

The Battle For Christianity

The Scriptures and Faiths
That We Never Knew

And that Jesus never
knew, either.

Wes Hopper, LUT
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Most people who are brought up Christian know at least a little bit about the Bible. However, what this usually means is that they know about the contents of the Bible, and very little about how those contents came to be. Regardless of the churches that they belong to, almost all Christians believe that the core beliefs of their theology were passed down from Jesus and his disciples – beliefs about who God is, who Jesus is, and what Jesus’ death and resurrection meant. Virtually every Christian denomination, from the Baptists to the Catholics to the Mormons and Appalachian snake handlers agree on these basics.

And they are all misinformed. The story of early Christianity is much more complicated and interesting than that, with quite a few wildly differing beliefs competing for the title of “true Christianity.” The theology that we have today was written by the winners of this contest, which took almost 500 years to sort out.

Over the past 300 years or so, scholars have been seriously studying the historical record using documents dating back to the first 200 years of Christianity. The content of this paper is based on the results of that scholarship.

To set the stage for this conflict, let’s note one important fact. Jesus never wrote anything. As an apocalyptic Jewish prophet from Galilee, he spoke Aramaic and likely some Greek. Like most rural Jews of that time, he and his disciples were probably illiterate, as writing in Greek was difficult and confined to trained scribes. There are no written records of any kind from either him, or his disciples.

“But wait,” you may say, “We have a whole New Testament written by his disciples. What do you mean, no written records?”

Sorry to be the one to break the news, but of the 27 books of the New Testament, only 7 books, all letters attributed to Paul, were actually written by the person whose name is on them. And Paul never knew Jesus or heard him speak. Figure 1 lists the 27 books, the approximate date written, and the authorship, if known.¹

So with no written records, the story of Jesus spread as an oral tradition. And, as you might expect, the stories varied with the story teller. So there was plenty of room for improvisation.

In addition there was an important cultural issue. Religion was a lively topic in that day and age, both in Israel and the gentile world. Although the Hebrew scriptures tend to feature Israel as monotheistic, even a casual look through them will show that the prophets were constantly complaining that the nation had fallen for “false gods.”

The most common archeological find in the Middle East is the Asheroth figurines shown here. A fertility goddess and consort of Ba’al, Asheroth shows that the ancient Israeli farmers commonly hedged their theological bets when it came to religion. Polytheism was widespread in Israel as well as the gentile world.



In addition to a multitude of agricultural and other fertility gods, both Jews and gentiles were exposed to 3 major theological systems – Greek, Roman and Egyptian. These systems had a lot in common in that they depicted families of gods behaving badly, with conflicts, rivalries and temper tantrums that would spill over and affect humankind. Even Judaism, although claiming to be monotheistic, had added similar elements, with legends of Satan, archangels and other heavenly beings. It was within this theological environment that Christianity developed.

Another significant issue that affected early Christianity was travel and communication. The only way for various groups to keep in communication was by personal messenger, and the messengers had to travel by foot, and occasionally by sea. This barrier allowed many Christian groups to develop in isolation and be forced to create their own answers to theological questions, or be vulnerable to the teachings of traveling evangelists claiming to bring the answers. When they created their answers, they drew on their knowledge of the religious traditions around them, as that was all they had to go on. That led to some interesting theologies, as we shall see.

Let's look at the timeline of the first 100 years or so. Although some people have tried to question it, we know that Jesus was a real historical figure, as the Jewish historian Josephus mentions his execution. His birth was probably between 6 BCE and 4 BCE, as Herod died in 4 BCE. His death was around 30 CE. We have no written records from his lifetime or the following 20 years. Scholars believe that the stories of Jesus circulated as an oral tradition in this period. Even after Christian documents were produced, the storytelling and oral traditions remained as a significant influence on what people knew or learned about Jesus in the 1st century.

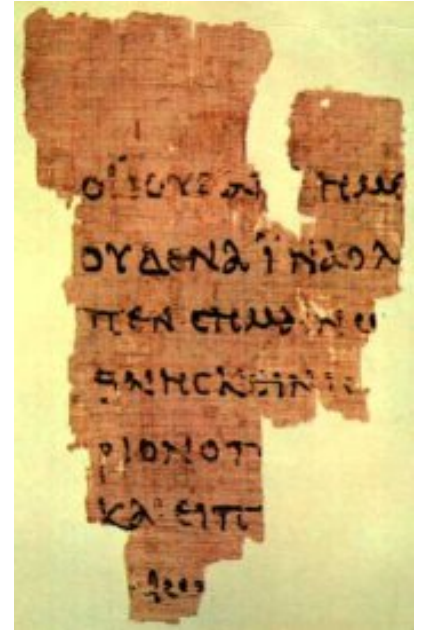
Between about 50 and 62 CE we have the 7 authentic letters of Paul, the first Christian writings.ⁱⁱ We know there were Christian communities scattered around the Mediterranean at that time from these letters and, of course, Paul was busy starting new ones. There were still no written accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. Paul not only didn't know much about his teachings, he made it plain he didn't care. "*For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.*" I Cor 2:2 For Paul, Jesus death, crucifixion and resurrection were virtually all that mattered.

The first gospel account of Jesus' life is Mark, written around 70 CE. Mark has no birth story, and no resurrection appearances, but it contains the first record of Jesus' teachings, coming 40 years after his death. Matthew comes 10 years later, and Luke 10 years after that, both of them borrowing from Mark and adding additional material to suit their audiences.

