

# New Testament Mythmaking

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That which is called the Christian religion existed  
among the Ancients, and never did not exist . . .

-St. Augustine

The *New Testament* is an extremely limited selection of texts produced from a large body of teaching that evolved among various Christian/Jewish communities during the first two hundred years following the death of Jesus of Nazareth.

The discovery of authentic Gospels, Acts and Letters at Nag Hammadi in 1945, the Essene Scriptures at Qumran in 1948, and the deconstruction of the canonical *New Testament* by postmodern Bible and religious historical scholarship reveals a picture of the formation, evolution and content of the teaching of Jesus that is quite different from the current Christian view.

According to the conventional view of Christianity, the authors of the *New Testament* were all present, and directly witnessed the divine intervention of Jesus the Christ, the “only begotten son of God” into the world. Further, these writings were all for the sole purpose of implementing Jesus intention to establish the Orthodox Christian Church. The conventional idea that the *New Testament* is “a singular collection of apostolic documents, all of which bear ‘witness’ to a single set of inaugural events, is misleading” (Mack 1995).

Scholars and religious historians know that the canonical *New Testament* record is the evolutionary product of two centuries of Christian myth-making, brilliantly constructed by the Orthodox Church leadership to establish its singular view of God's plan for his earthly kingdom and the church's absolute authority over it. Over the centuries the image of Jesus has been molded to fit some earthly view or another. For example, there is near universal scholarly agreement that the gospels and other texts of the *New Testament*, with the exception of most of Paul's letters (*Colossians* and *Ephesians* are of questionable authenticity), were actually written anonymously or pseudonymously during the first century by the leaders of what was to become the Orthodox Catholic Church (Duling 1979; Mack 1995; Butts 1987; Koester 1996; et. al.).

Various Jesus communities began to develop in the 30's and 40's of the first century. Many scholars now believe that the earliest was the community that produced the *Gospel of Thomas*, followed by the *Sayings Gospel* of "Q" (30 to 70 C.E.). The *Gospel of Thomas* may well have been the source for “Q” and the synoptic gospels. The *Letters of Paul* are dated from the 50's, the *Gospel of Mark* from the 70's, the *Gospel of Matthew* from the 80's, the *Gospel of John* in the 90's, the *Gospel of Luke* at the end of the First Century, and the acts, letters and other texts during the first half of the Second Century (Mack 1995; Butts 1987; Koester 1982, Pagels, 1989.). Each of the Jesus communities that produced the gospels and other texts of the *New Testament* had a different view of Jesus' teaching. All believed their disciple and his view to be the correct view. Several of these Jesus groups had their own gospels (Cameron 1982). Some of the early

Jesus groups viewed Jesus as a great esoteric teacher or sage (early Q, *Gospel of Thomas*, *Gospels of Mark* and *Matthew*). Others viewed him exoterically and dualistically, as a singularly divine and separate god (late Q, *John*).

These various texts then came to be collected by a radical Christian community (the "Christ Cult") that evolved gradually during the second through the fourth centuries to become the Orthodox Christian Church, (Mack 1995,1993; Koester 1996; Butts 1987). This particular view of Jesus and his teaching, along with its revision of Judaism, became the *de facto* religion of Empire following the conversion of Constantine (313) who became sole emperor of the Roman Empire in 325. In 381 Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire. The Church edited the large body of Christian literature in accordance with its view (the "Christ Myth"), suppressed Gnostic dissent, (the penalty for heresy was death), revised and appropriated the Hebrew epic in support of its view, created or revised the *Gospel of John* and added it to the Gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke to complete the "four formed gospel," attached this "New Testament" to selected and edited exoteric Jewish scriptures (the "Old Testament") at the Council of Nicaea (325), "fixed" this New Testament canon so that no other version of the Jesus teaching could be added or deleted (Council of Carthage 397 and again at the Council of Trent 1545-1563), and thereby created the contemporary Christian Bible, the official word of God for all Christians.

The scholarly contention that the exoteric and esoteric history of Christianity is a process of myth making should not be construed negatively. Nor is it news. All cultures create a narrative, a complex of myths to explain and understand their particular place in the history of the *kosmos*. Historians call these "myths of origin" and they constitute both the preconscious and superconscious deep cultural background of a culture. Religion, whether the exoteric metaphysical assumptions of scientific materialism to the "highest" nondual teaching of our great Primordial Wisdom Tradition always arises in a social-cultural context. These myths are experienced exoterically and esoterically depending upon spiritual maturity. The popular scientific materialist notion that "history" is true, and "myth" is false is misleading, as if "history" is somehow written completely objectively, and "myth" is merely its trivial subjective corollary. Indeed, the reverse has been argued by our Great Tradition: that objective reality is an illusion of reified concepts, beliefs and appearances created by the separated, egoic observer (e.g. Buddhist and Hindu metaphysics; Eastern and Western philosophical and religious idealism, and the quantum theory, itself an incipient epistemological idealism).

