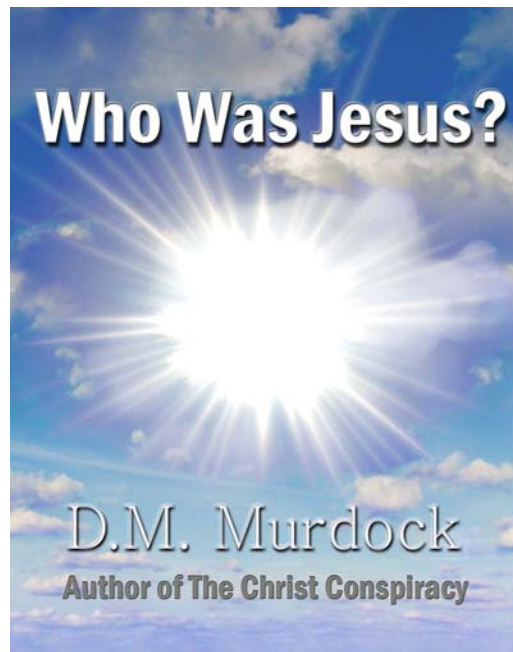


# Who Was Jesus?



**D.M. Murdock**

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# Who Was Jesus?

by D.M. Murdock<sup>1</sup>

In the nearly two millennia since the story of Jesus Christ began to be circulated, millions of people have wondered, "Who is Jesus Christ?" Much ink has been spilled, and many thousands of books have been written about this grandest of gods and men, in the quest to portray the "real Jesus." Practically every personality type and special interest group has been able to find a reflection of itself in Jesus, and countless people have looked to him as their inspiration and champion. Many millions, in fact, are quite convinced that Christ is indeed *the* God of the universe who came to Earth in a human body 2,000 years ago. Still others have settled into a comfortable position that Jesus was a "nice guy" and a "great leader" or a "political rebel" who fought for the underdog. These individuals often believe that Jesus was simply a human being, not God, but that his enthusiastic followers added a series of fairytales to his biography after his death. A minority of others have looked at the story with a jaundiced eye and found little evidence to be convinced of either of these two perspectives.

The life of Jesus Christ is principally drawn in four "gospels" or books found in the New Testament section of the Holy Bible. There were many other gospels, numbering around 50, written by a variety of people, but these four were deemed "canonical," or authorized, and placed into the Bible. Along with the canonical letters or epistles, these four gospels are asserted to have been the only truly inspired Christian texts. In other words, the faithful believe these books were written at the request of God Himself, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In the pursuit here to discover Jesus, I will confine my analysis mainly to these four books, the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as well as certain other biblical and Christian texts.

## The Gospel According to Matthew

The gospel of Matthew is traditionally placed at the beginning of the New Testament canon, but there have been many debates over the centuries as to which book was written first, with arguments for practically every order. It is generally agreed that Matthew is placed first because it was done so in the most ancient traditions, and because it presents a satisfactory synopsis of Christ's life.

The story begins with a genealogy of Christ's ancestors, including the Jewish King David, which makes Christ the "son of David," as was asserted in the Old Testament that the coming messiah would be. Jesus's miraculous conception and birth are depicted as having been of the "virgin" from the Old Testament scripture Isaiah 7:14.<sup>2</sup> The nativity is accompanied by the tale of King Herod, the star and the wise men. Because Herod orders all male children under the age of two to be killed, so

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<sup>1</sup> D.M. Murdock is the real name of the author whose pseudonym is "Acharya S."

<sup>2</sup> Note on biblical translations: While the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible is the most popular in the United States, a fact that might warrant usage here, its language is so archaic as to make it difficult to read by both native and non-native English speakers alike. For that reason, most biblical passages presented here are from the Revised Standard Version (RSV) unless otherwise noted.

that the "king of the Jews" could not live to adulthood, Jesus's parents, Joseph and Mary, take Jesus into Egypt to escape Herod's wrath. They return after Herod has died, to live in Nazareth, so that the Old Testament scripture can be fulfilled that the savior was to be a "Nazarene."

The next scene in Matthew cuts to Jesus's adulthood, when John the Baptist, preaching in the Judean wilderness, predicts Christ's coming and then baptizes him in the Jordan. During this event, the heavens open up to Jesus, the Holy Ghost descends on him, and a heavenly voice says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Mt 3:16-17) Jesus next spends 40 days in the desert, being tempted by Satan, who offers him "all the kingdoms of the world." Jesus resists the devil and emerges from the desert unscathed, but discovers that John the Baptist has been arrested, so he goes to Galilee, where he passes through Nazareth and onto Capernaum. Most of the rest of Matthew depicts Jesus as moving about in this northern part of Palestine.<sup>3</sup> At this point, Jesus begins to pick up his first followers, including the fishermen Peter and his brother Andrew, as well as the fishermen James and John, sons of Zebedee, leaving their father behind on the boat. With them, Jesus proceeds all over Galilee, preaching and teaching, as well as healing "every disease and every infirmity among the people." (Mt 4:23) According to this gospel, Jesus now begins to become very famous "throughout all Syria," with "great crowds" following him throughout Palestine "and from beyond the Jordan."

With the throng in tow, Jesus climbs up a mountain and delivers the famous Sermon on the Mount, including the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer. The crowds are depicted as being "astonished" by his teaching, and they continue to follow him when he comes down from the mountain. Jesus is surrounded by the sick, including a leper, whom he heals, and when he enters Capernaum again, a centurion approaches him about his paralyzed servant, whom Jesus also heals. Jesus then heals Peter's mother-in-law and many demoniacs, in fulfillment of scripture in the OT book of Isaiah. Continuing to have great crowds around him, Jesus gets into a boat with his disciples. Jesus is asleep in the boat when a sudden storm arises, and he rebukes his disciples when they wake him out of fear. He next famously calms the sea.

Proceeding to the "country of the Gadarenes," Jesus casts the demons out of a couple of people, sending them into a herd of swine, which promptly drown themselves. At this point, "all the city came out to meet Jesus," begging him to leave the area. (Mt 8:34) Jesus returns to the boat and to Nazareth, where he heals another paralyzed man and then finally meets Matthew. Jesus is approached by "a ruler" whose daughter has just died. Jesus raises her from the dead, heals a bleeding woman and two blind men, but charges the latter not to tell anyone about the healing. Nevertheless, the two go out and "spread his fame though all that district." (Mt 9:31) The Pharisees at this point are starting to become agitated and claim Jesus is casting out demons "by the prince of demons."

Next, Jesus is depicted as going "about all the cities and villages," again teaching, preaching and healing. He gathers his 12 disciples and gives them their mission and authority, and the disciples are named at this point in the gospel (Mt 10:2-4). Jesus specifically tells his disciples not to go to the Gentiles or Samaritans but only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." He also tells them that they will be able to heal

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<sup>3</sup> It is useful to keep in mind that the entire area in which this biblical drama takes place is only 90 miles long.

the sick, raise the dead and cast out demons, and that they should take no money or any extra belongings. Jesus then informs his disciples that any town which does not welcome them will be harshly judged by God, describing a fierce martyrdom scene:

Brother will deliver up brother to death, and the father his child, and children their parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But he who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes.... (Mt 10:21-23)

Jesus next says:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it. (Mt 10:34-39)

After giving this speech, Jesus goes about preaching in the cities. The imprisoned Baptist hears about Jesus's work and sends word to ask him if he is the messiah. Jesus replies in the affirmative. He then castigates various cities, such as Chorazin and Capernaum. Next, Jesus and his disciples pick grain to eat on the sabbath, for which they are excoriated by the Pharisees for defiling the sabbath. Jesus replies that he is the "lord of the sabbath" and therefore cannot defile it. He then proceeds to their synagogue, where he heals a man with a withered hand. Again, Jesus is assailed for working on the sabbath, but he responds by pointing out that the Jews themselves would pull a sheep out of a pit but not lift a finger to help a man on the sabbath. At this point, the Pharisees begin to plot to destroy Jesus.

Although Jesus is aware of the plot against him, he nevertheless keeps healing people, in fulfillment of another of Isaiah's prophecies. The Pharisees continue to harass Jesus, again saying he is working by the prince of demons. Jesus replies with the famous line "a house divided against itself cannot stand." (Mt 12:25) Jesus also says that those who speak against him will be forgiven but not those who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. He then calls the Pharisees and other Jews present a "brood of vipers." (Mt 12:34) Jesus is asked for a sign, but he responds that the only sign will be that of Jonah, meaning that he will be "three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Mt 12:40) When Jesus is informed that his mother and brothers are outside, he asks, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?"

Jesus proceeds to go outside near the sea, where he is surrounded by great crowds. He begins telling the crowds various parables, which the disciples question him about. Returning inside the house, he explains some of these parables further to his disciples. Afterwards, he returns to Nazareth, where the people are astonished to see what the carpenter's son has become. Eventually, Herod hears about Jesus's presence, and nervously believes that he is John the Baptist raised from the dead, as Herod has had John beheaded at the behest of his wife's daughter. When Jesus discovers this gruesome fact, he goes off in a boat alone, but he is followed again by great crowds. The throng becomes hungry, so Jesus takes the little food present, five

loaves of bread and two fish, and miraculously multiplies them to distribute to the hungry horde, feeding about 5,000 people.

After this feast, Jesus sends the disciples into the boat to the other side of the sea, while he retires to pray by himself in the hills. After a time, Jesus walks across the water to reach the boat, which is "many furlongs distant from the land." (Mt 14:24) His disciples become terrified by the sight, thinking he is a ghost, but he assures them otherwise. Jesus then leads Peter out of the boat to walk on the water as well. These miracles cause the disciples to fall down and pronounce Jesus the "Son of God." Across the sea in Genesaret, once again Jesus heals the crowd and is approached by the Pharisees, who castigate him for not compelling his disciples to wash their hands before they eat. Jesus then tells the people it is not what goes into a man's mouth but what comes out of a man's mouth that defiles him. (Mt 15:11)

Jesus next goes to Tyre and Sidon, where a Canaanite woman approaches him, begging for his help. He ignores her and tells his disciples that he came only for the lost sheep of Israel. He then compares the woman with a "dog," but she responds that even a dog needs crumbs, so he heals her because of her faith in him. As Jesus continues along the Sea of Galilee, he is pursued by great crowds once again who beseech him to heal them. Once more Jesus multiplies a few fishes and seven loaves in order to feed the hungry throng of about 4,000 people.

Later, when Jesus is in Caesarea, he tells Peter that he is Jesus's "rock" and that Christ's church will be built upon Peter. Jesus then instructs his disciples not to tell anyone that he is the Christ and informs them that he will be taken away and killed, but will rise again on the third day. Peter, upset by this news, objects to anything bad happening to Jesus, to which Christ replies, "Get behind me, Satan!" (Mt 16:23) Jesus then tells his disciples to take up the cross and follow him, stating, "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." (Mt 16:28)

Jesus next takes Peter, James and his brother John up to a mountain, where he is transfigured in front of them, his face shining like the sun and his garments becoming "white as light." Moses and Elijah appear on either side of Jesus, and begin speaking with him. A voice comes out of a cloud, saying, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him." (Mt 17:5) Jesus then appears by himself and, as they proceed down the mountain, instructs the others not to say anything about this event until he is risen from the dead. Jesus also informs them that John the Baptist was Elijah, for whose return the scribes had been waiting. As the four come down the mountain, the crowd returns and asks for more healings. Jesus lectures the crowd and his disciples about their lack of faith. Once more, while in Galilee Jesus states that he will be taken, killed and will rise again after three days.

