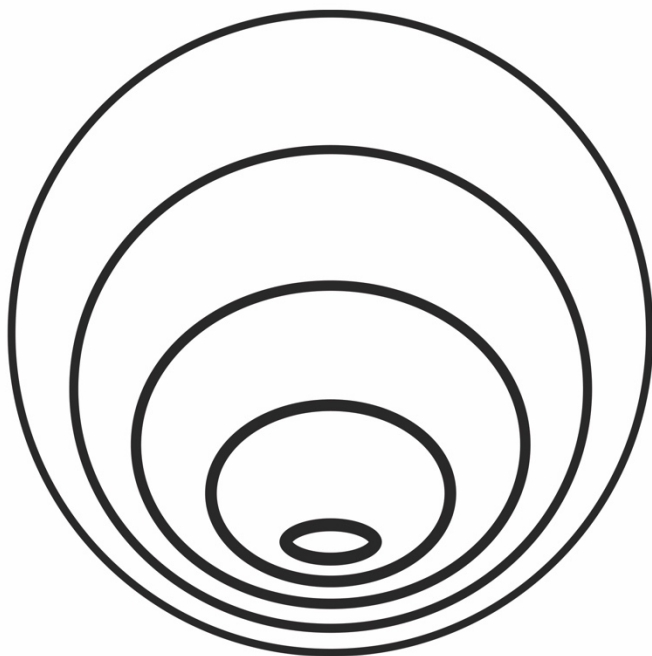


# Original Sin Is A Lie

Bob Peck

How Spirituality Defies Dogma  
and Reveals Our True Self



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**Part One:**

**Debunking Fearful  
Institutions**

**Original sin is a lie,  
because deep within,  
miles underneath  
our self-imposed,  
psychological blocks  
and habitual hardenings,  
is a shared truth,  
a shared existence  
among all beings:  
at the very core of who we are,  
Is Love.**

## CHAPTER 1

# Christianity Misinterpreted Christ

### Augustine vs. Pelagius

Nearly four hundred years after the death of Jesus, two monks were arguing.

Augustine considered human beings originally sinful.

Pelagius considered human beings as neutral: neither inherently divine nor inherently sinful.

Augustine had more political power, a larger movement of supporters, and a political savviness within the church authority that eluded Pelagius. Pelagius was eventually condemned to be a heretic and was removed from the Christian faith.<sup>1</sup>

Augustine became a saint.

Pelagius died in exile.

Augustine went on to become a gargantuan influence on not just Christian theology but Western philosophy as a whole.

Jesus himself never said a thing about “original sin”.<sup>2</sup>

Most people are unaware of this. In fact, many Christians believe that “original sin” is an undeniable fact of human nature. They think it’s some unquestionable truth about Christian doctrine, and therefore, ourselves.

And it is one of the most powerfully damning lies in the

modern lexicon.

To be clear this book is not exclusively about Bible scholarship and formative Christianity—I'll be happily covering a broad range of spiritual principles—but I am writing for those of us who were brought up in Christian families. We were programmed with a lot of awful falsehoods about how there is only one true religion, that Our Creator is a patriarchal god demanding obedience, and that disobedience to Him condemns us to a fiery eternity. These are all misinterpretations of the teachings of Jesus that took hold in order to scare believers into subservience.

After we learn about the context around these lies more deeply, we can begin to appreciate the real message of Jesus, of other spiritual systems, and ultimately who we truly are.

If we believe we are originally sinful, we have no love for ourselves.

When we have no love for ourselves, we have no love for others.

The fundamental belief in who we are has radical implications for civilization. If we believe we are inherently evil, then we (consciously or subconsciously) assume the worst about one another. Family members assume the worst about other family members, communities assume the worst about other communities, and governments assume the worst about other governments... We're stumbling down the path towards annihilation.

Pelagius suggested that it is on us to choose to listen to our Divine Creator, but Augustine preached that we are even incapable of *choosing*, suggesting that the very choice requires God's grace. From the Augustinian perspective, that's how dirty we are.

Their bitter rivalry actually began as distant admiration. After first reading Pelagius' *Commentary on Romans*, Augustine wrote that Pelagius was a "distinguished Christian man" and a "highly advanced Christian". Later on in their lives however, Augustine referred to Pelagius as "the enemy of God's grace", consumed by his mission to win out over his contemporary. In those same books



against Pelagius, he spent a considerable amount of time discussing why infants needed to be baptized immediately in order to avoid damnation.<sup>3</sup>

Augustine's false belief of original sin comes from the primordial Adam and Eve story, but it's primarily a misread of the apostle Paul, not Jesus. If original sin supposedly comes from the *Book of Genesis* story, why doesn't the Jewish religion have it?

It doesn't.

The texts that Paul and Augustine are referencing are from the first book of the Hebrew Bible and Christian Old Testament. It was a Jewish text first, and yet there is no original sin in Judaism—the foundational religion upon which Christianity is built.

