

The Nazarene-Mandean Conglomerate

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The calibration of our minds towards accepting conscious engagement as our greatest mental achievement, the Gnostic challenge to this modern claim through a coded language (now decoded), and the Church's befuddlement in the face of Gnosticism's superior psychological insights.

The Simple Community

Christian heretics of the early centuries are not discussed very much; they are dismissed as deviants requiring no explanation. There was, it is believed, a single community of believers called "Christians" in the beginning and the heretics were those who invented grotesque notions about Christ and had to be banished from that community. It was that simple. There was a single doctrine of Jesus as the Christ of God, and in unbroken succession we are recipients of that doctrine because the Church has kept her eye steadily on the central truth of Jesus' divinity and mission. You either accept or reject the fact of Jesus' divine mission, and on the basis of your decision end up in Heaven or Hell. End of story. End result of 2000 years of faithfulness to a set of ideas considered to be revealed truth. Hell is not talked about much now: theologians have changed it into 'eternal separation from God' and left it at that.

More to the point is the fact that there was never a simple community with one set of beliefs; there were in fact dozens of communities, those deemed "heretic" the unfortunates who lost out in the power-struggle between ideas. It should not be presumed that those who won this struggle were correct, and the others wrong; that is an opportunistic myth now deeply entrenched in the Christian psyche. Passed on as if self-evident this attitude is now roundly rejected by scholars but accepted still by most clergymen as the *regulating* will of God. It was not until the 4th century that this regulating will of God got underway at the hands of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who in his 39th Festal Letter let it be known that only certain books were to be considered inspired, and therefore canonical. As from that moment the lines of demarcation were drawn, the books not on the list being deemed apocryphal, or heretical, and proclaimed anathema. The scene was set for conflict, those who considered themselves good Christians on a Monday relegated to being heretics on Tuesday. The dividing line was in place, the sheep and the goats were about to be separated, and all because Athanasius was "influenced by the need and advantage of the Church", a statement of simple truth laden with dire implications for the future.

The effect of Athanasius' 29th Festal Letter on the broad sweep of Christian communities was one of fear - those in possession of the aforementioned apocryphal writings (previously termed "gospels") had to get rid of them; it was either that or own up to possessing a view of Jesus at variance with this now powerful faction. It was not as if Athanasius had not experienced the same thing himself - a mere 11 years earlier he had been forced to hide in Upper Egypt as a result of doctrinal shift among those of his own group. Ideas about Jesus and his status had been quite fluid up until this point, but from that moment the atmosphere changed. It was no longer a matter of arguing over this or that approach, it was a matter of being declared "already dead" (cut off from salvation) by the ruling faction. In *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, G R S Mead tells us that the Scriptures eventually turned into a literary fetish deprived of reason, and that "inspiration had ceased in the infancy of the Faith".¹ The "textual God" had reappeared, and he was about to stamp his disapproval on everyone and everything out of alignment with this groups ruminations.

When he published his book in 1960, Mead wrote of Christianity's origins being "imbibed with our mothers' milk", and of it being an integral part of the consciousness of the Western world. Interwoven with our earliest memories, the sheer solemnity of Christian doctrine found its way into our heart of hearts; that is, it affects us deeply without our realising it. And even if unconcerned with its ideas and beliefs, we may still be strongly influenced by those ideas and beliefs at the unconscious level. This results for many in an unquestioning attitude towards Christianity, a curious inability to shrug off the superstition that against all reason Christianity is probably correct in its pronouncements in spite of much evidence to the contrary. For others it is a nagging doubt about their rejection of Christianity. This suggests that anyone born within the confines of Christendom has a struggle on their hands if they wish to shake off the claim that Jesus was God in a human body, and that the Christian Church was in the mind of God before the world came into being. Christianity is something we have grown used to, it is part of us at the cultural level, and as such is backed by Mead's "stupendous power of inertia which force of custom carries".² Hence death-bed conversions and the sudden leap that some people make from unbelief to belief. We have been got at, and our principle spiritual battle is waking up to that fact.

The Gnostics

What better place to start than in the first century among the Christian communities trying to develop their ideas through direct experience of God and self. That is where it was all happening; no wonder Athanasius was so worried. There were Christian communities carrying ideas that undermined the Church's authority and treated it as no more than another branch of the faith. Some of these so-called Christians even believed that Christianity was a system of lost knowledge that could be translated into a world philosophy. The soul could be known

in the same way as the body: Christianity was an exact science of the soul that could satisfy even the most exacting intellect. Designated as the "first-born of Satan" for their intransigence, many of these communities were forced underground, the result being an ever deepening subversion that spread in all directions.

