

Chapter Eight

1

The ride home seemed to take forever, though I was driving more slowly than usual. Perhaps my instincts were imposing safety precautions, for my mind was having difficulty focusing on the road. For one thing, it was trying to decide how guilty I should be feeling. I told myself that I would never have initiated the physical contact with Sylvia, but there was no denying that when it was offered—or thrust upon me—I had seized it with an intensity which shocked me. Were all men like that? My relationship with Shauna was a satisfying one, within the limits we had established. Or so I thought. Something had taken over when Sylvia's body was suddenly against me, but there were other urges as well. That curious vulnerability in the woman seemed to signal an internal unrest, a struggle of confidence. Fear and need were in uneasy habitation in that awkward, oddly voluptuous body. The faint ripple of some subterranean conflict shivered her skin, and I had felt drawn to her. The instinct of lust had no doubt caught me as well, but so had an even deeper urge: to rescue, protect, vitalize. Perhaps, I thought ironically, to give salvation. Was all that, too, a part of the male instinct? Maybe not in these politically correct days.

I knew one thing. I would make no resolution now as to whether I would see her again. Life was unpredictable by nature. Who was I to override natural law?

I turned my thoughts to my conversation with David. The end of June in Philadelphia. The Age of Reason Foundation vs. the medieval forces of American fundamentalism. How would I, as 'resident publicist', portray the great struggle? David against Goliath? The ghosts of Darrow and Bryan returning to confront each other again? Too predictable. I needed a new image, something that summed up the Reason vs. Revelation debate, the ongoing progress of enlightened secularism which for me had begun on some March day in 1961, as near as I could recall. Could such grand themes be handled in all seriousness, or were we too cynical for that? How about something with a tongue-in-cheek approach—would David approve? The question was, would Burton Patterson? No doubt it would all boil down to how the man wanted to portray himself.

So Burton Patterson, civil rights litigator extraordinaire, was raring to return to the arena and take on creation fundamentalism. Was it for him an intellectual affront, as it was for David? With the earth teeming with so much evidence that life was an undirected, experimental work in progress, did the imposition of the primitive myths of some ancient scientifically-ignorant society constitute the ultimate insult, an offense to human intelligence which had labored so long to reach its present stage? Or were less altruistic motives involved? It would be interesting to watch, I decided.

But one other thought struck me, a connection I had failed to make while at David's office. Had Patterson been aware of the ACLU's intentions in Philadelphia before he had approached the fledgling Age of Reason Foundation? Had David's project struck Patterson as an ideal launch pad for a renewed career in the spotlight, a group that had as yet no firm organization and sense of self—one Patterson might try to mold to his own purposes? If that were so, did David have the perspicacity to see this and guard against it?

I began to see that perhaps my role would have dimensions to it which neither David nor I had envisioned.

And somewhere in the midst of all this, I, a lowly novelist, was attempting to find out who Jesus of Nazareth had really been and why early Christianity presented a piece of Gordian knot complexity which made the theory of evolution look like a child's coloring book.

Indeed, where to go from here? Over a meal of leftovers fitting a throwaway, muggy Tuesday in early May, I tried to put Sylvia's body and mercurial, affecting eyes out of my mind and review the state of my research. I instinctively felt that somewhere in the work I had done thus far lay the intimations of a pattern, a picture of what the early Christian movement, as represented by Paul, had been. What it had *not* been was the perpetuation of the life and personality of Jesus of Nazareth, of the things he had taught and the wonders he had performed. Many scholars seemed to think that such things were being preserved in other places, among other groups, and these were avenues I would have to investigate. But they lay beyond the world presented by all the New Testament epistles. Did these other places and groups lie in some alternate universe, contiguous dimensions which never came in contact with Paul and his Christ cult? It certainly seemed so.

Had Paul's movement turned itself into the Jewish equivalent of the cultic mysteries that were proliferating among the pagans during the first century? If the need of the age was for savior gods, did some Jews yearn no less for such a figure, one the traditional Messiah idea could not quite fill? Had this led certain sectarian circles to lean toward their own 'Jewish mystery' and seize on Jesus as a promising candidate for a savior divinity?

Paul, and possibly unknown others behind him, had unquestionably shaped the worship of Jesus along such lines. But their national heritage had contributed much that made it characteristically Jewish. Jesus' resurrection guaranteed their own, but unlike any Greek aspirations, it was a resurrection in flesh. The picture of Jesus fitted the general atmosphere of the mystery deities, but it had been fleshed out and given meaning by the Hebrew sacred writings, an element the pagan cults almost entirely lacked. Jesus, like the savior gods, rescued the devotee from the clutches of the hostile spirits and forces of fate—one of the concerns of epistles like Colossians and Ephesians. Yet a point of great distinction was that he had also been on earth itself to combat the demons. He had done it before people's very eyes, proving his power over the spirit world through exorcisms and healings. The pagans had their healing gods, too, like Asclepius and even Isis, but Jesus had done more. He had healed in the flesh: with his hands, the touch of his garments, his compassion and encouragement, his human presence. On top of all that—unlike the savior gods—he had taught people an ethic, how to heal by charity, how to better the lot of suffering men and women by mercy, forgiveness and love. He had set this example, too, by the act of humbling himself and entering humanity's own realm.

And yet all this came up against that baffling stumbling-block, that stubborn impediment to a rational, coherent picture. As I sat alone on my modest deck overlooking an even more modest garden, which every year cried in vain for more attention, I savored the cool, damp evening air and a snifter of after-dinner brandy and asked myself the ever-present question: If these features of Jesus were so unique, so beneficent—so saleable!—why did the early Christian movement not trumpet them to the skies? Scholars so often drew the fundamental contrast between Christ and the mystery deities: why didn't the early Christians do the same? If, in competition with the cultic gods, Paul and other Christian apostles possessed the immeasurable advantage which the earthly career of Jesus provided, how in the world could

they have buried the human man under the obliterating weight of all that divinity? How could they have ignored, scorned, lost interest in the very thing which would have won the hearts and minds of the multitudes who craved salvation: the personality, words and deeds of Jesus of Nazareth, son of Mary, recently of Galilee and Judea, crucified by Pilate, risen from a tomb outside Jerusalem?

A savior god in the flesh. What a trump card! The trouble is, no one bothered to play it. Certainly not the writers of Colossians and Ephesians, not even Paul himself. The competition would have collapsed before them.

The evenings of mid-spring were still short-lived. I sat in near-darkness, the lights of a quiet suburbia etching pale, half-seen outlines around me. Tonight I had no desire to resume my work, or to seek out human contact. Today's contact had been too unsettling.

And so I felt almost resentful when the telephone, which I had earlier brought out to the deck, rang insistently beside me. I lifted it after the fourth ring and heard David's agitated voice.

"Sorry to bother you so soon, Kevin, but I need your advice. Our Ascended Masters are apparently going to make themselves an ongoing nuisance. Or worse. Listen to this:

"Clue number one: This is the revelation given by God to Jesus Christ. The hour of fulfilment is near. Behold, every eye shall see him pierced, and all the peoples of the world shall lament in remorse. So it shall be. Amen."

"It came in a couple of hours ago. I don't know offhand what this is from. Do you?"

"Actually, it's from the opening of Revelation—though not quite accurately, as I recall. Wait, let me get my copy."

I retrieved my New Testament from the study, switched on the outer light and settled back into the deck chair. Nearby a dog barked briefly, and the distant sound of a passing vehicle ruffled the night air. Other than that, there was no sign of an approaching apocalypse. I lifted the phone to my ear.

"The prophet John is taking a forced vacation on the island of Patmos, presumably at the behest of the Roman authorities. He says it was 'because I had preached God's word and borne my testimony to Jesus.' Yes, here's the main part of your message: chapter 1 verse 7. As usual, they've garbled it—or abbreviated it for whatever reason. 'Behold, he is coming with the clouds! Every eye shall see him, and among them those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the world shall lament in remorse. So it shall be. Amen.' "

"Do you think it's a threat of some sort?" David asked.

"Oh, I'm sure that's the intended effect of the thing. The question is, do they mean it as a divine threat, or do they have something more human and immediate in mind?" I asked David to repeat the quotation as it appeared in the e-mail message. I jotted it down at the bottom of my New Testament page.

"They call it clue number one," David observed. "Are we supposed to infer some specific meaning from it? And that implies there's more to come, wouldn't you say?"

"Oh, I'd bet on it. These guys are probably going to play games with us."

I realized that my choice of words showed that I was already considering myself an integral part of the new project. I wondered if David had picked up on the "us" as well.

But David only sounded worried. "I don't like this Revelation business. The thing's a lightning rod for every crazy millenarian who's coming out of the woodwork these days.

I'm beginning to think that living this close to the year 2000 is a curse rather than a blessing."

"We'll survive it, David. And when we emerge on the other side and nothing has happened, this end of the world and return of Jesus fever will be shown for what it is. Then we can get on with the business of living and leave all this nonsense behind."

"I don't know. True fundamentalism is something you can't reach. Not with all the arguments in the world."

"Then we have to neutralize the stuff it feeds on. Like Revelation."

"Revelation is a drop in the bucket."

"So let's start emptying the bucket, even if it's a drop at a time."

"Sounds like a Chinese water torture to me."

We said good-night. I remained on my deck for another hour, leafing through the notorious final document of the New Testament with a jaundiced eye. David was right. This one piece of writing had contributed more to Western neurosis over the last 1900 years than any other, and it continued to unsettle the outlook and mental health of many in today's society. It had been the product of a disturbed mind, one man's vindictive nightmare of a blood-soaked end of the world, commanded by God and directed from heaven by Christ 'the Lamb' using teams of angels. That it was written by the apostle John who had traditionally been one of the Twelve was no longer held. Nor was he the same as the one who wrote the Gospel of John, or the epistles under that name. That much modern scholarship had established.

Bearing his testimony to Jesus, said the prophet. The stir he had caused had gotten him banished for a time to an Aegean isle. But what was that testimony? Was it to the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, his teachings, his life and death on earth? Even though Revelation was a piece of writing quite different from the epistles, both in genre and circumstances, even though it was probably written at the very end of the first century, it too had not a word to say about the human life recently lived.