Scholars noted something interesting about Jesus' teachings in Luke and Matthew. Both had obviously borrowed material from Mark, but there were instances of other material, about 250 verses identical in both gospels, not included in Mark. From this the scholars speculated that there was an earlier source document that Mark did not use, but both Luke and Matthew did. Scholars date this source to between 50 and 70 CE and call it Q, from the German work *Quelle*, meaning source.ⁱⁱⁱ

Later, when the first complete copy of the gospel of Thomas was found, many identical and similar sayings were seen to be included, leading scholars to debate whether Thomas was the source or whether Thomas had also drawn on Q. That issue remains unsettled.

The final gospel, John, was written from a mystical and gentile perspective to a Christian community that had separated from Judaism.^{iv} Dated 95 – 120 CE it depicts a very different Jesus from the other gospels, with a 3 year ministry rather than one-year and almost no similarity in teachings. Most efforts to use the Bible to justify anti-semitism rely on this gospel, as the author assigns much more of the blame for the crucifixion to the Jews than the other gospels do. John also pushes the start of Jesus’ ministry even farther back. Mark has it start at Jesus’ baptism, Matthew and Luke at their virgin birth stories, but John takes it back to the “beginning with God.”



Do we have any of the original texts of the Gospels? Probably not. Scholars today have 5,400 copies of handwritten pieces of New Testament books, from a few complete books down to small fragments such as this very early (125 CE) fragment of the Gospel of John. These sources date from the first 200 years to the Middle Ages and the inventing of printing. Except for the smallest fragments, no two of these sources agree word for word. Many of the differences are small, but some show deliberate modification and editing.^v

From the books of the New Testament we get the impression of an unbroken flow of theology from Jesus to us today. And of course this is the impression that the writers and compilers of these books seek to create. However the letters that are included, starting with genuine Pauline epistles, often talk about “false teachers.” This is a clue to the presence of alternate Christianities that were competing for the allegiance of believers. And in fact we can now show from the historical record that there were at least four major forms of Christianity, all of them quite successful at first, in existence in the early days. Let’s look at these groups.

Ebionites

The first form of Christianity was Jewish. The Ebionite name apparently came from an Aramaic word meaning “poor,” which is consistent with Paul’s account of taking up a collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. They considered Jesus a Jewish prophet, a man blessed and exalted by God, not divine but adopted by God. They taught that to be a follower of Jesus one first had to be a Jew. For gentiles, that meant converting to Judaism and observing the customs and Law, including circumcision.^{vi}

This was a regression from the original agreements that Jesus’ disciples, led by Peter and James, had with Paul that gentile Christians did not need to follow Jewish law.^{vii} However, there was conflict early on over this issue, and in his letter to the Galatians Paul strongly reproves the Galatians for being led astray by what appear to be Ebionite teachers. He recounts a major battle

he had in Antioch with Peter, James and Barnabas over their refusal to eat with gentiles who didn't keep kosher. This was a battle that Paul apparently lost, as even his companion Barnabas went over to the other side, and Paul left Antioch by himself.^{viii}

About 40 years later, the author of the book of Acts rewrote this story (Acts 10, 11) by weaving a tale of a vision that Peter receives from God, a vision of a large sheet lowered from Heaven containing non-kosher animals. When Peter won't eat, the voice tells him, "What God has made clean, you can't call profane." This vision is followed by a visit from gentiles seeking instruction who are immediately filled with the Holy Spirit and converted. Peter gets the message, at least in the convenient history of the Pauline writer of Acts.

The Ebionites arose as the proponents of this Jewish Christianity and claimed to follow the teachings of Peter and James. They considered Paul the enemy. It's unknown exactly how widespread this version of Christianity became, but we do know that 4th century writings attacking heresies were still including Ebionites. I find it astonishing that the apparent theology of Jesus' disciples, the ones who walked and talked with him, came to be seen as a heresy.

Pauline

The theology of Paul was the beginning of the brand of Christianity that was triumphant in the end, but I refer to it as Pauline here, because Paul wouldn't have recognized what it became. As an observant Jew, and a Pharisee, Paul knew nothing of the Trinity, the virgin birth or bodily post-resurrection appearances. He saw Jesus' death as the final, perfect sacrifice that was confirmed by God's raising of Jesus to Heaven. When he referred to Jesus as Lord and Son of God, he was deliberately committing treason, because those were the terms reserved for the Emperor. Paul used them in the same way as the Romans, as titles that were conferred on an exalted human being to indicate power and divine status.^{ix}

Of the 27 books in the New Testament, half of them (13) are attributed to Paul, but only seven of them were actually written by Paul. By comparing the authentic Paul with the pseudo-Pauline epistles we can clearly see how the Bible was used selectively to teach the approved theology.

In Paul's early and authentic letters, we see radical (for the time) teachings on the role of women and on slavery. He summed it up in Galatians 3:27-28 very succinctly: "*As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.*" In this one sentence, Paul wiped out three of the most important social and cultural distinctions of the 1st Century! Alas, it was not to last. In the later letters to which Paul's name was attached, we see his teachings on slavery and patriarchy significantly altered to be more conventional.

In the beautiful and very personal letter to Philemon, Paul adds a startling new dimension to the issue of slavery. One of Paul's converts, a relatively wealthy man named Philemon, has a runaway slave named Onesimus (meaning "useful", a common slave name). Onesimus apparently got in trouble for something and was afraid of being severely punished, so he did what he was entitled to do under Roman law; he ran away to a mentor of his master's, Paul, to beg for intercession. Paul was actually in jail at the time, so Onesimus ran away to jail!