Postmodernism (the psychology of the unconscious, relativity and quantum theory) has taught us the relativity of explanation. The quest of modernism, the quest for a single, certain, absolute system of explanation—a "theory of everything"—has given way to a postmodern "conceptual relativity," an understanding that there are multiple useful (pragmatically true) explanations for any given phenomena or event (the "principle of non-reductionist causality"). The conventional view of history and myth then, is that history occurs in "real time" objective "reality," and myth occurs in some sort of diaphanous "mythtime," or unreal subjective reality. A synthetic, synchronic view is that these apparently

different realities are both present in the metaphysical unity that is the flux or stream of the tantric continuum (quantum discontinuum) of our preconscious, conscious and super-conscious experience of being here in spacetime reality. Now one view may be manifest in individual or collective experience; now another view. Our attachment to, or identification with a particular view will polarize or separate us from other related or opposing views (*wu li*). The antidote is *shoshin*—zen mind—the openness of the beginners mind, understanding all views (including synthetic views and sublimely elegant mathematic and physical theories) contain truth as facets of a larger whole; not attaching to any particular view. (“I hold no opinions.” Gautama, the Buddha). This is more than dialectical thinking. This is liberation thinking. The relativity of all views—“conceptual relativity”—is contained within the inclusive ultimate nondual view which transcends yet includes even our views about it. (This is not to say that “everything is relative.” Ch.VII, *Quantum Emptiness and the Relativity of Absolutes*). That is, the nondual Ultimate or Absolute (Tao, *shunyata*, *Brahman*), the very essence and nature of mind (“Big Mind”) utterly transcends yet includes relative mind (“Small Mind”) and all of the conditional, relative phenomena arising therein, including our conceptual theoretical speculations and our closely held beliefs about it.

Mythmaking then, is a necessary and inevitable socio-psychological behavior complex in the evolution of the historical identity of any culture. Metamythmaking occurs as the various narratives, the icons and epics of a self-conscious species begin to merge and transcend their apparently separate and different iconographies into the more inclusive truth of the prior metaphysical unity that is their perfectly subjective source. According to our Great Wisdom Tradition, ultimately, every apparent difference is drawn up into its primordial source, only to re-emerge again and again, moment to moment, eon to eon, cosmos to cosmos, as if such differences were ever actually separated at all. Indeed, the realization of this truth is the perennial wisdom teaching that Jesus, and the Buddhas and other masters have transmitted exoterically to the people, and esoterically to their prepared disciples from the very beginning. The Primordial Wisdom teaching then, is the goodness, beauty and truth of reality carried forth through relative time and space within the deep background cultural storage vehicle of myths, metamyths, archetypes and metanarratives.

Therefore, no culture stands cognitively in an objective relation to its own myths. This includes the individual students, scholars, apologists and critics of the culture. Even those scholars of the religious myths of the culture remain attached to, or live in subjective relation to certain of these myths, as evidenced by the astonishing cognitive gymnastics (cognitive dissonance: both belief and denial) of religious historians, philosophers and theologians throughout the history of humankind. (Present company excluded, of course.)

### **The “Christ Myth” and the “Christ Cult”**

If we are to begin to understand the profound Primordial Wisdom teaching that is the esoteric “innermost secret” nondual teaching of Jesus, we must understand the nature and

historical evolution of both the outer exoteric and inner esoteric aspects of Christian mythology and ideology. This, in turn, will aid our understanding of the universal, transcultural truth of the descent of primordial "divine" Being, the *Logos* itself, our very source, into an avataric, logoc human incarnation—e.g. Jesus the Christ, Gautama the Buddha— who "overcomes the world" by realizing, then demonstrating—through perfect compassionate activity—the perennial truth of the ascent, the way of return to this "supreme source." It is this primordial nondual teaching that is the inner truth of the outer appearance of the Christ Myth, and indeed, of all exoteric religious myths and traditions.

