

# The Human Jesus (1)

by: Douglas Lockhart

*Jesus' Transfiguration on Mount Hermon, his agony in the garden of Gethsemane and his prearranged ordeal on the cross at Calvary in the service of a ritualistic dream - a dream of perfect freedom for the human spirit.*

## The 'Transfiguration' Theories

Marcello Craveri rejects the traditionally accepted Mount Tabor as an unsuitable location for the Transfiguration of Jesus due to its distance from Caesarea Philippi, the city visited by Jesus and his disciples prior to the event. He points instead to the majestic 8,500 feet high Mount Hermon as a more likely spot due to its close proximity to that city. While noting that mythologists and rationalists have each tried to explain this extraordinary story of glistering light and physical transformation, he rather lamely suggests that one of the three disciples accompanying Jesus may have had a dream which he later related to the others. Michael Grant is similarly not convinced by the storyline of the Transfiguration. Describing the appearance of Moses and Elijah to Peter, James and John as "conjured up" by the Gospel writers, he adds for good measure that the story "contains elements that look like deliberate inventions".<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to these writers, John Ferguson follows a slightly unconventional line of Christian reasoning and refers to the Transfiguration of Jesus as a "mystic's ecstasy". He also speaks of the disciples' experience of a brilliant light as a phenomenon well-known in mystical experience.<sup>2</sup> Holding to the pragmatic line, Craveri visualises Jesus walking ahead of the disciples on some high ledge and being struck by a brilliant ray of sunlight. *Ergo*, the description of his being transfigured by a blinding light from heaven is thrust into a more sensible context. No mysticism here. Yet, something important happened, but it was not the manifestation of divine power. The transfiguring moment for Jesus lay not in his prayers but in his decision to fully inaugurate the

Messianic Age by undergoing ritual crucifixion at Jerusalem. That was the key to the whole affair.

Referring to the appearance of Moses and Elijah, Craveri speculates that the appearance of these two Old Testament figures probably signifies the arrival of two Essene monks to encourage Jesus in his pre-planned mission.<sup>3</sup> Essenes? This way of reading the text will be automatically rejected by Christians, but it may not be as unlikely as it sounds. Luke's Gospel states that there "talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias. Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish in Jerusalem."<sup>4</sup> Two *men*? Accomplish? The Dead Sea Scroll scholar Barbara Theiring suggests that high-ranking Essenes embodied, for purposes of ritual, the persona's of archangels and prophets, so making Craveri's theory of outsider influence plausible. As with the meeting between Jesus and Satan in the wilderness, these two men symbolising both the Law and the Prophets are much more likely to have been chosen advisers than either hallucinations, literary inventions or Moses and Elijah visiting Earth from some other dimension. So too with the men in white robes (referred to as men and angels in different Gospels) seen later at the tomb. Jesus, it seems, was not wholly dependent on his immediate quota of disciples - there were others working with him toward the completion of a Messianic plan. On this basis an alternative meaning can be given to Luke's report on Jesus' countenance being "altered" as he prayed<sup>5</sup> - it could be said that he was anticipating (as he later did in Gethsemane) what was in store for him later, but on this occasion experienced euphoria instead of fear and despair.

But perhaps the more pertinent observations come from the historian Karen Armstrong. She notes that Jesus was in possession of certain "powers" (*dunamis*), and that he promised these self same powers to his disciples. But only if they had "faith". Faith in what? Faith in God, of course. Jesus was not asking them to believe in theological propositions; he was asking them to "cultivate an inner attitude of surrender and openness to God."<sup>6</sup> There was not anything he, Jesus, could do, that they would not be able to do if

they matched his level of faith and reliance on God - the powers of the Spirit were for everyone. Western Christians later interpreted the Transfiguration as God's power physically manifested in Jesus, and in line with Jesus' teachings accepted that a robust faith could produce the same powers in believers, but with a marked difference in expectations. Believers in God good will were now believers in Jesus as the Son of God come down to earth to save all human beings in all ages from eternal damnation. The proposition had changed from faith in God to faith in Jesus, and faith in Jesus necessitated unerring belief in a rapidly growing theology built around Jesus as God incarnate in human flesh. The teachings of Jesus had been turned on their head.

Not without good reason, however, for in what he said and did Jesus seemed to reveal God's hidden love and concern for human beings, and observers eventually concluded that God had been literally glimpsed in Jesus. Speaking with the authority of a Moses, or an Elijah, this "Nazarene" had healed the sick and made demons subservient to his will. More importantly, he had accomplished a remarkable deed in Jerusalem, and it was this deed that marked him out as special. Transfigured in his innermost being, he had turned towards Jerusalem with steely resolve and consciously submitted himself to trial and crucifixion. Why? To complete Israel's centuries old "act of atonement". Death by crucifixion would be followed by a miraculous return to life, and that would usher in a new covenant with Israel's God.

