

# THE JESUS PUZZLE

## A Novel About the Greatest Question of Our Time

by Earl Doherty

“As an historian, I do not know for certain that Jesus really existed, that he is anything more than the figment of some overactive imaginations. . . In my view, there is nothing about Jesus of Nazareth that we can know beyond any possible doubt.

In the mortal life we have there are only probabilities. And the Jesus that scholars have isolated in the ancient gospels, gospels that are bloated with the will to believe, may turn out to be only another image that merely reflects our deepest longings.”

Robert W. Funk, Jesus Seminar Founder and Co-Chair  
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## Chapter One

### 1

*The conference room at the Flamingo Hotel in Santa Rosa was the size of a basketball court. The 40-odd players in the game being played on this particular day occupied the center space, while spectators were ranged in bleachers around three sides. The hoops, however, were metaphorical, and the balls being bounced across the court were finely-tuned arguments and quotations from scripture.*

*Only one team commanded the court floor: the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar, vanguards in a renewed quest to discover the true nature, the genuine historical words and deeds, of the most influential figure in the history of the world. This was a quest, over the last two centuries, which had had lives as numerous as the many-headed Hydra. When one bit the dust under the slash of new discoveries and the ongoing advance of modern enlightenment, another sprang up in its place. The current “Third Quest” had all but reduced Jesus to earthbound dimensions and was fearlessly proceeding to debunk much of what Christians had held dear for almost 2000 years.*

*The members of this particular team, however, did not all jump as high—or in precisely the same direction. The scholarly ranks of the Jesus Seminar included a few more conservative elements. And on this sunny California afternoon, whose light spilled through floor-length windows like manna from heaven, the issues under discussion were guaranteed to bring these natural divisions of opinion into the open.*

*On this day it seemed that the spectators, too, were edgy. Perhaps they saw themselves as party to an exercise in heresy that would finally stir a lethargic Divinity to retaliate. The Jesus Seminar had garnered publicity verging on the notorious for several years now, in its unflinching examination of the teachings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels. As a body they had issued rejection notices right and left. When the dust had settled, only 18% of the early Christian sayings put into Jesus' mouth were given votes of confidence in varying degree, the remainder consigned to later invention as the product of faith, legend and the attraction of non-Jesus traditions.*

*To this outer darkness went "I am the resurrection and the life," and "Take up your cross and follow me," and a host of other sayings which had enriched the voice of Jesus heard over the centuries and filled the sermons of generations of pulpit orators. Nor had the authentic Jesus spoken any of the damnatory words thundered over the heads of the Pharisees, or the predictions of an apocalyptic End-time when fire and judgment would come to engulf the world.*

*Evidently, Christians would have to make do with a pared-down body of Jesus' teachings. But could they accept a recasting of Easter? For after closing the books on the sayings of Jesus, the Seminar was now embarked on an exhumation of the cross and the tomb, and the ancient stories were crumbling like dessicated papyrus fragments before the inrush of light and air.*

*For this two-day meeting, a list of several dozen propositions surrounding Jesus' burial, resurrection and post-resurrection appearances had been prepared for voting. That morning the Fellows, among other things, had consigned Joseph of Arimathea, whom Mark introduced to remove Jesus' body from the cross and place it in a tomb, to oblivion. He was apparently Mark's invention, the Fellows decided. Other details surrounding the burial were similarly dispatched. Matthew's posting of a guard at the tomb was rejected by 94%. And the Fellows were split almost down the middle as to who had actually disposed of Jesus' body: his followers or the authorities.*

*So far so good. Now as the Seminar returned from lunch break and the spectators refilled the several rows of seating, the media people with their hand-held cameras scurried around the tables once more, ready to capture the drama of the moment, as though Christians throughout the world were waiting on theological pincushions to learn what they might continue to believe. In fact, most of those Christians, if they were even aware of the Jesus Seminar's existence and its controversial deliberations, had tended to heap more scorn than praise upon the presumptuousness of those findings. Today only promised to fuel the fires of their indignation.*

*Out of the 100 or so official members of the Seminar, a little under half were in attendance today, along with a few scholarly guests. They were ranged about the outer sides of a rectangular arrangement of tables covered in white cloth. Each had his or her own microphone, whose cables snaked into the central space like beguiling serpents at the base of a new and seductive tree of knowledge. At the 'head' of this continuous chain sat Robert Funk, chairman and co-founder of the Seminar itself. A deceptively mild-mannered figure, he had directed the morning's deliberations and voting with a firm, if understated, hand. Other luminaries of the new quest were ranged about him: James Robinson, Marcus Borg, Karen King, John Dominic Crossan.*

*At the top of the afternoon's agenda stood debate and voting on the heart of this conference's deliberations. Four propositions blithely undercut the entire foundations of the Western world's religion: the belief that the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, had literally risen from the grave.*

*On each of these four statements, the Fellows would vote by choosing from a set of four colored beads, dropping one into the ballot box. Those who fully agreed chose a red bead; those who felt the statement had some degree of reliability, a pink one. If the proposition seemed at all possible, though lacking any reliable supporting evidence, a grey bead was dropped in. For improbability, the verdict was in black. The count was tallied and immediately announced.*

*These were the four propositions:*

- 1. Jesus' resurrection from the dead involved the resuscitation of his corpse.*
- 2. All statements in the New Testament and other early Christian literature about Jesus' resurrection are statements of faith, not reports of an historical event.*
- 3. Jesus' body decayed.*
- 4. Belief in Jesus' resurrection does not depend on what happened to his body.*

*Robert Funk invited Professor Thomas Sheehan to deliver a brief paper as part of the pre-voting debate. Sheehan remained seated, but the cameras turned their searching eyes on the bearded, intense-looking professor of philosophy from Loyola University, one of the guest scholars at these proceedings.*

*"I would agree," Sheehan began, "that the Easter victory of Jesus was not an historical event. It did not take place in space and time. The appearances of Jesus did not require the sighting of a 'risen' body in either a physical or a spiritual form. The resurrection is a matter of faith and not susceptible of proof."*

*That prominent Christian scholars could gather under the glare of God's sun and the eye of the believing world and voice such radical opinions surely showed that while the forces of faith and tradition were sleeping, someone had pulled a switch and sent the train of biblical criticism hurtling down a brave new track. Like the dust motes in the glare of the divine sunbeams, these distillations of heresy jostled the air.*

*At Sheehan's opening words, not a few of the spectators seemed to squirm in their seats, and even the odd Fellow around the rectangle fidgeted in uncertain discomfort.*

*Sheehan proceeded to outline "four stages" of doctrine concerning the resurrection, as revealed by the early documents of Christianity. Stage One was represented by elements imbedded in Paul's letters and elsewhere, such as the pre-Pauline hymns recorded in Philippians 2:6-11 and 1 Timothy 3:16. They spoke of Jesus' "exaltation to glory" directly from the cross, in a spirit state, not physical resurrection three days later. The earliest proclamations, including by Paul, contained no reference to the discovery of an empty tomb or the appearance of angels to women on Easter Sunday morning.*

*Sheehan also offered the evidence of a collection of sayings of Jesus which scholars called "Q". This was a lost document extracted from Matthew and Luke. "Q originates before 50 CE," claimed Sheehan, "and bears witness to the earliest Christian faith, but nowhere does it mention Jesus' resurrection."*

*One of the Fellows on the opposite side of the rectangle piped up, "Q mentions nothing about Jesus' death, either. How much can we deduce from a silence on the resurrection?"*

*“Something that close to the event itself,” Sheehan retorted, “has to be significant when it makes no mention of the supposed central event of the Christian faith. Q’s silence cannot be ignored.”*

*Funk’s interjection was softly curt, putting a lid on the impromptu exchange. “Anybody can die. Not everyone walks out of his tomb.”*

*Sheehan went on. Stage Two constituted Paul’s own ideas as expressed in his letters, all written in the 50s. Here Jesus was “raised” or “awakened” from death by God. There was no suggestion that this rising was in any sort of body. Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 presented a series of ‘appearances’ to various apostles and groups, Jesus being “made manifest” to them. But Paul included his own experience with the rest, a vision of Christ acknowledged to be entirely spiritual. This certainly implied, Sheehan pointed out, that all the other appearances were of the same nature. Paul’s phrase “on the third day” was a biblical reference and not a temporal description of when this “awakening” had taken place.*

*“Here we have proclamations of faith, not historical witness,” Sheehan declared. “Paul even goes on in 15:12-19 to claim that if humans are not raised, then Christ was not raised. He says this four times in one way or another in the course of a few sentences. If eyewitnesses had seen Jesus returning from the grave in some kind of body, you surely don’t think Paul could have made even a rhetorical denial of the resurrection?” This question seemed directed at the dissenter on the opposite side of the rectangle.*

*The other Fellow countered sharply, “Paul also said: ‘If Christ was not raised, your faith has nothing in it.’ Surely he is speaking metaphorically here. He means ‘If you do not acknowledge Christ’s resurrection.’ And where is the challenge to faith if all he means is that Jesus’ spirit was raised to heaven?”*

*“I daresay there are other fates in the spirit world. And the reality of Paul’s faith isn’t advanced by sleight-of-hand tricks.”*

*“Let’s be careful of our imagery, gentlemen,” Funk cautioned. “None of us here are magicians.”*

*A voice carried just audibly from the back row behind him. “Sorcerers, maybe.”*

*Funk gave the faintest of starts. Sheehan pushed ahead. “The Gospel of Mark gives us Stage Three: a tomb visited by women on Easter morning and found empty, attended by an angel who announces Jesus’ ‘resurrection’. And that’s the end of it. No appearances to these women or to his disciples. Shall we ignore the naked ending of Mark at 16:8? Or does anyone wish to give credence to those transparently derivative verses we find tacked on to some manuscripts of Mark’s Gospel?”*

*No one took up Sheehan’s rhetorical challenge.*

*“The final stage, Four, comes with the later Gospels over the next few decades, essentially revisions and enlargements of Mark. Here a physical Jesus, having emerged from the tomb, appears to various people, eats and converses, even offers his wounds to be touched. Moreover, these differing narratives of Easter in the later Gospels cannot be harmonized to produce a consistent story. They contradict each other too much. It’s clear that the physical resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday is a fictional evolution arising a good half-century after Jesus’ death. It is impossible any longer to accept such a miraculous event.”*

*There arose an audible hiss from two different sections of the gallery, seemingly from several mouths, and it floated out over the tables like the advance echo of a tidal flow that was rising just over the horizon. Sheehan defiantly closed his folder.*

*Casting a sideways glance at the gallery, an action which momentarily threw up a dike against the threatening flood, Robert Funk thanked the speaker and called on a tousel, dour-faced gentleman to his left. Gerd Luedemann, author of the controversial 'The Resurrection: The Greatest Hoax in History?' breathed on his glasses, adjusted his microphone, and grasped his sheaf of papers like a mightier pen.*

*"The evidence of Paul shows that the earliest reports of Jesus' appearances were of luminous apparitions, visions of a glorified Jesus which were interpreted as evidence of his resurrection. If a video camera had been present at one of these appearances, it would not have recorded anything on the tape. This was not an event open to empirical verification."*

*"It was verified by faith!" The shout came from one of the directions of the earlier hiss. Funk shot it a withering look. At none of the previous sessions had the public expressed a vocal objection to the proceedings or the views being aired. Though conservative positions were hardly checked at the door, it was an unspoken protocol that the audience would refrain from commenting during the deliberations, as a public question period was always offered after voting took place. Indeed, most audience members tended to be of a liberal mind, and usually applauded the Seminar's radical leanings.*

*The gallery had become visibly restless. Luedemann charged into the rising fray. "We have questioned whether Jesus' body was disposed of by his friends or by his enemies. In view of the flight of the Apostles, and the obvious fictional quality of Joseph of Arimathea, it is highly unlikely that Jesus' followers had anything to do with the disposal of his body. I would agree that in keeping with Roman practice, Jesus may not have been buried at all, but left to the mercy of the elements. His corpse may even have been eaten by scavenging dogs—"*

*At that point, several things happened simultaneously. One of the Fellows threw his own sheaf of papers out over the central space, where they floated down like fragments of shredded scripture. Nearby, another stood up and protested: "Mr. Chairman, are we going to ridicule ourselves before—"*

*He, however, was interrupted by the abrupt and powerful chant that arose from over a dozen figures who stood as one in the midst of two sections of the gallery, an infiltration of dissidents who had obviously been forewarned that an event of unacceptably heretical dimensions was due to transpire under the roof of the Flamingo Hotel on this sunny afternoon in California. . . .*

*"He is risen! The Lord is risen!"*

*Robert Funk arose in his seat, but the chant sang to the room's rafters. After a moment's hesitation, the two cameramen coordinated their all-seeing eyes, one upon the faces of the Fellows, startled, appalled, disgusted; the other upon the inundation which now moved along the rows of equally nonplussed spectators, flowing onto the floor of the center court.*

*The opposing team had arrived. . . .*

Hmmm. I looked back over what I had written. I was fairly certain that no such uproar, or even infighting, had ever taken place at any of the Jesus Seminar sessions, though there were some, no doubt, who would have liked to witness such a scene. Or engineer it.

For it was true that an unprecedented civil war was being waged within the ranks of today's New Testament scholarship, and the Jesus Seminar under Robert Funk had been almost entirely responsible for its outbreak. In each generation, the conservative element always looked upon the avant-garde ideas in its midst as unacceptably radical, but the scope of the Seminar's ongoing conclusions had carried the study of Christian origins into new, uncharted waters. Many, I knew, were feeling engulfed.

Well, perhaps I could get away with it. Artistic license. My scene would, after all, be part of a novel. But much of the material I had put into the debate had come from recent Jesus Seminar publications. And the Fellows themselves were real, though I might need to authenticate my depictions a bit. A friend who had attended one of their sessions had let me pick his brain about the goings-on. But I would probably have to get to one myself.

Maybe I could ask Robert Funk to check my manuscript.

The route to the writing of my novel, as well as to the startling conclusions it embodied, had been a long and unexpected one. So too had been the route to the radical and eye-opening work of the Jesus Seminar. The picture summed up by Thomas Sheehan about early Christian views of the resurrection, the path of evolution plotted from Paul's predecessors to the Gospels, had always lain in plain sight, yet only today, as the world careened toward the end of the second millennium of Christian history, had such things been perceived by professionals in the field and presented to the light of public examination. Why had it taken so long?

And why now?

As I glanced out the windows of my study to the mellow afternoon colors of a late New England summer, I realized that all I had to do was look into my own past, the latter half of the 20th century, to understand the answer to that question . . . .

## 2

I used to say that I was born and grew up just before the end of the Middle Ages. I would have put the change of era somewhere around the year 1960. Before that, everyone I knew in my youthful life, young and old, lived in a state of mind I would now call medieval. We moved in a layered universe. Somewhere below the earth we walked on lay a real place of horror and unthinkable suffering, the eternal fate, so we were led to believe, of many whom we knew and had dealings with every day—perhaps even ourselves, for salvation was a thing not easily won. The dread ruler of this place of torment, aided by his demon minions who lurked in the very air around us, worked unceasingly to ensnare our souls. This was an endeavor not all that difficult, since most human activity was either sinful or entailed tempting opportunities in that direction. Prayer, attendance at church, the aid of priestly counsellors, these were things no one would have dared do without if he or she hoped to avoid a terrible destiny after death.

The regions which lay in the other direction were altogether opposite. Even though, in this late medieval period, the science of astronomy told us that above the sky lay vast reaches of empty space dotted by other stars and galaxies to an unfathomable distance, we knew that somewhere up there lay heaven, the abode of God and the saved. Attending to them were myriads of angels, some dedicated to countering the efforts of their infernal

counterparts below, others assigned to protective roles for humanity—a task not always carried out with complete efficiency.

Though the year 2000 still lay a long way off, we were becoming increasingly conscious that history's most important event had occurred “almost 2000 years” in the past: the life of Jesus, the Son of God and Savior. “Our Lord” was still the most common way of referring to him, and he was the figure who dominated our lives. I was to remember more about Catechism than any other grade-school subject. One of our teachers drew the outline of a human soul on the blackboard, smudged in the sins with a piece of red chalk (they were “wounds” on its surface) and expounded at length on how the sacrificial death of a man-God “almost 2000 years ago” had erased and healed them. Even the smallest child had the power to influence heaven itself, for each sin committed, large or small, struck its own wound in the heart of the Savior sitting on his celestial throne. Fortunately, the redemptive power generated by that ancient sacrifice was infinite and could, with suitable contrition and repentance, be drawn upon to neutralize any and all affronts to Deity, even those of a child. Like a divine “good cop/bad cop” routine, Jesus saved, but left the matter of punishment for those who failed to seek his mercies to his more forbidding Father.

On the surface, Western society had been officially “secular” and “scientifically enlightened” for a good two centuries; even the Inquisition had sputtered out with its last execution in Spain in 1826, the hanging of a teacher for changing the wording of a school prayer. But in that place inside itself where a society as a whole dwells, the years up to the middle of this century had remained part of the medieval era. Religious ideas, leaders and institutions were still the true controllers of most thought and behavior. The vast majority of the Western world lived in a universe of heaven and hell, angels and demons, guilt and self-denigration, all of it colored by the redemption through blood sacrifice of a crucified god born of a virgin. Jesus was its king, and he received the obeisance of all his subjects in their very hearts and souls.

Many would have said that even today Jesus was still waxing strong in many hearts and pulpits, but such beliefs now ran counter to the outlook of society as a collective entity, for that society had become profoundly secular, skeptical, and unaccepting of religious control over its institutions and expressions.

I had often wondered what was responsible for the evolution of modern society within my own lifetime from the religious mindset to the secular. I had no ready answer. But for some time now we had been witnessing the established churches of time immemorial dying on their feet. Diminishing attendance, a shortage of priests and ministers, sexual scandals, the rejection by many laity of traditional dogmas and directives still being issued by Head Office, had created vast empty spaces throughout the naves, where the ever dwindling clink of the collection plate echoed forlornly. Ironically, it was not long after 1960 that the fundamentalist churches began to experience a surge. Part of it was a phenomenon which came out of the “hippie” movement of the 60s: a kind of back-to-basics Jesus cult. This had much in common with—and ended up largely joining—the “born again” movement of the Baptist and Pentecostal faiths which had existed for decades in the shadow of the mainstream churches.

With the latter's waning, such fundamentalist expressions had assumed center stage. Far from having left the Middle Ages, they now revelled in their medievalism. Not only was Satan alive and well, the Bible in its every word was declared inerrant, the scientific theory

of evolution (which even mainstream theology had accommodated) was condemned as a godless fraud, requiring suppression along with social advances like abortion rights, family planning and population control. Creation of the world 6000 years ago had become the “science” of choice, and almost all things sexual were regarded as shameful perversion. Jesus was once again “the Lord”, while paradoxically assuming the status almost of a family member. Believers had turned him into a cult figure who was more accessible than ever.

In North America especially, Christianity’s most vital expression and growth today lay in these right-wing, cult-like churches. Many had well-organized agendas to get into political power and return society as a whole to a medieval twilight. They had declared war on all things modern and secular. In recent years I found myself spending a lot of time wondering where these deep philosophical divisions within society were destined to carry us.

