

Journey 24 - FINDING THE ETERNAL WITHIN

So what did Jesus teach? I leave it to you to verify this for yourself, since it is not hard to find copies of THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS. The dry desert of Egypt preserved this Gospel from ancient times, and it was only discovered in 1945. It was part of the library of a group of desert "Saints" (a translation of the same word as "Essene"). The one copy of the Gospel of Thomas is in Coptic, the language of Ancient Egypt.

Say what you will about the corruption of the traditional New Testament, caused by pious fraud and mistranslation over the millennia--this copy of the Gospels comes straight to us from Ancient Times. THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS is nothing more than "The Sayings of Jesus." There are no miracles, no Messiah complex, no Sermon on the Mount (but the Beatitudes are all there), no entry into Jerusalem, no Crucifixion, and no Resurrection. Indeed, there is nothing internal to the book that would date the time of Christ. He may very well be the "Teacher of Righteousness" of the Judaic Essenes, who may have lived about 100 BCE.

Most of his teaching consists in parables and metaphors about reaching a state of "the X of Y" where X is a word usually translated as "kingdom" but could also be translated "realm" and Y is a word for "sky" usually translated as "heaven." Translating ancient metaphors is a tricky business. We have to put ourselves back into that time, and try to imagine how people of that time would understand this metaphor.

From the time of Aristotle (300 BCE) to the time of Galileo (1600 CE), nearly 2000 years, the worldview, the background of all thought, was that of Aristotle and Ptolemy. It made a large distinction between the heavens (i.e. stars, the moon, the sun, and the planets) and earth. Earth was made of four elements, earth, air, fire, and water, and was mutable and perishable. The heavenly bodies were made of a fifth element (quintessence) which was immutable, imperishable and eternal. Thus, the correct translation of this metaphor is "realm of the imperishable," or "realm of the quintessence," or "realm of the eternal."

Given that meaning, "the realm of the eternal is within," a saying found both in the BOOK OF THOMAS and the canonical gospels, makes perfect sense, to the surprise of Fundamentalists. It makes perfectly good sense to try to enter the realm of the quintessence while one is still alive. Although Joshua clearly believes in an afterlife, he gives no details. He does make it clear that the search for the realm of the imperishable is part of this life, if the seeker is to find ONE. That is exactly what the Saints were doing.

Desert Saints: Like mystics of all ages and all cultures, they found it necessary to withdraw from the world, to obtain solitude, for years at a time. The Yogis found solitude in the forest, the Taoist mystics found it in the mountains, and the Saints found it first in the desert and later on remote islands off the coast of Ireland and Scotland. It is clear to me, someone who has experienced the illumination of fire, that this is what Joshua bar Josuf (Jesus) had himself experienced, and this is what he wanted his followers to find.

The illumination of fire gives one a vision of life and history as a whole, with a single divine purpose running through it. This is what makes one whole (holy). Clearly, this was the original meaning of "holy," which has a common root with holistic, holographic, whole, hale and heal. Both

men and women withdrew from the Saturnalia of the Roman Empire to become pure and holy, and sometimes they returned as great witnesses to their experiences.

Martyr As Witness: The word "martyr" means "witness." This is something the legalistic Romans could understand. They had no science, but they had law, and they knew the value of a good witness. The Emperors persecuted the Christians, including former desert hermits. They went fearlessly and that impressed the materialistic Romans. This gives rise to the second definition of "Saint" as one who was martyred. The more Saints the Romans created, the more Romans became Christians.

Early Christianity: During the period of persecution, Christianity was also organizing itself as a religion, with priests and bishops. Peter went to Rome, as did Paul, while Thomas went to India. James evangelized in Jerusalem among the Jews. There was a formal, hierarchical organization being developed, i.e., the church, but there were also the Saints, who were completely outside any such organization, yet, who provided the main impetus for the growth of Christianity. One of the strengths of the early church is that it was open to men and women, rich and poor, and it practiced charity. It also opened the first orphanages, the first hospitals, and the first hostels. Even in the Middle Ages, pilgrims and travelers of all kinds stayed at monasteries along the way. Monasteries continued to be the centers of learning, the arts, and even of technology, until the rebirth of trade and of cities and of a middle class.

