

Gospel Mysteries



Introduction

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Where Was Golgotha?

Golgotha is the biblical name for the place where Jesus was crucified. It was probably a small hill just outside the walls of ancient Jerusalem. According to Christian tradition, it was within the area now occupied by the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. But some biblical scholars doubt that this is the correct location.

The name "Golgotha" is derived from the Aramaic word *gulgulta*. Matthew 27:33 and Mark 15:22 give its meaning as "place of the skull." When Saint Jerome translated these verses into Latin, he used the Latin word for skull, *calvaria*, which was later converted into the English word Calvary.

The gospels don't say why Golgotha was called the "place of the skull". One common suggestion is that the site was on a hill or near a rock that had the shape of a skull. Another suggestion, first made by the third-century scholar Origen, is that the name referred to the burial place of Adam's skull, traditionally believed to have been interred at Jerusalem. But these are merely suggestions, and no one really knows how the site got its name.

The bible also doesn't say where Golgotha was located. But it does give three specific clues:

Clue 1. John 19:41-42 says that Jesus' body was carried only a short distance before it was placed in the tomb. This indicates that the site was probably close to a cemetery.

Clue 2. Hebrews 13:12 reports that the site was "outside the city gate", but unfortunately doesn't say which gate.

Clue 3. Matthew 27:39 indicates that the location was near a road which carried a lot of foot traffic.

The second clue is consistent with an old Jewish religious requirement that all executions had to take place outside the city, a requirement which the Romans appear to have generally honored. And the third clue is consistent with the fact that the Romans often crucified people on elevated spots near major roads, to serve as a warning of the probable fate of anyone who challenged their authority.

Some scholars have suggested that Golgotha was probably near the northern section of the city, because this would put it close to the administrative area, where the main public buildings were located. At the time of the crucifixion, the northern section of the city was bounded by a wall known as the Second Wall. Unfortunately Jerusalem was destroyed twice by the Roman army during Jewish revolts in the first and second centuries, and this makes it difficult to determine the exact boundaries of the ancient city. However, the approximate location of the Second Wall is known.

During the first destruction of Jerusalem, most Christians fled the city, and the second destruction dispersed almost the entire population. Because of these upheavals, and because Christian writers rarely mentioned Golgotha during the next two centuries, some scholars think that knowledge of its location was probably lost. But other scholars argue that local traditions could have been strong enough to preserve the knowledge despite the upheavals. The scarcity of reliable information from these early centuries makes it impossible to know for sure.

Better information is available in writings from the fourth century onward, starting from the time of Constantine the Great. During his reign he and his mother, Empress Helena, became interested in building a church near the locations of Golgotha and the tomb in which Jesus' body was placed. The idea was especially appealing to the Empress, and in 326 AD she made a trip to Jerusalem to explore the possibilities.

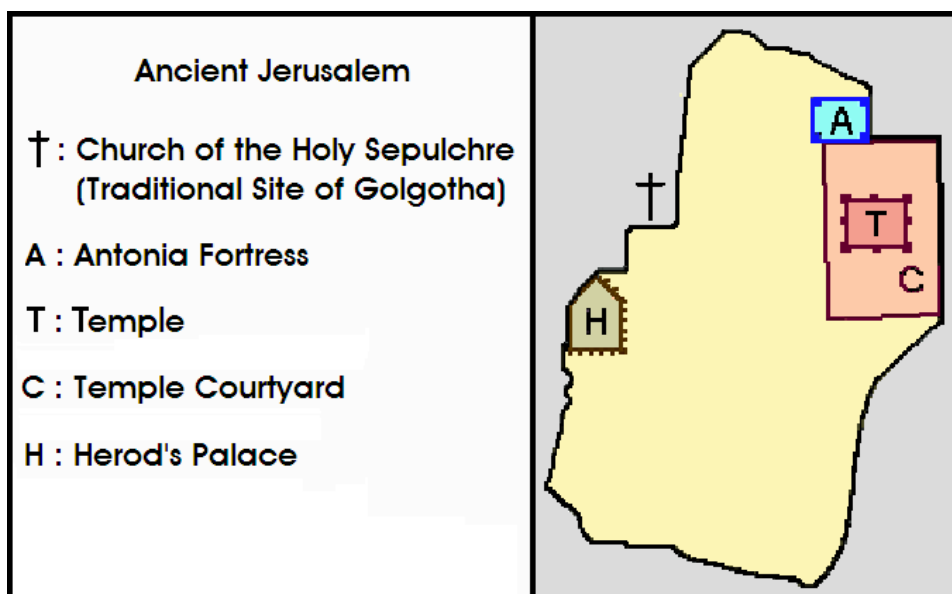
When the Empress reached Jerusalem, she was told that Golgotha and the tomb were in the vicinity of an old Jewish cemetery located on the northwest side of the city. The original source of this information is uncertain. One story, found in a fifth-century book known as the *Acts of Judas Cyriacus*,

says that Christians had learned about the cemetery from an old Jew who had to be tortured before he would reveal its location. But many scholars doubt this story, and in fact there is a good possibility that the cemetery was well-known to the people of the city. It's also possible that local traditions associated the cemetery with past crucifixions, thereby making it an obvious choice for the site of Golgotha.

In any case, the Empress was told that Golgotha and the tomb were in the vicinity of this old Jewish cemetery. But the exact locations of the two sites were still unknown. One problem was that the Romans had built a pagan temple over part of the cemetery, and in the process they probably destroyed parts of it.

Shortly after her arrival, the Empress ordered the demolition of the pagan temple and the excavation of the area beneath it. The earliest account of this excavation, by the church historian Eusebius, simply says "the venerable and hallowed monument of Our Lord's resurrection became visible." Exactly what this statement means isn't clear, but some later accounts say that the excavation uncovered a tomb containing some nails and the sign that Pilate had attached to the top of the cross. Several later accounts also say that three crosses were found, either in the tomb or a nearby cistern, and that one of them was identified by its healing powers as the true cross.

Because the earliest writer Eusebius doesn't mention the nails, the crosses, or Pilate's sign, some scholars think that the later accounts were embellished, especially since they differ from each other in various details. Thus, there is uncertainty about what was actually found during the excavation.



Note: The map shows the traditional location of Golgotha as identified by Empress Helena.

The first churches built at the location were later destroyed, once by Persian invaders, and once by Arabs. After the Crusaders gained control of Jerusalem in the eleventh century, they constructed the present Church of the Holy Sepulchre, although part of it had to be rebuilt after it was damaged by a fire in 1808. It encloses both the tomb of Jesus and a small rocky outcrop called the "rock of Golgotha".

According to church tradition, Jesus began his walk to Calvary from the Antonia Fortress, which housed the main Roman military garrison in the city. The traditional route, called the Via Dolorosa, covers a distance of about 0.4 mile [650 meters] and ends at the church. However, some scholars think that the last interrogation of Jesus took place at Herod's Palace, and that he began the walk from there. This would be a shorter distance.

The site of the present church appears to fit the available evidence regarding Golgotha's location: The church is north-west of the ancient city, probably just outside the ancient wall, and apparently in the area of an old cemetery. Thus it may very well mark the correct location, or at least be near it. But some scholars have expressed doubts, and several other possible sites have been proposed. The best-known alternate location, Gordon's Calvary (the Garden Tomb), is about 0.4 mile north of the ancient city.

The Fires of Hell

Hell is the place of punishment for the souls of the damned. Artists often depict it as an enormous cavern inside the earth, but it could actually be located in another dimension or a different universe. Whatever its location, it is ruled by the Devil, who is assisted by numerous demons in administering the various punishments.

Although the doomed souls in hell don't have physical bodies, they still feel real pain and experience real terror. This is because they are given the delusion that they do have real bodies, which are repeatedly mutilated, or perpetually burned, yet somehow continue to survive. This method of punishment allows the tortures to go on forever, since a soul never dies.

Some medieval writers speculated about the possible ways in which these doomed souls are punished. The ideas included relentless flogging with barbed whips, continuous immersion in a vat of boiling blood, confinement in a pit of poisonous vipers, permanent impalement on a thick lance, and repeatedly being ripped apart and eaten by demons.

According to the Book of Revelation, the Devil will eventually be punished along with the doomed souls. Revelation 20:10 says that he will be thrown into a lake of burning sulfur, where he "will be tormented day and night for ever and ever." Other biblical passages indicate that the Beast (Antichrist), the False Prophet, the demons, and all the doomed souls will also end up in this lake.

In some passages this lake of burning sulfur is called a "lake of fire", and artistic depictions usually show flames leaping up from its surface. Sulfur (also called brimstone) melts at about 115 degrees Celsius (240 degrees Fahrenheit), which means that the liquid sulfur in the lake is hotter than boiling water. People sometimes assume that this liquid sulfur serves as the fuel for the leaping flames. But unless there is an endless supply of sulfur, all of it would eventually be used up and the flames would die out. A more likely possibility is that the fires of hell don't need any fuel.

According to the traditional view, this lake of fire is at the center of hell, which is located in a huge cavern somewhere within the earth. Ancient stories suggest that such a cavern might be accessible by a long narrow passageway leading down from a hidden entrance on the earth's surface. However, the cavern could be hundreds of miles below the surface, or even at the center of the planet, much too deep to be reached by a passageway from above.

But hell might not be located inside the earth. It could be on another planet somewhere far across the universe. Or it could even be outside ordinary space and time, such as in a separate universe or a totally different reality.

The best-known literary description of Hell is in the *Inferno* section of the *Divine Comedy* by the medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri. In this book hell is depicted as an enormous underground pit with a series of circular terraces, one below the other, ringing its walls. The punishments become more and more terrifying with each downward descent toward the bottom of the pit.

People are saved from the torments of hell if they believe in Jesus and accept him as their savior. Even a serial rapist-murderer can be saved if he repents and accepts Jesus before he dies. Unfortunately, some people have gone through their entire lives without ever hearing about Jesus, and therefore didn't have an opportunity to be saved in this way.

Many modern Christians don't believe in the traditional hell of eternal tortures. They say that a loving and merciful God would never create such a horrible place. But others point out that Jesus himself warned about hell in passages such as Matthew 5:29 and Luke 16:19-31, and this proves that it really does exist.

Demonic Possession

In ancient times many people believed that evil spirits can enter a person's body and take control of it. This was a common explanation for conditions such as epilepsy and madness. In modern terminology this "madness" probably referred to certain mental disorders such as schizophrenia and delirium. Even today, we still don't fully understand what causes these conditions. Ancient people, who had even less understanding, frequently put the blame on evil spirits.

These evil spirits were also called demons, devils, and unclean spirits. Anyone who came under their control was called a demoniac (or daimoniac), and the condition was known as "demonic possession".

In some ways demonic possession resembles multiple personality disorder. In this comparison, the demon acts like an evil alternate personality that has taken control of the mind. One difference is that an alternate personality usually doesn't take permanent control. But even when it isn't in control, it could still be lurking within the person's subconscious, and still might be able to influence behavior. Some people use this idea to try to blame their bad actions on an "inner demon".

The traditional cure for demonic possession is to expel the evil spirit from the victim's body. In ancient times this was known as driving out (or casting out) the demon. Many people now call it exorcism, and use the name exorcist for anyone who can successfully do it.

According to the gospels, Jesus often performed exorcisms along with his other miraculous healings. For instance, in describing his ministry in Galilee, Matthew 8:16 says:

When evening came, many who were demon-possessed were brought to him, and he drove out the spirits with a word and healed all the sick.

Sometimes a demon would try to talk to Jesus before it was expelled. For example, Mark 1:23-26 says that he was speaking to a crowd when a possessed man suddenly cried out:

"What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are -- the Holy One of God."

"Be quiet!" Jesus said sternly. "Come out of him!" The evil spirit shook the man violently and came out of him with a shriek.

In this passage the voice of the man is actually the voice of the demon inside him controlling his breath and vocal chords. And because this demon is a spirit, it is able to recognize Jesus as "the Holy One of God." But Jesus tells it to "Be quiet" about this. At this stage of his ministry he was trying to keep his messiahship secret, and he didn't want the demon to reveal it publicly.

The demon also asks Jesus if he has come to "destroy us." When it says "us", it is referring to itself and all the other demons in the world. It is afraid that Jesus has come to destroy all of them. This idea is mentioned several times in the gospel of Mark, which depicts Jesus as waging a kind of war against demons. But since demons were regarded as agents of the Devil, this was actually a war between Jesus and Satan.

According to witnesses of modern exorcisms, the demon sometimes tries to hide within the victim, and hours may pass before it finally reveals itself. Then a prolonged struggle will often take place, with the victim shaking and jerking violently as the demon fights the spiritual powers invoked to expel it. During one reported struggle of this type, the victim's face suddenly contorted into an evil sneer that apparently emanated from the demon itself. Then a terrifying shriek pierced the air, and the body collapsed on the floor as the demon left it.

Some attempted exorcisms have had tragic endings. In these cases victims were tied down on a table or bed, then repeatedly choked, squeezed, beaten, and starved, sometimes over a period of several days, and this

eventually caused them to die. Although these deaths were probably unintentional, several exorcists have been convicted of crimes and sent to prison.

Jesus never used physical force when he performed an exorcism. He simply ordered the demon to leave the body. They always obeyed him because they knew who he was, and recognized his power and authority.

Although most cases of possession involve a single evil spirit, it's possible for a person to be taken over by several spirits simultaneously. For example, Luke 8:2 says that seven demons were expelled from Mary Magdalene. In a modern case, a victim spoke in different voices which claimed to be the same demons that had previously possessed Judas Iscariot, Emperor Nero, Adolf Hitler, and several other well-known evildoers.

John 7:20 and 8:52 say that some people in Jerusalem even accused Jesus himself of being possessed by a demon. This may have been their explanation for his ability to perform miraculous cures. At that time there was a general belief that a possessed person could have unusual qualities such as super-human strength, ability to foresee the future, or other special powers.

Unfortunately, Christians have sometimes accused other Christians of being possessed. This has happened during religious wars and persecutions, and during investigations into heresy and witchcraft. At the trial of Joan of Arc, church officials said that the voices in her head came from demons. In modern times accusations of demon possession have been made against members of certain fringe sects and against people who speak in tongues.

Evil spirits are sometimes blamed for other problems besides epilepsy and madness. For example, some people say that alcoholics, homosexuals, drug addicts, sexual predators, and adulterers are possessed by demons. Some Christians believe that a person who is filled with the Holy Spirit will be protected from the demons that cause these types of problems.

According to some ancient writings, demons were originally angels in heaven who supported the Devil in his rebellion against God, and were thrown out of heaven with him. Some sources say that one-third of the angels were thrown out in this way, and this has led to estimates that thousands, or even millions, of demons now serve Satan here on the earth.

But many people doubt that demons really exist. In their view, the possessed individuals described in the gospels were simply people who had mental illnesses. And Jesus cured them either through miracles or by using psychological techniques such as hypnosis.



Demon leaving a demoniac after being expelled by Jesus - From Les Tres Riches Heures du duc de Berry (1412- 1416)

The Ending of Mark

Ancient copies of the Gospel of Mark can have several different endings. The shortest ending is found in the oldest manuscripts, all of which terminate at verse 16:8. Most later manuscripts contain some additional verses, not always the same, which were apparently added to the gospel at later points in time. Excluding minor variations, these later additions created three new endings. The authors of these new endings didn't identify themselves.

Several theories have been put forward to explain the various endings:

Theory 1. The original ending (beyond verse 16:8) was accidentally lost. Later readers noticed the abrupt cutoff in the story, and several of them tried to finish it by inventing new endings.

Theory 2. An unknown person intentionally removed the original ending by cutting the manuscript at verse 16:8. Several later readers, unaware of what had happened, created new endings.

Theory 3. The original author was interrupted or died before he could finish the gospel, and had reached verse 16:8 at the time of the interruption.

Theory 4. The original author actually did intend to stop at verse 16:8, even though the story seems unfinished to most people.

The possible loss of the original ending is especially unfortunate because many biblical scholars consider Mark to be the earliest and most reliable gospel. It's also unfortunate that the apparent cutoff of the original text occurs at a critical point in the story, early on the first Easter Sunday just after Mary Magdalene and two other women discover that the tomb is empty. These women had just been told that Jesus was alive and on his way to Galilee, and that the disciples would see him there. But any account of what happened next, if it ever existed, is now lost.

One popular theory is that the original ending (beyond verse 16:8) was lost when part of a scroll accidentally broke off. In fact some scholars think that a portion of verse 16:8 itself is missing, with the extant text stopping in the middle of a sentence. If true, this would provide strong support for the theory of an accidental break off.

But there is another way to interpret verse 16:8 in which the final sentence does come to a proper end. If this interpretation is correct, it would mean that the cutoff point occurred between sentences, which goes against the theory of an accidental severing of the manuscript. Another argument against the accidental-loss theory is that an ancient scroll was normally rolled up with the ending on the inside where it would be unlikely to break off.

