

## Chapter 9

*God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. Take which you please - you can never have both.*

*-- Ralph Waldo Emerson*

We took thirty-minutes to refresh ourselves. I washed my face and did a few pushups. Whenever I am involved in something that requires a lot of concentration it helps me to take a minute and do something physical. It helps clear my mind. Before long, we had taken our places on the deck and the discussion continued.

“It seems that we have accomplished our first task: proving that it is logical and reasonable to believe that a supernatural Being exists. And I will have to agree that religion is still important today. What’s the next step?” I asked.

“By using this method for determining truth, we can discuss the various religions, specifically Christianity, Judaism and Islam to see if their doctrines and source documents meet the criteria for truth. If we can determine what does and doesn’t stand the test of this universally accepted standard, we can come closer to discovering the truth in religion and further determine if what we have in religion today is, indeed, valid.”

Suddenly, it occurred to me that we had already made a shocking and disturbing discovery, one that sent chills down my spine and almost took my breath away.

“But, Samuel,” I stammered, “if truth is consistent as our criteria states, then the irregularities that we have discussed render the Bible untrue! Can that be?”

I guess I had subconsciously thought that might be a possibility but I had really never admitted such a thing to myself, much less to anyone else. I can’t express how the realization struck me. Was it possible that the Bible and other sacred documents such as the Koran were not infallible?

“I think that’s a fair and accurate conclusion based on the evidence that you, yourself, have identified,” Samuel responded. “That doesn’t mean that they don’t contain the truth, it simply means that there are problems that need to be examined. Remember, these are ancient documents from ancient sources that have been passed down for thousands of years; stories and information that have been touched and told by a multitude of individuals. It’s not difficult to imagine how alterations and enhancements might have crept in and created the inconsistencies that exist today.”

“So, you believe that all of these inconsistencies are a result of man’s embellishment?” I asked. “How do you think that happened and why?”

“It’s really quite simple. Again, archeology tells us that many of the earliest religions were polytheistic, that is, they believed in more than one god. But if we look closely at that polytheistic concept we can see where it might have come from. Primitive people witnessed the power of the sun, the miracle of the regeneration of plants, the wonder of childbirth, the blessing of the abundance of wild game and the success of the hunt. It’s not difficult to imagine that they thought of all of these wonders as being the work of different gods. They gave names to these gods. Even as late as the first and second centuries CE, we can read where the Egyptians, Greeks and Romans worshipped a multitude of deities. That was how they viewed the universe from what they knew and understood at the time. Through the study of religion we can learn something about each civilization and what was happening at that particular time because many aspects of their religion reflected the times in which that religion was popular. It is evident that religion was adapted to meet the needs of a specific people at a specific time in history. As civilizations progressed, religious ideas were modified to conform to those changes and needs.”

That sounded reasonable. “Can you give me an example?” I inquired.

“Certainly. Perhaps the best example of the evolution of religion is the marriage of two faiths: Judaism and Christianity and the emergence of the Islamic religion out of the religion of the Hebrews. In an area where Judaism had a large following, the teachings of Jesus, a Jew himself, suddenly made the Old Testament palatable to non-Jews. The result of Jesus’s teachings was the New Testament. The Old Testament became integral to understanding the New Testament, thus creating a new document later known as the Bible. Christianity, then, became a new religion that was considered by the followers of Jesus to be the continuation or fulfillment of the Old Testament. In Islam, the Muslims believe in much of the Old Testament, but believe that the version we have today was corrupted. They hold to the Koran as the more accurate version.

“Religions evolve and new ones originate just as they have over the thousands of years of history. As for the modification of religion to meet a particular social environment, in Egypt during the time of the pharaohs the people believed that their kings were actually deities; that they were descendants of the gods – gods incarnate, or sons of God. This belief was important because it gave the pharaoh the respect of their subjects. The people believed that they actually had a god in human form living among them and leading their country. This belief was necessary at that time in the history of that culture.

“Another example is recorded in Jewish religious history. The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. They were being abused and oppressed. A man named Moses declared that he was called by God to lead the people out of Egypt and slavery. Would they have followed a common man or did it help that he was able to say that God wanted them to leave and would protect them as they left? Did it help that Moses told them that God promised them that a wonderful home, the Promised Land, waited at the end of their journey? When they fought battles, it was God who told them to fight and stood beside them in the face of the enemy. God was their motivation and their provider. It was this new religion and personal God that furnished the Hebrews with laws that gave them unity and made them unique. Through the

years, these ancient stories and laws have given the Jews an identity, a history.

“The Islamic faith provided a similar unification for a different group of people. At a time when the Arab tribes needed to be unified, Muhammad’s revelation from Gabriel brought harmony to these tribes and provided them with the spiritual unity they needed. The pages of the Koran are filled with promises that Allah will fight beside the Muslims in their struggle against the infidel or unbelievers. None of us can help but be affected by those things that touch our lives, and the various religious documents of ancient religions reflect those situations and conditions that existed at the time the documents were written.”

“That makes sense, I suppose,” I concurred.

“As for Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha, the story is told of his early life excursions into the real world. He had been raised in an environment where he was protected from the harshness of life and given all of the luxuries that money could afford. It was on these excursions that he observed the difficulties of real life and what seemed to him to be the cruelty of the cycle of life where creatures devour each other in an endless struggle for survival. These observations were what led him to begin to analyze and evaluate the reason for existence and the purpose of life. He was influenced by what he saw and motivated by the events in his life and surroundings. His teachings, however, have more timeless value than many of the other ancient teachers and prophets because his philosophy was based on the observation of life rather than political events. But even in that context, once again, he was influenced by the environment and customs and traditions that were prevalent during the time in which he lived.”

“But isn’t that true for all of us? Aren’t we all affected by our own problems and situations?”

“Exactly. None of us can help being influenced by those things that touch our lives. As we mentioned, Mohammad was also caught up in social and political events that shaped his

ideology. Some of his teachings were universal and some were directed specifically to the people who lived in his day.”

“How do you know that some of the teachings of the prophets were for the time when the prophet was living?”

“The best example in the Old Testament and in the Koran is the list of laws that were given to the people. Many of the laws pertain to washing or what kind of water is approved for drinking. There were laws on how to handle a dead body, or how to resolve legal disputes. These were laws that were intended for a primitive society. Certainly, most of them are not relevant for today’s population. Jesus’ teachings, like Buddha’s, were more universal. However, rather than totally focused on the individual, how to live with one’s self as most of Buddha’s teachings were, Jesus’ teachings were more concerned with how to live in peaceful harmony with others. Buddha’s teachings focused on ethical living. Jesus’ teachings were more concerned with compassionate living. However, he, too, was greatly influenced by the situations and conditions that existed during the time he lived.”

“If we must conclude that the sacred documents we depend on for communicating God’s message to us are not accurate or applicable for contemporary society, that is a serious claim,” I confessed.

“I understand the seriousness. But we must seek the truth in all things and this is one area that we should examine carefully. All of our ancient religious documents were transmitted through humans thus subject to human error or human embellishment. As we mentioned, we are all greatly influenced by the times in which we live and the situations with which we are confronted. And, as we have noted, the discrepancies and contradictions concerning the character of God, indicate that these documents simply do not meet the criteria for truth.”

