not start with modern scholars. It started in a serious way in Europe during the Enlightenment period in the late 1700’s. The pace has quickened in recent years, even as fundamentalism with its usual absence of reason has gained converts rapidly, especially in poor nations where people are most desperate for hope and least well equipped to apply reason.

Concurrently, religious conservatism in the United States may be in a growth mode because of the stress and fear that results from very rapid changes in our lives, including threats of terrorism and various other disasters. Yet, most of the people of our nation remain comparatively secular, and most put some emphasis on science and reason. New understandings of the universe have outdated the cosmology and the grand-scheme of God found in the Bible. Also, there is

growing multiculturalism in the nation, with its mixing of peoples and religions which detracts from the maintenance of a dominating religion, culture, and world view. Among subgroups of Americans our modern American lifestyles are prone to be hedonistic, which I too protest vigorously.

For those readers who are seriously disturbed about all the criticisms of the Bible to this point, be assured that I recognize that Christianity has a number of good qualities. It is among the more rational world religions to me. I find it more uplifting (for lack of a better word) than most. It offers a moral paragon in Jesus; well, some of the time. Its rewards, if true, are fantastic. The quality of writing is amazing for its time; however, I suspect that has much to do with multiple improvements made by many redactors, translators and transcribers. Much more of a positive nature could be said. My concern is whether the Bible's core claims are true, because I, for one, don't want to live a lie, or live a myth, if that sounds better. I worry about possibly upsetting some readers, but as rational modern humans we must protest against all forms of irrationalism, lest it leads to our collective demise or misery. How does one handle the proposition that Jesus is a man-God? I offer that and the human misery in Baghdad as two examples of religious irrationalism.

Chapter 20

What Jesus Actually Said

There is considerable discussion today comparing the historical or earthly Jesus to the mythical Jesus, or the Christ of Faith. Many participants in the Jesus Seminar apparently joined the effort as troubled believers concerned about getting clarity in their own minds about the status of Jesus. Let's look at how these Biblical scholars and historians determined to their satisfaction what Jesus said and didn't say. My treatment of this topic will draw heavily on the book *Honest to Jesus* by Robert W. Funk, who is the founder of the Jesus Seminar, a large study-group of leading theologians. Many of the members of this group have written relevant books and some have participated in major television programs as world-class experts on Jesus. Their investigative approach was exceptionally concentrated, comprehensive, lengthy, meticulous, and scholarly in evaluating the nature of Jesus as he appears primarily in the four Gospels and Acts, in Paul's Letters, plus, some non-Biblical materials. Their pursuit of truth and truth only was quite new to the world of religion in comparison to the historical habit of promoting doctrines as facts.

Shortened greatly to be brief, Robert W. Funk explains that the group first isolated and established particulars in the gospels and in Acts. Next they grouped the particulars into arrays or clusters that belonged together (61). Here they already noticed that the dialog of Jesus which came from the isolated sayings of Q, embedded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke varied in "marked ways" from much of that which remained in the four gospels and Acts. A third function was "to assemble comparative evidence." The researchers looked at non-biblical stories of the period that also dealt with teachers and charismatic figures like Jesus. There, they found stories of miraculous births, healings, the exorcising of demons, and criticism of the temple cult. Thus, many of the deeds claimed for Jesus were also claimed for other people of his time and in his area. Fourth, they put the arrays in strata, such as chronological order, which revealed Mark to be the earliest Gospel, Matthew and Luke to overlap with Mark, and their sources not to be independent of each other. Fifth, they studied the "literary vehicles of transmission," noting the use of anecdotes, their type, style, content, and the verbal vehicles used. Apparently this led to cata-

logging the types of stories and the kinds of information that they could encode about Jesus. The sixth aspect of the task was to broaden the perspective of each researcher; for example, was there any dissatisfaction, and if so, about what? Seventh, all observers or researchers themselves, as well as earlier studies of similar type, were evaluated to look for biases on their or its part. Recognition of these should improve experimental control.

Professor Funk says the Jesus of the parables has recently been rediscovered by people like himself at the expense of Jesus the apocalyptic prophet. He says the parables, and to a lesser extent the aphorisms, came to be understood as speech forms more characteristic of Jesus (Funk, 136). He notes that they are metaphorical, non-literal, and figurative, but says they have interpretive potential. Thus, the wisdom tradition was rediscovered and a new paradigm for understanding Jesus ensued. Funk says:

The parables are ostensibly about the kingdom of God or God's domain, but in fact they are pictures and stories about baking, dinner parties, shrewd managers, vineyards, lost sheep and sons, and other everyday topics. (68)

In the new view parables came to be understood as literary and aesthetic entities in their own right, with their own integrity and with new interpretive potential. That discovery changed everything says Funk. Jesus doesn't tell us how the parables explain or relate to God's imperial rule. Listeners or readers are left to make their own connections. Thus, the scholars began to see Jesus more as a Wisdom teacher (69).

The group of scholars identified characteristic speech forms of Jesus and also of New Testament writers as representers of the old and new faiths. This effort was said to be very helpful in evaluating who was really doing the talking in each sentence of the gospels, thus also helpful in evaluating the validity of more lengthy stories. Jesus was noted to have a unique style of storytelling, unique messages, unique lifestyle and philosophy that became quite easy to identify. Investigators felt that the real Jesus can be found in the parables, proverbs, and aphorisms in Matthew and Luke. In the gospel of John, the image painted of Jesus is so otherworldly as to completely contradict the earlier gospels. The Jesus Scholars set criteria of authenticity, such as coherence, convergence between words, actions and plausibility. As an example, the prayer of Jesus while sitting alone in the Garden of Gethsemane was obviously fabricated. "Jesus made no theological statements and no philosophical generalizations," says Funk. "His language is highly figurative. . . . It is non-literal or metaphorical. . . . His discourse and deeds are filled with celebration" (150, 161). He tends not to ever refer to himself. The real earthly Jesus has little in common with the Jesus of Christology. So, when you think you are reading Jesus' words in the New Testament, you are likely reading the scripture writer's pseudographic words rather than Jesus' real words of 30 to 70 years earlier. These issues fill several interesting chapters in Funk's *Honest to Jesus* book. Visit them for many more details about methodology.

Was Jesus a mystical Christ or only a flesh and blood human? Christianity is all about the nature of Jesus. The modern Biblical scholars think that Jesus viewed himself to be only what his “true sayings” and true ministry show him to be: a peasant sage, teacher, healer, proclaimer of a kingdom of God on earth, primarily to the underclass of Israel’s people. However, the gospels and Apostle Paul’s letters tell us that Jesus, now with the Father in Heaven, is Lord and Savior, Son of God and even creator of the world. (If so, why isn’t this mentioned in the Genesis story?) Keep in mind that Paul’s Biblical claims came from his personal visions or delusions which are well known in psychological literature to sometimes be associated with religious experiences. I have unease with that. Just imagine the irony of Pauline doctrine, which is the foundation of Christianity, resulting from a seizure. If so, then Christianity resulted from a seizure. Much more likely it resulted from common myth making.

Chapter 21

An Evaluation of the Jesus Story

The eleven Biblical scholars and historians that were named earlier as participants in the Jesus Seminar joined colleagues in evaluating the Jesus stories of the four Gospels and Acts, in part to estimate the probability of each and every “saying” of Jesus actually being his, versus that of overly enthusiastic gospel writers or editors helping Jesus to say that which the writers would have liked him to say, or which they felt he implied, meant, or needed to say. The Scholars note that successive gospel writers presented the historical Jesus of Nazareth as an increasingly mystical entity, which by itself tells us that myth-making was taking place over time. Such may have been viewed by gospel writers and their probable discussion groups as doing their duty to justify and support the almighty status that Paul and others had already claimed for Jesus. Also, the writers’ excitement and zealotry, stemming from their personal psychological needs within an unstable environment quite tolerant of “improving stories,” may have motivated them greatly. They must have felt they were discovering how their own eternal futures in Heaven could be earned. The final gospel, that of John, presents Jesus as purely a mystical or spirit entity. Robert W. Funk says in *Honest to Jesus*: “The Christ of Faith won its final battle over the Jesus of history” when the Christian Church adopted the Apostles’ Creed in the third century (43). It proclaims conception by the Holy Spirit, a virgin birth, Jesus’ seat at the right hand of the Father, a second coming and a judgment. Is this not legislating religious dogma? And what a leap upward from the poor, scruffy, potentially illiterate but very intelligent peasant that Jesus had probably been.

Funk says that the 1945 Nag Hammadi discovery in Egypt of about 50 books in a clay jar greatly enhanced the knowledge of scholars about early Christian heretics (71). Very importantly, among the materials was a complete Coptic Gospel of Thomas, having 114 sayings of Jesus. They contain minimal dialog, virtually no narrative, no passion story, no appearance stories and no birth or childhood stories. Neither the Gospel of Thomas nor the Gospel of Q has any

sayings that show Jesus to be a Savior and Son of God. Anything so important couldn't be forgotten or left out on purpose. Either these Jewish writers hadn't heard Paul's preachments or they had rejected them. For emphasis, let me repeat the following facts once more. About forty percent of the Gospel of Thomas' Jesus-sayings were similar or nearly identical to those in the Gospel of Q. The later-written, sayings within the Gospel of Thomas exhibit a Gnostic philosophy, again showing an evolution of belief or what I am calling mythologizing. The date of Q writing, having to be prior to the writing of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke where they reappear, and the recent finding of some identical Thomas sayings confirms that Q's identification and sorting out in the 1900's was valid, rather than being the dirty scheme of Christian liberals or nonbelievers designed to besmirch the Bible.

Scholars of the Jesus Seminar also reviewed many materials that had been rejected for use in the early church's canon, to gain a more complete understanding of the forces at work in the early Christian community and to find what each theological group believed. The new evidence showed that Jesus was not the originator of Christian theology! It further illustrated the abundance of theologies that were existent in the area at this period of time. The Nag Hammadi discovery in Egypt alone contained not only the early-written Gospel of Thomas but also a dozen other useful manuscripts.

Funk also implies that floods of new knowledge in the past three centuries have collapsed the old symbolic universe in which the stories of Adam, Jesus, and the great flood fit (63). Where is the earth and where is Heaven in the cosmos we know today that extends from us at least 13 billion light years outward, that is without fixed points in space or time? And, how do we deal with superstition, magic, miracle and myth from the past in an era of rationality?

The historical Jesus was put to death by the Roman occupiers of Jewish lands when he was about 30 to 32 years old. The major group of Jesus followers in Israel, called Nazarenes, was active in Jerusalem soon after Jesus' crucifixion. Modern researchers judge from their reading of Q writings that after Jesus' death the compiling group discussed the teachings of Jesus during evening meals together. They continued to attend the synagogue and to practice Jewish religious rituals. In more precise language, they continued to practice Judaism with their own Jesus add-on. They were definitely not Christians in the present sense. This fact makes Paul's new view of the significance of Jesus alarming and makes it appear to be a myth in its entirety. Little is known about the departure from Israel of the writers of the Gospel of Thomas in the late first century. Perhaps some or all traveled to the Nag Hammadi area of Egypt where their buried writings were recently found. The brutal war with Rome in 70 CE devastated the nation of Israel making many people flee.

The disciple Peter is mentioned many times in Acts, engaged mainly as a missionary in the Diaspora. He represented Luke's best or only hope for appearing to substantiate that Paul's doctrines were also those of Jesus. Matthew knows this and sets the stage by having Jesus state that Peter is to be the "foundation" of the new church. This is almost certainly legendary. Nor did Peter author the epistles Peter 1 and Peter 2. In total, the followers of Jesus in Israel seem

to have had very little role in the development of Christianity that was going on primarily in the Diaspora. Even Luke in Acts of the Apostles couldn't make the long-term presence of disciples sound convincing to me. His early chapters tell about the disciples evangelizing in Israel and its environment immediately after Jesus' death, but when Paul enters the story, the disciples began to vanish, except for Peter, whose mention was longer lasting. Churchmen in later times refer back to the disciples in order to claim that the church's dogma and creeds resulted from a continuous line of implementers of Jesus' wishes. In retrospect, what happened was that missionary work developed in the Diaspora, following Pauline and gospel writers' dogma, was probably out of touch with most of those followers who had actually known Jesus in Israel. Thus, very different religious practices were followed in Israel than in the Diaspora, which shows that Jesus made no preparations while alive for implementing Paul's theology. Even Peter is said in Acts to have resisted Paul's new ideas at first. Some Jesus Seminar and other scholars even suspect that the twelve disciples never existed as an appointed group but that such a group was invented by Pauline Missionaries to make Apostle Paul's claims about Jesus' savior role plausible.

Michael White, the author of *From Jesus to Christianity*, reminds readers that "the gospels are not 'histories' . . . Rather, they fall into the ancient literary category known as 'lives' . . . It was quite common in such literature to embellish the story with fanciful or romantic details, some of which might or might not be true" (98). White says that the Sermon on the Mount occurs only in Matthew (Matt. 5:1-7:28). This is a very strange situation for what may be Jesus' most often read quotation. Another anomaly mentioned by White (107), "James the brother of Jesus is never mentioned among the disciples in the Gospels; however, the earliest oral tradition places him among the apostles and witnesses of the resurrected Jesus (I Cor. 15:7)" (277).

According to Geza Vermes, the author of *The Authentic Gospel of Jesus*, "the Synoptic Gospels in their present form consist of an adjusted, supplemented and corrected version, a thoroughly revised edition, of the original message of Jesus. The words, idioms and images which a first-century AD Galilean master addressed to his compatriots and co-religionists were rephrased in the Gospels to suit a totally different public imbued with Hellenistic thought, in the Greek-speaking part of the Roman Empire. . . ideas foreign to Jesus were introduced into the Gospels" (172). An example might include Vermes' claim that ". . . the order to proclaim the good news of salvation to all the nations must be struck out from the list of the authentic sayings of Jesus" (380).

Vermes who holds a doctorate degree in religion also makes the following statement about the religion of Jesus:

Compared to the dynamic religion of Jesus, fully evolved Christianity seems to belong to another world. With its mixture of high philosophical speculation on the triune God, its Johannine logos mysticism and Pauline Redeemer myth of a dying and risen son of God, with its sacramental symbolism and ecclesiastical discipline substituted for the extinct eschatological passion, with its cosmopolitan

openness combined with a built-in anti-Judaism, it is hard to imagine how the two could have sprung from the same source. (415)

An interesting progression from religious fundamentalist to liberal thinker is described briefly in the book: *Missquoting Jesus*, by Bart D. Ehrman, even as he worked as a Biblical scholar, translator and textual critic. In brief, he had the following to say:

The more I studied the manuscript tradition of the New Testament, the more I realized just how radically the text had been altered over the years at the hands of scribes, who were not only conserving scripture but also changing it. . . . In some instances, the very meaning of the text is at stake, depending on how one resolves the textual problem” (207-208). Continuing, he adds: “I began seeing the new Testament as a very human book. . . . This stood very much at odds with how I regarded the text in my late teens as a newly minted “born again” Christian, convinced that the Bible was the inerrant word of God, and that the biblical words themselves had come to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As I realized already in graduate school, even if God had inspired the original words, we don’t have the original words. (211)

Chapter 22

Q and Thomas Refute the Bible's Claims about Jesus

In quick review, first came Paul's letters, ending about 25 to 30 years after Jesus' death, (55-60 CE) and concurrently the collection of Jesus' sayings, the Gospel of Q, was obviously available prior to its incorporation into the gospels of Matthew and Luke in about 70-80 CE. The earliest, or Q1 content, portrays Jesus as a very human teacher/healer. Its inclusion in Matthew and Luke indicates that without making a lot of changes in them, these writers were willing to use some sayings that viewed the Kingdom of God as functioning on earth, but in the remainder of their Gospels, they seem to have concocted their own more mystical sayings that better supported Paul's visions. Neither the sayings in Q, nor its long lost sister collection of sayings, the Gospel of Thomas, support Paul's version of Jesus.

It was quite a long time after Jesus' death before the four gospels of the Bible became available: Mark, an estimated 40 years (70 CE), Matthew 40-50 years, Luke and Acts 50 Years and John 60-80 years later. This left adequate time, after Jesus' crucifixion for the belief-groups in the Diaspora, to which three or four gospel writers surely belonged, to have developed and promoted the mystical Jesus story initiated by Paul's theology.

After Jesus' death, some of his followers in what is now Israel started meeting in supper groups, while also continuing to practice their Judaism. They began to collect Jesus' sayings in written form. The earliest of the written materials, known as the gospels of Q and Thomas may or may not have predated Paul's writings, but one can see that Q writings continued over time by the fact that they themselves became more mystical as time passed, reflecting changing circumstances within the group and within their society. Thus, some specialists, such as Burton Mack, sort the Q writings into early or Q1, mid or Q2 and late or Q3 subgroups, with Q1 writings being assumed to be most reliable. Once Q materials were used in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, no more was heard from the people of Q. The somewhat similar writings in the Gospel of Thomas

disappeared until found recently in a partly buried clay jar in Egypt.

For the best possible information and for my own convenience, the narrative content and quotations which follow in this lengthy section will all be taken from *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q & Christian Origins* by Burton L. Mack, unless readers are notified otherwise. Similar content in the Gospel of Thomas will be critiqued in the topic which follows. Mack, a Jesus Seminar participant, points out that in the earliest or Q1 period, Jesus' sayings point out that customary pretensions are hollow; for example, "Leave the dead to bury their dead" (111-12). This cynical or playful Jesus-language leads some scholars to point out its similarity to that of Greek Cynic philosophy. Later, in the second stage, the emphasis turned to such concerns as providing symbols for recognizing members of their Q belief group. In the third and final stage, a language of frustration, failed expectations and judgment is seen. But in spite of this evolution toward increased mysticism in attitude and belief, they never developed anything similar to the full dogma of the Pauline evangelists in their view of Jesus. Long-term schools-of-thought nearly always evolve toward complexity and mythology, with the original views being distorted. The Q1 people's early view of Jesus was that he was utterly human and nothing else. They would have known Jesus well and would have had the freshest memories of him. It became obvious to me from reviewing sections of the four gospels after first reading the book of Q that either the gospel writers knew little about Jesus as the man he actually was or they greatly embellished what they wrote about him. None of the gospel writers were likely to also have been ex-disciples as the church has maintained.

Modern scholars were first alerted to the existence of Q materials when they discovered that both Matthew and Luke contained Jesus' sayings not found in Mark. Yet the book of Mark was thought to be the source of gospel material for Matthew and Luke. So, if Mark didn't have certain Jesus sayings, then they had to have come to Matthew and Luke from an unknown source. The source was obviously some of Jesus' followers. The other event that shook Christian scholars was the 1945 discovery of the Gospel of Thomas, having content in part nearly identical to Q. It had existed from the late first century CE in Egypt. This reconfirmed that Q content could be confidently identified within Matthew and Luke and studied on its own as a separate and earliest source of post-death information about Jesus. The Q writings contained stories about Jesus, collected by his followers in Israel who apparently had not been indoctrinated by Jesus to support any of The Way (Christian) doctrine or dogma. Mack points out:

They [the people of Q] did not think of Jesus as a messiah or the Christ. They did not take his teachings as an indictment of Judaism. They did not regard his death as a divine, tragic, or saving event. And they did not imagine that he had been raised from the dead to rule over a transformed world. Instead, they thought of him as a teacher whose teachings made it possible to live with verve in troubled times. (4)

Neither did these followers worship Jesus. This obviously overturns Christian

claims about Jesus and shows the claims from Paul's visions to be preposterous. Equally surprising, there was no select group of apostles/disciples mentioned, no encounters with authorities in Jerusalem, no martyrdom and no mention of a Trinitarian church in Jerusalem. There was no plan or hope to start a new religion (5). Quoting Mack again:

Not only was there no reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus, no mention of Jesus as the Christ, and no instruction to Peter and the other Disciples about continuing Jesus' mission and baptizing converts into the church. (42) The people of Q did not think of Jesus as a messiah, did not recognize a special group of trained disciples as their leaders, did not imagine that Jesus had marched to Jerusalem in order to cleanse the temple or to reform the Jewish religion, did not regard his death as an unusual divine event, and did not follow his teachings in order to be "saved" or transformed people. (48)

Today's believers sometimes argue that the absence of such Pauline or Christian doctrine in the Q and Thomas sayings of Jesus proves nothing. Sayings, they contend are not the place to discuss theological concepts. Yet Jesus had used considerable God talk and Kingdom-of-God-on-earth talk in his Q sayings. How could he have not, within the whole of Q and Thomas verses, talked even once about the most important subjects of all, from Christianity's perspective? Their argument won't stand up. This Q information is truly shocking; it would seem to prove that the new religion of Paul and his missionaries in the Diaspora had no doctrinal linkages to Jesus and his followers in Israel, only a supposed vision by Paul of Jesus in Heaven. Are visions in which one speaks with the Son of God reasonable? Christians have been indoctrinated with such claims for so long that they may be immune to its staggering implausibility.

In the earliest of Q writings, Jesus spoke in the unusual parables and aphorisms that we know from our Bible reading. Mack calls these the language of a cynic sage. He makes the following powerful statement:

The narrative gospels can no longer be viewed as the trustworthy accounts of unique and stupendous historical events at the foundation of the Christian faith. The gospels must now be seen as a result of early Christian mythmaking. (10)

So, if these Q sayings have been right before our eyes for centuries, why had no one noticed them in Matthew and Luke, given their unique language (especially in the Q1 period), so different from that of the evangelists' more apocalyptic language? It is a more complex development than it would seem to be. First, Q people didn't make counter-claims to those of Paul and the gospel writers because they were obviously quite isolated from Pauline dogma in the Diaspora, and mostly, if not totally, unaware of what was happening there. The Q writers may have started writing even earlier than Paul did. Also, the simple, humanistic parables and aphorisms of Jesus in Matthew and Luke that make up

what we now know to be the Q1 sayings went unnoticed by most people when surrounded by Christian-type sayings and other verbiage. The uniqueness of those sayings was finally noticed and studied by European theologians during the Enlightenment period. Lastly, even the people of Q started to mythologize their Jesus sayings in the later stages (Q2 and Q3) as changes in their situation created new needs that could be best satisfied via a little mythmaking. Thus, there were moderate differences between the later Q materials in comparison to the first in time, making sayings a little difficult to identify as belonging to Q before period-differences were understood by researchers. The earliest written Q sayings are considered most likely to be the actual or approximate words of Jesus.

Although their “separate identity” was first imagined about 200 years ago, no one worked to fully isolate the Q-source writings until recent decades when it was finally understood that the Q community had evolved through stages. Also, finding the early-written Gospel of Thomas in Egypt in 1945 with its 40 similar sayings added surety to the accurate identification of Q writings hidden in Matthew and Luke. Thomas and Q sayings confirmed Jesus’ more humanistic views on life. Again, however, the gospel-of-Thomas people had also evolved over time, in this case into Gnosticism. But, the 114 Thomas sayings of Jesus now serve as proof that the theologians’ recent selections of the Q sayings within Matthew and Luke were not simply wishful or purposeful selections made to purposely contradict Pauline theology. The similar to identical sayings within the Gospel of Thomas probably had to have been collected prior to their group’s departure from Israel, in about the mid to late first century. While in Israel, the Gospel of Thomas followers of Jesus were obviously among the same group of people, who supplied the Q sayings to Matthew and Luke. Bingo! The two most original sources tell the same stories, at least prior to the Thomas people’s moving deeper into Gnosticism. Thus, we have evidence that early Christianity was barely in evidence in Israel post-Jesus, but was developed and evangelized in the Diaspora.

Readers must be wondering why this important new evidence from the people of Q and Thomas has not been widely publicized. I can only guess that it is news that most people would not want to hear and that knowledgeable people are reluctant to push in believers’ faces. Friends would fear ruining their relationships and conservative ministers would rather not even mention the names of the collections. They are well-known among liberal religious academicians but beyond that, as with Darwin’s evolution theory, they have a potential to unleash a volcanic eruption of emotion. There is also the option for Christians to claim out of fear that they suspect the process used in locating Q Sayings in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. We humans are skilled at arguing ourselves out of propositions we find emotionally disagreeable. Also, keep in mind that the Q sayings don’t attack Christianity; they simply tell a different story without a stitch of Pauline theology in it. Unfortunately, the Q and Thomas people seem to be the only writers that directly represent Israel, its Jesus followers and its Jesus during the earliest days of what became Christianity. The Jerusalem congregation (not church) of Jesus-followers seems to have had little representation

in the development of Christian doctrines other than some possible involvement by disciples.

The Q and Thomas writers, who likely produced the only early writings post-Jesus coming out of Israel, do not indicate that they know anything about the new religion in the Diaspora. The Jesus sayings also say nothing to indicate that there were apostles/disciples. In that the new Pauline religion required a means for Jesus' supposed instructions and doctrines to be passed on, the existence of disciples could have been purposely invented by gospel writers in the Diaspora who had a glorious theory that needed legitimization from the friends of Jesus. I don't promote such a view but I do see Paul's claim for Jesus' heavenly status as definitely pure invention, not maliciously invented but actually believed by him. The early church claims that its disciples transmitted the gospel until bishops replaced them, providing a direct link back to Jesus. However, there was probably almost no interest in maintaining a historic record over the first 50 or more years, as Jesus was expected to return any day and as the chaotic workload for a hand full of evangelists must have been too overwhelming to keep adequate records. Even Luke probably relied heavily on his memory plus rumors in writing the Book of Acts. The modern Catholic Church would have us believe that they know their early church history, but some theological historians seem to be exceedingly skeptical of that. Of course, we were left the book of Acts and Paul's letters.

Some readers must be protesting by now that the gospels are filled with stories that contradict much of what I have been saying. That is true, but if Paul started a great myth and if myths are not factual or truthful, then we should protest his and his followers claims, not mine. Finish this essay before making up your mind.

I will further describe the final stages in the Q writings because they teach us a bit about why and how people in the first century mythologized. The Q2 sayings make noticeable changes from Q1 in style and especially in tone, says Mack (107). The aphoristic style of Q1 is largely replaced by judgments on the world and pronouncements. The people telling the Jesus story were thus beginning to distort it or were creating it to fit their group-needs in troubled times, much like New Testament writers did. The later times during which the Q people wrote were troubling, even chaotic, and the Middle Eastern people's pseudographic attitude toward composition allowed them to compose somewhat creatively in the name of a well-known person; in this case, Jesus.

In the very few Q3 verses that exist, Jesus does momentarily make the leap to Heavenly Son of God, but not in a Savior role as in Christianity. Likely, a bit of Pauline doctrine was finally seeping into what is now Israel. Both Jesuses were expected to return to earth but with differing missions. But still, in Q3 writings, the Jewish codes regarding washings, alms and offerings are expected to be kept and the written Jewish law is to stand even if heaven and earth pass away (Mack, 176). This shows that Q3-ers are still dedicated to Judaism, and that they are still not parroting all Cristian themes. However, they had come a long way from viewing Jesus as a teacher.

Mack tells us, "For Mark Q was extremely useful, for it had already posi-

tioned Jesus at the hinge of an epic-apocalyptic history . . . Q provided Mark with a large number of themes essential to his narrative. [Among these were] the notion that the kingdom of God would be fully revealed only at the eschaton when the son of man [Jesus] (re)appeared . . . Naturally, Mark had to recast everything. An obvious switch is that Mark radically changed the Q material on John [the Baptist] and Jesus. He pictured John as knowing his role as the predicted precursor for Jesus, invented a story about John actually baptizing Jesus, and used that scene to introduce Jesus to the reader and the world as the son of God endowed with the Holy Spirit" (178-79).

With this, the people of the Thomas community went their own way, feeling that the legacy of Jesus had been betrayed, according to Mack. They moved toward Gnosticism, rejecting the physical world. Note that all groups discussed here have mythologized their writing over short periods of time: the Pauline writers, the Q writers and the Gospel of Thomas writers. We can also add the more ancient Old Testament writers and have a clean sweep for Biblical mythmaking. Most Grecian and Roman stories of the time were probably also myths. In that preachers have told most of us many times that people of the time of Jesus were meticulous in their story telling accuracy, we need to reorient our mindsets. Old, ritualized stories were well memorized; however, following Jesus' death, there were floods of varied stories that were highly unreliable.

Mack says that Matthew found Mark's story acceptable, and he used both Mark's and Q's material to create an even more impressive story, even as he mellowed Mark's wording. Matthew had Jesus function more as a patient teacher, and had him say that he had come to fulfill the Law, not to abolish it, thus linking his doctrine to the epic of Israel of the Old Testament.