In Capernaum, the disciples are asked if their master pays taxes, to which they respond "yes." Next comes Jesus's famous pronouncement, "Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt 18:3-4) Jesus then instructs the people that they should cut off their hand or foot, and pluck out their eye, if these cause them to sin. He reiterates that children should not be led astray, and then instructs the disciples in forgiveness.

Afterwards, Jesus leaves Galilee and goes to Judea, again followed by large crowds who are healed by him. In response to a question regarding divorce, Jesus strictly

forbids it and says that a person who marries after an improper divorce is guilty of adultery. Jesus then instructs men to become eunuchs if they can, being castrated:

"For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it." (Mt 19:12)

Jesus further instructs the crowd about the kingdom of heaven and eternal life, exhorting the people to follow the commandments, saying, "Honor your father and mother." He also makes his famous pronouncement that it is easier for a "camel" to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Next, he tells them, "And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life." (Mt 19:29)

Jesus and the 12 disciples next begin to make their way to Jerusalem, with Jesus telling them on the way that he will be taken and killed, and delivered up to the Gentiles, "to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." (Mt 20:18) At this point, the mother of the brothers Zebedee, James and John, asks Jesus to appoint them at his left and right hands in heaven. Jesus responds that it is not his decision but that of his Father. The other disciples are angered by the brothers' audacity.

As the group is leaving Jericho, they are followed by great crowds once again. Two blind men beg Jesus to have mercy on them, and he restores their sight. Finally, Jesus and his disciples reach the Mount of Olives, near Jerusalem, where Jesus sends two of the disciples to fetch an ass and her colt, which he will ride into Jerusalem. He instructs the disciples just to take the animals and to tell anyone who might object that the "Lord has need of them." (Mt 21:3) This event was in fulfillment of an Old Testament prophecy. In this manner, Jesus enters the city of Jerusalem, amid shouts of "Hosanna to the Son of David!"

Once in Jerusalem, Jesus enters the temple and overturns the tables of the moneychangers, saying that they have turned the holy place into a "den of robbers." Jesus then heals those who come to him in the temple, but his behavior angers the chief priests and scribes, who object to the crowd saying, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Jesus responds with his famous line, "Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings thou hast brought forth perfect praise?" (Mt 21:16) Jesus then proceeds to Bethany, where, hungry, he curses a fig tree because it has no fruit for him to eat. The tree promptly withers, leaving his disciples marveling, to whom he responds that by faith they themselves can move a mountain.

Next, Jesus enters the temple and is challenged by the chief priests and elders. He refuses to answer their questions about his authority and instead tells some parables. He then identifies himself with the "very stone which the builders rejected" (Mt 21:42), a reference to a scripture in Psalms. Jesus's authority disturbs the chief priests and Pharisees, who feel the crowd might consider him a prophet. Jesus tells more parables and then, when the Pharisees try to trap him by questions about paying taxes to Caesar, he asks them whose likeness is on a coin he shows them, to which they respond, "Caesar." At this point, Jesus says, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mt 22:21) The priests and Pharisees are astounded and go away. Jesus is next challenged by the Sadducees about the resurrection, and again the Pharisees come back to ask him



more questions. Jesus then publicly castigates the scribes and Pharisees, calling them "hypocrites" and "blind fools." Says he:

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like white-washed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but within you are full of hypocrisy and iniquity." (Mt 23:27-28)

Jesus again calls the scribes and Pharisees "serpents" and a "brood of vipers," asking how they have escaped "being sentenced to hell." He further castigates Jerusalem for killing its prophets. Leaving the temple, Jesus remarks that every last stone of it will be thrown to the ground.

While sitting on the Mount of Olives, Jesus answers his disciples' questions about the sign of his "coming and the close of the age." Replying that many false Christs will come to lead them astray, Jesus then states:

"For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and there will be famines and earthquakes in various places; all this is but the beginning of the sufferings." (Mt 24:7-8)

Christ next reiterates that his disciples will be hated for his name's sake and that they too will suffer being put to death. He further explains that there will be false prophets and that Judea will be laid waste as prophesied in the Old Testament book of Daniel. Next, he speaks of the coming tribulation, when the sun and moon will be darkened, and "the stars will fall from heaven," after which the "sign of the Son of man" will appear in heaven. As the people of Earth mourn, they will see the "Son of man coming on the clouds of heaven." Jesus then says, "Truly, I say to you, this generation will not pass away till all these things take place." He next exhorts his followers to be watchful of this day and tells them more parables. When Jesus is done speaking about these things, he tells his disciples that he will be taken away in two days' time, at the Passover, when he will be crucified. As Jesus is speaking, the chief priests and elders are gathering in the house of the high priest, Caiaphas, where they plot to arrest Jesus and kill him.

While Jesus is staying at Bethany, a woman with an alabaster jar approaches him and pours costly ointment over his head. This act incenses the disciples, who think it is a waste of money, which could have been given to the poor. Jesus responds that the woman has done a "beautiful thing" by preparing him for his burial. "For," said Jesus, "you always have the poor with you, but you will not always have me." (Mt 26:11) At this point, Judas approaches the priests and agrees to deliver Jesus to them for the sum of 30 pieces of silver.

On the first day of the Passover, Jesus and his disciples sit for their last supper together, at which Jesus tells the 12 that someone among them will shortly betray him. Judas singles himself out, and Jesus affirms that he knows it is Judas who will betray him. Jesus next picks up the bread, breaks it and passes it around, saying, "Take, eat; this is my body." He also lifts up his cup and gives it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Mt 26:28)

After singing a hymn, the group proceeds to the Mount of Olives, where Jesus tells them he will be "struck down" but will rise and go ahead of them to Galilee. He says that as he, their shepherd, is struck down, so the sheep will flee, but Peter objects



that he will never "fall away" from Jesus. Jesus assures Peter that he will indeed deny him. The group then proceeds to Gethsemane, where Jesus exhorts them to sit while he goes to pray, taking with him Peter, James and John. Jesus expresses regret at what is about to transpire, asking his Father in heaven to "let this cup pass" from him. Peter and the rest fall asleep, but Jesus wakes them and tells them that Judas is near with the authorities, who have come to arrest him. Judas informs the priests and elders that he will identify Jesus by giving him a kiss. After Judas does that, Peter takes out his sword and cuts off the ear of a priest's slave. Jesus tells Peter, "Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword." (Mt 26:52) Jesus further exhorts his followers to understand that what is about to happen was prophesied and must be fulfilled. At this point, the disciples run away.

Jesus is next led to the high priest Caiaphas, who castigates him and tears his robe, accusing Jesus of blasphemy when Jesus answers his question of whether or not he is the Christ. The scribes and elders present state that Jesus must be killed for blasphemy. Outside, Peter has followed Jesus, but, just as Jesus predicted, when Peter is identified, he denies that he ever knew Jesus, no less than three times.

In the morning, Jesus is bound and brought before the Roman governor Pilate. At this point, Judas becomes remorseful and tries to return the 30 silver pieces of "blood money." When the priests won't take back the money, Judas throws it to the ground, and then goes out and hangs himself. The money is used to buy a "potter's field" in which to bury "strangers," including Judas.

Meanwhile, Pilate is grilling Jesus over him being called "King of the Jews." Because it is a custom during the Passover time to release a prisoner, Pilate asks the crowd outside who to let go. The crowd shouts that they want the infamous criminal Barabbas released and that they want Jesus crucified. Pilate then takes some water in his hands and symbolically washes his hands of the blood of an innocent person. In response to his action, the crowd shouts, "His blood be on us and on our children!" Barabbas is released, while Jesus is scourged and prepared for crucifixion.

The soldiers remove Jesus's robe and put a scarlet one on him, as well as a crown of thorns on his head and a reed in his hand to serve as a scepter. Then they make fun of him, calling him, "King of the Jews," while they spit on him and beat him. Finally, they put his clothes back on him and take him to be crucified.

While they are proceeding to Golgotha, the soldiers compel a man called Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus's cross. They then give Jesus wine mixed with gall to drink, which he refuses. After they crucify him, they divide up his clothes, and they place a sign above his head reading, "This is Jesus the King of the Jews." (Mt 27:37) Two robbers are crucified on either side of him, they too joining in the abuse being heaped upon Jesus. The passersby also taunt him that he claimed he could tear down the temple and rebuild it in three days, but he cannot save himself. From the sixth to ninth hours after Jesus is crucified, the land becomes dark, and Jesus utters the words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46) He is given vinegar to drink, but shortly after, he dies.

At this point, Matthew writes:

"And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom; and the earth shook, and the rocks were split; the tombs were also opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many."

These supernatural events make many believers of the people present, including some of the soldiers who were persecuting Jesus. Eventually, a rich man named Joseph of Arimathea approaches Pilate and begs for Jesus's body, which he receives and lays to rest in his own tomb, rolling a rock in front of it. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of the Zebedee brothers, James and John, remain close to Jesus and outside his tomb. The Pharisees, remembering that Jesus had proclaimed he would rise again after three days, post a guard at the tomb and make sure the rock is sealed, so that his followers can't steal his body and pretend that he has risen. The next day, the two Marys approach the tomb, but an earthquake occurs, and an angel is found sitting on the rock he has rolled away from the tomb. The angel advises the Marys that Jesus has risen from the dead, at which point they run off in great joy. Jesus encounters them on the way and says, "Hail!" (Mt 28:9) The Marys fall to his feet, and he instructs them to go tell all his disciples that he has risen and that they will see him in Galilee. The priests, having discovered that the tomb is empty, pay soldiers to spread the rumor that the disciples have stolen the body, "and this story has been spread among the Jews to this day." (Mt 28:15)

The remaining disciples, minus Judas, journey to Galilee, where they find Jesus on the mountain, but are doubtful and afraid. Jesus tells them that he now has "all authority in heaven and on earth" and that they should preach the gospel all over the world. He then says that he will be with them "to the close of the age."

This is how the book of Matthew ends, with no mention of the ascension of Christ into heaven, as recorded in Mark and Luke. Like the ascension, there are many other events, themes or selections, called "pericopes," present in the other gospels, including John, that are lacking in Matthew. In Matthew's gospel, however, there are several pericopes that are not mentioned by the other evangelists. Concerning the parts or pericopes "peculiar" to Matthew and not found in the other gospels, the *Catholic Encyclopedia* ("Gospel of St. Matthew") states:

These are numerous, as Matthew has 330 verses that are distinctly his own. Sometimes long passages occur, such as those recording the Nativity and early Childhood (i, ii), the cure of the two blind men and one dumb man (ix, 27-34), the death of Judas (xxvii, 3-10), the guard placed at the Sepulchre (xxvii, 62-66), the imposture of the chief priests (xxviii, 11-15), the apparition of Jesus in Galilee (xxviii, 16-20), a great portion of the Sermon on the Mount (v, 17-37; vi, 1-8; vii, 12-23), parables (xiii, 24-30; 35-53; xxv, 1-13), the Last Judgment (xxv, 31-46), etc., and sometimes detached sentences, as in xxiii, 3, 28, 33; xxvii, 25, etc.... Those passages in which Matthew reminds us that facts in the life of Jesus are the fulfilment of the prophecies, are likewise noted as peculiar to him....