Another theory is that someone intentionally destroyed the original ending because it was inconsistent with some basic Christian beliefs. Of course this is merely speculation, since there is no direct evidence to support such an idea. Also, if someone had decided to destroy the ending for this reason, he or she probably wouldn't have chosen verse 16:8 as the cutoff point, because that still leaves inconsistencies. For example, verse 16:7 indicates that the disciples will have to go to Galilee to see the risen Jesus, whereas the other gospels say that he was first seen in Jerusalem. And verse 16:8 says that the women didn't tell anyone about finding the tomb empty, but the other gospels say that they immediately went and told some of the male disciples.

If the original ending really was lost or destroyed, it probably happened within a few years after the gospel was written. Otherwise the authors of Matthew and Luke, who most likely used copies of Mark as a source, would have included versions of his original ending in their gospels. Also, a longer time period would have allowed many copies of the gospel to be made, and this would increase the chance that the original ending would survive.

Some scholars think that the author of Mark stopped at verse 16:8 on purpose, despite the abrupt cutoff in the story. This is certainly possible. But

it would mean that the original version of the gospel didn't describe any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus.

Another possibility is that the author was interrupted or died before he could finish writing the gospel. However, if this had happened, other people would have probably known about it, and someone likely would have mentioned it in other early writings. Still, this possibility can't be ruled out, even though it is basically speculation.

The ending chosen for most modern bibles is known as the Longer Ending (or Apocryphal Addition). It consists of twelve additional verses (Mark 16:9-20) which are attached after verse 16:8. Because these twelve verses aren't in the oldest manuscripts, and are written in a different style, they almost certainly weren't part of the original gospel. But many people don't know this and therefore accept them as authentic.

In one of these added verses (Mark 16:18), the resurrected Jesus says that believers "will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all." Although Jesus probably never said this, many Christians believe that he did, and a few congregations even include the handling of poisonous snakes in their church services.

Some important new information about Mark's gospel may have been discovered in 1958 at the Mar Saba monastery near Jerusalem. The discovery is a possible copy of an ancient letter written by the early church leader Clement of Alexandria, in which he quotes two passages from a previously unknown version of Mark. Although questions have been raised about the authenticity of this letter, most scholars believe that it is genuine.

According to the letter, this other version of Mark was called the "Secret Gospel of Mark", and only a small number of people had ever seen it. Because it contained extra passages, it was apparently a longer version of the gospel. In fact some scholars think that it was actually the original version. If so, the New Testament version could be a shortened form with some passages, including the ending, intentionally removed. Thus, if a complete text of the secret version could be found, it might reveal the true original ending.

But unless new information is uncovered, questions about the gospel's ending will remain unanswered. All of the main theories involve conjectures, and all of them have deficiencies. As a result, the uncertainty about the true ending is one of the biggest unsolved problems in biblical scholarship.

The Devil

The Devil is known by many names, including Satan, Lucifer, Mephistopheles, Beelzebub, the Prince of Darkness, and the Evil One. According to ancient writings, he was originally one of God's foremost angels. But pride and envy caused him to revolt, and he was thrown out of Heaven. Despite this humiliation he remained defiant, and sought revenge by trying to tempt people away from God and convert them into his own worshipers.

One of his favorite ways to tempt people is to give them fantasies of future wealth. He knows that many people will eventually be overcome by greed and turn to dishonest methods to achieve their goals. As a master of deceit, he can even entrap people who think they have rejected him.

Because of his evil nature, artists usually depict him as a loathsome repulsive creature. Paintings often show him with horns, fangs, hooves, scaly skin, red eyes, and a tail. Since he was originally an angel, he is sometimes given wings. Medieval artists often gave him the legs and hindquarters of a goat. But no one knows what he really looks like, because he can disguise himself by magically taking on any appearance he chooses, or by fading into invisibility. In fact many people think of him as a supernatural spirit rather than a physical being.

People often ask why God allows him to pursue his evil activities. One possible answer is that God doesn't have full control over his former angel. Another answer is that God allows him to tempt people in order to test their faith and devotion. But the first answer implies that God isn't truly all-

powerful. And the second answer makes God the ultimate tempter, and the ultimate cause of much of the pain and suffering that people experience.

The Devil is often identified with the serpent that tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. Later in the Old Testament he appears in the Book of Job, where he is an angel called Satan living at the Court of Heaven, but slyly stirring up trouble. By the period of the New Testament he has been thrown out of heaven, and is showing himself to be the true Evil One.

His evil intentions are depicted very clearly in the gospels, especially in the famous temptation of Jesus. As described in Matthew 4:1-11, this temptation took place in a wilderness area where Jesus had gone to meditate and fast. As he meditated, Satan approached him and challenged him to prove his powers by turning stones into bread and by leaping from the roof of the Temple in Jerusalem. Of course Jesus didn't need to prove anything, and he refused both challenges. Then, for the ultimate temptation (Matthew 4:8-10):

The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will fall down and worship me."

Jesus said to him, "Away from me Satan! For it is written, Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only."



Afterward, when Jesus started his ministry, he attracted a lot of attention through his ability to expel demons. At that time the behavior of mentally-ill people was often attributed to evil spirits who had taken over their bodies under the direction of Satan. Such people were said to be possessed by demons.

The only way to cure demonic possession was to expel the evil spirits from the person's body. In one such cure, described in Luke 8:26-40, Jesus needed to expel a large number of demons from a single man. This man, who was named Legion, wore no clothes and lived in tombs. Local citizens had bound him in chains and fetters, but he had broken free and escaped. When Jesus ordered the demons to leave his body, they tried to save themselves by entering the bodies of some nearby pigs. But the pigs immediately ran into a lake and drowned.

As Christianity spread to new areas, belief in the Devil went with it. During the Middle Ages, European artists often depicted him as a half-man half-

beast, but in popular stories he could disguise himself as a black cat or a toad. Some of these stories even described personal encounters with him. For example, Saint Dunstan, a tenth-century bishop of Canterbury, reported that he was in his workshop making a metal chalice when Satan suddenly appeared in front of him. To defend himself, he seized the intruder's nose with a pair of red-hot tongs.

The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther reported dozens of encounters with Satan. On one occasion he threw an ink pot at the loathsome fiend.

The Witch Hunts

Fear of the Devil was especially strong during the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. During this period thousands of people were accused of being his helpers, and many of them were tortured and killed.

A witch hunt would often start when something bad happened in a community, and people looked for someone to blame. It was thought that witches and warlocks, using powers given to them by Satan, could cast magic spells which would bring misfortune to others. Suspicion would usually focus on an unpopular or reclusive individual, or someone who exhibited odd behavior. Accusations against such a person were often checked by examining the suspect's body for a suspicious-looking blemish, mole, or scar called a Devil's Mark. Such a mark could nearly always be found, but if more proof was desired, a confession could usually be obtained by torture. The normal punishment was to burn the victim to death.

During this period numerous stories about witches and warlocks circulated through the population. The stories could involve secret midnight meetings, worship at the feet of the Devil, sexual orgies and perversions, sacrificed babies, and blood drinking. Sometimes there were rumors that a particular woman had become Satan's lover.

Some people are attracted to the dark side of life that the Devil represents. Secret devil worship has long existed in some communities, and there has been a resurgence in modern times.

Many modern Christians doubt that Satan really exists. They say that biblical stories such as the temptation of Jesus are allegories, and that Jesus didn't actually expel real demons.

But some people believe that everything in the Bible is literally true, including the reality of the Devil. Many of these people think that they can see his influence in modern society, and take this as further proof of his existence.

What Causes Stigmata?

Stigmata are wounds or skin markings that match the wounds suffered by Jesus. They sometimes appear on mystics or other devout people, and are often regarded as a supernatural sign from God. But the evidence frequently points to natural causes, such as self-wounding or unusual medical conditions.

Some stigmata have unusual shapes, such as a cross or a circle, and some even glow in the dark. Many of them also produce a pleasant perfume-like odor. In a few rare cases they aren't even visible, but are known to be present from the pain that they cause.

Since they match the wounds suffered by Jesus, they are normally found on the hands and ankles, on one side of the chest, and on the head, shoulders, and back. But they aren't always real wounds, because many of them occur in the form of purplish skin blotches or tattoo-like markings. Actually, in some cases what looks like a blotch may be a real wound, because small amounts of blood will sometimes seep from it, even though no breaks are visible in the skin.

Some occurrences of stigmata persist for many years, but others only last a few days. In several cases they have appeared on Good Friday and vanished on Easter morning.

The word "stigmata" is the plural of the Greek word "*stigma*". This was an ancient name for marks that were pricked or branded onto the bodies of slaves and soldiers for identification purposes. The word was also applied to religious symbols tattooed onto members of pagan religious cults to show their loyalty to particular gods and goddesses.

The first known use of the word with regard to the wounds of Christ occurs in Galatians 6:17, where the Apostle Paul says "I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." Biblical scholars aren't sure what kind of marks Paul was referring to. Possibly they were the result of wounds he'd received from scourgings and stonings by people who opposed his teaching. But another possibility is that he intentionally inflicted wounds on himself in an attempt to experience the same pain that Jesus felt.

Attempts to re-experience the suffering of Jesus definitely took place during the Middle Ages. Writings from that time period contain numerous reports of mystics deliberately wounding themselves for such a purpose.

After self-wounding became common, people started hearing stories about wounds that appeared spontaneously. The most prominent case involved Saint Francis of Assisi, who died in 1226. It was said that his stigmata became present two years before his death, and that his hands actually appeared to have nails in them.

After Saint Francis died, other reports of spontaneous stigmata began to appear, and have continued to do so ever since. Near the end of the nineteenth century, an investigation by Doctor Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre (1818-1912) documented hundreds of cases that had occurred up to that time. And the rate of occurrence seemed to increase during the twentieth century.

The best-known stigmatics of modern times include Padre Pio, Therese Neumann, Heather Woods, and Lilian Bernas, but there have been many others. In some modern cases, people have reported that they went into a trance in which they seemed to be nailed to a cross, and when they awoke they found the wounds or markings on their bodies.

Many Christians believe that the sudden appearance of stigmata is a supernatural sign that a person is very close to God. According to some reports, the miraculous nature of the wounds is verified by the fact that they don't respond to medical treatment, but can suddenly heal without treatment and without leaving any scars.

Some stigmatics say that they gladly suffer from the pain of their wounds because their sacrifice helps pay for the sins of other people.

Stigmata are sometimes accompanied by other unusual phenomena such as powers of prophecy and the ability to live with very little food or water. Saint Catherine of Siena (1347-1381) reportedly went without water for an entire month while her wounds were present. And Angela of Foligno (1250-1309) didn't eat anything for twelve years except for what was offered at the Eucharist. Other associated phenomena include visions, trance-like states, and tears of blood.

Natural Explanations

Many people doubt the claims about supernatural or miraculous causes for stigmata. One reason for this is that none of the reported miraculous occurrences has ever been documented by strict scientific methods. In addition, there may be natural explanations for all of the reported phenomena. Here are several possible explanations:

--- A person could inflict wounds on himself while in a state of religious ecstasy and not remember doing it afterward. Failure to remember a self-infliction could also occur if an alternate personality temporarily took control of a person's body and created the stigmata.

--- Another possibility is that intense prayer or deep meditation could bring about a psychosomatic reaction that causes the wounds or marks to appear. This process, sometimes called "psychogenic purpura", has been investigated medically, and there is some evidence that it can actually occur.

--- Some people have secretly wounded themselves in an attempt to get attention or look pious. One well-known example was Magdalena de la Cruz (1487-1560), who finally admitted that her wounds were a hoax. In a modern

case, carbolic acid was reportedly applied to the skin to create blister-like wounds.

--- Another way to create fake stigmata is to paint them onto the skin, and several people have apparently used this method. The use of painted-on markings could explain cases in which the stigmata have unusual shapes, or glow in the dark, or appear to heal without leaving any scars.

The Nazarenes

After Jesus ascended to heaven, many of his followers stayed in Jerusalem and gathered into a closely-knit group that became known as the Nazarenes. According to Acts 1:13-16, the group initially had about 120 members, including Jesus' mother Mary and all of his brothers. The two main leaders were Simon Peter and the oldest brother of Jesus, who was called James the Just. During an early meeting a man named Matthias was chosen to replace the traitor Judas Iscariot in the inner circle of the twelve primary disciples.

The Nazarenes were the original core group from which Christianity grew and spread. But initially they still considered themselves to be Jews. They prayed in the temple at Jerusalem, and they followed most of the traditional Jewish religious practices. Other people in the city regarded them as a new Jewish sect.

But the Nazarenes differed from other Jewish sects in a fundamental way, for they believed that Jesus was the Messiah. They boldly took this message into the streets of Jerusalem and soon began to attract many new converts. They also spread the message to friends and relatives who lived in other places, and within a few years small groups of believers were established in several other cities.

At first most of the new converts were other Jews, many of whom were already interested in the prophecies about the Messiah. But then the apostle Paul began to convert many non-Jews (Gentiles). This led to a controversy when some Nazarenes from Jerusalem visited a community of new believers in Antioch and told some Gentile converts there that they would have to be circumcised in order to be saved. Paul strongly disagreed with this, and he made a special trip to Jerusalem to try to resolve the issue.

When he reached Jerusalem, a meeting was held to discuss the matter. Although some of the Nazarenes argued against Paul, Peter apparently took his side. After a lengthy debate, the final decision was that Gentile converts didn't have to be circumcised, but would still have to obey the Jewish laws relating to idolatry, sexual morality, and diet. This important meeting, sometimes called the Council of Jerusalem, is described in Acts 15:1-29.

During these early years the converts in other cities regarded the Nazarenes in Jerusalem as the final authority for deciding important issues. This was mainly due to the presence of Peter, James the Just, and other original believers. They were granted a special status because they had known Jesus personally.

But Peter eventually left Jerusalem. And mostly because of Paul's activities, the number of converts in other cities grew rapidly. For these reasons, the Nazarenes began to lose their influence. As the years passed, their continued adherence to the old Jewish religious practices left them increasingly out of touch with newer believers, many of whom had Gentile backgrounds.

In 66 AD a fierce war broke out in Palestine between the Roman army and a group of Jewish rebels. The casualties were enormous, but most of the Nazarenes managed to save them-selves by abandoning their homes and fleeing from Jerusalem. According to the church historian Eusebius, many of them fled to a place called Pella east of the Jordan River. But although they escaped, they had suffered a terrible blow.

By then Christianity had begun to separate from Judaism, and the Nazarenes quickly lost any remaining influence they might have had. There is evidence that many of them never accepted Paul as a true apostle and

didn't approve of some of the practices in the churches he established. Perhaps partly for this reason, they gradually became isolated from the main Christian movement, and had little effect on the subsequent history of the church.

The Nazarene Way of Life

During their years in Jerusalem, the Nazarenes sometimes called themselves followers of "The Way". By this, they meant their way of life. According to Acts 4:32-33:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything that they had.

In addition to their insistence on sharing, the Nazarenes put a high value on devoutness, non-violence, and a very simple lifestyle. All of these ideas could have come directly from the teachings of Jesus. Many scholars have pointed out that the Nazarenes' beliefs were similar to those of the Essenes. But theories about possible connections between the two groups are difficult to prove.

The origin of the name "Nazarenes" is uncertain. Because Jesus himself was sometimes called "the Nazarene", one frequent proposal is that the name was derived from "Nazareth". But this can't be proven, and there are reasons to doubt it. Some of the uncertainty stems from the fact that ancient writers spelled the name in several different ways, including "Nazirenes", "Nazaraeans", and "Nazoreans".

Persecution of the Nazarenes

Even in the early days, when the Nazarenes were still a small group, they were already being persecuted by the local Jerusalem authorities. The stoning of Stephen, the first Christian martyr, is starkly described in Acts 7:54-60. The threat of further executions caused others in the group to temporarily go into hiding. It was during this period that Paul (then known as Saul) got involved in the persecutions, although it isn't clear how big a role he played.

Later, during another flareup of persecution, James the son of Zebedee was put to death with a sword. Peter would have probably also been executed, but an angel came during the night and helped him escape from jail. Apparently he avoided further trouble until his later years, but finally, according to church tradition, was killed in Rome. James the Just also managed to survive the early persecutions, but was eventually killed in 62 AD.

The Fate of the Nazarenes

After they fled from Jerusalem, the Nazarenes gradually became isolated from the main Christian movement. Despite this isolation, they still managed to survive for several centuries as an independent sect. Their survival was mentioned by several later writers, including Saint Jerome, who reported that he visited a community of them in the Syrian desert in about 380 AD.

Many scholars think that another group of them survived under the name Ebionites. These Ebionites recognized Jesus as the Messiah but considered him to be of normal human parentage. They adhered to the old Jewish laws, had their own gospel, and disapproved of the teachings of Paul. For these reasons, the fourth-century Bishop Epiphanius declared them to be heretics.

