

SYNOPSIS

For 2000 years Christians have wrestled with two different strands of thought that soon became conflated: first, understanding the nature of God as seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; and second understanding what the Jesus acclaimed as the Christ represents. Before that we have another fifteen hundred to 2000 years in which the people known first as the Hebrews and then the Jews come to an understanding of a single God: 1000 of those 2000 years are covered with reasonably accurate records and then there is a further thousand years back of race memory. When it comes to Sunday morning sermons across the land, however, we revert to simplistic, cartoon like, word pictures: as though what we see described in bible passages can be accepted exactly as it happened and exactly as the English words imply; and yet at the same time members of our congregations privately express grave reservations nay incredulity as to the historicity and accuracy of the documents we are preaching from.

During those three or four thousand years ideas have been mulled, shaken & stirred. They may still be current but equally they've often been part discarded whilst remaining influential and only shallowly understood; but they probably affect us today without us realising it. This is a crude attempt to shape a context for the Bible and for Christian thought in way that makes sense to a questioning & progressive mind coming to Christian belief for the first time; and it eschews the simplified, cartoon like and childish approach frequently used for newcomers.

THE BIBLE & CHRISTIANITY **FOR PROGRESSIVE MINDS**

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PART 1 - INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT & THE BIBLE

INTRODUCTION

1. Almost two thousand years ago a man in his mid/late 30s tried to bring renewal to Judaism by preaching a threefold message of love for God AND your neighbour - which he inextricably linked; the imminence of the Kingdom of God - where truth, love & justice flourish; and a change of heart & mind - erroneously translated into English as repentance. This man was born into an interconnected world of Greek and Jewish thought, both of which operated under the blanket of the Pax Romana. He himself claimed a special relationship with God and spoke of himself variously as 'the Son of Man' & 'the son' in relationship to 'his father'. After successively trying to bring renewal first by his own words, then by sending first his inner 12 disciples out to preach and finally by send a wider set of followers out to spread the message of renewal, he set his face upon the backstop option of enacting the 'suffering servant' scenario from Isaiah chapter 53 which he must have accepted as prophesy. He was crucified by the Romans at the behest of the Jewish/Temple religious authorities and, as he died the painful and degrading death of all Roman political executions, experienced the desperation & sense of failure that is the lot of man.

2. On the 'third day' however his closest followers experienced his presence with them once again and remembered his teaching of resurrection. So began one of the world's great religions in which, at first and as Jews, his followers came to see Jesus 'as a son is to his father' so giving us the nature of God.

3. The driving source of what eventually became known as Christianity was the Pharisee 'Saul of Tarsus' who as St Paul, both drove Christianity into the gentile (non Jewish) community and transformed Jesus' teachings about what he (Jesus) represented - from the original message about what Jesus tells us of God to a message of what Jesus himself represented.

4. Over the next three hundred years Greek philosophy took over the nascent Jewish sect of The Nazarenes and changed what was a socially radical message of 'expressing the Love of God to all mankind' into a message of inner spirituality: assisted by slight mistranslations which distorted the meaning of the message, subtly & very slightly but most definitely; and set in stone when the Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity (only ten years after his predecessor 'Diocletian' made the most significant attempt to stamp it out) and brought about a centralised declaration of intellectual belief. This declaration transformed Christianity from a socially radical, caring, practical example of 'doing love' & 'making real the Kingdom of God' to an inner spirituality of sin & salvation which both aped all the Axial Age religions and defenestrated Christian belief of any practical threat to the established order.

5. The central element of this inward looking spirituality was God, Jesus & The Holy Spirit all making up aspects the Trinitarian God - God the father, God the Son & God the Holy Spirit. Our understanding of the Trinity itself developed from the original subtle Greek understanding of three aspects of God through a more direct Latin understanding and then to the increasingly primitive 'cartoon like' medieval western understanding most people keep today: the result leaving many parts of the church of God picturing Jesus as God walking

around on earth omniscient and omnipotent in capability and merely human & limited by choice.

6. As Christianity moved, from subtle 'nuanced' Greek thought first into a 'more direct' Latin matrix of belief & leadership and then into an era where the few intellectually challenging theologians were segregated from a populous kept backward by a church jealously maintaining its position as intermediary in Western Europe, it took up intolerant & cruel aspects which lie far from the original message of God as represented by Jesus. As important though was the marginalisation of thinking about what Jesus of Nazareth, who we know as the Christ, represents such that when humankind 'moved on' in its thinking about the mechanism & processes of the world in the era we call The Enlightenment - itself building on Mesopotamian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek & Arabic thought - Christian dogma seemed increasingly irrelevant.

7. In particular there is/was an issue with the transformation from an outward message of love coming first from the Jewish Rabbi Hillel in the generation before Jesus (overlapping by 10 years and surely influencing him), and then espoused by the Jesus we accept as showing us God, into a concept of personal sin transformed from Greek 'failure' & 'missing the mark' into twisted & distorted acts of mini evil and salvation - a concept alien to Jews like Jesus & Paul. It leaves Christianity struggling to reconcile our beliefs - loyalty, commitment & intellectual - about the fundamental truths of Creation in God with our modern, scientific understanding of the mechanism/processes of Creation/the Universe.

8. A Stripped however of the human speculation and attempts to describe the unknowable, which is what theology is, Christian belief, both commitment & loyalty and intellectual thought, is simple:

- There is a God and so life/creation has meaning.
- We see God, or the nature of God, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth
- The nature of God is love.
- There is a life after death.

Anything and everything else is theological speculation. As such it informs debate but can never be considered definitive fact. In truth Christian thought has been recast a number of times through history and some of the ideas we are left with betray the thought processes of former and more primitive times; thoughts baked in for reasons both 'small p' political AND 'big P' Political.

9. One suspects that the different casts we take to the message & mission of Jesus are & have been conditioned by the time in which we live(ed) and the ideas current at the time. It's no wonder therefore that ideas surrounding Jesus' birth and then later of the Trinity were ideas coming out of Greek thought following the period when the Jews were in disgrace after the two revolts which saw Jerusalem and the Temple razed and the Jews expelled: the supernatural element of Jesus' birth because there was a tradition within Greek legend of men & gods interacting and so a man part God and part human would seem normal; and the Trinity because Greek thought was particularly subtle of and Greek theatre used masks to change the

characters played by the same actors in a play – the original basis of the Trinity.

10. Ideas being conditioned by the time in which influential thinkers lived also applies to the ideas on sin and particularly the idea of original sin transmitted by women. One of the Western church's most influential thinkers, a brilliant theologian we know as Augustine of Hippo, is living at a time when the Roman Empire is crumbling; and, in the process of recovering from his own mental breakdown, he is looking for society's sins to explain what is happening to his world. In fact this has been a common factor through history - from the Hebrews after the northern kingdom of Israel is defeated in 744BCE to the Muslim empire trying to understand why it's world is failing in the 17/18C. Augustine's idea come at the beginning of a period for western Christianity where it's sundered from its more subtle 'and clever' eastern cousin, added to a darker and more primitive period following the fall of the Roman Empire and the arrival of the 'barbarian' tribes, and coming after Constantine had set the imperial seal on the model hammered out at Nicaea. As a result Christianity stopped thinking and playing with ideas, in the main, until a time 1500 years later. By that time secular society was in the throes of 'the Enlightenment' which inevitably led to agnosticism and atheism given the childish & cartoon-like defence a deeply conservative church tried to mount against these 'dangerous' ideas.

11. We are however left with an opportunity for a new model of God & Jesus. One that relates to the world we live in and that uses the ideas produced by the scientific understanding of the mechanisms of the word which we have grown up with a accept

for the OTHER aspects of our lives. This book/pamphlet is MY 'starter for ten'.

12. To quote the synopsis:

a. 'For 2000 years Christians have wrestled with two different strands of thought that soon became conflated: first, understanding the nature of God as seen in the person of Jesus of Nazareth; and second understanding what the Jesus acclaimed as the Christ represents. Before that we have another fifteen hundred to 2000 years in which the people known first as the Hebrews and then the Jews come to an understanding of a single God: 1000 of those 2000 years are covered with reasonably accurate records and then there is a further thousand years back of race memory. When it comes to Sunday morning sermons across the land, however, we revert to simplistic, cartoon like, word pictures: as though what we see described in bible passages can be accepted exactly as it happened and exactly as the English words imply; and yet at the same time members of our congregations privately express grave reservations nay incredulity as to the historicity and accuracy of the documents we are preaching from.

b. 'During those three or four thousand years ideas have been mulled, shaken & stirred. They may still be current but equally they've often been part discarded whilst remaining influential and only shallowly understood; but they probably affect us today without us realising it.'

13. I am assuming a questing and interested mind when attempting to describe the spectrum of Christian for a newcomer to the Bible & to the Church at large. The aim being to take someone with no background whatsoever in the subject and get them started. Where sections should need to be understood as opinion, rather than undisputed fact or accepted historical information, words like 'arguably' have been used to make it crystal clear. All dates are quoted in CE & BCE – 'common era' and 'before common era' – the modern usage amongst historians equating to AD & BC in 'old money'.