In Byzantine theology as developed by Maximus the Confessor (580-662 CE), human beings could unite with God. Karen Armstrong notes that this was a quite different approach from the Latins, to whom God "was an optional extra, an alien, external reality tacked on to the human condition."<sup>7</sup> The Western tradition is described by Armstrong as "eccentric" because of its concern with sin and atonement, rather than with the human condition transfigured in the same sense as Jesus was transfigured - to conceive of God in such an eccentric fashion was to run the risk of making God into an idolatrous object *out there* somewhere. The Eastern Church, on the other hand, did not conceive of transfiguration as an "invasion by a supernatural reality", but as "an

enhancement of powers that were natural to humanity."<sup>8</sup> But we had to open up to God for this natural condition to erupt - we had to surrender to God without reserve. Only then would that transformation of heart, mind and body take place, the transformation that Jesus, as an ordinary son of Israel elevated to Messiahship, had eventually experienced.

This is a long way off from saying that the disciples saw no more than Jesus lit up by the sun's rays and thought him transfigured; it is to accept the story at face value and suggest, as John Ferguson has done, that Jesus probably did undergo some kind of deep spiritual experience on Mount Hermon. I concur. Something powerful is going on in this story, and the temptation to sidestep it and see it as a normal event elevated through sleight-of-hand is perhaps to do it a grave injustice. This is not to suggest that the two men who appeared were in fact who they are said to have been - sectarian visitation is the more likely scenario. But the idea of Jesus having undergone some kind of epiphany as he contemplated what lay ahead of him is quite believable - Jesus' act of surrender may have been of such intensity that it produced psychic phenomena. Engaged, as he obviously was, in a ritualistic encounter with advisers sent to strengthen his resolve, he may have entered a state of deep contemplative reverie.

Yet this light-filled story is quite down to earth in many respects; the disciples are all but extraneous to the event, mere spectators overawed by what is going on. For instance, Peter blurts out something about building tabernacles to Jesus and his two visitors, and the stupefied tenor of this statement places him and his fellow disciples outside of those who are in the know. The interaction between Jesus and these Biblical luminaries is no ordinary even; it is as a carefully contrived bit of theatre driven by Scripture and fuelled by emotion. It was a plan executed with precision for the disciples' benefit, an event that would later include the lending of a donkey to Jesus when he arrived at Jerusalem, and the hiring of a room by an unidentified *helper*. Facts such as these cannot be easily explained; nor should they be overlooked. They are clear indications that Jesus was the central pivot in a politico-religious movement. Transfigured in body and

mind he may well have been, but the very intensity of spirit which triggered such an experience was allied to a purpose both religious *and* political. Jesus was not only Israel's priestly Messiah, he was also, *in potentia*, Israel's Messianic king.

### The Humanity of Jesus

To appreciate what happened to Jesus on Mount Hermon, we must first fully appreciate that Jesus was in every respect a human being. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that this was the case. He was flesh and blood and had grown up like any other child in Palestine. He could get angry, thirsty, hungry or tired. If he cut himself, he bled. He was human in *every* respect; and in spite of rumour, his birth had been like any other birth. Both his mother and father were known to the disciples, his parents proud of the physical lineage which connected Jesus to the Davidic Kings. This is to say what we all know but keep on forgetting - Jesus was a human being in every sense of that word.

He was *so* human the New Testament could not avoid recording that basic fact; even to the extent of his having experienced psychological trauma. Sweating drops of blood in the Garden of Gethsemane as he contemplates the horrors of crucifixion, he shows himself not only capable of fear and despair, but with a few words places himself in a sensible context in relation to Israel's God. This is not God praying to himself, or some inexplicable bit of God talking to some other bit; it is a man conscious of his own inadequacy bending his will to what he believes to be a divine purpose. The term "Son of man" means exactly that; it is a reference to the fact that Jesus identified with humanity in the fullest possible sense. And the term "Son of God" should not be used to disable this fact; this technical term has been wrenched out of its Jewish context and made into a sad, literalism. In his challenging book *Jesus and the Tide of Time*, John Ferguson quotes Bethune-Baker: "it was not that the Son of God came down from heaven, but that the Son of man ascended up on

high."<sup>9</sup> *That*, I think, perfectly captures the situation. Jesus was not God reaching down to man, he was man reaching up to God.

