

# 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 simply dismissed as deviants who do not require any 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 these days: theologians have changed it into 'eternal separation from God' and left it at that.

More to the point is the fact that there never ever was 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 to an unsuspecting faithful as if self-evident when it is in fact nothing of the kind, 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 fourth 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 had considered themselves good Christians on Monday discovering to their amazement on Tuesday that they were now classified as heretics. 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 holding a view of Jesus at variance with this powerful faction. And 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. So it can be said that ideas about Jesus and his status had been quite fluid up until this point, but from the moment this Churchman scratched out his list of inspired books, the atmosphere changed. For it was no longer a matter of arguing over this or that approach, it was now a matter of being declared "already dead" (cut off from salvation) by the ruling faction if you persisted in your use of writings considered subversive. In *Fragments of a Faith Forgotten*, G R S Mead puts his finger on the pulse of the whole thing when he says that the Scriptures eventually turned into a literary fetish deprived of reason, and that "inspiration had ceased in the infancy of the Faith".<sup>1</sup> The "textual God" had again appeared, and he was about to stamp his disapproval on everyone and everything out of alignment with his pet group.

When he published his book in 1960, G R S 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. Stamped upon, and 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 on

the surface of consciousness, we may still be strongly influenced by those ideas and beliefs at the unconscious level. For some, this results in an unquestioning attitude towards Christianity, a curious inability to shrug off the superstition that somehow, 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. Which 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 literally God in a human body, and that the Christian Church was in the mind of God before the world came into being. Did I say struggle? Sorry. I meant to say "battle". For as Mead points out, Christianity is something we have grown used to, it is part of us at the cultural level, and as such is backed by the stupendous power of inertia which force of custom carries.<sup>2</sup> Hence death-bed conversions and the sudden leap that some people make from unbelief to belief. We've 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 many Christian communities trying to develop their ideas through direct experience of God and self. That's where it was all happening; no wonder Athanasius was so worried. There were Christian communities out there with the most extraordinary ideas - ideas which undermined the Roman Church's authority and treated it as no more than another branch of the faith. A Branch! Imagine! And that was not all. Some of these so-called Christians 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, and in the end Christianity as an exact science of the soul could be made satisfying to even the most exacting intellect. Designated as the "first-born of Satan" for their intransigence against the ruling elite, many of these communities were forced underground, and the result was an ever deepening subversion which spread its tentacles 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 which the Church felt compelled to reject. And they were eventually in a position to make their rejection stick, for by the fourth century previously victimised Christian bishops were in control of Rome's legal arm, and any group considered heretical were defined as criminals and persecuted as such. So the narrow orthodoxies of the Church became the ruling norm, and Christian teaching was reduced, as Professor Stephen Hoeller puts it, to the lowest common denominator. The Roman "branch", because of good fortune (Constantine's beneficence), had taken over and was now able to dictate both the content and direction of the Faith. The Faith was now "Roman", and would soon be "Catholic", that is, universally accepted, because of power-politics played to the nth degree. Accused by the Roman 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 in their basic vision 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.<sup>3</sup>

Successful in terms of it being the centrally-positioned controlling Christian faction in the Roman Empire, the church at Rome worked to accommodate its rapidly growing flock by simplifying its message of the Christ, and the result was, as Hoeller again 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 words "a hidden life of great activity."<sup>4</sup> 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. These Gnostics seemed to be in every thicket, their teachings ever more dangerous to, and distant from, orthodoxy, and nowhere more so than in

Egypt, at Alexandria, where the greatest public library in the pagan world was housed. Thus the Alexandrian library was probably the principle source of information on past religious systems for Gnostically-inclined Christian scholars, and this may well 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 merely echoes of things deeper and richer. And not just an undisciplined rabble of esotericists, as the Church would still like us to believe, more often than not they were highly disciplined and skilled groups of individuals dedicated to a purpose which the Roman Church had already lost sight of - a liberation of the spirit aligned with Jesus' own teachings. Yes, there were rogues and vagabonds and charlatans among the Gnostics, and some of them may even have been quite mad, but no more so than many of the orthodox churchmen of the day. They too had a unorthodox element, and could be said without contradiction to have perfected the art of being odd long before the close of the fourth century.