14. Before we attempt a revised model of understanding, appropriate for the 21C let us look back on how we got here and what our existing ideas actually mean.

CONTEXT

15. The story of the Jews, of Christianity and of Islam begins with groups of misfits & outcasts emigrating from a part of the world containing the two great early civilisations of Sumer in Mesopotamia and then later Egypt. These misfits and outcasts came together at different times in the Canaanite Highlands in the mid 2C CE and they then emerge into history as a people known as the Hebrews. They brought with them the legends, clues & different words for 'God' which give us clues as to their origins and over a period of hundreds of years wove the different strands into a single narrative. We know, for example, that the story of Noah's Flood mirrors exactly an earlier Sumerian legend from Mesopotamia known as the Gilgamesh Epics - dating from the time when sea levels rose at the end of the last ice age. Similarly one noted historian/Egyptologist has

plausibly identified the Garden of Eden in an area that has modern day Turkey to the West, modern Armenia to the north, modern Azerbaijan to the east and Kurdistan to the south. Historians have found evidence of a Semitic city in Egypt's Nile delta abandoned in the era of Moses & the escape from Egypt; and there are two distinctly different words for God in the early accounts of Genesis.

16. Both the Hebrew Bible (THE Bible to Jews & Muslims and the Old Testament to Christians) and the Christian New Testament are collections of documents of faith written by a variety of different authors: all with different agendas and different objectives. As Rabbi Lionel Blue once said 'the Bible is a record of what happened, what people think happened and what they thought it all meant'. A progressive reader will view the collection as a series of 'experimental notebooks' from which trends & understandings can be detected. A conservative is more likely to take the position that the documents are inspired by God (rather than evidence of an emerging faith IN God); a modern conservative is arguably less inclined to question the documents than was the case previously; and a fundamentalist views the books as being dictated by God and therefore sacrosanct.

17. The Hebrew bible charts an emerging belief in a single God. It starts with the myths of the Hebrew people and goes on to record their history whilst describing their emerging belief in a single God and mapping the development of these ideas into the faith we call Judaism. In fact there have been three times in ancient history when different strands of civilisation have come to a belief in a single god. With roots in the 2C BCE, Zoroastrianism was the state religion for Persian empires from

600 BCE to the coming of Islam in 650 C; and Pharaoh Akhenaten also adopted a single god belief in Ancient Egypt. It is the beliefs of the Hebrews/Jews, however, that have formed the basis of religions that cover over half the world's population today with Christianity (31%) and Islam (25%).

18. Christians value the Hebrew Bible because Christianity emerged as a sect from Judaism and the early followers of Jesus came to believe that he was the prophesied Messiah or Christ (Greek name for the Messiah) and so looked for & cherry picked evidence that he had fulfilled all the prophesies. Christians came to see themselves as the true 'people of God' which the Jews have always felt themselves to be; and arguably, Christians also value it because the 'black and white' stories of the Hebrew bible were easier to deal with than the more demanding message of Jesus.

19. Whilst the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament charts the development of a belief in a single God, the New Testament records and explores an emerging narrative that in Jesus of Nazareth we see the NATURE of God; and furthermore that we should think in terms of a relationship with God, and with our fellow humans, that is distinctly different from what went before. It is based on four, related accounts of the life, mission, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, which we know as the gospels. It includes an account of the immediate period after Jesus' death & resurrection known as The Acts of The Apostles. It preserves a number of major letters (known as the 'epistles') written by the founders of those emerging Christian communities around the Mediterranean in the first 20 years after Jesus' death - written in response to particular situations/issues they faced but then expanding upon how to

live & what to believe; and finally it includes one apocalyptic tract which no one really understands (Revelations).

20. There are a number of other books of faith that DIDN'T make it into the final New Testament canon; largely because they were felt to have been written later on in the first few hundred years of Christian history. NOT as the Dan Brown's bestselling book 'The Da Vinci Code' has it, because they were suppressed but rather because they were felt not to be authentic. We know for instance that Jesus was crucified in 30 or 33 CE (from clues given by astronomical data and the timing of the Passover festival) and the debate about dating the New Testament ranges from the gospels/epistles being written between 40 & 60 CE (the earliest and a minority position), to more common accepted dates of 70 to 90 CE and even to the early part of the 2C around 115 CE. I myself subscribe to Bishop John Robinson's dating of 40 to 60

WORLD of the OLD TESTAMENT/HEBREW BIBLE

21. The Hebrews emerge as a people in the middle of the 2C BCE with emigration from Egypt being dated as 1700 BCE or 1400 BCE depending on whether you following the traditional biblical/Egyptian dating or David Rohl's New Chronology. Interestingly the Hebrew Bible is actually the basis of archaeological dating for Egyptian civilisation with the identification on which Pharaoh it was whose Egyptian army sacked the Temple of Solomon in 926 BCE being the key factor in whether you adopt the conventional dating system or whether you subscribe to the New Chronology. The identification of that pharaoh also determines whether the

events around Kings Saul, David & Solomon take place in the Early Iron Age or the Late Bronze Age; but either way the events surrounding the Kingdom of Israel start to acquire greater substance from the beginning of the 1C BCE. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible (the Torah) are believed to have been written in the mid 8C BCE at around 744BCE, recording the aural records of the development of the Hebrews; and they are then redacted, amended and revised after the Babylonian captivity, 586-538 BCE.

22. After the time of Solomon the Hebrews divide into two nations: the kingdom of Israel comprising 10 of the 12 tribes of Israel and the kingdom of Judah with the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The landmass of Judah was a block of land on the west side of the Dead Sea with modern day Jerusalem at its far north and Beersheba at its far south, stretching most of the way to the Mediterranean but not including the coastal strip of the Philistines. Israel was the larger of the two kingdoms, taking approximately the rest of the size of current landmass of Israel north of Jerusalem.

23. By 722 BCE the 10 to 20 year demise of the northern kingdom of Israel at the hands of the dominant Mesopotamian empire of the Assyrians had finished and according to the Bible the 'ten tribes' were carried off into captivity and/or were assimilated, never to be heard of again. There has been identification of these ten tribes with several distinct peoples in the Middle East as well as the indigenous people of America by the Mormons and the British by the 19C British Israelites; but more realistically, the Samaritans referred to in the Gospels are thought to have been assimilated remnants of the original kingdom of Israel. There has been a historical debate as to how

many people were actually carried off, and therefore whether any people or sub tribes were actually assimilated into their 'sibling' southern kingdom. Throughout the history of the three big faiths – Judaism, Christianity & Islam – big shocks to a civilisation have resulted in major changes in theology. In this case by 100 years later there was a trend amongst those remaining Hebrews inhabiting the Kingdom of Judah: Yahweh had become the ONLY God rather than being the tribal god of the Hebrews and there was an amount of editing of the Torah

24. By 586 BCE the remaining kingdom of Judah had picked the wrong side in a fight between the empires of Babylonian and Egypt at least twice and as a result the leaders and intelligentsia of Judah were carried off into captivity in 586 BCE in the established Babylonian pattern. The Persian empire conquered the Babylonian empire soon afterwards and the Persian Cyrus the Great allowed those exiled Hebrew intelligentsia to return home if they wanted – which is why Cyrus was considered by some Jews to have been the prophesied Messiah in the period after the return from exile. Many didn't come back and in fact Babylon had a significant Jewish populations for centuries afterwards. The return to restored Jerusalem and the beginnings of the restoration of the temple occurred around 538 BCE but by the time of the return the ideas of the Hebrew God taken to Babylon by their captive religious leaders had been modified by exposure to other cultures encountered in Babylon. The returnees came back with a clearly definable Jewish mindset – much to the consternation of their underlings who had stayed behind and no longer recognised what they were being told to do (it not bearing any resemblance to the religious practice they had been keeping whilst their leaders were away and changing).

25. In the 500 years after the Babylonian exile the Middle East came to be ruled first by the Persians and then it became part of the Hellenistic world when the empire formed by the great Macedonian leader Alexander the Great split after his death, and then finally it was ruled by the Romans. The Persians & Babylonians had influenced Judaism. The Greeks produced a translation of the Hebrew scriptures, and so most of what 1C Jews would actually read was this Greek translation we know as the Septuagint; and the Romans gave an ordered framework of peace and security to that part of the world. Despite all the peace and security however the Jews harkened back to memories of autonomy under David and Solomon and the 'Messiah tradition' became associated with 'taking back control'. The Maccabean revolt of 167-160 BCE was led by Judas Maccabee against that part of Alexander the Great's old empire still ruling Palestine. There was a big revolt against the Romans in 66-73 CE and then the temple, Jerusalem & Judea itself were destroyed and erased in a second big revolt against the Romans in 132-136 CE, after which the Romans had lost patience.