Gradually, over a quarter of a century of early Christian social experimentation, probably in Syria, one of the several Jesus communities began to shift its focus from the view of Jesus as a great teacher-sage, as it appears in the Synoptic Gospels of the New Testament, the *Sayings (logia) Gospel of Q* (early Q), and in the *Gospel of Thomas*, to a new focus on Jesus' identity, the meaning of his death and related ideas of his death, resurrection and martyrdom. **Jesus the human teacher, sage and spiritual master who realized the *logos/Christos* became transformed into Jesus, the separate *one and only* begotten son of God, a unique spiritual singularity in the history of humankind. Emphasis on the esoteric teaching ("the Kingdom of God is within you") shifted to the exoteric worship of Jesus as a god, or Jesus as God.** Moreover, belief in this story, the "Christ Myth" which became the Nicene Creed, was the only way to salvation for all human beings, now and forever. (Today, in the 21st century, this parochial view is still held by most Christians.) The evidence for such a group comes from Paul's letters of the middle of the first century. Indeed, this is probably the group to which Paul converted (Cameron, Duling, Mack).

As this "Christ Cult" spread, its christology became anchored in the mythology of martyrdom, the ancient transcultural archetype of the honorable death. The conventional, exoteric "Christ Myth" that emerged is expressed in Paul's letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15: 3-5), known as the *kerygma* (proclamation): Jesus the Christ died for the sins of humankind; he was buried, and on the third day was resurrected from death whereupon he appeared to Peter, then later to the other disciples. This "*kerygmatic* formula" that is the root of the "Christ Myth" is exoterically, the death and resurrection of the actual physical material body of Jesus the Christ, *the one and only* son of God. An exoteric reading of Paul's letter to the Romans clarifies (7:21-26) the formula: God regards Jesus' death as expiation for the sins of the gentiles, and to justify and encourage human beings to commit to the true faith (*pistis*) that was exemplified by Jesus himself.

The Christ Myth therefore provided the emerging "Christ Cult" (the very early Orthodox Church) a very material solution to two pressing problems: the forgiveness and inclusion of gentiles into the Christian Jewish community, and a miraculous sign from God (the resurrection) that justified the group's claim to be the children (chosen people) of the God of Israel, and the inheritors of God's kingdom on earth (Mack 1993, 1995; Koester 1996; Funk 1995).

## The Apostle Paul: Orthodox or Gnostic?

It is important to note that during the period of Paul's letters (the 50's), and indeed until the Gospel of Mark in the 70's, Christians regarded themselves as a part of the Jewish temple state in Jerusalem. The Christ Myth was an ancient mythological solution for a Christian Jewish community who was struggling to assimilate gentiles into its congregation (*ekklesia*) while maintaining its relationship with the law and the prophets of Israel (*synagogue*).

Paul understood that the Christ Myth had its exoteric and its esoteric dimensions, and as all great masters, he taught through both modalities. Paul's gospel proclamation of the *kerygma* in his letters to the Corinthians and Romans proclaiming Jesus to be the *Christos* (*messiah, logos*) was the bedrock upon which the later Orthodox Church built its dualistic **exoteric** theology. This same proclamation is the very base of the **esoteric** nondual transcendental theology of the great tradition of our monistic nondual Primordial Wisdom teaching, of which Gnostic Thomas Christianity and Gnostic Valentinian Christianity is an example, and which we see in the *Gospels of Thomas* and *John*. The difference lies in the emphasis on Jesus as the one and only Christ or God, or Jesus as the teacher and shower of the way to realization of the *logos/Christos* that dwells within each human heart.

The Valentinians revered Paul and viewed his letters, along with the *Gospel of Thomas*, as Gnostic primary sources for their nondual transcendental theology. Indeed, they considered Paul a Gnostic initiate (Pagels 1975). As noted, Valentinus received initiation into the Gnosis of Light by Theodus, the great disciple of Paul. It must also be noted that some of the theology attributed to the Valentinian school was standard Gnostic dualism. However, a close esoteric reading of the *Nag Hammadi* Valentinian Gnostic teaching in *The Gospel of Truth*, *The Tripartite Tractate*, *The Treatise on the Resurrection* (Codex I), *The Interpretation of Knowledge* and *A Valentinian Exposition* (Codex XI) reveals the nondual heart essence—the pith— of the teaching.