Given the blanket name of "Gnostics" because of their insistence that *gnosis* (knowledge) was integral to spiritual wisdom, these intrepid explorers of inner reality reached conclusions about God, self and world that the Church felt compelled to reject. By the 4th century previously victimised Christian bishops were in control of Rome's legal arm, any group considered heretical defined as criminals and persecute. By such means did the narrow orthodoxies of the Roman Church become the norm, Christian teaching reduced, according to Professor Stephen Hoeller, to the lowest common denominator. Because of good fortune the Roman branch was now able to dictate the direction of the Faith: the Faith was now "Roman" and soon be "Catholic", that is, universally accepted because of power-politics. Accused by the Church of having created doctrines allied, not to Christ, but to the thinking of Plato, Pythagoras, Aristotle, Orpheus and Heraclitus, the Gnostically-inclined communities were categorised as corrupt and dismissed as a universal danger. And this in spite of the fact that the Gnostic writings make no direct allusion to these philosophers at any time.³

Successful in terms of it being the centrally-positioned controlling Christian faction, the church at Rome worked to accommodate its rapidly growing flock by simplifying its message of the Christ. The result was, as Hoeller states, a reduction to the lowest common denominator of what had previously been a faith carrying considerable subtlety. Retreating to the monasteries, some Gnostics adapted as best they could to the mental restrictions placed upon them; others withdrew and formed secret congregations, nurturing, in Mead's words, "a hidden life of great activity."⁴ Private libraries of banned books were legion, and "schools" or "workshops" formed where a veritable science of the sacred was developed. The Church was appalled. Gnostics seemed to be in every thicket, their teachings ever more dangerous to, and distant from, orthodoxy; particularly in Egypt, and at Alexandria where the greatest public library in the pagan world was housed. The Alexandrian library was probably the principle source of information on past religious systems for Gnostically-inclined Christian scholars, and this may have been the reason for its destruction by fire at orthodox hands. Then there were the mystics, those inner travellers to whom the staid doctrines of the ruling Church were echoes of things deeper and richer. Not just an undisciplined rabble of esotericists as the Church believe, more a disciplined and skilled groups of individuals dedicated to a liberation of the spirit aligned with Jesus' own teachings. There were of course rogues and vagabonds and charlatans among the Gnostics, some of them even clinically mad, but no more so than many of the orthodox churchmen of the day.

But it is in the "Mandaeans" community that one detects the remnants of the old Jerusalem-based Nazarene Church of the Apostles, a sectarian community referred to by

Stephen Hoeller as Mandeans or *non-Christians* "constitut[ing] a vital, previously missing link connecting the gnostizing late flowering of the Essenes with the classical Gnosis."⁵ That sums up the situation quite well; it allows us to explore the issue of the Mandeans and their origins from a respectably speculative base. As is insinuated in the literature regarding this group, there is every reason to believe that the Mandeans were either an off-shoot of the Nazarenes, or conversely that the Nazarenes were themselves part of a larger grouping originally termed "Mandean". Dr Hugh Schonfield calls the Nazarenes "Mandean-Nazarenes", so making them one and the same., and this accords with the now growing notion of the Ebionites and even the Nazarites being integral to the Nazarene party.

The principle clue to their identity lies in their reverence for John the Baptist, and their bitter rejection of the idea of divinity being applied to Jesus by the Roman Church. Referred to by the French scholar Simone Petrement as "Gnostics", the Mandeans are linked with the Nazarenes and described as an unresolved historical problem. Petrement tells us that the Mandeans are "a mixture of Jewish-Christianity and Gnosticism",⁶ for these Jewish Christians viewed Christianity as an "enemy", its beliefs as in error. Yet they are called "Jewish-Christians", and that seems to connect them with Christianity. So have scholars overlooking the obvious? That the Jewish Christian Church was not Christian at all, but actually Nazarene?

Simone Petrement's answer to this question is "yes", but with qualification. She agrees that both the Jewish Christians and the Mandeans called themselves "Nazarenes", and notes that Mandean Gnosticism closely resembled Christian Gnosticism in its heterodox evaluation of Jesus, but she then notes the influence of Christian Gnosticism in Syria and Egypt and thinks the "Christian" influence on the Mandeans may have come from there. While that is quite possible, my sense of things is that these so-called Christian Mandeans have simply been badly labelled, and that it is the labelling that has bedevilled scholars ever since. The distancing effect of the Mandeans from the Christian Church noted by scholars is therefore not some late phenomenon, but probably integral to their character and belief system right from the start - they are quite possibly all that remained of the original Nazarene Church of Jerusalem.

