

An Introduction To The Christian Bible

or

Bible Babble for Beginners



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Mustard Smudge Publishing
2025

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A. Overview



The Christian Bible is a divinely inspired collection of historical facts and the source of all knowledge for a vocal minority living among us. For another minority, it is strictly a human concoction originating from an ignorant, superstitious, and cruel age that has been manipulated over the years to benefit people in power. However, I believe the majority like me are unfamiliar with the intimate details contained within it, aside from a cursory knowledge of some of the more popular themes of a paradise lost, epic floods, and the birth of a savior who has inspired countless holiday movies about happy families and eggnog. We maintain this ignorance at our own risk.

To one extent or another the Bible influences many of the political and social events shaping the world today, in part because Christianity is the dominant religion in the western world. It's read for inspiration by those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matthew 5:6), misread by others to justify evils such as slavery (Noah's curse on his son Ham in Genesis), and used to defend the ongoing wars in the Middle East. Because it is used and misused so much it's important for us to have a basic understanding of the history of the Bible so everyone can determine how much authority it should be given.

The Bible as we know it today had its start with stories passed down orally by people residing in the Levant region of the Middle East. This includes the land incorporated in present day Palestine and Israel. These oral traditions were transcribed to scrolls and parchments in the ancient languages of Hebrew and Aramaic and later modified by scribes to fill in perceived information gaps. To make these transcribed stories more accessible to most literate people of the expanded region, they were translated to the Greek language following conquest by Alexander the Great in the third century before the common era (BCE).

In the middle to late first century of the common era (CE), authors writing in the Greek language, decades after the fact, recorded stories of the life and teachings of a proclaimed Jewish Messiah living in Galilee. His name, Jesus of Nazareth. These recordings would be incorporated into the ceremonies and worship of the faithful and added to those already established. In the fourth century CE, a council of church leaders decided which stories and recorded teachings (from antiquity and from the earlier centuries CE) would be officially included in the Christian Bible, and these were subsequently translated into Latin. The officially recognized books of the Bible would later be modified by some prominent religious leaders after the Protestant Reformation, and subsequently the Bible translated to the vernacular languages of the Christian world.

It can be assumed that with every transcription and translation, scribes and translators made their own edits to make reading flow somewhat coherently. This also allowed for editions more in line with inherent biases. Readers familiar with the game “Telephone” can imagine the translation as this game being played out over centuries by people from many parts of the Western World speaking different languages. In the end the host of the party would then decide whose version they thought most likely to be useful.

The Christian Bible is based on tales of ancient Jewish prophets and heroes comprising the Old Testament, and the establishment of new beliefs based on the reinterpreted life of Jesus of Nazareth found in the New Testament. The Old Testament, with its stories of the persecution, exile, and defeat of the ancient Hebrews and of their God (who from a non-believer’s point of view reneged on every promise and failed them at every turn), is one of the most influential of all written texts, possibly surpassed only by the books of the New Testament. It is appropriate to think of the Bible as a series of books that are poorly edited, occasionally rediscovered, often misread, and frequently misquoted.

B. Old Testament



The Old Testament, which is based on the Hebrew Bible, is a compilation of narrative histories, laws, wisdom, and prophecies from Yahweh worshipping communities located in Canaan, Mesopotamia and Egypt. The written version of the Hebrew Bible, called the Tanakh, was canonized between the second century BCE and the second century CE, but most of the biblical accounts probably originated between the eighth and second centuries BCE as compilations of oral traditions and folktales circulating among a mostly illiterate culture. There are no surviving manuscripts from earlier years, with the Dead Sea Scrolls dating to the second century BCE being the earliest historical source. As a historical reference, the eighth century BCE was approximately the time when Homer was writing his Greek epics.

The Tanakh has 24 separate books which are traditionally divided into three groupings which include the Torah (Teaching or Law), Nevi'im (Prophets), and the Ketuvim (Writings). The Christian Old Testament includes 38 or 46 books (Protestants differ from Catholics with the latter adding the deuterocanonical books which were written after 300 BCE) and are generally grouped as Pentateuch, Historical, Wisdom, and Prophets (major and minor). The Pentateuch (from the Greek for five books) of the Old Testament aligns with the Torah books of the Tanakh. All the other books in the Tanakh are included in the Old Testament but some of the Prophetic books of the Tanakh are assigned to the Historical books in the Old Testament, some of the Prophetic books in the Tanakh are combined into one comprehensive book, and some of the Historical books in the Old Testament are divided into two books (Chronicles becomes 1 Chronicles and 2 Chronicles for example). The Tanakh was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the Old Testament was originally written in the Greek translation of the Tanakh, and this translation is referred to as the Septuagint.

The Pentateuch or Torah

Both the Torah and Pentateuch include the first five books which recount the narrative history of the creation of earth and the human race (Adam and Eve), the great flood (Noah's Ark), the emigration of the Jewish ancestors (Abraham) to Canaan, the exodus from Egypt (Moses and the Ten Commandments), the rule of kings (David and Solomon), the destruction of the temple and exile to Babylon, and the return of the exiled people, all of which provides the foundation of the Jewish religion. These books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, alternatively known as the five books of Moses. Biblical scholars think there are various literary sources for these books, and many of these were completed in what is termed the Persian period (538-332 BCE) when Hebrew elites were allowed to return to Judah from Babylon after being exiled following conquest by the Babylonian Empire in 586 BCE. Some of these stories may have been based on oral folklore from earlier centuries in Canaan, but the books borrow heavily from creation myths, epic flood sagas, and moral standards of other ancient peoples in Mesopotamia. The various stories and ritualistic laws of the Pentateuch have been stitched

together into a codified narrative, which may account for the repetition and differing points of emphasis presented in the books. The very nature of God is sometimes presented as a wrathful interventionist, and other times as that of a more metaphysical benefactor.

Historical Books

The next twelve books of the Old Testament are classified as Historical Books and include accounts of the Yahweh worshippers entering into the land of Canaan after fleeing Egypt (Joshua), the rise and fall of charismatic leaders (Judges), the rule of King David and Solomon in the united kingdoms of Israel and Judah (Samuel 1&2, Kings 1&2, and Chronicles 1&2), the rule of separate kings in the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah (Ezra and Jeremiah), the story of abiding loyalty (Ruth), and the tale of a young Hebrew woman becoming the Queen of Persia (Esther). Tradition has it that King David (of David and Goliath fame) united the disparate tribes of Yahweh worshippers under a single monarch around the year 1000 BCE, and established Jerusalem as its capital. Solomon, David's son from an illicit liaison with Bathsheba, supposedly ruled during construction of the first Temple, but succumbed to the temptations of earthly delights as he accumulated wealth, wives, and concubines.

Two of the Historical Books, Ezra and Nehemiah, tell the story of the return of the Hebrews from exile as a second exodus, emphasizing God's faithfulness and the importance of rebuilding the Temple and community, thereby reaffirming God's covenant with the Hebrews. These books suggest that the rightful chosen people are those Hebrews that were sent in exile as foretold by the prophets. Hebrews that remained in Canaan during the exile were considered as not among the "chosen". There was a real emphasis on purity of blood lines and the need for all males of the chosen people to divorce any foreign wives they may have wed during the exile period. Because the Hebrew priests and other elites were writing these books, they got to decide who were numbered in this exclusive community of "The Chosen".

Wisdom Books

The Wisdom Books include the story of a righteous man remaining faithful in the face of despair (Job), a collection of prayers and hymns (Psalms), wise sayings (Proverbs), an expression of the vacuity of worldly pursuits (Ecclesiastes), and love and intimacy in marriage (Song of Solomon). The story of Job supposedly occurred in a region bordering Canaan in about the year 2000 BCE, although it was written much later in the Hellenistic period after 300 BCE. The main emphasis of the Old Testament wisdom books is on understanding and attaining wisdom for all areas of life, including relationships with God and others, and grappling with the complexities of human existence and the nature of suffering. "When there are many words, sin is unavoidable, but the one who controls his lips is prudent" (Proverbs 10:19). "Go to the ant, you slacker! Observe its ways and become wise" (Proverbs 6:6).

Prophetic Books

The Prophetic Books of the Old Testament include classifications for Major Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel, and Daniel) and Minor Prophets (12 in all). Many of these

Prophetic Books were a response to the Babylonian exile and return of the Yahweh worshippers to the land of Canaan. The basic message of these books is that Judgment is coming but blessings will follow for those who repent. The biblical authors stressed that the misfortune falling on the chosen people, including conquest and exile, was a result of the people straying from the covenant established between God and Moses. Yahweh was more than willing to punish the chosen ones for their leading a life of sin, but He would always honor the established covenant and bless those returning to righteousness. Many of the books were written during the period of exile, or post exile, but chronicled the time leading up to the exile. Future Christians would interpret certain of these books, such as Isaiah, to establish that Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of a coming messiah, but this is most likely not the meaning of what was written.

Canonization of the Hebrew Bible and the Old Testament

It was sometime during the eighth century BCE that historians believe what would become the Tanakh began to be recorded by scribes compiling royal history and heroic legend for some of the historic accounts in the Bible. These were followed by the books of the Torah from the fourth to sixth centuries BCE, and the remaining over the next few hundred years as Israel and Judah were swallowed up by the expanding Assyrian Empire, followed by the Babylonians and then the Persians. Following conquest of the region by Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE, the early Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek that became the version of the Old Testament used by early Christian converts who were unfamiliar with Hebrew.

It is important to keep in mind that scribes who copied texts frequently added, changed, or omitted content without giving any indication in the manuscript that they had done so. It's also useful to know that there were two main kingdoms or territories of the Jewish people after the reign of Solomon. Judah in the south, including Jerusalem and the temple, and Israel in the north, including Samaria, the Sea of Galilee, and the Jordan River. Relations between these two kingdoms were often adversarial which led to separate myths regarding the history of the Jewish people. Over the centuries these myths would be melded together to produce a loosely coherent narrative.

The canonization, or codification of the Torah probably occurred around the year 400 BCE, with the Wisdom and Writings Books following during the next few hundred years. The middle of the first millennium BCE coincided with the Axial or Axis Age, the era which included the development of the great intellectual, philosophical, and religious systems that came to shape subsequent human society and culture in the known world. There was a shift or turning away from localized concerns and a move toward transcendence. During this time Indian metaphysicians proposed solutions to help people attain liberation (moksha) from karma's effects with the advent of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. In ancient Greece Socrates was the exemplar of thinkers who emphasized the use of reason in the relentless investigation of truth. Chinese thinkers striving to unify the kingdom and avert civil war debated the appropriate "way" (Tao or Dao) to guide people with the beginning of Confucianism. Persian Zoroastrianism saw human history as a microcosm of the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Likewise, in

the Old Testament the Hebrew Prophets came to view Yahweh as the supreme being who created heaven and earth and who shaped the destiny of all people.

The Old Testament would be included in the canon of the Christian Bible by church leaders in the fourth century CE, but not before there were serious attempts to exclude it from the Bible. Some Christian leaders believed the God of the Old Testament was inconsistent, wrathful, and genocidal and they attempted to exclude the Old Testament books from the official canon. However, their views would lose out to those who thought it important to provide a continuation of the stories presented in the Hebrew Bible to legitimize the Christian sect.

Old Testament Conclusion

If the Hebrew Bible, and the subsequent Old Testament, are based on anything close to historical fact, it could be argued that the actions of the Yahweh worshipping people in fulfilling the covenant between God and Abraham included heinous acts of genocide as they wiped out the indigenous people of Canaan with the land grab initiated by Joshua leading the Levites across the Jordan River. The exile of their descendants in the centuries to follow could then be thought of as the normal result of war and subjugation in the ancient near east. The biblical authors of the Hebrew Bible, however, sought to quell such notions by emphasizing that God gave the land to his chosen people, and that God used foreign intervention to punish his chosen for their falling into the sins of idolatry and material gain.

Their stories in the Tanakh and Old Testament then become those of sinning, repentance, and a return of the chosen people to the promised land in fulfillment of the covenant with Abraham, Moses and David. God's will be done. Biblical writers could have used the conquest and exile of the Hebrews as a future warning to them that they would be punished for straying from the path of righteousness. It was during their exile that they would also have been exposed to the myths of other religions that may have influenced their own writing.

The following tables are included to provide a chronology and summary of the biblical and historical accounts included in the Old Testament. As mentioned earlier, the first compilations probably occurred sometime in the Monarchic Period between 745 and 587 BCE, and include the legends of Joshua, David and Solomon. These could have been based on oral folklore from an earlier period. Many of the stories, including much of the first five books of the Old Testament, were compiled during the period of time when the Hebrews were living in Babylon during the exile (586 to 539 BCE), or in the Persian Period (538 to 332 BCE) when the Persian Empire ruled over Canaan.

There is no independent source of information that verifies historical authorship of any of these books. Although the first five books are traditionally attributed to Moses, who supposedly lived in the 15th century BCE, biblical scholars believe the books were compiled during the Persian Period, 538-332 BCE. Some of the prophetic books, such as Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, predicted the conquest of Judea and the exile of the Hebrews that historically occurred in the sixth century BCE. However, most biblical scholars believe the books were written after the

exile occurred, and in the case of the book Isaiah, well after this period. It makes predicting the future somewhat easier after events have already occurred.

TABLE 1 - Chronology and Classification of Old Testament Books

Book	Biblical Account		Historical Period	Account Compiled BCE	Genre	
	Timeline BCE	Attribution			Hebrew	Old Testament
Genesis	1800+	Moses	Persian	538 - 332	Torah	Pentateuch
Exodus	1450+	Moses	Persian	538 - 332	Torah	Pentateuch
Leviticus	1400's	Moses	Persian	538 - 332	Torah	Pentateuch
Numbers	1400's	Moses	Persian	538 - 332	Torah	Pentateuch
Deuteronomy	1400's	Moses	Monarchic	745 - 587	Torah	Pentateuch
Joshua	1400	Joshua	Monarchic	745 - 587	Prophets	Historical
Judges	1300's	Samuel	Monarchic	745 - 587	Prophets	Historical
Ruth	1140	Samuel	Monarchic	745 - 587	Writings	Historical
Samuel 1&2	1000	Samuel	Monarchic	745 - 587	Prophets	Historical
Kings 1&2	585+	Jeremiah	Monarchic	745 - 587	Prophets	Historical
Chronicles 1&2	610+	Ezra	Persian	538 - 332	Writings	Historical
Ezra	500's	Ezra	Persian	538 - 332	Writings	Historical
Nehemiah	400's	Ezra	Persian	538 - 332	Writings	Historical
Esther	400's	Mordecai	Persian	538 - 332	Writings	Historical
Job	2000	Moses	Hellenistic	331 - 164	Writings	Wisdom
Psalms	585+	David et al	Exilic	586 - 539	Writings	Wisdom
Proverbs	950	Solomon	Monarchic	745 - 587	Writings	Wisdom
Ecclesiastes	940	Solomon	Hellenistic	331 - 164	Writings	Wisdom
Song of Solomon	950	Solomon	Hellenistic	331 - 164	Writings	Wisdom
Isaiah	700's	Isaiah	Persian	538 - 332	Prophets	Prophets
Jeremiah	600's	Jeremiah	Exilic	586 - 539	Prophets	Prophets
Lamentations	585	Jeremiah	Persian	538 - 332	Writings	Prophets
Ezekiel	500's	Ezekiel	Exilic	586 - 539	Prophets	Prophets
Daniel	500's	Daniel	Hellenistic	331 - 164	Writings	Prophets

TABLE 1 (continued) - Chronology and Classification of Old Testament Books

Book	Biblical Account		Historical Account		Genre	
	Timeline BCE	Attribution	Period	Compiled BCE	Hebrew	Old Testament
Hosea	750	Hosea	Monarchic	745 – 587	The 12	Minor Prophets
Joel	835	Joel	Persian	538 – 332	The 12	Minor Prophets
Amos	770	Amos	Monarchic	745 – 587	The 12	Minor Prophets
Obadiah	850	Obadiah	Exilic	586 – 539	The 12	Minor Prophets
Jonah	760	Jonah	Hellenistic	331 - 164	The 12	Minor Prophets
Micah	735	Micah	Monarchic	745 - 587	The 12	Minor Prophets
Nahum	700	Nahum	Monarchic	745 - 587	The 12	Minor Prophets
Habakkuk	625	Habakkuk	Monarchic	745 - 587	The 12	Minor Prophets
Zephania	640	Zephania	Monarchic	745 - 587	The 12	Minor Prophets
Haggai	520	Haggai	Persian	538 - 332	The 12	Minor Prophets
Zechariah	520	Zechariah	Persian	538 - 332	The 12	Minor Prophets
Malachi	430	Scribe	Persian	538 - 332	The 12	Minor Prophets