Yet Bishop Irenaeus, Tertullian, Justinian, and even Origen use Paul's theology in their Orthodox polemic against Gnostic, and particularly Valentinian Gnostic heresy. (Valentinus was expelled from the Church for heresy in 143.) Was Paul a Gnostic or an antignostic? The Gnostics claimed him. Orthodox heresiologists claimed him. Conventional scholarship views Paul as an antignostic. Yet clearly, there is Gnostic terminology and nondual exegesis in the Pauline letters. Elaine Pagels suggests that this Gnostic terminology in Paul's letters "may be more plausibly explained as Pauline terminology in the Gnostic writings" (Pagels 1975).

The nascent nondual teaching in both the Pauline and the Valentinian *corpus* are derived from the ancient pre-Christian, pre-Greek Orphic/Hermetic and even Vedic mystery teaching: from the "religion that existed among the ancients, and never did not exist, from the beginning of the human race..." (St. Augustine, *Epis. Retrac.*). Paul, and the Valentinian Gnostics understood this ancient "Gnosis of Light" as the essence of Jesus' teaching and derived their esoteric and even nondual transcendental theology from it. For the Orthodox heresiologists this esoteric mystical Gnostic aspect of Paul's teaching was in direct

opposition to their own dualistic exoteric view of the Christ Myth which understood Jesus as the separate one and only god-man. Their solution: Orthodoxy suppressed and denied both the dualistic and the nondual gnostic, esoteric aspect of Paul's (and thus Jesus') teaching. They utilized only the exoteric materialist/ physicalist aspect in their exegesis, and claimed that Paul was thereby antignostic.

That Paul (and Jesus) taught "in two ways at once", is clear not only from an esoteric reading of the Pauline *corpus*, but from his express statements in the authentic letters: "The *psychic* does not discern *pneumatic* things" (1 Cor. 2:14). As we have seen, the *psychic* (mind) or *pistic* Christian is unprepared to receive the true Gnosis of Light directly, and is given only the exoteric teaching which emphasizes religious law, ritual and morality. The *pneumatic* (spirit) Christian ("the elect") is prepared through advanced spiritual practice and insight for the direct, esoteric and even nondual transmission of the Gnosis of Light. In our Primordial Wisdom tradition every great master or *mahasiddha* has transmitted the great nondual teaching in this "two ways at once."

The exoteric/esoteric dialectic is useful because without it the teacher and his/her unique transmission of the primordial nondual teaching will usually be interpreted from the exoteric pole only, thereby continuing the dualistic, polarized view at the expense of a more subtle, higher (deeper), more inclusive and comprehensive nondual understanding that is the precursor to liberation—the ultimate happiness—through the Gnosis of Light. Unfortunately, this is precisely the present situation regarding most contemporary historical interpretation of the teaching of Paul, and of Jesus (and of much Buddhist, *Vedanta* and Taoist teaching as well). Postmodern biblical exegesis remains rooted in second century exoteric Orthodox heresiology and its contemporary *apologia*. "From the modernism you choose, comes the postmodernism you deserve" (David Antin).

### **From Nazareth to Nicaea: The Packaging of Jesus**

We have seen how the Orthodox Church of the first two centuries gradually displaced the historical Jesus of Nazareth with the "Christ Myth," the "Christ of Faith," ultimately codified in the *Creed of Nicaea* (325), and declared the official religion of the Roman Empire in 381. Again, the penalty for heresy was death.

The primordial nondual teaching of Jesus the sage-become-*Christos* that emerges from an esoteric understanding of *The Gospel of Thomas*, early *Q*, the nondual Valentinian teaching and other Gnostic and Hermetic teaching including the esoteric aspect of *John*, was transformed into the dualistic, materialist exoteric dogma of the *kerygma* formula and the later Orthodoxy of the synoptic gospels. Step-by-step, the Jesus of Thomas and Valentinus and his mystical gospel of the Gnosis of Light that dwells within us all was reduced to the mythic, separate Jesus-as-God that we get from an exoteric reading of the *Gospel of John*.

Contemporary Christianity therefore, did not originate with the historical Jesus and his actual teaching of the Gnosis of Light, but with the "creedal Christ" (Funk 1995), the "Christ Myth"

created, packaged and sold by the apologists of the early Church, those "false Gnostics ... who caused the Gnosis to be rejected and alienated the Church from the supreme truths of transcendental theology. [This was] the great misfortune which befell Christianity (Eliphaz Levi). This was indeed, the Christian Catastrophe.

