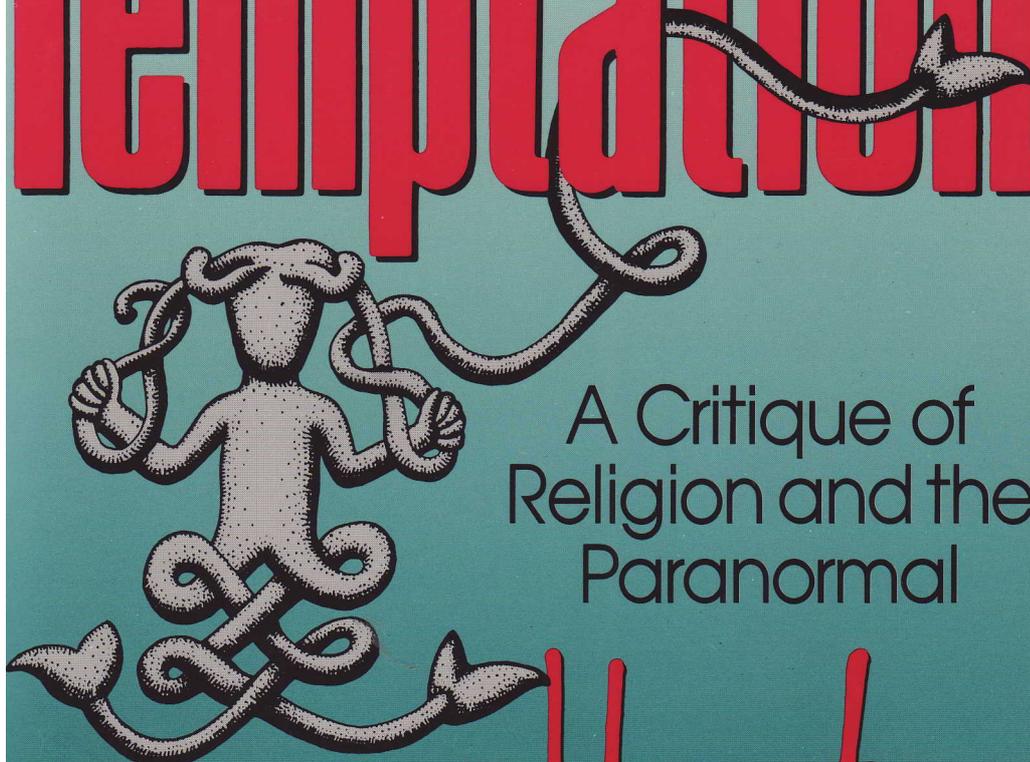


The
**Transcendental
Temptation**



A Critique of
Religion and the
Paranormal

paul kurtz

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"A very important book. . . . Clearly written and forcefully argued."

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In this highly acclaimed and controversial book, Paul Kurtz critically analyzes the bases of religion: How provable are the claims of the famous prophets who founded religions in their names: Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Ellen G. White, and others? Do their claims justify religious belief? Finally, is there any evidence that God exists, or that there is life after death?

In *The Transcendental Temptation: A Critique of Religion and the Paranormal*, Kurtz attempts to demonstrate that the major monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam—all rest on myths of revelation. Yet each succeeding generation appears to be impervious to the victories of skepticism over theology in the past or creates new and even more irrational religions. Why is this so? Why are the ancient messages of the prophets as well as the notions of extraterrestrial divinities and demons of the occult still persuasive?

Drawing upon extensive research in the paranormal fields—parapsychology, spiritualism, UFOlogy—Kurtz points out the striking similarities between the popular paranormal belief-systems of today and the classical religions of the past. He finds similar processes at work: on the one hand, fraudulent conjurers posing as prophets or psychics deceiving a gullible public and, on the other, self-deluded individuals acting out their revelatory fantasies. Kurtz attributes the willingness of large sectors of humanity to accept these claims to the proclivity in human nature for "magical thinking"—which undermines the power of critical judgment and allows many people to accept occult claims (e.g., belief in ghosts, psychics, horoscopes, UFOs), even though there is insufficient evidence in their behalf or strong evidence to the contrary.