Despite the differences, a detailed comparison of the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke reveals that these three are not independent of each other, which is why they are grouped together as "synoptics."

## The Gospel According to Mark

The general order of all three of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, proceeds through Jesus's life from "his birth, baptism, temptation, ministry, passion, death and then resurrection." For a variety of reasons, including the fact that nearly the entirety of Mark's gospel appears within Matthew, as well as a number of germane similarities between the texts, many scholars have concluded that Mark was the first gospel and that Matthew and Luke based theirs upon his. Other scholars aver that Mark is founded upon another document, "Ur-Markus," that is the basis also of Matthew and Luke. Between the gospels of Matthew and Mark appear "many points of resemblance in the construction of sentences," as well as similarities in "their mode of expression, often unusual, and in short phrases," while in certain pericopes "the greater part of the terms are identical." (CE, "The Gospel of Matthew")

Although there are many striking similarities that demonstrate common source texts, there are also details in each gospel that differ significantly in some places, with serious chronological discrepancies and other difficulties as well. Much shorter than Matthew's, the gospel of Mark contains several important differences, including in the language, story details and chronology of events. The differences between Mark and Matthew include the omission of 31 verses in Mark, as at 1:23-28; 4:26-29; 7:32-36; 8:22-26; 9:39, 40 and 12:41-44. The pericopes present in Mark but not in Matthew include the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples in Jerusalem and the ascension. Yet another difference can be seen at Matthew 5:15, with a passage from the Sermon on the Mount, which Mark (4:21) places in a different setting. In another instance of disparity between the texts, three of Jesus's miracles appear together at Matthew 8:1-5 but are set apart in Mark (1:40-44; 3:12, 5:43, 7:36, 8:30, 9:9).

The chronological order between Matthew and Mark differs in several places, such as at Matthew 8:23-9:9, depicting events that are given a different arrangement at Mark 4:36-41, 5:1-17 and 2:1-12. In Matthew, Jesus gets in a boat, calms the storm, heals the demoniac, goes back to Galilee and heals the paralytic. Mark parallels Matthew up to the point of the healing of the paralytic, which he puts much earlier in the narrative at 2:1-12, long before Jesus gets into the boat.

Another serious chronological discrepancy occurs in the story of Jesus raising Jairus's daughter from the dead (Mt 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk 8:40-56). As evangelical Christian Tom Dixon relates:

Mark and Luke assert that Jairus approached Jesus when he and the disciples got out of the boat near Capernaum, as crowds came rushing up to him. Matthew, on the other hand, states that it was while John the Baptist's disciples were talking with Jesus at Matthew's house.

Yet another example occurs with the story of Jesus overturning the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. In Matthew, Jesus enters Jerusalem, cleanses the temple, spends the night in Bethany and the next day curses the fig tree, which immediately withers. (Mt 21:12) In Mark, however, Jesus enters Jerusalem, spends the night in Bethany, curses the fig tree, cleanses the temple, and then the next day the disciples notice the fig tree is withered. (Mk 11:11-21) Moreover, all the synoptists place the cleansing of the temple at the *end* of their gospels, while John puts it at the *beginning* of the story.

In addition, while Matthew records more of Jesus's sayings and speeches, Mark is more detailed about the events or narrative of the story, adding more or less vague references to time and place. Matthew, however, is more precise about other facts, and it is generally agreed that Matthew's Greek is more elegant and refined than Mark's. Furthermore, it appears that Matthew was concerned with painting Jesus and the disciples in a more favorable light, omitting Jesus's displays of anger (Mk 3:5) and other overwrought emotionality (Mk 3:21), as well as the evident dimwittedness, hardheartedness and trepidation of the disciples (Mk 6:52; 8:17-21; 9:32). Matthew seems more aware of the (Jewish) readers' sensibilities concerning religious customs, omitting, for instance, the "Saying of the Lord" at Mark 2:27: "And he said to them: 'The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath.'" Concerning these differences between Matthew and Mark, the Catholic Encyclopedia ("Gospel of St. Matthew") states, "Omissions or alterations of this kind are very numerous."

The last verses of Mark, 16:9-20, are absent in several versions of the Bible, including the Revised Standard Version (RSV), which appends them in a footnote. This omitted pericope concerns the appearance of the risen Christ to Mary Magdalene and others. The RSV also omits some sentences at the end of Mark 16:8, referring to Jesus sending out "the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal life." Also omitted in the RSV is the ascension, which is included in the King James Version (KJV). The RSV also places Mark 11:26 in a footnote, while the KJV puts it in the text. The KJV was translated from a handful of biblical texts dating to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, while the RSV utilized the most ancient Greek texts. Fundamentalist Christians nevertheless believe that the King James Version is "inspired" and "inerrant," regardless of the fact that the texts upon which it was based differ in many places from the earliest Greek manuscripts, which were not available during the translation of the King James Bible. The fact that various versions of the Bible differ from each other is very significant and needs to be kept in mind.

### **The Gospel According to Luke**

The gospel of Luke also contains many similarities to the gospels of Matthew and Mark, such that a core text used by all three has been posited. The most well known material common to all three synoptics and missing in John includes:

- The temptation
- The calming of the storm
- The healing of Jairus's daughter
- The plucking of the grain on the sabbath
- The healing of the man with the withered hand
- The naming of the disciples
- The parable of the sower
- The parable of the mustard seed
- The transfiguration
- The "second" cleansing of the temple
- The foretelling of Christ's second coming
- Judas's betraying overture to the priests
- The appearance of Christ before the Sanhedrin
- The darkness descending upon Christ's crucifixion

It should be noted that all three lists of the disciples differ from one another and vary in different manuscripts as well. There are other discrepancies between the gospels, including in the genealogies and the birth accounts, entirely absent in Mark, and in Luke diverging in several details from Matthew. In addition, Luke, the longest of the

gospels, includes several important pericopes not found in the other evangelists, such as:

- The birth of John the Baptist (Lk 1:57-80)
- The annunciation of Jesus's birth (Lk 1:26-38)
- The shepherds in the field (Lk 2:8-20)
- Jesus's circumcision (Lk 2:21)
- Jesus being presented in the temple (Lk 2:22-38)
- Jesus teaching in the temple as a youth (Lk 2:40-52)
- The woman with the alabaster jar washing Jesus's feet with her tears, etc. (Lk 7:36-50)
- The disciples James and John threatening to destroy a Samaritan village by bringing down fire from heaven (Lk 9:54)
- The story of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37)
- The healing of the 10 lepers (Lk 17:11-19)

As an example of other disparities between the gospels, not only does Luke place Jesus's Sermon on a *plain*, rather than the *mount* of Matthew, but he also recounts only *four* beatitudes (Lk 6:20-25), whereas Matthew gives *eight* (Mt 5:3-12), and even these are significantly different from each other "in general form and conceptions." Matthew often arranges Jesus's speeches and sayings thematically or topically, while in Luke they appear scattered about.

When discussing the differences between the gospels, it is useful to consider the beginning paragraph of Luke:

Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely, for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed. (Luke 1:1-4)

Luke thus states that "many" had compiled narratives of Christ's life before him. The Greek term here for "closely" can also be translated as "accurately" and, combined with Luke's statement that he is writing "an orderly account," indicates he was aware of the chronological difficulties of the other narratives, which likely included not only canonical but also apocryphal gospels. In fact, the chronology of events differs widely in some places between Luke and the other gospels. For instance, in addition to the problem of Jairus's daughter, previously mentioned, the story of the centurion's servant being healed by Jesus appears in Matthew (8:5-13) *before* the sabbath-breaking grain plucking and the healing of the man's withered hand, while in Luke (7:1-10) the servant is healed *after* these other two occurrences. Also, Mark (1:16-45) and Luke (4:31-44; 5:1-16) differ in the order of the sequence of pericopes in which Jesus calls his disciples, the ministry in Capernaum, the casting out of a demon in the synagogue and the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, among other things. Moreover, in his account of Jesus's transfiguration (9:28-36), Luke claims it took place *eight* days after "these sayings," whereas Matthew and Mark put it *six* days after. In general, Luke has a similar chronology to that of Mark, although disagreeing in a number of details, but nevertheless suggesting that Luke followed Mark rather than Matthew.

## The Gospel According to John

The Gospel of John is located last in the canon but in early times was also placed directly after Matthew. The tone and structure of John's gospel differ significantly from the other three, which is why the latter are categorized together as synoptics, while John is not included in this group. The most noticeable difference between John and the other evangelists is that his gospel takes place mainly in Jerusalem and Judea, whereas the others focus on Christ's advent in the north of Palestine. John also appears to be more concerned with Jesus's sayings and speeches rather than his deeds and miracles, concentrating particularly on Jesus's interactions with the Jewish authorities, and displaying a more pronounced anti-Jewish tone and sentiment than the other gospels. John's gospel is frequently out of sync with the synoptics, so the tendency is to view it not as a strict history or biography but mainly a theological text. In fact, John is considered the most theological of the gospels, specifically highlighting Jesus's divinity, and evidently serving as a response to those who denied Jesus was God. There is a longstanding debate as to the true authorship of the gospel of John called the "Johannine problem," which includes not only denials beginning in antiquity that John wrote the gospel but also the fact that John speaks of "the Jews" as if he is not one himself.

The differences between John and the other gospels include a number of important pericopes present in John but not in the other evangelists:

- Jesus as God's Word or "Logos" (Jn 1:1-4)
- The marriage in Cana (Jn 2:1-11)
- The "first" cleansing of the temple (Jn 2:12-25)
- The healing pool of Bethesda (Jn 5:2-15)
- The raising from the dead of Lazarus (Jn 11:1-44)
- Jesus's mother, Mary, appearing at the cross (Jn 19:25-27)
- The side piercing (Jn 19:31-37)

There are many other pericopes in John that do not appear in the others. Some of the Johannine pericopes - such as the raising of Lazarus from the dead - are so significant it is difficult to believe that the others would not record them, if they had been aware of them. It is logical to ask if these verses were added later for specific purposes. Moreover, John does not mention the transfiguration, even though he was a witness to it! In his quest to demonstrate the divinity of Jesus, it would be highly logical for John to have reported the transfiguration, if it really happened. Nor does John mention the ascension, which is equally curious in light of his desire to reveal Christ's divinity.

As concerns chronological discrepancies, John's gospel presents the clearing of the temple at the beginning, while the others put it at the end. The solution to this problem has been to suggest that there was more than one cleansing, but some critics find this proposal unsatisfactory. Another problem arises in examining the language used to recount the speeches of Jesus and other gospel characters, as they are depicted in John's gospel in the "peculiar Johannine style," which differs significantly from that of the synoptic gospels. The solution proposed is that these speeches were originally given in Aramaic and thus the translations would be different, depending on the author.