The contemporary Neo-Orthodox Protestant theology of Bultmann, Barth, Tillich and Niebuhr, along with contemporary Christian fundamentalism and the Roman Catholic Church continue the dualism of the materialist, exoteric Orthodox legacy. Myths of origin evolve predictably. Their inevitable deconstruction and the excavation of more subtle truths waiting in their historical sources is painful due to our inherited belief and identity in, and emotional attachment to the comfort zones provided by the myth. The antidote? *Shoshin/zen* mind, the beginners mind, prior to the uncomfortable comfort zones of our attachment to our current conceptual and belief systems. Alas, easier said than done.

The challenge and the task of postmodern, postcritical, post metaphysical Christianity therefore, is to rediscover, then re-cognize the subjective, emotional, experiential-participatory transcendental theology of our Great Wisdom Tradition; to free the ancient, primordial nondual gospel teaching of Jesus from the *kerygmatic* grip of modernist, rational, "natural theology" exegesis of the canonical Gospels. "Men make gods and worship their creation" (*Gospel of Philip* - Gnostic). **The task then, is to restore the great esoteric and the innermost secret nondual teaching of Jesus to Christianity, and to situate it and understand it in the context of the nondual teaching of humanity's Primordial Wisdom Tradition.**

### The Early Jesus Communities and the Early Gospels

When examining events of the past it is urgent to remember the subjective, cultural, conceptual relativity of any explanation. History is interpretation. Hermeneutics and textual exegesis yield , at best, a temporary and relative view. Historical facts, truths and meaning abide in a continuum of pre-conscious deep background cultural/historical flux, as we have seen.

Bible and religious historical scholarship has identified, through documentary evidence, at least six distinct Jesus communities that arose during the first fifty years after the death of Jesus (Mack 1995, Duling 1979, Koester 1990). We have seen that one of them developed into the Catholic Orthodox Christian Church that emerged from what some scholars have termed the "Christ Cult" (Mack 1995, Funk 1995). It was this Jesus group that created and enforced, during the first three centuries, a body of carefully selected and edited literature that was to become the epic myth of origin of Christianity as it appears in contemporary versions of the Christian Bible.

At least five other Jesus communities produced their own Christian texts. The earliest was probably the Gnostic Thomas community that produced the *Sayings Gospel of Thomas* which was similar to the *Gospel of Q*, also a sayings gospel. "Q" means *quelle* or "source" in German. Either *Thomas* or the mysterious *Q* was the primary source of the three synoptic gospels, Mark,

Matthew and Luke (Pagels, Mack 1993; Duling 1979; Koester 1996). Some scholars now believe that Thomas was the earliest (30-60 CE) and therefore the source of "Q" and the synoptic gospels (Pagels, Koestler, Meyer).

Another early Jesus community was the "Jerusalem Pillars" (Peter, James and John) mentioned by Paul in his letter to the Galatians. There was also the "Congregation of Israel" who created the pre-Markan miracle stories (stilling the storm, feeding the multitudes, walking on water, the blind man, the deaf mute, etc.) that were incorporated into the earliest canonical gospel, the *Gospel of Mark*. Finally there was the Jesus community that produced the pre-Markan "pronouncement stories." These were instructive anecdotal stories in the Greek *metis* (*chreiai*) tradition wherein the master dramatically demonstrates the *metis* aspect of his wisdom (exoteric discursive knowing, *i.e. sophia/prajna/sherab*) *vis-a-vis* his nondual wisdom (*gnosis/jnana/yeshe*) in a pithy rejoinder to a challenge. For example: "Can the rich enter the kingdom of heaven?" "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, give to God what is God's." When asked why he shared the table with the unclean tax collectors, Jesus said in this pronouncement story, "Those who are well, do not need a physician."

The primordial stream of the Gnosis of Light that entered the Christian religion through the incarnation and esoteric nondual teaching of Jesus, continued through some of the early Jesus communities to Paul, and to the communities that produced the Gnostic *Gospels of Thomas* and *John*, and the Gnostic Valentinus and the later Christian mystics. Along the way the nondual Gnosis of Light teaching clashed with the dualistic exoteric apocalyptic trend of the emerging Orthodox Church (the Christ Cult), thereby contributing to the refining of the Orthodox view (the Christ Myth), and the eventual fixing of the New Testament canon, to the exclusion of all Gnostic texts (except John) at the Council of Carthage in 397.

Most of the early Jesus people, including the people of the synoptic Gospels, the *Gospel of Thomas* and the people of Q, viewed Jesus as a master teacher, prophet and sage. The Christ Cult made him a god, divine but separate from humankind. The esoteric and nondual Gnostic view is of Jesus as the great exemplar (*mimesis*, to become the pattern) of liberation into the Gnosis of Light that is already present within us, the implicate, hidden or cloaked (*maya*) ultimate destiny of all human beings. This mystical view was evident in the first century Gnostic communities that produced the *Gospels of Thomas* and Q, and was developed further in the nondual teaching of the Valentinian and Hermetic literature of the second century.