TABLE 2 – Summaries of Old Testament Books

Book	Summary
Genesis	Creation myth, fall from grace, epic flood, covenant with Abraham
Exodus	The Yahweh worshippers flee from Egypt, Moses receives the ten commandments
Leviticus	Description of proper rituals, sacrifices, and moral guidelines
Numbers	Yahweh worshippers travel from Mt Sinai to the west side of Jordan River.
Deuteronomy	Moses' farewell speeches urging the people to be faithful and obedient
Joshua	Describes the Hebrews entry into the "promised land", conquest, and dividing into 12 tribes
Judges	Highlights six charismatic leaders, becoming progressively worse, as the people fall into lawlessness
Ruth	Naomi, and her devoted daughter-in-law, Ruth, a non-Hebrew, and the lineage to King David
Samuel 1&2	The transition from Judges to the monarchy with the establishment of King David's dynasty
Kings 1&2	Outlines the monarchy after David, including Solomon, and the fall into idolatry and captivity
Chronicles 1&2	An account of the Davidic line of succession and the Temple
Ezra	Recounts the return of Hebrew exiles from Babylon, rebuilding the Temple, and pure blood lines
Nehemiah	Nehemiah's attempts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and efforts to restore people's spiritual life
Esther	The story of a Hebrew woman becoming Queen of Persia and her saving the Hebrew exiles
Job	The story of a righteous man remaining faithful in the face of despair and adversity
Psalms	A collection of prayers, hymns and songs in praise of God, faith, and hope
Proverbs	A collection of wise sayings on how to live a righteous life
Ecclesiastes	Explores the futility of worldly pursuits and finding true meaning and purpose in keeping commandments
Song of Solomon	A collection of love poems celebrating human love, or, the love between God and humanity
Isaiah	A prophet with a message of repentance, judgment and hope, and a suffering servant giving redemption
Jeremiah	A prophet with warning of judgment for the people of Judah

TABLE 2 (continued) – Summaries of Old Testament Books

Book	Summary
Lamentations	Five poems expressing grief over the destruction of Jerusalem and calling for restoration and repentance
Ezekiel	A prophet delivering messages of judgment and hope to the exiles in Babylon
Daniel	A leader of the Hebrews in the Babylonian and Persian courts
Hosea	Extolling God's love for his chosen people and his covenant with them even when they are unfaithful
Joel	Prophecies and warnings of adversity and of a future day of the Lord
Amos	A message of coming judgment and emphasizing social justice and compassion of the poor
Obadiah	The shortest book of the Old Testament; condemns the land of Edom for helping destroy Jerusalem
Jonah	After being swallowed by a large fish, Jonah repents and preaches to the Ninevites who turn to God
Micah	Warnings of doom but prophecies of hope. Christians read 5:2 as the Messiah will be from Bethlehem
Nahum	A prophesy of judgment of the Assyrians for their oppression of the Hebrews
Habakkuk	Coming to faith after wrestling with questions of injustice and evil in the world
Zephania	Delivering a message of judgment for Judah, but also hope
Haggai	A message of the importance of rebuilding the Temple and the blessings which will follow
Zechariah	Encouraging the people to rebuild the Temple and of the coming of the Messiah
Malachi	Addresses the sins and shortcomings of the exiles returning captivity

C. New Testament



The New Testament ostensibly tells the story of the life of Jesus of Nazareth (4 BCE – 30 CE) and the early days of Christianity. The New Testament contains 27 books written in Greek by 15 or 16 different authors, written between the years 50 and 120 CE. They can be divided into four main groups: Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, Epistles, and the Apocalypse or Revelation.

It's important to keep in mind that there were no official books of the Christian Bible, including those for the New Testament, until centuries after the death of Jesus of Nazareth. There were many gospels, letters and apocalypses circulating among the various groups and sects of the followers of the new Jesus movement, and many of these had different viewpoints on what theme or message should be emphasized for the new religion. The earliest attempt at compiling an official canon was made in the middle of the second century CE, but it wasn't until the late fourth century that a group of male bishops decided upon the official list of documents.

The four canonized Gospels, which tell the stories of Jesus' life, ministry, and death, were written anonymously and came to be ascribed to disciples (Matthew and John), and associates of apostles (Mark and Luke). However, despite these attributions, none of the gospels were written by men who knew or encountered Jesus. Also, the gospels are the only source of information for the life of Jesus, and they, like all biblical literature, should be read with a critical eye, examining their historical context, literary features, and potential biases.

Acts of the Apostles, written by the author of the third Gospel (Luke), describes the spread of the Christian church from Jesus' death to the death of the apostle Paul. Following Acts are 21 epistles or letters which are records of correspondence between a church leader and a Christian community. Thirteen of these letters were attributed to Paul the Apostle, which can lead to a certain bias toward his teachings of a divine Jesus who transcended human existence. The last book in the New Testament is Revelation, a Christian apocalypse. The author of this book describes the events leading up to the destruction of this world and the appearance of the world to come.

As mentioned, there were gospels and other writings that did not make it into the final Christian canon. These included writings by the Apostolic Fathers (Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp and others) and a collection of texts found at a dig near Nag Hammadi in Egypt (The Gospel of Thomas and others). At the time, these resources were as authoritative as the four Gospels or Paul's letters. Some of these writings were gnostic (from the Greek word *gnosis* meaning knowledge), believing that God is inherent in all humans and that some people attain enlightenment through true knowledge. There were some gnostic Christians who thought Jesus was one of these wise men who taught his disciples in this philosophy.

Historical Background

To understand the writings of the New Testament it's important to know the history of the occupation of the region by the Roman Empire, and how the life of a Hebrew man espousing radical notions of reform would fit into that political reality. When the Roman general Pompey (106-48 BCE), conquered the Near East, including Judah in 63 BCE, he established regional client-kings who were responsible for keeping the peace, carrying out Roman dictates, and collecting taxes. Herod the Great, a follower of the Hebrew faith, was named King of Judea (37-4 BCE), and although he renovated the Temple complex in Jerusalem, he was reviled by many Hebrews for his relationship with Rome. Upon his death, religious leadership passed to his sons who continued this close relationship with Rome, and who were in this role during the life of Jesus.

Jesus and his followers, if they existed, were strict devotees of the Hebrew or Jewish faith, and like others protesting before and during their time, preached about the coming Kingdom of God which would return the land to Jewish sovereignty. This was in accordance with the Hebrew Bible that prophesized a coming Messiah who would free the Chosen People from external rule. But Jesus also spoke out against Rome's political pawns, the Jewish high priests who interpreted the biblical laws to their own benefit. Jesus vilified the practice of requiring believers to pay for sacrifices to be performed by the religious elite at the main temple in Jerusalem, and this conflict with these power brokers would determine his fate.

Jesus was probably influenced by time spent with the hermit prophet, John the Baptist, to whom he was related. John was baptizing people in the Jordan River in preparation of the imminent Final Judgment. After being baptized, Jesus likely started preaching his own message based on John's teachings. John would soon be arrested and later executed by the son of Herod for denouncing the young ruler's marriage to his brother's wife, which was illegal by Hebrew law. The execution of John was carried out around 28 CE.

Jesus's radical preaching regarding the corrupt nature of the Temple elite and the coming Messiah who would free the faithful from Roman rule put him in direct confrontation with the High Priests of the Temple, and most importantly, the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The governor considered these ideas as seditious and subject to the common punishment for treason, which was crucifixion. This was the fate that awaited Jesus, and for many others preaching revolutionary ideals before and after him.

Jesus and his disciples were illiterate tradesmen and fishers who spoke Aramaic, so there are no writings by them in the New Testament, which was originally written in Greek. Nor is there any recorded documentation of their lives until decades after their deaths. The task of defining and rewriting Jesus's message fell to a group of relatively educated, urbanized, Greek-speaking believers of the early Christian community. They essentially transformed Jesus from a revolutionary man trying to reform Hebrew religious rites, to a Romanized demigod; from a man who tried and failed to free the people from the rule of the Roman empire, to a transcendent being uninterested in earthly matters.

(Saint) Stephen was a Hellenized believer in the new religion and became the first martyr for the followers of Jesus. He was condemned by the Temple priests who had him stoned to death for the heresy of speaking out against the priestly elites. Stoning was the typical method of execution employed by the temple high priests, while crucifixion was preferred by the Romans. One of those in attendance for the stoning of Stephen was Saul of Tarsus, a Hellenist Hebrew travelling down from present day Turkey. At that time, Saul was a defender of the Temple governance and member of the Pharisees who strictly observed the traditional and written laws of Moses.

Saul would later come to be known as Paul after his conversion to the teachings of Jesus following a revelatory vision of a resurrected Jesus who appeared to him on the road to Damascus (49 CE). The Epistles of Paul are the earliest writings in the New Testament and date to around 50 CE. Scholars have come to appreciate Paul as a primary driver of the religious movement that would become Christianity. Paul preached that Jesus would soon return from heaven and usher in the reign of God, not an earthly kingdom ruled by a Messiah but rather by God himself. This was important for many familiar with the Hebrew Bible in that a Messiah who was killed before freeing the people from bondage would be a false prophet.

Paul was interested in bringing these new teachings to Gentiles and lax practitioners of the Jewish faith who may have balked at the strict requirements of the Torah. As such, he preached that converts would not have to follow the ritualistic laws of the Old Testament, and in fact pushed the idea that Jews were not bound by the Torah now that Jesus the Christ had ushered in a new covenant to replace the Mosaic one. This put him in opposition to the original followers of Jesus, including James, the brother of Jesus, and the Apostle Peter, for both of whom Paul had contempt (Galatians 2:1-10). Paul preached an altogether new doctrine that would have probably been unrecognizable to the historic Jesus.

Paul's ideas about a resurrected and divine Jesus addressed the issue of what constituted a true messiah. Namely one that would eventually usher in a new Kingdom of God, rather than one who failed to free the people from Roman rule. Paul was the first to call Jesus the Son of God. (Philippians 2:6-7). However, this should be put in the context of the time. Paul's use of the term "Son of God" didn't necessarily mean Jesus was the actual son of God, an idea blasphemous to the true believers of the Hebrew religion, but rather that Jesus was exalted by God and possessed God's powers and spirit. The Jesus Christ of Paul's creation has utterly subsumed the historical Jesus of Nazareth in the Bible. The second century Church Fathers turned to Paul's writings to validate what would ultimately become the official Christian theology.

The destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple (by Roman legions after the Jewish revolt in 70 CE) was the historical event that cut the thread between the teachings of Paul's doctrine and the laws of Moses as followed by Jesus and his apostles. Jerusalem was no longer the center of what would become Christian doctrine, but the expansion of the new doctrine would be toward Rome. Paul was at the vanguard of this expansion up until his death in about 64 CE. At the

time of his death, Paul was a major figure within the very small Christian movement, but he also had many enemies and detractors, and his contemporaries in Jerusalem probably did not accord him as much respect during his life as they gave James and Peter. His surviving letters, however, have had enormous influence on subsequent Christian belief and his place as one of the greatest religious leaders of all time is secure.

The Gospels

The first three Gospels are known as the Synoptic Gospels because they have much material in common, and to differentiate them from the Gospel of John which introduces new stories perhaps written to substantiate the teachings of Paul. Most biblical scholars agree that the authors of Matthew and Luke based their written accounts largely on those of Mark. But they also contain some stories or allegories that are absent from Mark, which has led biblical scholars to hypothesize about the existence of an undetermined second source for these other two Gospels, referred to as Q, or the "lost source." The four canonized gospels were written for different audiences (Jewish and Gentile for example) and that is one factor on why the authors felt the need to write them emphasizing different messages or stories.

The Gospel of Mark was probably written within a couple of decades after the death of Jesus. The author was a Greek speaker writing for a group of people unfamiliar with Hebrew customs as evidenced by the author explaining Aramaic words and Jewish customs. The author himself may have been a Gentile since he misunderstands some of these Jewish traditions. For the Gospel of Mark, the story of Jesus begins when he is baptized, the point at which God pronounces Jesus as his son (Mark 1:9-11). Mark's readers could relate to the term "Son of God", because there were other mystical teachers, prophets, and miracle workers wandering about using that term. This Gospel does not include a birth narrative, and the original ending of it did not include an appearance by Jesus after his execution which was troubling for early readers. Scribes later added an ending more in agreement with the other gospels.

In Matthew, Jesus is unmistakably Jewish and there is an emphasis on Jesus' connection to two of the most important figures in Jewish history, King David and Abraham. This relationship is further underscored by the genealogy presented in Chapter 1, which traces the ancestors of Jesus back to these Old Testament characters through Joseph, the husband of Mary (but apparently not the biological father of Jesus). Matthew emphasizes Jesus' importance to Judaism by considering Jesus as the continuation of the Mosaic covenant. "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law (Torah) or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17). The Gospel provides a birth narrative including a visit of Magi (the Greek word for sorcerers). The execution and resurrection of Jesus is described, after which Jesus appears to the Disciples in Galilee. For the author of this Gospel, Jesus' divinity occurred at his birth, with Mary being impregnated supernaturally.

The Gospel of Luke was also written anonymously by a Greek speaker, perhaps a Gentile, who may also have written the Acts of the Apostles. Once again, a birth narrative is provided but instead of Magi the Holy Family are visited by shepherds, and the divinity of Jesus is suggested

as being established by a virgin birth. The genealogy of Jesus is described as going back to important Hebrew leaders, but suggests that Jesus is a universal savior, not just a Jewish Messiah (Luke 2:30-32). An added plot twist includes the family's flight to Egypt after the birth, to avoid the wrath of Herod (Massacre of the Innocents). The Gospel once again continues up through the execution and resurrection, after which Jesus appears to the Disciples in Jerusalem.

John is the only Gospel that explicitly states that Jesus had a prior existence with God before birth and was divine in nature from the beginning. In John, there is no birth narrative, and the baptism of Jesus is not described. Unlike the other Gospels, Jesus does not preach an apocalyptic message and does not teach in parables. John's divine Jesus proclaims his identity openly, and those who reject him are more strongly condemned than in the Synoptic Gospels. Like the other Gospels, the Gospel of John was written anonymously, though traditionally attributed to John the Apostle. Some of the stories may go back to one of Jesus' followers, but the Gospel itself was written well after the deaths of the disciples and is the compilation of several different sources. The most well-known verse comes from John 3:16, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life".

The Gospels had to overcome problematic issues in bringing Jesus' message to the people. These included overcoming the perception of his failed attempt at freeing the people from Roman rule (which would make him a false messiah), and making the message more palatable to likely Roman censorship. As mentioned earlier, claiming the divinity of Jesus who would return to begin a Kingdom of God addressed the former, and shifting the blame for his death away from the Romans addressed the latter. All the Gospels tried to shift ultimate blame for the death of Jesus from Pontius Pilate, a ruthless Roman governor known for sending multitudes to their executions, to the Jewish high priest, Caiaphas. This last issue paved the way for two thousand years of antisemitism.

Acts of the Apostles

The Book of Acts, most likely written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke, narrates the missionary enterprise that begins at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit comes upon the Apostles and empowers them to work miracles and speak foreign languages. The author was probably a Gentile, and the life and teaching of Paul is a major emphasis of the book thus favoring the concept of Paul's message of an exalted Christ and the gift of forgiveness and eternal life by Christ's death on the cross. The narrative in Acts goes to great lengths to explain why the message of Jesus is not only for those of the Jewish faith, and to show how Gentiles came to be a part of the chosen people of God. Acts attributes the delay of the end of the world to the necessity of spreading the gospel to the "ends of the earth".

Epistles

The Epistles are letters from the new religious leaders to communities of followers with guidance for how to live appropriately as followers of Jesus in the hostile social and cultural

environment in which they found themselves. Unlike the Gospels, the primary focus is not on the life of Jesus, even though many were written closer in time to when he lived. Birth narratives are not to be found. The epistles can be organized into three groups which include:

- Pauline epistles - those attributed to Paul and written to congregations as a whole
- Pastoral epistles - Also attributed to Paul but written to individuals with pastoral oversight
- General epistles attributed to other religious leaders

Among these are some of the earliest Christian documents providing insight into the beliefs and controversies of the fledgling Christian Church. They are foundational texts for the religion's new theology.

Of the thirteen epistles attributed to Paul, most biblical scholars believe only seven can be assumed with any certainty to be from Paul. These are Galatians, Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and 1 Thessalonians. The general message from Paul revolved around salvation through the belief in Jesus the Christ (Messiah), and the importance of Hebrews and Gentiles coming together as a united community. Paul believed Jesus became divine upon his resurrection, and Paul consistently emphasized that the death and resurrection of Jesus fulfilled the covenants made between God and Abraham and God and Moses, ushering in a new covenant without the requirements of the earlier laws. This was an important concept for a proselytizer spreading the word among Gentiles.