26. In the early years of what we now call 1C CE a charismatic faith healer with a new way of thinking about God emerged in Northern Palestine. Most scholars seem to accept that Jesus – the name we know him by in the English translation of the GREEK rendering of his Hebrew name (it would normally translated as JOSHUA in an English translation of the Hebrew name) - was born between 6 & 4 BCE and calculations by the astronomical data which determined the dating of the Passover festival would indicate that he died in either 30 or 33 CE. The accounts we have of his mission and his last one, two or three years were written by his followers, and so are books of faith

rather than attempts to present biographical data; and, whilst I myself follow the alternative argument in favour of a dating of the first of these records at ten years after his death, the consensus currently is approximately forty years after his death. By the time these records of his mission, death & alleged resurrection were made the movement following the death and resurrection of Jesus had spread around the Mediterranean world; and the letters written to the earliest of, what had been known in Palestine as the 'Nazarene sect' and would become known later as Christian, communities by those that founded them (these letters are known as the epistles) are accepted as being dated earlier than what we call the records we call the gospels at around ten years after his death.

JUDAISM AT THE TIME OF JESUS

27. In parallel with the mission of Jesus, and back BEFORE the time when the Jewish equivalent of the Brexiteers made their disastrous attempt to take back national sovereignty from the most powerful empire in history, one strand of Jewish thought was cross fertilised with Platonic Greek philosophy in the person of Philo of Alexandria (c30 BCE – 45 CE). This blending of Greek philosophy with Jewish/Christian thought was to become central to the story of the development of Christianity.

28. Coming back, however, to the run up to the life of Jesus in the early 1C three dominant strands had emerged within Judaism:

- a. The Sadducees who ran the country and managed/served in the temple.

- b. The Essenes who were a hermit like sect living away from the cities and establishment.
- c. The Pharisees whose practices centred on synagogues rather than the temple and who had come to believe in resurrection.

29. Pharisaic thought was very much based on debate and, like philosophers the world over, they would use extreme examples to illustrate their position and tease out answers to their questions. Therefore when we read of debates occurring between Jesus and the Pharisees, the extreme positions they are recorded as taking Jesus with may only have been their normal way of debating – something an untutored and inexperienced writers, from outside the Pharisaic movement, would not have understood and might therefore have presented as hypocrisy.

30. Pharisaic thought had divided into two major schools by the time of Jesus. Something like two thirds of pharisaic thought followed Rabbi Hillel, who believed that love was the central point of Judaism: and in fact so many of the thoughts of Jesus chime with Hillel's ideas that it is tempting to see him, either as a Pharisee of Hillel's school of thought or as someone who had come into contact and been influenced by Hillel. The remain third followed a line of those who wanted everyone to live the standards of the temple priests and for whom sin (strictly translated as 'missing the mark' or 'failing' - to keep to the religious laws) was the key factor: having a law/rule implies that one might fail to keep to that law and so fail, or sin.

31. Understanding these two strands is arguably critical in comprehending the distinct change in the direction of Christian thought when you compare the mission that Jesus preached to message coming down the centuries. Jesus followed a line, similar to or inspired by Hillel, where love was one of the key focuses of what he taught. In comparison, Paul, who as the dynamic & driven character who did more than anyone else to found a separate Christian church outside of Judaism, seems to have been a declared follower of the other line; and so he couches his thoughts in terms of sin. Paul's letters to the nascent churches around the Mediterranean world that he had founded form the backbone of the body of work we call the epistles and although those letters were written in response to specific situations their meanings have been taken as universal throughout Christian history.

32. In particular, putting sin at the centre of his ideas was later taken up by the influential 4/5C CE theologian Augustine of Hippo and then matured further by theologians such as the 11C Anselm to form the basis of atonement theory: where Christ is deemed to have died on the cross to atone for the sins of the world. It needs to be said though that 'sin' is NOT at the centre of Jesus' teaching and in the synoptic (related) gospels of Matthew, Mark & Luke he hardly ever mentions it except as an excuse to get people he has healed moving again. Furthermore, the Orthodox Christian world – the Eastern half of Christendom - never accepted atonement theory or any of its related theologies, either back before the eastern and western churches formally split or to this day.

NEW TESTAMENT

33. There are four accounts of the mission, death and resurrection of Jesus; however, even apart from the fact that authors were aiming their accounts at different audiences, there are thought to be only three original sources:

a. The writings of Mark are accepted as being a record of Peter's memories. Possibly it's the same John Mark that travelled with and disappoints Paul in the Acts of the Apostles; and maybe it's the same person that runs away naked in the dark at Jesus' arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane; and, just possibly it has been suggested, it is someone who goes to the tomb early on 'the third day' to find the body missing – Mark records a YOUNG MAN in white waiting in the tomb when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb to find the body missing whereas the other accounts records one or even two angels. Bishop Papius in current day Asia Minor c90 CE states that Mark recorded Peter's memories accurately but in the wrong order. Therefore, for example, all the Galilean elements are presented as a block as are later events taking place in Jerusalem.

b. John's gospel has occasioned debate since the very early days of Christian theology because the chronology is very different and the thinking is more advanced:

i. It had been thought by some of the early Greek writers and later by some of the great German theologians in the late 19C to be a product of the later first or 2C; however that was

demonstrated to be inaccurate when fragments of John's gospel were found in the Dead Sea Scrolls (collected by one of the Essene sect habitations as referred to earlier) dated to 90 CE.

ii. John, however, gets some of the micro detail right in ways that Mark and the other writers based on Mark q.v. don't. For instance Mark, Matthew & Luke use the Greek word 'ichthus' for fish in the story of the loaves & fishes. In comparison John uses 'opsarion'; and opsarion was a fish relish that had become the key method of getting fish from Lake Galilee to market in Jerusalem, 76 miles away by donkey, without the fish rotting. John knows because either John was there or John knows someone who WAS there. In addition John's chronology of Jesus moving around the country, and down to Jerusalem, over a two year period 'fits' Christian tradition; and it's often said that we need John to provide the 'colour and chronology' that we understand & accept. In fact Bishop John Robinson argues for the possibility that John was there, that John was even possibly the disciple John son of Zebedee, and that his more advanced thinking is accounted by the way someone develops as they gets older.

c. The third source account is often known by scholars as 'Q' and it's hypothesised that someone recorded Jesus' teachings as he went round Galilee teaching. In Matthew and Luke Jesus' teaching is presented as a block in the Sermon On The Mount; but as a wise teacher has often

said, teachers don't reinvent lesson plans but rather use the same lesson over and over again. It is reasonable to assume therefore that the Sermon on the Mount is a faithful rendition of Jesus' teaching throughout that period in Galilee.

d. German scholars in the 19C first came to the conclusion that everything in Mark is also in Matthew and Luke, with the addition in both of 'Q' source material. The three related gospels Matthew and Luke along with Mark on which their structure is based are known as the 'synoptic' gospels. The differences between Matthew and Luke therefore come down to who their target audience was:

i. Matthew is thought to have been writing for Jews and, for example, always refers to 'the Kingdom of Heaven' because Jews wouldn't say the name of God. Similarly in the nativity narratives (which only exist in Matthew & Luke and which were possibly embroideries written to glorify who Jesus became) Matthew concentrates on the wise men from afar to highlight the glory of Jesus' origins.

ii. In comparison Luke was writing for the new gentile communities and concentrates on the humble witnesses of shepherds.

e. Assuming that this accepted analysis is correct, Mark and John need to be seen as 'prime' accounts whilst

Matthew & Luke need to be seen as providing the meat of the early Galilean based ministry.

34. It is clear that neither Mark or John have any interest in the birth of Jesus and it's only the later, derivative writers, Matthew & Luke, who present the accounts later amalgamated into our nativity narrative. Luke presents the shepherds and Matthew gives us the wise men; though, even there, Matthew's gospel implies that the wise men arrived up to two years after the birth given the Herod orders a pogrom on children of two years and under in the area.

35. The Acts of the Apostle was often presented as 'part 2' of an account by the Luke who travels with Paul in his pioneering mission to the emerging Christian communities that Paul, inspires/supports.

36. At one time it was thought that Paul was responsible for most of the letters included in the New Testament but it is now accept by most scholars that:

- a. Paul wrote:
 - 1 Thessalonians
 - Galatians
 - 1 Corinthians
 - Philemon
 - Philippians
 - 2 Corinthians (though to be 5 separate letters)
 - Romans

b. Ephesians, 2 Thessalonians and Colossians were written by people attempting the style of Paul. In fact my

own father makes caustic comment on the writer of Ephesians as being unlike Paul in not being capable of constructing a logical argument.

c. Hebrews, Peter, James & John are accepted as non Pauline.

37. Revelation is the book in the New Testament that few understand. It is part of the canon of biblical literature we know as 'apocalyptic' (describing or prophesying the complete destruction of the world) and along with Daniel in the Old Testament seems poetic rather than grounded.