As is the case with the synoptics, there is doubt as to the authenticity of several verses in John. For example, at John 5:3-4, regarding the pool of Bethsaida/Bethesda, the last half of the first sentence and the entire fourth verse are missing



from the three oldest manuscripts of the New Testament and are therefore omitted in several translations, including the RSV, which appends them in a footnote. For the same reason, the authenticity of the story of the "woman caught in the act of adultery" found at John 7:53-8:11 is called into question, not being found in the oldest manuscripts and likewise omitted in some translations such as the RSV. The authenticity of the entire 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of John has also been questioned, as it appears from the text itself that the 30<sup>th</sup> verse of the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter was meant to be the ending. If this 21<sup>st</sup> chapter is in fact an interpolation, it would seem that it was added in order to establish the writer, John, as "immortal," since he is the "beloved disciple" specifically discussed at the end as "remaining until Jesus comes." It is possible that this passage was added because the gospel appeared so late as to cast doubt on the claim that it was written by the apostle John. Biblical inerrantists, however, deny that there is anything unusual about this chapter being added after the seeming ending in the 20<sup>th</sup> chapter.

### **Textual Harmonization**

Over the centuries, a complex process called "harmonization" has been developed by which the problems and differences in the gospels are reconciled, typically using five "principles of harmonization." Many of these problems have been known for centuries, as even several of the Church fathers attempted to explain them. The difficulty of harmonization is profound, particularly when the many different manuscripts of the New Testament are factored into the puzzle, with upwards of 150,000 "variant readings," including not only differences in wording but also errors. Regarding these "variant readings" in the New Testament, one Christian authority, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* ("Text, NT," v. 4; 594-595), remarks:

The NT [New Testament] is now known, in whole or in part, in nearly five thousand Greek MSS [manuscripts] alone. Every one of these handwritten copies differs from every other one. In addition to these Greek MSS, the NT has been preserved in more than ten thousand MSS of the early versions...and in thousands of quotations of the Church Fathers. These MSS of the versions and quotations of the Church Fathers differ from one another just as widely as do the Greek MSS. Only a fraction of this great mass of material has been fully collated and carefully studied. Until this task is completed, the uncertainty regarding the text of the NT will remain.

*It has been estimated that these MSS and quotations differ among themselves between 150,000 and 250,000 times. The actual figure is, perhaps, much higher. A study of 150 Greek MSS of the Gospel of Luke has revealed more than 30,000 different readings... It is safe to say that **there is not one sentence in the NT in which the MS tradition is wholly uniform.***

*Many thousands of the variants which are found in the MSS of the NT were put there deliberately. They are not merely the result of error or of careless handling of the text. Many were created for theological or dogmatic reasons... It is because the books of the NT are religious books, sacred books, canonical books, that they were changed to conform to what the copyist believed to be the true reading. (Emphasis added.)*

The Interpreter's Dictionary continues with a discussion of the more significant of the 64 papyrus fragments of New Testament manuscripts now known, one small fragment speculatively dated to the middle of the second century with the rest from



the end of the second to the eighth centuries. All of these fragments, which constitute about 40 percent of the New Testament, were found in Egypt "and undoubtedly were written there." Concerning these fragments, the Interpreter's Dictionary (596) states:

Many of them are too small to be of much value textually. Their cumulative evidence, however, is of value. They prove conclusively that in Egypt, particularly in the second, third, and fourth centuries, no one type of NT text was dominant. In those early centuries many types of text flourished side by side.

Thus, we know that even in early times there was no uniformity of the New Testament manuscripts.

The editors of *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (v. VI; 416) are likewise explicit in their pronouncements concerning the many "imperfections," "alterations" and "divergent nature" of New Testament texts and copies:

Among our earliest manuscripts, some show signs of being copied with workmanlike care...while others appear to have been copied by rather careless scribes... Scribal habits, including errors and alterations, need to be analyzed carefully. Commonly they are divided into two categories: unintentional and intentional alterations.

Regarding the gospels, theologian Dr. Bart Ehrman, author of *Misquoting Jesus*, remarks: "We don't have the originals! We have only error-ridden copies..."

New Testament scholarship has thus shown that the ancient texts used in the translation of the Bible vary greatly, and it has further sought to disentangle the original texts, or autographs, from the many thousands of alterations made by subsequent scribes. In other words, we do not possess the original gospels, and it is an indisputable fact that even the most ancient copies of the New Testament have been worked over repeatedly by a number of hands and do not agree with each other in many places, making the task of determining what was in the original extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The fact is that in many cases we are simply not dealing with the original words intended by the authors of the canonical gospels, which is to say that we don't really know what they intended to convey. In such an atmosphere, it is logical to ask whether or not the Bible as we have it could possibly be considered the "inerrant word of God." The usual response to this dilemma is to assert that not only were the evangelists under the guidance of the Holy Spirit but so too were the copyists who made all these alterations. This solution creates a new problem in that it suggests that the Holy Spirit made so many errors to begin with that the texts required many corrections by the subsequent copyists.

It is obvious from these facts why there has been such an enormous amount of New Testament scholarship and why a precise process of harmonization has been developed to deal with the numerous discrepancies in the gospel accounts of Christ's life. Some examples of harmonization have already been given, but the process is ongoing, as the divergences are overwhelming and seemingly insoluble in some cases. As another example of working with the principles of harmonization to overcome these discrepancies, one explanation for the differences in chronology between the gospels is that Matthew organized his according to subject, rather than

chronologically, combining "facts and precepts of a like nature." While the thematic approach to gospel chronology is satisfying enough regarding some of the problems, still others are not so easily solved, such as the raising of Jairus's daughter. It is evident from this narrative that neither Matthew nor Luke was arranging the event thematically; yet, they depict it as having occurred at different times. Both of them cannot be correct, unless the daughter was raised twice, a scenario that some literalists have proposed. Many people, however, will not find that answer to be satisfactory, and the only logical conclusion is that one or the other of the texts is incorrect.

Concerning some of the most blatant discrepancies and the attempts at their harmonization, evangelical writers Botti, Dixon and Steinman remark:

...well-meaning Christians posit absurd theories to explain gospel phenomena that conflict with their view that the gospels are chronologically arranged. As a result, Jesus is claimed to have raised Jairus' daughter twice from the dead, was twice crowned with thorns, was denied by Peter six or more times, and so on.

Regarding the messy ordering of the temple-cleansing and fig tree-cursing pericopes found in Matthew and Mark, Tom Dixon comments, "It is not hard to imagine that Matthew would want to simplify the complexity of Mark's account by grouping the cursing and discovery of the fig tree in one pericope." That reasoning may suffice to explain the fig-tree pericope ordering, but what about the rest of the chronology, even in those particular verses? Does Jesus spend the night in Bethany *before* or *after* he cleanses the temple? The solution to this problem is *both*: Jesus spends the night in Bethany both before and after he cleanses the temple.

Another difficulty arises when Jesus is anointed with oil by a woman in the house of someone named Simon. Matthew, Mark and John place the anointment at the end of their gospels, in Bethany, while Luke places it early in his gospel as having occurred in Galilee. The solution has been to suggest that Jesus was anointed twice in two different houses owned by two people named Simon. As another instance of harmonization, in order to explain why, in the exorcism of the demoniac, Matthew refers to "the country of the Gadarenes" whereas Mark and Luke call it "the country of the Gerasenes," apologists claim that these names refer to two different cities in that country. In another example, it is claimed that the sermon on the *mount* (Mt 5-7) and the sermon on the *plain* (Lk 6) are "probably different discourses."

In analyzing attempts at harmonizing the widely diverging gospels, apologists Botti, et al., further state:

The Evangelical believer needs to approach the synoptic gospels with the clear understanding that each author has intentionally omitted certain things that the other authors did not, and that each author intentionally re-arranged certain passages for didactic purposes. As many scholars have recognized, when we approach the gospels with this understanding, many of the apparent chronological problems evaporate.

Yet what is most important is that believers in inerrancy train their eye to discern when an author is clearly making a claim to chronology and when he is not. It is not enough to wave off every issue of apparent chronological contradiction with a simple appeal to topical rearrangement, as many Evangelical scholars seem to do. We need to have sharper answers.

The methodology of harmonization has been in the works for so many centuries and by so many individuals that there is practically no objection that it does not cover. Much clever thought and many machinations have been accorded to the discipline of harmonization, and euphemistic terms have been used to describe the chronological discrepancies, for example, calling them "dislocations" rather than errors. There are many courses on apologetics designed specifically to overcome objections. Regardless of these proposed solutions, the question is nevertheless begged as to why God would write an "infallible" and "inerrant" Word so full of problems and difficulties that it has required many centuries to iron them all out. It seems logical and rational to ask, could it not be that the fallible human beings who wrote, edited and translated the gospels simply made mistakes? Naturally, this position cast doubts on the concept of biblical inerrancy, but in our quest for honesty and truthfulness - the hallmarks of religiousness - can we really afford to ignore this logic?

### **The Gospel Dates**

Because of the lack of original texts, it has been very difficult to date the gospels as to when they were written or even when they first appear in the historical record, as these two dates may differ. The canonical gospels have been dated variously from shortly after the crucifixion, which is traditionally placed around 30 AD/CE, to as late as a century and a half afterwards. The current accepted dates are as follows, from the earliest by conservative, believing scholars to the latest by liberal and sometimes secular scholars:

Matthew: 37 to 100 AD

Mark: 40 to 73 AD

Luke: 50-100 AD

John: 65-100 AD

Many reasons have been given for these dates, from one end of the spectrum to the other, the earliest dates being based on the events recounted in the gospels themselves. The later dates are based also on this timeframe, but the difference is that they account for the mention of the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, which occurred in 70 AD/CE. According to this scholarship, the gospels must have been written after the devastation because they refer to it. However, conservative believers maintain the early dates and assert that the destruction of the temple and Judea mentioned in the gospels constitutes "prophecy," demonstrating Jesus's divine powers.

Based on the dating difficulties and other problems, many scholars and researchers over the centuries have become convinced that the gospels were not written by the people to whom they are ascribed. These individuals assert that the belief in the authorship of the gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John is a matter of faith, as such a belief is not merited in light of detailed textual and historical analysis. In reality, it was a fairly common practice in ancient times to attribute falsely to one person a book or letter written by another, and this *pseudepigraphical* attribution of authorship was especially rampant with religious texts, occurring with several Old Testament figures and Church fathers, for example.

We know for a fact - admitted even by the authoritative *Catholic Encyclopedia* - that the titles attached to the gospels, "The Gospel According to Matthew," etc., are not original to the texts but were added later. Indeed, the term "according to" in the original Greek, *kata*, could be interpreted to suggest that it was understood that the

texts were relating a *tradition* of these individuals, rather than having been *written* by them. In reality, none of the gospel writers identify themselves as characters in the gospel story. As one glaring example of this detachment, it is claimed that Matthew was recording events he witnessed, but the gospel attributed to him begins before he had been called by Jesus and speaks of Matthew in the third person. If Matthew wrote his gospel, why does he describe his meeting with Jesus in this manner: "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office?" (Mt 9:9) Why does he speak of himself in the third person and not even state that he was there or that he had witnessed anything?

Furthermore, there are places in the New Testament that indicate the books were written long after the purported events, such as when the text says, "In the days of John the Baptist," which indicates that the writer is set far ahead in time and is looking back. Regarding Jesus's body being stolen, Matthew's gospel says, "this story has been spread among the Jews to this day." The phrase "to this day" indicates that the writer is talking about a significant length of time, not shortly after the resurrection as some have attempted to place the composition and emergence of this gospel. Moreover, we do not have any mention in the historical record of this story having been spread among the Jews until the *second* century. It is possible that this particular verse was not added until that time, which means that it is not original to the gospel and that Matthew certainly is not its author.