### 3

All my life I had had a consuming fascination with history, the more distant the better. As a boy, while others were out swinging a wooden bat in an effort to drive a ball over into the next street, I was avidly reading of ancient empires. At barely more than twice my pre-pubescent age, Alexander the Great had conquered half the known earth, and many times I shared with him all the great battles he fought as he rolled like a juggernaut across the sands and mountains of Asia and into India. I took his early, tragic death as a personal loss. Even as I shivered in my own skin, I felt a fascination for the cruel, enigmatic Assyrians who wreaked such havoc on the ancient Near East and skinned their enemies alive. My mind reached back into the dimmest of historical pasts, to the haunting, sun-baked Egypt of the pyramids, to the Sumerian dawn of civilization and the invention of writing, an invention which soon recorded the legends of Gilgamesh who searched for immortality and found it only in that written record.

As I grew older, I found that my youthful interest in military battles and political chicanery matured into a fascination for the history of ideas, a thirst to know how the mind of ancient humanity thought, how its many strands viewed the universe and its workings. The ancient world was a rich cacophony of ideas, many of them being tried out for the first time, a riotous tower of Babel. One of the great sins of the Christian church as Antiquity passed into the long Middle Ages was its wanton eradication of most of these ideas, the reduction of their multifarious richness into a dull grey mush in the cauldron of imposed faith. Correct belief became the watchword and obsession of medieval times, and many were the crimes committed in its name.

Not long after opening my first history book, I discovered another medium which could bring the past vividly to life: the historical novel. The writer in this genre had assumed the task, besides that of entertaining the reader, of opening a window onto the past, giving us a sense of what it was like to live, strive, suffer, think and believe in a bygone age and often alien culture—as well as, perhaps, of providing along the way some insight into ourselves. When at the age of 12 I read Mika Waltari’s *The Egyptian*, with its powerful atmosphere and bittersweet picture of the timeless Nile and its long-dead civilization, I knew what I wanted to be in life.

After a few ambitious and immature efforts throughout my teen years, I produced a first publishable novel at the age of 22. It told of the ill-fated Athenian expedition to Sicily at the

turning point of the Peloponnesian War. Here, perhaps, was Greek history's greatest example of "hubris", that overweening pride which leads to utter downfall, in this case the destruction of Athens' naval fleet and the cream of her fighting men in a presumptuous enterprise to conquer the great city of Syracuse. What more dramatic natural event could a writer be offered than that fateful eclipse of the moon on the 27th of August, 413 BCE, the very night when the Athenians, admitting failure to penetrate the city's defences, were about to withdraw from the harbor in their great-oared triremes? The superstitious general Nicias held the eclipse to be an omen from the gods, telling them to wait and make one more attempt. The very next day their retreat was cut off and the entire expedition soon perished in blood and ignominy. Here, I thought, were great lessons to be learned and comments to be made, and if I did not yet possess the maturity to do them full justice, a publisher felt that they were effective enough to be offered to the world.

There followed novels on Hannibal, on the building of the Colossus of Rhodes, on the Greek philosopher Democritus who anticipated modern atomic theory by 23 centuries. But my favorite was an ambitious attempt to convey the significance of a great turning point in the evolution of rationality and the history of ideas: the career and trial of Socrates. The eccentric old philosopher and gadfly who buttonholed his fellow citizens in the marketplace of Athens wanted people to examine their ideas about the gods and the world, to question the assumptions and prejudices which underlay so much of what they accepted as truth or the "right way" of acting. His defence that "I am trying to make people think with their own heads," and his refusal to hold nothing sacred that could not be subjected to critical examination, were principles that had not only guided Western humanism for 2500 years, they were still needed almost as urgently today in our own marketplaces and temples.

My publishing career was checkered, and not everything I wrote saw the light of day. Now that I was living half my life, it seemed, in the ancient world, I returned to university in my 30s to build upon earlier studies in ancient history and classical languages. I also dipped my foot into Semitic waters, for I was feeling a pull toward the cradle of Western religion and the great events of Jewish history. I had almost settled on the Jewish Revolt of the first century, when the Temple as the center of Israel's religious life for a thousand years was swept away by the Romans, and Judaism swung in a new direction. But that was before Brenda Segal wrote her brilliant novel *The Tenth Measure*, which I came to believe could never be surpassed for sheer beauty and impact.

But there was another event that was beginning to tug at my writing hand. I had often felt surprised that so few writers in my field had been attracted to the man whom I, and just about everyone else, I supposed, would have regarded as the most influential figure in world history. Was that reluctance because this man was inseparable from the claims made about him, that he was God come to earth? Other figures in world mythology had been so characterized, but never one who had lived in an accessible period of history, and none had produced world religions still flourishing today. Jesus of Nazareth seemed unique, and perhaps that uniqueness was daunting.

If one left aside the myriad "devotional" novels written by Christian writers about Jesus, there had been only a handful of first-rate novels which had Jesus of Nazareth as a central character. I thought of Robert Graves' little-known and very unorthodox *King Jesus*, or Frank Yerby's melodramatic *Judas, My Brother*. James Mills wrote *The Gospel According*

to *Pontius Pilate*, the story of Jesus' trial and crucifixion from a neutral human standpoint, an open-minded mix of skepticism and philosophic consideration..

But eclipsing them all was a novel contained within the most ambitious project ever undertaken in historical fiction: Vardis Fisher's "The Testament of Man", an eleven-novel series tracing the evolution of humanity's religious and moral ideas from the dawn of intelligence two million years ago to the Christian Middle Ages. Fisher was a distinguished American novelist who turned to this project in the 1940s and 50s and met controversy and opposition for its insightful, uncompromising presentation of Judaeo-Christian history and ideas; both his career and this crowning achievement of his work went into an eclipse from which they never emerged. Despite the "message" they were often at pains to convey, I found these novels to be powerful pieces of storytelling.

The eighth of the series was *Jesus Came Again: A Parable*. Fisher was the first fiction writer to address the question of "the historical Jesus". That is, he was fully conscious of the great issue of New Testament scholarly research in this century: who and what was the real man who lay behind the early Christian faith? Perhaps, even, did such a man exist at all? Fisher's answer was not to portray a Jesus as he believed that man to have been. It was to present a "parable", a story about the *sort* of man and events whose perceived meaning could have given birth to Christianity. Fisher's Jesus was not so much the deliberate creator of anything, but a focal point to which the needs and expectations of those around him could attach themselves and propel a new movement into existence.

I had often returned just for my own pleasure to this gentle, touching story, a masterpiece of quiet understatement that got inside the soul of an era. In sensing my own pull toward that dramatic yet enigmatic figure in the history of ideas, I was always intrigued by the paradox: if one of the focal points in history lay in first century Palestine, why was it so difficult to discern the real character of the man who supposedly stood at its very center?

Little did I know that this question was going to prove more intriguing than I could have dreamed possible.

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## Chapter Two

### 1

How often it is that significant things in one's life happen almost by accident, through combinations of inconsequential events. One Sunday noon, Shauna and I were on the outdoor terrace of a local eatery, basking in an early spring sun and indulging in some marinated East Indian fare too exotic for the hour, when a couple seated at the next table spoke up and invited us to visit their local evangelical church.

The earnest young man spoke of unusual manifestations during their services, and of experiences in which he went weak in the knees and felt his body swept by some overwhelming intoxication. Shauna, in her ingenuous manner which masked a sly and not-so-innocent wit, began to allude to recent experiences of her own in that vein, until I hastily asked the man what he felt about the news accounts which told of statues drinking milk during recent services of the Hindus in their local temple. Did he give as much

credence to these unusual manifestations? After a momentary blank stare, he simply said that he knew little about such things. As they departed the restaurant, the couple again urged us to sit in on one of their prayer meetings, which was due to be held that afternoon only a few blocks away.

On a lark, we dropped in. It was an affair of jeans and guitars conducted by a pony-tailed pastor, and much chanting on the name “Jesus”. At one point there was an announcement that Jesus himself was due to return on Christmas Day in the year 2000. As we sat in a back row pew with the sun of a late-century spring streaming through the windows, I thought of Jesus riding those beams down from heaven, the way I imagined it as a boy, bringing life and the world as we knew it to an end in fire and judgment—though perhaps today he would be a little more “cool” about it.

I realized that I was beginning to hear the same prediction, or something like it, more and more as the century rolled down into the great watershed of the next millennium. What would it be like as the Day itself approached? My mind conjured up visions of a world-wide frenzy, a millenarian madness. As the year 2000 dawned, I wondered, would sanity be washed away in an inundation of Jesus fever?

Later, Shauna and I talked of what we had seen that afternoon. What could possibly explain, we wondered, the continuing appeal and influence of this figure who had lived almost two thousand years ago?

“There should be psychiatric conventions held to examine this one question,” Shauna suggested. She was Jewish, and was never quite sure how guilty those of her race should feel for unleashing this force upon the world. I tried to reassure her that, from what I knew of the affair, it was more than just the Jews who were responsible for launching Jesus on his mad career down the centuries.

“Much of what was made of Jesus was quite alien to Jewish thinking. Christians are always talking about the Judaeo-Christian line of development, but Greco-Christian would be just as accurate. But try telling a Christian that his faith owes as much to Plato as it does to Moses, or that the Stoic Zeno should be listed with Abraham among the patriarchs.”

Shauna, not surprisingly, had never read the New Testament, though elements of it, even the odd quotation, were familiar to her. I myself, after a boyhood saturated with the stuff, had gone through a decade following my conversion to atheism when I left all things pertaining to my religious upbringing in a musty mental box, revelling in my vastly broadened horizons of secularism, both ancient and modern. But on one rainy, solitary weekend when I was around the age of 30, I had read through the New Testament for the first time since my orthodox days. I was looking for some elucidation on the question of Roman persecution of Christians, and I found myself bringing a maturer and freer mind to the books which had governed my childhood.

I told Shauna that two things had impressed me overwhelmingly on this new, uncut reading of the early Christian writings.

“I was suddenly struck by how primitive most of it is. The ideas are so naive, and there is so much narrow-mindedness. Any science is non-existent. And the writing itself can be pretty crude. There are a few gems of wisdom and literary expression, mostly in moral directives and parables and such, but they get swamped in a great sea of embarrassing nonsense—at least when one labels it the word of God.”

“How could it have survived so long if it was so primitive?” Shauna had never been overly knowledgeable—or particularly interested—in the past, either yesterday’s or that of her ancestors; she was never one to dwell on things she had no control over, she said. But since our relationship began and my work brought her into a new and flagrant contact with the past as a living entity (or so I tried to present it), she had begun to share some of my interest and fascination.

I said in answer to her question: “Religious writings—not to mention religious minds—are tremendously flexible, since new rules can always be invented for interpreting them. But I wonder if we haven’t run out of options by now where Christianity is concerned.”

For the second thing that had struck me about the New Testament was the sense that so much of it seemed alien, especially the writings outside the Gospels. I had realized that this was the product of a time and culture which had nothing to do with my own and could scarcely be made relevant for today. An epistle like Hebrews seemed as though it could have been written on another planet. Paul’s picture of the universe and the process of salvation was in many ways unintelligible to the modern mind. And yet the idea of Jesus was the most enduring, adaptable creation of Western civilization. How had a simple Jewish preacher accomplished such a feat? Or if those who came after him were responsible for his transformation, whence came their motivation? Somewhere behind the simple—or simplistic—outlines of Christian history lay a mystery, a true puzzle.

“But I don’t expect anyone will unravel it soon. Certainly not before a good slice of Western society slips into some kind of psychosis a few years down the road.”

By this time, Shauna decided that we had spent enough time mulling over the mysteries of the past and offered for my investigation a mystery of more immediately exciting prospect. Perhaps as we proceeded I subconsciously foresaw that I would soon be tilling a fresh ground in my own work, for part of my brain conjured up a scene from George Rippey Stewart’s grand novel about the history of a fictional Greek colony, *The Years of the City*. Here the first farmers tilling the virgin soil had taken a maiden upon it by night for a rite of impregnation—though neither Shauna nor I were maidens. I refrained from revealing my imagery at such an intimate moment, but that a part of my mind could be capable of travelling back almost 3000 years even under these circumstances was something which probably wouldn’t have surprised her.

## 2

Was it only a coincidence that the very next day I was contacted by my agent with a proposal which was destined to have an impact on more than just my own future? Stanley and I went back over a decade, though he had hardly gotten rich off the limited role he occasionally played in getting a novel of mine published. No doubt the enthusiasm he displayed over the phone was sparked by the opportunity he saw to rectify that situation.

But his afternoon call was preceded by a delivery in the morning, accompanied by a curt note which said: “Read this! Now! I’ll call you at 2. Stan.”

The courier handed me a copy of a recent publication by the Jesus Seminar people, an issue of their bi-monthly magazine called *The Fourth R*. This one covered the Seminar’s debates and conclusions concerning the Gospel account of the resurrection of Jesus. I already knew that critical scholarship, and especially the work of the Jesus Seminar, had

been creating a stir in New Testament circles for some years now, a stir whose ripples had finally reached the media and even a few pulpits. But this publication was an eye-opener.

The Gospel story of the resurrection was being stood on its head by these progressive scholars. Probably for the first time in its history, I realized, the field of New Testament research was in disarray. I was amazed at how members of the Seminar could ridicule the fundamentalists, and even some less liberal colleagues, for their naive and uncritical acceptance of the Gospel accounts.

“Unbiblical nonsense,” they called it. One headline in the magazine read: “Christianity is not defended by fudging the facts....And God is not served by telling lies on his behalf!”

I was still perusing the more than 100 questions the Jesus Seminar had voted on concerning the resurrection account when the call from Stanley came in.

“Well, are you writing yet?”

“Writing what?”

“Your next bestseller, of course.” This was generous, since only one of my novels had ever approached that status, and the memory of it was fast fading from everyone’s mind, including my own. “The one that’ll bring you your long-deserved fame and fortune.”

In a flash I knew what he was getting at. The question of the historical Jesus, who and what he had really been, would without a doubt be the hottest topic in the media and public interest over the three years still to go before the next millennium arrived. Stanley had been the first to realize that I had to get in on the action.

“You mean a novel about Jesus?”

“What else? The real man, the mover and shaker, the lost, misunderstood soul—whatever. That’s up to you. But make it controversial. Cutting edge. That’s what the market is going to want. Take six months, tops. I want you to be first in the door.”

I took a deep breath. “Uh, Stanley, look. Jesus isn’t just your run-of-the-mill historical character. Do you have any idea—”

“I know you can do it, Kevin. And keep one eye on the movie rights.”

And that was that. Feeling caught up by what was beginning to look like a runaway train, I let Stanley sign off with a promise from me that I would give it some serious thought. But by the time I had hung up the phone, I knew the decision was inevitable. The moment had arrived for me to tackle that daunting, mysterious figure who stood in the eye of the storm.

One thing was going to need some review: my classical Greek which I hadn’t delved into in a few years. The entire corpus of early Christian documentation was originally written in Greek and would have to be gone through in fine detail. Moreover, it was a Greek which had evolved from the language of Plato and Thucydides and had its own characteristics. It was the international language of the empire in the first century (known as *Koine*—or “common”—Greek) and every educated Jew, Roman, Egyptian and Syrian, indeed almost any literate person in every corner of the eastern Mediterranean, could speak it.

An intriguing question: did Jesus know Greek? There seemed to be no question in any scholar’s mind that he would have preached in Aramaic, which was the everyday language of Palestine and the Near East generally. The average person today might well wonder why, if some of the Gospels and epistles were the product of people who had followed Jesus, nothing was written in any other language but Greek. Why had the career of Jesus, presumably not conducted in Greek, left us no product reflecting the language he did use?

I had recently heard about something called “The Muratorian Project”. Some institution had just put the entire Bible online, with a minute subject index plus detailed commentaries by leading scholars. (“Muratorian” referred to the first listing by the Church of an official canon of sacred writings at the end of the second century.) This would be critical, to be able to locate particular topics throughout the sizeable array of material which constituted early Christian literature. As for non-canonical writings, I would have to enter some of these into the computer myself. If I scanned in the texts I could do my own searches of this important secondary material.

The first step was to renew some contacts at the University, the same institution where I had obtained my MA. I had used its extensive Library in the past, but this project was going to require some extra resources, maybe even some special privileges.

As it turned out, the contact I made the next day was an unexpected one. David Porter and I had been good friends during our MA years, sharing philosophy and linguistics classes. After graduation he had gone on to another city to teach philosophy to first year undergraduates and we had lost touch. When I ran into him at the university that day, twenty years melted away.

“All things come round,” he said. “Who’d have thought I’d be back here teaching some of the very classes we took together? Shows you the universe is cyclical, after all. Of course, none of the students today are of the caliber we were.”

I nodded sagely. “Certainly not. These poor devils have had their brains fried by computer screens.”

“Lot worse than beer, let me tell you.”

David showed me to his office. It looked as though moving day had been last week, but he had actually taken up residence the previous August and now had seven months under his belt of teaching pre-Enlightenment philosophy to three different levels of undergrads.

“Quite seriously, the computer-formed mind in the 1990s has an entirely different way of absorbing courses on philosophy—and probably everything else—than we had. They’ve taught *me* a few tricks. If Descartes were around today he’d probably have to say, ‘I compute, therefore I am.’ ”

I struggled with what I could recall of Descartes, which amounted to little. “Didn’t Descartes declare that because he could conceive of God, therefore God had to exist? God is a perfect being and part of being perfect is that you must exist. Besides, the imperfect mind of men and women couldn’t conceive of a perfect being, so the idea itself had to come from God. Or something like that,” I finished lamely.

David laughed; he knew it had been a struggle. “That’s pretty good. Especially without a database. It’s amazing how many philosophers have come up with proofs of God’s existence, and yet it’s possible more than ever to doubt the fellow.”

I agreed that God was an elusive character.

“But I haven’t been ignorant of your own career, Kevin.” David looked over at his dishevelled bookshelves, as though he actually expected to find one of my books there. “I’ve read two or three of your novels. I remember the one on Socrates. You have a good knack for getting across philosophical ideas and keeping the reader interested. In fact...”

He rather pointedly trailed off, looking at me with an exaggerated expression, as though he had just thought of something quite intriguing. “I’m wondering if you mightn’t be interested in getting involved in a certain enterprise of mine.”

I said a little hastily, “As a matter of fact, my agent has just talked me into a new project that may afford me precious little sleep over the next three years.” When his eyebrows went up, I pushed on. “I want to write the definitive novel on the career of Jesus of Nazareth.”

David let out a whoop. “Three years? How about thirty? Early Christianity isn’t my specialty, but if there’s one figure in history on whom zero agreement exists, it has to be Jesus. What makes you think you can solve the puzzle—if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Ignorance, I guess,” I answered sheepishly.

“Actually, it sounds like an exciting project. But you know,”—and here he adopted his intrigued look again—“it might not be too far removed from what I was about to propose.” He picked up a pencil which he proceeded to wield for emphasis.