The experience on Mount Hermon was a turning point for Jesus. Before leaving Casaerea Philippi he seems to have experienced uncertainty, hence his question to Peter: "Whom say men that I am?" It is as if he needs reassurance. When that reassurance comes, however, he is unnerved: Messiahship is suddenly too much to contemplate - his disciples are to keep their mouths shut. In the safety of his own mind the idea of being Israel's Messiah had been a manageable concept, voiced aloud it took on the tenor of someone deranged by spiritual ambition. Yet that was in fact his conviction; he *was* Israel's Messiah, and others were just as certain. His disciples had suspected as much since the arrest of John the Baptist, and his rejection of Nazarene radicalism, although incomprehensible to some, seemed to suggest a higher form of spiritual truth to others.

To imagine for one moment that this flesh and blood man thought of himself as God incarnate in human flesh is to push his experience of himself and God beyond the limits of conceptual decency - and that in spite of indications in the New Testament that his name carried a divine connotation. (see my essay: In the Name of "Is") Son of God he certainly was, but not God's son in any literal sense. The whole of Israel was God's *firstborn* son (Exodus.4: 22), the *adopted* son of God, and Jesus too was an adopted son of God in this limited sense. He was the Messiah, and as the Messiah he was automatically termed "Son of God" by way of messianic, archetypal definition.

This fact is clearly seen in Matthew 16: 16 where Peter, in response to Jesus' question, says "You are the Messiah, the Son of God." And again in Matthew 26: 63 when the high priest challenges Jesus with the words: "I adjure thee by the living God, that thou tell us whether thou be the Messiah, the Son of God." On both occasions the word "Christ" (*Christos*) is used in Matthew's Gospel, but this is merely the Greek word for Messiah, and has no connotation other than that. The accusation of blasphemy directed at Jesus by the high priest was not because he claimed to be God's son, it was because he claimed to be the *Messiah*, a claim roundly

rejected by Israel's religious leaders in relation to Jesus' belonging to the Nazarene sect. There were hotheads among these Nazarenes who wanted a confrontation with Rome, and *that* was utter madness. Better that one man die for Israel than that Israel die because of one man. Innocent of harbouring insurgent values, Jesus became the nation's scapegoat, not by dint of circumstance alone, but as part of a planned exercise by his invisible mentors. Facing the excruciating ordeal of death on a Roman cross as part of his sect's spiritual imaginings (there was more than one form of Nazarenism), he became the archetypal "Son of God" who would deliver the Israel from Rome's tyranny without having to engage Rome in military conflict.

### Contradictions & Contrasts

The highly informal quality of Jesus' approach to religious observance is striking, particularly when it is weighed against the intensity of his spiritual life. How could he balance the two when such intensity was generally backed by rigorist opinions and nationalistic tendencies? How could he stop himself from closing off instead of opening up when his whole background was infused with doctrinal fixity? Yet open up he did; find the balance he managed to do - and that in spite of the fact that he was a sectarian leader schooled in the aspiration of a Galilean sect. Holding views plainly at odds with orthodox Judaism, austere Essenism and the *strict Pharisee-aligned Nazarenism of his brother James*, Jesus created a hybrid religious philosophy that in the early days angered his family and further split the Nazarene party. It may even be feasible to suggest that he had a following of dissident Essenes at his disposal (consider the "angels" in control of Jesus' tomb), for substantial numbers of Essenes later helped swell the ranks of the Jerusalem Nazarenes led by Jesus' brother James.

Christian scholars will balk at such a suggestion, but the tendency to keep the Essenes away from Jesus at all costs is now recognised by consensus scholars as untenable. In fact the Herodian party, which is a shadowy presence in the background of

the Gospels, is thought to have been the Essenes by another name; and it is also thought likely that Jesus' stinging criticism of the Pharisees was in fact aimed at this group. The basic story of Jesus in the New Testament has been tampered with, its focus changed, its host of characters manipulated to a much later purpose. If we are to move on in our understanding of Jesus' motives and purpose, we have to learn to accommodate the fact that he was, apart from a fallible human being, also a Jewish sectarian leader in possession of a grand vision that failed. The Kingdom of God did not appear as expected, nor did the Roman Empire vanish in a puff of smoke. The nation of Israel was not heralded throughout the Gentile world as God's chosen people' there was just the carnage of total war, the destruction of everything ever hoped for and the realisation that rabid nationalism *and* eschatological dreaming end up in the same place. Ideological fixity, however handled, *must* necessarily disappoint.