Moreover, even the latest of the accepted gospel dates are not based on evidence from the historical, literary or archaeological record, and over the centuries a more "radical" school of thought has placed the creation or emergence of the canonical gospels at a much later date, more towards the end of the second century. It is not within the scope of this present work to examine this alternative argument; suffice it to say that this important scholarship is based on a close examination of the most ancient Christian texts, the minutiae of which can be studied in Walter Cassels's extensive analysis *Supernatural Religion*. The result is that there is good reason to include these late dates in our investigation, and doing so may yield some surprising results as to the true authorship of the gospels.

Engaging for a moment in "outrageous speculation" to demonstrate how alternative dating of at least one of the gospels may provide solutions to outstanding problems, we will take as an example the gospel of Luke, which is addressed to "most excellent Theophilus." In dating Luke, it should first be noted that nowhere does the author of the gospel attributed to him identify himself as the Luke who was a companion of Paul, mentioned in three Pauline epistles. In fact, other than the title "the Gospel according to Luke" - which is admitted by all authorities to be an addition and not original to the text - Luke's name does not appear in *any* gospel. Despite outward appearances, it is by no means certain that the author of Luke, who was neither an apostle nor a known disciple, was anywhere near in time the events he is recording. When we factor in the Acts of the Apostles, which is regarded as having been written by the same person as the gospel of Luke and which likewise addresses "Theophilus," a whole new can of worms is opened, as there is also no record of that book having been written or appearing before the end of the second century. Furthermore, there is no mention in the historical record of any "Theophilus" earlier than the bishop of Antioch (fl. 177 AD), and the identity of Luke's Theophilus has never been explained adequately.

Some have sought to explain this name "Theophilus" as more of an epithet, meaning "Lover of God"; hence, it has been suggested that Luke was addressing his text to "God-lovers" in general. Among other reasons, the fact that Acts also begins with a

greeting to this "Theophilus" makes it more likely that it is a name of an individual. In the original Greek, Luke calls Theophilus "*kratistos*," a term used biblically with the following meaning, per Strong's Biblical Concordance:

- 1) mightiest, strongest, noblest, most illustrious, best, most excellent
- a) used in addressing men of prominent rank or office

Concerning Theophilus, Christian biblical commentator David Brown (1871) remarks, "It is likely [that] 'Theophilus' was chief magistrate of some city in Greece or Asia Minor." Could not this "chief magistrate" be a *bishop*, and this "city in Asia Minor" be *Antioch*? Especially since it was asserted by ancient authorities that Luke himself was from Antioch? It is possible that Luke's Theophilus is indeed the bishop of Antioch, who was a pagan convert to Christianity, fitting in with Luke's assertions concerning his instruction in Christian doctrine.

The fact that Luke is superseding "many" narratives also fits in with the idea that the gospel was composed at the end of the second century, as it is known there were *many* gospels by that time. Trying to fit Luke into the middle or end of the first century, however, is an endeavor rife with problems, including that there certainly were not "many" gospels in circulation or even in existence by that time.

When one considers the amount of time, effort and resources put into New Testament studies and criticism over the centuries, it is understandable that the wagons would circle whenever someone comes along with suggestions seemingly out of the ordinary, such as asserting a late date for the gospels. One must ask, however, if there is no clear scientific evidence of the existence of these gospels before that time, would it not be more honest to entertain at least the *possibility* of their having been composed at a later date? One reason why considering this possibility is so important is precisely because there *has* been so much time, effort and resources put into NT studies. Some of the hardest nuts to be cracked exist largely because of the early dates attached to these texts.

## Extrabiblical Testimony

The problem with the discrepancies and dates of the canonical gospels suggests that these texts are not entirely reliable biographies of Jesus Christ. It would thus be useful to turn our attention elsewhere for additional clues as to who Jesus was. However, when we go looking for material outside of the New Testament that might validate the events described there, we come up empty-handed. In other words, there is no contemporaneous evidence outside of the New Testament to attest to Christ's advent and ministry - or *even his existence*. This fact is singularly astounding, in consideration of the repeated assertions in the gospels that Christ was famed far and wide, drawing great crowds because of his miraculous healings, causing a fracas with the local and imperial authorities, and, upon his death, creating astonishing and awful miracles and wonders the world had never seen before, including not only an earthquake and the darkening of the sun and moon, but also dead people rising from their graves and visiting people in town.<sup>4</sup> One would think that if all these things happened, someone somewhere would have written about

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<sup>4</sup> These "great crowds" and "multitudes," along with Jesus's fame, are repeatedly referred to in the gospels, including at the following: Mt 4:23-25, 5:1, 8:1, 8:18, 9:8, 9:31, 9:33, 9:36, 11:7, 12:15, 13:2, 14:1, 14:13, 14:22, 15:30, 19:2, 21:9, 26:55; Mk 1:28, 10:1; Lk 4:14, 4:37, 5:15, 14:25, etc.

them. But, inspecting the literary, historical and archaeological record produces *nothing*. The dearth of evidence is not for want of suitable reporters, as during the first century the following historians and writers lived and recorded life in and around the Mediterranean, including in some of the very places that Jesus and his disciples moved about:

Aulus Perseus (60 AD)  
 Columella (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD)  
 Dio Chrysostom (c. 40-c. 112 AD)  
 Justus of Tiberius (c. 80 AD)  
 Livy (59 BC-17 AD)  
 Lucanus (fl. 63 AD)  
 Lucius Florus (1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup>-cent. AD)  
 Petronius (d. 66 AD)  
 Phaedrus (c. 15 BC-c. 50 AD)  
 Philo Judaeus (20 BC-50 AD)  
 Phlegon (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD)  
 Pliny the Elder (23?-69 AD)

Plutarch (c. 46-c. 119 AD)  
 Pomponius Mela (40 AD)  
 Rufus Curtius (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD)  
 Quintilian (c. 35-c. 100 AD)  
 Quintus Curtius (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD)  
 Seneca (4 BC?-65 AD)  
 Silius Italicus (c. 25-101 AD)  
 Statius Caelicius (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD)  
 Theon of Smyrna (c. 70-c.135 AD)  
 Valerius Flaccus (1<sup>st</sup> cent. AD)  
 Valerius Maximus (fl. c. 20 AD)

Oddly enough, not one of these writers recorded any of the amazing and earth-shaking events reported in the gospels, even though this period was one of the best documented in history and even though some of them lived or traveled in the same area in which the gospel story was set. Neither Jesus nor his disciples are mentioned by any of them. There is not a word about Christianity - nothing.

We do find, however, very short but much touted passages in the works of four writers of the late first to early second century, Josephus (93 AD), Pliny (110 AD), Suetonius (110 AD) and Tacitus (107 AD).<sup>5</sup> The value and/or authenticity of these passages is disputed and questionable. In any event, they represent *traditions* and appear too late to serve as eyewitness accounts demonstrating that any of the gospel events happened at any time in history.

This deficiency of historical references to the greatest man who ever lived and who was famed far and wide has made many people wonder about the story itself, causing them to doubt the most fantastic elements, including the bulk of Christ's signs of divinity. In order to add to our picture of who Jesus was, we will therefore need to inquire elsewhere.

### **Who are Elijah and Elisha?**

We cannot look to contemporary extrabiblical evidence to determine who Jesus really was. We may, however, follow certain internal clues that might give us some ideas. For example, in Matthew 11, when discussing who people say he is, Jesus's disciples respond that some believe he is Elijah. Jesus denies this identification and replies that John the Baptist is Elijah instead. Who was Elijah? Why does he appear with Moses next to Jesus during one of Christ's most miraculous events, the Transfiguration?

In the Old Testament (2 Kings 2:11), the esteemed Jewish prophet Elijah ended his earthly career by being taken up into heaven alive, such that "the Jews expected he would return just before the advent of the Messiah, whom he would prepare the

<sup>5</sup> See "Further Recommended Reading" for more on this subject.



minds of the Israelites to receive." (*Blue Letter Bible*, "Elijah") In the last book before the New Testament, the prophet Malachi ("My messenger") says:

"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and ordinances that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.

"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and smite the land with a curse." (Mal 4:4-5)

Thus, in the biblical book, chapter and verses directly preceding the gospel of Matthew it is said that Elijah would appear "before the great and terrible day of the Lord," an interpreted reference to Jesus Christ. Hence, Elijah is the messiah's forerunner, the same as John the Baptist.

Concerning the transfiguration scene in the gospels, which places both Elijah and Moses on either side of Jesus, Christian commentator Matthew Henry (1706-1714) states:

These two were Moses and Elias [Elijah], men very eminent in their day. They had both fasted forty days and forty nights, as Christ did, and wrought other miracles, and were both remarkable at their going out of the world as well as in their living in the world. Elias was carried to heaven in a fiery chariot, and died not. The body of Moses was never found, possibly it was preserved from corruption, and reserved for this appearance. The Jews had great respect for the memory of Moses and Elias, and therefore they came to witness of him, they came to carry tidings concerning him to the upper world. In them the law and the prophets honoured Christ, and bore testimony to him. Moses and Elias appeared to the disciples; they saw them, and heard them talk, and, either by their discourse or by information from Christ, they knew them to be Moses and Elias; glorified saints shall know one another in heaven. They talked with Christ. Note, Christ has communion with the blessed, and will be no stranger to any of the members of that glorified corporation. Christ was now to be sealed in his prophetic office, and therefore these two great prophets were fittest to attend him, as transferring all their honour and interest to him; for in these last days God speaks to us by his Son, Heb. 1:1. (BLB, "Commentary on Matthew 17")

Hence, Moses and Elijah appear next to Jesus in order to confer their authority on him, and, therefore, as the voice of God commands at Matthew 17:5, we should "listen to him." Regarding these events, David Brown remarks:

Moses represented "the law," Elijah "the prophets," and both together the whole testimony of the Old Testament Scriptures, and the Old Testament saints, to Christ; now not borne in a book, but by living men, not to a coming, but a come Messiah, visibly, for they "appeared," and audibly, for they "spake." (BLB, "Commentary on Matthew 17")

Jesus is made to appear talking with Moses in order to show that he is the fulfillment of Mosaic law, while Elijah is there in order to demonstrate that Jesus is his heir, i.e., the messiah, and the fulfillment of the prophets. As Jesus says at Matthew 5:17, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them." Furthermore, by God's voice booming from the



heavens, Jesus's place as His Son is exalted higher than the law and the prophets. The scene also serves to illustrate that Jesus could not *be* Elijah, as was suggested by some in the gospel story, because Elijah is there with him. If, as Jesus says, John the Baptist is Elijah, then logically Jesus would be equivalent to Elijah's Old Testament successor, Elisha. Indeed, as "Elisha" means "God is salvation," so too does "Jesus." Who is Elisha? Why would he be comparable to Jesus himself? Let us look at the events in the life of Elisha in comparison to that of Jesus. Elisha's life, it should be noted, is portrayed in the Old Testament in greater detail than that of Elijah, which indicates that he has some importance.