You're probably familiar with the Adam and Eve story. It's a creation tale, just like every civilization has their own creation tale. They were in the Garden of Eden, this extremely ideal situation, and God, our Endlessly-Loving Eternal Creator, played a trick on them. He said 'do whatever you like, but don't eat this one thing, this Fruit of Knowledge.' (*Genesis* 2:16-17) In this particular creation tale, we did that. We were tempted by an evil, persuasive reptile, and then they ate that damn fruit. This got them—and by extension all of their line, including us—kicked out of the garden.

Augustine added that moment as bullet point number one on why we're inherently evil.

But there are other reads on the creation tale of Judaism.

The Gnostics were a highly spiritual, esoteric branch of early Jesus followers who were eventually considered heretical by early Church Fathers, as I'll discuss later. They suggested that the Loving Creator to which Jesus refers—whose love falls on all of us, like the rain (*Matthew* 5:45)—was an entirely different entity than the god who created this plane of existence.<sup>4</sup> Marcion was an early Gnostic Christian (although some scholars consider him proto-Gnostic), who organized the first canon of gospels into what would become the New Testament. He called this entity "Yaldaboath", a false creator god who played that dirty trick on humanity in the garden. According to the Gnostics, Yaldaboath is the same one they call

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“Jehovah” in the Old Testament. You know, the one who encourages the killing of babies? (*1 Samuel* 15:2-3)

Marcion wrote extensively about the idea that while there is a lower false creator from the Old Testament, thankfully there is also a Higher, Transcendent, Forever-Loving Divine Being of Oneness, beyond this lower plane of duality. Christ was referring to a True God of Love and Oneness, and these views are what got the Gnostics in trouble.

Marcion’s theological view is fascinating because not only does it sound like a more transcendental, sophisticated view of existence, it helps us break away from the firm authority held by that demanding god who requires absolute obedience in the Abrahamic traditions. This is a vital step. It’s a departure from patriarchal anger, into an opening-up. We can now begin to contemplate a wider worldview and appreciation for many spiritual systems. Institutional Christianity has been so successful at programming so many billions (!) of people to not question scripture. To not question that angry, jealous god (*Exodus* 20:15). But once you do, what you find is beautiful, enduring, and powerfully transformative. Let’s go from fear to Love together, shall we?

Interestingly, at one point in his life Augustine of Hippo was a Gnostic. He practiced Manichaeism, which had influences from Plato, Plotinus and other Hellenistic philosophers. Because of this, some contemporary Christians have implied that Augustine ‘infiltrated’ the church with Gnostic doctrine. This is, however, an incomplete reading of history. What he did keep from his Gnostic days was the emphasis on the absolute non-materiality of God, writing:

*“I was made certain that you exist, that you are infinite... that you are truly he who is always the same, with no varied parts and changing movements, and that all other things are from you.”*

—Augustine, *Confessions* 7.20.26

Augustine’s striking and bitter contrast against the Gnostics

and the Neoplatonists was due to his insistence on Adam's sin corrupting the formerly innate perfection. He later diatribed against Manichaen Gnostics, calling their doctrines "insane".<sup>5</sup>

Like Pelagius and Marcion, Jesus didn't believe in original sin either.

Even Pope Benedict XVI, the gawdy golden Pope who embodies the material ostentation of traditional Catholicism, referred to "original sin" as "misleading and unprecise".<sup>6</sup>

There are exactly zero references to "original sin" in the gospels, the collections of stories of the life of Jesus. He's more focused on teaching compassion, forgiveness, and how to be truly spiritual. He teaches us how to pray. And attributes of his Father, the Father of All. He tells us to feed the poor. He tells us to visit those in prison. He tells us that what you do for the lowest of society, you do for him. (*Matthew* 25:40) This is because he understood that he was inherently One with All, even the most downtrodden, as someone who accessed that place of understanding which binds all beings together.

When you read the world mystics, you see this awareness emerge in other non-Christian traditions. Though the world tells us we are sinful, sages throughout the ages have insisted that we are One—all parts of a magnificent whole.

Unraveling fear-based institutional falsehoods is one of the most useful processes I have undergone in my humble experience on this planet. The evaporation of fear makes way for the True. And even beyond the analytical scholarship itself, the inspiration of those mystic seekers who have accessed these heights has unquestionably created who I am today. The highest gratitude I can express is owed to those brothers and sisters throughout our civilization who have contributed to reminding all of us of our True Essence. Our Oneness. Our Deepest Reality of Love.

So that's what we'll be exploring in this book. A bit of undoing, and a bit of rediscovery. We will untangle the exoteric to better understand the esoteric. By trimming back the thorns of the fearful ego can we see more clearly the radiant bloom of Self.

## Paul: The Convert and Inauthentic Attribution

Beyond the Garden of Eden, Augustine's "original sin" comes from a few lines from Paul, who was an incredible teacher in his own right, but even Paul never knew Jesus in person.