Given the deep-seated temptation that persists in human culture to accept supernatural phenomena, Kurtz asks, what are the prospects for developing a genuinely humanistic society based upon scientific and humane foundations? *The Transcendental Temptation* is an original and absorbing work that has stirred heated debate.

PAUL KURTZ is professor emeritus of philosophy at the State University of New York at Buffalo, founding chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, copresident of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, and the author or editor of more than thirty books.

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Content

Content	3
Preface: The skeptic versus the believer	4
VI: The appeal to mysticism	7
Vlt The Jesus myth	18
VIE: Moses and the chosen people	62
DC: Mohammed: The prophet of Islam.....	93
X: Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser	114
Conclusion: The argument from revelation reappraised.....	154

ONE: SKEPTICISM AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Meaning and transcendence
The value of life: Things left unsaid
Why has secular humanism failed to take hold?
The quest for transcendence
Skepticism
Skepticism as unlimited doubt
Skepticism as selective doubt
The scientific method
What is science?
Subjectivistic methodology
Testing truth-claims in science
Evidence
Logycal coherence
Pragmatic consequences
V indication of the scientific method
n'. Critical intelligence
; is critical intelligence? \ catalogue of intellectual skills The role of education
The justification of belief Deferring to custom Tbe appeal to emotion The appeal
to authority Subjectivism and intuition Faith as justification for belief

XV. Space-age religions: Astrology and UFOlogy Astrology

Historical assumptions
Scientific criticisms
Sun-sign astrology
Horoscopes
Conclusion: Why does astrology persist? UFOlogy and extraterrestrial life
Abductions
The extraterrestrial hypothesis and UFOs
Typical examples of UFO sightings
Other monsters, other seas, other galaxies
PART FOUR: BEYOND RELIGION
XVL The transcendental temptation
Magical thinking
Is magical thinking acausal?

The role of creative imagination
Does religion have a biogenetic basis?
The moral function of religion
The quest for ethnicity
Celebrating the rites of passage
Can we transcend the transcendental temptation?

Preface: The skeptic versus the believer

The question pondered in every period of history is that of meaning. Is there some purpose to human experience, some hidden or divine source of the cosmos? In virtually every age human beings have puzzled about roots. They have debated the question of whether human life is finite or whether there is a divine promise of eternity. The lines have been drawn between two conflicting approaches to the ultimate nature of human reality in the universe. The proponents of the practical stance call themselves empiricists, or rationalists, or scientific skeptics. They are skeptical about the claim of faith that the universe is divine. They are the atheists and agnostics of old; today they are called secular humanists and are castigated in such by believers. Ranged against them are the disciples of a transcendental and theistic world-view. The former are content to live in the world as it is and to deal with it as best they can; they seek to understand the categories of logic and experience, and they are willing to undertake the arduous task of transforming it by their own courageous efforts in the light of their own plans and projects. Opposed to them are all those who are discontented with mundane reality and who seek to escape to an imagined universe based upon faith and credulity. In conflict with the world they encounter, they find that it is too little; they seek deeper mysteries and truths, for the promise or hope that there is an unseen dimension to existence.

The scientific rationalist is a skeptic about the received myths. He holds the dominant religions of revelation to be mythological conjectures full of vain hopes and false illusions. These religious fantasies are by a fearful response to the ambiguities of mortal existence, and they weigh down frail human spirits who are seeking to find in their dreams refuge from the vicissitudes of fortune. Herein lurk the motives that even the most pretentious religious aspirations. Paradoxically, as admitted, the more absurd the claim, the more grandiose the result; the more incredible the mystery, the more committed and devoted true believers are likely to become.

Today, as of old, we face the same conflict within the human psyche: versus doctrinaire religion, the empirical world of intersubjective verification versus the world of fantasy, knowledge of fact versus romantic idealism, the courage to become versus the secret longing not to have so.

The wounds run deep in human civilization. Some cultures become fixated on the quest for the eternal, and some individuals, overwhelmed by this life, forever seek another. The contrast is between the scientist and the mystic, the philosopher and the theologian, the doer and the follower, the knower and the prophet, the independent person and the dependent soul.