The first wave of pagan barbarians rolled over the Western Roman Empire, but stopped short of Ireland, Wales, and Scotland, possibly because of a Celtic war-lord whose battle flag was a "bear," i.e. "Artos" thus giving rise to the Arthurian legends, all of which first appeared in the Celtic Fringe in the 8th and 9th Centuries. The monasteries there created a brief golden age, an age of marvelous manuscripts and fine jewelry. For about a century, they were the only people in Europe who could read and write, both Greek and Latin, and who still had a taste for the classics in those languages, and still had libraries and scriptoria. Thus, they made copies that wound up all over Europe. It was also a culture rich in Saints, some of whom began to evangelize Anglo-Saxon England, Frankish Gaul, and Lombardian Italy. This is how the Irish saved civilization, as described in Thomas Cahill's marvelous little book, HOW THE IRISH SAVED CIVILIZATION.

One of the last of these Hibernian scholars was Alcuin of York, who started a school and scriptorium for Charlemagne. It eventually became one of the first European universities. Most of the ancient books that have come down through the Middle Ages are Carolingian copies, the first to separate words with a space, and the first to use the Carolingian minuscule, father of "lower case." It is a wonder the Ancients could read their inscriptions, since they were all upper case, all the words were jammed together, and they were very fond of allusions and abbreviations, just as today we are very fond of acronyms.

How Did Sunday school Christianity Arise? By pious fraud and forgery. The Popes themselves know this. In her book, THE CHRIST CONSPIRACY, Acharya S introduces us to a vast, little known literature by people who challenge every part of Sunday school tradition. According to the skeptics, the Bible has been under more or less continuous revision from about 170-180 CE (when the oldest parts of the New Testament were written down, according to her) down to the dawn of

printing in the 15th Century. The skeptics doubt the huge drama of the passion of Christ, because historians of the time, such as Josephus, make no mention of it.

The skeptics do not think the life of Jesus could possibly be set in Galilee of around 30 CE, because Galilee at that time was a rich Roman province, with great cities under construction that are not even mentioned in the Bible. Nor could he have been from Nazareth since it did not exist in 1 CE, or 30 CE. In addition, the early church fathers, such as Justin Martyr and Marcion make no mention of the four canonical gospels, so they did not exist in the First Century CE. In Paul's letters, he makes absolutely no mention of the teachings of Jesus. He quotes no parable, no beatitude, none of the teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven. Indeed, no book in the New Testament makes any mention of any other book in the New Testament. Acharya and many skeptics conclude that the Jesus legend is pure myth, and is simply a recycling of Sol Invictus.

At the very least, Acharya and other skeptics should teach us to doubt Sunday school tradition. That is why I confine myself to modern philological and archaeological discoveries. The medieval church never had their hands on such things. The catacomb art is interesting for what it shows and what it does not show. The archaeology done under the Altar of St. Peters in Rome during WW II is also very interesting (see THE BONES OF ST. PETER in the bibliography). Neither supports the extreme position of Acharya. Under the altar, archaeologists discovered a First Century tomb, and a small, hidden church in the midst of a pagan cemetery, with a small meeting room, and an adjoining baptistery. They found the bones of a robust man of 70, missing feet and head, wrapped in purple cloth veined with threads of pure gold, hidden inside "the graffiti wall," part of the Tropaion (the church). Why not the head? Another church in Rome claims that relic. Why no feet? If Nero crucified Peter upside down, as tradition has it, the easiest way to get him down would be to chop off the feet. This suggests that at least some Church traditions are not a fraud.

Whether the Romans crucified Yoshua bar Josuf or not is debatable. The Book of Thomas does not mention it, but then this is a book of sayings. Crucifixion would be an unusual punishment for heresy. Usually, the Jews stoned heretics to death, as they eventually did to James. In the Koran, it says Yoshua was not crucified. The Jews keep a record of the several hundred would-be or accused messiahs between 100 BCE and 100 CE, and it includes one Joshu bar Josuf, whose mother was Mary. Joshu was stoned to death. We find no crucifixes in the catacombs, nor any Last Supper, much less a Last Judgment. The earliest crucifix in Christian Art is a crude and obscure figure on the door of the church of Santa Sabina in Rome, dating to the 5th Century CE.

