

Chapter Fourteen

1

Q.

On that single letter, I would come to realize, hung the modern liberal picture of Jesus of Nazareth.

A letter representing a document we no longer possessed, crumbled and lost into the sands of first century Palestine. Its ghost shimmered from the pages of Matthew and Luke, its echo could be heard behind the words of Mark.

With no attributed teachings to be found anywhere in the New Testament epistles, the ethical teacher in Gospel scenes like the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, or Jesus' journey to Jerusalem in Luke, was largely a product of Q. The silence in the epistles on any conflict of Jesus with the Jewish establishment had been filled to a great extent by the controversy stories lifted from Q. The Jesus of Paul and other first century letter writers, who never breathed a word about any miracles performed by their divine Christ, had gone on to emerge as a wonder-worker and exorcist first on the lost pages of Q.

The essence of the historical Jesus, the man who had walked the sands of Palestine and made such an impact on all around him, the picture on which so much faith depended and from which so much modern scholarship now derived its living, rested upon a mummy resurrected from the reliquaries built by Matthew and Luke and removed from the wrappings of their theological and sociological portrayal of Jesus.

Yet how much of the original Q was unearthenable from these later reincarnations?

Research on Q was perhaps the most active and vital department within New Testament scholarship as the 20th century approached its close. The last 10 or 15 years of study had established beyond any reasonable doubt that much of the document used by Matthew and Luke could be reconstructed with a fair degree of accuracy out of their common passages which had not been derived from Mark; that the document (probably different editions of that document) from which the two evangelists had independently drawn was the end result of a lengthy history of its own; and that this history had passed through three major stages of evolution and likely numerous minor ones.

But uncovering what lay at Q's murky beginnings, and the nature of its older material prior to each stage of revision, was something, I suspected, which scholars boasted more confidence in than was deserved.

Using a variety of sources both on paper and on the Web, I spent three days listing and categorizing all the units of Q that could be identified from the two later Synoptic Gospels. As for Mark, his relationship to Q was a thorny one. Most scholars seemed to agree that he reflected Q-type material, that he had drawn on traditions about a presumed historical figure which came from the community that produced the Q document. But they were driven to conclude that Mark had not possessed the written work accessible to Matthew and Luke. None of the great teachings which the later writers took from Q were present in Mark. And no scholar had come up with a reasonable explanation why the first evangelist, if he had had a copy of Q in front of him, would have ignored so thoroughly the teachings of Jesus, as well as so much detail about Jesus in controversy with the Pharisees.

It was a problem I had no delusions of solving myself.

From Matthew and Luke, therefore, Q had been resurrected.

Q was the product of a Jewish community or circle which had arisen in Galilee around the middle of the first century to preach the coming Kingdom of God. This document did not tell a narrative story, though a few of its units offered an anecdote or an unfolding encounter, such as the dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist, or the Temptation Story.

Rather, the vast bulk of the Q material was made up of individual sayings and pronouncements. These tended to be grouped together in clusters, linked because they possessed a common key term (called a 'catchword') or because they related to a common theme. It was obvious that Q had not reflected any pattern in Jesus' teachings, but rather had organized its sayings according to a couple of principles of common content.

Matthew had done the fullest job of revamping the Q material. He had collected numerous pieces from throughout his copy of Q and assembled them into the great Sermon on the Mount, a sermon few now believed had been delivered on one occasion by Jesus sitting on a hillside somewhere in Galilee.

Luke's use of Q had been less disruptive. His sequence was considered the more original because, among other things, it made no sense that he would have broken up so much of the Sermon and distributed its parts haphazardly throughout his Gospel. The pattern created by extracting the Q material from Luke and laying it out suggested that this was largely the way it appeared in the source Luke used. Thus, scholars had adopted the system of referring to the Q units according to the chapter and verse numbers where they were found in Luke. Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, for example, was identified as Q 13:34-35, because it appeared in Luke 13:34-35.

Rarely was there an exact agreement of words between Matthew and Luke. But this could be put down to little changes one or the other evangelist, or both, had made to fit their own writing styles, or perhaps to align a piece of material with their own views and editorial purposes. After all, these sorts of changes were visible in how they had adapted Markan passages to their Gospels. Establishing the original Q wording was often an uncertain and speculative task. Occasionally, a wider divergence might call into question whether something actually came from Q, or whether the two writers might have been drawing on some other source, perhaps an oral one. The same type of general similarity in a few of Mark's passages, when compared to Matthew and Luke's Q material, led some scholars to postulate that Mark too had drawn on selected Q units.

By now, Q, in its broad outlines and even many of its finer details, had emerged into the light of day, but other details, as well as the evolutionary process it had passed through, still lay in degrees of shadow and uncertain speculation. One thing was clear: Q had been written, from its beginning, in Greek.

Q was made up of 60 to 100-odd units—depending on the scholar doing the breakdown. The pattern derived from Luke provided a picture of the document's evolution, and by extension, the evolution of the community which produced it.

Three broad stages had been identified.

Several clusters of sayings throughout Q possessed a common atmosphere, style and purpose. As a group, these sayings on ethics and discipleship were closely related to the genre of Jewish wisdom collections, such as the Old Testament Book of Proverbs. There were Graeco-Roman equivalents as well. Such collections offered instructions about life

and how to behave in the current social situation. This group of sayings was judged to be the earliest layer of Q, and scholars called it Q1.

For the most part, these sayings were now regarded by liberal scholarship as the best authentic record of the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The Q community, it was said, had preserved and adopted them for its own use in preaching the Kingdom. They included the most prized of the Gospel ethics, none less than the lines in Luke/Q 6:27-28:

‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you; bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To him who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from him who takes away your cloak do not withhold your coat as well.’

Others involved pithy, often humor-tinged admonitions: not to hide one’s light under a bushel, to ask and seek and knock and the desired response would come one’s way, parables about the Kingdom of God. And, of course, the Beatitudes.

Beside such innovative and enlightened maxims, however, stood other clusters of sayings as radically different as night from day. Q 10:13-14 put these sentiments in Jesus’ mouth:

‘Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes....And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to hell!’

This lashing out against the Galilean cities which had not responded to the community’s preaching, together with pronouncements and controversy stories illustrating a clash with the Pharisees, were part of a ‘prophetic’ or apocalyptic layer which scholars called Q2. They judged these sayings to represent a later stage in the community’s history, a reaction to the hostility and rejection it had received from the Jewish establishment. The theme of punitive judgment against the unbeliever had become paramount. The figure of the Son of Man entered for the first time, one who would arrive at the End-time to judge the world in fire. Here, too, appeared John the Baptist, a forerunner to the Q preachers, prophecying a great retribution at the hands of a coming one who would ‘baptize with fire’.

Whether any of the sayings of Q2 had been spoken by Jesus was much debated. Many judged that these later issues of contention had been read back into Jesus’ time. The stark contrast with the teachings of Q1 also called their genuineness into question. The addition of these ‘prophetic’ sayings to the earlier ‘wisdom’ collection constituted a major revision of the Q document.

The third stage of Q was harder to pin down. To some it was simply a matter of embellishment after the traumatic events of the Jewish War. This later stage saw the stirrings of biography, even divinity for Jesus, elements which had not been present in the Q sayings before. These could be seen in the Temptation Story in which Satan sought to ensnare the Son of God with the promise of power, or the saying about the Son who knows the Father.

Other scholars saw more. There were signs that older material had been reworked at the Q3 stage; for example, in the dialogue between Jesus and John of Luke 7. But exactly how much recasting of earlier layers had occurred was difficult to judge. Such recasting had been governed by the leap made since Q2: that Jesus, from a human Galilean sage, had become in the Q community’s mind a divine being: from child and envoy of Wisdom, he had evolved to the Son of the Father himself.

And at some time after whatever revisions had taken place in Q3, the evangelists Matthew and Luke each got their hands on different editions of it and incorporated it into their revisions of Mark's Gospel. Less clearly, Mark himself had presumably borrowed some of its ideas or the ideas that lay behind it, even if no hard copy of Q had rested on his writing table.

2

It was early on Tuesday evening when I sat down with my lists and my notes thus far to try to make sense of Q in light of the conclusion I had already reached: namely, that there had been no historical Jesus.

Since all of the New Testament record outside the Gospels pointed so clearly in that direction, how could I explain the evolution of Q into a sayings collection attributed to a human Jesus who had lived and taught in Galilee and Judea?

One startling thing had to be taken into account in evaluating Q: at no stage could any reference to Jesus' death, let alone a resurrection, be discerned. Scholars admitted this. From the earliest days of Q research a century ago, this absence had been a source of great worry and perplexity.

Older explanations for the silence had long since been rejected. Today, the most prominent explanation fell within the context of the newest trend in scholarly thinking about Christianity's beginnings. This was designed to take into account the great diversity of community and belief to be found in the early Christian record.

This scenario suggested that Jesus had given rise, at various times and locations in his career—including after his death—to several movements which responded to him in very different ways. The Q community was one of those 'responses', a group forming in Galilee in reaction to the teaching sage who had worked in their midst. It regarded him as entirely human. This community, so the theory went, was unaffected by any fate Jesus may have subsequently suffered in Jerusalem. It remained impervious throughout most of its history to any influence from those cultic circles, such as Paul's, which had immediately turned Jesus into a cosmic divinity and abandoned all interest in his earthly life and deeds.

Such a scenario of wildly diverse reaction to one humble Jewish preacher appeared to me to be highly suspect. It turned early Christianity into a movement which had been absurdly schizophrenic. The contrast between Paul and Q could not have been starker. What Paul had made of Jesus, Q knew nothing about. What Q had remembered of Jesus, Paul showed no knowledge of—or interest in, as the scenario would style it. Scholars postulating such a theory also struggled with the question of when and how such a lofty transformation of Jesus into a divinity would have taken place.

In addition to these contrasting responses, there had been further divergent views and appropriations of Jesus floating about, some divine, some human.

Hebrews' sacrificial High Priest moved entirely in some Platonic higher-world setting. The Didache spoke of a non-suffering intermediary 'servant' in heaven. The Odes of Solomon and early Gnostic documents had varying presentations of a Christ as a spiritual part of the Godhead, acting on the world. The Gospel of John, it seemed, had originally possessed a Jesus who saved by revealing God; and he was eventually equated with the Greek Logos.

On top of all this, certain elements of the Gospels, because they seemed to possess their own distinctive characteristics, were being labelled as the product of even further groups who had selectively adopted aspects of Jesus' career, such as his miracles, or a certain class of pronouncement stories. They had turned these into guiding principles for their own group life. Like Q, such 'Jesus people' were regarded as having made no use of Jesus' death and resurrection. Like Q, there was no interest in Jesus as a redeeming agent, whether through a sacrifice for sin or anything else.

Apart from the innately bizarre quality of this kind of scenario, it contained at least one unexplained problem and one fundamental fallacy—or so it seemed to me.

The problem? The conversion of Paul. The elevation of Jesus to divinity was regarded as something which had to have developed over time, since it contravened the Jewish spirit so blasphemously. And it probably had to take place under Gentile influence, in Diaspora centers like Antioch. Yet Paul had been converted to Christ within 2 to 5 years of Jesus' supposed death. And in Jerusalem to boot. Who in this center of Judaism, while Jesus' corpse was scarcely cold, had gone against all that Jews held dear and turned a human man into God, attaching all sorts of Hellenistic mythology to him? Had Paul, a Jew born and bred, simply swallowed it whole? Or had he not believed in Jesus as the Son of God right from the start? Had he later been persuaded to it by nameless Gentiles, perhaps in Antioch, and then fudged the whole picture in his letters? And how to explain why such Gentiles themselves, people who had never personally experienced Jesus and had no history of turning human beings into cosmic divinities, would do such a thing to a humble Jewish preacher, even regarding him as having been raised from the dead?

The fallacy? It lay in the fact that the scenario was all an extrapolation backwards. Scholars derived these varying 'responses' from a later amalgamation of the separate diverse elements, from the supposed reconvergence of the original diverging strands: namely, the Gospels. To arrive at Jesus the teacher required stripping away the layers of an evolving Q. Predicating a series of communities which preserved the miracles and various other elements of Jesus' ministry, required speculative assumptions about the pre-Gospel histories of these ingredients which Mark and others had incorporated into their narratives. No document recorded the initial phenomenon, the breakup of Jesus into his component parts. And our earliest record, the letters of Paul, gave not an inkling of these other responses to the human man who for Paul had passed entirely into the realm of divinity. Not a hint could be found of these 'Jesus people' which were presumably flourishing and going their own way somewhere outside the boundaries of Paul's world.

Had they all existed in a series of alternate universes?

If we were to let the chronology of the documentary evidence govern our thinking, the earliest manifestation of Jesus was as a divine, spiritual Christ, with whom no life or ministry on earth was associated. Only later, along with further diverse expressions of the spiritual Son, did the evidence show the development of a human figure who had lived in Palestine at the time of Herod and Pontius Pilate, had taught and performed miracles, died and rose from a grave in the neighborhood of earthly Jerusalem.

What, then, to make of Q?

What to make of those elements within it which eventually, and almost single-handedly, created the picture of a teaching, apocalyptic-preaching, miracle-working Jesus?

More than once I had come across the claim that the recently unearthed Gospel of Thomas, part of a buried cache of Gnostic documents found in Egypt, was an independent witness to Jesus the teacher. Many of its sayings mirrored those of Q, and could even represent the more primitive versions. But since a literary relationship of some form was clear between the two documents, another explanation was equally possible, and some scholars leaned in this direction.

Q as we had it, and the Gospel of Thomas—which represented a second century text—were both diverging end results of a common beginning. The trajectory which produced the Gospel of Thomas had split off at an early stage from that of Q and undergone its own development. It was possible that if one could strip away the evolutionary accretion of Thomas—probably an impossible task since there was so little to work with—one would arrive at the same starting point as that of the Q document.

And just what was that starting point?

Rather than proceed from the unchallenged assumption that Jesus had existed and that Q must in some way reflect him—which was the approach of modern scholarship—could the stages of Q development be analyzed so that they did not have to lead back to an historical preacher in Galilee who had proclaimed the poor blessed and the meek as inheritors of the earth?

3

Midnight to 2 AM.

Using a print-out from the Muratorian Index, I indulged in several readings of the layer of sayings which formed Q1.

‘Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Kingdom of God...

‘If you love only those who love you, what credit is that to you?...Treat others as you would like them to treat you...

‘Can one blind man be guide to another? Will they not both fall into the ditch?...

‘Do not carry purse or bag, and travel barefoot; exchange no greetings on the road...

‘Think of the ravens: they neither sow nor reap; they have no storehouse or barn; yet God feeds them...Your father knows that you need these things...

‘Sell your possessions and give in charity. Store up your wealth in heaven where no thief can get it...for where your wealth is, there will be your heart as well...’

And so on.

A curious collection of sayings for a Jewish preacher. In all of Q1 there was scarcely a specifically Jewish idea to be found. One reference to Solomon. No mention of the Pharisees, or any other Jewish officials or institutions. Scattered references to the Kingdom of God, but in a non-apocalyptic sense and with none of the usual Jewish associations. An absence of all prophetic atmosphere.

The only passage showing even a semblance of a built-up dialogue was also the only Q1 unit containing the name ‘Jesus’.

Very curious indeed.

And yet this was supposed to be the authentic voice of Jesus of Nazareth. To me, it was decidedly cosmopolitan, even Hellenistic in flavor. In fact...

4 AM.

My instinct had been correct.

Certain scholars for about a decade now had been pointing out an intriguing and startling observation about the sayings in Q1. These ‘wisdom’ aphorisms bore a strong resemblance to the spirit and style of a type of Hellenistic preaching movement of the time.

The Cynics. I knew they had rung a bell.

I checked my own sources on Graeco-Roman philosophy. Half-remembered research of past years bore them out. During the first century, wandering Cynic preachers had tramped the cities and byways of the empire, urging people to adopt a certain lifestyle, an outlook on the world which was both religious and social. They claimed to be following the teaching and way of life of Diogenes of Sinope, the founder of the Cynic philosophy.

He whose light had been blocked by Alexander the Great, so went the popular anecdote.

They were gadflies, convinced that society was too authoritarian, too inegalitarian, too hypocritical. They were a kind of ‘in your face’ protester, motivated by the feeling that some divine power was directing them to shake up society.

Like Q, they too spoke of a benevolent God the Father. Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher who adopted Cynic traditions and preached to the poor and humble masses, was recorded to have said: ‘All men have always and everywhere a Father who cares for them.’

Dio of Prusa urged people to trust in providence, for ‘Consider the beasts yonder, and the birds, how much freer from trouble they live than man...’

The Cynics, too, had their Beatitudes. Blessed is the person, said Epictetus, who enjoyed the proper relationship with the deity.

And what of Jesus’ most distinctive teaching: Love your enemies, turn the other cheek?

Seneca in the mid first century reported this piece of counterculture Cynic philosophy: ‘Allow any man that desires to insult you and work you wrong; but if only virtue dwells in you, you will suffer nothing. If you wish to be happy, if you would wish in good faith to be a good man, let one person or another despise you.’ Epictetus reported favorably on the Cynic aspiration to brotherly love, remarking on their view that ‘when one is being flogged like an ass, he must love the men who flog him.’

Here were more than distant echoes of the Sermon on the Mount. Here were teachings cut from the same cloth.

The Cynics and popular philosophy even had the concept of a Kingdom of God, though with no apocalyptic associations. Rather, the phrase was a symbol for the stance toward the world which the Cynics were advocating. The one who ruled over his or her passions was a ‘king’ in a new domain, living in a different, natural order under special divine rule.

