

Chapter Six

1

I had decided that I needed a more systematic record of what was to be found—and not found—in the documents of early Christianity which lay outside the Gospels and Acts. My research thus far, including that memorable evening spent with Shauna before the computer, had uncovered a wide range of missing material in the epistles—in my own mind I had begun to call them “silences”. Over the next several days I drew up a series of headings and sub-headings to classify such silences, and aided by the Muratorian indexes and my own devices, began to fill in each category.

The extent of the void on the Gospel story to be found in the earliest record was nothing short of astonishing. Virtually every place, figure and detail associated with Jesus’ ministry and death was missing, even though many passages in the epistles offered natural, even compelling, occasions to mention them. By far the largest category, which came as no surprise, encompassed the sayings and teachings which the Gospels had attributed to Jesus. So many of even the most famous sayings had been ignored by writer after writer, in ways which suggested that they could not possibly have known of them. Or else, they used moral maxims very similar to those of Jesus, yet without giving him credit as their source.

I was especially struck by one missing saying, the famous ‘Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.’ Modern historical novelists writing about Jesus often used it to portray the man of Nazareth as a politically correct manoeuvrer who could think on his feet. Yet the writer of 1 Peter could say: ‘Submit yourselves to every institution,’ without drawing on it. Nor did Paul in Romans 13:1, when he urged submission to the authorities, or when he went on to advise: ‘Pay tax and toll, reverence and respect, to those to whom they are due.’ One had to assume that they could not have been familiar with any such pronouncement by Jesus.

A notable class of absent sayings was the whole area of apocalyptic prediction. Early Christianity was a sectarian movement which passionately believed that the end of the world was imminent—or at least its transformation. The Son of God was to arrive from heaven amid much woe and upheaval, to direct the establishment of God’s Kingdom. This was an event which had been long awaited in Jewish expectation, though in popular thought it was to be accomplished through the agency of a human Messiah. Paul told his readers in 1 Corinthians 7:29 that ‘the time we live in will not last long.’ In 1 Thessalonians 4 he spoke of how the trumpet would sound as the Lord descended, how the Christian dead would rise from the earth and those still alive would be caught up to meet Christ in the air. Many other writers spoke of the imminence and convulsive nature of this End-time. And yet not a single one of Jesus’ apocalyptic predictions as recorded in the Gospels was ever quoted by an epistle writer.

Nor was Jesus’ favorite self-designation as the Son of Man to be found anywhere in the epistolary record. Most of Jesus’ predictions about the End-time, even before the High Priest himself on the night of his arrest, focused on his role as Son of Man. This was an apocalyptic figure imagined by various sectarian circles in the first century, Christian and Jewish, and derived from the great visionary scene in the 7th chapter of Daniel. How could someone like Paul have been ignorant of Jesus’ association of himself with this figure?

Was the entire picture of Jesus as an apocalyptic preacher, one of the foundations of the Gospel story, to be dismissed as invention? It was impossible to believe that apostles and teachers of the early Christian period, so concerned with the expected arrival of Christ to usher in the new age, would be totally unaware that prophecy of this very event and his own role in it had been a prominent feature of Jesus' ministry—if it had in fact been so. That they had known of such a thing and chose to ignore it I dismissed as a logical impossibility.

It struck me that all this could hardly be squared with the theory of oral transmission. The sayings of Jesus, so the going wisdom went, had been kept alive by word of mouth, in preaching and in correspondence, until the time the evangelists assembled and recorded them in their Gospels, several decades after Jesus' death. But if no one in the interim ever attributed anything to Jesus, how was such an identification kept alive? How were they to be differentiated from the general stock of ethical material being bandied about by all and sundry? This had been an intense period of sectarian proselytising, when apostles of all persuasions, Jewish, Christian and pagan, were tramping the byways of the empire bringing messages of salvation and correct living to anyone who would listen. Why in the face of all this competition, reflected at every turn in the epistles, would no one ever point to Jesus himself as the source of Christian ethics and the foremost prophetic voice of the salvation to come? It made no sense.

Such a picture certainly suggested that much of Jesus' teaching as recorded in the Gospels was derived from outside sources, from the general ethics and promise of the age, and placed in his mouth. But I was not prepared at this stage to jettison as invention the entire concept of Jesus the teacher. This would have been too drastic an excision to the Gospel picture, and anyway, if Jesus had taught absolutely nothing, what in fact had his career revolved around?

I knew, of course, that modern critical scholars were saying that Jesus' 'genuine' teachings were to be found in Q, that mysterious lost document excavated from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. An investigation of it was on my list. But it occurred to me to wonder what groups had faithfully preserved the genuine Jesus when the entire corpus of canonical epistles, and seemingly everything else in the extant early record, had failed even to allude to a teaching ministry at all.

Considering the mood of discouragement I was rapidly settling into, Stan picked the wrong time to call and ask how I was getting along with the new project. Since my agent was one who rarely asked for progress reports, I realized that he must have had high hopes for the prospects of a Jesus novel at the turn of the millennium. I didn't have the heart to tell him that not a word of it had yet been set down on paper.

"Well, I'm trying to capture the spirit of the times, Stan. Lots of color, good insights into how we've all been shaped by first century developments. I'm playing with a lot of action ideas, too." I hoped it didn't sound like I was improvising on my feet—which I was. "I'm thinking of having Jesus himself as a kind of mysterious figure, almost in the background. If I try to portray him too sharply, I leave myself open to criticism. This way, the reader has more scope for reading whatever they like into him."

Stan didn't hide the note of misgiving. "Is that really going to work, Kev? You usually like strong characters. You're not turning politically correct on me, are you?" Shauna had asked the same question early on.

“Anything but, I assure you. In fact, I’m experimenting with a new twist. You may end up with something more controversial than you thought. Just leave it with me. I’ll keep you posted.”

“OK, but I’m still only giving you six months—five, now. An historical novelist doesn’t get an opportunity like this, well, more than once a millennium. Don’t blow it.”

“I can hear the clock ticking.”

“I’d rather you heard the cash register.”

Poor Stan. I hoped he wasn’t betting his mortgage on my current powers of invention. As for the “new twist” I had snatched out of nowhere, the only one I consciously sensed at this stage was the one being produced on my mental state by the distortions of the Christian documentary record. That record was not cooperating with the Stan’s “opportunity of a millennium”. As it turned out, the real opportunity had come with scholarship’s current investigation of that record and the unprecedented times we lived in. That this coincided with the onset of a new thousand-year mark was likely only a fortuitous plot development in the universe’s own inscrutable scheme of things.

The question of early Christian apostleship was another can of worms which I almost regretted opening. One of the great issues Paul was forced to deal with in his letters had been: who was a proper apostle of the Christ? Many were questioning Paul’s credentials, criticising his performance and his doctrines. And yet to judge by his silence on the matter, no one ever challenged him on the basis that he had not been an apostle of Jesus during his earthly ministry, as Peter and others had.

Paul’s own declaration stated that he was as qualified as any other apostle. His measuring rod, as he said in 1 Corinthians 9:1, was the fact that he had ‘seen’ the Lord just like everyone else had. This struck me as an obvious reference to visions, one of the standard modes of religious revelation in this period. Even in 1 Corinthians 15 he listed his own vision of the risen Christ along with the others, implying that they were all of the same nature, and no one regarded Paul’s ‘seeing’ of Jesus as anything other than a vision of his spiritual self. In his disputes with the Jerusalem apostles, the issue of who had known Jesus while he was on earth and the authority this should have given them was simply never raised. Paul never defended himself over such an issue.

No one ever referred to the fact that Jesus had appointed apostles. This, to me, was a striking silence. In 1 Corinthians 12:28, Paul said that in the church, ‘God’ had appointed apostles, prophets and teachers. Where was the idea that Jesus himself had appointed anyone? The choosing of disciples and sending apostles out to preach was a prominent feature of the Gospels, even in post-resurrection scenes. If any act of Jesus had been kept alive in Christian consciousness it would surely have been this. After all, the early Christian movement, as evidenced by the epistles, was anything but harmonious. Arguments abounded as to who had authority, who was preaching the correct doctrine, who should be listened to. The logical, indeed the inevitable, appeal would have been to those whom Jesus had appointed, and in turn to those who had received their appointment and teaching from such authorised apostles. A chain of authority could not fail to have been created, especially as time passed, a chain going back to Jesus himself.

And yet Paul could argue against those who, as he put it, ‘proclaimed another Jesus’ and appeal only to the spirit received from God as the standard—with the one he himself had

received being, of course, the proper one. Several decades after Jesus' death, the writer of 1 John condemned a rival group's doctrines about the Christ, but he too spoke only of true and false spirits, the former received from God, the latter from Satan. Not surprisingly, his own was among the former.

The 'church manual' known as the Didache, usually dated toward the end of the first century, offered in its 11th chapter a set of standards by which congregations could judge the itinerant preacher's qualifications and orthodoxy. Yet this included no consideration as to whether that authority went back through proper channels to appointed apostles and Jesus himself, whether such preachers' teachings corresponded to early, sacred criteria. It was a mystery to me how the entire Christian movement up to the time of Ignatius, if we were to judge by the surviving correspondence, could show not the slightest sign of developing a system of authority and orthodoxy based on the idea of apostolic tradition, ultimately founded on Jesus' own appointment of apostles.

Many scholars, I noted, were mystified by the overall picture of early Christian apostleship. The designation of 'apostle' was, in the earliest record, applied to anyone carrying the preaching message about the Christ; it had no narrow application to individuals chosen by Jesus. The concept of an inner circle of 'the Twelve', deriving a special authority from Jesus and conducting the spread of the faith, was missing. The term itself cropped up once in Paul, in 1 Corinthians 15 where he listed those who had received visions of the Christ, but since this 'Twelve' was mentioned separately from Peter and from another group referred to as 'all the apostles', it was far from clear just what this body constituted. Some prominent scholars were quoted in the commentaries as having rejected the historicity of the Twelve as a chosen circle of followers accompanying Jesus in his ministry. Only in the second century did the Gospel figures around Jesus emerge as witnesses to an historical ministry, and as guarantors for the truth of the church's teaching. Every Christian group, orthodox or heretical, eventually had its own link to Jesus, a founder from among the presumed original Apostles and a guarantee of its own 'correctness'.

Did the idea of the Twelve crystallize only later out of memories of a more amorphous group around Jesus? Would we have to abandon the concept of special appointment by him? Perhaps Jesus gave no direction to anyone to go out and preach in his name. But even if this were so, it was difficult to believe that once the missionary movement got started, claims of authority based on some form of link back to Jesus would not have developed—and quickly. Yet this was precisely what was lacking in Paul and the other epistles.