Petrement then states that it is more defensible to say that Mandeanism has a Christian origin than a Jewish origin,⁷ and finally reveals that she thinks this so because the original Mandeans were probably the Jewish Christians who left Jerusalem before the siege of the city in 70. This leaves the word "Christian" tacked on to the Nazarene-Mandeans, yet at the same time separates these Nazarenes from their fundamentally Jewish, heterodox orientation and that makes them into Christian apologists allied to Paul, which they certainly were not. So the point of confusion is the term "Christian", for in spite of being applied to the Nazarenes by all in sundry, this term did not apply to these Torah-loving Jews of sectarian persuasion. Remove the term "Christian", however, and the puzzle is solved. Petrement is aware that this is the case, for in the early pages of her massive work on the origins of

Gnosticism she states plainly, in relation to these Nazarenes, that "in the early centuries of our time, there was a Judeo-Christianity that was not Christian at all, but simply a branch of it. And soon to be considered heretical"⁸ in spite of venerating Christ because they "did not consider him absolutely divine or consubstantially united with the one God."⁹

The Mandaean-Nazarenes

The Mandeans carried within their doctrines and history vital clues as to how Jesus was evaluated in his day. For as Jean Doreese revealed in his 1958 study of the Egyptian Gnostics, the Mandeans eventually denounced Jesus as a "teacher of falsehoods".¹⁰ Present-day Mandaean-Nazarenes in southern Iraq trace their heritage not back to Jesus, but to John the Baptist, and take their name from the word, "Manda", meaning "secret doctrine".¹¹ This takes us back both to the restrictive mind-set of the Qumranite Essenes and to Hoeller's claim that the Mandaean-Nazarenes were *non-Christians* constituting "a vital, previously missing link connecting the gnostizing late flowering of the Essenes with the classical gnosis."¹² Suddenly, the whole picture begins to blossom with meaning, the Nazarene Jerusalem Church being seen to have been much more complicated in its origins and eventual effect than previously supposed.

This leaves us with the conundrum of how the Mandeans could be simultaneously worshippers of Jesus, yet consider him a heretic and betrayer of their secrets. Such a view can however be reconciled, for as "Mandaean" is another name for the Nazarenes as a baptising sect, and the Nazarenes were composed of both orthodox and heterodox branches, the problem is removed. It was the *Damascus* Nazarenes who schooled Paul in his new perception of Jesus, and it was Paul's flock who, due to this background influence, were later dubbed "Christians" at Antioch. The Jerusalem Nazarenes of Jewish (Pharisaic) alliance opposed Paul's new vision with their Torah-abiding conception of Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. Doreese confirms that the Naassene claim to have received their doctrines by way of Jesus' brother James is correct,¹³ and that other groups such as the "Peratae", the "Sethians" and even the "Ophites" were basically the same heresy under other names. Dividing into sects that remained basically united in thought and teaching, the Naassenes differed in that they reflected not the heterodox teachings of the Christian Nazarenes as developed under the guidance of Paul, but rather orthodox Nazarene beliefs.

The case seems to be that in spite of being devout followers of the Torah, which Paul's Christian-Nazarenes were not, the Jerusalem Nazarenes were at the same time unorthodox at base. This is what separated the Jerusalem Nazarenes from Judaism proper; they were called "Nazarenes" for that very reason - they were a highly influential Jewish sect harbouring many ideas at variance with Judaism in spite of an orthodox veneer. And so we have a "Mandaean" conglomerate of baptising sects, the Naassene choice of the name

"Naassene" revealing, inadvertently, what lay at the base of it all, for this Hebrew name translates as "serpent", and this corresponds to the idea of *deciphering and finding out* in the old Sumerian-cum-Genesis sense of that word. Here then is the root of the *gnosis*, the underlying theme of knowledge and comprehension made available to the high Gnostic initiates, and it has nothing to do with intellectualisms. In fact it could not be further away from the idea of "knowledge" in the conscious sense, for it reflects not "head-knowledge" (as the Christian Fathers so erroneously supposed) but a methodology or discipline through which an enlarged perception of self and world could be had.

The Mysterious Race of the Perfect Men

The initiates of Gnosticism were not the muddled idiots the early Church Fathers took them to be; they were skilled scientists of the soul armed with an exact vocabulary. By "soul" I do not mean some curious substance or spiritual geometry hidden within the human breast, but the potential we each possess in relation to our personal growth and maturity. *That* is the bottom line of Gnosticism when it functioned properly, and the attempt by the Church to distract attention from this movement and make it a laughing stock through jibes and false accusations is another of Roman Christianity's crimes.