This, it seemed to me, was the very atmosphere conveyed by the references to the Kingdom in Q1.

As for Q’s ‘rules of the road’, the practice of Cynic preachers in their wanderings about the empire were virtually identical. For both, the divine call necessitated a total break with family and possessions. This probably explained the meaning of Q 14:27, that a disciple had to ‘take up his cross’ and follow the Master. Commentators generally regarded this not as reference to Jesus’ own cross—something Q gave absolutely no attention to—but a Cynic-Stoic proverb. Bultmann thought it might have been used by the Jewish Zealots as well. It signified full submission to a calling of hardship and dedication.

There had been other telling observations as well.

Not only were the sentiments of Q1 similar to the Cynic philosophy, but the way some of them were presented fitted the image of the Cynic *chreia*. This was a little anecdote about a teacher, consisting of an objection and a response. A famous story about Diogenes took this chreic shape:

‘Diogenes was asked why he begged from a statue. He answered, “So that I will get practice in being refused.”’

To which one could compare Q’s anecdote:

‘A man invited to follow Jesus said, “Let me go and bury my father first.” But Jesus said: “Leave the dead to bury their dead.”’

Pronouncement stories of this type could also be found in the second layer of Q.

If taken entirely out of context, Q1 could easily be mistaken for a Cynic product. The passing reference to Solomon and a couple of other tinges of Jewish provenance, the inclusion of the name Jesus in one set of sayings, these could be bits of overlay in a process of adaptation.

Mistaken for a Cynic product. But would it be a mistake?

This was my last thought as I fell into bed.

Wednesday, 3 PM.

Hmm. So Burton Mack, among others, was now casting Jesus as a Cynic-style sage.

Why was I not surprised? Q1 was strongly Cynic-flavored. Yet it had to be Q’s early record of the preaching Jesus. Ergo—

Of course, this necessitated placing Jesus in a strongly Hellenistic environment. The Cynic style of his preaching must have been absorbed from such influences. Mack, therefore, did his best to portray the Galilee of the early first century as a strongly cosmopolitan region. Here Jews were of independent mind and could absorb foreign ideas without difficulty.

Perhaps such a picture was not an inaccurate one. After all, Q1 had apparently surfaced in Galilee.

Mack was also forced to cast Jesus’ concerns as having little to do with the Jewish social world, for the sayings of Q1 showed no preoccupation with specifically Jewish issues or institutions. The great conflict with the Pharisees would emerge only in Q2.

Did this make sense?

A body of material formed the bedrock of the Q document. It had figured, in some way, in the beginnings of a preaching movement in Galilee. Yet it was essentially non-Jewish in character, so close as to be almost indistinguishable from Cynic philosophy.

Moreover, the wide range of its concerns, the telling and innovative nature of its observations, suggested that it was the product of a movement, not a lone individual. It reflected the outlook of a school, a lifestyle followed by many. Its expression in finely-tuned aphorisms and anecdotes had been developed and honed over time. The whole thing hardly struck one as the sudden invention of a single mind.

And yet, as a candidate for that unlikely mind, scholars were now pointing to the very Jewish Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of the Gospels.

How likely was it that such a Jesus went back to these incongruous roots?

Was it not more likely that the later Jesus was a composite product of many ingredients, picked and adapted from here and there? Instead of the breakup of Jesus into a multiplicity of 'responses' to him, the earliest roots of the Jesus figure lay in independent sets of sayings, ethical teachings, wisdom collections. His miracles were inspired by the wonder-working prophets and wandering philosophers of the time, modelled on the biblical stories of feeding miracles, healings and raisings from the dead. The controversy stories and encounters with opponents reflected the experiences of missionaries of all stamps, in their conflict with the establishment, both Jewish and pagan.

It was all the flotsam and jetsam of an acutely religious period of philosophizing and proselytizing. One of these pieces of flotsam had been the Cynic-style aphorisms at the heart of Q. Through one avenue and another, all of these independent pieces were to come together, joining with the savior god of Paul to create a hodge-podge picture, often inconsistent and contradictory.

6 PM.

Re-reading Q1 for the tenth time at least.

The one unit which contained the name 'Jesus' was actually a string of three chreic anecdotes. In each one, Jesus responded to something said to him. The first of these read:

'When a man said to him, "I will follow you wherever you go," Jesus answered, "Foxes have dens and birds their nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."'

Here, scholars acknowledged that this particular 'Son of Man' did not, in the saying's original form, refer to the apocalyptic figure but to 'man' in general. It should not be capitalized. The saying was probably a popular proverb of the time.

If one compared the Q1 sayings with their equivalents in the Gospel of Thomas, one found in virtually every case of the latter only the skeletal attribution, 'Jesus said'. Here, too, the name of Jesus could have been added at some later stage of that document's history. Tellingly, the Gospel of Thomas contained the saying about foxes and birds and the son of man, but it was not connected to the other chreic anecdotes (which did not appear at all). This indicated that at the earliest stage of Q, the foxes saying had also stood alone. As well, the Thomas version was introduced only by the standard 'Jesus said', not by anyone else's words; it was not a response to anything. Q's version was clearly a later reworking.

All this strengthened my growing conviction that Jesus as the speaker, in all three chreic anecdotes, was a later overlay. Originally, there had been no 'Jesus' in any of the Q1 sayings.

And nowhere in Q1 was there any narrative element, nothing which could be placed within a life or ministry. There were no set-up lines for the sayings, no contexts.

A scientific, dispassionate evaluation of the earliest layer of Q would have to conclude that this collection of sayings had been adopted by a Jewish circle or community who first began to preach the Kingdom of God, somewhere in the environs of Galilee toward the middle of the first century CE. The collection came from either a non-Jewish source, or from Jews who were highly hellenized and immersed in Cynic traditions. At the time of adoption, or else subsequently, it may have undergone subtle Judaizing changes as the sayings found a new home in a Jewish prophetic milieu, but in general Q1 preserved its Cynic character. The sayings were regarded as a suitable ethic for those who preached and awaited the arrival of God's Kingdom.

How ironic.

The core of the teachings of Jesus, the ethical foundation of the Christian religion. It was beginning to look as though ultimately this had not even been the product of a Jewish way of thinking, but of a Greek philosophical movement.

The path of the history of ideas could be a tortured and unexpected one.

Peeling away the buried layers of Q and declaring that at their very heart lay the authentic voice of Jesus was clearly an exercise in preconception, arriving at a conclusion because one had begun from a starting point which could not be surrendered no matter what was uncovered. No one would have thought to insist that Solomon was the true author of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes simply because later tradition ascribed these anonymous collections of wisdom material to him.

But what of the other pieces of the Q puzzle? If one moved outward from that central core, could the rest of the Q evidence point to an evolving process: the development of a human Jesus who had not been there at the beginning, who did not lie at Q's ground zero?

What might an examination of Q2 indicate?

Another long night lay ahead of me.

8 PM.

Shauna on the telephone. A jolt. It reminded me that there was a 20th century world out there.

I had not spoken to her since the weekend. I had not seen her for almost a week before that. She brought this to my attention.

"Has it been that long? I guess time is moving at a different pace over here. I've been rather heavily into something, I'm sorry. It shouldn't be too much longer."

"I've heard that before."

"How about this weekend? We'll do something."

"Do you think you'll be back to earth by then?"

"I'll make a special trip."

Her pause suggested she was trying to decide whether to be amused. "For someone who never existed, this guy's got a pretty good hold on you."

I had no answer to that. "I'll call you tomorrow night."

As it turned out, I didn't.

11 PM.

There was a fire in the belly of Q2.

'This is a wicked generation. It demands a sign, and the only sign that will be given to it is the sign of Jonah...

'Woe to you Pharisees... You are like graves over which men may walk without knowing it...

'Do you suppose I have come to establish peace on earth? No, I have come to bring division...

'What hypocrites you are! How is it you cannot interpret this fateful hour?

'There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God and yourselves thrown out.'

'Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather...'

A rejected message. The Q preachers had been scoffed at. Doors had been slammed in their faces.

Those fire-breathing sentiments could easily be understood as the response of the Q community to rejection. No attribution to a Jesus figure was needed. Perhaps only later would this reaction be seen as that of one specific man, an heroic figure located at the sect's beginnings. At such a time, some of the sayings might have undergone alteration to place them in his mouth.

Did any of the sayings of Q2 betray the presence of such a figure in the community's past?

In fact, I found a few that betrayed his absence.

Luke/Q 16:16: 'Until John, it was the law and the prophets; since then, there is the good news of the Kingdom of God, and everyone forces his way in.'

Matthew's version, in 11:23, read, 'From the days of John the Baptist until now...'

Q scholars regarded Matthew as closer to the Q original, though both evangelists had adapted the saying to their own purposes and contexts. But the underlying implication seemed undeniable.

When the saying first formed, the community was looking back over its history. The implied time scale was much too great to make it an authentic saying of Jesus, commenting on a year or two of his own ministry. This was Q's picture of the past, a past of years, perhaps decades.

Before the preaching of John the Baptist, now looked upon as a forerunner or mentor to the community's work, the study of scripture formed the prevailing activity and source of inspiration. But a new movement was perceived to have arisen at the time of John: the preaching of the coming Kingdom of God, and it had inaugurated an era of contention.

But there was something wrong here.

Why wouldn't Jesus himself have been seen in this role? Surely the sect would regard his ministry as the turning point from the old to the new. The saying would surely have formed around him.

Q2's picture of its past lacked a Jesus at the most critical point where he would be expected to appear: at the movement's beginning.

A similar void jumped off the page when I read Luke 11:49:

'This is why the Wisdom of God said, "I will send them prophets and messengers; and some of these they will persecute and kill," so that the blood of all the prophets, shed from the foundation of the world, will have to be answered for by this generation...'

But how could such a saying have formulated with no mention of Jesus? Surely he, the Son of God, was the most important of those whom Wisdom had sent.

Moreover, I could see an even more profound omission. This saying reflected Q2's strong emotional focus on the great myth of the time among sectarian groups, that the Jewish leaders had a long history of killing God's prophets and messengers. And yet nowhere in Q was there even an allusion to the persecution and killing of the greatest of these: Jesus himself.

The Q community saw itself as the culmination of that long line of God's persecuted messengers. Had it possessed any knowledge of a similar fate suffered by its presumed founder at the hands of the political establishment in Jerusalem, such a fate could not fail to be incorporated into this theme.

Might someone object that it couldn't be worked in because the sayings were presented as delivered by Jesus—before the event of his death took place? A similar objection might be raised in regard to the saying about John inaugurating the new era.

And yet the evangelists had gotten around this type of problem quite neatly. They simply had Jesus make prophecies, or allusions to his future. Parables like the Tenants of the Vineyard could contain a clear reference to the murder of the Son of God. The Q compilers had done none of this.

No, the killing of Jesus would have been a central concern to Q2, and it would have shown up in passages like Luke/Q 11:49f.

Such a conclusion effectively destroyed modern scholarly scenarios that communities like Q reacted to Jesus in specifically limited and isolated ways. In the case of Q, with its focus on the killing of messengers from God, this postulated exclusion of all interest in Jesus' own death defied every law of common sense. The blinders worn by Q were a modern scholarly invention. It seemed equally impossible that the Q preaching circle would have remained impervious to the developing cults around them which focused on that very death as a redeeming act.

4 AM.

It was beginning to look as though I would see another dawn.

But I could not let go of that saying about Wisdom in Luke/Q 11:49.

'That is why the Wisdom of God said...'

Matthew had rendered this a direct saying of Jesus: 'I send you prophets, sages and teachers...' Scholars judged the Lukan version to reflect the original, for there was no reason why Luke would have created the reference to the Wisdom of God and placed such a saying into her mouth.

Had Luke left open here, perhaps inadvertently, a revealing chink in the wall which both evangelists had thrown up in front of the true nature of Q?

It certainly looked as though some sayings at the Q2 level had been attributed to Wisdom. Could she have been regarded as the source of the community's pronouncements? Instead of a 'Jesus said', perhaps it was 'Wisdom said'.

Wisdom. That personified, communicating aspect of God. She who had played such an persuasive role in Jewish thinking, calling men to knowledge of the Deity, his wishes and intentions. The Q preachers were her spokespersons, her envoys. Her children.

Had this outlook begun even with the first layer of Cynic sayings?

When adopted and adapted by a new Jewish movement preaching the Kingdom, perhaps they had been presented as the voice of Wisdom speaking. Or at least as inspired by her. This was the common way of thinking within the entire genre of wisdom collections of the time, a genre which the earliest layer of Q belonged to.

And if Wisdom's words lay at the genesis of the Q community, why not Wisdom herself as the perceived 'founder'? The inspirational force and channel from God.

That chink left open by Luke may have revealed the entire early landscape of Q, a landscape empty of any Jesus figure at all, peopled by a preaching movement inspired from heaven and working under Wisdom's direction. As she had done throughout Israel's past, Wisdom had sent this culminating wave of messengers to proclaim God's salvation, and as in the past, they had received hostility, rejection, and even death.

Dawn was indeed breaking when I decided that my brain could function no further without sleep. Even though I was itching to perform an experiment based on an observation I had already made about the Q1 sayings.

Could I find any indication of an original context for the Q sayings, something common between Matthew and Luke, which would show the clear presence of Jesus, especially at the earlier levels?

It would have to wait.

Thursday, noon.

The figure of Wisdom had haunted too few hours of fitful sleep. Perhaps she had been itching herself to break free from the evangelists' confines, emerge from behind the curtain. She was prodding me to get on with it.

I began by confirming my observations about Q1.

This wisdom saying lay at the core of Luke/Q 17:5-6: 'If you had faith no bigger than a mustard-seed, you could say to this sycamore tree, "Be rooted up and replanted in the sea," and it would obey you.'

Matthew 17:20 used the same saying, with minor changes: 'If you have faith no bigger than a mustard-seed, you will say to this mountain, "Move from here to there," and it will move.'

Had Q presented this saying in any context involving Jesus?

Evidently not, for Luke had placed it in Jesus' mouth in response to a request by the Apostles to 'Increase our faith,' a scene which took place during Jesus' long journey toward Jerusalem. Matthew, on the other hand, gave the saying to Jesus as his explanation for why the disciples had not been able to cast a devil out of an epileptic boy. And his scene took place in Galilee immediately after the Transfiguration.

Clearly, the saying had come to Q unattached to any context in a ministry of Jesus.

The same, amazingly, could be said of the Lord's Prayer.

This was arguably the most important and enduring thing Jesus ever spoke. Yet not even this had come to Q attached to a specific setting in Jesus' career. Matthew included it in the Sermon on the Mount, delivered to vast, attentive crowds. Luke offered it during the journey to Jerusalem, a private communication at the request of the disciples who asked, 'Lord, teach us how to pray.'

If not even the Lord's Prayer had passed through oral transmission attached to a context in which Jesus taught it, how could any context or narrative setting in the Gospels be trusted?

All the sayings of Q1 showed the same lack of contexts. And what of Q2?

5 PM.

Scraps of warmed leftovers accompanied my survey of the Q2 sayings. I would not have been surprised to find that the obsessive study of scripture was an unsung path to weight loss.

'Woe to you, Chorazin...Bethsaida...'

Had those Galilean cities, I wondered, preserved the occasion of Jesus' anathemas any better than the Christian tradition itself? Luke placed it in the context of the commissioning and sending out of 72 disciples. Matthew 11:20 added it to the dialogue between Jesus and John the Baptist.

It would seem that in Q they had stood naked, the words unattached to any occasion, not even—for there was no sign of such a thing—to the name of Jesus.

There was a saying in Luke 22:28-30 that the faithful followers of Jesus would ‘sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.’ Apparently the Apostles who received this assurance had not transmitted it in the context in which they heard it. For it appeared during the Last Supper in Luke, during Jesus’ passage into Judea in Matthew. Both were anchored to preceding words which were entirely different.

Narration or dialogue involving apostles, Pharisees or onlookers, used by Matthew and Luke to keep a chain of sayings going as an unfolding scene, were never remotely alike between the two evangelists. Clearly, Q had provided no narrative or contextual settings for any of these individual or clusters of sayings. Not even little set-up lines, such as “Jesus said to his disciples” could be found. Matthew and Luke had had to invent them all.

This situation held true for all sayings which could reliably be regarded as coming from either Q1 or Q2. The evangelists had worked with a skeletal raw material of core words.

Yet why would such sayings, particularly the ones considered to be authentic, have been consistently preserved and transmitted with nothing to identify even an attribution to Jesus?

And why would the Q compilers themselves, especially at the earliest levels when they would have been closer to Jesus’ memory, not have developed contexts of their own which involved even his name?

8 PM.

And so I was left with two or three extended units in all of Q where common contextual elements between Matthew and Luke indicated that a Jesus had finally been introduced into the Q material.

Q3 had arrived.

Perhaps the most important of these was the dialogue between Jesus and John.

John the Baptist.

What role had he filled in the Q community’s thinking? Had it been an evolving one? What had John originally proclaimed? Most Q scholars recognized that there were layers of Baptist material in Q.

This was how Luke introduced him in 3:7 to 17, a passage usually assigned to Q2, although Luke had made Markan insertions as well:

‘Crowds of people came out to be baptized by John, and he said to them: “You vipers’ brood! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Then prove your repentance by its fruits....I baptize you with water; but there is one to come who is mightier than I. I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His shovel is ready in his hands, to clear the threshing floor and gather the wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”’

Did John ever preach this way? Probably impossible to say. But there was no doubt that this was the way the Q preachers sounded during the Q2 stage, and they represented John as having done the same.

