

THE PSYCHOSPIRITUAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS CHRIST

Jesus as a Transpersonal Teacher

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I. INTRODUCTION

It is clear from conversation with many present-day Christians and from a careful reading of the Gospels that Christianity as generally practiced today is radically different from what Jesus taught. Burton Mack's *Who Wrote the New Testament* identifies two very distinct threads in early Christianity as *the Jesus Movement* and *the Cult of Christ*. The Cult of Christ is what has developed into conventional Christianity, It is represented by Paul's work and is focused on the idea of a resurrection and the idea of divine intervention in human history as a salvation event. Aside from the resurrection, this theme is not especially interested in the life of Jesus. The other thread, the Jesus Movement, centers on Jesus as a teacher and on documents of sayings. The Gospel of Thomas reflects this approach.

If we enlarge our view to take in the culture and events of the time in which Jesus lived, and what we know of what happened after he died and in the two millennia between then and now, we find that there are not just two stories about his life, his teachings, and what became of them, but several.

In these pages, after this introduction you will find three sections. First comes my own compilation, from decades of reading and reflection, of Jesus' central psychological teachings. Here is my disclaimer: I am a psychologist, and specifically a retired professor of psychology, with no training as a clergyman. I have written something here that I hope you will be useful, whatever your religious orientation may be. I deal with the work of Jesus from the perspective in which I am educated and competent, and leave the specifically theological aspects of his ministry to others. Here you will find what I consider to be the central practical teachings to be found in Jesus' words and deeds, together with the scriptural references for them, which can be used in connection with any translation or edition of the New Testament. In some cases I have made a minor conceptual leap from one of Jesus' teaching stories to what appears to me to be the general principle that underlies it.

All references are from the four canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, cited as Mt., Mk., Lk., and Jn. The compilation below does not draw on the Gospel of Thomas or on any of the other Gnostic gospels, but only on the four canonical gospels that received the stamp of approval of the early Catholic church. Of course the list below reflects my own appraisal of what is psychologically and spiritually important in his teachings. Someone else might make a different list, or disagree with some of my phrasings. What I have written is how I see it.

PART II. THIRTY CENTRAL TEACHINGS

- 1. The Divine Spirit exists somewhere, however deeply buried, within every person.** During this lifetime the “Kingdom of God” or “Kingdom of Heaven” is a psychological and spiritual state that you create within yourself and in your relationships. You have the choice of nurturing and encouraging this outlook, or of ignoring it. *(Mt 18, 23-25; Jn 10, 13-34; Lk 17, 20-21)*
- 2. Seek inner peace within your mind and heart, and outer peace in your relations with others.**
(Mt 5, 3-12; Mt 5, 38-46; Lk 6, 26-36; Mt 12, 25-7; Jn 14, 27)
- 3. Act with kindness, and so far as you can, with love, toward everyone.** Be kind and giving toward all—even strangers, enemies, and those who cannot repay you. *(Mt 5, 38-46; Mt 25, 34-46; Lk 6, 26-36; Lk 10, 25-37)*
- 4. Do not judge others,** and work diligently on letting go of your judgmental tendencies. *(Mt 18, 23-25; Lk 6, 37-8; Lk 10, 16; Lk 17, 4; Jn 8, 3-10)*
- 5. Give up self-righteousness,** which blinds you to what you do. *(Mt 38-46; Lk 6, 29-30; Jn 8, 3-10))*
- 6. Be a healer to yourself and others** in whatever ways you can. *(Lk 10, 25-37 and many healing stories)*
- 7. Seek to know yourself deeply.** This includes becoming aware of your own self-deceptions and defenses. And find your inner relation to the divine spirit within you. *(Mt 12, 7-8; Mt 12, 36-7; Lk 6, 41-2; Lk 11, 33-6)*
- 8. You are fully responsible for the effects of your words and actions** on you and others. *(Mk 4, 34)*
- 9. It is what comes out of us (what we say and do), not what goes into us, that degrades us.** *(Mk 7, 14-23)*
- 10. Reducing the number and intensity of your self-centered concerns** is a central key to live in a joyful and illuminated way requires *(Mk 14, 3-9)*
- 11. What truly counts is what you do now, and tomorrow.** What you did in the past is less important. *(Lk 16, 10-12; Mk 2, 15-17; Lk 19, 1-10; Mt 21, 28-32)*