But I would like to concentrate on one particular community, namely the Mandaeans, for it is among this curious congregation of individuals that one detects the remnants of the old Nazarene Church so impudently ejected from Rome by Pope Sylvester in 318. (see 'The Nazarene Conundrum' on this particular point) Stephen Hoeller unravels the basic historical complexities surrounding this group when he refers to the Mandaeans as "non-Christians", and notes that they "constitute a vital, previously missing link connecting the gnostizing late flowering of the Essenes with the classical Gnosis."<sup>5</sup> That sums up the situation pretty well, I think, and allows us to explore the issue of the Mandaeans and their origins from a respectably speculative base. For as is insinuated in the literature regarding this group, there is every reason to believe that the Mandaeans were either an off-shoot of the Nazarenes, or conversely that the Nazarenes were themselves part of a larger grouping originally termed "Mandaean". Dr Hugh Schonfield calls the Nazarenes "Mandaean-Nazarenes, so making them one and the same. This accords with the now growing notion of the Ebionites and even the Nazarites as 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 Church in Rome. Referred to by the French scholar Simone Petrement as "Gnostics", the Mandaeans are linked again and again with the Nazarenes and described as an unresolved historical problem. Unresolved indeed. Petrement has it that the Mandaeans are "a mixture of Jewish-Christianity and Gnosticism."<sup>6</sup> The plot thickens, for these Jewish Christians seemingly viewed Christianity as an "enemy", saying outright that it should not be believed in. Yet they are called Jewish-Christians, and that seems to connect them with Christianity. So what is going on? Is it possible that scholars have overlooking the obvious, that the Jewish Christian Church was not Christian at all, but actually Nazarene.

Simone Petrement's answer is Yes, eventually, but with qualification. She agrees that both the Jewish Christians and the Mandaeans called themselves "Nazarenes", and she notes that Mandaean Gnosticism closely resembled Christian Gnosticism in its heterodox evaluation of Jesus, but she then moves off into the influence of Christian Gnosticism in Syria and Egypt and thinks the "Christian" influence on the Mandaeans may have come from there. While that is of course quite possible, my bet is that these "Christian" Mandaeans have simply been badly labelled, and that it is the labelling that has bedevilled scholars ever since. The distancing effect of the Mandaeans from the Christian Church noted by scholars is therefore not some late phenomenon, but in my view 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.

But Petrement is not finished, she then states that it is more defensible to say that Mandaeanism has a Christian origin rather than a Jewish origin,<sup>7</sup> and finally reveals that she thinks this so because the original Mandaeans were probably the Jewish Christians who left Jerusalem before the siege of the city in 70. This, however, leaves the word "Christian" tacked on to the Nazarene-Mandaeans, yet at the same time separates these Nazarenes from their fundamentally Jewish, heterodox orientation, and makes them into Christian apologists allied to

Paul which they certainly never were. So the point of confusion is the word "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 Arabian, sectarian background. Remove the hyphen from "Jewish-Christian" and the puzzle is not only solved, it is also resolved. Petrement is quite 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 Christianity at all but simply a branch of it, which was soon considered heretical."<sup>8</sup> Why? Because in spite of venerating Christ, they "did not consider him absolutely divine or consubstantially united with the one God."<sup>9</sup>

### The Mandaean-Nazarenes

The Mandaeans 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 Mandaeans eventually denounced Jesus as a "teacher of falsehoods".<sup>10</sup> 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", which means "secret doctrine".<sup>11</sup> This takes us back both to the restrictive mind-set of the Qumranite Essenes and to Stephen Hoeller's statement 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."<sup>12</sup> Suddenly, the whole picture begins to blossom with meaning, the Nazarene Jerusalem Church being seen to have been much, much more complicated in its origins and eventual effect than previously supposed.

This, of course, leaves us with the conundrum of how the Mandaeans could be simultaneously worshippers of Jesus, yet consider him a heretic and betrayer of their secrets. These are diametrically opposed views, and cannot be reconciled, surely. The fact is, they can be, 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 anomaly is

resolved. It was the Damascus Nazarenes (possibly a branch of the Essenes) who school Paul in his new perception of Jesus, and were later dubbed "Christians" at Antioch, and it was the Jerusalem Nazarenes of Jewish (Pharisaic) alliance who 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,<sup>13</sup> and states that other groups such as the "Peratae", the "Sethians" and even the "Ophites" were basically the same heresy under other names. Dividing into a number of sects which remained fundamentally united in thought and teaching, the Naassenes, however, reflected not the heterodox teachings of the Christian Nazarenes as developed under the guidance of Paul, but rather orthodox Nazarene belief with, perhaps, its Arabian doctrinal background developed as a form of gnosticism after James' death.