But who, in their minds, was this ‘one to come’? If Jesus, it was a pretty stark picture of him. Here was no teacher of wisdom, no formulator of the ‘turn the other cheek’ aphorisms and light-hearted advice of Q1. This was a powerful End-time figure who would show no mercy and winnow the good from the bad, consigning the latter to hellfire.

That the Q community at this stage envisioned John as forecasting their own presumed founder figure with these words was almost impossible to accept.

A comparison of Luke and Matthew indicated that no reference to Jesus had stood in the Q passage which introduced John. The account of the baptism of Jesus by John at the Jordan was unknown to Q. Rather, we owed that scene to Mark.

Mark, in presenting John at the opening of his Gospel, had none of the Baptist's fulminating words found in Q. Instead, Mark quoted Isaiah—or rather, misquoted him—pointing to John as a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare a way for the Lord. Still, Mark's John had made a forecast of one to follow:

'After me comes one who is mightier than I, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop and untie. I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

The question was, did Mark derive such words from a knowledge of Q or contact with the community's traditions? Did he eliminate all the fire and End-time implications because he was now equating John's prophecy with a human Jesus of Nazareth who was about to join John by the Jordan? To Mark, the original Q material would have seemed inappropriate. As indeed it did to us.

If not the human Jesus, who was John presented as forecasting in this Q passage?

Obviously, it was the figure who represented another major motif in the community's preaching at the Q2 stage: the Son of Man.

'The Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect,' said Luke/Q 12:40.

'As it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man,' warned the Q preachers, as recorded in Q 17:26.

There was no suggestion in this type of saying that such a figure was to be equated with some human founder Jesus. The 'sign given to this generation' in Q 11:30 was the preaching of the Son of Man, and every indication showed that this apocalyptic figure was derived from an interpretation of the 'one like a son of man' who received power and glory from God in the vision of Daniel 7.

The Q people who studied scripture may well have been the first to create this new figure out of the Book of Daniel. They would be closely followed by the writers of that section of 1 Enoch known as the Similitudes, and later of 4 Ezra and, of course, the Gospels and Revelation.

That reference by John to the sandals. Was it present in Q, or did Matthew and Luke get it from Mark? But even if the sandals went back to the Q saying, they did not have to imply a human figure. The Muratorian commentary pointed out that the idea of carrying or taking off sandals was a common image of the time, used to illustrate the relationship between master and slave. It alluded to the great gap that existed between lord and lowly one. The Q writer could well have found it in keeping with the gulf John was declaring between himself and the coming Son of Man.

In Q2, then, the Son of Man was a figure who stood on his own, an apocalyptic judge prophesied by the Q preachers and, so it was said, by John. Obviously, it was only later that he became identified with a founder Jesus. Most of these Son of Man sayings were then simply placed in his mouth, creating the curious impression that Jesus was talking about someone distinct from himself. Except in one or two places, Matthew and Luke had done nothing to correct this impression.

No wonder such perplexity existed today in the interpretation of the Son of Man! This figure would also have attracted non-apocalyptic sayings, ones using the term 'son of man' as a reference not to any End-time figure but simply to 'man' in general, an occasional practice in the Old Testament. The wisdom proverb in Q1 that 'the son of man has nowhere to lay his head' would have been sucked into the Son of Man vortex at the Q3 stage and turned into a reference to *the* Son of Man during the activities of his earthly ministry.

Mark in turn would have followed suit by converting general sayings like 'man is Lord even over the Sabbath.' He had also created a raft of predictions by Jesus about the earthly Son of Man's impending death and resurrection, as well as his End-time arrival on the clouds of heaven, an image influenced directly by Daniel 7.

It was even possible, it seemed to me, that with the Son of Man fad raging during the time of the Gospels' formation, Christian prophetic sayings as well as interpretations of scripture which originally involved the Messiah would have been turned into references to the Son of Man, since the two were now to be equated. This was why Mark could declare in 9:12 that scripture foretold the sufferings of the Son of Man when in fact no such references could be found.

Since it was all a jerry-built affair, with no single organizing force pulling it into a coherent unity, the Son of Man in the New Testament ended up as a mish-mash concoction which continued to drive scholars crazy. They regularly declared the 'problem' insoluble. It struck me as perhaps the biggest exegetical joke played in the inheritors of the early Christian process.

11 PM.

So when did the Q John the Baptist acquire a knowledge of an historical Jesus?

This must have been at the Q3 stage, and a new passage was created to reflect it: the dialogue between Jesus and John in Luke/Q 7:18-35.

I could see that there were notable differences in the way Matthew and Luke had each adapted this Q unit, but there could be no doubt that in the editions of Q they both used, the dialogue stood with its present implication.

There had been an historical Jesus who was the founder of the Q community.

The dialogue was concerned with establishing the relative roles of the two figures, Jesus and John. By implication, most scholars assumed, the community was being forced to deal with followers of the Baptist, now a few decades dead, who were in a position of rivalry with the Q community itself. The dialogue served to establish Jesus' superiority, and John's role as his herald.

In Q 7:18-35, John from prison sends his disciples to ask Jesus whether he is the expected 'coming one' or not. Jesus points to his miracles and tells those disciples to go back and give John the answer. Jesus then declares to the people that John is more than a prophet, he is Jesus' own herald. He offers a parable condemning the people of this generation for rejecting both John with his ascetic message and Jesus with his more liberal one. Yet both approaches are valid, Q suggests, showing that 'Wisdom is proven right by all her children.'

Every critical analysis I had consulted regarded this passage as composite, a pastiche built up out of smaller, earlier units. It was a scene invented by a Q writer at a certain stage of revision.

This was proven by a comparison with the Gospel of Thomas. There, saying No. 78 read:

‘Jesus said, “Why have you come out into the desert? To see a reed shaken by the wind? (Or) to see a man clothed in fine garments like your kings and great ones? Upon them are the fine garments and they are unable to discern the truth.” ’

In Thomas there was no context or suggestion involving the Baptist. Here the implication was that those addressed had come out to see Jesus. Originally, it may have referred to some unnamed prophet or preacher—even a Cynic one.

The final sentence, a thoroughly Gnostic idea, was a later addition and showed that the Gospel of Thomas, too, had undergone its own evolutionary accretions.

In Q3, this earlier saying (without Thomas’ addition) had been worked into the scene between Jesus and John. The lines, addressed to the crowd in verse 24-25, now referred to John in the context of Jesus’ declaration about him.

Could other parts of this dialogue be seen as built up from earlier discreet sayings?

What about John’s question and Jesus’ answer?

“Are you the coming one?” might originally have been a question put to the Q people: Are these the last times? Can we expect the one who is to come—meaning the Messiah—or will there be further delay? The community’s original response was to quote passages from Isaiah, about the poor rejoicing, about the expected signs and wonders that would attend the coming of God’s Kingdom: the healing of the blind, the deaf, the lame, the dumb. Yes, said the earlier Q, the Kingdom was indeed coming, and it pointed to the preaching and healing activities of the Q prophets.

In Q3 the words of Isaiah, with other miracles thrown in, were assigned to the new Jesus, a reference to his own signs and wonders. This now provided the answer to John’s question.

Jesus’ evaluation of John to the people was also seen as a composite passage. And the parable, whose original meaning could not be uncovered, had been brought in to serve a new role, comparing Jesus with John the Baptist in their failed appeals to a stubborn generation. Here, too, another Son of Man saying had been artificially formed.

Over a late night snack I reflected that, to the modern mind, this whole process was a bizarre practice. To collect little snippets of sayings, proverbs, scriptural verses, and construct out of them a scene, a dialogue, a little tale containing a moral or a theological insight. And to present it as some kind of truth.

And yet this was one of the commonest literary practices of the period, seen not only in Q but in the entire history of Christian writings, both canonical and apocryphal. Take prior distinct units and recast them, assign them new referents and speakers, new meanings and interpretation. Often the earlier settings and meanings of these units would be lost behind the new creation. They might have borne little or no relationship to their reincarnations.

Obviously, the redactor could hardly have believed that he was creating something factual; but the discreet units had possessed their own sanctity, their cores of truth. No doubt, so the thinking went, they could be put together to create the reflection of a new truth, new insights, new relevance for the current times and situation.

This idea, as the solution to the Gospels, I was to develop more fully before long. It would come under the Jewish concept and practice of ‘midrash’.

The conclusion to this Q dialogue was illuminating:

‘And Wisdom is justified (proven right) by all her children.’

Matthew read: “And Wisdom is justified by her works.’

Whichever reflected Q—and scholars were persuaded that it was Luke—this line was clearly tacked on after living a previous life of its own. It pointed to my earlier deduction: that personified Wisdom lay at the heart of the Q community's origins. In its new setting, the saying was used to describe Jesus and John, but earlier, I had no doubt, it referred to the Q community itself. Its people had been Wisdom's children, her spokespersons. Their works had been her works.

Q, in its earliest stages, had been a preaching movement inspired by and founded in Wisdom, not any historical Jesus.

And what of the new Jesus, emerging in Q3? What was his nature? Both Jesus and John were presented in this dialogue as children of Wisdom. No qualitative difference was envisioned between them.

One was superior to the other, John was the herald. But both were seen as human preachers.

Jesus was not touted as the Son of God, something far beyond the status of any child of Wisdom. At this stage of Q, he was a human founder of the movement. Although his identification as the 'coming one' made him a messianic-style figure, Q nowhere used of him the exalted term 'Christ', Anointed One, a name which had implications of kingship, a name which others in very different circles were already using of their transcendent saving deity.

When a founder Jesus was developed in the community's mind, no patina of divinity was yet laid on him. That would come only at the very last stage, reflected in the story of the Temptation.

1 AM.

Once again, my part of the world had swung into deep night, carrying me along with it. I was exhausted. I realized I had failed to call Shauna, as I had promised.

Surrounded by scraps and notes and jerry-built affairs of my own, I had arrived at an intricate view of Q which threatened to explode my poor overworked head. Yet I had only scratched the surface of the endlessly fascinating and labyrinthine details of this document-by-proxy. One could spend a lifetime studying Q, and a few had.

But the outlines seemed clear. In those early layers, no attribution to a Jesus could be uncovered. The wisdom sayings were probably designated as the words of Wisdom herself; the prophetic pronouncements reflected the activities of the Q preachers, attributed to no individual. No settings were offered.

At the great revision of the Q3 stage, a handful of units, like the dialogue between Jesus and John, or the Beelzebub controversy in Luke/Q 11:14-23, were formed out of older pieces. A couple of healing miracles that would have been ascribed to the Q prophets were recast as those of Jesus. But the vast amount of previous material, perhaps with its order rearranged, was allowed to stand as before, possibly with a simple heading identifying it as the words of the new Jesus.

Minor internal changes would likely have been made, the use of personal pronouns now that the words were placed in Jesus' mouth, some incidental reworking to reflect his role. The latest stage of the Gospel of Thomas showed just such a process. It would have offered evangelists like Matthew and Luke even less to work with than did Q.

I was left with one major riddle. The obvious, climactic question in Q's pattern of development.

Where had the community's idea of a founder Jesus come from? How had such a figure arisen in the Q mind if he had not been based on an actual historical man?

Perhaps I had another question as a corollary. Why had this figure been given the name Jesus, which in other circles possessed the full significance of its Hebrew meaning: Savior? There was no soteriology in Q. Q had not seen its child of Wisdom as a redeemer. Once again that most arresting of Q's features reared its head: the Jesus of Q had not undergone a death and resurrection.

My whole body rebelled against any tackling of such questions tonight. It would have been too great a threat to my sanity. Besides, there wasn't much of the night left.

Sleep was the only available option, and it was a welcome one.

4

Breakfast came at noon. I debated calling Shauna at the lab, but I was not in the habit of doing that, and she might have felt awkward talking to me in front of others. I would call her that evening, I promised myself.

As it was, a phone call from David initiated a day's delay in plunging into the final thorny question of Q, and it probably preserved my sanity.

If the activities of the Ascended Masters could be said to promote anyone's sanity.

"I followed your advice, Kevin, and got in touch with someone at the FBI. An agent in Washington named Nelson Chown got back to me last night. Seems they do have a recently established sub-department or other trying to keep track of millenarian groups around the country. They're trying to make sure no one goes off the deep end as the year 2000 approaches."

"I wish them luck."

"Your friend Robert Cherkasian is someone they've got in their files, but so far he hasn't created much of a stir. Several years ago he was involved with some televangelist outfit and had a falling out with head office. He tried to set up his own ministry and sank a lot of money into a new network, but it didn't get off the ground. Chown thinks it was opposed behind the scenes by his old organization. Either they didn't want the competition, or they felt he was too loose a cannon."

"My money would be on both. His ideas were probably too far out for your average fundamentalist ministry. Especially with millions riding on the airwaves."

"Anyway, Cherkasian was in Philadelphia until recently, but he seems to have been keeping a low profile."

"Or staying underground."

"Chown says no one from the bureau has really been paying him too much attention."

"What about the Ascended Masters? What does he know about them?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. It was a new one on him. That's why he's coming up early next week. We're getting together and he's going to examine the e-mail messages and take a run out to the schoolhouse to look things over. I said he could talk to you while he's here. I hope you don't mind."

"I guess not. And what about Patterson?"

David cleared his throat. “Yes, well, I’m still sitting on that until I see Chown. My life is complicated enough as it is right now, and I don’t need Burton in some kind of flap to add to it. Especially when he finds out that I haven’t told him about any of this.”

“The flap is going to come sooner or later, my friend. The closer it happens to Philadelphia the more disruptive to your overworked life it may turn out to be.”

David’s voice sounded rueful. “Yes, I know. But I guess I’m just hoping that someone will snap their fingers and the whole thing will go away. I don’t ever want to hear the word ‘Revelation’ again.”

I laughed. “Then you’d better go off to the moon for the next four years.”

“I’m tempted.”

“Of course, by the time you get back you may find the Age of Reason Foundation being run by the Ascended Masters. Cherkasian will have me writing pamphlets on creationism—or drawing up membership lists for the 144,000 elect. Maybe he’ll have Patterson doing community work: we’re going to need lots of hands going around engraving the mark of the Lamb or the mark of the beast on everyone’s forehead. Got to sort things out for the Great Day, you know.”

“OK, OK. The moon will have to wait. I’ll call you when Chown gets here and set up a meeting.”

“Sleep tight. Try a copy of Revelation under your pillow.”

David answered me with a dial tone.

The call and the subject of the Ascended Masters had brought me back to the surface from my subterranean explorations of Q, and I decided to shower and change. Besides, I knew that an investigation of the great looming question would require some research in a certain sociological area, namely the behavior of sects, how sectarian groups evolved. Several things I had read these past few days had pointed in that direction. This would necessitate a visit to the University Library, which I would have to make before it got too late.

By 5 o’clock I was feeling considerably more human and clear of head. I was preparing to leave the house when the doorbell rang. I had to laugh at myself as various images went through my brain. Who was standing on the other side of the door? Robert Cherkasian? Agent Chown? Perhaps it was John the Prophet, accompanied by one of his angels of retribution.

When I opened the door to find Shauna on the porch, the first idea which crossed my mind was that she was coming to tell me she was running away with Burton Patterson. David wasn’t the only one whose life and brain were getting overworked.

“What’s the matter—have I grown a second head or something? Are you going to ask me in?”

“Yes, of course. My mind was elsewhere.” Shauna moved past me and stepped inside.

“So I see.” She looked around the living room and beyond it into the study. “So I guess it’s someone else who’s been living here for the last few days and left this mess behind.”

I sighed. “Something like that. I’m in the middle of a particularly difficult phase of my research.”

“Yes, so you told me. But really, Kevin, you’ve got to come up for air sometime. You really shouldn’t let it take such control of you. There are other things in life.”

There was a definite note of exasperation in her voice which I had never heard before. I tried to establish a cheerier mood.

“You’re right. I’m glad you’ve come to rescue me. I would have called you tonight anyway. To do something on the weekend.” I was improvising. “But this is better. You can come with me on a little errand, and then I’ll treat you to a meal somewhere.”

Shauna looked at me with a touch of skepticism. “What sort of errand were you about to embark on?”

I beamed at her. “I was about to investigate the joy of sects.”

My pun, though properly enunciated, fell flat. “With whom? I must have missed the invitation.”

I kissed her on the cheek. “Consider it reissued. C’mon. Just a quick trip to the Library. I know what books I want and then we can investigate whatever you like. Did you come in your car?”

“No, I came from work.”

“Good. Then I can do the driving for the evening. It’ll put me back on the straight and narrow.”

“No, my dear. What you need is to broaden your road.”

“I’ll take the freeway.”

The University stopover was a little longer than promised. I knew the area I wanted, but it took a little time to examine a range of material on the subject, both in the Religion and Sociology sections. Fortunately, Shauna’s innate love for books kept her occupied while she waited, and she drifted off into the stacks several times to browse and handle some of the timeworn volumes the University possessed. Over supper at a Chinese Buffet, she talked about some of the old books she had perused.

Afterwards we drove out to the Point overlooking the river. I had thought to rekindle a romantic spirit under a twilit June moon. But I made the mistake of bringing her up to date during the trip out on developments concerning the Ascended Masters, and our conversation about the schoolhouse, Cherkasian and FBI agents stretched over the hour we were parked there. I also read to her the e-mail which constituted clue number three, from a little notebook I now carried with all my Ascended Masters messages and musings. I regarded it as a good luck charm—or so I hoped. Carry the enemy in your pocket, and he has less chance of sneaking up behind you.

“Well, I’m glad you’ve notified someone,” was Shauna’s reaction. “I really don’t like the sound of bowls of fire poured out over those who refuse to repent.”