In a sense, the schism between these two parts of ourselves is reflected in our culture and is never completely resolved; for no sooner is an accommodation reached in a historical period than it emerges in the next, often even more pronounced than in the previous, though it may assume different forms. It is as if the species Man has a schizoid nature—his feet implanted on the earth but his

imaginative soul soaring toward a heaven of magical unreality. Overwhelmed by the ache of humdrum existence, he seeks an escape to another dimension. Today, a similar dichotomy exists between scientists and paranormal-ists, the disciplines of rigorous inquiry and the cults of the occult, the world of modern science and the mythology of fundamentalist religion.

It is often difficult to know which side of our nature will dominate and control us. To live and function, one must accept the practical realities of common sense and ordinary life and come to terms with them. One cannot be completely out of touch with the external world of brute existence for long—that is, if one is to endure. We need to bake our bread, build our shelter, forge our plowshares, ward off the threats to our daily existence, and deal with friend and foe alike. Men and women could not long survive if they remained fixated in a dream world of religiosity. Knowledge is an instrument of action. We need to understand the objects and events of the world about us, if we are to cope with them and solve the problems of living that may arise. Yet man is fascinated by questions concerning his origin and destiny. Troubled by disease and death, he often craves something more. Thus he tends to read into his life some divine mystery. He erects cathedrals and monuments, develops creeds and dogmas, engages in ceremonies and celebrations—all to deny his mortal existence and to reinforce and give permanence to that which is absent. Homo religiosus invents religious symbols, which he venerates and worships to save him from facing the finality of his death and dissolution. He devises paradise fictions to provide succor and support. Man deceives himself about his ultimate destiny so as not to be tormented by the contemplation of it. Although he must of necessity use his intelligence to cope with the world—at least up to a point—he is forever poised, ready to leap beyond reason in an act of faith. There is, he insists, something more to the human drama, thus straining to resist and deny his existential demise. In a case of supreme self-deception, at various times and in various places he has

xv

Preface: The skeptic versus the believer

been willing to profess belief in the most incredible myths because of what they have promised him: Moses on Mt. Sinai delivering the Ten Commandments to God's "chosen people," Christ crucified beckoning man to salvation, Mohammed the true prophet of Allah so appointed by Gabriel, Buddha the Light, Joseph Smith and the New Zion of the Mormons, or the Chariots of the Gods transporting extraterrestrial beings from outer space to observe humankind. The pathos of the human condition is that many or most human beings cannot easily accept the stark realities of human finitude, the fact that there is no ultimate providence or purpose for our existence. Extraterrestrial beings may exist in remote corners of the universe, but there is no evidence that they have had anything to do with us, can communicate through ESP, or are responsible for our future destiny. One must be skeptical about the very existence of extraterrestrials until it is verified and demonstrated—though it remains an exciting possibility of tremendous import.

Most members of the human race consider skepticism to be disenchanting; since it questions their revered dream-fictions, it is also held to be dangerous. The methods of science and reason leading to technology and industry have contributed enormously to the progress of human civilization. Religious believers cannot deny this. They are willing to use the fruits of science and technology—but only up to a point. They are ever ready to leap beyond science by fashioning

a doctrine claiming two truths, insisting they have a right to their beliefs in religious revelations, however fanciful they may be. Skeptics refuse to be lured by the transcendental myths of the day. Unable to accept uncritically the prevailing beliefs, they often stand alone condemned and hated by believers for their "negative" heresies.

One may ponder why skeptical dissent about religion has been held by a relatively small group of intellectuals and naysayers. Are the religious needs of men and women too powerful, the hunger for the divine too pervasive for skepticism ever to prevail? Does religiosity have its roots in biology and genetics? Does it have adaptive value? Is there deep within the human breast a transcendental temptation that reappears in every age and accounts for the ready acceptance of myths about the transcendental? If so, can or should it be overcome, and how?