Briefly, Paul was a member of another sect of Judaism called the Pharisees—which we'll get into more shortly. The Pharisees were in conflict with the early Jesus-following Jews in those first decades after the death of Jesus in 30-34 C.E. In those days, most practitioners of the Jewish religion worshipped in the Temple in Jerusalem. When the Temple was sacked by the Romans in 70 C.E, suddenly most of the religion was now without their center of worship. This opportunity made the Pharisees and the Jesus-following Jews competitive for a large population of temple-abiding Jews, newly shaken into a temple-less existential crisis.<sup>7</sup>

So Paul, initially Saul the Pharisee, was heading from Jerusalem to Damascus to stamp out some rowdy Jesus-following Jews (*Galatians* 1:13) when suddenly, in the middle of the road, he was graced by a divine vision. Saul was spellbound. Bathed in perfect, white light, he saw an image of a man. Saul asked the spirit, "Who are you?"

The spirit replied, "*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.*" (*Acts* 9:5)

He couldn't see for three days, and finally came to after being healed in Damascus by a follower of Jesus... at a community gathering which he would have very likely been breaking up, if he hadn't gone through his life-altering experience.

Even though his conversion experience took place after the crucifixion, Paul became as influential as any apostle in spreading the teachings of Jesus. He traveled extensively throughout the Roman Empire establishing house-churches and corresponding with early church leaders on matters of theology and spiritual living. His letters comprise the Pauline Epistles, which account for 14 of the 27 books of the New Testament.

There is real beauty to Paul's conversion, primarily because it

emphasizes that the Creator's Love is so powerful that it can even touch the heart of the hostile persecutor. It is unconditional, inescapable. And for any skeptics questioning the legitimacy of such an experience, after you read the Hindu guru stories of the 19th and 20th centuries, some of which I'll share in this book, as well as new scientific theories on the nature of consciousness, you start to approach mystical experiences like Paul's with considerably less scrutiny.

However, two points to emphasize in this early chapter are that: 1) Paul never knew Jesus in person. The attributed author of more than half of the books of the New Testament never met the guy on whom the whole religion is based. And 2) that the legitimate authorship of many of Paul's letters is disputed by both scholars and Christian theologians alike.<sup>8</sup>

I do want to be clear that Paul did write some real gems, like:

*"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth."*

—Paul of Tarsus, 1 Corinthians, 13:4-6 (NRSV)

And I particularly want to honor:

*"There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."*

—Paul of Tarsus, Galatians, 3:28 (NRSV)

Even Augustine has his moments... they don't just make anybody a saint.

But again, the second-most influential person in the creation of the entire religion (Paul) never met the first-most (Jesus).

What I'm getting at here is that the teaching we have today is two thousand years' worth of "Telephone". A Fully-Awakened Being taught Unity to disciples, who shared those stories for decades (called the 'oral tradition'), Paul heard these stories and wrote his own takes about them, then they entered the gospels in

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their own assorted interpretations, and then centuries later Augustine makes his own declaration that we must all be inherently evil. This is a faulty conceptual regression here, friends.

The second point on this foundational figure is that Paul's Epistles (letters) are placed into two categories: disputed and undisputed. We are nearly certain that seven letters were written by Paul himself:

- *First Epistle to the Thessalonians*
- *Epistle to the Galatians*
- *First Epistle to the Corinthians*
- *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*
- *Epistle to the Philippians*
- *Epistle to Philemon*
- *Epistle to the Romans*

But the other seven are unlikely Paul's at all:

- *Epistle to the Ephesians* (debated)
- *Epistle to the Colossians* (debated)
- *Second Epistle to the Thessalonians* (debated)
- *First Epistle to Timothy* ("Pastoral", highly unlikely)
- *Second Epistle to Timothy* ("Pastoral", highly unlikely)
- *Epistle to Titus* ("Pastoral", highly unlikely)
- *Epistle to the Hebrews* (inauthentic)

How are we able to make such a claim?

We can question who actually wrote each letter by using both internal and external evidence.

What do I mean by that?

Internal evidence means the text inside the document, and external means we have early church fathers writing other letters to each other with hot takes on the nature of these documents back

in those days.

Internally, the structure and composition of the disputed letters are wildly different than the authentic letters.

The vocabulary is very different: terms like “piety,” “heretical,” and “the Savior” as a name for Jesus, are only in the Pastorals; they do not occur at all in authentic Paul or anywhere else in the New Testament. The author(s) of *Colossians* and *Ephesians* understands redemption as the “forgiveness of sins” (*Colossians* 1:14), which also does not occur in Paul’s other letters.<sup>9</sup> Many of the religious terms from these letters falsely attributed to Paul play heavily into modern American Christianity.