2

The universe had reached Wednesday. There was a little park down the block from my modest suburban home, and on this mild spring day in mid-April the trees were greening and buds were opening in the tended flower beds. Life in the late 20th century had its own evils, but it was undoubtedly better than humans on this planet had ever known it. What had life truly been like almost 20 centuries ago, I asked myself, when men like Paul took to the dusty, dangerous roads or ventured out across precarious seas in primitive ships, all to carry some message about a crucified god and the prospect of eternal life? Sitting on a park bench newly scrubbed of the grime of winter, looking out over an oasis of green where various life forms, including human, were newly emerging from their cold-month cocoons,

I had to marvel at the vigor and tenacity of that ancient eruption of men like Paul and the ideas they carried. I had to wonder why it had generated such a dramatic effect, a world-wide energy which was only now winding down, losing its momentum, eddying into the swirl of new currents that would carry those of us on board this little ship of human society out into different waters and new destinations. What these would be, none of us could say. The park bench was firmly anchored to the ground, but I felt very much a part of that swirling eddy, and I decided that the dizziness was intoxicating.

But my task was to uncover the picture of that earlier swirl, whose currents were to set the flow of the next 2000 years. I had brought only my old dog-eared copy of the New Testament to the park bench, and as my body soaked up the morning sunshine and my ears the sounds of the awakening streets I tried to let my mind recreate the atmosphere of Paul's time from Paul's own words, from the raw display of personal conviction, enthusiasm and struggle on the part of a man who had a compulsion to preach, else he would, by his own admission, go mad.

But Paul was not alone. Several times since beginning my research I had lighted on a vivid passage in 2 Corinthians which spoke of the trials he faced as a Christian missionary. Chapters 10 to 12 presented a tantalising picture of a broad, obsessive movement in which countless men—and maybe a few women as well—felt the spirit of God upon them and went out to win the world over to a new faith.

And yet somehow the picture was odd, for this was a world of intense competition. Here was no unified Christian movement, as Acts would later present it. Paul's greatest obstacle was not unbelief, or the antagonism of the authorities. Rather, it was the presence of rival apostles who preached different messages, who preached 'another Jesus'. In 10:7 he spoke of these others who, he said, were convinced they belonged to Christ, who claimed authority as legitimate apostles. In the Christian community at Corinth which Paul claimed as his own these rivals had disparaged him, rejected his qualifications. To this Paul retorted that he belonged to Christ as much as they did. In the most vituperative language to be found anywhere in his letters, he condemned such men as 'sham apostles, deceitful, masquerading as apostles of Christ.' He called them agents of Satan.

Most scholars I had looked at realized that Paul could not be directing this vilification toward the Jerusalem group. With Peter and James he maintained at least courteous relations, and he worked on their behalf to collect contributions of money. Besides, it would have been impossible for him to describe in such terms men who had personally known Jesus or had been appointed by him. But just who were all these rival apostles who had no obvious connection to Jerusalem, who were going about trying to undo Paul's work, preaching their own brand of the faith? It was one of the great problems in early Christian research.

In fact, it struck me as the picture of a level playing field, a wider amorphous world of apostleship, with no one seeming to claim any link to Jesus himself, or defending the lack of it. No one, including Paul, seemed to claim a link even with the group in Jerusalem who were privileged to have had such a connection with Jesus, something Paul could easily have done. Instead, as Paul said in 11:4, these different gospels being preached, the different Jesus others were proclaiming, came from 'the spirit', meaning the inspiration each claimed to receive from God. Paul simply declared that his spirit was more authentic. Here was an array of preachers and prophets ranging the empire, proclaiming their competing versions of

Christ, none of whom showed the slightest interest in pointing to any aspect of the recent life lived on earth which had presumably set the whole thing in motion. In 10:13 Paul spoke of each apostle's missionary territory as a sphere whose 'limit God laid down for us.' He even referred to his message as the 'gospel of God'. Why was he incapable of presenting anything as having proceeded from Jesus? Why did no epistle writer of the entire first century ever speak of carrying on the work and ministry of the Lord himself?

Something had driven men like Paul to devote a lifetime to preaching, enduring perils and hardships and persecution in the service of their faith. If that something had been Jesus himself, or the report of him through others, it was baffling how the man and his life could have gone into such a total eclipse in all their minds.

I sat in the warm sun through midday, the sounds of distant traffic like the static of the ages through which I was trying to hear, down the long centuries, some clear signal from the spirit of the first century and the men who had shaped it. I recalled a vivid phrase from a book I had recently consulted on the philosophy of the period, John Dillon's *Middle Platonism*. It spoke of the era as one filled by 'a seething mass of sects and salvation cults.' Here before me were the direct words of a man who had been a part of that seething mass, one who had been caught up in its struggles. Paul had struggled against the missionaries of other faiths, the wandering philosophers—a kind of popular clergy—who preached pagan systems of beliefs and ethics, as well as the proselytising Jewish rabbis who had long been successful at winning gentiles to the ancient religion of Abraham. He had struggled against the pull of the Graeco-Roman gods and savior cults which he occasionally alluded to, and which later church Fathers waged war upon. And he had struggled against the competing, teeming life forms of his own movement. It occurred to me that Jesus' prediction that there would be false teachers and imposters in the believers' midst had been placed in his mouth simply to lend divine clarification to the situation that every early community had to face: an intense struggle over rival doctrines and views of the figure they worshipped.

The passage in 2 Corinthians revealed such a situation in one center in Greece. But a Christian community in the heart of Asia Minor faced a similar set of troubles. The next letter in the corpus was to the Galatians, and here Paul began by chastising his recent converts for listening to other missionaries and now following 'a different gospel.' Anyone who preached a gospel at variance with his own, he declared, 'should be cursed!'

And then Paul went on to make a truly astonishing claim.

'The gospel you heard me preach is not the product of men. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.

Here was the premier Apostle of the period passionately defining the highest measure of reliability and authenticity for a Christian preacher's gospel: not that it had its roots in the things Jesus had taught and done on earth, not in Jesus' own delegation of authority during his ministry, not through any apostolic channel which went back to a genesis in the Lord's own life, but through a divine revelation, the spirit of God bestowed individually on chosen Christian prophets!

I knew that the Greek behind 'a revelation of Jesus Christ' would be an objective genitive: Jesus as the object of the revelation. Amazingly, then, Paul was acknowledging no gospel of Jesus going back to Jesus. He was allowing for no primacy of any gospel held by

those who had seen, heard and followed the Lord while he was on earth, no superiority of any apostle who had been appointed by Jesus himself. Either Paul was guilty of the most supreme arrogance, or else such concepts simply did not exist for him. It was as though Jesus had become a divine Son in heaven immediately after his death and perceived resurrection, taking on a whole new mythological significance. From there, everything had started afresh, generated by revelation from God and a study of scripture. The incarnated life so recently lived on earth was left to wither like some amputated appendage, all connection to it severed, its features discarded and forgotten.

At the moment I could not see why or how such a bizarre development could possibly have taken place.

3

On Friday I caught Shauna at work before the lab closed for the weekend. The research of the intervening two days since my sojourn in the park had been spent in putting together a picture which was so perplexing, and even somehow disturbing, that I needed to lay it out before another mind and get a reaction. Shauna was the natural candidate.

That picture had resulted from striking out in my own uncharted directions. I had come to perceive that the silence in the epistles concerning the Gospel Jesus was only one half of the picture—the negative half. Within that silence, Paul and the other writers were presenting their own positive features of the Christian missionary movement and its beliefs about the heavenly Son. Those features, while almost never touching base with the Gospel account, presented a consistent, identifiable pattern of their own.

I was neither prepared nor inclined to cook a meal, but Shauna said that she would cancel her weekend in Paris and come over anyway.

“Paul and pizza,” she sighed as she came in my door. “Now there’s a combination to seduce an unsuspecting girl—especially a Jewish one.”

I gave her a kiss. “How about if we save the seduction till later? The pizza’s warm and so is the computer. If you promise not to get cheese on the keyboard, we can access them both at the same time.”

She pouted and gave me a teasing caress. “And here I thought you were looking for a different kind of access. But you’d better be careful. All this Christian propaganda you’re feeding me, I might just get converted. Then I’d have to become celibate.”

I returned the favor. “Well, I guess I’d have to call in a de-programmer.”

“Hmm.” She pretended to look thoughtful. “I wonder if Burton Patterson has had any experience in that field?”

I harrumphed. “If not, I’m sure he’d love to learn the ropes on you. Have you responded to his invitation yet?”

She looked down her nose. “My responses are not bestowed so freely, sir.”

I pulled her into the kitchen where the pizza, freshly delivered, was sitting on its box on the warming tray. I almost relented on my earlier resolve, and Shauna wasn’t helping any by her words and antics as we got out plates and began dividing up the slices. Bacon, tomato and mushroom—double cheese. When I first learned that my own favorite combination was hers as well, I knew that this lapsed Christian and this non-observant Jew were undoubtedly headed for an intertwined destiny.

This time I took the seat in front of the keyboard. I had created a few text chains, in which a general category was linked with consecutive passages throughout the epistles, so that I could string together and read as a group various verses illustrating a given topic.

“Now I know you sometimes make connections that I’ve missed, but mainly I just want to see what impressions you get when I show you certain groups of passages. Most of them are from Paul, or those writing in his name, but there are a few from other epistles as well.”

“Tell me again how long after Jesus Paul came along.”

“Actually, Paul is thought to have been born around the same time Jesus was. As near as they can calculate, he was converted to Christianity within 3 to 5 years of Jesus’ death, but we know virtually nothing about his early missionary career. He only surfaces with the letter 1 Thessalonians around the year 50—let’s say two decades after the crucifixion. In Galatians, he barely hints of the things he did before that time. There’s no reason to think he changed his theology about Jesus very substantially over those years—he gives us no hint of that. But it’s natural to think that things did evolve with him, probably his missionary strategy at least. And he spent time in Antioch, where lots of ideas were percolating on the Hellenistic religious scene. Remember that he only went to Jerusalem once in all those years, for a two-week visit. So where and when he got his information about Jesus—”

“I thought he didn’t have any,” Shauna interjected.

“Well, he certainly shows little sign of having any. But somewhere he developed his cosmic theology about Jesus, and one has to wonder what he based it on. If he knew nothing at all about Jesus the man, what would ever lead him to turn that man into such a cosmic deity, or accept such an elevation of him from others?”

“Maybe he was inspired.”

I laughed. “Well, yes, that’s the orthodox view, of course. He got it all on the road to Damascus. The funny thing is, Paul never talks about any event on the road to Damascus. That’s Luke’s view of things in Acts, which was probably a legend that grew up later about Paul’s conversion. Paul scarcely talks about any vision of Jesus—just once briefly in 1 Corinthians. Most times he simply says he was called by God to preach the Gospel—and not with any sense of a dramatic conversion experience. When he talks about his doctrines of the Christ he never refers to such an event as their source. More often than not, he seems to imply he got his knowledge through reading scripture.”