“About ten years ago I got involved with a group called the International Skeptics. They’re mostly interested in debunking UFOs and alien abductions and paranormal phenomena, stuff like that. I started, just subtly, raising these issues in the classroom, mostly to see who thought what, how many young people today believed in these things, or perhaps might even have imagined they’d experienced them. There didn’t seem to be an alarming incidence in my students subscribing to what the Skeptics were most concerned about, but my net gradually went wider and I found I became more interested in the views they held in more ‘spiritual’ categories—for want of a better word.”

“Like?”

“Angels, for one.” David made a motion in the air with the pencil, as though he were tapping one of the creatures on its wings to gain its attention. “It’s one thing to read that 62% of Americans believe in angels, it’s another to actually hear half your philosophy class express a belief or acknowledge the possibility that such creatures exist and even interact with humans. It kind of makes you wonder what you’re doing in the classroom at all.”

I nodded without commenting.

“I don’t teach science, but how much scientific literacy can they possibly possess when they’re willing to allow that perhaps we *should* offer the theory of divine creation 6000 years ago alongside Darwinian evolution? Keep in mind that this is not a Bible College. We like to think we’re one of the leading universities in the state, if not the country, and yet a good portion of our students think that everything in the bible must be true.”

“I guess we’re not really as secular a society as we like to believe.”

David grimaced. “Personally, I’ve decided recently that I don’t much care if UFOs exist or not, or whether someone claims he can bend a spoon with his mind. I’ve decided those things are not nearly as dangerous as belief in angels or the inerrancy of the bible or whether a God lives in the sky and has a department that spends its time pulling yours or my strings. It’s things like this that are undermining the rational basis of society, and they are going to extend into a lot of areas we’ve started to take for granted, whether it’s the efficiency of our educational system and the nation’s productivity, or the right of a woman to have an abortion or even to go out and work. When you pull the shades down on one window and block the light of rationality, the whole house gets dimmer, and soon you get to accept the darkness and eventually the rest of the shades get pulled down.”

“But it’s not just religion,” I pointed out.

“No, it isn’t. Some of this New Age stuff is just as irrational. But it doesn’t matter, it all has to be harmful to a healthy view of the world.”

I used my finger in imitation of his pencil. “And you want to do something about it!”

David nodded earnestly. “Three months ago I proposed to the Skeptics board that we broaden our scope and even focus on debunking the worst spiritual and religious excesses. It would mean taking the bible on—head on, since that’s the source of a lot of them.”

“And how did they react?”

“Cautiously. Essentially, they showed me the door. They said: ‘Have a run at it and see what you can organize, then get back to us.’ I took a deep breath, said ‘What the hell’ and started e-mailing. I’ve sounded out friends and people who had long forgotten I’d existed, as well as a lot of complete strangers. And not just in university philosophy faculties. Contacts gave me contacts. I decided I needed a specific concrete proposal, so I came up with this one: we organize in cells and present a promotion for rationality and secularism in everyday beliefs and outlooks, attracting as much publicity as we can, and then hold a nation-wide, maybe even world-wide, Symposium for Rationality”—the pencil gave the words capital letters—“in the year 2000.”

“Impressive.” It wasn’t a lie. “And the response?”

“About 50 hearty endorsements, a hundred or so ‘I’ll think it over’s, and about as many ‘Don’t bother me’s, or words to that effect. I’ve got a core of about six, all but one being university profs, who are actually trying to organize things. About three dozen are putting various ideas on paper and a few are starting to trickle in. We’re feeling our way.”

“And just how did you think I could contribute to this worthy enterprise?”

“At the U, I always thought you were one of the most rational people I’d ever met, even if you had an overly romantic streak about you. I still haven’t decided whether there may be some kind of God or not, but one thing I do know is that he—or she—has to be rational, and I see precious little rationality in the God most religionists bandy about these days. I remember you adopting an atheism which was serene and secure and sat perfectly well with you, like it was a good breakfast you’d eaten that morning.”

Now there was a metaphor I’d never thought of! “I guess for me, abandoning God was pure release and freedom: seeing the universe crystal clear for the first time—and being exhilarated by the look of it. I know I was convinced that within a few decades at most, maybe even by the time I’d reached this age, the rest of the world would have followed suit. Naive, obviously.”

“Who knows? Maybe you were right—just a bit premature. Maybe this is a temporary aberrant phase, some kind of death throes. Unfortunately, I’m living in it, and I’m *not* exhilarated by the look of it.”

I asked David again what he thought I could contribute.

“Well, now that you’ve told me about your latest project, there may be material there we could use. Biblical scholars these days are a schizophrenic lot. They’re either pulling down the battlements or busy trying to throw them back up. They’re raising a lot of dust and we’ll have to wait and let the air clear before we see what comes out of it. The only one I approached, somebody at Claremont, says he’s too busy campaigning for rationalism in his own field. He’s embroiled in some new ‘quest for the historical Jesus’, he says.”

“It’s funny,” I remarked. “This ‘quest’ for the real man has been going on forever, it seems. It’s true the Gospels can’t simply be accepted as factual, historical accounts. After

all, they don't even come close to agreeing with one another on a lot of details, big and small. And none of the New Testament writers were historians. They presented the Jesus of their own faith, sometimes long after the fact. But somewhere under all this superstructure must lie the actual figure of history. How hard can it be to dig him out?"

"This fellow I spoke to sounds pretty confident."

"Well, they've been on the site with their picks and shovels for a good two centuries now, and it seems every generation of scholars tosses the previous one's diggings onto the scrap heap and claims to have finally uncovered the genuine article. But I wonder how they're going to be sure they can recognize it when they do."

I didn't voice the thought that I had to ask the same question of my own new project.

The time was getting well toward the middle of the afternoon, and I had yet to visit the library to map out my strategy. David picked up my signals.

"Think about it," he said, putting the pencil down. "This research of yours is very intriguing, and maybe being an outsider you'll bring a fresh perspective to it, who knows? I'd really like it if you'd keep in touch with me, as often as you want. Maybe when we get things a little further organized here I'll have a more concrete proposal for you. You may be interested in spite of yourself."

I assured him that I already was. "By the way, what are you calling yourselves?"

"Well, we don't know yet. We're knocking a few ideas around. Do you always title your books before you write them?"

"Sometimes. Though titles are subject to change. You never know where the writing process is going to lead you. Or the research itself, for that matter."

We exchanged e-mail addresses and other sundries. David had a final, somewhat ominous word. "You know, something like this—even your own work you may find—inevitably attracts opposition. I haven't yet put out any general feelers on the Internet, and I may not. But already I've got somebody or some group on my tail who doesn't like our complexion. They managed to get a hold of my e-mail address and sent some text from a recent rationalist magazine they knew I'd be interested in. Even though I wasn't certain who had sent it, I decided to download it. Fortunately, I've gotten into the habit of checking for viruses whenever I bring in something I don't know. Believe it or not, there was a nasty little bug worked into the thing that would have screwed up my whole drive and destroyed some very useful files we've been putting together. On top of everything else, we're now forced to establish a security system."

"Cyber-terrorists. Every advance in rationality has occasioned a counterattack from those who prefer to hang on to the old ways of thinking. Hemlock takes many forms."

"I'll watch what I drink. Let's hope they don't try anything worse, but I don't think we've heard the last of them." He stood up and shook my hand. "Kevin, it's great seeing you again after all these years. Who knows what might come of it? Maybe it wasn't just a chance meeting."

I chided him for his note of irrationality. I said goodbye and set off for the library.

A three-hour search of various indexes and reference books gave me a working list of documents I would have to investigate. I was particularly interested in Christian writings outside the New Testament, since instinct told me that anything not part of the sacred canon might have preserved information or views about Jesus that were more original and

dependable. I knew before I started that relying entirely on the Gospel picture would be a mistake and give me nothing that a thousand writers before me hadn't come up with.

I spoke to an assistant librarian I didn't know, and who hadn't read any of my novels. On the basis of my status as an alumnus and on my reputation as a successful writer, which I was at pains to impress upon her, I managed to wring concessions for a few privileges not normally enjoyed by someone who was not on the university staff.

In the early evening I departed for home with several books, some for immediate scanning into my hard drive. I hoped it had enough free space and a good resistance to indigestion. On the other hand, the spirit of my computer (I was often convinced that it had one) should have felt well at home by now with the ideas and atmosphere of ancient world religion and philosophy.

Those visions of riches and acclaim which Stanley had tried to plant in my head continued to dance in the background, but I knew that the task itself would be a challenging one, with no guarantee of success. To be controversial was one thing, but if I could not tie it to some appearance of reality, some meaningful picture of what had actually transpired in a backwoods part of the Roman empire in the early first century to shape the entire future of the Western world, the whole thing would probably be dismissed out of hand.

Nor could I ignore the 'political' ramifications of any portrayal of Jesus I would come up with. Today's environment, with its burgeoning struggle between religion and secularism, might well react to any such novel in ways that had nothing to do with its literary or entertainment merit. Could I juggle all these balls at once?

And there was an additional ball closer to home. How would Miss Shauna Rosen, Jewess extraordinaire with whom I was engaged in another kind of juggling act, react to my immersion in the figure which had brought so much misfortune to those of her race who had lived for two millennia in his overwhelming and grievous shadow?

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## Chapter Three

### 1

As I usually did when embarking on a new writing project, I bought a special bottle of wine to mark the occasion, and as she usually did since our relationship had taken flight a few years earlier, Shauna joined me that evening to help in the marking. I told her of my unexpected meeting with David Porter.

"If your friend thinks he's going to eradicate spirituality, he's in for a disappointment." Shauna with wine on her lip could lead in a number of directions, any of which would be quite stimulating. Tonight we were headed for some animated conversation.

"Oh, I don't imagine David plans anything so ambitious. He just feels that some brands of irrationality sap society's potential. He wonders how we can properly understand and control the world around us if we believe in all sorts of forces and entities that don't exist."

"Do we really need to control the world so thoroughly? Doesn't our obsession for control and understanding get us into a lot of trouble?"

Shauna and I rarely quarrelled. There was always a streak of humor in even the most adamant of her discussions, few of which were deemed important enough to upset her keel of sensibility. I, on the other hand, could get determinedly supportive of my own views. More often than not, Shauna enjoyed playing off that determination.

“If someone would show me,” I declared, “how you can come to the best decision about something when your opinions on that thing are irrational or erroneous, I’d be glad to hear.”

“Is it irrational to want to feel that there’s something ‘out there’, something beyond what we can study with our scientific instruments? That way, there’s always a little mystery to the world. The potential for what can happen in it, what can happen to us, becomes unlimited. If we’re able to understand everything, if we lay everything bare to the light of day, we’re stuck with what we can perceive. We can never go beyond that.”

“That should be more than enough, I would say. Those horizons are huge. Just how much space do you want?”

“Personally, I have all the space I need. But for some, it’s the quality of that space. They don’t especially like what they see around them, so they invent other dimensions where things can be the way they’d like them to be.”

“No problem was ever solved by inventing a fantasy that promises to take you away from the problem. The problem just grows bigger by neglect.”

“Spoken like a true pragmatist.” Hadn’t David called me overly romantic? “But it’s not just the God-in-the-sky fantasy. Lots of people have abandoned any such figure and yet they still believe in things science can’t detect. Look at some of these New Age ideas. Energy flows and reincarnation and that sort of thing.”

“That was David’s point. How can we turn out competent scientists who are going to understand the world if we believe in angels, or powers in crystals?”

“Oh, I think that’s selling it short. Anyway, a lot of New Agers think that energy forces in humans, or between humans and the universe, are real. It’s just that they can’t be detected by our narrowly scientific methods.”

“Then let’s broaden our scientific methods. But if we still can’t detect something, it’s too easy to fall back on the claim that our equipment is faulty or our science too limited. Too many pink elephants are let in the door that way. Ultimately, if reason or the senses or the instruments our senses have created to help them can’t accommodate something, we have no right to hold on to it, much less build our lives around it.”

“You might be missing out on things science can’t give you.”

“I’ll accept any judgment made in the court of reason.”

The argument was winding down. We both knew it. Besides, Shauna’s lip was looking less argumentative and more sensual by the moment. Middle age has its fascinations which youth cannot yet imagine. Shauna was just entering it and I had been saving her a place for a few years—even before I knew her. The mind is a wonderful storehouse, and a woman with two or three decades of sexual experience has a fascinating inventory of responses and sensitivity. When the body moves more slowly, the savor is sweeter, and like the lip glistening with red wine Shauna’s flavors had ripened to perfection.

Joy at being alive is also richer when experience, rather than a flood of hormones, produces it. Shauna was a medical laboratory technician, so she dealt with the manifestations of life on a daily basis. Her down to earth realism and common sense appealed to me greatly. And still there was something exotic about her. Partly it was her Jewish character,

which for me spelled subtle depths extending back into misty pasts, an innate tenacity, a swirl of fecundity (though she herself had no children). The broadening in the middle of the nose spelled a sensual richness, and I often spent more than a few moments attending to that very feature, to her great amusement. Like her coloring, her lovemaking was in smoky hues, mellow browns and burgundies. To be enclosed within her was to enter a place of warmth and deep pleasure.

As for myself, the energy of youth had been replaced by more thoughtful quests. The sands of time wash quickly over the imprint of Alexander's stride, but the measured pace of Plato's words reechoes down the long centuries and will probably never die out.

Afterwards, there was a little more wine and a late night snack.

"This is my third christening of a new project with you," Shauna said between munches. "But I must say this is probably the most ambitious one you've taken on yet. What are you going to do with him?"

"With who?"

"Jesus, of course. If he's not the divine Son of God, which I presume he's not, what are you going to have him be?" She rolled her tongue provocatively along her upper lip. "Are you going to give him a Jewish girlfriend?"

I shuddered. "Getting torn apart by the critics is one thing, but being rended limb from limb by enraged Christians is something I'd rather not experience. I don't think I'll work in any love interest."

She looked disappointed. "Isn't that what sells? You've had some racy stuff in some of your other novels. Are you going to suddenly become politically correct?"

"I don't know what I'm going to become. I really haven't had any time to think about it. Is the focus going to be on the man himself or on some secondary figure—a fictional character, perhaps, with everything seen through his or her eyes? That's a common device in historical novels. But it would certainly be challenging to present the story through the eyes of Jesus himself. That's what Vardis Fisher does, though his Jesus—Joshua, really—has no sense of himself as a special man with a special mission. He just has a knack for attracting people to himself, men and women. Especially women. Here, let me read you something from a study of Fisher's Testament of Man."

I fished out one of the many ringbinders crammed into my bottom bookshelf, in which I kept some of the many copies I'd made from this or that source in the course of years of research. "I don't remember the author of this study, some college thesis I think it was." I flipped the sheets. "Here...he's talking about the novel *Jesus Came Again: A Parable*.

"Speculation and expectation about a coming Messiah and the cataclysmic change he would bring had been fermenting in Judea for two centuries until it had reached the level of almost national insanity, especially among the common folk. Migrations across the land of vast numbers of people: farmers, city dwellers, rabble of poor and sick, are recorded during the early decades of the first century, and many a man who sought to lead them, or claimed to be a wonder-worker or teacher or even the actual Messiah, was seized and executed by the Roman authorities as an instigator of public disorder. Such disorder was easily provoked. The average man and woman outside the privileged classes were ground down by a crush of tithes and taxes. Working of the land was crude and injurious. Slavery caused major human misery. Rampant superstition, and a belief in a world full of demons who tormented with

illness and possession, produced nervous disorders and psychotic behavior among many. In an era of primitive medicine, sickness and physical degeneration made millions wretched. Fisher creates a heart-wrenching view of a world full of pain, insanity and injustice.

“ ‘At one such fevered moment during the reign of Herod Antipas, a young Jew named Joshua joins the throngs of poor and sick who crowd the roads of Judea, making their disorganized way to Jerusalem and other holy places. They are expecting the imminent appearance of the Messiah, who will rescue the downtrodden, heal the sick, right all wrongs. Several people attach themselves to Joshua, mostly women: from the simple widow with child, to the educated Greek, to the mystic who has visions of heaven. Some of them begin to believe that Joshua is himself the Messiah, though he vigorously denies it. Fisher has shaped his story in the classic ‘quest’ mold: the little travelling band of diverse characters who pass through experiences and trials in their search for something to give them hope and a new life.’ ”

I skipped a few paragraphs ahead. “ ‘When a growing number of those following him imagine that he has healed the sick and even caused a dead man to return to life, Joshua is at last seized and led before Pilate. His humble admission that he believes the Messiah will conquer even Rome with love, clashes with the sympathetic Pilate’s need, in a land ever teetering on anarchy, to keep in check all ideas and advocations which encourage a belief that Rome’s authority will be overthrown. For one Jew among many, it means crucifixion as a “rebel”. But among Joshua’s followers, a seed of belief has been planted.’ ”

“That’s Fisher’s approach, you see: understated and touching, sometimes even naive. He’ll probably influence my background presentation. I want to convey what makes the times tick—or at least those who responded to Jesus. But how are we going to know what made Jesus tick? The Gospels give us nothing like that. Each evangelist just offers us a divine figure in the image of his own theology.”

“What about ‘Suffer the little children,’ or whatever that saying is? Doesn’t that show he was supposed to be compassionate and sensitive?”

I shrugged. “Was he? What about—I think it’s in Luke—‘you have to hate your father and mother, wife and children, and so on, if you want to be a disciple of mine’? In one Gospel he tells his disciples to go out and preach to the world, in another he tells them not to cast pearls before swine, the swine being gentiles who are too ignorant to appreciate the Law. The contradictions are so numerous and significant, you can’t trust anything that’s said of him. Unlike Fisher, who didn’t pretend to be at all historical, I’d like to construct my tale around at least a kernel of something reasonably reliable. But the trouble is, earlier writers like Paul are supposed to have created some cosmic resurrected Christ and filed the man himself in some bottom drawer and ignored him. If the early stuff has so little about the human Jesus, where are we going to unearth him?”

“Perhaps it’s an impossible task.”

“I certainly hope not.”

## 2

I spent part of the next morning scanning pages into my computer from the books I had taken out of the library the day before: letters of Ignatius, Polycarp, Clement of Rome, Barnabas. These so-called Apostolic Fathers, all writing around the end of the first century

and the first few decades of the second, were almost the only non-canonical record we possessed of the “post-apostolic generation” of the Christian movement, but before any centrally organized Church began to take shape.

I realized I had to put one thing together before I could start assembling data: a time chart showing the approximate dates when all the Christian and related documents were written. That wasn't as easy as it sounded, because the dates of so many of them were uncertain, little more than educated guesses. I could easily have constructed a chart on the computer, with an icon for each document that I could shift around at will as I learned more. But I felt like having something concrete, in real space, something I could rest my eyes on away from the screen. So I mounted a date strip along the wall, running from the year 30 CE to 150. Below it I affixed a Post-It for each document: green for the Christian ones, blue for the Jewish, red for the Roman. After three days of quick research I had over 40 pieces of paper fluttering on my wall above the computer screen.