“But all of these documents claim that God has protected the accuracy of what is contained in these sacred writings.”

“Yes, and I believe that’s true. I’ll address that a little later in our discussion. However, once again, some of the information transmitted was certainly intended for the audience who initially received it. We must be careful in determining what was meant to be universal and what was intended for the civilization living in those ancient times. Over the years, through various translations, some of the original text has certainly been lost, altered or misinterpreted. Humans are not infallible.”

“But someone had to write down these messages from God otherwise we wouldn’t have gotten them! Throughout history hasn’t God always communicated through humans?”

“God communicates any way God wants. I’d like to go into more detail on that later. But let me say here that there are two dangers in communicating through humans that we must acknowledge: one is that there is the risk of enhancement, and the second is that we tend to shift our attention from the source of the communication, God, to the messenger. Especially if that messenger is someone who we can actually see and touch; someone like ourselves.”

“So, you are saying that we have, perhaps, become followers of people, the messengers of God, rather than followers of God?” I asked.

“If we examine history, we can easily see evidence of that,” Samuel suggested. “We believe in a God who is spirit, a Being who is not of this world or subject to its natural laws; one who is beyond our comprehension, who cannot be experienced with any of our senses. That is, we believe in a God that cannot be touched or heard or physically seen. As humans, we need something that can be. That’s the way we are made. We are touchy-feely creatures. When a very special person comes along who teaches the things of God and helps us to understand spirituality then suddenly we have someone that we can see and hear and touch. We have what we consider a physical manifestation, an epiphany, of God.”

“And so, we transfer our worship from God who we cannot see to the messenger who we can.”

“Exactly. Whether the messenger wanted it that way or not. We live in a matter-oriented world, a world of touch, smell, taste, sound and sight. These are the things that appeal to us. These things we can understand. In ancient times, men erected idols that represented gods. Why?”

“Because they couldn’t experience God with any of their senses.”

“Right.” Samuel continued his explanation. “People needed something they could see and touch so they made images. From the earliest times, archeologists have been able to piece together the type of gods worshipped by early civilizations by examining the carvings and paintings found in excavations. But inevitably, when we mold a physical image or icon representing God we make God physical. We transform God from an inconceivable entity to an easily definable, limited being or object. The truth is we cannot visualize God. This great Deity is beyond our senses. When we try to assign an image to God, regardless of what that image is, we are actually humanizing this non-human existence.”

“So, you think we have attempted to make God human?”

“If the historical records concerning religion are correct, then yes,” he affirmed. “This humanization began thousands of years ago. The earliest stories of almost every civilization tell of gods that made war with other gods, had sex and established families. These are human activities that are instigated by human weaknesses or the desire to reproduce in order to sustain the species. We call God a ‘he’ giving God a gender. Gender is only necessary for reproduction. There is no other reason for it. If God is the Creator then God has no need to reproduce or sustain the species. After all of these years things still haven’t changed. We are still trying to make God human. The Catholic religion advocates a holy family where God is the father, Mary is the mother and Jesus is the son. Putting gods into families was a common practice in the earliest religions. Why?”

“Because families are what we understand,” I replied.

“Exactly. These are all attempts to better understand a Being that cannot be understood; an attempt to make God familiar. Thomas Aquinas said,

‘Hence in the last resort all that man knows of God is to know that he does not know him, since he knows that what God is surpasses all that we can understand of him.’”<sup>27</sup>

“You’re right, we still do it today. We still attempt to limit God by giving this Great One human characteristics and traits,” I confessed.

“And we have adopted icons, or idols, that help us create a version of God that we can see and touch,” Samuel noted. “In Christianity there is the cross. Early church fathers warned against using the cross in churches for fear that people would begin to worship it as an idol; that it, rather than God, would become the focus of their worship. For many, this is exactly what has happened. In some churches just attempting to remove the cross that hangs in the sanctuary or doing something that might be considered disrespectful to it is considered blasphemy! The cross has become a place where people go to pray and in many instances, it is the object of their prayers. They wear it around their neck for protection. It has become an idol. What the early church fathers feared would happen, has.”

I thought about my own experiences. I remembered those times when we would all gather around the cross and pray.

“Having something that we can see or touch does seem to help,” I admitted.

“Certainly it does. But it can have a devastating effect on how we perceive the character of God. And, by the way, these images don’t necessarily have to be a thing made by human hands.”

“Ah, I see where you’re going with this. You think a person can also become an idol?”

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<sup>27</sup> Armstrong, p. 205.

“Of course. We have idolized movie stars and other influential people for centuries. A good example is Jesus. Christian theology claims that God sent Jesus to earth and was, in fact, the power behind what Jesus did. From his birth, to his miracles, to his crucifixion, to his resurrection, it was God that performed the miracles through Jesus. But rather than worship God for these miracles, Christians worship Jesus when, in actuality, he was only a tool, so to speak, used by God to communicate with us. If you examine the hymns of a Protestant hymnal, you will find the vast majority of hymns are written in praise and worship of Jesus not God. Jesus worship has become a substitute for the worship of God.”

“But Christians claim that Jesus is God!”

“Yes. So let’s discuss that a little further. As you know, God becoming man is called the incarnation. So, let’s assume that it’s true, that God came to earth in the form of a man. Why in the form of a human?”

“Because that’s what we are, humans. God communicates with us as one of us.”

“And, so as a human, God was given a human name, Yeshua, or Jesus. It could have been John or Frank or any other name.”

“Yes, I suppose it could have.”

“So, when the communication was complete, when the job was done, when God had finished with the body called ‘Jesus’, what happened?”

“Well, Jesus was killed. He died.”

“The physical body dropped off and the name was no longer needed. God was back to being God, so to speak. Right?”

“I suppose. But then Jesus was resurrected, so he still existed!”

“It doesn’t matter. It was still God in a human skin. That’s what incarnation means, the embodiment of God in human flesh. Before, as well as following the resurrection, Jesus was still the incarnation of God. God was still playing human. So, when he returned to heaven why hang on to the name and the person of Jesus if it was God all along? If Jesus was only the vessel or tool used by God to communicate to humans, why give credit to Jesus for the things that he said and did and taught if it was really God talking and performing the miracles?”

“But wait!” I cried, “the Christian doctrine says that Jesus has always existed along with God. Therefore, God didn’t come to earth as Jesus, The God-Jesus came to earth as the Man-Jesus. It was the God-Jesus who was incarnated in the flesh.”

“That’s a bit of confusing theology! So, regardless of that scenario, Jesus always gave credit for things he did and things he said to God the Father. So it is God who should be getting the credit and the worship.”

“I think I’m following you. Jesus did say that he could do nothing on his own, that everything was from the Father. In John 14:10 he said,

‘Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work.’

I guess you could say he was the messenger.”

“Exactly. My point here is that God should be getting praise, but Jesus, being in human form, became a substitute for God because he could be seen and experienced in a physical way. Jesus has become an idol, an image of God. In Jesus we have an anthropomorphic god, a god with human characteristics. After thousands of years of trying, we have finally created a god in our own image. Certainly, we should still admire Jesus’ dedication and commitment as we should all prophets. But it is God who should be worshipped.