But Paul seems to portray different personas throughout his letters, from that of an inclusive visionary, "There is neither Greek nor Hebrew, slave nor free, there is neither male nor female" (Galatians 3:28), to that of an authoritarian, "Let your women keep silent in the churches" (1 Corinthians 14:34). But Paul seemed to realize the important role women could assume in the new Church, as he did in recognizing Phoebe and Junia among others (Romans 16). It was Paul's teaching that Jews and Gentiles alike would no longer have to abide by the Torah that put him at odds with the original followers of Jesus. For Paul, belief in a resurrected Christ and the Kingdom of God to come was all important.

The Pastoral Epistles differ in language and content and suggest a more developed and hierarchical church structure than is generally believed to have existed during Paul's lifetime. The Pastorals do not emphasize characteristic Pauline doctrines such as the importance of Christ's death on the cross and instead they focus on matters of doctrine, piety and Church organization. They have a more conservative point of view regarding the role of women in the Church where it is written that women should be discreet, chaste, homemakers, good, obedient to their own husbands (Titus 2:4-5), and for women to not be permitted to teach or have authority over a man, but who will be saved by bearing children (1 Timothy 2:12-15). It would seem the Pastoral Epistles, were probably written after Paul's death and meant to justify a more conservative Church hierarchy.

While the majority of the Pauline and Pastoral Epistles were named after the churches or individuals to which they were written (example: Romans, Timothy), the General Epistles were named for their supposed authors (example: James). The two most prominent themes in the

General Epistles are addressing external and internal challenges to the new church. External challenges included persecution from political rulers and Hebrew elites, and internal dangers included the increasing threat of false teaching. 1 Peter and James have a greater focus on external pressures, while 2 Peter, 1–3 John and Jude deal with the growing threat of heresy from within.

There was a real power struggle within the early Christian communities regarding, among other things, the very nature of Jesus. Was he human, was he God, or was he something else? As mentioned previously, there were other gospels and teachings that had different views on this issue and it wasn't until much later that the concept of the Holy Trinity came to be dominant. Because the General Epistles supported this viewpoint, they were readily incorporated into official Church canon centuries later.

Revelation

The Book of Revelation is unlike any of the other books of the New Testament and most likely the least understood. One of the main reasons for its inclusion in the canon literature is that it tells us that Jesus is God. Revelation is the Apocalypse of John (who most religious scholars believe is not the same John who wrote the Gospel due to its very different writing style), and it was composed at the end of the first century CE. Contrary to popular belief it does not include a prediction of the end time, and nothing in it substantiates the concept of a "rapture". These are ideas that gained popularity in relatively recent times.

The Book of Revelation departs from the spirit of the stories about the life of Jesus and presents a more vengeful persona that will separate the believers from those following the anti-Christ, with the former joining Jesus in heaven while the latter burn in hell. Believers are compared to sheep who will ascend to heaven, and all others compared to goats who will descend to hell (cue the Cake song). A very materialistic vision of heaven is presented with the concept of a city of gold and banquet feasts, which contrasts sharply with Jesus teaching a more aesthetic life in the Gospels.

Specific symbolic numbers are referenced in this Book, such as the mark of the beast (666) that was to be used to designate the non-believers. Modern scholars believe the number 666 was a clandestine way of referring to the emperor Nero, who persecuted early Christians and who many believed would come back as the anti-Christ. Transliterating the spelling of Nero Caesar into Aramaic and assigning Hebrew numbers to the Aramaic letters will result in this precise number.

New Testament Conclusion

How Jesus became God can be tracked over time by examining the books of the New Testament in chronological order. The earliest, the writings of Paul, preached that Jesus became divine at the time of his resurrection (like those stories in Greco-Roman and Jewish myths). In the Gospel of Mark Jesus appears to become divine at his baptism, while in the

Gospels of Matthew and Luke it was insinuated that he must have been divine at his birth with stories of the virgin birth. In the Gospel of John, Jesus existed from eternity past and came down in human form to provide guidance for living a holy life. Finally, Jesus became one with God and part of a holy Trinity as established by official church decree in a later century.

Table 3 on the next page lists the 27 books of the New Testament and provides their biblical attribution of authorship, their likely date of historical compilation, and their classification. As background for this table it's assumed that Jesus was executed in 30 CE, James, the brother of Jesus and early church leader, was stoned to death in 62 CE, Paul was killed in 64 CE, Peter was executed in 64 CE, and most of the original 12 Apostles would have been martyred within a couple of decades of the death of Jesus. Authorship of books attributed to these men after their deaths would have been impossible without supernatural involvement. Tradition has it that the disciple John lived to old age in present day Turkey but most biblical scholars do not believe he wrote the Gospel or epistles bearing his name, or the book of Revelation. It was common for authors to assume the name of prominent figures when writing to give them a level of importance.

Table 3 – Books of the New Testament

Book	Attribution	Compiled (CE)	Genre
Matthew	Matthew the Apostle	80-90	Synoptic Gospel
Mark	Mark (scribe)	70	Synoptic Gospel
Luke	Luke (scribe)	80-90	Synoptic Gospel
John	John the Apostle	90-100	Gospel
Acts of the Apostles	Luke (scribe)	80-90	Acts
Romans	Paul	56-57	Pauline Epistle
1&2 Corinthians	Paul	54-56	Pauline Epistle
Galatians	Paul	49-51	Pauline Epistle
Ephesians	Paul	80-100	Pauline Epistle
Philippians	Paul	59-62	Pauline Epistle
Colossians	Paul	80-100	Pauline Epistle
1 Thessalonians	Paul	49	Pauline Epistle
2 Thessalonians	Paul	70-90	Pauline Epistle
1&2 Timothy	Paul	90-120	Pastoral Epistle
Titus	Paul	90-120	Pastoral Epistle
Philemon	Paul	55-63	Pauline Epistle
Hebrews	Paul	80-100	Pauline Epistle
James	James	80-100	General Epistle
1 Peter	Peter the Apostle	70-110	General Epistle
2 Peter	Peter the Apostle	110-140	General Epistle
1,2,3 John	John the Apostle	100	General Epistle
Jude	Jude	90-100	General Epistle
Revelation	John the Apostle	96	Apocalypse

D. Christianity Takes Root



The term “Christianity” was not used by early members of the new religion based on the message and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, nor is it used anywhere in the Bible. Its first appearance in any ancient source is from the early second century CE. The early believers probably referred to themselves as “Followers of the Way”, or “Nazarenes”, but little is known about their existence or beliefs other than what was written in the Pauline letters and other resources, such as the Gospel of Thomas and the writings of Clement of Alexandria. Most of these early converts were Jews who believed in Jesus as fulfilling the prophecies of a Messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God, and they were led by James the Just after the death of his brother, Jesus.

James, like his brother and the rest of the Apostles, were all Jews following the laws of the Torah. As practicing Jews or Hebrews, they believed in one Creator God, that they belonged to the chosen people, the Torah was divinely revealed to Moses, and that there was a place for Gentiles in God’s plan. But their belief in Jesus as the Messiah put them at odds with others of the Jewish faith. The original pre-Christian religion of the Jesus Movement developed before and independently of Paul by members who knew and spent time with Jesus. But Paul’s vision of the new faith would come to supersede that of the original founders with his message of salvation through faith without adherence to the Torah. Paul also introduced the mystical concepts of the rites of “baptism in the name of Christ”, and the partaking of the “body and blood of Christ”, which Paul wrote about before any of the Gospels. Baptism as an initiation rite, and the ritual of breaking bread in thanksgiving would have been ordinary practices for the original apostles, but to introduce the mystical concepts of eating flesh and drinking blood would have been a bizarre concept to them.

In many ways, James became the forgotten man of the bible even though he was one of the most important and influential leaders of the new movement after the death of Jesus. And the most neglected document in the New Testament is the Epistle of James with its emphasis on the message of Jesus which most likely contains the most direct link to his teachings, although likely not written by James. Centuries later Martin Luther, a champion of the apostle Paul, would move the letter from James to the end of the New Testament claiming that it was of lesser quality. For James, the focus was on the message and not the divination of the messenger. James was writing about the message of the Kingdom of God being ushered in as foretold by the Hebrew Bible, while Paul was writing theology for a new kind of religion based on the belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ.

In the late first century CE and into the second, influential leaders and writers of the Movement downplayed the role of John the Baptizer while the existence of James was muted, and in some cases denied. For the writers, or later editors of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, this was important if the concept of Jesus as God was to take hold. Very human siblings were problematic for this new theology. It was also necessary for Mary the mother of Jesus to become a perpetual virgin, and the stories of her remarkable human family were lost to history.

Christian leaders would gravitate more toward the life of Peter and promote him as the “rock upon which I shall build my Church”, considering him as the first pope. Gentile converts would champion Paul with his theology of salvation through faith in the resurrection of Jesus and his rejection of the tenets and rituals of Judaism.

Gentiles soon outnumbered Jews in the Jesus movement, and new converts wanted to make it known they had nothing to do with the Jewish religion, who they considered a rejected people without Christ. For them it was Paul promoting himself as the true successor to Jesus, and Paul’s insistence that new Gentile converts would not have to adhere to the laws of the Torah that would prove most appealing. Paul’s theology would win out and the Jesus movement expansion westward toward Rome would break with the original pre-Christian religion centered in Jerusalem. As James Tabor posited in his book, *Paul and Jesus*, Christianity is Paul, and Paul is Christianity.

By the end of the second century CE some cultivated pagans began to convert to Christianity. Clement of Alexandria (150 – 215 CE) was able to adapt the semitic God of the Bible to the Greco-Roman ideal. Clement had no doubt that Yahweh of the Old Testament and the God of the Greek philosophers were one and the same. He believed that Christians could become aware of the image of God inscribed in their own being by imitating Jesus the Christ.

The first ecumenical council of the new Christian church met in ancient Nicaea, now Iznik, Turkey, and was called by the Roman emperor Constantine I in 325 CE. Constantine was in the process of converting to Christianity and wanted to clear up the controversy over the true nature of Jesus, whether he was a divine being or a man. There was much debate at the time within the Christian community as to Jesus’ true nature. From this council came the Nicene Creed (Jesus as God the Son), confirming the concept of the Holy Trinity, as well as official recognition of which books were to be included as sacred scriptures in the Bible.

Jerome of Stridon (later St. Jerome, born 340 CE) translated the newly canonized Bible into Latin. In his translation, Jerome included some late Jewish books originally written in Greek (called Apocrypha) in his compilation of the Old Testament. These, however, are not included in the original Hebrew Old Testament, but only in the Greek translation of it (the Septuagint). Jerome did add prefaces indicating that they were not part of the original Hebrew Bible, but later copyists neglected or omitted his prefaces, and soon Jerome’s whole Latin translation was considered of equal authority.

After the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century, some Protestant scholars refused to accept adding the Apocrypha to the Old Testament to maintain consistency with the Hebrew Bible. The very first edition of the King James Bible included the Apocrypha, but subsequent editions excluded them. Thus, to this day Catholic Bibles include the Old Testament with the Apocrypha (46 books in all), strictly Protestant Bibles exclude it (for a total of 39 books), but certain “ecumenical” Bibles (such as The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Expanded Edition) include it as an appendix.

Appendix 1 – A Brief History of the Ancient Near East



Location

What constitutes the Near East has evolved over time. Originally, the term was used by western Europeans to denote the territory of the Ottoman Empire and Europe's Balkan Peninsula, to distinguish it from the Far East (China and beyond) and the Middle East (Iran to Myanmar). For this summary it shall be defined as the central part of what now constitutes the Middle East including regions on the eastern

shores of the Mediterranean Sea from Egypt to Turkey, and east to the Persian Gulf. The ancient lands that it encompasses are Mesopotamia (between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in modern Iraq), Persia to the east, Syria to the west, Canaan along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean, Anatolia (modern day Turkey), and Egypt.

Prehistory

Beginning about 125,000 years ago, modern humans (*Homo Sapiens*) began to migrate out of the African continent into the Near East in search of more hospitable climates following periods of prolonged drought. The Northern Hemisphere experienced warm summers every 20,000 years during the last ice age, which created "green corridors" of warm, wet climate between Africa and the Near East. These favorable conditions may have encouraged *Homo Sapiens* to follow the animals they hunted for food and move north and east out of Africa. Migration most likely occurred in episodic waves of movement out of, and back into Africa, dictated by the changing climate.

Finally, about 45,000 years ago migration out of Africa reached beyond the Near East and pushed all the way into northern Europe. During this time, as *Homo Sapiens* migrated into the Near East and beyond, they would have encountered another related hominin migrating south, *Homo Neanderthalensis*, the Neanderthals. The presence of Neanderthal DNA in modern humans suggests that interbreeding occurred between these two groups, whose descendants would include the people of the Near East who would shape the cultures of this historically significant region.

Mesopotamia

For thousands of years before the first urban centers appeared, farmers grew their crops and herders tended their flocks of sheep along the banks of the two great rivers of this region. Social and economic advantages resulting from successful agriculture practices led to the formation of larger communities of people living and working near one another. In the fourth millennium BCE, relatively large urban communities would become the centers of the world's first known civilizations. Mesopotamia would become known as the "cradle of civilization" with the development of a writing system for communication, monumental architecture, and a transition to more complex societies.

In the mid-24th century BCE, the first empire was established after Sargon of Akkad, with his Akkadian army, wrested control of the other city-states of Mesopotamia and adjacent regions. His empire would stretch from the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean. As the founder of the first multinational empire in the world, his reign became legendary, inspiring many tales about him such as *The Legend of Sargon of Akkad*. His birth legend would include a tale about his humble beginnings when his mother, unable to keep the baby, placed him in a basket sealed with tar, which she then set adrift on the Euphrates River to be found by a servant of a king. This story would later resonate with the writers of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible. Sargon and his grandson would also be the inspiration of the fictional character Nimrod mentioned in Genesis.

The first Dynasty of Babylon would occur at the beginning of the second millennium BCE and would include the rule of King Hammurabi. He would bring the entirety of Mesopotamia under the control of Babylon and is best known for his famous *Code of Hammurabi* which served as a model for other writers of societal rules and regulations, including the Mosaic Law of the Old Testament. During Hammurabi's reign, a relative peace would ensue throughout his empire, which was not necessarily typical of ancient times.

The Assyrian Dynasty, originating in upper Mesopotamia and in power from 900 to 600 BCE, created the most expansive empire to date in the Near East through its powerful army's use of new technology such as iron weapons and taller, more maneuverable chariots. It was the Assyrians who would sweep through Canaan along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean overrunning the many established kingdoms there, including Israel, Judah, Moab, Philistine, and Ammon.

Many elites from these various kingdoms would be forcibly relocated to the Assyrian homeland, a deportation policy commonly employed at that time to weaken the former political structure of the subjugated regions, and to provide needed labor and expertise for the conquerors. However, many of the craftsmen, farmers and common laborers were allowed to stay in the conquered lands to keep the economy functioning and providing tribute payments to the conquerors. Unlike Judah and Philistine, the Kingdom of Israel would essentially come to an end after this occupation with the remnants of the original social structure completely dissolved and absorbed into the culture of the invaders. Many of those that did remain in the area would form a society of people known as the Samaritans, mentioned in the New Testament of the Christian Bible.

After the fall of the Assyrian Dynasty, the Second or Neo-Babylonian Empire eventually came to power. Historically known as the Chaldean Empire, this empire would be the last ruled by monarchs native to Mesopotamia. Its greatest king, Nebuchadnezzar II, would rule from 605 to 562 BCE and would become famous for his military campaigns in Canaan (including the destruction of Jerusalem), his construction projects in his capital, including the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, and for the pivotal role he was to play in Jewish history and the later Jewish faith. Without the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem, and the dislocation of the Hebrews, there would be no Hebrew Bible as we know it.

Nebuchadnezzar installed puppet rulers in the conquered states of Canaan, including Zedekiah in Judah who's mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible. But Zedekiah would eventually lead his people in opposition to Babylonian rule which prompted Nebuchadnezzar to overthrow Zedekiah, destroy the temple in Jerusalem, and to forcibly relocate the Hebrew elites to Babylon. This was also the same fate falling to those living in the semiautonomous regions of Philistine, Moab and Ammon, and those communities would be dissolved never to resume as functioning independent cultures.

Those people exiled to Mesopotamia surely included some placed in bondage, but also included many who would assimilate to their new surroundings, owning property and inter-marrying. Unlike those exiles from Philistine, Moab and Ammon, the former priestly caste from Judah would never give up their desire to return to their former home. It was these priests and their scribes who would codify the books of the Old Testament, including stories passed down orally from their ancestors, and develop new myths and histories to provide the foundation of a national identity for the diaspora.

Nebuchadnezzar is mentioned numerous times in the Hebrew Bible including 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, therefore, those books were obviously completed after his reign. In 2 Kings, he is introduced as the instrument of God besieging Judah due to the sins and corruption of the people there. And in Daniel, written in the Hellenistic period around 150 BCE, Nebuchadnezzar is presented as a philosopher king, or an enlightened despot, accepting the god Yahweh at the end of his rule. It seems remarkable that Nebuchadnezzar, the one person most responsible for the exile and captivity of the Hebrews, is shown to be a somewhat sympathetic figure in parts of the Old Testament. Centuries later, writers of the New Testament would portray Babylon and its kings as symbols of wickedness and sin.