There aren't any reliable reports of what finally happened to either the Nazarenes or the Ebionites. Quite possibly both groups completely died out soon after the fourth century. But a few scholars think that small communities may have survived for a longer period in remote areas. There has also been speculation that some late survivors were progenitors of medieval heretical groups such as the Cathars. But unless new information is uncovered, the final fate of the Nazarenes will remain a mystery.

Note: According to legend, a modern group of Christians known as the Nazarenes of Malabar (India) was founded by the disciple Thomas in 52 AD, and thus could be an offshoot of the original Nazarenes of Jerusalem. Another modern group, the Nazarenes of Mount Carmel, claims to be a "modern resurrection" of the ancient Nazarenes.

The Resurrection of the Dead Saints

Readers of the gospels are often puzzled by a short passage at Matthew 27:52-53, which comes just after the description of Jesus' death on the cross. The passage reads as follows:

The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people.

The passage says that some dead holy people returned to life and came out of their tombs, then went into Jerusalem, where many inhabitants of the city saw them. Because the King James translation refers to these resurrected people as "saints", this event is sometimes called "the resurrection of the dead saints".

Matthew 27:51 indicates that an earthquake occurred just as Jesus died, and that this was what opened the tombs of these saints. But although their bodies returned to life immediately, they apparently didn't go into Jerusalem until at least two days later, or no earlier than the first Easter Sunday.

The resurrection of these saints obviously wasn't an ordinary event. In fact it was clearly a divine action. God could have brought it about directly, or he could have simply created the conditions that finally gave rise to it. Some people have suggested that the final trigger was a supernatural power that emanated from Jesus as he died on the cross.

Scholars have looked for reports of this resurrection in other ancient writings, but no definite references to it have been found. However, some scholars do see a possible connection to ancient prophecies about a resurrection of dead saints expected to occur during the End Times. The prophecies say that all dead saints will return to life at that time so that they can take their place in a newly-created eternal Kingdom of God. Some people have suggested that the resurrection described in Matthew's passage was a "preview" of the bigger resurrection prophesied for the End Times.

Another possible explanation for Matthew's passage relates it to a story known as the "Harrowing of Hell". According to this story, which is mentioned in the Apostles' Creed, after Jesus died on the cross he descended to Hell and rescued the souls of all the ancient dead saints from their imprisonment there. After these rescued souls left Hell, they could have returned to their old bodies in the tombs and brought them back to life. But if this is what happened, it must have taken place very quickly, because Matthew says that the bodies were resurrected almost immediately after Jesus died.

Who Were These Resurrected Saints?

All of these resurrected saints were apparently buried in the vicinity of Jerusalem. Nothing is said about any dead saints who were buried elsewhere. The passage also doesn't identify any of the resurrected saints by name, but some later Christian writers speculated about who they might be. The suggested possibilities included Adam and Eve, Abel, Abraham, Isaiah, and various other Old Testament figures. Because the earliest followers of Jesus still considered themselves to be Jews, they would have regarded these Old Testament figures as saints.

Matthew also doesn't say what these resurrected saints did after they were seen in Jerusalem. Modern readers often assume that they went back to their tombs and died again. Such a temporary resurrection could still serve as a preview of the general resurrection prophesied for the End Times. However, the passage doesn't say that they went back to their tombs and died again, so other possibilities should be considered. Of course they probably aren't still alive on the earth somewhere. Perhaps the most likely remaining possibility is that they eventually ascended to heaven.

Were These People Really Resurrected?

The other three gospels don't mention the resurrection of these saints. Partly for this reason, many biblical scholars doubt that it really happened.

They argue that such an extraordinary event, if it really occurred, would provide strong evidence for the divinity of Jesus, and therefore the other gospel writers would have also described it.

Another reason for doubt is that these resurrected saints would have created a lot of excitement when they appeared in Jerusalem, and a historian like Josephus, who wrote a detailed account of the period, probably would have said something about it. But he doesn't mention it at all.

For these reasons, many scholars believe that Matthew's passage describes a legendary story rather than a real event. It might be similar to a modern "urban legend". Of course, this raises the question of how such a story could have originated.

According to one theory, the story originated in the days immediately after the resurrection of Jesus. This would have been a time of great excitement for his followers. They believed that he was the long-awaited Messiah, and that he had come to establish a new eternal Kingdom of God on the earth. Buoyed by their high expectations, they could have viewed his resurrection as a "signal" that this new kingdom was about to be created. They could have even been looking for signs that it was beginning to appear.

One such sign would be the resurrection of the ancient dead saints. Perhaps some of Jesus' followers thought they saw resurrected saints walking around in Jerusalem during this period. If so, the original reports of these sightings might have survived in the form of a legendary story. And this legendary story might be what is preserved in Matthew's passage.

Note: Under normal circumstances, a dead body will eventually decompose to the point that its individual features are no longer recognizable. But many early Christians believed that the body of a true holy person is incorruptible, so that it doesn't decay at all, but is miraculously preserved for its eventual resurrection. This explains how long-dead saints could return to life in their original bodies.

First Witness to the Resurrection

Who was the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection? To try to answer this question, we first need to look at what each gospel says about the matter.

Gospel of John (20:1-18)

This gospel gives the most detailed description of what happened on the morning of the resurrection. It says that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb shortly before dawn and saw that it was open. Thinking that someone had moved the body, she ran and told Peter and an unnamed disciple what she had seen. These two men ran to the tomb, found it empty, and then left the area. But Mary lingered nearby and began to weep. Eventually she looked into the tomb again and saw two angels, who asked her why she was weeping. She told them that someone had moved Jesus' body, and that she didn't know where it was. Then suddenly she turned and saw Jesus himself. Here is the description of her encounter with him, as told in John 20:14-16:

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

Thus, according to this gospel, Mary Magdalene was the first person to see the risen Jesus. She didn't recognize him initially and thought he was a gardener. But when he spoke her name, she immediately knew who he was.

Gospel of Matthew (28:1-20)

This gospel also begins its account with the discovery of the empty tomb. But in this version of the story, Mary Magdalene is accompanied to the tomb by another woman who is identified as "the other Mary". After these two women reach the tomb, they see an angel who says that Jesus has risen and isn't there. The angel then instructs them to tell the male disciples that they can see Jesus in Galilee. The two women hurry off to find the male disciples, but on the way they suddenly encounter Jesus himself. He says, "Greetings", and they fall at his feet and worship him.

Thus, according to this account, Mary Magdalene and another woman also named Mary were the first eyewitnesses to the resurrection. This gospel doesn't describe any other encounters with Jesus in or near Jerusalem. But it says that the male disciples went to Galilee, (as the angel had instructed), and saw Jesus there.

Gospel of Luke (24:1-35)

According to this gospel, several women went with Mary Magdalene on her visit to the tomb, including Joanna and Mary the mother of James. After the women find the tomb empty, they suddenly see two men in shining garments standing next to them. These two men tell them that Jesus has risen and left. The women then go to the male disciples and tell them what happened at the tomb. The disciples don't believe them, but Peter goes to the tomb anyway, finds it empty, and then leaves. Thus, in this account nobody sees Jesus during the initial visits to the tomb.

But later two of his followers do encounter him during a trip from Jerusalem to a village named Emmaus. One of these followers is named Cleopas, but the other one isn't identified. As they walk toward the village, Jesus joins them and begins talking with them, but they don't recognize him. After they reach the village, they all decide to have dinner together. During the meal the two travelers suddenly recognize their companion as Jesus, but he immediately vanishes from their sight. They hurry back to Jerusalem to tell everyone what happened. When they arrive, they find the disciples gathered together talking, and saying that Jesus is alive and has appeared to Peter, though nothing is said about where or when this appearance to Peter took place.

Thus, this gospel isn't clear about who saw Jesus first. It could have been the two men who encountered him during the trip to the village, but initially didn't recognize him. Or it could have been Peter, who in the meantime had told the other disciples about an encounter of his own. In either case, this account is inconsistent with those of John and Matthew because it indicates that none of the women saw Jesus near the tomb.

Gospel of Mark (16:1-20)

The oldest known manuscripts of this gospel don't describe any post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Partly for this reason, many scholars believe that this gospel's original ending has been lost. Whatever the case, these oldest manuscripts stop abruptly at verse 16:8, right after the discovery of the empty tomb. In the last two verses Mary Magdalene and two other women are told that Jesus has risen and is on his way to Galilee, and that his followers can see him there. Thus, if the original ending was lost, the missing part most likely described at least one appearance in Galilee but none in the vicinity of Jerusalem.

Later scribes who made copies of this gospel realized that the original ending may have been lost, and several new endings were eventually invented to take its place. The ending chosen for most modern bibles consists of twelve verses (16:9-20) known as the "Longer Ending" or "Apocryphal Addition". This ending says that the risen Jesus made his first appearance to Mary Magdalene. But this was probably copied from John's account and thus is unlikely to be an independent source of information.

The possible loss of the original ending of Mark is especially unfortunate, because many scholars think that it was the first New Testament gospel to be written.

First Corinthians (15:1-8)

In addition to what the gospels say, there is also an important passage

about the resurrection in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This passage (15:1-8) specifically says that the risen Jesus appeared first to Peter (who Paul calls Cephas), then to the other male disciples, and then to various other people.

Paul doesn't say where he got this information, but he did know Peter, and he also met some other disciples during his trips to Jerusalem. For this reason, and also because this letter to the Corinthians was probably written at least 15 years earlier than any of the gospels, some scholars think that it may be the most reliable source of information about the resurrection.

Conclusions

Many people find these different accounts to be confusing and inconsistent. Attempts have been made to reconcile them, but this necessarily involves loose interpretations and implausible arguments. Some of the difficulties may stem from the fact that the gospels probably weren't written until at least 35 years after the events, and by then most of the original witnesses were either dead or couldn't be located. Paul's letter to the Corinthians was written earlier, but it doesn't give any specific details about the appearances it mentions.

The inconsistencies could indicate that the stories gradually changed as they passed from person to person during the intervening years. However, the common elements suggest that there were originally three basic stories about what happened on that first Easter Sunday. In one story Jesus makes an appearance to Mary Magdalene (and possibly another woman) near the tomb. In another story he appears to Peter at an unspecified place and time. And in a third story, found only in Luke, he appears to Cleopas and an unnamed companion on the road to a village called Emmaus.

Many people doubt that Jesus would have made his first appearance to an obscure follower like Cleopas and a companion who isn't even named, especially since Luke is the only gospel that contains this story. For this reason, attention is usually focused on the other two stories.

In trying to decide between the other two stories, some scholars think that Paul's first letter to the Corinthians should carry the most weight, because it's probably closest in time to the events themselves. Paul specifically says that Peter was the first person to see the risen Jesus. Luke also indicates that Jesus might have appeared to Peter first. But neither account actually describes the appearance.

The accounts of an appearance to Mary Magdalene (and possibly another woman) are found in John and Matthew. Both gospels say that the appearance took place near the tomb, and both give some details about it. Although those details aren't consistent, the accounts could still be based on the same original story. It's possible that the other writers (Paul and Luke) had also heard this story, but intentionally excluded it from their accounts.

Why would Paul and Luke intentionally omit a story about an appearance to the women? Some scholars have suggested that they did so because women weren't considered to be reliable witnesses. But another possibility is that Peter wanted the story suppressed. By suppressing the story about the women, he would find it easier to get people to believe that the first appearance was to him, and this would enhance his status and reinforce his leadership role in the early community of believers.

Luke does say that women discovered the empty tomb. But then he indicates that they left it and went to the male disciples without ever seeing Jesus. To some people, this suggests that he had heard the full original story about the women, but intentionally omitted the part about their encounter with Jesus near the tomb.

However, if there was an attempt to suppress the story about the appearance to the women, it didn't succeed, and this could indicate just how important their role was. In fact, if judged by the amount of surviving detail, there is more evidence for an appearance to the women than for an appearance to Peter.

Note: According to the Catholic Church, the risen Jesus visited his mother Mary before he appeared to anyone else, to comfort her and let her know that he was alive. However, this is merely an assumption based on what he should have done. There is no mention of such a visit in the New Testament.

The Virgin Birth

According to the gospels, Mary became pregnant with Jesus through a divine action. Luke 1:26-35 says that the angel Gabriel visited her beforehand and told her that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." And Matthew 1:18 says "she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit."

When Mary became pregnant, she was engaged (but not yet married) to Joseph. Matthew 1:19-24 says that Joseph wanted to back out of the marriage after he found out about Mary's pregnancy. But then an angel appeared to him in a dream, told him about Jesus, and convinced him to accept Mary as his wife. Matthew 1:25 says that he "had no union with her until she gave birth to a son", thus confirming that it was a virgin birth.

Jewish girls of that period usually became engaged when they were twelve or thirteen years old. Actually, for legal purposes this engagement was regarded as the first stage of a marriage, although the girl would normally stay with her parents for about a year before going to live with her husband and consummating the marriage. If she became pregnant before then, she would face public disgrace, and if the law was strictly enforced, could even be executed as an adulteress.

Thus Joseph's initial intention to back out of the marriage could have put Mary into a very difficult situation. She may have even fled from her hometown for a while, because Luke 1:36-56 says that she spent three months of her pregnancy at the house of her relative Elizabeth in Judea. It's possible that she made this visit to avoid the humiliation she would have experienced in her own community. In any case, Joseph's eventual decision to proceed with the marriage must have been a great relief.

According to Saint Augustine and some other early Christian writers, Mary didn't feel any labor pains when she gave birth to Jesus. These writers believed that labor pains are a curse that God put on women because of Eve's misbehavior in the Garden of Eden (see Genesis 3:16). But because Mary conceived Jesus in a divine manner, the curse didn't apply to her, and therefore the birth was painless.

Many Christians believe that Mary remained a virgin through her entire life. However, Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3 say that Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters. Some people argue that these must have been step-brothers and step-sisters. But most biblical scholars believe they were natural children of Mary and Joseph who were born after Jesus. Supporting evidence for this view can be found at Luke 2:7, which refers to Jesus as Mary's "first-born", thus implying that she had other children later.

The virgin birth isn't mentioned in the earliest Christian writings, such as the letters of Paul and the gospel of Mark. This has led some scholars to argue that the idea wasn't part of the earliest beliefs about Jesus, but was introduced later. One possible explanation is that Mary didn't tell anyone about it until she was near the end of her life, so the original followers of Jesus never heard about it.

Some ancient non-Christian writings give a completely different account of the birth of Jesus. These writings say that Mary was either seduced or raped, but that this was covered up. Some accounts even say that the real father of Jesus was a Roman soldier variously identified as Pantera, Pandera or Panthera. These non-Christian accounts are examined in detail by Dr. Jane Schaberg in her book *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*. Some of the evidence discussed in the book seems to support the idea that Mary was raped, but much more would be needed to provide a definite proof.

Stories about divine conceptions and virgin births were fairly common in ancient times. They were created for kings and other famous men as a way to give them a semi-divine status. Examples include the pharaohs of Egypt, Alexander the Great, and various Roman emperors. Some scholars think that the story of Jesus' virgin birth developed as an imitation of similar stories about other famous men.

Note: There is a theoretical possibility that a woman could conceive a

child naturally while still a virgin. It could happen if an unfertilized egg began to multiply and develop into a fetus on its own. This would lead to a natural virgin birth. The scientific name for this process is parthenogenesis, and it has actually been observed in reptiles and fish. But a baby produced in this way will always be a female, because the egg wasn't fertilized. Therefore this couldn't be what happened in Mary's case.

The Gospel of John

Ever since ancient times, people have wondered why the gospel of John is so different from the other gospels. This difference is so obvious that several early church leaders even argued against including John in the bible. Of course it eventually was included, and over the centuries has probably been the most influential gospel of all. But many people still wonder why it's so different.

Here is a list of some of the major differences:

-- In John the ministry of Jesus appears to last at least three years. In the other gospels his ministry seems to last about one year.

-- In John the unnamed Beloved Disciple plays a big role in the story. The other gospels never mention this person.

-- As depicted in the first three gospels, Jesus normally uses common everyday language and tends to make short simple statements that go straight to the point. But in John he talks in a different style, and often gives long speeches of a type not found in the other gospels.

-- In the first three gospels, Jesus frequently employs parables in his teaching. In John he hardly ever uses parables.

-- John contains several theological concepts not mentioned in the other gospels. Examples include the description of Jesus as the Eternal Word (or Logos), and the idea of the Paraclete, or Holy Spirit, acting as a "Comforter".

-- In the first three gospels, Jesus sometimes performs exorcisms on people possessed by demons. John doesn't mention any exorcisms.

-- John describes several remarkable miracles that aren't reported in the other gospels. These include the conversion of water into wine (John 2:1-11), giving sight to a man born blind (John 9:1-8), and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45). On the other hand, John says nothing at all about the birth of Jesus, his baptism by John the Baptist, or his temptation by the Devil.