### *The Gospel of Thomas*

*The Gospel of Thomas* is a Coptic (Egyptian) translation of an authentic Greek text discovered in 1945 with the *Nag Hammadi* library (Codex II, 2). Scholars date the original text from the 30's to the 70's of the first century and consider it a source for the Matthew and



Luke Gospels, and possibly “Q” as well. It is considered by most scholars to be the “Fifth Gospel.” It is a wisdom sayings gospel (*logos/sophon*) transmitting 114 *koan*-like instructions on awakening and expressing the inner Gnosis of Light. It is of tremendous importance for it is the only extant text authentically documenting that early Jesus communities produced sayings gospels based solely upon the actual teaching of an historical Jesus. Because it is early, and very much like the hypothesized but undocumented *Sayings Gospel of Q*, the possible “source” of the three *synoptic gospels*, it reveals much about the historical development of Jesus’ teaching from its early formulation in *Q*, through the mythmaking process of later *Q*, and the *synoptic Gospels, Acts and Letters*. Unlike the other Gospels—Gnostic or synoptic—*Thomas* contains no *Christos*, no Jesus narrative, no dualism, no nihilism, no ontological speculation and no fantastical mythology or cosmogony. It is the voice of Jesus transmitting the wisdom of the ages in its earliest, purest Christian formulation. *Thomas* is a zen-like testament in that it is interpretive and performative. It does not preach. It does not condescend. It demands first person, present tense lifeworld response from the hearer, right now. It is radical in that, unlike the *synoptic Gospels, Acts and Letters*, its teaching is nondual, that is, no separation between God and humanity. The presence of God (*Christos*) is already present in everyone.

The *Gospel of Thomas* then, reveals authentic historical documentation of Jesus’ actual radical esoteric teaching of the Gnosis of Light, the primordial nondual wisdom mindstream that flowed from Jewish Kabbalistic mysticism through the Gnostic teaching of Paul and the *Gospel of John*, the Valentinian School and some of the Sethian literature, all the way to the Catholic and Protestant mystics of the Reformation. This is the inner, esoteric teaching that would begin a polemical battle between the Christian Gnostics and the Orthodox Church that would rage for three centuries. This is the great inner nondual teaching that would ultimately be lost to Christianity with the victory of the dualistic, exoteric creator god theology of the Orthodox Church.

The inherent nondual view of the *Gospel of Thomas* transcends yet includes the *Q* people’s early view of Jesus as a prophet and sage who teaches law and morality (*Q*). It transcends and includes the exoteric martyrology of late *Q* (*Q*<sup>3</sup>), and of the later “Christ Cult” that transforms Jesus into the separate transcendent god of the “Christ Myth,” the Christ who died and whose physical body was magically resurrected from the dead in *kerygmatic* expiation for the alleged original sin of humankind. This later view served the Christ Myth of the developing Orthodoxy by transferring the emphasis from Jesus’ heretical mystical esoteric teaching to the exoteric, fabulous event of his physical, bodily resurrection and ascension. As if by demonstration of miracles and magic his divinity were proven. The esoteric and even nondual view of both the Valentinian School and the *Gospel of Thomas* avoids such dualistic exoteric materialist proof strategies. (See also the *Greek Gospel of Thomas* [*Nag Hammadi Codex II*] and the *Book of Thomas* [*NHC, II*], a question/answer dialogue [*erotapokriseis*] in which Jesus nondual teaching is expressed in terms of platonic ontology and ethics.)

The Jesus people of the Gnostic Thomas and Valentinian communities, steeped in Jewish mysticism, could not believe, did not need to believe the outer exoteric *kerygma* martyrology of the Orthodox Christ Myth. With the conviction of their inner esoteric direct contemplative experience of Jesus' teaching with its emphasis on the personal enlightenment and transcendence of each human being, the notion of the necessity of Jesus' death as atonement for our inherent original sin, and of a magical, supernatural physical body resurrection was absurd. Indeed, even in the canonical *New Testament*, Paul, Matthew, Luke and even John made it clear that Jesus first appeared after the resurrection as a blinding luminous spiritual presence, not in physical, bodily form (Pagels 1989; Funk 1995; Robinson 1988).