As the church developed its teachings, the Gospel of Matthew became a favorite. It said what believers wanted to hear. Matthew did not draw a clear picture of how Jesus was the founder of the church, so Luke made a major effort to do so. Luke made the long line of Jewish prophets seem to be a precursor to Jesus. Like Matthew, he created opportunities to build his theology. Quoting Mack, "Luke turned Jesus' march toward Jerusalem, as found in Mark, into a long and leisurely journey during which Jesus walked and talked with his disciples, sent them on their mission and received their reports, had dinner with a Pharisee, performed a few healings, instructed the crowds, received a group of Galileans, and so forth" (188). As the Gospel of Q mentioned none of these events, am I seriously expected to believe that nearly forty years after Jesus' death, and living in a foreign land, Luke has such detailed information, necessarily obtained from or passed from short-lived and illiterate fishermen? We must remember that peasants in Israel had an average lifespan of about 30 to 40 years. One theory is that Luke the gospel writer was also the Luke who was Paul's traveling physician. It's very doubtful.

According to Mack, in the Greco-Roman period, attribution was a matter of appropriateness: "The standards for judging the appropriateness of a speech attributed to a particular person had little to do with modern notions of historical truth, but much to do with ethos, or the correspondence of a person's speech and character (198). "It was a powerful and fully sufficient vehicle for

a movement engaged in the formation of a group with a particular ethos (201). Q2 is actually a myth of origin for the movement (204). It seems that shifts in a group's mood or situation can bring about changes in ethos and direction, as noted when the Q1 group phased into Q2. Group-think is very important in congregations where an individual's means of psychological survival is a powerful common bond to a supportive community. Mack concludes his chapter, "Mythmaking and the Christ," as follows:

This account of early Christian mythmaking has revised the traditional picture puzzle of Christian origins by making three moves. One has been to underscore the many forms of Christian mythology. The second has been to take multi-formation as evidence of intellectual labor. And the third is to see the variations in myths or "christologies" as evidence for vigorous social experimentation. The attraction of the social formations in the early Jesus movements and congregations of the Christ has largely been left out of account in previous descriptions of early Christianity. But as it turns out, it was hardly the myth or the message that generated Christianity. It was the attraction of participating in a group experimenting with a new social vision. (225)

The Jesus sayings of Q's compilation were absorbed into the Gospels, and images of Jesus were integrated into the Christ myth, says Mack. Jesus was linked with the epic past of the Jews, while appearing as "the incognito son of God" (227). Further: "The gospels were read as accounts of Jesus' life as written by the apostles" (230). (This seems to be absolutely untrue.) The missions of the apostles [formerly called disciples] were thought to have given rise to the Church. This myth helped Christianity to supersede the Q peoples' focus on the *authority of Jesus* rather than on the apostles of the church.

At the conclusion of the chapter titled "Bishops and the Bible," Mack sums up, "It is . . . no wonder that the discovery of Q in modern times has created some confusion. According to the myth of apostolic tradition underlying the canon of the New Testament, there is simply no place for Q and the first followers of Jesus who were not Christians" (236).

The gospel writers cleverly amalgamated the largely very different sayings of Jesus in Q with Paul's kerygmic ("proclamation" of the death and resurrection of Jesus) doctrine and his Last Supper to make two opposed stories fit and be appealing. Mack tells us, "The kerygma developed in the congregations of Jesus people in northern Syria (Antioch and beyond) and appears to have overshadowed, if not erased, the memories and importance of Jesus as a teacher" (216). It took a lot of imagination to fill the cracks and to connect all of the contradictory pieces together. Contrast the difference between Jesus' giving instructions as the teacher within the Q document and his making a statement via his martyr's death and resurrection in the Christ myth. One of the new Jesus groups "turned a set of miracle stories into 'signs' that signified the Jesus movement as the replacement for the Jewish religion." And, in spite of Jesus'

death being an execution at the hands of the Romans, the Christ myth portrays him sacrificing himself willingly for the salvation of the world. Mack assures readers, "The first followers of Jesus did not know about or imagine any of the dramatic events upon which the narrative gospels hinge" (247).

The process of ferreting out the Q materials within Matthew and Luke is covered at length in *The Lost Gospel* and the full text of Q is also given there. The verses of Q are familiar to us but standing together as a Gospel unto themselves, they collectively and consistently picture a humble Jewish Jesus far removed from Paul's theology. It is the absence of Christian doctrine in Q materials that proves this point.

I am sure that many people would like to lock the door against all discussion about Q. Just imagine the emotional and political fallout from the world's believers finding their Christianity to be accused of being mythic. A gradual gaining of awareness over time would limit the rancor. But if human psychology runs true to form, proofs of the New Testament stories being myths would be totally blocked from entering the consciousness of true believers. Mack tells us, "Myths are difficult to criticize because mentalities turn them into truths held to be self evident, and the analysis of such cultural assumptions is seldom heard as good news" (251). Any distribution of evidence showing these stories to be mythic would likely create one of those kill-the-messenger situations. Christianity is woven into American culture. Believing is morally necessary and patriotic in the minds of many American people. In spite of this, the millions of people who have left it or ignored it seem to be living happy and socially beneficial lives without it. Are all of those agnostics in Europe and the non-religious in China and Russia miserable? Are they creating social chaos? No, chaos is more often what religious zealotry creates. It appears to me that such Europeans, Asians and Chinese are as content and as morally functional as are Christians. Mack makes the succinct point: "[Q's challenge] is a matter of being forced to acknowledge an affair with one's own mythology. . . . Recognizing one's own myth is always much more difficult, if not downright dangerous" (237). The solution may again be for believers to reduce their certainty and then carry on as church members, now less willing to do battle over dogma. Everyone does need a supportive community, or better yet, several communities.

Let me add a couple of unrelated ideas. First, Mack thinks that Mark had a prejudice against Jews because some Jews had rejected his own discussion-group's Jesus-movement in the Diaspora. Therefore, he made it seem in his gospel that Jewish leaders had rejected Jesus during his final trial. To humanity's great shame, this retaliation claim by one man became God's word to literalist Christian believers who then treated Jews as Jesus-killers for most of 2000 years, says Mack. As a final aside, the Gospel of Q can be found in several modern books similar to Mack's.

Chapter 23

The Gospel of Thomas Supports the Gospel of Q

The logic of investigating a source that wasn't selected as part of the New Testament canon is that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas were obviously among the earliest to be collected, and they were likely collected in Israel where they escaped distortion by Pauline writers. Yet, the Thomas people evolved in doctrine. Especially in their later-written sayings of Jesus, readers will find Gnostic beliefs. But in general, the collection offers an interesting and magnetic Jesus. About one-third of the sayings are similar or nearly identical, to those of the Q sayings found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, with both likely representing the earliest compilations and therefore truest sayings of Jesus. The Gospel of Thomas' the-kingdom-is-within-you-and-outside-you doctrine, and its claim that God's light can shine in each person was somewhat popular in the second century and could have become the guiding theology of Christianity. But the theology of the conflicting Gospel of John offered ever so much more to churchmen and believers in the form of potential for an organized church, as well as for personal salvation and a future in Heaven.

A quick review of the complicated, chaotic and lengthy process of approval of the Church's theologies and doctrines, including the selection of materials to be placed in the New Testament, should remove any surety one might have about God's inspiration operating on the bishops during those activities. The process strikes me as having been equivalent to a political convention, as opposed to a God-inspired convocation. A recently written book, *Lost Christianities* by Bart Ehrman, describes the profusion of potential materials and ideologies that brought about forgeries, book burnings and doctrinal feuds among churchmen. In the end, the theology of the Gospel of Thomas had no chance of being selected as the dominant theology of Christianity or even of inclusion in the New Testament due to its Gnostic incompatibility with other sources.

The two resources that will be used in the following topic are *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas*, also by Elaine Pagels, and, *Unearthing the Lost*

Words of Jesus by John Dart, Ray Riegert, and Dominic Crossan. Pagels relates how Irenaeus, while the bishop of Lyons in 180 CE “had denounced secret writings as an abyss of madness, and blasphemy against Christ” (5). Toward the end of the second century, when diverse beliefs and religious practices were at a peak, Irenaeus claimed that the four gospels were trustworthy because Matthew and John, whom, he says, were Jesus’ disciples, actually witnessed the events they describe. But if so, when, where, and how did these likely-to-be fishermen obtain their sophisticated knowledge, and how does one explain how the Q and Thomas followers of Jesus in Israel remained ignorant of Jesus’ heavenly status as described in the four gospels? The disciples, being of very humble background were likely all illiterate or nearly so. They would have needed many years of fulltime formal education to develop the skills and knowledge reflected in the Gospels of Matthew and John.

John wrote his gospel in 90 to 100 CE or 60 to 70 years after Jesus’ death, so to have been at least 20 years old when he would have accompanied Jesus, he would have been 80 to 90 years old when he wrote his gospel, in an era lacking in health care. In this short-life era, it’s not reasonable, in fact the claim is ridiculous. Pagels tells us, “Few New Testament scholars today would agree with Irenaeus; we do not know who actually wrote these gospels, any more than we know who wrote the gospels of Thomas or Mary; all we know is that all of these ‘gospels’ are attributed to disciples of Jesus.” When two stories disagree so completely, someone is lying, or more nicely put, someone is concocting a myth, an old and widely-used ploy. The Church had much to gain by claiming Matthew and John to be both disciples and gospel writers. In such who-did-it matters and why, the rule is to follow the money, or in this case, the benefit or the usefulness. The Jesus story in the four Gospels offered fantastic rewards for believers and it offered the type of Jesus that was compatible with the church-directed dogmas that churchmen wanted like “Jesus saves.”

In describing the Gospel of Thomas’ sayings, Pagels adds, “I was surprised to find in some of them unexpected spiritual power—in sayings such as this from the Gospel of Thomas, translated by Professor Mac Rae: ‘Jesus said: “If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you. (Gospel of Thomas 70)” ’ ” (32). Again from Pagels:

To my surprise, having spent many months comparing the Gospel of John with the Gospel of Thomas, which may have been written at about the same time, I have come to see that John’s Gospel was written in the heat of controversy, to defend certain views of Jesus and to oppose others. . . . What John opposed, as we shall see, includes what the Gospel of Thomas teaches—that God’s light shines not only in Jesus but potentially in everyone. . . . Thomas’s gospel encourages the hearer not so much to believe in Jesus, as John requires, as to seek to know God through one’s own, divinely given capacity. . . . The Gospel of John helped to provide a foundation for a unified church, which Thomas with its emphasis on each person’s

search for God, did not. . . . Even its first generation of readers (c. 90 to 130 CE) disagreed about whether the Gospel of John was a true gospel or a false one, and whether it should be part of the New Testament. (10 Tertullian, Apology 39) (34)

Pagels debunks any expansion of Jesus' meaning when he used the expression kingdom-of-God, by saying, "According to the Gospel of Thomas, the 'living Jesus' himself challenges those who mistake the kingdom of God for an other-worldly place or a future event." Saying 3 in the Gospel of Thomas says, "the kingdom is inside you and outside you." (227)

Dart and Riegert, in their book, *The Gospel of Thomas*, say that this gospel shows that "early believers revered him [Jesus] primarily as a teacher of wisdom, not as an apocalyptic prophet or messiah. . . . Jesus provides advice on getting along in the world and the importance of being true to ourselves. His message is strongly countercultural: he shuns materialism and directs the reader toward the simple life, a spiritual existence" (12-13). This is not the Jesus of the New Testament. Most importantly, it is recorded by people who actually knew Jesus. The authors write, "Some scholars date parts of 'The Gospel of Thomas' to the middle of the first century A. D., just a few decades after Jesus' crucifixion and before the writing of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John" (111). An English translation of *The Gospel of Thomas* was published in 1959. It also appears in Pagel's book.

Chapter 24

The Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke

Mark developed important Christian dogma and history in his gospel prior to the writing of the other Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John. Apostle Paul had already established the major claims for Jesus and issued his proclamation. Mark followed Paul's central theme that Jesus is a redeemer/savior to all people who believe in him and follow him. Mark, perhaps more than any other gospel writer, fleshed out much of the remaining Christian doctrine. He also provided some story and dialog of Jesus during his one to three years of ministry but he made changes in some of the sayings of Jesus that he may have received from the people of Q. "Mark radically changed the Q material on John and Jesus. He pictured John as knowing his role as the predicted precursor for Jesus, invented a story about John actually baptizing Jesus, and used that scene to introduce Jesus to the reader and the world as the son of God endowed with the holy spirit" (Mack, 179). Mark has no birth story for Jesus, and, very notably, only very brief and limited post-resurrection appearances, in contradiction to Luke's Acts of the Apostle's telling of 40 days of post-resurrection activity by Jesus. This seems to catch Luke in the act of mythmaking.

In Mark 7:20, one reads that Jesus declared that all foods are clean. A. N. Wilson says that this cannot be historically true because Acts makes it clear that Jesus' followers in Jerusalem were still observing the Jewish dietary laws long after the death of Jesus (255). As for comment on the resurrection, Mark says only that the woman who came to Jesus' tomb saw a man in a white robe and ran away, frightened. (Pay attention to how much Matthew and Luke add to this scene, as these authors are discussed.) The Jesus Seminar scholars feel that the passion story in the gospels is taken in part from Psalms and other Old Testament books, again distorting reality. In general, the gospels may tell us more about Paul's faith than they do about the man Jesus. One scholar felt that Mark tells more about what Jesus did than about what he said. In Mark, Jesus is depicted as a healer with a specialty of casting out evil spirits.

He speaks in riddles and seems to have a messianic secret says Funk (43, 129). The exhortation to *believe* that Jesus was crucified to atone for our sins in order for us to be saved is repeated over and over in Mark.

Matthew and Luke, using some of Mark's content, wrote about 45 years after Jesus' death. Matthew, who writes for a Jewish audience, gives the lineage of Jesus backward to King David, supposedly to fulfill scripture regarding the coming Messiah, even though the father of Jesus is supposed to be the Holy Spirit, not Joseph as given in the lineage. Matthew makes his Jesus story symbolically repeat several events in Jewish lore, including the killing again of babies wherein King Herod replaces the Egyptian Pharaoh (as earlier with Moses), crossing bodies of water, selecting twelve disciples to match the twelve tribes of Israel, and Jesus' spending forty days in the wilderness to match the forty years of Moses in the wilderness. This seems to represent purposive mythmaking, and it seems rather useless to me as evidence of a bridge to the Old Testament. It has God play the foolish Jewish game of matching new events with older, traditional events to give prestige to the new events. And, Jesus probably didn't grow up in Egypt as claimed.

Matthew expands and elaborates the narrative of Mark to make it more weighty. The following example is given by Marcus J. Borg in his co-written book, *The Meaning of Jesus—Two Visions*:

In Mark, Jesus does not teach about being messiah, Son of God, and so forth. . . . To Peter's exclamation, "you are the messiah," Matthew adds a second christological affirmation: "the Son of the living God." Then, rather than end the story with Jesus' enigmatic command to be silent, Matthew adds a response from Jesus strongly commending Peter and explicitly affirming Jesus' own special status: "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven." (56-57)

This sequence is nicely evaluated by Borg: "the gospel traditions as they develop display a demonstrable tendency to add exalted language to earlier texts" (56). Once again we find not the words of Jesus but those of the New Testament writers. They do it over and over again, making themselves very untrustworthy. Keep in mind that the Jesus Seminar scholars collectively estimated that eighty percent of Jesus' statements in the gospels are not trustworthy as unadulterated statements of Jesus. And keep in mind that the Jesus we find in the early-written Gospels of Q and Thomas made no claim to be a Christ, a Savior, or a Son of God.

Later in his book, Borg, a professor of Religion, admits to his readers: "But I am skeptical that we can take a salvic understanding of his death back to Jesus himself" (81). And he adds, regarding Matthew's and Luke's passion stories, "I see the additions they make to Mark's passion story as imaginative elaborations" (86). Matthew and Luke add to Mark's appearances of the risen Jesus to the disciples. Matthew places the appearances in Galilee, Luke places them in Jerusalem. In total, both seem to have made up a story in an effort to

better sell their “good news” story. Both tell us how Jesus became God’s son, but again with differences. Luke tells a more humanistic story that seems to be designed for Roman approval. He also adds a post-resurrection story about two disciples meeting the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Elaine Pagels in her book, *Beyond Belief*, relates how Mark tells of a Passover feast as a last supper, how Matthew and Luke expanded that, and how John made a major finishing change that fitted his personal doctrine. During the feast, Luke in 22:15, has Jesus say, “With [great] desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you, no longer shall I eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God” (23). Pagels says John tells of an earlier last meal, but not a Passover meal, that has shaped Christianity, “John believed that Jesus *became* the Passover lamb” (24). Thus, John says Jesus was arrested on the previous night. Pagels adds, “Thus to show that Jesus, like the sacrificial Passover lamb, actually died before sunset on the evening of the first day of Passover, John also says that a Roman soldier thrust a spear into Jesus’ side to make sure that he was dead” (24). The water and blood that supposedly came out served as a symbol for the Christian ritual of drinking Jesus’ blood. And, John tells us that the soldiers refrained from breaking Jesus’ bones, so as to meet the requirement in Exodus to not break the bones of (real) Passover lambs. The latter line earned him the bonus of serving as a prophesy fulfilled. All this very likely depicts nothing more than myth making.

A major part of the myth was the belief that faithful bishops passed on only what they received directly from the apostles/disciples and thus the gospel that was handed down was absolutely certain or true. It sounds good but it is very unreliable. The gospel writers don’t even agree with each other, especially John. The disciples in the gospels were probably uneducated peasants who supposedly constantly showed their ignorance when conversing with Jesus. So, if Jesus really was the Son of God, why would he as the creator of this fabulous and immense universe have chosen such a poor means as twelve illiterate peasants to inform churchmen about his earth-shaking status and plans? As we have seen in the earliest written portions of the gospels of Q and Thomas, Jesus never said most of the things for which he is given credit, so the real Jesus may have had no information to pass on to humanity apart from that intended for his Jewish people.

The early bishops of the church themselves played important roles in the development of scripture and church dogma. They chose and interpreted New Testament content. They developed church dogma, rules, policies and procedures, all the while claiming that the apostles (former disciples) were the bearers of the gospel of Jesus Christ, as received from Jesus. This is probably the king of Biblical myths.

Ian Wilson, in his book, *Jesus: The Evidence*, lists several discrepancies between Matthew and Luke, the only two writers who tell us about the birth and youth of Jesus. Wilson credits Marina Warner’s book, *Alone of all her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*, for these (46). In Matthew, the news of Jesus’ coming birth is given to Mary’s husband Joseph in a dream. In Luke, the angel Gabriel speaks directly to Jesus’ mother Mary. In Luke, Jesus’

family traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of the census. Matthew said they already lived in Bethlehem. Next, a mess was made of efforts to establish a genealogy for Jesus, wrongly tracing him back to King David. There were several contradictions regarding which people belonged in the genealogy and when. Matthew tries to justify Jesus' assumed divine parentage on the basis of Isaiah 7:14 which predicts that a virgin will give birth. But as always, it would seem, the chapter is about a birth serving as a sign to King Ahaz, not to Christians. The verse cannot possibly stand alone as a prediction of a coming Son of God. Ian Wilson points out that neither Matthew nor Luke have the support of historical evidence for their stories of wise men, the guiding star, Herod's attempt to kill infants and the fleeing of the family to Egypt in Matthew. The pregnancy and birth stories, appearing only in the books of Matthew and Luke, vary in many details, including lineage, name of father and city of residence. These birth stories represent two purposeful efforts to fulfill prophesy regarding a messiah to come that would help to tie the Old and New Testaments together. Truth was obviously not important to this purpose. Certainly the claim of the Bible's content's being inspired or guided by God is shot down.

Chapter 25

The Gospel of John

John, the fourth gospel writer, spinning his fabulous yarn about 60 to 70 years after Jesus' death, expanded the Jesus story back to the beginning of time. Quoting Robert Funk in his book, *Honest to Jesus*: “the divine word and wisdom—the logos—was present with God at creation and only later took on the form of a human being and accepted the conditions of finite existence” (122). Thus John at times seems to present Jesus as God, a bold new theological step. Wow! One wonders how he knew this. If “word and wisdom” refers to Jesus having divine status, it is incompatible with his (Jesus') own humble practice of never even hinting of such a connection in his sayings in the Gospel of Q and the Gospel of Thomas. It is obvious that John felt an urgent need to expand and solidify the growing Jesus story. He also wrote with intent to quash heresies that were blossoming everywhere, including the ones felt to be contained in the Gospel of Thomas. Quoting Funk again:

In the synoptics [the first three gospels] Jesus speaks frequently in parables and aphorisms; in John, Jesus is a lecturer given to extended monologues. In the synoptics Jesus speaks about God's Domain; in John, Jesus speaks mostly about himself and his relation to the Father. In the first three gospels, Jesus performs exorcisms; in John, Jesus performs “signs.” (126)

Here we have more evidence of fabrication. These two Jesuses are very dissimilar and could be deemed to be two persons in a court of law. John's creative writing obviously fulfilled needs that he had identified in the new faith called The Way, including the need for Jesus to express forcefully his role as God or as God's representative on earth. The new faith needed a Jesus fit to sit at the right hand of God, rather than a peasant who tells parables about everyday matters. In his writing, John obviously created the type of Jesus that he and the people of his community wanted. Other gospel writers did some of this as well.

Elaine Pagels, in her book *Beyond Belief* says that very significantly, John alone suggests that Jesus is himself God. He has the disciple Thomas recognize

the resurrected Jesus with the words “my Lord and my God.” She also noted that John adds nearly five pages of new farewell discourse, beyond that of other gospel writers, in which Jesus teaches his disciples. John also tells a suspect story, that no other gospel writer tells, about Jesus’ raising the dead Lazarus to life (John 15–18). John claims to possess far too much new knowledge to be credible in about year 90 CE (55-60 years after the death of Jesus, and in an era of very short human lives). John’s motive in describing the three foregoing events is obvious; he is trying to re-mold a lowly peasant so that he better fits the stature of a God or a son of God.

There is no chance that John ever met Jesus and little chance that any of the other gospel writers did, so many of the four gospels’ stories are likely to have come from fabrication, rumors or hearsay sources. Earlier, it was noted that the followers of the human Jesus in Israel were very out of touch with missionaries in the Diaspora, so surely John is winging it (making myths) by putting words in Jesus’ mouth. With Paul’s letters, the final gospel of John, and Luke’s Acts of the Apostles completed, the Jesus story had turned into a super supernatural story. Jesus had evolved from a humble but eccentric and radical sage, healer of the poor and downtrodden, and proclaimer of a kingdom of God on earth, to literal God or Son of God, and creator of the world (the Word that was with God). To John, Jesus is a divine entity from heaven.

In the gospel-making process in which all four writers are engaged, the final writer, John, depicts a sermonizing Jesus who talks a great deal about himself and his relationship to God. John has Jesus refer to himself in such ways as “I am the light of the world,” and “I am the way, the truth and the life.” The Jesus Seminar scholars, cited much earlier, feel Jesus would never have said such things. It is completely out of character for him to do so. This seems to be a glaring act of fabrication and of story-evolution by John and his study group, if he had one. Likewise, quoting Funk: “John provides numerous lengthy discourses on a variety of themes that have little in common even with the Jesus of the synoptics.” (126) If neither Q nor Thomas people, Mark, Matthew or Luke knew of such statements, where could John have found them 60 years after Jesus’ death? Perhaps in his imagination, driven by desire? Please let me repeat, although there was good memorization of long-established sacred writings in John’s time, it obviously was little practiced during the flood period of contradictory new writings, stories, rumors, and gossip that followed Jesus’ death. The New Testament canon wasn’t firmly established until 400 CE, leaving many potential sources unselected.

John’s story often deviates from that of the other gospel writers. Elaine Pagels in *Beyond Belief* provides the following list of John’s additional divergences: he switches the money changers story from a last act of Jesus to the first act, he adds a new story about Jesus’ raising Lazarus to life in order to show that Jewish authorities were then so fearful of Jesus’ abilities to accomplish magical acts that they needed to kill him for their own safety, he tells how the disciple Thomas upon recognizing the risen Jesus said, “My Lord and my God” in order to emphasize that Jesus is God (John 20:28), he describes lengthy, intimate dialog between the disciples and Jesus (John 13–18), he chal-

lenges the claim in the Gospel of Thomas that the divine light can be present in everyone, he says that a Day of Judgment is coming, *and is here*, he never mentions either of the words “apostles” or “the twelve” (disciples), he has Jesus continually proclaim his divine identity (utterly uncharacteristic of Jesus), and, he also adds to the number of post-death appearances, putting them in Galilee. Funk thinks a second author or an editor added the extra appearances as an appendix to John 21 (262). As was noted earlier, John’s gospel provided the basis for the accepted Christian definition of Jesus and his role. His Jesus was more radiantly glorious and appropriate for leading the battle for souls.

Further comment on John 21 is provided by Alexander J. M. Wedderburn in his book, *A History of the First Christians*:

John 21 here is strikingly at variance with the previous chapter and thereby highlights this problem of the disciples’ departure from Jerusalem. For according to John 20 not only has the empty tomb been discovered but Jesus has already appeared to his disciples on two successive Sundays, and yet in chapter 21 we find some of them resuming their work as fishermen as if nothing had happened, let alone the commissioning of John 20:21–3, and they seem to be taken completely by surprise when Jesus does eventually appear to them on the shore; had nothing prepared them for this possibility? As a narrative sequence John 21–23 therefore raises more questions than it answers. (19)

Leaving the preceding topic, the fact that John, as the final writer of the Jesus story, claims to know far more about Jesus than those who wrote earlier, makes his new claims highly suspicious. He significantly expands the role and purpose of Jesus, his original humble speech and message and his life history. Of such, are myths made. I highly recommend the Pagels book, which provides much more detail and also contains the Gospel of Thomas.

Other Biblical writers also promised a glorious Second Coming of Jesus, which the Jesus Seminar scholars agree was not Jesus’ expectation. Jesus did talk about the kingdom of God, which was already present on earth by God’s being available to all who call upon him, but which hopefully would be reinvigorated with God’s increased assistance. The Jews expected this to be facilitated by a Jewish messiah/king appointed by God. In summary, the original, phenomenal and unique Jesus of Judaism was by now destroyed in a Christian train-wreck engineered by Apostle Paul and well assisted by the four gospel writers who are probably all pseudographers whose real names are unknown.

Chapter 26

The Acts of the Apostles

Luke's Acts of the Apostles can be considered to be an early history of Christianity or a fifth gospel. I suspect that Luke purposefully used Acts to justify the glorified new titles and authorities claimed for the absent Jesus by bringing Peter, the most important follower of Jesus, in to serve as his (Jesus') personal representative within the new religion taking form in the Diaspora. Mathew had already told a story about Jesus' saying about Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church." This supposed prophesy needed to be fulfilled. However, the theologians of the Jesus Seminar and others assert that Jesus had no plan or intent to found such a new church. Peter is claimed by G. A. Wells in his book, *Can We Trust the New Testament?*, to have died before he is said to have become the first Pope. But it seems that today's Roman Catholic Church concludes only that Peter was the first Pope metaphorically or spiritually.

The story of Paul's much more important work in the Diaspora, (in comparison to Peter's) was mostly withheld in the book of Acts until toward the second half, no aoubt to better legitimize Jesus' disciple, Peter, as the main witness for Jesus and as a founder of The Way rather than Apostle Paul, who had never even met Jesus. Some Biblical scholars feel that many events described in Acts are propaganda or false rumors. Acts wows readers with a great number of miracles, in an apparent effort to convince them that Jesus is truly Christ, risen from the dead and awaiting the collection of his followers upon his return to earth. G. A. Wells puts it this way: "the first thing Acts must do, is to show that this doctrine is incontrovertibly true. Hence the book begins with the risen one [Jesus] giving 'many proofs' over a period of forty days that he is alive and well, before he finally ascends to heaven" (82). The miracles said to occur in this period are so miraculous and so profuse as to make me want to chalk them up as total farce. How has Luke, living in the Diaspora, learned the details of these many additional events in Israel as he writes forty to fifty years later in the Diaspora?

Some people think this Luke was Paul's physician for a period of time. Even if this was the case, which seems doubtful, Paul and Luke would not have been active as missionaries until after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, so,

due to age, Luke was not likely to have been an eyewitness to the ascension he wrote about 40 to 50 years earlier. And Jesus' ascension would not have been advertised ahead of time so spur-of-the-moment travel was unlikely. We are likely getting information from Luke that has been retold and added-to endlessly.

In Acts, Luke blames the Jews for the rift between patrons of Judaism and followers of the new faith wherein Pauline Christianity soon went its own way and probably lost many of its Jewish converts. I view the split as Paul's fault in creating a new religion that borrowed its cast of actors from Judaism but not its plot.