“So Saul gets converted, changes his name, and goes off to search for Jesus in the Jewish scriptures instead of going to the people who knew him while he was on earth. That almost seems pathological. As though he didn’t want to know anything about the human Jesus.”

“You’d be surprised how many scholars actually postulate reasons like that to explain Paul’s complete lack of interest in the man he had just deified.”

I polished off the last bite of my pizza slice, brushed my hands against the sides of my shirt and hit the keyboard. The Web stood ready. The Muratorian home page with its luxurious illustrations shone out into my humble study.

“OK, I call this first chain “The Beginning of the Missionary Movement”, but maybe I should think of it as ‘Learning About Jesus’. Here’s the first passage. I placed them in my own order of importance—purely subjective.” Galatians 1:16 flashed onto the screen.

‘God chose to reveal his Son in me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.’

“It’s right after this that Paul says he immediately went to Arabia and then Damascus, and only three years later did he go to Jerusalem for a short visit to get to know Peter. So Paul seems to be saying that he knows of the Son entirely through God’s revelation.”

“And it’s God who tells him about Jesus, not the spirit of Jesus himself.”

“Right. And there’s something funny about that preposition ‘in’. It’s as though Paul is saying that the Son gets revealed through people like himself who have been inspired by God, rather than through reports about Jesus from those who knew and followed him—let alone through Jesus’ presentation of himself during his own career.”

“That’s a bit presumptuous, isn’t it?”

“Well, no one ever complains about it. And all the writers talk the same way, about revelation by God. It’s ‘the gospel of God,’ and ‘God’s act of redemption,’ and God calling the believer, not Jesus. I’ll show you that list in a moment.”

I brought up my next quote, from Romans 16:25-27.

‘Glory be to God who has strengthened you, through my gospel and proclamation of Jesus Christ, through his revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages, now disclosed and made known through the prophetic writings at the command of the eternal God that all nations might obey through faith—to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ. Amen.’

“Whew,” Shauna said after staring at the screen for almost a minute. “Did Paul always write like that?”

“Well, in Greek you can write long sentences with a string of ideas because it’s an inflected language, unlike English, so you don’t lose track of which phrase is modifying which word. It can be quite sonorous, actually. But I confess I rearranged the translation a little to try and make things clearer.”

Shauna gave me a look which suggested I had not been too successful. “So he’s saying what? What’s this ‘mystery’ kept secret for long ages?”

“It has to be Jesus Christ. There’s nothing else he could be referring to.”

“But that doesn’t make sense. If God is revealing Jesus for the first time in long ages, what was Jesus himself doing? Didn’t Paul count that as a revelation of Jesus?”

I shrugged. “It doesn’t look like it, does it? And that ‘proclamation of Jesus Christ’ is an objective genitive, so it’s Christ being proclaimed, not doing the proclaiming.” I pointed to the screen. “Anyway, it says here that the disclosing was through scripture, not through Jesus himself.”

“How can Paul just ignore Jesus’ whole career like that?”

“I don’t know.”

Shauna turned to me in mock condescension. “Maybe the translation isn’t right, if the sentence is so complicated.”

I gave her a poke. “Nice try. But there are a few other places where you get the same idea. They can’t all be mistranslated.” I called up the next link in the chain: two passages from Colossians. “These are by someone a little later than Paul writing in his name.”

‘I became a minister...to preach the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and generations but now disclosed to the saints. God chose to make known among the

Gentiles the richness of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of (your) glory.’ (1:25-27)

And, ‘I strive...that you may have all the richness of understanding, the full knowledge of God’s mystery, which is Christ, in whom lie all God’s treasures of wisdom and knowledge.’ (2:2-3)

“So he’s saying that Christ is a mystery revealed by God.”

“Yes, after long ages of being a secret.”

She considered a moment. “Maybe Paul and the others believed that Jesus didn’t reveal anything important about himself when he was alive. They had to rely on God’s revelation about Jesus after his death.”

“But if Jesus didn’t claim anything for himself, what inspired men like Paul to heap so much divinity on him? Anyway, Christians couldn’t fail to assume that Jesus had revealed himself for what he was, at least to his chosen followers. Traditions like that would have formed very quickly, if only to support the claims that the early church was making about him.”

Shauna looked perplexed. “So why don’t they give Jesus any credit for revealing God’s secret? Maybe Paul wanted to claim that his way was the only way—through direct inspiration.”

“Now *that* would be presumptuous. What would that make Paul look like?”

“Maybe he wanted to upstage Jesus.”

“Maybe they all did. Look at this next one.” I brought up Ephesians 3:3-6 onto the screen. “This one is even later, and also written in Paul’s name.”

‘It was by a revelation that God’s mystery was made known to me. From what I wrote to you before, you recognize my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in former generations was not made known to men, but has now been revealed by the Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets: that through the gospel the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body and partakers of the promise in Jesus Christ.’

“You see, all these prophets and apostles have had things revealed to them by God’s Spirit. There isn’t a word about any of them receiving knowledge or inspiration from Jesus himself. And always the mystery of Christ, unknown to all the ages before this divine revelation of him. How could they express themselves like this so universally with the memory of Jesus’ recent ministry so fresh—no matter what he might have claimed or not claimed about himself?”

Shauna peered more closely at the screen. “But doesn’t it say here that the mystery is something specific—about the gentiles being fellow heirs? Maybe Jesus hadn’t made a special point about that, and now it’s being revealed, so to speak. And wasn’t there something similar in the one before?”

I called up the excerpts from Colossians again. Shauna pointed to the first passage. “See—the mystery is ‘Christ in you.’ Maybe Jesus didn’t say that either, and Paul thinks he’s gotten a revelation about it—or the guy who wrote this pretending to be Paul.”

I took out my Greek text and reviewed both passages. “Well, first of all, the Greek isn’t that precise. These things could be referring to the ‘richness of the mystery’, or the ‘insight

into the mystery' which 'Paul' says he's gotten, not the mystery itself. Besides, the other quote from Colossians and the one from Romans point specifically to Christ himself as the content of the secret. But surely the amazing thing is that all these writers could talk about Christ and things having to do with Christ and salvation and never once point to Jesus' own ministry as having had anything to do with revealing them. Why would they so thoroughly cut him out of the picture like that?"

Shauna made her own gesture of bafflement.

I flipped through the other passages in my chain. "Look at this. Here—2 Corinthians 5:18—Paul says he's been given the ministry of reconciling man to God. Didn't Jesus do that in *his* ministry? Back in chapter 3—here—Paul says that God has qualified him to be the dispenser of his new covenant, but he doesn't have a word to say about Jesus dispensing that covenant. And then he goes on to talk about the splendor of God's work in sending the Spirit to inspire missionaries like himself. But where is the splendor of Jesus' life and ministry? Wasn't his work at least as important as Paul's? Does Paul think God placed greater importance on *his* work than on Jesus' work?"

"I thought Paul was always talking about how humble he was."

I pointed to my next passage: 2 Corinthians 6:2. "Well, how's this for humility? Paul quotes Isaiah: 'In the time of my favor I heard you, in the day of salvation I helped you.' This is supposed to be God promising salvation. But when does this promise come to fulfillment? Was it in Jesus' life and death? No. Paul points to his own ministry and says, 'I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation.'!"

Shauna patted me on the shoulder. "Don't worry, Kevin, I'm sure you'll work it out. Maybe all we need is another slice of pizza." She popped out of her chair and headed for the kitchen. After casting one last scowl at the screen, I followed her.

Shauna occasionally complained about my kitchen—or at least the organization of it. When I told her that the business of eating was not one of my priorities, she countered that it was precisely one's non-priorities that should be the most efficiently organized. That way, one didn't have to spend time thinking about them—time best spent on the more important things. On the other hand, she didn't own a warming tray, a feature I always played up as a prominent part of a truly efficient kitchen, especially when one was serving pizza in it. I noticed she expressed no qualms about such things on this occasion.

But then, significantly more momentous issues were on our plate that evening: unraveling the unexpected mysteries of a 2000-year-old faith. And everyone loved a mystery.

Back at the keyboard, I said to Shauna: "Paul is consistent in what he tells us about his inspiration. And not only his own. The engine that drives the entire missionary movement seems to have nothing to do with any memory of Jesus, or directions he left behind. It is God's Spirit, sent directly from heaven."

I called up the first passage in my next chain, 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

'It is God who has bound us firmly with you in Christ and anointed us, God who has set his seal upon us by giving the Spirit to dwell in our hearts, as a pledge of what is to come.'

“This is so representative of what Paul says—and everyone else. They all point to God as the one who got everything started. And he did it by sending the Spirit.”

Shauna started to point to the screen. “But—”

“Yes,” I interrupted. I knew by now she was quick to spot things. “That ‘in Christ’ pops up all over the place. It’s almost like a mantra. Sometimes it’s ‘through Christ’. I remember a parish priest when I was a boy sticking it into every second sentence of his sermons, and it became quite annoying. But the way he was using it is the way I’m certain Paul was using it. For the priest and for Paul, it was a reference to the mystical presence of Jesus. I’ve looked at many occurrences of the phrase in the letters, and Paul and the others never seem to be referring to Jesus in the past, to his life on earth. It’s Jesus in the present they’re concerned with: God working now through Christ, like some kind of spiritual channel.”

At one point in my survey, it had struck me that this was a concept virtually equivalent to the Greek Logos, or personified Jewish Wisdom: Christ as the intermediary force between God and the world. However, I left this unsaid with Shauna, as I was reluctant to get into a long discussion about the religious philosophy of the times.

“Here Christ serves as a kind of mystical bond God has used to link Paul and the others together. In fact, Paul even says that believers are ‘in Christ’ as part of Christ’s body. In a spiritual sense, of course.”

Shauna screwed up her nose. “It all sounds faintly blasphemous to me. Not to mention distasteful. It doesn’t seem like the sort of thing a normal Jew would come up with about a crucified rabbi. No wonder they were persecuting them in the synagogues.”

I had moved on to my next link in the chain. “Here’s another example of drawing a blank on Jesus.” I read her parts of 1 Corinthians 2:11-16.

“ ‘Only the Spirit of God knows what the nature of God is. We have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us from God. And we speak of these gifts in words not taught by human wisdom, but by the Spirit...’

“What do you think of that?” I asked her.

“Well, I know Christians say that the whole meaning of Jesus’ teaching was to reveal God and what he wanted. Didn’t Paul think that, too?”

“Apparently not. Apparently Paul considered that only the Spirit knew and taught about God, and that we understand God’s gifts only through the Spirit. There’s another spot—here, Romans 1:19—where he says, ‘All that may be known of God by men...God himself has disclosed it to them.’ I mean, didn’t Jesus disclose God? Wasn’t the idea that God’s attributes had been visible in Jesus? And how could any apostle preaching Jesus talk of God’s gifts and never speak a word about Jesus’ gifts? It’s one thing to feel that you’re not interested in the things the man did, but Paul should not have been capable of making statements which openly dismiss those things as though they never existed.”