There was the supposition at one time that, given the availability of education, the increase in literacy, and the elimination of poverty and disease, humankind might someday outgrow the religiosity of its infancy. There was the hope that in its place might develop a mature scientific outlook and a responsible moral and social philosophy grounded in a naturalistic view of the human condition. Under this view the universe possesses no purpose or meaning per se and is indifferent to human

xvi Preface: The skeptic versus the believer

achievement and failure. It is not divine in origin or sustenance. The human species is a relatively minor species on a tiny planet in one galaxy among countless others. Hence, the beginning of wisdom is the awareness that there is insufficient evidence that a god or gods have created us and the recognition that we are responsible in part for our own destiny. Human beings can achieve this good life; but it is by the cultivation of the virtues of intelligence and courage, not faith or obedience, that we will most likely be able to do so. We can attain some measure of social harmony and justice, as well as a creative and bountiful life full of potential excitement and exuberance. But what we do depends upon whether we can develop scientific knowledge and moral excellence. The human adventure is not alien to adventure and poetry, romance and beauty. Nor is it insensitive to wonder and awe or the splendid majesty of the cosmos. These are religious qualities, but natural piety need not be devoid of stark honesty about our past and future. Surely we need to avoid a schizoid approach. The method of critical intelligence as used in science, philosophy, and ordinary life is an essential therapy if we are to rid ourselves of false illusions and dogmas.

This was the pagan conviction that prevailed in Hellenic and Roman civilization. It was eventually overtaken by a failure of nerve, and the Dark Age of religiosity descended upon Western civilization. A humanist outlook emerged during the Renaissance and reached fruition during the Enlightenment, with the development of modern science and the ideals of democracy and freedom. But the belief that reason and science would properly emancipate human beings from false mythologies of illusion was mistaken; for the twentieth century has witnessed the growth of virulent new ideological religions (fascism and Marxism-Leninism-Stalinism) and the persistence of orthodox, supernaturalistic religious dogmas. It has also witnessed an outburst of a new set of beliefs in the paranormal and the occult: astrology, UFOlogy, psychic and space-oriented science-fiction religions, and a bizarre magical-spiritual world-view.

Secular humanism provides an outlook on man and the universe, a philosophy of life, an ethic of reason and freedom. It is the story of possibility and outreach. Secular humanism is an alternative to the religions of illusion and salvation. But

how it copes with the claims of the transcendent without dogmatically dismissing them and how it deals with life, offering opportunity and power, is a crucial issue. Can secular humanism provide a meaningful substitute for God and the transcendent? Can it deal with the world as it is and yet help us to fulfill our basic yearnings and hopes for what we might become?

.....

VI: The appeal to mysticism

Is there a form of knowledge that cannot be derived from the usual sources of human experience, and that need not be justified by reference to them? According to the classical religious tradition, there is; it has been called the "mystical experience" or "mystical consciousness." Mysticism is supposed to untap an esoteric form of knowledge of a transcendent realm of being that lies deep within the soul. This knowledge is incapable of being translated into ordinary sensory empirical terms; it defies the categories of cognitive logic; it is extra-ordinary in its essential nature. Yet it is supposed to be the most important kind of knowledge we can discover; and it points to a reality beyond our normal consciousness of the world.

I wish to deal with three issues. First, what is mystical experience? How have the leading mystics characterized it? Second, how have they interpreted their mystical experiences? Is mysticism evidence of another kind of ultimate reality? Is the existence of a transcendent source the sole explanation that may be inferred from it; or are there alternative, naturalistic and causal explanations of such experiences? Third, it is important that we distinguish between direct and secondhand accounts of mystical experience. A firsthand report is from the standpoint of someone who claims to have had an extraordinary experience of ecstasy and insight. Secondhand interpretations are from those who have not had such an experience but are asked to evaluate a claim to determine whether it should be taken as trustworthy. What should be their response to such a claim?

What is mysticism?