- 12. Principles have value only if you act on them.** A transformation of the heart and mind is a good beginning, and then we need to express it in our words and actions (*Lk 16, 10-12; Mt 12, 36-7*)
- 13. In giving we receive. Helping others helps you.** (*Mt 4, 34; Mt 18, 23-35; Lk 10-16*)
- 14. Avoid violence, and do not hang on to anger or a desire for revenge.** (*Mt 5, 38-46; Lk 6, 26-36; Jn 7*)
- 15. Even those who have acted worst can repent, and act differently.** (Just saying that you repent is of little use unless you stop acting in injurious ways.) (*Mt 12, 36-37; Mt 21, 28-32; Lk 9, 23-26; Lk 11, 33-36; Lk 16, 10-12; Mk 2, 16-17; Lk 19, 1-10; Lk 7, 37-47*)
- 16. Forgive others when they wrong you or otherwise act badly** (*Mt 12, 25-7; Mt 5, 38-46; Lk 6-37; Jn 7-53*)
- 17. In conflicts, whenever possible reach an accommodation with your opponent** rather than going to court about it. (*Mt. 5, 21-24; Lk 12, 59*)
- 18. A gentle spirit is the state of mind we ought to seek.** “Blessed are the merciful . . . and the peacemakers.” (*Mt 5, 3-10; Jn 7-53*)
- 19. Wealth makes living a spiritual life a greater challenge.** Wealth and power are not worth having if you have to deaden your soul and & dull your sensitivity to gain them. (*Mt 4, 14; Mt 12, 12-13; Mk 11, 11-15; Lk 9, 23-6; Lk 18, 18-26*)
- 20. Worry less about material security.** If you do your best now, tomorrow will take care of itself. (*Mt 6, 28-34; Mt 10, 8-14; Lk 12, 13-33*)
- 21. Service to others without personal gain** is a path to becoming a great soul and gaining the true respect of others. (*Mt 10, 42-44; Lk 10, 25-37*)
- 22. Be most generous to those who are in greatest need.** (*Mt 8, 23-25; Mt 14, 3-9; Mt 12, 41-44; Mt 20, 1-14*)
- 23. Your deeds speak for themselves. Do not show off or boast about** what you have done. (*Mt 6, 1-5, 16*)
- 24. Avoid seeking honors and others’ admiration.** (*Lk 14, 2-11*)
- 25. Abstain from hypocrisy,** in which you pretend to be virtuous and selfless but are really looking for other people’s admiration. (*Mt 6, 1-5, 16; Mt 23, 1-7, 23-35; Lk 11, 44-52; Lk 20, 45-7; Jn 7-53*)

26. Do not imagine that you are better than anyone else, whatever your station in life and theirs. Humility is one of the most important virtues. (*Mt 18, 2-7; Lk 14, 2-11*)

27. Spiritual knowledge comes from an inward search, not from rules and laws. (*Mt 23, 1-7 & 23-35; Mk 2, 23-27; Lk 11, 44-32*)

28. If the spirit and the letter of the law conflict, observe the spirit. Laws are made for people, not people for the law. (*Mk 2, 23-27; Lk 13, 15-16*)

29. Honest people are transparent in their actions and avoid secrecy, while the dishonest try to hide and conceal what they do. (*Jn 3, 20-21; Lk 6, 41-2; Lk 11, 33-6*)

30. Most people often cover their ears because they don't want to hear, and close their eyes because they don't want to see. I teach by telling brief stories because that bypasses their defenses and makes it easier for them to understand. (*Mt 13, 10-15; Lk 10, 25-37*)

"Peace is my parting gift to you. Set your troubled hearts at rest, and banish your fears," Jesus reminded those who heard him. *Jn 14, 20-27*) *"Keep me and my teachings in your mind and heart."*

PART III. COMMENTARY

No one today knows utterly and absolutely for certain which of the words and actions attributed to Jesus in the gospels are actually his and which are not. Thousands of biblical scholars have marshaled every tool of historical and scholarly analysis available to them to try to make that determination. One approach involves careful attention to which events described in the gospels occurred after Jesus' death, so that they could not possibly have said things that referred to them, but rather they must have been inserted by the author of one of the gospels, or by a carrier of the oral tradition that bridged from Jesus' life to the writing of the gospels. Another approach, textual analysis, scrutinizes details of ancient texts and compares one text to another. If, for example, a scripture contains two very different styles of writing, there is a good chance that the material in one of those styles was borrowed from another source. Yet another approach scrutinizes the historian, the person who is telling the tale, in recognition that every teller of a story makes a statement that is uniquely grounded in his or her own viewpoint, motives, and experience.

The gospels that have come down to us are peoples' memories of stories that had been told for decades. None of the authors of the four canonical gospels knew Jesus personally. None of them heard a single word he uttered, or caught a single glimpse of him. By the time Mark wrote the earliest of the four gospels, the 12 apostles were already dead. In a society where few people could read and write, their oral memories were much better than ours. Nonetheless, the work of Elizabeth Loftus, Leon Festinger, and other recent and contemporary psychologists has shown how prone to distortion our memories can be. Such distortions are especially likely to be in the direction of conforming to our wishes and reinforcing our self-images.

Mark wrote the oldest of the gospels, by the accounts of some historians at least twenty years after Jesus died and by the accounts of others even later, around the years 67-70, in the Aramaic language. Matthew and Luke wrote a decade or two later, and John came later still. These four biographers used a variety of sources in their accounts. They interviewed people who had heard Jesus speak or who had heard stories about him from others who knew him. And they consulted older manuscripts written by earlier authors, some now vanished with no trace. (The Catholic Church's repeated waves of book burnings of "heretical"—i.e. not officially approved—manuscripts, including the entire library at Alexandria, may have played at least some small role in those vanishing acts.) After Mark wrote his gospel, someone else translated it into Greek and fiddled with it a bit. Then there is the "Q tradition," which consisted of a lot of people writing down everything Jesus and his disciples did. It's thought that Matthew and Luke both had access to those documents, and did their writing from them, Matthew around 80-85, and Luke around 100. John apparently did his

version all by himself around the years 85-90. The Gospel of John apparently started out as a Gnostic gospel (see below) and was later rewritten by the mainstream church to make it more orthodox. The gospels floated around like pamphlets for awhile, and then all got put together in a book somewhere between the year 1150 and 200. The Council of Nicea, which is said to have done a thorough job of censoring out everything it didn't like, took place in the year 323, and the earliest manuscripts we have today, except for the recently-discovered Nag-Hammadi texts (1945) are from around the year 400 A.D.