It can of course be argued that there were mitigating circumstances - much of Gnostic imagery and symbolism was so obscure as to be utterly unintelligible to anyone looking in from the outside. Doresse cites this problem when he says of the Naassene-Ophites that their cult of the serpent cannot be explained,¹⁴ for in the topsy-turvy world of Gnosticism he thinks the evil serpent of Genesis ought to have been exalted as the "revealer of *gnosis* to Adam", so making him into a Saviour figure. This did not happen; the Genesis serpent retained its evil reputation because the serpent's gift in that (r)evolutionary moment was not a spiritual epiphany as Doresse seemed to think, it was rather the isolation of the mind within the mind as a rudimentary experience. The mental echo-chamber of the self was up and running, and the immediate result was a sense of self as nakedly alone and vulnerable.

The language of the Naassene-Nazarenes is still obscure, but it is no longer unintelligible. Jean Doresse tells us that the basic code being used is as follows: the human brain is "Eden"; the membranes enveloping the brain are the "heavens", and the head is "Paradise". Epiphanius makes similar observations in connection with the Ophite-Nazarenes. He observes that there is a river with branches flowing out of Eden (the brain), and these branches he identifies with the human senses. The eye is the river Phison; the ear is the river Geon; and the breath is the river Tigris. Doresse's footnotes also reveal that "the land of bondage" (Egypt) in the Biblical Genesis equals the *evil of matter*, so when it is said that the Gnostic master Mani "left Egypt", it simply means that he died. Here then is the underlying meaning of Gnostic teachings made clear, the verbal code used by these first psychologists

brought to the surface for our scrutiny and admiration. And at the base of it all a vision of reconciliation, a vision of opposites reversed and in union, a vision in the "heavens" (high up inside the head) of a coiled serpent which speaks not of evil, but of energy. So when in their obscure teachings these sectarians speak of Christ "mastering the serpent" ,¹⁵ they do not mean that he mastered evil, but that he brought the serpent as *energy* (the energy of the biosystem in relation to *psyche*) under control. That, basically, is the key to the whole edifice of Gnosticism, and without that key we are left with Christianity as it has now become.

It is interesting to note that the human senses play an important role in relation to Gnostic enlightenment. Perfected man is not concerned with beliefs about anything in particular, he is an experimentalist who has realised that sense-perceptions are responsible for an anomaly in human consciousness - namely, *conscious* sleep. Conscious sleep is not dream sleep; it is our *submerged* state of self-awareness during engagement with self, other or world. Awareness of "self" *disappears* during conscious engagement and we are, as the Gnostics were fond of saying, *caught in physis* as we go about our daily tasks. In such moments we function in a manner not unlike that of our pre-conscious ancestors, except that unlike them we *return* to self-awareness at some point. When and how our ancestors gained self-awareness is lost to us, but that they did gain that ability is attested to by our now having that capacity, a capacity we take for granted. Caught up in thought, speech and deed, we stay consciously submerged of the "who" that we are and functioning on automatic pilot. The "who" does return, but almost immediately descends again into self-forgetfulness. And so the Gnostic Jesus says: "Know what is before thy face, and what is hidden from you will be revealed to you."¹⁶

In Gnostic terms, human beings are slaves chained to the world who continually suffer because their senses have been usurped through attachment to the world. Only in this sense is matter "evil"; it is *not* evil in its own right. In one of the Gnostic texts we read that Jesus, in relation to a stage of salvation, reverses the rotation of the world to counteract its effect. It is the *effect of the world* that is being battled against, not the world itself.¹⁷ There is a barrier between the worlds, and to penetrate beyond this barrier it is necessary to first *realise that it exists*, and then consciously attempt to deal with it.

Doreese writes of this curious mental state in exact terms: "This 'gnosis' moreover, is to be not so much a 'knowing' as a remembering; it is to awaken the neophyte, to recall him to his original nature."¹⁸ This suggests that our primordial nature was not under the sway of perception locked into matter; but that is perhaps too hasty an interpretation. Gnostics masters were certainly interested in linking up again with the original energy of consciousness, but as their story of Christ mastering the serpent confirms, this was not conceived as a return to some primordial, preconscious state of mind (*participation mystique*), more a holding of "self-presence" *in place* during acts of conscious engagement with self, other or world. Becoming conscious of being conscious had been our *first*

awakening, our *second* awakening waking up to the fact that we returned to our ancient preconscious state during acts of mental engagement, our *third* awakening the realisation that our hard-won sense of self had been usurped by cognitive engagement to such an extent that *sense of self* seldom registered on us with any force. We had escaped from primordial unconsciousness once, now we had to escape from it all over again. Not in the sense of decrying mental engagement, but in realising that our almost constant lack of self-presence *during* mental engagement was dangerous because it robbed us of the *feeling* dimension of our natures. In Gnostic terms, *this* was the battle we were each engaged in, and it was a battle so subtle in form, so invisible because of its high visibility that we mostly lived and died without ever realising that there was a problem