38. There was an ongoing debate in the first few hundred years about which books should be included in the canon of the New Testament and which shouldn't. There is agreement across the different denominations on the 27 books included though: the eastern Orthodox church ratifying the canon in 692 CE; the western Catholic church ratified it in 382 CE & reaffirmed it in 1545 CE; the Anglican church recognised the canon in 1563 CE; and the Calvinist churches recognised the canon in 1647 CE. Wikipedia's 'Development of the New Testament Canon' is fairly accurate and authoritative and is a good place to start

CRITICAL MISTRANSLATIONS of NEW TESTAMENT WORDS

39. There are a very small number of critical, key words we read regularly in the New Testament where the meaning of the translated word is either inaccurate or misunderstood and for which a correct understanding is critical. The first two are

references to 'Word' & 'Wisdom'. As Judaism developed either side of the Babylonian captivity the God of the Hebrews became ever more remote and as a result intermediaries were introduced to act as 'God's arm on earth'. In Greek Septuagint translation most freely available to Jews at that time and then the early Jewish sect following 'the Christ', the two beings to fill that gap were Logos & Sophia which we translate as Word & Wisdom:

a. Quite early after Jesus' death, in the letters of Paul, there is identification of Jesus as the Word of God – his representative on earth; however, Greek is a subtle and nuanced language and the word 'Logos' means different things according to context. At its most basic it means 'words'. In Greek philosophical thought it also means the underlying principles of logic and reasoning in the world; and, as said, to the Jews in the Hellenistic world it meant 'the arm of God'. All of which leads to misunderstandings:

i. Firstly the Word of God is NOT the bible. The 'Word' in the sense used in the New Testament is Jesus.

ii. When John says 'the Word was with God and the Word was God' in chapter 1 of his gospel he was being clever in using a word which meant subtly different things to the two communities he was writing for – the Jewish sect following Christ and the new emerging Greek thinkers forming the gentile Christian current

b. Quite early on there is also an identification of the Wisdom (Sofia) with the Holy Spirit.

40. The words translated as 'belief' & 'faith' in the New testament are also absolutely misunderstood; and this is not opinion or perspective but rather a strict matter of translation. Whenever the words 'belief' and 'faith' are used they are always a translation of the Greek noun 'pisti' and the Greek verb 'pisteous'. Those words mean to have commitment and loyalty: NOT to accept an intellectual concept as the meaning changed into in the developing Romano Greek world when the Bible was translated into Latin. Jews were not bothered what you thought. Rather they were bothered what you did. So when Jesus says 'believe in me', although he was speaking Aramaic, his words were rendered into Greek text using a term that was understood absolutely; and again in 2 Corinthians, itself thought to be a collection of 5 letters that Paul wrote to the church he had founded in Corinth, Paul was dealing with the issue of influential people round the city who were gaining 'mafia clan' like influence over followers and he uses the words 'pisti' and 'pisteous' to describe the commitment & loyalty they expected over people for services rendered.

a. The misunderstanding occurs when the original Greek documents were first being translated into Latin. There was no Latin word equating to the verb Pistious and so Jerome and the early translators used the Latin word 'credo' which DOES mean intellectual belief as we understand it today. Whenever anyone preaches on faith and belief, and both use the words in the modern sense as well linking them with words attributed to Jesus and

written by Paul, however, they have got it wrong, full stop. No ifs, no buts, no opinion, no ambiguity.

b. Going further, and critically, one of the phrases driving the Protestant movement as it split from Catholicism was 'justification by faith' as opposed to 'justification by good works' – good works as a way of paying your way out of purgatory by employing someone to say prayers for you or by feeding the poor. In fact the original Greek terms mean being justified by commitment & loyalty to the mission of Jesus (faith) rather than by keeping to the Jewish law (mistranslated as 'good works'). Arguably the position of Luther and the important Protestant reformers were opposite to that which they intended as a result of this particular mistranslation.

41. Another word that has been misappropriated is 'repentance'. The original Greek means to think about God in a different way; and in the correct sense it is one of the two strands of Jesus' ministry – the first is 'love' and the second is 'thinking about God differently'. It does NOT mean regret & abasement for sins acknowledged in the way it has been taken for much of Christian history.

PART 2 - CHRISTIAN BELIEF, PRACTICE & DISPUTE

ESSENCE OF JESUS' LIFE, MISSION, DEATH & RESURRECTION & LOVE v SIN

42. Arguable you can take the essence of Jesus' life, mission, death & resurrection down to four concepts:

- a. There IS a God.
- b. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see the nature of God.
- c. The nature of God is 'love'.
- d. There is a life after death.

Anything and everything else apart from those four are human constructs or explanation which mean something to some people but not for all and are therefore up for debate and discussion.

43. One issue not often discussed is what Jesus thought about himself; but then he was a Jew and the Jews were & are not interested in the mechanism involved in explaining the substance of God. He clearly regarded himself as significant and frequently used the terms 'father' and 'son'; but later doctrines such as trinity are human constructs attempting to delineate a mechanism for his relationship to God. As such they became the plaything of Greek philosophers and theologians for a 500 years after the death of Jesus and then for theologians across the Christian spectrum for a further 1500 years. Arguably the best definition I have ever seen however is the simple statement that "God IS and God is as he is in Jesus'.

44. What is crystal clear from the gospels accounts is that Jesus preached the Kingdom of God (Kingdom of Heaven in Matthews see earlier); he preached thinking about God as father in different way; and he did NOT preach a message involving sin in any way other than to give a reason for someone having been healed. There is no other conclusions open after reading the direct words attributed to Jesus.

PERSPECTIVES WITHIN CHRISTIANITY

45. The reformed Protestant churches give sole authority to the bible. The Catholic church, which became the Roman Catholic church after the Protestant churches seceded from the original western church, gives ultimate authority to the church and its traditions. The Anglican Protestant tradition balances both. All three traditions however give us problems when a tradition is shown to be dubious or fallacious or if there's a biblical mistranslation that later becomes known, because most Christians, and in fact most religious people, seems to be conservative and resistant to change. In itself this is arguably ironic in view of the radical nature of Jesus' teaching. Taking anything as the ultimate authority needs to be re-examined, however, when that tradition is mistaken or is the result of a tradition based on a mistranslation, whether divinely inspired or of human origin'.

46. In addition to differing traditions one encounters differing generalised approaches to the bible and to Christian theology.

- a. The conservative evangelical viewpoint certainly used to take the default position that whatever is written

has credibility and is the basis for further discussion. The conservative evangelical viewpoint now seems to eschew critical doubt and its perspective can seem like a fundamentalist attitude; and unless people are actively exposed to alternative ideas this can often default to a cartoon like fundamentalism.

b. True Fundamentalism, where every word of the bible is taken as fact in every little detail, is a very recent movement. It came from the USA in the 1920s as a reaction to the teaching of 'evolution' in classrooms; and it follows a pattern through Christian history, and in fact a pattern in the history of other religions, where a fast changing world leads people to take 'hard & fast' stances on different topics. The infallibility of the Papacy, for instance, came into being after the turmoil of the formation of Italy in the mid 19C. In these situations people feel the need to grasp certainties but they then forget over time why they took hold of the position so the motivation is forgotten leaving just the certainty.

c. To conservatives 'liberal' is often used as a pejorative term but the term 'liberal' really just indicates a spectrum of people who are more open to changes in thinking. One issue for a conservative thinker is that liberal thought shies away from hard and fast beliefs and they (conservatives) see it as a set of nebulous concepts that mean very little. To someone of the liberal side of thought however conservative thinking can be seen as cartoon like.

d. A liberal thinker is most likely to be a humanist in the late 15/early 16C meaning of the word, wanting to understand the thoughts represented in the bible in the context and language of the time. So, with respect to the bible a liberal Christian humanist would be concerned with what the meaning and context of a word or phrase meant in the original language/culture in which it was written – as so a lesser extent would be a moderate conservative from 50 years ago – whereas a conservative evangelical is now more like to take the attitude that God was involved in putting the English words into position and that any changes in understanding are suspicious.

e. A radical thinker is to the left of liberal in the same way that fundamentalist is to the right of conservative. As a brief reflection, the more one thinks and studies with an open mind the more likely one is to abandon hard & fast beliefs. Interestingly some of the liberal thinkers I know are from High Church Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism where they can focus on the practical aspects of Christianity whilst letting their minds float more freely.

CHRISTIAN FESTIVALS

47. Of the major festivals Easter is clearly the most important festival in the Christian world. Leaving aside the issue of when Pentecost developed on from the Jewish festival it is derived from, the next important festival to be developed was Epiphany. The Egyptian church appropriated the midwinter date of the annual rebirth of the Egyptian sun god in the Egyptian calendar and used it to commemorate the unveiling to

the world of Jesus at his baptism – and threw in the birth of Jesus along with it for good measure. Only later, as part of its mission to take control of Christianity, did the western Catholic church appropriate European, pagan, midwinter festivals and use it to celebrate the birth of Christ. Up until that this Christianity had shown very little interest in the birth of Jesus. It was at THIS point that the Western church redefined the East's Epiphany as being represented by the arrival of the Wise Men. Technically the Protestant churches follow the Orthodox (Eastern) church pattern of celebrating the baptism of Christ at Epiphany even though, culturally, it has become associated with the three Wise Men (Kings).