Seven green ones stood for the genuine letters of Paul, all in a clump under the 50s of the first century: 1 Thessalonians, Philipians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans and Philemon. Six more letters had been written later using Paul's name, and I sprinkled them over the next few decades: Colossians around the year 80, Ephesians a few years after that, 2 Thessalonians around 90. The group called the Pastorals—1 and 2 Timothy and Titus—seemed to be dated by different scholars anywhere between 100 and 130. I compromised and stuck them at 115.

The group of three letters known as 1, 2 and 3 John were usually dated somewhere around the year 90. 1 Peter went below 85. 2 Peter, judged late, I stuck at 120. Then the ones considered early: James, Jude and Hebrews. They were anybody's guess, but I affixed them a little before the year 70, the climax of that watershed which constituted the First Jewish War, perhaps the greatest upheaval of its time. Putting down the Jewish revolt and destroying the city of Jerusalem was the most demanding military campaign the Romans had to undertake in the first century. Three-quarters of the population of Palestine were either killed or displaced. I marked that event with its own piece of paper. The Book of Revelation, an upheaval in itself, went under the 90s (though some thought it written during the Jewish War), along with the non-canonical epistle 1 Clement.

The seven letters of Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch who perished in the arena at Rome, went on a single piece under the year 107, followed shortly by two other writers who didn't make it into the canon either: Polycarp and Barnabas. A church manual called the Didache (which meant “Teaching” in Greek) belonged somewhere around 100. For now, that was it for the early Christian writings. I would leave the apologists of the second century until later, as I didn't know if I would have occasion to dip into them.

That left an assortment of Jewish and Roman documents. The historians Josephus, Tacitus and Suetonius could be fixed to specific dates in the late first and early second centuries. But then came a slew of documents from a set of miscellaneous Jewish writings known as the Pseudepigrapha, coming from the period 200 BCE to 200 CE. (The word referred to writings under “false” names, usually great figures of Israel's past.) They promised to be a significant asset. A day and a half of reading the little commentaries attached to these roughly six dozen works had given me a feeling that the background to early Christian thought was much more complex than most people imagined. The most promising ones went up on the wall.

As for the Gospels, things were not quite as straightforward as I had anticipated. The controversy over which one had been written first was pretty well settled by now: Mark, the earliest, was usually dated around 70 or so, with Matthew, Luke and John (all of them, in various ways, dependent on the Markan foundation) strung out between 80 and 110. But recent scholarship had concluded that all of the Gospels had been written in stages, edited and revised over time; the later Church had lost sight of that early history of development. Moreover, a search of all the non-Gospel writings had shown scholars that evidence for a knowledge of the Gospels' existence was difficult to find before the middle of the second century. I decided to leave them off my chart for now. The same applied to the Acts of the Apostles, whose suggested date of writing fluctuated wildly over almost a century. The dating of anything purporting to be history would have to be given the closest examination.

### 3

The next day was a Friday, and a dreary start to the weekend. Winter was being shown the door, but putting up a protest on its way out: March days damp and dirty, with a half snow half rain falling. Shauna had left the evening before to visit some out-of-town family, and in the morning I had only a cup of coffee to give me a kickstart on this first day of data gathering. As usual, however, it wasn't long before I found myself slipping into the atmosphere of the ancient documents I was perusing, both on the printed page and on the computer screen. The window into a long dead mind is often clouded and grainy, and clarity of meaning can be elusive, but the wonder of bringing alive a forever departed past out of a few recorded words by one who had lived it is something we should never lose or neglect. Without it, we would be little more than the animals.

Yet today that departed past contained an unexpected curiosity. I decided that to get at the historical Jesus, one should perhaps start by looking at his background: his parents, his family, the places of his birth and life. The Gospels, of course, contained a lot of that stuff, though they didn't always agree. But one couldn't prove the validity of the Gospel story by appealing to the Gospel story.

But here was the problem I encountered. Using the Muratorian Project Index and my own search of the non-canonical material I had entered, I could find no references to the names of Mary and Joseph, nor to Bethlehem, Nazareth or Galilee, anywhere in the non-Gospel documents of the first century. I decided to look up the name of the man who one might say was the most crucial in Jesus' life, namely, the man who had tried and executed him: the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate. In the epistles, he appeared only in a single passing reference in 1 Timothy 6:13, at my date of 115. Elsewhere, in all the discussions about Christ's death and crucifixion, he was nowhere to be found. I could not even locate a reference in Paul or any other epistle writer to the fact that Jesus had undergone a trial! Little did Pilate realize when he washed his hands, that he was washing himself out of the wider Christian record for about 80 years!

Ignatius seemed to have been the first letter writer to bring Pilate back into the spotlight. This martyred bishop was also the first to mention Jesus' mother by name, Mary. Nobody mentioned Joseph. In chapter 9 of his letter to the Trallians (he wrote all his letters as a prisoner on his way to Rome in 107) Ignatius said: 'Close your ears then, if anyone preaches to you without speaking of Jesus Christ. Christ was of David's line. He was the son of

Mary; he was really born, ate and drank, was really persecuted under Pontius Pilate, was really crucified. He was also truly raised from the dead.'

To me, this passage had a peculiar character. As I read it, it seemed to be declaring these events as true, as though someone were denying them or refusing to accept them. Why would any of Ignatius' fellow Christians be listening to preachers who were not speaking of Jesus Christ? And just who would be denying or be ignorant of the fact that Jesus had been the son of Mary or executed by Pilate?

By the next day the precipitation had turned to a steady drizzle of rain under leaden skies. It suited my mood. Things were not getting off to a bright, energetic start. The documents were beginning to look as dense as the weather, clouded over, yielding not the bright nuggets of information I looked for, but an oddly unilluminating murk. I had begun to realize that even basic topics like Jesus' death were being discussed in the epistles in ways that seemed to bear no relationship to the Gospel picture.

In my search for Pilate, I had read a verse in Colossians, 2:15: 'On the cross he discarded the cosmic powers and authorities like a garment; he made a public spectacle of them and led them as captives in his triumphal procession.'

Somehow, I couldn't see this idea fitting into any scene on the hill of Calvary outside Jerusalem, a scene of which there seemed not a hint anywhere, not only in Colossians. The 'powers and authorities' were terms for demonic spirit forces, believed in this period to inhabit the atmosphere and the layers of heaven just above the earth, harassing and crippling mankind. Fisher had illuminated the injurious role they played in the thought of the time.

A cross-reference pointed to Ephesians 6:12 which said rather bleakly: 'Our fight is not against human foes, but against cosmic powers, against the authorities and potentates of this dark world, against the superhuman forces of evil in the heavens.'

This, from a decade or so after Paul's death, put into his mouth by someone probably in one of the communities he had preached to. But Paul himself had things to say about these demonic forces. In 1 Corinthians 2:8, he even seemed to assign them responsibility for Jesus' death, with nary a mention of Pilate's role. I saw from the commentary that Paul's meaning here was a debated one, but that evil spirits were the 'rulers' being referred to was the opinion of many. I made a note to investigate the whole question of spirits and the spirit dimension in the thought of Paul's time.

I settled into my chair and looked up at the Post-It creation strung along the wall. OK, so no parents, no birthplace or home town, and no human executioner before Ignatius. No place of execution, either, from the look of it. Searching for Calvary and the scene of the crucifixion, I had found nothing outside the Gospels. But the sites of his ministry, the towns where he worked his miracles, perhaps, or the places he taught: surely some of these had been mentioned in passing by writers like Paul.

The various indexes yielded nothing. I keyed in everything I could locate in a scan of the Gospel texts: places and names from the Gospel story. With one possible exception, the darkness was impenetrable. Because it was difficult to believe that all the early writers could have been so silent, I took the rest of the weekend to read through Paul and the other epistles, checking various points in the Muratorian commentaries. I came away baffled. It had never struck me in the past when reading (or hearing as a kid) passages from the New Testament epistles, that they didn't really say anything about Jesus' life. In fact, one

wouldn't even have known from the early writers that Jesus had just recently lived. They didn't seem to locate him at any particular point in the past. No Herod, no Romans.

Another missing character was John the Baptist. No one in all the documents I surveyed, right into the second century, ever mentioned him. I noted Paul talked a lot about Christian baptism, but he had nothing to say about Jesus' own baptism, let alone John the Baptist.

Nor could I find any reference to the places of Jesus' preaching. Galilee never got a mention. No Temple. Not even a Jerusalem. Paul and the others never located Jesus anywhere. Come to think of it, I couldn't really remember any reference to Jesus actually teaching, although a lot of things the epistles were advocating in the way of moral directives and such sounded like his stuff. It was just that they never bothered attributing it to him, which seemed odd. The only possible candidates were a couple of cases of what Paul called 'words of the Lord', about divorce and Jesus coming at the end of the world, though he almost seemed to be implying that he got these directly, as private revelations.

One of them, the exception I had noted earlier, was in 1 Corinthians 11 and it did remind me of a Gospel scene: Jesus speaking the words about his body and blood over the bread and wine at the Last Supper. Actually, make that 'the Lord's Supper', which was the term Paul used. This passage would need a close look at. It was about the only link I could find in Paul to an incident in Jesus' life, though it was more tantalizing than definite. Elsewhere, I couldn't find any reference to the Last Supper at all.

Then there were the miracles. I couldn't find any. Paul never mentioned any miracles. This was particularly strange, since he often argued with his readers that resurrection of the dead was possible. But he never used Jesus' own raising of the dead as any kind of proof. Naturally, I didn't think that any reputable scholar today really believed Jesus raised anyone from the dead, but the idea that he had done so must have developed pretty soon. The epistle writers were always talking about God's promises of resurrection, but no one ever pointed to Jesus' feats as support for those promises. Where the hell was Lazarus? Not even Ignatius talked of Jesus' miracles—and he was about to face the lions!

By Monday morning, bafflement was turning to frustration. If I were thrown back entirely on the Gospels, I would have little I could depend on, and how to resolve the contradictions found between them? If the most up-to-date research was paring away even the essentials of the Gospel story, on what could any tale of Jesus be based? Had Fisher already followed the only course open to a novelist: make of it what you want and present it as some kind of morality tale, with no claim to history? But this went against my grain. If my interest lay in the history of ideas, my tale of Jesus had to embody his ideas or the ideas he gave rise to and how they shaped the future. Or was there some other alternative I would have to come up with?

Perhaps I was going about it the wrong way. Instead of looking for Gospel features, I should have been asking myself what writers like Paul were actually saying about Jesus. It might be better not to measure them according to Gospel standards. Looking back over an assortment of passages in Paul, I thought I could see that Jesus Christ (or more often "Christ Jesus") was a figure already ensconced in an entirely spiritual setting and identity. Jesus' transformation to divinity and the realm of heaven was already complete, and scarcely an echo remained of his incarnation on earth in Paul's own lifetime.

For some reason, that aspect of him had receded out of sight, and Paul was either ignorant of the Jesus on earth (which hardly seemed possible in view of his close contacts with the Jerusalem apostles) or else he had no interest in him—which seemed astonishing in itself. Dipping into the commentaries provided by the Muratorian Project, I found that it was a longstanding criticism of Paul, one I had vaguely heard before, that he had all but perverted the original Christian message by turning Jesus into a cosmic Christ and blocking access to the human man. Looking for Jesus of Nazareth in Paul was apparently a hopeless task. It may have crossed my mind even at this stage to wonder how such a bizarre transformation could have been performed by Paul, or even whether it was likely, but for the moment my prominent reaction was one of dismay.

And yet it was one thing, it seemed to me, to postulate that the life and ministry of Jesus held no interest for Paul. The same thing could hardly be said of Jesus' death and rising from the grave. For Paul's letters were full of proclamation and comment about these great redeeming acts. Christ crucified was ever on his lips; faith that God had raised him from the dead formed the centerpiece of his preaching. Yet even here, such events never appeared in their historical context. All the features of the Gospel passion, details of the crucifixion scene, the story of the empty tomb—all had been stripped away.

If we judged by the early writers alone, responsibility for the death of Jesus seemed to have been placed entirely at the feet of the demon spirits. That is, except once. Or so I thought until I saw the footnote. In 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16, Paul referred to the Jews 'who killed the Lord Jesus.' Many commentators now judged this to be a later insertion ("interpolation" was the official term for this sort of thing) into the letter, for these verses contained a clear allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem, an event which happened after Paul's death. Most of them also thought that such sentiments could not be by Paul because nowhere else did he express himself so viciously toward his fellow Jews. If this passage was to be cut out, then nothing in the first century epistles told us that any human agency was responsible for Jesus' death, Jew or Roman.

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## Chapter Four

### 1

The next day involved errands which had more to do with the mundane tasks of living, but I managed to squeeze in a trip to the University library in search of a couple of books mentioned in the Muratorian commentaries. That evening, Shauna joined me for one of my patented "short-notice" meals. I was a fairly competent cook when I took the time for it and Shauna often threatened to move in with me for that reason. But neither of us were really ready to compromise our independence, and when I was intensely into a research phase I could be jealous of my isolation. This time, however, my frustration at how things were going gave me a need to talk.

Perhaps my preoccupation led me to overheat the cream for the beef stroganoff, but Shauna graciously made no comment on the slightly sour taste. At least the broccoli was perfectly *al dente*. Through the main course she talked about the cousin she had spent the

weekend with, and it was only when I brought out the cream Napoleons from our favorite French pastry shop that she asked me how the work was going.

“Funny you should ask,” I said in mock sarcasm. Shauna knew very well that I had been chafing at the bit all through the meal. “Actually, I’m considering a change of plan. Rather than an historical novel, I’m thinking of writing a whodunit. The first mystery is Who Killed Jesus? The usual suspects are nowhere to be found.”

“You’ll have to explain that.”

When I had done so, she volunteered: “Perhaps Paul didn’t really care who had pulled the trigger, so to speak. Weren’t we all guilty? Isn’t that the idea behind the Christian view of Jesus’ death?”

I thought about that for a moment. “Well, Paul certainly believed we were all sinful. But I’d have to say he doesn’t really regard Jesus’ death as a crime. It’s more a case of God and Jesus doing us a willing favor, working together to engineer this sacrifice for our benefit. What you don’t get is any sense that someone is directly responsible for it; no one is ever allotted blame for Jesus’ execution. And yet the Gospel story is one huge conspiracy: the Jewish elders plotting his death, the High Priest interrogating and abusing him, various witnesses giving false testimony. Even Pilate with his good intentions chickens out and bows to the pressure. And what about the crowds screaming for his blood? Surely they were seen by the early Christians as contributing to Pilate’s decision.”

Shauna murmured: “His blood be upon us and upon our children.” That particular verse from Matthew, along with the epithet of “Christ-killers” it had spawned, had been burned into every Jew’s consciousness for close to two millennia.

“Yes, but you won’t find any sentiment like that on Paul’s part. There simply is no sense of Jesus being the innocent man who was betrayed and unjustly sentenced to death. And Paul’s not the only one. In fact, this may surprise you, but there is no mention of Judas in the entire first century outside the Gospels.”

“I’ve heard it said that Judas was an invention.” She looked pensive. “I’d like to think so, but then we’d have to live with the fact that we’d been demonized for almost 2000 years over an invention.”

“I know. Certain people have a lot to answer for. Matthew may have given us the cry of the crowd, but he got Judas from Mark. I think the Jesus Seminar group have already rejected both as inventions of the evangelists.”

Shauna always volunteered to wash up the dishes when I cooked, and I always refused to let her. We usually retired to the TV room after a good meal, but tonight I took her into my study to show her the battleground, the scene of my new struggle with the intransigence of the early Christian record. The fluttering Post-Its along the wall might have been my flayed skin. Shauna thought they looked rather comical.

I pulled up another chair for her beside the computer. “I want to show you something else.” Although we could have looked at a printed page in greater comfort snuggling on a couch, I wanted the vibrancy of the computer screen before us, plugged into cyberspace. It presented a window onto the vast reaches of an unknown landscape, an image which early Christianity was beginning to assume for me. I logged onto the Web.

“You say maybe Paul didn’t care enough about Pilate to bother mentioning him. But one thing he does care about is his fellow Jews. If Jesus was killed in Jerusalem, and if the Gospel picture is even one-tenth real, there had to be Jewish factions working against him

who had some kind of role in his death. There would surely have been some sense of Jewish responsibility among early Christians.”

The Muratorian Web page was stunning. A subtle, intricate artwork in the background changed periodically, revolving from right to left: a repeating series of color-drenched illuminations from medieval manuscripts of the Bible. I shuddered to think of how much computer space was tied up in all this fine, rich detail, but as a gateway to the sacred scriptures it was highly evocative. One could probably watch it for hours.

Two title pages could be called up: one for the Old Testament, the other for the New. On the latter, each of the 27 documents of the canon was listed, plus links to separate introductions to the Commentaries and to the Indexes. I clicked on Romans, the first and longest letter in the corpus of Paul’s epistles, considered by most to be the Apostle’s masterpiece. The text scrolled upward, as usual, but one class of footnote marking could bring in—onto the lower portion of the screen—brief clarifications on the text itself: alternate readings and discussions of a linguistic nature, usually to do with the original Greek text. Another class of notation supplied Gospel and other textual parallels with optional screening of these texts to one side. Still another transferred the reader to the appropriate point in the primary commentary provided on the work in question, by some leading scholar. These commentaries could also be approached through the separate commentary link off the title page, and supplementary excerpts from other scholarly works were often provided, all of it variously linked. The organization of this wealth of material, with the inclusion of an intricate Index whose detail and subtlety I had only begun to scratch at, spelled a monumental undertaking on the part of some group or institution I as yet knew nothing about.

“Romans 10,” I intoned, scrolling to that point in the text. I advanced line by line to verse 13. With Shauna craning at the screen beside me, I said: “You see, here Paul is trying to show that the Jews have no excuse for failing to believe in Christ and gaining salvation. All they have to do, he says, is ‘call upon the name of the Lord and they will be saved.’ ” I had already learned that this was a quote from Joel 2:32 in the Greek Septuagint (Paul was using the Jewish bible which had been translated into Greek a couple of centuries earlier, not its Hebrew original). For Shauna’s benefit I called up the footnote which identified and quoted the Old Testament verse—in English and in Greek. There was also a link to the primary commentary provided on Romans, by C.K. Barrett. Here, Barrett’s comment was highlighted, in which he pointed out that while the original word “Lord” in Joel was a reference to God himself, Paul chose to interpret the term as referring to Jesus Christ.

I went back to the text. The quote from Joel, that all will be saved who call upon the name of the Lord, introduced Paul’s argument concerning the Jews’ response, a series of poetically structured questions. I asked Shauna to read them aloud.

“ ‘But how are men to call upon him whom they have not believed in?  
‘And how are they to believe in him whom they have never heard of?  
‘And how are they to hear without a preacher?  
‘And how can men preach unless they are sent?’  
‘For it is written: How beautiful the feet of those who preach good news!’ ”

I pointed out to her that those who “are sent” and “those who preach good news” referred to apostles like Paul. We scanned a few verses further, to where Paul declared that faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes through the word about Christ. The voice of such preachers, Paul claimed, had gone out to the ends of the earth—which was a bit of hyperbole on his part.