A definition of mysticism is not easy, since there are so many varieties; it is often difficult to find a property that underlies them all. There is the mysticism of the Eastern religions: the Upanishads is a source, and Shankara is the great teacher and interpreter of Advaita. There is also an extensive Yoga system of mental concentration. The Buddhist mystical tradition begins with the Buddha himself and extends to the Satori experience of contemporary Zen masters. In Asian religions, the self becomes

91

92

The appeal to mysticism

infused with divine Being, while the idea of a personal God is foreign. Monotheistic religions also express mysticism. In the Muslim tradition, there is Sufism. There are Jewish Chassidic mystics. Christianity is infused with the philosophy of neo-Platonism and Plotinus, and it abounds with great mystics and saints including Dionysius the Areopagite, Meister Eckhart, St. Gregory, St. Bernard, Heinrich Suzo, Catherine of Genoa. St. Theresa of Avila, Mme. Guyon,

St. Marguerite Marie, St. John of the Cross, Jan van Ruysbroeck, and Jakob Boehme.

Students of mysticism have sought to distinguish mystical experiences from other forms of religious experience or divine encounter. Paul's alleged encounter with God on the road to Damascus, as recorded in the New Testament (Acts 9) is not mystical per se; nor should mysticism include "the hearing of voices," "the seeing of visions," or "the receiving of revelations" by means of verbal commandments. Hence, mysticism would exclude Moses' instructions from on high in the form of the Ten Commandments, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, or Mohammed's reception of the divine messages recorded in the Koran. This special class of revelation claims we shall deal with in subsequent chapters. Nor should mysticism be used synonymously with the occult or the paranormal, with apparitions, demons, ghosts, telepathy, precognition, clairvoyance, or extrasensory perception. Mysticism should not be used so ambiguously as to include aesthetic experiences: the intense moods aroused by poetry, music, the arts, the inspiring appreciation for the beauty of nature. These are unwarranted, metaphorical extensions of the term. More precisely, mysticism is applied to that specialized class of experiences in which mystics claim to have some direct encounter with a spiritual reality; this is usually discovered in an overwhelming and unique encounter overflowing with intensity and rapture.

William James, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, suggests that our normal consciousness, which includes rational-empirical components, is but one special type of consciousness and that there are "potential forms of consciousness entirely different." We sense objects in the spatial-temporal world by means of colors, tones, shapes, and sizes. This world is malleable to our purposes; objects in our behavioral field are affected by our actions and vice versa. These we interpret in terms of relational concepts. Mystics claim that over and beyond these normal forms of awareness there is another range of consciousness in which we come into contact with a reality much deeper, more authentic and enduring than anything we confront in everyday life. They are unable to translate this reality into meaningful perceptual or conceptual equivalents. Nor can they communicate by means of linguistic discourse precisely what it is. It is "ineffable," they insist, unutterable and indefinable.

93

What is mysticism?

Plotinus denies that discursive reason can adequately describe a mystic encounter with the One:

The discursive reason, if it wishes to say anything, must seize first one element of the Truth and then another; such are the conditions of discursive thought. But how can discursive thought apprehend the absolutely simple? It is enough to apprehend it by a kind of spiritual intuition. But in this act of apprehension we have neither the power nor the time to say anything about it; afterwards we can reason about it. We may believe that we have really seen, when a sudden light illumines the Soul; for this light comes from the One and is the One.¹

Some species can sense smells or hear sounds well beyond the human perceptual range. Is it not possible that there is an extended awareness which the mystics can untap, opening up dimensions unknown to ordinary consciousness? This is a special challenge for the scientific empiricist and skeptic. If knowledge about the universe has its roots in some experience (whether potential or actual, direct or indirect), then why not admit the claims of the

mystics, who may be so attuned to reality that they can penetrate to the essence of Being. There is a fairy tale about a stranger visiting a kingdom where everyone is blind; it is impossible for the stranger to convey to the blind inhabitants any sense of the richness of the visible world. No doubt it is difficult to explain to a frigid woman or a celibate monk the meaning of an orgasm, if they have never enjoyed a sexual climax. Why not allow the possibility of an extended sensibility, which opens up splendors undreamed of by the prosaic imagination? Classical mysticism in its specialized form has been relatively rare. W. T. Stace estimates, for example, that there were only one hundred well-known Christian mystics. Many of the great scholars who have devoted an enormous amount of time to studying the phenomena admit to never having had such an experience. Cuthbert Butler, a Catholic theologian, and author of an important study on mysticism, admits that he has never had any such experience himself, "never anything that could be called an experiential perception of God or His Presence."² William James confesses to being an outsider. He says that most of the writing on mysticism that he has seen "has treated the subject from the outside, for I know of no one who has spoken as having the direct authority of experience in favor of his views. I am also an outsider. . . ." James suggests that states of mystical intuition may be only very sudden and great