I. Howard Marshall's small book titled *The Acts of The Apostles* is a compilation from a series of guest lectures he delivered at Moore College in Sydney, Australia in 1991. In its early pages, this currently practicing minister states, "With the rise of modern criticism, this [literal] understanding of Acts was called into question; its historical validity could no longer be assumed, but had to be verified, and the result of that process was somewhat negative" (14). Expanding on this theme, Marshall adds:

Within the last forty years or so, the realization that the Gospels—and with them the book of Acts—are to be seen as primarily *theological* works has become dominant. It was recognized that the Evangelists were men with a message which they couched in the form of an account of the doings of Jesus and his followers, and therefore it made sense to approach their writings in such a way as to lay bare the character of their several theological understandings of Jesus. (15)

During the earliest evangelical work, the disciples potentially were the only evangelists who had major personal experience with Jesus. Their input into the new religion would be expected to be enormous, but in spite of Luke's best effort to make it seem to be so, their efforts in total strike me as being very weak, possibly excepting Peter's efforts. Marshall comments on this leadership as follows:

Acts does not display a lot of interest in the details of leadership of the church. The task of witness is assigned by divine command to the Twelve at the outset. They appear to function as leaders in virtue of their qualifications as witnesses, but at some point (on which Luke is tantalizingly vague) Peter and the rest of the Twelve give way to a leadership group of James and the elders, which is presumably modeled on existing Jewish patterns of synagogue leadership. The apostles, in consultation with the church, appoint the Seven to share in leadership roles in Jerusalem, and missionaries appoint 'elders' in the churches which they found (Acts 14:22). Paul himself chooses those who share in this work. (77)

But how could these suddenly emergent seven disciples have promoted Pauline theology in the Jerusalem church which wasn't a church at all but rather a group

of Jesus followers still worshipping at the synagogue? Conservative Christian churches rely on a continuous line of witnesses from Jesus until today to justify their claimed status of Jesus and his assumed instructions to disciples in support of New Testament theology. But the lack of sufficient disciples transmitting the new gospel leaves a gaping hole in the theology, perhaps the largest of all those found in the New Testament. Even Luke who can exaggerate greatly is unable to stretch the story in Acts sufficiently to make the twelve disciples appear to be either essential or long involved in the evangelization efforts that moved very quickly from Israel into the Diaspora. But, most of the disciples soon disappeared from the evangelization efforts in the Diaspora. Even Peter eventually faded away from the story told in the book of Acts. In that the congregation in Jerusalem was obviously practicing Judaism rather than Pauline Christianity, those disciples who worked there were not witnessing for The Way or Christianity. Nor did the Books of Q and Thomas provide evidence of it. It seems reasonable to conclude that we owe Apostle Paul for the “gift” of Christianity rather than Jesus. Later, Marshall states, “There is a legitimate and necessary quest for the historical early church” (84).

Alexander J M Wedderburn in *A History of the First Christians* used Luke’s Acts of the Apostles as his major source of reference for his book, in spite of his distrust of its content, because so little else was available. Paul’s letters are somewhat useful as historical documents wherein he described his personal missionary work. In justifying the need for his own book Wedderburn remarks:

As long as Christianity lays claim to be rooted in history, then it is legitimate and necessary to pose the question what those roots, historical in all probability, really were and not to be content with the traditional version or versions of the story of those origins. For implicit in the description of Christianity as a ‘historical’ religion is surely the claim that it is rooted, not in a possibly at least partly fictional story preserved in its canon, but in events which actually happened. (x)

The first congregation resulting from Jesus’ activities was apparently located in Jerusalem where James, the brother of Jesus, and his followers engaged in discussions during meal sharing. It is referred to as a church by Wedderburn, in spite the group’s maintenance of Judaist rituals. This type of short-lived Christianity is referred to as Judaized Christianity in the book. Wedderburn points out that “these followers of Jesus from the first, at least had this in common, that they believed that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s promised Messiah. . . it is striking that we know next to nothing about the survival of any Christian communities in Galilee.” However, Acts 9:31 “. . . presupposes the existence of Christians in Galilee” (4-5).

Wedderburn tried to evaluate a host of suspicious stories and claims in Acts, but he felt that he had very little access to other information to compare it against. He summed up the situation early in his dialog with “In other words, a healthy dose of caution and critical skepticism is called for in approaching

this essay, but we may nevertheless approach it in the hope that much of it will survive this skeptical scrutiny and prove of value" (15). Wedderburn continues: "The Acts account allows us to observe a sufficient number of discrepancies and anomalies to assure us that what is: common sense would anyway suggest to be the case in fact corresponds better to the evidence which Acts itself presents. In other words the spread of the Christian faith was probably far more haphazard and unplanned than the author of this work would have us believe, far more dependent on other factors like trade routes, the slave-trade or the directions taken by those fleeing from persecution" (15).

The disciples of Jesus left no written materials in the Bible, say the Jesus Seminar scholars. This means that those who knew the man Jesus best probably had little, if any, impact on the Biblical story of Jesus, and little impact upon the doctrines of Christianity. If Jesus had a plan to initiate a complex new religion, it seems reasonable that he would have picked disciples of Apostle Paul's caliber, education and experience, rather than unsophisticated peasants to serve in his absence. As is, the Jesus story varies considerably among the four gospels and Acts of the New Testament, and differs dramatically in the Gospels of Q and Thomas. Thus, the importance of the latter, written by followers of Jesus in Israel which show no obvious contamination by Pauline doctrines prior to their writings being appropriated by Matthew and Luke in about 70 CE, is to question or even negate the new Christian theology. Are we observing God at work or humans at work in developing the New Testament? In the Christian period, up to 325 CE, several Christianities were competing and a great deal of conflict and confusion ensued among various proponents. Such conflict evidences that God was not guiding the development of Christianity.

Some people assume that the Disciple Peter wrote the epistolary books Peter 1 and 2, consisting partly of highly sophisticated instructions for bishops that are light-years removed from the abilities and concerns of a peasant fisherman. Peter was probably an illiterate Aramaic speaker and the letter writer was probably a skilled Greek.

Chapter 27

Contradictions in Resurrection Stories

Easter morning, Mark says that visitors found a young boy at Jesus' tomb, and the rock was already rolled away; Matthew says an angel was there rolling the rock away and that guards were there. Some scholars note that Matthew made the changes because his angel gave the story prestige and the presence of Roman guards took away the doubters' suspicions of body theft, rather than resurrection. Matthew had a story to develop and he did his duty here by improving on Mark's gospel. An even better tomb story is found in the later-written apocryphal Gospel of Peter in which Jesus emerges from the tomb escorted by angels in the presence of awe-struck Roman guards. In contrast, the earliest gospel writer, Mark, has the most brief and simple tomb story.

The women who are said to have visited the tomb on Easter morning are different in each gospel. One can guess that believers provided a continuing supply of new rumors that could serve as welcome claims for the later writers. The point to be made is that with all these contradictions evident, why would one accept the resurrection as fact? Many years later, our eager evangelists, in selecting content for the New Testament, likely accepted the most desirable stories available, both psychologically and in fulfillment of "the good news." It is stupendous to realize that a rumor of an empty tomb initially viewed by two to six people could lead to two billion people believing in a factually improbable religion. I can imagine that the first rumor may have triggered group-wide mystical hysteria and thinking, that like a great fever spread to mobs of people via a mob psychology, and that in turn led to rumor expansion lasting for several decades. The evidence of this is shown by the existence of hundreds of writings or books that weren't selected for inclusion in the New Testament. If there was no resurrection and no ascension, as reason informs us, did thieves steal the body, or did the burial workers only pretend to bury Jesus where his friends thought he was placed? Is Jesus' body still in a burial place which was unknown to his followers?

Jesus' post-death visitations to disciples and his ascendance to heaven could easily have been initially contrived stories or the creative imaginations of later evangelists. Some fundamentalist preachers still rely on the repetitions of such highly emotional stories to elicit mystical phenomena that are claimed to be the work of the Holy Ghost or personal contact with God. Some of the skeptical biblical scholars/historians listed earlier especially question the validity of after-death stories found in the gospels, including the resurrection, the appearances and the assumption of Jesus into Heaven, partly because these represent full-blown supernaturalism. Additional sightings of the risen Jesus were still being added to his historical record for nearly 60 years after his death.

Obviously, the needs, wants and wishes of each succeeding gospel writer, combined with a keen awareness that they were building a new faith, drove them to fix their story here and there so that it says what they were convinced it had to have been. Sociologists inform us that such substitute myths are nearly always created following great disappointments, such as was Jesus' death. Historically, replacement myths have often promised even greater rewards than did their forerunner myths. In the case of the Jesus story, his shocking and initially humiliating death was succeeded by a new post-death myth purporting to provide a glorious new opportunity for all humans to live forever. How is that as a feel-good substitute for the great disappointment of Jesus' sudden and unexpected death?

"The accounts of the death of Jesus in the Gospels are ritualized," writes A. N. Wilson (55). Before writing, Gospel writers already held theological beliefs about the significance of Jesus' death, as claimed by Paul. Wilson writes, "All the details of the 'passion' —vinegar to drink, the crying aloud to a God who has forsaken him—are taken from the Psalms or other Jewish Scriptures, so that we cannot look here for much in the way of historically verifiable narrative. The Gospels, as much as the other writings of the New Testament, such as Paul's letters, are first and foremost theology" (55). But good theology tended to make bad history, due to the distortions that passion and need promote. A wondrous new opportunity being offered by missionaries was probably viewed as being more essential to ones well-being than was the historical accuracy of the story. And given the belief that Jesus could return to earth any day, there was no time to waste.

Wilson writes of Paul's paradoxes and points to the fact that for him "the cruellest form of humiliating death becomes a sign of glory" (58). Wilson says that this was a Roman scandal. The passion and resurrection narratives are gold mines for detecting mythmaking and contradictions. They make divine inspiration look very improbable.

Funk in his book *Honest to Jesus* says the story of Jesus' arrest, trials, and execution is largely fictional; it was based on a few historical reminiscences augmented by scenes and details suggested by prophetic texts and the Psalms. At the least, the Jesus story was an ongoing action of imagining what took place and what it might have meant, as opposed to fact collection. The myths grew step by step as each new writer added his imaginings to the previous ones. Later Funk says, "In his brilliant study, John Dominic Crossan has shown that

virtually every detail connected with the passion was based on some scripture. That prompted him to conclude, 'We know virtually nothing about the arrest, trial, and execution of Jesus other than the fact of it. The stories of the arrest in the gospels are themselves fictions . . . we have no historically reliable information at all' " (233).

Chapter 28

The Early Church Stole Jesus from His Jewish Followers

Most Jews were highly indoctrinated regarding Jehovah's long and special guidance of their tribes, so when they first heard that one of their many itinerant preachers, now deceased, was being touted by Paul and a few evangelists as a savior and son of God, they must have asked, as do I, What! Two Gods? And Jewish people would surely have asked how their omniscient and omnipotent Jehovah could have suddenly and completely taken away their status as his Chosen People. The son of God claim for Jesus was a polytheistic sacrilege to the Jews, say some theologians. Thus did the new religion that became Christianity soon become mostly non-Jewish. And, thus did the entire early structure of Christianity hinge on Paul's supposed vision and his maniacal driving force. Is it not a house of straw analogy, to hang one's salvation hopes on the claim of one person (Paul) to have had revealing conversations with a God?

The grieving Q followers of Jesus in Jerusalem met together for evening meals and discussions about such topics as the kingdom of God and how to live the life that its realization demands, blending their Jesus story into Judaism and continuing to use the services of synagogues. Remember that the sayings of Jesus in the Gospel of Q say nothing about any disciples. It seems possible to me that churchmen invented the existence of some or all of the twelve disciples because they were sorely needed after Jesus' death to show that Jesus and his teachings confirm Paul's claims. The Gospels of Q and Thomas verify that Jesus had followers at events but the New Way Church desperately needed long-term disciples to testify to Jesus' status, purpose, plans, thinking, character and history. If true, the sending of a group of seven Disciples to assist the Jerusalem group of Jesus followers (see Acts 8:25) means to me that Jesus did not prepare his supposed disciples to spread the word of his being a Redeemer/Savior/Son of God because he did not view himself to be such.

Spreading his “good news” in the Diaspora a few years after Jesus’ death, Paul found that although some Jewish people accepted his theology, they resented his failure to require the keeping of several Jewish religious laws and practices. In Acts 18:6 Paul angrily told some Jews who argued with him, “henceforth I will go unto the gentiles,” so the percentage of Jewish versus gentile converts may have begun to decrease at that time.

The Gospels of Q and Thomas indicate no post-death awareness among the followers of Jesus in Israel, of his being a savior and a son of God as was heralded in the nations of the Diaspora. In this sense, the first Christians remade Jesus to fit their own needs and took him away to serve the wider world of people, without even evangelizing notably in Israel. The first several chapters of The Acts of the Apostles describe a brief period of evangelization efforts by disciples in Israel, before the new faith became expanded in the Diaspora, loaded with new dogma. Yet the congregation in Jerusalem may have been the only one to survive in Israel into the second century. In that the earliest followers in Israel (Q people) didn’t tell us about Jesus’ claiming to be a savior or a son of God, those roles seem very unlikely to have been valid. And to this day, few Jewish people would claim to be benefiting from the Christian version of Jesus. It doesn’t fit whatsoever into the story of Judaism and it even contradicts Judaism. It could easily be viewed as an insult to Jewish people.

Chapter 29

Assembling the Testaments

Although older Scriptural stories were obviously added to, corrected or updated at different times, creating conflicting and duplicate coverage of some periods and stories, parts or whole books eventually became formally or traditionally approved and were placed into a canon. The true names and titles of authors are seldom known throughout the Bible, which adds to our ignorance.

A scholar of Biblical languages and the Bible, who appears to be quite secular himself but is also disturbed by the ignorance of uninformed secularists, has very recently written a book that informs us about how the Bible was written. Authored by Jacques Berlinerblau and entitled *The Secular Bible—Why Nonbelievers Must Take Religion Seriously*, it first asserts that the documents that compose the Hebrew Bible “were assembled into a fairly stable canon by Jews somewhere between the second century BC and the first century AD” (12). Thus, surprisingly, the Old Testament canon came together about 2000 years after the Jewish tribes supposedly first began their relationship with their God. Berlinerblau states, the Old Testament “demonstrates no explicit recognition of being that unified body of books that later generations referred to by the names mentioned [Bible, Hebrew Bible, Tanakh and Old Testament]. (28)

In his study of Deuteronomy, Berlinerblau tells us, “[Bernard] Levinson pointed to the radically ‘transformative’ work of those who wrote the fifth book of the Pentateuch. Their textual re-workings of earlier Biblical materials were conscious, ‘creative, active, revisionist, and tendentious.’ These scribes had a specific political and theological agenda that they sought to implement by rewriting and in essence reformulating existing works such as the Covenant Code of Exodus (20:23-23:33)” (37).

Berlinerblau asks, “How many books were written across hundreds of years? How many have multiple, anonymous authors and editors? How many texts can one think of in which later contributors surreptitiously commented on, altered, erased, interpreted, melded, spliced, fudged, and cut and pasted the work of earlier ones, all to have the process begin afresh with even later generations of nameless participants?” (43)

The books of both testaments were hand-recopied over and over, due to the

lack of printing capability, translated one to several times, and finally selected from numerous competitors, often after long and bitter disagreement. The older Greek Bible and the King James Bible read quite differently, perhaps because the translators had different cultural experiences, moments in history and mind sets. The Old Testament is said to vary considerably between its Greek and Hebrew versions.

According to H. Marshall in his small book, *The Acts of the Apostles*, “The autographs of all the books of the New Testament have perished, and we are dependent on a mass of later manuscripts which have been copied from earlier ones with a good deal of sporadic error and deliberate alteration” (16). I am often supported by other authors, as is the case here, in my contention that Biblical writers often have been more attentive to building their religion than to being reporters of it. To this degree, the Christian religion is man-made rather than made by history, God or Jesus and that is troublesome.

Not until the Nicene Council meeting in 325 CE was the nature and history of Jesus finally clarified in the Nicene Creed, which declared that God and Christ are of one substance. The selection of written materials for inclusion in the Catholic Canon followed soon afterwards. Elaine Pagels convincingly argues that the contents of the New Testament Canon were definitively selected by Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, in 367 CE, from a much larger pool of relevant writings. Unacceptable materials were hunted down and destroyed (176-77). According to Robert W. Funk, in his book, *Honest to Jesus*, such unacceptable materials tended to be deviations from the Church’s institutional opinion. He states that there have been over a hundred unused apocalypses found. Other people say that the Four Gospels in the New Testament were selections from a total pool of about 100 gospels. If so, this implies that the selection committees made choices that were exceedingly important in forming the doctrines of Christianity. Who was in charge here, God or man? If God inspired Biblical writers, did he also inspire the selection committeemen, all of the writers including those whose works were not selected, the redactors and the copy makers (scribes)?

In his book *Honest to Jesus* Robert W. Funk illustrates a simple way in which myths/legends grow. He says,

We are fairly confident that the scribes who made copies of the New Testament (the Gospels in particular) tended to modify the Greek text to match the orthodox views that were emerging. The opening line of the Gospel of Mark, to cite one example, reads “the good news of Jesus Christ” in several manuscripts. Other manuscripts have been amended to “Jesus Christ, son of God.” The tendency of scribes was to expand titles and labels in accordance with the practice in their times. (95)

Historians note that there was division and heated argumentation about Christian doctrines and about New Testament content in the early church. Such lengthy and ongoing argumentation is difficult to imagine if God was providing

divine inspiration and guidance to get all the followers of Jesus to accept a single doctrine. The mystical Gnostics, who believed Jesus to be non-corporal, the Marcionites, Montanites and Docetites caused considerable fuss and confusion while a single Christian theology was being formulated. As an example of the doctrine-wars, the Trinitarians finally caused their doctrine of the three-person nature-of-God to prevail and become the “true faith” by winning a rigged election in Nicaea in 325 CE. This sounds like common politics to me rather than deliberations significantly influenced by God. It is incredible that after three centuries, the delegates at Nicaea were still discussing the nature of Jesus. One big clue to Jesus’ real status is given by Jesus himself in Mark 10:18. To a man who addressed him as “Good Master,” Jesus is said to have replied, “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is God.” Jesus’ self-image seems to be less than that of a Son of God. Surely he wasn’t lying to us. Competing Christian ideologies were weeded out, so numerous materials promoted by members of losing groups were rejected for New Testament inclusion, a long and chaotic mess that smacked not at all of having godly guidance.

The bishops of the early church had very important roles in the selection of Biblical materials, in interpretation of materials and in policy development. As an example, note the influence that Irenaeus had as the bishop of Lyons in about 180 CE. The Gospel of Thomas, influential at the time, emphasized spirituality, a coming from the light, and gnosis or intuited spiritual knowledge in order to be born again into power. Pagels in *Beyond Belief* tells us, “Irenaeus was dismayed at the way that such practices were dividing Christians from one another . . .” To bring church members back to the true faith he wrote a five-volume apologetic attack “to demand that members of his congregation stop listening to any of them and return to the basic foundation of their faith” (141). His instructions “would become the basis for the formation of the New Testament and what he calls its ‘canon of truth,’ which in turn, would become the framework for the orthodox creeds” (142). Irenaeus had no respect for human experience such as intuitions as means of gaining insights into the divine. He also postulated that the devil “captured and came to dominate the human race.” Humans “would have been utterly destroyed had not the divine word descended from heaven to save us” (147). Which way is it? Were we saved from the devil or saved from God the father who apparently hadn’t provided a previous means for humans to potentially gain salvation, until Jesus traded his life to gain salvation for people born after him? Or was it, as Irenaeus and John thought, that Jesus was God, in which case, what drove the creator of billions of celestial bodies to fret away 32 years of time and endure a horrible momentary death on earth? Irenaeus says it was God’s only way to inform us. I say BS to that! The Jews claimed to know their God without his dying. Irenaeus’ premise is unreasonable. But, Irenaeus became a chief architect of the New Testament collection of written materials now in the Bible, according to Pagels (147). If Jesus was actually God, the humble peasant Jesus had now metamorphosed into the most spectacular entity in the entire universe. That strikes me as mythmaking at its superlative best but it likely made truth a victim.

Chapter 30

Can All Gods Be Only One?

A modern trend is to explain away the incompatible existence of many contradictory but supposedly powerful gods as revealed in their respective holy books or legends. Some believers seem to feel that any contradictions in the holy messages/writings from the various gods are man's errors, not the gods' errors. If the contradictions were minor they might be ignored, but when Jehovah made no mention of having a son, while serving as a tribal God for the Jews, and when Allah disclaims Jesus' being a redeeming savior or Son of God, Christianity's core claim is refuted. Conversely, when the Christian God, within his inspired Bible, gave no warning that his holy book will be replaced in full at a future date by a prophet's contradictory Koran, Islam is refuted. (The commonality that Christianity and Islam do have is a natural expected result of their original common geographic proximity and their similar timing.) Then, the Hindu holy writings claim their Gods to be Vishnu, Shiva, Sakti, Krishna, Brahma, and more (varied aspects of a single God), thus contradicting monotheisms. Also, Hindu souls transmigrate in reincarnations, even in animals, while Christians and Muslims go to heaven or hell. Surely a single, personal, universal God that can't clean up such major confusion is not worthy of human confidence. A God that demands allegiance from his subjects and that is concerned with humankind's well-being could not allow such confusion. This foolish idea of all Gods being one thrives I believe only because it is useful in hiding the embarrassment of many competing and conflicting gods/religions which makes them all highly suspect. I own a small book that lists 1000 gods that once made the world scene. It is a stretch to call the majority of them gods, but even the approvable ones are quite numerous. Man has been a religion-creating fool, or enthusiast as I said earlier. Whether there are ten, one hundred or one thousand gods claimed to accurately explain the great mysteries of the universe, wouldn't it be foolish to believe in any one of them? We need to concentrate more on the nature of man as a believing animal rather than on the existence of God.

The gods of our world are often lauded by followers as being powerful, loving and very concerned about human well-being. I could agree that most of such generalized claims are true because when a mind is fully filled with the stories,

beliefs, doctrines, emotions and experiences that accompany a religion, the God fixated on long and hard is sometimes actually found to come into focus (exist) with the anticipated qualities. The God is typically observed to perform small miracles such as filling one with love, peace, hope and good health. How can they do that? It's easy. The mind alone does it, within the mind, just as it happened for the Native American boy on a vision quest or just as daydreaming often about the male/female next door or on TV can build into love without any other interactions. Minds can become programmed by our thoughts, wishes, hopes, expectations and experiences, as we will investigate later.

Chapter 31

Concluding Comments on Biblical Content and History

My broad objectives in writing this essay were to expose four major weaknesses of the Christian Bible. These included: 1) its claims of truth and reason often fail; 2) archaeological and historical research shows that the glorious history of the earlier Jewish patriarchs, including the exodus from Egypt, was almost certainly mythic rather than real; 3) the Old Testament does not predict the arrival of a Son of God or Christ figure; 4) the titles of Jesus, stated by Paul and some gospel writers as Lord, Savior and Son of God, are not supported by the early followers of Jesus remaining in what is now called Israel (Q and Thomas people). I feel the arguments in the first three cases have been adequate without remaking them here. However, it needs to be stated again that weakness 4 was in part a result of considerable isolation between followers of Jesus in Palestine or present-day Israel and Pauline evangelists in the Diaspora. I think Paul may have increasingly ignored Israel and its people because he knew his new theology was not at all compatible with Judaism in its homeland. He and his followers probably soon saw that the potential for his startling new dogma to flower long term lay outside of Israel. And once Israel's evangelization became largely ignored over time, he had reason to be embarrassed about it. His two visits to Jesus-followers in Jerusalem were short, unsatisfactory and twenty years apart if the book of Acts has it correctly. There is little evidence that most of the disciples played a significant role in evangelizing in either the Diaspora or Israel. In fact the claim by early church fathers that the new church was founded by the disciples of Jesus is a myth in my judgment, and I think many Biblical scholars, other than fundamentalists, are very suspicious likewise. Isn't it strange that Paul, in the main, abandoned the site of his doctrine's origin, and the site of his main characters' residence, plus utterly modified the theology of his youth?

The Biblical scholars of the Jesus Seminar felt that about eighty percent of

the dialog accredited to Jesus in the New Testament was probably not reliable (Funk, 41). But, for people who have believed for a lifetime that all of Jesus' dialogue and all of the claims made about him by Paul and his supporters are factual, then what I have written here has to be viewed as untrue. I ask readers to ponder the comparative reasonableness of the two opposing sets of claims—that Paul's claims are true or are not true. As a start, we could ask ourselves whether different laws of nature prevailed 2000 years ago allowing for creation, resurrection, ascension and much more. The evidence collected here shows that Paul and the New Testament writers created a monster-sized myth, step by step, regarding the nature of a very unusual man, a Jewish peasant having an unusual style of teaching and unusual messages. They used the rumored absence of the body of Jesus from its sepulcher and Paul's claim to have had later visions of him in heaven to generate a religion that has grown endlessly. Following the development of Paul's theology, evangelists began to promise the most fantastic rewards that had ever been offered by a religion. They soon had a run-away mythology and a best seller book. Mohammed later accomplished the same quick success with his somewhat similar package of benefits within Islam. I am not surprised that the Jesus myth grew and prospered. Compared to the many ridiculously simplistic near-east religions of the time, Christianity was comparatively well crafted. It was ready for a more sophisticated and modern clientele.

It has often been shown that when one gospel writer either created or passed on a myth, the Gospel writer who followed typically expanded and glamorized it. To understand this better one has to see mythmaking as part of a process in which each gospel writer participated in a belief group that studied and discussed diligently, each with distinct needs, wishes and ideas, each drawing courage from their study group to mythologize. The better the story the greater the hope. The founders' cultural conditioning in their nations of birth, including their earlier religious indoctrinations also must have influenced their telling of the Jesus story. Myths were still common and relatively acceptable to people in the Diaspora during the Greek/Roman era that we are evaluating.

Message carriers distributed Paul's doctrinal writings (letters) to congregations of The Way people throughout the Diaspora. It was a chaotic time but also an exciting time of building a great new hope for mankind. Mass psychology was likely operative and very effective in obtaining conversions due to the emotionally charged story of Jesus' suffering and ascension to heaven and due to the gratitude and excitement felt by converts for the opportunity for everlasting life. Of course they also fell under the new unwelcome threats of sin, hell, damnation, separation from the world, and restrictive rules for living and religious practices.

We have seen that many Biblical claims fail the truth test or contradict each other. Mark, the earliest gospel writer, says that when the High Priest asked Jesus whether he was the earthly messiah, he answered, "Yes" (which is probably the first small untruth); the last gospel writer, John, tells us that in answering the High Priest, Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, an infinitely higher rank. Thus was the desired final myth created. Funk refers to such

changes made in written materials as “the poetic license exercised by storytellers the world over” (34). It is quite amazing that Matthew and Luke, upon seeing and reading the Gospel of Q content that was supplied to them, didn’t say a word in their gospels about the striking differences between the Jesus sayings of the Q materials and the Jesus of The Way content, obviously developed by missionaries in the Diaspora. Gospel writers had much to gain if Paul was right about the status of Jesus rather than the Q followers of Jesus. The writers of the Gospel of Q probably knew little to nothing about Pauline Theology prior to completion of their own writing and they may never have had the opportunity to argue about theology with the people of The Way. Keep in mind that in 70 CE the Romans had destroyed the Jewish hope for a Promised Land led by Jehovah and his Messiah.

It is obvious from their prose that Paul and the gospel writers were emotionally intoxicated with their glorious news of a redeemer/savior who was due to return to earth very soon. There were many souls to save, doctrines to shape, and gospels to be written and distributed, all before Jesus’ imminent return. It was critical that Jesus be clearly seen to be the entity that they felt he implied himself to be, though he never quite stated it. Peoples of the area in Jesus’ time believed in magical births of rulers/Caesars, so the Jesus story of resurrection and ascension may have seemed quite plausible to many of them. Alexander the Great was said to be the son of the God Zeus via a virgin birth. Roman Emperor Augustus, as well as Pythagoras and Plato, were thought by some people to be sons of the God Apollo. Several supernatural events in the New Testament were preceded in time by similar myths within surrounding nations. Even when gospel writers copied from an earlier writer, they were prone to make significant changes when doing so, virtually always with the purpose of adding power or prestige to Jesus, to the “good news” or to the new believers.

Funk describes another source of error in bibles. He says, “No two copies of any of the books of the New Testament were exactly alike since they were all handmade. It has been estimated that there are over seventy thousand meaningful variants of the individually reproduced Greek manuscripts of the New Testament itself” (94). Today’s Bible was obviously only one selection from those variants. But far more important, it seems to me that the increase in Jesus’ stature from wisdom-teacher/cynic-sage to Christ the Son of God in heaven which took place between the Q/Thomas depiction of him and Saint John’s depiction is so large as to be possible only by some outright fabrication of story by John.

Biblical writers often disagreed with each other. For example, Mark 10:17–22 says man is justified to God through his *good works*, whereas Paul says that by the act of Jesus’ death and resurrection, man is redeemed and *saved through faith*. Thus we have a contradiction over one of the most important issues in the Whole of the New Testament: which route should a person take to be saved? Which writer was inspired, if any, and which one wasn’t?