Babylon was a world capital, with the "world" being the Near East for those living there, which surely included people from Anatolia, Persia and Canaan in addition to native Mesopotamians. The city streets must have been filled with a cacophony of sounds from the many different languages being spoken. The Tower of Babel reference in Genesis, a parable attempting to explain why people speak different languages, most likely came out of the writer's experience of living in Babylon.

For the priests and scribes of the Yahweh worshipping cult living in Babylon, it was important to introduce their god as being omnipresent and not requiring the temple which was destroyed back in Jerusalem. In the Book of Genesis, Yahweh is introduced anthropomorphically as walking in the Garden of Eden, and as an invisible god commanding "let there be light." It is this latter presentation that was developed to unite the diaspora in a belief of a god that travelled with them and didn't require a permanent structure in which to reside as was the case with many of the other gods of the Near East. This concept would be a binding force to keep the Yahweh worshipping community tied together when other societies of Canaan would be dissolved. In many respects, it can be argued that the coming Jewish faith was founded in Babylon and not Jerusalem.

Persia

In late sixth century BCE, Cyrus the Great and the Persians rose to prominence in the Near East, culminating with their taking control of the important center of Babylon from the failing Babylonian polity. On the Cyrus Cylinder, a cone of baked clay with cuneiform writing, the victorious Cyrus is portrayed as having been chosen by the chief Babylonian god Marduk to restore peace and order to the Babylonians. Assuming supernatural legitimacy would be a concept used by rulers and prophets from other communities and cultures of the Near East.

After the Persians came to power, they began to allow foreign exiles to return to their homelands (should the exiled so choose). The Canaanites had been there about 100 years and while many chose to remain within Persian controlled Mesopotamia, those choosing to return to Canaan included the priestly caste and elites of Judah who longed for the lost power their ancestors had with the temple dominated religion of Yahweh worshippers. For these returning people, Cyrus would be held in high esteem for the deference shown to their religious beliefs.

In the Book of Isaiah, whose middle chapters were written in the post-Babylonian period, Yahweh summons Cyrus as the chosen one, the only Gentile in the Bible to be identified as a messiah or anointed one. The final chapter in Isaiah includes the introduction of Zion Theology which describes the Temple as a place where peoples from all the world would come to worship and interact, a reflection of the Persian ideology of multi-culturism. Persian culture would be a significant influence on people returning to Canaan.

Many of the stories of the Hebrew Bible were created or improved upon during time spent living in the Persian controlled regions. The story of Joseph in Genesis, very similar to the folktale narratives found in Persian culture at that time, references eunuchs, courtiers held in high esteem, during Joseph's time spent in Egypt. Eunuchs were not common in Egypt, but were in Persia, which suggests a story of Persian influence. The character of King Solomon was most likely based on the epitome of Persian royalty. Greek authors wrote about a Persian king who had 360 concubines, while in Kings 1 it states that Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines.

The Book of Esther, written in the middle fifth century BCE, describes the lives of the Jewish community residing in Susa, near Babylon. It tells the story of Esther, who would marry Xerxes, King of the Persian empire, and Mordecai, her court guardian. The etymology of the name Esther can be traced to the Old Persian language referring to the Near Eastern goddess Ishtar, and Mordecai to the god Marduk of Babylon. There was no mention of Yahweh or temples in the Book of Esther, and it wasn't until later when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek that the name Yahweh was inserted liberally into the story.

The legacy of Persian culture would remain strong with the Yahweh worshipping culture. The Talmud, the central text of Rabbinic Judaism and the primary source of Jewish religious law was written in Persia between the third and fourth centuries CE. Cyrus and the Persian empire are not mentioned in the New Testament after appearing significantly in the Old Testament, but

even today the decree of Cyrus the Great allowing the return of the Hebrew elites to Judah has appeared on Israeli postage stamps.

Egypt

Egypt is mentioned in the Bible more times than any other place outside Canaan. Biblical Egypt is the term used by historians and scholars to differentiate between Ancient Egypt (as it is portrayed in Judeo-Christian texts) and what is known about the region based on archaeological evidence. Although archeological evidence shows interaction between the people of Egypt and Canaan from as far back as 10,000 BCE, they do not otherwise corroborate the biblical account. The empires and kingdoms of ancient Egypt were already thousands of years in existence by the time the Hebrew Bible was codified as scripture, and there is historical record of this interaction between the regions. The migration of people into and out of Egypt and Canaan would be a continual occurrence over the millennia, and at times this took the form of invasion and conquest.

In the biblical account recorded in Genesis, Abraham and his wife Sarah took refuge in Egypt during a time of famine in Canaan (and the Pharaoh took Sarah as his wife for a time), Moses was raised in Egypt and had an Egyptian mother, Joseph (son of Jacob and Rachel) had an Egyptian wife and became an important advisor to the Pharaoh, and Solomon married the daughter of a Pharaoh. Yet there is no archeological evidence or written accounts from second sources that can verify these biblical stories, most likely written many hundreds of years after they supposedly took place.

Thutmoses III, possibly the most successful king in expanding the empire of ancient Egypt, conquered much of the Near East in the early 1,400s BCE and won a decisive battle against a coalition of Canaanite rulers to begin Egyptian control of Canaan for the next three hundred years. It was during this time that the areas of Canaan functioned as vassal states or provinces of Egypt, and anyone living in Canaan would have been considered as living in Egypt. This could be the basis for origin stories taking place in Egypt as recorded in the Hebrew Bible.

Egypt was a significant influence on the people that lived in Canaan during the period of Egyptian rule and continued to be of interest to the writers of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. The story of Moses leading the Levites out of Egypt and to the Promised Land is an important event for people of the Jewish religion, and the flight to Egypt out of Judah by Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus, as recorded in the Gospel of Mathew, is a favorite story of Christians. Egypt was both an empire to be feared, but also one to whom the Yahweh worshipping people sought assistance when attacked by other warring nations. To emphasize the importance of this interaction, the biblical name of Moses most likely is derived from the name of the Egyptian pharaoh, Thutmoses.

Canaan

The land of Canaan as the "Promised Land" is a central theme introduced in Genesis and developed throughout the Bible. The land's boundaries vary across different Biblical texts, but some suggest it was bordered by Mount Hermon to the north, Beersheba to the south, the Mediterranean to the west, and the Jordan River to the east. Ancient settlements such as Jericho were established before 10,000 BCE, and for thousands of years it witnessed the migrations of peoples into and out of its borders. It was an area fought over by empires from Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Egypt due to its central location in the region and its border with the Mediterranean Sea.

According to the biblical account, Abraham and his family migrated here from Mesopotamia, Moses led his people out of Egypt to its borders, Joshua invaded and laid waste to its Canaanite settlements including Jericho, Saul became the first king of the Israelites, David became the unifying leader, and Solomon reigned over a great kingdom of wealth and beauty. Biblical scholars would have these events taking place from the early second millennium to the early first millennium BCE. However, there is no historical evidence from archeology, or writings from the various empires which controlled the area to support any of these stories. They most likely are origin stories of a Yahweh worshipping people that were codified by the priestly caste and their scribes, many of whom lived in Mesopotamia in early to middle first millennia BCE.

The withdrawal of the Egyptians from Canaan in the 12th century BCE coincided with the violent and disruptive age known as the Bronze Age Collapse. Drought conditions may have played a large part in this collapse, but another factor may have been an incursion of seafaring invaders from the west. This led to a transition period in Canaan during which the political situation reverted to dispersed settlements with localized control.

The period following the withdrawal of Egypt would coincide with the biblical account of the conquest of Canaan by Jacob and the Israelites, who supposedly destroyed Canaanite cities while spilling much blood. The historical evidence, however, paints a much different picture. Over the centuries following Egyptian rule and the Bronze Age collapse, the dispersed settlements transitioned to a more regionally connected economy with increasing trade and commerce, including more centralized societies. These included the Philistine city-states in the southeast, of which Gaza was an important center, the regions of Israel and Judah on the west side of the Jordan River and Dead Sea, the Phoenician states bordering the sea to the northwest, the Kingdoms of Moab and Ammon to the east, Edom to the south, and Aram-Damascus to the north. It would seem the population of Canaan consisted of the same people (Canaanites) before and after this transition with no great incursion of a people invading the region and establishing their own culture and settlements.

The Hebrew Bible references a united Kingdom of Israel including the separate areas of Judah and Israel, which was supposedly in place sometime in the late second millennium BCE. While there is no evidence of a unified Kingdom of Israel, or the reign of David (the adopted son of

Saul and hero of the David and Goliath story), the archeological discovery of the Tel Dan Stele, dating to around 800 BCE, includes the only extra-biblical archaeological reference to a House of David. The once free-standing stone tablet refers to the defeat and deaths of the King of Israel and the king from the House of David by Hazael, king of the neighboring region of Aram Damascus. There is no consensus among historians regarding the meaning of the term “House of David”. It could mean the name of a place (like Bethlehem literally meaning the House of Bread in Aramaic or House of Meat in Arabic), the name of a kingdom, or as reference to a people. If the term House of David refers to a dynasty based on an actual king, it’s debatable if a passing reference from 800 BCE can be used as proof that a unified kingdom and founding ruler was in place hundreds of years earlier.

Regarding the name Israel, the biblical account tells of God giving Jacob that name with the meaning “one who struggles with God”. The earliest textual reference for the existence of a place called Israel comes from the Merneptah Stele, with an inscription by the pharaoh from Egypt who reigned from 1213 to 1203 BCE. This stone tablet primarily speaks of the pharaoh’s war with the ancient Libyans to their west and gives only passing reference to Israel at the end of the inscription when it lists several settlements that were overrun in Canaan. It reads “Israel is laid waste—its seed is no more” and would seem to refer to a group of nomadic people and not an actual nation or city-state.

The Mesha Stele found in present-day Jordan and dating to around 840 BCE includes a reference to King Mesha of Moab and his war with the Kingdom of Israel whose story parallels, with some differences, an episode in the Bible’s Book of Kings. It’s the most extensive inscription ever recovered that refers to the Yahweh worshipping kingdom and bears the earliest certain extrabiblical reference to the god Yahweh. In the story, the Moabites and their god Chemosh prevail over the Israelites and their god Yahweh.

In Judah and Israel, post Egyptian rule, there does seem to be a beginning of a coalescence of people interested in developing a new culture and identity for themselves after being subservient to the whims of the Egyptian empire. There is evidence of the Yahweh worshipping people changing their eating habits by eliminating pork from their diet to differentiate themselves from other Canaanite kingdoms with whom they were in periodic conflict, such as the Philistines and Moabites. While there is no evidence of a wealthy, unified Kingdom of Israel with a lavish palace and great leader named Solomon, there does seem to be a growing economy developing new trade and commerce opportunities, like other kingdoms in Canaan. The seed of the story of Solomon seducing the Queen of Sheba could have been borne from an increase in trade with the Arabian Peninsula, the home of the land of Sheba. Perhaps not as romantic but vitally important to a growing economy.

With the return of exiled Canaanites from Babylon in the late sixth century BCE, including the descendants of the elite class of Judah and Israel, new ideas about a Jewish nation began to take shape. The exiles brought with them new myths about their ancestors’ origins and the importance of ritual worship. This was often at odds with the established life of those believers

who had stayed and worked the land for seventy years while the elite were exiled. Oral stories of past patriarchs and momentous events passed down over the centuries were added to new myths and stories from those returning from Mesopotamia, codified in a book which would become the Hebrew Bible. It may have been at this time that the Yahweh worshipping people of Judah started to think of themselves as having a separate Jewish identity, not only worshipping a separate deity than their neighbors but also with a distinctive culture.

While there was a temple in Jerusalem that was destroyed during the war with the Babylonian empire in 586 BCE, there is no evidence of King Solomon building it. This temple would have been like other temples in Canaan constructed to Yahweh and the other gods worshipped by other Canaanite peoples. In 520 BCE when the exiled people of Canaan returned to the area many of these temples were probably rebuilt. For the Yahweh worshipper of Judah, this would become known as the second-temple period.

In the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great and his Macedonian and Greek army defeated the Persians in a series of decisive battles that would lead to the conquest of Persia, Mesopotamia, Canaan and Egypt. Alexander would be proclaimed as descending from the gods, including being proclaimed a pharaoh in Egypt where inscriptions in Luxor record this historical event. Following Alexander's death in Mesopotamia, a series of Hellenistic leaders would rule over Canaan until the second century BCE. During this period the Hebrew Bible would be translated to the Greek language and become known as the Septuagint. This translation would be used two hundred years later by the followers of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth in converting those in the Greek speaking world.

The 160 BCE Maccabean revolt in Judah that occurred as a backlash against an attempt by authorities to Hellenize the greater Jewish community there, resulted in a Yahweh worshipping people taking control of the area. At that time, Jerusalem would become the capital of the autonomous and eventually independent Judaeian state ruled by the Hasmonean Dynasty. Up until this time, Jerusalem was considered a minor backwater by the former ruling empires and was not comparable in size or economic vibrancy to other Canaanite settlements. Localized control in Judah lasted for over a century, but internal divisions within the ruling family eventually led to power slipping away from the Hasmoneans with a new powerful empire from the west taking control, the Roman empire.

Herod the Great was appointed as the King of Judaea by the Romans and would remain in power until his death in 4 BCE. Herod would renovate and add to the Jerusalem temple during his reign, building a perimeter wall around the Temple Mount, and incorporating Hellenistic, Roman and Arabic architectural influences. The kingship and rule of Judah would pass to his sons upon Herod's death and would last into the first century CE.

The Continuation of History

During Roman rule at the beginning of the first century CE, the divide between monotheistic and polytheistic religious views caused clashes between Jews and Gentiles in the Roman province of Judaea and its capital of Jerusalem. This friction, combined with oppressive taxation led to the Jewish revolt of 66 CE. While the revolt was successful in expelling the Romans from Jerusalem and forming a new localized government, independence was to be relatively short lived.

Roman forces were sent to Judaea to restore control in April 70 CE and they laid siege to Jerusalem, cutting off supplies. Within the walls, the Zealots, a militant anti-Roman party, struggled with other Jewish factions that had emerged, which weakened the resistance even more. By August 70 CE the Romans had breached the final defenses and massacred much of the remaining population. They also destroyed the Second Temple.

When the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed the Jewish people of Canaan lost their religious and political center, but the newly forming cult of the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth found their legitimacy when it would be written in the Gospel of Mark that Jesus had prophesized its destruction and subsequent hardship for the people of Judah. The following centuries would find Jerusalem becoming a Christian and then Muslim city with importance shifting from the Jewish Temple to first the Church of the Holy Sepulcher constructed nearby, and then to the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque constructed on the Temple Mount in the seventh century CE.

The myths and stories of the people living in Canaan would reverberate down through the centuries influencing nations and people far removed from its history, giving solace to some, and misery to others. It could be said that the current horrors gripping the promised land, with the slaughter of innocent civilians by worshippers of different deities are the result of an ancient hangover.

Appendix 2 – History of the Jesus Movement



At the beginning of the first century CE, the Jewish people could be broadly defined as belonging to two distinct groups, the Hebraic or the Hellenistic Jews. The Hebraic Jews were intent on maintaining the old traditions of the Jewish religion; spoke either Aramaic (a Semitic language related to Hebrew) or Hebrew; considered the temple as the hub for ritual sacrifices and worship; and used the Hebrew bible for religious reference. The Hellenistic Jews were those who had assimilated into Greek culture after Alexander the Great had conquered the region in the fourth century BCE, or who were included in the diaspora and may have lived, or be living, outside of Judah. The Hellenistic Jews spoke Greek as their first language, may have been accustomed to worshipping at a synagogue (Greek for assembly) instead of the temple, and used the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew bible) in lieu of the original scriptures.

Jesus and all his original apostles were Hebraic Jews, committed to following the Torah and worshipping in the temple whenever they were in Jerusalem. James the Just, brother of Jesus (ref: Matthew 13:55; Mark 6:3; Acts 12:17, Galatians 1:19), was joined by Peter and became the leaders of the Jerusalem-based Jesus Movement upon the death of their proclaimed Messiah (ref: *Gospel of Thomas Saying 12*, Clement of Alexandria in his *Hypotyposes*). Their message of living a life modeled on the example of Jesus as related in the Gospels (considered “good works”), would become part of the tenets of the early Christian church and persist with the Roman Catholic church in the decades following the Protestant reformation (see below). The original apostles would all be dead within a few decades of the death of Jesus, many reportedly martyred for preaching their new beliefs which were considered a threat by the Jewish priests and by the Roman authorities at that time.