-- The first three gospels say that Simon of Cyrene helped Jesus carry the cross to Golgotha. But John 19:17 says that Jesus carried the cross the full distance himself, and doesn't mention Simon of Cyrene.

-- The gospel of John adds some extra details to the accounts of the crucifixion and the resurrection. These include the spear thrust into the side of Jesus, the presence of his mother at the cross, and his appearance to Mary Magdalene outside the tomb.

This list could be much longer, because there are many other examples besides these. But this should be enough to show that there are major differences between John and the other gospels. Now we need to look at possible reasons.

Actually there is a very simple explanation for many of the differences. It is suggested by John 21:24, which says that the gospel is based on the memories of the Beloved Disciple. The fact that the other gospels never

mention this disciple suggests that their authors didn't get any information from him. So this disciple was probably the source for the stories that are unique to John, such as the raising of Lazarus and the conversion of water into wine.

Similarly, many of the stories found in the other gospels, but not in John, probably came from sources known only to their authors. Thus, the use of different sources can easily account for many of the differences between John and the other gospels.

But that explanation doesn't work very well for some differences, especially the difference in how Jesus is depicted. The first three gospels portray him as a teacher, healer, and prophet whose main concerns are the problems of society and the need for people to live more virtuously. In these gospels he shows great compassion for poor, oppressed, and outcast people, and he heals many disabled and demon-possessed individuals. When he teaches, he talks in simple language, draws images from everyday life, and uses parables to make his points.

But the gospel of John depicts him quite differently. In this gospel he talks in a different style, and often uses words and ideas not found in the other gospels. Instead of making short penetrating statements about how people should live, he gives long speeches about why he came to earth and why people must accept him as their savior. He rarely uses parables, and he doesn't cure any cases of demonic possession.

Various explanations for these different portrayals of Jesus have been put forward. For example, some people say that he must have talked and acted in different ways depending on the circumstances, but each gospel only reports situations involving one type of behavior. Another possibility is that different authors chose to emphasize different aspects of his divine nature. Thus some people believe that Matthew, Mark, and Luke mainly show his human side, whereas John mainly shows his spiritual side.

But most scholars doubt that any of those explanations are correct. Instead, they favor another theory based on the idea that John's gospel was written in stages. According to this theory, the first stage was a short narrative that combined various stories and teachings passed down from original witnesses. This first stage, which has apparently been lost, would have contained accurate information about Jesus and his ministry.

Then later, according to the theory, an unknown person tried to introduce some new ideas into the gospel. To do so, this second author invented some long speeches for Jesus, and also added several new theological concepts. This author may have also eliminated some material, such as stories about demonic possessions.

If this theory is correct, the long speeches in John are fabrications that give a false picture of how Jesus talked and what he said. And some of the ideas in the gospel come from a later stage in the development of Christianity than what is found in the other gospels.

A revision by a second author could also explain why John says that Jesus carried the cross all the way to Golgotha, whereas the other gospels say that Simon of Cyrene carried it part of the distance. The original passage could have been changed to eliminate the implication that Jesus was too weak to carry the cross by himself.

Thus there is a possibility that the original version of John was altered by a second author. Yet even if that happened, the gospel still contains a lot of valuable information not found anywhere else. This includes the accounts of Jesus' early visits to Jerusalem, several important miracle stories, and extra details about the crucifixion and resurrection. The gospel also provides some unique information about major figures such as Mary Magdalene, Pontius Pilate, Thomas, and Judas Iscariot.

Of course many people believe that everything in the bible is literally true, and therefore can't accept the idea that someone altered John's gospel. But whether it was altered or not, it has been an inspiration to millions of people. And it will always be one of the great treasures of Christianity.

The Teachings of Jesus

In Matthew 5:17, Jesus says:

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them, but to fulfill them."

In this passage, which is part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said that he didn't intend to abolish the old Jewish religious laws, such as the Ten Commandments and the various regulations on marriage, inheritance, property rights, diet, and similar matters.

But he often did re-interpret these laws, or add to them, sometimes in very radical ways. As a result, some of his teachings were very controversial. According to Luke 4:28-30, some people in his hometown of Nazareth became so angry at him that they tried to throw him off a cliff.

Even today, some of his teachings still seem very radical to many people. Here are some of the best-known examples:

Violence

In Matthew 5:38-39, Jesus says:

"You have heard that it was said, 'eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."

Some Christians, such as the Amish, the Mennonites, and the Quakers, try to strictly adhere to this principle of non-resistance. Some of them have been put in prison, or even executed, for refusing to participate in wars.

In Matthew 5:44 Jesus says "Love your enemies." Some people interpret this to mean that you should try to help them rather than harm them. Others say that any needed punishments should be left to God.

But many modern Christians consider these ideas to be unrealistic. They believe that it is sometimes necessary to defend oneself, or even to launch the initial attack. Many people also believe that evil-doers must be punished for their crimes, or at least locked up to prevent them from doing further harm.

Wealth

In Mark 10:25, Jesus says:

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God."

Some scholars think that the word "camel" in this statement resulted from an accidental mis-copying of a very similar word which meant "rope". Thus, Jesus may have actually said "It is easier for a rope to go through the eye of a needle ...", which is a more natural metaphor.

But whether he said "camel" or "rope", his point was that it is very hard for a rich person to go to heaven. In fact, Mark 10:17-22 indicates that the only way a rich person can go to heaven is, in Jesus' words, to "sell everything you have and give to the poor." Some people try to avoid this conclusion by pointing to Mark 10:27, which says "all things are possible with God." Thus, God can make it possible for a rich man to go to heaven. Certainly this is true. But the context of the statement indicates that God would accomplish this by inspiring the rich man to reform his life and willingly give his money to the poor.

Jesus also warned against the accumulation of wealth on several other occasions. In Matthew 6:19 he says "do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth", and a few verses later, in Matthew 6:24, he says "You cannot serve both God and Money". In Luke 6:24 he says "woe to you who are rich." Jesus dis-approved of wealth because he thought it was wrong for some

people to live in wasteful luxury while others starved.

According to the Book of Acts, his original followers tried to live by these teachings after he left them. They formed a community in Jerusalem, known as the Nazarenes, in which everyone "had everything in common" (Acts 2:44), and any new member had to sell his or her possessions and give the proceeds to a common fund.

But many modern Christians disagree with these ideas. They see nothing wrong with acquiring money and wealth. And people who do become wealthy are often admired by others.

Non-Marital Relationships

In Matthew 5:28-30, Jesus says:

"But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell."

In an effort to follow this teaching, some people have become hermits, or found other ways to live in total celibacy. Some of the men in the Heaven's Gate cult even castrated themselves. But most people aren't willing to take such drastic measures, and many doubt that it's really necessary.

Compassion and Forgiveness

The teachings quoted above are examples of what are sometimes called the Difficult Teachings of Jesus, because most people find them very hard to follow. Their radical nature has led some people to call Jesus an extreme moralist. Others have called him a utopian dreamer, a social or political reformer, or even a communist.

But whatever else he was, he was also a person of great compassion. He had very strong feelings for the poor, the downtrodden, the outcasts, and the persecuted, and he was keenly aware of the oppression and injustice that kept them in their place. This is why he condemned greedy people who live in opulence while so many others suffer in poverty.

Jesus also had a very strong willingness to forgive. He believed that everyone deserves another chance. A good example of this is his teaching about turning the other cheek: Not only should you instantly forgive a man who strikes you on one cheek, but you should also turn your other cheek to give him a chance to see his error and realize the need to reform himself.

Jesus probably didn't mean it literally when he talked about gouging out eyes and cutting off hands. Most likely he was simply using hyperbole to emphasize his point. But the mere fact that he could talk in this way provides another example of just how strong his convictions were.

Of course most people can feel compassion, and most people have some willingness to forgive. But few, if any, have ever felt these emotions as deeply as Jesus did, or had as strong convictions as he did. That difference may explain why some of his teachings seem so radical to us.

Speaking in Tongues

According to Acts 1:4-8, before Jesus ascended to heaven he told his followers that they would soon be "baptized with the Holy Spirit". He said that this baptism would give them miraculous powers which they could use to help spread their new faith to other people.

The promised baptism took place a short time later on the Jewish day of Pentecost. As described in Acts 2:1-47, the followers of Jesus were together in a large house in Jerusalem when a sound like a rushing wind suddenly surrounded them, and flames of fire descended upon them. As the Holy Spirit filled them, they began to speak in tongues.

In this passage the word "tongue" means a foreign language. Thus the

followers of Jesus were miraculously talking in many different languages. This got the attention of people in the street outside the house, many of whom were foreigners, because they heard voices speaking their own languages. When a large crowd gathered, Peter went outside and explained how the miracle had occurred. As a result, many people were converted to the new faith.

Later events would show that this baptism with the Holy Spirit also gave Jesus' followers other miraculous powers in addition to the ability to speak foreign languages. These other powers included the ability to heal people, the ability to prophesy, and the strength to resist persecution. Called Gifts of the Holy Spirit, all of these special powers would be used to help spread the new faith.

Events would also show that the Holy Spirit can sometimes give people a different way of speaking in tongues. In this other method, instead of talking in a foreign language, a person will speak in a way that sounds like babble. This babble, which may be accompanied by shaking, jerking, and shouting, usually seems meaningless to other people who hear it.

Note: In scholarly discussions, this apparent babble is called glossolalia. The other way of speaking in tongues, miraculous speech in a foreign language, is called xenoglossy. But scholars aren't always consistent in how they use these terms, because they sometimes apply the word glossolalia to both cases.

Does a Divine Language Exist?

Among modern Christians, the babble form of glossolalia is by far the most common. But some people don't think it should be called babble. Instead, they believe that it is a divine language, often called the language of heaven or the language of the angels. To those who believe this, tongue-speakers are being used by God as channels for the delivery of messages in this divine language. And some people, called interpreters, can translate these messages into human words.

The idea of a divine language isn't new, for it was mentioned by Saint Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians. Specifically, in verse 14:2, he says:

For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God.

Actually, Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians partly because glossolalia had become so prevalent in their church that it was disrupting the worship services. To help solve this problem, he urged them to show restraint when talking in tongues during open worship. He also mentioned that he himself spoke in tongues more than any of them did, but that he normally avoided doing it during worship services (1Corinthians 14:1-19).

Paul was trying to get the Corinthians to conduct their services in a more orderly manner. But one of his recommendations for this purpose seems wrong to many modern Christians. This recommendation is found at 1Corinthians 14:34-35, where he says:

Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the Law says. If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

Some people think that Paul wrote this because he had heard that most of the disruptions in the services at Corinth were caused by women, and he thought that forbidding them from speaking would be the best way to solve the problem. But some scholars have a totally different explanation for this passage, because they don't think that Paul really wrote it. Instead, they believe that an unknown person inserted it into his letter at a later time, as part of an effort by male Christians to exclude women from leadership roles in the church. Supporters of this theory say that the passage doesn't fit smoothly with the surrounding parts of the letter, and therefore it is probably a later insertion.

But whether Paul actually wrote this passage or not, most modern women strongly disagree with it. They feel that they have just as much right to speak in church as men do. And that includes speaking in tongues.

Paul's letter, together with some other evidence, indicates that glossolalia

was a fairly common practice among the earliest Christians. Some scholars think that it became less common in subsequent centuries. But it probably never completely died out, because it is mentioned in writings and reports from several later periods.

Modern Revival of Tongue Speaking

A strong resurgence in tongue-speaking began in the early twentieth century and has been gaining strength ever since. But most of the early participants in this revival were poor people from small lesser-known church denominations. Partly for this reason, mainstream Christian leaders were initially suspicious of the activity. To them, the behavior of these new tongue-speakers appeared to be mindless emotionalism.

Mainstream leaders were especially concerned about the physical aspects of the new activity. A report on one early gathering said that people danced in the aisles, writhed on the floor, and howled like wild animals. An observer at another gathering said that the activity reminded him of the behavior of voodoo priests, who also speak in tongues and often go into a frenzy while doing so. Such reports raised considerable alarm among church leaders. Several of them even warned that tongue-speaking was the work of the Devil, who had sent out demons to lead people astray by giving them false emotions.

But despite these warnings, the movement continued to grow, and the practice has slowly gained acceptance, or at least toleration, in most Protestant denominations. In recent decades it has also spread to some Catholic and Anglican congregations. Churches in which glossolalia is prevalent are sometimes called Pentecostal or Charismatic churches.

Some members of these churches speak in a calm rhythmic patter that has been described as pleasant to the ear, or even beautiful. Others show more visible emotion, and sometimes accentuate their speaking with clapping, shaking, shouting, and dancing. In one unusual form called "holy laughter", people begin laughing uncontrollably, often falling out of their chairs and rolling around on the floor. When these people are later asked about their behavior, they say that they had no control over what they did, but were driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. Some of them have described themselves as "drunk with the Holy Spirit."

Some Christians believe that the modern resurgence in tongue speaking is a sign that the End Times are near, and that Jesus will return very soon.

Outside observers have offered several explanations for why people talk in tongues. One common explanation is that many people only pretend to do it and have to fake their performances. Another possibility is that people enter a hypnotic or trance-like state. And observers of some groups have even described what they saw as mass hysteria.

But most tongue-speakers don't care what outsiders think. They believe that they have been baptized with the Holy Spirit in the same way as the earliest followers of Jesus were. Some of them also believe that they are the only true Christians, and the only people who will be saved.

Judas Iscariot

Judas Iscariot was the infamous disciple who betrayed Jesus. According to the gospels, he led a group of armed men to a garden where Jesus was praying and identified him with a kiss. After a brief scuffle, Jesus was seized and taken to the Jewish religious leaders. They put him through a long interrogation, then turned him over to the Romans and pressured the Roman governor Pontius Pilate into ordering his crucifixion.

The Jewish leaders paid Judas a bribe for his help. Matthew 26:15 says that it was "thirty pieces of silver", possibly referring to a silver coin known as a Tyrian shekel. But Judas didn't get any benefit from the money, because he died shortly after the betrayal.

The New Testament contains two accounts of how he died. Matthew 27:3-5 says that he felt so much remorse over what he had done that he returned the bribe money and then hanged himself. And Acts 1:18 says: "with the

reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out." Because these accounts appear to differ, there is some uncertainty about how he actually died.

Note: The non-biblical Gospel of Judas (discussed below) suggests another possibility for how he died. This is the shocking idea that the other disciples stoned him to death because of the betrayal. But this probably isn't what really happened, since the bible most likely would have reported it too.

Because Judas was a common name in ancient Palestine, the gospel writers usually added the surname Iscariot to make it clear who they were talking about. John 6:71 calls him "Judas Iscariot the son of Simon." He was put in charge of the disciples' money, keeping it in a special box and making purchases for the group as needed. John 12:6 says that he sometimes stole money from the box for his personal use.

Matthew 26:14-16 suggests that Judas betrayed Jesus out of simple greed for the bribe money, whereas Luke 22:3 and John 13:27 say that the Devil entered into him and made him do it. But some biblical scholars have put forward another theory. They say that Judas wanted Jesus to lead a revolt against the Romans and got angry when it became clear that no revolt was planned.



The Kiss of Judas
by Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337)

Jesus was fully aware of the coming betrayal. He talked about it several times, and though he never mentioned Judas by name, he did identify him indirectly. This fore-knowledge has led some people to argue that the betrayal wasn't an act of free will, but was imposed on Judas as part of a divine plan for the atonement between God and humankind.

But most theologians believe that Judas did act in free will and should be punished for it. And in Matthew 26:24, Jesus says "woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." The medieval writer Dante Alighieri apparently agreed, because in his *Inferno* section of the *Divine Comedy* he condemned Judas to the lowest circle of Hell, doomed to be chewed for eternity in the teeth of Satan.

Yet some people still argue that Judas shouldn't be blamed. Several scholars have suggested that he may have simply been the negotiator in a secret pre-arranged surrender, and that his later portrayal as a traitor is a historical distortion. Variations on this idea were put forward in the book *The Passover Plot* by author Hugh J. Schonfield, and in the controversial film *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

This idea surfaced again with the discovery of an ancient copy of a previously lost Gospel of Judas. This book appears to depict Judas as the most trusted of all the disciples. It also says that Jesus told him about the

necessity for a betrayal and asked him to take the blame for it. But the only existing copy of this gospel is badly damaged, and considerable guesswork is involved in determining the correct translations of some key passages. As a result, questions have arisen as to how it really depicts Judas. In any case, because it probably wasn't written until the second century, most scholars doubt that it is a trustworthy source of information.

Another unorthodox view of Judas can be found in a fraudulent book called the *Gospel of Barnabas*. This book makes the preposterous claim that Judas, not Jesus, was the person who died on the cross. It alleges that this happened because Judas was miraculously transformed to look like Jesus shortly after the betrayal and was accidentally crucified in his place. Of course this entire story is an obvious fabrication.