Perhaps the most important question regarding the Bible is, shouldn’t God’s plan for mankind have always been scrupulously consistent and reasonable, instead of having the mystical New Testament’s Jesus-story largely replace the

very different historical tribal-god story of the Old Testament? A redeeming Son of God was not expected and the salvation of humankind hinging upon an itinerant preacher's death and a rumor of his resurrection seems rationally preposterous. Jesus' personal unawareness while alive of the role later given to him in the New Testament creates a major blow to its believability. Had he known that he was the Savior, then a lot of preparation was needed that he didn't attend to, like informing disciples, if any. On a more positive note I do compliment many of the Bible's writers, their scribes, their translators and their redactors on the literary quality of their work.

There is strong evidence to show that when Jesus was born in the New Testament story, he was brand new to the Bible, and when he died he still belonged to Judaism not Christianity. He never intended to start a new religion and never expected to be thought of as a Savior of mankind and a Son of God, say my previously referred to Jesus Seminar historians (Mack, 311). My opinion, from a real-world perspective, is that obviously Jesus was not virgin-born, not resurrected, and not a savior or Son of God, but one of several itinerant Jewish preachers of the time, a good and unusual man, cruelly murdered. Then how does one explain Jesus' empty tomb? There are many guesses, all of them too obvious to need listing. At a time when supernaturalism was acceptable, when myths often substituted for truths, when there was endless retelling of events (rumors), and when needs/desires often served as powerful forces driving both rumors and the development of myths, false stories should be expected. The gospel writers, writing thirty-five or more years after many claimed events were thought to have taken place, didn't investigate the stories as would likely be done today. Even if investigations had been made, their outcome would have been risky if the investigators were personally heavily invested in only one of the possible outcomes.

If the preceding paragraph tells it like it is, what would be left for Christians to believe in? Obviously much less, but truth is seldom utterly unbending. Some people might simply soften their surety in the Jesus-saves story and remain a liberal Christian, some might dump all but the humble and moral mode of living advocated by Jesus and one's common sense, some might switch to belief in a generalized cosmic spirit or force that infuses the cosmos, some might find great inspiration and satisfaction from the knowledge that we humans are important components in a very interconnected and interdependent world, some might direct the attention that they previously devoted to God and church to human well-being and to the well-being of nature (humanism), some may attend church for the great fellowship it can offer, some might look to Buddhism as a stress-reducing mode of life and some might join a rollicking but low-dogma mega church. Scores of possibilities are there, but if one must have an assurance of eternal life, religions are powerless in my view. Have courage, old age should reduce the fear of the death that we have always known was coming. To me, the sleep of death without a heaven or hell sounds perfectly peaceful, but to others it may not.

Chapter 32

Fundamentalists Respond To Their Critics

A set of responses to skeptical arguments such as mine is presented by Lee Strobel in his book, *The Case For Christ*. The author sees himself as an ex-atheist, but I saw him more as a person poorly informed about religion in his youth and as a troubled person in his early life who thus became a prime candidate for conversion. He interviewed several conservative Biblical experts, each representing a different specialty, to make his rebuttal to the skeptic community including participants in the Jesus Seminar.

In Strobel's first interview, Craig L Blomberg, made the point that, uniform testimony of the early church shows Matthew and John were disciples of Jesus as well as authors of the gospels carrying their names and thus were eyewitnesses to the New Testament stories. In my view, this position wouldn't fly among most competently educated Bible Scholars. The uniform testimony of the church consists of enthusiastic claims made by Church Fathers caught in an embarrassing shortage of evidence for Jesus' divinity long after the deaths of the first and second wave of missionaries. Much of this history was compiled between one and three hundred years later. It comes as no surprise that the early church fathers supported needed dogma. They had no other choice. The claim of Matthew and John's being disciples is not supported by my referenced scholars (including some well-trained practicing ministers) by reason or by the two gospel writers themselves, to the best of my knowledge. Could John of Galilee have been a disciple in 32 CE and written his gospel in 90 to 100 CE? That two bishops in the years 125 and 180 CE confirmed the two to be both disciples and writers seems almost irrelevant. The Church Fathers at this time, surprised and concerned that Jesus had not yet returned to earth, were now on a great mission to make the gospel story a coherent and believable whole on a long term basis. The church risked demise if it couldn't justify its origin. Also, churchmen probably thought they had eternal life to gain by salvaging their Gospel.

Later Blomberg defines the Gospel of Q as a hypothesis when it is instead a fact, with partial duplication being found in the Gospel of Thomas which was separated from the Gospel of Q from about 70 CE until the 1900's. Next, the Q sayings are said not to have had the narrative content that would be able to provide a Pauline-type picture of Jesus. But, if Jesus was truly the Christ, surely, within 62 sayings in Q and 114 in Thomas, he would have said something that would have clearly indicated his being the type of entity Paul claimed him to be; but he didn't. Had he said that he is a Savior or Son of God, would his Gospel-of-Q-and-Thomas followers have failed to pass on that claim to us even within a saying? Many of Jesus' Q-and-Thomas sayings speak of God (Jehovah) in his historic Jewish context. Next, Blomberg estimated the writing dates of Gospels to be ten to twenty years closer in time to Jesus' death than do most competent scholars. One could assume that he does that so his gospel writers possibly could have also witnessed the teachings and the death of Jesus some 50 or more years earlier. In that most, if not all, gospel writers lived in the Diaspora, why would they have been in Israel at the time and at the place of Jesus' unannounced ascension to Heaven?

Blomberg also says Paul met with the apostles in Jerusalem as early as 35 CE. This obviously refers to Paul's very brief meeting with disciples following his first vision in which the disciples were said to be afraid of him, as reported in Acts 9:26. The disciples were perhaps the only people who could later verify Paul's visionary claims about Jesus. That fact must have put a lot of pressure on Gospel writers to design their Jesus-story so as to establish Jesus' as Christ and Savior. Certainly the Q and Thomas writings never helped them to establish this. One of the questions I keep asking myself is, if there is a God, why are many of us, the supposed beneficiaries, so little convinced by the Bible that we are still debating about whether that God even exists while having to simultaneously tackle the even less likely prospect of a peasant-sage Son of God ascending to Heaven in order to serve as the Savior of billions of people that were created fallible by the Son and his Father? This creates a vicious circle of events where gods create a problem (sin and permanent death) and then had to provide its solution (salvation and heaven).

The next interview was aimed at finding documentary evidence for the existence of the biblical Jesus. Bruce M Metzger makes a number of points that I felt were minor. He confirmed that recently John's date of Gospel writing is said to be more like 90 CE rather than 160 CE, and that church doctrines have stood the passage of time and criticisms. According to "early tradition," he says that the gospel writers Mark and Luke were respectively a helper of the disciple Peter and an associate of Paul. Thus, all Gospel writers would have been closely connected to the life and ideas of Jesus, and we are supposed to see this as the means by which Christian doctrine originated from Jesus. The idea has several flaws that even I am aware of: 1) it ignores the contradictory evidence about Jesus' status found in the Q and Thomas sayings; 2) it is unreasonable that Jesus as an incognito God would have been exceedingly careless by not making his full status crystal clear to numerous appropriate people; 3) it leads many, if not most, liberal scholars that hold advanced degrees in Religion to be highly doubt-

ful of all of Metzger's assumptions; 4) in that the disciples were unlikely to have had any formal education, the supposedly peasant-disciples Matthew and John were not able to also be sophisticated gospel writers; 5) if these gospel writers were adult disciples in 32 CE, they would have been exceedingly old when they wrote their gospels, in about 75 and 90 CE, respectively; 6) at least three of the four gospel writers are thought to not have been living in Israel as all disciples once had to have been; 7) we know that Paul concocted and spread the new gospel without having had human contact with Jesus, which makes his claims for Jesus suspect; 8) Metzger admits to a mountain of false religious materials having been written in the early years after Jesus' death. This makes one suspicious of biblical materials generally because it implies that God wasn't involved in insuring that a single reliable set of materials would be written and added to The New Testament. Instead, contradictions and mythologizing were rampant, showing how absolutely vital the selection of only God-inspired writings were. I agree with most of what Metzger said about the Gospel of Thomas.

Many Christians point to a statement made by the non-Christian Historian Josephus, supposedly implying that Jesus was more than human. But a consultant for Strobel, Edwin M Yamauchi, should be congratulated for admitting, "That means early Christian copyists inserted some phrases that a Jewish writer like Josephus would not have written" (79). Scholars certainly agree.

Strobel dismisses the approximate 200 contributors to the Jesus Seminar as being largely left-wing, radical-fringe scholars that found what they came to find. But humans are known for belittling their adversaries—just as I have. I got the impression from reading many books that are outcomes of the Jesus Seminar effort, that many of those authors joined in Seminar study with questions about the status of Jesus rather than with definite opinions. Thus, they would likely be persuaded by the facts learned in their research rather than by any prior liberal biases and wishes. And, after many years of joint study and writing, the Jesus Seminar investigators became unparalleled experts on Jesus. I have seen some of them participating as experts on important television specials. Many have written several books about Jesus.

I sensed that Strobel also found what he set out to find. He constantly assumed the validity of statements made by gospel writers and others in the first century CE to be equally trustworthy to the type of evidence that wins court cases today. But the situations then and today are very, very different. The early word-of-mouth events at the time of Jesus as reported by gospel writers occurred in a world where truth and reason were little respected. And these events occurred forty-five to seventy years before the gospels were written while the writers probably lived isolated in nations other than Israel where the New Testament developed. Most damaging to the New Testament's version of Jesus is that the Jesus sayings compiled by his Q-and-Thomas followers in Israel utterly lack in such support. Strobel's book has chapters dealing with the evidence contained in the stories about Jesus' missing body and appearances. Evidence? Somebody was said to have seen something and 40 years later someone in another country wrote about it. In a mystical event during this period of time this is terribly, terribly weak evidence. A sentence on page 238 of Strobel's book

says, “Legends can’t explain these initial eye-witness accounts.” My response is that the gospels don’t even agree about who the witnesses were and what they saw. And, even today’s eye-witnesses in court are very often wrong. The first century of post-crucifixion history of Jesus shows little effort being made to verify events, who the observers were, who they informed and the observations made, while rumors and hearsay stories ran rampant. Note the huge variations between the gospels of Mark and John

Later, this essay discusses how rumors originated. Hasn’t the world witnessed millions of false rumors and beliefs? A rumor of an empty tomb among such people would be unexceptional—they were mythic by habit and story tellers rather than realists or rationalists. The original rumor would tend to generate an orgy of added stories, dreams, visions and other related mystical experiences. This very day I reread much of the book of Acts, finding it once more a fantasy land of constant miracles. Those mystical people who raised the dead, cured diseases and saw Jesus ascend to heaven couldn’t be more different from those I live among here in the United States. Today, almost no one would believe reports claiming what Luke’s eye-witnesses say happened. The scene was insanity ran amok. Strobel admits that the resurrection stories are somewhat personal, a little complex and mystical. His book makes an effort to argue using reason but it too often collapses into mostly poor-quality subjective evidence. It totally ignores the central importance of mythmaking in Jesus’ time and assumes the people were just like today’s Americans. Reason, logic and truth were not held in high regard in the area at that time, in spite of the potential influence of advanced Greek and Roman philosophies. Strobel’s hear-say evidence is too often claimed to be true-say evidence. On my second trip through the book, it seemed to contain even fewer good points.

Congratulations to the hardy readers who have reached this point. You are winners all. For some it must have taken lots of grit and guts. This completes the critique of the Bible. Topics related to religion follow.

Part V

Our Minds, Our Beliefs

Chapter 33

Conflicting Beliefs and Resistance to Change

Moving on from Biblical critique, how do thinking people who are also fundamentally religious, manage to maintain two conflicting beliefs such as: “The creation of the earth 6000 years ago has to be true because God tells us so, but the earth has to be billions of years old to account for the evidence available” or “I believe that Jesus was not the son of God but I need to continue to pray to him?” In these situations which psychiatrists may call a cognitive dissonance, one of the aspects or pathways of our minds can dissociate its content partially or completely, thus disallowing or weakening the unwanted knowledge, and thus potentially corrupting reality. In the above example, “Jesus is not the son of God,” may be the unwanted knowledge that is chosen to be dissociated, thus again, allowing one to pray with zeal. Some people can do this much easier than others.

John F. Schumaker discusses the role of dissociation in his book, *The Corruption of Reality: A Unified Theory of Religion, Hypnosis, and Psychopathology*. Schumaker posits that religion, hypnosis and psychopathology can and do regulate reality. Thus, cultures logically serve as regulators of reality, some being much more concerned with rationality than others. Ancient cultures typically wove unrealistic religious and ritualistic beliefs into the total life experiences of members with little or no concern for rationality and truth. They were known for their trances, rituals and other far-out mystical experiences. Mystical experiences such as induced trances, as well as common hypnosis, that replace real-world awareness, are dependent upon mental dissociation. It is obvious that our present-day religious conservatives in the United States also accommodate more mysticism and irrationality in their belief systems than do the members of liberal churches. Yet, it is the conservative churches that are typically gaining the most members. Why would this be so? Apparently the more visceral, emotional, yet absolutist types of religion are favored emotionally over those that are more liberal, objective and rational. Schumaker feels that some

realities are too painful to be accommodated in the raw and these tend to be relieved by dissociation and replacement with more friendly myths. Many fundamentalist churches have increasingly made their services a celebration with raucous music and abandoned body movement, which may be related to dissociation. The appeal of this I can appreciate, especially for younger members. However, I can't accept claims that the Holy Ghost generates the emotional abandonment.

There is something alluring about mystical beliefs and subjective modes of thinking. Paul Kurtz called it the "transcendental temptation" in his book that used those words as the title. One explanation is that the harshness of primal/objective reality can be decreased or evaded by people's subjectively defining reality the way each wants it to be, thus paving the way for mysticism. Herein lies the weakness of subjective modes of determining what is true. In subjectivism, knowledge is limited to conscious states and elements, where mental experiences, including those thought to be encounters with spirits, are or may be valid, as opposed to knowledge gained largely by employing the five senses, and accompanied by evidence, logic and reason. Realists believe that objects are real apart from the mental act of perception even though perceptions are completed in the mind and can be distorted by the mind. When our primitive ancestors, most of whom assumed that they lived in a mystical spirit-world, felt the need to control the ruthless forces of nature, they subjectively or mentally invented and employed powerful spirit entities and rituals to counter nature's forces and the fears that accompany them.

I contend that Christians, Muslims and other religious people created the spirit entities and theologies found in their-best-seller holy books mainly to provide the peace of mind or the assurance that an afterlife and an opportunity to join loved ones in paradise could provide. Even Hinduism's reincarnations are a type of resurrection and afterlife. If resurrections or reincarnations were valid, they would be a solution to man-kind's greatest fear; death. But are they true? Given the lack of compelling evidence, the claims should be seen as figments of human imagination.

Schumaker, the New Zealand psychologist, whom I have met, thinks humans have "tandem brain capacity" that sometimes seems to allow two conflicting realities and two mind sets. He posits that mankind's ancestors evolved consciousness to the point that it became debilitating to them (20). They then evolved a capacity to "dissociate itself from its own data" including the capacity to dissociate itself from some of the terrifying situations and conditions in life. More specifically, the brain became able to (a) selectively perceive its environment, (b) selectively process information, (c) selectively store memories, ((1) selectively disengage from already stored memories, and (e) selectively replace dissociated data with more user friendly data. "Thus, humans can "regulate their own reality" (22). Remember this, it's how we can (but don't have to) fool ourselves. It makes mythmaking more probable.

So how reliable are our human judgments and beliefs? Schumaker says, "despite our cerebral talents, it seems that the mental world of the human being is often at odds with the true nature of things. Not only that, we will fight to

preserve what is false. We do this while also, paradoxically, apprehending the world with astonishing precision” (21).

Cultures provide both information and misinformation, so personal realities are typically less than completely reliable. Schumaker assumes that there is a primary reality that is factual and reliable (realism). As for the role of religion, Schumaker supports Sam Harris’ view in his book, *The End of Faith*, as well as my view. Schumaker makes this potentially shocking statement:

... without cultural sanction, most or all of our religious beliefs and rituals would fall into the domain of mental disturbance. Religion is abnormal in the literal sense of the word. By this I mean that, in the course of adopting religion, one is required to construe (or misconstrue) the world in terms of principles that contradict or supersede naturalistic modes of understanding. (29)

Therein lies the problem for all rationalists and skeptics. Therein is the probable answer to why scientists and objectivists, on average, are far less religious than are non-scientists and subjectivists. When we note that the world’s people have believed in hundreds of Gods, along with their accompanying theologies, and when we are then expected to take the Bible’s claims as facts, we see irrationality at work and find it unfathomable that believers don’t. Don’t take this to mean that I think believers are less intelligent than I am. Most aren’t. We obviously rely on different methods to guide us to the truth. Religious people may claim that they know God or Jesus exists because they experience him mentally. I don’t believe that this mental-experience route to knowledge works. I believe it only seems to work. Religious beliefs are off base from their start in that they rely on the existence of spirit beings or upon a persons acceptance of a sphere of reality filled with and managed by spirit beings. The mind alone can perform such a felt connection to any God or other spirit, given an adequate depth of prior indoctrination and idealization about the spirit (e. g. religious education). This may not constitute absolute proof of the absence of spirit entities in the universe but it provides good evidence of its being so. That’s why my head shakes when I think about this situation. I also realize that some believers are perplexed about my beliefs. Certainly *how* one thinks determines *what* one thinks. Realists and idealists think differently, so they will often disagree about what they should believe. One person might say “Jesus often tells me which path to take,” another may insist that such is an impossible fantasy and isn’t true. We need to know more about how the mind creates the feelings of reality where none exists, but we do know that a child can experience shared events with an imaginary friend that feel real. How does this differ from an adult’s knowing Jesus? Both situations require mental preparation. Minds have many surprising abilities, some of which fool us by creating something that seems to be other than what it is. Out-of-body experiences are an example.

I suspect that many people’s literal religious beliefs are, in part, a defiance against what they may perceive to be hard, cold objective realism. If so, the transcendental temptation beckons believers in from the cold that only they

feel. Belief of a religious type is an emotional or good-feeling enterprise. It can yield an “if it feels right, it is right” attitude which could dodge truth. It needs to be clarified that realists, rationalists and skeptics also feel full measures of love and caring, but they don’t use mystically intuited feelings or experiences to evaluate the physical universe or the world of knowledge. If a realist said: “I feel that life forms evolved,” it would only mean that given what he or she knows (intuits from worldly experience) evolution makes sense, or it is well evidenced. This is an application of realism even though the word “feel” is carelessly used, but to have faith in prayer’s ability to make changes in the physical world is to apply idealism, or more properly idealism, unless that change is known to be evidenced empirically.

Schumaker shows how the brain transacts dissociation, and how religious and hypnotic phenomena are the result of identical mental operations. Both use dissociation from unwanted knowledge, followed typically by a more desirable (wanted) replacement for the loss, relying on suggestion and auto-suggestion. Accordingly, people scoring high on hypnotizability tests were found also to be more religious than those scoring lower. Both religion and hypnosis depend upon suggestibility by others or by oneself, as do trances and sometimes answered prayers.

Another perspective on mankind’s resistance to major change is that early in a person’s life one begins to establish what I call foundational beliefs or philosophies that soon represent who one is and how one lives his or her life. Humans automatically collect a mountain of mental support for such a belief and lifestyle while largely ignoring that which opposes. Once this occurs, a major change in this foundational set of beliefs would represent a loss of “self” and a loss of one’s way of life. If a major belief or philosophy that has become the trunk of our being goes down, a lot of related branch beliefs go with it. For example, a child born into a fundamentalist-oriented family will soon learn that “God is.” This foundational belief then obviously dictates many secondary beliefs and lifestyles. It may direct a person’s philosophy of life, views about causes and effects, choices, habits, morals, behaviors, goals, career, friends, preferred type of government, lifestyles, what has value and even personality. The individual’s friends and support community are there because they agree that “God is.” With all of this investment, will evolution be accepted when studied in college, or will the person only search for counter-evidence? Will the person be able to liberalize his or her religion? The answers are obvious: not likely. One becomes locked into his or her beliefs. Similar scenarios are often played out in our liberal versus conservative political orientations, in our social science versus hard science orientations, in polarized judgments about the nature of humans to be fundamentally either good or bad and in many other opposing moral positions. The need to automatically reject ideas other than the orthodox ones of a particular sect, ideology or philosophy can imprison the mind or can tenaciously protect one against using drugs for example. Beliefs and values need to be reevaluated regularly, but unfortunately, many religions don’t allow that.

Chapter 34

Mind and Consciousness

Mentally experiencing a spirit being or becoming one with God is widely held by Christian believers to be the strongest verification, among many, for the existence of and the access to God or Jesus. However, the “vital processes” of consciousness, awareness, emotional involvement, memory and thought now seem to me, and I believe to nearly all relevant scientists, to be no more than “the natural functions” of our brains, in the same way that the “life” in an engine is a “function” of the metal engine. Thus, neither mental-life (cognition) nor engine-life requires supernatural explanation.

Epistemologically, dualism holds that reality demands that two separate and irreducible substances inform human beings, the material and the mental or the body and the soul. Thus dualism allows spirits and souls to become actors in the lives of humans. In dualism, spirits are not assumed to be bound to bodies. But the brain, whose functions we call mind, is extensively woven into the body via the nerve system and neuroscientists in mass assure us that the mind has no existence independent of the brain. Meanwhile, they have identified reasonable and simple explanations for the experiences that convince many people to believe in a separate reality of minds and spirits versus body, while the researchers themselves have generally become very skeptical of religious claims.

In a study conducted a few years ago, the report of which I have misplaced, Buddhist monks were monitored for brain activity while engaged in religious experiences. Their brains functioned normally during the religious experiences, such as praying, which suggested that the experiences were mind-driven naturally, rather than powered by energies from an outside spirit component of reality. A considerable amount of similar research has been done since which is rapidly consolidating the position of naturalism as the only operant involved in cognition.

For many years Michael Persinger and his team investigated the attainment of sensed presences as initiated by their special helmet-device placed over the temporal lobes of hundreds of individual subjects. In the Oct/Nov 2007 issue of *Scientific American Mind*, David Biello’s article “Searching for God in the Brain” says “Affected subjects translated their perception of the divine into

their own cultural and religious language—terming it God, Buddha, a benevolent presence or the wonder of the universe. Persinger thus argues that religious experiences and belief in God are merely the results of electrical anomalies in the human brain.”

Other studies have yielded similar results. For example, Patricia Smith Churchland, in her book, *Brain-wise: Studies in Neurophilosophy*, also reports on an experiment that Michael Persinger conducted to see whether the religious experiences very commonly described by the special class of temporal-lobe epileptics could be produced in normal subjects. She summarizes:

Persinger’s data raise the possibility that because we can induce the effect in normal subjects by altering neural activity in the temporal lobe, then probably the effect in both normals and epileptics has nothing to do with contact by a Supreme Being. . . . Both skeptics and believers find it far-fetched to suppose that God would choose to manifest himself through one particular pathological condition. (386-87)

Churchland had this to say about Descartes’s belief in mental dualism, conceived as a physical brain and a non-physical mind or soul:

Cartesian dualism assumes that the mind’s operations in thought, language, memory retrieval, reflection and conscious awareness proceed *independently* of the brain. When clinical studies on brain-damaged patients showed clear dependencies between brains and *all* these ostensibly brain independent functions, classical dualism had to be reconfigured to allow that brain-soul interactions were not limited to sensory and motor functions. Achieving this connection without rendering the soul explanatorily redundant had been the bane of post-Cartesian dualism. (6-7)

This quote nails the argument against dualism for me. Churchland also discusses further studies that “demonstrate that the unity of mental life is dependent on the anatomical connections in the brain itself” (46). She presents interesting chapters entitled “Self and Self-Knowledge” and “Consciousness.” Her major hypothesis of “the self” seems to be that it is “a loosely connected set of representational capacities” (64). Representations might include the sight and feel of one’s leg, an attitude toward rhubarb as a food or a plant, memories about what one did, saw, or felt on a visit; one’s goals, hopes, fears, self-image and much more. As the representations of the self are dynamic or changeable, the self changes, she argues.

Brain functions are becoming understood in spite of their great complexity and the minuscule size of the neurons and dendrites in the tangles to be studied. Recently, researchers studying brain functions down to the very specific chemical/electrical processes within a neuron and its network found that regarding memory, specific manipulations of neurons via chemical and electrical signaling added to connectivity of the neurons that, in turn, strengthened short

term memories. For long-term memories, proteins called CREB activated select genes in neurons, causing them to produce messenger RNA, thence to produce synapse-strengthening proteins that in turn strengthened memories. This description is very incomplete and might contain errors. But it does show that the intimate connection between mind and body, activated by physical-world chemicals and electrical energy, has become a means for understanding mental function. It comes from an article by R. Douglas Fields, "Making Memories Stick," *Scientific American*, February 2005.

A book titled *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science & the Biology of Belief*, by Andrew Newberg, M.D., Eugene D'aquill, M.D., and Vince Rause, describes brain functioning during mystical experiences as observed during their research on such experiences. They define mysticism as "the art of establishing his [man's] conscious relation with the Absolute." They added, "At the heart of all the mystics' descriptions . . . is the compelling conviction they have risen above material existence, and have spiritually united with the absolute" (101). The author continues:

The power of ritual lies in its ability to provide believers with experiential evidence that seems to "prove" that the guarantees made in myth and scripture are true. Rituals allow participants to taste, if only for a moment, the transcendent spiritual unity that all religions promise. The fact that the unifying effects of ritual are generated by basic biological function explains the pervasiveness of ritual activity in virtually every culture, and the similarity of purpose with which the rituals of the world have evolved. It also tells us why ritual ceremonies still have such power for so many, even in this rational age. (96)

Note that the previous quote specifies that the unifying effects of ritual (a frequently repeated ceremony that symbolizes a belief) are generated by basic biological functions. The only thing thus proven is that the brain is supplying the raw experiences. The powerful experiences are only assumed to be mystical in nature, which may or may not be true. Sexual climax is also a powerful experience that is not mystical. Hypnotic episodes, trances, hallucinations and similar states or conditions don't seem to be mystical in nature. The golden nugget or major finding from the authors' research seems to be that "mechanics are wired into the human brain and are set in motion by nothing more tangible than the mind willing itself toward God" (107). The investigators identify the many steps or stages within the brain in the complex process of attaining a feeling of oneness with a God. Some of their claims are somewhat startling. One complication of researching the attainment of unity with God is that people who so practice may be delusional or have brain damage. Sigmund Freud assumed all such claimants were delusional while William James did not. The three investigators/authors quoted here seem confident that they separated out the unreliable persons from the authentic mystics in their research. For example, real mystics will almost always describe their unity experiences as ecstatic and

joyful while psychotics usually describe theirs as terrifying. The researchers further explain:

A neurological approach ... suggests that God is not the product of a cognitive, deductive process, but was instead “discovered” in a mystical or spiritual encounter made known to human consciousness through the transcendent machinery of the mind. In other words, humans do not cognitively invent a powerful God and then depend upon this invention to gain the feeling of control; instead, God in the broadest and most fundamental definition of the term, is experienced in mystical spirituality. (133)

The deeper question is: Are these unitary experiences merely the result of neurological function—which would reduce mystical experience to a flurry of neural blips and flashes—or are they genuine experiences which the brain is able to perceive? (140)

Readers may be surprised to know I agree that God can be experienced. All of the world’s mystics can’t be crazy. As I have said before, the experience probably is real, but the causative agent is likely the mind rather than a God. The mind, however, needs appropriate contemplation, suggestions, or teasing to start the religious experience. A realist like me will probably never have a religious experience because my mind never dwells on such expectations. However, such experiences may be the single most influential factor in maintaining peoples’ belief in the supernatural abilities of their God or spirit. But, in that the world’s gods are said to have different histories, purposes, natures, abilities and much more, why would all such gods, including the Jungle god Ugg, produce the same type of mystical experience, unless it is only the mind that is involved in reaction to a common mental expectation. What this research shows is that “the neurobiological aspects of spiritual experience support the ‘sense’ of the realness of God” (143). The investigators conclude “while our imaging studies do not prove the existence of a higher spiritual plane, they do strongly indicate that to the brain, these states are as real as any other” (178). But, hallucinations can also seem real. The causative agents are claimed to be culture-specific. The research team hinted at one idea that seems reasonable: that the unifying experience with God, whether driven by a God or only one’s own mind, can be life-changing. Can we build a new religion around that?—one that can dramatically improve the behavior of humans without the heavy baggage of our present contradicting religions?

Some religious people feel that souls, the supposed mystical aspect of the mind, rather than natural means are involved in informing humans through visions, intuitions, dreams, trances and premonitions. But scientists find no evidence for souls as either entities or functions, when brains are wired with electrodes to reveal what is happening during such supposed spiritual phenomena. They find the physical brain doing its job naturally as though it’s counting chickens. It appears that souls are no more than a very ancient concept for which there is no physical or functional evidence. Nor has there ever been a

validated transfer of new knowledge from a God to humans in modern times. An article by Steven Pinker, in *Newsweek*, Sept 27, 2004, said the following:

The soul is in fact, the information-processing activity of the mind. New imaging techniques have tied every thought and emotion to neural activity. And any change to the brain—from strokes, drugs, electricity or surgery—will literally change your mind.