I looked at Shauna. “What do you think? Has Paul made a good case here in showing the guilt of the Jews for not believing in Christ?”

She could tell I was probing. “This is a trick question, right?” She was staring at the verses on the screen, extending from 10:13 through 10:21. “Paul is ticked off because the Jews he preached to didn’t listen to him.”

I drew out my “Yes” in expectation of something more. I pointed to the later verses in the passage. “Here he quotes from other books of the bible, passages he takes as prophecies that show how, in contrast, the gentiles *did* believe when they heard.” One of these was Isaiah 65:1: ‘I was found by those who were not looking for me; I was clearly shown to those who never asked about me.’

“Paul turned to preaching to the gentiles when his own countrymen failed to respond,” I explained, “and he enjoyed much greater success. He was ‘Apostle to the Gentiles’ by default. Preaching to Jews undoubtedly occupied many of the years following his conversion before he comes into the spotlight through his letters, which are written largely to gentile communities.”

I brought her attention back to those questioning, poetic verses. “Now, remember he is talking about Jews in general, as he is of the gentiles. There is a kind of collective guilt and merit here.” I repeated my earlier question. “Do you think he has made the best possible case?”

Shauna read again and suddenly gave a start. “Where is Jesus?” I smiled and nodded. She turned to me. “Why doesn’t he blame the Jews for not listening to Jesus?”

“Right. Jesus had preached to Jews. Many of them heard his message. Yet collectively they rejected him. Supposedly, they even had a hand in killing him. What possible reason could Paul have had to leave this drastic rejection out of the equation? Look what he says in verse 18: ‘Can it be that they did not hear it?’—meaning the message. ‘Indeed they did...’ But then all he does is go on to quote from Psalm 19 which supposedly talks about apostles preaching to the ends of the earth. Why wouldn’t he mention the Jews’ spurning of the Son of God in the flesh? What more would he need to prove the extent of their failure and their guilt?”

Shauna was getting intrigued in spite of herself and made the next observation on her own. “And why, when he is contrasting the guilt of the Jews with the merit of the gentiles, doesn’t he point out the strongest point of contrast? He could have said that the Jews had rejected the message even though delivered by Jesus himself, while the gentiles had accepted it second-hand.”

Now it was my turn to give a start. “Very good point. I missed that.”

Shauna’s air of self-satisfaction gave way to a sudden deflation. “But here—” She pointed at the screen to verse 12. “It says, ‘what is heard comes through the word of Christ.’ Isn’t that a reference to Christ preaching?”

“No. The ‘of Christ’ in the Greek is just a genitive noun. It can mean ‘the word *about* Christ,’ or Christ speaking through the preachers, and that’s the way all the commentators

seem to take it. The whole structure of Paul's argument revolves around the response, or lack of it, to messengers of the gospel like himself. He's made no room for Jesus here."

Shauna looked at me in mild perplexity. "So—what does it mean? Why would Paul leave this out?"

"I don't know. It's one thing not to mention somebody like Pilate if you have no interest in him. It's another to leave out Jesus himself where he clearly demands inclusion. I thought about it last night, but I really can't give you an answer."

I turned back to the screen. "But that's not all. Look at this." I scrolled to the following chapter, Romans 11. "He asks his readers if this failure to believe in Christ means that God has abandoned the Jews, that they have no hope. He quotes Elijah in 1 Kings: 'Lord, they have killed thy prophets...' To which God had replied that he made sure a remnant of Israel stayed faithful. Paul uses this as a prophecy that the same will hold true this time, that Jews will come around, perhaps eventually all of them. The point is, he can refer to Israel's history of killing the prophets—"

Shauna interrupted defensively: "I don't think that's true. I've never heard of anything like that in our traditions."

I clicked on a footnote marker. "Actually, you're quite right. See—that idea was really just a going myth of the time, used by some sectarian groups who suffered opposition from the establishment and saw themselves as modern-day prophets being persecuted like the prophets of old." One line in the footnote read: 'About the only prophets ever recorded as having been murdered by the ruling class were those of Elijah's time: during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel many were executed for expressing opposition to the queen's introduction of her native Phoenician deities.' Shauna's head gave a little shake of vindication.

"But the point is, my dear, Paul refers to an alleged past history of Israel killing messengers from God. Can you see what's missing?"

Shauna was catching on to the game more quickly now. "Yes. Paul doesn't say anything about the Jews having murdered Jesus! Surely he would have said that, if that's what they did!"

"Yes, one would think that killing the Son of God would have been trumpeted as the culminating atrocity. And look: in these verses—" I pointed to 11:7, 10 and 11. "He says that God gave the Jews blind eyes and deaf ears, and that they do not see. Here he says that they 'stumbled'. One of the other epistles uses the same image. That's pretty mild language to encompass the sin of deicide." I told her about the unique passage in 1 Thessalonians which modern scholars rejected as a later interpolation.

Shauna let her breath out very slowly. "Does this mean the Gospel picture is totally false?" The hint of anguish in her voice was like a ripple on the surface of a vast well whose depths could only be guessed at. She looked at me plaintively. "Did we suffer all this time for absolutely nothing?"

"I can't answer that," I said softly. "Not yet, anyway."

She looked back at the screen, her mouth a little set. "Show me something else."

I thought for a moment. I decided it would be best to move to a less emotional issue. Perhaps I could start dipping into the widespread silence I had encountered about Jesus' teachings. And I had another idea. I stood up.

"Here, why don't you sit at the console? I'll give you directions."

Shauna seemed to like that. She took her new seat with hands poised over the keyboard as though she were about to unlock a secret vault wherein lay some long-lost key to salvation.

“Click on the corner arrow.” We were brought back to the title page, where a striking reproduction from the 8th century Irish illuminated manuscript known as the Book of Kells was momentarily stationary in the background, an intricate filigree of golds and browns embroidering the Greek letters used in Christ’s name. We watched it in fascination for a few moments and then entered the labyrinthine Index.

There were three major branches of the thing. One was a set of Concordances. First the English text: all the principal words, listed alphabetically, of the translation used by the Muratorian Project, which I gathered was their own ‘modernized’ King James text, somewhat like the Revised Standard Version. It leaned toward literalness and simplicity. Under each word, like a regular Concordance, were listed all the passages in which the word occurred, but the context given for each occurrence was open-ended; one could range as far as one liked on either side of the word’s appearance. At the same time, there were comparisons provided on important passages in four different modern translations. The other Concordances were those of the original languages: Hebrew for the Old Testament, Greek for the New.

The second branch was a monumental Topics index, which in many respects operated as a bible dictionary. When sampling this several days earlier, I had looked up “Spirit” and found everything from Paul’s conception of the divine Spirit operating in the missionary movement, to spirit forces inhabiting the celestial spheres, to an examination of the term used in a variety of contemporary philosophies. These topics, in addition to their own ‘in house’ discussions, were linked to various biblical texts and to the commentaries.

The third branch, which I had yet to investigate, was a Biographical and Geographical Encyclopedia.

I directed Shauna to open the Concordance.

“What would you say is Jesus’ most famous saying?”

She thought for a moment. “I don’t know—‘Love your enemies’? ‘Turn the other cheek’?”

“Let’s try ‘love’.”

We browsed, moving back and forth from the Concordance to the New Testament texts. Many were the sayings attributed to Jesus in the Gospels which invoked the idea of love. Matthew 22:34f presented the classic scene wherein Jesus was asked by the Pharisees what was the greatest commandment. Jesus’ answer had been twofold: Love God and Love Your Neighbor, the latter quoting the ancient commandment in Leviticus. Mark and Luke contained similar scenes.

And yet when we encountered similar sentiments in the epistles, the voice of Jesus fell strangely silent. Paul twice expressed himself exactly as Jesus had done in the Gospels: he told his readers that the whole Law could be summed up in that double commandment of love. Yet in these passages, Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14, there was not a hint that Paul knew he was following Jesus’ own instructions. Working from the Concordance, Shauna called up James 2:8, where the writer told his readers that they did well when they ‘fulfill the sovereign law laid down in scripture: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ And yet ‘James’ had not a word to say about Jesus’ championing of this very commandment.

“I don’t understand,” she said. “Wouldn’t James want to appeal to Jesus’ teachings to support what he says? If I were trying to persuade someone to follow my advice, and the Son of God had said the very same thing, I’d be crazy not to point that out.”

“It’s certainly curious,” I agreed. But that was before we turned to 1 Thessalonians 4:9. If James had been curious, Paul was downright dumbfounding.

“‘For you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,’” Shauna read. “How could he say such a thing? You always hear that this is a summary of what Jesus taught. Didn’t Paul know that?”

I said somewhat sardonically, “At this point, I don’t know what Paul knew.” I elected to keep going until we had exhausted all the references on love. Surely someone somewhere in the epistles had attributed such a teaching to Jesus.

The letters 1 and 2 John were full of the love commandment. In most cases, the source seemed clearly to be God, though occasionally the thought was ambiguous and could have been referring to Jesus. Scholars frequently argued the point. Yet 2 John 4-6 surely settled the matter: the command to ‘love one another’ was said to have been received at the beginning ‘from the Father.’

1 Corinthians 13 was a paean to love, though some thought that this chapter was a later insertion and not by Paul. But even here there was no mention of Jesus as a teacher on the subject. A Jewish form of moral instruction called “The Two Ways” formed part of the Didache and the Epistle of Barnabas, and both spoke sentiments on love similar to the Gospel teachings, yet neither of the Christian writers who had adapted this material and included it in their works had chosen to put in any reference to Jesus. We read through the entire Two Ways passages in both epistles, and while each one was a litany of Christian ethics, Jesus as a teacher of any of it was nowhere to be found.

Further investigation turned up other no less startling anomalies. 1 Peter 3:9 urged: ‘Do not return evil for evil, or abuse with abuse; but on the contrary retaliate with blessing...’

“There’s your ‘turn the other cheek’ idea,” I said to Shauna. “So why doesn’t he appeal to Jesus’ own words?”

“Maybe he doesn’t know about them,” she suggested. “Although that doesn’t seem likely, does it? Peter surely heard Jesus saying them with his own ears.”

I laughed at her naivete, though it was based on understandable ignorance. “Oh, there isn’t a chance that the apostle Peter wrote this letter. Or the other one attributed to him, either. All these epistles with names like John or Jude or James are pseudonymous. They were written later under the names of famous apostolic figures, or else they had the names attached to them some time after they were written. Scholars can tell by the writing styles and various features of their content that they can’t be attributed to their traditional authors. I don’t think a single one of them is judged these days to be authentic. And where Paul is concerned, they’ve pretty well settled that Colossians, Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and the Pastorals are all later. Of course, Christians weren’t the only ones doing that sort of thing. It was a common enough practice in the ancient world to write in some famous figure’s name. Whether such things should be called forgeries is debated. I’m not sure they were really meant to deceive anybody.”

“Except us,” Shauna said wryly.

I laughed. “Well, that certainly was the effect, intended or not. And it was almost immediate. By the later second century, these ascriptions, including the ones for the Gospels, were accepted by almost all the church Fathers.”

Investigating various words and ideas led us to many moral maxims and admonitions voiced in the epistles which had a familiar ring to them. ‘Let us no more judge one another,’ Paul had said in Romans 14. Pseudo-Paul in Ephesians 4:26 urged: ‘If you are angry do not let anger lead you into sin.’ James 4:10 advised, ‘Humble yourselves before God and he will exalt you.’ Surely these were echoes of Jesus’ teachings. And yet no one had elected to identify them as such. It was the writer of James, too, who said to his readers: ‘Listen, my friends, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the Kingdom?’ Perplexingly, there was not a glance in the direction of Jesus’ own memorable first Beatitude: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’

At a line in 1 John which assured believers that ‘We can approach God and obtain from him whatever we ask,’ Shauna remarked in a perplexed tone: “Even I know that Jesus said ‘Ask and you shall receive.’ It doesn’t make sense that all these writers would never point to Jesus as the one who gave them these teachings.”

“Maybe everyone already knew he had said them.” It was the best I could come up with, though I was scarcely convinced of my own suggestion.

“Even so. How much energy does it take to say ‘as Jesus said’? We Jews often quote a famous rabbi’s saying, but we usually include his name too, even if everyone knows where it came from. We like to do that; it honors him. Maybe sometimes you don’t bother, but I can’t believe not a single Christian writer in all these cases ever wanted to honor Jesus as the source. Besides, it would make the writer’s argument stronger. He’d do it by instinct.”

I had to agree. Presently Shauna expressed curiosity about the subject of the Jewish Law and Jewish dietary restrictions. How had Jesus felt about these things? From my reading of Paul thus far, I knew that both were burning issues of his day. Did male gentile converts to Christianity have to be circumcised? Did all the dietary laws, which said that many foods were unclean and had to be avoided, still apply to Christian believers? According to the Gospels, Jesus had definite pronouncements to make on both these key questions. Had Paul appealed to the Lord’s own views in the debates he engaged in through his letters?

In a long discussion in Romans 14 dealing with quarrels in Christian communities over what foods could be eaten, Paul had written: ‘I know and am convinced, as a man in Christ, that nothing is impure in itself.’ Nothing was said about Jesus’ own view. And yet the scene in Mark 7 clearly had Jesus declaring ‘all foods clean.’ He had accused the Pharisees of hypocrisy and told the people: ‘Nothing that goes into a man from outside can defile him.’ Shauna observed that it would have been impossible for Paul to have known of such a tradition and left it unsaid. We soon found that similar discussions about dietary restrictions in 1 Timothy and the Epistle of Barnabas, both as late as the early second century, also failed to draw on Jesus’ pronouncements.

Jesus’ Gospel view about the Law as a whole created a similarly perplexing picture. In Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was adamant that the Law had to be upheld:

‘Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away,

not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.’

And yet Paul had challenged the Law right and left. He believed it had been superceded. Observance of it was no longer required for salvation—only faith, faith in Christ Jesus, available to Jew and gentile alike. In Galatians 2 he lambasted Peter for refusing to eat with gentiles in common table fellowship. He rejected the necessity of circumcision for converts to Christ. For him, as he said in Galatians 3:23, mankind had been a pupil or even a prisoner in the custody of the Law until faith in Christ came, and now the Law had been abolished.

Shauna protested. “How could he possibly have preached such a thing in view of Jesus’ own words that not a dot of the Law could be abandoned? Didn’t anyone tell him?”

“Actually, you have a very good point. It seems impossible to believe that the other apostles would have neglected to let Paul know about this little detail, especially since it was a point of contention between them. But even more impossible is that his enemies among the apostles out in the missionary field wouldn’t have thrown it in his face.”

“Paul had enemies among the apostles?”

“Yes, although they don’t seem to have been from Peter’s group. Some of these other apostles wanted to stick to the letter of the Law. You can be sure if Jesus had said such a thing, they would have known it, and they would have used such words to condemn Paul for his disparagement of the Law. Yet Paul never seems to deal with any such challenge.”

“Does that mean Matthew made up Jesus’ words? Maybe it’s what he wanted to believe. Maybe he believed in maintaining the sanctity of the Law and invented a saying for Jesus which agreed with him.”

“That’s certainly possible. But if Matthew could simply invent words by Jesus on an issue as important as this, it’s going to be difficult to trust him on anything he puts into Jesus’ mouth—or any of the other evangelists.”

Shauna considered for a moment. “But surely *some* of their words have to be accurate. They have to be right that Jesus taught *something*.”

“Do they? Have we found a single reference in the New Testament epistles to the fact that Jesus taught such-and-such? For that matter, have we found anything saying that Jesus taught at all? Remember Romans 10, where Paul couldn’t even tell us that the Jews had rejected Jesus’ own preaching.”

Shauna still looked skeptical. “There must be something somewhere.”

As if to answer her challenge, a few minutes later these words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 appeared on the screen:

‘To the married I give this ruling, not I but the Lord, that the wife should not separate from her husband...and that the husband should not divorce his wife.’

A footnote compared this to a similar saying in Mark 10:11-12, though the Gospel wording was quite different and introduced the idea of adultery, which Paul had not. But the really informative comment attached to this passage was something else. The footnote read:

‘In addition to the many ‘echoes’ of Jesus’ sayings which scholars have detected in Paul, there are four occasions when Paul declares he has received instructions or information from the Lord himself. New Testament commentators call these citations ‘words of the Lord.’

Of the other three, one was a declaration a few chapters later that ‘the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.’ Another was a prophecy in 1 Thessalonians 4 about what would happen on the day the Lord arrived from heaven, while the last concerned the ‘Lord’s Supper’ in 1 Corinthians 11:23f when Jesus spoke the words over the bread and wine, a scene I had already earmarked for closer study.

The footnote went on to say that, while there was some debate on the matter, scholars had generally concluded that in all but the Supper scene, Paul was not quoting sayings of Jesus from his ministry. Rather, he was engaged in a practice common throughout early Christian preaching. Paul and his fellow charismatic missionaries of the Christ were relaying directives and revelations which they believed they had received directly from heaven, through inspiration, through visions and interpreting glossalalia (speaking in tongues), or simply through a study of scripture. A quote from the late American scholar Norman Perrin went so far as to admit that many of the sayings in the Gospels were originally of this nature, only later to be placed in Jesus’ mouth by the evangelists, and that few of the Gospel sayings could be relied on to be historical. Others admitted that Paul had no sense of Jesus as an ethical teacher, but saw himself as the mouthpiece for a Christ in heaven who operated on earth in the present time of faith, through God’s Spirit.

The footnote pointed to a couple of passages by way of illustration. One of these was 1 Corinthians 14:36-38:

‘Did the word of God originate with you? Are you the only ones it has reached? If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that what I am writing is also done by the Lord’s word.’

There was certainly little sense here of a missionary movement impelled by traditions about the teachings of Jesus. Paul’s world seemed to be one of inspiration and revelation directly from God—and a competitive one at that. Once again, the atmosphere created by the early documents, by the voices of those who had been the heart and soul of the apostolic generation, was curiously out of sync with the picture crafted by the later evangelists. And how much later was yet to be determined.

## 2

It was getting on toward midnight and we logged off the Web. I could see that the research for this book was going to cost me a bundle in Internet time charges. Shauna and I left the study and took up our usual semi-reclining position on the living room couch, a well-worn but comfortable item which served as the centerpiece of a not too coordinated decor. Shauna always said that since I lived so much in the past, my tastes for the present were somewhat indiscriminating.

It was late. But after our session before the cold, unforgiving computer screen with its impenetrable secrets, we both needed a more satisfying physical contact. The frustrations of that session, however, precluded any activity but talk. If anything, Shauna felt even more bewildered than I did.

“I don’t think you can understand what it’s like to live in the shadow of this great looming monolith that Christianity has been for 2000 years, especially when we’ve suffered

so much at its hands. I know that's mostly behind us today, but it wasn't really so long ago. My father had a few stories to tell of his experiences even in this country."

"And you've got long memories," I said gently.