As to Jesus' death as *kerygmatic* expiation of the original sin of humankind, these early Gnostics viewed the act of forgiveness as beginning with the individual. Forgiveness is seen as an act of love. We are forgiven our sins to the degree that we forgive ourselves, and others. This is the reciprocal nature of love. Forgiveness is accomplished—by grace—within the individual. No external agent or belief is necessary. What we give is what we get. What we sow is what we reap. Our Primordial Wisdom Tradition understands this truth as the Law of Cause and Effect—the Law of Karma.

However, the framers of the Orthodox view—codified in John—needed the doctrines of the exoteric physical resurrection and the vicarious atonement in their materialist polemic against the deeper, subtler esoteric view of the Gnostics. For the esoteric and the nondual Christian Gnostics the emphasis was on our original goodness—the inherent Gnosis of Light—not our original sin, our separation from God. What was important was our spiritual life, not death. Jesus was "the living one," the "living Jesus" who mirrors "the light that is over all things," the living presence of the *Christos*, the "I Am" that dwells within each human form, and indeed in all phenomena. "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you..." "The Kingdom of God is within you, and it is outside you." "Become a disciple of your own mind." "Light the light within you." "There is light within a being of light, and it lights the whole world..." "Look to the (inner) living one as long as you live" and not only in death (the Orthodox view), but in this very life you may return to the primordial kingdom of the Gnosis of Light that is the very ground of the world and all its beings. Jesus transmits this primordial wisdom in *Thomas* definitively in saying 108: "Whoever drinks from my mouth will become as I am, and I myself will become that person, and the mysteries shall be revealed to him." *Thomas* traces this primordially present wisdom seed of the Gnosis of Light to *Genesis* where humanity (Adam) descends in the image of the first primordial light. Jesus speaks: "We came from the light, the place where the light came into being by itself... We are its children, the chosen of the living Father" (*Thomas* 50).

As the "true disciple" initiate realizes, then demonstrates in the lifeworld his/her actual identity as a spiritual being of light—as the true Gnosis of Light—enlightenment (salvation, *apolytrolosis*) arises and eventually, through this new Christ consciousness one may become as Jesus, a living Christ. One who receives (*paralambano*), then demonstrates in the lifeworld

this Gnosis of Light "is no longer a Christian, but a Christ" (*Gospel of Philip*, Gnostic). With such an inward view the Gnostic Christians of the Thomas community did not need the external magic and miracles that we see in the *Gospel of John* to establish objective credibility of their personal subjective experience of the Gnosis of Light.

### *The Gospel of John*

The Gnostic Jesus community that produced the *Gospel of John*, probably in the 90's of the first century, seems to have developed its view of Jesus and his teaching independently of the other Jesus communities, and probably as polemic against gnostic heresy (Pagels, Koester, Mack). The Gospel of John became the locus of controversy between Irenaeus, the architect of the emerging Orthodox view of Jesus as God, and the Gnostic view of Valentinus and his disciples of Jesus as humanity's great teacher of the Gnosis of Light, that "luminous *epinoia*" that outshines from a "being of light and lights the whole world." Irenaeus, and later, Athanasius warn Christians to avoid the direct penetrating insight (in Buddhism it's called *vipashyana*) of *epinoia* and to experience God only through *dianoia*, or concept and belief. Thus was Christianity gutted of its essential esoteric mystical core. This bias persists in Catholic and protestant Christianity today (Pagels, Meyer, Layton, Koester).

The Johannine community developed, over time, both an exoteric and an esoteric view of the Jesus teaching that shows little resemblance to the three synoptic gospels. For the esoteric faction, the story of Jesus is the Hermetic/Hellenistic, Jewish Kabbalistic Gnostic story of the descent and ascent of the *Christos*, the unfathomable mystery of the divine presence of our transcendent supreme source, the "Primordial Father" incarnated into human form to realize and demonstrate the great perennial truth that this same result is the potential destiny of each human being. There seems to be little interest for either the exoteric or the esoteric factions of this community in producing the historical narrative of Jesus' life that we see in the synoptic gospels. The concern of the synoptic gospels is the story of the appearance (descent) of the divine presence as it develops (ascends) and becomes manifest in Jesus the human spiritual teacher. There is no attempt to identify Jesus with God, or to portray him as a God. But in an exoteric reading of John, Jesus bursts forth into spacetime reality not as human, but as the fully formed Christ, the incarnate *logos* itself, the Son of God. Here, Jesus is not only God's divine messenger, but God himself in a human form. Although the synoptic gospels refer to Jesus as the "Son of God" and "Messiah," these epithets referred to human functions and Jesus would have been considered a man, and not, as in John, "Lord and God" (Pagels, Koester). Again, "Men make Gods and worship their creation" (*Gospel of Philip - Gnostic*).