<b>Elisha</b>	<b>Jesus</b>
Anointed or <i>christed</i> by his forerunner, Elijah. (1 Kings 19:16)	Baptized or "cleansed" by his forerunner, John. (Mt 3:13)
Associated specifically with the number 12. (1 Kings 19:19)	Has a circle of 12 disciples. (Mt 10:2)
Immediately leaves his mother and father to follow Elijah. (1 Kings 19:20)	Directs disciples to immediately leave their parents in order to follow him. (Mt 4:22)
Goes to Gilgal ("a wheel, rolling"). (2 Kings 2:1)	Goes to Galilee (Heb: "Galiyl": "circuit") and Golgotha (Heb: "galal": "to roll").
Appears in Bethel ("house of God"). (2 Kings 2:2)	Appears in Bethlehem ("house of bread").
Goes to Jericho. (2 Kings 2:4)	Goes to Jericho. (Mk 10:46)
Takes on the mantle of Elijah (John). (2 Kings 2:13)	Takes on the mantle of John (Elijah).
Crosses the Jordan river by miraculously parting the waters. (2 Kings 2:14)	Crosses the sea of Galilee by miraculously walking on the water. (Mt 14:24)
Curses some boys, destroying them. (2 Kings 2:24)	Curses a fig tree, destroying it. (Mt 21:9)
Replenishes the land with water. (2 Kings 3:20)	Gives the woman at the well the "living water." (Jn 4:10-11) Replenishes the "heart" with "living water." (Jn 7:38)
Miraculously increases oil to fill empty jars. (2 Kings 4:1-6)	Miraculously turns water in jars into wine. (2:7-9)
Causes an old woman to conceive miraculously. (2 Kings 4:14)	Is the product of a miraculous conception.
Called the "man of God." (2 Kings 4:16)	Called the "son of God."
Prays to the Lord in a room with the door shut. (2 Kings 4:33)	Specifically instructs on prayer to the Lord in a room with the door shut. (Mt 6:6)
Raises a child from the dead. (2 Kings 4:34)	Raises a child from the dead. (Mt 9:25)
Miraculously feeds the multitudes, starting with small amounts of food and ending up with leftovers. (2 Kings 42-44)	Miraculously feeds the multitudes, starting with small amounts of food and ending up with leftovers. (Mt 15:34-37)
Heals a leper. (2 Kings 5:12-14)	Heals lepers.
Restores sight to the blind. (2 Kings 6:20)	Restores sight to the blind.
Saves Israel from foreign invasions and influences; is Israel's savior. (2 Kings	Saves the lost sheep of Israel from foreign influences; is Israel's savior.

6:8-23; 9:1-3)	
Is threatened with death by Israel's king. (2 Kings 6:31)	Is threatened with death by Israel's king. (Mt 2:13)
Delivers Israel in a day of "good news." (Gk: "evangelias") (2 Kings 7:9)	Delivers Israel with his "good news." (Eng: "gospel"; Gk: "evangelion")
Predicts famine in Israel. (2 Kings 8:1)	Predicts famines and other disasters. (Mt 24:7)
The man of god wept. (2 Kings 8:11)	The son of God wept. (Jn 11:35)
Elisha's "servant" becomes king of Syria, "betrays" Israel. (2 Kings 8:13)	Jesus's disciple betrays him, the Lord of Israel.

As can be seen, the lives of these two figures, Elisha, the Old Testament man of God named "God saves," and Jesus, the New Testament son of God named "God saves," run very closely in several salient instances. At first glance, there also seem to be some serious differences between Elisha and the later Jesus, such as Elisha's display of wrath when he destroys boys and causes blindness and leprosy. Even here, however, Elisha and Jesus are alike, as in the non-canonical early Christian text depicting Christ's childhood, *The Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (c. 185 AD?), a "lost book of the Bible," Jesus is portrayed as an angry boy who kills and maims people. In one episode (3:1-3), a furious five-year-old Jesus calls the young son of Annas the scribe a "godless, brainless moron" and vows to make him "wither away," instantly killing him. In the next chapter, Jesus kills a boy who bumps into him. When the parents of the murdered child complain, Jesus causes them to go blind. (5:2) Jesus next sasses his stepfather Joseph when the latter goes to punish him for these deeds. When a teacher tells Joseph that he should commit Jesus to his care, the young savior laughs and remarks:

"Really, teacher, what my father has said to you is true. I am the Lord of this people and am here in your presence and have been born among you and am with you. I know where you are from and how many years there will be in your lives. I am telling you the truth, teacher, when you were born, I existed. And if you want to be a perfect teacher, listen to me and I will teach you wisdom which nobody knows except me and the one who sent me to you. For you are my disciple and I know you, how old you are and how old you will live to be. And when you see the cross my father has described, you will believe that everything I have said to you is true." (Bernhard, 6:4-7)

Throughout the *Infancy Gospel*, Jesus is portrayed as a belligerent and arrogant little boy, as well as a violent killer who soon makes everyone afraid of him. He is also depicted as the lord and savior who raises up a playmate who had fallen off a roof and died. (9:5) The boy Jesus further saves a man who had chopped his own foot off with an axe, and he creates clay birds that he miraculously animates, among other miracles. Even without using this non-canonical Christian text, Jesus's fiery personality can be seen in the gospel accounts, as at Mark 3:5 - "And he looked around at them in anger..." - and in the pericope of the moneychangers, where Jesus takes a whip and overturns their tables.

Considering these numerous, detailed and remarkable correspondences between Elisha ("God saves") and Jesus ("God saves"), it is fair to ask whether or not the gospel writers had in mind closely reproducing in Jesus the figure of Elisha and/or other Old Testament characters.

## Jesus as Fulfillment of Prophecy

In addition to various Old Testament characters serving to "prefigure" the person of Jesus Christ are the numerous Old Testament scriptures held up as "prophecies" of the messiah fulfilled in Christ. Over the centuries, in fact, since the story of Jesus began to be circulated, believers have appealed to these scriptures to demonstrate that he was indeed the messiah. These prophetic scriptures number in the hundreds, depending on the apologetic text consulted. When these scriptures deemed prophetic of the coming messiah are placed side by side with the characteristics and sayings of Jesus, as well as the events of his life, a startling and convincing comparison is apparent. Many of these comparisons or "prophecies," however, are highly tenuous and in reality have little if anything to do with the coming messiah; nor are they truly "prophecies." Indeed, it is not just the apologists but the gospel writers themselves, and perhaps interpolating later scribes, who have glommed onto OT scriptures that are *not* "prophecies," trying to make them appear to be predicting Jesus's advent. When the list is critically pared down, many fewer scriptures are possibly applicable.

The following chart highlights some of the better-known and more obvious scriptures illustrating the Old Testament "messianic prophecies" and their relationship to the New Testament gospel of Jesus. Most of these purportedly prophetic fulfillments are included because of the specific mention in the New Testament of "prophets," "prophecy" or otherwise identified by such phrases as "in fulfillment of scripture" or "it is written."

Old Testament	New Testament
Jewish tradition based on scriptural interpretation held that there would be a messiah from the house of David, descended from Abraham. (Gen. 12:3, 18:18; Is. 9:7)	In the genealogies of Matthew and Luke - which are not the same - Jesus is said to have descended from Abraham and David. (Mt 1:1; Lk 1:32-33; 3:34)
"Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Is. 7:14) "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (KJV)	"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way.... All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel.'" (Mt 1:18-23; Lk 1:27-31)
"The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." (Gen. 49:10) "But you, O Bethlehem, Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days." (Micah 5:2)	Jesus is a descendant of Judah. (Mt 2:6; Lk 3:33) After Jesus is born in Bethlehem, Herod asks the wise men where he is. They answer that he is in Bethlehem, "so it is written by the prophet: 'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.'" (Mt 2:1-6)
"When Israel was a child, I love him, and out of Egypt I called my son." (Hosea 11:1)	"And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of

	Egypt have I called my son." (Mt 2: 14-15)
"Thus says the Lord: 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are not.'" (Jer. 31:15)	"Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.'" (Mt 2:17-18)
"Therefore beware, and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for lo, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the boy shall be a Nazirite to God from birth; and he shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.'" (Judg 13:4-5)	"And he went and dwelt in a city called Nazareth, that what was spoken by the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He shall be called a Nazarene.'" (Mt 2:23)
"A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for God.'" (Is. 40:3)	"For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" (Mt 3:3) "He said, 'I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (Jn 1:23) "As it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the lord, make his paths straight.'" (Lk 3:3-6)
"I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son, today I have begotten you.'" (Ps. 2:7)	"...and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" (Mt 3:17)
"... In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations." (Is. 9:1-2)	"...and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 'The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles...'" (Mt 4:13-15)
"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief... "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed....	"That evening they brought to him many who were possessed with demons; and he cast out the spirits with a word, and healed all who were sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah, 'He took our infirmities and bore our diseases.'" (Mt 8:16-17)

"...yet he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors." (Is. 53:4-32)	
"Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me..." (Mal 3:1)	"This is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way before thee.'" (Mt 11:10; Lk 7:27)
"Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes." (Mal 4:5)	"For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John; and if you were willing to accept it, he is Elijah, who is to come." (Mt 11:13-14)
"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law." (Is. 42:1-4)	"...he healed them all, and ordered them not to make him known. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he shall proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not wrangle or cry aloud, nor will any one hear his voice in the streets; he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, till he brings justice to victory; and in his names will the Gentiles hope'." (Mt 12:15-21)
"I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old, things that we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us. We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation..." (Ps. 78:2-4)	"All this Jesus said to the crowds in parables; indeed he said nothing to them without a parable. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter what has been hidden since the foundation of the world.'" (Mt 13:34-35)
"Binding his foal to the vine and his ass's colt to the choice vine..." (Gen. 49:11) "Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass." (Zech. 9:9)	"So they took branches of palm trees and went out to meet him, crying, 'Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord, even the King of Israel!' And Jesus found a young ass and sat upon it; as it is written, 'Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on an ass's colt!'" (Jn 12:13-14; Mt 21:2-5)
"And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day." (Zech. 14:21) "Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? (Jer. 7:11)	"And Jesus entered the temple of God and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, 'It is written, "My house shall be called a house of prayer"; but you make it a den of robbers.'" (Mt 21:12-13)
"I thank thee that thou hast answered me and hast become my salvation [Yeshuwah]. The stone which the	"Jesus [Yeshua] said to them, 'Have you never read in the scriptures: "The very stone which the builders rejected has

builders rejected has become the head of the corner." (Ps. 118:21-22)	become the head of the corner..." (Mt 21:42)
"...and upon the wing of abominations shall come one who makes desolate, until the decreed end is poured out on the desolator." (Dan. 9:27) "Forces from him shall appear and profane the temple and fortress, and shall take away the continual burnt offering. And they shall set up the abomination that makes desolate." (Dan. 11:31) "And from the time that the continual burnt offering is taken away, and the abomination that makes desolate is set up..." (Dan. 12:11)	"So when you seed the desolating sacrilege spoken of by the prophet Daniel, standing in the holy place (let the reader understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains..." (Mt 24:15-16)
"Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered..." (Zech. 13:7)	"Then Jesus said to them, 'You will all fall away because of me this night; for it is written, 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"" (Mt 26:31; Mk 14:27)
"...they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots." (Ps. 22:18)	"And when they had crucified him, they divided his garments among them by casting lots..." (Mt 27:35) "When the soldiers had crucified Jesus they took his garments and made four parts.... So they said to one another, 'Let us not tear it, but cast lots for it to see whose it shall be.' This was to fulfil the scripture, 'They parted my garments among them, and for my clothing they cast lots.'"" (Jn 19:23-24)
"They gave me poison for food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink." (Ps. 69:21)	"...they offered him wine to drink, mingled with gall..." (Mt 27:34) "After this Jesus, knowing that all was now finished, said (to fulfil the scripture), 'I thirst.' A bowl full of vinegar stood there; so they put a sponge full of vinegar on hyssop and held it to his mouth." (Jn 19:28-29)
"'And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him...The land shall mourn...'" (Zech. 12:10) "Yea, dogs are round about me; a company of evildoers encircle me; they have pierced my hands and feet..." (Ps. 22:16) "He keeps all his bones; not one of them is broken." (Ps. 34:20)	"...when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear... For these things took place that the scripture might be fulfilled, 'Not a bone of him shall be broken.' And again another scripture says, 'They shall look on him whom they have pierced.'"" (Jn 19:33-37)