“In Islam, the prophet Mohammed is revered to the extent that if someone insults this prophet, they put their life at risk. Mohammed was, historically, a man just like any other man in this world. The difference is that he allegedly found a way to get closer to God than most men do. According to some biographies, at first, Muhammad really didn’t want the job of prophet. Like Moses, he was hesitant to take on the task, as probably anyone would be. In reality, we should all be able to accomplish the same kind of enlightenment experienced by Mohammad, Buddha and Jesus. These men were sincerely seeking to tap the power of God and they achieved it.

“It is ultimately God who is responsible for revelation, not humans. Humans may serve as messengers, the conduit, but it is God, the source of the message that should get the credit, or in this case, the worship. And since the messenger’s teachings might have been influenced by the events and history of his day we are caught in a dilemma: how to separate the teachings that were applicable to that specific place and time from those teachings that are universal and timeless. As a result of this dilemma, we have people doing things like wearing the same kind of clothing as the prophets wore and trying to capture the same living environment in which the prophets lived. When in fact, the prophet only lived and dressed the way they did because it was the way people lived and dressed at that time! If they lived today they would no doubt dress and live as modern people do because that is what is contemporary. Holding on to these ancient customs only serves to make religion appear outdated and irrelevant. Adhering to ancient dress and rituals and customs only restricts our spiritual freedom and draws our attention away from the real object of our worship...”

“God.”

“Exactly.”

I tried to summarize what I thought I heard in our discussion.

“So you are suggesting that some of the messages from these prophets constitutes universal truth and the rest was meant

for the time in which the prophet lived and should be ignored by believers today?”

“Not ignored. We can always learn from history, but we should not try to bring that exact teaching into today’s environment because it just doesn’t always apply. And there is another caution we should note.”

“And what is that?”

“The teachings of these great men were not written down by the prophets themselves. Others wrote down their teachings after the death, and in some cases, many years after the death of the teacher. In the case of Buddha who lived around 560 BCE, although the basics of his teachings were much more ancient, the things he taught were passed along by word of mouth for centuries. They were not written down until some 500 years after his death. With Hinduism, again while the religion itself dates back to as early as 4,000 BCE, or earlier, the first written record of the teachings or Vedas, were not composed until around 1500 BCE. The Hebrew Scriptures were composed around 500 BCE by scribes using a very primitive form of writing who based their records on verbal reiteration of ancient stories. Followers of Jesus wrote the letters, or books of the New Testament not long after his death, but the actual canonized New Testament was compiled over several hundred years. The Koran was allegedly written by companions of Muhammad during his ministry, around 610-632 CE, but was not actually compiled until 633 and standardized in 653 CE.<sup>28</sup> We have already discussed the way in which stories and information can become skewed by misinterpretation and personal agendas so the big question is: were these manuscripts that are considered to be the actual words of the teacher and of God modified, altered or enhanced in any way? As we have discussed, in Christianity, the Apostles never understood Jesus when they talked with him on a daily basis. What makes us think that they understood his teachings or his ministry when he wasn’t there to correct them? They were left on their own to remember and interpret his

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<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia – *Koran*

sayings and his complex parables. It was their recollections and interpretations that were used to write the books of the New Testament. Let me ask you to do something.”

“Okay,” I volunteered.

“Please tell me, verbatim, what I just said.”

“What do you mean?” I wasn’t sure I understood what he was asking me to do.

“Were you listening to what I was saying? The things we were talking about are important to you?” he asked.

“Of course they are. And, I was listening.”

“Well, then, please tell me, word for word, what I just said,” he insisted.

“I don’t think I can,” I admitted. “I can tell you what you said, but I can’t repeat back to you what you said word for word. My memory isn’t that good. I’m not sure anyone could do that.”

“That’s my point,” he said. “In the New Testament we are told in quotes what Jesus said when he taught. These things weren’t written down while he was teaching or even a year after he taught. These were written down decades after. And yet, the writers and their sources seem to be able to remember, verbatim, what Jesus said. That’s not only improbable, it’s impossible! It would have been much more believable if the authors of the New Testament would have written that Jesus taught us to love one another rather than to put it into quotes as if they remembered exactly how Jesus said it. These are the types of things that make the content of the Bible suspect.”

“I can see that. I guess I never thought about it.”

“Certainly, it is easy to understand why they used that approach. The words carry much more weight if they were spoken directly from Jesus than if they came from someone else.”

“That’s true,” I suppose.

“In the case of Muhammad,” he continued, “he was not present to check the accuracy of the written material once it was committed to script. Was there anything misinterpreted or added by those who wrote? How can we know?”

“Enhancements and alterations of these ancient writings could also have been a result of mistranslation or misinterpretations. Throughout history, men have manipulated these sacred documents in order to use God as an excuse to get people to act in certain ways. In some instances to even commit atrocities -- inhumane actions against other humans. God has been used to frighten people into obeying certain laws or giving money to the church. As we have discussed, even today our biggest wars are fought in the name of God. So it is obvious that the original message from the Ultimate One has been adapted or enhanced for the sake of social or political agendas or to address certain conditions that existed in various times throughout history.”

“Do you think these modifications of the original message was intentional?” I asked.

“Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn’t. Take the Crusades for example. Again, it is obvious that religious leaders conspiring with the government understood the power they had over people and made the decision to abuse that power intentionally. However, in many more situations, the messenger, whether it was Moses or Mohammed felt that God was on the side of their people and therefore they conveyed a message that they sincerely felt was from God, and perhaps it was – but much of it was a message for a specific time and a particular people.”

“Those revelations have had a great impact on history.”

“Yes, they did and still do. But by including so many messages for a specific time, the more universal, timeless information has become obscured.”

“So you think the universal message is still there, just hidden.”

“Hidden not only by a mixed bag of messages, but also by the enhancements and alterations over the years of history that we have just discussed. And, I think there are other reasons how the original message from God became altered.”

“How was that?”

“As you know, many of the sacred texts considered to be the original communication from God was given before writing existed. In those ancient times information was communicated by word of mouth. Sometimes this information was conveyed through storytelling. By the time it had been passed down from generation to generation, slight changes, or even extreme modifications might have occurred. When I was very young we used to play a game at parties that illustrates my point. A large group, say twenty of us, would sit in a line. The first person in line would whisper some information into the second person’s ear. That person would whisper what he heard, or thought he heard to the third person and so on until the message had made its way all the way down the line. The last person would then share the information with the entire group. Most of the time it was amazing how the information was altered as it traveled from one person to another. One participant might have misunderstood, or heard the wrong word or wasn’t listening very well and just got all the information incorrect. This was in a small room over a very short period of time with very simple information passed on from person to person none of whom had a particular agenda. Even today, if you ask a group of people to recount a story they heard on a current newscast you will get a variety of interpretations and descriptions of what they remembered hearing. That’s because some will have heard the entire story being broadcast, some might have just heard a portion and others might have gotten the story from someone else who heard the report and was merely trying to repeat what they had heard from a secondhand source. The reporters, themselves, might have gotten the story wrong and reported false information, or allowed opinion to influence their report.