“Why—do you think they’re talking about me?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised. You’re pretty unrepentant sometimes.”

“Ouch. What can I do to gain your forgiveness?”

We went back to Shauna’s place, a modest apartment unit in a pricey building, conveniently located for walking to the lab on good-weather days. We had a snack of leftover brownies, but the lovemaking which followed, though re-establishing some of the closeness I knew we had lacked throughout the evening, had an element of reserve to it, a loss of direction. Perhaps larger events were sweeping me up in their stormy course. It might take a little time for our relationship to regain its former moorings. Then again, that old, secure haven might no longer suffice. Instead of a halcyon spot, it may merely have turned musty. We would have to reach a new harbor.

Chapter Fifteen

1

One of the profoundest and most far-reaching insights in the history of New Testament scholarship had come during the 1970s. It would never have been possible if society as a whole had not recently entered that brave new secular world—and carried the more adventurous circles of biblical research along with it.

Previously, the interpretation of Christian origins had enjoyed a protected and rose-colored status. The internal workings of the Christian movement, it was claimed, had not been governed by the same forces which invested other religious and social groupings. Christianity was not to be regarded as the product of its time, and more than one scholar had made that bold declaration in print. If Paul or Luke issued a dictum on social behavior, if they championed the rituals and practices of the Christian communities, such things had developed within the Christian movement as a result of theological necessity, revealed through the spirit from God or Jesus' own teachings.

Theological correctness, it was assumed, was permanent and timeless, isolated from its historical origins and ultimately proceeding from the will of God. Nothing in the personal experiences of the great figures of early Christianity, such as Paul or the evangelists, would have disturbed this inspired pursuit of the truth. The Christian movement as a whole had evolved along a path of divine inevitability, uninfluenced by the day to day social and political context around it.

When that snug and preposterous little balloon was finally pricked, it collapsed almost immediately.

Overnight, scholars turned out books and articles showing that, in fact, the process worked the other way around. Theological principles tended to be developed in order to justify and legitimate community practice. The religious construct which a movement evolved for itself served the primary purpose of filling its needs as a social group. The way such a group viewed and interpreted its past was entirely determined by its life situation in the present.

The study of Christianity as a sect, following the universal rules of sectarian behavior, had finally arrived.

A sect was by nature a group which had set itself up in opposition to the rest of society. Or it had been forced into that position because its reform agenda, its new interpretation of current events, of society's guiding principles, had not been accepted by the wider establishment. In that situation of isolation and conflict, it had to justify its stance, its new view of the world. And the first audience to which that justification was directed was itself; only second was it aimed at the world at large.

The reaction of such a sectarian community followed consistent paths. One looked backwards. Support for the present was sought by a reconstruction of the past. The elements of current faith and teaching, current ritual and practice, were strengthened if it could be shown that such things had been there from the beginning; that they had been

established under divine auspices, in inspiring circumstances, and preferably by an heroic founder figure with a pipeline to the deity. The more inspiring and glorified that past, the greater would be the faith and determination of the present believers. This was especially needed at a time of conflict, or during a later generation, when the fervor and loyalty of the initial period might be flagging. In keeping with the broader tendencies of human societies to seek meaning and stability for the present through myths of a sacred, determining past, the sectarian group sought to sanctify its beliefs and practices by embodying them in their own hallowed and unimpeachable precedents.

Another path looked outward, beyond the battlements. A strong self-defence was needed for the sect in order to withstand attacks from a hostile environment. Theology was to a great extent determined by that conflict. Again, the rejection the sect underwent was sanctified by seeing it as the reflection of a similar rejection that had been experienced by the founding members or glorified founder figure. Further strength could be gained by portraying that figure as having forecast the present time of troubles and girding his followers for it.

Finally, all these elements of sectarian response required a document in which to be recorded. The account of the community's formation, the story of its founder, his teachings and his example, the events and roots upon which the sect's theology was based: some or all of these things set down in writing formed what was known as a 'foundation document'. Sociologists had shown that this was an almost universal phenomenon of sectarian expression throughout history and around the world.

I was to spend the rest of the weekend and beyond reading several seminal works on this subject, both by writers in the New Testament field and by the secular sociologists who had preceded them and pointed the way. The Muratorian commentaries had also directed me to a few recent studies of the Gospels from the sectarian point of view, especially in regard to Matthew, Luke and John, with their picture of the 'parting of the ways' between the Christian sect and the Jewish parent. I was amassing considerable material and insight for my analysis of the Gospels. But although none as yet had applied these principles to the question of the invention of the historical Jesus, I found that the same sectarian factors were leading me to the answer I sought for Q.

Did Q1 represent a distinct sectarian phase? I found that hard to believe.

The sayings which made up these wise and subtle teachings showed no apocalyptic atmosphere, no hint of violent conflict with an establishment. There was an utter absence of focus on glorified beginnings or a founder figure. The Kingdom of God being proclaimed was little more than that spoken of in popular Hellenistic philosophy. As Mack put it, the Q1 Kingdom had the Cynic character of offering "an alternative community ethic and social vision."

And Q1's presentation of God the Father fitted the widespread concepts of the time, those which extended beyond the boundaries of Judaism.

But Q2. Now there was a case of classic sectarianism. Hostility and reaction. A circling of the wagons. The transition from one to the other was almost unfathomable. It was difficult to believe that the first phase of this sect in Galilee had actually operated for a time under the atmosphere and principles embodied in the Q1 sayings. If hostility was to arise, wouldn't it have done so almost immediately?

My conclusion had to be that Q1 represented a foreign source, one which had flourished in a non-Jewish milieu. It was even possible that this source had been an oral one. The Jewish preachers of the new movement had encountered and adopted it, perhaps making minor changes during assimilation, claiming it as the product of Wisdom. It would not have been the first time that Jews had declared pagan writings, or the ideas contained in them, as having an ultimate Jewish provenance.

But where was Q2's focus on the past? Or the glorified founder? Here I saw a unique kind of split. John the Baptist marked the inauguration of the new era of preaching. Q had made him into a forerunner, if not an actual founder. He filled the role of validating present teachings by locating them at the movement's inception. He, too, had prophesied what the Q community was now prophesying, especially the coming of the Son of Man.

But my instinct had already told me that the Q community right from the beginning had possessed a proper and glorious founder, larger than life, one with a true pipeline to the Deity. That had been Wisdom herself. With this personified communicating agent of God in place, John the Baptist's role would have been compromised. If one could read behind Q 7:35, he had been relegated to the status of 'child of Wisdom', just as all the members of the Q community in the early stages regarded themselves.

Ultimately, however, even Wisdom possessed deficiencies as an ideal founder. If she had not actually been on earth, but only inspired the community and transmitted its teachings from heaven, she could not have performed actions which reflected and predetermined those of the community. She had not herself engaged in controversy with the Jewish establishment. Most important, she had not spoken the sect's teachings in the flesh.

Or had she?

The first clear emergence of Q to our eyes was in the Gospel of Matthew. In his use of the Q passages, Matthew showed a tendency to regard Jesus as the incarnation of Wisdom herself. Had such an outlook already been present in the Q document he used? One perhaps Luke did not pick up on because he had not the same interests? Several of the Q3 sayings had obviously been recast from earlier Wisdom sayings. Jesus' lament for Jerusalem in Q 13:34 was now thought to have originally been an oracle of Sophia/Wisdom; the hen was a maternal image for a divine being:

'O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you!

How often I would have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not! Behold, your house is forsaken...'

Luke had let slip that a Q2 oracle in the same vein, in 11:49, had been spoken by 'the Wisdom of God'. And the saying that only the Son knows the Father in Q 10:22 was a reflection of the role of Wisdom, as God's authorized intermediary.

In other words, Wisdom was turning into Jesus.

The first step would have been to imagine that Wisdom had appointed a representative, one who had founded the community and spoken her sayings. He had been, as Q 7:35 revealed, her child. Scripture was full of the voice of Wisdom speaking 'by the gate'. Her myths, in various apocryphal writings, contained the idea that she had come to earth and sought acceptance. Would a human embodiment of Wisdom not have been a natural development in the Q mind?

And the sayings collection itself. Its very existence, over time, would have induced the community to see it as having been spoken through a human mouth.

The one thing the sectarian mentality required was precedence. The Q people saw themselves as the latest in a long line of rejected prophets and messengers sent from God. This child of Wisdom would serve as the one who had first undergone that rejection; who had set the example for fortitude and defiance in its face. It was he who had first argued with the Pharisees. It was he who had made the authoritative pronouncements of faith and practice which continued to guide the community. And the miracles. There was no question that the Q prophets, as preachers of the Kingdom, had claimed the performance of signs and wonders, for every sectarian movement of the time had to possess that facility. These, especially the healings, were the indispensable pointers to the Kingdom. To collect traditions about such miracles and assign them, with due exaggeration, to a founder, would enshrine them in the best possible light.

The Q community's Jesus would have been a figure instantly recognizable. For he was the glorified embodiment of the Q preachers themselves. This was why he would be neither Christ nor redeemer. He did only what the Q people had done from the beginning, only better. He opened the door for men and women's entry into the new Kingdom.

Was it really possible for the Q community to believe that such a founder had existed? To interpret the community's evolving record in this way? After the great upheavals of the Jewish War which disrupted Palestine from one end to the other, killing or displacing three-quarters of the population and destroying so much, a denial of any new view of the past could hardly be verified.

It was probably not even raised.

It occurred to me to wonder why John the Baptist could not have served as an heroic founder. It almost seemed that Q2 had been priming him for just such a role. But perhaps John was too familiar. Perhaps it was known that he had not been a wisdom teacher, that he could not have spoken the Q1 sayings. And I suspected that by the time of Q3, a rival sect existed which already claimed John as its founder. This situation might further have induced the Q community to develop a founder of its own, one touted as superior to John. The Baptist could now serve the secondary role of precursor and herald, one who fitted scriptural expectation. Such a role would, incidentally, put the rivals in their place.

John the herald. Q2 had declared him as such. But of whom? Originally it had been of the Son of Man. But had John the herald been another influence on the imagining of an earthly Jesus? Perhaps in the aftermath of the Jewish War, those sandals John had referred to were seen as belonging to human feet.

Q3, then, finally reached the stage where it could serve as a true 'foundation document' for a classic sect. All it lacked was an actual biography of the founder. That deficiency would shortly be made up by the Gospels.

Were there precedents for a wholly invented founder figure? Mythical traditions in the ancient world were full of them, and even a later Christian Gnostic sect, the Elchasaites, was acknowledged to have probably begun much as I was postulating Q had. The Book of Elchasai (meaning 'Hidden Power') contained the record of the sect's inaugurating visions and teachings, but it later came to be understood as the record written by a man Elchasai, who had himself been the recipient of this knowledge from heaven. A more famous and modern example of the process lay in the invention of William Tell as the founder of the Swiss Confederation in the late Middle Ages. Tell did not put in an appearance until close to 200 years after the event, and he was now known never to have existed. The reader

acceptance of this fact was due no doubt to his nationalistic context, rather than a more highly charged religious and sectarian one.

Once more I emerged into a bleary-eyed dawn—I calculated it to be Wednesday morning—with one question unresolved. At the moment I could see no avenue to an answer other than speculation.

Why had the Q founder been named Jesus?

Why did he appear with the same designation as the divine lord of the Christ cults and other expressions of the spiritual Son dotting the early Christian landscape? After all, the Q Jesus was not regarded as a savior, which was the meaning of the name itself.

Except perhaps in a general way, as the Q preachers themselves might be said to offer salvation to those who responded to their message. Would this have been enough?

Or was the term by now so widespread among Jewish sectarian circles across the empire that the offer simply couldn't be refused? Yet this would imply that the Q community by this time, perhaps in the decade or so following the Jewish War, was aware of the spiritual Christ cults flourishing in the wider world, and thus of the higher significance of the name. If so, did this impel that move toward divinity discernible in the final phases of Q3?

Another possibility. Could the latest stages of Q possibly post-date the earliest roots of Mark, and had there been some crossover influence? Some scholars speculated that this may have been the case, though it would require pulling the initial version of Mark to an earlier date than I had decided upon.

But there was another possible explanation, and I knew I was going out on a limb for this one.

Had Q3 in fact used the name Jesus at all?

Even if it nowhere appeared in the Q text, even if another designation had been used by the Q3 redactors in passages like the dialogue between Jesus and John, Matthew and Luke would have changed it to Jesus.

And as I fell into bed to sleep once more through the light of day, a further corollary occurred to me. Since Matthew and Luke only took up Q to amalgamate it with Mark probably no earlier than the end of the century, after the Q community's demise or passage on to other things, it was even possible that some intervening hand had already altered Q3's original designation for its founder to fit a deepening trend: the universality of the name Jesus. It may have been at this later time that the crossover influence from a newly-written Mark had occurred. Perhaps the altering hand was someone who saw the Q document as a surviving record of the now humanized and historicized divine Christ of the Gospel of Mark.

In fact, had Matthew and Luke each inherited the two documents, Q and Mark, from a common source? Had they arrived by the same post, so to speak? The idea made some sense.

I stared at the lightening ceiling with drunken, heavy-lidded eyes. Did it make sense that such wholesale revamping of a community's material could be performed so blithely at turn after turn?

Yet we could see it before our very eyes in the hatchet and recasting jobs which Matthew and Luke performed on Mark and Q.

Not even the very words of the Lord had been sacrosanct. The evangelists had practiced wholesale and blatant invention. In order to show, for example, that Jesus had risen bodily

from the dead, Luke had concocted a scene in which Jesus showed the disciples his hands and feet, let them handle his 'flesh and bones'. To prove the reliability of the witness to the resurrection, the evangelist had made up a 'reliable' anecdote to support it!

To the 20th century nose, the whole practice gave off an unsavory odor. Surely its perpetrators had to regard it as shameless deception. And yet the evidence, from all branches of Christianity for its first few hundred years, showed that this was the universal way of doing things: rewrite, recast, invent without compunction sayings and dialogues, deeds and miracles, whole scenes, whole Gospels, letters written by famous apostles of the past, entire careers for those apostles, letters between Jesus and foreign kings, between apostles and philosophers, between a Christianized Pilate and the emperor, birth stories, genealogies, astronomical phenomena, scenes in heaven itself, not to mention fabricated insertions into non-Christian writings.

The minds of these men had simply not functioned like ours. They followed none of the modern principles of logic, of science, of integrity. Truth knew different criteria. Historical honesty was subsumed and vanished under an allegiance to a higher religious truth and necessity.

The Christian movement was founded on expectations of the immediate future which were not conducive to reasoned, ordered behavior. It lacked any moderating central influence or body, and the men involved in it were not noted as stable, sober-minded individuals who followed academic rules. Ignatius of Antioch was a prime example of the closed, fevered, monolithic mind of so many early Christians. The vituperation against opponents expressed in all manner of documents showed that these could be volatile men, driven by fanatical fervor and unscrupulous when it came to advocating their point of view. When one believed one was in direct communication with the divine, in the pervasive presence of malevolent, deceiving spirits operating on every level of life and the world, opposed by heretics and unbelievers manipulated by Satan, when the concept that one's own particular views and personal visions could not possibly be wrong or subjective, one operated on principles which were entirely different from the average modern scholar in the field or the average reader of those ancient words. To attempt to analyze the system of transmission and the development of tradition in early Christianity, oral or written, as though it followed lines that were reasonable, honest, or in any way predictable from the vantage point of minds such as ours lying 2000 years in the future and aeons away from its psychological outlook, was to engage in the naivest of self-deceptions.

Scholars of the modern era made the vast mistake of thinking to impose their own sense of order and reason on the Christian documents and movement as a whole. They had only succeeded in creating sand castles which bore no relation to historical reality.

On that note, I fell into a deep and dream-infested sleep.

2

John's trumpets were sounding. I was sliding into the great lake of fire. Shauna by its shore could not reach me, for I had left her too far behind.

Cherkasian wallowed in his rejoicing, for those damned trumpets kept sounding.

Or ringing. Did angelic trumpets ring?

Like telephones?

I rolled over in bed. The sun of a late afternoon, streaming through the bedroom window, pierced eyelids that felt like molten lead. There was no question of me opening them. I groped for the telephone on the side table.

What came out of my mouth when I got the receiver to my ear was unintelligible.

“Kevin? David. You sound terrible. Are you sick?”

“No,” I mumbled. “You’ve just awakened me out of a good night’s sleep.”

“At 5 PM?”

“You have to take your nights when you can get them. What’s up?”

“I’m at the office. With Nelson Chown. The FBI man? We were out to the schoolhouse today. He’d like to talk to you this evening. Can you get yourself out of bed? Maybe you’d like to have supper with us. Or breakfast, for you.”

“Right. Bacon and eggs. Just give me time to dunk my head in the bathtub. Where did you have in mind?”

“This guy’s a man on the go type. How about Edna’s on River Road? He’ll probably head back to Washington from there as soon as we’re finished.”

“OK. It’s 5, did you say? Make it 6:30.”

I stumbled out of bed vowing never to binge on scripture like that again. I was probably going to have to join Fundamentalists Anonymous.

“There are more and more of these little communes springing up across the country. They’re planning on waiting out the end of the millennium and most of them don’t cause any trouble at all.”

Nelson Chown was a short, powerfully built man, and totally bald. Despite the Oriental sounding name, he looked as American as apple pie. And that was what he was eating at the moment. No main course. As for myself, since the supper menu hadn’t included bacon and eggs, I settled for spaghetti and meat sauce, although the sauce was thinner than the ketchup I had topped it with.