The authentic letters are personal, with Paul solving specific problems faced by these early communities, whereas the Pastoral letters are broad, far-reaching philosophical treatises that tend to reflect larger theological questions, including guidance on ‘traits of a deacon’, a role that didn’t exist during Paul’s lifetime.

Timothy himself in *1 Timothy* is my favorite example of the extreme contrast.

In the genuine letters, Paul considers Timothy extremely trustworthy and of an incredible character. Paul has “no one else” like him, who truly cares (*Philippians* 2:20), and he calls Timothy his “beloved and faithful child” (*1 Corinthians* 4:17). But in the Pastorals, Timothy is considered immature (*1 Timothy* 4:12), lacking in strength (*2 Timothy* 2:3-6), and prone to “youthful lusts” (*1 Timothy* 5:2, *2 Timothy* 2:22).<sup>10</sup>

The invalidation of *1 Timothy* is particularly important because of all this fun stuff:

Religious exclusivism!

*“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”*

—*1 Timothy*, 2:5

Patriarchal chauvinism!

*“Let a woman learn in quietness with full submission.*

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*But I don't permit a woman to teach, nor to exercise authority over a man, but to be in quietness. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. Adam wasn't deceived, but the woman, being deceived, has fallen into disobedience; but she will be saved through her childbearing."*

—1 Timothy, 2:11-15 (NRSV)

And of course, advice for slaves to better obey their masters!

*"Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved."*

—1 Timothy, 6:1-2 (NRSV)

Paul didn't write this.

Jesus didn't say this.

And Our Infinitely Loving Creator had absolutely nothing to do with such awful, Iron Age garbage mentalities.

There are a couple of adorable articles online written by amateur Christian apologists explaining why all of Paul's letters are indeed written by him. But that is not scholarship. Hardly any serious Bible scholar (Christian or non-Christian) accepts all of Paul's letters as authentic.

Blogger Christians are defending those letters' authenticity because they know what I know: the realization that the Bible is not infallible has massive implications for breaking out of unquestioning religious obedience. The infallibility doctrine is the preposterous idea that *every word in the Bible is literally true*. And it's a massive hurdle to overcome in the beginning of the spiritual awakening process.



## Early Questions in Texas

My family and I are proud to be from Texas.

Although there are certain unfortunate connotations with the American South, I take pride in the fact that my grandparents on both sides supported the Civil Rights Movement and equality for all people. I never met either of my grandfathers, but my dad's father, Bob, played saxophone in the 40s, 50s, and 60s surrounded by musician friends of every race and background. My mom's father, Tommy, was a radio DJ in East Texas. He played soul & funk music, and one favorite family story is that he showed up to DJ a high school dance at a predominantly black high school. The emcee announced "Dr. Rock!" to great excitement, and upon his entrance, the dancers were stunned to see a lanky white guy with big glasses walk up onstage. Their concerns quickly subsided though, because as soon as he grabbed the mic he brought the same vibrant energy that they knew intimately over the airwaves.

There are a lot of churches in Texas. Living with my mom, we really were "Easter-Christmas Christians". Church was actually a great time to me, because we only went twice a year! We were Episcopalians who didn't know the words to most of the songs, but we sang them anyway, with the wholeness of our hearts. We had a great pastor, Father Patrick Gahan at St. Stephen's, a gifted orator capable of generating joyful laughter with a lighthearted observation and a moment later bringing you to a sincere testimony about grace and love. As our bi-annual pastor, he baptized me when I was eight.

Due to my personal experience of a much less forceful Christianity, I found some peace in it all. Some potential.

But as soon as I started to see the church's ego, my questioning began. Even good Christian people with noble intentions began saying things that made little sense.

Around that time, I can vividly remember going with my best friend's more pious Baptist family to a local "Vacation Bible School"—where the children go during the summer to soak up

Bible stories, and have Christian teachings reinforced in a more digestible way than the pastor's sermons on Sundays. An older woman came up to me and asked me, a nine-year-old boy, "Do you want to go to heaven?" Before I had a chance to reply, she said, "If you do, you must accept Jesus as your Lord and Savior. Just say these words and you're guaranteed to get into heaven."

Based on what I'd heard from Father Gahan heaven sounded like a better place than the alternative, but I didn't understand the concepts of Lord or Savior. What I did understand was that even to my nine-year-old brain earning something so important merely by mouthing some magic words seemed illogical. Many of the other kids went along with it, but it didn't make sense to me, so I couldn't.

Most American Christians have had similar experiences of this type of proselytization at an early age. Until that moment I had never questioned anything religious, but after that I began to question everything.

## **Why It's Okay to Pick and Choose**

Only a few more Biblical bones to pick and we'll get beyond ancient Judaea. I realize it can be tough for some, but these points are crucial to undoing the fear. And regenerating the Love.