Paul, the self-proclaimed apostle to the Gentiles, is believed by most scholars to have been a Hellenistic Jew from Tarsus in present day Turkey. However, Paul also claimed to be a Pharisee, or Hebraic legal scholar (Acts 23). Paul’s challenge to the original members of the Jesus Movement centered on the need to follow the laws set forth in the Torah, and that salvation could be achieved through belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Paul reasoned that the original Mosaic covenant between God and his chosen people was replaced by a new covenant ushered in by Jesus whereas the Torah no longer applied to the followers of Jesus, and the chosen people were now all who accepted this new tenet of salvation. (ref: Romans 7:1-6 and 1 Corinthians 15). This new theology troubled James and Peter who believed Paul’s teaching could be misinterpreted leading to sinful lives (2 Peter 15). Like the original apostles, Paul would be dead within a few decades of the death of Jesus.

The Hebraic Jewish sect of early Christianity would be subsumed by the Hellenistic converts with the expansion of the Church into the Roman world. Paul’s theology of the sacrifice of Jesus releasing the followers of the Jesus movement from the Hebrew laws would become the norm for the new Christians as they were called after 100 CE. However, reference to Paul’s

teachings by Church leaders during the second century is minimal, which may or may not be evidence of his disfavor during that period. Certainly, the Church (meaning those in power) was interested in supporting the notion of followers being dependent on rituals and sacraments administered by male priests, a call back to the need to adhere to “the law” which Paul had rejected during his lifetime. This possible disfavor may also have resulted in a challenge from a separate group of visionaries advocating for their belief in the real Jesus of Nazareth and using Paul’s teachings to support their own theological views.

The Ebionites and later the Gnostics, the word “gnosis” being Greek for knowledge or awareness, believed that Jesus as the Messiah was human but had attained an enlightened state of being through gnosis. They believed that others could attain this enlightened state by doing as Jesus had done. The Gospel of Thomas is a gnostic writing found buried in Egypt, written sometime during the late first century CE to middle second century CE, and most certainly not by the Apostle Thomas. It’s a collection of sayings by Jesus and proclaims that the Kingdom of God is already present for those who understand the secret message of Jesus. The Gnostics would be branded heretics by those promoting the belief in Jesus as God.

In the third century CE, a Christian priest, Arius revived the ancient gnostic heresy concerning the person and nature of Christ. In what would become known as Arianism, he denied that Jesus was on the same level as God the Father, but rather a person created and not self-existent. It fundamentally challenged the divinity of Jesus Christ which undermined the core Christian belief in the accepted concept of salvation through Jesus as the divine Son of God. This stirred up a great controversy among the church leaders which led to the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE where the nature of Jesus was hotly debated. There were many bishops of the Christian Church who supported the theology of Arianism. After much in-fighting, Arianism would be declared a heresy by those supporting the proclamation of the Nicene Creed and the concept of the Holy Trinity. The divine Jesus proponents came out winners in this battle for primacy of the Christian Church.

Debate over the true nature of Jesus even with those confirming the Nicene Creed would continue for centuries. Many Christians were taught to believe in the “two-nature” doctrine that held that Jesus had both human and divine natures that were equally present in his person. Others, however, believed in a Christological formula declaring that there was one nature which became incarnate, emphasizing Jesus’ divine nature. This issue would result in divisions within the Christian Church that would lead to a series of splits and rapprochements between the Roman and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Eventually, these disagreements would lead to a major break between the Churches in 1054 CE.

The “Great Schism” came about due to a complex mix of religious and political disagreements between the western and eastern branches of the Christian Church. Added to this was the fact that the western branch was Latin-based and ruled from Rome, and the eastern Greek-based and ruled from Constantinople. Religious disagreements included whether it was acceptable to use unleavened bread for the sacrament of communion,

controversy over the wording of the Nicene Creed, and whether clerics should remain celibate. These religious disagreements were made worse by a variety of political conflicts, particularly regarding the power of Rome. Rome believed that the pope should have authority over the patriarch of the eastern church. The leaders in Constantinople disagreed, each church recognized their own leaders, and a definitive break between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches ensued lasting well into the 20th century CE.

The next major schism to take place was the Protestant Reformation of 1517, when Martin Luther, a German monk and university professor, posted his ninety-five theses on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg. Luther thought that the Church's focus on "good works" such as pilgrimages, the sale of indulgences to obtain forgiveness, and the veneration of relics retained by the clergy were immoral and harkened back to the actions of the Jewish elite in the Jerusalem temple back in the time of Jesus. Of course, the seeds of revolution against the church also were due in part to nationalism, mercantilism, anticlericalism, and opposition to vested property interests in the hands of the Catholic Church. Luther argued that individuals could be saved only by personal faith in Jesus Christ and the grace of God, not by any blessings from the clergy. To this last point, he specifically referenced Paul where it was written that a person is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law (Romans 3:28).

In response to Luther's rejection of papal authority, the Church excommunicated him, but they also knew that many of the charges leveled against the Church had merit. This hastened implementation of a counter reformation by the Church to rid it of abusive clergy and to minimize the accumulation of wealth and power by a religious elite. But they argued against Luther's assertion that salvation could be achieved through scripture and faith alone. To this point, they referenced the Book of James, where it was written that a person is justified by works and not by faith only (James 2:24).

Martin Luther thought the writings of Paul and James contradicted each other, and because his arguments were based on those of Paul, he relegated the Book of James to an appendix in his translation of the Bible into German. For Luther, the fact that Jesus Christ had to die for our sins signified that salvation was achieved by believing in Christ's death and resurrection. The argument presented by Luther, faith and not deeds, lasts to this day for many practicing Protestants, contrary to that of Catholics and some opposing Protestants. Luther's contention of abusive clergy and the accumulation of wealth and power by a religious elite still ring true, even if his later antisemitic rants lessened his moral authority.

There are three major Christian traditions in today's world: Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant. Of the total world population of seven billion persons, those identifying as Christian is about 2.2 billion, or approximately 32% of the total. Of these, 1.1 billion are Roman Catholics, 800 million are Protestants, and 300 million are Orthodox. According to various sources, Pentecostalism is the fastest-growing religious movement in the world, with 35,000 people becoming Pentecostal or "born again" every day.

Appendix 3 – Influences on the Writing of the Old Testament



During and after the exile of Hebrew elites, following the conquest of Canaan by first the Assyrian Empire and then the Babylonian Empire, the Hebrews would have been directly exposed to the religions and cultures of the Mesopotamian Kingdoms, and later that of Persia. Persian rule of Canaan would last for four hundred years after the return of the Hebrews to their “promised land”. Many of the stories and myths found in the Old Testament include direct references to these other cultures, and many similarities can be found in the writings of the Old Testament with historical and religious stories from these other communities.

Direct references can be thought as starting in the book of Genesis where it is written that Abraham and his family emigrated from Ur, in southern Mesopotamia, to Canaan supposedly in the latter part of the second millennium BCE (Genesis 11:28-31). Later, the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, recounts the Babylonians' attempt to build a city and tower reaching to heaven. The historical conquest of Canaan by the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires in the sixth century BCE are referenced in the Books of Kings, Chronicles and Jeremiah, with King Nebuchadnezzar II portrayed as a particularly cruel enemy of the Hebrews. King Cyrus of Persia is introduced as a Messiah figure (the only Gentile to receive this accolade in the Hebrew Bible) in the Book of Isaiah, where he is credited with freeing the Hebrews from captivity after the Persians defeated the Babylonians. And in the Book of Esther, the title character marries King Xerxes of Persia, and saves the Hebrews from destruction while they were in exile.

The Book of Daniel, which contains stories set in the Babylonian court, reflects the experiences and perspectives of the Hebrews living in exile. Other books such as Ezra and Nehemiah are set during the Persian period and reflect the interactions between Hebrews and the Persians in the post-exilic period.

Other Old Testament stories have similarities with myths, legends and historical figures of ancient Babylon and Persia. Elements within the creation story of the Book of Genesis bears striking similarities with the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, most notably the flood narrative along with themes of paradise, mortality, and divine punishment. The Epic of Gilgamesh was written sometime between 1250-900 BCE although the oral tradition occurred well before that. As reference, the Book of Genesis was probably completed during the Persian Period of rule around 500-300 BCE. The laws presented in the Torah, including the Ten Commandments, are similar in presentation to the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, with the latter written about 1750 BCE.

The biblical character of Moses was very likely modeled on some of the legend associated with King Cyrus in that they both were viewed as liberators and leaders, with each overcoming an

oppressive ruler and freeing the Hebrews from captivity. Moses was also said to have been placed in a basket and set afloat on the river Nile as a newborn to escape a death sentence, which is similar to the legend of Sargon of another earlier Mesopotamian King.

The exile of the Hebrew elites was a pivotal moment in the development of Judaism, forcing a re-evaluation of their religion and culture. The concepts of heaven, hell and with a final day of judgement may have been introduced at this time, which were concepts in the ancient Persian practice of Zoroastrianism. Before the exile, the Hebrews were expected to worship and perform ritualistic sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem and other high places, with the Temple being preferred by the priestly cast. During exile, the priests and religious elites adapted to their situation by emphasizing prayer, Torah study, and synagogue gatherings in place of temple rituals. The very word “synagogue” is from the Greek meaning assembly.

Appendix 4 – Revelations on the Apocalypse



The Apocalypse of John, or Revelations, is the most bizarre, least read, worst written, and most misunderstood of the books of the New Testament. The author gives his name as John and supposedly was residing on the island of Padmos off the coast of present-day Turkey when he wrote it. The book was originally included in the official church canon when church officials assumed he was John of Zebedee, identified as one of the original disciples of Jesus.

However, Bible historians now agree that this is a completely different person, and the book was written sometime around 100 CE. The Greek writing is very poor which makes translations somewhat difficult, but we should keep in mind that 90% of the population couldn't write at all so the author was still in the upper tier of Greeks when it came to manuscript.

Because the content celebrates the attainment of eternal life in great opulence in heaven (in contrast to the teachings of an austere life in other New Testament books), and on the coming of a vengeful deity (unlike that espoused by Jesus the man), early church leaders were reluctant to include it in official church canon even with the mistaken belief that it was written by one of the original disciples. However, it had two big selling points in its favor. The first was that it offered the reward of ever-lasting life with God for those living a true Christian lifestyle, and it firmly stated that Jesus is God. After the adoption of the Nicene Creed, it was important for Christians to pronounce their belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus as God.

Revelations was written after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem by Roman legions, and the author infers that the temple would have to be restored at its original location for the prophecies of the Bible to be fulfilled in preparation for the second coming of Christ and establishment of the new Kingdom of God in Jerusalem where the saints will reside. For hundreds of years, Israel was nowhere close to becoming a sovereign state and church leaders assumed that when the Bible mentioned Israel it was referring to the Christian Church.

If you ask Christian fundamentalists today what Revelations is about, they may very well say it's about predicting the future apocalypse. But Revelations was never written as a historically accurate prediction of future events. Augustine of Hippo, considered by some as the greatest Christian thinker after St. Paul, cautioned against any attempt to compute the years remaining until the coming of Christ. Augustine believed that the Kingdom of God was already established on earth with Christianity. When the final judgment occurs, those not belonging to the City of God will go to eternal misery, which is the second death. Augustine considered the new Jerusalem as a vision of the eternal heaven, the place where humans and God interact.

But evangelical predictions of the end times have been commonplace since the middle 19th century. The Great Disappointment took place in 1848 when a farmer in upstate New York

convinced thousands of people that the end of the world would occur on a certain date, which failed to materialize. Interesting enough, the Seventh Day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses formed in the aftermath of the Great Disappointment. In the book, *When Prophecy Fails*, by Riecken and others, it is suggested that cognitive dissonance occurs when expectations aren't met whereas people become more committed to a certain belief to relieve psychological tension. This would explain the persistence of religious cults advocating the coming apocalypse.

The Davidians (a name derived from the Bible's David) are a Christian sect established as a spinoff of the Seventh Day Adventists and from which another spin off produced the Branch Davidians in the early part of the 20th century. A member of this latter sect, Vernon Wayne Howell, would change his name to David Koresh and make claim to being the final Messiah sent to earth to bring about the catastrophes required to fulfill the prophecies of the Apocalypse of John. His first name came from the House of David, and his last name from a Hebrew transliteration of the Old Testament's Cyrus the Great who set the Hebrews free from their Babylonian captivity. The siege and disaster in Waco, Texas in 1993 would soon follow.

Appendix 5 – A Virgin Birth



Of the 27 books included in the New Testament, there are two, and only two, that reference a virgin birth: the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The Gospel of Mark does not include a birth narrative but does have a reference to a voice from heaven acknowledging Jesus' divinity upon his baptism. This seems more important than a virgin birth for the author of Mark. For the Gospel of John, nothing is said about a supernatural birth, but rather insinuating that Jesus was a man with the divine word of God present in him and accomplishing all his marvelous deeds by virtue of the power of God. There was a range of opinions on the human or divine nature of Jesus of Nazareth in the decades and centuries following his death.

If some Jews and non-Christians found it hard to believe in the concept of a virgin birth, so too did many Christians. The very concept of virginity had a different meaning two thousand years ago than what we understand it to mean today. Now, when people talk about virginity the assumption is that the person has not engaged in penetrative sex. But back then, for females, it meant having a hymen. The very idea that a woman could conceive without having sex was hard enough to come to grips with, but for a woman to retain virginity after giving birth was incomprehensible. Early Christian philosophers such as Augustine and Ambrose found it hard to approach the subject using terms like Mary's "closed doors" and "fence of her chastity" when describing her physical attributes.

There was no consensus for how conception happened with Mary for those Christians promoting a supernatural birth of Jesus. Some early Christians believed that impregnation happened through Mary's eyes as the angel spoke with her, while others it occurred through her ear as depicted in a Gothic archway at St. Mary's Chappel in Wurzburg showing a long tube extending from the mouth of God to Mary's ear. There were Christian writers of the early centuries CE who were unconvinced of the concept of a virgin conception, but their gospels and texts never made it into the official church canon.

Many Gnostics of that time believed that Jesus was merely a man who attained enlightenment through gnosis, Greek for knowledge, and taught his disciples in this discipline. Others believed that Joseph was the true father of Jesus and the birth was the result of a natural human act. In the non-canonical *Infancy Gospel of James*, Joseph is skeptical and is appalled at the news of Mary's pregnancy and reproaches Mary by saying "Who has done this evil in my house and defiled the virgin?". When Mary objects by saying "I am pure", Joseph answers with "Whence then is that which is in thy womb?". This gospel also includes the story of the midwife Salome whose hand is burned while examining Mary. It would seem something supernatural was going on down there.

Eventually one form of Christianity with the concept of a virgin birth would come to dominate and stamp out all other beliefs in its wake. This would not become official church doctrine until centuries after the life of Jesus and his mother, so it did take a while. For the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, it was important to establish the supernatural aspects of Jesus' birth to authenticate his divine nature. But even with these two gospels included in the official church canon, there are differences.

For the Gospel of Matthew, the holy family was living in Bethlehem where the birth took place, three magi (Persian priests or sorcerers) came to visit the newborn, the family fled to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod, and afterward they return to live in Nazareth. For Luke, the holy family was living in Nazareth and they travelled to Bethlehem for a census at which time Jesus was born, shepherds came to visit the newborn, and then the family returns to Nazareth. The image of a nativity scene involving an ox and donkey looking on is included in the pseudo-Gospel of Matthew which never made it into the official church canon but which was made famous by a painting done by Giotto in the 1300s CE.

The various details from these writings have been conflated, and contradictions glossed over, to give us our current representations of the birth of Jesus during our Christmas celebrations. It was in the sixth century CE that official church doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary was formally declared at the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 CE.

Appendix 6 – King David, Man, or Myth?



Everything that we know about the life of David comes from the books of the Hebrew Bible, namely Samuel 1 and 2, Kings 1 and 2, and Chronicles 1 and 2. Other books of the Bible mention David or are accredited to David, but only the aforementioned contain information about his life. There is no historical documentation or archeological resources to substantiate or discredit what is written in these books. The only extra-biblical reference to the name of David comes from the archeological discovery of the Tel Dan Stele, a stone tablet recovered from a site in what is now northern Israel which dates to around 800 BCE. Reference on that artifact is made to a “house of David” among a list of people killed by the King of Aram Damascus.

Many Christians and Jews today are familiar with only the popular notions of a lyre-playing David and his devotional songs to God, who somehow defeated Goliath while armed with nothing more than a slingshot, and who became the first and greatest leader of the united Kingdom of Israel. His life has taken on mythical status and is held up as a model for others, and for many, the dream of fulfillment of biblical prophecies. It would be easy for skeptics to simply dismiss these stories as myths, but close reading of the scriptures reveals contradictions and what seems a blatant attempt to apologize for reprehensible behavior of the hero that would be unnecessary were the stories merely invented to provide moral lessons.