Psychologist Susan Blackmore recently interviewed twenty eminent thinkers working in the area of Neuroscience, in an effort to better understand the current status of knowledge about the mind. Her report is found in the book, *Conversations on Consciousness*. She has this to say:

Most people launched into versions of the mind-body problem or ... the hard problem. Briefly stated, the hard problem is the difficulty of understanding how physical processes in the brain can possibly give rise to subjective experiences. After all, objects in the physical world and subjective experiences of them seem to be two radically different kinds of thing: so how can one give rise to the other? No one has an answer to this question, although some people seem to think they do ... (3)

As neuroscience progresses and we learn more and more about the brain, we are gradually coming to understand such functions as vision, learning, memory, thinking and emotions. So when that understanding is complete, there will still be something left out—consciousness—that we haven't yet explained—a conclusion hotly denied by the [Paul and Patricia] Churchland, Dan Dennett and Francis [Crick]. (6)

None of Blackmore's 20 interviewees seemed to support mind-body dualism. This rejection is in keeping with views in the scientific community, which has little interest in mystical religious claims.

In a similar vein of scholarship, Daniel C. Dennett has authored a small book entitled, *Sweet Dreams: Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*. Dennett prepares us for his oncoming philosophy by reviewing our physical bodies. He tells us,

For we now know that the “miracles” of life—metabolism, growth, self repair, self defense, and, of course, reproduction—are all accomplished by dazzlingly intricate, but non-miraculous means ... It has been tempting over the ages to imagine that these striking differences must be due to the special features of some extra thing—a soul—installed somehow in the bodily headquarters ... For many people, this idea (dualism) is still the only vision of consciousness that makes any sense to them but there is now widespread agreement among scientists and philosophers that dualism is—must be—simply false: we are each made of mindless robots and nothing else, no nonphysical, no robotic ingredients at all. (2-3)

Theoretically, experiences could be projected into a mind by a spirit entity using a technique and energy source unknown to humans, but one shouldn't bet on that horse because no extraneous source of energy has been registered during religious experiences when the mind is working naturally. Nor has the mainstream of scientists validated the reality of extrasensory perceptions (ESP) such as those claimed for mental telepathy. It is true that little is yet known about "how" the brain's physical wiring, chemical releases and synapses create nonphysical cognition or subjectivity, but they do. Meanwhile, researchers are continually finding additional evidence that all mental functions are operated via natural processes in a physical or material brain. Note that I have not said that mental function is absolutely and totally a natural process in the brain. It warrants my confidence but not yet an absolute claim.

For anyone broadly interested in this area of knowledge, I highly recommend Patricia Smith Churchland's up-to-date book, *Brain-wise: Studies in Neurophilosophy*, also John F. Schumaker's *The Corruption of Reality*, and, for a quite different and more comprehensive book, Paul Kurtz's outstanding *The Transcendental Temptation*.

Chapter 35

The Mind of the Bible-Believer

The heading above is identical to the title of the book which will be referred to throughout the discussion of this topic. Psychologist Edmund D Cohen's *The Mind of the Bible-Believer* is a comprehensive four-hundred-plus pager that may be serving as the definitive document analyzing the psychology employed in practicing what the New Testament requires when abetted by religious conservatives. Readers are warned that the notes on the following pages are inadequate to transmit Cohen's many concepts found in his very large book, so you might want to read the book. Cohen states, "The major thesis of this book is that the Bible . . . is a psychological document." The author himself was drawn into an Evangelical church for three years after which he realized that the religion was designed to maintain an uncomfortable psychological hold on its converts. He says he felt "the experience, in retrospect, resembled nothing so much as a bout of substance abuse." He also wants readers to know, "The New Testament is nothing other than a psychological manipulation—a depth-psychotechnology—designed to knit its people together." Continuing, he adds, "I contend that New Testament Christianity was . . . deliberately contrived and field-tested over a few eventful decades" during which "upstart pastors are unwittingly the restorers and new practitioners" in what he calls "...the Evangelical mind-control system" (4). If this sounds like simple sour grapes, hang in there; the man is a true expert, although his writing is often difficult.

Cohen relates that the ruinous Roman conquest of Israel and the destruction of its Second Temple in 70 CE caused much difficulty. He says, "Every kind of constructive, this-worldly activity for Jews in Israel was made completely futile." He thinks history demonstrates:

The New Testament grew out of a profound sense of spoliation of the Jewish identity, when events turned so powerfully against the historic Jewish expectation of God's special favor. More importantly, it grew out of its authors' practical need to have a tightly

knit, supportive and informal network of people around them, when the formal institutions were all tightly under the control of foreign oppressors and many prominent Jews behaved basely and disloyally.
(4)

Cohen adds. "Hence, the enormous emphasis on life after death in Christianity, sharply contrasting with the scant Old Testament mention of the topic . . ." (4). For many suffering souls, the afterlife may have been the best hope they had left and it therefore was worthy of whatever hardship its attainment may require. Cohen alerts religious readers that his book may be very painful to read. "What I have to tell them is that maintenance of their illusions cannot co-exist with an effective response to the retrograde social views and inconspicuous personal misery being spread far and wide by the new conservative Evangelicals" (3). Later, the book claims statistics show higher rates of divorce among this group than among others. "Debating the merits of the Bible along the familiar, epistemological lines only ensures that the debate will remain safely clear of the truly sensitive issues and vulnerabilities in the Bible-believer's experience of his religion" (4).

A Frenchman, John Calvin (1509-1564) was an early contributor to the rise of fundamentalism. The first of his publicized five points of Calvinism was "The nature of man, owing to Adam's fall, is totally depraved, so that nothing good can come from him without God's gracious intervention" (14). Imagine a counselor employing this type of talk on his patient! The second "point" was "God decided before creating the world which people would receive salvation; that number might be a very small portion of humanity, God's elect." The third point was: "Christ's sacrifice on the cross redeemed the elect only" (14). Do points 2 and 3 sound fair to you? Those people not elected have no chance whatsoever for an afterlife, leaving what alternative . . . hell? It seems to me that these three points could destroy a believer's mental health and quality of life because of disappointment, fear and self doubt. By contrast, my own early life without religion yielded a happy, thoughtful, obedient child that a good Christian would praise. I only had to deal with humanity and behave according to its obvious needs. Luckily, John Wesley, founder of Methodism, softened some of the harshness of Calvin's doctrines during their moments in the sun. Peter Bohler promoted the acceptance of sudden religious experiences which has led to the present emphasis on born-again experiences (15-29).

The Puritans and others became quite preoccupied with "whether one is included in the circle of the elect or left out . . ." To help his readers feel the full impact that religion had on American colonials, Cohen quotes a paragraph from a John Edwards' sermon that is frightening. It seems to me to reflect a more fervent but similar type of enslavement that Cohen experienced during his three years with his Evangelical group.

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked, his wrath toward you burns like fire; he looks

upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear you in his sight; you are ten thousand times more abominable in his eyes than the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours. You have offended him infinitely more than ever a stubborn rebel did his prince; and yet it is nothing but his hand that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell the last night, that you was [sic] suffered to wake again in this world, after you closed your eyes to sleep. (14)

Cohen thinks that the New Testament writers had noted human behavior well enough to be aware of many psychological insights that they made use of in designing their scriptures, first striving to be appealing to potential and new converts through the love and caring of Jesus, and secondly, after switching to the requirements of a stern God, able to hold them over the long run through fear of losing eternal life. He describes a “mind control system” practiced by Evangelicals that includes “separating people from competing influence, or discrediting or defining as illegitimate potential competing influencers . . .” (71). Mind control, Cohen asserts, may also make use of brainwashing, deprogramming, snapping (sudden conversions), correcting others, dissociation, wish fulfillment, indoctrination, group pressure, symbolism, counseling, determinism (predestination), radical renewal and looking inward as only some of the other tools that are said in the book to be used by some conservative church leaders to control their converts (71–161). But we must pass over these and move on to explore the mind control system that Dr. Cohen has analyzed. He finds there are “interlocking, layered psychological devices—seven in number—embodied in the Bible” (170).

Device 1: The Benign, Attractive Persona of the Bible

Related to this topic is an earlier statement and answer by the author that seems appropriate here. He first posed a question: “Why should orthodox, biblical Christianity have survived so long, and why should it be enjoying a resurgence in enlightened democratic, twentieth-century North America? . . . The short answer is that its ‘spiritual’ content—the cleansing, rebirth, peace, prayer, perfect guidance and so on—taken by the conservative religious people as true at face value, by the skeptics of an earlier time for hollow chimera, and by the liberal religionists as the symbolic expression of something ineffable and sublime, is none of these things” (64).

Cohen goes on to explain, as I understand him, that the Biblical writers were savvy enough about human nature to make use of some of the best insights of modern psychology in their writing, designed to draw and hold converts. Quoting the author: “Proponents took the lovely surface impressions of Jesus in the Gospels and built a whole new religion out of them alone. . . . the King

James version lent the Bible an air of harmless quaintness and kept the finer nuances embedded in a code few could decipher” (170). But the author accuses the churches of decreasing their concern over time, about the quality of life in this world and fixating on the next life, thus creating a bait and switch situation. Dr Cohen explains further:

What I mean by persona of the Bible, then, is an apparent relevancy of teaching and promise of benefit that finally turn out to have totally different meanings from what the new inductee was led to think. We will encounter it many times, as our analysis unfolds. Little by little, newcomers are brought along to understand the teachings to mean something altogether different from what appeared on the surface—and oriented toward the next life, not this one. But one kind of promise, the kind that indicates a tranquilized, soporific, guilt-assuaging state of mind will be experienced, is kept, albeit by a means with a net detrimental effect on mental health. . . . The misleading biblical surface impressions are not inadvertent. Initial recruitment contacts could not succeed without them. (171)

Device 2: Discrediting “The World”

A brief series of Cohen’s ideas on discrediting the world follows in shortened form (172).

A human “gets himself to imagine that some sort of energy is coming into him from outside . . .” He is urged to practice “discrediting his own conscience” and “discrediting people other than believers and [discrediting] the environment.” His role “is to preach and ‘witness,’ not to listen . . . the lack of freedom to investigate, participate, and experience, which is prescribed in the Bible is sick. . . . The implication is that anything passing for learning that is not the biblical religious program is to be opposed” (172-178). This phobia expressed in the New Testament about human nature and the natural world is gross over-reaction when viewed rationally, as the following comments indicate.

The active phase of the devotional process of discrediting “the world” begins with the rearrangement of perception to confirm the expectation or tacit presupposition that there is an ulterior purpose behind everything that is not part of the religious program—not that the individual bringing the extraneous teaching personally had a bad motive but rather his lack of the “truth” entails his inability to have any good motive. How can a human, whose fleshly little mind is sin cursed, whose heart is innately wicked and corrupt, and who has come from his mother’s womb preprogrammed to speak lies have a good motive unless it is inspired in him by the Holy Spirit. (179)

Device 3: Logocide

The literal meaning of the word logocide might be to kill words or kill logic, so the question is asked by Cohen: “How far is it possible to go in misusing words—planting them in contexts that distort their meanings and draw their feeling tones and connotations too far into the foreground—to mislead people, confuse them, and mount a campaign of disinformation against them” (183). Examples in the Bible include “Jesus speaking of a ‘kingdom’ meaning a spiritual Kingdom, when the mind-set of his hearers makes them understand a political kingdom; Jesus also speaks of a temple torn down and rebuilt in three days, which his disciples later took to mean his atoning death and resurrection” (185). As further examples of logocide, in the New Testament, Cohen identifies the use of hyperbole, and gives the examples of a camel going through the eye of a needle and faith moving mountains. As faith in God has never yet moved a mountain, it is useless as an indicator of insufficient faith. Thus, the faiths of all peoples on earth would rate as failures. This apparently minor type of tearing down of the mental health of converts, that are in the second or ‘holding’ stage of indoctrination, becomes very important because it is repeated over and over in the Bible and thus in Bible study and sermons. The author gives examples of device 3 over the span of 50 pages. He asserts that the Bible is often hard to read and offers the following comments to justify his claim:

Something about the verses eludes their adherence to memory: they are Teflon coated. The believer ascribes this quality, which distinguishes the Bible from other writings in ancient languages, to the process of the understanding coming thru the intervention of the Holy Spirit, qualitatively unlike the way earthly ideas are understood. . . . Frustration of communication, and of thought inconsistent with the churchly enterprise’s purposes, is the end served by the resulting terminological confusion. *I submit that the New Testament was designed that way.* Paul knew what he was doing, and building on the Pharisaic tradition of putting an interpretative gloss on the scriptures, he deliberately made his terminology confusing. He may even have been mocking the believers when he said, “crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit.” (2Cor. 12–16) (184)

Does God actually love each human? If I were the creator of all the bacteria, or all of the grasshoppers of the world I can’t imagine loving each one individually, yes, even all of the cows. Getting to know each one is the first hitch and a lack of commonalities is the second hitch. A lack of time and usefulness and other issues follow. The idea is nonsensical. Could gods and humans share traits, knowledge, abilities, emotions or histories, in other words: where is the compatibility? These comments lead me again to quote Cohen who finds that God insists on getting far more than he or she gives, as is indicated below.

In the person of the father, although the supposed positive nature of his love is lauded constantly, his actions manifesting it are of-

ten negative, reflecting more petulance and tyrannical senility than righteousness or loving kindness. His deputy angel leads a rebellion against him. . . . When his people prove unable to follow his impossible rules, he lets others who are not his people to conquer them. At all times he screams for attention, deference and reassurance, like some senile human incumbent of a powerful office with lifetime tenure. . . . Since one could hardly work up much affection for the furious, terrifying bundle of contradictions God the Father is portrayed to be, it is oddly reasonable for the love for him to which man is exhorted to consist of obedience, not affection. (209-10)

Device 4: Assaulting Integrity

Integrity is the uncompromising adherence to moral and ethical character. Even one's beliefs are associated with integrity which includes making an honest effort to believe only that which is true so as to not ill advise others. The ministers who shout the loudest may have the least integrity as they unashamedly pitch what is starkly or rationally unbelievable. But in my view conservative Christians typically are little concerned about rationality, logic and reason as ways of knowing in Christianity.

Their choice of a way-to-know is often that of personal experience, which is often a minister-guided experience. This may allow one to have the experience that is most desirable. But when we watch a magician's acts which are make believe, in spite of looking very real, are we then assured of "knowing" that magic is legitimate. Experience too often only reflects the emotional needs or wishes of hearers or viewers. Thus the collection of reliable objective evidence necessary to establish a real basis for "knowing" is left out, or in the passage of time an event is wrongfully reported in the Bible and then is wrongfully accepted widely out of need or want. Cohen tells of several ways converts are provided Biblical experiences using psychological techniques that are designed to bring them surety of belief and peace. Examples include the story of the newly risen Jesus appearing to Simon and Cleopas as they walked, and then appearing to the group of disciples at supper, his visits having great emotional and sensual impact on them. It was the type of story that moves people who have a spirit-reality mind-set or a worrisome salvation-doubt.

A final quote from the author on integrity suggests that:

If the believer were ever to notice that his belief takes place in a vacuum, that nothing in his direct experience supports or augments it, and that its purport to be more real than reality, so real that what is real, by comparison, seems unreal, deteriorates if not constantly refreshed with more repetitions and exercises in the hearsay information that is its sole source, then he might begin to imagine how his world would be without it. He might explore the possibility that when his beliefs sometimes seem fantastic, that is because they are fantastic. (240)

Device 5: Dissociation Induction

Cohen feels that, “Dissociation Induction is at the core of this work, the matter where at last, depth psychology gets intensively applied to explaining the Bible’s power over people. The more outward devices we have covered serve to create the conditions for this one to work.” His description is rather long and difficult, so I will attempt to select a few of his most important points. John 3:4–8 tells us that “sin is the transgression of the law” and that Christ “was manifested to take away our sins . . . Whosoever abideth in him sinneth not . . . He that committeth sin is of the devil . . .” So, if disobedience to scriptural rules is a sin and the result of sin is death, without an afterlife or the blessings of God even in this worldly life, then one is a hostage to God. “The psychological condition, the unconscious component of the phenomenon, is a special kind of dissociation. The believer is guided into the posture that will make it possible to exclude from his or her conscious mind those thoughts, attitudes, emotions and feelings incompatible with the ones prescribed for the believer” (269). The mind of the believer is renewed so that it will think only Godly thoughts, while enjoying “peace and tepid joy” (261). The author warns us that “we shall find underlying the misleading biblical and theological conceptions of sin and faith, meaty psychological stuff, with dissociation at its root (249). Biblical sin seems to be unbelief and faith is belief without direct evidence, rather, only hearsay evidence from revealed sources. (Heb 1:1–2) Cohen notes: “Nobody had taught those people to ask the critical questions that is our second nature . . .” (271). But Apostle Paul locked the door against critical questions by insisting that since faith in Christ has been revealed, humans are no longer under the law but rather are justified by faith. All one needs to do is to believe in Jesus Christ and serve him. (See Gal 3:11–12, 23–26) Faith in Jesus was quickly established in the New Testament while concern for keeping the Jewish law faded away completely long, long ago. I believe this qualifies as a dissociation of concern for the Jewish law. Imagine the total number of such switches that had to be made in replacing Judaism with Christianity. The reader who is truly interested in this difficult topic should read Cohen’s book.

Device 6: Bridge Burning

At last the reader will get a break, that of brief and simple reading. First, let’s find out what bridge burning is, in the context of this book? The author in review says: “At several levels, the New Testament seeks to make the gap between the believers in their tightly knit circles and outsiders so wide that the believer will not get out, even though outsiders should come in . . . the discrediting of outsiders, the express prohibition against considering the possibility that an outsider might have something to say worth heeding, and the intensely taboo aura of bad conscience accompanying any thought that might undermine the doctrine, combine to counteract the effects of outsiders in close proximity, with whom the believer may have business” (339). If an outsider should say

something to give the believer pause it should be thought of as the work of the deceitful devil. Any unpleasant situation can be explained away, with perhaps a good feeling for having pushed away temptation and sin (342). Hebrews 10:31, one of many frightening Bible Verses, says, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (344). As the present writer, I ask where is the love, the peace and well-being for humans in such a bait and switch type of situation.

Device 7: Holy Terror

Author, Edmund D Cohen, speaking of fundamentalist Christianity, states, “The bottom line is that getting people to dance to its tune out of fear is what Christianity is all about. All else is evasion and obfuscation” (348).

“After receiving the build-up that becoming a Christian would make one the recipient of a love consummated in the sacrifice of the redemptive atonement, far better than the frail, fickle human kind, the believer never finds nor notices that he has not found anything in the Bible really telling about the content of Godly love or what it was about the alleged sacrifice that could have mattered so much to God” (348). The present writer has often asked himself about the great sacrifice of Jesus. Was a death of three days duration worth the tremendous fuss that the Bible makes about it? And, did heaven have no way to kill or reduce the pain for Jesus?

The supposedly wondrous, fabulous story of salvation turns out to be more one of disappointment than hope, Cohen reminds us. “And what ‘hope’ does the believer get? The Bible creates out of whole cloth, the bogey of spending eternity being worked over in Gods torture chamber. The only hope offered is some slight chance of escaping the bogey” (349).

What happened to the love of God and the flow of peace he supposedly brings? I realize that some churches preach more love than pestilence, but the literal Bible presents a lot of fear and punishment with its drumbeat about sin, hellfire and damnation, plus the possible pre-selection of only a few people for everlasting life. That would leave the large majority of good Christians with the bitter pill of failure to obtain the reward of afterlife. The Bible’s flirtation with predestination seems to make devotion, faith, prayer, and proper behavior in general redundant for the losers. Wouldn’t behaving properly, having faith and praying fervently be wasted if one’s goal is everlasting life and if salvation only comes to those who win the Heavenly lottery. Further, if you must have faith in prayer before a godly healing can take place, but you are unable to obtain faith before faith has been demonstrated to work, are you not in a meaningless stand-off caused by bad rules?

Giving Jesus the “Son of God role” created difficulties for Christianity, first by making God the father’s role far too human-like not to be suspected of being designed by humans, second by the unreasonable dual responsibility of two absolutes (Gods) in a single job. Can two all-powerful entities accomplish more than one all-powerful entity? In my view, even the general Biblical claim that humans can gain knowledge of cosmic Gods is outrageously egotistical of

us.

Cohen informs us of another way that human reasoning is made useless by Evangelicals. “The truth claims made for the doctrines expressed as paradoxes all depend on the premise that the paradoxes point beyond themselves to profound insights of which earthbound humans are not capable, that the humans will only be let in on beyond the grave. That makes the doctrines transparent to all known modes of inquiry... To the mind that wants to have something to test, the criterion of what the scriptural language will allow takes on great appeal” (320).

Becoming a Christian is a process. “First comes the fear appeal. At this crucial juncture, a fear of the ominous discord with the much more recurrent portrayal of salvation as general amnesty for the elect ... is employed. ... It is highly indicative that a fear broadside coupled with the teaching that Godly ideation (the renewed mind, the mind of Christ) comes in from outside is alien to one’s own, natural ideation, together comprise the prelude to a major statement about the radically transformed, inverted outlook the believer is to take on” (351). “A dissociation theme is about to be introduced. Then it comes. Being a ‘new creature’ in Christ, for whom ‘all things are become new’ states again the obliviousness or death to the natural, to be accompanied by coming alive to the God complex and the illusive intimation that truth makes sense or rings true” (352). Following this commitment, a person is pressed to isolate herself from the sinful outside world and to work on the attainment of greater faith.

“It comes to seem oddly reasonable and even reassuring that the natural and supernatural are so separate that the former reveals nothing whereby propositions about the latter might be proved or disproved” (359). One view of such fundamentalist belief is that it promotes a fantasy-land in the mind, crafted by good people out of need.

An interesting tale of his sudden loss of faith is briefly told by Dr Cohen. In his third week in Seminary, while bored, feeling trapped and depressed, an extraneous thought broke his mental entrapment. He reports, “Then I realized an essential thing: the God of the Bible, toward whom I had labored so hard to cultivate the right relationship of fear and Bible marination, and the spirit of absurd, oppressive, antihuman, killing authority pervading all of Kafka’s writing are one and the same!. In that moment, the entire Christian indoctrination collapsed in my mind ...” (378). Looking back, I saw that the intervening three years, I had grown not in righteousness but in rigidness, not in purity but in priggishness, not in holiness but in assholiness. While closing off any number of positive avenues of expression, Christianity had provided approved avenues of expression for many of my worst temperamental weaknesses. I was myself again after a miserable illness—a self-induced mental illness—like waking up from an unusually long, convoluted bad dream” (379). Pages later we find this parting shot. “I call giving up on reality and withdrawal into fantasy and fiction by a different name: *decadence*” (405).

Chapter 36

Science, Naturalism and Faith

The struggle between science and religion is often seen as one between reason and faith. Science is principally a method of gaining knowledge but the knowledge so gained is often also referred to as science. It is reasonable to have considerable confidence in scientifically gained knowledge because its theories have been tested and often retested by tried and true methods in the natural world. The definition of faith that I will use here is that faith is belief without adequate or appropriate evidence. As for a scientist's faith in the rising of the sun, this is not a good example of faith, rather a confidence based on reason which includes thousands of years of observations by humans. It's an application of reason rather than a belief based on intuitions, visions or desires. The same is true of faith in one's doctor. But a claim of Jesus' divinity is a supernatural type of claim, and as such is not testable, provable, or knowable. Gods could theoretically make themselves knowable and testable by physically entering into the material world where they could be seen, heard, touched and tested. Or, alternatively, they could routinely and often simply provide unambiguous claims via visions or intuitions to all humans that certain events will occur in the material world and then always make those events occur. The God of Moses is said to have done this several times. Where is that God?

But some religious scholars claim that there is no conflict between religion and science because being based on faith, religion is exempt from tests of reason. Faith does its thing of offering solace and ethics and has no need for reason these believers claim. But typically, it does have need. An aggressive faith departs far from these boundaries. Religions can deny the true causes behind natural events, the true origin of humanity, the true age and nature of the cosmos, the causes and cures of illnesses, the true history of tribes, the nature of reality and much more. All religions make many claims that conflict head-on with well evidenced scientific/naturalistic claims to truth that impact human lives in practical ways. Many Islamic suicide bombers are motivated to kill infidels by

their strong conviction (faith) that Allah will be pleased and will reward them immediately in heaven with a new life and a bevy of assenting virgins. Such important mystical predictions are non-testable and in my view can lead to very harmful behavior. I see no application of reason here and no solution to such terrorism short of believers' aborting this aspect of their faith in favor of better ones. Would the sacrificing of virgins by ancient tribes be justified by a tribe's faith in the practice? Mystical beliefs are often acted out in the natural world where there is no reliable evidence of Godly causation.

Faith, as non-evidenced belief, which is constantly used in religion, and reason which is used in science and everyday life, are opposing methods-for-knowing (truth finding). Faith usually relies on biblical and church authority; science relies on discovery through controlled experiments, the collection and analysis of facts, and the application of reason and logic. Religion can rely on deductive logic while science relies more on inductive processes (letting facts determine a conclusion). Thus, conflict is assured because the two techniques tend to yield contradictory answers. A lack of reason allowed the ancient Egyptians to believe their God, Aton, lived in, on or was the sun. If one's religious claims are unreasonable, then living with them should be impossible. Reason and faith must stand together, or the conflicting portion of faith must go. Actually, a mixture of these two processes is sometimes felt to be used; for example, religious believers are very prone to point to "God's complex and wondrous world" as justification for their faith in God through reason. But thorough analysis pokes holes in such an argument. The wondrous world could be a natural world of unknown origin rather than a created one. And, if you claim that a God created the universe, then haven't you relied on a mystical explanation without reliable evidence. Also, we still would lack an answer for who or what created your God. Of course I don't have answers for existence either, but I have little need for any because I haven't made a claim beyond saying that it's a great mystery and we humans have no basis for claiming a specific causative agent. Our ancestors thought rainbows were directly caused by God. The momentary lack of other causal hypotheses in this case did not justify their trust in God.

One of my proof readers asked me, "Couldn't a particular type of God be responsible for creation?" Yes, many possibilities "could." But that is why "could" by itself does not constitute a basis for belief. However, even Scientists sometimes suggest a "could be answer" as a plausible guess for future investigations when there is only very limited evidence for it. In fact, most scientific study results are statistically analyzed for their treatment response differences that provide confidence-level ratings against a null hypothesis. Such scientific studies do not yield absolute proofs, rather acceptable evidence. This is why Scientists search and "re-"search.

An item of religious faith may not be logical, reasonable or true if it has not been run through a reasonableness filter. Thus it is often referred to as "blind faith." Reason, by comparison, is a stern taskmaster. With little possibility of finding support from reason, religions can't endure without people's acceptance of them via a large dose of faith. The faith-trap partially strips away one's use of reason, one of the tools needed to avoid acting out of ignorance or desire.

Faith without reason is not a sound basis for believing anything. Scientific investigation has yielded thousands of new insights into the physical, biological and behavioral universe, and those insights have in turn yielded thousands of practical improvements for the human race. Supernaturalism, in contrast, has yielded nothing of this sort. Religious holy books have contained many useful observations about human nature and history, but have added almost nothing to physical and biological knowledge, where magic still ruled, even in Apostle Paul's time, as he and others in the Book of Acts are said to have initiated many miracles including the raising of several dead people to life. Shouldn't one assume that what doesn't happen today, also didn't happen yesterday, a mere 2000 years ago? Don't the laws of nature determine what is possible and what is impossible? This is definitely true on the basis of the world's collective scientific experience to date. This would contradict the many supernatural religious claims made throughout history. I know that many readers are shouting "wrong," to which I request, "follow up your miracle rumors and you will find assumptions and other weaknesses in the claims." I also ask the present reader, do you support the miracles said to be performed by alien gods? We scientists following a common view of reality, and applying the standard processes of scientific investigation tentatively support each other's investigations and theories in every nation of the world. The reliable methods of science tend to produce reliable and credible results everywhere with only small margins for error.

Religions obviously have sometimes served remarkably well as psychic comforters for their believers yet Christianity also deserves considerable blame for the ignorance and misery of the long and horrible Dark Ages. It has provided the motivation for numerous wars, the Crusades, witch hunts, burnings at the stake during the inquisition, and the suppression of science at times. In contrast, naturalism's scientific method has been spectacularly effective in unmasking the secrets of the physical universe. Until now, science has been more of a blessing for the masses than not. But, in the hands of militants it also has the capacity to destroy millions of peace-loving people.