"We had to. It's often the only thing that kept us going. Although I personally don't choose to dwell on those things. I'm quite happy with who I am today. But the thing about Christianity is that it's always been so secure and self-righteous in its certitude—this great power it possessed. Always the figure of Jesus towering over everything, like a personal blessing on everything Christians ever did. With Jesus standing over their shoulder, Christianity was a force we just couldn't escape. Now all of it seems so...mercurial. Everybody seems to be questioning everything, denying things Christians used to be so certain of. You've been looking closely at the record, and nothing seems to gel. It's like the traditional figure of Jesus is evaporating into the mist and nobody can see what's really there."

"That reminds me of a passage from one of Fisher's novels, but I won't look it up tonight."

Shauna said thoughtfully, "You know, the only time I visited Israel I was rather young, and it was around Passover. I never practiced religion much, as you know, but with Jews it's also a feeling of community, of taking part in things that go back so far and give you a clear sense of belonging and identity. But in Jerusalem at that time it seemed we were being inundated by Christian visitors for Easter. It was right after the '67 war, when all of the city had become ours. Even in our own capital, in a new country which had given us so much pride and strength, we couldn't get away from Christian presumptions. Even the sites in our own ancient city were being claimed as the foundations of Christian truth."

"And yet Jesus was a Jew," I reminded her. "Christianity grew out of Judaism."

"Yes, I know that's what they always say. But, you know, even though I don't know much about these things, I can instinctively grasp that that's not really right. I'm prepared to admit that Jesus himself wasn't the one responsible, but things got out of hand and what came out of it was definitely not Jewish."

"Well, I told you not so long ago that Greek ideas and precedents had as much to do with what Christianity became as anything Jewish. I think I'm going to have to start investigating in that direction very soon. My novel may be taking on dimensions I hadn't anticipated."

My old clock over the fireplace—the latter left cold now that winter was almost over—struck twelve. I thought of pumpkins and overstayed welcomes, of obsolete ideas that needed putting to rest.

As yet, Shauna showed no sign of wanting to leave. We snuggled closer and I said: "You were talking about Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem. That's another thing which is curiously absent from the New Testament epistles. Nobody ever goes there to visit the place where Jesus died. They never talk about Calvary, or even about the tomb where he was supposed to have risen from the dead. I couldn't find a single reference to any spot in Galilee or Jerusalem which anyone associated with Jesus. There don't seem to be any holy places at all."

"That's certainly odd. Jesus had to have died somewhere. You'd think such a place would have been turned into a shrine."

"You'd think so. Paul is always talking about Jesus' death. In Philippians he says something like, 'All I care about is knowing Christ, and sharing in his sufferings and

absorbing the power of his death and resurrection.’ When I read that, I had this image of Paul running to Calvary and embracing the ground where Christ had died, soaking up the power of his blood and sacrifice. Paul was a very mystical man, and emotional too. And yet in Galatians he says that after his conversion he didn’t go near Jerusalem for three years, and then he says that all he did there was get to know Peter. He stayed for only two weeks and didn’t see any of the other apostles except James. Then he went off and didn’t return there for another 14 years! So when did he visit Calvary—the very site of the world’s salvation? Are we supposed to think he had no interest in the place? He doesn’t bring it up once.”

“Maybe he did go, but didn’t mention it.”

“That’s extremely difficult to believe. Paul is always sharing personal emotions and experiences with his readers. It’s impossible to think that he went to Calvary and just never bothered to say so. That would have been an experience he would carry for the rest of his life. It should have come up at least some of the times he talked about the cross.”

“But if he talks about the cross, he must have the place in mind where that cross stood.”

“So why doesn’t he ever put it into words? Why would he never want to go there? And what about the tomb? Paul is always talking about Jesus’ resurrection. He looks forward to his own. He keeps assuring his readers that they will enjoy one, too. There’s a line in Romans that says we shall all share in Christ’s resurrection. Do you mean to tell me he never wanted to visit the tomb itself and see where this marvellous event happened? To strengthen his conviction that resurrection was indeed the Christian promise? Wouldn’t he talk about such an experience in his letters, his preaching?”

Shauna had no comment.

“And it’s not only Paul. None of them do. No epistle writer ever expresses the slightest desire to visit such places. Not Bethlehem where Jesus was born, or Nazareth where he grew up, or the places where he preached and worked miracles in Galilee. Paul seems to make an allusion to the Passover Supper, but he never goes there; he never visits the upper room where Jesus celebrated this sacrificial meal before he died. Nor does he ever go to Gethsemane, or even talk about it. That should have been a spot dear to Paul’s heart: Jesus racked by fears and doubts, facing death and seeking strength from God. That was a carbon copy of how Paul himself felt. He should have been drawn to the place like a magnet!

“When you think about it, all these places should have been irresistible to every early Christian. There isn’t a word anywhere about people coming from other centers to visit the scenes of Jesus’ life. No one wants to walk the ground he walked on, or handle the things he touched. Where are his clothes, his household utensils? He had to live somewhere, he had to eat and do the things we all do. There should have been a thousand relics circulating. Surely someone somewhere would have mentioned them.”

“What about pieces of the cross, or the shroud? I’ve heard of them.”

“Forgeries, more than likely. But the point is, they’re all later. No one mentions those kinds of things for at least a couple of hundred years. Where were they in the earlier period?”

From the touch of frustration in Shauna’s voice one would think I had been loosening the ground under a believer’s feet. “But the Gospels had to be based on *something*. Paul’s Jesus died *somewhere*, didn’t he? Have all those early Christians drifted off into some mystical world and taken Jesus with them?”

“You might not be too far from the truth.” I remembered Paul’s comment that it was the demon spirits who had crucified Jesus. But it was too late in the night to get into that.

“I’m beginning to hate this,” Shauna said with sudden, surprising vehemence. “So much for your precious history. If it’s so shaky, how can we learn anything from it? How can we know anything about it? We Jews are fixated on our own history. Is it just as shaky, too? I don’t want to embody so much of my identity in things that happened centuries or millennia ago. I don’t really care if we came out of Egypt, or who won some ancient battle. I want my identity to be based on what I am as a person now, in this body and this time. Why does everyone make such a big deal out of the past? Don’t they like living in the present? Don’t they like to make their judgments on what we can discover and do right now? I’m tired of being buried in old books. I’m tired of being read words somebody wrote ages and ages ago, somebody who never lived in my own time and couldn’t have had any idea of what it would be like. I’m tired of being told we have to do or be such-and-such because some hoary old words by some ancient mind are written down somewhere. I’ve got a mind of my own and I’m quite capable of using it, thank you very much.”

She sat up and gestured angrily, apparently in the direction of the past. “And now we look back into history and find out it’s nothing but a phantom. Everyone’s invested so much in it and it all collapses like a house of cards. Jesus never rose from the dead. Maybe we don’t even know where or how he died. Maybe Jews never celebrated a first Passover in Egypt. Maybe it’s all just a bunch of stories. When are we going to grow up and let it all go?”

She softened and looked apologetic. “I’m sorry. I know you’re so fascinated with the past and you’ve built your life’s work around it. But we can’t go there. It doesn’t exist any more. And maybe it’s doing us more harm than good to think that we can keep it alive.”

I looked at her, startled and a little humbled.

“It’s true that the human instinct has always been to tie ourselves to the past,” I said. “Myth is all about feeling that our very lifeline is tied to some sacred time and event. Not just in terms of identity, but as a kind of mystical force that literally keeps us alive—a tie to some symbolic womb. But we’ve been losing that, and losing it is a part of the process of growing up. Maybe we’re reaching adulthood and finally cutting the umbilical cord. Modern Christian research just wouldn’t have been possible twenty-five years ago. We wouldn’t have had the courage to cut the lifeline. And now we’re going through a struggle with those who still can’t summon the courage. But the thing is being cut, and we can’t reattach it.

“I guess I do have a fascination with the past, but the main reason is so that I can understand the world and where it’s coming from. I’m not afraid of what I might find out, and if it means I have to reevaluate everything and even revise my own identity, so be it. But I want to know the reality of the thing, not its mythical embodiment. I think I’ll be much richer and wiser for it.”

“Those are very worthy sentiments,” Shauna said in mollification. “I just wish there were some way to cut the lifeline without having most people drown before they get to the ‘richer and wiser’ part. But I don’t want you to think I’m not interested in your project. I’m really quite fascinated. Especially since I’m beginning to wonder how you’re going to handle it.”

“You’re not the only one.”

She snuggled back against me. “I’ll even come over any time you like and help you push some more buttons.”

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## Chapter Five

### 1

It had not been my intention to contact David any time soon, but the next morning he called from his office at the University and extended an invitation I couldn’t refuse. Things were coming together faster than he had anticipated, he said. Their fledgling campaign to promote rationality and secularism was to be given a modest birthing ceremony that Saturday evening at the country house of a newly-committed supporter, a wealthy gentleman I had only vaguely heard of. David referred to him wryly as a “philanthropist who dabbled in offbeat causes.” My expression must have gone out over the phone line, for he hastened to modify his flippant introduction to Burton Patterson.

“Actually, he made a fair name for himself in his younger days as a trial lawyer, specializing in civil rights cases. Then he got into the money business and switched to supporting such issues from outside the courtroom. Somebody put him on to me only last week and I had my first meeting with him the day after I saw you. It’s been a flurry ever since. The group has actually decided on a focus issue—or two—and even a rough plan of action. We’re going to make a formal announcement on Saturday.”

“You mean to the media?” I asked, a little surprised.

“Oh, no—although we’ve invited a columnist from the Times we hope may give us some favorable coverage down the road. No, this is really an ‘in house’ thing. A bit of self-indulgence on our part to get things formally under way. And it’s something to get Patterson officially on board. There’ll be about four dozen of us there, mostly from this area of the country, though there’s a couple coming in from the west coast.”

I had misgivings on one score. “If you don’t mind me asking, why are you inviting me to be a part of this select company?”

I may only have imagined the hesitation. “Well, part of it is sentimental. I still remember us jawing away far into the night in our younger days about issues like religion and rationality and where the world was going. I still think you’ve got a creative mind and you don’t deal with academics every day, so you might bring a broader view to things. Let’s just say that studying history and writing novels is a promising combination.”

After a promo like that, I wouldn’t have been likely to refuse, but I pretended to accept on one condition. “If you’ll give me a few minutes of your time to discuss some questions on ancient philosophy. I can use some help in my Jesus research.”

David said he would go one better and forewarn a female colleague who would be at the Saturday gathering, a specialist in the philosophy and civilization of the ancient world, something that was not really his own forte. That clinched it for me and I promised to attend—that and the fact that I was invited to bring along a companion. I had been feeling guilty of late at my lack of imagination in outings with Shauna. My creativity seemed to extend only to my work.

The coming event gave the next three days of my research a carefully selective focus. I needed to give myself a crash course in certain aspects of ancient world religious thinking. One of the things which had struck me in my reading thus far was the sense of puzzlement many felt concerning a central feature in the early development of Christianity. There were few scholars anywhere who had not addressed the question of the amazing transformation which Jesus underwent so soon after his death. It is one thing for followers to see divinity in a respected master, or to lionize him in such a direction after his passing. It's another to deify him on the scale to which Jesus was ensconced in heaven at the very right hand of the Father, especially after his mission on earth had ended in such apparently ignominious failure.

One book I consulted, *Paul and Jesus*, put it this way:

'No one who examines the Gospels...and then reads the epistles of Paul can escape the impression that he is moving in two entirely different spheres....When Paul writes of Jesus as the Christ, historical and human traits appear to be obscure, and Christ appears to have significance only as a transcendent divine being.' On the next page the author, Herman Ridderbos, went on to ask: 'Jesus was not dead the length of a human lifetime before his stature was not only infinitely increased, but also entirely changed. How did this come about?'

This infinite increase in stature was usually referred to as the "mythologizing" of Jesus, the practice of investing him with features which belonged exclusively to deities in the spiritual realm. Several asked the question why Jesus of Nazareth, an historical person, would have been portrayed entirely in mythological terms.

One feature, for example, was the idea that Jesus had been pre-existent. That is, he had been with God in heaven before his life on earth; in fact, he had been with God from the very beginning, sharing in part of God's nature, before the world had been created. The passage beginning in Colossians 1:15 called Jesus 'the image of the invisible God, born before all creation, (in whom) the complete being of the Godhead dwelled.' Many were the scholars who had expressed astonishment that any Jew, let alone a whole movement of them, could have raised a fellow Jew to such a lofty position beside their ancestral God, that they could have called him the 'Son of God' in a literal sense.

Jesus had also been given a role in creation. The same passage in Colossians declared that in Jesus 'everything in heaven and on earth was created, and all things are held together in him.' In Hebrews, the Son was said to sustain the universe 'by his word of power'. One had to wonder at the capability of the mind of the first century to turn a humble Jewish preacher into the principle of cosmic coherence!

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:6, had styled Jesus a figure 'through whom all things came to be and we through him.' Certain liturgical hymns quoted by Paul and others had cast Jesus as a divinity descending from the realm of God through the layers of heaven, communing with angels and subjugating the demon spirits who inhabited the lower celestial spheres.

But what scholars focused on most, and with the greatest perplexity, was the fact that all the divine titles for God were applied virtually immediately to someone who had been, in the public perception, a crucified criminal. Even the most ancient and sacred title for God, 'Lord', had been applied to Jesus by Paul and others without the slightest discomfort. How could such an elevation have been effected so soon, and within a milieu that would have

made it virtually unthinkable? I thought of Shauna's comment—her instinct, really—that there was something very un-Jewish about Christianity. And yet, most of the early Christians were Jews. Christianity, to judge by the record, had originated in the very heart of Israel, out of the experiences of ordinary Jews in Jerusalem. How could such Jews have created something which would have astonished—indeed, horrified—their monotheistic brethren everywhere; something which ran so counter to the longstanding obsession of the Jewish mind to keep separate all things divine from all things human? The Jewish God could not be represented by even the suggestion of a human image. A whole society had literally bared its neck before Pilate's swords to protest against Roman standards, which bore human images, being mounted upon the fortress wall overlooking the Temple. Perhaps an even greater dimension to the mystery: how did the first Jewish Christians achieve such explosive success in spreading this unorthodox creation to virtually all corners of the empire within a handful of years?

Such an elevation of a human man was, to my knowledge, unprecedented anywhere, at any time. There had to be some explanation for the phenomenon on this occasion, and I refused to believe that it lay in an actual resurrection in flesh as the Gospels portrayed it. I was in good company, for the progressive Christian scholars who postulated this deification didn't believe in such an event either. Their reasoning, however, that after the execution of Jesus, the disciples ran to the scriptures and ransacked them for passages which could illuminate the 'meaning' of what they had witnessed in the ministry and death of their master, reading into such things his cosmic deification, did not have the ring of reality to it. In any case, they would have had to consult a far wider range of sources, for much of what was made of Jesus smacked of broader ancient world mythology and philosophy. Who would have done all this, and why?

And what of the accompanying "loss of interest" (the usual scholarly rationalization) in the life and human features of the very man they had just elevated, as witnessed by the total silence about that human life in all the early epistles? The two aspects of this puzzle did not appear logically compatible. If one elevated a man to Godhead, why would one lose all interest in his human life? Surely that life would undergo the closest examination, to illustrate and celebrate that divinity. The presence of the very Son of God on earth, living and teaching and performing miracles among men and women, many of whom still lived during Paul's time and would have possessed vivid, compelling memories of him: this would surely have resulted in the prizing and revering of that divine life in humanity's midst, not its relegation to some forgotten closet for close to a century.

No explanation for this bizarre development seemed possible. Besides, turning a man into God would have been so unprecedented, so blasphemous to the Jewish mind, that Christians would have found themselves engaged in a continual defence of the doctrine, requiring constant focus on the human man. No, some element had to be missing from this baffling picture.

I spoke to Shauna that evening and relayed David's invitation. She seemed genuinely excited at the prospect though, as always, brought her own irrepressible wit to the moment.

"I hope you told him that I probably don't meet his rationality requirements. After all, I know very little about philosophy prior to John Lennon, and I have occasionally been known to avoid walking under ladders. I'm likely to blurt out something completely inappropriate."

“In that case, I’d better bring my muzzle. I don’t want you to embarrass me in front of that distinguished company.” Actually, Shauna usually shone on such occasions. She could be quite voluble in social settings, and her pragmatic opinions were often delivered with subtle acuity. One of the ties that bound me to her was that she could be endlessly fascinating in an understated way.

But two more days of steady reading were to intervene before the occasion itself. I had occasionally tackled the subject of ancient religion when researching previous novels, but never in such depth and not for the time of Jesus. By the first century CE, Greek philosophy had left behind the literal acceptance of the Olympian mythology of gods and goddesses and was now focusing on a deeper religious quest: understanding the nature of the ultimate high God and how humans related to this Deity and the divine realm he inhabited. Formulating a system of ethics was also of primary concern.

These were the developments of the Hellenistic age, after Alexander had turned the eastern Mediterranean world upside down and established an uneasy mix of Greek and older conquered cultures. The times had been destabilized. War was frequent among the several kingdoms which emerged from the breakup of Alexander’s short-lived empire, until Rome rolled over most of them in the first century BCE and imposed its own brand of absolute rule. There was much pessimism in many circles and the destruction of old ways of faith and collective state religion. Instead, ‘salvation’ of the individual became the new preoccupation, the new buzzword. And it was a salvation *from* the world. The flight of the mystic became the religious yearning of the age: ‘To leave this earth, to fly to heaven, to be like unto the Gods and partake of their bliss.’

The Olympian myths were now regarded as only primitive reflections of the true reality. The ultimate God was an absolute being, the highest form of spiritual existence, pure mind. In ways which varied from philosophic school to school, he had caused the universe to be created. To some, he was a principle operating within the world, virtually abstract; to others he lay entirely outside it, completely transcendent.

But a transcendent God didn’t do the world much good if he couldn’t have contact with it. If he became so lofty and perfect—as the philosophers had increasingly made him—unable to approach the inferior world of matter, he needed a subordinate, a deputy, an ambassador to fill that role. But in a monotheistic setting, this intermediary figure had to be a part of the ultimate God himself, an emanation from him. He became part of the “workings” of Deity, part of the construction of the spiritual world. In some parlance, he became a Son.

For this role of intermediary, the Greeks created the “Logos”, an abstract divine force operating on and in the world. The Logos was a widespread concept among the Greek philosophies, variously interpreted. It would seem that part of the interpretation of Jesus had been along the lines of the Greek Logos, an intermediary force between God and humanity. The Gospel of John, in its stirring Prologue, cast Jesus as the Logos made flesh, and some scholars said that Paul’s Jesus was the Logos without the name—and more personalised. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria preceded Paul and had a Logos as an integral part of his hybrid mix of Jewish and Greek philosophy. In him, there seemed to be echoes of Christ before Christ.

Yet I had to ask myself why disciples of Jesus would ever get the idea that their master was the embodiment of the Logos, an abstract force and an essentially foreign concept. And

why would anyone have responded to such a bizarre message? The question of who had actually come up with this interpretation also loomed large, for the simple fishermen apostles of the Gospels hardly seemed likely candidates. Was it Paul's doing? He would surely have come into conflict with the simpler views of Jesus among the Jerusalem group, yet there wasn't a hint of any clash with them over the fundamental nature of Jesus.