Whenever I talk about these ideas, I lose so many fellow Christian-upbringing adults who left the religion. Perhaps rightfully so. We couldn't grapple with the hypocrisies of modern-day Christian leadership, from the private jet televangelists to the child abuse from Catholic priests. From homophobia to the Inquisition, there are a few thousand reasons that church leadership has failed us over the millennia.

Honestly, I think so many of us came to the same questions Marcion and the Gnostics brought up in the second century, mainly: "how can a God of Love condemn us to a fiery eternity?" So we left Christianity.

But I didn't leave Christ.

And I don't mean Judeo-Christian-messianic-Bible-Christ, but

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rather Christ-Consciousness, or sometimes called the Cosmic Christ, really whatever you feel comfortable calling the state of awareness, of Unity, of Love, attained by that Jewish teacher from Galilee ambling across the Judaeen countryside.

The Gospels, and even Paul's letters, do have value. They have some absolutely beautiful, transformative teachings for humanity, you just have to get archaeological with the text and do some digging. And once you see the real teaching *underneath* the false layers of controlling institutional rhetoric, the scriptures will start to come alive. You'll see their parallels in other faith traditions, and how they can contribute to a way of being that is harmonious, compassionate, and self-actualized.

But sadly, many secular-minded non-Christians don't get this.

For example, there is no shortage of atheists joking about Jesus cursing the fig tree. It is a complete lack of understanding of metaphor and the historical context regarding the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

*"The next day, when they had come out from Bethany, he was hungry. Seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, he came to see if perhaps he might find anything on it. When he came to it, he found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. Jesus told it, 'May no one ever eat fruit from you again!'" and his disciples heard it."*

—*Gospel of Mark, 11:12-14*

Very simply, the fig tree represents the old ways of ancient Judaism, which is symbolic to the Temple in Jerusalem.

It was destroyed by the Roman army a few decades after the death of Jesus. The *Gospel of Mark*, in which this scene takes place, was written around 70 C.E., in the immediate time during and after the fall of the temple, so the Markan author is writing to Jews still reeling from the temple's destruction.<sup>11</sup> He's having Jesus prophesy its fall.

The fig tree, cursed by Jesus, is a literary device. It is a political, cultural, religious, and even sectarian symbol for mainstream religion.

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If you don't understand this, then yes it's a pretty bizarre nonsensical moment. Hating on a tree.

If you do understand the historical context and the symbolic meaning, you can understand that Jesus is bringing about a new interpretation of Judaism—focusing on inclusion, love, transcendence, as opposed to exclusion, dogma, judgment—and that the old ways of ancient Judaism will soon crumble, along with the primary temple of their faith... which falls about forty years later.

While secular readers typically don't make this interpretation, churchgoers aren't too far ahead.

But it's not entirely their fault.

Contemporary church leadership doesn't want to go into great detail about *1 Timothy* being a forgery.

Or that out of the 5,700 manuscripts (copies) of the New Testament that we have today, there are more discrepancies (~400,000) in those manuscripts than there are words in the New Testament (~140,000).<sup>12</sup> Granted, that number might be a bit sensationalistic considering that not every variant changes the meaning of the text, but it helps paint a picture of how human this process has been over the millennia. There are differences between these accounts, stories, and teachings, and they are worth understanding more deeply.

Your local pastor only has his congregation for twenty minutes a week, really, and even in longer services the sermon usually doesn't exceed half an hour. Instead of spending time on these complex historical issues with heavy theological implications, most pastors are going to read a few inspiring verses and hammer home a point that applies to contemporary society: They emphasize that "Jesus is the greatest", throw in a Lord's Prayer or two, and let everybody rush out of there to beat that horrible after-church traffic. Okay obviously there are beautiful moments on some Sunday mornings, but in-depth biblical scholarship typically isn't happening.

My dear Catholic brother-in-law whom I cherish, was forced

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to endure my endless (buzzed) spiritual-guy-proselytizing one evening, and he bravely, sincerely responded to one of my points by saying,

"I do appreciate what you're saying, but I just don't think it's okay to pick and choose."

This is a fairly common argument I hear from Christians. It's a friendlier framing of the "infallibility doctrine", without the pride.

And I am absolutely thrilled to share that—yes, it is okay to agree with and practice certain teachings in the Bible, while rejecting and taking issue with other teachings in the Bible.

For context, the New Testament was written by over a dozen different authors, for different communities, in different decades. And that's just the New Testament: the Old Testament was also written by dozens of authors, spread out across centuries. In the formation of the New Testament—the stories and teachings of Jesus—the initial events that took place were spoken of in Aramaic. Then we have decades of oral tradition before they were written down in another language, Greek. Then over the following centuries there were thousands of copies made, by hand, of those originals. To quote UNC Chapel Hill professor Bart Ehrman, today "we have copies of copies of copies of copies of copies of copies."<sup>13</sup>

There is historical reliability and historical unreliability. There is certainty and there is an overwhelming abyss of mystery.

Was there divine inspiration?