While there, Onesimus became a Christian. So Paul sent him back to Philemon with the letter, in which Paul goes to great length to remind Philemon how much he is indebted to Paul, and to point out that as Onesimus is now a Christian, there's a new relationship other than master and slave. He says in vs 15-16, "*Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, **no longer as a slave** but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*"

In other words, Philemon is being told that as a Christian, he can't own another Christian! They are brothers in Christ, and not only can't he punish him, Philemon has to free Onesimus. This was not just radical, it was revolutionary. So it's not surprising that it was challenged later.

Well, if you can't modify an existing letter of Paul's, the next best thing is to have "Paul" write a new letter that says what you want. The books of Colossians, Ephesians, and 2 Thessalonians attributed to Paul are called the "disputed letters" because although most scholars believe them to be written by others, a few scholars still believe that Paul may have written them. Part of the reason most scholars doubt them is that the author (s) back away from Paul's radical teachings.^x

Both Colossians 3 and Ephesians 6 contain sections on slavery, and are clearly addressed to Christian slaves and Christian masters. "*Slaves, obey your masters in everything not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord....Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly.....*" In these letters there's a mutuality of obligation, but nothing about freeing your brothers in Christ. The radical Paul has disappeared, and the conservative Paul has surfaced.

But it gets worse. In the so-called Pastoral Epistles, the books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus which virtually all scholars agree were not written by Paul, the teaching on slavery takes another step backwards. In Titus 2 we read, "*Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to steal, but to show complete and perfect fidelity...*" There is no mutual obligation for the masters, and the instructions are not even addressed directly to the slaves, just what to tell the slaves. The conservative Paul is gone and the reactionary Paul has raised his ugly head.

We can see the same process at work in Paul's teachings on gender equality. The genuine Paul was very radical for his time. We see in 1 Corinthians 7 his teachings about the obligations of husbands and wives is carefully balanced for both. It is clearly about mutual rights and duties. For every duty for the wife, there's a duty for the husband. No patriarchy to be found.

In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul is dealing with, it appears, a problem with differences of opinion about celibacy. Some scholars believe that the issue was that some married women were taking a vow of celibacy (perhaps without their husband's concurrence) and flaunting it by going without their matrimonial head coverings in church. In the midst of that discussion, verses 4 & 5, we find another radical gem. Paul refers to "*any man who prays or prophesies*" and then to "*any woman who prays or prophesies*" equally. To Paul, either men or women can be leading the worship, and that's why the lack of head covering was inappropriate. No patriarchy here, either.

Then, in Romans 16 Paul praises a list of people that have been his benefactors and coworkers. Out of 27 people, 10 are women. He also uses a specific Greek verb, translated “to work hard”, to refer specifically to apostolic work. He applies it to himself twice in other letters (Galatians 4, 1 Corinth 15) and he applies it here in Romans 16 four times, and all to women! To Paul, gender equality existed in home, in worship and in apostolic missionary work.

The authentic Paul was way ahead of his time on patriarchy, and as a result later writers sought to rewrite his opinions for him. One obvious attempt was a writer who added two verses to an authentic letter of Paul’s, 1 Corinthians. In the middle of the discussion on speaking in tongues in chapter 14, vs 33b – 36, we find this inserted: “*As in all the churches of the saints, women should be silent in the churches. For they are not permitted to speak, but should be subordinate, as the Law says. If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church. Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only ones it has reached?*” This clumsy attempt at forgery is not only out of context where it’s inserted, it directly contradicts Paul’s earlier statements in chapter 11! Unfortunately most Bibles don’t point out the problem and most readers miss it. My NRSV Bible has the inserted text in parentheses and a detailed footnote, but not all do.

As with slavery, the “disputed” Pauline letters roll back Paul’s gender equality a notch or two. In Colossians 3:18-19 we read: “*Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives and never treat them harshly.*” Ephesians 5:22 repeats these instructions, and adds this for the wives: “*Just as the church is subject to Christ, so also wives ought to be, in everything, to their husbands.*” So a definite patriarchy, albeit a kinder, gentler patriarchy, is back.

In the Pastorals, even the kinder, gentler is gone. The most famous, most reactionary and most quoted verses are from I Timothy 2:11-15: “*Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.*”

If you look at the estimated dates on these groups of letters, you will see the progression. Paul’s letters were written between 50 and 60 CE. The disputed letters were likely written between 70 and 90 CE. The pastorals were written between 120 and 130 CE or so. As Christianity matured, the radical vision of Paul “*all are one in Christ Jesus*” got rewritten to be progressively more reactionary and conventional. We’ll look at the additional changes that were made to Paul’s theology after we cover the other two groups claiming to be the “real Christians.”

Marcionites

Marcion was a gentile born around 100 CE and lived in the city of Sinope on the southern shore of the Black Sea, in what would be today northern Turkey. He was apparently from a wealthy family in the shipbuilding or merchant trades, and his father was reputed to be the bishop of the Christian church there. In any event, he was brought up in a Christian family.^{xi}

Marcion had one particular and unusual trait – he was an accomplished and original thinker. While he was making a pile of money from his business, he was also thinking seriously about his theology. He was particularly taken with the works of Paul and especially Paul’s assertion that salvation came through the gospel of Christ and not the works of the Jewish law. Marcion took this to the extreme, believing that the two were mutually exclusive.

In addition, he found a conflict in the scriptures that he considered almost unsolvable. In comparing the Jewish scriptures with the Christian gospel (Gospel of Luke) he could not reconcile the seemingly angry and punishing god of the Jews with the loving, forgiving God he found in Jesus’ teachings. Many of us today can sympathize with that conflict, because we can’t, either!

In 139 CE Marcion moved to Rome and made a huge donation to the church there. Naturally he had no trouble being accepted into the fellowship – some things never change. He then spent the next five years working out his theological solutions.