The Jungian analyst Erich Neumann captures the intricacies of this situation when he says that consciousness "is a late product of the womb of the unconscious".¹⁹ He also notes that this process is going on in our daily lives, in the act of falling asleep and awakening from sleep, and talks of us re-experiencing the emergence of consciousness from unconsciousness during the early stages of childhood. For it is in childhood that the process of falling asleep and awakening takes on special significance, and that significance is allied to the fact that the child is not yet properly conscious, but still embedded in primordial unconsciousness even when awake. In a world all of its own, the child, through its parents, engages in the struggle to attain the kind of consciousness possessed by its parents, and in due course succeeds because of them. This ascent towards consciousness, says Neumann, "is the "unnatural" thing in nature ... and constitutes the history of man's conscious development."²⁰

Our problem, it seems, is *nostalgia*. We are nostalgic for our primordial beginning. We intuit it to have been a paradisiacal state greater than our present conscious state, and if religious, are tempted to make a return journey in search of it. What we do not realise is that we are then in danger of losing everything gained since human beings first emerged from the blind security of creation's womb. The outcome of this dangerous stage is termed "uroboric incest" by Neumann, and it refers to such things as "*the unio mystica* of the saint to the drunkard's cravings for unconsciousness and the death-romanticism of the Germanic races."²¹ Such a desire signals self-abandonment, surrender and regression; it is, in other words, *infantile*. Thus said Neumann in 1949, and his observation that the infantile ego is responsible for this tendency towards self-abandonment holds good today - we are, in other words, ever in danger of regression and surrender to forces inimical to consciousness.

The Dilemma of the Nazarenes

To not properly recognise the existence of the Nazarenes, or their role in early Christianity, is to be under the influence of a distorted history. The Nazarenes are fundamental to the story of Christianity, and ignoring them changes nothing. Ignoring them rents the fabric of

historical analysis. When Christian scholars say that the Nazarenes reverted to Judaism and therefore of no historical consequence, they are doing so on behalf of a predetermined set of false beliefs about these Nazarenes. The Nazarenes neither left nor joined with Judaism again, they continued to ran parallel to this great religious tradition as they had done from the very beginning. Dubbed "sectarian" because they harboured ideas and doctrines at variance with Judaism, they nevertheless attracted thousands of Jews into their ranks and became a force to be reckoned with post the Roman invasion of Palestine. Described by Hugh Schonfield as having a leadership that functioned not unlike the Sanhedrin, this Jewish scholar terms the Nazarene Elders as "the *de facto* government of Israel loyal to the Messiah and exercising the same kind of powers."²² These Nazarenes were no ordinary group; they were a power group carrying considerable authority.

The Nazarenes led by the Apostle Paul were however different in teaching and doctrine. As Schonfield shows, there were "Two rival authorities among the Nazarenes, two presentations of Jesus as the Messiah, two inspirations, two gospels".²³ There were, in other words, two principle Nazarene factions, Paul being forced, on two occasion, to attend the Nazarene Council in Jerusalem led by Jesus' brother James. Schonfield makes the same observation as Hyam Maccoby - Paul, he contends, had no intention of starting a new religion: he wanted his Christian-Nazarenes to be recognised as *part of Israel*. Paul's problem was that he repudiated the Jewish Torah, and that made it impossible for his group to remain within Judaism. This, in combination with the problem of his believing that his Jesus was in some sense "divine" astonished Jewish orthodoxy and intensified the split between the rival Nazarene groups.

Paul kept his elevated theology of the Christ and his full rejection of the Torah under wraps for some time; if he had not done so the split with James' Jerusalem-based Party would have been immediate. Jesus, it should be remembered, was James' elder brother, and that made him the legitimate leader of *both* groups. Paul's inflated confidence before James is however mystifying - why did he accommodate this upstart's requests? Only Jesus or the Nazarene leadership under James had the authority to confer apostleship on anyone, and Paul was claiming this title on the grounds of having conferred with Jesus in a vision, an experience that led to him being *looked after* by "Nazarenes" in the city of Damascus. Here then is the "other" Nazarene faction, a faction at odds with the Jerusalem Nazarenes over the extent of Jesus' spiritual status. As Paul journeyed into Arabia soon after and remained there for three years, a connection between the Damascus Nazarenes and that part of the world can surely be presumed. Puzzled, Schonfield then observes that Paul "claimed an intimacy with the mind of Jesus greater than that of those who had companied with him on earth and had been chosen by him."²⁴ New Testament claims for Jesus' resurrection aside, Schonfield did not believe Jesus to be alive and on Paul's side, but he did think he had survived his crucifixion only to die in the tomb of the spear wound inflicted on him while on the cross.