If the question of casting Jesus in the mold of the Greek Logos was an unlikely and puzzling development, perhaps another way of interpreting him lay closer to home. Scholars had long pointed out that Jesus was viewed by some early Christians as the embodiment of Judaism's own version of the Logos, a figure known as personified Wisdom. Wisdom was a she (since the word in Hebrew was feminine), and was first developed as a poetic personification of the divine word, the voice of God communicating with the world through scripture and the prophets. This knowledge of God was "wisdom" to the Jews, and it became an aspect of the Deity.

Among Jewish scribes in the centuries after the return from Babylon, Wisdom took on the nature of a distinct entity, a separate divine being who was seen as an emanation of God. The Jewish wisdom teachers portrayed her in Old Testament books like Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus as coming to earth—though not in any physical incarnation—calling men and women and inviting them to knowledge of God. She became a frequent figure in Jewish writings outside the bible as well. For certain Jews to conceive that Jesus was Wisdom come to earth in the flesh was perhaps not inconceivable, though the sex change seemed problematic. On the other hand, no Jewish sect of the time could ever have made a woman into God.

Perhaps on some of these questions I could sound out the specialist David had spoken of who would be attending the Saturday launch of—what? I realized I had forgotten to ask him what the group had decided to call itself. It had surely settled on a name if it was ready to emerge from the womb. No doubt the baptismal ceremony would be a part of the proceedings.

## 2

Shauna and I arrived at the country estate of Burton Patterson about four in the afternoon of the first Saturday in April. The place lay some 15 miles outside the city, and off the beaten highway. The setting was impressive amid low, newly-greening hills, but something about the placement of the main house said that its designer was in love with light. Tall pines on one side of the structure gave an area of shade to one of the terraces, but the towering trees seemed principally to serve as an architectural device, creating a skyline from the vantage point of the long driveway which pulled the viewer up into the stratosphere and drowned him in a sun-drenched blue. Elsewhere, the structure gleamed and sparkled, even in this late afternoon, and all its surfaces seemed designed to catch the light of any hour and season.

A valet whisked my car off to some hidden parking area and we approached the front entrance. The doors stood open. An attendant flanked one side, checking names against a guest list. Inside the doorway, skylights which were not evident from the driveway allowed streams of light to illuminate a foyer of subtle colors and adornments. Light obviously had some special significance for Burton Patterson.

We were directed to a large reception room, already crowded, on one side of the house—or manor, as Shauna later chose to call it. Nothing I was to see that day could be labelled overtly ostentatious, but this was obviously a man of considerable wealth and taste to match. As we were handed cocktails I hastened to remind Shauna that Burton Patterson was said to contribute a significant amount of his wealth to worthy causes.

“And he made all this from civil rights litigation?”

“Oh, no.” I had neglected to recount everything David had told me. “That was before he got into making money—at what, I have no idea.”

There were perhaps three dozen people in the room. Glass doors on the far side led into some inner court, again with light gaining access from above, though at this time of day and in early spring the effect was subdued. Strains of Vivaldi drifted in from somewhere, possibly the courtyard itself. I felt the composer of choice was no accident. Vivaldi had always impressed me as full of light.

Shauna and I were shamelessly eyeing the surroundings, and so we didn’t notice David until he stood at my elbow.

“Don’t let this place throw you,” he said in an almost apologetic tone. “I haven’t sold my soul. Burton actually sought us out. We found we had a lot in common—except this, of course.” He gestured wryly around the premises.

“You mean you couldn’t afford this on a philosophy professor’s salary?”

“No, but philosophy has its own rewards, my dear boy.”

“Yes, I understand mountain tops are going pretty cheap, these days.” David and I used to have a habit of indulging in chains of repartee, not all of it clever, but at this point I realized I was a whisker away from a *gaucherie* I might not have lived down for the duration of the evening. My haste was just perceptible as I turned to Shauna and made introductions.

David seemed quite prepared to find Shauna engaging, and he hovered a little closer to her than to me as we were led about the room and introduced to some of the other guests. Most were in couples. All of them had an academic look. I did not yet fully comprehend what ambitions he had for his little enterprise, but if he had any hope of creating a popular movement, or of appealing to popular tastes (could one create a popular taste for rationality? I wondered), he was going to have to broaden his image. However, one had to start somewhere, and this was his milieu.

Shauna and I had a little game we played in situations like this. Perhaps I should have said that the game was really hers: she had all the moves. Whenever we were introduced in strange gatherings and I was identified as the novelist Kevin Quinter, if anyone claimed that they had read one of my books, I was given a surreptitious nudge; if the actual title was produced it became a real poke. If the other guest gave no sign of ever having heard of me, Shauna very gently cleared her throat or gave a just audible sigh. She always informed me of the tally at the end of the evening in case I had lost count.

It was two sighs to nothing by the time David introduced us to one of his colleagues at the University, a science professor of some sort. The man struck me as one who would certainly not put up with irrational theories in any of his classes. On being told my name and occupation, he narrowed his eyes and ruminated, “Quinter...Quinter... Didn’t you write *The Pharaoh’s Chronicler*? I seem to recall it was a good novel. I like a lot of that ancient stuff. Good escapism, but very evocative and thought-provoking at the same time.”

As I thanked him I was aware that Shauna was standing almost on the other side of David and would have had to reach across him to deliver her poke. My mind knew she wasn't likely to do it, but my body gave a little sideways twitch just out of habit. I hoped that would satisfy her.

It was perhaps 15 minutes and a few mini-conversations before we reached the host. He was standing in a knot of five or six people, including two striking women, and I had been occasionally glancing about to see if I could spot a likely candidate for the role of philanthropist and owner of these fair premises. When I was finally brought before him I was taken aback, for he was considerably younger than I had envisioned him, probably around my own age. He was a tall man, just over six feet, somewhat lean of limb, with a head of light brown hair that was almost unruly. His face was full, sporting a square jaw that could not have made it other than handsome, but his nose, though it dropped solid and straight from top to tip, was angled a little to one side. This gave him a noticeably different countenance depending on one's angle of view.

For some reason David, in introducing Shauna and myself to Burton Patterson, referred to me only as a "writer" rather than his usual term of "novelist". This might have led to a question seeking elucidation, but instead Patterson said somewhat expansively, "Ah, our chronicler of great events." It registered on me that this was an intriguing piece of ambiguity. It could be a capsule description of my actual profession, for historical novelists usually did just that in their own way. On the other hand, he could well have had something else in mind, a more immediate role for someone with writing talents. Perhaps his wasn't the only mind present with the same thought.

But I had no time to work out deeper meanings, and in my haste to fill the gap in a growing silence, I blurted out: "Your house is quite striking. You seem to have a thing about light."

Patterson turned fully toward Shauna and me, or perhaps it was the dramatic nose that faced Shauna while I had a more plebeian view.

"Yes, I relish the light. We need to seek it out wherever we can, and nurture it. There are too many who would block the sun and deliver us all to darkness." Somehow, off Patterson's lips the pronouncement was not at all pompous, and I reminded myself that he had been a trial lawyer, championing, of course, only the worthiest of causes. Besides, everyone listening would have accepted the sentiment as a pithy comment on the purpose of the gathering. I almost congratulated myself on having set it up for him.

But I had no time to do so, for Shauna unexpectedly interjected: "Wasn't it Diogenes the Cynic who asked Alexander the Great to step aside, since he was blocking the light?"

Patterson turned the full force of a powerful smile on her. "Yes, it was. Alexander had offered to give the testy old philosopher anything he desired when he encountered him sitting by the side of the road. Diogenes chose not to have his light cut off."

Shauna gave the briefest of glances about her and remarked ingenuously, "Of course, that was *all* he wanted."

Inwardly I gave a groan. I knew Shauna well enough to realize she was just being her usual gadfly self, someone who couldn't stand to see anyone take themselves too seriously. She could never resist a clever dig when the opportunity presented itself. But I wondered how others would interpret her not so subtle allusion.

I didn't dare look at David, but Patterson himself showed no sign of taking offense, and he didn't miss a beat. With a laugh that acknowledged the 'touché', he said: "The problem is, dear Lady, no one these days would listen much to a grubby old Cynic who lived in an earthenware tub and scowled at everyone who passed by. We expect our wise men and women to achieve a certain degree of success. And modesty is only a sign of insecurity."

He was giving Shauna a look I recognized, for I'd seen it more than once. Shauna with her sharp wit and engaging spirit could be intensely attractive to some men. When one added the sparkle in two slightly but intriguingly mismatched eyes, I was convinced that Burton Patterson was on the verge of taking a tumble.

Before I could do or say anything foolish, David diverted the attention of the room by announcing: "All right, ladies and gentlemen, I think it's time we got these proceedings under way."

There was an unobtrusive dais emerging from one corner of the room. It might have been used for a small band on occasions when dancing was on the menu, but here a microphone had been set up. David took his stand behind it and looked out over almost fifty faces. These were of various ages, more male than female, but they all seemed subtly compatible. The atmosphere was easy and animated.

"Most of you know why we're here today. What I've been proposing and what many of us have been working on over the last few months may seem ambitious or even presumptuous. Some might call it foolhardy. But I don't think any of us in our profession have not been dismayed at some time or other by the many manifestations of irrationality in the world around us. Our society prides itself on its science, its technology. Everyone reaps the benefits of applied rationality—indeed, we couldn't live without it. But somehow our personal beliefs have not always kept pace. Today we live in a strange melange of scientific and pre-scientific mindsets, of reasonable and unreasonable tenets. The same mentality that can perform mathematical calculations and understand how computers and cameras and space shuttles work may also believe in angels and alien abductions, or that the earth is only 6000 years old. The problem is that irrationality can be like a virus; it infects the healthier tissue and may even jeopardize its survival. We've all seen that in the classroom, and we see it in the technological workforce which is regularly compromised by certain forms of scientific illiteracy and superstition.

"The other problem is that so many of these irrational expressions are tied up with religion, and religion as you know is not just dogmatic, it is backed by forces which are often systematically attempting to impose their dogmatism on society as a whole. And the further we move toward secularism and scientific rationality—and we are doing just that, make no mistake about it—the harder these forces fight to buck the trend.

"Where are we headed? I honestly don't know. We all like to think that progress moves linearly, that despite temporary setbacks or delays, the development of reason and science and humanistic philosophies moves forward, that there is no going back. But of that we have no guarantees, as history has shown us time and again, and I guess what I've been proposing is that we try to do something to ensure that the progress will continue. We need to start today to work for and reach an 'Age of Reason'."

David had slowed down on his last sentence and now I realized that he was letting those final three words hang in the air. I knew before he told us that this was to be the name of the new enterprise.

“Age of Reason. In many respects, of course, we have already reached it. In many respects we’ve been there for some time. But my own experience in the classroom, and it’s supported by many I’ve spoken to, leads me to think we may be slipping. And so our focus group has decided that we should direct our energies, to begin with, on two key areas.

“One, not unnaturally, is the field of education. We need to ensure that the younger generation will indeed reach an Age of Reason in their own lives and their own thinking. Conservative forces have been gaining too much influence in education, especially at the High School level. Censorship is rampant and science is being castrated by opposition to certain subjects, especially the teaching of evolution. Since the theory of evolution is one of the cornerstones of modern science and affects so many disciplines, we are in danger of creating an epidemic of scientific illiteracy through the suppression of evolution in our schools and textbooks. Teachers are increasingly reluctant even to bring up the subject for fear of conservative backlash. The push to have so-called Creation Science added to the curriculum is on the rise once more and must be resisted. Unfortunately, these forces are like the many-headed Hydra—no matter how many times you cut off their efforts, they keep coming back. Opposition to Creation Science and the promotion of evolution is going to be a high profile feature of our campaign to bring an Age of Reason to the classroom.

“To that end—as well as to many others—I’m pleased to announce that we’ve had someone come on board who will bring a lot of personal commitment and expertise to this subject. Those of you familiar with Mr. Burton Patterson’s background will know that he has had considerable experience in civil rights litigation and even anti-fundamentalist cases. He’ll be invaluable to us in mounting opposition to the suppression of established scientific knowledge in the field of education.”

There was more than polite applause throughout the room, which our host graciously acknowledged. Some of the applause may also have been motivated by the fact that Patterson’s contribution was to be a financial one as well. Still, the impact of such a figure on the group’s profile would be invaluable, and David had scored a real coup in bringing him in, even if Patterson himself had initiated the contact. It crossed my mind to wonder if he might have his own unspoken agenda.

David resumed after the applause died down. “I’ll be giving you all a fuller report on the details of our plans, of course, but let me go on to mention the other focus we’ve decided upon. As you all know, there’s a little division in time coming up on the horizon, as arbitrary as these things may be. We’re already seeing manifestations of irrationality in connection with it, and you can be sure there’s more to come. But on the positive side, a new millennium could be a golden opportunity. We know the spotlight the media are already starting to give this event. There’s no reason why we shouldn’t be able to grab some of it, promoting the new era as an Age of Reason. We’re already pushing ahead with the organization of our Symposium on Rationality for the early part of the year 2000, and we’ve got a few other ideas up our sleeves.”

As David went on, I couldn’t help feeling impressed at the scope of the proposal being put forward. But I found it hard to believe that a handful of academics could really create a movement that would have a significant influence. Could they rescue the educational

system from the clutches of the fundamentalists? Would any voice of rationality be heard amid the circus that the turn of the millennium was already promising to be? When I glanced at Shauna, she gave me a little smile which might have meant anything.

There were questions from the floor, some of which David answered directly, while others were deferred to the inaugural publication which the Age of Reason Foundation—for that was to be the official name of the organization—was preparing for circulation. A few voices urged that other items be put on the agenda. I realized that there would be no shortage of issues to gain the Foundation's attention, nor minds to tackle them. Perhaps, after all, one could believe that a great thirst for rational thinking did exist out there, and that it could be harnessed to achieve something new and productive as the great divide of the next millennium was reached in only a few years' time. Perhaps the transition from medieval to modern times, whose first stirrings I had experienced as a boy, was finally to reach maturity.

The formalities over, the gathering was invited to move from the reception room into the inner courtyard. The place reminded me a little of a Roman atrium, but lacking any ancient statuary or colonnades. Instead, a variety of simple, clean-lined structures which might have been viewed as sculptures or simply as architectural features broke up the area. Some of them served as benches. The space was almost equal to the reception room itself but possessed a greater sense of intimacy, and it stood open to the sky. On all but one side the walls rose through two storeys and slanted roofs; on the fourth, the upper reaches of the pines could be seen over a lower segment of the house, reaching into the blue. Even though I was sure the occasion itself and the sentiments expressed were influencing my thoughts, I felt that the tenor of everything I had seen of the surroundings Burton Patterson had created for himself spoke of a sophisticated, questing mind, open to a world that held endless fascination and no terrors.

Within the court the company broke up into loose groups. Four stringed musicians were ensconced in one corner, and their music drifted unobtrusively over the next hour or two through Vivaldi, Corelli and other masters of the Italian Baroque. Our less artistic appetites were fed from trays of finger food along with the serving of further drinks. I reflected that the cocktail party had to be one of the great inventions of modern society—and one of its most rational, of course.

Whether by accident or design, our host remained with a little knot of people which included Shauna and me. Burton Patterson occasionally took in Shauna with his smile as he made a point to the group, but he showed no overt effort to engage her in personal conversation. In fact, somewhat to my surprise, he eventually worked his way into a one-on-one with me. Shauna, I noticed, eventually drifted out of the circle to another area of the courtyard.

"When I was a boy I read historical novels voraciously," Patterson confided, showing that he knew of my literary specialty, probably from David. "It was my ambition to be an archeologist and dig up ancient cities. I like investigating roots. I like to imagine someone like me living at some previous time and how he would cope and make a life for himself. It makes one appreciate what we've been through to get to our present stage of progress—and how determined we should be not to lose it."

My estimation of Burton Patterson had quite naturally soared at this. Had David been aware of what we had in common?

“And what happened to those boyhood ambitions?” I asked. “Or did you spend time in the sands of some ancient tell before you went into law?”

“Nothing so romantic, I’m afraid. I think I heard the lure too soon of fame and fortune. I saw that such things were not likely to be had by spending my days on my knees, digging in the earth. But I still haven’t lost my fascination for the past. I admire people like you who can bring it to life for the rest of us.”

“And who have you read?” It was the most subtle way I could think of to find out if he was familiar with any of my own novels.

“Oh, I haven’t read too much since my younger years. None of yours, I’m afraid. Those days people like Mary Renault were the rage—all her novels about ancient Greece and Alexander, which I’m sure you know. And Zoe Oldenbourg on the medieval Crusades was a favorite. Her stories about the beginnings of the Inquisition in France had quite an emotional impact on me. I would even say they stirred my first passion to champion free speech and free thought. Those who would literally burn you in the name of correct belief have been an ever present danger and they are still with us, unfortunately. She brought that home to me very vividly.”

“Yes,” I agreed. “Oldenbourg could communicate a sense of indignation and profound tragedy at the folly of fanaticism. Her *Cities of the Flesh* was one of the pivotal books of my life.”

Patterson nodded enthusiastically. It was always amazing to me how a simple subject in common could grease the wheels of human communication.

“You knew she was an historian as well?” I asked. “On the Crusades to the Holy Land as well as the one against the Albigensian heresy in France.”

“I believe I did, although I haven’t read her histories. But I would imagine the demands for research on any good historical novelist are quite immense.”

I nodded in agreement, but before I could act on my impulse to find out what he might think of my current project, Patterson stopped me short with his next remark.

“But there was one novelist whom I admired very greatly. The range of his research must have been more extensive than just about anyone else in the field. Are you by chance familiar with Vardis Fisher?”

I almost dropped my drink. “Do you know,” I blurted, “that you are the first non-writer I’ve encountered these days who knows Fisher? He had a promising career in the 1930s as a contemporary novelist before he got some kind of bug and decided to write the historical novel series to end them all. The difficulties and opposition he faced were tremendous. How much of the Testament of Man have you read?”

“I think all but the one on the matriarchal phase, which I had difficulty finding. But I still remember the day I discovered him. I read the first book in the series in the space of about six hours: *Darkness and the Deep*. I’d never encountered any novel that tried to recreate the dawn of intelligence in the human mind two million years ago. Absolutely fascinating.”

“Yes, and he did it without a stick of dialogue, since this was before language. It was before fire and tools and hunting. The most primitive concepts and emotions were just beginning to emerge. Life was stark and violent. And yet somehow Fisher managed to create a sense of exhilaration in the reader.”

Patterson made a wry expression over the lip of his glass. “Well, it would depend on your philosophy, of course. The Creationists would have hated it. All those processes of nature and life and instinct groping and evolving automatically, as though some cosmic switch had been thrown and the whole thing left unattended. That’s the gut feeling I was left with. It’s all been a blind search for intelligence and understanding. We’re still emerging from our own ignorance, trying to understand our own nature. That may be a scary picture for some people, but personally I find it inspiring—and exhilarating, as you say.”