He eventually came up with a different solution to the angry god, loving god conflict than we might. He decided that there had to be two gods, the punishing god of the Jews, and the God of Jesus that Luke and Paul wrote about. The god of the Jews was a god of Law and punished lawbreakers, which meant everyone since no one could keep the Law perfectly. The God of Jesus, who had nothing to do with the creation of the world and the Law, came into the world to save people from the god of the Jews. Marcion believed that this God had never had any contact with the world until then, and was unknown to it.

This second god theory sounds strange to us today, but as I pointed out in the first part of this paper, multiple and conflicting gods were a familiar story in the 1st Century. To people familiar with the pantheon of Greek and Roman gods, the story would sound completely logical. Well, logical in the mythological sense, anyway.

So who or what was Jesus then? If he was truly human, how could he represent this nonmaterial God? Marcion solved that problem with a docetic solution. Derived from a Greek word meaning “to appear, to seem to be,” Marcion’s docetic solution was that Jesus wasn’t part of the material world at all. He wasn’t born, he didn’t have a flesh and blood body, he only appeared to be human. And to support this, he quoted Paul who said in Romans 8:3 that Jesus came “*in the likeness of sinful flesh*” with the emphasis on “*likeness*.”

Marcion then took Paul’s atonement theology and applied it to Jesus, teaching that his death atoned for all our sins in the eyes of the old god and by faith in Jesus’ death we could escape the wrath of that old god and gain eternal life. Unfortunately we don’t have any good records of Marcion’s explanation of how a non material being could die and shed blood. Perhaps he thought that Jesus’ death looked so real that it fooled the old god. Who knows? What we do know is that he went to work spreading this gospel.

He based all his teachings on two primary sources – the letters of Paul and the Gospel of Luke. He discarded the Hebrew scriptures as irrelevant stories about the old god and said they didn’t

apply anymore. In essence, he took everything Jewish out of Christianity. He wrote a book of his own, *Antithesis*, that consisted of taking stories of the old god's behavior from the Hebrew scriptures and contrasting them with teachings and sayings of Jesus. The old god would do something vengeful, and Jesus would teach something loving. How could this be the same God? Unfortunately this book no longer survives, except in some commentaries of his opponents.

Marcion has the distinction of creating the first approved (by him) canon of scripture, consisting of 10 letters of Paul (the 7 authentic and the 3 disputed), the *Gospel of Luke*, and his own *Antithesis*. His problem was that even these works reflected in places the Jewish scriptures and their one god theory. Well, obviously these errors were inserted later by forgers! So Marcion edited them to remove the offending passages.

Having his theology and his approved scriptures in hand, he was able to call a church council together in Rome to present his views and get the rest of the Christian community in line with them. Unfortunately, the council was not very receptive at all. They not only turned him down, but refunded his donation and excommunicated him. How rude!

That was far from the end of things for Marcion, though. He went back to Asia Minor and began his own missionary work to start churches, and was very, very successful at it. In some parts of Asia Minor Marcionites were the original form of Christianity and for a long time were the greatest number of persons claiming to be Christians. These churches were a vibrant form of Christianity that thrived for hundreds of years, and there are writings of their opponents condemning them well into the 4th Century. Obviously Marcion had hit a theological theme that resonated with the people of that time. As we shall see, it was only an accident of geography that kept Marcionite teachings from being the surviving theology.

We can find references to docetic teachers in the New Testament in several places. One obvious reference is in 1 John 4:2, "*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.*" So every teaching that said that Jesus only seemed to be flesh and blood was false. That covered the Marcionites and, as we shall see, the Gnostics.

One very famous passage is the story of "doubting Thomas" in the Gospel of John in which Thomas says he will not believe that Jesus is risen unless he can actually feel the wounds. It was apparently added to specifically counter docetic teachings, especially those of the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, by having Thomas put his hands into the risen Jesus' wounds to confirm he was flesh and blood, not a spirit. Like much of the Gospel of John, this story is not found in any other gospel because the other gospels were written before docetism became an issue.^{xii}

Gnostics

The fourth major branch of Christianity was Gnosticism. Unlike the others, this branch was not a uniform, single theology but a family of beliefs that could and did vary widely in specifics. The differences have caused scholars to question them being lumped together under a single label because of their differences. In most cases they still are, if for no other reason than convenience.

To keep it simple, I'm going to cover the major beliefs of one well known branch to give an idea of how their beliefs differed from the other threads of Christianity.^{xiii}

There were a couple of things that set them apart and made reconstructing their theology difficult. First, they didn't have their own churches. They existed as elite groups within existing churches, almost as a secret society. They believed that deliverance from this world came from knowledge (gnosis) that was only understandable by the elect few, so they were not particularly evangelistic. The preoccupation with secret knowledge led many of their writings to be difficult to understand, perhaps deliberately obscure. And for a long time only a few fragmentary writings were available.

That all changed in the last 60 years or so with the discovery of Gnostic writings in Syria and Egypt. In particular, the large cache of documents found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945 was a treasure trove for scholars, and it included the only complete copy of the Gospel of Thomas ever found.

The Gospel of Thomas is quite different than the narrative gospels in the New Testament, as it is more a collection of sayings, some very familiar sounding, and some very mystical and obscure. Scholars believe that it may have been rewritten, added to and modified over the years by the communities that used it. In any event, it's a fascinating look at the ideas that were circulating in early Christianity.



Gnostic theology was quite different from the other branches of Christianity, but not that different from some aspects of Greek and Roman mythology. The Gnostics had an interesting hierarchy of gods and conflicts responsible for the world that we both live in and need to be delivered from. Here's a brief summary of one version of that mythology.