1. Reprinted in W. T. Stace, *The Teachings of the Mystics* (New York: Mentor, 1960), 115.

2. Cuthbert Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), 136.

94 The appeal to mysticism

extensions of the ordinary 'field of consciousness' ... an immense spreading of the margin of the field."³

The problem, of course, is that mysticism, by its very nature, violates the standards of scientific objectivity. If we were to accept its data, it would need to be amenable to intersubjective analysis and corroboration. Unfortunately, this is precluded almost by its very nature. Until recently it has been virtually impossible to replicate it, that is, until the introduction of psychedelic drugs, which seem to arouse similar psychological experiences. Should we reject mysticism a priori? This appears to theists dogmatic by definition.

The problem for skepticism is that mysticism, at least in its classical sense, is an unusual and bizarre experience. Although mystics claim it to be ineffable and untranslatable, some of them do try to explain and interpret it in language, and this we can submit to careful scrutiny. The first thing we discover is that there are significant differences in the accounts of the mystics, particularly between Eastern and Western mysticism, and there are radically dissonant interpretations. Nevertheless, according to some commentators, there is a common characteristic. The most important feature of mysticism, Stace maintains, is that it involves the apprehension of an ultimate "nonsensuous unity" to all things, a powerful sense of the "oneness to reality." In this undifferentiated unity, divisions and multiplicities disappear. This pure unitary consciousness is allegedly devoid of any sensory-intellectual content.

Rudolf Otto describes the Hindu mystic tradition of Advaita as follows:

True Being is Sat alone, Being itself, the internal Brahman, unchanging and unchanged, undivided and without parts." That is (a) the multiplicity of things exist only through "Maya" (which is usually translated as "mere appearance"). Sat itself is the One only, (b) in itself Brahman or Being absolutely and immutably "One only," without parts, without any multiplicity, and therefore without the multiplicity of differences and delimitations. . . . This Eternal One in

its uniform nature is wholly and purely Atman or spirit, pure consciousness, pure knowledge. . . . Thus it is at once "anantam" without end, and beyond space and time. . . . The soul of man, the "inward Atman," is nothing less than this one eternal, unchangeable, homogeneous Brahman itself.⁴

Mysticism thus involves a path for the soul to take, a ladder by

3. The Works of William James: Essays in Philosophy, ed. F. Burkhardt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937), from "A Suggestion About Mysticism," *Journal of Philosophy, Psychology and Scientific Methods*, Feb. 7, 1910, p. 157. f

4. Rudolf Otto, *Mysticism East and West: A Comparative Analysis of the Nature of Mysticism* (New York: Macmillan, 1932), p. 19.

What is mysticism? 95

which it can ascend into a mystical intuition of the One. This involves, in the words of Plotinus, a union with the divine:

When the soul turns away from visible things and makes itself as beautiful as possible and becomes like the One ... And seeing the One, suddenly appearing in itself, for there is nothing between, nor are they any longer two, but one, for you cannot distinguish between them, while the vision lasts.⁵

St. Augustine expressed the meaning of Christian mysticism with the descriptive phraseology: "My mind in the flash of a trembling glance came to Absolute Being—That Which Is."⁶ Mysticism thus implies some direct contact of the soul with transcendental reality, an intense attachment to and identification with it.

A major strand in mysticism is the belief that the way to achieve the mystical experience and discover the unity of existence is to turn within, [the path to God is by means of introspection and introversion; God is immanent in the soul.

God is hidden within the soul, and the true contemplative will seek him there in love. (St. John of the Cross)

The soul finds God in its own depth. (Jan van Ruysbroeck) Where the soul is, there is God. (Meister Eckhart) We should seek God in our interior. (St. Theresa)⁷

The mystical experience culminates in a tremendous burst of passionate and emotional fulfillment. This involves the opening of the heart, an arousal of love. There is supposedly a "union" in the sense that the soul of the mystic, as it were, melts away or becomes fused with the divine, owing into God as God flows into the soul. There is often an allusion to an intense and shimmering light, which suffuses the mind and being of the person and dominates everything. Out of this experience emerges an indescribable joy, a sense of bliss, ecstatic happiness, a buoyant experience of peace, an inner sweetness.