“And you don’t think that it was just some kind of axe Paul had to grind? Maybe it really was something pathological with him.” At my expression, she hastened to add, “Of course, I realize that’s grasping at straws.”

“It certainly is, though it’s been done. But that sort of explanation doesn’t hold, if only because Paul isn’t the only one talking like that. Look at this. Here’s the writer of 1 Peter saying that the prophets foretold grace and salvation, as well as the sufferings and glory destined for believers, and that it all referred to the epistle writer’s own time. And now those things ‘have been announced to you by preachers who brought you the gospel through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven.’ It’s like the case of the ‘secret hidden for long ages’: between the old prophecies and the preaching of Christian apostles there’s not a word about Jesus revealing such things. Everything is through the Spirit.”

“Bizarre,” Shauna murmured.

“There’s one passage—here it is, Titus 3:6—where you almost think he’s about to make a reference to Jesus’ life and then you realize it’s one of those spiritual medium things.” I read from the screen, starting at verse 4:

“ ‘But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of our righteous deeds but because of his mercy, by the water of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...’

“This is very typical of the slant all the early writers take, that it’s God who has acted in the present, rather than Jesus. It’s God’s kindness—or his ‘grace’ in other places—that has appeared. They’re always saying that it’s God who has saved us, rather than Jesus.”

“He even calls God ‘our Savior’,” Shauna noted.

“Yes, although he goes on to give the same title to Jesus. But if you look carefully at this passage, you see that God saves in the present time through some kind of baptism and the power of the Holy Spirit. Not, as one would expect—”

“Through the death and resurrection of Jesus,” Shauna completed my thought.

“Exactly. Jesus is introduced only as the agency for the sending of the Spirit.”

“Like a conduit—”

“A spiritual channel—” Another Logos type image.

“An electrical cord running between heaven and earth.”

I smiled at her. “Yes, a good metaphor. Jesus can be introduced as an intermediary force helping God work through the Spirit, but nobody can bring him in as a living, preaching—and dying—force in his own right, who did the work of salvation within living memory. That same writer earlier in this letter is absolutely mind-boggling. Listen to this: ‘...in hope of eternal life which God promised long ages ago and has now at the proper time revealed in his word through the proclamation entrusted to me by the command of God our Savior...’ ”

I threw up my hands. “Now, if anyone can find a chink in this picture where Jesus can squeeze himself in I’d like to see it. God makes promises ages ago and now he’s acted on those promises by revealing his word to apostles like Paul. Is this writer as pathological as Paul? Excuse my metaphor, but it’s like they’ve all taken a scalpel and cut out the heart of the whole Christian organism.”

Shauna winced. “Or worse.”

“For a movement which is supposed to have begun as a reaction to a human being, to the man they thought was God’s Son, they’ve all swung their focus away from him and fixed it entirely on God.”

I flipped erratically through one of my other chains. “ ‘The Gospel is the saving power of God.’ ... ‘God who has saved us and called us.’ Didn’t Jesus do these things? ‘God is appealing to you through us.’ ... ‘Fix our minds trustfully on God.’ ... ‘God began the good work in you.’ Wasn’t the good work started by Jesus? ‘You are by God’s own act an heir.’ What about Jesus’ act? ‘We need to teach you God’s oracles all over again.’ Here’s Paul again, in 1 Thessalonians, saying, ‘God called us to holiness, not impurity.’ I don’t care if you don’t know a single actual saying Jesus spoke, how could Christians not have regarded Jesus as calling people to holiness? It’s unfathomable! Then he says that anyone rejecting these rules is rejecting God. I guess he couldn’t have heard of Jesus’ saying that ‘Anyone who rejects me rejects the one who sent me.’ ”

Shauna let her breath out and said, “OK, Kevin, this is all well and good—but!” I knew that my custodian of common sense was about to stand up and attempt to save the day, as she always did. “I have no idea why they all expressed themselves like this, but Paul and the others must have talked about Jesus’ death and resurrection, didn’t they? They had to have him in mind *some* of the time.”

“Well, yes, they did, of course.” I was allowing more exasperation to creep into my voice than I should have. “But it all has a kind of disembodied quality. You never get a sense of context. It’s like that business of who was responsible for the crucifixion. Nobody is ever accused of it except maybe the demon spirits. Paul talks about the benefits of Christ’s death which God—and himself, of course—are making available through the preaching of the gospel. All you have to do is believe and you get eternal life. But it’s like the bare fact of Jesus’ death is something he’s pulled out of a box God mailed to him—”

“With the Holy Spirit as the postman,” Shauna quipped.

I laughed in spite of myself. She could always bring me back to an even keel with her refreshing wit. Not to mention a sparkle in the eyes that I was a complete sucker for.

“Yes. And Jesus as the mail van that brings the postman, I suppose.” Now we were being silly. Then a thought occurred to me. “It’s almost as if the fact of Jesus’ death were a part of the mystery being revealed by God. The secret kept silent for long ages. They’re all learning about Jesus and his redeeming work through the Spirit.”

“Maybe it was the significance of his death that was the secret. After all, Jesus couldn’t teach about his death before it took place.”

I considered this idea for a moment. “Well, that might be a solution. Except that it shouldn’t preclude everyone from at least referring to his death—his whole career, in fact—as something that had recently happened, something located between God’s promises and mysteries, and the revelation of them by people like Paul. Besides, the Gospels *do* have Jesus giving prophecies about his death and hints about its meaning during his ministry.”

“Then I have no solution.”

We both stared intently at the screen as though willing it to supply the elusive explanation, the reason why Paul and the other early writers could so ruthlessly detach the Christian proselytising mission from that recent incarnation of the divine figure they all preached and worshipped. By rights, the movement should have reeked of the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth, it should have exuded his human personality, resounded with his every thought, word and deed. Prophets should have echoed his apocalyptic predictions, preachers trumpeted his teachings; and all should have gloried in the wonder and promise of his reputed miracles. Images of the figures who had been part of his life, the places he had trod,

slept on, preached in, died on, should have hung in the very air Christians breathed, burned into their memory and consciousness. The Son of God come to earth. The face of God incarnated for all to look upon.

Instead, they had turned him into something remote. Instead of his birth in Bethlehem and a youth in Nazareth, they spoke of his pre-existence in heaven with God. Instead of his miracles on the shores of Galilee's sea, they told of his work in creating all things. Rather than proclaim the teachings he gave from hillside and marketplace, attended by the rapt faces of ordinary men and women thirsting for a new ethic of charity and love, they sought out his voice in scripture and cast him in the mystical role of channel for God's Spirit from heaven, instilled into the minds of prophets and seers. As for the vivid events at the climax of his life, his trials and sufferings and terrible execution on a hill outside Jerusalem, these immediately evaporated one and all before the great cosmic reflection of them in the spiritual realms, in the struggle and ultimate triumph over the demon forces who were unwittingly doing the work of God in their own destruction. Then he had risen, but none said where, and no one spoke of a wondrous return in flesh. When Jesus of Nazareth died, his own movement buried him and it was left to such as Ignatius 80 years later to unearth the bones and to plead for the simple recognition that Jesus had indeed been born of Mary, had really been persecuted and crucified by Pontius Pilate.

Why is it that the great issues of life are usually the ones we manufacture for ourselves, out of things we cannot touch, ideas we cannot prove, emotions that roam landscapes we can never set eyes upon. When respite is needed from such human obsessions, it is probably the refuge of lovemaking that we most often indulge in, where all can be touched and seen, and the passions raised require little philosophizing.

Shauna was, in her easygoing way, the most uninhibited lover I had ever known, and there were times when she could even mix sex with humor. When in one of her moods, she could be witty to the point of distraction, and she once took pad and pen to bed and sketched everything we were doing. But mostly she was capable of losing herself in the activity at hand as though it were the most natural, rewarding thing on earth—which it was, she said. I often compared her to the women I had known as a young man, in that period when the Middle Ages had waned but before the sexual revolution had really settled in to form the new government. My lone Jewish girlfriend during that time had also struck me as completely at home in the arms of a lover, whereas my Christian—or even ex-Christian—partners, so it seemed, always had an ear cocked. The voice they listened for echoed down the centuries, in the rabid misogyny of the early Church Fathers, the obsessive anti-sexuality of the medieval church, the fixations of a more modern clergy who were still adamant against all expressions of pleasure in the human body.

I had often told Shauna I was convinced that the center in the brain which stimulated religious belief lay right beside whatever neuronal cluster was responsible for the fear of sex, for the stimulation of one inevitably triggered the response of the other. The obsession of today's fundamentalists to create eunuchs of their children and banish human eroticism to the far side of the moon was merely the latest chapter in a long tradition of soul-destroying suffocation which much of Western society had visited upon itself for almost two millennia. Modern sexual liberation and libertinism, which the conservatives so deplored, was simply the heady response to a renewed flow of breath and the lifting of centuries of self-imposed guilt and shame.

The foundations of my ancestral culture were in the process of crumbling, as an ancient god collapsed into the dust of time, but Shauna's body beneath me was a foundation I could cling to, ever vital and passionate, even if on this occasion there was no humor in the mix. That we were in love was something accepted between us. Whether we would one day marry was an issue yet to be decided. For her, cultural considerations still operated, even if she did not attend the synagogue, and an earlier marriage had not been fulfilling. For myself, one who had been forever single, marriage continued to connote old associations, part of a world-view firmly discarded, and I had always been reluctant to renew any connections with it. Perhaps I envisioned that one day the union fated for me would simply happen, generated spontaneously by some new force we would all find ourselves a part of. When the world reached adulthood, when the medieval era was finally washed away to mingle its last traces with the waters of history, my life partner and I would find ourselves standing together on the shore, ready to undertake the journey to lands unknown. Such, in any case, had been the naive fantasies of my youth, when first I stripped off the personal detritus of centuries.

Tonight Shauna was marvelously responsive, though with a little more solemn cast than usual. Ever reluctant to consider myself an exceptional lover, I decided that Paul and pizza had after all been a potent combination. Somehow I felt that Shauna was not just a disinterested observer to my research or to the broader upheavals of the Christian scholarly world. Even if one's own house is left standing, the collapse of the neighborhood around it can have a sobering influence. The rumble of the earthquake of change may well have been echoing in Shauna's ears as well.

Chapter Seven

1

I spent most of the following week in New York City with my publisher. Two of my older novels were about to be reprinted, and I was being consulted on design features and covers. I let drop the hint that my next project would be unusual and decidedly controversial. Winston was intrigued, but knew enough not to press me when I told him that for now it was to remain a closely guarded secret.