The John of Revelation had been a local prophet in Western Asia Minor near the end of the first century. He had apparently made the rounds of the Christian communities in the area, and at the beginning of his document he had Jesus Christ in a vision dictate letters to them. The letters were full of the mundane, petty circumstances of these communities, things John had obviously dealt with first hand. Nevertheless, these local Christians—or at least those who heeded John's words—would soon find themselves sitting on the very thrones of heaven, from where they would rule the nations of the world. So the prophet made Jesus promise in his letters.

The message of apocalyptic. The lowly, the marginalized, the faithful shall be given the earth's government. With such a vision, it was no wonder that many disturbed and delusional souls flocked to a banner like Revelation.

The Ascended Masters. Were they a real threat? Fanatics came in all styles, and all in some way were dangerous. Why did religion and fanaticism go hand in hand so readily? Were there neuronal connections between these two human expressions as well? What was the world in for, now that the more sedate versions of the established religions were crumbling before the steady advance of rationalism and secular philosophies? The field had been left to the more fundamentalist expressions, with their determined closure of the mind to modern scientific and social advances. Perhaps Revelation represented the spirit of our

times more than we cared to admit. David's misgivings may have been on the money: we were in for some real woes and upheavals before the new era he was so anxious to bring about could begin.

I peered into the shadows about me, glimpsing lurking forces which I could probably do very little to counter. At midnight I retired for an uneasy night, one haunted by Ascended Masters and by the spirit of Shauna consoling an inconsolable Sylvia.

2

The next day I had not lost my sense of foreboding. I decided to make a close examination of whatever the Ascended Masters sent to us. The use of the word 'clue' suggested that their choice of passages would yield some indication of their intentions. I compared the e-mail quotation with the original text. Why had they chosen to cut out certain phrases? The first step in answering that question was probably to study the actual Revelation passages and see what meaning emerged from them.

They had reproduced the first part of the opening sentence of Revelation, which read:

'The revelation from Jesus Christ which God gave to him to show his servants what must soon take place, and Christ made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.'

A chain of revelation from God to Jesus Christ to John, all of it through spiritual channels. This seemed to be the mark of all the early writers, seeing Christ as the present intermediary between God and the world, passing on knowledge through inspiration and revelation. John was no different from the rest in ignoring any appeal to Jesus' words on earth, or any apostolic tradition going back to him.

Then the Masters had stuck in the last phrase of verse 3: 'For the time of fulfilment is near.' This was straightforward. No matter how long ago such things were written, no matter how many others in the past had been similarly convinced, each investigator of scripture always believed that the sacred writings referred to his own time and immediate future. God was aiming his ancient message directly at the reader. Delusions of grandeur were a prerequisite for the scriptural fundamentalist.

The clue had then jumped to 1:7, which read in full:

'Behold, he is coming with the clouds! Every eye shall see him, and among them those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the world shall lament in remorse. So it shall be. Amen.'

The first sentence could not be other than a reference to the so-called Son of Man. The clouds motif went back to Daniel 7:13, that epoch-making vision in which God conferred glory and sovereignty over the nations of the earth on the 'one like a son of man' who approached the divine throne 'with the clouds of heaven'. Daniel meant this figure, perhaps an angel, to represent the righteous saints of Israel who were to receive these things at the establishment of the Kingdom. In the Gospel of Mark the evangelist made Jesus declare to the High Priest that he would return in glory as the Son of Man, 'coming with the clouds of heaven'. Mark's idea was an obvious derivation from Daniel.

Speculation about this figure had undergone a surge since the writing of the book of Daniel in the second century BCE, for the Gospels, Revelation, and a couple of Jewish apocalyptic writings, 1 Enoch and 4 Ezra, had all incorporated a figure under this name some time in the latter first century, and all handled him differently. I was aware that the Son of Man had appeared in the lost document Q, sometime around the Jewish War. This preoccupation with the Danielic figure reflected the intense focus on scripture during this unsettled period, in a search for information about God's intentions for the coming End time.

Had such a trend existed in the time of Jesus, and had Jesus really used the term of himself, as the Gospels portrayed it? There were those who denied both elements of this question, and many regarded the Son of Man as perhaps the thorniest problem in New Testament research; no one claimed any comprehensive solution to it.

A search showed that Revelation used the term twice, in 1:13 and 14:14, but the curious thing was that John must have gone directly to Daniel for it, not to any Gospel tradition. For he used the term in its pristine form as it appeared in the Danielic vision: 'one like a son of man.' He did not turn it into a title: *the* Son of Man, as the Gospels did. It seemed to me that this would indicate that Jesus had not employed it as a title he applied to himself, for how could John have escaped knowing that?

Why had the Ascended Masters cut out the reference to the clouds? Obviously, they had no interest in the idea of the Son of Man. It was probably too arcane and cryptic even for them, and it may not have fitted the 'clue' they were trying to give. But what did they mean by the phrases they actually used?

In Revelation itself, the remainder of this verse had been a close adaptation by John of a verse from the prophet Zechariah, 12:10b, which read:

'Then they shall look upon him whom they have pierced, and shall wail over him as over an only child, and shall grieve for him bitterly as for a first-born son.'

The Muratorian commentary described how early Christian interpreters had made an 'atomistic' use of the sacred writings. That is, they searched for phrases and passages which seemed to be related to the subject they were investigating. These they lifted out of context and declared them to be prophecies about Jesus and their own day. They ignored the original context or any meaning which the writer had intended. Old Testament prophets who had been speaking of their own time and circumstances were turned by men such as John and Paul into prophets of the distant future. These later investigators believed they were living in the final days of the old age, on the verge of the new, and were convinced that God had foretold all the details of this End-time and encoded them into scripture.

I was beginning to get an insight into the process of 'revelation' which so many early writers spoke of, including Paul. These men had pored over the pages of the sacred writings, and when they got an idea, when they made a connection between what they were reading and what they were looking for, a light went on, and they regarded it as a revelation from God, perhaps through Jesus Christ, his intermediary. Perhaps they imagined Jesus himself standing over their shoulder, and it may have been that in the intensity of the moment, the result of long hours spent in fevered examination of God's cryptic word, they even had a vision of him.

I reflected that fundamentalist writers and roving evangelists were even today doing exactly the same thing. An industry was in full swing out there, especially in America, ransacking scripture for prophecies of the imminent return of Jesus and the events of Armageddon. Probably no New Testament document was more scrutinized for this purpose than Revelation.

Is that what the Ascended Masters had done? Were they, too, some fundamentalist group who pored over God's word and imagined that it pointed directly at them? David Koresh of the ill-fated Waco, Texas community of millenarians had evidently done the same thing. Revelation had determined their world-view and demented ideas. The Masters had performed a dramatic 'atomistic' operation on this passage of Revelation, choosing only those phrases they wanted. Why? 'Every eye shall see him pierced' significantly altered the sense of the original verse, but in what direction? It did not immediately seem clear. Was Christ, in their mind, to be crucified once more? Something the world would be responsible for and would subsequently lament? Perhaps I was going to have to wait for future messages before I could unravel the puzzle.

Chapter Nine

1

It was approaching evening, and the day had been oppressive. Dark, low-hanging clouds had held in their moisture, as if willing it to rain by condensation alone. The dusk was also descending on my sense of comprehension, the murk in my mind fast closing on darkness.

I had not left the house since returning from the university. Perhaps it had been some vain attempt to submerge myself in a fevered examination of my own, to search for the word that would provide inspiration, listen for the revelation that would unlock the key to the puzzle. I was hungry but I didn't feel like eating. Had that been a part of the process of revelation, too? A submersion in rapt study to the exclusion of all else, until dizziness, a physical intoxication had induced the vision of inspiration? Perhaps I should try it.

About seven o'clock, the phone rang. Following my hello, there was a silence of about two seconds before the voice on the other end said, "Hello...Kevin? This is Sylvia. I—hope I'm not bothering you. If I am, I could call back at another time." Her voice sounded as tentative as her words.

"No, no. Not at all, Sylvia. I'm not busy." I was, however, experiencing a sinking feeling that my ill-advised actions of the day before had set in motion some ongoing consequences. Not the least of which was my own ambivalence, for part of me had definitely taken a leap when I realized who was calling. "What can I do for you?"

There was another hesitant pause.

"I—I just wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday morning. I've been feeling badly about it, and I didn't want you to come away with a bad impression of me." She was clearly feeling some discomfort.

"Sylvia, that's not necessary. We're both adults. Those things happen."

Now she was flustered. “Yes, of course, I suppose so. I just have to be careful. I guess there was no harm done.”

“No, of course not.”

“I just don’t want to be responsible for anything.”

I had to assume that this was an allusion to my relationship with Shauna. It seemed to me she was over-reacting. I tried to steer the conversation in a less awkward direction. “There’s no reason to worry, Sylvia. In fact, I want to thank you. Your knowledge was invaluable to me. You’ve given me some good insight into things.”

She seemed pleased. “Oh. I’m glad I could be of help. I hope you’ll think about me again.”

I’m sure I will.”

And that was the end of this curious phone call. It crossed my mind to wonder where she had gotten my number. Perhaps from David. Though there was only one Kevin Quinter in the telephone book. I decided to disconnect the phone for the balance of the evening.

The study windows were open. The air, rich with the smell of new spring foliage, was warm and muggy. I tried to put the image of a troubled Sylvia Lawrence out of my mind and return to the matter at hand. I had transferred my jotting of the message from the Ascended Masters to a piece of paper. This I picked up and looked at again, for the twentieth time at least.

‘Every eye shall see him pierced.’ ‘Pierced’ referred to Jesus’ crucifixion. His death on the cross. The defining moment of his life. The pivot point between the world’s past and God’s future. The moment of salvation.

If a single event had burned itself into Christian consciousness, it surely had been this.

But had it? As I had already seen, no writer anywhere had bothered to reproduce any of the details of the Gospel story surrounding Jesus’ death. A fluke? Coincidence? It was impossible to believe that none of these writers had known anything about the event, even if the details eventually provided by the Gospels were not accurate. Surely something had to have been known beyond the fact of the death itself.