The origin of the surname Iscariot is uncertain. According to one theory, the name means "man of Kerioth", and refers to a town or area in ancient Judea. If correct, this would suggest that Judas came from southern Palestine, whereas the other disciples were probably Galileans from the north. According to another theory, the name Iscariot comes from the Latin word "*sicarius*", meaning "dagger-man". The Sicarii were a group of rebel assassins who were resisting the Roman occupation of the country. Thus Judas might have originally been a member of this group.

Perhaps the best-known artistic depiction of Judas is *The Kiss of Judas* by Giotto di Bondone, c.1306, a fresco in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua. Another well-known depiction can be found in Leonardo da Vinci's *The Last Supper*. Here the artist shows Judas as somewhat smaller and darker than the other disciples, and he appears to be clutching a bag which may contain the bribe money.

The Son of Man

In the gospels Jesus often refers to himself as the "Son of Man". The term appears in all four gospels, and is used more than 70 times. The way it is used suggests that it was a title. But if so, what did it mean?

Linguistically, in the Aramaic of that period, the term "son of man" simply meant "an ordinary man" or "an ordinary human being". But many scholars believe that it also had a specific prophetic meaning. They point to a passage in the Old Testament Book of Daniel (7:13-14), which reads:

In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

In this passage Daniel seems to be using "son of man" as a name for the Messiah. According to the old Jewish prophecies, the Messiah was a great future leader who would overthrow all evil rulers and set up an eternal Kingdom of God. During the years when Jesus was growing up, many people were expecting this Messiah to appear within a short time.

But there were different ideas about how the Messiah would accomplish his goals. Many common people thought of him as a military leader who would drive the Romans out of the country. But the scriptures sometimes depicted him as a devout holy figure who would use non-violent methods and God's assistance to achieve his ends.

Many scholars believe that Jesus used "Son of Man" in the same way as the Book of Daniel did, as an alternate name for the Messiah. Jesus even used the same imagery as Daniel in several of his own statements, such as when he says (Mark 13:26) "At that time men will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory."

But why would Jesus use a substitute name for the Messiah? One possibility is that he realized that he might be arrested if he openly called himself the Messiah, and so he used Son of Man as a secret "code name".

Most likely the authorities knew about the Messiah, and were ready to arrest anyone who claimed that title. But they may not have known what Son of Man meant.

Another possibility is that Son of Man was a specific name for the non-violent type of Messiah, and Jesus wanted to make it clear that he didn't intend to start a revolt. In his view the main role of the Messiah was to provide an atonement for everyone's sins so as to bring about a reconciliation between humankind and God.

Some scholars think that "Son of Man" is a misleading translation of the original Aramaic, and that a better translation would be "Son of Humanity". This could be interpreted to mean that Jesus represented the whole human race. Another possible translation, found in some bibles, is "Son of Adam". But however the term is translated, it was probably an alternate name for the Messiah.

Why Did Jesus Have to Die?

Most modern Christians believe that Jesus suffered and died in order to pay for everyone's sins. By sacrificing himself, he brought about the atonement that allowed God to forgive us and offer us salvation.

But many people wonder why God didn't just forgive everyone outright, without requiring a sacrifice first. There are several possible explanations for why a sacrifice was necessary. Known as Atonement Theories, they can be briefly described as follows:

The Ransom Theory

In Mark 10:45 Jesus says that he came to give his life "as a ransom for many." The idea that he died in order to pay a ransom is the basis for the Ransom Theory. This is one of the oldest atonement theories, and during the first thousand years of Christianity, it was the most common explanation for why Jesus had to suffer and die.

The early Christian scholar Origen gave one of the first full descriptions of this theory. He said that the disobedience of Adam and Eve caused God to abandon humankind to the Devil, who then exerted his power over us. Later, when God decided to reconcile with us, he agreed to pay Satan a ransom for our release. The agreed-upon payment was Jesus' death on the cross. After the crucifixion, Satan kept his part of the bargain by releasing us from his power. But then God pulled a trick on him by resurrecting Jesus.

Some later writers argued that God's trickery was justified because the Devil himself is so dishonest. Others said that Satan should have known not to ask for Jesus' death in the first place, and therefore got just what he deserved.

The Ransom Theory is also called the Bargain Theory and the Classical Theory. It was the primary atonement theory for more than a thousand years, from the first century to the eleventh century, and is still accepted by some Christians.

The Satisfaction Theory

The eleventh-century scholar Saint Anselm didn't like the Ransom Theory. He believed that an outlaw like the Devil had no right to exert power over humankind, and therefore God didn't need to pay him anything for our release.

To replace the Ransom Theory, Anselm put forward another explanation known as the Satisfaction Theory (or Debt Theory). According to this theory, all of humankind owes a debt to God because we dishonored him through our disobedience and sin. But his pride, as well as the need for universal justice, prevents him from simply forgiving us. To resolve the matter, Jesus volunteered to pay our debt for us by suffering and dying on the cross. God accepted this act of love as a full atonement, and thus satisfied, he then forgave us and offered us salvation.

Some people still wonder why God didn't just forgive us outright. Another criticism of this theory is that it puts Jesus in the role of a sacrificial lamb. In

ancient times lambs and other animals were often sacrificed to pagan gods as a way to appease them. It was thought that the death of an animal could serve as a substitute payment for a person's sins. Similarly, in the Satisfaction Theory, the suffering and death of Jesus serves as a substitute payment for humankind's sins.

The Moral Exemplar Theory

According to this theory, Jesus tried to help us obtain salvation by giving us a perfect moral example of how to live. He hoped that his teachings and his example would inspire us to lift ourselves out of sin and enter into true communion with God.

This theory, which is also called the Moral Influence Theory, is usually attributed to the medieval scholar Peter Abelard. Many Christians have found it attractive and helpful. But some people wonder how it explains the crucifixion, since Jesus could have given us his teachings, and also provided a perfect moral example, without dying on the cross. One possible answer is that his death, though not strictly necessary, helped to draw attention to his life and therefore made his mission more effective.

Unfortunately, many people continue to ignore the example that Jesus set, and still commit immoral acts. Thus, if the purpose of his mission was to inspire everyone to live without sin, so far it hasn't been fully successful.

The Penal-Substitution Theory

The basic idea of this theory is that Jesus suffered and died to take upon himself the punishment that we ourselves deserve. Although God wasn't willing to forgive us outright, he was willing to accept the punishment of Jesus as a substitute for our own punishment. Thus, in this theory Jesus takes the role of an innocent scapegoat who is punished for the sins of others.

On one occasion God punished humankind by sending a flood that killed everyone on the earth except a few people on Noah's boat. But according to the Penal-Substitution theory, when humankind later needed to be punished again, God allowed Jesus to take the punishment for us.

Some of the underlying assumptions of this theory can be found in the letters of Saint Paul. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century took those assumptions and developed them into the modern form of the theory. In some ways it resembles the Satisfaction Theory, since Jesus' act of taking our punishment for us is basically equivalent to paying our debt for us.

The Penal-Substitution Theory is accepted by many modern Protestants. Most of them also believe that Jesus' sacrifice brought the possibility of forgiveness to everyone, including people who have lived since the crucifixion and people who will be born in the future. This is known as universal atonement. But some Christians believe that Jesus died only for the "elect", a small minority who are predestined to be saved. This is called definite (or limited) atonement.

The Governmental Theory

According to this theory, God acts as a governor (or overseer) of all life on the earth. But he became very displeased with the way people were behaving, and he wanted to show us that we deserve severe punishment. To demonstrate just how severe, he sent Jesus to suffer and die.

Thus, the crucifixion was meant to be a demonstration of the punishment that we all deserve. By showing us this example, God hoped that we would realize the seriousness of our sins and reform ourselves. He could have actually punished us, and would have been justified in doing so, but decided to merely give us a warning, and let us have another chance.

One problem with this theory is the fact that many people have lived and died without ever hearing about Jesus or the crucifixion, and therefore were never aware of God's warning. And many people who are aware of it appear to disregard it.

The Christus Victor Theory

In 1931 Gustaf Aulen published the book *Christus Victor*, in which he argued that Jesus came to earth to defeat the evil forces that had gained control over us. To win our salvation, Jesus needed to overcome both Satan and death. The name *Christus Victor*, which means "Christ the Victor", refers

to his successful accomplishment of this task.

In some ways this theory is similar to the Ransom Theory, for it assumes that humankind had come under the control of the Devil after the sins of Adam and Eve caused God to abandon us. But in this theory, instead of God paying Satan a ransom for our release, Jesus freed us by directly defeating the Evil One. And his resurrection proved that death can also be conquered.

In his book Aulen argues that this was the original belief of the earliest Christians. It is also the basic belief of many modern Eastern Orthodox Christians, and in recent years it has become popular among some evangelical Christians.

Summary

The starting point for all of these theories is the alienation from God brought about by humankind's sins. This alienation is what allowed the Devil to gain influence over us and lead us into even greater sin.

In some theories the first step in solving the problem is to free humankind from the Devil's influence. In other theories that step can be skipped, because Satan will automatically be pushed aside if we reconcile with God.

One solution would be for everyone to reform themselves and start living in accordance with God's wishes. But there is apparently very little chance that this will happen. Therefore any reconciliation between God and humankind requires a divine action. The simplest action would be for God to simply forgive everyone unconditionally. But he wasn't willing to do this, and so another way to bring about the reconciliation had to be found.

The Beloved Disciple

One of the biggest mysteries in biblical scholarship concerns the identity of "the disciple whom Jesus loved." According to the Gospel of John, this was the disciple who leaned on Jesus during the Last Supper, and the only male disciple present at the crucifixion. In addition, John 21:24 implies that the entire Gospel of John is based on this disciple's memories. Yet, oddly, it never gives his name.

The other three gospels don't give his name either. In fact they never even mention this "Beloved Disciple" (as he is often called). They also say nothing about any disciple leaning on Jesus during the Last Supper or witnessing the crucifixion. Their total silence on the matter only adds to the mystery.

Church tradition does provide a name. It asserts that the Beloved Disciple was none other than John the son of Zebedee, the brother of James, and one of the original twelve disciples. This is why the fourth gospel is named John. In fact the tradition identifies John as the actual author of the gospel, not just the source of information for another writer.

Most biblical scholars doubt that John was the final author. The gospel is written in elegant Greek, and it makes use of advanced theological concepts. It isn't the type of book that a Galilean fisherman like John, whose native language was almost certainly Aramaic, likely would have written.

But the gospel, or parts of it, could still be based on John's memories. Therefore he could still be the Beloved Disciple. Obviously he was in a position to know a great deal about the events that the gospel describes. He could have passed this information to other people, and someone else could have later used it as the basis for the final version of the gospel.

However, the evidence for identifying John Zebedee as the Beloved Disciple is far from conclusive. And many scholars believe that there are better candidates. But before we get to their arguments, we first need to list the main items of evidence:

Item 1. The Gospel of John often uses the word "disciple" to describe any follower of Jesus. Thus the Beloved Disciple wasn't necessarily one of the original twelve.

Item 2. References to this disciple always use the words "he", "him", and

"his". Thus, unless this is a deliberate attempt to deceive, the person in question was a male.

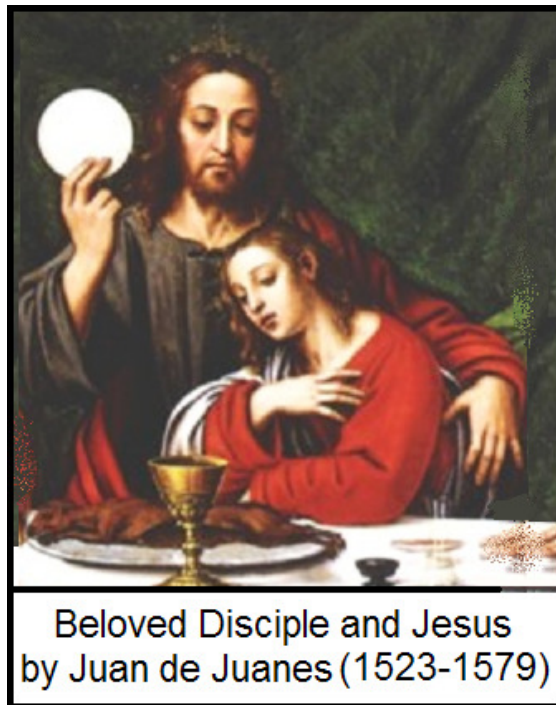
Item 3. John 19:27 says that Jesus' mother Mary went to live at the home of the Beloved Disciple after the crucifixion. Acts 1:14 says that she was part of the early community of believers, known as the Nazarenes, who lived in Jerusalem during that same period. Taken together, these two pieces of information indicate that the Beloved Disciple must have had a home in or near Jerusalem.

Item 4. The Gospel of John gives a detailed description of the interrogations of Jesus by the Jewish leaders and by Pilate. Presumably this information came from the Beloved Disciple. This implies that he was able to gain access to the locations of both interrogations, and therefore must have had a personal connection with at least one member of the Jewish religious establishment.

Item 5. During the crucifixion, the Beloved Disciple stood near the cross. This could indicate that he wasn't afraid of being arrested as a known follower of Jesus.

Item 6. The Gospel of John says that Jesus made several visits to Jerusalem prior to his final visit during the week of the crucifixion. He could have met the Beloved Disciple during one of these earlier visits. The authors of the other gospels appear to be unaware of any earlier visits to Jerusalem. That could help explain their silence about this disciple.

Taken together, the evidence seems to indicate that the Beloved Disciple was a man, that he lived in or near Jerusalem and had a home there, and that he may have personally known at least one high-ranking Jewish religious official. Another possible conclusion is that Jesus met him during an earlier visit to Jerusalem, and formed a closer relationship with him than the other disciples realized.



We know that Jesus had at least one secret disciple in Jerusalem. According to John 19:38, Joseph of Arimathea "was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews." This man had enough social prominence to be able to personally ask the Roman governor Pontius Pilate for permission to remove Jesus from the cross and bury him. Another influential man that Jesus knew was Nicodemus, who John 3:1-21 calls "a member of the Jewish ruling council". Thus Jesus had at least two friends or secret disciples who lived in Jerusalem. The Beloved Disciple could have been a third.

So who was this "disciple whom Jesus loved"? Now that we have reviewed the main items of evidence, we can look at specific possibilities:

John the Son of Zebedee

As already noted, the main reason for identifying John Zebedee as the Beloved Disciple is church tradition. However, there is no known mention of this tradition until near the end of the second century, probably at least 80 years after the gospel was written. Also, the identification could have resulted from confusion between John Zebedee and John the Elder, a later figure who may have put the gospel into its final form. For these reasons, many scholars doubt the validity of the tradition.

Several items of evidence also seem inconsistent with the idea that John was the Beloved Disciple. For example, it is unlikely that a Galilean fisherman would have had a house in or near Jerusalem, or would have been allowed to witness the interrogations of Jesus by the Jewish leaders and Pilate. Also, if a prominent disciple like John was the authority behind the fourth gospel, its author most likely would have mentioned it within the gospel itself, since this would add legitimacy and prestige to the work.

These arguments seem plausible to many people. But they are not conclusive, and for that reason the traditional view that John Zebedee was the Beloved Disciple can't be completely ruled out. And many Christians still accept it.

An Unknown priest

In his book *The Passover Plot*, author Hugh Schonfield argues that the Beloved Disciple was an otherwise unknown priest who lived in Jerusalem. Schonfield says that this priest was a secret disciple of Jesus who was also well enough acquainted with top Jewish officials to be able to gain entry to the interrogations of Jesus.

The book also suggests that the Last Supper took place in this priest's home. That would explain why he was present. And since he was the host, he would have had the privilege of sitting next to Jesus during the meal.

This proposal appears to match the known facts. But it is incomplete in that it doesn't identify a specific person.

Lazarus

A number of scholars have argued that the Beloved Disciple was Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha of Bethany, and the man that Jesus raised from the dead. Much of the argument is based on John 11:1-3, which says that as Lazarus lay sick, his sisters sent a message to Jesus which said "Lord, the one you love is sick." John 11:5 and 11:36 also say that Jesus loved Lazarus.

The Gospel of John never mentions Lazarus by name after Chapter 12, and it first mentions the Beloved Disciple in Chapter 13. Some argue that this isn't a coincidence, but that the gospel simply changed its way of referring to Lazarus.

John 11:18-19 indicates that Lazarus' house in Bethany was less than two miles from Jerusalem, and that he knew many people in the city. This could mean that he had enough social status to gain admittance to the interrogations of Jesus. His house was also close enough to Jerusalem to serve as a home for Jesus' mother.

The other three gospels never mention Lazarus, at least not by name. John 11:16 indicates that some of the other disciples saw Jesus raise him from the dead, so they must have known about the incident. It seems odd that the other gospels would fail to mention such a remarkable miracle. However, a fragment of the Secret Gospel of Mark does appear to describe the incident, although it doesn't give the raised man's name.

Overall, Lazarus seems a good fit for the evidence, and many scholars think that he is the best candidate.