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 their orthodox veneer. And so we have a "Mandean" 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 unequivocally 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 whatsoever 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 in fact 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 *in combination with others*, whatever their level of development might happen to be. *That* is the bottom line of Gnosticism when it functioned properly, and the attempt by the Church to distract attention away from this movement and make a laughing stock of it through jibes and false accusations is another of the crimes Roman Christianity still has to answer for.

But 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,<sup>14</sup> 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 of self-consciousness. 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, and it 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” ,<sup>15</sup> they do not mean that he mastered evil, but that he brought the serpent as *energy* (the energy of the biosystem in relation to consciousness) 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 sleep. But not the sleep of the night, rather the sleep of the day, the sleep of perceptually identifying with the world to such an extent that we forget to remember ourselves and become veritable automatons for much of the time. Caught in *physis* (matter) as the Gnostics were so fond of saying, we function in a not dissimilar fashion to our pre-conscious ancestors (we are unaware), but do have the ability to wake up to ourselves from time to time. "Wake up to yourself" we say to others (and to ourselves), and in using such an arrangement of words reveal an unconscious knowledge of our shared predicament. We are asleep on the face of reality, hypnotised by its demands, somnambulistically ensconced in thought, speech and deed to such an extent that our ability to will an authentic act is all but non-existent. Or, as the Gnostic Jesus says: Know what is before thy face, and what is hidden from you will be revealed to you."<sup>16</sup> So what is hidden? Why the Kingdom of God, of course. It is there right in front of our eyes, but we cannot detect its presence.

In Gnostic terms, human beings are slaves chained to the world, beings 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. And so 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.<sup>17</sup> But there is a barrier between the worlds, and to penetrate beyond this seemingly impassable barrier it is necessary to first realise that it exists, and then consciously attempt to dismantle it.

Doreese writes of this 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.”<sup>18</sup> This suggests that the Gnostics saw our original nature, our primordial nature, as superior to matter, that is, not under the sway of “perception” locked into matter; but that is perhaps too hasty an interpretation. Yes, these Gnostics were certainly enamoured by the possibility of linking up again with the original energy of consciousness, but they clearly understood the dangers involved - their story of Christ mastering the serpent confirms this. It was not just a matter of returning to the primordial state, the state before consciousness emerged, it was a matter of balancing conscious and unconscious energies so that both were operative at the same time. Getting perceptually locked in matter was our first awakening, our “Genesis”, our primary experience of ourselves as selves over against the world as objective event. Our second awakening was the attempt to break the chains of perceptual slavery to matter, to the world of distraction and engagement, and initiate a sustained condition of conscious awareness over against the self as subjective event. We had escaped once, now we had to escape all over again.

The subjective “I” was seen to be mostly asleep amidst all of its grand conscious activity, and only through extraordinary effort could it find the will to surface, as a conscious self, for any length of time. Oddly enough, this resistance was not due to the “I” warding off the idea of transcendence (it rather liked the idea of transcendence); it was due rather to the utterly banal fact that it could not resist dipping back into the mesmerising stream of conscious engagement. Whether internally or externally, the demand to function without cognisance of self was simply too

great. And on top of all this was the added factor of having to suffer consciously as it witnessed not only its inability to remain awake, but also its inability to properly relate to others. Weighed down by the burden of the “conditions” it placed on others, it more often than not closed down the process of its own transcendence through fear and shame. Fearful of what was being revealed, and ashamed of its own inability to attain what every human being on the planet already believed themselves to have attained, it fell or fled or slipped back into its narrowly focused stream of attention. In Gnostic terms, this was the nature of 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 the situation when he says that consciousness “is a late product of the womb of the unconscious”.<sup>19</sup> (emphasis added) Just how late may have surprised Neumann. 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.”<sup>20</sup>