I stopped my pacing of the study floor. Could I have overlooked something? Suppose the Gospel details were in effect not an historical account, but rather some later overlay of invention. If an earlier writer, one not familiar with any Gospel, had wanted to tell his readers something about Jesus’ crucifixion, what would he have said? I had not in my searches approached the question from this angle.

If there had been a doorman at the entrance to the Muratorian Project, he might have wondered at my constant visits. Past the illuminated manuscripts once more, I entered the Index. As always, I was fishing, and my own associations, my own index of terms residing in my brain, often determined the corridors I followed. One of these corridors led me to Galatians 3:

‘You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.’

Paul was reminding the Galatians of how he had preached to them about Christ’s crucifixion, painting some picture which he obviously felt had impressed them. What were its details? He did not say. Outside of the Lord’s Supper scene, which he seemed to impute

to direct revelation from Jesus, nowhere did Paul give a single Gospel incident concerning the passion. If one dismissed 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16 as a later interpolation, which most critical scholars did, Paul failed even to hold the Jews responsible for Jesus' death, a silence particularly astonishing in Romans 11. Nowhere did he give a single detail about the rising from the tomb on Easter morning, and even the list of post-resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians 15 was suspect, for the language was that of revelation, and the 'seeing' of all the others was seemingly identical to Paul's own.

What, then, had been the content of Paul's picture of Christ's crucifixion, or anything else, which he had painted for the Galatians?

Another corridor led to 1 Peter 2:22-24. At first glance it had the air of a description of the passion.

'He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.'

Here were faint echoes of the trial, Jesus silent before his accusers and abusers. His character, sinless and honest, trusting in God. The use of the word 'tree' for the cross seemed a little odd. I wondered what influence might have led to a tradition which spoke of the cross of Calvary in such terms.

'Peter' had given his readers this portrait of the suffering Christ as an example of how the Christian should suffer persecution or mistreatment with humility and acceptance. But how thin the account! If it was the silence before the Jewish Sanhedrin, or before Pilate, why were such figures not mentioned? If it was the silence under abuse and scourging, why none of those details? And where were the words from the cross, Jesus' comfort to the good thief, his call for forgiveness for his executioners? These sentiments would have served admirably in making the writer's point to his readers.

A notation to the 1 Peter passage led me in an unexpected direction. Scholars had long noted the similarity of this passage to parts of the Suffering Servant Song in 2nd Isaiah, chapter 53. This entire chapter had been an important source of prophecy about Jesus to early Christians. I called it up on the screen. Running through its twelve verses, I recognized that certain ideas corresponded to what the author of 1 Peter had written, some almost word for word. In my copy of the Old Testament I highlighted the pertinent lines:

'But he was pierced for our transgressions, tortured for our iniquities...
and by his wounds we are healed...
He was afflicted, he submitted to be struck down, and did not open his mouth...
He was led like a sheep to the slaughter...
He practised no lawlessness, and there was no deceit in his mouth...
He bore the sins of many and interceded for their transgressions.'

The commentary even noted a possible connection in the use of the term 'tree' in 1 Peter. The word appeared in Deuteronomy 2:23, with its prohibition against leaving a man who

had been executed on a tree hanging past sunset. Apparently this too had been looked upon as a prophecy of Jesus' fate.

Once more that curious picture of early Christian writers and preachers going to scripture for information about Christ. According to the commentary, some scholars acknowledged that the writer of 1 Peter showed no trace of literary dependency on the Gospel story, but was citing solely from Isaiah 53. Had 'Peter' no oral traditions to draw on in describing Jesus' suffering and death? Why did he turn to perceived prophecies of the event rather than the real thing? If Christians of this writer's time had no information about the central event of their faith, nothing resulting from historical witness, what in heaven's name *did* they have, and how could the movement ever have gotten off the ground, let alone sweep the empire, if they could say nothing about the historical event itself?

Had Paul's description of Christ's crucifixion similarly been drawn from scripture?

The rain had started. It drummed on the deck with an impatient sound. With whom were the gods impatient? I hoped it was not with me. The forces of nature had ever been the gods' only true voice. Unfortunately, it was in a language none could understand, except perhaps for its effects in storm, flood and earthquake. For more exact communication, the gods relied on the voices of men, occasionally women. They spoke through human vocal chords. To get men to speak as they wished, inspiration was needed. This in turn required faith; faith on the part of those who had been chosen, faith on the part of those who heard them speak. Throughout history there had never been any shortage of either.

I asked myself when had Christian writers begun to describe Jesus' crucifixion in terms familiar from the Gospels? I had all but exhausted the epistles of the New Testament. One lone, passing reference to Pilate was to be found in the Pastoral epistle 1 Timothy. This, however, was a late piece of writing, even though attributed to Paul. Scholars dated the Pastorals anywhere between 100 and 130. The circumstances and organization of the church which they reflected did not exist in Paul's time, and their overall picture fitted the early second century. In any case, the commentary noted that some scholars questioned the authenticity of this reference to Pilate because it did not seem to fit the context well.

I moved on to the non-canonical writings of the period around the year 100. I had so far dipped very little into 1 Clement, the letters of Ignatius, and the Epistle of Barnabas. If such writers knew nothing of any historical details surrounding Jesus' death, I was ready to despair.

1 Clement had been written about the year 96 from the Christian community in Rome to the one in Corinth, attempting to mediate a dispute over leadership in the Greek city. Whether its author was really the so-called bishop of Rome at that time, a certain Clement as later tradition had it, was difficult to say. My own search system for the copy of 1 Clement I had scanned into my computer was not as efficient as the Muratorian one, but it didn't take me long to locate an astonishing passage in chapter 16.

To admonish the feuding Corinthians, Clement appealed to the example Jesus had given them, as one who had come not in pride but in self-abasement. To illustrate this, Clement drew not on memories or traditions about Jesus' humble conduct in life and in death, but on scripture. He lifted out the entire 53rd chapter of Isaiah and quoted it to his readers. To this, he added verses from Psalm 21, whose original writer had lamented the contempt and derision he had been shown by his enemies during some misfortune. That derision had been

voiced in this taunt: ‘He set his hopes on the Lord; let him deliver him, let him save him, since he has such a liking for him.’

I realized without checking that these words of the Psalm were very close to ones Matthew had put into the crowd’s mouth at Jesus’ crucifixion scene. Yet Clement had gone to scripture for them. If this writer in Rome at the end of the century knew of Matthew’s Gospel, as some claimed, —since he offered a few “words of the Lord Jesus” which echoed the Sermon on the Mount—why did he not draw on such a Gospel for an account of Jesus’ passion? In quoting the Psalms, why had he not felt the urge to point out to his readers how those prophecies had in fact been fulfilled by the events themselves? This was a practice rampant in the Gospels, but so far I had not encountered it anywhere in early Christian correspondence.

As for Ignatius of Antioch, he had been my earliest locatable source for a reference to Pilate outside the Gospels. Yet beyond the simple declaration in two or three spots that Jesus had suffered and died under Pilate, no further details of the historical event of the crucifixion were offered. In view of Ignatius’ eagerness to impress the fact of Christ’s passion upon his readers, it had to be significant that he appealed to no Gospel account to support it. Chapter 3 of his letter to the Smyrnians contained a declaration that he knew Christ had risen in ‘human flesh’ because he had shown his wounds to his disciples. But Ignatius pointed to no written record as the source of this information. It was evidently a piece of oral tradition, or perhaps some preaching anecdote developed to support the contention of Christ’s resurrection.

Such silences would be my starting-point, I decided, in trying to pin down the probable dates of the Gospels: if Ignatius, the bishop of an important center like Antioch in the early second century, had not yet received a copy of a written Gospel, what did this say to those who maintained that the first one had been penned almost half a century earlier?

The voice of the gods was more insistent now. Heavier rain had rolled in and with it the deep sonority of thunder. I had yet to glimpse any of Zeus’ lightning bolts in the late evening sky. How frightening such things must have seemed to our primitive ancestors, huddling in caves as the elements thrashed the earth about them. How could they not have believed that some sentient force was aiming itself directly at them, sending a message and a warning—or worse? The world’s oldest profession had surely been those to whom fearful people had turned to explain such furies and guide them to a proper response. The priest and the prophet were still with us, but they were on the defensive now. Science and secularism were squeezing them into musty corners from where they had to shout all the louder. To such voices had the speech of the gods retreated.

I hoped that the storm would not produce a power outage. If it became more violent and moved any closer, wisdom would dictate that I disconnect my electronic equipment and return to the primitive practices of my more immediate ancestors: reading from the pages of books. When one considered that the material I was now perusing had survived to reach me down most of the long centuries by means of a laborious copying and recopying, by hand and by quill, often under difficult and pain-filled conditions, one had to marvel at the perseverance of the human spirit in its concern over the message of Divinity. Today we could call up that message in a fraction of a second and reproduce it in not too much more. The gods were going to have to make adjustments.

I turned next to the Epistle of Barnabas, probably the latest of the non-canonical writings to survive before the period of the great second century apologists. It was a long, rambling and rather uninspiring work, so the verdict went, probably written in Alexandria around the year 120. Its ancient attribution to the apostle Barnabas who had accompanied Paul on some of his journeys was now rejected. The writer roundly condemned the Jews for not understanding their own sacred scriptures, which were entirely a coded prophecy about Christ and his cross. So the allegorical method clearly showed, said 'Barnabas'. And he went on to demonstrate this, often in embarrassingly outrageous fashion.

I found that this epistle, despite its late date, had many perplexing silences about Jesus. Yet beside these stood intimations of a crude familiarity with some historical elements. The writer could speak of Jesus' 'teachings to the people of Israel' and yet never offer a single ethical saying of Jesus; in fact, in his 'Two Ways' section which presented traditional moral precepts, not even the material that resembled the Gospel ministry did he attribute to Jesus. Two items which sounded like Jesus' sayings were assigned instead to scripture. There were chapters on the Sabbath and Jewish dietary laws, but no appeals to any of Jesus' words on these subjects. Barnabas did make reference to 'miracles and wonders' by Jesus, the first I had found anywhere in Christian correspondence, but he gave no specifics. And he told of unnamed 'apostles' chosen by the Lord, but described them in very un-Gospel terms, calling them 'sinners of the worst kind.' I wondered what channels of oral tradition had produced *this* image of the likes of Peter and Paul. It was hard to believe—indeed impossible—that Barnabas possessed any written Gospel, even in the year 120. His sketchy, distorted picture of historical events, emerging as it were from a murky fog, was certainly curious.