From the information available about Jesus in the New Testament, and from the studies of thinkers on both sides of the scholarly divide, it seems probable that Jesus was bound ideologically to the idea of undergoing the trauma of crucifixion. Not by chance that he underwent arrest, trial and crucifixion - *everything* had been stage-managed. But it all went wrong; the Kingdom of God did not miraculously materialise as expected, just the Roman's as usual. The attempts of men to manipulate the heavens ended in disaster: nationalism unravelled Israel and split the Nazarene party into disparate groups. In the end Zealots and Nazarenes *and* Christians were subjected to a curse - the *Birkat ha-minum* - and banned from the synagogues. Scattered to the four winds, these groups survived, but all was confusion and a mad scramble to adjust doctrinal notions. Afterwards, with Paul and Peter and Jesus dead, there was a polarising of opinion about Jesus among those who still considered him important. Accepted still as the Messiah of Israel by some sectaries, this remarkable man's status was progressively heightened by Rome's surviving Christians until he matched the sun god Sol Invictus. But all was not lost, something of Jesus' mentality lived on in the so-called Gnostic groups, their often veiled understanding of events now

crucial to our comprehension of the same events. Predicating their understanding of Jesus on inner, rather than outer, events, the interrelated Gnostic groups nevertheless left vital clues as to how these outer events ought be viewed.

Jesus was a man capable of intense self-scrutiny, a sophisticated man carrying complex beliefs allied to culture and religious training. But he was also an insightful man capable of breaking away from the narrow fundamentalisms of his day, a man willing to confront prejudice and religious xenophobia wherever he found it. When all is said and done, however, he was also a man caught up in the grand imaginings of a religious sect which, due to the twists and turnings of history, would finally subjugate the Roman Empire and don her mantle by unanticipated means. Jesus' personal relationship to God would be bent in a blasphemous direction through a hindsight interpretation of Paul's Nazarene-based Christology, and by such means the juggernaut of Roman Christianity would gather momentum, its theological speculations hardening into unchallengeable dogma, the Galilean Messiah being transmuted, step by violent step, from paragon of virtue into God incarnate.

In the apocryphal Acts of Peter beloved of the Gnostics, Peter speaks in guarded tones of what he witnessed on Mount Hermon. In fact he is so careful that all he can say is: *Talem eum vidi qualem capere potui*. Which translates as "I saw him in such a form as I was able to take in."<sup>10</sup> Writing of this incident, and of those very words, Henry Corbin terms such an experience "theophanic" (the visible manifestation of God to man), and give further examples of people seeing forms of God *appropriate to their capacity*. Corbin then speaks of perception possessing "a personal character", and of the field of vision as defined by the "dimension of being ... common to this or that group".<sup>11</sup> In apparent agreement, Origen, the great Alexandrian Father, speaks of those who witnessed the Transfiguration of Jesus as experiencing it "according as each man was worthy".

In relation to this, I would like to suggest three way in which we can approach the story of the Transfiguration: (1) as a

completely natural event during which Jesus was caught in a stream of sunlight; (2) as a literal event during which he emanated divine light from his body; and (3) as a moment of deep contemplation during which he was, in some outward sense, transfigured. My own choice is the latter because, as Karen Armstrong so succinctly says in relation to this story, "Jesus' glorified humanity showed us the deified human condition to which we could all aspire."<sup>12</sup> That is the more sensible approach - and that in spite of the Jesuit Malachi Martin evaluating such thinking as Modernism's "Winsome Doctrine". Jesus' transfiguration is perceived in different ways, the way in which we see it determining, I believe, our capacity for freedom. There again, what do I mean by that?

### **Back to the Kingdom of God**

It seems strange that a man as intelligent as Jesus did not realise that the Jewish dream of a physical kingdom of God on earth was a utopian hope incapable of fulfillment. But as Hugh Schonfield has shown in *The Passover Plot*, Jesus was a man of his time relying on a blueprint of Messiahship gleaned from the prophetic books. Splicing past history onto the present (the persecution of the Teacher of Righteousness and much else), the contents of the documents involved were made to live again. And so the fortunes of the Elect were mapped out, the Scriptures made to divulge the exact character and course of Jesus' mission.

By what ever means we explain the *non-appearance* of this Kingdom, the facts are that Jesus believed in it, the multiple sectarian groups believed in it, and orthodox Jewry believed in it. Jesus even taught his disciples a prayer to this effect, and was convinced that a spiritual transformation of the physical world was part of the Messianic sequence. In the twinkling of an eye all would be changed. The lamb would lie down with the lion, weapons would be reshaped into useful tools, Israel's heroic dead brought back to life in parallel to his acting out the drama of the Suffering Servant. The whole Messianic package was a drama which had to be played out in the real world.