And so it has always been, right from the very beginning when the first conscious stirrings occurred - there was a battle to be engaged in. So the problem 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, we are tempted to make a return journey in search of it. What we do not realise is that we are then in great danger, the danger of losing everything gained since human beings first emerged from the

blind security of creation's womb. The outcome of this dangerous stage in conscious development is termed "uroboric incest" by Neumann, and 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."<sup>21</sup> 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. And if they are not ignored, but called by other names and made to disappear into the historical morass by sleight of theological imagination, then there is still a problem by way of the tearing effect they have on the fabric of historical analysis. So when Christian scholars say that the Nazarenes, as a group, reverted into the fold of Judaism, and are therefore of no historical consequence, they are in fact manipulating history to suit themselves. For these Nazarene sectarians neither left nor joined with Judaism again, they simply continued to run parallel to this great religious tradition as they had done from the very beginning. Sectarians for the very reason that they harboured ideas and doctrines at variance with Judaism, yet deeply attached to Judaism by way of devotion to the Torah, the Nazarenes attracted many thousands of Jews into their ranks and became a religious force to be reckoned with. Described by Hugh Schonfield in as having a leadership functioning not unlike the Sanhedrin, this Jewish scholar goes on to describe the Nazarene Elders as "the *de facto* government of Israel loyal to the Messiah and exercising the same kind of powers."<sup>22</sup> No ordinary group these Nazarenes; they were a power group carrying, if only in their own imagination, considerable authority.

But there were at the same time the other Nazarenes, led by Paul, and they were quite different again in teaching and doctrine. As Schonfield shows, the Jews could not tolerate the fact that there were "Two rival authorities among the Nazarenes, two presentations of Jesus as the Messiah, two inspirations, two gospels".<sup>23</sup> This was the state of play during those early years, and Schonfield's statement reinforces my contention that there were in fact rival Nazarene factions. Paul was forced, on more than one occasion, to attend the Nazarene Council when it met in Jerusalem under James' auspice, so making James' Nazarenes an authority that could not be ignored. Schonfield then makes the same observation as Hyam Maccoby - Paul had no intention of starting a new religion. He wanted his Christian-Nazarenes to be recognised as *part of Israel*. The problem was that Paul's Christians repudiated the Jewish Torah, and that made it impossible for them to remain within Judaism. This fact, in combination with the problem of the Christians stating that Jesus was in some sense "divine", astonished Jewish orthodoxy and intensified the split between the rival Nazarene groups.

This suggests that such a statement of doctrine was not made at the beginning of Paul's ministry, and that he 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' Nazarene Party would have been immediate. Jesus was, it should be remembered, James' elder brother, and that made Jesus, as the Messiah returned from the dead, the legitimate leader of both groups. So it is with an inflated confidence that Paul first appears before James (a confidence which has long since mystified scholars), for is he not an Apostle created by (the now supposedly dead) Jesus himself, and is not James bound by blood and station to seriously consider and listen to his declarations? And James did listen, he did attempt to accommodate Paul's requests, and this strongly suggests that Jesus may not have been dead at all as the New Testament claims, for only he (and the Nazarene leadership in Jerusalem) had the authority to confer such a title on anyone. Why else would James have listened to this upstart and one time persecutor of the Nazarenes?

Hugh Schonfield adds the finishing touches to this situation when he notes 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.”<sup>24</sup> Now Schonfield did not believe that Jesus was alive in the sense that I have suggested, but it is interesting to note that this Jewish scholar did believe Jesus to have survived his crucifixion, and to have inadvertently died of the spear wound delivered while on the cross. This is to say that he saw Jesus’ death as a mistake, as a plan gone wrong, as an extraordinary act of courage and spiritual bravado which almost came off. With regard to James and Jesus’ disciples, he describes Paul as having been a presumptuous upstart in their eyes. For Paul quite obviously considered his authority greater than that of the Jerusalem Elders.