But I was searching for descriptions of the crucifixion. This is what I encountered in chapter 5:

'Now, when the Lord resigned himself to deliver his body to destruction, the aim he had in view was to sanctify us by the remission of our sins....For what scripture says of him is: He was wounded on account of our transgressions, and bruised because of our sins, and by his scars we were healed. He was led to the slaughter like a sheep, and like a lamb that is dumb before its shearer.'

This was clearly yet another use of verses from Isaiah 53. In lieu of a written Gospel, or even oral tradition, it would seem that Christians for almost a century had relied on Isaiah and an assortment of Psalms to provide them with a picture of Jesus' experiences at the most important point of his life. What a strange state of affairs! To go to an ancient writing whose details had been twisted to serve as prophecy, rather than to the historical events themselves. 90 years after Jesus' death, a major Christian writer working in a center like Alexandria had scarcely a snippet of concrete information he could quote about the atoning death of the man he worshipped as the Son of God.

But something following Barnabas' quotation from Isaiah 53 caught my eye. The fact that this coincided with a resounding crack of thunder directly overhead I took as of no significance in supernatural terms, but some resident spirit in my brain told me that I was putting my computer, even if not my soul, in jeopardy. I decided to shut the thing down and unplug it. If my ancestors could do it, so would I. I grabbed my old Penguin copy of Early Christian Writings and a Greek-English version of the Apostolic Fathers from the University

(now overdue, I realized). With these I retreated to the darkened living room. There I settled into my favorite reading chair and turned on a single lamp behind me. The rest of the house was virtually shut down, to ride out the storm which now sounded as though it was leading a charge down my street.

The lamp flickered occasionally but held valiantly on. It was close to midnight.

I chose the Greek-English version and turned to the pages of Barnabas, chapter 5. ‘For the scripture concerning him speaks thus,’ were the words which prefaced the quotation from Isaiah 53, and this is what followed it:

‘Therefore we ought to give great thanks to the Lord that he has given us knowledge of the past, and wisdom for the present, and that we are not without understanding for the future.’

I knit my brow. It was at this point, I think, that the veil started to lift, but to my conscious mind it was only a flicker of movement—off to the side, so to speak. My forward vision simply registered the opinion that there was something very peculiar about this statement. For Barnabas seemed to be saying, quite bluntly, that knowledge of the past, which would have included the experiences of Jesus, came from scriptural passages like Isaiah 53. A little footnoted cross-reference pointed one back to 1:7 where the writer had made a similar statement: ‘For the Lord made known to us through the prophets things past and things present...and a taste of things to come.’

Here was a Christian writer in the second decade of the second century praising God for revealing Jesus through scripture. Not prophecying, but giving knowledge of. With no idea supplementing this, that the events of history had in fact fulfilled such prophecies. If Barnabas’ stated intention was to show that the Jewish scriptures had in fact been a prophetic repository about Christ, he would have been making constant comparisons between scripture and history. Instead, all he ever pointed to was the former.

Over the next couple of chapters, Barnabas went on to draw many bits and pieces from scripture which he took as relating to Jesus, particularly his passion. One said: ‘Nail my flesh,’ from the Septuagint version of Psalm 119:120. Another quoted Zechariah 13:7: ‘When they shall smite their shepherd, then the sheep of the flock shall be destroyed.’

But the quotation from Zechariah was introduced by an exceedingly curious statement. The Penguin translation put it most clearly: ‘For God lays the bruising of His flesh at their door, with the words—’ Was Barnabas saying that we know the Jews were responsible for Jesus’ death because prophets like Zechariah tell us so? Was this possible? Would Christians, who for over two generations showed no sign of blaming the Jews for the death of Jesus, have taken it upon themselves to create a ‘history’ which said that they *were* responsible, simply on the perceived witness of God’s word in scripture? This was more than curious, it was staggering.

There was another quote which served to support the Jews’ responsibility. I saw that Barnabas had presented many of his scriptural quotations as the direct words of Christ, presumably because they were phrased by the prophets and psalmists in the first person singular. “For the synagogues of the wicked have risen against me,” said Psalm 22, and so Barnabas had taken this as the voice of Christ speaking from the pages of scripture. This reminded me of something I had just read in 1 Clement, and I flipped back to the earlier

epistle. Sure enough, the long quotation from Isaiah 53 had been introduced as the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking in scripture and telling of Jesus. In Clement's view, God was revealing things about Jesus through his Spirit, in the writings. Occasionally, as in Barnabas, Jesus himself was presented as speaking directly.

The veil shifted just a little more. Writers like Clement and Barnabas—and the one who had written Hebrews, for I recalled that he too had done the same—seemed to regard Jesus as a figure who resided in scripture. From there he spoke. From there came some of the 'teachings' he was said to have imparted. As for his deeds and experiences, especially surrounding his suffering and death, did they, in the view of these men, reside there too? If traditions about Christ's crucifixion had been lost—as the silences in Paul and elsewhere strongly suggested—had scripture provided the only source available? Jesus was entirely spiritual now, and both he and God were telling of those lost experiences through the writings, indeed they had encoded them there in advance.

Another bolt of lightning, now visible through the forward windows of the house, must have given me a jolt. I berated myself. What kind of absurd rationalization was I indulging in? Such a bizarre situation could never have developed, the complete loss of history, the total eclipse of the man who had begun the whole movement. Nor was there any suggestion of such a thing in the words of the documents themselves. And to consider that Christianity had started out of some totally mundane career and that all the traditions about Jesus were later invention made no sense either. If Jesus had done virtually nothing, what had provided the amazing energy for the missionary movement, the impulse for such cosmic deification?

For someone like Clement, Jesus gave no impression of being a dead man in the past, whose memory was reverently cherished or whose precepts were carefully preserved and observed. He was a living, active presence who operated through the Spirit and who spoke through the words of the Hebrew bible, the spiritual son communicating knowledge of God and of his own redeeming activities. In the later Barnabas, it was as though he were beginning to emerge from that spiritual world, stepping into the past, but in a haphazard, indistinct fashion, still tied to his scriptural home. In Ignatius, it had been into a skeleton history: son of Mary, really born, truly crucified by Pontius Pilate.

But to read Clement and those who came before him was to read of a suffering, sacrificing Christ who had undergone these things in scripture itself, or whatever world scripture represented. One travelled to the pages of the sacred writings to learn the details of these otherwise unknown events. Was this conceivable?

My internal agitation was being aggravated by a more outward reaction to the onslaught around me. For the full force of the storm seemed to be releasing itself right over my head. Streaks of ghostly light seared the walls and furniture around me. Cracked bells that had lost their pitch pealed through the heavenly cathedral. Whether it was the voice of God giving me an answer, or perhaps trying to drown me out, it would need someone more adept than myself at interpreting divine communication.

But before I was completely swept away into bottomless, uncharted waters, I thought I spied a raft, a life-saving straw. Someone had said—I was sure it was Paul—that Jesus had been 'born of woman' and was 'the son of David'. If Jesus had been viewed as the Christ, the expected Messiah, this was an essential requirement, for the Old Testament had been full of promises that one of David's stock, of Jesse's seed, a branch from the tribe of Judah, would be raised to the kingship of Israel, creating a new glorious monarchy that would rule

the earth. It was utterly impossible that Christ would not have been regarded in some way as descended from David, and this would surely have to be given an historical basis. It could not have been lost sight of in oral tradition that the human man who had ministered in Galilee and died on Calvary, who had risen from a tomb outside Jerusalem, had been of a line which went back to Israel's greatest king.

Where had those Pauline references been? It was late, and with the distraction of the storm, I was losing my concentration. There was nothing for it but to make a quick skim of the epistles.

Back in the darkened study, while the downpour outside was blown against the window panes, I groped for my Greek-English New Testament and rescued my trusty old dog-eared copy as well. As I made my way back to the living room, I wondered why it was that we bothered. Even in the face of tumult and adversity, what gave us our thirst for knowing? How long had primitive humans been overwhelmed by the elements around them, powerless to do anything but survive in an uncaring universe? How long before they had stood up at some subtle moment of transition and said, 'No more. We don't want to huddle in the cold, drenched by the rain, cowed by the forces around us. We want to do something about it. We want to understand.'

In Vardis Fisher's second novel of the Testament of Man, the human species had harnessed fire and created for itself "Golden Rooms" of light and warmth. This discovery was part of the development of intelligence, the creation of golden rooms in the mind. Fisher had vividly conveyed the wonder and elation when a fundamental truth entered the brain for the first time. But with the light of awareness and self-discovery came greater questions and greater fears. When humans began to know, they also realized how much they did not know. And with the heightened awareness of one's own existence, came the fear of non-existence. As Fisher portrayed it, this, together with the reverence humans felt for the miracle of fire, created an instinct for religion. The world had been split into two, and the supernatural was born. To the challenges it faced in the real world, humanity now added a new concern—some would call it an albatross—the dread of unknown, unseen powers which must be placated. It had embarked on the path leading to gods and superstition.

The single lamp over my reading chair created its own golden room, and within its aura of warmth and light amid the surrounding tempest I opened my New Testament to the letters of Paul. There at the very head of the corpus, in the opening lines of the epistle to the Romans, lay the passage I remembered.

'Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who arose from the seed of David according to the flesh, and was designated Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.'

The other translation did not make this turgid sentence any more lucid, but from what I could see, Paul was stating two facts about Jesus, seemingly relating to the two sides of his nature or activity. The first was in the flesh—presuming that this was the meaning of *kata sarka*, 'according to the flesh'. The second was in the spirit—*kata pneuma*, 'according to the spirit'. The meaning of this too was cryptic, for the other translation chose to make this a

reference to the Holy Spirit. Was Paul saying here that in the sphere of the flesh Jesus had been descended from David, while in the sphere of the spirit he had risen from the dead and been declared Son of God and assumed his full power? I resolved not to show this passage to Shauna. This had to be an unusually difficult one, but I would never be able to convince her that the writers of the New Testament were anything but unintelligible.