Just by comparing the four Gospels' varying accounts of events that they all report, anyone can see that the descriptions of some of what he said and did were changed and embroidered in the successive retellings. But why? What motives underlay the changes and embroidery? Among other things, apparently the biographers, sometimes known as "evangelists," wanted a wide audience, just like authors today, so they spiced up their accounts to make them more engaging.⁴ Another reason for the differences is that apparently each of the four authors wanted to advance his own view of Jesus mission and message. This led the evangelists to do more than a little editorializing about what Jesus actually said and did—and sometimes even to put their own words in Jesus' mouth.

Therein lies a major problem.

Why? Because Mark, Matthew, Luke and John were not Jesus. They simply had not attained the level of consciousness of the divine teacher they wrote about. For that matter, there is no evidence at all, and no one has ever suggested, that even a single one of his apostles or disciples ascended to the same remarkable transcendent plane of consciousness on which Jesus himself lived. Not Peter, nor Paul, nor any of them. There are too many incidents of small-mindedness in the writings, or the records of the statements, of every one of them. In fact, there is incontrovertible evidence that every one of Jesus' followers mentioned in the New Testament quite clearly DID NOT ascend to a plane of consciousness that came even near to his own. (There is some reason to believe that Mary Magdalene came closest, but she was a woman, and in those days that automatically clouded her credibility.) They all had smaller minds and hearts than Jesus. But you knew that. As a result, his biographers, their sources, and the other authors of the New Testament were all too often less than accurate in their understanding and reporting of what Jesus said and did, and were sometimes even quite clueless in regard to what he meant by what he said and did.

As I began to fathom that reality, it left me in a quandry. If the New Testament, and even the Gospels, contained as many errors and as much misunderstanding as numerous biblical scholars say they did, how could I myself hope to discover what Jesus truly meant?

I decided to begin with the four Gospels of "the Canon"—those four among the many accounts of Jesus' life and deeds that had received the official stamp of approval of the Catholic Church—for the simple reason that they're the only universally accepted accounts of his actions.

But that still left the question of how to separate fact from fiction in the Gospels. Fact was what Jesus truly said and did, and fiction was everything else attributed to him, including all the errors and distortions in accounts of his life. Without a way to tell fact from fiction, I could never truly know what Jesus meant. Was there any way to make that separation?

The question drifted to the back of my mind as I busied myself with other matters. But then one day, like a lightning bolt, an answer suddenly came to me.

In retrospect it seemed so obvious. How could it have taken me so long?

The key insight is utter simplicity itself. If indeed Jesus was *either* the Only Begotten Son of God, or one of history's greatest prophets and spiritual teachers --then those actions and sayings in the Gospels that radiate a higher, fuller, richer field of consciousness than the one within which most of us live must be his true words and actions. And those that do not, those words and deeds that anyone of his time could as easily have thought and said, and especially those that reflect any small, limited, petty, or vindictive thoughts or sentiments must be words or actions that someone else attributed to him.

Immediately and intuitively I felt that this was the solution I had been seeking. Jesus was a beacon who has shined through the ages. He did more than just reason more cleverly than other people. He wasn't just a sharper thinker. *He lived in a different realm of consciousness. He transcended the limiting consciousness in which most of us dwell.* He lived in the dimension of Large Mind, Open Heart, and Loving Acceptance of All the Lord's Children. He was, quite simply, beyond the small-mindedness, pettiness, vindictiveness, nastiness, and intolerant self-righteousness in which the rest of us sometimes get caught up. He walked through the same world as others, but *he perceived it from the standpoint of another dimension.* He did not just hold a different set of beliefs and attitudes, but rather had a fundamentally different quality of being.

The realization that he lived on a transcendent plane of consciousness, and that it permeated his entire way of being, was a precious key! All I had to do was to read the Gospels and distinguish between those words and deeds that reflected the selfish, small-minded side of the polarities just above, and those that reflected the openhearted, large-minded side. side. When a passage reflected the former side, I could be fairly confident that it was the real Jesus. When one reflected the latter side, it had to be something erroneously reported, or a modification by someone of lesser consciousness, such as an ordinary person driven by a tightfisted, arrogant, selfish, ego-aggrandizing, or self-righteous attitude. In short, it was inserted at some point by someone who Just Didn't Quite Get It.

And those who Didn't Get It, just plain didn't. They may have been baptized in the water, but not in the Spirit. That is, the baptism failed to transform their heart and soul. Or the Divine Spirit just brushed across them ever-so-lightly, and sometimes they remembered it and sometimes not, and they said or wrote some of what ended up in the Gospels during intervals when they had forgotten.

Flush with my new insight, I took out my favorite Bible, which at that time

was the *New English Bible*, and eagerly began to read. When I came across a parable, action, an admonition by Jesus that displayed the illumined consciousness of Great Heart and Mind, I marked it in the margin and inserted a bookmark. When I ran across anything attributed to him that lacked those qualities, I concluded, "this isn't Jesus" or "not authentic" and didn't mark it. And I largely ignored almost everything in the Gospels besides Jesus' own words and actions, except for those descriptions of events and places that provided a historical context for understanding what he did and meant.

Driven by my quest, I very carefully went through all four Gospels. Then I photocopied everything I'd outlined, cut up the photocopied pages, and rearranged the passages so that all those that dealt with one topic were together. I wrote a brief title for each passage, or group of related passages. I had, I believed, identified the authentic teachings of Jesus. I concluded that I had through my own unique methodology penetrated to the very essence of the message Jesus brought us when he walked upon the Earth. Later I discovered that my approach was not unique, and that throughout the ages there were others who had done much the same. Most prominent among these is The Jefferson Bible. More than two hundred years ago, Thomas Jefferson, from his own perspective, did much the same thing that I had done. The result can be found online as "The Jefferson Bible."