So why go along with Paul’s claim to Apostleship? Why humour him? Why accommodate him unless there was good reason to believe that his credentials were authentic? That is the question that has not been answered and to suggest that James only humoured Paul because he saw the possibility of making money out of the Gentiles is insufficient to explain the long and tortuous negotiations that ensued. No, Paul’s Jesus was quite probably alive and exerting pressure on the factions as he waited for God to fulfill his side of the bargain. And there is another piece of evidence to support this idea, for if Jesus had died on the cross, then James and Jesus’ disciples would have ceased to believe in him as the Messiah. He had to survive for the Nazarenes to survive, for whatever their complexion politically or religiously, they looked to him as the final messianic arbiter of Israel’s fate, and to be “final” he had to live on in concrete terms. Dreams and visions by a few worthies would not have been enough, only someone they could touch, eat and argue with would have convinced these tough-minded men to continue in the face of such opposition, and that is exactly what he is said to have done!

That there was another gospel doing its rounds is mentioned by Paul, a gospel of the "circumcision" opposed to his gospel of the "uncircumcision", and it is this Jewish gospel to which we must now turn our attention, for it is in fact not Jewish at all. In spite of its quite obvious Jewish trimmings, the Nazarene gospel of Jesus

as the Messiah of Israel was in fact heretical in Jewish eyes, for this self-same Jesus had been rejected by the Jewish nation 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 a failed Jewish Messiah, an apostate Messiah, a Messiah of Galilean imagination who had flouted the very law James' Nazarenes upheld, and this fact made the Nazarenes suspect in Jewish eyes in spite of the Jerusalem contingent's obvious devotion to the Torah. And there was more, for like John the Baptist, Jesus had broken with the ancient religious code of Judaism and made the individual more important than the collective, and there were even Nazarenes who said that his crucifixion had been an atonement for Israel in its own right. This was the heart of the matter, for such views made the Torah obsolete by definition, and on top of it all was the little matter of militant Nazarenes angering the Romans and endangering Israel's whole future. On the whole, a bothersome bunch these Nazarenes, and the branch called "Christian" was proving itself the most recalcitrant of all.

So is it surprising that after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in the year 70 the Jews should later earmark the whole Nazarene conglomerate as responsible for the debacle that took place? And is it surprising that the Jews should compose a curse to be read in synagogue so that Nazarenes in general, and Christian Nazarenes in particular, could be winkled out and expelled? The *Birkat ha-minum* curse (composed approximately 80 CE) admirably sums up the whole situation, for it links these Nazarenes with the idea of "apostasy", and in doing so 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 prayer-curse against the Nazarenes is quite explicit - it wants these Nazarenes to disappear, it wants them removed from the book of the living. Strong sentiments. A total rejection of everything the Nazarenes stood for in spite of their orthodoxy in Jerusalem, and indicative of the fact that their surface orthodoxy obscured beliefs not in accordance with Jewish religious practice. And that in spite of James the Just's impeccable orthodoxy; which suggests that we are not being told the whole story in relationship



to these Nazarenes. So who were they? What were they up to? And why did they end up carrying the historical can for just about everything that went wrong for Israel? Apart from the Zealots, no other group was so stigmatised, and the attempt to gather these Nazarene factions under one banner and make them all “Christian” in outlook, is at best a mistake, and at worst an attempt at concealment.

### The Fragmentation of the Nazarenes

The apparent fragmentation of the Nazarenes into Ebionites, Mandeans, Naassenes and others, suggests a group of some 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.

For instance, the word “Ebionite” 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. But although separate in this sense, they were in every other sense still part of the Nazarene fold. Schonfield is adamant on this point, being 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.<sup>25</sup> Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in the fourth 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. Oddly enough, 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. Now as James was a leader of the Ebionite community due to his own dietary habits, this expansion on his beliefs cannot but be of interest, and the

added factor of James being of singular importance to all of the Nazarene groups should not be overlooked.

And neither can the fact recorded by Epiphanius that the Nazarenes possessed 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, then the existence of gospels and travel tales predating the canonical gospels and Acts has to be considered possible. It is interesting to note in this respect that the Jewish Gospel parody - the *Toldoth Jesu* - was based not on the canonical Gospels, but on the Nazarene-Ebionite texts;<sup>26</sup> this rather suggests the Nazarene gospels to have been the original gospels in Jewish eyes. In conjunction with this, the word "Mandean" stands out as important in its own right, for as we saw earlier, "Manda" means "secret knowledge", and this suggests that the Nazarene conglomerate 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 as to be kept secret, these Nazarenes begin to emerge from the mists of Gnostic speculation as not at all staid in the manner reflected by their founder, James the Just.