Why had Paul chosen these two elements? I wondered. If he had wanted to make a statement about the two spheres of Jesus' activity, earth and heaven, it seemed odd to pick the descent from David as the most quotable element of Jesus' entire life. And if Paul knew this piece of historical data about Jesus—presumably through human channels—why did he never give his readers any other biographical information?

Another anomaly struck me. The second element didn't quite parallel the first. Being declared Son of God in the spirit sphere was something that had to be a matter of faith, not historical knowledge. It was essentially a scene in heaven after his resurrection. Here Jesus had received his full investiture as Son of God, along with certain unspecified powers.

A piece of historical data and a spiritual event. Why this curious combination of elements?

Both were essential parts of his gospel, Paul was saying. Paul preached that Jesus was the son of David, and yet he never gave us other information about the human man. Was nothing else essential? In view of his relegation of everything else about Christ's life to the scrap heap, it would seem not.

But there was something else about this whole passage which bothered me. The trouble was, I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I had been looking for something historically concrete, something to set against all the implications in documents like 1 Clement that Christ existed in and spoke from scripture, that for all knowledge of Christ one went to the writings, as though historical tradition had simply been lost or was non-existent. Paul himself had implied the same thing. Only here did he seem to give a piece of historical biography. And yet—

The clock on my mantelpiece, an antique mechanical thing I had inherited through several generations, struck midnight. I felt as though I had been sitting there, beneath the storm, for hours. Perhaps the force of it had bent time, slowed it down. I went back and read through Romans 1:1-4, performing my own deceleration, stopping on each phrase to absorb its implications.

The gospel of God. That is, given by God. A manner of expression Paul often used. Paul's gospel was God's gospel. As he insisted elsewhere, he had not gotten it from any man. It was not a man's product. He had received it through revelation. From God, from heaven. No role for Jesus there.

God had promised this gospel beforehand. The verb was *proepaggelō*. This he had done through the prophets. What did Paul mean by 'promise'? It did not seem logical that he meant God had merely said through the prophets that in the future he would give a gospel to Paul. It surely meant that the very content of that gospel had been forecast in the sacred writings.

I checked my other translation. There, God 'announced' the gospel beforehand. This fitted my assumption much better. The root of the verb was the same as the word for angel, God's 'announcer' and messenger. God had given the details of the gospel about Jesus in

scripture. Everything was there ahead of time, pointing toward the gospel which had been revealed to Paul. Indeed that, obviously, was where Paul had gotten it.

About his Son. The gospel of God was ‘about his Son’, *peri tou huiou autou*. Both God’s gospel, given in scripture, and Paul’s gospel were one and the same, a message, the ‘good news’ about the Son of God. God in scripture had looked ahead not to Jesus, but to the gospel that told of him.

What was wrong with this picture?

God had foretold Paul’s gospel.

God did not foretell Jesus. Or promise him, if that were in fact the meaning of the verb. Rather, he promised and foretold the gospel that Paul would carry.

My mind felt as though it was hovering on the edge of an abyss.

If Paul believed that God had encoded in scripture information about Jesus which would form part of Paul’s gospel, then God would have been first and foremost foretelling Jesus. Even if absolutely nothing about Jesus’ life had been transmitted to Paul through human channels, learning about Jesus’ life in its foretelling in scripture would be a window onto that life. Any sane mind would have made the simple adjustment and said that God had given information beforehand *about Jesus*. That’s the way it would have been presented. Not that God had given information about Paul’s gospel. The Son came into the picture only as the content of that gospel.

Scripture had not been the prophecy of Jesus’ life and activities. It had been the prophecy of the gospel which told of those activities.

All trace of the storm was blotted out. The universe was filled with silence.

No life of Jesus intervened between the writing of scripture and the revelation of the gospel to Paul. Wherever or whenever those activities had taken place, it had not been located in history between the two events.

They had all presented it the same way: Paul, Peter, Clement, even to some extent Barnabas. And no doubt others. The Son lived in scripture, or whatever world scripture told of. His very existence—never mind the actual details of his life—his very existence was to be learned of only through God’s sacred word, the word that had come to Paul and others like him.

There had been no historical Jesus.

I waited for the thunderclap. Would it be a bolt of horror—congratulations—punishment?

None came. Only the steady drumming of the rain.

The sentence in the Greek had gone on. The content of the gospel which had been foretold by God. Paul offered two elements about the Son. That Jesus, in the sphere of the flesh, had been of the seed of David. That in heaven after his resurrection Jesus had been proclaimed or appointed Son of God, receiving his full power in that role. The structure of the sentence, the relationship between its elements: clearly Paul was identifying these two points about Jesus as elements of his gospel, elements which had come from the source of that gospel: scripture. God had recorded them there. Paul had read them there, inspired by God’s Spirit.

I could not see how the sentence could be taken in any other way. Why had no one else, as far as I knew, seen it with this meaning?

This would eliminate that anomaly I had noted earlier, the linking of a piece of historical data with an item of faith about an event in the spiritual world. The first was not a piece of historical data at all. It, too, had been a feature of Jesus derived solely from scripture, that he was the son of David. To be literal, ‘had arisen out of the seed of David.’

Was this possible? *Kata sarka*. A cryptic phrase, when one thought about it, one I had encountered a few times in Paul and other writers, or some close variant of it. It was almost a stereotyped reference. Why not ‘in his human life’? Or ‘when he came to earth’ or some such? *Kata sarka*, according to the flesh. What did it really mean? Could Jesus be of the seed of David in an entirely spiritual sense? I resolved to find out.

It would also explain that other anomaly: why Paul showed no interest in any other piece of biographical information about Jesus. This one wasn’t biographical in the historical sense. It was a feature derived from scripture.

But now another unconscious perceptor was going off. That the Messiah would be David’s descendant was an idea which ran riot throughout the prophetic writings. That Paul’s Christ enjoyed this necessary characteristic Paul could readily deduce from prophets like Isaiah. Because of its prominence in the writings, Paul would have been justified in presenting this as a chief feature of Jesus’ nature ‘in the flesh’. But that odd second feature: Jesus in the spirit being designated Son of God in power following his resurrection. I had asked myself why Paul had chosen to highlight this idea, one that seemed less significant than the death and resurrection which had been shunted to the side. Was there a passage somewhere which would have suggested this scene in heaven, something whose importance would have led Paul to present this as being a supreme experience of Jesus ‘in the spirit’?

My tingling perceptor was telling me yes, and I had a feeling where. It was a passage I had encountered more than once, discussed in the commentaries in one connection or another, one of crucial importance to early Christian interpreters of Jesus.

I almost ran into the study—a hazardous piece of foolhardiness, since the place was totally dark—and retrieved my Old Testament. Back within my golden room, I opened it to the Psalms. It had been an early Psalm, I was sure.

It was unfortunate I couldn’t have had this kind of luck in picking lottery numbers, or catching buses. There it was: Psalm 2. This was a Psalm written for a royal coronation. God welcomes and anoints his king and the writer warns the foreign nations to beware of their plots and ambitions against the Lord and his anointed. At its center, I read these lines:

‘I will tell of the decree of the Lord:
He said to me, “You are my son, today I have begotten you...
Ask of me, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance,
and the ends of the earth as your possession...” ’

Here, surely, was the source of Paul’s second assertion in Romans 1, in both its elements. Paul had assumed that this passage in the Psalm applied to Jesus. Jesus is proclaimed, appointed God’s son by God himself. And he is invested with power, receiving the nations of the earth as his possession.

In my island of light underneath the lamp, it seemed to me that all the elements of the opening lines in Romans now fell into place. God told the ‘good news’ about Jesus his Son in scripture. This account resided there, unknown and unperceived, until prophets of Paul’s

time unearthed it through the inspiration of God's Spirit. As Colossians and Ephesians and the writer who added Romans 16:25 were later to put it: it was a mystery kept secret through long generations. Paul had seized on two elements of this scriptural account to highlight for his readers (although some said he might have been borrowing an earlier creedal formula). That Jesus was 'of David's seed' according to the flesh. And that he had gained his full stature as Son of God following his resurrection when God had welcomed him in heaven and gave him power over the earth.

Again, one set of questions needed to be answered. If Jesus had never been on earth in history, where had he come to heaven from? Where had the death and resurrection taken place? Could this be accommodated to the meaning of 'according to the flesh', and could Jesus be regarded as connected to David in this state?

The shock was beginning to wear off. I could see that so much of what I had previously observed had pointed inevitably in this direction. Paul and the early Christian writers had never appealed to Jesus of Nazareth. They had been silent on everything in his life. There had been no concept of apostolic tradition going back to Jesus. Instead, they had all spoken of the Spirit, how the Spirit inspired, how it told of God's secrets. They had gone to scripture at every turn, pointing to Jesus on its pages, never turning from there to his historical life and declaring how such 'prophecies' had been fulfilled in the historical events. Paul's letters revealed a world of rival apostles, all claiming that the Spirit they had received was the true one, and none of them ever claimed a link to Jesus himself. Jesus was a present force, not a figure of the recent past. The picture of Jesus they knew, the picture they presented to the believer, was the picture of Jesus found in scripture.

The center of the storm seemed to be passing. Lightning flashes no longer filled the room with starkly edged specters. It was yet too soon to risk reactivating the computer, and I still had no memory as to where that other reference was located, Paul speaking of Jesus as 'born of woman'. But I recalled now something which Sylvia had said in connection with one of the savior gods of the mystery cults: Dionysos, too, had been born to a woman, in a cave. Yet Dionysos had never been regarded as an historical figure. Perhaps this was the simple answer. That in all these 'historical' features accorded to Jesus, such things had existed in a mythical realm, as the activities of the Greek deities had. Early Christianity and the sectarian Jewish circles it grew out of had developed their own equivalent form of myth, something in which the Jewish scriptures played a crucial part. Perhaps it could even in some way have been thought of as existing 'in the sphere of the flesh'.