CHRISTIAN DISPUTE

48. Most of the theological disagreements in the early centuries following the death of the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we know as the Christ, concerned the mechanism of his humanity, his divinity and the structure of divinity itself. These were the playthings of the Greek philosophers & theologians who dominated Christian thought; and the heresies of Montanism, Gnosticism, Donatism, Marcionism, Monophysitism, Manichaeism, Catharism are but to name a few. The two biggest councils to resolve doctrinal issues in Christianity were held at:

- a. Nicaea in 325 CE where the current model we use of God as father, son & holy spirit was ratified and where the relationship between God the father, God the son and God the holy spirit was formalised (later amended 381CE) leading to the Nicene creed,

which is the only creed accepted by all the leading Christian denominations.

- b. Calcedon in 451 CE where the issue of Jesus Christ's humanity and his divinity were the subject of intense debate. The final answer being that he was both fully divine and fully human.

49. Then there are the major political splits which have occurred for a number of reasons: predominantly the result of different Christian practices, of political 'land grabs' and the result of corruption in the western Catholic church:

- a. The western and eastern halves of the church – Catholic and Orthodox – separated mostly because of the head of the Catholic (Roman) church, the Bishop of Rome aka the Pope, claimed hegemony over the church as a whole, based on his supposedly being the heir of St Peter; however, it was triggered by a small unilateral change to the Nicene creed in the Catholic church AFTER the creed had been formally adopted at Constantinople (381CE). The Orthodox churches (and Scottish Episcopal church) still say the original words whereas the Catholic church (Roman Catholic now and that also means some of the Protestant churches, such as the Church of England, which were derived from the Catholic tradition) unilaterally added extra words to say that 'the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father AND THE SON' rather than the original '...from the Father...'. Known as the Filioque clause this was the prima facie issue on which the east and west formally split in 1054.

b. Between the times of the Catholic & Orthodox split in the 11C and the Protestant reformation in the 16C one other revolt against corruption in the medieval western church is of particular note. The Cathar church in the 12/13C took a dualist stance – something fairly common in the first 1000 years of Christianity – where there is a good God and a bad God and a higher neutral God. Catharism was finally broken by the only crusade ever launched against Christians and it was broken using brutal and inhumane tactics such as burning a church full of people with the attitude that ‘God will know his own when they get to heaven/hell’. The full details of the Cathar crusade are sickening in the extreme which is of particular note when one accepts that Cathars were a peace loving sect based on humility.

c. The last of the major splits is known as the Protestant reformation but in fact there were precursors to it 100 years earlier with the Lollards in England and the Hussites in Bohemia (modern day Czech Republic) reacting against corruption in the Catholic church.

d. The split of the Protestant churches from Catholicism during the Reformation was in part a reaction against corruption again; in part it was the result of the original Greek bible texts becoming available in the west after they were shipped out before the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453 CE, at which point the Church’s jealously kept teachings of New Testament texts were sometimes found to be false; and in part it was the result of the invention of the printing press which widened access to the printed word across

the European world. Broadly speaking Protestant churches are divided into the various Reformed churches, which abandoned the episcopal systems of Bishops, and the Lutheran & Anglican churches, which are more of a compromise and both retained the Apostolic system (claimed laying on of hands when consecrating Bishops in an unbroken chain going back to Peter). There ARE theological differences between some of the Protestant churches and the Roman Catholic church but not as many as you think, and hardly any between Roman Catholicism and Anglicanism. What theological differences DO exist between RC & Anglican Church of England (CofE) are based around 19C doctrines such as the Infallibility of the Papacy and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. There have in fact been several movements within Anglicanism seeing themselves as fundamentally Catholic in nature and thinking themselves to be more RC than anything else but the CofE's founding 39 articles list more impeccable Protestant doctrine.

e. For the British, the era of the England Civil war led to what would previously have been the Puritan wing of the Church of England splitting away to form the non-conformist denominations of Presbyterian churches (now amalgamated as the United Reform Church) and the Baptist church. The Civil War period starts in 1642 CE and lasts until the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 CE and includes the only period in which a Republic has every been set up in Britain (in England, which means England, Wales & Ireland, but not in Scotland which was still a legally distinct country at the time).

f. Again, just for the British, the final split comes when the Methodist movement splits away from the CofE in the Evangelical revival of the late 18C to early 19C. Being the last split from the CofE partly explains why some elements such as the words of our respective communion services are so similar.

PART 3 - A UPDATED MODEL of GOD

AN ALTERNATIVE 21C MODEL of GOD & FROM LOVE TO SIN & SALVATION

50. Theology is an attempt to describe God in ways that make sense in the context of the time and to the originator. For political reasons for both church and state our modelling of God were somewhat frozen in the 4C. This is a personal attempt at a model to explain Creation, God & Jesus Christ detailed in terms fit for the 21C rather than the 19C, or even the 12C. Its building blocks are:

- a. There is a Creator, therefore life, creation & everything has meaning. In contrast the atheist's approach means that creation is purely random occurrence and that therefore nothing has intrinsic meaning.
- b. A 'Creator God outside time' began a process 13.7 billion years ago with a big bang and a mechanism called evolution, with the hope, aspiration, plan (and if you are outside time and can see both the beginning & the end those terms all mean the same) that one or more sentient species would evolve capable of loving each other.
- c. In that sense 'love' is the fundamental factor/criteria/reason for the existence of everything & everybody in the created universe.
- d. From this we can view ourselves and any sentient species as being made in the image of God.

e. Therefore humans are 'a' or 'the' result of God's dream.

f. With whatever mechanism you choose to explain the existence, mission, death & resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth (whom we know as the Christ) his advent in the world demonstrates & confirms the truths that:

- i. There IS a God.
- ii. In the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see God or we see the nature of God.
- iii. The nature of God is 'love'.
- iv. There is a life after death.

Incidentally this model happens to validate the phrase 'in the beginning the son was God and the son was with God' because if Jesus was subsumed into a God outside time at his death then he was there with God at the beginning and at the end.

51. This model does not answer the questions as to the mechanism by which Jesus came to be the son of God but then it is arguable that postulation and theory as to the nature of Jesus the Christ have proved to be counterproductive to his own proclamation of The Kingdom of God.

52. Some historians postulate that there is an axial age from about 800 BCE to the end of the millennium where religions across the globe started changing and where thought started deepening. In it Judaism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism & Zoroastrianism all started becoming deeper, more spiritually aware and more introspective. As a by-product of this they all

started becoming outwardly caring. The pattern is the same across the faiths though, that an inward focus produced to an outward looking change.

53. How then did a pattern of a commitment/intellectual belief in a loving Kingdom of God turn so inward looking that belief in personal salvation & intellectual creeds and (for evangelical Protestants) personal relationships with God all became more important than the loving acts required to propagate the Kingdom of God?

54. One likely turning point was when the Emperor Constantine legalised Christianity within the Roman empire. He did it only ten years after Emperor Diocletian (reigned 284 – 305 BCE) had made the most significant attempt to stamp out the Christian sect to that time. When Constantine took power he saw Christianity as something to unify the empire and he set up councils to come to agreement upon some of the major theological disputes at the time in order to solidify that unity. The resulting Nicene creed eliminates any reference to the Kingdom of God or to the radical social agenda Jesus held, and instead turns Christian thought inwards to belief as we use it in the modern sense of intellectual faith rather than the 'commitment & loyalty' meaning of the Greek word 'pisti' which Jesus and Paul understood.

55. Probably aligned with that and almost certainly reinforcing this turning inward is the likelihood that the legitimisation of Christianity promoted a move away from women 'DOING love' in the early church and towards men 'THINKING sin, theology & structure' as the church became socially acceptable and a good career opportunity.

56. Regardless of how 'we got here', what would seem self-evident is that, if we are to consider the words of Jesus as pre-eminent, the only point of the introspective thoughts of personal sin or salvation, or even of personal relationships with God, are to act as a driving force to further the Kingdom of God. In that sense such an introspective thought process may be no more unique than the way the other great faiths emerged after the Axial Age; but certainly, as a result of the efforts of the 17C Quakers and of the 18/19C Evangelical revival in promoting loving changes & movements in society, we DID see society change for the better as a result of personal introspection. The other, purely introspective path is one of the major risks of Christian belief in that it is hard not to view a concentration on the 'inward' as the sole or prime focus other than as a cosy, self-indulgent distraction to demonstrating commitment and loyalty to the message that Jesus preached.