As we mentioned, before writing, storytelling was the means by which information was conveyed. So, imagine over

thousands of years, a message being passed down from generation to generation with hundreds of people passing along the story, each trying to adjust the story slightly to make it a little more interesting or entertaining or more applicable to their specific society and culture; many individuals passing along the story having their own agenda, seeing opportunity to alter the message to suit their particular objectives. How distorted might that message become?"

"Yes, I can see how that might happen."

Samuel continued. "Let's assume that one of God's first messages to mankind was 'God created everything.' Wouldn't that be simple enough to understand? Wouldn't that motivate men to worship God when they experienced the wonders of nature? Now, imagine that a child asks his mother or father where flowers came from? Or where the animals came from. So, the child's parents would tell him that God made the world. That was the original simple truth. And the child would then follow up with the question that children always ask, 'How?' And so, the parents might try to explain how things were created. Since they want their child to remember that it was God who did the creating, they might come up with an explanation in the form of a story that would be colorful enough for the child to remember even though they had no idea how it was actually accomplished. As you know, things are always easier to remember when they can be related to a story. Through the telling of the imaginary story, the simple, basic truth becomes a fable. The Bible is filled with these kinds of stories that are meant to communicate a simple truth."

"So while the truth is still there it has become camouflaged as part of a legend or fable."

"Or a parable or a creative story. The moral or essence of the story is hidden or enhanced by man's imagination. That's why there are dozens of creation and flood stories that have been passed down through history. Religion has become so altered over the years by human embellishment and self-serving agendas that truth in religion is no longer distinguishable. But here's the

biggest reason why religion has become so altered. It is historically evident that as tribes and civilizations invaded other civilizations the philosophies or myths of the two cultures mingled. Sometimes the religion of the conquering people was forced on the conquered population. At other times the religions would simply mesh, taking some gods from one myth and adopting them into the other. The Greeks and Romans are a good example of this occurrence. In the later years, BCE, the Romans adopted many of the Greek gods and simply gave them Roman names. So as these religious ideas became more and more integrated one with another, the further they deviated from the original ideology.”

It all seemed to make sense. Even today when Bible scholars write books that help to deliver God’s message to readers they use modern examples that will make the message seem more relevant and easier to understand. They use modern illustrations to communicate the ancient principles being taught. Certainly, writers have used this method throughout history.

“It’s no wonder that our religions today are so confusing,” I noted. “But do you think that has happened with the religions that are prevalent today? Do you think these ancient myths have influenced contemporary religion?”

“Absolutely. For instance, in Christian theology we run into what seems to be ancient reoccurring themes. In fact, Christianity contains more elements of other ancient myths than any other contemporary religion. December 25, celebrated by Christians as the birth of Christ, was originally a pagan holiday, Saturnalia. It was a celebration of thanksgiving to Saturn, the god of agriculture. Saturnalia was a festival that preceded the winter solstice that included the abundant presence of candles symbolizing the quest for knowledge and truth. The renewal of light and the coming of the new year were celebrated in the later Roman Empire at the *Dies Natalis* of Sol Invictus, the ‘Birthday of the Unconquerable Sun,’ on December 25.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Robert A. Kaster, *Macrobius: Saturnalia, Books 1–2*, Loeb Classical Library, 2011.

“The popularity of Saturnalia continued into the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, until the Roman Empire came under Christian rule. In 350 CE, Pope Julius I declared that Christ’s birth would be celebrated on December 25, perhaps an attempt to make it as painless as possible for Romans to convert to Christianity.<sup>30</sup>

“Easter was also originally a pagan holiday that followed the vernal equinox, celebrating the goddess Eastrā, a fertility goddess who brought an end to winter and the beginning of spring.”

“Yes, I’ve heard these things before.”

“There is also a similarity between Christianity and Hinduism regarding end times,” Samuel continued. “According to the Hindu religion, the world is soon coming to an end.

‘In the incredibly complex mathematics of the Hindu universe, a day in the life of Brahma – called a kalpa – lasts the equivalent of 4,320 million earth years. A “night of Brahma” is the same length. Divided into constant, smaller cycles, each of these kalpas ultimately ends as the world is consumed by fire and the universe is destroyed and recreated. According to Hindu thought, the current age is called the Kali-Yuga, the final act of a kalpa began eons ago, an age that is approaching its end, after which the world will be destroyed once more and prepared for another cycle of creation.’<sup>31</sup>

“This dark age of Kali-Yuga is to be characterized by dissention, war and strife, in which materialism rules desires, virtue is nonexistent, and the only pleasure is found in sex.”<sup>32</sup>

“The earth being destroyed by fire sounds a lot like the Christian belief that the earth will be destroyed by fire and a new heaven and earth will be created,” I remembered.

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<sup>30</sup> Kenneth C. Davis, *Don’t Know Much About Mythology*, HarperCollins, 2005, New York, pp 259.

<sup>31</sup> Davis, p. 338.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344

“That’s true. In fact, there is another similarity between Christianity and Hinduism in regard to the end times. In the Hindu tradition, Kalki, a Hindu avatar of Vishnu, will appear and end the current evil age.

‘In an apocalyptic vision, Kalki will ride a white horse and carry a great sword to punish evildoers in this world, and usher in a new Golden Age.’<sup>33</sup>

“This is very similar to the apocalyptic description of the end of time as described in the New Testament in the book of Revelation.

‘I looked, and there before me was a pale horse! Its rider was named Death, and Hades was following close behind him. They were given power over a fourth of the earth to kill by sword, famine and plague, and by the wild beasts of the earth.’<sup>34</sup>

“In a similar ancient prediction, many people thought the Mayans predicted that the world would end on December 21, 2012.

“These similarities in predictions are further evidence of the synthesis of religious ideas across different religions and civilizations.

“There are many more. It is recorded in the scriptures that Jesus’ birth was the result of the union between a human and the spirit of God; that he was “King of the Jews”, that he died on a cross and that he rose from the dead. And yet, in many different ancient religions that were popular long before the birth of Jesus, many of these same occurrences were said to have happened to other people, gods and kings. There were ancient religions where kings were known to have sacrificed their lives for their subjects. As we have mentioned, Pharaohs of Egypt were said to be ‘sons of the gods’, and were, themselves, human incarnations of popular deities. In the Greek religion that was prominent just before and during the early years of Jesus, the Greeks believed in

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 345

<sup>34</sup> Bible, Revelations 6:8.

many god-men. One famous god-man was Hercules who was the son of the great Roman god, Zeus, also called Jupiter, and an earthly mother, Alcmena. Several gods were even killed, but later rose from the dead. Osiris, one of the most popular gods in Egypt and worshipped throughout Mesopotamia, was one of the first resurrection salvation gods. The Egyptian religion was certainly known to the Jews in the region of Jesus' birth.

“But the most profound example is of Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha. In his book, *The Essence of Buddhism*, Jo Durden Smith records,

‘Great lives deserve great and important births – and so it was with Siddhartha Gautama, the prince and later sage (Sakyamuni) of the Sakya people, for he was conceived when his mother, Mahamaya (or Maya) dreamed that a Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) came down from Tushita Heaven – the home, by tradition, of contented gods –and entered her body in the form of a white elephant with a red face.