"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1)	"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46)
"Thy dead men shall live, together with my dead body shall they arise. Awake and sing, ye that dwell in dust: for thy dew is as the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead." (Is. 26:19) (KJV)	"...the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many." (Mt 27:52-53)
"After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him." (Hos. 6:2)	"...the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and on the third day rise." (Lk 24:7)
"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to all the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor..." (Is. 61:1-2)	"And [Jesus] stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.'" (Lk 4:16-19)
"The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren--him you shall heed..." (Deut. 18:15)	"When the people saw the sign which he had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!'" (Jn 6:14) "Moses said, 'The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet from your brethren as he raised me up. You shall listen to him in whatever you he tells you.'" (Acts 3:22)
"For I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground..." (Is. 44:3) "Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters..." (Is. 55:1)	"He who believes in me, as the scriptures has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.'" (Jn 7:38)
"The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.'" (Ps. 110:4)	"So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was appointed by him who said to him, 'Thou are my Son, today I have begotten thee'; as he says also in another place, 'Thou are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek.'" (Heb. 5:5-6)
"Your divine throne endures for ever and ever. Your royal scepter is a scepter of equity; you love righteousness and hate wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your fellows..." (Ps. 45:6-7)	"But the Son he says, 'Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the righteous scepter is the scepter of thy kingdom. Thou has loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades.'" (Heb. 1:8-9)



These numerous correlations and many others between the Old and New Testaments may be found in the footnotes of the RSV and other versions, and need not be reproduced in full here. Suffice it to say that the writers of the New Testament were very familiar with the Old Testament - the only "scriptures" of the time to which they could possibly be referring - and that many of these scriptures were adapted from the Greek OT or Septuagint. In fact, the Old Testament scriptures common to Matthew, Mark and Luke are almost *all* from the Septuagint, rather than the Masoretic or Hebrew OT.

On the surface of it, if taken literally the New Testament appears to record the advent of the messiah, as prophesied in the Old Testament. However, there may be a different reason for this appearance. In scrutinizing all of the Old Testament "prophecies" that purportedly relate to the coming messiah, it is evident that the gospels were designed in order to show that these scriptures had been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. When these and other OT scriptures are studied and seriously considered, therefore, it is logical to ask if they constitute "prophecies" and "prefiguring" of the advent of a historical Jesus Christ - or if they were used as a *blueprint* in the *creation* of a *fictional* messiah.

### **Questions about the Gospel Story**

If you have been told repeatedly by authorities, usually since you were very young, that the gospel story is true in every fact and detail, and that the Bible is the inerrant and infallible word of God, you may very well believe it. After all, aren't the people in authority there for a reason, and don't they always tell the truth? Nevertheless, over the centuries many people have not been convinced that the miracles recounted in the gospels really happened, believing instead that Jesus's zealous followers added these stories to his biography in order to convince others that he was divine. These people who are skeptical cite other tales and myths that contain similar miracles and magic tricks to show that the gospel story is not unique. In addition, many people have problems accepting all the obvious contradictions in the Bible as a whole but also in the gospel story, as well as apparent mistakes, failed prophecies and repugnant doctrines. The objections raised by people who are skeptical include questions and concerns about the following:

- Miracles
- Contradictions
- Errors
- Failed prophecies
- Chronological discrepancies
- Erroneous translations
- Erroneous interpretations
- Lack of character
- Illogic
- Repulsive deeds, sayings and doctrines

The scope of this present work is not to list all of the problems with the gospel texts but to provide a sampling instead.

***Miracles***

There are so many miracles, including feeding the multitudes and walking on water, it would require too much space to elucidate upon all of them, so we will examine just a few of the most spectacular and incredible. For example, it is very difficult to believe that Jesus raised a man, Lazarus, from the dead. Not only is it difficult to believe the story itself, but also the fact that it appears *only* in the gospel of John - by nearly all accounts the latest of the gospels - makes one wonder why the first three evangelists would overlook such a momentous event. The logical solution is that the raising of Lazarus did not really happen but was an afterthought by either the writer of John or a later scribe.

It also seems inconceivable that if the saints rose up out of their graves and went into Jerusalem, appearing to many people, the Jewish scribes - who are everywhere present in the gospel story - would not have recorded such a supernatural phenomenon somewhere in their books. Jewish scribes were known to record practically everything significant that affected them, especially purported supernatural events. They often wrote screeds against individuals, however minor, who may have irritated them. Surely, if Jesus had caused such a ruckus throughout their country, overturning tables in their sacrosanct temple, threatening to throw it to the ground, and then having their dead rise and walk through their holy city, they would have recorded Jesus somewhere! But they did not, as if he never existed and they had never heard of the story.

Another detail that makes the gospel story difficult to believe is that the ascension - one of the most miraculous events to happen to Jesus - is not even mentioned by Matthew or John. How could they possibly fail to report such an occurrence, if it really happened? It is clear that Matthew is very concerned about recording the major, miraculous events of Christ's life, which he allegedly witnessed, and that John is quite obviously interested in showing everything that could possibly be considered an indication of Christ's divinity - and the ascension is surely one of the biggest qualifications - yet, no word of it? This omission seems very odd to the logical mind. Even the accounts in Mark and Luke are doubtful and are missing in some early manuscripts, causing these verses to be omitted in some translations. It is sensible and honest to ask, did the ascension really happen, or was it an afterthought? Could it not be that the ascension was added later in order to explain what happened to Jesus after he was resurrected?

Instead of engaging in illogical machinations involving supernatural events that go against the laws of physics, it is reasonable to ask whether or not the evangelists and later scribes were writing fictional, and not historical, accounts.

***Contradictions***

Like the miracles, there are enough contradictions in the gospels to warrant questioning their historical value. We are asked to subscribe to some irrational and illogical gyrations in order to harmonize these many problems. For example, the names in the genealogies and of the disciples differ between gospels and vary from manuscript to manuscript. A significant amount of ink has been spilled in order to reconcile these lists, but a simpler and more logical solution would be to ask, perhaps somebody made mistakes? Or, perhaps these lists are not historical in the first place but contrived to show that Jesus fulfilled prophecy?

A number of other contradictions appear throughout the gospels, including Jesus exhorting his followers not to bother with the Gentiles, only the "lost sheep of Israel," but at the end, after his resurrection, telling them to go to "all the nations." Christ is quite adamant that he has only come for Israel. Why is this mission changed suddenly and dramatically in the end?

Another apparent contradiction occurs in the commonly held idea that Jesus was a "political rebel" fighting against the vested interests of both Judea and Rome, but he nevertheless tells the people to give Caesar their tax money and to "turn the other cheek" when struck. "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's?" Is this really something a "political rebel" would say?

Jesus says he came not with peace but a sword, but then he tells Peter to put away his sword, because "he who lives by the sword, dies by the sword." Which is it - a sword or no sword?

Jesus first tells his followers to hate their mother and father but later exhorts them to honor their mother and father. How can we do both?

And so on. Again, instead of engaging in mental gymnastics, should we not simply ask whether or not the evangelists and later scribes made mistakes, because they were writing fictional accounts?

### ***Errors in Time and Place***

In addition to the many problems already noted are several others concerning the gospel topography or geographical locations. Some of the towns mentioned have never been found to exist in the historical or archaeological record, and still others are evidently plucked from the Old Testament, such that their names are outdated and were not in use at the time. Indeed, the gospel story is anachronistically set in a time that had been long gone by the beginning of the first century, depicting, for example, Stone Age agriculture and giving an impression of a vast wilderness full of sheep and shepherds, when in fact the area was already well developed and densely urbanized. Moreover, the evangelists make the assertions that it was a custom to release a prisoner at the Passover, but there is no evidence that there was any such custom, Jewish or Gentile, at any time. These and other errors cast doubt as to whether or not the evangelists actually knew the area and culture they were writing about and had ever lived there at any point, much less the era in question.

### ***Failed Prophecies***

As one glaring example of failed prophecy, many people point to Jesus's assertions that he would be coming back "soon" and that certain other things would take place before "this generation" would pass away. But, these things still have not happened. Jesus says that there were some present who "will not have gone through all the towns of Israel, before the Son of man comes." (Mt 10:23) He also states that they would not "taste death before they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom." (Mt 16:28) None of that happened, and those people are all long dead.

### ***Chronological Problems***

As we have seen, there are many places where the gospels do not agree with each other on the chronology of events in Jesus's life. There are numerous chronological discrepancies that are reconciled only by the most extreme stretch of logic, and,

instead of admitting that the evangelists or subsequent copyists may have made mistakes, terms like "dislocations" are used and other excuses are given, in a seemingly deceptive manner.

Let us give another example of how apologetics appear deceptive: In the cleansing of the temple, depicted at the beginning in John and at the end in the synoptics, the apologetic reasoning is that Jesus did it twice. It is difficult to believe that Jesus did it even once, much less twice, since this momentous occurrence appears nowhere in the historical record. There is no indication anywhere in the gospels that Jesus had previously cleared the temple - which one would think would have been a highly noteworthy event - no recollection by an evangelist, no bitter or critical commentary by any Jewish authorities, who surely would have been incensed by his behavior. This earlier event is never mentioned as a reason for the authorities, Jewish or Gentile, to be angry with Jesus and to justify their harsh treatment of him. Nor is there any mention of this wild and highly noticeable behavior in any non-biblical document - one would think that the opposing Jews would have recorded such an event, especially since they were so very fanatical about the temple, and would have offered it as a reason for persecuting Jesus early on in the gospel story, if it had happened at that point. That there were *two* cleansings of the temple, during both of which Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers, seems impossible to believe. While the efforts may be sincere for those who refuse to doubt the inerrancy of the Bible, this type of conclusion appears sophistic and disingenuous to many people.

Nevertheless, this episode in the gospel story has convinced many people that there *had* to be a person behind all of the fairytales they think were added to his biography, because it does not seem to be something someone would make up. On the contrary, when Old Testament scripture is studied, it becomes evident that this part about the temple being cleared of moneychangers is a reflection of the earlier scripture at Zechariah 14:21: "...And there shall no longer be a trader in the house of the Lord of hosts on that day." This book, Zechariah, is the penultimate before the New Testament, followed only by Malachi. It is evident that this pericope was included in the gospel story in order to make it appear that Jesus had "fulfilled prophecy."