So too for the wilderness sectaries. Patterning their daily behaviour on what they thought was a fair representation of how this Kingdom would function, they lived austere, Law-driven lives devoted to interminable rituals of cleanliness. Atonement was of the people on behalf of the people through prayer and rituals meticulously enacted by a priestly elite. Orthodox Jews, on the other hand, were less strict in their observance of the Law and relied on animal sacrifice to wash away the sins of the nation. So ingrained was the practice of ritual slaughter that it continued in the Temple right up until 70. In contrast to this, Jesus seems to have rejected Temple practice, abhorred Qumranite exclusiveness, and advocated an open-ended attitude to the Law that broke with Jewish Orthodoxy and strict Nazarene policy. Offering an almost casual forgiveness for sins, this upstart of a Messiah methodically "carried out certain actions calculated to have particular effect". So says Schonfield; and he adds, "It is as if he [Jesus] was a chemist in a laboratory confidently following a formula set down in an authoritative textbook."<sup>13</sup> Which text book, he wonders? How did he manage to break away from the rituals of cleanliness and purity and still expect the Kingdom of God to materialise? Could it be that Jesus' mature interaction with Essene thought caused him to react against ideas he himself had once held?

In *History and Eschatology*, Rudolf Bultman sets the context for rigorist beliefs by noting that Israel's Old Covenant with God was grounded in an historical event (Moses and the Law), whereas the New Covenant between God and the Christians was grounded in the concept of history's end. For the Christians, the game of history had completed itself in the incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection and glorification of the *Christ*. All that was left was a sweeping up operation before the Messiah reappeared in triumph. Theologically, Christians were not part of history, they were an eschatological event in their own right - they *were* the end-time. The new aeon was imminent. The Kingdom of God was just around the corner. God was about to wind up the whole messy business of human society and inaugurate a theocratic state with the New Israel (the Christians) in charge. But it did not happen. The Son of

Man did not appear in clouds of glory. History continued and Christianity fell back into it like a stone into a pond.

This happened after a period of euphoria, a period of certainty during which Christians *and* Nazarenes expected God to make his move. Bultman observes that the expectation that the end-time had been reached runs through most of the New Testament. In Paul's opinion the night is far spent, the day is at hand (Rom. 13: 12). For Peter "The end of all things is at hand" (1 Peter 4: 7). And the writer of Revelation is equally sure that "The time is near" (Rev. 1: 3; 22: 10). Israel's history had reached its goal; it was about to be consummated in a time of troubles. And so Christianity turned into a new kind of religion - it had no option. Paul's intricate theology of Christ's return in glory had corkscrewed in the face of unfulfilled promises, and in Christian hands it did the same. Laying the emphasis more on the nature of the Messiah's obedience to the will of God, Jesus' return was pushed into the future first by Paul, and later by the Christians. The difference was that in Christian hands Jesus began to inflate towards theological disaster: the messenger was turning into the message.

Deep in this turn-around was a perception of Jesus supported by Jesus' own behavior. As Bultman observes in relation to Paul: "the demands of God are summed up in the commandment of love, that is, in a commandment which does not consist in formulated statements".<sup>14</sup> It was life that mattered. It was encounters with one's fellow human beings that mattered. Love did not grow out of doctrine; it grew out of people interacting. Such a notion had not appeared in Paul's mind by accident; it had appeared because he had an insider's grasp of Jesus' cast of mind. The Nazarene party under Jesus' brother James was still boxed in by orthodox notions, the separatist Pharisees similarly closed off, the rigorist isolationism of the Qumarite Essenes intact. When dealing with the daily grind of life and relationships, Paul's teachings so closely reflected Jesus' teachings that we can only marvel at the idea of these two men never having met - and that in spite of the fact that Paul presents himself to the Nazarene Council as a "Jesus-appointed" Apostle. What are we to make of that statement? Karen Armstrong returns us to base: his

"glorified humanity showed us the deified human condition to which we could all aspire."<sup>15</sup> Before anything else, Jesus was a human being who understood human beings, a being brought to a curious level of psychological and spiritual completion through the nature of his mission.

Paul was convinced that Jesus' life and teachings heralded a perfect freedom; but he did not anticipate the appearance of a Church using the name of Christ to enslave. Jesus the man of flesh and blood and untoward opinions was eventually turned into a phantom, into a mirage upholding the Roman Church's every wish, and as a mirage in its own right, that Church offered its apparently substantial services to a world in need. John Baldock, author of *The Alternative Gospel*, puts it best: "there can be little doubt that in turning Jesus himself into the message the Church has led the Westernised world into a spiritual desert, in which it [the Church] is more of a mirage than the oasis it holds itself to be."<sup>16</sup> Turning Jesus into a spiritual head-locking device, this organisation of self-appointed authority figures systematically fitted this device to all and sundry, and the result was psychological and spiritual entrapment instead of freedom. Jesus *was* God. Jesus' mother had remained a virgin after given birth to God in the shape of a human being. Jesus could walk on water and make withered limbs whole. Jesus could make the blind see, raise the dead and detect fish under water. There was absolutely nothing he could not do - he was the most powerful being ever to have appeared on earth.