One of my proof readers asked, "Is there morality in science?" Of course not directly, for just as morality in government and education rests on the behavior of the human beings involved, so does it in scientific and technological activities. Yet, I share the implied concern in the question and it is not a minor one. Science leads to technological advances and technological inventions, like the atomic bomb and even the passenger planes that destroyed the twin towers in New York, has at times exceeded our political/social capacity to control it. The materialism that inventions make possible may yet result in blighted or miserable societies. But, scientific methods can also be utilized even by Social Scientists and often can effectively analyze moral issues and recommend their solutions.

Historically a minority of human beings has shown themselves to have a great potential for cruelty and an abuse of power. Science may indirectly supply them with the means for cruel acts. This situation is already well out of control. Scientific knowledge is eagerly put to use by both security-seeking and rogue governments, often to the peril of constituents. Improved moral and political

guidance, as well as improved education in general, are sorely needed. To the degree that religions have done this, they should be commended, but even the Christian track record in these activities is not good. And among a growing rebellious Islamic minority, their religion is the central motivator of terrorism. Witness the indoctrination of youths in Madrassa schools and the increasing rhetorical virulence of some adult Muslims, even within Christian nations. Let's at the least moderate our religious absolutes while concentrating on loving and caring for all people. Secular people are doing this quite well and better all the time as the world mixes its peoples. Millions of inclusive or non-dogmatic Christians are in a position to be very helpful in making the world a better place to live, so please, stay in the harness. I am myself a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church, on its skeptical fringe.

I don't know of any good plan for curbing technology. Neither hating science, nor its exuberant promotion called scientism, is likely to help. Sometimes it seems that nations and persons of differing faiths and ideologies are in a headlong rush to destroy themselves. Religions typically claim to encourage peace, but their exclusive and often rigid ideologies can promote evil behavior by individual people, institutions, and governments. Today's examples are numerous and frightening. I am convinced that religious zealotry is the major cause of conflict in our world at this period in time.

Giving oneself to vigorous religious faith has often been treated in Christianity as a beautiful thing, a giving of self as if one were a bride for Jesus. But religious faith is too often blind and ill-advised. This may be easier to recognize by contemplating the faith errors made by people of other religions. Judaism unrealistically claimed Yahweh to be the Jews' own special tribal God, which at times made them aggressive, if we can believe in the story of the settling into Canaan. It also gave us wrong views of cosmic and world history, of reality, of causation, and of human reward. Hinduism posits sanctity of animals to a degree that it further impoverishes its people. Buddhism seems to ask for the impractical total extinguishment of desire. Islamic faith sometimes calls for irrational Jihad to be carried out. I believe Christian faith errs in that it leads many people to assume that their vivid religious experiences and waves of strong mystical or supernatural feelings are sent from their God when natural or psychological explanations seem far more reasonable. Christian faith posits a false worldview in that: 1) it leads to a false spirit-driven view of reality, 2) it leads to a false view of how one can gain knowledge and 3) it leads to a distorted view of what has value. It claims that spirits are in charge of events in our world, that the spirits are our major source of power, knowledge, and hope, that they control the keys to supreme value (eternal life). These are phenomenal claims and light years removed from those made from reason. Lastly, there are numerous unreasonable stories in the Christian Bible which should heavily challenge one's faith in it. To have faith in a fantasy would not be beautiful or wonderful. In fact, belief in fantasies is a major indicator of the mental illness schizophrenia. Believing in non-evidenced claims, as is often practiced in religions, is not a valid method for "knowing." The human race's gods are many, their dogmas and promises contradictory, their roads to bliss varied.

In science, claims must be empirically verified (derived from experiment) or be discarded. Research projects are of varied types, but the scientific method may be practiced somewhat as follows. Typically a researcher or a team of researchers first notes a worthy and potential fix to a need, formulates a hypothesis that would likely specify and improve the situation, reviews relevant literature and develops a comprehensive plan for testing the hypothesis. They then engage in empirical experimentation, or collection of facts, with attention to potential errors, adequate sample size, a well designed sample selection process, and control treatments. The researchers may take experimental samples, provide treatments, make tests, take measurements or engage in other appropriate methods, while carefully equalizing all variables within the experiment, except the experimental variables. They replicate adequately, randomize treatments, avoid experimental errors of varied types in conducting the experiment, analyze the study's results, including statistically, draw conclusions, and publish all of this so that it can be criticized or verified publicly by the relevant scientific communities. Often other researchers will repeat or modify the study. In the long run, errors are usually found and corrections are made. It is sometimes a greater honor for scientists to find conventional theories to be false than it is to find them to be true. Of course, even scientists have sometimes found it difficult to think outside of the current paradigm or current view. Chet Reymo writes in his book, *Skeptics and True Believers*;

It is the essence of scientific skepticism to test and retest each link in the web, to try to prove it faulty, to look for more concise patterns of constructs and connections that will adequately explain our immediate sensations. A scientific discovery often exposes new avenues for research, which is to say that the answer to a question often creates new questions. (35)

The scientific technique provided a wondrous philosophy and technique for gaining knowledge compared to the prior cacophony of contradictory and ignorant pronouncements about supernatural powers by peoples of the world. The cacophony continues in the area of religion where the expression "I feel" is still often the basis for a belief. That it is labeled a conclusion from faith doesn't help, although sometimes a feeling can emanate from legitimate past natural experiences within the material world and thus have some usefulness.

A few scientists bifurcate or rely on two opposing means for gaining knowledge or for knowing (epistemology), so that in most areas of knowledge, except religion, they look for repeatable evidence, reason and logic to guide them. In religion they may rely on dogmas, rituals, gut feelings, personal needs and wishes, their culture's expectations and indoctrination; then justify it by claiming to have faith. Thus, in their personal lives, such scientists intellectually rely on faith as a means of knowing and of solving problems, even though they would be horrified to see faith used alone in sending up a rocket or even to treat their dog at the veterinary office. Yet we shouldn't worry greatly as religiosity is very low among scientists having Ph.D. level training and especially those that

are physicists and biologists. Teachers at high school and community college level are comparatively far more religious and are under pressure by parents and their communities to support what their community believes including how knowledge can be gained and problems solved.

Chapter 37

Rationality, Gaining Strength?

I have recently noted that people in the mass media are beginning to ask the type of hard and previously untouchable questions discussed in this essay. This very day, as I write, the CNN Television station reported on a trial, in France I think, that is asking: “did Jesus actually live?” Several lengthy television documentaries in recent years have looked at the hard facts regarding the Jesus story of the Bible and other religious topics. A minor flood of skeptical books is now available. But most importantly, I feel are the remarkable fire-quenching changes in the beliefs and understandings of the liberal clergy in the country, especially within the higher levels of clergy responsibility and education. Also, those of us who promote reason over faith as a method of knowing and as a route to a good life are pleased to note that a growing number of Christians have downplayed or rejected scriptural literalism and its very personal God who is erroneously thought to intervene in natural laws. Many people contend that the Bible should still be accepted as having metaphorical and/or spiritual truth, which would be an improvement in my view. The God options that I find least troublesome include that of a universal spirit that never intervenes in natural laws and that of envisioning God as the vital spirit within all life or all matter. These seem to be unsupported by the type of evidence I normally require, but if the tiger of religious zealotry is declawed by such liberalization of religious beliefs, the human race should greatly reduce the instigation of wars and engagement in ideological battles in the defense of their assumed to be one-and-only true religion. At this point in history Islam has less chance to liberalize itself than does Christianity. It’s frightening.

Though I compliment those Christians who have rejected the literal interpretation of Biblical verse in favor of more liberal ones, I do find it incongruous that some people treat the Bible as a menu from which to reject its obviously untrue components, but still choose to believe literally in “core parts,” typically including salvation through Jesus. Why should one trust a portion of an unbe-

lievable whole? Perhaps because in matters of religion, humans in general have historically given priority to emotional needs over reason. Compromises may offer some of both and could lead to a useful increase in rationality. But, if it is harmless and it makes you happy, go for it. I offer my best wishes to those of you who are struggling with the god issue.

The most important idea in this essay may be that most people tend to believe what they want to believe or need to believe. How many mothers have claimed that their very guilty son who is accused of a horrible crime “couldn’t have done it?” Fear and security play major roles in determining our actions. Thus, nearly every person ever born has participated in a religion that claims to treat these. Although all religions seem to be unbelievable, literally; I would not fuss if they were harmless. They often are not. In their virulent forms, religions tend to be dogmatic, absolutist, rigid, tyrannical, zealous, unyielding to competing ideas, out of date, ignorant, and ready to fight against enemies. However, in their liberalized forms, religions can assist in the production of happy individuals, excellent citizens, solid families, good communities, good friends and neighbors.

Recently, I have been very pleased to see many books and television documentaries engaging at last in rational discussions about the Christian Bible, with participation by Biblical scholars and historians who aren’t as biased and narrow in knowledge and belief as conservative ministers tend to be. All good citizens need to do what they can to reduce the heat (zealotry) of religious belief. The same for the heat from skeptics and atheists, I can imagine some readers retorting under their breaths. If my or others’ writings have seemed spiteful to believers themselves, I apologize. I am well aware and much concerned that the claims herein will be maddening to people who feel they must maintain their full religious belief. But religious doctrines and dogmas, as well as scientific claims, must always remain fair game to tough and reasoned criticisms lest we become a society of ignoramuses.

It has been an almost impossible struggle for me to be moderately gentle, kind and non-dogmatic while discussing the religious dogmas/doctrines of a Christianity that I view to be largely mythical and often flat wrong. How does one equivocate on such topics as the role of Jesus? Either it is 100% true that he is Lord and Savior or it is 100% false. I keep remembering a line in the old Merle Haggard song, “When you’re walking on my country boy, you’re walkin’ on the fight’n side of me.” I am sure it is the same with a religion that I dare to criticize, and that is disturbing. I have no hate in me, only love for all fellow humans; but I am cursed or blessed with a rigid conscience that demands that I tell it as I see it. What I can’t justify so easily is this: I have sometimes been guilty of excessive generalizing. Also, the essay often represents my personal perspective and due to my limited religious training I will have made errors relating to Bible content and intent.

Chapter 38

Sensing a Spirit Realm

Our world is now usually viewed scientifically as being physical/material, operated by uncompromising natural laws. The world-view of Bible writers and of most people of their time was mystical; a world where events, behaviors, and thoughts were often or always spirit-driven. This necessitated good and evil spirits. People like the Heaven's-Gaters, whose presumed souls were supposed to fly to a space ship after their suicides, remind us of the fallacy of a mystical world view (having spiritual intuitions of truths). They believed souls exist and can travel out of body, that space ships exist which can miraculously pick up souls while traveling thousands of miles per hour to get the hypothetical souls to a hypothetical God. There is a mystical similarity here to the Biblical account of God's management of our cosmos? To me, both contain assumptions and claims that lack supportive reason and logic.

Mysticism is defined in my Webster's College Dictionary as "the doctrine of immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to transcend ordinary understanding, or of a direct intimate union of the soul with God through contemplation or spiritual ecstasy." Note how fantastic, how miraculous and magical this idea is. Isn't it equivalent to belief in the work of fortune tellers, channelers and dozens more types of highly suspect self-styled seers that many of us would not trust to teach our children? The existence of both Gods and souls seem to me to be mere speculations. Mysticism goes beyond everything we directly or unambiguously know. Just try to think of a single bit of original knowledge that was discovered via mystical means. I have always distrusted mystical beliefs because they seem to be subject to manipulation in providing whatever is desired by the formulators. The claims mysticism generates are generally unverifiable by the methods that knowledgeable humans use to verify their claims. Thus, humans have been able to invent and believe in hundreds of Gods having widely varied histories, powers, and intentions, without concern for the unlikely existence of any of them. The intuition or vision that Jesus wants you to become a missionary is likewise improbable. Applying the kicker of an old joke, the truth in spiritual intuitions could be said to be as elusive as is trying to catch flatulence let loose in a high wind.

Testimonials of a spiritual experience are weak, if not worthless, in my view, because the experiences attested to could have been generated in the mind, rather than generated by a spirit entity outside of the mind. When a person thinks the thoughts necessary to elicit a religious experience, appropriate activity starts in the neurons of the brain and it ceases immediately when the thought process changes. Though not hard or absolute proof of the natural causation of a religious experience, it certainly is evidence. Also, testimonials of interventions by varied spirit entities often contradict each other (for example, both sides in a conflict being supported by opposing gods). And, if the assistance of spirit entities in response to prayers were actually powerful in determining outcomes in the physical world, then wouldn't NASA, the U.S. army, corporations, hospitals and scientific laboratories have tried to use them in a formal manner to assure their own success? (The U.S. military did flirt, small time for several years, with what is sometimes collectively called pseudo-sciences as means of gaining information.) No, it is likely our human ability to self-generate powerful mental experiences during our contemplations or assumed contacts with gods that makes us feel that our God has to be real. Why do I claim it is likely self-generated? For one reason, many varied gods, modern and ancient, were claimed to create the same powerful types of experiences, when one's mind is properly indoctrinated and faith is strong. Even a love like that of Romeo and Juliet was imagined to be transmitted between partners by the winged Eros shooting arrows into the partner.

Researcher Michael Persinger electrically excited the temporal lobes of hundreds of people's brains over many years, creating religious feelings in most of them. David Biello discusses these studies in the article "Searching for God in the Brain," appearing in *Scientific American—Mind*, Oct/Nov 2007. The article says, "affected subjects translated this perception of the divine into their own cultural and religious language—terming it God, Buddha, a benevolent presence or the wonder of the universe." Persinger thus argues that "religious experience and belief in God are merely the results of electrical anomalies in the human brain." So religious experiences are not only transmissions from our one true Christian God, but are enjoyed by Hindu and Shinto followers plus those persons in the jungle communing with their God, Ugg (my creation). Religious experiences were ubiquitous from caveman to modern man. The match that lights them is usually mystical contemplation and belief relating to sermons, meditation, singing about spirit entities, praying, grieving about deaths and so on.

Spiritual "I feel" assumptions are a major part of human enculturation and, I suspect, a means by which believers feel more secure. All religions utilize some forms of mysticism. It is the nature of mankind to experience periods of awe, wonder and sudden understanding, to experience intuitions, premonitions or oneness with God which people assume are mystically or spiritually generated. Taking these ecstatic moments to be spiritual encounters with a God must require rationalization. Naturalists may experience awe and wonder too, but view such experiences to be natural in-mind responses to such emotional phenomena as nature's beauty, her splendor and great mysteries, the life-force within us or

a child's innocence. As a skeptic, I also ascribe my intuitions and premonitions to insights and understandings gained in previous natural experiences, rather than to a connection with a spirit realm. Thus one's mind-set can greatly influence the type of intuitive experience he or she will have. I admit that my naturalistic intuitions are not as powerful, psychologically or emotionally, as are the assumed encounters with a God because the assumptions and expectations made about a God and his powers should bring on a much higher emotional high in one's physical brain which function we call mind. Modern research which we will pursue later implies that a strong religious experience may be the result of a unique process within the naturally controlled brain.

I don't give credence to a spirit realm of reality, because I see nothing happening of this type that isn't readily and simply explainable as either an ordinary function of our amazing yet error-prone mental processes, or as a misjudgment about an event's nature. In my view, the latter is noted among the large number of claimers of miraculous healings that could have resulted from many other causes. In such cases, reason is often abandoned or weak. If prayer actually results in healing, then the nationwide death toll from diseases would be decidedly less on average for those who pray than for all those millions who are non-believers, which national statistics don't clearly show. Members of the Church of Christ Scientist, who rely completely upon divine cures in fighting their life-threatening maladies, have a greater incidence of death than people in other categories do from conditions that modern medicine could have controlled. Another consideration is that because faith groups within many world religions claim their specific God generates the awe, spiritual ecstasy, oneness, intuitions and miracles that human's sense; therefore, we must be very suspicious of all God claims. If the hypothetical God Allah is responsible for supernatural acts in our world, then Jehovah can't be responsible. The people who believe only in a cosmic-mind, or a universal spirit, as opposed to a personal God like Yahweh that is involved in the affairs of humans, have at least solved the contradictory-claims problem of today's world. The cosmic-mind type of spirit entity or God makes no claims, has no described identity and reveals no history, plans or theology. A cosmic mind may be a good fallback belief as an alternative to belief in a personal God because it would seem to be harmless; that is, it would lack hard dogma, not generate wars, waste excessive time or energy.

True believers, mystics, New Agers and believers in paranormal events tend to point to what they identify as "a lot of unexplained things happening out there," implying that there are supernatural or paranormal forces at work in a spirit or unknown sphere of reality. But while believers are loaded with examples that they say serve as evidence, non-believers and most scientists rarely, if ever, are in agreement, because for them, well-known psychological, sociological, physiological, and especially human-error explanations guided by reason and experience, are adequate to explain such speculative phenomena. Some brave scientists are rumored to say that solid evidence for a miracle has never been found, even once.

Believers in a spirit sphere of reality are usually philosophically idealists where the object of their external perceptions consists of ideas. My old World

Book Encyclopedia says: "Idealism is a doctrine that considers mind or spirit as the basis of the universe. Many idealists maintain that things do not exist outside of the mind, but only as the mind knows them" One can understand why this would be felt to be true. Only minds are able to conclude perceptions and devise conceptions. These can and often do change. My desk can potentially be seen or envisioned as: a desk, a stack of lumber, plant cells, sawdust, atoms, or a speck, when seen in the distance. But, the natural universe obviously existed independently long before minds evolved; so, inexperience with an object is not the same as nonexistence of the object. People who don't believe in spirits are usually realists who view objects to be real, apart from the act of perception. Some people employ both realism and idealism, perhaps functioning as a realist while engaged in scientific work, and as an idealist when praying, but this constitutes two conflicting worldviews that surely can't both be right.

A great many previously unexplained and falsely explained events and conditions in the distant past were later correctly explained naturally; for example, the causes of deaths, diseases, droughts and poor crops were once seen as the interventions of an unhappy God but generally no longer are. Demon possession scenarios are on the wane. And, it is now known that premonitions are typically explainable as the result of concerns on one's mind, and intuitions are the result of half-buried relevant observational experiences coming out of memory storage to join the active mind in problem solving, and thus need not be supernaturally caused.

Supposedly-rare circumstances/events are typically usual circumstances/events in a highly complex natural existence where a great many variables impinge on every situation and outcome that one is trying to explain. In this situation it is easy to pair a problem like illness and a solution like answered prayer together in a manner that implies supernatural involvement. The illness could have improved for many reasons and does not justify an assumption that it was an answered prayer. Empirical evidence providing numerous reliable observations made under well controlled conditions is needed. Answered prayers seldom if ever fit this criterion. Nor do unexplained or unusual events justify a belief. Once almost everything was unexplained or falsely explained.

Visions only demonstrate phenomena that our amazing minds can accomplish, naturally. If you were to send your young son or grandson into the hills alone, right now, with the goal of meeting his Guiding Spirit and learning from that Spirit, would he be successful? If Native American boys can do it, why not your boy? I believe most psychologists would say it happens because the Native American boy believes it can happen, he even expects it to happen, and he desires it to happen. Before going out to a choice spot in nature, he undergoes long indoctrination; he hears many stories about Guiding Spirits from several tribesmen which imply that everyone believes in Guiding Spirits. He learns some mental techniques and he becomes a believer. When he goes out he is mentally conditioned. Such a prepared and expectant mind will likely perform a mental illusion for him. So it is with religious experiences; minds are not difficult to guide or to deceive. Mystics see mystical phenomena often. As a ten-year-old child I saw my only apparition the same night that I had heard my

parents discuss them and I went to bed spooked. Years later, I had a frightful false premonition that my dad had died. But again there were pre-conditions. I had reflected the previous evening on Dad's telling about his true premonition of his mother's death and I had wondered if such a thing could be possible. But Dad's case also was not very impressive because he had been warned of his mother's dire condition a few days before her death. In both of our cases, what were earlier on our minds came back out of our minds in slightly new form.

Some people in West Africa think they can steal the soul of another person, at which moment the thief typically falls into an ecstasy. The ecstasy is probably real, the explanation isn't. Neurologists are well aware that thoughts and near-death conditions can trigger chemical releases and electrical signals that can in turn create varied kinds of mental reactions, including ecstasies and other religious experiences.

Enthusiasts, whether believers in flying saucers, paranormal phenomena or religion, tend to experience the object of their constant attention, while non-enthusiasts seldom do. Preachers hide this means of suasion (mind conditioning) by telling us that God comes to us only when we humans first beseech him often and earnestly, after which our minds are already conditioned to produce a religious experience for us. Thus most mystics and religionists have learned to prepare their minds to produce an illusion via elaborate and lengthy rituals, exhaustive praying and dancing being high among them. If it existed, the spirit being that is solicited surely wouldn't care about the ritualistic preliminaries, but the producing natural mind needs them. Hippies relied heavily on drugs to assist their minds in developing their visions and ecstasies. Shamen and witch doctors learned the tricks of the trade thousands of years ago. I have had the good fortune to watch part of the three-day-long Crow Native-American Sundance, where dancers supposedly fell into trances and had visions, brought on naturally, in my view, by the drugs of exhaustion, the intoxication from near-constant dancing, drumming, chanting and whistling, plus the expectations, desires and reinforcements on the part of both dancers and observers.

Chapter 39

Do Miracles Actually Occur?

Miracles. People love them; they seem to bring a degree of self control into human lives; they seem to provide a rationale for unusual and quirky events; they are deeply embedded into our cultural heritage; and they are reported a lot. The Bible tells us they will happen if we believe. They probably have been claimed to occur under every good and evil spirit that has ever existed. Ancient peoples performed ceremonies to appease the Spirits to bring rain and good crop yields. Healing ceremonies were also once ubiquitous. But, many events diagnosed as being supernaturally caused are actually misperceptions. In Afghanistan where I spent six years of my life, the Jinns were thought to come at night to carry out their varied little deeds. I doubt that those people lied. The victims probably surveyed the house carefully enough to feel they had observed some minor mischief and went on their way satisfied that their belief in Jinns held up. A very smart friend who holds a Ph.D. degree once explained his belief in lucky numbers with “because it works.” In my view, thousands of examples of answered prayers stand for no more than the nature of humans. Well over one hundred years ago James Frazer surveyed the world to record mystical beliefs and practices. He wrote more than eight hundred pages on the topic. *The Golden Bough* cover sheet says “The Golden Bough’s revelation to Frazer’s time and to ours is that the ‘facts’ and ‘reasonable beliefs’ of one culture can seem like delusions to another culture. . . . Our resemblances to the savage are more numerous than our differences from him.”

Unusual events occur in a complex existence because there are so many total events occurring. Christians typically have a mindset that expects to observe miracles, and such expectations influence one’s interpretation of events. Human nature has shown itself to quickly note oddities while ignoring thousands of routine events and phenomena. But, have believers in miracles never noticed that the claimed miraculous outcomes are never indisputably true? They are more like “I prayed for her and she got well.” Just once before I die I would

like to see a prayer lead to an obviously miraculous act that can be trusted totally, like a soldier's missing arm being replaced, a house replaced after a hurricane, or a person dead for a year being brought to life. The multimillions of miracles claimed to occur are found where the evidence for them is in a grey area of believability where other explanations are possible and plausible. Regarding whether an event is a miracle, paired events do not indicate a miracle has occurred. Psychological, sociological and physiological phenomena often best explain what is claimed to be a miraculous event. Personal experiences, memories and observations are very often unreliable. Poor health or imbalanced brain chemistry can distort brain function. The expectation of a miracle or total distrust of one will likely distort what is observed and what will be concluded from it. Miracles may be a favorite toy for gossip groups because they build feel-good confidence in the phenomena, and they are titillating and expandable over time.

It is difficult to conduct reliable research on religious matters due to the emotions and desires involved. It even pays to be skeptical of research teams that have a substantial vested interest in the outcome of their research. Imagine asking both conservative Christians and atheists to convey their level of happiness. People in each group may contend that they are happier than they really are because they would want to support the superiority of their practice. In major research, double-blind methodologies are recommended to reduce errors and distortions. Great care must also be given to the management of sample selection, experimental methodology and data evaluation. The development and analysis of interview forms must be done especially thoughtfully by experts.

Some people report having powerful religious experiences, where one "knows" he or she was in the presence of the Divine in a most vivid, intense, and real manner? Go to India to observe a culture and a religion that thrives on mystical experiences. There is reason to believe that minds (brain function), can do this naturally if stimulated appropriately. Even the research described by the brain researchers in the topic *Mind and Consciousness* (of this essay) show that all mental activity in the brain is processed naturally. However, they note that a God could have created naturally-functioning brains to be able to accommodate the experiences of oneness with Him. That's a "could have" *if* a god actually participated in the creation of brains, rather than evolution. And miracles are invalidated by the fact that all gods are claimed to create them. Is that reasonable?

Certain methods facilitate, strengthen or speed up mystical experiences. Among individuals worldwide who actively pursue mystical experiences, there are definite similarities in the complex methods used to induce vivid experiences and deep trances. Do spirit entities need such rituals as a warm-up routine before they respond "supernaturally," or is it our minds that need the rituals in order to produce the ultra-vivid experiences in our minds "naturally?" Conservative ministers often beg their audience to take the first step in creating a deeper relationship with God (or Jesus) by asking for forgiveness and by beseeching God for his assistance. The minister's typically repetitive and emotionally pleading voice adds to the seeker's emotional preparation as he or she

builds desire, feelings of deep love and an attitude of contrition on the part of the seekers. Such procedures can potentially trigger the flow of hallucinogenic drugs in the brain, or induce the necessary connections of neurons in the brain which are thought to be facilitated by no more than the minds' willingness to connect with a spirit entity. Either of these preparations in turn can create extraordinary experiences in many people. Does this not turn the minister's role into that of a psychologist? Preparatory activities for religious experiences often include emptying the mind, exhaustive and repetitive praying, chanting, drumming and dancing, combined with continual expectation or indoctrination, and sometimes the use of drugs. The longer the conditioning the more vivid the experience tends to be. I believe it would be true to say that all primitive cultures conducted mystical ceremonies and enjoyed the waves of emotion that can follow. How did Jehovah fit into that activity as it occurred long ago in the African jungle or in Bombay?

Religious experiences are nearly always in keeping with the cultural traditions, beliefs, and practices of the experiencer. We must be highly suspicious that human minds and human wishes have created the magical experiences felt. An isolated Hindu will never mentally encounter Jesus or Mary; nor will a Christian encounter Sakti. This fact seems to discredit all encounter claims with a specific God that is said to represent all humans. A single cosmic-mind could theoretically transmit religious experiences uniquely designed for each receiving person's specific needs but obviously doesn't as religious holy books vary tremendously. And transmittal to six billion people using 100 languages makes no sense. Caroline Davis in her book, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience*, although she is a believer in the veridicality (truth content) of many religious experiences, admits:

The most powerful challenges to religious experience will prove to be the "conflicting claims challenge," that subjects of religious experiences cannot agree on a single, consistent account of the alleged percepts [spirit entities], and the "reductionist challenge," that religious experiences can be explained more plausibly by reference to natural (and often pathological) factors alone than by explanations which allow certain religious experiences to be veridical [truthful].
(3)

One shouldn't argue that the religious experiences are not real, only that the assumed or claimed cause isn't the cause. By the way, I found Ms Davis' evidence for supernatural events and entities to be primarily that of trusting feelings and ideas derived subjectively. That requires a leap of faith, and without valid evidence, one has no basis for such belief.

Expanding on the naturalistic explanations skeptics might give for religious experiences, researchers know that our brains can, under certain conditions, generate vivid in-mind religious experiences that, like dreams, seem to occur in the real world (outside of the mind), but likely don't. Religious experiences typically happen to thoroughly indoctrinated people, to those in the presence

of a supportive group, and to those who have trained themselves in the art of eliciting such experiences. It typically happens when some of the following conditions prevail. The experiencer is in long and deeply involved prayer, dancing and drumming exhaustively, dreaming or having nightmares, on drugs, insane, in a seizure, in a state of sleep apnea, delirious, near death, physically exhausted, ritually entranced or in ecstasy, heavily indoctrinated, exceptionally needy, or receiving suggestions. Monks and other mystics often indulge in lengthy mental training or conditioning in an effort to increase their pleasure or satisfaction in spiritual encounters or to improve their ecstasy in trances. Mankind seems to have an insatiable need to believe and thus to enjoy transcendental myths (witness the hundreds of religions, the thousands of superstitions and all the folklore that our planet has produced). It is a bit frightening to realize how easily and completely minds can be led astray. Some of us even fall victims to the weirdest of cults. Remember Jim Jones, the Waco incident, and the Heaven's Gaters?

The near-death and out-of-body experience is reputed to make a person changed for the rest of his or her life. That would seem to require full surety in the supernatural nature of the experience and in the functioning of Gods, Souls and telepathy. I can accept the out-of-body experience but only as a natural psychological-experience. Tanner Edis in his excellent book: *The Ghost in the Universe*, briefly discusses the work of psychologist Susan Blackmore. He tells us:

She points out that OBE's [out of body experiences] take place when information from the external world is not available to our brain, but our awareness has not been switched off. Under conditions conducive to an OBE, she argues, our brain will focus attention on the most stable representation of the world available. As it happens, our memory is organized according to a birds-eye view. . . .and so it becomes our working picture of "reality." While having an OBE we survey a scene including ourselves from above, and this feels no less real than our ordinary models based on continuing sensory input.