It turns out, however, that Thomas Jefferson and I were both potentially guilty of making the same sort of mistake. In discussing the work of one group of New Testament historians, *The Jesus Project*, a colleague of mine who is a Middle Eastern historian and Anthropologist, William Clay Poe, remarked, "The data for an objective analysis of what Jesus said and did and meant does not exist, and the result is that they discover the Jesus for whom they were looking." Jefferson and I may have been making the same mistake. Or maybe not. See what you think.

One other point. These days there is considerable sentiment that soon Jesus will reappear on Earth --**and save us all**. That belief contains a major misconception. That's the idea that in reappearing, he can save us all. Or for that matter, save you and me. That belief is in the same category with the belief that just because you've been baptized, you are now a good Christian. Someone who has been baptized can still lie, cheat, steal, kill, and commit numerous other most unChristian acts, and many do. If indeed Jesus comes again, he will be able to do no more than point the way. You and I will still have to save ourselves, for as Jesus said two thousand years ago, "It is not what goes into us that defiles us, but what comes out of us." A parallel statement which logically accompanies that one is, "It is not what goes into us that transforms us spiritually, but what comes out of us." Jesus can show and tell us what to do, but we have to do it for ourselves. It is unproductive to blame what we do or fail to do on others. It is also unproductive to expect that we will be transformed by another's magic wand, because that expectation relieves us of walking a righteous (to be diligently distinguished from "self-righteous") path ourselves.

PART IV. SIX STORIES

Diverse Views of Jesus' Message and What Happened to It.

SUMMARY OF THE SIX STORIES

- **Story 1:** The conventional story: Jesus is the Son of God, born of a virgin birth, etc. He died on the cross to save us all, and was resurrected and ascended to heaven after three days. We become transformed through our faith in Jesus and the Divine Father. This is the story we all know, which has been labeled "The Cult of Christ" by Burton Mack. It needs no retelling here because you can hear it in Churches and on radio stations everywhere all across the United States. In the most openhearted understanding, such faith can help people go beyond their self-centered concerns and transform their outlooks and their lives. In a more limited, sectarian understanding, non-Christians are viewed as pagans, infidels, heretics, and blasphemers. It appears to me that in the latter view Jesus' attitude and teachings have been largely lost.
- **Story 2:** Jesus spent half his life learning from saints and sages of India under the name of St. Issa.
- **Story 3:** Jesus was a Rabbi on the Hillel side.
- **Story 4:** The bishops were victorious and set up an authoritarian, imperialistic religious hierarchy that has endured for two thousand years.
- **Story 5:** The Gnostics were the "depth psychologists" of early Christianity.
- **Story 6:** What Jesus allegedly did and said is all we've really got. The rest of the New Testament is the product of limited, smaller minds and hearts. "Big Mind" and "Big Heart" are eternally true and "Small Mind" and "Small Heart" are eternally mistaken. The compilation in Part II above is an expression of story 6, drawn only from the for canonical gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, & John, even though some scholars now consider the Gospel of Thomas to be on the same level of authenticity with the other four, and some consider it to be more authentic, as it was never subjected to censorship by a church hierarchy. Neither Jesus nor his immediate friends wrote anything down.

If you are interested in Story 2, the best reference I know of is Elizabeth Claire Prophet's

The Lost Years of Jesus. (Summit Univ. Press, 1984) I know nothing about the veracity or authenticity (or lack of it) of these sources, which speak of Jesus as “St. Issa” when he allegedly traveled through India, but it is a fascinating tale. India was as much a hotbed of a wealth of spiritual ideas and traditions in those days as it is today.

The comments below deal primarily with the well-substantiated stories 3, 4, and 5, drawing on the Nag-Hammadi scripts which include the Gospel of Thomas and many of the gnostic gospels as well as on the consensus of historical scholarship. One excellent source on Gnosticism is Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels*, Vintage, 1979. Another is Robert J. Miller's (ed.) *The Complete Gospels* (Polebridge Press, 1994).

STORY 3: JESUS WAS A RABBI ON THE HILLEL SIDE (primary source: Aidan Kelley, Doctor of Divinity)

At this point there is a generally agreed-upon history of how Judaism and Christianity developed. It is no longer controversial, but accepted by basically all genuine religious scholars.

The birth story about Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew explains his name. Yehoshua = "God will save." It's often written Joshua, one of the most common Jewish names of his time. Jesus is a Greek form of the name Joshua. He spoke Aramaic, his family language, and Greek, for talking with the Romans.

There is no doubt that Jesus was Jewish, as attested by various references in the New Testament. In Judaism there were two dominant traditions. The HOUSE OF SHAMMAI was the more rigid and conservative that emphasized adherence to the letter of religious law. The key ethical principle seems to be adherence to its very detailed, highly legalistic rules. The HOUSE OF HILLEL, by contrast, followed the great Jewish teacher Hillel and was the more liberal side that emphasizes openheartedness. We always know more than we can say, more than we can write down, it maintained. In this telling, at an early age Jesus became a Rabbi of the House of Hillel. He saw himself as a reformer, trying to work within his own tradition to improve it. There is no evidence that he intentionally set out to found a new religion. He doesn't seem to think he was doing anything new or unexpected. He seems to have picked up a number of Old Testament prophecies and figured, "this must mean me," and this apparently included saving his people through suffering and death. There are all kinds of things in Matthew like, "And Jesus did that because it is written." Jesus was especially given to quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. The term "Rabbi" literally means "my master", a term which turns up frequently in the gospels. The word usually translated as "master" or "teacher in the new testament is in fact written as "Rabbi" in the Greek texts from which the English has been translated.