### The Outer and the Inner

Such was the tenor of the early centuries of Christianity's growth towards might and power; not much has changed. Jesus is still being peddled as God squeezed into a human body, and Mary is now Queen of Heaven as well as Virgin Mother of God on earth. The head-locking device is still worn by believers, the fight to retain the Church's traditional values and attitudes a fight engaged in every day by those who interpret the modern world as bound by Satan and in the grip of his grotesque minions. There is a heaven,

and there is a hell, there is bliss and there is damnation, those who say otherwise not only deluded, but unwittingly in the pay of diabolical forces. However the world may appear on the surface, *that* is the underlying reality, Churchmen who go along with the world's "winsome doctrine" anathema before God.

This is to say that *anyone* who questions Christianity's traditional doctrines is heading for the flames or some postmodern version of the same. The author of this essay is heading for the flames. You, the reader of this text, if you have ceased to believe in the old fashioned way, similarly bound. It is better never to have believed than to have heard the Good News and dismissed it; or, worst still, have fallen away from it into apathy or willful rejection. Or, as Paul put it, once you have heard the Jesus story you have no cloak for your sin. The twenty-first century has arrived, but this is still the underlying tenor of Christian thought at the highest levels of the Catholic communion. Many Anglicans are in accord, evangelicals and fundamentalists known for their stand on such matters. Bound to the old doctrines for the sake of continuity and social cohesion, believers "disinformed, deformed, and infantilised by two thousand years of the Church's fairy-tale preaching" cannot, as the theologian/historian Uta Ranke-Heinemann states, bear the insights that are available to them.

Conservative Christians consider all of the basic doctrines of early Christianity sacrosanct, the doctrine of Christ's atoning death on the cross viewed as untouchable. Take that touchstone doctrine away and Christianity is as nothing. The business of a Jewish man in his mid-thirties functioning as a God-directed human sacrifice for the sins of humanity is however as blatantly inadequate today as it was when Jesus himself mistakenly attempted to make it the cornerstone of his Messianic vision. He did not have the whole of humanity in mind as he set the wheels of his mission in motion, but he did envision his ordeal on the cross as a one-off atonement for Israel as a nation. Humanity would certainly benefit from the inauguration of God's kingdom on earth, but that would be a side-effect of having a "Holy Nation" in their midst.

What we have to remember, and keep on remembering, is that Jesus was a flesh and blood individual capable of making mistakes just like the rest of us, the only difference being that he believed himself to be the Messiah of Israel, God's archetypal Son chosen and called and supported by angelic forces. So when the mistakes came they tended to be of some proportion, the mistakes of the Church based on the same grandiose myth similarly impressive. But understandable, as it turns out. Rome's Christians had lost all cognisance of the myth's Nazarene origins; all they had were Paul's letters, and it was out of these mystically-oriented portraits of Jesus' mind that they constructed their literalised Christology. The cosmic "Christ" was on the loose, the messianic underpinnings of this word lost in a welter of speculation backed by letters forged in Paul's name. Stranded between the Nazarenes and Rome's Christians, a dead Paul of Tarsus' alternative Nazarene Jesus would defy gravity and ascend to the stars via a corpus of carefully edited gospels. The truths in these Gospels remained, but they were now editorially slanted to convey a picture of Jesus the Messiah that coyly obscured his inherent divinity. All of which tells us that Jesus' attempt to single-handedly initiate the closing down sequence of his age had backfired; the Roman empire, transmuted into a machine designed to crush the will of spiritual dissenters, carried on as usual.

As a man of his times Jesus was influenced by sectarian beliefs, and these beliefs let him down. Yet in every other way he was well ahead of his time. He was reformer. He challenged the accepted religious practices of Jewish orthodoxy and severely denounced sectarian narrow mindedness. He healed when he was not supposed to, forgave sins and invited censure, broke the laws of the Sabbath and spoke of that holy day as having been made for the people, not the people for it. He had untoward views on just about everything, and he hated the Temple priesthood's commercial transactions. He was, in effect, the new broom that sweeps clean, but he miscalculated - God, he discovered, was not susceptible to arm-twisting.