Mary Magdalene

Various books and movies have popularized the idea that Mary Magdalene was the Beloved Disciple. Some people have gone even further, claiming that she secretly married Jesus and bore him a child.

While most scholars dismiss the idea that she married Jesus, or bore him a child, a few still think that she could have been the Beloved Disciple. In fact there is some evidence that she did have a "special" relationship with Jesus. For instance, in a fragment of the apocryphal "Gospel of Mary", the disciple

Levi tells Peter "Surely the Savior knows her very well. That is why he loved her more than us." Another apocryphal work, the Gospel of Philip, also may contain hints of a special relationship between Mary and Jesus.

Some people think that the figure immediately to the left of Jesus in the painting *The Last Supper* by Leonardo da Vinci, traditionally identified as John, looks more like a woman than a man. This has led to the theory that Leonardo had secret knowledge about Mary Magdalene which indicated that she was the Beloved Disciple.

One problem with this identification is that the bible always uses "he", "him" and "his" when referring to the Beloved Disciple. Also, John 20:2 clearly depicts Mary Magdalene and the Beloved Disciple as two different people. But some people argue that these are false clues which an unknown person deliberately inserted into the text to try to hide the truth.

Other Candidates

The individuals listed above are generally regarded as the best candidates for the role, but others are occasionally proposed. These have even included such unlikely possibilities as Saint Paul and Judas Iscariot. Some scholars even argue that the Beloved Disciple wasn't a real person, but a symbolic figure created to represent anyone who embraces Christ as his redeemer.

Summary:

To many scholars, Lazarus appears to be the most likely possibility. But John Zebedee can't be completely ruled out, and many Christians hold to the traditional view that he was the Beloved Disciple.

Note: Most scholars reject the frequent assertion that Jesus had a homosexual relationship with the Beloved Disciple.

Secret Gospels

Some early Christians believed that certain gospels contained secret knowledge. Copies of these gospels were usually passed around privately, so that only certain people would have a chance to read them. For these reasons, biblical scholars call them "secret gospels".

In some cases a secret gospel was only used by a particular group or community of Christians. When that group disappeared, or was absorbed into the general Christian movement, its secret gospel could be lost, especially if only a few copies had existed. Some of these gospels may have also been intentionally destroyed because they expressed unorthodox views.

But several secret gospels have survived. One of them, the Gospel of Thomas, could be one of the earliest known Christian writings. Another one, the Secret Gospel of Mark, may contain some missing sections of the New Testament Gospel of Mark. Others may provide information about the gnostics and other groups that existed outside the main Christian movement.

Judging by their content, secret gospels could contain two kinds of special knowledge:

1. A private revelation received directly from God or Jesus. Such a revelation could be received through a vision or dream, or through a mystical communication.

2. Secret teachings of Jesus or his disciples which were passed down privately. In most cases these teachings would initially be transmitted through private conversations, but eventually someone would write them down, often in the form of secret sayings.

The special knowledge found in secret gospels was thought to be a pathway to true wisdom and final salvation. But anyone lucky enough to obtain a copy of one of them could have encountered an unexpected problem. This is because the writing in these gospels was often hard to interpret, and the reader might be expected to find a "hidden meaning". Thus,

only the select group of people who could interpret the gospel correctly would gain any benefit from it.

Evidence for the existence of secret knowledge can be found within the New Testament itself. For example, in Mark 4:11-12, Jesus tells his disciples:

"The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding."

This suggests that Jesus revealed a special "secret of the kingdom of God" to his disciples, but not to "those on the outside".

The letters of Paul indicate that he also passed along secret knowledge to certain favored individuals. For instance, in 1Corinthians 2:6-8 he mentions "God's secret wisdom", and says that he has given it to "the mature", by which he apparently meant his most advanced converts.

The gnostic sects of Christians were especially interested in secret knowledge. In fact, the word "gnostic" is derived from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means "knowledge". In gnostic usage this word often had the special meaning of "hidden" or "secret" knowledge.

Some secret gospels have probably been lost forever. Others survive only as fragments or secondary translations. The best known survivors are the Gospel of Thomas, the Secret Gospel of Mark, the Apocryphon of James, the Secret Book of John, the Gospel of Judas, the Dialogue of the Savior, and the Gospel of Truth. Here are brief descriptions of some of them:

The Gospel of Thomas

The opening lines of this gospel say that it contains "secret sayings" of Jesus, and that anyone who discovers their true meaning "will not taste death". The gospel then gives 114 of these sayings, most of them introduced by the words "Jesus said".

Because some of these sayings, or variations of them, also appear in the New Testament, a modern reader might conclude that they weren't really secret. But the Gospel of Thomas may have been written before the New Testament gospels, so its claims about secret information could have originally been valid. It may be an example of a gospel that started out as a secret book but later became well-known.

Although Jesus spoke Aramaic, this gospel was probably first written in Greek, with his sayings translated into that language. But the only surviving complete copy is a Coptic translation. Thus, the English versions of most of the sayings are the result of three translations. Partly for this reason, modern English readers may find some of the sayings hard to understand.

The Gospel of Thomas could be one of the earliest known Christian writings, and it may contain some authentic sayings of Jesus not found anywhere else. For these reasons, many scholars consider it to be the most important surviving non-biblical gospel.

The Secret Gospel of Mark

As its name indicates, this gospel was a special version of the New Testament Gospel of Mark. The exact differences between the two versions are uncertain. But the secret form of the gospel was probably longer, because it contained at least two passages that aren't in the New Testament version.

These extra passages are preserved in a letter attributed to the second century writer Clement of Alexandria. A copy of this letter was discovered by Morton Smith in 1958 at the Mar Saba Monastery in Israel. Although some people have expressed doubts about the genuineness of this letter, most scholars have concluded that it is authentic.

The longest extra passage in the secret gospel is a variation of the story of the raising of Lazarus as described in the Gospel of John. But the secret gospel contains a more primitive version of the story, and it also includes an account of an "initiation", in which Jesus and Lazarus spend the night together. The other extra passage is a short description of an encounter between Jesus and the family of Lazarus in Jericho.

Some scholars think that the Secret Gospel of Mark was the original version of the gospel, and that the New Testament version is a later edition in which certain passages have been removed. If so, one of the removed

passages could be the original ending of the gospel, which appears to be missing from the New Testament version. Thus, if a complete copy of the secret version could be found, the true original ending might be revealed.

The Apocryphon of James

For many centuries this was a lost gospel. Then in 1945 a complete manuscript was discovered near the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi. One of its passages suggests that it was originally written in Hebrew, but internal evidence indicates that the surviving copy is a Coptic translation of a Greek text.

The book is named after James the Just, the oldest brother of Jesus. The opening lines say that it contains a secret revelation which Jesus gave to James and Peter before he ascended to Heaven. This revelation is then presented as a dialogue in which Jesus gives a number of sayings, parables, prophecies, and rules of conduct. There is a possibility that some of these sayings really do go back to Jesus. But scholars don't know who actually wrote this book, or what sources were used in composing it.

Near its beginning the Apocryphon of James mentions another "secret book", which may have described a different revelation from Jesus to James. But if this other book actually existed, it has apparently been lost.

The Gospel of Judas

This gospel was probably originally written in Greek, but the only known copy is a Coptic version that was found in Egypt. There is some mystery surrounding the discovery of this copy. At one point it was apparently in the possession of a dealer on the black market, who may have sold some of the individual pages in separate transactions. In any case, the existing copy is badly damaged, and some pages are missing.

Internal evidence indicates that this gospel was written during the second century, which means that Judas Iscariot couldn't have been the real author. Since it expresses some gnostic views, it may have originated among that group of Christians.

The Gospel of Judas has attracted attention because it may depict Judas as a favored disciple of Jesus rather than a betrayer. Even before it was discovered, some people had argued that Judas was only a pawn in a divine plan and therefore shouldn't be blamed for what he did. The Gospel of Judas may express a similar view.

However, because the only known copy is badly damaged, controversies have erupted over the correct translations of some critical sections. Thus there is some uncertainty about how this gospel really depicts Judas.

The Secret Book of John

This book, which is also called the Apocryphon of John, was probably written in the second century. Its unknown author claimed to be John the son of Zebedee, one of the original twelve disciples. The opening lines say that Jesus gave some secret teachings to John after his resurrection. These teachings are then described in detail.

Actually, two different versions of this gospel have been discovered. Most scholars think that the shorter version is the original, and that the longer version is a later expansion. In any case, both versions are essentially gnostic works. As such, they are important sources for the study of early gnosticism. But they probably contain little, if any, valid historical information about the real teachings of Jesus.

The Eucharist

The Eucharist is a ceremonial re-enactment of the Last Supper. It is also called Holy Communion and the Lord's Supper. Its traditional purpose is to give worshipers the opportunity to eat the flesh of Jesus and drink his blood. The flesh and blood are assumed to be miraculously created out of bread and wine at an earlier stage of the ceremony.

The miraculous conversion of bread and wine into flesh and blood is called transubstantiation. The traditional belief is that the conversion occurs

when the bread and wine are consecrated by the reciting of the phrases "this is my body" and "this is my blood". The Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and several lesser-known Christian groups officially affirm that the transformation actually does take place.

The origin of the Eucharist can be traced to certain passages in the gospels, including John 6:53-58, Mark 14:22-24, Matthew 26:26-28, and Luke 22:19-20. For example, in John 6:53-54, Jesus says:

"I tell you the truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Taken literally, this passage says that it is necessary to consume the flesh and blood of Jesus in order to be saved. The Eucharist provides an opportunity to do this, with the miracle of transubstantiation supplying the needed flesh and blood.

To most people, the bread and wine still look and taste the same after they are consecrated. Many believers in a real transformation consider this to be just another part of the miracle. Others say that the flesh and blood of Jesus is inter-mixed at the microscopic level and thus isn't noticed. On the other hand, many modern Christians simply regard it as symbolically representing Christ's flesh and blood. In some churches grape juice is substituted for the wine used in the traditional form of the sacrament.

In ancient times, when the number of Christians was still small, outsiders heard rumors about the Eucharist and reached the conclusion that it was a form of cannibalism. This gave Christianity a bad reputation, and was one of the reasons for the persecution of the early believers.

The True Cross

The cross on which Jesus died is called the True Cross. According to Christian tradition, it vanished after the crucifixion, but was found again about three centuries later during a search in Jerusalem. Parts of it were eventually taken to other places, and many modern churches claim to have small pieces of the wood. Some people believe that this wood has miraculous healing powers.

The bible doesn't say what happened to the cross after Jesus was removed from it. Some Christians claimed later that the Jews had hidden it, but this is unlikely. In fact, no reliable reports of its whereabouts appeared for almost three hundred years. Then finally, according to church historians, it was discovered in Jerusalem in the year 326 AD by Empress Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great.

The Empress went to the city in that year to search for Jesus' tomb and the location of Golgotha (the place where he was crucified). The historical descriptions of her search differ about certain details, but they all agree that she successfully identified both locations, and also found three crosses in the same area. She believed that these were the crosses used to crucify Jesus and the two men put to death with him. But initially she didn't know which one was the true cross.

There are slightly different accounts of how the Empress determined which cross was the correct one. According to a book called the *Acts of Judas Cyriacus*, the crosses were laid (one at a time) on the coffin of a dead youth. The first two crosses had no effect, but the third one instantly brought the youth back to life, thereby proving itself to be the true cross. Another account, by the historian Rufinus, says that the test was performed on a dying woman, who was immediately restored to health when touched by the third cross. Of course it's possible that both tests were done, perhaps with different people as witnesses.

At any rate, in both cases the true cross was easily identified by its miraculous healing power. The usual explanation for this healing power is that it is an intrinsic property of the wood itself, created when the cross was in physical contact with the body of Christ and stained with his blood, sweat,

and tears.

After its identification, the true cross was separated into at least two pieces, one of which remained in Jerusalem, while another was taken to Constantinople. But fragments soon began to turn up in many other places. As early as 348 AD, Cyril of Jerusalem said that the "whole earth is full of the relics of the cross of Christ." Even more fragments became available during the Middle Ages after Crusaders found large pieces while plundering conquered cities.

Eventually the wood became so plentiful that some people obtained their own individual pieces, or at least small particles, and kept them inside gold crucifixes which they wore suspended from their necks. Hundreds of churches and monasteries also acquired pieces, many of which are still kept inside reliquaries decorated with gold and jewels.

The existence of so many pieces has led some people to question whether a single cross could have supplied enough wood for all of them. One famous doubter, the great Protestant reformer John Calvin, suggested that all the existing fragments, if collected together, would fill a large ship. Some theologians responded to Calvin's charge by asserting that wood from the true cross can miraculously multiply itself, thereby creating whatever amount is required to meet the need. It is also possible that Calvin vastly overestimated the total volume of the surviving fragments, and that a single cross actually could have provided all the necessary wood.

Of course, even if a single cross could have provided enough wood, this doesn't mean that all of the surviving pieces are genuine. In fact there is a good chance that many of them are fakes. Some historians believe that dishonest knights brought chunks of ordinary wood back from the crusades and sold them to church officials under the false claim that they came from the true cross. As for the numerous small pieces, many of them were bought from traveling merchants who probably didn't know (or care) where the wood originally came from. Even the cross discovered by Saint Helena might not have been the real true cross. The various accounts of the discovery differ about certain details, and this raises questions about what she actually found.

Even so, many people have believed that at least some of the pieces are genuine. This belief was especially prevalent during the Middle Ages, and new stories about the wood's miraculous healing power appeared throughout that period. One explanation for these stories is that the reported cures were "faith healings" brought about by an extremely strong belief in the power of the wood. Some of these stories could have also been fabrications created to attract pilgrims to the church or holy site where the wood was located.

Reports of modern healings are not very common, possibly because most specimens of the wood are now kept in reliquaries or glass enclosures where they can't be physically touched. Also, many specimens could be fakes, and these obviously wouldn't have any healing power.

Barabbas

According to the gospels, it was customary for the Romans to release a Jewish prisoner during the Passover festival. The Roman governor Pontius Pilate tried to use this custom as an excuse to release Jesus. But an unruly crowd in the courtyard demanded that a prisoner named Barabbas be freed instead, and Pilate eventually gave in to the pressure. Thus Barabbas was released, and Jesus was crucified.

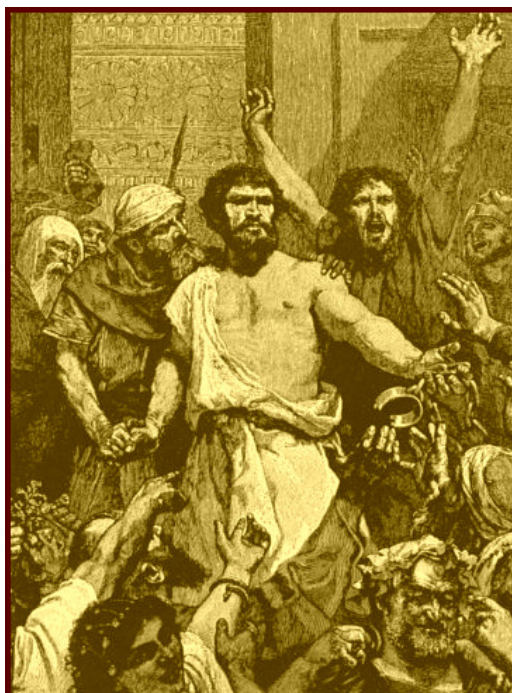
In books and movies, Barabbas is usually depicted as an evil criminal. But he may have actually been a freedom fighter in the Jewish resistance to the Romans. Evidence for this can be found at Mark 15:7, which says that he was in prison because he had taken part in a recent uprising. In fact, some biblical scholars think that he was an important rebel leader. If so, this would explain why the crowd shouted for his release, because any leader in the fight against the hated Romans would be very popular with the common people.

But Jesus was also very popular with the common people. When he

entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, he was greeted by large excited crowds. Many people believed that he was the long-awaited Messiah, who with God's help would overthrow all oppressive rulers and establish a new eternal Kingdom of God.

But if Jesus and Barabbas were both very popular, why did the crowd call for Jesus to be crucified and Barabbas to be released? The probable explanation is that the crowd was dominated by employees of the Jewish religious authorities. Their servants and henchmen would have been in the courtyard, and probably composed a significant part of the gathering there. Also, because Jesus was arrested late at night and brought before Pilate early the next morning, most of his followers probably didn't know where he was, or what was happening to him. And his closest followers had apparently gone into hiding out of fear of arrest.

Thus the Jewish leaders could have told their servants and henchmen to shout for Barabbas to be released, and the rest of the crowd could have then joined in. This explanation is supported by Mark 15:11, which says that the "chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead." But why did the Jewish leaders want Jesus to die instead of Barabbas? The answer is that many of the common people believed that Jesus was the Messiah, and this made him a threat to their authority.