“Did you speak to Cherkasian?”

“Oh, no. Just a discreet surveillance. You can sense certain things from the look of a place, especially the grounds. I’d say there’s no more than half a dozen living there. And I’d bet that’s not the head honcho’s permanent residence.”

“Would you say they seem secretive? Like they’re trying to isolate themselves and keep everyone out?”

Chown looked at me a little more intently. “You know something about this kind of people? Actually, not overly. But that may come. Usually when a group acquires a place like this they don’t make waves for a while, just sort of quietly get things organized. Then the real walls go up and the declarations start—if that’s what they’re into.”

“Oh, that’s what they’re into all right. I guess you’ve seen their e-mail messages.”

“Yes, very interesting.”

David interjected, “Mr. Chown spent the afternoon checking them through channels James would never have had access to. It turns out they didn’t all come from the same point.”

“You mean the University?”

Chown’s fork attacked the final piece of his apple pie. “Yes. The first one, your introductory love letter, came from Philadelphia. Clues 1 and 3 from the University. Clue

No. 2 was also from Philly.” The one about the falling stones; I knew them all like my own name by now.

“What do you make of that?”

“I don’t know. It might just be a case of where he happened to be at the time. But something tells me that’s not the reason. In Philly the messages came from a terminal located in a private home. I’ve learned that the house is owned by two men who’ve had ties in the past with fringe groups. We’re doing a more thorough check on them right now. Cherkasian’s own residence is listed in rural New Jersey, but there’s no reason why the house in Philly couldn’t be his home away from home. So it would be convenient for him to send messages from there. The two from here couldn’t be made from the schoolhouse. He had to have somebody at the University do it. Why go to that trouble?”

“To make it more difficult to trace them?”

“Actually, the more people and terminals you use, the harder it is to cover your tracks. If you’ve got a good detour system set up from one location, it makes better sense to send them all from there.”

David asked. “That detour business. Does that mean these guys have got some kind of network across the country?”

“Oh, no, they’re just some provider offering a shady service. There are a few of them around. It’s not really illegal, just frowned on.”

“And what about the Ascended Masters? What kind of an organization is it?”

Chown pushed his plate away and made a wry gesture. “You know as much about them as I do, Mr. Quinter. Probably Cherkasian’s own baby, I’d guess. They’re not on file anywhere. So I want you to tell me as much as you remember about this man. You don’t mind?” He gestured with a mini-tape recorder he had taken from his pocket.

I shrugged and proceeded to recount my visit to the schoolhouse of the week before, the older man’s appearance and demeanor, the impressions I had received. “One thing I would say, he’s not just a wild-eyed fanatic, though he’d probably spout scripture with the best of them. But he struck me as a manipulator. He definitely had a control over those two kids.”

“Most self-styled Messiahs are like that.”

“What do you think he wants?” David piped up. He was still worried, and obviously still agonizing over certain decisions. “Do you think he’s a danger?”

“From the little history we know of him, I’d say he’s trying to establish a power base for himself. Attract a bit of attention at the same time. A while ago he was eased out—booted out—from a televangelist organization with millenarian leanings, and he probably never forgave them. Now he may be trying to establish his own profile, offer his own end-of-the-world message. Outdo the less crazies.”

“Even the lunatic fringe has its own establishment,” I muttered.

David persisted. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“Because I can’t, Mr. Porter. Probably the most you have to fear is some demonstrations at your hearing in Philadelphia. When I get back to the office, I’m going to assign an agent to take a periodic run out here over the next two weeks and see if anything seems to be cooking at the schoolhouse. We can always do a little sweep if things looks suspicious. I’ll also keep on top of the investigation in Philly. And if I can arrange my work schedule, I’ll be at your hearing. I’ve heard a bit about Burton Patterson in the past and I’d love to see

him in action. Anyway, between now and then I'll keep you abreast of every development. Don't worry, Mr. Porter."

"Hmph," I scoffed. "Tell water not to flow downhill."

David clucked and rolled his eyes.

"By the way," I asked, "has Cherkasian ever written anything that you know of?"

Again Chown looked at me with some respect. "You ask the right questions, Mr. Quinter. Best way to see into a man's mind, by what he's written. Nothing's surfaced so far, but it's one of the things I've got my eye peeled for."

Nelson Chown left a few minutes later for a nighttime drive back to D.C. David and I lingered over coffee.

"I'm not going to tell Burton." David looked as though he had just made the hardest decision of his life. "The hearing starts a week next Tuesday, and Burton will be going to Philadelphia the middle of next week. He'll have so much on his mind to prepare for things, I'm not going to worry him over some possible demonstrations. He's probably expecting something like that anyway."

"Or hoping for it. In the interests of attracting media attention for the Foundation, of course." Cherkasian wasn't the only one seeking the limelight.

David, the decision made, set the whole question aside. He brightened. "Phyllis is coming down a week Friday. Her article will hit the Times the day before. We're going to discuss the hearing on the weekend. She'll be there too, you know. We'll be going up on Monday morning."

I smiled. I was happy for him. "I hope your weekend will mix a bit of pleasure with the business."

"Yes. We're not too far along, but— Anyway, maybe you and Shauna would like to get together with us. Take a little breather before the big moment."

"I suppose that would be possible. I'm sure Shauna would like to meet Phyllis."

"They've both got a certain feisty quality about them."

"Yes, I would say so."

"Didn't you mention something at our last meeting about letting myself and Phyllis in on something to do with your research? I seem to recall you promised it would be intriguing."

"Yes, I did. I'm not too sure Shauna will want to sit through it herself. I think she's been getting a little impatient with me lately over my obsessive studies. I admit they've got a bit of a hold on me, though I've always tended to be like that in my research. It's just that I'm trying to get all the basics out of the way before the court case."

"Clearing the decks?"

"Sort of. Anyway, if Shauna doesn't want to sit in, maybe we can arrange it for a separate time."

"Sounds good to me. By the way, have you arranged your own trip to Philadelphia? You know I've got some rooms reserved at the Holiday Inn for the Foundation. We can accommodate maybe 12 or 15, depending on the mix."

"Shauna and I are planning on taking the train Monday afternoon. She's got the week off as holidays."

"She doesn't mind spending them in a stuffy courtroom?"

“She has another two weeks planned for later in the summer. I mean, she doesn’t regard the hearing in the same class as a trip to Hawaii, but I know she’s sufficiently intrigued. She seemed keen on it when I first suggested it to her.”

“I’ll make a note to set aside a double for you.” The grin was followed by a grimace. “I’m not that far with Phyllis—yet. I’ll have to play the thing by ear.”

My own ear needed a scratching. “Tell me something. What about Patterson? Is he bringing any female companionship with him? Someone to share his nights with. Or even that reception you were planning.”

David looked at me a bit blankly. “I really don’t know. Come to think of it, he hasn’t mentioned anything like that specifically. He has his own accommodation—at the same hotel. But if the party at his place was anything to judge by, he shouldn’t lack for a few attractive females floating nearby.”

“Floating, yes. From their empty heads. But maybe he’s looking for a bit more than that,” I mused somewhat sarcastically. “Now that he’s about to become a national celebrity.”

“Let’s hope we all are.”

3

If Patterson’s big moment was coming up in two weeks’ time, I began to feel that my own would arrive in a little less. I looked upon my impending presentation to David and Phyllis as the first real test of how coherent a case I could present of my theory, and how convincing I could make it. I hoped by then to have all the broad ingredients laid out. I knew I couldn’t do more in the time remaining than make a general survey of the four Gospels, but I already knew the kinds of things I was looking for. If or when the time came to fashion an actual novel, further detailed research would have to be undertaken.

Of all the intricate multitude of pathways which crisscrossed the early Christian landscape, the most important and most highly charged point of intersection was that spot on the map at which the Gospel of Mark was created.

On some lost writing-table, in an edifice long since crumbled into the earth, at a geographical location now unknown, perhaps within the space of a few years whose dates could no longer be marked on the calendar of history, the most influential story ever penned by human hands was set down on paper. Many paths had converged on that undertaking. Many others branched out from its center to create the two-millennia-old culture and faith which had shaped the Western world.

Yet so many elements of that event would be forever obscured, forever lost. Not a single name of those who were involved in the enterprise would ever be known. If any of them answered to the name ‘Mark’, it would only be by coincidence, for the Mark the later church had in mind was definitely, all were now agreed, not the author.

Modern thinking located the Gospel of Mark in a largely Gentile community in northern Palestine or southern Syria. The cities of Sidon and Tyre were favorite educated guesses. The nature of the sectarian enclave which created the first narrative version of a life and death for a human Jesus was an apocalyptic one. It expected an imminent and violent overthrow of the present order and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Jesus as the Son of Man would arrive on the clouds of heaven to judge the world.

As the parables and their commentary in Mark 4 indicated, only this select community in which Mark worked had been granted the proper insight into the mysteries about the coming Kingdom. In the Gospel story, that community was represented by the disciples. In fact, Mark's picture of the followers of Jesus would not have been based on any historical traditions about the early apostles of Paul's day, but rather was a literary invention to serve symbolic and instructional purposes, aimed at the Gospel's readers. Mark's Jesus, and the narrative world created for him, had nothing to do with history, but served as the foundation document of the Markan community. All the features of this Gospel, in one way or another, filled its sectarian needs and situation.

Yet Mark did not simply invent. Somehow he drew on Q or Q traditions, in ways not yet understood. Perhaps a member or members of the Q circle in Galilee emigrated to the coastal city where Mark was written, carrying some of their traditions with them, but no written copy of the Q document, whatever its stage or condition at the time. As for other Gospel ingredients, some scholars saw Mark's collections of miracle tales and controversy stories as adapted from outside sources, or as already existing in the Markan community; others felt Mark developed them himself. Whoever the author, the miracles of Jesus were closely modelled on miracle stories found in the Old Testament, such as those by Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings. They were also similar to wonder-working traditions existing in pagan literature.

Mark had drawn, of course, on the Pauline type of Christ cult and its concept of Jesus as the divine Son of God, crucified and resurrected in a mythical realm as some form of sacrifice for sin, although the Gospel contained none of the theological language of Paul himself. Most likely, the Markan community had grown up as a cultic entity. It would have been similar to the one in Antioch which had launched Paul on his Gentile missions.

The great question in my mind was: did the author of Mark, in fashioning his Jesus story, envision it as fact, or simply as a form of morality tale, an inspiring myth, a way of embodying in metaphor the religious principles of the prior mythical phase of belief? When it was first read to the congregation, was it labelled 'history'? So many of the details of the story came obviously from scripture, Mark's other great source of inspiration and material; its hearers would recognize this immediately. Would they have seen the scriptural passages as predictions of historical events, or merely as pointers to higher religious truths?

I would probably never arrive at a definite answer to these questions.

Perhaps it had been the Q community's development of a founder figure which gave Mark the idea of placing his divine Jesus in history. However, I was beginning to suspect a complex dialectic of influences crisscrossing between Mark and Q over time, rather than a simple one way street. On the other hand, quite apart from any role played by Q, the very dynamics of the cultic preaching movement, drawing more and more on scripture for its picture of the mythical Christ, would have tended inevitably to draw Paul's Christ to earth, to interpret the scriptural pointers as historical. Did Paul's 'born of woman', governed by Isaiah 7:14, irresistibly lead to a human mother for Jesus and a specific name? Did those to whom Paul and his fellow missionaries preached demand that their savior god plant his feet on the ground? Sectarian needs would have been operating here as well.

When Q came along, with its 'record' of a preaching, miracle-working child of Wisdom, it may have been the stone that tipped the wagon.

By the weekend my survey of the Gospels was well under way, but I had resolved not to bury myself in study any more to the exclusion of all else. At the very least, Shauna would finally disown me. And so on both Friday and Saturday evenings we hit the night spots—which for us included the symphony and the theater. She seemed particularly fascinated by the involvement of the FBI in the investigation of the Ascended Masters.

“Are they going to assign you all bodyguards?”

“Nothing so dramatic, I hope. The worst thing that could happen is the media gets hold of this and focuses entirely on Cherkasian and the Masters. They’ll have no time or attention to spare for the hearing itself and the issues involved, much less the Age of Reason Foundation. The whole exercise could backfire on us.”

“Did you ever think maybe that’s their intention?”

We had just started polishing our ice cream cones at a street kiosk outside the theater, and my top scoop did a balancing act at my reaction to Shauna’s comment. I looked at her in a sudden panic.

“Oh, no! Do you think that could be it? Chown did say something about these people seeking attention. Cherkasian may be intending to spill things to the media himself. Not only will he get to hog the spotlight, he’ll make it look like we overreacted by contacting the FBI.”

“Wouldn’t the whole affair make him look like a bit of a loony?”

“Maybe he wouldn’t care. He might think the publicity would benefit his ambitions anyway—whatever they are. I should call David and at least tell him to play down the thing with Phyllis. We don’t want her thinking we’re being spooked by a bunch of millenarian kooks.”

“Isn’t that the case?”

“Well, I only suggested it to keep David from worrying himself sick. And from telling Patterson, I suppose. Maybe it would have been better if he’d let him in on it after all. Knowing Patterson, he probably would have insisted that David ignore the whole thing.”

“Having FBI agents in the courtroom to protect him from bible thumping end-of-the-worlders might not fit the image Mr. Patterson would like to project.”

“Maybe I’d better discuss this with David.”

After the play, Shauna came over to my place for a while, but once again there was an awkwardness and reserve between us when it came to more intimate activities. I was almost certain that Shauna was feeling some dissatisfaction at our situation, probably with my own lack of unqualified commitment. My binges of privacy and especially the obsessive immersion in my research which had marked the last few weeks were only the most prominent symptoms. The time had come to face the issue squarely, both in my own mind and in a discussion with her about our relationship. At another time, I probably would have done that very thing without delay. But because of the press of events, because I didn’t want to risk adding further difficulties to the course of the next two weeks, I told myself that it could wait that long.

She seemed keen enough on meeting with David and Phyllis the following weekend, though it would involve listening to my presentation. I had a feeling that by now she may have felt more familiar with the subject than she would like to be. Perhaps it had assumed for her the nature of a villain, a burgeoning beast that was devouring my soul and imposing its awkward bulk between us.

Maybe she was not far wrong.

Over the course of the next few days, it seemed that several lurking beasts were hovering on the horizons of my concentration, and not all of them were external. Despite my recent resolutions, my reading, webcrawling and notetaking became once more almost obsessive, as though I were trying to wring from them sustenance, security, justification. I wanted to turn it into a mystical experience, make it the culmination of my life's work, something that would transform me as well as the world around me. I felt the urge to trumpet my discoveries and insights, scatter them like new seeds over the ignorant, naive landscape of a society mired in primitive belief, become a new Messiah. Surely the world could be made to see the soundness and incontrovertibility, the wonder and power of my ideas—if only they would listen.

It seemed fanaticism was not the monopoly of any one type of belief system. Ruefully, I had to admit that the human blueprint was undoubtedly much the same in all of us. Perhaps it would be wise not to cast Rational Man and Rational Woman as a species apart.

I managed to get hold of David only on Tuesday. An agent sent by Chown had checked out the schoolhouse that morning and noted nothing amiss. Chown himself had called to say that he would be at the hearing, but only by the second day. Somewhat embarrassed, I told David of my new misgivings about Cherkasian and how he might be planning to turn the publicity tables against us.

"Thanks, Kevin," David said in mock bitterness—at least I hoped it was. "I thought we finally had a handle on this thing and I could sleep at nights. Well, I'll try to immunize Phyllis on that score when she gets here. And when I speak to Chown next, I'll suggest he and his people keep a low profile at the hearing. You're probably right about Burton. The last thing he'll want is some kind of apparent bodyguard. Who knows what the media might make of that?"

"My spin talents would probably not be up to it."

Phyllis was to arrive Friday. We set Sunday afternoon as a tentative time to get together at my place. David prodded, but I refused to let him in on what tale I was going to tell. The truth was, I had already worked out a sequence for presenting the evidence before I would hit them with the punch line. I wasn't about to blow it ahead of time. I would have to bring Shauna in on the game.

That was also the day I tried to get in touch with Sylvia, for I had heard nothing from her since the night I had visited her home. Had she followed my urging to seek professional help? I wanted to let her know that my concern and my promises had been genuine, and that I really wanted her to keep in touch with me. But a couple of calls that day reached only her answering machine. I decided to wait rather than leave a message. I would try again before leaving for Philadelphia.

Thursday evening brought a disquieting development. Shauna called to offer her apologies, but she had decided to go away for the weekend.

"I haven't seen my parents in a while, Kevin, and perhaps this would be a good time. You probably don't need me for your little presentation to David and Phyllis, and I can meet Phyllis in Philadelphia."

I sensed that the desire to visit her family was not the whole story, but I also sensed by something in her voice that I should not try to talk her out of it. Apparently, things had become sufficiently unsettled between us that Shauna felt a need to get away, though she still seemed committed to attending the hearing with me. Perhaps it was a signal that I was going to have to add a more personal item to the agenda for Philadelphia. Could I manage it on top of everything else?

“I’m sorry you won’t be here. If I don’t make a good case to convince David and Phyllis, I could have used you as a rooster on my side.”

This, of course, had been the wrong thing to say, and I realized it as soon as it came out. Was that all I needed her for?

“Well, Kevin, I’m hardly the person who’ll make or break your success on this project. You may find it’s a bit of a lonely undertaking, considering what you’re trying to do. Anyway, I’m leaving right after work tomorrow, so I’ll give you a call when I get back Sunday night.”