‘...a great light covered the earth as the baby appeared, unstained and fully aware, and rain fell to wash both mother and child. Then the baby took seven steps, looked to the four corners of the world and said (in one of several versions): “For enlightenment I was born, for the good of all that lives. This is the last time that I have been born into this world of becoming (samsara). There is now no existence again.”

‘... At the baby's naming ceremony, his father arranged for his future to be predicted by a wise man called Asita, who found thirty-two auspicious marks on his body and prophesied that he would either become a powerful ruler – perhaps the monarch of the whole of India—or a great sage. If he took up the religious life and turned his back on his birthright, he said, Siddhartha could become a teacher of both men and gods, even the savior of the world.’

“This story was told about Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha, hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. The story holds many similarities to that of the birth of Jesus. One is an immaculate conception with Buddha having an earthly mother and a god as father just like the stories of Jesus. At the birth of Jesus there was a bright star. At the birth of Buddha there was a bright light that covered the earth. At the naming of Buddha, a prophet told of his future proclaiming that he could be the savior of the world. Following his circumcision, at the consecration of Jesus, a prophet named Simeon said of Jesus,

‘Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’<sup>35</sup>

“And, finally, Krishna, one of the deities of the Hindu religion resembles Jesus in that he was considered the incarnation of the god Vishnu, the second god in the trinity of Hinduism. As you might know, the Hindu trinity consists of Brahma, the creator god, Vishnu, the preserver god, and Shiva, the destroyer god. Krishna lived hundreds, perhaps thousands of years before Jesus. It is taught that he, too, was born without sexual union, but was the result of ‘mental transmission’ from his father to his mother. Hindu philosophical and theological traditions portray him as a god-child and the Supreme Being.<sup>36</sup>”

“That’s amazing. I had no idea.” This was shocking information but the stories were a matter of record taken from very old documents that told of the history of those specific religions past down over thousands of years.

“Few people do,” he agreed. “In fact, one story of the birth of Muhammad is very similar to the stories told about the birth of Jesus. His birth, too, echoes these same mythological themes. In the Sira, the accepted biography of Muhammad the Prophet, Sirat Rasoul Allah writes:

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<sup>35</sup> Bible, Luke 2:29-32.

<sup>36</sup> Wikipedia - Krishna

‘It is recorded that when the mother of the apostle of Allah became pregnant with him she had a vision, and a voice spoke to her, saying, “Thou art pregnant with the prince of this nation. When he is born on this earth, thou must say, ‘I place him under the protection of the only One, from the wickedness of every envious person.’ And thou must name him Muhammad.” While she was carrying the child in her womb she saw a light issue from her which illuminated even the castles of Busra in Syria. And Abdullah b. Abdul-Muttalib, the father of the apostle, died while the child was yet unborn.

The apostle of Allah was born on a Monday, on the thirteenth day of the month of Rabi in the year of the Elephant. At the time of the apostle’s birth a Jew standing on the flat roof of a house in Medina called forth the Jewish people and when they assembled around him, saying, “Woe to you. What is the matter?” he told them “This night the star has risen, under which the apostle is born.”<sup>37</sup>

I recalled the stories that I have read every Christmas. “It does have many of the same elements: a vision that foretold the birth of the child, what he should be named, and that he would be great. In the New Testament, Luke tells the story of the birth of Jesus.

‘In the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the

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<sup>37</sup> Sirat Rasoul Allah, Translation of the Sira as published on Faithfreedom.org

Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.<sup>38</sup>

"...And the light that shown, as well as the reference to a star marking the birth of the prophet," Samuel added.

"There was even the announcement of his birth by another human. This information is really a surprise," I confessed. "All of these themes have been repeated throughout history about gods and god-men. But do you really think that the stories about the births of Jesus and Muhammad aren't true?"

"Who knows? The story of Buddha was surely known to the followers of Jesus, as were the other myths of gods and human incarnations of deities taught by other religions that were prominent in the area where Jesus lived and taught. Certainly, the followers of Muhammad knew the stories of Jesus. As we have said, we know from history that as cultures spread and came into contact with other cultures, their religions also mixed and became synthesized, taking some from one religion and some from the other. With all of these elements common with other popular religions, and by incorporating the Old Testament scriptures of the Jews, Christianity offered something for everyone. Were the birth stories of Jesus and Muhammad merely a synthesis? Here we have examples of religious ideas from the Egyptians, the Greeks, the Mesopotamians, the Jews and such religions as Hinduism and Buddhism as well as several other religions that existed in the known world. Were these stories true or were they enhanced to fit the formula of great people and incarnate gods? There isn't enough evidence concerning Jesus' life from other sources to draw a conclusion one way or another. If these birth stories are not true, I have no doubt that it was not Jesus' or Muhammad's intention that such stories should be fabricated. Maybe these are just coincidences. But there does seem to be a formula established for religious greatness. But let me add here that, regardless of what we conclude about these births, there can be no doubt that the life

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<sup>38</sup> Bible, Luke 1:26-33.

and teachings of these two great men, or prophets, have had a significant impact on the world.”

At this point, I was having difficulty trying to process everything that we had discussed. All of this information was so new to me. I could understand how religions could merge and mix because I was familiar with the merging of the Hebrew religion and Christianity since it is taught that Christianity is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy. It is almost like the two religions merged into one. That is, for Christians.

“I’m having trouble processing all of this stuff about how we see so many ancient mythological themes popping up in today’s religions. This knowledge can have a great impact on religion!”

“I am not saying emphatically that some of these ancient beliefs were applied to Jesus so that he would meet the criteria of a god-man, but it does raise legitimate questions as to their credibility. It is proof that religions have shared ideas and religious concepts.”

“I can see that. I have struggled with these questions for many years and I’m sure many others have as well, but have been too shy to discuss them openly. But Jesus did claim to be the Son of God.”

“Let’s discuss that,” Samuel continued. “According to the writings of his followers, he did. He also said we were all sons of God. In Matthew 5:8-9 Jesus said,

‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.’

“Those who endorse peace are called sons of God.”

“But he said, ‘if you’ve seen me you’ve seen the Father’, and ‘I and the Father are one,’” I argued.

“How were they one? In physical appearance?” he asked.

“No,” I replied, “these religions claim that God is spirit and has no physical body.”

“True. So how are they one? If I am assigned by my employer to go into one of his shops as his representative and I am told exactly what to do and what to say, then how will I represent myself to his employees in that shop? Won’t I tell them that the employer and I are one? I speak his words. I represent his interest. And if they tell me they want to see the employer, won’t I say that to see me is to see the employer? Why? Because I have come to do the will and speak the words of the employer. Technically, in this situation, we are one. But in a more spiritual sense, there is much ancient Eastern theology in Jesus’ teaching.”

“You think Jesus studied Hinduism?”