### **An Inhuman Theology**

Elaine Pagels and Uta Ranke-Heinemann have each contributed much of importance to the subject of Jesus, and to the problem of the cross. Pagels has opened our eyes to the importance of Christian Gnosticism, and Ranke-Heinemann has challenged us with her dismantling of Christian doctrine. Reminding us that Christianity during the first few centuries was an "illegal sect whose members increasingly reflected the diverse interests of an ever more complex population",<sup>17</sup> Pagels notes that after the Church's elevation to the level of imperial institution in the fourth century, Christian teaching changed from being a celebration of human freedom to one where universal bondage to sin became the central, preoccupying focus. In turn, Uta Ranke-Heineman attacks the Catholic Church's preoccupation with suffering and points to its inhuman theology of the cross as the root of this spiritual malady.

The fact that early Christianity was not preoccupied with sin and suffering suggests a view of the cross altogether different from that held by the later Church. So what happened? Where did the optimism go? The joy? The exuberance? The freedom? Why, and how, did the theology of the cross change? Ranke-Heinemann is aware of its baleful effect on human affairs. She writes of a theology which "built substructures under and superstructures over" Jesus' crucifixion, and speaks of a "frozen theology" and a "petrified dogmatic edifice". Quoting the Viennese historian Fredrich Heer, she reveals that both Goethe and Shiller saw Christians as "cruel enemies of life, as venerators of the cross, unhinged by the spasms of penitence".<sup>18</sup> Her own opinion is that the theology of the cross has probably not assisted human beings towards humane action, but actually helped promote our inhumanity to each another down the centuries. Her book, *Putting Away Childish Things*, ends on this sobering note, and Pagels is not far behind with a similar condemnation. In *Adam, Eve & the Serpent*, Pagels talks of the Christian view of freedom changing when Christianity became the religion of the emperors. And then she pinpoints the cause - Augustine. It is Augustine who read into

the message of Jesus, Paul and the Genesis story his "theory of original sin."<sup>19</sup> Becoming the dominant influence in western Christianity, Augustine's rank pessimism about human nature infiltrated and destroyed the "freedoms" enjoyed by Paul's churches - the "rule of Law" was back in place, and for all the wrong reasons.

Karen Armstrong tells us in *The First Christian* that Paul's Christianity "became a religion far more concerned with sin, with eternal life, with mystical dying in the death of Jesus and the attainment of freedom from the fetters of sin and death."<sup>20</sup> So was Augustine really to blame? Or do we have a scrambled view of Paul's teachings? There are two Paul's in the New Testament, and one of them is a fake. How else can we explain the Epistles bearing Paul's name that were never written by him? Paul number one is bright, hopeful, respects women and sounds like Jesus; Paul number two is darkly obsessed with sin and dislikes women. Paul number one is relaxed about the Law; Paul number two virtually reinvents the Law. So what happened? Did someone tamper with Paul's image; or is it simply that Paul lost sight of his original vision and turned conservative? That is a possibility. It might be that with the failure of Jesus' expectations concerning the Kingdom he began to rationalise previous hopes. Karen Armstrong notes that he eventually takes Christianity right out of the world altogether,<sup>21</sup> and that could suggest a shift in perception.

The Gospels reflect Pauline opinion - question is, *which* Paul? Armstrong notes that Jesus' Sermon on the Mount is not concerned with earthly necessities; she thinks that may reflect additions made to Paul's thinking. If that is the case, then the Jesus who seems disinterested in earthly things may be a late creation by those trying to avoid the question of why his promised Kingdom had not turned up, the emphasis now being on an *inner* Kingdom and, for Rome's Christians, on a *heaven* beyond the skies. Jesus' eschatological hopes have been transposed, for some, onto an ethereal key reflecting Paul's rich Christology, for others into a promised after-death state dependent on *sustained* standard beliefs.

The Roman Church had turned, finally, into an imperial institution selling a heavenly kingdom sculpted back into an earthly kingdom of its own design; an earthly reflection of a heavenly ideal that quickly betrayed its premise. Sandwiched between what the Church had to sell, and what she wanted to be, Christians and exiled Nazarenes of differing persuasions took an alternative route and devoted themselves wholly to the heavenly ideal - a point of rupture that Rome's hierarchy quickly transmuted into harassment and overt persecution. These desperate searchers for interior knowledge were a blatant threat; if left to their own devices, and vices, they would undermine the Church's earthly authority. The "Kingdom" was now visibly a part of this world, that *other* Kingdom a matter of legislated belief. Christian followers of the *gnosis* did manage to survive, however, their Nazarene-affiliated cousins following similar patterns of exploration and discovery. Hence the fact that so many of the Gnostic groups can be traced back to Nazarene, Ebionite, Ophite and Mandeian sources: their fundamental intentions were not only similar, they were, in many cases, identical.