Give Us Barabbas
Illustration from 1909 Bible

The Mystery of Barabbas

The so-called "mystery of Barabbas" refers to some puzzling similarities between the released prisoner and Jesus himself. The most striking similarity concerns their names. Some ancient Syriac copies of Matthew, and a few other ancient sources, call the freed prisoner "Jesus bar Abbas". The name Barabbas can be obtained from this by eliminating the first name "Jesus" and changing "bar Abbas" to "Barabbas". Furthermore, the phrase "bar Abbas" can be translated as "son of the Father", which could possibly be applied to Jesus himself, since he sometimes used the word "Abba" (father) in referring to God.

From this evidence, many scholars have concluded that Barabbas' original name was "Jesus bar Abbas". Other evidence indicates that this name was intentionally altered by later Christian writers. One well-known case concerns the scholar Origen, who reportedly promoted the change for reverential reasons, because he didn't want the name "Jesus" to be associated with a criminal.

Another similarity between the two men relates to their possible roles as rebel leaders. The gospel of Mark says that Barabbas had been imprisoned for taking part in a revolt, and his popularity with the crowd suggests that he had been one of its leaders. But from the viewpoint of the Romans, Jesus could have also appeared to be a rebel leader. Many people were calling him the Messiah, a title which implied that he would overthrow the existing government. He had a large number of followers, many of whom might be

easily swayed into taking part in a revolt. In fact, his earlier attack on the temple merchants could be regarded as a "mini-revolt".

Thus, both men may have had the same name, and both of them could have appeared to be rebel leaders, at least from the Romans' viewpoint. These similarities are known as the "mystery of Barabbas". Some people think that the similarities are too close to be accidental and have looked for another way to explain them. According to one radical theory, in the original story Jesus himself was the imprisoned rebel leader, and Barabbas is an invented "fictional duplicate" inserted into the story to play that role instead. The motive for such a change would be to cover up the fact that Jesus had tried to organize a revolt against the Romans and was crucified as a result.

But this theory is mostly speculation, and its supporters have to resort to questionable arguments to explain the details. For these reasons, most scholars are unconvinced. In fact, Jesus was a common name in ancient Palestine, and uprisings against the Romans took place quite frequently. Therefore it shouldn't be surprising that a rebel leader with the same name as Jesus would happen to be in Roman custody on the day of the crucifixion.

Note: The gospels don't say what Barabbas did after he was released. But other ancient sources do preserve some traditions about him. According to one tradition, on the day he was released he went to Golgotha and watched Jesus die on the cross. Some sources also say that he was later killed while taking part in another revolt against the Romans.

Will Jesus Come Again?

After Jesus ascended to Heaven, his followers expected him to eventually return to the earth again. This expected return is known as the Second Coming. It is also called the Second Advent, the Parousia, and the Last Coming.

During his ministry Jesus talked about a second coming on a number of occasions. For example, in John 14:3, he says "I will come back", and in Matthew 16:27 he says "For the Son of Man is going to return in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what he has done."

Most Christians believe that Jesus did promise to return. But some people are puzzled by certain statements he made regarding the time of his return. One such statement can be found at Matthew 16:28, in which he says "I tell you the truth, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Another example is found at Luke 21:32, where he says "I tell you the truth, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened." He makes similar statements in Luke 9:27 and Mark 9:1.

Some people take these statements to mean that Jesus promised to return while some of his disciples were still alive. But his meaning isn't completely clear, and it's possible to interpret the statements in a way that doesn't put any time limit on when he will come back.

However, his original followers may have misunderstood him, because they believed that he would return very quickly. That's why many of them stayed in Jerusalem instead of going back to their homes in Galilee and returning to their former occupations. They expected the second coming to take place either in Jerusalem or on the nearby Mount of Olives, and they wanted to be in the area when it happened. Because they anticipated only a short wait, they saw no reason to go back to their previous way of life.

The apostle Paul also expected a quick return. Although he apparently never met Jesus, he knew about the promised return, and he expected to live long enough to see it happen. In 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 he says that the time is so short that believers must drastically change the way they live. But several of his letters, particularly those he wrote to the Thessalonians, reveal that some people were starting to wonder why Jesus hadn't already returned and were concerned about the delay.

As the delay grew longer, it was natural for people to start worrying that they wouldn't live long enough to see Jesus return. But an intriguing passage

at John 21:20-23 suggests that many people held onto their hopes for a surprisingly long time. At one point in this passage Peter asks Jesus about the final fate of the Beloved Disciple. The passage continues as follows:

Jesus answered, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." Because of this, the rumor spread among the brothers that this disciple would not die. But Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"

Evidently Jesus had once made a statement about wanting the Beloved Disciple "to remain alive until I return." Such a statement could have caused people to expect this disciple to live until the second coming. Thus, as long as he remained alive, people could still hold out hope that Jesus would soon return.

The passage also mentions a rumor that the Beloved Disciple would never die. This could indicate that he eventually reached a very advanced age. But at some point he finally did die, and this may have been the final blow to the expectations of a quick second coming. Some scholars think that this passage was written shortly after this disciple's death, and that it is an attempt to explain why Jesus still hadn't come back.

Because the early hopes for a quick return weren't fulfilled, later Christians gradually shifted their attention away from the second coming. But most modern Christians still believe in it. A number of people have even predicted an exact time and place for it, and in some cases large crowds gathered to watch. Such predictions are often based on "signs" such as natural disasters, wars, the appearance of evil political leaders, an increase in immorality, and sightings of the Wandering Jew.

The study of biblical prophecies has led some people to expect the return to take place during a future period known as the End Time. Other predicted events of this period include a final war between Good and Evil, the resurrection of the dead saints, the Last Judgment, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Opinions differ as to whether Christ will return before, during, or after these other events.

The Rapture

Some people associate the Second Coming with an expected event known as the Rapture. This refers to an envisioned future time when Jesus will suddenly appear in the clouds and pull all true Christians up to him, then take them to heaven. Everyone else will be left on the earth, where they will go through a period of torment called the Tribulation.

During the Rapture all saved people will be pulled up to Jesus at the same moment, and will appear to vanish instantly from the face of the earth. In the same process all dead people who lived righteous Christian lives will be resurrected and also pulled up. Thus Jesus will rescue not only the living righteous, but also those who have died.

Many of the expectations about the Rapture are based on Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, especially a passage at 1Thessalonians 4:16-17:

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever.

Jesus will not come down to the earth's surface, but only to the clouds, and the saved will be pulled up to meet him there. Many Christians believe that they will be "glorified" as they are pulled up. This means that their bodies will be converted into an imperishable perfect form, and that their minds will be freed from any desire to do sinful things or think sinful thoughts. This is seen as a necessary step in preparing them to enter heaven.

After the Rapture, the people left behind will have to suffer through the Tribulation, a period of famine, plagues, pestilence and war. According to some predictions, this will last for seven years.

Some Christians expect a different order of events, with the Rapture not taking place until either the mid-point or the end of the Tribulation.

The Family of Jesus

According to Matthew 1:18-25, Mary became pregnant with Jesus while she was engaged (but still unmarried) to Joseph. After Joseph found out about the pregnancy, he wanted to break off the engagement. But then an angel came to him in a dream, told him about Jesus, and persuaded him to go through with the marriage.

Mary was still a virgin when she gave birth to Jesus, and he was her first child. But she apparently had some other children later. Evidence for this is found at Matthew 13:55-56 and Mark 6:3, which indicate that Jesus eventually had four brothers and at least two sisters. The names of his brothers are given as James, Joses, Simon, and Jude. Unfortunately, his sisters aren't named, and we don't even know how many there were.

Some Christians believe that Mary was a virgin throughout her life, and that Jesus was her only child. People who believe this argue that the brothers and sisters mentioned in the gospels must have been step-brothers and step-sisters. However, Luke 2:7 refers to Jesus as Mary's "first-born", thus implying that she had other children later. In fact, most biblical scholars believe that all of the mentioned children were sons and daughters of Mary who were born after Jesus.

Joseph was a carpenter, and he presumably taught this trade to Jesus. But there are indications that Joseph died prematurely. Apparently he didn't accompany Mary to the wedding at Cana, and he doesn't appear in any subsequent part of the story either. Also, according to John 19:27, after the crucifixion Mary went to live at the home of the un-named Beloved Disciple, which she probably wouldn't have done if her husband had still been alive.

When Jesus left home to begin his ministry, other members of his family appear to have disapproved. According to Mark 3:21, they said that he was "out of his mind", and some of them attempted to "take charge of him" and bring him home. Matthew 12:46-50 indicates that he refused to talk to his mother and brothers when they tracked him down and tried to see him. And John 7:5 says "even his own brothers did not believe in him."

The gospels don't say how long this rift with his family lasted. But there must have been a reconciliation at some point, because Acts 1:14 says that Mary and all four brothers later joined the Nazarenes, the original community of believers who lived in Jerusalem after Jesus departed.

According to Luke 1:36, Mary was a relative of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Luke 1:39-56 says that Mary went to live at Elizabeth's home in Judea after she became pregnant with Jesus and stayed there for about three months. Some scholars have suggested that Mary used Elizabeth's home as a refuge while waiting for Joseph to decide whether to accept her as his wife.

The oldest brother of Jesus was named James. He became a very important leader in the early church, and is the named author of the New Testament Epistle of James. Because he was very pious, and followed the Jewish religious laws very strictly, he was called James the Just (or James the Righteous). He was condemned to death and executed in Jerusalem in 62 AD.

Why Was Jesus Crucified?

According to the gospels, the main charge against Jesus was that he claimed to be the king of the Jews. The Roman soldiers were mocking this idea when they dressed him in a purple robe and pressed a crown of thorns onto his head. This was also the charge written on the sign at the top of the cross.

But the charge was false. The enemies of Jesus had concocted it by

twisting the meaning of the old Jewish prophecies about the coming of the Messiah.

According to those prophecies, the Messiah was a great future leader who would appear during a period of extreme desperation and crisis known as the End Times (or Last Days). Assisted by God, he would overthrow all evil oppressors and set up a perfect kingdom on earth, where all the righteous people could live forever in peace and joy.

During the years when Jesus was growing up, many people believed that the End Times had already arrived, and that the Messiah would soon appear. This belief was especially strong in Galilee, the region of Palestine where Jesus lived. And the belief grew even stronger when John the Baptist began proclaiming that all of the prophecies about the Messiah would soon be fulfilled.

But those prophecies could be interpreted in different ways. Some scriptures, such as Isaiah 53, depict the Messiah as a devout non-violent person who will prepare the way for the new kingdom by sacrificing himself to pay for humankind's sins. Other scriptures describe him as a future descendant of King David and depict the new kingdom as a purified version of David's original kingdom. These references to King David caused many common people to envision the Messiah mainly as a military leader, whose first action would be to organize a revolt against the hated Romans and drive them out of the country.

The Romans were fully aware of the discontent in the country and the hope for a liberator. More riots and uprisings took place in Palestine than in any other part of their empire. Because of this unrest, they were always on the lookout for potential rebel leaders.

When Jesus began his ministry, he didn't publicly call himself the Messiah. He probably realized that it would be dangerous to do so, because even though he clearly didn't plan any type of military action, the authorities could have misunderstood his intentions and arrested him anyway. An example of his caution can be found at Matthew 16:20, which says that "he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ." (The word Christ is the English equivalent of the Aramaic word for Messiah.)

But despite his silence about his intentions, his teachings and miraculous cures soon began to attract large crowds, and within a short time many people in Galilee were thinking that he might be the Messiah. As a result, when he and his disciples set out for Jerusalem to attend the annual Passover festival, they were accompanied on the trip by a large group of followers. It isn't clear how big this procession eventually became, because other groups of festival-goers may have joined it along the way. But by the time it reached Jericho it was large enough to attract considerable attention, for many people in the city heard that it was coming and gathered along the road to watch Jesus go by.

According to Luke 19:11, during the last stage of the trip many of the travelers were expecting the new perfect Kingdom of God to be created at any moment. This is an indication of the high level of excitement within the group at this time. This excitement was sustained all the way to the end of the trip, so that when Jesus reached Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, a large exuberant crowd celebrated his entry into the city.

Shortly after he arrived, he got so angry at the dishonest merchants in the temple courtyard that he launched a physical attack against them. A few biblical scholars, looking for hidden meanings, have argued that he was actually trying to trigger an uprising in the city. Others have suggested that he expected God to step in and create the new perfect kingdom by divine intervention. But the gospels indicate that his main concern during this period was to prepare his disciples for his coming departure.

Christians often blame the Jews for his death. But this blame should probably be limited to the Jewish religious leaders, who had managed to keep some of their power by cooperating with the Romans. These leaders saw the crowds that gathered around Jesus, and they knew that many people were calling him the Messiah. Mark 11:18 says "they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching." But their ultimate fear probably went deeper, because if growing numbers of people believed that Jesus was the Messiah, he could eventually become a serious threat to their authority.

Mark 12:12 says that these religious leaders initially hesitated to arrest

Jesus because "they were afraid of the crowd." But at some point they decided that they had to get rid of him. With Judas Iscariot's help, they were able to seize him late at night when there was no crowd to defend him. After interrogating him until early morning, they turned him over to the Romans and accused him of claiming to be a king.

Under Roman law, anyone who claimed to be a king was guilty of rebellion against the emperor. The normal punishment was crucifixion.

But the crucifixion couldn't take place until the Roman governor Pontius Pilate gave the final order for it, and the gospels indicate that he was reluctant to do so. Apparently he realized that Jesus was innocent. Actually, he had the power to release Jesus if he really wanted to. But in his role as governor he often needed the collaboration of the Jewish leaders. And in the end, he was more concerned with placating them than with saving Jesus.

Thus the gospels put nearly all of the blame for the crucifixion on the Jewish leaders. But some scholars think that just as much blame, or even more, should be placed on the Romans. In fact John 18:3 says that Roman soldiers took part in the initial arrest of Jesus, suggesting that the Romans were involved in the matter almost from the beginning. Their military commanders always kept a close watch on the city, especially during festivals. They could have easily mistaken Jesus for a political agitator, or even a potential rebel leader. And they were usually quick to react to even a minor threat.

When the Jewish leaders wanted to kill someone, they normally sent their henchmen to gather a mob and stone the victim to death. Crucifixion was a Roman form of punishment, and it is a basic fact that Roman soldiers, not Jews, put Jesus on the cross.

For these reasons, some scholars think that the Romans were the real culprits, but that the gospel writers tried to cover this up and blame the Jewish leaders instead. The gospels were written during a period when Christians were trying to avoid trouble with the Romans, and putting the blame on them could have created friction. It would have been much safer to blame the Jews.

But other scholars, while they agree that the Romans were partly responsible, still think that the Jewish leaders should get most of the blame. These leaders probably had a much greater fear of Jesus than the Romans did. But they wouldn't have wanted the common people to blame them for his death. To try to avoid this, they could have coaxed the Romans into believing that Jesus was a trouble-maker, and let them get rid of him.

A compromise view is that both groups, Jewish religious leaders and Romans, played important roles. But unless new evidence is uncovered, there will probably never be agreement about who should get the most blame.

In any case, the crucifixion can be explained as a natural result of the prevailing political circumstances in Palestine. However, many people believe that it was actually pre-ordained beforehand, as part of a divine plan in which Jesus had to suffer and die as a sacrifice to pay for everyone's sins.

The Mysterious Mary Magdalene

Mary Magdalene was one of the earliest and most devoted followers of Jesus. She was among the few who saw him die on the cross, and she may have been the first person to see him alive after his resurrection.

She is also known as Mary Magdalen and Mary Magdala. The surname suggests that she came from Magdala, a city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. She may have become a follower of Jesus when he taught in that area during the early part of his ministry.

In the gospel story she is first mentioned in Luke 8:2-3, which says that she had been cured of seven demons. Because this passage comes immediately after the description of a "sinner" who anointed Jesus' feet (Luke 7:36-50), some later writers identified both women as the same person, and concluded that Mary had once been a prostitute. This idea has persisted into

modern times, even though there is no specific evidence to support it.

Another common idea, popularized by various books and movies, is that Mary was the mysterious Beloved Disciple, and that she secretly married Jesus and bore him a child. But most biblical scholars doubt that any of this is true.

Actually, the gospels say very little about Mary Magdalene until the story reaches the day of the crucifixion. But then she suddenly becomes very prominent. She saw Jesus die on the cross, and she watched to see where his body was taken. She went back to the tomb early on Easter morning and discovered that it was empty. And the Gospel of John indicates that she was the first person to see Jesus after his resurrection.

But then, without any explanation, she completely disappears from the story. The Book of Acts never mentions her, nor does Paul in any of his letters. Her sudden entry and exit during the most critical part of the story puzzles many people. Since she played such a big role in the key events, why is she hardly mentioned anywhere else in the New Testament?