**THE WAY WE THINK ABOUT GOD
HOW WE SHOULD RESPOND to HIM/HER/IT
& HOW TO BEHAVE AS A CHRISTIAN**

57. In understanding what the words we translate as 'faith' meant to Jesus and to Paul it is clear that Christianity was founded as a 'doing faith'. At the same time Christians have been thinking, discussing and arguing about the minutiae and the 'mechanism' of God & Jesus for 2000 years; and arguably it is in the discussing/arguing that most discord has been created. For some you may want to think in terms of God's dream being for species to evolve capable of loving each other and so making wider Christian love the prime *raison d'être* for creation. In contrast, for the great Christian apologist C.S. Lewis the reason

behind everything is that what God “cares about is that we should be creatures of a certain kind and quality – the kind of creatures HE intended us to be – creatures related to himself in a certain way”...&... “if you are right with him you will inevitably be right with all your fellow creatures”. For others across the Christian world, and particularly within my own particular community, they may prefer to start with your own faults (sins) and then take inspiration from the direct example and mission of Jesus. Wherever we come from, arguably, our focus as Christians has to be ‘the outward example of Jesus’ rather than the ‘inward face contemplating Christ’ and so our priority needs to be as a light in the world/community. It up to us to make God’s Dream come true, and up to us to bring about the Kingdom of God. One has to acknowledge though that wherever you sit in the spectrum of these stances can be influenced by many things; amongst others: your own personality, the people who first influenced you, the community you come from and the characteristics of your upbringing.

58. Going from love to sin one not only echoes the disputes within Judaism around the time of Rabbi Hillel, and then later the differences in approach between Jesus & Paul, but one is arguably dealing with the founding difference between the mission of Jesus of Nazareth and the Axial age changes in Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism & Confucianism. It is however in intellectual dispute where the emotions raised can get so out of hand that these differences have the potential to wreck every single loving precept of Jesus. So whilst arguing that it is not thoughts but loving actions that matter most to the God we see in Jesus, in the end it may not matter an iota as long as the actions coming out from all the different camps thought follow

the same patterns of love and compassion. If they don't then we clearly have a problem. If they do then we may merely have an intellectual disagreement as to 'the number of angels we can fit on the head of a pin'.

59. Two thirds of the way in to this guide and only now do we come to what should be the most important part of it – how we SHOULD live and behave as a Christian. It's incontrovertible that we Christians down the ages HAVEN'T lived and behaved as the example of Jesus would show us; but in concrete terms what IS that? In Paul's letter to the Galatians he described the 'fruits of the spirit' in terms of Christian characteristics. For some people C.S.Lewis deals with Christian behaviour in a way I myself struggle with in his book Mere Christianity. Perhaps the most influential thought I've ever heard myself came in a sermon by Rev Carol Hibberd back in 2003. She suggested: "live by letting everything you do contribute to the Kingdom of God" and "asking yourself every minute of the day if your actions are helping or hindering the Kingdom". As an example, does running the shower for a few minutes to warm up whilst you go to the toilet help The Kingdom when it clearly wastes water and electricity? Does shouting at the driver who has just cut you up on the motorway help? Does ignoring the misery around you when someone cannot afford to eat or sleep under a roof help? Ask yourself this question of every little thing you do and it might help you live in a way that the God we see in Jesus wants.

60. The Kingdom of God is one of the key concepts attributed to Jesus in the gospel accounts of his mission, death & resurrection (Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew's gospel). To understand what the phrase entails you need to read the gospels with a mind free from preconceived thoughts. As such I

am going to let Jesus' words as rendered from his Aramaic speech into Greek text stand without comment.

61. At the very end of the day however there is a fragment in C.S.Lewis Narnia story The Silver Chair that stands for me as the defining reason for Christian commitment, for Christian intellectual belief and for Christian behaviour. Puddleglum, the marsh wiggler, Scrubb & Jill have gone into the underworld of Narnia looking for the long lost Prince Rillian. They have freed Rillian but before they can escape the Witch who has kept him enchanted for many years finds them and casts a powder on the fire which makes them dizzy:

“The Prince and the two children were standing with their heads hung down, their cheeks flushed, their eyes half closed; the strength all gone from them; the enchantment almost complete. But Puddleglum, desperately gathering all his strength, walked over to the fire. Then he did a very brave thing. He knew it wouldn't hurt him quite as much as it would hurt a human; for his feet (which were bare) were webbed and hard and coldblooded like a duck's. But he knew it would hurt him badly enough; and so it did. With his bare foot he stamped on the fire, grinding a large part of it into ashes on the flat hearth. And three things happened at once. “First, the sweet heavy smell grew very much less. For though the whole fire had not been put out, a good bit of it had, and what remained smelled very largely of burnt Marshwiggler, which is not at all an enchanting smell. This instantly made everyone's brain far clearer. The Prince and the children held up their heads again and opened their eyes.

“Secondly, the Witch, in a loud, terrible voice, utterly different from all the sweet tones she had been using up till now, called out, “What are you doing? Dare to touch my fire again, mud-filth, and I’ll turn the blood to fire inside your veins.

“Thirdly, the pain itself made Puddleglum’s head for a moment perfectly clear and he knew exactly what he really thought. There is nothing like a good shock of pain for dissolving certain kinds of magic. “One word, Ma’am,” he said, coming back from the fire; limping, because of the pain. “One word. All you’ve been saying is quite right, I shouldn’t wonder. I’m a chap who always liked to know the worst and then put the best face I can on it. So I won’t deny any of what you said. But there’s one thing more to be said, even so. Suppose we have only dreamed, or made up, all those things – trees and grass and sun and moon and stars and Aslan himself. Suppose we have. Then all I can say is that, in that case, the made-up things seem a good deal more important than the real ones. Suppose this black pit of a kingdom of yours is the only world. Well, it strikes me as a pretty poor one. And that’s a funny thing, when you come to think of it. We’re just babies making up a game, if you’re right. But four babies playing a game can make a playworld which licks your real world hollow. That’s why I’m going to stand by the play-world. I’m on Aslan’s side even if there isn’t any Aslan to lead it. I’m going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn’t any Narnia. So, thanking you kindly for our supper, if these two gentlemen and the young lady are ready, we’re leaving your court at once and setting out in the dark to spend our lives looking for Overland. Not that our lives will be

very long, I should think; but that's a small loss if the world's as dull a place as you say."

As a very personal summary of faith in both senses of the word – English 'intellectual' and original Greek 'commitment' - Puddleglum's final statement 'does it for me': I'm on Aslan's side even if there isn't any Aslan to lead it. I'm going to live as like a Narnian as I can even if there isn't any Narnia.

PART 4 - IN ADDITION

SOME POINTS OF INTEREST

62. Amongst the further points of interest that may interest a progressive soul are those that follow. One can argue that most, maybe all, are only of intellectual interest; and that none should affect the fundamental aspects of Christian life & mission; but they ARE important in understanding how we got to where we are today and they DO merit consideration 'down the line'.

63. The Trinity The recognition of Jesus of Nazareth as 'Son of God' was an instinctive 'all embracing' and 'whole hearted' recognition by the people around him that he was to God as a son was to his father. After his death & resurrection Christians – the early Jewish followers of Jesus and then later, in particular, Greek thinkers - started trying to work out a mechanism for Jesus Christ's relationship with God. Defining God as Father, Son & Holy Spirit came late into the game and it was just one of several models that attempted to explain the inexplicable. The idea itself first developed in the late 2C and when the Roman Emperor, Constantine, put his stamp on it for political reasons, 100 years later, as part of his adopting Christianity as the official faith of the empire, any further thought was 'frozen in time'. Christianity had stopped being an 'outsider' insurgent faith and became institutionalised. The trouble is that for us is that whilst The Trinity was suitable for the mind of Greek philosophers it sounds like a fairy story to the ordinary person in the street and certainly causes theological problems relating to the other faiths who believe in the 'one God'. In fact all of the multiple models & definitions

mean/meant the same thing: that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see the nature of God: “God IS and God is as he is in Jesus”. Arguably that is all that matters.

a. To understand how we arrived with The Trinity as a concept we have to go back to the Judaism into which Jesus was born and understand the environment in which Christianity developed.

b. To recap, in the four accounts we have of Jesus’ ministry there are three strands of material: Peter’s memories of incidents and exchanges during a two year mission as written down by Mark; and a second strand coming from John’s memories. The third element are the parables which record the big scale sermons which pad out Mark in Matthew & Luke but they don’t involve Jesus talking about himself. Peter only remembers Jesus talking about himself as ‘The Son’ and the ‘Son of Man’ whereas John remembers a richer variety – the good shepherd, the bread of life, the light of the world, the way the truth & the life – and there are plausible reasons for that. In neither is there an explicit claim however and in all the accounts Jesus describes himself poetically rather than anything else. We don’t know why. Maybe he was still working it out; maybe he was just careful about lighting the fuse too early, maybe he didn’t want to put people off with outlandish claims or maybe the poetic references conveyed his own understanding that he was ‘of God’ in a way better than an actual description does? Occasional quotes such as “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” etc are comment

from the author rather than quotes. They cannot have been Jesus' direct teaching: not unless he favoured a passing stranger with a much more direct claim than he did his close disciples.