I resolved to track down Paul's reference and investigate the whole question. With a little shiver of misgiving, I realized that this would require further consultation with Sylvia.

One thing seemed clear. Jesus' death and resurrection had been mythical events, they had taken place somewhere in the spiritual world. No other explanation could account for the total silence on all the details of the crucifixion and the rising from the tomb. Not just the Gospel details—*any* details. That such a situation could exist surrounding the central event of the Christian faith was simply inconceivable. Pilate, had he been responsible for Jesus' crucifixion, could not possibly have dropped completely out of sight, to emerge in Christian correspondence only with Ignatius and a second century Pastoral epistle. Paul had pointed to the demon spirits as the unwitting executioners of Jesus, and the spirits did not reside on earth. They were part of the heavenly realm just above the earth. If Jesus' death were a

mythical event, like the deaths of other savior gods, then it, too, had been revealed by God. It, too, was a part of God's mystery, hidden for long ages.

I realized that I had already encountered the probable source of the idea that Jesus had been crucified. Writers everywhere, 1 Clement, John the prophet of Revelation, Barnabas, and no doubt others, had opened the sacred book and pointed to passages about piercing, the nailing of flesh. If these were messianic, then the Christ had clearly undergone crucifixion. According to 1 Peter, probably drawing from Deuteronomy, he had hung on a 'tree'.

I suddenly realized what other incident had been revealed—at least to Paul. He had declared it so in 1 Corinthians 11:23. 'For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you...' Paul was speaking of the revelation he had received about Jesus' words over the bread and wine of the thanksgiving meal which the Pauline communities observed. Like the cultic meal of the Mithraic myth, this was part of the myth of Jesus. Perhaps it had been a product solely of Paul's mind, an 'inspiration' arrived at for no other reason than a mundane one: to induce the unruly Corinthians, who scrambled for more than their share of food and drink, to treat the meal with more respect, to see it as a sacrament established by the Lord. The bread and wine were in fact sacred elements, said Paul, for they were the very body and blood of the sacrificed Jesus. Perhaps this would explain why his term, the Lord's Supper, was unlike any other term used for the meal in early Christian literature, because it had nothing to do with any established tradition.

It seemed likely that Paul's innovative treatment of the Jewish meal had been influenced by the mysteries, which also believed in the establishment of cultic meals by their gods. This form of sacrament would have been repugnant to Jews, whereas it had strong affinities with Greek practice.

The lightning and thunder had moved on. Only the rain continued to beat its persistent rhythms around me. I decided it was safe to return to the study and get my lifeline operating again. Two points would have to be cleared up before I could give myself the go-ahead to tentatively accept my startling conclusions.

All tiredness had been washed away in the rush of revelation. I hoped that mine had not been the product of divine communication—although I *had* been studying scripture.

2

Somewhat to my surprise, I discovered that the storm had not obliterated the outside world. The Muratorian Project still existed. When I called up the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:23, it was like reestablishing contact with some living voice.

'For I received from the Lord what I passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks...'

'On the night he was betrayed.' Most readers would have taken this as an allusion to Judas. My old translation had 'on the night of his arrest.' Again, the post-Supper scene when Jesus was seized by the authorities came naturally to mind.

Why these two different translations? The verb Paul used was '*paradidomi*', which meant literally 'to hand over' or 'to deliver up'. From my Lexicon I learned that one of its uses was as a kind of technical term in the context of martyrdom, best rendered as 'to

surrender' someone. There was no necessary implication of betrayal or judicial arrest. In fact, the identical verb had been used in Romans 8:32: 'God delivered him up for us all.' And in Ephesians 5:2 and 25 it was Christ himself who performed the action, who 'gave himself up on your behalf.' In neither case could the idea have involved betrayal or arrest. Clearly, translations of the epistles could be influenced by the Gospel picture.

Then there was the question of 'at night'. This fitted the Gospel account, of course, but after a moment's reflection I realized there was no reason why a mythical story could not be set at night. Paul may have deduced this element from some passage in scripture; or, since 1 Corinthians 5:7 suggested that he made a connection between Jesus' sacrifice and Passover, he may have associated the meal with that celebration, which took place after sunset.

So far so good.

My second point was the passage in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul's statement of the core doctrines of his gospel. It was prefaced in verse 3 by a now-familiar statement: 'For I passed on to you, as of first importance, what I also received...'

The verb for 'received' was identical to the one in 11:23—*parelabon*. Paul had received his doctrines—how? Through personal revelation, or through the accounts of others before him? I had to lean to the former, because that was the meaning I had arrived at for the earlier phrase. And because in Galatians 1:11-12 Paul had so passionately declared that his gospel had *not* been received from any man, but from a revelation about Jesus Christ.

Then Paul went on to state this 'mini-gospel'.

'...that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.'

According to the scriptures. *Kata tas graphas*. This was the crucial phrase. Traditional wisdom said that Paul used 'in accordance with' to mean that Jesus had done these things at the governance of scripture. They were a fulfillment of prophecies about the Christ.

The problem with this interpretation, however, was that Paul nowhere discussed such an idea. He never compared scripture with history and pointed out the relationship between them. This would have resulted in a clear reference to an historical event in the recent life of Jesus, and my previous surveys had never uncovered such a thing.

But *kata* could be used in other senses, and one of these was the same as one of the ways we used 'according to' in English. If I told someone that "According to the newspaper this morning, the President went to Chicago," I would not mean that the President was fulfilling or acting in accordance with the newspaper account. Rather, I had learned of his trip to Chicago through that report in the newspaper. Paul could well have been saying that he knew of Christ's death and resurrection from what he had read in the sacred writings.

Such a meaning would utterly exclude any possibility that Paul knew of a Jesus who had died and was resurrected in recent history, a man living in his own lifetime. It was hardly surprising that no commentator had ever chosen to interpret the phrase this way.

In both passages, then, Paul's statements were consistent with everything else I had investigated this dramatic night, that information and belief about Christ came through revelation and scripture.

How strange—at least to our minds. To think that an entire religious movement had taken to the byways of the empire, had won over hearts and minds in so many centers of Jewish and gentile life, solely on the basis of words written in a book.

Yet these were the words of God. And the whole tenor of the times was to seek out clues to the unseen world which mirrored this one. Jews believed that everything in this world was mirrored and predestined in heaven. In Platonic philosophy, the human world of matter was an inferior reflection of the divine reality above, timeless and perfect. Beyond a handful of rationalist philosophers, the ancients had no scientific concept of the universe to speak of. Angels and spirits filled the layers of the heavens above them. Mystical reality was real, a place and a state to be yearned for, to achieve through salvation.

Scripture was God's window onto that unseen reality, revealing his secrets and wishes. Every educated Jew—and Paul was certainly that—lived within the pages of the holy books. He governed his life by their words. Ancient philosophy as a whole, its view of the universe and Deity, was a product of intellectual contemplation. The genuine reality lay outside the observable world. Ultimate truths were reached through the rejection of the world and the abandonment of the body. God was believed to communicate first through his scriptures, second through visionary revelation. God had spoken to Paul through both.

Perhaps it was not so strange, then, that Paul and a host of believers could love and commit themselves to a Christ no one had yet seen. Everyone around them was doing the same. Philosophers moved in purely mystical spheres. Isis, Mithras, all the savior gods: they had not come closer to earth than myth. God himself was entirely supernatural. He had never left heaven. Yet countless generations of Jews had devoted their lives and destinies to him. Why not to a Son of God?

The Son had been the religious innovation of the age. An intermediary figure, a bridge to the transcendent, ultimate God, a revealer, a redeemer. Such a figure had at first been impersonal, abstract like the Greek Logos. But gradually it had moved toward the personal. God's Wisdom became a female entity who aided him, came to earth and called, gave knowledge and resided among men. The Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, so I recalled from my conversation with Sylvia at the party, had taken an intermediate step, making the Logos 'the Son' and 'first-begotten of God', instilling him into Moses. Greek and Roman philosophers, I was to learn later, had associated the Logos with certain savior gods, and at least one Hellenistic sect personalized it in the direction of a saving entity.

Christians followed that trend. They created a Son who, like some of the cultic deities, had died for them, to whom one could be mystically united, who revealed God and guaranteed resurrection and eternal life. He was a Son to love.

For Paul, scripture was not the prophecy of the Christ event, but its embodiment. God's word revealed the spiritual world where Christ lived and performed his redemptive acts. Before long, however, through ways I had yet to investigate, this Christ was to spill into history and into Gospels which told of him. I realized by now that most of this Gospel 'biography' had come from scripture, the details of a life painstakingly built up from their words and ideas, no doubt with other influences enriching the mix.

When this process was complete, scripture became a book of prophecy about Jesus. Christians lost sight of the fact that this is where he had come from.

I took a deep breath, several in fact. Was there a flaw in the picture somewhere? Would I wake up tomorrow morning and reject the whole thing as too incredible, too unacceptable? Could it really be true that less than a century into the Christian movement, it had turned in

an unexpected and unprecedented direction, one which had led to 19 centuries of faith based on a monumental misconception?

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew that the theory that a human Jesus had never existed was one of those things which had bounced around out in left field; but I had never encountered or taken notice of it, and I knew nothing about any of the writers or scholars who had championed it. This could be another avenue of investigation to follow.

But tonight I had only my own thoughts to draw on. The voice of the gods had receded. The noise of the rain was slackening to a muffled vibration. The universe felt strangely empty, hollow sounds echoing in a new void that would never be filled. If the divine voice had fallen silent, perhaps no sound would ever be heard again...

Except the doorbell.

Whether it was the lateness of the hour, or the fact that I had felt isolated in some other dimension for what seemed half an eternity, the little chime at my front door struck me as something that could not be identified. When it repeated a few moments later, I got up in a kind of stupor, wondering what new mystery lay waiting for me on the other side.

The mystery turned out to be a rather damp and worried-looking Shauna.

“My God, Shauna! What are you doing here? At this hour?”