“Who can say with certainty? Remember, in ancient times religions did not have names. There was no Hinduism or Judaism or Buddhism by name. Christianity was not called Christianity until the mid-first century. The Bible tells us that followers of Jesus were first called Christians in Antioch.<sup>39</sup>

“In the earliest times, each culture had its own supreme god and usually a pantheon of other gods who were called by specific names. For example, early Mesopotamia had Apsu and Baal, also called Marduk; Egypt had Re, Greece had Zeus, the Celts had Nuadu, and the East had Brahman and Tao. Over time, ideas and philosophies became accepted by a culture and were attached to their specific gods. So, as we have discussed, when one culture came in contact with another, the ideology, as well as the gods of one culture would mix with the other. To accept some aspects of philosophy from another culture was not necessarily to accept its god. If the newly introduced philosophy contained an idea that made sense, it might be adopted as part of the most widely accepted ideology of the culture where it was introduced and attached to the god of that culture. It was not like they were accepting a formal religion like Hinduism or Taoism

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<sup>39</sup> Bible, Acts 11:26.

since these philosophies had no names. They were simply accepting different ideas in an attempt to understand either God or life.”

“Do you have proof that this occurred?” I needed some evidence of what Samuel was saying.

“Of course. Many cities had places where men would meet and discuss philosophy. In Roman cities these places or discussions were called forums. The Synagogue was also a place where religious ideas were discussed. In the New Testament, Paul went to the Areopagus and introduced Jesus to local officials who were discussing philosophy and religion.<sup>40</sup> We know that Plato and Socrates also held or attended forums. These discussions included ideas from all over the known world.”

“And you think Jesus attended these discussions?”

“That possibility certainly exists. Remember, he spent time in the synagogue and this was one of the places where these discussions were held. He was obviously an intelligent seeker of truth. There is no historical record of what he was doing from the age of thirteen until he was around thirty years old. What was he doing during this time? Doesn't it make sense that he would be spending some of that time learning? Remember, Jerusalem and that entire area was a major trade route. It was a region that was visited by travelers from all over the known world. We know from historical records that these forums and discussions were one of the ways ideas spread.

“Remember when Jesus said that he and the Father were one? In the Vedas, the earliest known spiritual writings, the emphasis throughout the text is on the assumption that God exists in all of creation; that God permeates the universe. They call this presence, Self. Self is in all of us and Jesus certainly believed this when he said: ‘that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.’<sup>41</sup> And, ‘I and the

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<sup>40</sup> Bible, Acts 17:19.

<sup>41</sup> Bible, John 10:38.

Father are one.’<sup>42</sup> In the Upanishads, a son is asking his father for answers to life’s biggest questions. Concerning God, or Self, his father says,

‘It is everywhere, though we see it not.  
Just so, dear one, the Self is everywhere,  
Within all things, although we see him not.  
There is nothing that does not come from him.  
Of everything he is the inmost Self.  
He is truth; he is the Self-supreme.  
You are that, Shvetaketu, you are that’.<sup>43</sup>

Al-Hallaj, a student of the 10<sup>th</sup> century Islamic mystic al-Junayd wrote this poem:

‘I am He whom I love, and He whom I love is I;  
We are two spirits dwelling in one body.  
If thou seest me, thou seest Him,  
And if thou seest Him, thou seest us both.’”<sup>44</sup>

“So, are you claiming that Jesus was not deity?” I exclaimed.

“I am saying that everything Jesus did pointed to God. When Jesus was asked which of the commandments was the greatest, he said,

‘The most important one,’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’<sup>45</sup>

“He didn’t say that God was three gods in one. What if his followers took the religion that Jesus talked about and made it a religion about Jesus? It is evident from the New Testament scriptures that the Apostles never understood Jesus or his mission. In the story of his arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane Peter tried to fight off the soldiers who had come to arrest Jesus

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<sup>42</sup> Bible, John 10:30.

<sup>43</sup> *The Changogya Upanishad*, Chapter VI, 13:3.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Nicholson, *The Mystics of Islam*, Routledge, Kegan Paul, London, 1914, p. 151

<sup>45</sup> Bible, Mark 12:29

still thinking that he was going to set up an earthly kingdom as the Messiah. So when Jesus was crucified they must have been devastated. What should they do? Perhaps they began to speculate and enhance the story of Jesus to make it palatable and cohesive and understandable, even though they, themselves, didn't understand. When we worship Jesus, what if we are worshipping a man rather than worshipping God? And think with me just for a minute, what if he was a man? Think of the power and promise in the fact that there was a man who was so dedicated and committed to God that he lived a perfect life; that he successfully emulated the Inconceivable One right up to death! What an example for all of us. In fact, much more than to think of him as a god-man who had the power to achieve things that we cannot since we are not superhuman. It is much more inspirational to consider him as a real person not possessing supernatural power that enabled him to know things that we cannot know that helped him through the tough times; but to consider him a real human being who took what life dished out just like it does to all of us, and in spite of it all, lived a perfectly God-centered life! Maybe he was used as a tool to heal the sick and raise the dead, but what if all of us can do those things if we are as God-centered as he was!"

"But, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis said that we only have three options when it comes to the claims of Jesus; either he really was God, he was deliberately lying, or he was not God but thought that he was which would make him delusional or insane."

"I don't think those are the only alternatives," Samuel continued. "Remember, as you stated earlier, Jesus did not write down any of his own teachings. Nor were any of his teachings written down until years after his death. Even then the things written were based on hearsay from men who did not understand Jesus when he was alive. Men who never personally met Jesus wrote most of the text in the New Testament. The other alternative is that his followers turned him into the god that they wanted him to be."

"So, what do you conclude concerning Jesus?"

“As I just said, we must consider the possibility that men took what Jesus taught and made it a religion about Jesus. That Jesus never intended to be considered the only Son of God and that he never intended to start a new religion. It is entirely possible that well-intentioned men created this idea of Jesus’ godship.

“Remember, Jesus always pointed men to God and not to himself. His greatest teachings are found in Matthew, Chapter 5 of the New Testament, a Chapter called the Sermon on the Mount. In this Chapter, he never talks about being the Messiah or the only Son of God.

“In his book, *How Jesus Became God*, Bart D. Ehrman writes this concerning Jesus being divine:

‘As I pointed out, we have numerous earlier sources for the historical Jesus: a few comments in Paul (including several quotations from Jesus’s teachings), Mark, Q, M, and L, not to mention the finished Gospels of Matthew and Luke. In none of them do we find exalted claims of this sort. If Jesus went around Galilee proclaiming himself to be a divine being sent from God – one who existed before the creation of the world, who was in fact equal with God – could anything else that he might say be so breathtaking and thunderously important? And yet none of these earlier sources says any such thing about him. Did they (all of them) just decided not to mention the one thing that was most significant about Jesus?’

‘What we can know with relative certainty about Jesus is that his public ministry and proclamation were not focused on his divinity; in fact, they were not about his divinity at all. They were about God. And about the kingdom that God was going to bring. ... This was the message he delivered to his disciples, and in the end, it was the message that got him crucified. It was only afterward, once the disciples believed that their crucified master had been raised from the dead,

that they began to think that he must, in some sense, be God.”<sup>46</sup>

I had to think about that for a minute. This was probably the biggest blow to my belief. What if Jesus was *not* the Son of God? How would I handle such an idea? Maybe there were inconsistencies in the Bible, but there was never any doubt in my mind that Jesus was divine. Samuel could see my concern. He continued.

“I know this might come as a shock, but, as you know, Christianity is the only religion that believes that Jesus was God. Or, even that he was the Messiah. There are reasons why the Jews don’t believe it.”

“Like what?”

“They claim that Jesus did *not* fulfill the messianic prophecies.”