I tried not to let the unease show in my voice. “OK. And—the tickets are all ready for Monday. And the hotel room. David’s arranged everything.” But she already knew this. “I’m sure we’ll have a good time.”

“I’m sure we will.”

“Give my love to your parents.”

“I always do.”

Chapter Sixteen

Phyllis Gramm had sparkled the day she first appeared and braved Philosophers’ Walk with us, but on Sunday afternoon she fairly glowed, and together with the gleam in David’s eye which he tried unsuccessfully to hide from me, I felt certain that another double room would be on the booking in Philadelphia.

David also arrived with a copy of the Thursday Times. As resident publicist for the Age of Reason Foundation, I should have been the first out of the starting gate to obtain a copy. But I knew David would be bringing one for me, and in any case, neither a spare minute nor a spare brain cell had been available over the last few days for extraneous reading.

“ ‘A new movement may be on the horizon for American education. Its goals promise to bring it into conflict with more conservative forces who aim to usher in the next millennium on a different note...’ David began to read from Phyllis’ article, skipping from one spot to the next. He knew I would be perusing the entire thing at the first opportunity.

“...Burton Patterson, noted civil rights attorney absent from the public scene for almost two decades, will be reentering a Philadelphia courtroom next week to try to prevent the state of Pennsylvania from introducing Christian Creationism to the classroom under the banner of Science, a measure hotly opposed by civil libertarians and others who see it as a thinly-disguised attempt to do an end run around the constitutional separation of church and state....Behind Patterson stands a newly-formed group with ambitions of influencing the American intellectual scene in the run-up to the year 2000....” David cleared his throat. “At

the head of this prestigious team stands the talented and highly-acclaimed philosophy professor—”

“Hey!” Phyllis exclaimed, delivering a good-natured jab that would have done Shauna proud. “No creative editing. One editorial board was bad enough.”

“What does Patterson think about it?” I asked.

“I spoke to him on the phone last night at the hotel. He said he hadn’t gotten around to getting himself a copy, but he seemed to like the parts I read to him. He’s been busy preparing for the hearing.”

“I’ll bet. Why did he need a weekend at a hotel for that?”

“He’s a behind-the-scenes man, Kevin. As much of his preparation involves personal contacts and finding out what his opponent has in mind.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’s making a lot of personal contacts.” Now I was starting to sound petty. I changed the subject. “Anything further from the Ascended Masters?”

“Nothing. I guess three clues is all we get to solve the puzzle. I spoke to Nelson Chown yesterday. He says his people in Philadelphia have found out that the group at the house have been recruiting at the U of P, much like Cherkasian did here. One of the agents made contact with some student who responded to the overture and then decided he didn’t like what he saw. Chown hopes to have something more concrete on Cherkasian and what he’s up to by the time he gets to Philadelphia late Tuesday.”

“Boy, that will give us plenty of time,” I commented, with more than a touch of sarcasm.

“Also, I told him not to go anywhere near Patterson at the hearing. I’m not sure he was completely happy with that.”

“I thought he said all we had to worry about was a few demonstrations?”

At this point David cast a glance at Phyllis, who was looking at the two of us with a fascinated expression.

“See? The eagle-eyed reporter. You better watch what you say. She probably thinks she’s on to some juicy confrontation story, and the whole Age of Reason Foundation will go out the window as a poor second in public interest.”

I wasn’t sure whether to look concerned. David laughed. “Don’t worry. I filled her in on all the good parts. I promised her an exclusive on our apocalyptic friends—provided it’s played second fiddle to more important considerations, of course.”

“There’s always more than one angle to a good story,” Phyllis countered. “I won’t short-change the Foundation, but Patterson vs. Cherkasian might be a great boxing card.”

“Don’t forget, my dear, Mr. Patterson’s opponent in the courtroom will be Chester Wylie. And he’s no wild-eyed fundamentalist.”

“Great. A three-way bout. The fight of the century.”

Then Phyllis turned to me. “But David tells me you’ve been sniffing out a story of your own. The beginnings of Christianity are a very fascinating subject. A few years ago I did a column on the Jesus Seminar when they were voting on the authenticity of Jesus’ sayings. It was the first time the mainstream media were willing to give uncensored coverage to any radical questioning of the Gospel record. I hear they’ve recently voted that it’s unlikely Jesus was even properly buried, let alone raised from the dead.”

“That’s right. I guess once the genie’s out of the bottle, it’s impossible to stuff him back in. Things start to snowball. The pressure’s built up underneath the lid for so long, now that’s it’s been taken off everything comes pouring out.”

“I hope you don’t mix your metaphors like that in your novels,” Phyllis admonished with a chuckle.

“My editor doesn’t let me get away with much,” I laughed. “But come on into the study. That’s where I do most of my research. I’ve been relying heavily on the Muratorian Project on the Web—do you know about that?”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

Phyllis and David followed me into the back room. My multi-colored mural was still in place, and I had set out two chairs for the larger audience—but no popcorn. The baton was at the ready, but today I would rely less on my wall display than on a simple verbal exposition, with a few notes and copies of the New Testament standing by for illustration. I had had very little time to prepare and knew I would basically be winging it.

When David and Phyllis had taken their seats, I stepped back beside the computer, scratched my head and fidgeted, and generally acted like a nervous professor about to begin his very first lecture. Only it wasn’t acting.

“Let’s start with an analogy.”

David was smiling broadly, Phyllis looked intrigued. At least I had their attention.

“Suppose a deceased man’s descendants claimed that the man once won a lottery. Yet there was no record at the time of such a win. No entry of a large sum of money in his bank statements, no mention of it in his diaries and letters, no memory about a spending spree. If on his deathbed he told someone that he never got a break in his life, if he died of starvation, and so on. What conclusion do you think you would draw from all this silence about the lottery win?”

Phyllis asked, “Do I have to put up my hand?”

We all laughed and I began to relax. I was among friends—even if they would eventually come to the conclusion that I was crazy.

David spoke up. “I guess the answer you’re looking for is that the evidence—or lack of it—points to the falsity of the claim. The man was not likely to have won a lottery.”

“Yes. That type of evidence is called the ‘argument from silence’. Despite the scorn New Testament scholars like to heap on it, it can be quite legitimate under certain circumstances. The more one has good reason to expect something to be mentioned and yet it’s found to be missing, the more valid the argument becomes. And the more widespread the silence, the stronger its force. So I’d like to begin by telling you about something I call ‘A Conspiracy of Silence’.”

Of course, that was a tongue-in-cheek term. But it seemed a suitable way to express the astonishing universality of the void to be found in the early Christian record.

I launched into a breakdown of the great range of silences in the New Testament epistles about the life and circumstances of Jesus of Nazareth, occasionally pointing out a relevant document on my mural. The lack of any mention of the places and details of Jesus’ birth, his ministry, his passion and death. No pilgrimages to Calvary, the very site of mankind’s salvation, no prayers and commemorations at the tomb where Jesus had risen from the dead, no holy places at all. No relics, nothing Jesus had touched, worn. Nor, in the first century, had there been any reference to the agency of his death, no Pilate, no holding the Jews responsible—outside of the interpolation in 1 Thessalonians. No Judas, no John the Baptist, no baptism of Jesus. And not a single reference to a miracle. No apostles appointed by

Jesus, and no chain of apostolic preaching and tradition going back to him. No reaction, no defence against the blasphemy and affront to Jewish sensibilities at turning a man into God.

Not in all the 80,000 words of the New Testament outside the Gospels and Acts, in over 500 separate references in 22 documents to ‘Jesus’ or ‘Christ’ or ‘the Son’, plus a few to ‘the Lord’ meaning Christ, had anyone, by choice, accident or necessity, happened to use words which would identify the divine Son and Christ they were all talking about with his recent incarnation, the man Jesus of Nazareth who had lived and died at the time of Herod and Pontius Pilate.

I had their attention. And I had clearly stimulated their curiosity. But I had saved the most intriguing category until last. For even more than his death, Jesus persisted in the modern secular mind on the basis of his recorded work as a teacher. For this—as a human man—he had been and continued to be justly famous. Why then, I asked, did the New Testament epistles entirely ignore him as such, even to the extent of offering teachings identical to his own without ever attributing them to him? An outline of the most prominent silences on the teachings, prophecies and pronouncements of Jesus to be found in the epistles evoked comments of astonishment from both David and Phyllis.

“Naturally, scholars have long remarked on this silence about the historical Jesus as the source of Christian ethics.” I reached for another sheet on the pile of notes I had hastily printed out the night before. “But I should read you one of the most mind-boggling comments on the subject ever made in a scholarly publication. This is Sophie Laws from her study of the epistle of James:

“ ‘Whereas the Gospels have one form of adoption of Jesus’ teaching, in that they identify it as his, James provides evidence of another way of retaining and preserving it: absorbed without differentiation into the general stock of ethical material.’ ”

David gave a groan. “I wonder what we should call that. ‘Preservation by burial’?”

I laughed and made a mental note to remember that one. “Yes, it’s amazing that later generations were able to unearth it.”

Phyllis was more thoughtful. “That’s strange, because I always understood that the things Jesus said and did were preserved through the early period by means of oral transmission.”

“Precisely. By word of mouth, in preaching, in correspondence, the sayings of Jesus were supposed to have been kept alive over several decades until the evangelists assembled them and recorded them in their Gospels. But how are Jesus’ teachings kept alive by being ‘absorbed into the general stock of ethical material’? How are they preserved if no one ever attributes anything to him? The other question is, why would such a bizarre development take place, this universal non-attribution of Jesus’ teachings to Jesus? Other scholars have remarked on this silence and some of them take comfort from the fact that every document shows the same thing, as though a collection of silences makes more certain the existence of the object of the silence.”

“I guess you could say zero plus zero plus zero adds up to a sizeable number,” quipped David.

“Only in New Testament math.”

I went on to illustrate the void in Paul on the recent ministry of Jesus. Paul had made no place for it in the picture of God’s salvation history leading to the future Parousia. He had talked of revelation and inspiration through the Spirit. All knowledge, even the gospel itself, had come from God. Christ and his redeeming role was the great mystery revealed by God

after long ages of secrecy, and the missionary movement of which Paul was a part had been the first proclamation of this divine secret. For Paul, it had all come through scripture, the great repository of the Christ event. Or so the first century writers seemed to be saying.

From David's expression, I had the feeling that he could sense where I was going, but Phyllis was looking increasingly perturbed. I did an about-face and outlined in brief some of the leading philosophical ideas of the age: the transcendent Father and the intermediary Son; the Platonic Logos and Jewish personified Wisdom, both channels of knowledge about the ultimate God and avenues of salvation. I tried to convey some of the current thinking of the time: layered universes and supernatural forces, the basics of mythical thinking.

When I reached the Greek mystery cults, with their mythical tales of savior gods and goddesses, slaying and being slain, teaching and revealing, establishing sacred meals, born to virgin mothers and offering guarantees of a happy immortality, a look of comprehension came over Phyllis' face. It was accompanied by a rather evident skepticism, though there seemed no hostility in it.

"I can see what you're getting at now. I don't know much about the theory that Jesus never existed, at least in detail, but I've never given it much credence. I must confess I've never heard it presented in this fashion before. I thought it usually had to do with the lack of reference to him in sources outside the New Testament."

"Yes, that seems to be where a lot of the attention gets focused. People like the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, or the Jewish historian Justus of Tiberias, Pliny the Elder who collected records and myths about natural phenomena associated with famous figures—no writer of the day of any sort says anything about Jesus or Christians."

"There were no Roman records about Jesus?" David asked.

"The Roman historian Tacitus about 115 makes the first pagan reference to Jesus as a man executed by Pilate. But it's highly unlikely he's consulting an official archive. For one thing, he gets Pilate's title wrong. And the chance of the Romans keeping meticulous records about every political execution around the empire for almost a century are virtually nil. Many scholars acknowledge that Tacitus information—and it's just a bare reference—probably came from popular hearsay and police interrogation of Christians. This would have been at a time when the idea of an historical Jesus had just developed among them. Pliny the Younger and Suetonius around the same time say even less about a human figure.

"What about Josephus?" Phyllis objected. "Isn't he the one Christians always quote to support their side of the case?"

"Well, Josephus is the great conundrum. Did he write that famous passage about Jesus or not? As it stands, it's too devotional, too naive to be his product. Josephus would never declare Jesus the Messiah, or give credence to his miracles and his rising from the dead. That's a later Christian interpolation, everyone agrees. But did it replace or rework something Josephus actually wrote there? As far as I'm concerned, the silence of all Christian commentators before the fourth century about any such original passage is proof enough that none existed. Origen in particular would have had occasion to draw on it in refuting Celsus, but he and everyone else are silent.

"As for Josephus' second reference, it's only in passing when he's talking about the death of James, and there's evidence that the surrounding passage has been tampered with by Christians. I happen to think that Josephus may simply have quoted James' title 'brother of

the Lord', the one we find in Paul, which is a reference to the spiritual Christ. It could have gotten amended later to mean the sibling of Jesus."

"But didn't the Jews talk about Jesus in the Talmud?" David asked.

"Well, those references were only written down much later, and they're so garbled in what they say about Jesus that they can't be relied on to reflect any knowledge of such a man."

"A conspiracy indeed," David remarked.

Phyllis had obviously absorbed a great deal of what I had said over the past hour. Now she came across like an intelligent pupil disagreeing with her professor.

"But just a minute. You said that Paul never talks about Jesus' death and resurrection as part of history, but there's a famous passage in 1 Corinthians, isn't there—I don't remember chapter and verse—where he's giving all the appearances Jesus made to various apostles after the resurrection? Wouldn't that locate Jesus in the time of those apostles?"

A taste of informed rebuttal. Good. This passage I had looked at carefully some time ago, and I agreed with her. It was perhaps the strongest passage in the epistles against the theory I was espousing. At least on the surface.

"Yes, 1 Corinthians 15. Let's look at that." I gave each of them a copy of the New Testament and we turned to the critical passage. I read aloud:

" 'For I passed on to you, as of first importance, what I also received, 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...'

"First of all, before we go on to those appearances, the whole key to this passage begins with that verb 'received'. Is Paul speaking of received tradition from others, such as the apostles who supposedly followed Jesus? Or is he speaking of personal revelation from heaven? The verb can be used in both senses, and Paul does so. But the governing consideration is surely Paul's adamant declaration in Galatians 1:11-12, that his gospel had *not* been received from any man, but from a revelation about Jesus Christ. It doesn't seem likely he would compromise such a passionate principle here. Even if others had been preaching a resurrected Christ, Paul brought his own interpretation to everything, especially the part about 'dying for sin', so he could have felt justified in claiming that he had received his doctrine from the Lord. In fact, he goes on to give a capsule summary of his gospel and he points to scripture as the source. That's where his inspiration comes from. Or through, since ultimately the revelation is from God. This isn't the meaning scholars usually give 'according to the scriptures' here, but it's a valid one and it fits in with everything Paul says about his use of the sacred writings."

"What about Christ rising on the third day? That doesn't refer to Easter?"

"That can be from scripture, too. Hosea 6:2. Anyway, 'on the third day' is a biblical expression that really means 'at the time God chooses to act', more of a future promise idea than an exact chronological designation."

"I see."

"But let's go on. Now, there does seem to be a direct link leading into verses 5 to 8:

" '...and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve. Then he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one born untimely, he appeared also to me...'

“First of all, this is all one sentence. But is the whole thing supposed to follow on the ‘received’ at the beginning? If Paul is using ‘received’ in the sense of information from others, that can hardly apply to his own revelation. If he’s talking about personal revelation from God, that would hardly include the appearances to Peter and the others. There’s something not quite right about the way this passage has come down to us, and most scholars sense that the list of visions probably doesn’t belong in the same category as the doctrines about the Christ. Some suggest Paul intended some kind of closure after verse 4, and in fact there’s a change of verb tense there. Perhaps the ‘visions’ were intended as a testimony to the doctrine.”

“You say ‘visions’. So you’re implying this was not meant as a physical appearance?”

“Actually, the word ‘appeared’, which most translations use, is misleading. The Greek verb here is commonly used in the context of revelation, not visual or physical contact. It might be better thought of as ‘experienced a manifestation of.’ Paul uses the same verb in referring to his own experience in verse 8, and no one considers that he saw Christ in the flesh. In fact, the way Paul lists his own vision with the rest clearly implies that they were all the same. Even if we were to accept Acts’ dramatic rendition of things on the road to Damascus, we have to see all the others as no more than visions of this sort. This not only wipes out Easter, it means there is no necessary chronological connection between Jesus’ raising and the list of visions. The resurrection Paul describes can be entirely mythical, revealed through the scriptures. Then these people experience a revelation about Christ and that resurrection. I happen to believe that this series of ‘revelation experiences’ by members of the Jerusalem sect around Peter and James inaugurated this particular branch of the Christian movement. Paul joined it, and the Western world was off on a mad jaunt we’re still dizzy from.”

“Who were those ‘Twelve’, by the way?” David asked. “I assume it’s not the Twelve Apostles of the Gospels because Paul lists Peter and ‘the apostles’ separately.”

“Good observation. It’s hard to say. There’s another vague reference in Acts to the Twelve, and I suspect it refers to some kind of committee in the early Jerusalem church, probably based on the symbol of the twelve tribes. What its role was, I have no idea.”

“So things do not always say what they appear to say.”

“Not when you’re dealing with chains of translation and transmission and the evolution of ideas over 2000 years. Not to mention the addition of preconceptions no one wants to give up.”

“So—” said Phyllis. She seemed to have reached a kind of neutral position, neither accepting nor rejecting, if I could read her. “If no one knows the Gospel Jesus before the Gospels, where did all the Gospel information come from?”