What we see in catacomb art is not the crucifix, but Christ in Orisen. This is the T gesture, standing with arms wide open. Do that to a person, and they will come give you a hug. Do that to the world, alone on a hilltop at dawn, and gain a wonderful epiphany of the innocence and beauty of the world, despite the pain and struggle. It could very well be that the T gesture came first, and was eventually given historicity by the process of myth making, followed by ignorant centuries that took these myths literally.

The oldest copies of the New Testament that have survived are the Vatican Codex, and the Sinai Codex, both dating from the 4th Century CE. There seems such a distance between the "Sayings of Yoshua" and even the short version of Mark that one suspects many decades or even centuries had to pass, decades of syncretism and mythologizing.

It is not unusual for religions to begin with the mystical teachings of the founder to a small circle of disciples. As the religion develops, it is not unusual for it to absorb elements from other religions over the centuries (syncretism) and to incorporate fantastic fairy tales that may incorporate some symbolic truth (mythology). I know that somebody sold small fragments of canonical gospels in a second Century style to antiquity dealers. Nothing would be easier to forge, if one knew the writing style of the appropriate decade. One could even use ancient papyrus and ink prepared in the old way. However, it does not make a great deal of difference to me whether the church traditions about the dates of the Gospels are true or not.

The Books of the New Testament as we have it were selected from a vast variety of "gospels" at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, under pressure from Emperor Constantine, who brought Christianity out of the catacombs and built it fine basilicas. He broke some major taboos to do so. The Basilica of St. Peter was built over a pagan cemetery (which is still down there!), just so the altar could be placed directly over the tomb of St. Peter.

Constantine meddled in religion primarily for state reasons. He needed an all-embracing ("Katholos" means "all-embracing") state religion to end divisive strife, and to make the Roman Empire more defensible. In this, he succeeded, so that at least the eastern part of the Empire survived for another thousand years.

So, are we to reject the Bible altogether? Did these miraculous events really happen? Was Christ resurrected? Did Paul have a transcendental vision on his way to Damascus, wherein he beheld the risen Christ? This might explain the eventual success of Christianity. If the Shroud of Turin turns out to date from the 1st Century, I might even believe it myself. And it could be authentic. Science has not ruled that out. The Titulus found in Empress Helen's house in Rome may be authentic and dated to 30 CE. It has "Jesus Christ King of the Jews" written from right to left in Hebrew, Latin and Greek.

Here is a second possibility, compatible with the first. Yoshua experienced the illumination of fire, and his teachings on the way to enter the "realm of the imperishable" (Kingdom of Heaven) worked. Those followers who gave up worldly concerns and went off into the desert as Seekers of the illumination of fire often succeeded, and when they returned to the world (or when the world came to them), they were not only holy and wise, but they also had "miraculous" powers, such as healing, or walking on water. The miracles of one age are the science of the next. The age of faith passes, and the age of spiritual science begins.

So why am I involved in these questions? Because I want you to understand the Way of the Saints and Sufis. The Sufis were desert saints who liked the pure monotheism of Islam, and so converted when Islam swept through the deserts of the Middle East in the 7th Century CE. I am trying to show that the Way of the Saints and Sufis was and is a valid path, one of the seven ways, each equally legitimate if we can scrape away centuries of pious forgery and superstition. I could also write treatises on Yoga or Taoism, but others could do it better than I could. There are ancient traditions of Shamans and Medicine men or women taking many forms in the Americas, in Siberia, and in Hawaii. See the works of Max Freedom Long, for one entrance to that world. Once again, others know far more about it than I do. There is Kabbalah, which also appeals to me. I don't claim to be an expert on it. I just happen to have figured out the essence of the Saints and Sufis,

and can explain to you what "the kingdom of heaven" metaphor would have meant in Ancient Times.

One can pursue the Way of the Saints and Sufis without being a Christian or Muslim. One can do Yoga without being a Hindu or Buddhist. In other words, the path is one thing, the religion another.