In an article in the May/June 2004 issue of, *Skeptical Inquirer*, titled "Darkness, Tunnels, and Light" G. M. Woerless describes a researched case from which a complete explanation is given of the chemistry and neurology thought to be involved in eliciting the near-death experience. Most skeptical writers think oxygen deprivation is involved in the experiences of a tunnel of concentric rings and lights.

In the Nov/Dec 07 issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine an article, "Out of Body and in the Lab: New Experiments Stimulate Seeing Self Elsewhere," writer Kendrick Frazier describes two recent studies that are aimed at "understanding both out-of-body and near-death experiences and, perhaps more fundamentally important, the strong degree to which our sense of self is associated with our mind's perception of physical body." Very briefly, a group of participants "experienced a virtual body as if it were their own and localized their 'selves' outside of their bodies at a different position in space." The investigators "suggest that the special unity between self and body can be disrupted,

leading to the striking experience that one's self is in another physical location. ... Illusory self-localization to a position outside one's body shows that bodily self-consciousness and selfhood can be dissociated from one's physical body position. ... The researchers acknowledge that they have induced only some aspects, not all, of out-of-body experiences" (5-6).

Chapter 40

Particles to Waves, and Waves to Particles?

A scientific observation of wave-particle duality within quantum mechanics has generated claims that human consciousness can supervene the physical or material principles of physics, thus control physical events, even allowing for successful retroactive prayer and implying a spirit sphere of reality. Parapsychologists, some alternative medicine promoters, New Agers, and other idealists who assume that minds are mystically driven, are busy promoting these ideas. Physicist Victor J. Stenger, writing in *Skeptical Briefs*, newsletter of The Center for Inquiry, March 2004, said:

The claim . . . can be traced to a wrongful interpretation of the famous wave-particle duality. . . . The popular picture of particles as somehow also being waves is a pedagogical simplification used to “explain” interference and diffraction effects in familiar terms. . . . This theoretical description does not imply a dual reality in which one form of reality is exchanged to another by the act of measurement or some human thought.

I have personally long noted that physicists as a whole seem to have exhibited little excitement over this particular debate. Stenger’s comment seems to explain why. The following quote was taken from the Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia site on the Internet:

In quantum electrodynamics, Richard Feynman shows the wave-particle duality of photons and electrons is an illusion. In his view, photons and electrons obey rules that share some qualities of both particles and waves. They are neither particle nor wave, but some generalized object with no direct macroscopic analog.

Chet Raymo in his book, *Skeptics and True Believers*, elaborates:

Things happen in quantum physics according to probabilities; no single atomic event is precisely determined in the classical Newtonian sense. . . . the so-called uncertainties encountered on the quantum scale of nature are themselves exactly described by mathematical laws that have been repeatedly confirmed to a high degree of precision. . . . Attempts by New Age gurus to turn quantum physics into a religion of magic, miracles and mysticism are profoundly misguided. (189-90)

The aspect of quantum mechanics wherein certain pairs of measurements, such as location and speed of an object, that have an intrinsic uncertainty associated with them is referred to as “the Heisenberg uncertainty principle.” The overall impact of quantum mechanics on physics seems to be equivalent to that of Einstein’s theories upon Newton’s theories. In the normal everyday conduct of science, traditional physics still functions in a wondrously disciplined manner as do Newton’s laws, because the error impact of both quantum behavior and cosmic constellation behavior is infinitesimal at the macro and world levels in which we live our lives.

So, if quantum mechanics does not prove that mind can control matter, the idealist’s claim of a new paradigm or world-view based on this seems to be invalid, and there is no evidence from it supporting religious miracles, or any other mystical beliefs. In my view, mysticism is the oldest paradigm, rather than the newest. Beginning in prehistory, it was largely pushed aside by the rise of the scientific discovery that the world ticks according to natural laws operating in a physical or matter and energy environment. Reality is informed initially by our five senses aided by the tools that extend the collection of sensory information, such as microscopes and flame-photometers. The scientific method emphasizes systematic data collection (induction) as a means of discovery, and it follows a multi-step process of establishing and testing a hypothesis. It has very rapidly multiplied man’s knowledge a great many times.

Chapter 41

Evolution and Intelligent Design

In this much debated topic I will not attempt to be either scholarly or comprehensive but rather will draw briefly on simple common sense. It will deal further with the question raised much earlier: “How did we get here?” And, my prior argument for consciousness being a phenomenon created by a physical brain allows me to better assume the possibility of our origin by naturalistic evolution. We humans share about 98.8% of our genes with apes, and the entire architecture of life; cells with walls, nuclei, and mitochondria; body organs; and hundreds of other building-blocks are found in most or all higher life-forms. This places mankind squarely within the animal kingdom. Would the Christian God have had reason to provide these commonalities between humans and beasts, given the exalted position of humans that one finds stated in the Book of Genesis?

In *Scientific American*, March 2005, Michael Shermer’s article titled “The Fossil Fallacy” warns readers that proof of evolution is not found in a single fossil; rather, he says, “Proof is derived through a convergence of evidence from numerous lines of inquiry—multiple, independent inductions, all of which point to an unmistakable conclusion. He goes on to point to the fields of geology, paleontology, biogeography, comparative anatomy and physiology, molecular biology, genetics, and many more areas as sources of collective evidence for evolution.

Both the fantastic diversity and the distribution of life-forms are best explained by the need that species have had to adapt to ever changing environmental conditions. In my personal view, evolution is also evidenced by: 1) a fossil record that shows the bones of modern animals in recent strata and none of these in the undisturbed strata of the ancient Pre-Cambrian era; 2) a fossil record that shows that of all the animal species that have ever existed, a large majority have long been extinct; 3) a fossil record showing progression from simple to complex life forms; 4) a fossil record that exhibits some sea an-

imal skeletons with vestigial hip and leg bones useful only on land 5) fossils of some land animals pointing to earlier life in the sea; 6) fossils sharing many intermediate stages within many types of animals; 7) the evolutionary linkages shown by testing for comparative genetic coding, body chemistry and physiology within the animal kingdom, including humans. One could add dozens of additional types of evidence. In the 150 years since Darwin's insight, thousands of researchers have compiled massive evidence for the validity of evolution as a general theory without finding significant negating discoveries. That is amazing. Only the details of the process of evolution have changed to a small degree over time.

"Intelligent design" and "complexity theory" postulate that the values of some of the numerous physical constants that are necessary for life forms to develop had to have been in very narrow ranges, and that such environmental fine-tuning necessitates a "God's" involvement. Proponents say this small-chance possibility for naturalistic evolution dooms it. This is a reasonable claim although likely untrue. Who would argue that complexity and specificity are not there? But we also know that certain types of rare animals and plants live in very different, even very hostile, environments. This shows that adaptation has been able to solve some of the problems created by a narrow range within required physical constants. And, as already stated, behind the hypothetical god-magic involved in universe creation, the God of Genesis had to have been even more complex than the universe that he built. If the fact of the existence of the universe requires that it was created by a God, then so does the existence of God require a creation, thus taking the great mystery backward another large step, getting one into a deeper and more complex quandary, rather than a simplistic solution.

Victor Stenger in "The Evolution of Creationism," found in the *Skeptical Briefs* Bulletin of The Center for Inquiry, June 2004, had this to say about intelligent design as championed by Christian groups who wish to discredit the theory of evolution:

Intelligent Design has been a wholesale failure, as both science and strategy. None of its scientific claims, especially the work of the main theorists William Dembski and Michael Behe, have stood up under scientific scrutiny. None of their claims are published in scientific journals. Numerous books and articles refute their positions in great detail.

Assuming God did provide fine-tuning so that life forms, and particularly the family of man, could develop on planet earth, it seems very strange that such a God created billions of billions of cosmic bodies apparently without such purpose, and also that more than ninety percent of all life forms once existing are now extinct, never available for humankind's use. Nearly our entire universe is exceedingly hostile to life-forms, as are parts of our planet. Is it possible that the universe wasn't created to provide a home for mankind, as the Book of Genesis insists? The earth is about four and a half billion years old (4,500

million years) and humans are about one million years old. If the creation of humans was intended to provide company for God, as Genesis suggests, God had quite a wait. An initiating spark of life on our planet in the form of proto-plants/animals may not have been likely to occur in a million sites in a million years, but in trillions of sites over hundreds of millions of years, the chances improved dramatically.

Some biologists say that many intelligent-design and irreducible complexity proponents misinterpret the evolutionary process. Again, Stenger points out that “the universe is not fine-tuned to life; life is fine-tuned to the universe.” Thus, some life-forms thrive on sulfurous and very hot ocean vents and some live a mile deep in the earth. Apparently, these life-forms have accommodated themselves to their environment. The naturalistic universe with its physical laws innate within all levels of the matter/energy complex seems to have been up to the task of originating biological life. For me the magical alternative found in religions is even more difficult to believe. The evidence that species did evolve is super abundant in fossils. Natural evolution of species is believable to nearly all of the thousands of Ph.D. holders in Biology. It carries the weight of a mountain of evidence, far greater than those who deny it seem to understand. It deserves the following absolutist statement of support from me, a type which I generally deplore. Believe me, there is no chance whatsoever that the evolution of species did not occur and there is no chance that life on earth started in the manner stated in Genesis.

But readers of the forgoing must be shouting by now: how do you evolution enthusiasts explain the many cases of “irreducible complexity” or “improbability” where numerous changes would have had to occur simultaneously in order for the organism to get from one stage to another? How they ask did eyes and wings occur by chance where the statistical probability of each is almost zero? In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins shows how simple it is. The all or nothing perspective of “either the eyes see, or they don’t see,” is wrong he says. It assumes there are no useful intermediates. He points to gliding flight and parachuting as examples of useful intermediates for wings. And numerous simple eye designs are found in nature. Charles Darwin himself explained how eyesight could have evolved. Dawkins’ states: “But the candidate solutions to the riddle of improbability are not, as falsely stated, that of design and chance. They are design and natural selection” (119). Dawkins also suggests: “intelligent design is not the proper alternative to chance. . . . Seen clearly, intelligent design will turn out to be a redoubling of the problem. . . . The designer himself/herself/itself immediately raises the bigger problem of its own origin. . . . Far from terminating the vicious regress. God aggravates it with a vengeance. . . . Natural selection is not only a parsimonious; (frugal) plausible and elegant solution; it is the only workable to chance that has ever been suggested” (120). Continuing, Dawkins points out how the process works:

What is it that makes natural selection succeed as a solution to the problem of improbability, where chance and design both fail at the starting gate? The answer is that natural selection is a cumu-

lative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces. Each of the small pieces is slightly improbable, but not prohibitively so. When large numbers of these slightly improbable events are stacked up in series, the end product of the accumulation is very improbable indeed, improbable enough to be far beyond the reach of chance. It is these end products that form the subjects of the creationist's wearisomely recycled argument. . . . He doesn't understand the power of accumulation. (121)

Conservative Christians' belief in the inerrancy of the Bible story of creation is obviously theologically threatened by the theory of evolutionary origins. They sometimes argue their case in a rational manner, but their commitment is to religious dogma, not reason. Even their usual searching straight-away for evidence of their foregone or prior conclusion (special creation) is anathema to science because at the same time, they then fail to look adequately for evidence for evolution and they start with the door closed to the possibility of looking for evidence against special-creation. One quickly notes that the very few authentic creation scientists are all, or virtually all, conservative Christians who obviously feel they have much to lose by straying from Biblical dogma, while a variety of less rigid religious beliefs and especially non-beliefs are common among scientists in the mainstream of evolutionary science.

Many of the organizations that deny evolution list as "their scientists" people who are not full-fledged scientists (not holding Ph.D. or MS degrees and not having worked in a relevant field of science), and many of the real scientists they list are not biological scientists. I recently read an evolution-denying article wherein the authors claimed to have collected multi-thousands of signatures "from scientists" who support special creation or one of its variants. This smells extremely fishy and must erroneously include public-school teachers whose religion or whose fear of parents is stronger than their science. Both the evidence of, and the support for, the evolution of species is overwhelming. Many biological scientists consider it to be so well-evidenced from all sides that it could be labeled a fact, rather than a theory.

Victor Stenger, in the Feb/Mar, 2004 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine says, "Now we understand how eyes evolved several times by natural selection." A recent unknown writer countered with something like the following: The eye probably started to evolve from a single cell that was slightly sensitive to light. Later, one individual cell with this sensitivity, perhaps out of billions, may have developed a slight cup in the light-sensitive cell, strictly by chance, and the evolution of an eye was under way. The initial chance event seems impossible, but less so if we look at the number of chances that there could have been for a very minor mutation in one organism over millennia of time and in billions of potential sites.

The World Book Encyclopedia says that simple one-celled bacteria arrived on earth about three billion years ago while complex mammals arrived a mere two hundred million years ago, an indication of the complexity and glacial speed of deep-evolution at work. Where do we find such news in Genesis? Evolution's

origins going back perhaps a billion years are mostly lost due to the quick decay of the early biological organisms' small, soft bodies and the soft parts of plants, but a few prints, originally made in mud are found, including those of some tiny bilaterals and plants. The first plants preceded animals and evolved as surely as did animals.

People ask why evolution doesn't occur today. It does. It seems probable that all species are evolving minutely, though irregularly, especially at times of ecological change, but doing so too slowly to observe physically in higher animals within a human lifetime. To the contrary however, simple bacteria do mutate often, usually in genotype only that can be observed in its DNA and in its ability to cause disease. They can sometimes do it quickly. Some simple mutations only change one gene at a time. Using 70 years as a human lifespan, the 500,000,000 years since small animals arose is equivalent to over 7,000,000 human life-spans. And people challenge me to show them evolutionary change happening today? When new disease-causing viruses and bacteria are offered as recent examples of evolutionary change, my questioners protest that they mean change from one species of animal to another. This exposes the depth of their naiveté about evolution, making productive conversation impossible. How can the very recent existence of Neanderthal people be explained except by evolution? Were there two Adam's and Eve's at creation, only about 6000 years ago?

Most modern people readily accept the fantastic achievements of scientists in space exploration and technology but then claim that those particular scientists that are trained in biology falsely trust a theory about the origins of life that has had well over a hundred years of study devoted to it by thousands of scientists. Consider the probability of nearly all scientists being wrong and poorly informed common people being right. The two sides to the evolutionary debate are not scientists versus scientists; rather, fundamentalists versus scientists.

The most difficult aspect of evolutionary descent to accept is its generation of the initial spark of life. I also find this difficult but not impossible, over eons of time. For readers who generally accept the evolution of species but can't accept natural evolution as the initial means of life's origin, I see little harm in their giving the latter job to a God. Thus, evolution could be thought of as God's own method of generating life-forms. A universe with evolved life-forms existing within it probably is not emotionally or rationally appealing to most people. But, to me, neither is the simplistic and illogical special-creation story spun in Genesis. Non-believers are not immune to emotional appeal, but everlasting life and family togetherness beyond the grave is not at stake for them, and what a difference that can make. Of course the emotional appeal of a belief has no necessary relationship to truth, in either case.

When scientists study the brains of animals progressively upward through the life-forms to humans, it is obvious that we are not a life-form far apart from the animals. Our brain, having comparable components, is not particularly unique, nor is its function likely to be far more inexplicable than those of higher animals. If complex eyes and eyesight have evolved four different ways in four quite varied types of animals, brains and their associated components should

also have been able to evolve. The path that evolution took in increasing brain complexity is quite evident from a study of the brains of a range of today's animals, from the simplest to the most advanced. Even the brains of our earliest ancestors for which we have fossils were only about half as large as are those of today's humans. There is no place for Adam and Eve in the history written by fossils.

Some people protest that it is impossible that lifeless physical material could have produced mental functions. It does seem that way, but those supposedly-lifeless molecules, atoms and sub-particles in the ancient earth, even in rock and dirt, varied widely in structure and chemistry and were vibrant with varied energies, including that within molecules and atoms. If one adds to this the helpful functions of sunlight, water, air, warmth, cosmic rays, chemical interactions, fixation of nitrogen by lightning bolts, and heavy elements brought to earth by space debris, one begins to see limited possibilities for starting natural processes over billions of years, to create a weak spark of botanical or zoological life. Robert Shapiro writing in an article entitled, "A Simpler Origin for Life," *Scientific American* magazine, June 2007, says this: "The sudden appearance of a large self-copying molecule such as RNA was exceedingly improbable. Energy-driven networks of small molecules afford better odds as the initiators of life. . . . Inanimate nature . . . provides us with a variety of mixtures of small molecules with which to work. Fortunately, an alternative group of theories that can employ these materials has existed for decades. The theories use a thermodynamic rather than a genetic definition of life." Progress seems to be slow and a workable specific theory is still not found although a sizeable group of scientists are working on it.

Among the simplest of organisms today are some that only recognize light or food which they move toward, and toxic or acidic materials from which they move away. Beyond such simple organisms, evolution's long line of ever more complex animals exhibit brains and nerve systems that, to an extent, chart the whole evolutionary path of neurological development.

Chapter 42

Criticisms of Literal Interpretations

My emphasis on reducing the impact of literal, dogmatic or conservative interpretations of Biblical verse has been because I believe many Biblical claims violate common sense, scientific knowledge and human well-being. Whether a society is Islamic, Christian, Judaic, Hindu, Shinto or other, government officials at all levels must guard against allowing themselves to be controlled by rigid religious dogma. In recent years, we have witnessed both Palestinian and Jewish heads of state being resisted so forcefully by their respective dissident citizens that they were unable to reach a lasting peace accord with each other. It seems that Allah had provided a home for the Palestinians that Jehovah had already given to the Jewish nation. When a myth is perceived as a fact it can become intractable. When one's holy book is viewed as containing knowledge of a God's actual plan for humankind, every believer is expected to assist that God in fulfilling his plans. Each person's dedication to Godly agendas is felt to be necessary to assure that God will continue to bless and reward the individual's religion, nation and state. Thus, even some family support can be sacrificed for religious goals, some or all of which are likely based on fantasies. Islamic suicide bombers are demonstrating the application of this mindset at the present time. Christians demonstrated it during the crusades, during the crackdown on heresies, during John Calvin's heyday, and during the rise of Protestantism in Europe.

Today, Christian conservatives would like their form of religion to be taught in schools. They could stop the teaching of evolution and the real history of the earth. I fear religious political action may be able to stop stem-cell research, all abortions and gay marriages, prohibit the showing of skin, as well as writing or speaking against anything that the dominant religion says, does, promotes or believes. It is the absolutist certainty on the part of many conservative Christians that their efforts are required by God that is most bothersome to me. Such an ideology can be powerful and in error, a frightening combination. One

has to wonder if the Aztec God's wishes were fulfilled by the throwing of Virgins into wells or whether Allah is pleased with today's suicide bombers. Would Americans want prayer in schools, Sunday closing laws for most businesses or required attendance at weekly religious indoctrination classes for all citizens? I want governments to put reasonable moral restraints on their citizens but only those that reason dictates, not those that religious dogmas dictate.

I congratulate the growing number of people who are maintaining their religion with reservations, their certainty in its creeds reduced, as was true of several Founding Fathers of our nation who called themselves deists (a belief system which rejects the supernatural revelation aspect of Christianity). The fully liberalized practice of Christianity as a whole is not disturbing to me, where evolution replaces special creation, and so forth. A few Christians have evolved mentally to accept more impersonal deities that are metaphorical, pantheistic, naturalistic or cosmic-spirit in type. Limiting God's role to creation would also greatly reduce the human conflict over whether religious claims or reason should be given priority in dealing with life's issues.

Robert W Funk, in his book, *Honest to Jesus*, says, "Scholarship in religion . . . is all but bankrupt" (6). Later he speaks of "a pervasive religious illiteracy" and "a profound public ignorance" (6, 7). This expert on Religion may be taking aim especially at public and ministerial ignorance regarding recently publicized evidence about the nature and meaning of Jesus. Conservative congregations often learn little beyond what the minister knows, and he or she often knows little beyond what his or her church hierarchy taught them. Typically, their training consisted of closed-minded indoctrination rather than open-minded learning. Further, as people tend to protect that which is comforting to them, they typically turn away from any unnerving questing of their religion, thus potentially protecting their ignorance. Richard Dawkins in his book, *The God Delusion*, reminds us that "we get nowhere by labeling our ignorance 'God'" (134). (Do I not also protect my ignorance? I hope not, but being human the impulse to do such is there; so, bring on your counter-evidence if it is actually evidence.) My skeptical lecturing could potentially add to someone's misery, but I feel obligated to urge rational belief and practice for those caught up in mysticism, as a matter of good citizenship, rational and peaceful living. The disbelieving ex-ministers that I have met to date seem to be doing quite well emotionally with the exception of being very angry about what they might describe as the lies that were originally used to draw them into a faith group. I also was disturbed for a long time upon leaving my church, feeling that I had been told lies. But of course, even if so, it wasn't purposeful and it was no great loss to me either.

Funk's comment reminds me of a very unexpected experience I had in Afghanistan. The least expected person that was possible, a Jehovah's Witness missionary from the United States, came to our yard bringing the message of Christ to employees of the U.S. Embassy, USAID, and professional contract groups in Kabul. I should have said he was "trying" to do so. As I went about my auto maintenance, he fell into telling me his sad story at length. This man of obvious very humble background was thoroughly discouraged and dismayed at the lack of interest that people had shown in hearing his pitch. His pain was

severe so I let him talk. His lament was that he had come here offering the greatest prize in the universe—salvation and paradise in heaven—and everyone he had tried to talk to took little heed of it. Hanging his head and shaking it gently, he said the rewards his message brings are greater than a great store of gold and asked me how it is that people could ignore this. He said he was sure that the people who were sending him away would dig for months in their backyard if it were only rumored to have buried treasure, while the treasure he offered is absolutely sure. His question seemed to be: are these people crazy? I didn't tell him that he was the wrong man, representing the wrong belief group, bringing the wrong message to the well-educated Americans in Kabul. The sad and puzzled man was naive and utterly ignorant of the situation. Just remembering the event and his pain puts me in a momentarily sad mood years later.

The typical conservative minister warns his or her converts against reading or hearing anything outside of that found within their community of faith, as such is likely to be the work of Satan. In politics or business, we might call this a cover-up. Information should be rejected or accepted after it is read or heard, not before. I realize that many ministers feel responsible for keeping Satan at bay for the benefit of their church members. But this then constitutes a religious dictatorship rather than a democracy, a denial of freedom to those so deprived of other views. Protecting a congregation from competing religious ideas is a cowardly act on the part of the minister, especially if it is motivated by his or her fear of losing members that are willing to learn from other sources. Such a suspicious approach is rejected in education, in science and in society at large. Thus, I need—and will welcome—all kinds of critics to rebut the statements in this essay, even if it is unpleasant for me.

Obviously, the religion that one practices is far more likely to be more a matter of sheer chance than it is a studied choice. If you were born in Calcutta you are likely a Hindu. If your parents are Jewish, you will likely practice Judaism. If a person stumbles into a revival tent, as my family did, his or her commitments to a God and to a denomination may be sealed in that moment. The person's theoretical salvation may then be a matter of sheer chance. So, most people belong to a religion or denomination that they fortuitously fell into but then were all too often prepared to engage in battle to defend. Such a religion is not likely to be worthy of one's soldiering for it. Such chance should play no part in one's worthiness for salvation, if there is such a thing. But our Christian God apparently was asleep when all of those other Gods crowded in with their religions, setting up our present very confusing and disorienting world situation. And the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses seem to think that they have the first crack at filling the allotment of 144,000 people that they contend will be accepted into Heaven.

What is it that drives the religious belief machine? Beyond the awe and mystery of our being alive, and beyond its fulfillment of several human needs, an idea pursued by Richard Dawkins in his book, *The God Delusion*, makes a lot of sense. He feels that: "Natural selection fosters the minds of children to have a tendency to believe whatever their parents and tribal elders tell them.

Such trusting obedience is valuable for survival . . . But the flip side of trusting obedience is slavish gullibility” (176). James Dobson, founder of today’s infamous ‘Focus on the Family’ movement, is equally acquainted with the principle. He says, “Those who control what young people are taught, and what they experience—what they hear, see, think, and believe—will determine the future course for the nation” (177). Who doesn’t agree with Dobson? Madrassa schools of the Islamic world follow Dobson’s generalized advice, but the specific actions of their graduates might include bombing the innocent enemies of Allah. The important issue is “what is taught.” Dobson’s youthful followers are also taught to be unbending in ways that are in my view harmful to society and potentially painful to its members. Such is the nature of absolutisms, and especially those stemming from stories and claims concocted thousands of years ago.

Feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, failure, self loathing, longing for connections, or fear of death likely make one more susceptible to conversion and to born-again experiences than otherwise. Conversion is helpful to many deeply troubled people, and I commend that relief for those in serious trouble. But there can be hypocrisy in telling people that the pain is due to allowing Satan to rule, or that the elation coming from conversion is the work of the Holy Ghost if both are only psychological phenomena. Minds, properly led, are capable of almost anything. How else do we explain the spectacular mystical experiences possible under dozens of faiths and religions, brain anomalies, rituals, drugs, shamanism, and many other practices? Religious inductees assume conversion experiences are heaven-sent when they are more likely only mental phenomena within our brains, perhaps influenced also by our genetic inheritances flowing from our superstition-haunted and often frightening cave-dwelling past.

Highly conservative religions often promote ignorance that is deleterious to societies. They may direct their flow of attention and resources toward their religion and toward their assumed afterlife, rather than toward today’s citizenship in its fullest form. They often protest against scientific knowledge such as the evolution of life forms, the need for population control, pollution control and much more, or they ignore these things. If conservative religion would prevent U.S. high schools from teaching the theory of evolution, then the preparation of biologists, medical doctors, paleontologists, geologists, historians and many other professionals, plus research in these fields, would suffer truly crippling blows. And if the earth was taught to be far less than billions of years old, the same would be true for the earth sciences, both theoretical and applied. Some people have relied on God to cure health and behavioral problems that either don’t improve or that improve naturalistically from the new positive thinking or new hope for life without mysticism. Our ancestors’ trust in powerless spirits may have caused them to forgo sincere and workable efforts to fix many of their own mundane problems. Muslim societies may have often been constrained economically and culturally by their untenable attitudes toward women and toward openness to the outside world. Today’s people may progress best when they trust their own problem solving skills rather than rely on assistance from spirit entities. If one’s holy book speaks ill of non-believers, homosexuals, or

Sabbath laborers, those who behave in these ways will possibly be persecuted. If religion offers false hopes for eternal life, in exchange for its tremendous costs to believers and society in financial outlay, time, and energy, it has perpetrated another injustice. Many more examples could be given. In summary, your religion probably has an impact on me and mine on you.

The role of prayer in health may be best used to complement naturalistic treatment efforts, or to help the patient feel better psychologically. Also note that the areas in which prayer is utilized most are the improvement of health, happiness and behavior, none of which are unambiguously the results of a God's actions. So, how is one to know whether prayer or the doctor's treatment led to success, and how much improvement represents a success? Religion can easily hide a God's ineffectiveness behind this dual-responsibility screen. Yes, I know that answering every prayer would make God a slave of humankind. Must we then approve of a useless God?

The effectiveness of spirit healing needs to be evaluated by objective and verifiable evidence. Long ago God supposedly knocked down the walls of Jericho and lifted Jesus to heaven, which if true, were objective and easily verifiable proofs of God's existence and power. Shouldn't a God that is concerned about people trusting his existence and power give us such verifiable demonstrations often? I suggest that God instantly repair one square block of New Orleans to pre-hurricane condition. I and everyone else would then become believers because the results would be unambiguous. For non-believers like me who have come to the studied conclusion that there is no reason to believe, wouldn't putting us in the fires of hell be murder on a God's part if that God is hidden from us?

In my own beliefs, I try to avoid absolutism in all matters because my scientific training as well as my personal reasoning councils against it. (Did I hear a big "Huh"? Yes. I have been somewhat dogmatic in this essay.) But I have never called myself an atheist due to its supposed absolutist declaration, "There is *no* God." I find the evidence for atheism is very strong but there is no way to prove it in an absolute sense. My aversion to absolutist religious belief is considerable, whatever the religion, because a world full of people strongly subscribing to irrational beliefs that are thought to be life saving creates lunacy and conflict. We see such religiously motivated lunacy in great abundance today. In contrast, the scientific method requires one to verify results or claims to a high degree of confidence (often the 99% level of confidence) leaving a little room for error.