If there was an historical David, he would have lived about 1000 BCE, hundreds of years after the supposed exodus of Moses and his followers from Egypt, and almost a thousand years after Abraham and his family came to Canaan from Mesopotamia. During this time there was a loose confederation of Yahweh-worshipping tribes in the land of modern-day Israel and Palestine. In the north was the ancient Kingdom of Israel, and in the south a smaller number of tribes in the region of Judah (including Jerusalem). These were separate areas of Yahweh-worshipping people and only Israel in the north would have been considered an actual kingdom at the time, led by the first king named Saul. Both regions had common enemies including the Philistines to the west, among others, and there was tacit agreement between the two regions of armed assistance should there be the need to fight their common foes.

It was written that David was born in Bethlehem, in the region of Judah, the seventh son of a family of shepherds (it would be necessary for future messiahs to trace their lineage back to Bethlehem and David to fulfill biblical prophecies – including Jesus of Nazareth). The teenage David rose to prominence from his humble origins through two main episodes related in 1 Samuel 16 and 17, namely as a talented musician playing in Saul’s court, and as the slayer of Goliath. David gained fame as the quintessential lyricist and would eventually become known as the author of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible, including songs of praise, thanksgiving and

lament. In contrast, David the warrior is exemplified by his singular stand against the Philistine giant of a man, Goliath, demonstrating his courage and trust in his God.

A careful reading of the passages from 1 Samuel reveals somewhat contradictory statements of David's role in Saul's court and his confrontation with Goliath. There are also inconsistencies between the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation (the Septuagint), the latter of which was typically used by Christians in the following centuries. There's also the fact that many of the psalms have references to events that took place hundreds of years after David's death. It seems likely the stories of the Hebrew Bible were written with a goal of inventing the myth of David as opposed to providing a true history of his life.

The story of David and Goliath is a good case in point, a remarkable but certainly possible description of events (aside from Goliath's height of nine and a half feet). In 1 Samuel 17:4 it's David who kills the man-giant, but in 2 Samuel 21:19 it's written that a different person, Elhanan, killed Goliath. The author of 1 Chronicles, writing hundreds of years later recognized this contradiction and attempted to overcome it by explaining that the large person slain by Elhanan was Goliath's brother, Lahmi. The stories of David and his warrior followers echo those of Homer writing about Greek heroes with legendary exploits in the killing of beasts and giants.

Deconstructing the imaginary David and reconstructing an historical David from what is written in the Bible is difficult, and impossible to do with any certainty. It's made all the more difficult knowing the biblical authors' intention was to invent a hero to serve as an aspirational identity for a chosen people. Any such attempt will have to peel back the unrealistic layers of glorification and arrive at a reasoned construction of an implied history, and examine the written record of earlier, neighboring kingdoms to determine how these previous histories may have influenced the biblical authors.

A written account of a 13th century BCE Hittite general, Hattusili, tells the story of him leading the Hittite armies to many successes with the divine assistance of their patron goddess. This Hittite text is called *The Apology of Hattusili* and mirrors the story of David's exploits which was written hundreds of years later. The genre of what are termed "Apologies" are written to demonstrate the worthiness of a reluctant hero and their divine right to power.

There were other non-heroic events of David's life that were left in the Hebrew scriptures. When David fled from Saul he was joined by a band of misfits and outlaws who attempted to shake down a wealthy landowner. The landowner denied them any protection money and soon after the man was killed, supposedly by God, and David was then married to the man's widow, Abigail (1 Samuel 25). In a further act of desperation, David joins the Philistines and fights with them against his former army of the Kingdom of Israel (1 Samuel 27). Not a good look for the future king of said kingdom. After David takes over the kingship of Israel by force, and the surviving members of Saul's family are put to death, he arranges to have one of his

courageous warriors, Uriah, killed in battle so that he can marry that man's wife, Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11).

There was also the typical family disfunction associated with David's life that perhaps was normal for a man with eight wives (plus other concubines) and multiple offspring. His eldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister and was assassinated by his half-brother, Absalom (2 Samuel 13). Absalom later attempted to usurp the kingship from his father (succeeding for a brief time), but was tricked into a battle favorable to David's forces and Absalom was soon dead (2 Samuel 18). Solomon, David's son by Bathsheba, would take the kingship from his older half-brother, Adonijah, upon David's death. After Solomon secured the throne, he had Adonijah put to death (1 Kings 1).

It seems bizarre by our ethical standards today that the biblical writers would leave these less than heroic events in the Hebrew Bible unless the stories were so well-known to the readership that they would have to be addressed. But leaving them in also forced the writers to come up with new stories proclaiming David's lamentations upon the many deaths of those standing between him and the throne, and about his many glorious accomplishments, including making Jerusalem the capital of his united kingdom and bringing the Ark of the Covenant there.

At that time Jerusalem was not controlled by Israel or Judah, but rather was a Jebusite village inhabited by a separate tribe of Canaan, and was known then by the name Jebus. When David proclaimed himself King of Judah after the defeat of Saul's army by the Philistines and assumed the kingship of Israel after defeating Saul's heir, he moved to conquer Jebus. He was successful in doing so, declared it the new capital of a united kingdom, and arranged for the Ark of the Covenant to be moved there from another nearby village (Solomon would later be credited with constructing the first temple in Jerusalem).

There are historical issues with this account of Jerusalem and the united kingdom of Israel and Judah. Archeological evidence indicates that David and Solomon's homeland of Judah was conspicuously undeveloped, and there is no evidence whatever of the wealth of a great empire flowing back to it. Jerusalem at the time was nothing more than a remote, typical highland village. Likewise, there is no evidence of a unified kingdom of Yahweh worshipping people spanning the length of the ancient regions of Israel and Judah.

By the seventh century BCE conditions in Judah and Israel had changed dramatically, with Jerusalem becoming a larger economic center dominated by its temple. The northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians while the separate Kingdom of Judah with its capital of Jerusalem remained intact. Judah would be defeated by the Babylonians in the next century and the temple in Jerusalem destroyed. It would be almost a hundred years later when the descendants of displaced elites would return from exile, wanting to take up their ancestral positions among the lower classes of Yahweh worshippers who had remained in Judah carrying

on with their lives. When the origin stories of the promised land were being written by these returning elites the concept of a united monarchy was used as a powerful tool of political propaganda to hold up as inspiration for a return to former glory with a main temple in Jerusalem.

The stories of David and Solomon and their rule over a large territory in the central highlands of Israel and Judah were part of this legend, probably passed down from earlier generations which found it necessary to defend David and apologize for his transgressions. The biblical authors of the succeeding centuries reconfigured David as actively righteous leader, and as a model for future kings and messiahs.

Appendix 7 – Gods of the Bible



It's important to understand the historical context of Bible stories to fully understand what is being said, specifically regarding other deities. Most of the stories take place in the areas around the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee, but the people and customs of this region were influenced by developments in other parts of the ancient near east.

Archeological finds from the ancient city of Ugarit in present day Syria reveal a culture with a belief in a divine pantheon of gods with a chief deity El, his consort Asherah, and their children (the council of gods) which predate much of the Old Testament.

The collapse of Ugarit and much of the ancient near east during the Bronze Age in about 1200 BCE resulted in widespread chaos that may have led to the start of the Israelite civilization further to the south in what was then Canaan. The Ugaritic texts state that El and his consort Asherah had 70 sons. The people of the Bible seem to have incorporated this concept into their own beliefs, which may be the origin of the 70 nations that came from Noah's descendants listed in Genesis 10. In Deuteronomy 32:8-9 the most-high (El) allocated each nation to one of his children. When Abraham came to Canaan supposedly in the early second millennium BCE, the god El was worshipped as the elder deity, Asherah was his consort and Baal was the god of fertility and rain (very important for the area). El was the god who made the covenant with Abraham making his descendants the chosen people, and the name is preserved in Hebrew names such as Isra-El, Ishma-El, and Beth-El.

Around the year 1000 BCE, there were five kingdoms centered around the area of the Dead Sea and Sea of Galilee with two situated to the west of the Jordan River, and three to the east. Those to the west included Israel with its capital of Samaria, and Judah with its capital of Jerusalem. Biblical literature presents Judah as a separate kingdom, but most likely it was just a sparsely populated region and Jerusalem was just one of a few remote highland villages. The three kingdoms to the east included Ammon with its capital of Rabbath-Ammon (located at current day Amman, Jordan), Moab with its capital of Dibon, and Edom with its capital of Bozrah. The kingdoms of Egypt with their pharaohs were further to the south, the Assyrians further to the north, the Babylonians to the east, and desert tribes to the southeast.

Each of these kingdoms or regions was affiliated with their own patron god, and the king and subjects worshipped their god to provide prosperity for the kingdom. Yahweh or Adonai (the term for Lord when speaking of Yahweh) would come to be worshipped by the people of Israel and Judah who was the divine protector assigned to them by the chief deity, El. Likewise, Milcom was the patron god for the Ammonites, Chemosh for Moab, and Qos for Edom. Henotheism is the acknowledgement of many gods but the worship of one patron deity and this was the cultural norm during this period. In 1 Kings 11, it was written that King Solomon

did evil in the sight of the Lord, like his father David, and built a high place for the god, Chemosh, and for the god of Ammon. It seems the wisdom of Solomon included hedging his bets on how best to secure a comfortable after-life, and he was willing to appease the many gods who may hold his fate in the next life.

Sometime in the 800s BCE, the king of Moab, Mesha, broke with the kingdom of Israel when the Israelite king died. At the time Moab was a vassal state to Israel being expected to provide a yearly payment of sheep and wool and to provide manpower in times of war. Israel enlisted the help of Judah and Edom (who may also have been a vassal state to Israel) to reign in the rebels of Moab, but the Moabites were able to turn back the invading armies and became free of vassalage. This story is included in the Bible in 2 Kings, and details were confirmed by archeological finds in the early 20th century CE in present day Jordan.

2 Kings 3:1-27 relates the story of this war. The attacking kings enlisted the help of the prophet Elisha to guide them when their armies ran low on water. Elisha told them that Yahweh would provide water and that the armies should undertake a scorched-earth policy in Moab by cutting down every tree, stopping up every spring, and ruining every good piece of land. When they were on the verge of victory, the Moab king made human sacrifice to the god Chemosh and the story ends rather abruptly with the Israelites retreating to their own land. It would seem the god Chemosh had bested Yahweh for this one battle anyway.

Passages in both the Old and New Testaments reference the Israelites original polytheistic system of worship, sometimes modified to reflect the beliefs predominating when the oral stories were transcribed. 1 Kings and 2 Kings references the worship of Baal as well as Adonai during the reign of King Ahab of Israel. Jehoram, the son of Ahab, would become king after his father. At the time there were still pillars or statues of Baal and Asherah (El's consort) in residence and in 2 Kings 3: 1-2 it states, "And he did evil in the sight of the Lord, but not like his father and mother; for he put away the sacred pillar of Baal that his father had made." Apparently, he stashed away the pillar of Baal for safekeeping and kept the one of Asherah prominently displayed. When the Old Testament was later transcribed, the name Baal was corrupted to Beelzebub, a term for Satan, when it became expedient to demonize this earlier venerated deity.

El and Adonai (or Yahweh) are conflated at some point in time with the latter being thought as the most high among the pantheon of gods. In Psalm 82, reference is made of Adonai standing in the congregation of the mighty (the Divine Council of the earlier Ugarit community) and judging among the gods. Adonai condemns the other gods presumably for allowing the people of Israel and Judah to be overtaken by the Babylonian conquest which occurred sometime in the 600s BCE. The last verse of this Psalm states, "Arise, O God, judge the earth for you shall inherit all nations". With this, Adonai or Yahweh has taken over control as the patron deity of all nations displacing the other patron deities.

At this point the pantheon of gods or Divine Council had been renegotiated; former gods were demoted to a lower status, and some suggest they had become angels who became the guardians of the different nations. In Daniel 10 reference is made to the archangel Michael, one of the chief princes and the patron angel of Israel. Other archangel princes would preside over Persia and Greece who were prophesized to be in opposition to Israel. These angels would come to be known as demons or princes of darkness.

Modern belief in Christianity includes the concepts of the Trinity, angels, and Satan. Most philosophers and almost all non-believers regard the doctrine of the Trinity as a thin disguise for polytheism. The Father, Son, Holy Spirit, and that of Satan the fallen archangel, function as much like individual gods as any of the Divine Council of the Old Testament. That angels and demons are not called gods is merely semantics, a rather transparent attempt to conceal what is a conflation of monotheism and pagan polytheism.

Appendix 8 – Jesus and His Siblings



Most Christians believe that Mary was a virgin who miraculously conceived of the baby Jesus by being “overshadowed” by the Holy Spirit, and who subsequently gave birth to the Son of God in fulfillment with the Old Testament prophecy,

Therefore, the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

Immanuel, Jesus, it’s hard to get all the details right when you’re prophesizing. That Mary was a virgin at the time of Jesus’ birth is “substantiated” in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke and included in their birth narratives (See Appendix 5). However, Mary’s virginity after the birth of Christ remains an open question and the answer may depend on the person you’re speaking with and their reading of the Bible. So, what’s the background for debate?

Two different Gospels recount that Mary had other sons and daughters, and the names of these siblings are provided,

“Is this not the carpenter’s son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us? Where then did this Man get all these things?” (Matthew 13:55–56)

“Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” (Mark 6:3)

And the Apostle Paul also claimed that Jesus had at least one brother. On his first trip to Jerusalem after his conversion, Paul wrote,

“But I saw none of the other apostles except James, the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:19).

An unbiased reading of these passages would seem to suggest that Mary had other children who weren’t exalted as was Jesus before and after his life. That would seem to suggest that these other siblings had normal human births requiring Mary to have had sexual intercourse with a man. Or through in vitro fertilization which was hard to come by in ancient times.

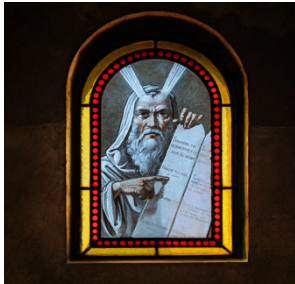
But the official acts of the Fifth Ecumenical Council held at Constantinople in 553 CE refer to Mary as “aeiparthenos” (i.e. ever-virgin), and this became the official view of the Christian Church. For the Church establishment it was important that the virgin birth and Mary’s perpetual virginity be signs of Mary’s total consecration to God, her single-minded service to him and utter abandonment to his will. For the mother of Jesus to have other siblings would mean she had given in to human emotions and feelings (and God forbid – had sexual relations), which may have cast a negative light on the divinity of Jesus. So, for them, the passages cited above refer to cousins or more distant relations and not actual siblings of Jesus.

But the Greek translation of these passages use the Greek words for brothers and sisters and not the Greek words for cousins or for distant relations. The Greek word for cousin is used in other parts of the Bible so it seems strange that the correct terms would not be used throughout.

The idea of a perpetual virgin is first mentioned in a writing called the *Infancy Gospel of James* or *The Protoevangelium of James*, and it is estimated to have been written in the middle part of the second century and in Greek, hence it could not have been written by the Apostle James. However, in this book James is presented as an older stepbrother of Jesus being a child of Joseph and his first wife, prior to his marriage to Mary. This Gospel was considered apocryphal by the early church leaders and was not included in the official Church canon. However, it may have planted the seed for subsequent Church dogma about the perpetual virginity of the mother of Jesus.

For many Catholics today, Mary is venerated as having semi-divine status whose body and soul were raised to heaven (The Assumption of Mary). This became official Church dogma by Pope Pius XII in 1950. Many Protestants do not believe in her perpetual virginity or in the Assumption of Mary because it is not supported by canonical scripture. They have no issues with interpreting the Bible literally or believing that Jesus had siblings. For them, James the Just is the brother of Jesus. For Catholics, the majority of whom do not depend on a detailed reading of Scripture, they have no problem with the contention that Mary was perpetually a virgin, but the belief that Jesus had siblings is a foreign concept to them.

Appendix 9 – The Real Ten Commandments



If there is anything in the Bible that everyone should be able to agree upon it would be the Ten Commandments. After all they were supposedly etched in stone by the finger of God. But as it turns out there are questions and differences of opinions about the exact makeup of the commandments and how they apply to Christians today.

The commandments are presented as a series of fourteen imperatives (Thou shalt not....) included in multiple verses, are not specifically numbered, and could be interpreted as being ten or more commandments depending on how they are separated. Ten has been used because that specific number was referenced in other Old Testament books.

When the Levites fled Egypt to escape persecution by the Pharaoh, Moses went up Mount Sinai to meet with Yahweh at which time the Hebrew God spoke of a series of rules that have been recorded in Exodus 20: 3-17 and in Deuteronomy 5: 6-21. There are slight differences between these two recordings, but they are generally the same set of edicts and are summarized in the table below. However, they're never identified as the "Ten Commandments" in these passages.