In the beginning, there was only one God, totally perfect and totally unknowable, beyond description. This God then created a divine realm for some unknowable reason, and other divine beings emerged. These other entities, called aeons, produced more entities until there was a complete set, called the Fullness, or Pleroma.

In one version of the myth, the final aeon, called Wisdom, or *Sophia* in Greek, somehow falls from grace and decides to produce a divine offspring without the benefit of her male partner, which leads to a very deformed and imperfect offspring. So Sophia moves him from the divine arena to a lower level of creation where no one can see him, and leaves him there. She names him Yaldabaoth, and this bad tempered and imperfect being becomes the Jewish God, Yahweh.

Yaldabaoth knows nothing of the divine realms above him, and believes that he is the only god there is, so by stealing power from his mother, Sophia, he creates a family of other divine beings, the evil, cosmic forces of the world. At some point they receive a vision of the true God, and decide to create a man in the image of that God. So they make Adam, but without a spirit he has no life. But Yaldabaoth gets tricked into breathing life into the man, and when he realizes what

he's done, he casts the man into the realm of matter. From that point on the task of mankind is to find a way home, out of the physical and back to the spiritual.

The way home is through the secret knowledge. The world is not redeemable, it is hopelessly corrupt and evil, so it is to be escaped from, not fixed. The secret knowledge cannot be deduced from studying the world, it can only come from revelation and it is Christ that brings that knowledge.

The problem that the Gnostics had to solve was to determine how Christ could come into this corrupt world and not be corrupted by it. Some Gnostics took the docetic line that Marcion and others had claimed, that Jesus was not a flesh and blood human, he only appeared to be. He came and delivered his secret knowledge, and then returned to the divine realm.

Many Gnostics took a different approach, referred to as separationist. They separated Jesus from the Christ, and taught that Jesus was human but specially made to receive the Christ, the divine messenger. The Christ entered him at his baptism to empower his ministry, and then left him on the cross to die alone, causing Jesus to cry, "*My God, my God, why have you left me behind?*" (The literal translation of Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46.) In one version of this teaching, the Christ returned to Jesus after his death to raise him from the dead.

In either case, the docetic or separationist, Christ was bringing the secret gnosis necessary for salvation. Not everyone could receive this gnosis, either. Some Gnostics taught that there were three kinds of people in the world. Some were at the base level, animalistic with no spirit within and no afterlife possibilities. Then there was another group of people with a soul but no divine spark. They could achieve an afterlife if they had faith and did good deeds. The third group was composed of those in the know, the ones with the knowledge who know who they are, how they got here and how they can return to the divine realm.

Although many of the surviving writings of the opponents of the Gnostics accused them of being very libertine in their behavior, the evidence seems to show the opposite. They seemed to believe that the body was evil and should be punished and denied all pleasure. We can see echos of this attitude in Christianity down through the Middle Ages into the present, particularly in the flagellants of the 13th and 14th centuries. Author Dan Brown created an unforgettable villain out of this kind of sect for "The Da Vinci Code." There's no evidence that the Gnostics took self punishment that far, but they were hardly libertine.



So for the first 300 years or so of Christianity, those were the choices you had – Ebionite, Pauline or proto-orthodox, Marcionite and Gnostic, plus a few lesser know variations. Geography mattered – if you were in Israel or heavily Jewish cities, you'd likely find Ebionite congregations. In Asia Minor you would find almost all churches were Marcionite. In coastal Asia Minor, Greece and Italy, the churches were proto-orthodox. In Syria and Egypt there would be active Gnostic groups within the churches regardless of the outer form. And all these

theologies would be spilling over on each other creating a bubbling stew of teachings. That's why most of the writings of those who we now call the "Church fathers" were concerned with rooting out heresies – because "heresies" were everywhere!

Choosing the Scriptures

Within the proto-orthodox branch of Christianity, there were two tasks that occupied the leaders of the 3rd and 4th Centuries. The first was rooting out heresies as mentioned above, which meant determining which writings were to be considered scripture and which weren't. This was not an easy task, as there were many writings circulating in the names of various apostles and other authorities that were very popular, but not necessarily completely orthodox in their teachings. A list of some of these can be found in Figure 2, all of which can be read in Bart Ehrman's "*Lost Scriptures*." Some of these survived as complete documents and some as just fragments.

It's interesting to read these gospels, epistles, revelations and visions and realize that at one time all of them were considered scripture by one group or another. The *Gospel of Peter* has a strange resurrection scene in which 3 men, whose heads reach up to the sky, emerge from the tomb, followed by the cross. A voice speaks from the sky, and the cross answers! The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* is a story of Jesus' childhood, and not very flattering. Everyone who annoys Jesus gets struck dead, and then he calms down and brings them back to life. Anne Rice used this story as an inspiration for her book on Jesus' youth, "*Christ The Lord: Out of Egypt*."

The *Acts of Thomas* is the source of stories that Jesus' brother, Thomas, brought Christianity to India, as it recounts his missionary journey and miracles there. The *Acts of Thecla* is the fanciful account of a woman who we know from Paul's letters was a companion and co-apostle with Paul. The document is a treatise on the virtues of celibacy and recounts a series of miracles that Thecla performs. In one trial she's thrown into the arena with lions, who just lick her. In another, my favorite, she jumps in a vat of ravenous seals who are struck dead and she is unharmed.

One thing that is interesting in many of these documents is the theme of celibacy. Even in non-gnostic Christian writings, the idea that the body was bad and sex was unclean would sometimes surface. This started early in Christian circles, as Paul writes about it for himself and discusses it as an option for Christian communities.^{xiv} This attitude survives in the sections of the Christian Church today that require celibacy for those in ministry.