It crossed my mind to wonder if even in these prestigious offices, in this forward-looking time as the 21st century approached, a publisher might get cold feet on a book which was certain to raise the hackles on a broad range of roosters. Was it possible I would suffer the same fate as Vardis Fisher, relegated to the valiant fringes of the publishing world, on the outskirts of oblivion? Then I reflected that even this was a presumptuous comparison, since at that moment I had scarcely a clue as to how I was going to proceed with this 'ground-breaking' novel. As yet, it existed entirely in the mystical dimensions of theoretical reality.

When I returned home, I discovered that David had been trying to contact me, and at the beginning of the following week I arranged to meet him at his University office. May had just arrived, spring was getting down to business, and exams at the U were winding up. Many of the students were heading out to get the jump on summer jobs, parties or the endless cycle of study. I congratulated myself that all this was long behind me, until I

realized that I was essentially in the same ratrace—with decidedly fewer parties. At least I got to pick my own subjects for whatever degree I chose.

David's office door stood open. The late morning sun which streamed through the high, academic-style windows fell on a frazzled figure sitting behind a desk more perilously cluttered than when I had first seen it over a month ago.

"Come in, Kevin. If I haven't buried that chair under a mountain of papers, take a seat." He pointed toward something in front of the desk which currently supported three large boxes of envelopes. I set these on the last square foot of space on the vinyl sofa against the wall and sat.

"How is the lovely Shauna?" He winked. "Burton asked about her just yesterday."

"Did he now? And just how acquisitive is this man when his eye lights on something he likes?"

"Burton Patterson is a man of impeccable propriety," David intoned, which was followed by the raising of one eyebrow the barest of notches. "And subtlety. But then, I'm sure you were already planning on buying Shauna a dozen roses every Friday, just to show her how much you care."

I gave that an ambiguous laugh and let the topic drop, though part of my brain started to calculate the monthly cost of a dozen roses every Friday.

David leaned expansively back in his chair. "Well, where should I start? Since we've gotten onto the subject of Burton Patterson let me give you this piece of news. No—first of all, I'd better bring you up to date on the nitty-gritty. The Foundation is getting incorporated and applying for non-profit status. Last Thursday I oversaw the setting up of a Web site: six of us working on that for a solid week, let me tell you. My own student days are starting to look like the Dark Ages."

He fished a card out of his desk drawer and flipped it toward me. "There's the URL. Are you on the Net? Yes, of course you are. Give us a visit and see what you think."

I glanced down at the card. These days, business cards scarcely bothered with something as old-fashioned as a street mailing address. Visits and communications went by cyberspace now. The Age of Reason Foundation, fittingly I supposed, inhabited not a concrete building on some asphalt block, but a neuronal site in an electronic mind that circled the world. Soon we would all be disembodied synapses firing in one planet-wide brain. I wondered if that brain would eventually become homogeneous. Could one part of it remain anchored in the Middle Ages while the rest moved on into the Third Millennium? Then I reflected that one of the capacities of the human brain was the potential for disassociation—not to mention schizophrenia.

David was continuing, "We've put out feelers on the Net for more members. Not just to academic institutions. We've posted on various newsgroups. We're already starting to get interested inquiries. Of course, that's not all we've gotten. Take a look at this."

He picked up a sheet lying to one side and handed it to me. It was the print-out of an e-mail to the new Web site. "It came in a couple of days ago. They managed to delete a return address. I'm having someone look into finding out just where this group is located. They call themselves the Ascended Masters. Probably a bunch of crazies just letting off steam, but you never know."

I read:

'Wake up and acknowledge the ASCENDED MASTER Jesus Christ. His message is

all the Reason we need. Your presumptions label you for what you are: the prophecied Antichrist whose seductive message signals the beginnings of the woes heralding the arrival of the Lamb, the Son of Man who shall reap the over-ripe harvest of the earth's crops. So does Revelation 14:15 foretell. The powers of darkness will be defeated and you shall be thrown along with your false worshippers of the wisdom of the world into the lake of fire with its sulphurous flames. You will find that 6,000 years is the true tally, despite your evil intentions and hotshot lawyers.'

I handed it back. "Well, whoever they are, they've managed to garble allusions to several New Testament documents, including Paul. There's no Antichrist by name in Revelation, but they're probably thinking of the 'beast', which is really a reference to Nero when he comes back from the dead."

"Christians believed that Nero returned from the dead?"

"That he was going to," I corrected. "It was one of the great myths of the time, apparently. The Antichrist idea began with the Jews—or some of them—who thought that some agent of Satan, a 'man of lawlessness', was going to impede the work of the Messiah and lead to a great confrontation before the Kingdom could be established. Some Christians took over the idea and focused it on Nero returning in the form of a beast. It's the letters of his name which add up to 666."

"Fascinating."

"Do you think this group poses some danger?"

"Well, we have to allow for the possibility."

"By the way, I'm not aware of any 'hotshot lawyers' in the New Testament. What are they referring to there, do you know?" Somehow I had a feeling what the answer was going to be.

"Actually, that's the strange part of it—and why we're not just dismissing the whole thing as a crank response. The rest could be taken off what we've said about ourselves on the Web page. But that allusion to Burton Patterson is something that shows some inside information."

My eyebrows went up.

"Yes, there's no doubt the 'hotshot lawyers' is a reference to Burton. It concerns one of the things I was planning on telling you today. I don't know whether you're aware that the ACLU has a fresh challenge coming up against a couple of state legislatures who are passing bills in favor of teaching creationism in the schools. This sort of thing is picking up steam again, it seems. Earlier this year in Tennessee, they were considering a law that would let school boards dismiss teachers who present evolution as fact rather than a 'theory'. And Alabama is insisting that disclaimers be placed in biology textbooks pointing out that evolution is a 'controversial theory' held by 'some scientists'. Give a listen to this piece of scientific reasoning." He fished another piece of paper out of the surrounding clutter.

"'No one was present when life first appeared on earth. Therefore, any statement about life's origins should be considered as theory, not fact.' That's what the state Senate wants Alabama students to read in their textbooks." He tossed it back on the heap. "No wonder we're losing the capacity for rational thinking."

"No one was present when God created the world, either. But creationists seem to have infallible sources about that little event."

David snorted. “It’s getting so that teachers simply won’t teach evolution at all. The fundamentalists are becoming so assertive that schools are afraid of confrontation with parents and church groups and so they simply skip the whole subject. In some states, teachers find themselves facing school boards where half the members are creation fundamentalists. I don’t have it right here, but some recent poll in biology classes showed that as few as 10% of the students had studied evolution at all.” David’s hands went up. “And this is where our future scientists are going to come from?”

“What does all this have to do with Burton Patterson?”

David relaxed back into his chair. “Sorry. I get so worked up over this thing. As I said, the ACLU has been planning a court challenge against feelers by Georgia and Pennsylvania to sneak creationism onto school curriculums.” He paused for effect. “The Age of Reason Foundation is going to handle the one in Pennsylvania.”

I gave a jerk of surprise. “How did you manage that? You’re barely out of the starting gate. I’m surprised the ACLU has even heard of you.”

David leaned forward over the desk and adopted a conspiratorial expression. “Well—this is between you and me, but it was through Burton.” I waited. David decided it was best to look a touch sheepish. “I know what you’re going to think. But Burton has heavy connections with the ACLU going back decades. With us handling the court hearing, it’ll bring us into the limelight overnight. We couldn’t have bought that kind of publicity.”

“Wait a minute,” I interrupted. “Let me guess. The great man himself is going to personally conduct the courtroom proceedings.”

David gave a wry smile. “Something like that.”

“I guess you’re not the only ones itching to get into the limelight—or return to it. And just when is this hearing to be held?”

“End of June. In Philadelphia.” Another pause. “We’re hoping you can be there.”

Now I was really taken aback. “Me? Why me?”

David looked as though he had been carefully preparing for this moment for some time. “Kevin, I think you’ll agree with me that the period we live in is so complex, even chaotic, with things happening and changing so fast, that the media simply can’t keep up with it. They really can’t be expected to get things right all the time or put the proper slant on things. When you want to get your ideas across and create the right picture, you’ve got to do it yourself. With the Internet offering a whole new medium of communication, it needs its own ‘reporters’, so to speak, some new brand of writer to present things to the online public and the traditional media...don’t you think?”

I was staring at him nonplussed. He said, “I thought maybe you’d like the post of resident publicist for the Age of Reason Foundation.”

I finally found my voice. “David, I’m a novelist!”

“Yes, but you’re one of the best writers I know of. You had a flair even when we were at the U, without the academic pretensions. We need color, style. Someone who can pitch to the ordinary man and woman, say things people will want to read, things they can understand. We need to generate some excitement. After all, we’ve got a subject here which is bound to be a bit cold and dry.” The next line was delivered like some rousing old school motto: “You can make ‘Rationality’ into the next buzzword—it’ll be hanging on everyone’s lips!”

Needless to say, I looked skeptical. “That I doubt. But why not a professional PR person?”

“Bah! We couldn’t work with someone like that. We need a writer with a personal investment, a familiarity with what we’re trying to do. He has to have some conviction in it. We don’t want the traditional slick, shallow approaches to everything. The other thing is, we’ve got to be able to handle sensitive issues with tact, not come across too preachy, or too elitist.”

“That’s a tall order.”

“I know you can handle it, Kevin. Naturally, there’d be a stipend. A fairly decent one. Burton’s making available a sizeable fund for the Foundation. And he was quite impressed with you at his place. He thinks you can do the job, too.”

I remembered the greeting Patterson had given me at the gathering, as ‘our chronicler of great events.’ This implied that he and David had discussed the possibility before he had met me.

“And the hearing?” Since this was to be Patterson’s show, I wondered if I was being taken on as his personal biographer.

“You’ll be our Net reporter, if you like. We may even be able to persuade some of the news services in the regular media to carry you. You’ll be putting things in their broader context, plugging the Foundation. Not too blatantly, of course. But we need to make sure that what’s being written about us creates the best impression, and the more that voice is our own, the better. We’re up against some pretty stiff counter views—and not all of them come across quite as loony as that one.” He gestured to the message from the Ascended Masters.

“And how do you think these guys found out about Philadelphia?”

“Oh, there’s any number of ways. Through ACLU contacts probably. Although it’s surprising that they found out so soon.”

In the back of my mind where I was turning over David’s proposal, the idea did have some appeal. Sales of my novels had achieved bestseller levels only once, so a regular stipend would be a useful addition to my income. Branching out into non-fiction forms of writing was also an idea that had long held some fascination for me. Besides, it would be a forum not only for the Foundation, but undoubtedly for my own views and experiences as well, as long as they didn’t clash with those of my employers. But that raised a sticky point, and I voiced it to David.

“No, Kevin, I would rather you thought of yourself as a colleague, not an employee. Naturally, some kind of PR committee would have some...input, or approval role, in what you wrote and sent out, but we would want to encourage your own creativity. Anyway, my friend, at this stage we’re still doing everything by the seat of our pants.”