Jesus' death and resurrection had been a plan gone wrong, an extraordinary act of courage and spiritual bravado that had *almost* succeeded. That is to say quite a lot, but it leaves the question of Paul's bravado and credentials unanswered, and that leaves us none the wiser.

Paul mentions a Jewish gospel of the "circumcision" opposed to his gospel of the "uncircumcision", and it is to this Jewish gospel that we must now turn. In spite of its Jewish trimmings, the gospel of the Jerusalem Nazarenes was in fact heretical in Jewish eyes: their Jesus had been rejected by the Jewish orthodoxy and crucified by the Romans as a political subversive. These were the ugly facts of history, and they could not be conjured away: Jesus was an apostate Messiah who had flouted the "Law" James' Nazarenes venerated. The Jerusalem Nazarenes were unacceptable in Jewish eyes for this very reason - *their* Jesus had not played by the rules. Jesus had quite obviously broken with the ancient religious code of Judaism and made the individual more important than the collective; there were even Nazarenes who believed Jesus' crucifixion to be an "atonement" for sin. Such views made the Torah obsolete by definition, and there was also the matter of militant Nazarenes angering the Romans and endangering Israel's whole future. These Nazarenes were a bothersome bunch, and the branch called "Christian" at Antioch was proving itself to be the most bothersome of all.

After the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 the Jews earmark the whole Nazarene conglomerate as responsible for the debacle and composed a curse - *the Birkat ha-minum* - to be read in synagogues so that Nazarenes in general, and Christian Nazarenes in particular, could be winkled out and expelled. This curse admirably sums up the situation; it links these Nazarenes with "apostasy" and accuses them of not only assisting in Israel's destruction because of their militancy, but of having abandoned the vows and principles of the Jewish religion. The curse against the Nazarenes is explicit - it wants these Nazarenes removed from the book of the living. Orthodoxy rejected just about everything the Nazarenes stood for, and that in spite of James the Just's impeccable reputation. Apart from the Zealots, no other group was so stigmatised.

The Fragmentation of the Nazarenes

The fragmentation of the Nazarenes into Ebionites, Mandeans, Naassenes and others, suggests a group of internal complexity either regrouping for purposes of survival, or perhaps reflecting particular aspects of doctrine and belief. Or both. And as it is known that Jesus' brother James was an Ebionite leader, and that the term "Mandean" probably applied to the whole Nazarene conglomerate, then the appearance of so many Nazarene branches post-70 becomes less problematic.

The word "Ebionite", for example, simply means "the poor", and seems to have constituted a branch of the Nazarenes specifically interested in diet. Being strict vegetarians, the Ebionites can be said to have deviated from the main Nazarene body and to have taken

on separate identity as a result. Although separate in this sense, however, they were in every other respect still part of the Nazarene fold. Schonfield is of the opinion that the Ebionites cannot be regarded as a separate denomination to the Nazarenes for very reason of their belief that Jesus was born in a normal manner and their categorical rejection of Paul's divine Christ. Such thinking, he argues, sets them firmly in the orthodox Nazarene camp.²⁵ Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in the 4th century, states that the Jewish Christians (Nazarenes) wrote an anti-Pauline book called the Acts of the Apostles, and that the Ebionites used a book by the same name. James the Just is mentioned in this book as being against the Temple, and is said to have rejected Temple sacrifices and the fire on the altar. As James was a leader of the Ebionite community due to his own dietary habits, this expansion on his beliefs has to be of interest, and the added factor of James being of singular importance to *all* of the Nazarene groups should not be overlooked.

Neither should the fact of the Nazarenes possessing Hebrew versions of Matthew, John and the Acts of the Apostles. As these books were not translations of the canonical gospels, were anti-Pauline, and presented a picture of Jesus at variance with "Christian" tradition, the existence of gospels and travel tales predating the canonical gospels and Acts has to be considered. As the Jewish parody of the Gospel - the *Toldoth Jesu* - was based not on the canonical Gospels, but on Nazarene-Ebionite texts,²⁶ this makes the Nazarene gospels the *original* gospels in Jewish eyes. In conjunction with this the term "Mandean" stands out as important, for as "Manda" means "secret knowledge" the Nazarene conglomerate obviously considered themselves to be in possession of knowledge *beyond* Judaism's theological grasp. Having their own gospels, their own travel tales of the Apostles, and a body of doctrine considered so important it was kept secret, these Nazarenes emerge from later Gnostic speculations as a foil to both Roman Christianity and to orthodox Judaism. And in the midst of it all the figure of St Paul, the self-proclaimed "Nazarene" whose letters to the churches were tampered with and forged to cater for Athanasius' "need and advantage of the Church".