Because of the wide variety of Christianities that existed at that time and the communication difficulties, the simple fact that some bishops had decided on a particular canon of scripture didn't mean that everyone knew about it, or cared. Many of the "Lost Scriptures" continued in circulation and use for hundreds of years.^{xv}

As we have seen, the first "approved" canon of scripture was put together by Marcion out of heavily edited versions of the Gospel of Luke, and the letters of Paul. This became a stimulus for the opponents of Marcion to put their own approved list together. By the middle of the 2nd Century the leading proto-orthodox teachers had settled on 10 letters of Paul plus Hebrews, which they mistakenly attributed to Paul. The debate over the gospels was more intense, as

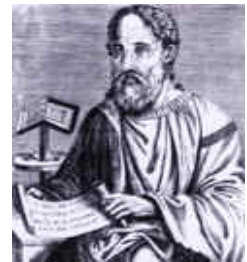
various groups had their favorite gospels and they were hard to reconcile. In addition, the Gospel of John was being circulated and it was so different that it was usually not included.

The first effort to integrate all four gospels came from a Syrian Christian teacher named Tatian in 170 CE. It appears to have been popular, but his practice of correcting the texts to resolve discrepancies wasn't well received. In the 180's, an important Christian writer, Irenaeus, who was the Bishop of Lyons in France (Gaul at the time) wrote "*Against Heresies*" in which he defended the four gospels and produced the first statement of Christian creed. He also argued that the understanding of scripture wasn't subject to private interpretation, but guarded from error by the teachings of the apostles down through the bishops. He listed as scripture, in addition to the gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, letters of Paul (10 plus Hebrews), 1 Peter, 1 and 2 John, Revelation, Shepherd of Hermas, 1 Clement, and the Pastorals (1 and 2 Timothy, Titus).

In the early 3rd Century, Tertullian, Bishop of Carthage, listed his own canon which included the four Gospels, Acts, 13 letters of Paul, 1 John, 1 Peter, Jude, Revelation and Shepherd of Hermas.

About the same time, Clement, Bishop of Alexandria, created a list that included the four gospels, Acts, 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 and 2 John, 1 Peter, Jude, Revelation, Epistle of Banabas, 1 Clement (a different Clement), Shepherd of Hermas, Preaching of Peter, Sibylline Oracles and the Didache. As we can see, some of the writings that were later removed were considered very important to the early Church, and were widely used.

Early in the 4th Century Eusebius wrote his 10 volume work on church history, and indicated that the debate over authentic scripture was still going on. He listed 4 categories of books – acknowledged, disputed, spurious, and heretical. At this point the accepted books included the 4 Gospels, Acts, 14 letters of Paul (including Hebrews), 1 John, 1 Peter and (perhaps, he said) Revelation. The disputed category included James, Jude, 2 Peter and 2 and 3 John.



In 367 CE the powerful Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, wrote a letter that listed the 27 books that we know today as the New Testament. His canon was not automatically accepted, but when the great theologian Augustine of Hippo endorsed it at the Synod of Hippo in 397 CE it became the official standard. Many of the rejected documents continued to be used by individuals and churches for quite a while, though.

The Divinity of Jesus

By the start of the 2nd Century the Pauline Christians had painted themselves into a theological corner that Paul would not have recognized. As I mentioned in the section on Paul, he used the terms "Lord" and "Son of God" in the same way that the Romans used those terms for the Emperor. They referred to a special human being who had been selected by God and exalted to ruling status over humanity. But by insisting that Jesus was both fully human and fully divine, the later Christians seemed to contradict the monotheistic idea of one and only one God.^{xvi}

This problem was easily solved by the Ebionites, who, as adoptionists insisted that Jesus was human, not divine. It was solved by the docetists who taught that Jesus was wholly Spirit, or was human with a temporary Spirit inhabiting him. The proto-orthodox teachers were left with the problem of explaining how both Jesus and God could be one God.

Around 100 CE, Ignatius, the Bishop of Antioch, wrote a spirited defense of Jesus' humanity and real suffering in opposition to docetic teachers. He didn't have an explanation of how Jesus could be fully human and divine, though.

About 100 years later, a man named Theodotus from the proto-orthodox community in Rome began teaching that the true story passed down from Jesus disciples was that Jesus was a mere man born of a normal father and mother. Although this was probably true and he obtained a large following in Rome, he and his followers were eventually removed by those who insisted that Jesus was both man and God.

This just led to more controversy and dissention, led by a man named Hippolytus of Rome, who said the leaders had gone too far in asserting Jesus divinity. It split the church in Rome and Hippolytus set himself up as the new Bishop in opposition to the existing Bishop.

Both sides in this dispute held to the teaching that Jesus was both human and divine, and to monotheism – one God. But Hippolytus's opponents solved this by saying that Christ was God the Father in human form. Even Hippolytus had the honesty to admit that most of the Christians in Rome supported that view.

But that solution created more problems, and Hippolytus and his ally Tertullian pointed them out. How can God's son be himself? Who did Jesus talk to when he prayed? Can God the Father be killed? It was obvious that this conundrum required a creative and original solution.

And then there was the issue of the Holy Spirit to consider, too. Genesis has the Spirit moving over the waters, and Jesus spoke of "another Comforter" who would be sent by God as Jesus was sent. There were actually 3 beings whose relationship to one another had to be understood.