Rank and file Christians for whom, doctrinally, the transfiguration of the self took precedence over the sufferings of the cross were dubbed "Gnostic" by the Roman Church, but it is likely that *all* Christians carried this title, the inference being that knowledge in this deeper sense had been part of an earlier system later made subservient to a "rational" *gnosis*. The Church was in effect guilty of the very crime she was accusing others of committing - the crime of promoting fixed doctrinal notions over that of meditative expertise.

### The True Church

In *The Gnostic Gospels* Elaine Pagels pries open the Gnostic world and confronts us with a mentality quite other than the one expected. Revealing what she terms "the other side of the coin", she draws our attention to the fact that not only did orthodox Christianity denounce the Gnostics, the Gnostics denounced the orthodox as "unknowingly empty, not knowing who they are, like

dumb animals."<sup>22</sup> Accusing orthodox Christians of having built an "imitation church", these Gnostics elaborate fully on their grievances and voice the opinion that the Church at Rome has enslaved its flock through fear and forced it to obey earthly representatives. The Roman Church is referred to as a counterfeit church that claims exclusive legitimacy, those who lead it described as blind because they speak of things about which they know nothing. This is their principle failing, and out of their arrogance springs the notion of doctrines that cannot be questioned by anyone. Oppressing their flock, the hierarchy of this Church is said to slander the truth and preach a false Christ.

Elaine Pagels captures the essence of the problem when she tells us that by the end of the second century orthodoxy had established objective criteria for church membership. "Whoever confessed the Creed, accepted the ritual of baptism, participated in worship, and obeyed the clergy [were] accepted as ... fellow Christian."<sup>23</sup> The beating heart of the Christian faith had been lost, and into the vacuum had poured man-made doctrines backed by emotional investment. *That* is the basic story of what took place in the early centuries, and it is hotly refuted by Rome's hierarchy. But the truth will out - modern scholarship has taken the lid off this particular pot, and feeble attempt to put it back on have failed. Gnostic Christians are now known to have set up *qualitative* criteria and looked for evidence of spiritual maturity in those claiming to be Christian. In contrast to this, Rome's bishops did away with qualitative criteria and attempted to unify the scattered churches through *standardisation* of doctrine. It was no longer what you experienced in your own depths that mattered; all that matter was what you believed in your mind. Attempts to have the best of both worlds was also forbidden: if you belonged to an orthodox church and were foolish enough to hold a cult meal or baptise someone without the bishop being present, then not only had you separated yourself from the legitimate Church, you had also separated yourself from God.<sup>24</sup>

The Gospels of the Gnostics were banned, and along with this went the suppression of those who understood their message.

Full of symbols and veiled language concerning interior processes, these Gospels were either hidden by initiates so that their insights might survive, or destroyed by those who found their insights incomprehensible and threatening. Classified by Irenaeus as apostate, and therefore worse than pagans, the Gnostics were described as evil seducers and hounded from pillar to post, the reason for this harassment their claim of be able to discriminate for themselves between what was true and what was false. They did not need to be told what to believe, they said. They did not require the advice of waterless canals (the bishops); and neither did they need doctrines that bound the mind to fixed paths of thought. Their Christianity was founded not on beliefs, but on relationship, their behaviour not on the dictates of authority figures, but on the presence of God in their midst. The rule of faith had displaced conscience and made the arbitrary notions of men sacrosanct.

It was the educated Christians who fled from the Roman Church. Tertullian complained that it was the cream of his membership who deserted the ship of faith for the ship of understanding. And as discussed earlier, the word "understanding" should not be interpreted as a desire for knowledge in the intellectual sense. *Gnosis* was not "hard knowledge"; it was deep insight into the things of the spirit. The human mind was backgrounded by archetypal energies, and the release of those energies cleared perception of its dependence on external forms. This was the heart of their *secret* Gospel, and it was also the heart of Jesus' teachings.

Jesus was a nonconformist, those who take his teachings seriously of similar ilk. The Church has modernised its image, but only because it had no option - the world of spiritual aspiration and commonsense was streaking away from it. Paul may have considered the cleverness of the world foolishness, and the foolishness of Christian belief a mark of intelligence, but if he had lived a little longer he would have changed his mind. In spite of evidence to the contrary in his own Epistles, I do not think he believed what the Roman Church ended up believing; in fact I think he would have been scornful of Catholic doctrine as it

eventually evolved. Paul has been blamed over and over again for writing the Roman Church a doctrinal blank cheque, but a careful examination of the New Testament suggests skullduggery. There is a phantom Jesus in the Gospels, and there is a phantom Paul in the Epistles, and we would do well to carefully study their separate profiles.

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