“What is the Messiah supposed to accomplish?”

“Well, let me explain their argument. According to the Jews and many Christians, there are certain prophecies that describe what it will be like when the Messiah comes.”

Samuel walked over to the bookshelf and selected a Bible from among the books. He began searching the pages as he talked.

“One of the central themes of biblical prophecy is the promise of a future age of perfection characterized by universal peace and recognition of God. Specifically, the Bible says he will build the third Temple. Ezekiel 37:26-28 says,

‘I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever.’<sup>27</sup> My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.<sup>28</sup> Then the

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<sup>46</sup> Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, Harper One, 2015, p 127-128.

nations will know that I the LORD make Israel holy, when my sanctuary is among them forever.’

“In Isaiah 43:5-6 it says that in the last days he will gather all Jews back to the land of Israel:

‘Do not be afraid, for I am with you;  
I will bring your children from the east  
and gather you from the west.

<sup>6</sup>I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’  
and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’  
Bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the ends of the earth.’

“The Messiah is to usher in an era of world peace, and end all hatred, oppression, suffering and disease. As it says in Isaiah 2:4:

‘Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall man learn war anymore.’

“And, he will spread universal knowledge of the God of Israel, which will unite humanity as one. As it says in Zachariah 14:9:

‘God will be King over all the world – on that day, God will be One and His Name will be One’

“The Jews claim that if an individual fails to fulfill even one of these conditions, then he cannot be the Messiah.”

I hadn’t heard any of this before. “But the Jews didn’t believe in the second coming of Christ. Aren’t these things supposed to be fulfilled at that time?”

“If you read The Revelation, it is a very violent time. If these things are supposed to come to pass at all, I suppose it’s *following* the holocaust told about in Revelations. In fact, Jesus, himself, never claimed to be the prince of peace. In Matthew 10:34 he is credited with saying,

‘Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.’

“And, the second coming is not mentioned in the Old Testament at all.

“Also, the Jews argue that many prophetic passages speak of a descendant of King David who will rule Israel during the age of perfection. In Isaiah 11:1-9 it says:

<sup>1</sup> A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.

<sup>2</sup> The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the LORD—

<sup>3</sup> and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;

<sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he will judge the needy,  
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the  
earth.

He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;  
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.

<sup>5</sup> Righteousness will be his belt  
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

<sup>6</sup> The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling<sup>[a]</sup> together;  
and a little child will lead them.

<sup>7</sup> The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

<sup>8</sup> The infant will play near the cobra’s den,  
and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s  
nest.

<sup>9</sup> They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the  
LORD

as the waters cover the sea.’

“Jeremiah 23:5-6 says:

‘The days are coming,’ declares the LORD,  
 “when I will raise up for David<sup>[a]</sup> a righteous  
 Branch,  
 a King who will reign wisely  
 and do what is just and right in the land.  
<sup>6</sup>In his days Judah will be saved  
 and Israel will live in safety.  
 This is the name by which he will be called:  
 The LORD Our Righteous Savior.’

“This message is reiterated in Jeremiah 30:7-10, 33:14-16; Ezekiel 34:11-31, 37:21-28; and Hosea 3:4-5.”

“I was madly taking notes.”

“The Jews maintain that the Messiah must be a descendant specifically on his father's side from King David. They use Jeremiah 33:17:

‘For this is what the LORD says: ‘David will never fail to have a man to sit on the throne of Israel...’

“They also quote Genesis 49:10, Isaiah 11:1, and Ezekiel 34:23-24. According to the Christian claim that Jesus was the product of a virgin birth, he had no father – and thus could not have fulfilled the messianic requirement of being descended on his father's side from King David.”

“But don’t some Christians claim that Joseph adopted Jesus, and passed on his genealogy through adoption.” I remembered from a sermon I’d heard.

“I believe they do, but there are two problems with this claim: there is no biblical basis for the idea of a father passing on his tribal line by adoption. A priest who adopts a son from another tribe cannot make him a priest by adoption, and Joseph could never have passed on by adoption that which he didn’t have.”

“What do you mean?”

“Joseph descended from Jeconiah so he fell under the curse of that king that stated that none of his descendants could ever sit as king upon the throne of David. Jeremiah 22:28-30 says:

‘Is this man Jehoiachin a despised, broken pot,  
an object no one wants?

Why will he and his children be hurled out,  
cast into a land they do not know?

<sup>29</sup> O land, land, land,  
hear the word of the LORD!

<sup>30</sup> This is what the LORD says:

“Record this man as if childless,  
a man who will not prosper in his lifetime,  
for none of his offspring will prosper,  
none will sit on the throne of David  
or rule anymore in Judah.’

“Jeconiah also means Jehoiachin according to the footnotes in Matthew.”

“But can’t we trace Jesus’ heritage back to King David through his mother, Mary? Wasn’t she a descendent of David?” I was trying desperately to win this argument.

“Well, it does mention that in the third chapter of Luke. However, there are several problems with that theory, as well. First of all, there is no evidence that Mary descended from David. The third chapter of Luke traces Joseph's genealogy, not Mary's. Secondly, even if Mary’s genealogy could be traced back to David that doesn't help Jesus since tribal affiliation goes only through the father, not the mother. Here they use Numbers 1:18 to show that it is the male that carries the promise.

‘and they called the whole community together on the first day of the second month. The people registered their ancestry by their clans and families, and the men twenty years old or more were listed by name, one by one,...

“And, finally, even if family line could go through the mother, Mary was not from a legitimate messianic family.

According to the Bible, the Messiah must be a descendent of David through his son *Solomon*. The Jews use 2 Samuel 7:14:

‘I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with a rod wielded by men, with floggings inflicted by human hands.’

“And they quote 1Chronicles 17:11-14:

‘I declare to you that the LORD will build a house for you: <sup>11</sup>When your days are over and you go to be with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>12</sup>He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. <sup>13</sup>I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. <sup>14</sup>I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.’

“So, you see, the third chapter of Luke is irrelevant because it describes lineage of David's son *Nathan*, not Solomon. So, these are a few of the reasons why the Jews do not accept Jesus as the Messiah.

My mind was reeling with information. Why hadn't I been told of these things before?

“So, where does that leave us concerning him? Is he to become no more than a great prophet?”

“Absolutely not! His contribution to the spiritual aspect of humanity is enormous. At a time when there were many religions in the area of his birth and, therefore, many concepts about God and who God was, through his life he showed what a man should be, how a man should behave, how a single life could impact the world simply by living a God-centered, God-committed life. Even in death, he did not strike back at his enemies. Even in death he forgave them and showed how strong one man could love another by emulating the love of God. His teachings further emphasized the concept of a God that wants

only good for mankind: love your neighbor as yourself; love those who take advantage of you; when a man asks for help, give it; the meek shall inherit the earth; if a man asks you to go a mile with him, go two; and we could go on and on. His teachings called for positive, loving actions toward all men. In fact, he was one of the first men to show the need to update the scriptures in order for them to more effectively meet the needs of a changing social environment.”

“Really?” I couldn’t tell where Samuel was going with this.

“If you’ll remember,” Samuel reminded me, “Jesus altered several of the Old Testament scriptures. In Exodus 21:23-25 it says,

‘But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.’