Where in the Bible Jesus attacks Jews for being legalistic and lacking in compassion, he is siding with the House of Hillel and attacking the House of Shammai. At this point we have an internal philosophical debate within Judaism, not Jesus as an outsider. Jesus said, "the letter kills but the spirit gives life." This was the Hillel side of the debate--for compassion. (If Jerusalem had not been destroyed, we might have found Jesus quoted

along with other Rabbis. There are many close parallels to Jesus' teachings in Jewish writings, such as *the Mishnah*, *The "Sayings of the Fathers,"* which dates from the 2nd or 3rd century B.C. Many of Jesus' teachings are almost identical to those found there. Lots of little bits and pieces of the Mishnah still exist in the Catholic blessing of the Eucharist.") After several centuries it came to be generally agreed within Judaism that the House of Hillel was right.

In fact, Jesus did not teach a new set of ethics. His ethics were not essentially different from those of Hillel. Conventional institutional Christianity focuses not on what he taught but on who he was. For example, the story is told that someone said to Hillel, "Teach me the whole of the gospel while standing on one foot." Accepting the challenge, Hillel stood on one foot and said, "Love the Lord with your whole hear, mind, and spirit, and your neighbor as yourself; all else is commentary." The central belief was not about heaven and hell, but about spiritual resurrection.

Jesus was, however, a reformer in emphasizing the right of women to sit with the men and learn with the men, and in emphasizing the compassionate aspect of the ethics of Hillel even more than Hillel himself did. His emphasis was on openheartedness and loving kindness. The greatest tragedy was in being spiritually dead. Where the House of Shammai said: "You get what you deserve," Jesus said, "What we get is a gift, because God is a loving parent." The Lord gives you things as a gift, said Jesus. God is unconditional love, and he's forever giving away the store to people who haven't earned it.

There was also a very heavy patriarchial, anti-woman bias in traditional Judaism. Jesus, by contrast, was notorious for conversing openly with women. He was very pro-woman in a culture that was very anti-woman. He was a leading advocate for women's liberation in his time. The Gnostics insist that Mary Magdalene was his wife and that much of their understanding was transmitted through her. The Gospels do not say at any point that Jesus was not married, and Rabbinic law was very clear on the point that you could not be a rabbi if you were not married. When she is weeping at his tomb on Easter morning, she spoke words that mean, "My Lord and Master; my husband." The evidence seems pretty clear that Mary Magdalene was his wife. *Mary Me Gadallah* in Hebrew means "Mary who was great." She was also nicknamed "Mary the magnificent." St. Paul and his followers were leading figures in undoing Jesus' move toward greater equality and respect for women and returning to masculine supremacy.

It is conceivable that if Jesus had not been killed, he would have discouraged attempts to set up a new religion in his name and would instead have been viewed as a Jewish teacher even greater than Hillel.

STORY 4: THE BISHOPS WON, AND SET UP AN AUTHORITARIAN RELIGIOUS HIERARCHY THAT HAS ENDURED FOR TWO THOUSAND YEARS

THE STORY CONTINUES: AFTER JESUS' DEATH, HIS FOLLOWERS BAND TOGETHER.

Jesus was framed by the local Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, who was afraid he was gaining too wide a following and stirring up the people. Two "witnesses" testified that he was inciting the people against the authorities and stirring up rebellion with the intention of becoming the King of Israel. Jesus admonished them for lying and said told the Governor there was no need for him to demean their dignity by paying them to lie, because he was perfectly capable of condemning the innocent without such testimony. All the judges who were present refused to endorse Pontius Pilate's condemnation of Jesus and got up and left, saying they would have nothing to do with this condemnation of an innocent man.

After the crucifixion, Jesus' friends *did believe* that they had seen him alive again. That's history. To believe they were right is to step into faith. Jesus and his apostles, (his chief followers) were simple working people from his home town. Fisherman, tax collector, etc. Eventually they were all, or almost all, killed for telling this apparently ridiculous story about him.

Jesus' followers also believed he would be right back at the head of an army of angels to throw out the Romans. Jesus himself is said to have predicted that this would happen within the lifetimes of his listeners. But about 40 years later the Romans destroyed Jerusalem. After that people realized that they hadn't gotten was Jesus was saying entirely straight, and they'd better start writing things down.

Up to the point at which Matthew was writing, all Christians were Jews. Judaism was not just a religion, but a civilization. The Romans, at least in their treatment of the provinces, were thugs with power and money, not a legitimate government. They terrorized their subjects and killed someone whenever they wished. The idea of a fair trial in Roman times is a historical fiction.

After Jesus' death, gradually Jesus' followers began more and more to baptize people as Christians. When Christians refused to stop baptizing Jews, Jewish Rabbis threw the renegade Christians out of Judaism. When that occurred they lost their privileges that the Jews enjoyed under Roman law and began to be persecuted. John was writing as that occurred. By the time of Luke, Christians were identified scapegoats, persecution was widespread, and the situation was very dire.