Human behavior is largely driven by beliefs, so it matters greatly what those beliefs are. Everyone knows that staunch believers sometimes kill and maim because of their illogical beliefs, but democratically elected officials may also take harmful actions, based on their religious beliefs. When those are irrational they may have a negative impact on governmental or societal policies dealing with economics, international relations, education science, health issues, moral issues, lifestyles, attitudes toward minorities and the poor, and much more. An example is the banning of fetal stem-cell use in research because of their containing hypothetical souls, where just a speck of unconscious fetal matter

can become more important to save than is the life of a vibrant adult human being. Someday, this banning decision could possibly qualify as an act of murder of any person that dies due to the lack of the necessary stem cells.

Certainly no critic of religion that I know wants an anything-goes moral environment. Actually, such a fear from a religious source may show no more than an irrational fear of nonbelievers. Nonbelievers are not devils. Those I know are all very moral and caring. Very few seek a loosening of sensible moral codes or laws. The stereotypical rabble-rousers at the lowbrow bar in town seem too often to be fallen Christians rather than atheists. Rules/laws for living are already reasonably made via democratic processes by governments and social institutions in conjunction with citizens at all levels. Duplications or substitutions for those rules in holy books are not necessarily helpful to society.

I deplore Christianity's degrading view of humankind as explicated by, for example, Augustine of Hippo, Paul of Tarsus, John Calvin, or Jerry Fallwell. These people see most human beings as born into sin, cheaply seduced by desire and Satan, depraved and wicked, given to pursuing degrading desires of the flesh, rather than pure and godly matters of the spirit. Wouldn't such a terrible self image reduce one's ability to become a happy, wholesome, loving and productive human being on his or her own efforts? In our highly imperfect world, Christians are unwilling to make God responsible even for the bad events that are partially to wholly outside of human control, so they heap far too much blame on humanity. But worse than this is religion's historic tendency to be a magnet for conflict, including war. A recently circulated e-mail listed eleven ongoing or very recent armed conflicts in our world associated with religious zealotry. Accepting holy-book content metaphorically, or as general guidelines, rather than as a God's expectations for humans, would certainly add to the peacefulness among nations and various subgroups of people, even between political parties.

There is a cultural war going on in the United States, a power struggle between the forces of conservative religion verses the forces of liberal religion and secularism. And yes, I admit that some secularists, within the media in particular, backed with funding from business interests, with their buy, buy, buy mania, do promote excessive materialistic values and moral looseness, harmful to the well-being of society. Children do see too much sex and violence and too many frightening scenes as well as other poorly selected and wasteful content in our media. These are problems often blamed on secularism, but capitalism, in which unethical entrepreneurs pocket the wealth that the sex and violence generates, is a much better culprit to point to.

Even though I have championed the positive virtues of human beings living without religion, I must say that under certain stressful conditions, that some humans of all types are capable of becoming monsters. Such people may need either professional help or even the psychological shakeup that can occur within a born-again type of experience. Reasonable religious organizations should continue, even increase, their very useful work with the young, the poor, the troubled, the sick and the aged. What frightens me is a Pat Robertson's type of religion grossly influencing the education of the nation's children or

the direction of our government. Governments at all levels and non-religious organizations can also have an impact on the behavior of their constituencies by making family living conditions, especially incomes, education and health care, conducive to people becoming hopeful of having a decent future and then striving for such a future. Severe poverty leads to hopelessness, bad values, bad habits and bad choices.

Although religions certainly can benefit society, and many groups are doing very little harm while also being helpful, still too much of what is wrong with the world today is caused by unbending religious views.

Chapter 43

Criticisms of Liberal Interpretations

Sam Harris, the author of a recently published book, *The End of Faith*, takes parishioners of both conservative and liberal religions to task for the damage that they do to reason and logic. He points out that even liberal believers call for some reliance on faith which competes side by side with rational approaches to dealing with nearly all aspects of life. He asks, “How is it that, in this one area of our lives, we have convinced ourselves that our beliefs about the world can float entirely free of reason and evidence?” (17). A problem with religious moderates is that they “betray faith and reason equally” (21). He then adds: “But religious moderation still represents a failure to criticize the unreasonable (and dangerous) certainty of others. . . . Clearly, the fact of death is intolerable to us and faith is little more than the shadow cast by our hope for a better life beyond the grave” (39). Harris asks, “When will we realize that the concessions we have made to faith in our political discourse have prevented us from even speaking about, much less uprooting, the most prolific source of violence in our history? (27) “He despairs that . . . no quantity of reason, applied as antiseptic, can compete with the balm of faith, once the terrors of this world begin to intrude upon our lives” (43). “Given the power of our technology, we can see at a glance that aspiring martyrs will not make good neighbors in the future. We have simply lost the right to our myths and to our mythic identities” (48). “Given the link between belief and action, it is clear that we can no more tolerate a diversity of religious beliefs than a diversity of beliefs about epidemiology and basic hygiene” (46).

The apparent lack of reason involved in a person’s acceptance of irrational religious beliefs has also amazed me. The most satisfactory answer does seem to be, as Harris says, that the fact of permanent death is intolerable to most people. Powerful religious experiences no doubt provide hope and a degree of surety to many believers. But that they can put all of their eggs (hopes) into such a basket of irrationality is quite incredible. And that they apparently fear

permanent death so much seems irrational to me, except during their childhood and their parenthood years perhaps.

I agree with Harris that wrong thinking tends to lead to conflict and is destructive to the well-being of societies and their citizens (witness the cases of Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot). Unlike Harris, I do not equate the damage done by liberalized religion to that done by conservative religion. I recognize Harris' concern, but feel that only religious radicals are likely to irrationally promote serious conflict. I fear that expecting a sudden and full application of reason in reconfiguring someone's religious beliefs and actions could itself be unreasonable and perhaps even cruel. The tree of Christian belief has a mighty set of roots and limbs that preclude its being uprooted easily and quickly. Self-help pruning of some limbs of unreasoned faith may be more appropriate. For many people, religion is more than a belief, it is an ever present, overall way of life. I assume that even those people holding liberalized positions, already vaguely aware of something being awry with their faith, will find it difficult to let go of the greatest hope ever offered to them, just in case. If moderates and skeptics push them too hard or too fast it could do more harm than good. My arguments in this essay will be hard to take even by liberal believers but at least the essay can be abandoned at any moment. My role as a disturber gives me anguish rather than pleasure; but for the good of the peoples of the world, it needs to be done as part of a long and continuous process of enhancing rationality.

It is true that religious people in their past majority position have well-protected themselves historically from reason and evidence by 1) claiming faith to be reasonable or even morally superior to reason, 2) making it forbidden to examine one's own religion and impolite to criticize another person's religion, 3) claiming that faith issues relate to a sphere of reality and content separate from that in the material world and therefore not subject to secular criticism. These protections have become more irritating or threatening to skeptics and secularists in the U.S. as they note conservative religion's recent forceful entrance into everyday politics as a means to eventually establish a Christian nation. Do I dare say God forbid? No group claiming an unproven ideology to be a fact should be given authority to dominate the politics of diverse people.

History informs us that religion is an apparent universal need, right or wrong. I am convinced that for many people, it would need to be mellowed gradually if done at all, psychologically and politically. I must remember that if there is harm done by religion, good works are also done. Yesterday I talked to a man volunteering at the soup kitchen, as were several Unitarians. He was volunteering there five days a week, washing dishes as fast as he could. His quick response to "why" was "I'm doing Jesus' work." Additionally, he had befriended several of the people who eat there regularly. My more agnostic friends and I, working there only once a month, were probably less motivated than he was by our more worldly concern for humanity, and I suspect that would motivate him some as well, if he could no longer wash dishes for Jesus. Some religious families I have known use God so constantly and so deeply that I am sure it would utterly disorient and depress them to lose their connections to God. In that the conscientious practice of a religion often becomes an overall way of

life, its removal could leave a gaping psychological, social and philosophical void short term. Of course the same could be said about people whose nonreligious area of interest has taken over their lives, as with UFO extremists and radical conspiracy claimants. Religion and other all-consuming interests can serve as strong drugs when they become a constant part of one's life. By contrast, I feel no need whatsoever for a religion or a God. Other coping practices handle my needs well and without any "what-ifs" to worry about—for example, what if my few small sins keep me from entering heaven? My habits also form a way of life but luckily not one that needs guarding all of the time. I have been without the religion drug from birth, except for a few years of low level affiliation, and therefore have enough alternative activities, interests and ethical standards to provide abundant self-fulfillment, meaning and purpose, plus support for my fellow citizens.

Chapter 44

Morality

Family values need not spring from ancient holy books. Learning from experience, following society's rules, applying common sense, and using the democratic process of participation in making rules for behavior is a better way. When I was young, the concept of "good citizenship" was promoted and served us reasonably well with its practical set of specific morals and values. Those too-much-admired biblical "do's and don'ts" are themselves man-made and are sometimes ignorant or outrageous. The idea that morality is dependent upon and intrinsically related to religion is baseless propaganda. Morality is inherently a human need, and because of that, codes of behavior have been around for at least 4000 years because they are absolutely essential to the effective functioning of groups and societies. In the 1800's BCE, the Hammurabic Code of Babylon laid out laws or rules that were remarkable for their time. The Bible informs us about the Jewish moral code, and as is true of all ancient moral codes, it is very imperfect and now outdated, but it was functional in its day. Jesus in particular improved on the moral codes of his time, with several notable exceptions. Unfortunately, the Bible continued to support the keeping of slaves, giving husbands dominion over wives, punishing sinners by stoning and permitting the wanton killing of enemies, women and livestock in war. God himself is said to have personally destroyed the Egyptian newborn and assisted the Jews in killing their enemies.

Richard Dawkins reminds us of the following two instances in the Bible where God appears in a tyrannical role that reflects once again his phobia about competing gods. In Numbers, chapter 25, following some Israelites making sacrifices to Baal, God ordered Moses to "Take all of the heads of the people and hang them up before the Lord against the sun, that the fierce anger of the lord may be turned away from Israel." In the second instance, Dawkins says, "Having promised to drive out of their homelands the unfortunate Amorites, Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites, God gets down to what really matters: rival gods!" In Exodus 34:13-14 God says, ". . . ye shall destroy their alters, break their images, and cut down their groves. For thou shalt worship no other God: for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."

If we humans will learn to behave always with love in our hearts and discipline as our way of life, there will be little need for us to have a religious moral crutch. Christian America has a worse record of behavior than do several more secular nations. And the secular European nations report a generally high degree of personal fulfillment. Religion can help some believers to curb unacceptable behavior, yet the majority of our nation's lawless and alienated people typically respond, when asked, that they believe there is a God. Meanwhile, those Americans who are philosophically atheists, agnostics, skeptics, freethinkers and humanists seem to have very low crime rates, and the moral codes they follow would be generally acceptable to most Christians, but free of religious prescriptions, like prayer and church attendance. Very few in this group would be Gay-bashers, would hate or curb the legitimate rights of any minority of people. I note that the religious dropouts who then become bad actors are seldom behaving poorly because of loss of belief but because of being overwhelmed by real-life problems like loss of income, drug addiction; problems in their family, marriage, physical health or mental health. Religious dropouts may not be living a religious life but neither are they likely to be committed atheists or humanists.

I admit that religion can potentially turn around the wasting lives of drug-addicted, very alienated, or very troubled people for whom any God or any human can potentially become a psychologically powerful "significant-other," especially within a supportive community of like-believers. Jesus Christ, whose persona itself is emotionally powerful and whose assumed influential status in Heaven makes him a bearer of the gifts of love, forgiveness and everlasting life, obviously plays this role very well for true-believer converts. In my view, this saving of psychologically tortured humans, not for the purpose of salvation, but for the chance of living a useful and happy life on earth, is the most beneficial potential outcome from Christian practice. However, sadly, it is one's belief in the mystical existence of spirits, souls and eternal life that supports the promise of being saved that is probably necessary for the overwhelming psychological response of rebirth to occur. Thus, this tool may not be fully effective outside of conservative religion. Religion also provides parents with an additional and possibly useful justification for their rules (do as God, the Church and I say). However, my wife and I had no trouble raising our children without the God threat or Godly love. My own common sense morals, learned before joining a church, changed very little upon my loss of religion at age nineteen, because the value of caring about other people and about society had always been very obvious to me. Surely murderers already know they shouldn't kill and thieves that they shouldn't steal. What they don't know is how to plan and conduct a successful life, how to forgo many pleasures of the moment in fulfillment of one's life plan, and much more. I am constantly impressed by the outstanding way that the professional people of little to no faith that I know have led exemplary lives. They are obviously successful, fulfilled and happy by having followed a well-known success strategy.

A comment one often hears, is that "without religion anything goes." It's a big lie with only a small stain of truth. Aren't the terrorists nearly all religious?

Can you believe that we skeptics and atheists are also against much of what the media feeds us that children are likely to be viewing, hearing, or reading? The quick-and-easy sex shown, for example, implies that it's the norm for young people: "everyone is doing it." I am angered that such programs are making big bucks for the capitalists who purposefully appeal to the weaknesses (the sexual and drug interests) of youth. In spite of high religiosity in America, we are a terribly materialistic and pleasure-oriented people, which distracts us from the important duties of caring for family, being good citizens, and developing ourselves. And many young people are doing far too little to develop themselves. Many are caught-up in a pleasure-oriented culture that little prepares them for a decent personal future or good citizenship. The major influence on young people may be their parents' socio-economic status and the improved parenting that tends to go with it. Religion is not essential to live a moral life but having a reasonable and strong moral code is. And where does that come from? From society and all of its components, of course. For me, building a solid lifelong moral code was as easy as falling off of a log. It was largely an application of common sense.

The relativism of what is called post-modern thought is deplorable to me in its fullest application, as it posits that everyone's truths, beliefs, behaviors, tend to be equally valid or acceptable because these are just personal opinions and selections of lifestyles where one choice may be as good as another. Truths, beliefs, and good behavior are said to be highly susceptible to unique personal experiences, indoctrinations, personal circumstances and coercion by power elites. Anyone should be able to see limited merit in this claim. Even killing is justified when more good will come from it than from not killing. Thus, values and morals are often good or bad relative to the situation at hand, just as post modernists contend. But in contrast to such relativism, the rule of thumb "do unto others" is a nearly absolute value. Good parenting and good citizenship rules are often somewhat similar around the world but rules of marriage vary more widely due to religious and cultural dictates that often lead to female suffering, for example. Post modernism is often too permissive in dealing with social issues.

Social Science research can suggest human behavior and rules that promote societal well-being. Physical Sciences are less relative to existing circumstances than are Social Science areas of knowledge and even less relative than are the Biological Sciences. Physical scientists fresh from other cultures such as India, could quickly and competently substitute for American scientists in the conduct of many complex scientific studies, there being almost no negative or contradictory biases implanted by the Indian scientific experience. The laws of hard science produce the same results everywhere and the scientific method is relevant and is used almost universally.

Even common ethical standards are slowly moving toward worldwide acceptance, although the criminal behavior of terrorists, rogue individuals and nations are often major exceptions to this. Rules of conduct, minus religious prescriptions, often make sense everywhere in the world, as seen in the world-court laws. But, religions can override the application of common sense rules,

in order to please a God, as Judaism did in following the Old Testament Laws. Gaining freedom from most of these ancient overrides could be a big benefit to affected societies. The Christian God is sometimes said to hate homosexuals, Allah hates non-believers and the collection of interest on loaned money, Jehovah hated ethnic cross-marriages. Dozens more examples could be given. These kinds of differences are often harmful to individuals, nations and world citizenship.

When I was young and not yet religious, as well as after I had abandoned religion at age nineteen, I behaved well-because I didn't want to hurt my parents whom I respected and loved, and because I already had accepted appropriate personal values and standards prior to being religious. Now, my children and grandchildren have done likewise for their parents. Yes, it is too small a sample to justify the making of predictions for others but it demonstrates a possibility.

Matthew Arnold in the opening lines of his famous nineteenth-century poem, "Dover Beach," penned the gloomy view of life which follows. At a time when other eminent Victorians such as Thomas Hardy, were agnostic, Arnold apparently regretted suddenly seeming to be cast into a life devoid of the consolations allegedly provided by belief in the Christian God. The poet described what he saw as the prospect for the human race that spread out in front of him.

... the world which seems
to lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
and we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.
(Matthew Arnold, "Dover Beach")

Me thinks that Arnold doth protest too much, but he does it beautifully. If he is suggesting that a godless life has no joy, love, light, certitude, peace, or help for pain, he is maddeningly wrong in my experience. I and the nonbelievers that I know have enjoyed the opposite of these in abundance. Arnold sounds like a highly indoctrinated believer whose lifestyle or belief has been taken from him, leaving him maladjusted-poor fellow.

I am friendly with a number of skeptics. We are, in my judgment, a fun-loving, happy, intelligent and pleasant group. These people are wonderful parents, happy and productive citizens and outstanding friends just like the best of religious people are. Good secular people in general are guided by principles of human decency and good citizenship that are quite self evident. They realize that the well-being of neighbors, communities, organizations, and society in general is necessary for their own personal well-being. Thus, they nurture the symbiotic relationships between individuals, societies and institutions. Remarkably, secular people seem to have no need for a comforter, or need for additional ethical guidance apart from societies' laws and expectations. Most do say they

are delighted to be free at last as thinkers. They are free from religious dictates, religious philosophy and the terrors of hell, not at all free from personal morality, integrity, and responsibility. They also are likely to be more free than are religious people from degrading prejudices against homosexuals, women, other races, and outsiders to one's various groups. In that life has been brutal, historically for many if not most of the humans who have ever drawn breath, those so trapped today and those so persecuted today deserve my and your sympathy and untiring assistance.

I find that human love and caring is a fully adequate substitute for the love and care felt to be provided by a God. The warm, vibrant, and always-present humans in humanism can be a great substitute for the formless and distant spirit entities of religion which probably don't even exist. And, one's enlightened exploration of the natural universe can for some of us produce mental ecstasies fit for the gods while also, potentially, supplying knowledge useful to humanity. Accomplishment is a joy to me when the task of the moment is going well.

Let me make a quick final comparison between the forgoing discussion of non-religious morality to that of the Old Testament morality as epitomized by God's instructions in Deuteronomy 20:13-17. In the effort to clear away indigenous tribes in Canaan for Israelite settlement, God instructed the Israelites to offer peace to settlements of people willing to leave and become tributaries or slaves ("they shall serve you"). For those tribes unwilling to surrender but too far away for settlement, siege was prescribed. "And when the Lord thy God hath delivered it into thine hands, thou shalt smite every male thereof with the edge of the sword: But the women and the little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, shalt thou take unto thyself." But for the people in the cities which the Lord is giving to the Israelites as their inheritance, "thou shalt save alive nothing that breatheth: But thou shalt utterly destroy them." Note that Jehovah, being a tribal God, had absolutely no concern, let alone love, for non-tribal peoples. Also, he understood women to be property of men, approved of slavery, showed little respect for human life in general, and made no supernatural efforts to find and use less horrendous fixes for the situation. He seems to be far removed from the God of the New Testament. Could it be that Jehovah is only a character in a self-serving Jewish myth?

My recommendations for common-sense behavior include: do dump the sin, punishment and hellfire nonsense that Christianity and other religions have used as a painful whip to enforce their religious rules. And do stop worrying about whether you and yours will be among the small minority of the elect or among those worthy of being saved. Societies already have or can find better rules for behavior than religions promote, rules that are based on present-day experience, reason and scientific studies. What would societies have to fight about without differences in their religious doctrines and the lifestyle differences those demand? Simply love and care for your fellow humans, follow society's rules and enjoy each day.

Chapter 45

The Comfort of Faith and Moral Guidance

I shouldn't show inadequate respect to humankind's need for religion, even if it is utterly without a truth basis. It seems to be a tremendous comfort and guide for many people. Some elderly believers testify that their knowing that Jesus loves them and supports them gives their life its only meaning. I am sure they would argue that their lives are happier for it and that the nation and the world are better off for it.

Seriously troubled people obviously have the most to gain psychologically from a conversion experience. Obviously it can provide wrenching psychological experiences, bring new hope, and possibly bring an improved set of values that is usually essential to make major changes in a troubled person's habits, attitudes and goals. I approve of this in serious circumstances even though I don't assume that godly power has any direct part in this. One's mind, if motivated, can potentially handle the entire job, but an assumption and a feeling that Jesus is personally assisting one in his or her rebirth efforts could reinforce one's confidence and effort. Thus, what new conversions can sometimes uniquely provide, I assume, is the assumption of Godly assistance and love, the strong determination, the enthusiasm and willpower, the promise of salvation, and yes, the psychological turn-around needed for addicts to give-up drugs or other bad behavior. In this advice I contradict all of my earlier advice in this essay because salvaging people whose lives have spun completely out of control is more important than any ideology. A person playing the role of a "significant other" can also potentially salvage a troubled person's life but it is typically a long and very time-consuming project, seldom practiced to successful completion.

Religion can also provide the struggling recruit with a strong experience of being part of a compatible and supportive community of people. This might be a psychological advantage over secularist organizations and groups. Many religious people would claim that strong faith provides a much needed restraint on human behavior. This may be useful, but again unfortunately, it may be

most true when the religious experience is so all encompassing or conservative that it also does harm. But, also fully effective for those who have not allowed themselves to become out of control or alienated from normal life is the loving guidance and support of family, relatives, friends, teachers, neighbors, youth workers, community organizations, workplace mates, clubs and friendship groups. Unfortunately, youths in city gangs usually don't make use of sources outside of their gangs. The family, the schools, the churches and other institutions in the neighborhood have often lost their hold on them. Worst of all, the youths themselves have usually taken on debilitating non-adjustive values and lifestyles.

I venture to claim that religion can be an addiction when it is used extensively. So, to liberalize it, people may need to develop new interests and lifestyles that could at least partially substitute for religion. One might substitute the joy of gaining intellectual strength and freedom for any psychological loss obtaining from a mellowing of one's faith. Let the study of science, psychology, sociology, history, the humanities, music, current events and much more serve as a bridge to a new life. Anyone who needs a replacement for his or her lost faith in religion should consider replacing it with added concentration on the well-being of family members and friends, even on humankind in general where human kindness and love can add greatly to peoples' well-being and happiness. Become a savior to someone via your affection and in-depth support.

Chapter 46

My Philosophical Positions and Passions

As I have already built some of my life story into this essay, I will risk telling readers a bit more about how I try to reach dependable conclusions. The foregoing discussions in the essay may have already implied that I am philosophically a realist, a rationalist and an objectivist (looking heavily to the material/biological universe for evidence in my search for truth), and a subjectivist only in the sense that my mind evaluates and converts sensory perceptions and/or prior understandings into expanded conceptions, understandings and knowledge. Personal feelings, wishes and mental experiences are hopefully relied on cautiously, as these can be unreliable. I attempt to rely on objective empirical research and common reasoning as major ways-of-knowing, and rely on established or verified information when it is available. I am a monist, believing that mind is solely a function of the physical brain rather than a function of a mystical (spirit) sphere of reality. I do not believe in the hypothetical entity known as a soul. Lastly, I am a skeptic of poorly evidenced claims and claims of personal knowledge, especially those which are mystical in nature or guru led. I believe that testimonials should always be treated as highly suspect for error. Testimonials usually have a sample size of only one; they are typically employed by unsophisticated or overly zealous people who also lack the skills or the broad background necessary to evaluate their claim. They tend to ignore potential alternative causations and they may be overly influenced by their emotions. Emotionally I am a very satisfied, and I hope, a very caring humanist. I believe that humanity must rely upon itself at every level. Yes, we are our own and our brother's keeper.

As for my passions, I have truly lived at peace in my presumed natural universe. I have felt a healthy sense of connectedness to it, I am thrilled with wonderment and awe of its richness and abundance, and I have been irresistibly drawn toward the study of it. A novel has never been written that is as exciting to me as is the unveiling of the natural universe through science and reason.

Further, the study of human nature and the pursuit of knowledge relating to history, the sciences, philosophy, current events and more has been a delight. Without religion, I am mildly excited and elated most of the time by the wonder of all that is. I have truly enjoyed and appreciated the freedom to question, to doubt, to search for truth, to know what I am, and where I am going, even though it will be where dead cats go. I have no horror of death, and little anxiety about it, only moderate regrets about my life's near expiration.

A most wonderful component of my natural world has been that of interactions with its people, people who can turn loneliness into fullness, gloom into brightness, sorrow into comfort, hardness into softness, sadness into joy, familiarity into love. With or without a god, you and I are not alone. We have access to the great warmth and compassion of humanity, especially of relatives and friends, plus that of our animal companions. My world is warm and fuzzy enough.

Chapter 47

Closing Words

I hope this heavy dose of devaluing traditional beliefs has not caused serious emotional stress in readers. I have assumed that no literalist believers would read this essay but rather, people who to an extent are open to investigating all sides of contentious propositions, or people who are already questioning their beliefs. Even if totally rejected, this essay should add ideas and information to a person's own search for truth. These touchy issues need to be vigorously and openly debated to avoid our living a life driven in part by irrational thinking. As the Taliban and al Qaida enthusiasts demonstrated recently, *beliefs generate and drive behavior*, for better or worse, even for war or peace. Reasonable belief is exceedingly important. I contend that if the present religious beliefs of terrorists and radicals were suddenly and completely removed, western world conflict with them would cease immediately. Even the nation of Israel is in danger of having internal conflict erupt between their own ultra-religious and their secular citizens should outside threats to the nation abate.

For those of you who have been in anguish, wanting desperately to counter my arguments as this was read, would it help you to know that I may already know what you would have said in rebuttal? I have read a good number of books and articles defending Christianity and its Bible. But, as I am certainly no Bible scholar, there is no doubt that I have made errors and exaggerations because of inadequate experience. Also, I realize that many readers would make a good case for their different philosophical perspectives if given a chance. For example, those who are idealists philosophically would argue from perspectives that would change the dynamics of some discussions. If I have been too dogmatic, try to forgive me. It may be because there is still some disgust in me for having been led astray by conservative Christians and more importantly for having to live for 55 years in the closet of non-believers. Again, congratulations in triplicate to those who had the grit to stick with the discourse.

Let me repeat how readers of this essay might liberalize their religious beliefs and practices, if such is desired. Importantly, I hope the reading experience has provided some self-clarity about what each reader really believes. Readers might continue as satisfied church congregants, but begin to envision their God as a

creator only or as a cosmic spirit beyond the reach of humans. They might migrate to a less self-assured belief group like the Unitarian Universalists (I will receive no payment for this endorsement). At the least, religious beliefs could be opened to exploration, including varied perspectives of God and the Bible. One's Church could be persuaded to provide sermons to assist members in living better lives; provide open-minded discussions about Christian belief; provide the mutual psychological support of a loving community of members; promote the mostly exemplary values and ethics of Jesus; strengthen harmless spirituality and much more. I realize that this would require a monster-sized reduction in the Biblical promises offered to literalist believers. Like the father who can't hold the daughter that is in love with a thief, these substitute church-experiences can't compete with the rewards promised by religious absolutists or literalists, but they could release one from a potentially hellish psychological captivity. The humanistic lifestyle that I live is a good, solid choice. The largest secular humanism organization offers wonderful publications, books, magazines, conventions and workshops, yet has no hold whatsoever on participants. If interested contact, Center for Inquiry, P.O. Box 664, Amherst, New York 14226-0664.

Appendix A

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Appendix B

A Message for Those Attending My Wake and for Readers Post-Wake

For those readers/listeners who are now at my wake, I hope that the unusual act of the deceased requesting that his essay be made available to a reasonable number of people without cost, and that a few select bits of it be read, is not in terribly bad taste. If you are now at the wake, sorry, neither booing nor rock throwing will serve you today. However, I have requested that your MC read only very brief selections from the more personal first and last parts of the essay, and then let each person interested in doing so finish it at home. For those who plan to read the essay after the wake, I warn that its content could be upsetting if you have a strong need to believe that the Bible is literally true. But for other readers it may be an interesting eye-opener to view the Bible's stories and religious claims as myths. Although I wish my final ceremony to be a celebration with gusto, for what has been a good life for me in general, I would be remiss not to reassure my family members how very much they have contributed to my happiness and satisfaction. You have been terrific. You lifted my life from what would have been mediocrity into one of joyfulness. I am filled with love and pride for each of you. Because of you, my departed wife and a few good friends, I will have died satisfied with both my life and fate and will have done so relatively unafraid, I now assume. If I have a regret, it is that being a self-sufficient generalist, I spent too much time working and planning work, even including volunteering, leaving too little time for quality social interactions.

So, please, friends and loved ones, don't mourn, but rather celebrate, as I have endeavored to celebrate my own life as it has moved along. Celebrate my many years of life and good fortune, my joys and happiness, love of life, love of family and friends, modest contributions, and philosophical inclinations. What a great adventure it has been. I will have departed content and filled with love. Thank you, thank you, one and all. Squeeze all the gusto you can out of your

lives, while always keeping your consciences happy. Finally, fear not death, for it gets much easier to accept as one ages. OK, OK, let the party commence; and do not fail to have one. I clearly hope your lives, the frightening national and the world situations go well.

Lloyd