Based on all these factors, it is reasonable to suggest that the gospels are not chronologically accurate because their writers were not infallibly inspired, and that the Bible is not the inerrant Word of God or a reliable "history book" but, rather, a collection of fictional traditions, fables and myths.

### ***Translations Errors and Language Problems***

The assertion that Jesus's mother, Mary, was a "virgin" when she gave birth is, of course, one of those miracles that less credulous people have difficulty accepting. When the scripture cited as "prophecy fulfilled" in Jesus's nativity is examined, it appears that Mary's virginity is a contrivance based on an erroneous or loose translation, not on a historical fact. In the original Hebrew at Isaiah 7:14 to describe the individual who would conceive the son named Immanuel, the term used is *almah*, which means "young woman" but not necessarily a virgin. The Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, changes this word to *parthenos*, which does mean "virgin." As we have seen, many of the scriptures cited or quoted in the gospels were from the Septuagint, which is where the evangelists evidently got their ideas from, not from a factual state of virginity in a historical Mary.

In the passage at Matthew 19:24 concerning the "camel" passing through the eye of a needle, it is theorized that the word was originally *gamla* in Aramaic, which evidently means both "camel" and "rope," as in a thick cable made of camel's hair. It is far more logical that the original word is meant to convey not "camel" but "cable rope," and that the original translators of this saying got it wrong.

The fact that some passages are omitted in certain versions and translations of the New Testament clearly demonstrates that the book has been interpolated and altered, leading to the conclusion that the Bible could not possibly be the inerrant Word of God infallibly recorded by inspired scribes. The apologetic solution is to claim that all individuals involved in the construction and preservation of the New Testament texts were "filled and guided by the Holy Spirit." According to this belief, even the translators - modern day included - are working under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. As Bishop Alexander states: "And since the ultimate author of Sacred Scripture is the Holy Spirit, the translator needs His illumination and inspiration to correctly convey His message." This claim begs the question as to why the Holy Spirit didn't correct the "virgin" and "camel" translation errors, among others. Logically and rationally, of course, we may simply suggest that the copyists and translators were fallible humans who made mistakes.

### ***Illogic***

In the name of integrity, the rational person must ask why we must suspend logic and scientific methodology when it comes to religious texts and traditions. It seems unconscionable for God to force believers into suspending their critical, logical and rational minds, but this suspension is precisely what the believer is asked to do, repeatedly. Several examples of where we must suspend logic in order to believe the gospel story as historical fact have already been provided. Another such instance occurs with the apologist argument regarding the diverging chronology for the pericope of Jesus being anointed by a woman in the house of Simon. This argument holds that since Jesus's ministry was at least one to three years long - that number being unclear in the gospels as well - he would have been anointed in houses many times. However, all that anointing would be surprising, not only since there is no precedent for it but especially since the disciples fiercely object to such a costly ritual even once, and they do not suggest that it had ever happened before. Moreover, of all these possible anointments, why would the evangelists hit on two Simons? Were all these anointments *only* in the houses of people named Simon?

Also, since the cross supposedly only gained spiritual significance after Jesus died on it, what is Jesus referring to when he instructs his disciples to "take up the cross?" (Mt 10:38, 16:24; Mk 8:34, Mk 10:21; Lk 9:23, 14:27) Why does John the Baptist - who upon first sight pronounced Jesus "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 29) and who was a witness to the "Spirit of God descending like a dove," saying, "I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God" (Jn 1:33-34) - send word from prison to Jesus, asking him if he is the messiah? How could Peter, after witnessing Jesus's many miracles - even walking on water himself! - and seeing Jesus transfigured on the mountain, deny him later? And why would Jesus, knowing that Peter would deny him, make Peter the "rock" of his church? Why would the Jewish crowd, who had been following Jesus around and many of whom had been healed by him, shouting "Hosannas" upon his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, nevertheless ask for the release of an infamous criminal and for Jesus to be put to death? Etc., etc.

***Jesus's Character***

Many people follow Jesus because they believe he set a great moral example. But, did he really? If we all acted like him, would the world truly be a better place? There are many things that make his character appear less than stellar. For instance, when Jesus tells people to hate their mothers and fathers, and to leave them behind in order to follow him, he sounds very much like a cult leader. He also seems to be callous and uncaring towards his mother and brothers, when he denies them. Furthermore, some people also object to Jesus calling Jews "vipers" and equating the Canaanite woman with a "dog." It is perplexing that Jesus appoints Peter the "rock" of his church but then calls Peter "Satan." Also, it seems to be very arrogant and presumptuous of Jesus to assume that he can just take someone's ass and foal, simply by declaring that he is the Lord of the universe. In addition, Jesus predicts that Judea will be destroyed, which many people logically believe is simply reportage after the fact by the biblical scribes. Nevertheless, even if Jesus did predict this occurrence, since he is omnipotent, why didn't he stop it? Since he is God, he must have caused it in the first place. Where is his compassion and understanding?

These are objections raised by people regarding the character displayed by Jesus throughout the gospels. There are people who, even if they believe that there was a man called Jesus who did some of the things in the gospel, do not think he was a particularly good man, much less a god. He often comes across as arrogant, as well as angry, and he continually speaks down to people in a very haughty and conceited manner. He is self-absorbed and obsessed with issues that are seemingly not very important, such as whether a fig tree bears fruit for him or his head will be anointed, whereas real problems, such as slavery and poverty, remain unexamined and unchallenged by him.

***Repellant Deeds, Sayings and Doctrines***

Many people who read the gospels are bothered by Jesus saying he came to bring not peace but a sword. Jesus not only speaks about coming with a sword but also makes many pronouncements that the world will be in violent chaos - these things are objectionable to peace-loving people, and, again, since Jesus is the omnipotent Lord of the cosmos, he is in charge of these events and could prevent them from happening.

Jesus tells his followers that they should cut off their hands and feet, and pluck out their eyes, but should anyone really do that? What about becoming a eunuch for heaven by being castrated? Apologists may say that Jesus did not really mean that or that it is better to be castrated than to forfeit heaven, but some people might respond that heaven is not a proven place, so castration is quite a risk to take.

Jesus also seems to encourage people dying for him, or martyrdom, by telling his followers that "he who loses his life for my sake will find it." (Mt 10:39) This teaching seems to be very objectionable and the mark of a cult leader.

Some people also find the eucharist, where Jesus symbolically shares his body and blood to be repulsive and barbaric. The whole concept of blood atonement in the first place seems repulsive and barbaric - and unnecessary for an all-powerful God.

Also, many people believe that teaching young, innocent and impressionable children that they are "born in sin" is abusive. There are numerous other repellant and scary



sentiments expressed in the Bible, which includes many depictions of extreme violence and bloodshed on a massive scale.

### ***Apology Accepted?***

Christian apologists have answers for all of these objections, but to some people many of these answers appear to be illogical and contrived. A number of these excuses also seem dishonest and lacking in integrity, if not outright mendacious. Moreover, the reasons or excuses for the disparities, "dislocations" and mistakes in the gospels invariably lay the responsibility upon the evangelists themselves, leaving God and his alleged inspiration out of the picture and wholly blameless, even though the very selling point of the gospels is that they are different from all other texts because they are infallibly inspired by God. Such a dichotomy does not seem compatible with a truthful perspective. Rather, Christian apologetics seems to employ "sleight of hand" in its attempts at solving these problems, activity that makes less credulous people skeptical, if not suspicious.

It is because there appears to be so little honest admission - as well as, often, civil response - that many people feel put off and antagonistic toward biblical stories and doctrines. Instead of saying, "Well now, you're right - that doesn't sound too good," the response is all too often to attack the person making the observation. Judging by its "fruits," it seems to many people that Christianity teaches disrespect of human beings, so that its defenders feel they can personally attack those not convinced of their faith, addressing them with little respect and making offensive comments and insults. The Christian teaching that people are "born in sin" appears to make fervent believers hostile towards others.

### **Conclusion**

There are many millions of people today who believe as they have been taught that the gospels are historical texts, infallible and inerrant, containing the sayings and deeds of the Son of God, who came to Earth 2,000 years ago in order to provide redemption and salvation. Because of the difficulties in believing all the miracles ascribed to Jesus, there are also many millions of people who do not believe Jesus was the Son of God who supernaturally confers anything upon anyone. This latter category of people usually perceives the gospel story as containing some history, including a general outline of the life of a man called Jesus, with the addition of many fables and fairytales. There is a third school of thought, however, that sees no evidence for either of the first two premises: In fact, this group apprehends that the story of Christ as recorded in the disparate and divergent gospels has so many difficulties, errors and fallacies that it cannot be taken literally. This faction believes that the gospels are works of fiction, much like *Gulliver's Travels* or any other clearly fictitious tale placed within a historical setting, and that no such historical person as Jesus Christ ever existed in the first place. This thesis evinces that the evidence shows most of the sayings, personality characteristics and biographical details found in the New Testament were cobbled together from earlier, pre-existing texts and traditions surrounding a variety of individuals, including both men and gods, both Jewish and Gentile, found widespread around the Roman Empire of the time.

Members of the first camp of literalists raise the issue of Old Testament "prophecies" and "prefiguring" as having been fulfilled in Jesus's life. However, what is more probable is that the writers of the New Testament constructed Jesus's life precisely in order to follow these scriptures. It is a fact that the gospel writers refer repeatedly to certain events and sayings as "fulfillment of prophecy" found in one Old Testament



book or another, such as Isaiah. It would be more rational to suggest that, rather than God descending on Earth to fulfill these supposed prophecies - and many of them certainly are not in fact prophecies at all - the authors of the gospels cut and paste the most germane scriptures that they considered to be characteristics of the coming messiah, weaving them together to *create* a *fictional* figure called "Jesus the Christ."

The fact is that, when all the evidence is weighed, it would seem irresponsible and unscientific to merely assume the gospel tale is historical, either in part or as a whole. The most honest perspective would be to approach it as if it is *not* historical until evidence is presented otherwise. This short treatise does not delve into the extremely important field of comparative mythology in order to demonstrate whence much of the gospel tale likely emanated. Suffice it to say that such material is highly relevant to this subject. Regardless of how much we study the bible, it is doubtful that without placing the Christ story within its historical milieu, surrounded by the myths and traditions of other supernatural gods, sons of gods and legendary heroes, we will ever know who Jesus really was.

With so much of our global social structure based on holy writ of some sort or another, it is imperative that we examine thoroughly our sacred cows and not shirk from exposing them to the sunlight. In consideration of the current political climate, which includes an ardent movement to "fulfill prophecy" by bringing about Armageddon and all of the attendant "End Times" tribulations and horrors, the issue of who Jesus was is not to be taken lightly. We should not blindly follow mummified traditions and ancient texts that could very well prove to be misleading, misinterpreted and mythical. Leading our lives and creating - or destroying - our futures based on such texts is perilous and irresponsible. It is paramount, therefore, that we consider the possibility that, rather than being the omnipotent Son of God, Jesus Christ is a manmade, literary character devised for a variety of purposes that no longer serve the greater good of humanity.

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