There were a great many different groups that identified themselves as Christians. Among these were the Gnostics, who were also originally Jewish. They were a loose collection of groups that were not terribly interested in being "organized." As Roman

persecution intensified, however, there came to be survival value in having some kind of organization. The various followers of Jesus found that without some degree of coordinated response to Roman persecution, they were hunted down and killed, group by group. Some of the Christians agreed to a centralization of authority and power as a temporary measure to respond to the crisis. "Bishop," in the ancient languages, means overseer, supervisor. Those who were tapped to run the show were designated "bishops." The early Christians didn't know that the crisis would go on for more than 200 years, and that the bishop structure would become entrenched and they'd end up stuck with it. Jesus taught that we are all equal in the sight of God. To make someone our "spiritual superiors" whom we must obey violates the most basic principles of his teachings.

But by 200 A.D. Christianity had become an institution headed by a three-rank hierarchy of bishops, priests, and deacons who had decided that they were guardians of the only true faith and all who disagreed with their interpretations were guilty of heresy. Anyone who challenged their consensus, and wished to practice other forms of worship or who held interpretations of Christ's teachings different from their own, were declared to be heretics and expelled. The Gospel of Philip, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, and the other Gnostic Gospels that were not unearthed until 1945 had all been suppressed by the hierarchy of bishops. "The Church" became the authority, and major parts of Jesus own example and teachings were pointedly ignored. To the organized bishops, all who considered themselves Christians but remained outside the groups that banded together under the bishops' authority, hierarchy, and doctrines were considered heretics. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, makes this quite clear: "Let no one do anything pertaining to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by the person whom he appoints. . . . To join with the bishop is to join the church; to separate oneself from the bishop is to separate oneself not only from the church, but from God himself." (Pagels 105)

In the late Roman empire, by the fourth century the Emperors had increasing difficulty governing and the Bishops of the Church had become extremely powerful. Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and made it the official religion of the empire. By that time the doctrines of the Bishops were well entrenched, and Constantine called a Council in Nicea in the year 325 to unify warring schisms within the Church. The Bishops viewed it as their best opportunity yet to silence dissent from their "official line." Pope Sylvester I, who was ill, was represented by priests. Jesus teachings against wealth had come to be widely ignored, conveniently so since the Church had become the richest institution in the Empire. The Council was held in an imperial palace. The Trinity that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (whatever that was) were a single being was enshrined as official church dogma. The council approved this creed, which became fixed Church doctrine forevermore, was:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of all things visible or invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten. . . not made, being of one essence (homoousion) with the Father. . . who for us men and our salvation came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and comes to judge the quick and the dead. . . .

That, and not anything having to do with ethics, or the raising of consciousness, or any inward search, became the cornerstone (and some would say the tombstone) of Church doctrine, and then there was only *the church*, which essentially ruled the empire. The only two bishops who refused to sign this formula and they were thrown out of the Church, exiled by the emperor, and all books by Arius, who viewed Christ as a created being rather than identical to the father according to the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, were burned, *and concealment of any book by Arius was made punishable with death.* (Contrast that attitude with Jesus attitude in the story of the adulterous wife when he said, "Let he who is guiltless throw the first stone.") The Empire was ending, the Middle Ages had begun, the Roman and Eastern branches of the Church began tearing at each others' throats and continued to do so until about 1000 AD when their split became irreconcilable, and for a thousand years no one dared openly question Church doctrines. The book burnings that followed the Council of Nicea were one of many in the history of the Church. The organized bishops had become the Church, and the Church had become the Western World's dominant power. But in that power, where was the transcendent love and the openheartedness that Jesus taught?

In the course of the consolidation of their power, the bishops rescinded everything Jesus had tried to do in the direction of opening society to fuller participation of women. The bishops reduced them again, as they had been under Judaism, to total domination by a masculine patriarchy. Ultimately their self-righteous, "We are right and others are wrong," attitude spread to become the Crusades, which tried to convert "infidels" by means of military might, and killed many who refused, and the medieval holocaust in which more than half a million women were branded "witches" and burned at stake, alive, for resisting the Church's total domination of their lives. (Joan of Arc was the most famous of them. Five hundred years later the Church changed its mind about her and canonized her as a saint.) Jesus hung on the crucifix in every Church and from every Priest's neck, but hearts of those who dominated the Church hierarchy had become obsessed by an attitude of religious imperialism, as dedicated to the quest for worldly power as the Romans had been, and among them his spirit and teachings appear to me sometimes hard to find.

It is intriguing to consider the personal journey of Tertullian, who in his early and middle adulthood railed against heresy, deified the church hierarchy, and argued for a strict order of obedience and submission. By the end of his life, he had completely changed his mind, and scorned and rejected the conventional church as "the church of a number of bishops,"

STORY 5: THE GNOSTICS WERE THE "DEPTH PSYCHOLOGISTS" OF EARLY CHRISTIANITY.

The word "Gnostic" comes from the Greek word "gnosis," which means knowledge. That we can each strive for directly revealed, personal knowledge of the divine is one of the basic tenets of Gnostics, who encouraged each person to seek direct spiritual experiences rather than depending on priests. In 1934 Professor Hans Jonas suggests that many people felt deeply alienated from the world in which they lived, dominated as it was by the lawless Roman military dictatorship, and that gnosticism combined this pessimism

toward the world with an attempt at self-transcendence. There arose many different forms of Gnosticism, and one of the movement's basic tenets was that they were all legitimate, and no one or no group could claim to be an authority that said that its way was true and the ways of others were not. When the bishops began to turn Christianity into a centralized, "universal" creed in which all were supposed to believe exactly as they themselves decreed, the Gnostics replied that the real truth of Jesus' sayings had slipped out of the bishops' grasp. In their view, all doctrines, speculations, and myths, including their own, were only approaches to truth. They tried to find the truths of the teachings in a variety of ways that transcended ordinary everyday states of consciousness, and developed practices to attempt to deeply grasp the truths that he was pointing toward. Carl Jung declared that his lifelong work had a close affinity with the Gnostic outlook, and thought Gnostic ideas expressed "the spontaneous, unconscious thoughts that any orthodoxy requires its adherents to repress." In the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus says:

"If you bring forth what is within you,
what you bring forth will save you. If you do not
bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring
forth will destroy you." (*The Gospel of Thomas*, Pagels, xv)

In the same work, when the disciples asked Jesus where they should go, he replied, "There is light within a man of light, and it lights up the whole world. If he does not shine, he is darkness." And also, "Recognize what is before your eyes, and what is hidden will be revealed to you." But, he notes, when he came into the world, "I found them all drunk. I found none of them thirsty. And my soul became afflicted, . . . because they are blind in their hearts and do not have sight."

From *The Book of Thomas the Contender*, Jesus speaks "secret words" concerning self-knowledge: "He who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge of the depth of the all." When, in the *Gospel of Thomas*, his disciples ask him whether to fast or give alms, how to pray, and what to eat, Jesus turned them back to themselves with the reply, "Do not tell lies, and do not do what you hate."

He also speaks of the Kingdom of Heaven: "The kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty. . . . What you look forward to has already come, but you do not recognize it. . . . The Kingdom of the Father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it."

Based on this passage, notes Pagels, some Gnostic Christians expected liberation to occur not through events in history, but through internal transformation. But the *Gospel of Thomas* also warns that this path is not easy:

"Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds. When he finds, he will become troubled. When he becomes troubled, he will be astonished, and he will rule over all

things."

How does one seek and find? In *Zostrianos*, the longest of the Nag Hammadi texts, Zostrianos says that first he had to transcend physical desires, probably by ascetic practices; then he stilled his mind with meditation; then he saw a vision of the divine presence; then he gave long, deep thought to how he could move toward liberation and transcendence; then he went out into the desert and had further visions. There and in other texts there are references to nine levels of understanding through which a person must pass, but so far I have found nowhere that these are spelled out.

Bette Stockbauer suggests that the gnostics were the inheritors of a wisdom tradition which Jesus relayed, in secret, to a select group of his disciples. She writes,

"They taught that the path to liberation lay in the attainment of Gnosis, the knowledge of sacred truths of the spiritual universe. They said that each human being is the inheritor of a divine

spark, a bit of fire given by the hand of God. Most men do not realize this fire within and live in ignorance of their true nature, but Jesus' life had as its mission the purpose of reminding humanity of its true nature. He demonstrated, through his life and death, the way to freedom and taught the secrets of the ascent. The Gnostics wrote of an ongoing relationship with Jesus, even years after his death, through revelation and vision. They knew the sciences of astronomy, divination, and healing, and the great mysteries of human origin and immortality. . . . Because they had always voiced the absolute necessity of individual freedom in finding salvation and because they refused to bow to any authority other than their own, they began to be viewed as renegades, a danger to the growing power base of Constantine's church."

The Gnostics drew heavily on the Yogic & Buddhist idea of overcoming desire. They held that because the Jewish God was a jealous, wrathful God, he was not the highest god but one of a relatively low state, and that there was a higher God who we could aspire to emulate. Many Gnostics viewed their goal as that of moving from the "lower" realm of physical reality to a "higher" realm of spiritual reality. Gnostic scriptures held that the liberation brought about by Christ's death and resurrection was an example that we could follow. It appears that they viewed Jesus not so much as a savior as one who calls on us to awaken from a long sleep and remember our spiritual mission. Stephan Hoeller says that Gnostic teacher and poet Valentinus, a leading mediator between Gnostics and the organized bishops, describes Jesus as savior in the sense of being a "spiritual maker of wholeness" who cures us of our sickness of ignorance.

While Jesus was alive and during the early years after his death, the Christian movement apparently showed remarkable openness toward women. Jesus violated Jewish conventions by talking openly with women, and included them among his companions. Ten to twenty years after Jesus' death, women held positions of leadership in Christian groups and acted as prophets, teachers, and evangelists. Men and women sat together for worship. According to Professor Wayne Meeks, at Christian initiations the person presiding ritually declared that "In Christ there is neither male nor female." Paul quotes this saying, endorses the work of women deacons, fellow workers, and even one who is

an outstanding apostle, but he also expresses his own (traditionally Jewish) inclination toward masculine authority over women.

One group of gnostic sources claims to have received a secret tradition from Jesus through James and through Mary Magdalene, whom some scholars believe to have been married to Jesus. Valentinius suggests that the divine consists of one part, the Ineffible, the Depth, the Promal Father, and also of Grace, Silence, the Womb, and "Mother of the All." From the seed of the Ineffable Source, Silence brings forth all the emanations of divine being, ranged in harmonious pairs of masculine and feminine energies. In the Gospel of the Hebrews, Jesus speaks of "my Mother, the Spirit." In a gnostic poem called *Thunder, Perfect Mind*, a feminine power says, "I am the first and the last. . . I am the whore, and the holy one. I am the wife and the virgin, I am [the mother] and the daughter. . . ." The *Dialogue of the Savior* includes Mary Magdalene as one of three disciples chosen to receive special teaching and even praises her above the other two, Thomas and Matthew: ". . . she spoke as a woman who knew the All." In The Gospel of Mary, Peter continually gets angry at Jesus for talking privately with Mary Magdalene and at Mary for teaching. Mary tells Jesus, "Peter makes me hesitate. I am afraid of him, because he hates the female race." Jesus replies that whoever the Spirit inspires is divinely ordained to speak, whether man or woman. (Pagels 65)