From the mystical point of view which I share, absolutely! The Sermon on the Mount is *sublime*. There are verses from Paul that are unifying, transcendent. There are moments in the recorded life of Jesus that will move the depths of your heart. But there are too many textual inconsistencies across our spectrum of authors to try to justify *infallibility*: there is no way around the *hundreds* of differences in plot points, let alone ideologies!

*"What has been presented as Christianity during these nineteen centuries is only a beginning, full of mistakes, not full-blown Christianity springing from the spirit of Jesus."*

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—*Albert Schweitzer, Nobel Peace Prize winner and a father of modern New Testament scholarship*

Initially we need a basic understanding of the timetable of this literature.

[As I have referenced previously, "Before Common Era (BCE.)" and "Common Era (CE.)" have become the standard in historical scholarship, replacing BC "Before Christ", and AD "*Anno Domini*" or (Year of Our Lord). Despite my overt admiration for the teachings of Jesus, as an author I'll be using secular historical markers. I'd like to clarify that my following brief summary is, again, a regrettably thin depiction of a subject that takes years to fully understand.

It took me five years to get a glimpse. Thousands of books have been written on the formation of the New Testament, entire careers are devoted to understanding its complexities. Start here but a few good scholars on the topic are Albert Schweitzer, Ferdinand Christian Baur, Bruce Metzger, David Flusser, Dominic Crossan, John P. Meier, Wayne Meeks, L. Michael White, Elaine Pagels, Bart Ehrman, James D.G. Dunn, Richard B. Hays, N. Thomas Wright. And then read the famous Christians' commentaries: St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, J.B. Lightfoot, St. Bonaventure, John Wycliffe, St. Hildegard of Bingen, St. Augustine, Origen.]

The brief outline is as follows:

- Jesus of Nazareth was born in Palestine under the rule of the Roman Empire, roughly the first decade BCE, during the reign of Herod the Great. Divine conception hypotheses aside, his parents, Joseph and Mary, were working class Jews in Nazareth, a small unremarkable town in the province of Galilee.<sup>14</sup> We have recently discovered the remains of the nearby town of Sepphoris, a larger metropolitan area—the very likely urban center where he and Joseph worked as craftsmen. Jesus began his ministry at age thirty upon being baptized in the Jordan River by a wandering Jewish apocalyptic preacher called John the Baptist. (*Matthew* 3:13-17; *Mark* 1:9-11; *Luke* 3:21-23) Jesus then travels around Judaea teaching radical, universal love

within a new interpretation of Jewish scripture to a group of close friends, as well as larger crowds. His meteoric rise in popularity concerns both powerful Jewish leaders and the Roman provincial government. After a ministry of 1-3 years, he was tried by the Sanhedrin, and sentenced by Pontius Pilate to be scourged and finally killed by the state through crucifixion (an event present in all four Synoptic Gospels) in roughly 26-33 CE. His immediate followers claimed to have experienced his resurrected body days after his death. An oral tradition of stories, teachings, and parables began spreading throughout Judaea soon after.

- In the mid-to-late 30s CE, enter Paul of Tarsus, formerly Saul, who famously had that conversion experience on the road to Damascus. (Again,) Saul was a Pharisee (oppositional Jewish sect) who viciously opposed the Jesus-following-Jews (as they weren't quite "Christians" at that point). After his conversion experience, Saul became Paul. He spent the rest of his life traveling the larger Mediterranean world, meeting with surviving disciples, and helping to establish many "house churches", the earliest Christian communities. Paul's correspondence to these congregations (*Epistle to the Corinthians*, *Epistle to the Galatians*, *Romans*, etc) are the documents included in the New Testament along with the gospels themselves. The dates for most of his letters are estimated to be in the 50s CE.<sup>15</sup>
- According to the widely-accepted "Two-Source Hypothesis"<sup>16</sup>, we have what is considered to be the first gospel, the *Gospel of Mark*, written around 66-70 CE, almost immediately after the destruction of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem by the Roman army. (To be clear, that places the first gospel to be written thirty to forty years after the death of Jesus.) The *Gospel of Matthew* likely came next in 80-90 CE in the Jewish homeland, most likely Galilee. The *Gospel of Luke* was written next, typically agreed upon in 85-95 CE, along with a book by the same author, *The Acts of the Apostles*, which tells the story of what happened to the

apostles after the death of Jesus. The Two-Source Hypothesis suggests that *Matthew* and *Luke* used *Mark* as a source, as well as another unknown document that scholars refer to as “Q”—thanks to around 250-300 verses of similar material in *Matthew* and *Luke* that is absent from *Mark*.<sup>17</sup> Last is the fourth canonical gospel, the *Gospel of John*, in 100-120 CE, which is so different than the other three canonical gospels (the “Synoptics” meaning “read together”), that already by the end of the second century Clement of Alexandria referred to *John* as the “Spiritual Gospel”<sup>18</sup>; less rooted in historicity, more focused on the divine elements of Christ that bring about a more ‘kingly’ Jesus.