When Moses came down from the mountain and found his people worshipping other gods, he became angry and broke the tablets upon which the laws were written. After the people repented sufficiently, Yahweh rewrote the laws upon new stone tablets and gave them to Moses. These laws are noted as being the same as the first copy and are specifically identified as the "Ten Commandments", or from the Hebrew, the Ten Words (Decalogue in Latin). These laws are recorded in Exodus 34: 14-26 and again are presented as a series of imperatives that are much different than those of the earlier version.

To make things even a bit more confusing there are slight differences between the Bible used by most Protestants, the King James Bible, and the Bible used by Catholics and Lutherans, translations of the Latin Vulgate Bible. One of the differences is the order of the Ten Commandments. Catholics and Lutherans usually use the arrangement of the commandments made by Augustine of Hippo (St. Augustine) as presented in the Latin Vulgate Bible. Most Protestants use the arrangement formulated by the Eastern Orthodox Church which was used for the King James translation. They are mostly the same with one omission, but are numbered differently.

Both the Latin Vulgate and King James English translations base their versions of the Ten Commandments on the imperatives given in Exodus 20. These are presented in the table below under the headings "King James" and "Latin Vulgate" and omit much of the unnecessary

verbiage given in the Bible translations. The commandments from Exodus 34, those specifically mentioned as the Ten Commandments, are also presented under their own heading.

	King James	Exodus 34	Latin Vulgate
1	You shalt have no other god before me	You shall worship no other god	You shall have no other god besides me
2	Do not make graven images	Make no molded gods	Don't take the Lord's name in vain
3	Don't take the Lord's name in vain	Keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread	Keep holy the Lord's Day
4	Keep holy the Sabbath	All firstborns are mine	Honor thy father and mother
5	Honor thy father and mother	You shall rest on the seventh day	You shall not murder
6	You shalt not murder	Observe the Feast of Weeks	Do not commit adultery
7	Do not commit adultery	Men shall appear before God three times a year	Do not steal
8	Do not steal	Don't offer the blood of sacrifice with leaven	Don't bear false witness
9	Don't bear false witness	Give the first fruits of your land to the Lord	Don't covet your neighbor's wife
10	You shalt not covet	Do not boil a kid in its mother's milk	Don't covet your neighbor's goods

The commandments are abbreviated in this table and the actual Bible passages are much more elaborate. As example the tenth of these rules in Exodus 20 is translated as "You shall not covet your neighbor's possessions including wife, servants, ox, donkey, or anything else." The fourth in Exodus 34 is translated thusly "*But the firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb: and if thou redeem him not, then shalt thou break his neck. All the firstborn of thy sons thou shalt redeem. And none shall appear before me empty.*" It's difficult to fit that passage into a table.

Christians have chosen to concentrate on the rules included in Exodus 20 as their Ten Commandments even though they aren't designated as such in the Old Testament. They have come to regard these as the Ethical Decalogue or the ethical Ten Commandments, to distinguish them from the Ritual Decalogue listing of Exodus 34. It's interesting that there are three to four commandments associated with homage to God with the remaining concerning ethical behavior. But there's no mention of slavery, torture, kidnapping, child molestation or rape which are commonly considered the most heinous acts one person can perpetrate upon another.

As shown, the King James version of the second commandment forbids the making of graven images or idols (idolatry), whereas the Latin Vulgate version eliminated this commandment and went right to keeping the lord's day holy. As a result, the two versions differ in arrangement by one row with the Latin Vulgate translation making up ground by splitting the last commandment of "coveting" as two separate commandments. Catholics will say their second commandment is incorporated in the first, which they contend that idolatry (worshipping graven images, or false gods, money etc.) can logically be assumed to be covered by "You shall have no other god besides me". Protestants (except Lutherans), harking back to the Reformation, contend that Catholics are practicing idolatry by having art and statues depicting divine beings. Catholics will say that they are venerable images of God and the saints which cannot be considered idolatry. And the debate goes on.

As with most of the Bible, specific passages must be considered in the context of the time and culture when they were formulated. Adultery in ancient times didn't have the same meaning to what Christians consider adultery to be now. In the Old Testament adultery was voluntary sexual intercourse between a married woman, or one engaged by payment of the bride price, and a man other than her husband. For a man, having sex with slaves, prostitutes or unmarried women wasn't necessarily an offense. Abraham had sexual relations with his wife's maid servant, Hagar, resulting in the birth of Ishmael. King David had Bathsheba's husband murdered so he could cohabit with her. And as related in 1 Kings 11, King Solomon had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines. Now that dude got around. Times change, except maybe in Utah.

Regarding the worshipping of other gods, early Israelites were polytheistic and worshipped Yahweh alongside a variety of Canaanite gods and goddesses. (See Appendix 7 for a more detailed description of these other gods). God's covenant with Abraham giving the Hebrew people the land of Canaan came with the provision that Abraham and the early Hebrews would worship their god, Yahweh, as the supreme being. This wasn't a demand to be the only god but rather the most important, so they were to worship no other god before Yahweh. King Solomon worshipped other deities as written in 1 Kings.

The commandment about keeping the Sabbath holy was always considered to be Saturday, the Jewish holy day, by early followers of Jesus. The Sabbath was never changed from Saturday to Sunday by Jesus Christ or his apostles who continued the Jewish practice. Sunday became the day of rest and worship for mainstream Christians through the Church claiming authority to overrule Scripture. This was most likely done to incorporate influences by potential converts and quite plausibly through anti-Semitism. The official line from the Church is that Christians celebrate on Sunday because it is the day on which Jesus rose from the dead and on which the Holy Spirit had appeared to the apostles. Like most passages in the Bible, believers pick and choose what makes the most sense for their own lives, even if they're written in stone.

Appendix 10 – Zionism



Today, the term Zionist is often used pejoratively, but its original meaning was nothing more than someone striving for Jewish nationalism. Modern Jewish Zionism emerged in late 19th century Europe, originating from unsuccessful attempts by Jews to integrate into Western society due to increasing antisemitism on the continent. However, Christian Zionism has roots in 17th century English Puritanism, with some Christians advocating for Jewish restoration of the original temple to hasten the second coming of the Messiah (They base their belief on Old Testament prophecies that exiled Jews will

return to the Promised Land and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem as a precursor to the return of Jesus). In the 1840s, Zionist Evangelical Protestants from England may have passed their ideas on to Jewish communities elsewhere.

One of the key forces in shaping the history of Palestine at the turn of the 20th century was the Jewish Zionist movement. This movement emerged from and is rooted in political developments in Europe, but it changed and developed as it evolved from a political movement in Europe to a settlement and nation-building project in Palestine. Thus, we need to step outside the physical context of the Middle East to understand a force that ultimately changed the Middle East.

In the late 1890s, Vienna, the capital of the Austrian-Hungarian empire, was a crucible of new visions and thinking. At one time during this decade, Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Sigmund Freud, Gustav Mahler, and Marshal Tito all lived in Vienna. In 1896, Theodor Herzl, an author, journalist, and playwright living there published a pamphlet called “The Jewish State” in which he promoted the idea of a Jewish homeland, and which made him a major figure in the Jewish world. Herzl wasn’t a practicing Jew, but he came to the realization that assimilation would be impossible for Jews living in Europe. Many protestant Europeans thought of Jews as a separate ethnic race, as outsiders, and not worthy of being a true citizen of the nation where they lived. This view resonated with many but not all European Jews.

For Herzl and his followers, European Jews would have to start their own nation state to escape the pervasive antisemitism. They came to believe that being a Jew was more than just having a different religion but having a distinct culture with its own language and with a political sovereignty. This was the focus of the First Zionist Congress held in Switzerland in 1897. But for other Jews, including Lionel de Rothschild, a British banker who cofounded the Anti-Zionist League, assimilation was still the preferred course for the Jewish people. Those Jews emigrating from the anti-Jewish pogroms of the Russian empire, the majority of whom wanted a separate homeland, helped swing Jewish popular opinion behind the Zionists.

With the turn of the 20th century, European political leaders began to warm to the idea of a separate Jewish state. These sentiments were not always altruistic, with some wanting to be rid of the Jews in their country. In 1903, the British government offered the Zionist Congress a portion of their Ugandan protectorate in Africa as a location of a new Jewish nation, which at the time was populated by the Maasai people. Herzl and some of the Zionists were in favor of

this proposal as official recognition of their goal for a separate homeland, but the proposal would be rejected after the death of Herzl in 1904.

Many Jews were emigrating to the United States at this time with its promise of freedom of religion and liberty, with many settling in the upper east side of Manhattan. But with an expanding Jewish population many Jews living there feared a rise in antisemitism and looked for other outlets for the burgeoning population. The Galveston Movement operated between 1907 and 1914 to divert Jews fleeing the pogroms of Russia and eastern Europe away from congested communities of the US Atlantic coast to Galveston, Texas, from where they'd be dispersed to the interior of the United States. Some 10,000 Jews made their way to Texas during this period, later making their way to other cities of the Midwest, eventually assimilating into their new communities.

During the last weeks of World War I in 1917, the foreign secretary of the British government, Arthur Balfour, issued a letter stating the British government's support for a home for the Jewish people in Palestine provided this did not adversely impact the existing communities in the area. This letter may have been written to appeal to the Jewish community in the US, who could apply political pressure on the US government to provide continuing military support for the European allies. With the Ottoman Empire surrender later that year, Palestine would come under the control of the British when the former Ottoman lands were divided among the victorious allies. The British obtained a Mandate for Palestine from the League of Nations in 1922 arguing that the existing people of the area were not competent to rule themselves. During the Mandate, the area saw successive waves of Jewish immigration and the rise of nationalist movements in both the Jewish and Arab communities. The British made conflicting promises to Arabs and Jews alike.

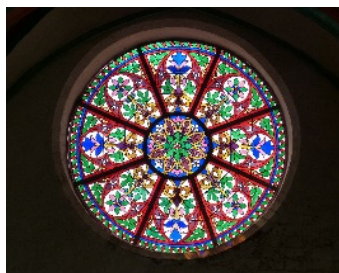
The British attempted to limit Jewish emigration to Palestine in the late 1930s and into the next decade which met with Jewish terrorism with the killing of Palestinians and British military personnel. Arab retaliation would follow, and the Zionist movement became more revisionist with a goal to maximize land accumulation. World War II presented a new set of political circumstances, with for instance, half the Jewish population of about 500,000 living in Germany in the 1930s emigrating to the US (95,000), South and Central America (75,000), Palestine (60,000), and Great Britain (40,000). Nazi policies would prohibit Jewish emigration after 1941.

In 1946, after the war, the British government gave up on the situation in Palestine wanting to extricate itself from the mess it helped to create and referred the Palestine Mandate to the newly created United Nations. A two-state solution was proposed, and the Zionists used this context to declare for themselves the new state of Israel in 1948 amid continued fighting. The US recognized the independent nation of Israel just eleven minutes after the declaration. About half the Arab population of Palestine would flee or be expelled from their homeland because of fighting in the next few years, and Israel would occupy more than two-thirds of the land designated for the Palestinians by the original Mandate. Jordan and Egypt would control the remaining areas. As a result, the Palestinians were effectively left to be controlled by the three countries of Israel, Jordan and Egypt.

Palestinian guerrilla attacks on Israel from bases in Syria led to increased hostility between the two countries leading up to the war between an Arab coalition of nations including Syria, Egypt, and Jordan against Israel. As a result of this conflict another 500,000 Palestinians were displaced after a preemptive strike by Israel against the Arab coalition with Israel capturing the Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank, the Old City of Jerusalem and the Golan Heights. The tension and fighting continue to this day.

In the US, support for Israel has been strong since its inception in 1948. Many liberal politicians have felt that Israel is the only country in the Middle East that shares American values in terms of freedom of expression, gay rights and the rule of law. For many conservative politicians, with a base of evangelical Christians, there has been a belief that the US has a moral obligation to help Israel to fulfill the prophecies of the Bible, even though many think that if the Jewish people don't convert to Christianity they will be going to hell. Because of recent conflicts in Palestine, support for Israel is beginning to erode especially with younger people. The lasting impact of the myth of God's promise to his chosen people remain with us today with Christian and Jewish Zionism ideology.

Appendix 11 - The Cognitive Science of Religion



Cognitive science is the study of how the mind works, functions, and behaves. It draws on aspects of psychology, linguistics, philosophy, and computer modeling. From this study it can be shown that beliefs play a central role in our lives. They lie at the heart of what makes us human, they shape the organization and functioning of our minds, they define the boundaries of our cultures, and they guide our motivation and behavior.

Neil Van Leeuwen in his book, *Is Religion Make-Believe?* delves into the cognitive science of religion and explores the concept of factual and imagined beliefs. Factual beliefs are based on reasoning and knowledge and provide involuntary control over how we sense the world around us. These beliefs are vulnerable to change as evidence is presented that refutes our original beliefs. We may believe the health club is open on holidays, but when we go there on Memorial Day and see a sign that states the facility is closed on all government holidays our factual belief is updated. Imagined beliefs are not necessarily based on facts, are not subject to change with new evidence, and have a more circumscribed scope.

Van Leeuwen suggests that religious credence is more like imagined beliefs in that believers voluntarily choose to accept the credence even if the belief is not based on facts. Religious belief or credence can be compartmentalized and overlaid on top of factual beliefs and turned off when the person is not in a sacred time or setting. Factual beliefs are never turned off and guide behavior in most situations, but religious beliefs can override intuition and guide behavior when an individual is within, for them, a sacred time or place.

When a family member or friend dies, a person can have a profound sense of sadness and grief if they allow their factual belief in an end of life to guide their behavior. But at the same time, they can talk about going to a better place to comfort themselves or others with a religious credence of a paradisaical afterlife. Holding a credence that your ancestors exist after death and are watching is very different than a factual belief that your ancestors are watching.

A plurality of Americans believes in a creationist theory of human origins that occurred in the last 10,000 years, but barely one-fifth believe that the earth is less than 10,000 years old. This is one of many such cognitive-psychological incongruities in the public's belief system but doesn't mean that many Americans suffer from acute delusion. Rather, many hold concurrent factual and imagined beliefs that can be mapped onto each other.

Religion can be a central part of one's identity through its theological beliefs and rituals of worship, or for a sense of community and culture. For many, acceptance of a religious credence is willingly done to strengthen this personal identity and to signal to others that they belong to a particular group. This can have negative impacts when the beliefs are expanded to the persecution of others not belonging to the group.

It can be helpful to understand the psychological distinction between factual beliefs and religious credence when discussing issues with others espousing different beliefs. An avowed atheist expressing doubts about the likelihood of a virgin birth or the possibility of human existence starting less than 10,000 years ago will often fall on deaf ears when talking to a practicing Christian. Facts are not always the most important aspect when discussing religious credence. Likewise, for someone holding a certain religious credence, conflict can arise when the imagined belief is presented as a factual belief. That can be the very definition of delusional.

Appendix 12 – The Bible on Homosexuality



It's unlikely that the biblical authors had any notion of sexual orientation (the term homosexual wasn't even coined until the late 19th century) as we have today, so it's important to read the Bible with an understanding of the cultural context in which it was written. There are six references to same-sex eroticism in the Bible, three in the Old Testament and three in the New.

This is in addition to the possible homosexual relationship between David and King Saul's son written in the Book of Samuel. While these passages are negative about the practices they mention, there is no evidence that these in any way speak to same-sex relationships based on love and mutuality. To the contrary, the cultural context of the time demonstrates that what was being condemned in the Bible is very different than the committed same-sex partnerships we know and see today.

In the Old Testament, the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19) and the Levite's concubine (Judges 19) are about sexual violence and the Ancient Near East's stigma toward violating male honor. The injunction that "man must not lie with man" (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13) coincides with a society anxious about continuing family lineages and retaining the distinctiveness of Israel as a nation, along with other injunctions that we typically choose to ignore. Each time the New Testament addresses the topic in a list of vices (1 Corinthians 6:9, 1 Timothy 1:10), the argument being made is most likely about the sexual exploitation of male prostitutes or the practice of pederasty which was socially accepted at the time in the Greco-Roman world. When Paul speaks of vile passions and men with men committing what is shameful (Romans), it is part of a broader indictment against idolatry and excessive, self-centered lust.

In the Genesis story, two angels disguised as men come to Sodom and spend the night at the home of Lot. Because of their xenophobia, people of the town approach Lot's house and threaten to sexually abuse his guests as a way of demonstrating their dominance over the strangers. Lot tries to diffuse the situation by offering his two unmarried daughters to the angry crowd to do with them what they wish. Interestingly, Lot isn't condemned or chastised for this heinous proposition. Eventually the crowd is turned back, and the next day God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah sparing only Lot, his wife and his two daughters (Lot's wife is turned to a pillar of salt when she disobeys the angels' command not to look back upon the destruction). Disregarding the perverse morality of Lot offering up his daughters, the story is about the evil of sexual violence and rape and not about sexual orientation.