She stood on the porch with her little umbrella shaping the rain into a glistening tube around her body, her pant legs and jogging shoes already spattered—though I was sure she had not been jogging. For some reason, we both stood there, she in the rain, myself under the lee of the doorway. She wore an almost guilty look, as though this deprived her of the right to come in out of the downpour.

“I was worried. Your phone line has been busy or something for hours, and it was getting so late, and with the storm—”

I spied her car out on the street. “Why didn’t you park in the laneway? Here—good grief. Come inside. You’ll be drenched.”

She shook out her umbrella as she scurried through the door. “I didn’t want to wake you in case you were sleeping. Yes, I know, that doesn’t make sense, does it? Well, sometimes it’s hard to think straight at 2 AM.”

I helped her take her jacket off. “Would you like some hot chocolate?”

“That would be glorious. But it might put me to sleep right there.”

“Don’t you have to get up for work in the morning?”

“I suppose. But it’s been months since I took a sick day. I could always call in—unless you’re going to be busy, of course.”

“No, no. From the look of it, I’ll probably be sleeping in myself.”

Shauna took off her wet shoes and we went into the kitchen. I set about preparing the promised hot chocolate.

She asked, almost tentatively, “Is your phone out? I was trying since about seven, and that was before the storm hit.”

“No. I took it off the hook.”

“Oh.” I knew she was wondering if she had interrupted one of my privacy binges. Which in a way was true. “Have you been doing anything special?”

I mixed the chocolate and the Kwik just the way she liked it. “Mostly riding out the storm, like everyone else, I imagine.” I stuck the two cups in the microwave, the modern

male's indispensable survival machine. "I did a little more research while I was at it. Roughing it, of course. No computer. Had to shut the thing off, just to be safe."

She nodded, knowingly.

"Why, what did you think had happened to me?"

She gave a little laugh, and I could tell she was still feeling self-conscious. "Oh, I don't know. I thought maybe you were discussing the coming apocalypse with Burton Patterson on the phone. Or you'd run off with some history professor or other."

I kept my eye on the microwave timer. I said with some humor in my voice, "If I do that, I'll let you know first."

"I hope so."

The timer gave three beeps. I served the chocolate piping hot and we sipped away at it, sitting at the kitchen table. The night was quiet, the continuing fall of the rain a delicate murmur. The world outside lay drowsy and sated in the wake of the gods' passing passion. If their voice was weakening, their virility seemed unaffected.

Shauna's eyes were drooping over the steaming cup. Why had she been worried at a busy phone signal? I wondered. Enough to come over in these conditions at such an hour?

She asked, "You said you'd been working—did you discover anything interesting?"

"Oh, a thing here and there. I'm not sure how I'll use it." I had no intention of trying to explain anything tonight. The warm milk was trickling down my throat, soothing my insides, as I knew it would be warming hers, adding to her sleepiness. With her dusky coloring and her large, dark-edged mismatched eyes, her small, somewhat 'zofitig' figure—such a delightful word she had taught me from her Yiddish heritage, meaning fleshy but in a pleasing way—she might have been an embodiment of the Earth Mother herself. But unlike the priests of Attis, the Great Mother's consort, I had no intention of castrating myself in her service. In fact, with the warm, sweet fluid tingling my mouth, I felt quite an opposite urge. I had had enough of the stern and fulminating voices of the gods. Now I wished to draw a different sound from a creature of the earth.

"Would you like to go to bed?"

She looked at me with the tiniest of smiles in her eyes. "And just what kind of a proposition is that, sir?"

"To be close. To forget gods and priests and prophets. Perhaps to find out who we should really be worshipping." I reached for her hand across the table. "Tonight I would like to taste something sweeter than chocolate."

Her little shiver was not from the dampness.

We left the cups, half-filled, steaming on the table.

Hers was an altar I occasionally worshipped at in this fashion. Nothing was more intimate than this gift of exclusive attention, requiring no reciprocating measure on her part except sheer response. This gift she gave me in return, to fill my ears with the sounds of her pleasure, drowsy and unabashed. The other gift was beneath my mouth. The poet had missed out in his rapt preoccupation with the nectars of the gods; there were savors closer to earth he might have waxed poetic on. As the night slid deeper into its post-traumatic lassitude, I kept Shauna on the edge of languor and excitement, with the occasional flare into a more involuntary gush of passion. For such exquisite primate capacity, 60 million years was worth the wait. It was unfortunate we had brought some of the dinosaurs along with us.

Eventually she asked for a respite and drew me up and into her. The combination of my extended ministry at the altar and the tension of the day's discoveries produced an almost immediate visionary experience, which seemed to communicate itself to all devotees present, and within minutes we both hovered at the edge of sleep.

"I will not stir from this bed until noon, I warn you," Shauna purred, nuzzling against me under the blanket.

I murmured my complete acquiescence, and we both left the world to its own devices.

3

Other than a discreet phone call to the lab at 9 AM, which I was blissfully unaware of, Shauna was true to her word. We lounged in bed as the noon hour passed, and then some. It was a day which welcomed the sun as a lord returning to his domain after the ravages of the marauding storm.

Brunch was toasted waffles and maple syrup. The syrup was the real thing.

This morning—or afternoon, as it certainly was—I felt more secure about referring to Shauna's mission of mercy the night before.

"Did you really think something had happened to me?"

"Well, if you must know, Kevin, I felt lonely and a little apprehensive in the storm. I just wanted to hear the sound of your voice."

I'm sure I looked as sheepish as I felt. I had truly been selfish not to have thought of that. And she had braved the storm's rigors to cross the city just to be with me. "I'm sorry. That was not considerate of me, was it? I could claim I had a lot of things on my mind, but that's really no excuse."

Her eyes forgave me. "What sort of things?"

I told her briefly of the Ascended Masters and their e-mail to David.

There was a certain 'I told you so' in her expression, even though she hadn't. "You see what happens when you take on fanatics? They can bite back. You never know what people will do when their precious convictions are challenged."

"If no one ever challenged established convictions—" The rest of the thought awaited its turn with a mouthful of waffle.

"Yes, that's what you always say," Shauna admonished. Were my unspoken thoughts so predictable? "Why don't you tell me about your little discoveries? Seeing that they were so important you had to disconnect my lifeline to you."

"Hmm." I cleared my throat. How could I introduce such an idea and not seem like a total idiot? In fact, today I had done my best not to think about it at all, though without complete success. Now I was brought back to it in all its awesomeness. And complexity.

I began. "What would you say—" I paused as though giving my brain one last chance to review the entire picture and decide if I had indeed jumped to some wild, hair-brained conclusion. My RAM wasn't equal to the task.

Shauna was waiting, her mouth full of waffle and syrup. I plunged in.

"You know how we could find no sign of anyone blaming the Jews for Jesus' death?" Yes, that was a good opening. She'd be sympathetic to that approach. "Suppose I were to say that the reason is that no one at all killed Jesus." She switched to chewing more slowly.

I tossed the rest out cavalierly. "Mainly because no such person ever existed."

Shauna stopped chewing altogether. Then she decided it was best to swallow. She pursed her lips, cocked her head at me, and said: “I would say you were standing under a tree during the storm when it was hit by lightning.”

I had a sinking realization that this was precisely the reaction I was going to get when presenting the same outlandish proposition to them all: David, Patterson, Winston my publisher, who knew who else. If I couldn’t persuade Shauna, neutral, clear-headed, Jewish Shauna, who had even shared in some of my research, I might as well abandon the whole project. I tried not to sound desperate.

“But remember all those silences we uncovered. The man’s life had dropped into a black hole, as far as the epistle writers were concerned. And what about all those references to secrets kept hidden for long ages? They were clearly talking about Christ. Paul looks to the Spirit of God in scripture for revelation about Jesus; he gets nothing from Jesus. God is the source of everything, all knowledge, even the ethics. God even does the saving. Don’t you think it all fits?” Whether this frantic string of justifications made the case—

Shauna was digesting more than just the waffles and syrup. “But— It seems so...so extreme! Couldn’t there be some other explanation?”

“Of course it’s extreme. It would be completely unacceptable to millions of Christians. Regardless of whether it was good enough for Paul. But if that’s what really happened, there’s no use in perpetuating a fiction. Think of how much better we’d understand everything, how we could see the development of religious ideas in history—”

Shauna gave me her most skeptical expression. “Somehow I don’t think too many people would find that an adequate compensation.” She tentatively poked her knife and fork at the rest of her waffle, as though wondering whether she should continue to be eating at such a moment.

Then she had a thought. “Maybe Paul placed all that emphasis on scripture because up to then that was what everyone believed in. If it wasn’t in scripture, it had no validity. Some people are still like that.”

“Yes. But all the more reason to make scripture clearly point to the historical man.”

“Maybe he just wanted them to have faith. If he gave them proof, there’d be no merit in it.” I could tell that this was only a half-hearted attempt.

“Well, you’re right about one thing. Paul certainly puts an emphasis on having faith. It’s all anyone needs to—”

I stopped short. Half of my own waffle still lay uneaten. I nodded, more to myself than to Shauna. “Faith. Yes, Paul is always talking about having faith. That’s how you get saved. By believing in Jesus.”

Shauna said wryly, “That hasn’t changed much.”

I prodded the air with one finger and said slowly, “But there’s one kind of faith he doesn’t talk about...” Was I receiving a true ‘revelation’? Perhaps ancient man, when he made any connection in his mind, believed he had been prodded by some divine force. I got up from the table. “C’mon. We’re going to check something.”

Shauna made as if to follow, then decided that the universe hadn’t sufficiently collapsed to prevent her from taking a last—and very large—mouthful of waffle and syrup. With her cheeks bursting, she dutifully followed me into the study.

I activated the computer and logged onto the Web. “Faith: that’s the common denominator of one of those chains of passages I made, but I didn’t show it to you the first

time.” Into the Muratorian Project. “Paul is always stressing the idea that God has offered faith in Jesus as the means of eternal life. And he talks about believing in certain things about Jesus.” I started my chain going.

“Here’s Romans 10:9: ‘If you believe in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead, you will be saved.’ You talked about proof, but didn’t they have proof? According to the Gospels, dozens of people were supposed to have seen Jesus in the flesh after his resurrection. Why would anyone need faith that he had risen? Here—in 1 Thessalonians 4:13: ‘We believe that Jesus died and rose again...’ Did they need faith to know that Jesus had died, too?”