Well, why not? It was worth a whirl. For all I knew, the whole enterprise could sink like a stone—even with Burton Patterson on the bridge. I said cheerily, “OK. Put me down for Philadelphia at the end of June.” David looked immensely pleased with himself.

But I couldn’t let it get me too distracted from my top-priority project. “On one condition—that you leave me alone in the meantime. Make that my first assignment and I won’t go on payroll, so to speak, until then. If I can’t nail down my research for a Jesus novel over the next six weeks, I may just chuck it. But I’ve got to give it my best shot.”

David countered, “How about a compromise? Between now and the hearing we’ll have one—at the most two—meetings to clarify your position and establish some ground rules. Then we can take it from there in Philadelphia.”

“Fair enough. Now, it’s my turn. Since I got back from New York I’ve waded into a new area of research and I’m floundering. There are a few old works on this subject and an assortment of articles, but I haven’t been able to locate a comprehensive, up-to-date study. Scholars seem to be all over the place on it, and no one agrees on how it should be integrated into the picture of early Christianity.”

“What is it?”

“The Graeco-Roman mystery religions. Or cults, if you will. The commentaries have the occasional reference or allusion to them, but nothing substantial. Over the years I’ve picked up a smattering of impressions, but I need to talk to someone who can answer some specific questions. I don’t suppose that would be you?”

“Yikes, no. That’s far too esoteric for me. However—” and here David gave me a curious smile—“you’ve already been in contact with the person who could help you, I’m sure.”

“You mean Sylvia?”

“Yes, of course. I’m sure she’d be delighted to see you again. In fact, she told me the other day that if you came to see me, to be sure and suggest that you drop by her office.” He glanced at his watch. “Actually, you might catch her there in a few minutes. She’ll be getting out from monitoring an exam.”

“Yes, I never thought of that,” I mumbled, not too convincingly. David and I exchanged a few more words and arranged that he would give me a call later in the week.

“Burton will be delighted,” David called as I went out the door.

Not with everything, I hope, I said to myself. I had decided I couldn’t afford the roses.

2

Of course, I had thought of Sylvia Lawrence even before coming that day, but for some reason I had gone through the motions with David. Was it guilt or anticipation I felt as I made my way down the corridor to Sylvia’s office, not far from David’s own? The woman had made an impression on me at the Patterson house, in the elegant courtyard under a cool evening sky, but what it was I had not yet allowed myself to analyze.

There was no answer as I knocked on the frosted glass-panelled door. After a moment’s hesitation I was about to invoke discretion over valor and make a quick departure when footsteps approached from around a nearby corner. Sylvia Lawrence came into view carrying a hefty armful of papers. When she saw me, her face brightened and she almost trotted the few steps between us, as though fearing I might run away.

“Mr. Quinter! How nice to see you.”

“How are you, Sylvia?” I hoped that this would prompt her to switch to my first name. I also hoped it wasn’t deference she was showing me. After all, I couldn’t have been more than eight or ten years older than her. And showing less, I told myself.

“Here, let me take those from you.” The action of reaching for the papers not only brought my hands in contact with her arms, it placed my face quite close to hers, closer than

we had stood at the Patterson gathering. In that moment it struck me that the angular features which might have seemed offputting at a distance were actually quite strong, and the momentary expression they adopted gave me an unexpected rush. I dropped my eyes as I pulled back with my arms full.

I blurted, “Exam papers?”

She was fishing for her office key in a small pocket of her jacket. “Yes. You should have come earlier and tried it. I’m sure you would have done well. Philosophy of History 204. I made sure there was a question on the ancient Greek historians.”

“Herodotus and Thucydides.”

She gave me a smile as she produced the key. “Well, I regard Herodotus as little more than a chronicler—or worse, since he can be rather naive and prejudiced in his analyses. Thucydides on the other hand—”

“A master. I couldn’t have done without him when I wrote my novel on the Athenian expedition to Sicily.”

“None of us could do without Thucydides. Our whole interpretation and much of our knowledge of the period of the Peloponnesian War is dependent on him.” She gestured to the papers in my arms. “I’m willing to bet that several students in there have talked about how Thucydides ‘created’ the history of the time for later ages. He may have lived it and wrote some of it as it was going on, but he brought his own judgement to the interpretation of events, and we’re fortunate that he was a man of such intellectual integrity and perception. We are entirely in the hands of those who have ‘created’ history for us, Mr. Quinter, and if lesser minds are all we have to go on, we have to be extremely careful of what we make of their product.”

Sylvia had made no move to unlock the door, as though this spot and this moment in the well-worn hallway of an ageing university was something to be savored. Then she glanced down at the pile of papers I had taken from her and apparently decided that the moment was over. “I’d better let you set those down.”

As she inserted the key in the lock I said, “It’s unfortunate Thucydides didn’t complete his work. I once considered writing a novel about the War, with the focus on Thucydides himself. I even envisioned a scene where he was interrupted in mid-sentence, the point where his history breaks off suddenly.”

She smiled at me over her shoulder as she pushed open the door. “I’m sure that would have been very interesting.”

The contrast with David’s office could not have been greater. To say that Sylvia Lawrence was neat would perhaps have been an understatement, but it was the neatness of an artist who makes dramatic use of a large canvas without once losing control of any element within it. There were several tall bookcases, the type with horizontal glass doors on the upper shelves, filled to the brim with volumes of all shapes and sizes. In addition to an impressive desk, there were three lamps, a small sofa, two chairs and a stool. The year-end collection of exam papers, reports and who knew what else was breathtaking, but I had little doubt that their proprietor knew exactly where every sheet rested. On the wall to the right of the desk hung a piece of modern art. Its colors were varied and subtle, but following bold, well-defined lines, and it was too large for the room. It conveyed the same impression which her body had had on me at the gathering: a touch too tall and ungainly, yet somehow engrossing and inviting closer examination.

Sylvia took the papers from me and set them down on the corner of the desk. Rather than move around to her chair and place the piece of furniture between us, she leaned back against it and asked conversationally: “How is your novel coming?”

The chair in front of the desk, unlike David’s, was clear, but as she did not invite me to sit, I also remained standing, feeling that odd magnetism at being near her which I had sensed at the party. Her clothing today was not as elegant, but it was well tailored and somehow complemented the quirky personality it enclosed.

I almost confided in her. “Actually, it could be going better. Sometimes I feel I’m in the house of mirrors at the amusement park. What’s image and what’s reality? And why does everything look so distorted?”

The comment seemed to pique her curiosity. I asked, “Tell me, what’s your feeling about Jesus?”

She gave me the fleeting impression that I had struck a nerve. Then she took a breath as though opening a box and deciding what item to pick from it. If some of those items were more personal than others, she chose a neutral one.

“I guess I would say that Jesus came along at just the right time. He gave expression to a lot of things that were developing in his day. The Jews thought the Kingdom was coming, and a Messiah to rescue them. The Greeks wanted a way to communicate with the transcendent God.”

“You mean the Logos idea?”

“Well, the general idea that we needed an intermediary between God and the world. A savior, if you like. Personal salvation was the preoccupation of the era, and various gods were developed to provide it.”

“Like the savior gods of the Greek mystery cults?”

“They were a part of the picture.”

“Only Jesus was a man.”

“That’s right.”

“What I mean is, if everyone else was developing savior gods who were mythical, why did the Christians choose to pin it all on a man? It must have seemed odd at the time.”

“I suppose Jesus must have impressed them.”

Her eyes, perhaps two feet away, were on a level with mine. I said, “So much so that they completely abandoned the man—after they turned him into a god.”

“What does that mean?” Only the voice was expressing curiosity.

I dropped my eyes. “Oh, just a little oddity I’ve encountered in my research.”

I turned to the bookcase beside me. “Do you have any books here on the mystery cults?”

“Yes, I do. Would you like to see them?” She moved to a farther case and raised one of the horizontal doors. “Angus...Burkert...Wagner—”

“Are any of them recent?”

“The Burkert is. He views the cults as primarily votive religions, requesting the gods for favors and protection against the vicissitudes of life. Like Christians do of the saints.”

“Is that valid? Didn’t they provide a kind of eternal salvation?”

She took out a volume and idly thumbed through it. “The trend among modern scholars seems to be to downplay that. But you have to understand that we really know very little about the mysteries. Many thousands of people over the centuries became initiates in the various cults, but they were sworn to secrecy about what went on during the rites and what

they were supposed to signify. Not one of them ever broke the silence—or at least so that it ended up in some record that survived. We have a tantalizing account of the initiations to Isis by Apuleius in his novel *The Golden Ass*, but he is deliberately allusive and says he's not allowed to tell more. All the frescoes and inscriptions tend to be enigmatic and open to interpretation."

"So the secrets of the mysteries perished when Christianity eradicated them?"

"Unless we unearth something new about them." She came back toward me and sat once more against the edge of the desk with the book tucked against her. "Were you hoping to include some orgiastic rite of Dionysos in your novel? In very ancient times the women who conducted the rites were supposed to have indulged in some quite shocking behavior."

The little flush in her eyes made me laugh self-consciously. "Well—a certain amount of eroticism never hurts any book, I suppose. But I guess I was really looking to clarify the question of whether the mystery cults influenced Christianity at all. Some scholars seem to imply that they did, and then others try to shoot them down."

"That's been the pattern over this century, certainly. There were some extravagant claims by the History of Religions school in the early 1900s that Christianity was little more than another 'mystery religion', with Jesus as its savior god. Like Osiris, Attis and Mithras. You're familiar with them?"

"I'm getting there. I know they were the gods of various cults who suffered and died in some way and came back from the dead and gave salvation to those who underwent initiation into their worship. That seems a lot like Jesus and the Christians, doesn't it?"

Sylvia smiled a touch condescendingly, as though I were a promising student who didn't know quite as much as he thought he did and could stand some additional education. So close to that smile, with her body against the desk and the book pressed to her chest, I was beginning to feel that I would surrender to any education she wanted to give me. She was just a bit too near, and while propriety suggested that I should move away, my feet weren't listening.

"Well, first you need to correct a couple of misapprehensions there. There was a lot of variety in the cults, and differences between the deities, so it's difficult to make generalizations. Mithras was probably the most important of the cultic gods, but he didn't die. Instead he slew a bull, which likely goes back to some agricultural rite or coming of age ritual, as all the cult ceremonies probably do. This was the 'saving act', if you like. The others did die in some fashion, except for Isis if you want to separate her cult from her husband Osiris, but only Dionysos had a myth which clearly says he came back from the dead. The old scholarly contention that the ancient world was packed with dying and rising gods and that Jesus fitted into the pattern like another pea in the pod is a misconception."

"In what way?"

"Because it's far from clear whether these gods were thought of as having been resurrected. The older scholars made too much of one reference in a Christian heresiologist from the 4th century, Firmicus Maternus. He makes a remark that might refer to some kind of resurrection, but it's open to interpretation. And anyway, it's quite late."