It can be dangerous to go where no one has gone before, and the proto-orthodox thinkers were definitely in uncharted waters here. Ehrman reports that the orthodoxy of one century could become the heresy of the next, and uses the great Christian thinker and writer, Origen of Alexandria, as an example.^{xvii}

Writing in the 1st half of the 3rd Century, Origen worked out a biblically rooted solution in which the essence of Christ came into being in eternity past and over time was so loyal to God that he became one with God. This soul then became human and incarnated as Jesus, who was then equal with God through a transference of God's being. But ultimately subordinate to God. It was the best that Christian thinkers could do at the time, but later on when future Christians refused any notion of Christ being less than fully equal with God, Origen's writings became heretical.

Eventually by the end of the 5th Century the Christian community, of the proto-orthodox anyway, had agreed on the doctrine of the Trinity that we're familiar with today. In essence, they simply declared it to be true. We see the results in the 3 parts of the Nicene Creed:

"We believe in one God, the Father Almighty...."

"We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God... God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God..."

"We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son..."

It's an amazing story when you realize how much trouble these early Christian thinkers had to go through to invent a solution to the logical problem that they had created. And the solution that they finally arrived at won't really stand a critical going over. But today in many churches Christians will sing the Doxology, "*God in three Persons, Blessed Trinity*" without ever questioning how that can be.

Why the Proto-Orthodox Won^{xviii}

The Christians had suffered various persecutions from the Roman authorities off and on for the first 300 years. Mostly local events at first, starting in 249 CE there were periods of empire wide persecution occasioned by the refusal of Christians to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Since the gods needed to be appeased, every natural disaster was blamed on angry gods and the Christians were held responsible for that. This oppression culminated in the Great Persecution of 303 to 313 CE in which churches were destroyed, books burned and Christian clergy arrested. But the persecution didn't work as the Christians refused to perform the sacrifices and by 313 official tolerance for Christians was restored.

At this time, Constantine was the Emperor and he had begun to attribute his success to the Christian God and to call himself a Christian. Once his power was established he became very active in the church, calling the first Ecumenical Council in Nicea in 325 CE. Since this call was coming from the Roman Church, it's no surprise that the Council was composed of only proto-orthodox delegates. So we can say that the proto-orthodox won the battle for Christianity due to the accident of geography and politics.

It's also fair to say that if Roman Christianity had been Ebionite or Gnostic it would not have been so attractive to Constantine. He wouldn't have wanted to become a Jew and follow Jewish law, and the studies of esoteric and hidden knowledge required by the Gnostics would not have appealed to a man of action. The Marcionite version was very popular and might have been attractive to him but it didn't have a presence in Roman churches. It also had the disadvantage of not having ancient roots (an idea very important in Roman society at the time) because Marcion had discarded all ties to Judaism. So in addition to the accidents of geography and politics, we can add the fortuitous accident of having the right theology at the right time, even if it was a theology that neither Jesus or Paul would have recognized.

For further reading I recommend any or all of the books in the Bibliography. There are many fascinating people and events that couldn't fit into a short paper.

Do Jesus and the Bible matter?

In the first class I taught on this material, one lady exclaimed in dismay, “Well, then, why should we care about Jesus and the Bible at all, if none of its true?” And that’s likely to be the reaction of many people who have depended on the truth of the scriptures for assurance, perhaps more than they realized. So let me explain why I think Jesus is still important.

First, look at one thing that sets Jesus apart from all the other prophets and teachers in 1st Century Judea. We remember him! Out of all the prophets and teachers, we remember Jesus because his followers did not disband and go home, they somehow decided that what he had meant in their lives was worth dying for. That was not true for the followers of any of the rest of the prophets, because when the leader was killed, that was the end of the movement. So we can say that Jesus was a powerful presence, so powerful in some way that his followers promoted him to God-like status after his death.

The second important thing about him was what he taught. Rather than building an army to bring the kingdom of God on Earth, he taught that the kingdom was already here – among us. Instead of a punishing god, he taught of a God of love and a friendly universe. Instead of a Jewish kingdom, he taught of a kingdom that extended to all, including Samaritans and Romans. So when we realize this, we can see him as a great spiritual teacher, way ahead of his time and someone that we can follow as a positive example.

So how can we understand what he taught and separate that from words put in his mouth by later generations? Great question! And to answer it a group of over 200 scholars assembled in 1987 and worked for 6 years, producing in the end a new “from scratch” translation of the four NT gospels plus the Gospel of Thomas. They developed a process to decide whether something attributed to Jesus was likely to have been said by him, using specific criteria, and the group voted on it. All sayings were assigned one of four probabilities: unlikely, perhaps possible, pretty likely, or that’s him! – by voting (after passionate discussion, of course).

The full discussion of their criteria is too involved to cover here. If you’re interested, get *The Five Gospels* and read the fascinating story for yourself. But here’s some things they realized. First, Jesus’ sayings were distinctive and cut against the social and religious grain of the culture. They surprised and shocked listeners because they reversed roles or changed expectations. They were characterized by exaggeration, humor and paradox. Second, Jesus makes no claims about himself or speaks in the first person. But he makes many statements about a friendly God. And the multitude of stories of his compassion that his followers put in the gospels speaks well of him.

So the authentic, historical, Jesus seems to be a spiritual teacher and example that we can learn from and follow. As a human being, we can see him as a real example and role model for us in a way that a divine being couldn’t be. In Unity we refer to him as one who shows us the way, an elder brother.

The Bible is our source book for what Jesus taught, and, when used like other ancient wisdom books, is a valuable source of teaching stories. That’s why Jesus and the Bible still matter.