- There are non-Christian references to the life and death of Jesus as early as 93 CE, by the Jewish historian Josephus in *Antiquities of the Jews*, and in 116 CE by the Roman historian Tacitus in *The Annals*.
- By the second century, there are hundreds of gospels about the life and teachings of Jesus. Early church leaders are forced to become critically selective of which ones are authentic, and which are forgeries written in the name of Jesus's apostles. Marcion of Sinope, who wrote about the false creator god, proposes the first Christian canon in 140 CE. Bishop Irenaeus is the first to give us the list with the four gospels of today's canon as the second century comes to a close. Origen of Alexandria contributed extensively to the canonical selection and its methodologies, and Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria gives us today's list of 27 books in his Easter letter of 367 CE.<sup>19</sup>

A summary about the sometimes strikingly different portrayals of Jesus in the four gospels is that “the Jesus of *Mark* would not recognize the Jesus of *John*.”

Although *Matthew* is placed first sequentially thanks to the birth narrative, historically we start with *Mark*, where Jesus is an outlandish desert wisdom teacher unappreciated by his hometown, who even has a faulty miracle (*Mark* 8:22-26). In *Matthew* we have a distinctly Jewish rabbi obsessed with fulfilling the apocalyptic



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message of the ancient Israelite prophets in the Old Testament. The Jesus of *Luke* is more concerned with preaching to the Gentiles (non-Jews) as it was likely written outside of the Jewish homeland, and then by the time we get to *John*, Jesus is an authoritative kingly figure, the direct descendant of God Himself.

*“The Bible has noble poetry in it... and some good morals and a wealth of obscenity, and upwards of a thousand lies.”*

—Mark Twain

There is no shortage of resources listing the vast textual inconsistencies. The differences are discussed in books written by Bible scholars and on websites created by militant atheists proud to show the contradictions.

It would be easier to overlook the inconsistencies if they weren't so numerous and striking.

When the vast majority of people read the Bible, they start with the birth narrative in *Matthew*, read all the way through it, then to *Mark*, etc, onto the end of *John*. They all sound relatively similar. This is called "horizontal reading", how we read a book from start to finish.

Bible scholarship, however, begins to get quite interesting very quickly through "vertical reading", a scholarly method of analyzing a single plot point of one gospel in comparison to another. Then you begin to see just how distinct these accounts truly are.

There are entire volumes dedicated to these discrepancies—I have come to greatly appreciate Burton Throckmorton's *Gospel Parallels* as a reference guide in this method. (Throckmorton's *Parallels* only includes *Mark*, *Matthew* and *Luke*, not *John*, as *John*'s plot points are wildly different than the earlier three.) A cursory list is as follows:

- The genealogy of Jesus listed in *Matthew* has different ancestors than the genealogy listed in *Luke*. *Matthew* goes back to Abraham (*Matthew* 1:1-16), while *Luke* goes back to Adam (*Luke* 3:23-38).

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- The nativity story only appears in *Matthew* & *Luke*; *Matthew's* is brief and simple while *Luke's* account goes into great detail.
- In *Mark*, flipping the moneychangers' tables in the temple in Jerusalem (*Mark* 11:15-18) causes his arrest and trial, while in *John* it's at beginning of his ministry (*John* 2:13-16).
- In the Synoptics (*Mark*, *Matthew*, & *Luke*), Jesus tells short teaching parables that illustrate a moral message, speaking very little about himself; in *John*, he often speaks at length about himself, with only two short parable teaching moments.
- In *Matthew*, the elders ask for a sign to prove he is the Son of God. He refuses and curses them. (*Matthew* 12:38-39) In *John*, the primary reason for him performing miracles is to prove his divine authority.
- The rejection at Nazareth is the first episode of his ministry in *Luke* (*Luke* 4:14-29); in *Mark* and *Matthew* it comes near the end of the narrative. (*Mark* 6:1-6) (*Matthew* 13:54-58)
- Passion week has differences across all gospels, but the contrast is particularly stark between *John* and the Synoptics. Unlike in the Synoptics, *John's* Last Supper is not Passover but rather the day before, making the following day, his crucifixion, the Passover Seder. This adjustment has theological implications—replacing the Passover lamb with Jesus, the "Lamb of God", for sacrifice.<sup>20</sup>
- While all the gospels agree that he was crucified and resurrected after three days, each account has differences: there are guards at the tomb in *Matthew* (*Matthew* 28:4), there's no guard but rather two angels in *Luke* and *John*. (*Luke* 24:23; *John* 20:12-13) The women come in the morning in *Mark*, but in *John* it's only Mary Magdalene at night. (*Mark* 16:1-2; *John* 20:1)
- There's even a "longer ending" of the *Gospel of Mark* that does not exist in our earliest versions. In this addition (*Mark* 16:9-20), Jesus tells the disciples they will "speak in new

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tongues," and be invulnerable to snake bites—a clear (mis)inspiration to the Appalachian snake handlers of today.