Always, of course, it came down to this. Shauna and Sylvia had asked more or less the same question. For the modern mind, writing down information in a narrative setting had to be either of two things: a deliberate work of fiction, or an accounting of facts, as accurate as they could be ascertained. In the ancient world, there were other varieties of narrative, especially in the religious context.

I said as much to my audience. “Are you familiar with the concept of ‘midrash’?”

Both shook their heads. “I know it has something to do with Jewish writings,” Phyllis noted.

“That’s correct. It was an ancient Jewish method of presenting some kind of spiritual truth, an insight, getting across a moral or instructional point, by embodying it in a new commentary, even a narrative story. The details of that story, the pointers to the insight or truth, were to be found in scripture. Scripture was God’s code. If you knew how to interpret it, how to put together the pieces, you could create a picture that would inspire people and reveal how one should believe and how one should act.

“The procedure in midrash was to ‘flesh out’ the meaning of a given passage; perhaps combine two or more passages and create some composite picture. Sometimes a story in the bible would simply be retold, but put in a new, modern context, to illustrate that the ideas lying behind the old version were not only still applicable, but that God had given them a new meaning.”

“Can you give us an example?” Phyllis asked.

“Well, the overall view of the early Christian movement was that God’s relationship with the world had entered a new phase. He was establishing a new covenant, one that would supercede the old. Most believed it was in preparation for the establishment of the Kingdom. And the Gentiles who joined this new Jewish movement, or who worked on it from within, since Gentiles converted to Judaism were already a sizeable body attached to synagogues in the Diaspora, naturally saw the inclusion of non-Jews as a critical part of the new covenant.

“So the elements involved in establishing the old covenant had to be incorporated into the story of the new one. Jesus had to be portrayed as a new Moses. His birth experiences are similar. He performs miracles that are like the ones attending the Exodus. Mark, in fact, fits in two sets of five miracle stories which parallel the crossing of the Red Sea and the manna from heaven, as well as the healing miracles of the prophets Elijah and Elisha in 1 and 2 Kings. The object is to show that Jesus is a new Moses and a new prophet.”

“Which miracles of Jesus paralleled the Exodus?” asked David out of curiosity.

“Stilling the storm, walking on the water. And, of course, the miracles of the loaves and the fishes. The link with the Exodus prototypes would be obvious to the believers of the time and would set up all sorts of conscious and unconscious associations. Miracles were also expected to mark the inauguration of the Kingdom, so Jesus had to be portrayed as performing signs and wonders. The old covenant was marked by blood sacrifice, that of animals performed by Moses. Jesus himself served as the sacrifice to establish the new one, and he speaks words at the Last Supper scene which are a close parallel to those spoken by Moses. And he does things which show that more than just Jews are to be welcomed into the new covenant. Considerations like these would determine how the evangelists—or rather Mark, since the others generally followed his pattern—would lay out the basic story.”

Phyllis said warily, “So are you saying that *none* of the Gospel details would have gone back to preserved memories about what Jesus had actually done? If he existed, of course.”

I smiled at her tactful proviso. “The thing is, the last fifty years of New Testament research have been a process of eliminating that very necessity from virtually every element to be found in the Gospels. Scholars already knew that the Gospels had been put together out of small, separate units, sort of like beads strung on a string with filler material added to create a narrative effect. But every evangelist after Mark could also be seen to have reworked the material he took over according to his own particular editorial and theological purposes. They had to assume that Mark operated under the same principle in putting

together his bits and pieces. If you so blatantly change your received sources, or the pieces you're working with, the last thing you're trying to do is preserve history or factual accuracy. You're creating a religious statement, a moral guide. In sectarian terms, you're justifying your own beliefs and practices."

I digressed for a few minutes to give them a thumbnail sketch of Christianity as reflecting the nature and behavior of the classic sect.

"The preaching Jesus is really the preaching sect. Scholars recognize that Jesus vs. the Pharisees is very much a picture of the post-Jewish War situation. It's anachronistic to try to transplant it to Galilee a half century earlier. The whole apocalyptic atmosphere of Mark and Matthew doesn't fit the earlier time, and Luke reflects an even later situation. As for John, he's somewhere out in left field. Few believe his picture of Christ has anything to do with historical memory. All of John's so-called teachings are utterly unlike the ones in the Synoptics."

"But what about those teachings?" Phyllis asked, a little plaintively. "Everything Christians hold dear about their ethics is supposed to go back to Jesus. We still think the Western world's enlightened morality—such as it is, you'd probably say—is dependent on this great enlightened mind, even if you don't believe he was divine."

"But that's a universal human tendency, Phyllis," I responded. "We only seem to be able to get a handle on things, whether it's ideas, or technological inventions, or whatever, by imputing them to specific and superior individuals. We've always focused such things on famous ancestors, or past figures we build up. Or gods in the case of myth. Whereas they're almost always collective developments over time. The first century was quite a progressive era. There were new ideas in the air. Many of Jesus' sayings were really Jewish and Hellenistic moral maxims, popular parables, traditional wisdom teachings. Once they all got put into Jesus' mouth, with the passage of time people lost sight of their real origins."

"The real origins would have been less exciting, I suppose; less inspiring," David commented.

"Exactly. After all, a community leader can say, 'Jesus said this,' or 'Jesus gave us an example when he did this.' But if you don't have that figure to focus on as the specific source, the one who provided the example, it's much more difficult. This is one of the chief dynamics in the invention of prototypic figures like Jesus. They fill the necessary roles so perfectly. It's almost impossible to do without them."

"I can see a problem in that, though," David suggested. "When you have this famous, unimpeachable figure at your disposal, then it becomes very tempting to attribute things to him. If the religious establishment declares that this is what Jesus said or did, then it becomes immutable law—Gospel, so to speak. That can lead to all sorts of abuse."

"True. Although originally, such a device served to justify things the community was already doing, or to solve the problems it faced. I'll give you an example. One of the burning issues in the early Christian movement was whether the observant Jew could eat with Gentiles and lower-class individuals, since this was a contravention of their strict purity laws. Yet table fellowship was the central expression of Christian society. It couldn't be abandoned. A solution had to be found."

"Let me guess," said Phyllis. "That's the reason why the Gospels portray Jesus as associating with Gentiles and outcasts."

“Right. ‘I came not to call saints but sinners.’ Acts has a naive scene in which Peter receives visions about God himself suspending the dietary restrictions of the Jewish past.”

“So one of the things Jesus is most famous for, his egalitarianism, is simply a sectarian invention?”

“Yes, but to justify its *own* enlightened actions. We seem to need to embody all the good things we come up with in some superhuman precedent. The bad things we can handle on our own.”

Phyllis seemed to be reacting, as my presentation went on, with a mix of fascination and disconcertion. At the same time, as one involved in the media, I sensed she could smell a good story, a controversy of epic proportion. But she was not yet prepared to blithely accept things on the basis of an historical novelist’s research. I had a feeling that today would set Phyllis Gramm, freelance scribbler, on a research path of her own.

“So let’s say we relegate most—or even all if you like—of the words and deeds attributed to Jesus in the Gospels as later developments for the purposes of your sectarian mentality. But are they not building on *something*? Surely the death of Jesus at least, is not determined by sectarian needs. Would it not have some basis in history?”

“Not necessarily. The death of Jesus in the Gospels could still be seen as a midrash rendition of the previous view of Jesus’ death in a mythical setting. Prior to Pilate’s role in the Gospels, the only ones mentioned as responsible for it were Paul’s demon spirits.”

I reminded her of the layered universe concept with its spiritual dimensions. I described Jesus’ descent through the heavens in disguise, as ‘foretold’ in the Ascension of Isaiah, how he would be ‘hung on a tree’ by Satan in his spirit domain above the earth.

“And the death of Jesus is in fact the ultimate sectarian need. It’s the source of salvation, the exaltation of the elect—or, in a more universalist context, the forgiveness of the world’s sins. The death of the god was absolutely necessary. It’s an ancient motif far older than Christianity.”

“OK, but why do you completely rule out the option that the Gospels are interpreting a real death? The death of a man who had lived in Palestine, the Jesus of history. I don’t know why Paul talked about demon spirits, but isn’t there a possibility that Jesus was simply a human man, perhaps a rather charismatic preacher of the day, and all this was what others made of him after he was gone?”

I nodded, and found myself pacing the floor in front of my Post-It mural, with its right-angled turn at the year 100, roughly the spot where Christianity itself had swung in a radical new direction.

“Yes, of course, that’s the path of least resistance. There’s no doubt that this is the direction modern liberal scholarship is headed, along with most of the non-believing community. But—”

I groped for a way to convey the acute problem—even the fallacy—involved in this kind of rationalization.

“If it all began with such a man, why is that man so maddeningly elusive for almost a hundred years after his death? And if some groups are interpreting his death, his crucifixion, and turning it into a cosmic redeeming act, why are others totally unconcerned with any death at all? How could one man’s life have given rise to so many radically different responses? How could all the multiplicity we see in the early Christian record proceed out of a crucified criminal?”

“Perhaps because he was so impressive. He moved people in all sorts of ways.”

“But to turn a man into a god is a huge leap, especially a deification on the scale Jesus supposedly underwent. It’s unheard of anywhere else in history. Declaring the Roman emperors divine didn’t compare at all. Look at what the Christians made of Jesus: the Son of God, pre-existent before the world’s creation, equated with the Greek Logos, creator and redeemer of the world. They made him rise from his tomb, for heaven’s sake! And all this among Jews! A people who had an obsession against linking the divine with the human in any way. They couldn’t even bring themselves to represent God by the slightest suggestion of a human figure. What could possibly have impelled such a reaction on the part of a man like Paul? Because Jesus was a charismatic preacher? If that were the case, history would be full of men turned into cosmic deities.

“You say he was so impressive. Then why can we find no trace of him *as a man*, no trace of the things he supposedly did to produce that reaction, for the entire early period of Christianity? Scholars in desperation point to the earliest layer of Q, but they’re pointing underground, to something obscured and interpreted through layer upon layer. They’ve brought their own needs and wishful thinking to their excavation. If the whole Christian movement began out of a teaching Jesus, as the scholars now claim, does it make sense that the record of that teaching would survive only in such a meager, tortuous fashion?”

Phyllis made a gesture of bewilderment. “Yes, I read a book on Q after I did the Jesus Seminar article—they were appealing to it so much. It did strike me that they got a lot out of a document no one could put their hands on. It’s a conundrum, for sure.”

Perhaps I could see a way. “A conundrum? No, Phyllis, it’s a dilemma. A dilemma that can’t be solved. Look at it this way.”

I leaned against the edge of the desk. “If Jesus was a man who had the explosive effect the scholars say he had, on the people around him and on countless others who never even laid eyes on him, that man would have lit up the sky like a Roman candle—if you’ll pardon the pun. Every commentator and every historian of the day couldn’t have helped but take notice of him. Just the fact that his followers were going around claiming he had risen from the grave would have attracted press coverage, good and bad. Do you think in the face of that, Josephus would have totally ignored the Christian sect? Impossible. Christians themselves would have lionized every aspect of his life, the things he said and did. Instead, we have nothing but silence, both inside Christianity and out.

“On the other hand, let’s say he was just an ordinary guy, maybe a preacher with some charisma and a few thought-provoking ideas, as you say. But he performed no real miracles, didn’t say a quarter of what’s attributed to him, didn’t rise from the dead. That would explain why he created no stir in the wider world and got his life virtually ignored by his own followers. But then how do you account for this great wildfire he supposedly lit all across the empire, virtually overnight? All those different responses, this elevation *by Jews* to the status of throne-partner of the God of Abraham himself?

“I think you can see what I mean. The dilemma is insoluble. Either he was a mover and shaker—and yet his life went into an immediate eclipse, even among Christians. Or else he was essentially an ordinary man—and yet they turned him into a cosmic deity. If anyone can offer a convincing solution to the choice between those two fallacies, I’d be willing to listen.”

Phyllis looked bleak. “I never thought of it quite like that. I’m afraid I have no solution for you.”

All three of us fell silent for a few moments. I was beginning to feel that, when faced with the possibility that Jesus never existed, the instinctual reaction would always be the same: a sense of loss, a feeling that some hole had opened up in the fabric of the world’s foundation, whether one was a believer or not. The figure of Jesus had created Western society as we knew it, and its removal could not help but shift the ground under everyone’s feet.

David’s next comment bore this out. “I think most people, regardless of what they believe, if they had a chance to go back in time and witness any one scene in history, would probably choose Jesus’ trial and crucifixion, simply because it was so loaded with drama and consequences for the future. It would take a wrenching readjustment to accept that the entire story is pure fabrication. We’ve all lived with it for too long.”

“Oh, I grew up with it too, don’t forget,” I said. “But did the first century Christians? Almost all the details of the Passion account go back to one source: Mark. And they’re all missing from Paul and the other first century writers—except for Paul’s words of Jesus at the Lord’s Supper, but that can be seen as an origin myth about the establishment of the Christian sacred meal, like the meals of some of the other savior god cults of the time. It may not be a coincidence that the cult of Mithras, whose sacred meal is closest to that of the Christian one, first flourished in Paul’s home neighborhood of Tarsus during the first century BCE.”

“So you’re saying that Mark made all these details up?” Phyllis had now adopted the air of one who was taking notes, though it had to be mental ones.

“No,” I said, “I’m saying he took them from scripture. He wasn’t the first to learn of Jesus from the writings, of course. Paul and the earlier mythical phase were getting their picture of Jesus’ activities in the spiritual world from scripture, too. But Mark went much further. He built up a whole earthly Passion story from countless little passages, mostly in the Psalms and prophets. It was in the best tradition of midrash.”

“The whole thing?”

“What if I could show you that virtually every detail of Mark’s Passion account, from Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem to Easter morning, had a parallel in some Old Testament verse or other?”

Phyllis spread her hands in a gesture of invitation.

Here was my moment. Along the right-hand wall, below the second century portion of my time chart, I had cleared ten feet of space. From behind the computer I drew out a roll of paper, another hastily assembled creation of the day before. Using bits of masking tape, I unrolled the long narrow strip and attached it to the ten feet of wall running underneath the mural. The markings on it were in bold felt pen. A series of crudely drawn scrolls containing scriptural quotes ran along the upper half of the strip. Below each scroll I had printed a line or two, accompanied by a rough sketch in a red pen. I had some little talent for drawing, and even at a distance of several feet I thought that the little vignettes were recognizable.

David and Phyllis shifted the angle of their chairs for a better view. I picked up my baton.

“At the climax of the ministry which Mark has created for his Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus and his disciples go up to Jerusalem. Do you remember how Jesus enters the city?”

“This is Palm Sunday, right?” said David. “Isn’t he riding on a donkey?”

“Yes.” My baton tapped the little sketch of a figure on a small animal. “Now, we look in Zechariah, chapter 9 verse 9, and we find—” I read from the scroll above it.

“ ‘Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!

Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!

Lo, your king comes to you:

triumphant and victorious is he,

humble and riding on an ass,

on a colt the foal of an ass.’

“Now, unless we’re willing to believe that Zechariah is actually prophecying Palm Sunday—which no reputable scholar these days would think of doing—we can see that Mark has constructed his scene as a midrash on this passage. The people being urged to rejoice by Zechariah, Mark has turned into the reaction of the crowds as Jesus enters the city, spreading their cloaks and palm branches on the road. He even has them shout a verse from Psalm 118: ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’ He’s probably also thinking of a line in Zephaniah, about the people rejoicing at the King of Israel being in their midst. This is one of the features of midrash construction. The interpreter takes different passages from various points in scripture which in his mind complement or relate to one another. They all get assembled in the composite picture.”

“I guess the question is, did Mark construct things like this because he believed the scriptural passages were actual prophecies of historical events?” Phyllis was still determined not to surrender too easily.

“He may very well have done so,” I replied, “though my feeling is otherwise. But we can be sure he’s starting from scratch. Neither he nor the other evangelists can be familiar with any oral traditions about Jesus actually making an entry like this into the city. They’re all too close to scripture, and they’re all virtual carbon copies of Mark. There’s no sign of any other source of information operating here.

“In fact, Matthew does something quite bizarre. He’s so slavishly tied to scripture that when he reworks Mark he has the disciples go and bring back both a donkey *and* her colt. Why? Because as you can see, the passage in Zechariah can be read as referring to two separate animals. Exactly how Jesus can ride both is never illustrated, but Matthew is anxious to point out that all this is in fulfilment of the words of the prophet, and he quotes Zechariah.”

“So Matthew at least think’s he’s pointing to history.”

I hesitated. “It’s possible. He and the other later evangelists are always declaring their Gospel events as fulfilment of scripture, whereas we find almost none of that idea in Mark. And yet, why does Matthew so thoroughly revamp his sources, Mark and Q? Should he not have thought that *they* were historical records and he was distorting them? I tend to feel that the fulfilment of scripture thing is still part of the midrash approach. The scriptural passages are pointing to new truths, but these truths are being embodied in fictional tales. I don’t know. It’s extremely difficult to get inside the minds of these writers.”

My baton moved on. “Jesus Cleanses the Temple. A very vivid scene. An angry Jesus drives out the money changers and the animal sellers from the Temple court.”

“You have made my Father’s house a den of thieves!” quoted David.

“Something like that. It’s been a favorite picture of the righteous Jesus almost since it was written, but I suspect that this was motivated by the Christian need to denigrate all things Jewish. The trouble is, no one ever asked until recently whether this scene was at all feasible, if it made any sense. Could one man do this? The outer court of the Temple was huge. And could he do it with impunity? Jewish and Roman authorities were constantly in attendance. It’s really a preposterous idea. And anyway, the activities of these traders were absolutely essential to the functioning of the Temple. They made the public sacrifices possible. There was no thievery about it.”