The next link was 2 Corinthians 5:7. “ ‘We live through believing, not through seeing.’ Maybe Paul himself hadn’t witnessed Jesus’ life, but plenty of others had. Why is historical witness never a factor in any of Paul’s doctrines about Jesus?”

I had already concluded that even the list of visions in 1 Corinthians 15 was a matter of faith, for they had been precisely that: revelations of a spiritual figure, just like the one Paul had received. “When he’s arguing with the Corinthians about the certainty of their own resurrection, he can even speak hypothetically that if the dead are not raised, ‘then Christ was not raised.’ He says it half a dozen times, as though it would be possible *not* to believe it. He points to God and says that God’s witness to Christ’s resurrection would be false if we were not to be resurrected too. Obviously, his faith that Jesus rose from the dead comes from God. Meaning scripture.”

Shauna waited patiently for me to get to my point. She probably thought I was just being my usual perverse self in stretching things out.

“Look at this one and you’ll see what I’m getting at.” I read from the passage starting at Romans 3:21.

“ ‘Now God’s righteousness has been revealed...which the law and the prophets bore witness to...’ Note, by the way, that Paul appeals to scripture again, not history. ‘...whom God set forth as a means of expiating sin through faith in his blood.’ It would seem one has to have faith that Jesus’ blood was shed. ‘...to prove now that God is righteous and justifies anyone who has *faith in Jesus.*’ ” In my emphasis I was trying to lead her to revelation by force.

She said slowly, “So Paul has a fixation about faith in Jesus. Wouldn’t that be natural?”

“Yes, very natural. Faith that Jesus has provided salvation. Faith that he died and rose from the dead. Faith that God has revealed it all. With faith you get resurrected to eternal life. Everything is dependent on faith. But think about it. Isn’t there another faith that should be required? Something even more natural?”

She was staring at the screen as though the answer might be hidden in the words, like an Anacrostic puzzle. “I—I’m not sure I can see—”

“The most important one. The one that comes first—when a Christian apostle first approaches the prospective convert. Without this piece of faith, you don’t go on to any of the others.” I waited another moment. “Paul has faith *in the Son of God*—”

Some divine force prodded Shauna as the light of revelation flooded her face. She let out a long slow “Ah!” and turned to me. “He doesn’t say that you have to have faith that Jesus of Nazareth was the Son of God. That would be the faith that would have to come first!”

I beamed at her like a proud tutor. And then she proceeded to turn the tables on me.

“So Paul has faith in a Son of God—that he exists.” She measured out each idea at a time. “And he believes in what this Son had done for him. A sacrifice and all that. But he doesn’t identify this Son with any recent human man, someone who was crucified by Pilate.” She added for emphasis: “Or the Jews.”

“Right. All this faith in what Jesus is, or what he has done, is not attached to a recent human man. Paul’s Jesus is a given entity. You either believe in him or you don’t.”

Her eyes gave me that little smile which always warned me when she was about to say something clever. “I guess you could say that what we have here is...a missing equation.”

I gave her a broad smile in return. “The Missing Equation.” I repeated it, savoring the phrase. “Yes, I like that. I can use that.” I leaned over and gave her a kiss. “There’s only one side to Paul’s equation. He believes *in* the Son, not that anybody *was* the Son. Paul’s starting point for everything is the divine Son in heaven, not any Jesus of Nazareth in recent history. That’s Christ’s starting point, too—in heaven. And that’s where he stays. Or almost. Somewhere he had himself sacrificed. If we are to believe Paul, the deed was performed by the demon spirits.” I added for emphasis: “Not the Jews.”

Shauna’s head gave a little bow. “Thank you. But that was my next question. Where *did* the dastardly deed happen?”

“Well, you’ll have to let me get back to you on that. It had to do with myth, and views of the spirit realm. And Hellenistic philosophy about true reality. With a few savior god ideas thrown in. I won’t bother you with all the details just yet. I have to do more work on it.”

“It sounds like pretty esoteric stuff.”

“Yes, it is. And it’s stuff we have no equivalent for today. Which is probably why it’s so difficult for people—even scholars—to really see it. If you read Paul without assuming he’s applying all these heavy ideas to the Gospel Jesus, you start to get a sense that the world his mind is moving in is actually quite alien to us. I daresay the average reader of Paul would simply find most of it unintelligible.” I was beginning to see that I would face a monumental task in trying to get the whole thing across in any simple fashion.

Suddenly, Shauna spoke up in a burst of excitement. “You see—didn’t I tell you? I *knew* that something didn’t seem right about it! It would have been totally blasphemous for a Jew to go around saying that a man was the Son of God. And any other Jew would probably have stoned him for it.”

“More than likely. And when you think about it, that’s what makes Paul’s silence so telling. If he *had* been going around preaching that a recent man was the Son of God, he would have been constantly forced to defend such an outlandish proposition. But he never gives us a word about any such defence. There’s where your Missing Equation really stands out like a sore thumb.”

Shauna considered for a moment. “But you know, Kevin, I would think that even a divine Son in heaven would have been offensive to many Jews. After all, ‘God is One’ is supposed to be our central theological statement.”

“You’re probably right. And no doubt that’s why the early church suffered some persecution. But at least the idea was part of the spirit of the times: inventing a divine son for the ultimate God. Of one form or another.”

“And Paul could point to scripture and say: See, it’s all there. God says so.”

I nodded. “Yes, God says so. They all put it exactly that way. The early writers never say that ‘Jesus came to earth’ or ‘lived a life’, let alone recently. It’s always, Jesus has been ‘revealed’ by God. God ‘manifested’ Jesus.”

I pointed to the screen, where the passage from Romans 3 was still showing. “Like that one. ‘God set him forth.’ When I looked that verb up in the Lexicon, one of the meanings was ‘to display, to bring into public light.’ There’s a verb like that in 1 Peter. I remember it struck me as odd at the time. Let’s see if I can find it...”

It took about half a minute to get the passage onto the screen. “There—1:20. ‘He was chosen before the foundation of the world, and now he has been manifested in these last times for your sake.’ ”

Shauna agreed that this would certainly be an odd way of referring to Jesus’ life on earth.

“There are a bunch of verbs like that in the early writers. They all mean to reveal or make known, or give evidence of one’s presence. They certainly don’t mean to be incarnated—regardless of what some of the translations read into them. They’re the sort of words a Greek might have used about his experience of the god during the mystery rites. They’re simply saying that God has made Jesus known.”

“Well, if that’s the case, it’s no wonder they call God the Savior.”

“Actually, they’re both saviors. Jesus performed the act—in some mythical realm and time. Now God reveals it all and makes the benefits available through faith in the whole thing. All courtesy of Paul, of course.”

“Does Paul call himself a savior?” Shauna asked, a little ironically.

I laughed. “Everything but. All amid protests of humility.”

Shauna suddenly turned mock serious. “And just how do you propose writing a novel about someone who never existed?”

“It will certainly be a challenge, I agree.”

“Well, at least you won’t have to worry about character development.”

“Or physical description.”

“But this non-existent hero does have a name.” She thought a moment. “I guess I’m curious about that. Why was this Son in heaven called ‘Jesus’?”

“I’ll have to ponder that one. But off the top of my head, I would say it’s probably because the name in Hebrew means ‘savior’. But you should know that. Yeshua—Joshua. Doesn’t Joshua’s name in the bible mean ‘liberator’? Or, strictly speaking, ‘Yahweh saves’. What more natural name for a Jewish savior deity—especially one who’s considered a part of God? As for ‘Christ’, that simply means Anointed One, like the ancient kings of Israel who were anointed by God. The word ‘Christ’ is the Greek translation for the Hebrew Mashiach or Messiah. For the first Christians, who would all have been Jews I suppose, the traditional human Messiah was moved to heaven and made into a divine Son. They would have been interpreting scripture, probably under the influence of the wider religious ideas of the day—Wisdom, the Logos, the cults, take your pick. So ‘Christ Jesus’ would simply mean ‘Anointed Savior’. As to who first put the two words together, or when, and applied them to a divine Son, I doubt we’ll ever know that. I’m sure it had to be earlier than Paul.”

“Perhaps whoever it was, we should call him the true founder of Christianity. But I guess we’ll never know his identity.”

“Well, the ideas had to come before the names. But like all things in the history of ideas, nothing ever springs full-blown into anyone’s mind. Christ Jesus undoubtedly evolved from earlier, more primitive concepts.”

“But what about the Gospels? Where in heaven’s name did they come from—all that detail about a human Jesus?”

“Basically from scripture, I would say. I’ve already seen that process at work in some of the turn-of-the century writings like 1 Clement and Barnabas.”

Shauna seemed suddenly to think of something and asked, almost apologetically, “But weren’t people in general, as you say, expecting some kind of human Messiah? I mean, wouldn’t the Gospels make sense as representing a popular reaction to some preacher or other—sort of like your Fisher’s Joshua?”

“It might,” I allowed. “And I’ll get a better idea of that once I tackle the Gospels. But already I can see that there’s too close a link between the Gospel events and scripture. And it wouldn’t change the fact that the Christ of believers like Paul has nothing to do with a Gospel-type man. The circles Paul moved in don’t reflect popular Jewish expectations. I’ve even come across some purely Jewish groups who believed in a spiritual Messiah waiting in heaven for an apocalyptic end of the world.”

Shauna stretched her arms. “Well, my dear, I don’t think I’m going to be around at the end of the next millennium when you get all this sorted out.” She cast a covetous glance toward the study windows. “I have to live in this lifetime, and we really shouldn’t waste our unexpected day together.” She added hastily, “I mean—outside the bed. The weather is so glorious. Much as I love tramping the dusty highways of your ancient past...”

“Say no more. Paul’s waited this long for someone to listen to what he was really saying. I guess he can afford to be patient a little while longer.”

Holding hands, we went out the door shortly afterward into a bright spring sunshine. Despite my admonition, I thought I could detect Paul’s footstep following behind us at a discreet distance.

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