The exoteric oriented members of the John community emphasized the miracle stories (the "signs source") as proofs of the miracle of the singular divinity of the Christ, the one and "Only begotten Son of God." The members with esoteric understanding must have understood these stories as exoteric mythical signs outpicturing the deeper esoteric and

nondual truth of the divine *logos* working through Jesus in the world, and in the limited mind of humankind toward the evolutionary purpose of revealing the true Gnosis of Light, that indwelling presence abiding within each human being that is the divine potential awaiting its recognition and realization.

The exoteric aspect of the *Gospel of John* clearly intends the seven miracles as signs "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." (Some scholars believe this exoteric material was added much later.) The magical exoteric martyrology of the resurrection is to the same purpose. However, at the esoteric, gnostic core of the *Gospel of John* is the archetypal, nondual primordial wisdom teaching of the descent and ascent of the Primordial Father—our supreme source—as the incarnate *logos/Christos*, the divine presence at the heart of each one of us. Esoterically, as with the *Gospel of Thomas*, magical signs and martyrdom are not required. "I lay down my life to receive it back again. I lay it down of my own free will." On this view, Jesus did not intend to die in keregmatic atonement for our sins. It is not his death, but the perfect demonstration of his life that is the essential core of the teaching.

The *Gospel of John* contradicts the synoptic gospels on several points. Why then did Irenaeus and the Christian Othodoxy select the *Gospel of John* to complete the "four formed gospel" that became, in 397 CE (Council of Cartage), through the agency of Constantine and Athanasius, the *Four Gospel Canon* of the *New Testament*? An outer, exoteric reading of the *Gospel of John* holds that *only* Jesus embodies the divine Gnosis of Light and that therefore, humanity can know God only through the agency of Jesus (and therefore the agency of the Church). However, the Thomas and Valentinian gnostic Christians, drawing from the well of esoteric and nondual teaching of Jewish Kabbalah (and much earlier *hekalat*) and Greek Hermetic mysticism, came to see Jesus intervention in the world in a much different way. Here we recognize that each human being carries the inherent imprint of the "image of God" as the presence of the Gnosis of Light, the divine seed of liberation hidden within the human heartmind. Clearly, the christology written into the Gospel of John suited the purposes of Irenaeus, Tertullian and the later Bishops of the Orthodox Church in their ideological war against such radical nondual primordial wisdom teaching.

As the Johannine community evolved, the exoteric view and the esoteric view began, more and more, to differentiate. According to some scholars (Mack 1995, Duling 1979), about the beginning of the second century the exoteric faction of the community split off to join with the emerging Christ Cult that was the incipient Orthodox Church. The esoterically oriented faction continued to develop in the Christian Gnostic tradition.

That there is a protean exoteric/esoteric amalgam to the canonical *Gospel of John* is clear. How and when this came to be, what was added or deleted, and by whom will perhaps, never be known. What is also clear is that in *John* there is a fully developed eschatology. The descent, resurrection and ascension of the Christ (whether in bodily or spiritual form) is fulfilled. Jesus final words are, "It is finished." The *eschaton* (end time) is already present in the presence of Jesus, the realized *Christos*, and in a latent form in every human being. This is the "good news" of the Primordial Wisdom teaching that is made manifest through the nondual teaching of

Jesus as it is given through an inner esoteric reading of the *Gospel of John*. In the synoptic gospels we are waiting for the *eschaton* and the final fulfillment of the *parousia*. In both esoteric and exoteric John the mystery is revealed. The end time is now, and always was. And always will be. However, for the esoteric Christian understanding *Christos*, the luminous spiritual presence of nondual God—the primordial base or source, beyond a dualistic creator god—bestows the Gnosis of Light that is the nondual unity of love and wisdom. The fulfillment of this promise occurs, not vicariously through mere belief in, or through the death of a singular, eternally transcendent son of God; not through a future paracletic second coming, but here, now through each one's opening to receive—faith/*pistis* as ego surrender—this ever present presence of the Gnosis of Light that abides within the spiritual heartmind of all beings, without a single exception. It is this liberation/enlightenment that is, according to our Great Wisdom Tradition, the end of all our seeking—the happiness that cannot be lost—ultimate Happiness Itself.