c. The start of the evolution wherein Jesus comes to be accepted as the Son of God is seen in the later days of Jesus' ministry; and the Johannine scholar, Dr John Robinson, believes that when the author of John's gospel uses the idea of the Son (along with Word & Logos in chapter 1) he is describing the relationship between Jesus and God i.e. as a son is to a father. For Greek thinkers developing early theology (and remember that as Jews the very earliest followers of Jesus were not interested in the mechanism by which he was accorded the acclamation 'son of God') the phrase The Son of God demanded a divine intervention in the procreation of Jesus; however, other than when discussing the mechanism of Jesus' divinity it doesn't actually matter. It is absolutely clear from the parable of the Wicked Tenants in Matthew that Jesus claimed a unique relationship with the God whom he called 'his Father'.

d. Jesus died in 30 or 33 AD. The gospels are conventionally dated in a spectrum between 70 to 90AD, although Dr Robinson's inherently plausible approach dates them earlier (40 to 60AD), whilst the letters of Paul particularly are from the period between 50 & 60AD. The gospels are a formalisation of what must have been passing around by word of mouth – the ministry of the man Jesus who had been acclaimed as 'Christ'. The letters of Paul and other writers are specific communiques to the

early communities of believers encouraging them, dealing with practical problems emerging within them and fleshing out what the faith meant in practice. What came next however was a consequence of a number of factors:

- The location of Palestine within the Hellenistic (Greek influenced) Eastern Mediterranean conquered by Alexander the Great.
- The pre-eminence of Greek thoughts within the Roman empire.
- The fact that Judaism was also highly thought of within the empire.
- The missionary efforts of Paul.
- The Greek philosophies of Plato and Aristotle that, both so influenced the empire and were very different to the ideas of the Jews.

There was inevitably a cross fertilisation of ideas. So after the initial enthusiasm of Jesus' message had worn off the new Christians had a question: what did understanding Jesus as the Son of God actually mean? Over those first 300 years we see a variety of idea about exactly what Jesus was, what the Holy Spirit was and about how they related to God.

e. For the very start of this process we have to go back to the time when the Hebrews had split into two Kingdoms. The larger, wealthier Kingdom of Israel had been defeated by the Assyrian empire in the middle of 8C and the 10 tribes carried off into slavery. Many times in the history of the three big faiths – Judaism, Christianity & Islam – big shocks to a civilisation have resulted in major

changes in theology. In this case by 100 years later there was a trend amongst those remaining Hebrews inhabiting the small Kingdom of Judah, which was Jerusalem and what we now call the West Bank: Yahweh had become the ONLY God rather than being the tribal god of the Hebrews and there was an amount of editing of the Torah – those first books of what we call the Old Testament – to reflect it. Added to that the Kingdom of Judah picked the wrong side in a fight between Babylon & Egypt and ended up being utterly defeated with the elite of society being carted off into captivity, as was standard practice by the Babylonians. That inevitably brought more souls searching. Just one of the small changes that comes out of this period is a split between talking about the essence of God and about his manifestation on earth. This is when references emerge to the Glory of God and later the Word of God (translated as Logos in Greek) and the Wisdom of God (Sophia in Greek); and these ideas evolve further such that Wisdom and Word mean God's blueprint on earth.

f. Critically the word Logos was also used entirely separately in Greek Philosophy to mean the principle of order and knowledge in Greek philosophy. So what John was doing in those first verses of his gospel – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” etc – was making sense of Jesus with this concept of ‘the blueprint of God’ in a way that appealed both to Jews and to Greeks. The fact is though that John, Paul and all the other writers accepted Jesus as ‘OF God’ but wouldn't have seen him AS God. Theirs was

a poetic understanding of the significance of Jesus as Son of God.

g. Over the next few hundred years theologians continued to try and define the unknowable; and the next big change comes around the end of 2C. We go from Theophilus of Antioch writing about God, Jesus as His Word (Logos) and the Holy Spirit as His Wisdom (Sophia) 150 years after the death of Jesus; to Tertullian (150–220 CE) who first uses the word 'Trinity' and who starts defining Father, Son & Holy Spirit as aspects, faces or masks of God at the turn of the century (Greek theatre had actors using masks to denote which character they were playing). We've now abandoned earlier poetic understandings of Father, Son & Holy Spirit and replaced them by attempts to DEFINE exactly what the fundamentals of the relationship are. Move forward another hundred years to 325BC and you get to our Nicene creed as an attempt to end the debate about how what is now known as The Trinity relate to each other, and this is the point where Constantine imposes a solution.

h. Interestingly one of the defining elements of Christianity is this fact of having to think in approved ways or risk being labelled a heretic – and it isn't the case for Jews and Muslims.

i. It was only at the time of the Enlightenment towards the end of 17C that people started questioning again; but then throughout history we've all tended to reinvent God in the light of our own understanding of the

world. As a civilisation that is no longer interested in metaphysics & philosophy in the way the Greeks were how can we rationalize the changing ideas of God and of Jesus? Well if you take a step backwards you can see that the 4C ideas of the Trinity and the 1C ideas about Jesus as the Word of God actually mean the same. Both ends of an evolving 300 year timeline are attempts to describe the fact that: God IS; God is as he is in Jesus; and that the God we see revealed in Jesus is a God of Love; and both are consistent with the earlier emotional response to Jesus that saw his followers acclaiming him as 'Son of God'. In other words: that there is a 'creator entity' we call God and that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see everything we need to know about the nature of this God; and furthermore that as revealed in Jesus we have an active & interested God whose primary focus is Love. In other words sFATHER, SON and HOLY SPIRIT.

64. God's Plan For Us We like to use the phrase "God's plan for us" without thinking through the consequences. If we are acting out God's plan then we have no free will. Moreover if we model God as a parent we have to recognise that a good parent doesn't have a plan for their child but rather has an aspiration – or dream. A parent's dream is usually that their child has a fulfilled life; so in terms of God, he/she/it wants sentient species capable of living and relating to each other in a loving manner. The reality, therefore, of the relationship between the creator and man (the species) is 'God's Dream' not 'God's Plan'. The caveat however revolves around the philosophy of a God outside time. A Creator/God has brought time into being along with matter and the universe. The result is that God can see the beginning, middle and end

simultaneously, and in that sense God's dream, hope, aspiration & plan all mean the same thing.

65. Fact Or fiction – The Story Of Jesus

a. There is far more evidence that a man called Jesus of Nazareth lived and died in Palestine – dying in 30 or 33 CE – than there is of Julius Caesar coming to Britain 100 years before Rome annexed Britain. Caesar wrote the only report of his invasion himself. In contrast there are several independent accounts of the ministry of Jesus and of his enduring following by Roman writers such as Josephus as well by his committed followers.

b. Ignoring the fact of whether Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected after his death the evidence for his existence, his death and the movement which survived him is incontrovertible. One has to plead desperation and ignore the clear evidence which remains to deny his existence. Sixty years after Jesus' death the Roman-Jewish writer Josephus makes reference to "the brother of Jesus who was called the Christ" and also to the death of John the Baptist. The further point has been made by C.S. Lewis that to suggest that the gospels on their own were fiction was to invent the concept of the novel over a thousand years before we accept it to have first been seen. Fragments of early copies of the gospels have been found including a small part of John's gospels in the Dead Sea Scrolls dated to before 90AD. It takes imaginative contortions of imagination to deny the existence of a man known as Jesus of Nazareth who had SOME form of dramatic effect on the world around him. There are those

who do perform such mental gymnastics which is why the clearest facts only have been presented; and no mention has been made of the gigantic movement spawned by the life, death & 'alleged' resurrection – which to any serious historian would indicate that SOMETHING significant happened.

66. How Could Jesus Be Both Human And Divine The Council of Chalcedon in 451 CE came up the philosophical fudge that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. The net result was to cut off parts of the early church that disagreed, but ask yourself whether it really matters? All we need is to accept that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we see the nature of God. If you need more then think of Jesus of Nazareth being subsumed into the presence/being of a 'God outside time' upon his death & resurrection. As part of a God outside time then he was part of God at the beginning, is part now and is part of God at the end to come.

67. Prayer Most Christians spend a lot of time in prayer and in many church services the prayers/intercessions can almost be another sermon; however, we need to remember Jesus' words – "do not pray as the Pharisees do, on street corners" – and also realise that 'more' words cannot make a difference to God. So for some the question comes "what is the point of prayer"? No one actually knows. Jesus doesn't say. There are many theories around but they are no more than that. Perhaps the reason is that, as the radical theologian Don Cupitt wrote, somehow it seems a worthwhile thing to do.

68. Doubt is Healthy Doubt can mean different things. Intellectual doubt leads us to question and gain a better

understanding of something. Emotional doubt helps stop us being quite so definitive in our views and helps us to tolerate peoples of views we might not share. A healthy dollop of doubt might have stopped our brothers, sisters & forebears from causing quite as much damage/hurt/evil to their fellows in the name of God down the ages.