“Did you know that Fisher’s original publisher abandoned him when he reached the biblical era? Fisher drew on the most progressive scholars of his day for his research, and when he wrote his novel on Solomon around 1950 he didn’t pull any punches in shattering the myth of early Jewish monotheism and the integrity of the biblical record. Reviewers denounced him right and left, and the regular publishers wouldn’t touch him. Fisher pressed on and finally found a brave soul in Alan Swallow of Denver.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“I’ve taken one of my own mottos from Fisher, that dogma must not rule history—or historical fiction. He showed that many of the Genesis legends were derived from Mesopotamia, and many Hebrew ideas and laws were based on Egyptian antecedents. No writer working in the medium of popular fiction had ever done that sort of thing before, and he suffered for it. His books never reached the audience he hoped for, and he died in obscurity.”

“When was that, do you know?”

“I believe it was in 1969.”

“Well, we owe a lot to a few brave souls throughout history. The great bulk of mankind has been quite content to perpetuate what they’ve been taught and not to question. But I have a feeling the organism’s gene for questioning has been coming to the fore lately. We may be on the verge of an age of reason after all.”

I had begun to notice in speaking with Burton Patterson that he displayed a habit of angling himself before a listener a little to the right, and that he would look at the person before him at an equal angle toward the left. This meant that their view of his nose was straight on. I reflected that the organism’s gene for vanity was certainly alive and well in even the most enlightened of us, and had probably been so for even Fisher’s time span.

Proving my point, I once more tried to steer the subject toward my own current project. “And what did you feel about the novel on Jesus in the Testament? As always, Fisher could be unorthodox.”

Patterson hesitated and knit his brows in the faintest of scowls. “As I recall, that one I may have been a little disappointed with. I always envisioned Jesus as a dynamic fellow who knew exactly what he was doing. When you’re trying to shake up society’s basic outlooks, you can’t pussyfoot around.”

It suddenly struck me that the man was doing just what everyone else for 2000 years had done to the hapless Jewish rabbi: cast him in their own image or the image that most suited their purposes. It had begun, if the scholars were to be believed, with the very first response to him when his corpse was scarcely cold. Jesus was the classic chameleon who changed his spots with each new situation, not at his own will, but at the will of those who had claimed him for their own. What could the original man have been to produce such an astonishing reaction and yet one which created so much confusion and uncertainty?

To Patterson I simply said, “It’s not quite so easy to determine just exactly what Jesus was like or what he was trying to do. I’m finding it difficult to get a handle on him myself.”

“This would be the novel you’re working on?” David had given him a thorough report on me, from the look of it.

“Yes. The record is maddeningly frustrating. Nothing outside the Gospels tells us anything about the man.”

“Why not use the Gospels, then?”

“Because they’re so tendentious. The evangelists have created the Jesus they want to believe in. John and the Synoptics are incompatible, they display an entirely different Jesus: different teachings, different miracles, a completely different philosophy of salvation. Who are we to trust? Can we trust anyone?”

“There must be some sort of kernel one can rely on.”

“If there is, it’s proving extraordinarily difficult to identify it.”

I was struck by the similarity of response between Patterson and Shauna. Even without a vested personal interest in the founder of the Western world’s 2000-year-old faith, the normal reaction was one of incredulity that even the basic knowledge about Jesus stood on such shaky ground. “He lived at the time of Herod, he died at someone’s hand, and somebody soon after his death made him into a god. That’s about it.” I decided not to go into the fact that even this basic information was impossible to pin down from the non-Gospel record.

“Are you leading Mr. Patterson back into your dim, forgotten past?” Shauna had come up beside me and laid her hand on my arm. “Everyone here’s looking toward the future. And a fascinating future it promises to be.”

“Do I detect a note of skepticism?” Patterson asked, subtly turning his head to present the optimum angle to Shauna.

“I don’t know. I generally tend to feel that people do things when they’re ready to, not when others attempt to persuade or shame them into it.” Again, I knew that Shauna was not in any way antagonistic to what had been announced today. She simply had a bit of the devil’s advocate in her and besides, she liked to tease.

“But perhaps they *are* ready,” Patterson rejoined. “I would like to think that we are simply giving a voice to the spirit of the times. Many people believe as we do but don’t realize that such beliefs are widespread, that so many of their neighbors think as they do. I can’t believe that teaching our children that this great and intricate universe was built practically yesterday by a deity who also flooded the earth shortly afterward to wipe out too much fornication, or turned women into salt for being curious, or stopped the sun in its tracks to enable his followers to slaughter more of the natives they were stealing the land from—I can’t believe that’s what the majority of the people of this country who are eagerly awaiting the third millennium really want. I believe they’re ready to move on and leave such childish notions behind. They just need someone to speak out for them and put their aspirations into words.”

After a pause that hung in the air, Shauna nodded and said in a tone close to earnestness: “Well, perhaps yours will be the effective voice they need.” I could tell she wished to allay any misgivings that she was not in sympathy with the sentiments that had been expressed on this beautiful spring day in these invigorating surroundings. Burton Patterson, with his mellifluous tone and his charismatic demeanor, had carried everyone within earshot into

visions of an idyllic era of reason, so that there was not a soul of us standing about who did not eagerly await the arrival of the new dawn.

“Oh—Kevin.” Shauna turned to me suddenly and broke the spell. “There’s a woman over there who seems quite anxious to speak with you. She says David mentioned you were interested in discussing some matters of ancient philosophy. I offered to relay them to you, but she must have felt I was too mired in the 20th century.” Shauna had slipped once more into her teasing manner and gave me a good-natured poke. I assumed it was the one she had missed out on earlier, but she confided in a half-whisper, “Miss Lawrence her name is. She told me she had actually read one of your books, title and all.”

Patterson spoke up and offered to free me from my attachment to his entourage if Shauna would take my place. Shauna agreed and I was dismissed to the edges of the courtyard and the company of Miss Lawrence to discuss ancient philosophy.

It turned out to be one of the most stimulating conversations I’d had in a long time. Sylvia Lawrence was the direct opposite of Shauna, tall and seemingly ill at ease in a somewhat oversized body, pale and almost prim, yet with a quiet energy that pulled one in to her. She seemed to have so much going on in her mind at once that one could get a little dizzy witnessing its workings.

Most conversations on Greek philosophy seemed to take as their starting-point the great rivalry between Plato and Aristotle, and ours proved no exception. After a mutual introduction and opening gambit, Sylvia Lawrence had this to say about rationality in the ancient world:

“Aristotle was the first real man of science, in that he based so much of his philosophy on actual observation. He didn’t quite have a theory of ‘experimentation’—nobody in the ancient world did, to speak of—but at least he tried to let an empirical study of the world around him govern his conclusions. Which is not to say that he didn’t get a lot of things skewed because of prejudice and established beliefs—such as his view of women.”

I hastened to agree that modern enlightenment on the equality of the sexes had been a long time coming.

“But he had the sense to see that Plato’s view was probably wrong. You know the classic Platonic philosophy, of course, which says that all things in the material world of the senses we live in are really imperfect copies of eternally existing ‘Ideas’ or spiritual forms in the upper world of God. Aristotle pooh-poohed this and suggested the opposite: that our experience of individual versions of a thing in matter—like a horse, for example—led us to develop a mental ‘ideal’ form that all these versions fitted, but that the representative ‘Idea’ of a horse had no real independent existence in the upper world. He failed to carry the day, however, and the whole of the ancient world, and even the medieval one, followed Plato in one way or another.”

As my mind downloaded all this and compared it with what I already knew, a twilight was descending over the courtyard which softened the lines of architecture and guests alike. The hour was past six and there was a touch of coolness to the air. I became aware that a diffuse lighting was emanating from subtle sources I could not immediately identify. The pines overhead were like sentinels, guarding us from the encroaching forces of darkness. They also produced the odd sensation that if one were to turn upside-down one could fall into the sky.

I held myself right side up and turned my attention back to Sylvia Lawrence. “Perhaps you could help me to clarify some things. This whole subject is pretty esoteric. How did the Logos fit into Plato’s system of forms and origins?”

“Well, first you must realize that the term Logos was really a catch-all in the ancient world. Strictly it means “word”, but the meaning is far more loaded than that. Different philosophies could use it quite differently, and it evolved over time. The Stoics saw it as the principle of reason in the universe—sort of the mind of God—and this reason was also present in the human mind, meaning that humans were an integral part of the cosmic world, in continuity with God.” Sylvia had fallen into a kind of lecturing mode, no doubt from the habit of the classroom, although the half-filled cocktail glass would have created an incongruous feature in that setting.

“The Platonists, on the other hand, had a dualistic outlook: that the universe was not a unity but in two parts, basically heaven and earth, the spiritual and material worlds, the Ideas and the copies, and there could be no direct interaction or communication between the two, certainly not between us lowly humans and the ultimate transcendent God. He was too absolute, too much a pure mind to be able to have contact with the world of matter.”

“So the Logos served as a kind of interface between the two realms?”

“Yes, that’s a good term. Platonism—in the centuries after Plato—used the concept of the Logos to refer to all the processes going on in heaven which proceeded from the mind of God. That mind produced Ideas, as well as the energy which generated the material world out of these Ideas. Since the Logos was the image of God, sort of a radiation from him, like light or electricity if you will, he was the revealer of God’s nature, a way of getting in touch with him.”

Sylvia had a habit of attaching on extra ideas as they came to her, like additional cars on a train. I realized that some of these cars were getting close to the earliest Christian views of Jesus. I asked, “Would you say that this Logos could be called a ‘Son’ of God?”

“In a poetic sense, perhaps. None of the Greek versions of the Logos was envisioned as a separate personal being. It was more an abstract force, a way of describing the power or thought of God working on the world. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria—that’s in Egypt, but I’m sure you know—he may have moved a step further. Philo called the Logos ‘the Son’ or ‘the first-begotten of God.’ He said that the Logos could enter special people and inspire them with a knowledge of God and the ability to communicate him to others. That’s what he believed about Moses. Moses was his hero, really.”

It occurred to me that perhaps the early Christians had envisioned God’s Logos as having entered Jesus. “Did Philo see Moses as divine, then?”

“Oh, no. Philo would never have been guilty of that kind of blasphemy. He went further than other Jewish thinker of his day in embracing Platonic philosophy, but he was still a Jew at heart, and the integrity of a monotheistic God was too dear to him. His Moses remained human; he was just God’s privileged receptacle, you might say.”

So near yet so far. It seemed that a direct connection from Philo to the early interpretation of Jesus was not to be had. “Could Philo have influenced Christian views of Jesus, do you think?”

Sylvia smiled, a touch knowingly, as if to tell me that she understood my interest in the matter. Either David had given her an account of my new project or it had come out in conversation with Shauna.

“Well,” she ventured, “it’s true later Christian thinkers realized that Philo seemed to be presaging ideas about Jesus—he did, after all, live most of his life before Christianity began. On the other hand, Paul shows no conclusive sign of having been familiar with Philo’s writings.”

“Perhaps the ideas were broader than Philo, more widely spread. Everyone working on the same concepts during that whole period: about some kind of intermediary figure or force that gave access to the ultimate transcendent God. Doing his work for him.”

Sylvia’s eyes widened. They could be quite expressive, even if they sometimes reminded me of a nervous bird. There was a deep intelligence behind them, though her manner could suggest that it was not thoroughly harnessed. Or perhaps it shared space with other, less intellectual currents.

“That’s a very perceptive analysis. History is full of things, not just philosophy, which show widespread expression—things being ‘in the air’, so to speak, taking various forms. We sometimes get too hung up on identifying what specific case influenced or produced another specific case, when it’s more subtle and indefinable than that.”

“So Philo as a Jew in Alexandria preferred to see God’s Logos as residing spiritually in a human man. But someone like Paul somewhere else moves more toward the idea that this Logos came to earth himself—or itself—and lived a full life of his own. Does the second idea proceed from the first?”

“An interesting question. As always in such cases, it isn’t one single idea that produces another, but a complex set of them from various sources coming together and generating something new in the mind of an innovative person or group.”

I realized this was a nice capsule summary of how the history of ideas proceeded.

“By the way, did Philo have anything to say about Jesus in his later years? How long did he outlive him?”

“It would have been about a decade and a half, though the exact date of Philo’s death isn’t known. But to answer your first question, no. Philo says nothing about Jesus or Christianity.”

Yet another curious silence, I reflected. “Don’t you think he would have been interested in a movement which envisioned the divine Logos come to earth?”

“He certainly would have. But then, perhaps all the philosophical writings of Philo we happen to have come from the pre-Christian part of his life.”

I acknowledged the possibility. We paused to sample a delicate little crepe from a passing serving cart. After Sylvia licked the traces of syrup from two fingers, she volunteered: “But you know, the Jews shouldn’t really be judged by Philo. He represented more Hellenistic currents outside Palestine. In Jerusalem, they had their own concept of a divine intermediary going back to a time even before the Greek Logos.”

“You’re referring to personified Wisdom.”

Now Miss Lawrence was impressed. “Well—you’ve gone pretty deeply into things, haven’t you? I suppose you know, then, that this was more of a Near Eastern tendency, to strip off certain aspects of a deity and turn them into separate divine figures. The higher gods were not necessarily transcendent, they simply delegated their authority too efficiently and lost parts of themselves in the process.”

“And I believe that process was called...hypo—...hyper—...” I had overreached myself. I couldn’t remember the term.

Sylvia smiled, this time with more animation. “It’s called ‘hypostatization’. The separated divinities were ‘hypostases’.”

“Yes, of course. Wisdom originally began as the wise knowledge about God and life one received from God, and then evolved into a distinct figure herself. She developed her own voice speaking on God’s behalf, summoning people to her.” The passage from Proverbs 8 and 9 had stayed with me in its vivid image of Lady Wisdom standing by the gate of the town and calling.

“That’s right. But Wisdom took on other roles as well. She was God’s throne-partner in heaven from the beginning, and she was his agent of creation.”

“Now that’s significant, I’m sure. Because those are two of the features given to Jesus in the earliest layers of Christian thinking. It must indicate a very close link made between Wisdom and Jesus. But why would that happen? Who would think of making a crucified preacher into the incarnation of an hypostasis of God who had helped create the world? A female one, at that. And I don’t think the Old Testament gives any inkling that Wisdom is supposed to suffer, die and be resurrected. Why would Jesus’ followers after his death make such a connection?”

“Well, I’m not an expert on Christian theology, but perhaps it was because Jesus had taught knowledge and love of God, just as Wisdom did.”

Something about the way Sylvia said this made a certain mental antenna quiver, but it was buried a little too deeply to be given more than a moment’s notice, and it passed. Actually, she had made a good point and I said so. A few seconds later, however, I realized that it foundered on one perplexing anomaly. If that was the reason for the association, this should have brought Jesus’ teachings to the fore in the post-Easter picture of him. And yet, to judge by the non-Gospel record, Jesus as a teacher of wisdom and knowledge had simply dropped out of sight; none of the epistle writers showed any interest in that aspect of his life—or any other aspect, for that matter. But something told me not to wade into this particular swampland with Sylvia Lawrence.

Instead, I voiced a different connection. “But still, you say Wisdom preceded the Logos, and yet both these concepts have a lot in common. Like this business of creation and giving access to God. Did one influence the other, or are we still looking at things ‘in the air’?”

“Well, don’t forget that ideas are always evolving, and different expressions of them act on one another. You should read the Wisdom of Solomon in the Old Testament Apocrypha. It was written in Alexandria sometime during Philo’s lifetime, though not by him. This Jewish writer merges Wisdom and the Logos like love and marriage.”

“I guess it was handy that one was female and the other male,” I joked. “Jew and Greek together in the same bed.”

Sylvia’s eyes softened just noticeably at this, and she said in a voice that held a subtle change of quality: “Actually, one source of the figure of Wisdom in the first place was probably the Phoenician goddess Ishtar. She stood in front of the gate to her temple and also called to men—although she was calling them to something a little more provocative.” I would not have thought to style Sylvia Lawrence sexy, but those eyes seemed to hold a subtle call of their own that I hadn’t noticed before. Had I displayed more charm than I usually gave myself credit for? I told myself it was more likely that even ancient philosophy could be an aphrodisiac to the right mind. At the same time, I had to admit that this odd woman was beginning to exert a pull on me.

As the sky overhead deepened into darkness, and the artificial lighting of the courtyard gave everything and everyone in it a mellow cast, it struck me that all this had not yet led to any great insights into my quest to understand the early Christian phenomenon. Somehow Jesus had been a sponge, soaking up the prevailing philosophical concepts of the age. But a firm grasp as to why a human man, a humble preacher, would have produced this effect still eluded me.

I was also struck by the contrast such a picture presented to the whole atmosphere of the Gospels—and Acts. None of these documents seemed even to suggest such a process. Indeed, they were full of their own associations to Jesus: as son of David, Messiah, the enigmatic Son of Man. Acts especially, in its picture of the early growth of the Christian movement, seemed utterly devoid of any transformation of Jesus into the earthly embodiment of some pre-existent mediator and creator entity in heaven. What could possibly be the key that would make it all fit together?

Since the university where David and Sylvia taught promised to be one of my regular haunts for the duration of this project, Sylvia invited me to drop in at any time, and if she were not in class we could chat further. It was at this point that David appeared.

“I trust you two have got Kevin’s book all worked out by now.”

“Just the sex scenes,” Sylvia quipped. I caught the note of surprise in David’s expression before he turned to me with a subtle ‘what’s-been-going-on-here’ expression. I feigned innocence.

We drove back into the city a few hours later under a bright moonlit sky. The moon was just past full. Shauna reminded me that we were in the midst of Passover week, and as it happened, tomorrow was Easter Sunday. Both celebrations, the heart of Jewish and Christian observances, commemorated events that went back thousands of years, yet we lived in a time that had only just begun to question the historical foundations of these two cornerstones of Western tradition. How many lives would be forever changed if both were finally held to be nothing more than puffs of mythical smoke? More to the point, what would replace them?

The conversation drifted to more mundane matters and we ended up sounding out each other’s reaction to the gathering. I couldn’t really see how I would fit into David’s grand scheme, although he had asked if he could get in touch with me in a couple of weeks after certain things were in place—without giving me any elucidation as to what he had in mind. I chose not to ask for it. I was anxious to get back to my work, since I had decided to approach the whole thing from a different direction.

By the time we reached the city, I was probing Shauna for her reaction to Burton Patterson, and she me for mine to Sylvia Lawrence, both of us with protestations that, of course, no thought of jealousy was involved. I did neglect to mention to her that I would probably have the occasion to consult Sylvia further about questions of ancient religion and philosophy. I felt guilty about this when she informed me that Patterson had extended an open invitation to her to “get together some time.” My nonchalance was transparent as I inquired what her response had been, and hers equally so when she answered that she had simply said that she would let him know.

“I’m sure he knew what I meant. Besides, I didn’t want to alienate your new business partner—or the Western world’s new savior.”

“I’m sure he’s neither,” I clucked. And yet I had been taken with the man, and despite her offhanded attitude, I knew Shauna had been as well.

We were both tired by the time we reached her front door, and under that almost full moon we said good night. As usual, we didn’t set a day for our next meeting.

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