Louis de Blois (a Benedictine abbot who died in 1566) described his experience as follows:

It is a great thing, an exceeding great thing, ... to be joined to God in the divine light by a mystical and denuded union. This takes place where a

5. Stace, *Teachings of the Mystics*, p. 115.

6. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, VII, 23. Quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 4.

7. Quoted in Douglas Clyde Macintosh, *The Problem of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Harper, 1940), chap. 2.

96 The appeal to mysticism.

pure, humble, and resigned soul, burning with ardent love, is carried about itself by the grace of God, and through the brilliancy of the divine light shining on the mind, it loses all consideration and distinction of things, and lays aside all, even the most excellent images, and all liquified by love, and, as it were, reduced to

nothing, it melts away into God. It is then united to God without any medium, and becomes one spirit with Him, and is transformed and changed into Him. ... It becomes one with God, yet not so as to be of the same substance and nature of God.⁸

St. John of the Cross (a Carmelite who died in 1591) describes his experience: The end I have in view is the divine Embracing, the union of the soul with the divine Substance. In this loving, obscure knowledge God unites Himself with the soul eminently and divinely. . . . This knowledge consists in a certain contact of the soul with the Divinity, and it is God Himself Who is then felt and tasted, though not manifestly and distinctly, as it will be in glory. But this touch of knowledge and of sweetness is so deep and so profound that it penetrates into the inmost substance of the soul. This knowledge savours in some measure of the divine Essence and of everlasting life.⁹

St. Francis of Sales (Bishop of Geneva, who died in 1622) depicts the soul's union with God. He says:

As melted balm that no longer has firmness or solidity, the soul lets herself pass or flow into What she loves: she does not spring out of herself as by a sudden leap, nor does she cling as by a joining or union, but gently glides, as a fluid and liquid thing, into the Divinity Whom she loves. She goes out by that sacred outflowing and holy liquefaction, and quits herself, not only to be united to the well-Beloved, but to be entirely mingled with and steeped in Him. The outflowing of a soul into her God is a true ecstasy, by which the soul quite transcends the limits of her natural way of existence, being wholly mingled with, absorbed and engulfed in, her God.¹⁰

The first questions that need to be raised are: What does the experience as recounted mean? What does it point to? What interpretation shall be placed upon it?

One of the problems is that interpretation has been colored by the social and cultural context in which a mystical experience occurred. Christian mystics tend to read Christ into the message, but Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, or Jewish mystics differ in their cultural interpretations. Buddhists are not theists and Hindus are not monotheists; and so the

8. *Spiritual Mirror*, c. II, quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 9.

9. *Ascent of Carmel*, II, c. 24, 26, quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 10.

10. *Treatise of the Love of God*, VI, 12, quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 11.

97

Some naturalistic explanations

notion of a Supreme Being is not present, nor is there expectation of personal immortality. Hindus refer to contact with Atman or the world-soul, Buddhists to Nirvana or nothingness. Their experiences are not evidential for the monotheistic interpretations of the Western religions. Stace suggests that perhaps no religious significance should be read into mystic experience: it is an experience in itself without any special theological trappings.

Can we cull from such experiences, at the very least, a transcendental inference? Does it point to a realm beyond, of which only some individuals by special efforts can get a brief glimmer? Should we pay close attention to what their experience tells us about ultimate reality? Or, on the contrary, is the mystic's experience an altered, pathological state of consciousness? Is it a distortion of normal consciousness and perception? Bertrand Russell observes: "From a scientific point of view we can make no distinction between the man who eats little and

sees heaven and the man who drinks much and sees snakes. Each is an abnormal physical condition, and therefore has abnormal perception."¹¹ William James says that "mystical experiences are, and have the right to be, authoritative for those that have had them." But, on the other hand, he agrees that those who have not had the experience are not called upon to accept their validity. Yet he concludes: "It must always remain an open question whether mystical states may not possibly be superior points of view, windows through which the mind looks out upon a more extensive and inclusive world."¹²