I told her that Vardis Fisher had made much of the dying and rising savior gods idea in his *A Goat For Azazel*, the novel in the Testament of Man which dealt with the spread of Christianity. Sylvia wasn't familiar with him. "But it's not surprising, if he wrote in the 50s. He would still have been under the influence of the older scholarship."

“But surely,” I objected, “even if these gods didn’t actually rise from the dead, they still conferred salvation, didn’t they? As I understand it, Christianity was engaged in a great struggle with the cults before Constantine was converted. If they didn’t offer the promise of some kind of afterlife, why would anyone have bothered with them? Why would they have proved such strong competition?” I had gotten the impression that many of those who had studied the mysteries were New Testament scholars who had an understandable interest in downplaying the influence of the cults on the origins of their own faith.

“That’s certainly a valid point. There are suggestions that the cults did confer some state of happiness in the afterlife. But the idea that resurrection was guaranteed for the believer because the god himself had been resurrected is impossible to show. We really can’t find that idea depicted in the myths or the frescoes, and of course we don’t have any writings from the cults as we do in Christianity. We can’t even be sure that the cults envisioned the initiate as merging with the god in some mystical way, as we see in Paul. We just have so little to go on.”

“But—it strikes me that the Greeks and Romans wouldn’t need their gods to be resurrected in flesh. The Jews were developing the idea that the righteous dead of past times were going to come back to life to be rewarded and take part in the Kingdom, which was going to be on earth, or at least on a transformed earth. So the Christians needed Jesus to come back in the flesh, to provide the example, the precedent—”

“The paradigm,” Sylvia offered.

“Yes. But the Greeks: they didn’t really want to have the body survive death, did they? I mean, didn’t they find that idea repugnant?”

“Yes, generally that’s the way Greek philosophy looked at it. Plato—and even Orphism before him—regarded the soul as divine and trapped in the prison of matter, in the body. The body was something to break free of, so that the soul could rejoin its divine source in the heavenly world. Some Greek writers, like Celsus, scorned the Christians for wanting to preserve the body forever, which they regarded as simply refuse.”

“So does that mean we have Plato to thank for alienating us from our bodies? Maybe the early Christians were so anti-sexual because they carried the ‘evil of matter’ to extremes.”

She gave a little laugh. “Oh, I think there’s more to it than that. Most cultures seem to have some anti-sexual streak in them, and I don’t think Plato bears the sole responsibility for the idea that we don’t belong in our garments of flesh.” She was looking at me more intently now. “Also, I would say that the Christians were influenced by an overdeveloped sense of sin and self-examination among the Jews—not to mention their obsession over ritual purity. And that extended to sexual relations as well.”

Sylvia’s voice had become quietly sensual, her words more measured. “Nothing could make one unclean quicker than contact with a woman.”

The office was warm and close. It held the odor of books. Sunbeams through the window gilded dust motes floating in the air. Beside them hung Sylvia’s words, soft and golden as well. I thought I could smell her skin. She said, “But we’ve outgrown all that by now, haven’t we?” It was poised between a statement and a question.

Never had I received such a compelling invitation to ritual uncleanness from a woman before, and it was all I could do to keep myself from reaching out to her and embracing the proffered garment of flesh—whether Plato liked it or not. I tried to keep my voice on an even keel.

“So—on top of that, then, you would say—that the mystery gods, even if they didn’t come back to earth, had still triumphed over death and passed on that triumph to their initiates. So that their souls could be saved and be happy in the afterlife....The Greeks did have an idea of the afterlife, didn’t they?” Right at that moment, I couldn’t remember anything.

She looked down at the book she was pressing against herself, though it was closed. “Yes, it wasn’t uniform, but they had their Isles of the Blessed or Elysian fields, and even a Hell, in Orphism. By the time of the Christian period, ideas about an afterlife had become pretty mystical.” She looked up again, her expression a little more composed. “But I agree, the initiates to the cults must have felt themselves linked to the god and his fate in some positive way. They had received hidden truths about the world and the supernatural, and this gave them a certain mastery over their fate in the present life as well as some kind of guarantee of immortality.”

“Which is a lot like the Christian attitude toward Jesus, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps.” There was the faintest touch of defensiveness. “But Jesus was a human man in history. The savior gods were mythological. That’s why you can’t talk about whether Attis or Osiris came back to earth or not. They were never there in the first place—at least not in identifiable history.”

Part of me felt like pacing, if only to release some of the tension I was feeling and to relieve the effect of Sylvia’s proximity. But I thought that it would seem too self-conscious. I compromised by edging sideways toward the nearest bookcase and leaning my hip against the ledge which protruded below the upper shelves with their glass doors. Here one could have set a fair-sized volume, but I rested my hand on it, letting my gaze sweep along the rows of books in their neat proliferation.

“So they were thought of as having performed their deeds in the distant past, a kind of primordial time, I take it?”

“Originally. That’s the way all myth was regarded in earlier times; even today, in primitive societies. Some kind of golden age at the beginning of things. Eliade—the anthropologist of religion, you know him?—he calls it the ‘sacred past’, when the gods first performed actions which society now copies. You see, when a culture develops religious rituals, or even ways of performing actions like farming or hunting, they see themselves as reenacting things the gods did in the sacred past. That gives it a mystical significance, and they can make a kind of connection back to the divine action and draw continuing benefits from it. They ‘recreate’ it in the present, with all its sacred effects.”

“You mean like the Christian Eucharist? The priest stages Jesus’ blessing over the bread and wine during the mass and this harks back to when Jesus himself did it.”

“Yes, that’s what a sacrament is, essentially. The original act is kept alive and brought into the present, and its effects are made available to the devotees. The sacrament taps into invisible forces operating between past and present, or between heaven and earth.”

“Is that the way the Jews look at Passover? Though that’s not a primordial past, is it?”

“Not in the mythical sense. It may originally have been, before the Jews decided to place all their myths in archaic history and start counting years. Probably Passover related to an agricultural rite in ancient Canaan, and later got reinterpreted as part of the Exodus story. That sort of thing often happens: new myths get attached to old rituals whose original purpose has been lost. But the Jews were still recreating a sacred past: something their

heroic ancestors did—with God’s participation. The same effects were supposedly still available, such as the promise of future deliverance like the one that happened in Egypt.”

I thought of Shauna’s frustrated comments. “I wonder why it is that we can only find meaning to ourselves in the present by investing everything with symbolism from the past. Can we not be happy with ourselves as we are today?”

Sylvia’s eyes seemed to take on a darker cast which I found suddenly affecting. She said in a subdued tone, “Perhaps we carry too much baggage from the past. We can’t escape it. That’s where our Fall took place and that’s where our salvation has to come from.”

I echoed her own earlier line. “But haven’t we outgrown that by now?”

She shrugged. “We fell as humans. Something more than human has to save us.”

Something in me wanted to respond to this enigmatic comment, but I knew neither its meaning nor what the appropriate response would have been. Instead, I said, “Well, that’s certainly Paul’s view. He was overwhelmed by the power of sin. Yet isn’t it curious that all the savior gods, Jesus especially, have to take on some semblance to humanity? It would seem that only by getting down with us in the mud of matter can they lift us up.”

Sylvia once again chose to correct me. “Well, the cults at the time of Jesus didn’t see their gods as coming all the way into matter. Even if they could speak of Dionysos, for example, as being born to a woman in a cave. The gods still operated in a part of the spiritual world. Myth isn’t the same as history. And by the time we get to Plutarch in the first century, and others after him, the activity of the savior gods is no longer seen as happening in a primordial past. Platonism had more or less taken over and placed myth in the heavenly world of higher reality. These things the gods do, like Mithras slaying the bull and Attis getting castrated and such, they go on in a mythological realm above the earth. The stories of the myths were regarded as reflecting timeless spiritual processes going on in heaven. At least that’s the way the philosophers looked at things. The average devotee of the cults probably regarded the activity of their gods as more literal.”

“But not as literal as Jesus.” It was a question. “I mean, Mithras didn’t slay an actual bull at some point in history.”

“No, of course not. Such things happened in some equivalent spiritual setting. But none of this is really written out anywhere, you know. We can get an idea that this is the way they thought from writings like Plutarch’s *Isis and Osiris*, or the 4th century Sallustius. But we’re really speculating about how the cultic myths were viewed, especially by the average person. We can’t even be sure when the various myths developed. The very early ones like Dionysos and the cult of Demeter at Eleusis near Athens, they go back centuries before Jesus. But the big cults as we know them now—of Isis and Mithras and the Great Mother with her consort Attis—they really come into clear view only in the early second century. But they had to have roots going back a considerable time.”

“So they could have influenced Christian ideas?”

“I suppose so. Paul’s view of baptism and the eucharist is really quite un-Jewish. Most Jews would have been horrified at the idea of eating God’s flesh and drinking his blood.”

I jerked upright in some excitement. “Yes, I thought of that recently.” Or had it been Shauna? “But if this was so terrible to Jews, how could Jesus have instituted a sacrament like that? I mean, all his apostles were Jews. Wouldn’t they have balked at the idea?”

She lowered the book to her lap, still leaning back against the desk. The gesture both exposed her and protected her. “I don’t know. Maybe they would have followed him anywhere...even into blasphemy.”

Her voice had trailed off, but I didn’t notice. I was busy asking myself if it were possible that Paul had reinterpreted the historical Last Supper, recasting Jesus’ words in a more cultic fashion. Or perhaps even inventing them altogether. I would have to consider 1 Corinthians 11:23 in that light. I could not recall that Paul had ever made a clear reference to the pagan mysteries, unless it was in a cryptic phrase just before that passage, when he was discussing the Corinthian Christians’ communal meal—something about ‘the table of demons’.

I asked, “Do any of the cultic sacraments definitely go back before Christianity?”

“Well, those ceremonies I mentioned in the cult of Dionysos, they were supposed to have involved eating the flesh and drinking the blood of the god. Wine would have represented the blood, and probably raw animal meat the flesh.”

“Or bread?”

“Possibly. But that was more likely the case with the later cultic meals. With Mithras, for example. Mithraism had a sacred meal of bread and a cup of wine, or I think it may have been water.”

“Really? When did the Mithras cult develop?”

“Well, the god goes back to ancient Persia and must have had mysteries of some sort attached to him for a long time. The Hellenistic version of the cult was probably under way by the first century. Recently someone suggested it arose out of an astronomical discovery made around the reign of Mithradates of Pontus about a hundred years before Christ—in Tarsus, as I recall. The king’s name shows he was a devotee of Mithras.”

“Do you think the Christians knew about it? Wouldn’t they have been bothered by the fact that Jesus established a meal just like the ones in the mystery cults?”