Figure 1

Books of the New Testament

<u>Title</u>	<u>Author</u>	<u>Date</u>
1 Thessalonians	Paul	50 – 51 CE
1 Corinthians	Paul	53 – 54 CE
Philippians	Paul	55 – 56 CE
Philemon	Paul	55 – 56 CE
Galatians	Paul	55 or 57 CE
2 Corinthians	Paul	55 – 58 CE
Romans	Paul	58 CE
Gospel of Mark	Unknown	68 – 75 CE
Gospel of Matthew	Unknown	80 – 90 CE
Colossians	Unknown	70 – 80 CE ?
Ephesians	Unknown	85 – 95 CE
2 Thessalonians	Unknown	75 – 100 CE
1 Peter	Unknown	80 – 95 CE
Gospel of Luke/Acts	Unknown	90 – 100 CE
James	Unknown	75 – 125 CE
Revelation	John somebody	95 – 96 CE
Gospel of John / 1 John	Unknown	95 – 130 CE
Hebrews	Unknown	90 – 115 CE
Jude	Unknown	90 - 110 CE
1 Timothy / 2 Timothy / Titus	Unknown	120s – 130s CE
2 Peter	Unknown	120s – 130s CE
2 John / 3 John	Unknown	120s – 130s CE

Figure 2

Other Early Christian Writings

Gospel of the Nazareans	Epistle of the Apostles
Gospel of the Ebionites	3 rd Corinthians
Gospel of the Hebrews	Letter to the Laodiceans
Gospel of the Egyptians	Letter of 1 Clement
Gospel of Thomas	Letter of 2 Clement
Gospel of Peter	Letter of Peter to James
Gospel of Mary	Letter of Barnabas
Gospel of Phillip	Preaching of Peter
Gospel of Truth	Pseudo-Titus
Gospel of the Savior	Treatise of the Resurrection
Infancy Gospel of Thomas	The Didache (Teaching) of the 12 Apostles
Proto-Gospel of James	
Secret Gospel of Mark	Shepherd of Hermas
	Apocalypse of Peter
Acts of John	Apocalypse of Paul
Acts of Paul	Secret Book of John
Acts of Thecla	On the Origin of the World
Acts of Thomas	The First Thought in Three Forms
Acts of Peter	Hymn of the Pearl

All these writings, and more, are available in “Lost Scriptures” by Bart Ehrman

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Note: Not all these books are referenced in the paper, but they have provided insights and informed my view of the subject matter. They are all worth reading!

Authors

Marcus J. Borg is Hundere Distinguished Professor of Religion and Culture, Emeritus, at Oregon State University, Canon Theologian at Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Portland, OR, and author of numerous bestselling books including *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* and *The God We Never Knew*.

John Dominic Crossan is an Emeritus Professor of Religious Studies at DePaul University in Chicago, and author of several bestselling books including *The Historical Jesus* and *The Birth of Christianity*.

Bart D. Ehrman is the James A Grey Professor and Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and author of many books including *Misquoting Jesus* and *Jesus, Interrupted*.

Robert W Funk was a Guggenheim Fellow and a Senior Fulbright Scholar. He served as Annual Professor of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem and as chair of the Graduate Department of Religion at Vanderbilt University. He also authored many books including *The Acts of Jesus* and *A Credible Jesus*. Died 2005.

Roy W Hoover is Weyerhaeuser Professor of Biblical Literature and Professor of Religion Emeritus, Whitman College, Walla Walla, WA. His books include *The Authentic Letters of Paul* and *Profiles of Jesus*.

Donald L O'Dell holds a Master's Degree from Princeton Theological Seminary with an undergraduate degree in History. An active United Presbyterian minister for many years, he is now semi-retired and active in a New Thought (Unity/Religious Science) congregation in Florida.

John Shelby Spong served as Episcopal Bishop of Newark, NJ, prior to his retirement. A passionate New Testament scholar and visiting lecturer at Harvard, he has been an outspoken advocate for change in the church. His many books include *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*.

L. Michael White is the Ronald Nelson Smith Chair in Classics and Christian Origins and is the director of the Institute for the Study of Antiquity and Christian Origins at the University of Texas at Austin. His books include *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite*.

Endnotes

- ⁱ White, *From Jesus To Christianity*. All the books of the New Testament are discussed and dated here. The 7 authentic letters of Paul are listed on p166.
- ⁱⁱ Borg and Crossan, *The First Paul*. All discussions of Paul and his writings are based on this book, especially Chapter 2, “How to Read a Pauline Letter.”
- ⁱⁱⁱ White, *op cit.* pp 133 – 142
- ^{iv} White, *op cit.* pp 305 - 314
- ^v Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*, p 219
- ^{vi} Ebionites primarily discussed in Ehrman, *op cit.* pp 99 – 103 and White, *op cit.* pp 404 – 406
- ^{vii} Galations 2:1 – 10
- ^{viii} Galatians 2:11 – 14
- ^{ix} Borg and Crossan, *op cit.* Chapter 2
- ^x In addition to Borg and Crossan, see White, *op cit.* 260 – 271
- ^{xi} For discussions of Marcion, see White, *op cit.* pp 408 – 411, and Ehrman, *op cit.* 103 – 112.
- ^{xii} White, *op cit.* pp 317 – 318
- ^{xiii} Ehrman, *op cit.* pp 113 – 134 and White, *op cit.* pp 394 – 398
- ^{xiv} I Corinthians 7
- ^{xv} Choosing the approved scriptures, see Ehrman, *op cit.* pp 229 – 246 and White, *op cit.* pp 445 – 458
- ^{xvi} Ehrman, *op cit.* pp 151 – 157
- ^{xvii} Ehrman, *op cit.* p 155
- ^{xviii} Ehrman, *op cit.* pp 247 - 257