Phyllis peered at the scroll above my sketch of Jesus with the flail. “And this scene comes from where?”

“Again, from a combination of passages. Malachi says that ‘the Lord you seek will come to his Temple.’ Hosea 9:15—which certainly wasn’t talking about animal sellers—says, ‘For their evil deeds I will drive them from my house.’ And Zechariah 14:21 prophesies that, ‘When the time comes, no trader will be seen in the house of the Lord.’ Your ‘den of thieves’ quotation comes from Jeremiah 7:11. But he’s railing against those who commit atrocities and make sacrifices to Baal and then come into the Temple and think they’ll gain forgiveness.”

David volunteered, “I imagine that if Jesus had really done this, there’d be all sorts of details available about it that didn’t fit scripture.”

“Exactly. It’s the kind of incident that would have grown with the telling, as it passed through oral transmission. Some evangelist would surely have recorded some non-scriptural details about it.”

I moved along my scroll strip. The plot against Jesus. The Psalms had told of those who had wished him dead, of his enemies’ conspiracies—only the unknown Psalmist was talking about himself and his own enemies.

Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. The Psalms had contained many a lamentation which the evangelist could use to paint his picture of a fearful Jesus. ‘How deep I am sunk in misery, groaning in my distress,’ said Psalm 42. I pointed out that Mark’s fashioning of so many elements in his Gospel were for instructional purposes. If even Jesus could be afraid of the trials he faced, the sect’s members need not feel guilty about fearing the persecutions which beset them. And the sleeping Apostles at Gethsemane were an example of the personal weakness all had to deal with and try to overcome.

Phyllis pointed to one of my sketches, a pile of coins. “I take it that represents Judas. I know that *his* existence at least has been called into question.”

“Yes. Apart from Judas being a convenient figure to represent the unresponsive Jews as some kind of evil force, there were enemies of the Psalm writers who could be taken as pointing to such a figure. Psalm 41 says that ‘Even the friend whom I trusted, who ate at my table, exults over my misfortune.’ That gave Mark his scene at the Last Supper when Jesus says, ‘One of you who is eating with me will betray me.’ The 30 pieces of silver is taken from Zechariah 11:12. Matthew goes so far as to tell us that Judas regretted his action and ‘threw down the pieces of silver in the Temple.’ Do you think he might have gotten that from Zechariah, who says that he threw the dirty money the authorities had given him into the treasury?”

This brought me to the trials of Jesus. Scholars had pointed out the many inconsistencies, indeed impossibilities, of Jesus’ appearance before the Sanhedrin: that such a trial could not

be conducted at night, that the blasphemy charge made no sense, that the Jewish leaders had no jurisdiction to pronounce a death sentence. Most scholars now regarded Mark's whole trial narrative as designed to serve his theological concerns. His desire to portray the Jewish authorities as the force behind the execution of Jesus embodied his community's animosity toward those who sought to kill the Christian sect itself.

The false accusations at the Sanhedrin trial, the silence of Jesus before his accusers and before Pilate, even Pilate's washing of his hands in the Gospel of John, all these details had scriptural precedents. The famous choice offered between Jesus and Barabbas was likely pure fiction in any case, because it went against all that was known of Roman practice and even of Pilate himself. Many scholars had called it into question.

The minute details of Jesus' scourging, the abuse he suffered at the hands of the soldiers, all were echoes of verses from the prophets. The crown of thorns reflected a detail of the treatment accorded one of the goats in the Jewish ritual on the Day of Atonement. Isaiah 50:6 had said, 'I offer my back to the lash...and I did not hide my face from spitting and insult.' The Suffering Servant Song of Isaiah 53 told of one who 'bore our sufferings...he submitted to be struck down.'

Mark was building up his Passion edifice out of stones quarried from the sacred writings, out of bricks fashioned from the ingredients of the prophets' words.

"Perhaps the early Christians didn't know the details of what Jesus went through," Phyllis suggested. "Maybe Mark was forced to make things up."

I scratched my head with the baton. "Well, that tends to be the going explanation these days. But ignorance of detail is one thing. Paul, for all he talks about the death of Jesus, never even hints that he underwent a trial of any kind. For all that he talks about Jesus' sufferings, there's not a scrap of tradition he can offer about specifics. The abuse in the courtyard, the crucifixion on Calvary—these things were conducted in view of great crowds, so we're told, and surely they would have been. None of the details of these scenes reached Paul? Or any of the other epistle writers? No one ever alludes to anything throughout the entire first century. Not even the name of Pilate appears!"

"So the Jewish onlookers never shouted, 'His blood be upon us and upon our children'," David said in a somber tone. "I've always found that such a wretched line. So much misery from a handful of words."

"No, they didn't." I peered at one of my scrolls. "But 2 Samuel says, 'David said, Your blood be on your own hands.' And, 'May it recoil on the head of Joab and upon all his family.' Did Matthew get his idea from these passages? Who knows? In any case, Matthew's Gospel is chock full of anti-Jewish sentiment. The ironic thing is, that of all the evangelists, he's the one who was probably a Jew himself, though the Christians who came after him were quite willing to believe the crowd's outburst was fact."

I moved along the wall, baton in hand, reciting.

"Isaiah 53:12: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors.' Jesus is crucified between two thieves. Psalm 22:7: 'All who see me jeer, they wag their heads; he committed his cause to the Lord, let him deliver him.' The taunts of the onlookers at the crucifixion, even using the same Greek words that appear in the Septuagint.

"Psalm 22:18: 'They divided my garments among them, and for my raiments they cast lots.' "

Phyllis interjected. “That business of the soldiers gambling for Jesus’ clothes right below his feet always affected me when I was a kid. I thought it was so callous. Now I guess I’m going to have to apologize to all those Roman centurions.”

“And for the drink of vinegar and gall, I suppose,” David added.

“Yes, that’s Psalm 69. The prodigies of nature at Jesus’ death, like the darkness at noon and the earthquake, came from Amos and Joel, even to the hour. A few things were needed for the story which did not come from scripture, like Mark’s invention of Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus down from the cross and bury him. And Matthew adds guards at the tomb to ensure that no one would claim that Jesus’ body was stolen by his disciples.”

“One thing I always found curious,” Phyllis said. “Paul has this long list of resurrection appearances in 1 Corinthians, all to men of course, but the Gospels run absolutely counter to this by having women go to the tomb and witness the first appearance of Jesus. Why do you think that is?”

“Well, Mark started it, but he only had his women going to anoint the corpse, and they find the tomb empty, that’s all. There were no resurrection appearances in Mark—that is, until someone added them later to make up for the embarrassing shortfall. Matthew and John extended things by inventing appearances and giving the first one to Mark’s women. Luke has them find the empty tomb, but he gives some minor apostles on the road to Emmaus the first encounter with the risen Jesus. It’s all a kind of haphazard development.”

Phyllis stood up and approached my mural, running her eye over all the scraps and strips with their scrawled notes and scribbled quotes, the occasional splotches of color in my sketches along the time chart.

She said soberly, “There’s obviously more to the early Christian picture than meets the average person’s eye, I can see that. And out of all this conglomeration of ideas, somebody sits down one day, writes a Gospel and sends the history of the world shooting off in a new direction. If what you say is true, Jesus of Nazareth comes alive out of the blue, and we owe it all to maybe one man whose name we’ll never know.”

“Well, not exactly out of the blue. I happen to think that no idea ever springs to life in a state of pure originality. There’s a source and inevitability to everything.”

I set down my baton. “The ideas that went into Jesus of Nazareth had a lot of precursors. I said that Mark put his Gospel together, especially the Passion, out of scriptural pieces, but he also had a template to fit it all into. There’s a pattern, a theme that shows up repeatedly in the previous centuries of Jewish literature, some in the bible, others in apocryphal writings. It’s a story that scholars have characterized as The Suffering and Vindication of the Innocent Righteous One. You find it in the story of Joseph in Genesis, in Isaiah 53 with its Suffering Servant, in Tobit, Esther, Daniel, 2 and 3 Maccabees, Susanna, the Story of Ahikar, the Wisdom of Solomon. They all tell a tale of a righteous man or women falsely accused, who suffers, is convicted and condemned to death, gets rescued at the last moment and raised to a high position. In the later literature, he’s exalted after death. Does it sound familiar?”

“Mark’s Jesus is another tale in the series, obviously,” answered David.

“Yes, a man who preached God, is convicted though innocent, suffers in faithful silence and after death is exalted to glory and God’s presence. But all these stories are really the story of the Jewish people: the way they saw themselves during the centuries following the Exile. As a nation, except for the period of the Maccabean kings, they were continually subjugated by the godless empires around them. And as a righteous group within the nation,

they were persecuted by those of their own people who had surrendered their souls to the foreign culture, the rich and the powerful. Like all sectarian or persecuted mentalities, they believed that through their suffering and faithfulness to God, they were destined to be raised to glory.

“For the new Christian sect, Jesus was more than just a Messiah. He was their paradigm. What he went through, they went through, and the triumph he enjoyed was a guarantee of the triumph that was in store for them. The Gentiles who hijacked the Jewish Christ movement finalized the new story, applied it to themselves as a new Israel, and carried the ball off at a different tangent. The history of ideas is anything but linear. It grows like a mutating life form, in unpredictable directions.”

Phyllis turned and looked at me with a thoughtful expression. “Layers upon layers. You create an image of a great seething mass of subconscious motivation and experience, stretching back into a misty collective past. Things bubble to the surface and some new group creates a new theology, a new mythology out of it all.”

“And by the next generation, a new history has entered society’s consciousness. That’s the way myth operates. Until that society evolves to the point where the great myths of the past break down and can no longer function in the face of new developments. That’s the point we’ve reached today. It’s taken us two millennia to get here, but it’s time for Jesus to withdraw back into the mists he came out of. In fact, that reminds me of something my favorite author wrote. Allow me to indulge myself...”

I strode over to the bookcase on the other side of the study and drew out a compact book, its cover a simple, worn blue fabric. Alan Swallow’s editions of the Testament of Man had been frugal.

“When Vardis Fisher got to his novel about the growth of Christianity, he was coming off a rather simple and moving portrait of a Jesus who never understood what he was, or what he was inaugurating. In *A Goat For Azazel*, Fisher had to present a wealth of material, religious and philosophical, about all the ideas that went into the Christian movement and what was made of Jesus. For that reason, some critics pronounced it too wordy, even too sermonizing, with shortcomings in plot and characterization. But I can sympathize with Fisher, because such a complex subject couldn’t possibly be gotten across entirely through dramatic action. Maybe he tried to get too much into it, but without that detail, he would have shortchanged the reader and left him without enough to go on to make his case. I think the reader who approaches it as a novel of ideas and provocative insights would come away fascinated by all that went into the origins of Christianity. It’s a problem I know I’m going to face in creating my own novel.”

“This was part of a series?” asked Phyllis.

I gave her a capsule description of this most ambitious of historical fiction projects. “If you take *The Testament of Man* as a whole, then *A Goat For Azazel* could be looked upon as a kind of philosophical discussion chapter in the larger picture. Certainly, previous novels have a lot of action in them, like *The Valley of Vision*, about Solomon, and Israel’s first steps toward monotheism. Or *The Island of the Innocent*, which chronicles the clash of Hebrew thought with Greek, centered on the Maccabean Revolt. There’s more than enough blood and fire in that one. But even *A Goat For Azazel* has a lot of color and interest. Fisher lays it out like a detective story, and you get introduced to famous Christian figures, like the evangelist Luke and Ignatius of Antioch.”

“What does that title refer to?” David asked.

“It’s part of the Jewish Day of Atonement ritual. The priests laid the sins of the people on the head of the goat, and it was driven out into the wilderness where the demon Azazel disposed of it, and the sins were wiped out.”

“Meaning Jesus is the new goat, I take it.”

“Yes. The moral Fisher is trying to convey—or perhaps the question he is asking—is: are we wise in creating a scapegoat for our sins, instead of accepting the burden of them on ourselves? He suggests that maybe salvation is too easy if all that’s required is faith and repentance because the consequences of sin have been placed on the shoulders of the scapegoat Jesus. Should humanity’s ethical wisdom be based on penitent relations with a deity, or upon responsible and productive social behavior in this world, to eliminate its pains and injustices?”

“Good question,” said David.

Phyllis asked, “Did Fisher believe Jesus was a myth?”

“My feeling is he didn’t try to answer that specifically. He left it open. That’s why he called his novel on Jesus himself ‘A Parable’. And he’s saying here that even if the birth of the new religion were triggered by a man who actually lived and died, the religion itself is the product of the long-developing myths he’s been tracing through all the earlier novels. Of course, scholarship in his day was nowhere near as advanced as it is now. The layered structure of Q, for example, was still unperceived, the sectarian nature of Christianity, the obvious editorial motivations of the evangelists. Even so, Fisher’s analysis was very much ahead of its time.”

Phyllis, the scribbler, asked, “Was he a good writer?”

I smiled at her very natural and partisan question. “I would say very much so. There’s a simplicity to his style, but a poetry as well. Actually, I was going to read you a little summary passage here I got reminded of....” I opened the book.

“The story’s hero, the ‘detective’, leaves a manuscript chronicling his investigation, and in the last chapter his son is reading from it:

“ ‘The story had its simple and humble beginning in the land of the Jews—and yet not there, for the story is ancient. Was there a lowly one named Jesus who was hanged as a false messiah? I put that question to my friend Elisha and he said that nobody will ever know now and it does not matter. Was there an Orpheus, was there, let us ask, a Buddha, or have the gods been only glorified images of ourselves? If there was a Jesus he has now been swallowed by the mists, like a lonely figure climbing a high mountain, that vanishes from sight and forever when the clouds enfold him; and what he taught, or to whom, or how he lived and died we can never know.’ ”

“He sounds almost wistful about it,” Phyllis remarked.

“Yes, perhaps he is. Perhaps even as a non-believer, Fisher couldn’t help but tap into the power that myth holds over all of us. At another spot in the book he has his hero say something like, ‘Even if there never was such a man, even if he never said a word that they have him say, there is such a man for me now.’

“I think he realized that the idea of Jesus was part of a great and widespread human yearning. We are constantly striving to create better myths for ourselves. So many of them have been produced by fusing previously existing ones. Christianity took the salvation promise of the Hellenistic mystery cults and the mystical leanings of Greek philosophy and

fused them with the higher ethical concerns of the Jewish culture along with their expectations of a new world. Even Judaism itself, after the Jewish War and the destruction of the Temple, was evolving into its own higher stage. Perhaps it's not a coincidence that both developments were taking place around the same time. History tends to move in waves, and you often see a whole complex of innovations taking place simultaneously, even in unconnected areas. The second century under the Roman empire was probably the most happy and enlightened period of human history before our own. The trouble is, every new movement brings with it the seeds of its own petrification and decay. The more successful it becomes, the more it moves toward being institutionalized. Fisher says that the earliest Christians, like Paul, were creating a new poem for the religious mind of humanity, but before long others had compromised it by declaring it actual history."

"Poets write a poem, and theologians turn it into dogma," David offered.

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "That's actually very close to the way Fisher puts it himself. With dogma comes intransigence. With power—absolute power, as the Christian Church gained—comes a betrayal of the higher principles earlier espoused. Eventually, everything that isn't seen as a direct path to the otherworld salvation is denigrated and even rooted out: art, science, philosophy—"

"Not to mention differences of opinion," added David.

"Yes. Then something else comes along, like the rediscovery of ancient learning at the time of the Renaissance, and a new fusion takes place. Things go off in a new direction."

"Followed by the Reformation and horrendous religious wars. Out of which, presumably, comes a reaction in the Enlightenment."

"The forever oscillating pendulum," Phyllis remarked. She turned to David. "And you, sir. Are you building any safeguards against the abuse of power into your new Foundation?" Her lightness of tone did not entirely alleviate the very real, eternal issue which lay behind the question.

David shuddered. "Yikes! Right now, I'm just trying to get the media primed for the hearing next week."

"Aha! Manipulation already! I'm going to have to keep an eye on you people. I hope you realize you're still on probation."

David seemed to take this as a double entendre, by the look of his grimace.

"Anyway," I said, closing the book. "That's my case so far. A lot still needs fleshing out, and I haven't answered every question I've got in my own mind—plus a few I'm sure I haven't thought of yet. You don't have to say whether you agree with me or not. It's a lot to absorb at once, especially when it comes out of the blue like that."

David stood up and stretched. "Well, the idea's been around for a while, I know that. But it sounds like you've given it a few new twists. How about if we leave any discussion of it till after the hearing? Whether the Foundation will want to make use of it, I don't know." He gave me the old freshman grin. "Maybe we'll let you float the idea in your novel first. Then if you don't get stoned or lynched from the nearest tree, we might think about picking it up."

"There's the old school spirit!" I said.

We wrapped up the afternoon at a local restaurant, a fine place and one of Shauna's and my favorite haunts. I had missed her today. A lot was being invested in new directions in my life, it seemed, but was it at the expense of old established values—myths, so to speak?

The parallels within parallels were a little disconcerting. I hoped she would call me when she got in that evening, as she had promised.

By this time tomorrow, if things went according to plan, we would be arriving in Philadelphia. By that time, too, I assumed, all the players would be on the scene, ready to step the next day onto the stage we had set—which perhaps the times itself had set—for the confrontation between the sacred and the secular, between the old and the new.

To [Novel7.pdf](#)

Return to [Home Page](#)