What do all these differences mean?

How do they affect Christianity?

Most importantly, it means that these stories were not chiseled in stone by a divine hand. They were several different story collections being told orally, that were written down decades later by different authors in different parts of the Greco-Roman world. It's actually quite reasonable that they have so many discrepancies. It wouldn't make any sense to end up being a flawless, unified document.

To point to the mystical view, Jesus was fully realized. He made an impact on those around him, and after his death and perceived resurrection, the Judaeen countryside was quite understandably ablaze with stories about this mysterious, impressive teacher for decades.

While certain discrepancies between the gospel accounts are minor plot points, others have extremely impactful differences theologically and culturally.

### **“Have You Considered?”**

Ram Dass had a friend in Washington whose name was Milton Friedman.<sup>21</sup> There was another Milton Friedman who was a famous economist. Ram Dass' friend Milton Friedman was a speechwriter working in the White House.

One day he received a telephone call. The caller said, “Is this Milton Friedman?” And he said, “Yes.” The caller said, “I represent a church in California, and we have a large surplus of money in our accounts, and we wonder if you could suggest how we should invest it.”

To which his friend replied,

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*“Have you considered giving it to the poor?”*

To which the man on the phone replied,

*“Is this the real Milton Friedman?”*

To which his friend replied,

*“Is this the real church?”*

## The ‘Foolish’ Pharisees as a Later Emphasis

In the ancient Jewish homeland, the main Temple in Jerusalem was the center of Jewish life in many aspects: spiritually, culturally, economically. And as the historian Josephus records, the Temple priests, known as the Sadducees, were the most powerful Jewish sect in the first century. They had greater influence over the wealthier populace, while the Pharisees had more influence over the rest of Jewish society.<sup>22</sup> So when the Jewish Temple was destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE, there was a significant vacuum both existentially as well as politically.

The Temple-centered Sadducees were no more, leaving the other prominent groups: the Pharisees, the Jesus-following Jews, and the Essenes. The Essenes lived off in the wilderness and were not vying for power. So that left the Pharisees and Jesus-followers to grapple with how to live in a post-Temple Romanized world.

The Pharisees and the Jesus-followers were at war for new believers.

Among the four Gospels, *Matthew* uses especially Jewish rhetoric: the “Matthean author” is more concerned about the prophets, the Law, etc, than the other three New Testament Gospels, which is one of the main reasons scholars place the *Gospel of Matthew* to have been written in the Jewish homeland. Unlike *Luke* for example which is more concerned about preaching the message of Jesus to non-Jews (AKA “Gentiles”), placing the writing of *Luke* in another geographic area of the Roman Empire that was not the Jewish homeland.

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This Jewish homeland context is significant because immediately after the Temple's destruction, the Pharisaical sect becomes the primary threat to the growing power and influence of the Jesus followers. It is no surprise then, that Jesus is particularly brutal in his condemnation of the Pharisees in *Matthew*.<sup>23</sup>

In the three "Synoptic Gospels" (*Mark*, *Matthew*, and *Luke*), Jesus calls the Pharisees out for being hypocritical. They were preaching purity and practicing impurity. They were concerned with how they were being perceived by others on the outside, without living truthfully from the inside.

He lists their woes in three gospels, but in *Matthew*, he really lets them have it.

In *Mark* their hypocrisy only gets a few lines, and in *Luke* a few more, but in *Matthew*, the Prince of Peace rails against them, calling them hypocrites to their face and ultimately referring to the Pharisees as "blind fools" and "you snakes, you brood of vipers!" (*Matthew* 23:13-35)

To be absolutely clear here, the excessive, uncharacteristically harsh tone of his condemnation in *Matthew*, is a later addition on top of the portrayal of Jesus, created by the author of *Matthew* who was reflecting the tense political divisions of his time, decades after Jesus' death.

The author used this scene as an opportunity to denigrate his political opponents beyond the original event, as the two other gospel accounts are considerably more mild-mannered, and not written in that tense political climate.

Sadly, Jesus's lengthy admonishment of the Pharisees in *Matthew* has been used throughout history as a justification for anti-semitism in a variety of different cultures in different time periods. According to scholars, this passage led to everything from the heartless medieval persecution of Jews by Christians, to even contributing to the Holocaust itself.<sup>24</sup>

This is what happens when the ego tries to dilute the truth.

The historical context provided does not completely invalidate *Matthew*, but it does strongly de-emphasize his criticism of the

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Pharisees as awful hypocrites, and it paints a far less divisive, more loving Jesus. Ultimately it's a clear example that there have been political and cultural influences upon Jesus's original teachings. And that even before its formation as a separate religion, Christianity was quickly starting to misinterpret Christ.