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.<sup>27</sup> This suggests that there was 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 stand-ins for the human brain, the inner landscape of consciousness and sense-perceptions allied to a system of "transformation", the whole strange scheme shared by so many sects begins to take on a quite different aura - 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."<sup>28</sup> 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 Christians had very good reason to discredit teachings linked to Jesus' brother James and their Nazarene precursors. 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?"<sup>29</sup> 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. I wonder why?

### The Regrouping of the Nazarenes

Speaking of the Naassenes and the Ophites, 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.<sup>30</sup> With her usual clarity, 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. This French scholar also notes that sects claiming to be Gnostic are of relatively late date, probably around the middle of the second century. As such, they reflect an adopted state by way of reaction to a Church who used the term "Gnostic" by way of derision.

The Church, in its estimation, had 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 discovered in their writings.

Petrement makes this plain when she says of Irenaeus that he did not really know who the Ophites were, and that he simply created this name out of their writings because he could not identify their principle teacher, or master. Mead concurs. Ophitism, he says, "is a general term among the haeresiologists for almost everything they cannot ascribe to a certain teacher."<sup>31</sup>

Oddly enough, the meaning given to "Ophite" by the Church Fathers is "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". Mead explains the situation by pointing out that such an accusation was merely a term of abuse - the early Fathers of the Roman 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 this 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 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, to use the appropriate term, for it means "Son" or "Word", so revealing itself as a conceptual extract and not an actual name.<sup>32</sup> Schonfield sums up the whole crazy debacle with the following statement:

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 controverted; 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.<sup>33</sup>

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 regrouping. 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. Jesus, too, was probably dead. 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, undergoing a long and arduous period of persecution at the hands of their 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 the fact that so little is known about these Nazarenes and their leaders due to a loss of records, adding that he suspects such a loss of documentation to have been due to willful destruction and suppression. He then notes that both Eusebius and Epiphanius acknowledge the Nazarenes to have survived persecution and gained large numbers of Jewish converts, which implies that the Nazarene groups considered in this chapter were, as already suggested, more homogenous than as presented by the heretic-hunting Church Fathers, and this is confirmed by Malachi Martin’s reference to these self same Nazarenes turning up large as life before Sylvester 1 in 318.

So the whole situation can be summed up thus: the scattered Christian community with all of its differences and anomalies eventually succumbed to the new faith as presented by the Roman faction, and from there on in the Nazarene Mother Church, itself fractured into many related groups, was deemed heretical because it viewed Jesus as an ordinary man chosen by God to carry the title of "Messiah" ("son of God" in symbolic terms), not "Christ" in the theological sense of God literally made manifest in human flesh. Powerless to fight the Roman Church because of its military strength, 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 eventually drove the Jesus myth right to the edge of blasphemy, and after his death the embryonic Roman Church toppled his theology of the “Christ” over into the abyss of imagination run riot. And Peter is the other unfortunate, for he is made to change sides and become the connecting apostolic link affording the Roman Church a continuity with the Nazarenes that never actually existed in real terms. All in all, this is a pretty depressing tale considering what the Roman Church eventually got up to, and no less depressing today when one sees

the teeming millions still emotionally subservient to a faith whose credentials are at heart forgeries.

Is it any wonder then that western spirituality has failed to bring about that intrinsic change in the human spirit so long hoped for? Is it any wonder that our civilisation has raped and plundered the whole globe in the name of Christ? And is it any wonder that we are now faced with a multi-faceted Church rent by conflict, hatred, sexual abuse, misogyny and general small-mindedness? If it were not so pathetic, the Church's bravado in the face of ever-encroaching proofs as to her real nature would be laughable, but so much suffering and stupidity has resulted from her theological make-believe that laughter is not appropriate. Imbibed with our mother's milk, the manipulated story of Jesus has been used to calibrate our mentalities to an alarming extent and, as suggested at the beginning of this essay, our principle spiritual battle is waking up to that fact. Backed, a Mead said way back in 1960, by the "stupendous power of inertia, the force of custom, against which but few have the strength to struggle", our task is to become properly conscious of our conscious existence, not merely spectators locked fast in conscious dream. *That*, I believe, was Jesus' ultimate message, but it has become scrambled beyond all recognition.

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