Evidence from outside the bible suggests a possible answer. This evidence indicates that Mary was ostracized by the other disciples after Jesus departed. One example of the possible hostility toward her can be found in Section 114 of the Gospel of Thomas, where Peter says "Let Mary leave us, for women are not worthy of the Life". The Gospel of Mary (described below) also depicts friction between her and Peter. All of this suggests that Peter may have led an attempt to drive her out of the original group of believers. These original believers lived in Jerusalem for a number of years after Jesus left, but there is no record that Mary was ever with them.

Some scholars have suggested that Peter wanted to get rid of her because he saw her as a threat to his position as the main leader of the post-resurrection community. She could have also suffered from the general prejudice against women who asserted themselves in the male-dominated societies of ancient times.

Although the bible says nothing about her later life, other sources do preserve some stories about her. According to one well-known tradition, she went to France and lived for thirty years at a place called La Sainte-Baume. A local church there claims to have her skull and displays it to pilgrims.

Some stories also suggest that Mary attracted her own group of disciples who accompanied her on her travels and later tried to preserve the traditions about her.

During the Middle Ages she became a symbol of the virtue of repentance, due to the belief that she was a reformed harlot. She is the patron saint of Magdalen College, Oxford and Magdalene College, Cambridge. But her name was also used for the infamous Magdalen Asylums for "fallen women" in Ireland.

The Gospel of Mary

Three fragments of a previously-lost "Gospel of Mary" have been found in modern times. The longest fragment, a Coptic translation from the original Greek, begins in the middle of the story and also has a long gap at a later point. But enough survives to make it clear that the "Mary" in the story is Mary Magdalene, although she is always just called "Mary" in the extant text. Actually, most scholars doubt that she was the real author, but the work could be based on some early traditions about her.

The surviving fragments depict a controversy between Mary and the other disciples, especially Andrew and Peter. Shortly after the point where the surviving text begins, the male disciples become fearful because Jesus has left them. When they begin to weep, Mary comforts and encourages them. Then she says that Jesus appeared to her in a vision and gave her some special revelations. There is a gap in the surviving text at this point, but after it resumes, Andrew and Peter begin arguing with her about Jesus' teachings. Levi (Matthew) tries to defend Mary, but the gospel appears to end with the controversy still unresolved. Whoever wrote this gospel may have been trying to give Mary's side of a historical disagreement between her and Peter.

Note: Some scholars think that Mary's prominence in the early traditions was an obstacle to later attempts to exclude women from leadership positions in the church, and that the story of her previous life as a prostitute was a later fabrication created to discredit her.

Lost Gospels

According to some estimates, early Christians wrote at least twenty gospels that weren't included in the bible. Many of these non-biblical gospels apparently disappeared later, although it's possible that copies of some of them still survive at unknown locations. Luckily, several that appeared to be missing have been found again in modern times. But some are still missing, and could be permanently lost.

Gospels that were left out of the Bible are called noncanonical gospels. Many scholars also call them apocryphal gospels, because most of them have unknown origins. This uncertainty about their origins was one reason many of them were excluded from the Bible. But some were also excluded because they expressed unorthodox or heretical views.

Scholars know about the past existence of some missing gospels because they are mentioned in other ancient writings that have survived. Parts of some lost gospels were even copied into surviving writings, so that a portion of their original content is still preserved.

In fact, people are often surprised to learn that parts of several lost gospels may have been preserved in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. This preserved material has been identified by certain characteristics which indicate that it was copied from other writings. Thus the authors of the New Testament gospels apparently got some of their information from earlier writings. Modern scholars call these earlier writings "sources", and have determined that there were probably three of them. But apparently all of them have disappeared.

These three lost sources may have been the first gospels. Their ancient names are unknown, so they are usually identified by modern names, specifically the Lost Q Source, the Pre-Markan Passion Narrative, and the Signs Gospel. Because no copies of any of them have survived, they are sometimes called hypothetical gospels. But most scholars believe that they really did exist at one time.

Actually, these three missing gospels aren't completely lost, since material from them is preserved in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. In fact, considerable knowledge about their original content has been obtained by studying this preserved material.

Some other non-biblical gospels have been discovered more directly, because actual physical remains have been found. Examples include the Gospel of Peter, the Gospel of Mary, and the Gospel of Judas. All of these were discovered in modern times. But only fragments or secondary translations have been found, so the complete original forms of all of them are still unavailable.

These three rediscovered gospels are named after Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene, and Judas Iscariot, but those weren't their real authors. Their real authors are unknown, and will probably never be identified. In ancient times unknown authors would sometimes ascribe their books to famous people in an effort to get more publicity and authority for them.

Ancient writers mentioned a number of other gospels which they knew about, but which apparently no longer survive. These include the Gospel of Matthias, the Gospel of Perfection, the Gospel of the Seventy, the Dialogue of the Savior, the Gospel of the Twelve, the Gospel of the Hebrews, the Gospel of the Nazarenes, the Gospel of Bartholomew, the Secret Gospel of Mark, and the Gospel of Eve. Other gospels may have also existed, but even their names have been lost.

Some early gospels may have vanished because they were secret gospels and very few copies were made. Others could have been lost due to wars, conquests, upheavals, and persecutions. In addition, there have been accusations that early church leaders intentionally destroyed some gospels in order to cover up embarrassing facts about the origins of Christianity. Some intentional destruction did take place, but exactly what was lost can't be determined.

But the modern discoveries prove that a missing gospel can sometimes be

found again. And there is a chance that more will be found in the future, especially since small fragments of several possible unknown gospels have been uncovered in various excavations.

Here are brief descriptions of some of the best-known lost (or rediscovered) gospels:

The Gospel of Peter

A fragment of this gospel was discovered in Egypt in the late nineteenth century, and two more possible fragments have been found since then. But a large portion may still be missing. Hopefully the remainder will eventually be found, because the available text contains some interesting material, including the only known description of Jesus leaving the tomb after his resurrection.

Ever since the first fragment was discovered, this gospel has been controversial. A few scholars think that it preserves some of the beliefs and views of the earliest Christians. But most regard it as a secondary work containing a mixture of fanciful elements and material copied from the New Testament gospels.

One very intriguing part of this gospel is its account of the exit of Jesus from the tomb. This exit takes place during the night as some Roman soldiers stand guard nearby. Suddenly the soldiers see two men (or angels) descend from heaven and enter the tomb. A short time later the men come back out with Jesus between them. At this point the men look so tall that their heads reach to the sky, and Jesus looks even taller. They are followed out of the tomb by a cross. Suddenly the soldiers hear a voice from heaven, and the cross answers it.

The description of this scene puzzles many people, since it appears to depict a wooden cross that can walk and talk. But some scholars think that the passage is actually describing a cross-like formation of resurrected saints who have returned to life along with Jesus and follow him out of the tomb. A few scholars also see connections between this account and a passage at Matthew 27:52-53, which describes a similar resurrection of dead saints.

The Gospel of Mary

The existence of this gospel was unknown until several fragments were discovered in modern times. Since the only long fragment is a Coptic translation, most of the original Greek text is still lost. And even the long fragment may only include about half of the gospel.

Because the "Mary" in this gospel is depicted as a very prominent disciple, most scholars assume that she is Mary Magdalene, although in the extant text she is always just called Mary. The gospel emphasizes her prominence by presenting her as a strong leader, and by suggesting that she was the most favored disciple of Jesus and received a special revelation from him. It also suggests that this led to a conflict with Peter, who may have seen her as a threat to his position as overall leader of the disciples in the period after Jesus departed.

Indications of a rivalry with Peter are especially evident in the last section of the extant text, in which Mary gets into an argument with Peter and his brother Andrew over some private revelations that Jesus had given to her. This section may derive from memories of a historical conflict between her and Peter which eventually caused her to leave the group. Thus, although this gospel probably wasn't written until the second century, it may preserve some traditions passed down from an earlier period.

The Gospel of Mary contains some gnostic ideas, particularly in the section which describes the revelations she received from Jesus. This connection with gnosticism, together with the prominent role that the gospel gives to a female, may have led to its suppression by orthodox Christians.

The Gospel of Thomas

This gospel was probably first written in Greek, but the only surviving complete text is a Coptic translation discovered in Egypt in 1945. Its initial section indicates that it contains the "secret sayings" of Jesus, and the main text then gives 114 of these sayings. In most of the passages Jesus speaks as a teacher and his disciples make comments and ask questions.

Because the initial section of this gospel refers to "secret sayings", many scholars believe that it was a secret gospel, at least originally. This means

that it was thought to contain secret knowledge, and that only certain individuals were allowed to read it. Several other secret gospels, or fragments of them, have also been discovered.

The Gospel of Thomas may preserve some authentic teachings of Jesus that aren't found in the bible. For this reason, many scholars regard it as the most important surviving non-canonical gospel.

The Gospel of Judas

The only extant copy of this gospel was found in Egypt, but the time and place of its discovery are uncertain, and there are indications that it passed through the Egyptian black market at one stage.

The existing copy is a Coptic text, probably a translation of a still-lost Greek original. Unfortunately the manuscript is damaged in many places, and some pages are missing, so that translation and interpretation are difficult. However, many scholars believe that it was a secret gospel used mostly by certain gnostic sects of Christians.

This gospel is notable in that it may depict Judas Iscariot as the most loyal disciple of Jesus, and an innocent martyr instead of an evil betrayer. But because of the damage to the manuscript, and the difficulties of interpretation, there is some uncertainty about this matter. In any case, this is one of the later gospels, probably not written until the second century, and most scholars doubt that it contains any authentic information about the real Judas Iscariot.

The Lost Q Source

This early gospel is also called the Lost Sayings Gospel and the Q Document. Like other hypothetical lost gospels, its probable existence has been inferred from studies of the New Testament gospels. In fact, it is thought to be the original source of many of the teachings of Jesus that are preserved in Matthew and Luke. The name "Q" comes from the German word "quelle", which means "source".

Most scholars believe that this gospel was primarily a collection of the sayings of Jesus, with little narrative material or biographical information. In the earliest period these sayings must have been preserved orally, but later someone apparently collected them and wrote them down. They may have been collected for the use of early Christian missionaries as an aid in spreading the new faith.

Scholars have put together possible reconstructions of this gospel by extracting material from Matthew and Luke, but some uncertainties are involved in exactly what should be included. There is a chance that some of the original parts of this gospel have been completely lost.

The Pre-Markan Passion Narrative

Scholars have deduced the probable existence of this gospel from careful studies of the Gospel of Mark. These studies indicate that the author of Mark obtained some material from an earlier source. This source has been lost, but the evidence indicates that it was a short narrative of the arrest, interrogation, and crucifixion of Jesus. For this reason, it is called the Pre-Markan Passion Narrative.

The unknown author of this lost narrative had a good knowledge of what happened to Jesus during and after his arrest. The narrative might have even been written by a member of the first community of believers, known as the Nazarenes, who lived in Jerusalem in the years after Jesus departed.

Reconstructions of the original form of this gospel indicate that it gave a simple straight-forward account of what happened before and during the crucifixion. Because this account may be the basis for all the later accounts, whoever wrote it performed an extremely important service.

The Signs Gospel

The likely existence of this hypothetical gospel has been deduced from studies of the Gospel of John. It is called the Signs Gospel because it apparently described some miracles of Jesus which it called "signs". Its unknown author may have regarded the ability of Jesus to perform these miracles as one of the "signs" that he was the Messiah.

These miracles include the changing of water into wine (John 2:1-11), the giving of sight to the man born blind (John 9:1-8), the healing at the Pool of

Bethesda (John 5:2-9) and the raising of Lazarus (John 11:1-45). The fact that these particular miracles aren't mentioned in the other gospels indicates that their authors probably hadn't read the Signs Gospel.

In addition to the miracle stories, this gospel may have also contained some information about John the Baptist, and about the crucifixion and resurrection. But it probably didn't have much information about the teachings of Jesus.

Glossary

Angels. These immortal beings serve God in Heaven and act as his messengers in his communications with people on the earth. Angels were created before people and have free will. Some of them, led by Satan, rebelled against God and were expelled from Heaven. Of those that stayed loyal, the best-known are the archangels Gabriel, Michael, and Raphael. It was Gabriel who came to earth to tell the Virgin Mary that she would give birth to Jesus.

Antichrist. A man of ultimate evil, he will appear during the End Times, and with the help of the Devil will take temporary control of the earth. During his rule he will reward wicked people and persecute righteous people. But eventually he will be defeated and condemned to eternal torment in hell.

Demons. These evil spirits are servants of Satan. They can bring bad luck and cause disease, madness, or other afflictions. In the gospels they are often depicted as being in control of a person's body, a condition known as demonic possession. Jesus had the power to remedy this condition by ordering the demon to leave the victim's body.

Devil. The Devil is the supreme evil spirit and the ruler of Hell. He was originally an angel in Heaven, but was thrown out after he rebelled against God. He commands an army of demons who were expelled from Heaven with him and now assist him in his evil pursuits. Eventually he and all of these demons will be defeated and condemned to burn forever in a Lake of Fire at the center of Hell.

Devil's Mark. During the witch hunts, the body of a suspected witch would often be searched for a suspicious-looking mole, scar, or skin blemish known as a Devil's Mark. Some people believed that such a mark could be created when the Devil licked a woman's skin. In many cases the examiners would stick needles into suspected marks to test their sensitivity, but the final identification was often an arbitrary judgment. The Devil's Mark is also called a Devil's Seal or Witch's Mark.

End Times. According to some ancient prophesies, the world will eventually enter a period of terror and tribulation known as the End Times. Many devastating events will occur during this period, as the forces of good and evil engage in a final great struggle for control of the world. The struggle will end after the second coming of Jesus, who will defeat all the evil forces and establish the eternal Kingdom of God.

Hell. This is the place of eternal torment for the souls of the unsaved. These souls can be tortured in various ways, but ultimately all of them will be cast into a Lake of Fire along with the Devil, the Antichrist, the false prophet, and all the demons.

Harrowing of Hell. One of the lines in the Apostle's Creed says that Jesus "descended into hell." This refers to a visit that he made to hell after he died on the cross, a visit which completed his sacrifice, and which also gave him the opportunity to free the souls of the ancient dead saints from their imprisonment in the underworld. According to some sources, Jesus had an encounter with the Devil during this visit and gave the evil fiend a severe

wound.

Heresy. A heresy is a belief that is contrary to the true gospel. The first heresies began to appear in the early period of Christianity, and although tolerated initially, all of them were eventually condemned by church authorities. Over the centuries many people who held heretical beliefs have been tortured and burned to death.

Incorruptible Bodies. Some Christians believe that the bodies of saints and other very holy people don't undergo the normal processes of decay and decomposition after death. This is not considered to be the same as artificial preservation or mummification, but instead is believed to be a divinely-inspired miraculous preservation with absolutely no decomposition taking place. Some people also believe that these perfectly-preserved bodies will be resurrected back to life again during the End Times.

Relics. A relic is a surviving body part or personal item of great religious significance. In Christianity, relics of Jesus or famous saints are especially important and are often kept in special shrines or reliquaries. Well-known relics include the Holy Grail, the Crown of Thorns, the True Cross, the bones of Saint Peter, and the skull of Mary Magdalene. Some people believe that many purported relics are fakes.

Second Coming. The predicted future return of Jesus is called the Second Coming. In Mark 14:62 he says "you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Some people see signs that he will come back very soon, but the bible indicates that the exact time can't be foreseen, and that it will happen suddenly and unexpectedly. The exact place of the return is also unknown, although the city of Jerusalem and the Mount of Olives are often mentioned as possibilities.

Secret Gospels. Some early gospels were believed to contain private teachings of Jesus or special revelations from Jesus or God. Because these books were often passed around secretly, modern scholars call them secret gospels.

Signs of the Times. Some people believe that certain "signs" will precede the arrival of the End Times, and serve as a warning of the events to come. Such signs include earthquakes, storms, epidemics, famines, wars, the breakdown of society, rampant immoral behavior, the appearance of evil political leaders, and sightings of the Wandering Jew.

Stigmata. Many wounds were inflicted on Jesus during his passion, particularly on his hands, his ankles, his side, his back, and his head. Wounds or skin blotches in the same places have subsequently appeared on other people. Called stigmata, they may be a sign that a person is very devout and close to God. But in some cases they have apparently been self-inflicted.

True Cross. This is a name for the cross on which Jesus was crucified. Some people believe that its wood has a mysterious power to heal. But many of the surviving pieces could be fakes.

Transubstantiation. This is the name given to the miraculous conversion of bread and wine into the flesh and blood of Jesus. This conversion is believed to take place when the bread and wine are consecrated during Holy Communion. To most people, the bread and wine still look and taste the same after the consecration. Many modern Christians doubt that the conversion actually occurs.

Wandering Jew. After Jesus picked up his cross and began carrying it, a Jewish bystander hit him on the back and told him to go faster. For this action, the Jew was condemned to wander the earth alone until the Second Coming of Jesus. Over the centuries many sightings of this Wandering Jew have been reported. Some people believe that a sudden increase in these

sightings would be a sign of the nearness of the End Times.

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