“But in Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus said,

‘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’.

“In Deuteronomy 24:1, the Old Testament law declares that any man who finds his wife to be indecent can obtain a divorce. It states,

‘If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house...’

“But in Matthew 5:31, Jesus says,

‘It has been said, ‘Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce. But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.’

“In Exodus 20:13, the Old Testament scriptures declare,

‘You shall not murder.’

“But in Matthew 5:21-23 Jesus enhances or clarifies the scripture and says,

‘You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment. But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, “Raca”, is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, “You fool!” will be in danger of the fire of hell.’

“The original scriptures were meant for a very primitive civilization and were, therefore, very basic. The modifications offered by Jesus made them more applicable to a more advanced society. His life and his teachings were a great example of the nature of God. His teachings were logical and rational,” he concluded.

“It’s possible I suppose, that some things might have been added or misinterpreted during the writing of these documents. But as I mentioned, many believe that God has carefully protected His message so it has been transmitted accurately. It is believed that the accuracy of the Bible was protected by the guidance of the Holy Spirit and that the Koran was dictated directly to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel,” I insisted.

“I understand those arguments. But if that is the case, then, once again, why are there so many contradictions and inconsistencies? Is God so inconsistent? Why does God’s message say one thing to the Jews, another to Muslims and yet another to Christians? How can they all be true if they contradict each other and even contain contradictions within their own pages? Why do so many religious ideas exist and have endured around the world? As you stated, if there is one Supreme God, shouldn’t there be one religion and one message for everyone universally? And if there are many religions, then who has the

correct one, or does anyone? Does God mean to confuse us? Or is it the human element that confuses us?"

"But," I argued, "some insist that because God used men to write the scriptures that it makes sense that the personality or style of the writer will come through their writing and it would look contrived if there were no inconsistencies."

"If God is perfect then God's message should be perfect as well. If God can create the universe then surely God could write the scriptures using humans and still keep the message perfect and flawless. Why would God allow there to be discrepancies that allow for misinterpretation or mistranslation? Again, does God intend to confuse us? If God has a message for us wouldn't God want it to be clear and straightforward so we understand exactly what God intends to say to us?"

That was a good point. There was silence while I considered what Samuel had said. After a few seconds, he continued.

"Let me interject something else here that I think is very relevant."

"Okay."

"We have been discussing the inconsistencies in the scriptures and the ways and means that these might have occurred. But here's something else to consider. Thomas Paine published a book in the late 1700's titled, "The Age of Reason". In it he argues that if God's message was intended for all people of the world then why did he choose to deliver it in a particular language, knowing how vulnerable language is to manipulation and modification and how it is virtually impossible to accurately translate one language to another. Paine says,

'Human language is local and changeable, and is therefore incapable of being used as the means of unchangeable and universal information. The idea that God sent Jesus Christ to publish, as they say, the glad tidings to all nations, from one end of the earth unto the other, is consistent only with the ignorance of those who

know nothing of the extent of the world, and who believed, as those world-saviours believed, and continued to believe for several centuries, (and that in contradiction to the discoveries of philosophers and the navigators,) that the earth was flat like a trencher; and that a man might walk to the end of it. But how was Jesus Christ to make anything known to all nations? He could speak but one language, which was Hebrew; and there are in the world several hundred languages. Scarcely any two nations speak the same language, or understand each other; and as to translations, every man who knows anything of languages, knows that it is impossible to translate from one language into another, not only without losing a great part of the original, but frequently of mistaking the sense; and besides all this, the art of printing was wholly unknown at the time Christ lived.’

“If this message was meant to be universal it has fallen dismally short of it goal. According to Ethnologue, a publication of SIL International, a linguistics company, in 2009 there were 6,909 different languages in the world. In 2009 the Bible or parts of it had been translated into about 2,508 languages. That represents less than half of the known languages in the world.<sup>47</sup>

“In other words, language was the *worst* method for communicating a universal message, even if that message was, at first, a message for one specific group of people.

“And, of course, we have already mentioned the problems of accurate translations. We have evidence of this problem today. There are many translations of the Bible, each trying to communicate the original meaning and intent more accurately. Sometimes translation problems are minor, but sometimes they can have an enormous impact.”

“Like what?” I questioned.

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.linguisticsociety.org>

“Well, for instance, one critical place where it appears that there is a mistranslation is in Matthew 1:22-23 where the writer of Matthew translates the Hebrew word, *alma*, as *virgin*. Matthew says,

‘The **virgin** will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’ (which means “God with us”).’

“In regard to this claim, Rabbi Tovia Singer, a Jewish scholar says,

‘For nearly two millennia the Church has insisted that the Hebrew word *almah* אַמָּה can only mean “virgin.” This is a vital position for defenders of Christianity to take because Matthew 1:22-23 translates *alma* in Isaiah 7:14 as “virgin.” The first Gospel quotes this well known verse to provide the only “Old Testament” proof text for the supposed virgin birth of Jesus. The stakes are high for Christendom. If the Hebrew word *alma* does not mean a virgin, Matthew crudely misquoted the prophet Isaiah, and both a key tenet of Christianity and the credibility of the first Gospel collapses.’

‘How accurate is this Christian claim? The only place to explore this assertion is in the Jewish Scriptures. If the Hebrew word *alma* means virgin, then each usage in the Bible must be either a clear reference to a virgin or at the very least appear ambiguous. The word *alma* appears in the Jewish Scriptures seven times in the feminine and twice in the masculine. If even one reference refers to a woman who is clearly not a virgin, then Matthew’s rendition of Isaiah 7:14 becomes untenable.

‘In the same way that in the English language the words “young woman” does not indicate sexual purity, in the Hebrew language there is no relationship between the words *almah* and virgin. On the contrary, it is usually a young woman who bears children. The word *alma* only conveys age/gender. Had Isaiah

wished to speak about a virgin, he would have used the word *betulah*<sup>4</sup> (בְּתוּלָה) not *almah*. The word *betulah* appears frequently in the Jewish Scriptures, and is the only word – in both biblical and modern Hebrew – that conveys sexual purity.<sup>48</sup>

“Did Matthew make a mistake in translation? Maybe.”

“But this is a crucial part of Christian theology!” I argued.

“That’s why it’s so important. You see, this is evidence that language is *not* an efficient conduit for communicating a particular message to people who did not share the same language. And we know from the scriptures that this message was to be universal, for everyone.

“Some people would call what you are suggesting Universalism.”

“Absolutely,” Samuel exclaimed. “Religion *should* be universal. God *should* be universal. Truth *should* be universal. God created us all and put us in a world that was made for us. That’s all-inclusive, universal.”

We had discussed so much. Samuel had introduced so many radical, and yet, reasonable ideas that I had to ask to take a break so I could consider the things that we had talked about. I had to be very careful not to get too caught up in the discussion so that I lost my objectivity. I wanted to be sure that I was hearing arguments that were supported by evidence of some kind. As far as I could remember, everything we had discussed had been substantiated with hard evidence, history or common sense. There were a few conjectures that I had to think about but overall, I was excited about what I was learning.

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<sup>48</sup> [www.outreachjudaism.org](http://www.outreachjudaism.org) - Rabbi Tovia Singer