Sylvia pushed herself away from the desk and went back to the shelf where she had gotten the first book. This she slid into its place. “I’m not a specialist in the Church Fathers, but you might check Tertullian, or perhaps it’s Justin Martyr. They must have thought that the mysteries preceded Jesus because they defend themselves against the accusation that the Christians had copied their eucharist meal from the Greek cults. Do you know what explanation they came up with?”

“I can’t imagine.”

“They said that the demons had wanted to weaken the faith of Christian believers and so they arranged for the pagans to establish counterfeit eucharists before Jesus.”

I snorted. “I can see what you meant. Not everyone we rely on for our view of the past was at the intellectual level of Thucydides.”

Sylvia had taken out another book, a slim worn volume which looked as though it could have been a century old. She walked back to me and opened it.

“This is not a recent publication, but the myths it describes haven’t changed—to my knowledge. In the myths about Mithras it says...that after he slew the bull and its blood ran out into the earth, which vitalized all life, the sun god Helios came down and the two of them formed a pact, and they sealed it by celebrating a meal together. They drank water mixed with wine and broke loaves of bread. One version of the myth has them eating the flesh of the slaughtered bull. The devotees of the Mithraic cult observed a meal of bread and

wine in commemoration of this event. The myth was their explanation of the sacramental meal.”

My mind was eagerly turning over this information, and my hands began to move in the air in front of me, as if trying to mold some new concept.

“So it’s possible Paul is familiar with certain cultic practices like a commemorative sacred meal, and he decides to reinterpret the Last Supper—only for some reason he calls it the Lord’s Supper—which would have been essentially a Jewish Passover meal, let’s say some kind of thanksgiving meal—” I did a mental right turn. “Like the eucharistic meal described in the Christian document called the Didache! Now that I think of it, that meal had no words of Jesus, or even a reference to the Last Supper. It’s not even linked to his death. It has prayers of thanksgiving to God over the cup and the bread—”

“*Eucharistia* in Greek means thanksgiving,” Sylvia offered.

“Yes, that’s right. And there’s some reference to Jesus his Servant, I can’t recall exactly. Now suppose, since Jesus was a Jew and the Apostles were Jews, there was no thought of his declaring that the bread and wine of the Passover meal was really his body and blood, then Paul comes along and wants to give the meal a sacramental significance like the Greeks do in their savior cults, so he reinterprets things along those lines. Which means that the evangelists must have gotten the idea from Paul, while the Didache reflects an earlier—”

Sylvia was looking at me rather wide-eyed, and I realized that my usual sedate self was eroding quickly. But I wasn’t ready to rein myself in just yet.

“By any chance, Sylvia, have you got a New Testament here?”

“Greek or English?”

My mouth fell open a little. “You have a Greek New Testament?”

An unchecked smile made her face striking, I decided. “The Bible is one of the premier pieces of literature in the ancient world, Mr.—Kevin, and I am a professor of ancient philosophy and religion, as you may recall.”

“Yes, of course. I guess we’d better make it the English. I’m OK if I’ve got my Lexicon, but—”

She brought up the book from a lower shelf. I opened it to 1 Corinthians 11:23.

“Here... ‘For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, This is my body...’ etc.” I paused. “Damn. I wish I could remember what I read about this passage in one of the commentaries. About this opening phrase, because it can have either of two meanings. Let me think...”

“I’d better get out the Greek as well,” Sylvia volunteered. “Maybe that will help.”

“Wait, yes—‘I received from the Lord’: does that mean through a personal revelation or from a tradition passed on through human channels, from those who had been at the Supper? That would be a crucial question if we want to consider whether Paul invented these words by Jesus. It would have to be the idea of personal revelation. He would have imagined that Jesus had informed him of this through some kind of inspiration.”

Like his ‘words of the Lord’, I thought, which were considered by scholars to be referring to communications Paul believed he was receiving from the heavenly Christ. Then I remembered that 1 Corinthians 11:23 was in fact one of those sayings, only scholars had made an exception for the source of this one, considering it to be a report Paul had gotten from the other apostles.

Sylvia had meanwhile moved away toward the window to retrieve another book. She laid it on the protruding ledge of the bookshelf and leafed through the pages. “Here it is in the Greek.” She read: “*‘Ego gar parelabon apo tou kuriou, ho kai paredoka humin...’* “There’s your ‘For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you...’ ” She looked up and beckoned with her head. “Come see.”

As I took the three or four steps to where she stood, I said, “You have a beautiful accent. I wish I could read Greek like that.”

“It’s just practice.”

I stood right beside her now, and we looked down at the book together. Like a pupil with a crush on his teacher, I knew I wanted to impress her. I pointed. “*‘Parelabon’*. That’s from *paralamban*∩, right?”

“Yes, it is.” Her voice, soft and musical, was almost in my ear. “I’m more familiar with classical Greek than New Testament Greek, but that would mean to receive some tradition or teaching from someone else.”

I made a little sound of exasperation.

“However—” Her voice held a certain amusement. We were playing more than one game. “The verb was used in the mysteries to signify the reception of a revelation from the god. So—”

“So—” I flashed her a smile that was almost coy. Our nearness was making us playful. “Paul *could* be talking about a revelation he thinks he’s received from the Lord. And—” I turned back to the book and leafed ahead to Galatians 1:11-12. Now my memory was operating with astonishing clarity. I pointed to the Greek words. “Aha! *‘Parelabon.’* Same verb. Paul uses it here in both senses.” I translated haltingly. “‘I did not receive it from any man...I received it—understood—through a revelation of, or from, Jesus Christ.’ Both ways. Case closed!”

My eye lit on an earlier word in the Greek. “Wait—*‘para anthr*∩*pou’*: from any man. Yes, now I remember. The other dispute.” With my right hand in the Galatians passage, I flipped back to 1 Corinthians. “There—*‘apo tou kuriou’*: from the Lord. The battle of the prepositions!”

Sylvia looked at me quizzically. “Please enlighten me.” She seemed to find me eminently entertaining, and her eyes were sparkling. At this proximity they looked strikingly beautiful.

I flipped between the two openings in the book, my left and right hands marking the two antagonists, and announced theatrically: “In this corner, the preposition *‘para’*, meaning ‘from’, usually representing the immediate, closest source of something, some piece of information. In this corner, his worthy opponent, the preposition *‘apo’*, also meaning ‘from’. He represents, usually, the remote or ultimate source of something, the originator of the idea. Now...if Paul uses *‘para’* in Galatians, *from* any man, that fits the usual meaning, because he is talking about the immediate source of a gospel—though here he’s denying that this is the case, that he got his gospel from any man. Now...in 1 Corinthians Paul uses *‘apo’*: *from* the Lord, which would usually mean Jesus was the ultimate source, the originator of the words—” I hesitated. “Which is why most scholars claim that he doesn’t mean a direct personal revelation here, but rather that he got these words of Jesus *through* others...” Was I in the process of falling flat on my face? I was desperately trying to remember all the ins

and out of this little argument from only one reading of the Muratorian commentary about it.

Sylvia came to my rescue. “Except that—wait a minute, let me check.” She moved over and took down an imposing volume from the top shelf, which she had no trouble reaching. After a moment, she pronounced: “ ‘In everyday speech, *para* and *apo* were used without exactness of distinction.’ ” She closed the tome, which also had a rather ancient look to it. “That’s the verdict of Mr. Brose, who by the way is long dead, poor fellow.”

She swept back and stood beside me again. She seemed animated, almost giddy. Her nearness, especially being a woman who stood as tall as myself, was becoming overwhelming, provocative. Part of me signalled that I was in grave danger. She tapped the Greek New Testament in front of us. “I’m willing to bet you’ll find *apo* used in the other sense even some places in here.”

“I’ll have to check when I get home.” I took my hands out of the book, leaving it open at the 1 Corinthians passage. “But it certainly seems as though Paul could be offering the Corinthians something he got from the Lord through inspiration: the words Jesus was supposed to have said at the Supper, which made it a sacrament—of a very un-Jewish type. Whether he got the idea from some cultic meal in particular, or was just expressing general sacramental ideas he had absorbed from the Hellenistic world around him, his own treatment of Jesus and the myths of the cults seem very close.”

When I looked back to that moment some time later, I told myself that I had probably stood on the verge of making a connection, that something was about to click in my mind, if only I’d had another few seconds to think without distraction. As it was, Sylvia glanced down at the open page and said, “Anyway, it doesn’t sound right the other way. If Paul is about to tell his readers the very words Jesus spoke, why would he start by saying that these words ultimately came from Jesus? That’s redundant. It makes much better sense if he’s saying that he knows these words of Jesus because they came to him directly from the Lord himself.” She smiled at me with an almost childlike delight. “Don’t you think?”

I looked at her in open admiration. She had made that connection just off my partial reading a few minutes ago. “I don’t think I would ever have thought of that. You’re beautiful, Sylvia.”

Just how I meant these words was perhaps hard to say, but their effect was unambiguous. Releasing a little sound of pleasure, Sylvia pushed herself against me and put her arms around my neck. Perhaps it was my mouth that sought out hers, but her lips on mine were intoxicating. For the space of a few seconds we were both drunk. Was it on an alcohol of lust—or some kind of intellectual stimulant? The latter may have been part of the cocktail, but that full warm body pressing me against the bookcase had lost all sense of awkwardness, and my hands at their own direction began to search out dangerous places. Sylvia’s pelvis was fearlessly seeking its own perils.

They no longer rang bells at universities to announce classes, but something must have gone off in both our heads at the same time. Sylvia abruptly stopped her movements against me and pulled partially away. My mouth and my hands came slackly to rest and we both looked, startled, at one another. A moment later she withdrew and moved around the desk, brushing at her hair and clothing.

“I’m very sorry, Kevin,” she said, her voice subdued but holding a little tremor. “That wasn’t very fair of me. I don’t usually try to seduce men who visit my office. Especially

ones I hardly know.” She placed herself between the chair and the desk and glanced up hesitantly at me. Her face looked a little like a frightened bird.

“I—” I looked away, faltering. “I don’t know what to say either, Sylvia.” For some reason, I pushed the guilty book away from me, to a point a few inches along the ledge. “I hope you don’t think I was trying to take advantage of you.”

“No, no. It was my fault. You’re just...a very nice man. And, well, you...know a lot of things that interest me—without being some stuffy academic.” She was playing idly with her jacket collar. “Of course, I realize you’re—otherwise attached.”

“Yes, I suppose I am.”

Mechanically, she reached for the pile of papers at the edge of the desk and moved them in front of her. “But I hope you’ll still feel like consulting me if you want any further information regarding your work. I’ll try to behave a little better.” Her expression was faintly plaintive. “I find your research very interesting. I would like to understand it more.”

I felt that the less I said, the better. I smiled at her and promised I would certainly consult her again, and that I too would behave better. When I waved to her awkwardly from the doorway, she was still standing with her hands resting on the exam papers.

I made my exit from the building more than a bit furtively. My biggest fear was that I would bump into David. I was sure the expression on my face would give everything away.

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