69. The Virgin Birth And Why It Doesn't Matter The prophecy of a virgin birth came about when the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek between the 3C and 2C BC (known as the Septuagint). The Septuagint translated what modern, more authoritative version translate as "a young woman" in the critical passage in Isiah as "a virgin". It doesn't actually matter though. Neither of the two prime eye witness gospels are interested in Jesus' birth (Peter's memories as recorded by Mark and the tradition of John). For them it was his life, death and resurrection which caused them to acclaim him as The Son of God; and even for us today it is the life & resurrection which, we believe, tells us of the nature of God.

70. Mary Magdalene

a. Mary Magdalene was not a prostitute, the Eastern Orthodox tradition never recognised it and the 7C CE Pope, Gregory the Great, deliberately fudged unconnected incidents in the gospels and trashed her reputation in to make a point about repentance. In savaging the reputation of a woman who was as close to Jesus as any of his male disciples for his own misguided message, however, you have to acknowledge this act was the result of underlying sexism at the very least as well as falling far far below any decent standards of love,

integrity or honesty. The facts are that Mary stood by Jesus when the men ran away and that she was the first to see the risen Jesus on the 'morning after'; and modern thinking is that she was of a higher social status and may even have helped support Jesus during his ministry. Whatever she was however her pivotal reputation has been degraded in a way that casts shame on those who did it and the truth needs to be trumpeted widely and repeatedly.

b. The Wikipedia entry on Mary Magdalene is accurate and uncontroversial and indeed Googling 'Was Mary Magdalene a prostitute' throws up numerous sites all telling the same thing: that Mary was probably a woman of higher status who supported Jesus in his ministry; that arguably she was as close as any disciple; that the myth of her being a prostitute was an amalgamation of her being named Mary, of Mary of Bethany washing Jesus' feet and of an unknown 'sinful woman' similarly washing his feet. Pope Gregory the Great made an example of Mary as a repentant sinner but given the total lack of anything other than coincidence there has to be the possibility that this gigantic error was more than merely an ignorant & incompetent mistake. The Roman Catholic church took the massive step of reversing its historical position on Mary in 1969 but popular culture persisted with the myth. In 2018 Pope Francis took the biggest step yet in creating a major feast day for her in line with the male apostles. The Orthodox communion has always recognised her importance and many of the Protestant churches disagreed with the then Roman Catholic church position. The blackening of her character for political reasons

remains the thing she is known for however and that should not be tolerated. When the truth becomes something to be sacrificed in the light of political expediency you know that there's a rotten canker at the heart of your organisation.

71. The Church Good Or Bad? With the loving example of Jesus in front of us we have to admit that much of what the various churches did through history was unmitigated evil. We make ourselves ridiculous if we try to defend the massacre of Jewish & Muslim men, women & children when the 1st crusade resulted in the capture of Jerusalem in 1099; or defend the burning of churches full of supposedly heretic Christian Cathars in southern France in the early 13C; both of which and many more were committed under a Christian banner, with leaders claiming a Christian motivation and were sanctified by the head of the Western church. With a less superstitious understanding we understand this as plain evil and a gross distortion of Jesus' teaching of the vilest kind. And yet, and yet, without some form of formal organisation it is hard to know what might have come down the ages to a time when it is clearer that Christians are at the heart of much of the good of the great 20C charities and disaster relief agencies. Perhaps we just have to accept the distortions done in the name of Jesus and work to make sure it doesn't happen again. It didn't have to have happened that way though; and we have to be clear that ordinary people, be they Christian, Jew, Muslim are capable of great kindness to each other. It is however in the institution set up to sustain and promulgate the message where criticism must be directed.

a. When the first crusade entered Jerusalem the description goes that the crusaders were wading knee

deep in blood as they massacred the Muslim and Jewish inhabitants. In the years after 9/11, when opinion in the West and in the US in particular was demonising Islam, Ridley Scott made a film called the Kingdom of Heaven; and however many factual inaccuracies there were in the film – and there were (!!!) – he was correct to conveying the words & actions of Saladin in recapturing Jerusalem from the nearly 100 year old crusader kingdom of Outremer in NOT permitting a massacre in reprisal. In the film Saladin is given the words to the effect that “we will show them that we are better than that” – a fair rendering of what is known to have been said.

b. It is easy to put these horrific and barbaric actions down to a superstitious and barbaric time in history; however we are talking about a time when the actions of the church took the lead in misguided bigotry rather than mitigated its effect. In general throughout history Karen Armstrong in her ‘Fields of Blood’ makes a good case that fundamentally the sources of war are not religion and that religion tends to mitigate the worst effects of power politics; but the actions in the name of God in the medieval era, and at a time when learning & medicine flourished among the Muslims of the East, seem to have enhanced the barbarity of the era and they remain a stain throughout history.

c. Then again the Jews too suffered through repeated pogrom after pogrom throughout Europe; and one has to ask again and again “where was the love of God in any of the actions of the church then. The counter may come that individual Christians probably responded kindly to

each other, but then people at a local scale often do anyway. What was the organisation setup to promulgate the ministry of Jesus doing to tip the balance of human kind from the evil that men can do to the good which they can also do? The answer has to be 'very little' at best and 'absolutely nothing' at worst.

d. Unquestionably the great monastic orders preserved some of what was left of the Roman empire through dark times ahead and unquestionably they were influential in setting up the world as we know it. The questions needs to be asked though whether, had what they preserved not been available to the West, the world would necessarily have been a worse 'less loving' place?

e. Coming forward to the second half of 20C we see examples of both an ineffectual & irrelevant church: where small scale politics & infighting characterise local parishes; where numerous child based organisations have been found guilty of child abuse of the worst kind; and where recent memory is of the corrupt power exerted by parish priests rather than love (in Roman Catholic Ireland in particular). The question that needs to be asked here is of how COULD the loving nature of God as demonstrated by Jesus have been so distorted?

f. It is perhaps in the mass disaster relief agencies of the 20C, many of which were Christian based and most of which were the product of a Christian centred world, that we see love being the primary function of Christian people rather than salvation with love as a side effect; and yes we have the example of the care of the Quakers

in the 17C and one convent order in 15C Italy set up to minister for the poor which cannot be ignored, but we also have to understand just how far we as an organised faith have been from the example of Jesus throughout history.

g. There is however an “and yet” moment. To offer some balance and some defence for the faith I will turn to a more intensely personal style of writing and say that in my own experience those occasions where people have gone over and beyond the level of ordinary human kindness have tended to have a root somewhere in Christian faith; and of note, at one manufacturing company I managed it was little surprise to me when I found that those key individuals I trusted implicitly were active Christians. Going to a wider scale when one reads of individuals going over and above what might be expected I, personally, have often found a Christian element. I am not trying to argue that the good offsets the bad or that ‘going the extra mile’ is purely a Christian characteristic. All I am trying to do is offset the bad I have myself laid before you. At the end of the day perhaps my own motivation is the same as that of Puddleglum’s in the earlier section on the subject of love which leads me to insist of the fundamental rightness of belief in the God who ‘is’ and the God who ‘is’ as he is in Jesus.

h. The negative is spilt milk now however and that incredibly sour spilt milk should not stop us trying to getting back to what the example of Jesus of Nazareth means about our understanding of God. We need to recognise the good and stop the bad ever happening

again. Oh and perhaps be a little bit more humble before we throw mud at other faiths that might perhaps be going through an infinitely less dark period in their history.

72. Do You Have To Go To Church To Be A Christian If Jesus wanted us to have loyalty to his ministry rather than believe in what he was then what we do out in the community around us matters far more than any medieval concept of worship. When people say “you don’t have to go to church to be a Christian” they are right; however most of us need SOME kind of discipline to keep you keyed into the Christian community. Perhaps THAT is the most important role for church services. For many there’s an emotional and psychological stimulus produced by attendance. Not for all however. For others the old ‘monastic discipline’ approach is as relevant. Your approach is a product both of your own psychological make up and of the wing of the church you come from. Never feel that you have to feel what anyone else feels about church services. It doesn’t matter. All that matters is that you live a life that contributes to the Kingdom of God; and if you don’t then no amount of church attendance counts for anything.

73. The Church As A Pilot Light In The Community Thinking in modern terms, an admirable leader doesn’t want worship but rather wants their ‘people’ to be happy & fulfilled; and this is very much in contrast to an Old Testament and Greek mythological view of God and gods where obeisance and worship were requisite. We ought therefore to wonder what the point of church services is; and if we question what the point of church services is then we next gravitate to pondering the justification for spending a lot of time & money keeping churches open. Perhaps the answer is that keeping small local

village churches open means that there is a 'pilot light' maintained in the community. One that CAN spark something more if/when required. The corollary of that however is that the church community has to be sensitive and alert to the needs of the wider community; and also that church services are a means to an end rather than the end in itself. The final thought on the 'pilot' idea is that for the great majority of the time it isn't needed; it is only in need that the pilot light ignites something bigger; and that we may find it frustrating to irrelevant for much of the time. Perhaps the only answer for that feeling of personal irrelevance is to go back to the mantra of letting every little thing you do contribute to the kingdom of God on the basis that sooner or later the balance will tip on any one issue – and that balance point may not be seen for many years to come.

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