The referenced passages of Leviticus are included with a long list of prohibitions known as the Code of Holiness which is a collection of secular, ritualistic, moral, and festival regulations for the people of Israel. Being a member of the chosen people, the author would be interested in promoting heterosexual relations as a way of continuing their blood lines which could explain

the injunction of a man lying with a male. But those wishing to use the Code of Holiness as an argument against sexual orientation gloss over other prohibitions which we now consider anachronistic and which we choose to ignore. You shall not sow your field with mixed seed, a garment of mixed linen and wool shall not come upon you, you shall not shave the sides of your head, you shall not tattoo any marks on you. People can pick and choose Bible passages to support most positions that they hold. Polygamy and adultery are commonly thought as sinful by most Christians and Jews today, and yet there are many examples of these practices being condoned in the Bible (As there are today for people claiming to be Christian). Abraham had sexual relations with his wife's maid servant, and had a son by her, Ishmael. The maid servant and Ishmael were later banished to the desert so that Isaac could become the heir (And this was considered ethical behavior?). King David and Solomon, among others, practiced adultery and polygamy. Cultural norms do change.

In the referenced passages from Corinthians and Timothy, English translations include terms such as homosexuals and fornicators, and assert that they shall not inherit the kingdom of God. The Apostle Paul is the presumed author of these letters, and during the middle of the first century CE he would not be familiar with the term homosexual. He was writing in Greek, and he used the words "malakoi" and "arsenokoitai". The Greek word malakoi typically means soft, and can be interpreted as weak, lacking self-control, and laziness. In the ancient world this term may also have been used to refer to women, and some translators may have used this knowledge to translate the term as "effeminate".

The compound word arsenokotai is translated as male and bed. Most translations of the Bible to English since the middle of the 20th century have associated the translated terms of soft, male and bed as a reference to homosexuality, although again this would not be a concept known to Paul. After Paul's apparent coinage of the term arsenokoitai, most subsequent uses of it in ancient literature appear only in lists of vices. Some religious scholars have pointed out that the word likely relates to sexual or economic exploitation. That may involve same-sex behavior, but it would be exploitative forms of it, not loving relationships. Once again, anachronistic translations of the Greek words are open to misinterpretation and biases of the translator.

Chapter 1 of Romans provides a description of behavior of the unrighteous including the passage "For this cause God gave them up to vile passions of women exchanging the natural use for what is against nature, and for men leaving the natural use of the woman". It's hard to know exactly what is being said here but women were obviously thought of as something to be used. For Paul, the presumed author of this letter to the Romans and a Jew living in the first century CE, a pagan lifestyle and excesses practiced by many Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world would be considered idolatry and unrighteous. It's not completely clear what Paul was talking about when he wrote about vile passions, but he did not have the concept of sexual orientation that we have today. However, he most certainly was aware of pederasty, the

practice of an older man mentoring a young boy and having sexual relations with him, which was practiced in the Archaic and Classical periods.

As a first-century Jew, Paul would have considered pederasty as a violation of righteous behavior, just as he did other types of unrighteous excesses like covetousness, maliciousness, and envy. However, being an unmarried follower of the laws of Moses he perhaps would not have had a tremendous amount of insight into a healthy sexual relationship. Although we can only surmise this since little is known of his personal life.

While it's reasonable to assume that Jesus and his fellow Jews in first-century Palestine would have disapproved of gay sex, there is no record of Jesus speaking on this topic, unlike those passages referenced from the Old Testament, and in the letters from Paul. He does speak about sexual immorality in general, and when asked about the practice of divorce in a heterosexual relationship he references Genesis (as related in the Gospel of Matthew) where it is written, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and mother and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh". This addresses heterosexual marriage but says nothing about a caring homosexual marriage.

Just as attitudes toward adultery and polygamy have changed over the years, so have attitudes toward sexual orientation. If we are to give moral authority to the Bible about issues such as this, we must understand them within the cultural context of the community where and when they were written.

Appendix 13 – The Bible on Abortion



Nothing in the Bible specifically addresses the issue of abortion or defines when life begins for humans. Anyone arguing from pro-life or pro-choice positions and attempting to use the Bible as a moral authority on this issue is not making credible assumptions. However, people try to infer what some passages mean to justify their stance, from both sides of the debate.

The concept of personhood has been debated for millennia. Aristotle and Hippocrates held a gradualist view of the development of the fetus. As the time for birth drew near, the fetus moved from the animal-like embryo to the human child. Jewish interpretation of the laws of the Hebrew Bible put an emphasis on life beginning with the first breath, or after the birth of the child. The general Islamic view is that full human life begins only after the ensoulment of the fetus, which most Muslim scholars believe occurs at about 120 days after conception. So, there has been a range of thinking on when life begins, at conception, sometime after conception but before birth, and at or shortly after birth.

The Christian Church has gone through a metamorphosis on this subject over the last fifteen centuries. Saint Augustine in the fifth century declared that homicide applied only to killing a formed fetus after a gestation period of 40 days for males or 80 days for females (apparently females needed a longer incubation time to become fully human). The Justinian code of the sixth century confirmed that fetuses under 40 days did not have souls. But in 1588 Pope Sixtus V rejected this view and promulgated the ruling which declared that abortion was to be condemned whatever stage of development the fetus had reached. In 1591, his successor, Gregory IX, rescinded that, but Pius IX reinstated the earlier ruling in the late 1800s.

In 1965, the Catholic Church ruled that abortion as the taking of a life rather than as a sexual sin. And in the 1970s white evangelicals (and white nationalists) seized the issue as a cornerstone of their movement to control the political system in the US. Still, most Catholics, Protestants and perhaps even most Orthodox Christians agree that it's a woman's right to decide. Until white evangelicals came to prominence, even Southern Baptists in the US did not have abortion high on their list of concerns for the moral well-being of the country.

For the last fifty years, pro-life activists have tried to make the argument that the Bible says life begins at conception, and that abortion is murder. They quote Deuteronomy 30:19 which states "Choose life that you and your descendants may live", but this isn't about abortion. In Isaiah, they point to passages about the Lord forming someone or someplace (Jacob or Israel) in the womb. This doesn't address at what point this happened or if it's talking about the formation of a human being or the nation of Israel. In Jeremiah 20:14-17 the author states that his father did not kill him in the womb, but the whole passage is about him wishing he'd been

aborted. And in the New Testament, Luke 1:41 relates the story of Mary visiting Elizabeth when the latter is pregnant with John the Baptist (in the final trimester). The passage reads "...When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb". Pro-life activists will point to this passage and say that the fetus is a functioning human able to distinguish voices. But they fail to point out that Elizabeth is in the final trimester of pregnancy, that quickening (movement) does occur in a pregnancy but not at conception, and that the story is about a birth brought about by God (supernatural) and not about natural pregnancies (an angel helped Elizabeth conceive even at her advanced age).

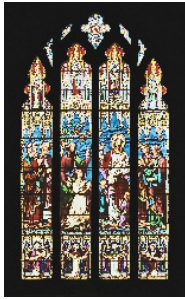
Pro-choice activists will reference Numbers 5:11-22 and Exodus 21:22-25. In Numbers, to confirm a wife's faithfulness to her husband, she is brought before a priest and given holy water to drink. The belief was that if she had been unfaithful her belly would swell and her thigh would rot. The activists will suggest this is about a pregnant woman being given abortive medication resulting in a miscarriage. But it becomes apparent that this is about a woman who isn't necessarily pregnant because in the following verses it states that if the woman has not defiled herself then she shall be free and may conceive.

The Exodus passage is translated "When men fight and hit a pregnant woman, so that her children come out (hmmm...her children come out), but there is no harm, the one who hit her shall surely be fined, as the woman's husband shall impose on him, and he shall pay as the judges determine." For pro-choice activists the correct translation is that there is a miscarriage but the woman herself is not harmed. With this interpretation, the fetus or unborn child is not considered a human and only a fine is imposed. But this passage can also be translated that no harm occurs to either the woman or the child, in which case the baby is born and is a living person. It's not clear what is being stated here.

The Exodus passage may have been assimilated from the earlier Code of Hammurabi, a Babylonian legal text, and copied to the Hebrew Bible. In that Code, Assyrian women were punished for aborting their fetuses. This seems straight forward and a condemnation against abortion, but in the same Code fathers were allowed to kill their newborn babies. It seems apparent that the law was designed to control the woman's right to choose rather than to protect the fetus.

So, in conclusion, you will not find anything in the Bible which expressly prohibits or condones abortion. Bible passages are dependent on transcriptions and translations which have not always been unbiased or necessarily accurate. But if we wish to make a moral judgement using the Bible as our basis, we must make inferences about what was meant knowing that context is important and that what was normal or natural in ancient times does not always apply in our times. The debate about when personhood is achieved continues (does it occur at conception, after the quickening, or at birth?). Reasonable people can have different opinions, but none can use the Bible to conclusively prove their position.

Appendix 14 – Circumcision



Male circumcision is the oldest known human surgical procedure, with historical records and archeological evidence dating the practice back to ancient Egyptians in the 23rd century BCE. A lack of proper hygiene and modern medicines made the practice advantageous for the population in that it could minimize the harmful effects of some infections and diseases affecting the male genitalia. These practices were most likely passed on to the semitic tribes of Canaan, including the Hebrews of the ancient near east.

In Genesis 17:10-14 it is written “Every male child among you shall be circumcised, and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me (God) and you.” It was further written that anyone who is not circumcised shall break God’s covenant with his chosen people, and that this shall be done eight days after birth. There are very good scientific reasons for this delay after birth in that newborn babies do not have sufficient Vitamin K production to prevent excessive bleeding, and production of this vitamin from normal bacterial action in the gut can take months to achieve sufficient levels if not supplemented. Certainly, eight days is better than none, which was probably arrived at by practical experience.

For those of the Jewish faith, circumcision is routinely performed on the eighth day of the child's life according to the referenced passage in Genesis, and it is forbidden to postpone the practice for any reason other than the health of the child. The circumcision itself must be performed by a Mohel, a pious, observant Jew educated in circumcision techniques as well as in the relevant Jewish law and tradition. Circumcision performed by any other individual does not qualify as valid regardless of whether a rabbi is presiding over it. This is because the removal of the foreskin is itself a religious ritual that must be performed by someone religiously qualified.

In Islam the performance of circumcision is one of the rules of cleanliness and it is believed that the prophet Abraham was the first person to perform circumcision. This practice has continued as a highly recommended practice of the prophets, including the Prophet Muhammed. Many Muslim scholars maintain that circumcision is an obligatory necessity with others stating that it is not obligatory but a highly recommended practice. In the practice of Islam, circumcision is recommended to be performed on the seventh day after birth, but it can be carried out up to 40 days after birth or thereafter until the age of 7 years, depending upon the health of the infant or child at the time.

The Jesus movement, and Christianity thereafter, has taken a different path for their believers. St. Paul argued that it wasn’t necessary for Gentiles to follow Jewish ritual law when they converted to a belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus the Messiah. As he proselytized in Asia Minor, he encountered many adult converts who were unwilling to undergo the painful ritual of circumcision. St. Paul’s argument became accepted Church policy in the early Jesus movement and became entrenched in the tenets of the Christian Church in Europe, probably

aided by anti-Semitic feelings of the expanding Church population. Therefore, circumcision was not routinely practiced in the Western World up to the 1800s.

In Victorian Britain in the 1800s the view that male circumcision could reduce the risk of venereal diseases and reduce the inclination of masturbation took hold particularly by many better educated parents. Masturbation was considered a particularly unhealthy behavior, not only because it was morally frowned on but also because it was thought to deplete energy. The remarkable success reportedly achieved by circumcision in curing the various disorders that were related to masturbation or irritation of the penis became well known in medical circles in Britain at this time. These views were subsequently transported to Puritan America.

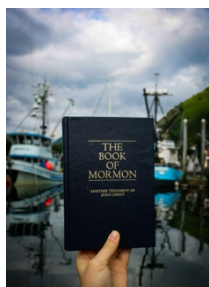
However, in Great Britain and Canada circumcision quickly became an antiquated practice because medical practitioners in both countries felt no direct correlation between cleanliness and circumcision existed. The practice of circumcision in the United States, despite this, has remained common in the modern era because of unique cultural principles. These cultural principles make the American medical community distinct and allow a more direct view into the popularity of male circumcision in America.

According to Thomas Szasz in his book, *The Medicalization of Everyday Life*, the American enthusiasm for preventing masturbation and for promoting circumcision are manifestations of the same puritanical zeal for health as virtue that has been ever present in American society. Medical doctors intrinsically linked good morals with proper health practices, raising the popularity of circumcision in the US. A combination of religion, the medical monopoly on information, and the importance of cleanliness to medical professionals and individuals in American society created an environment in which circumcision continues to thrive in the US.

If good hygiene is practiced, there are no overriding benefits to consider circumcision as a routine medical procedure used on newborn males, especially since there are readily available medications that can be used to treat infections and diseases that may arise whether an individual is circumcised or not. The decision then becomes one based on religious or cultural factors.

It's to be noted that the practice of female circumcision, which is still practiced in parts of the world, and which many consider a ritualized form of child abuse and violence against women, is thankfully not mentioned at all in the Bible.

Appendix 15 – Mormonism



The question is often asked if Mormonism is a Christian Religion. A typical definition of a Christian is anyone who puts their trust in the teachings of Jesus Christ, and who believes in his death and resurrection for the salvation of humankind. From this definition Mormons are most definitely Christian. But from a theological viewpoint, Mormonism itself diverges from traditional Christianity in some significant ways. The doctrine and beliefs of the Mormon or Church of Latter-Day Saints (LDS) differs in its views on scripture, the nature of God, the deity of Christ and the trinity, and salvation.

Mormons accept extra books in their church canon with their inclusion of a compilation of the revelations of Joseph Smith, the founder of the LDS, and the *The Book of Mormon*, a record of ancient groups coming to the Americas who have moved from Jerusalem, shortly before its destruction, followed by a visit of the resurrected Jesus Christ. Although the records, inscribed on gold plates, were supposedly lost in the fourth century CE, the prophet-warrior, Moroni, is said to have returned in the early 19th century as an angel in a revelation to Joseph Smith and led him to where the plates were buried, on a farm near Smith's boyhood home in western New York state. Smith then translated these into English as the *Book of Mormon*.

Mormon doctrine also includes a concept of God as part of a united, divine community, and one of a gendered, married and procreating being. The belief that God is married is unique to Mormonism (and to some people of the Old Testament) and this belief is integral to the Mormon belief in eternal marriage as necessary for exaltation in the afterlife. Mormons also do not believe in the Holy Trinity including a Jesus of a coeternal and coequal with God, but that prophets like Jesus and Joseph Smith are men who have been authorized and empowered to share the Word of God.

Protestant Christians believe in "Faith Alone" for salvation and criticize the LDS for a belief in salvation through good works, just as they criticize Catholic Christians. Mormons, however, feel that they are misunderstood in that their doctrine emphasizes that they should perform good works but in gratitude for God's grace.

Much of the criticism of Mormonism has to do with controversial past policies of the LDS Church including polygamy as practiced by early adherents of the religion (and by a minority of fundamentalists today) before it was banned by the Church as a condition of Utah gaining statehood in the 1890s. They also had a policy of not allowing African American men to be in the priesthood thus denying them and their families the blessings of the church. In 1978 Spencer Kimball, the LDS Church President, had a revelation that allowed him to change this Church policy that appeased critics and allowed the Church to grow. A similar revelation regarding the status of women hasn't been received from God yet.

Until the early 20th century, LDS members referred to non-members as "gentiles," but in a move to reduce the animosity to other Christian sects, they changed LDS rhetoric to call non-

members “non-Mormons” and the term now used is “friend of another faith”. LDS members believe that their church is the one true Church closest to the early Christian church, just like many other religious sects.

Many non-Mormon Christians today consider Mormonism to be just another silly, man-made set of religious ideas that have been used to enslave the minds of lots of gullible people. But is it really that different from other religious sects? What would Christians think of a man today saying he had a revelation of getting a promise from God promising that his family and offspring would be his chosen people, and that he could indulge in extramarital relations to conceive of a male heir (Abraham not Joseph Smith)? Or what of a man who came up to them saying that he received commandments from God that were etched in stone, but the tablets were lost or destroyed so he had no physical proof of their existence (Moses)? Or what would they think of an author claiming that a man that was executed as a traitor to the government seventy years ago was in fact God himself who would come again to destroy the earth (The Apocalypse of John talking about Jesus).

So, is it important whether Mormonism should be considered a Christian sect? Maybe only for people who feel their own illogical beliefs are being threatened.

Acknowledgements



Resources used for this compilation include the following:

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- *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* by Bart Ehrman
- *A History of God* by Karen Armstrong
- *Zealot, The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth* by Reza Aslan
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