During the process of sorting the various Christian writings, virtually all the feminine imagery for god disappeared from the officially transmitted Christian tradition, and every one of the "secret" texts that the Gnostics revered was omitted from the collection that became the foundation of the New Testament, and in this process,. The bishops formulated the "precepts of ecclesiastical discipline concerning women," which declared: "It is not permitted for a woman to speak in the church, nor is it permitted for her to teach, nor to baptize, nor . . . to claim for herself a share in any masculine function&emdash;not to mention any priestly office." By AD 200 mainstream congregations returned to the Jewish custom of separating men and women; women's participation in worship was condemned; and female leadership was branded heretical.

The Gnostic Scriptures, write Stockbauer, "give us back a Christianity that, even in its own time, barely saw the light of day. They offer an answer to the restlessness of modern Christians who question the representation of the Jesus that has been presented to them, his place in history, the purpose of his life, his meaning in modern times." Gnostic Christians held that baptism did not make a Christian. The *Gospel of Philip* declared that many people "go down into the water and come up without having received anything."

I do not mean to paint a uniformly glowing picture of the Gnostics. They appear to have been as dualistic as orthodox Christians, but in the sense of viewing matter as bad and spirit as good. And not all Gnostics were tolerant. Despite a general attitude of tolerance, some Gnostics condemned others who did not accept their views.

If the many are drunk, asleep, and not truly seeking, the demanding disciplines of the Gnostics will probably not be attractive to them, so on that ground too, it is no wonder it lost ground to the institutionalized church, where the rules of worship and belief were

clearly spelled out and easy to follow.

Christian gnosticism enjoyed a wide following between 50 and 250 AD, but as the institutionalized Church became increasingly powerful it also became less tolerant. After it became wedded to the political power of the Roman empire, it essentially declared war on the gnostics, and by the end of the fifth century Christian gnosticism was almost completely silenced. There has been a kind of small, quiet "Gnostic revival" since the discovery of the Nag Hammadi manuscripts, which articulate a number of Gnostic perspectives. (The Dead Sea Scrolls, found two years later, represent an earlier, Jewish form of Christianity.)

STORY 6. BACK TO THE SOURCE. Do your best to forget for the moment the other stories above, and listen to what Jesus himself is saying. You can begin with my summary of thirty central teaching in Part II above, go to the gospels, and read the sections that the citations refer to. (Any New Testament will do. For many years my favorite was the New English Bible, published by the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses; now I like the 2011 version of the Zondervan New International Version).

As noted above, I created that compilation long ago and it reflects my own conclusions about which of Jesus alleged statements and actions were truly his, in contrast to later editorial embroidery or transformations by others. My primary criterion was, "Which reflect the openheartedness and the transcendent level of conscious that we could expect from one of the greatest religious figures in history (or if you prefer, the incarnation of God in human form), and which reflect the pettiness and small-mindedness that might characterize later editors of his work, but not the Master himself?"

Another kind of attempt to grasp what Jesus was really saying, mentioned briefly above, is *The Five Gospels: A Report of the Jesus Seminar*, by Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, & the Jesus Seminar. (Harper San Francisco Polebridge Press.) This was a long-term effort by a group of biblical scholars to distinguish between what Jesus definitely said, what is doubtful, and what he pretty surely did not say. Now they are meeting each year to determine the probably authenticity of the various actions attributed to him, and are finding that task more difficult. The text is color coded, and the introduction to it suggests that an "unofficial but helpful interpretation of the colors" is: *Red: That's Jesus! Pink: Sure sounds like Jesus. Gray: Well, maybe. Black: There's been some mistake.* A scholarly critique of the work of the Jesus Seminar, and alternative interpretations, is presented by Richard B. Hays of Duke University Divinity School in "The Corrected Jesus," Copyright (c) 1994 First Things 43 (May 1994): 43-48, available online.

We can also reflect on *The Community Rule Scroll*, one of the the Dead Sea Scrolls, found in a maze of caves above the Dead Sea. These scrolls appear to reflect an earlier, more explicitly Jewish form of Christianity (if indeed we can consider them definitely Christian) than Gnostic teachings: "According to his insight he shall admit him. . . . He shall keep his council in secrecy in the midst of the men of deceit and admonish with

knowledge, truth and righteous commandment those of chosen conduct, each according to his spiritual quality and according to the norm of time. He shall guide them with knowledge and instruct them in the mysteries of wonder and truth in the midst of the members of the community, so that they shall behave decently with one another in all that has been revealed to them. . . He shall instruct them to do all that is required at that time, and to separate from all those who have not turned aside from all deceit."

AN INTRIGUING QUESTION

Which of the stories above is the "right" one?
Thomas Jefferson's answer:

"Our particular principles of religion are a subject of accountability to our god alone. I enquire after no man's and trouble none with mine; nor is it given to us in this life to know whether yours or mine, our friend's or our foe's, are exactly the right." (Letter to Miles King, September 26, 1814)

Look into your own heart, mind, and soul to discover which of these stories, or which combination of them, has value for you.

Note: I make no pretense to being a biblical scholar, but I have relied heavily on such scholars in putting together these comments. For more information, you might look at my collection of web links at:

<http://www.sonoma.edu/users/d/daniels/jesuslinks.html>

or do your own web search using search terms of interest to you.

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THAT'S ALL, FOLKS.