Referring to the general run of texts used by the Gnostic sects, Jean Doresse mentions as noteworthy the fact that these heretical Churches, despite their surface differences, used the same myths and the same writings.²⁷ This suggests an underlying continuity of thought allied to Jesus which, although at variance with the canonical Gospels, and difficult to interpret due to complexity of image and symbol, was nevertheless coherent at base. And when one realises that these seemingly incomprehensible images and symbols are codes for the human brain, the inner landscape of consciousness and sense-perceptions allied to a system of spiritual transformation, the whole scheme begins to make sense - these Gnostic were not as silly as they sounded, merely ultra cautious in the face of a growing persecution. Doresse puts it thus: "The sects knew how to hide from their enemies a great deal of their mysteries."²⁸ He is not at all sure that many of the Church's accusation against

the Gnostics have any foundation, for he notes that the same sects seen through different eyes can be described in a completely different light.

On this score it should be remembered that the Gnostics were written about mostly by their Christian enemies, and that these enemies had very good reason to discredit teachings linked to Jesus' brother James and the Nazarene sect. Doresse eventually gives in to his suspicions and says, "was Gnosticism really such a shapeless conglomeration of different religions, disparate philosophies, of astrology and magic as is here painted for us, perhaps in forced colours?"²⁹ Forced colours indeed. And he has good reason for his suspicions, for, odd as it may sound, even those Gnostic sects with no apparent Nazarene connection held James the Just in high regard.

The Regrouping of the Nazarenes

Speaking of the Naassenes and the Ophites, the French Gnostic scholar Simone Petrement wonders if their claim to be Gnostics meant that they saw that name as the name of their sect; or whether, as is more likely, they saw the name "Gnostic" as meaning *Christian*. Irenaeus makes an interesting slip in this regard when he speaks of heretics as "Gnostics falsely so-called", so making orthodox Christians "Gnostic" by definition.³⁰ Petrement sums up the situation by saying that Gnostic heretics probably used the term Gnostic in all innocence, and that their use of this term did not mean that they saw themselves as a sect within Christianity. She also notes that sects claiming to be Gnostic are of relatively late date, probably around the middle of the 2nd century. As such they reflect an adopted state by way of reaction to a Church who used the term "Gnostic" as derisory.

The Roman Church had, in its estimation, the true *gnosis*; the Gnostics did not and were given the name "Gnostic" by way of sarcasm. In relation to names in general, the facts of the situation seem to have been as follows: names such as "Ophite", "Naassene" or "Peratae" were not designatory in any real sense; they were merely labels stuck on to certain unnamed groups with particular doctrinal proclivities. Petrement makes this plain when she says of Irenaeus that he did not really know who the Ophites were, and that he created this name out of their writings because he could not identify their principle teacher, or master. G. R. S. Mead concurs. Ophitism, he says, "is a general term among the haeresiologists for almost everything they cannot ascribe to a certain teacher."³¹

The meaning given to "Ophite" by the Church Fathers was "serpent worshipper", and this links them directly with the Naassenes, whose name also means "serpent". But not in quite the same sense, for it is one thing to have the name "serpent" *in* your name, it is quite another to be nominated a "serpent worshipper" because of your name. Mead explains the situation by pointing out that such an accusation was merely a term of abuse - the early Fathers of the Church were not above twisting the truth of a situation to their own benefit.

And it *was* to their benefit to deride Christians who just happened to believe that Jesus was an ordinary man born of ordinary parents. For whatever else they said about Jesus, and whatever the nature of the doctrines they created out of experimentation, *that* seems to have been the basic belief of these so-called Gnostic Christians. And it was the Nazarene-oriented rejection of Rome's divine Jesus that eventually made these groups anathema in Rome's eyes. Hence the background fact that the Ebionites, Ophites, Naassenes, Mandeans and Peratae are all Nazarene affiliated - they are, in other words, coexisting off-shoots of the Jerusalem Church, or a parallel group with its origins in Arabia, attempting to challenge the Roman Church on its progressive elevation of Jesus to the heretical status of God incarnate. Even the title "Peratae" is a mock-up, for it means "Son" or "Word", so revealing itself as a conceptual extract and not an actual name.³² Schonfield sums up the whole crazy situation thus:

Catholic Christianity had good reason to seek to discredit the Nazarenes and to brand them as heretical. For one thing it was fatal to the doctrine of the deity of Jesus that his own Apostles and the Christian membership of his family had held that he was no more than man, and had been anointed by the Spirit of God at his baptism, thus becoming the Messiah (the Christ). The true apostolic tradition had to be fiercely denied and con-troverted; but in the late second century when a movement arose urging the Church to return to what came to be called the Adoptionist view, that Christ had been received into sonship of God when he was baptised in terms of Psalm ii. 6-7, its advocates could still point out that this view had been held "by all the first Christians and by the Apostles themselves". The evidence available establishes that they were right.³³

As a result of the war with Rome, the Nazarenes fled Jerusalem and migrated to Pella in 66. Schonfield thinks it likely that at least some of the leaders escaped, and adds that the Nazarenes were numerous in other parts of the country, so allowing for a re-grouping. But many must have died in Jerusalem, caught in the swell and turmoil of a city besieged. By the year 70 all the main characters in this extraordinary play of forces were dead. James, Peter and Paul were dead, as were most, if not all of the original disciples. Governed by the family of Jesus, the Nazarene party went through a period of disintegration and factionalism, but eventually regrouped. The Roman Church had its own troubles and underwent a long and arduous period of persecution at the hands of its Roman masters. Evading capture, members of Jesus' family elected Simeon, his first cousin, as head of the Nazarene administration, and this set the pace for a dynasty of Hebrew leaders carrying the traditions and beliefs of the original Nazarenes into the future.

According to Schonfield, the Nazarenes congregated in the outlying areas of Galilee, Auranitis and Gaulanitis, and managed not only to survive, but also to successfully proselytise these areas and bring many Jews into the Nazarene fold. Holding doggedly to the belief that Jesus was the true Messiah of Israel, these Nazarenes underwent the persecutions of Emperor Domitian, and during the Bar Kochba revolt refused this new Messiah recognition. Cut off from the Christians, and suffering from what Schonfield refers to as "eccentricities" due to being influenced by Baptists, Essenes, Samaritans and others, the Nazarenes nevertheless managed to sustain a central system of government. Known as the "Heirs", the family of Jesus was later written of by Hegesippus as "those who take the lead of the whole Church as witnesses, even the kindred of the Lord, and when profound peace was established throughout the Church they continued to the time of Trajan Caesar."

On having recorded this statement, Schonfield laments that so little is known about these Nazarenes and their leaders due to a loss of records, and adds that such a loss of documentation was due to willful destruction and suppression. He also notes that Eusebius and Epiphanius acknowledge the Nazarenes to have survived persecution and gained large numbers of Jewish converts, and that in spite of the *Birkat ha-minum* curse. Nazarene coherence and authority is confirmed by the Jesuit historian Malachi Martin's reference to these self same Nazarenes turning up before Pope Sylvester 1 in 318. They wanted their "Church" back, he reports, but it was not to be. Powerless to change the Roman Church's trajectory, the Nazarenes did the next best thing, they went underground and blamed Paul for all their woes. In a sense they were right to do so, for Paul had driven the Jesus myth to the edge of what sounded like blasphemy, and after his death the Roman Church completed the exercise. A depressing tale when one thinks of those who have died and suffered because of this myth, and of those still emotionally subservient to a faith whose credentials are at heart forgeries.

Is it any wonder western spirituality has failed to bring about that intrinsic change in the human spirit it hoped for? Is it any wonder that our civilisation has raped and plundered the whole globe in the name of Christ? Is it any wonder we are now faced with a Church rent by conflict, hatred, sexual abuse and misogyny? The Church's bravado in the face of proofs contrary to her claims would be laughable if it were not so pathetic. So much suffering and stupidity has resulted from her make-believe that laughter is not appropriate. Imbued with our mother's milk, the manipulated story of Jesus has been used to lead us away from our own unfathomable depths, our principle battle now being to wake up to that fact. As observed by G. R. S. Mead in 1960, our task is to become properly conscious in the face of "the stupendous power of inertia, the force of custom, against which but few have the strength to struggle". *That*, I believe, was Jesus' fundamental message, a message that the Nazarenes-cum-Gnostics laboured to convey throughout their tortured history.

References and Notes:

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- 32 Petrement, Simone, *A Separate God*, (as above), p. 116.
- 33 Schonfield, Hugh, *Those Incredible Christians*, Element Books, Shaftsbury, Dorset 1985, p. 117.