Some naturalistic explanations

The religionist who accepts mystical experiences as veridical is often un-schooled in comparative scientific analysis or unaware of alternative explanations for the mystic state. Committed to a theistic world view, he finds theistic interpretations plausible. Yet a number of alternative naturalistic explanations are possible. Classical religious interpretations were made in the prevailing cultural milieu, particularly during the medieval period. With a shift from a religious to a scientific culture, naturalistic causal interpretations are meaningful.

An interesting question to be raised is this: What are the preconditions necessary to achieve the mystic state? It is clear that it is a relatively rare occurrence and that it requires an enormous effort. This does not deny

11. Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism*. Quoted in Walter Kaufmann, *Critique of Philosophy and Religion* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. 315.

12. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 422-24, 428. Quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 137.

98 The appeal to mysticism

that many ordinary human beings have reported mystical-like experiences. a sense of oneness with nature and of peace; but these are not the kind of experiences that great mystics and saints report.

Reading the accounts of their lives, we find that their experiences usually involve a long and arduous period of preparation before the mystic culmination. There is first an intense longing for the mystical experience, a desire to discover God or achieve Nirvana. Second, there is an intense effort at a spiritual life, including constant prayers and devotions. Third, the mystic must repress all physical desire, worldly goods, sexual thoughts, or carnal lust. Fourth, he or she must lead a life of asceticism, self-denial, and self-control. This may include fasting, lack of sleep, hard work, even self-flagellation and mortification. Fifth, the mystic generally lives an isolated and secluded life, whether in darkened caves or isolated cells, and he or she withdraws from the world. The ground is thus laid for such an experience by sensory deprivation, sexual repression, and enforced withdrawal; in short, the preconditions for a psychotic-like reaction are present. Now, the direct way, according to the mystic, to achieve the sought-for state is to turn within by engaging in contemplation and meditation. This may begin with the chanting of a mantra, the repetition of a prayer, the focusing of one's concentration upon one object or experience. According to yoga, the technique is repetition and concentration. Only then does the desired detachment occur. Recent research shows that a "relaxation response"—which is far short of a mystic experience—can occur by focusing attention on any object, without the need for reciting a prayer or mantra. A preliminary state of dissociation seems to emerge. It is only after a long and arduous path that the mystic may achieve his desired release. When it occurs, he enters a kind of trancelike state, in which the awareness is disengaged from bodily sensations. An out-of-body experience occurs.

St. Augustine described this state as "midway between sleep and death." He says that "the soul is rapt in such wise as to be withdrawn from the bodily senses more than in sleep, but less than in death."¹³

And St. Gregory affirms that "the mind disengages itself from things of this world and fixes its attention wholly in spiritual things." He says that "by dint of a great effort," it mounts up to a momentary perception of the "unencompassed light." Then, "exhausted by the effort" and blinded by the vision of the light, he continues, "it sinks back wearied to its normal state, to recuperate."¹⁴

13. St. Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, 26, 53. Quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 50.

14. St. Gregory, *Benedictine Monachism*. Quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 67.

Some naturalistic explanations 99

Other mystics seem to have an impression of floating in mid-air, or levitating. St. Theresa recounts that "often my body would become so light that it lost all weight." She was aware of being "lifted up." Heinrich Suzo also reports an impression of "floating."¹⁵

All of these are common forms of out-of-body experiences that people report today—somewhere in the realm between hypnagogic and hypnopompic sleep. The real question is whether an exacerbated focus on these experiences is a symptom of mental illness. These experiences resemble psychotic states. The schizophrenic often is out of cognitive touch with reality. He may not be able to clearly distinguish objects in the spatial and temporal world. His normal perceptions are distorted. His own sense of selfhood may be in doubt or lost. He may seem to stand outside of himself, and he views himself as a spectator, or he finds himself swallowed up by reality. Schizophrenics are often enmeshed in hallucinations and fantasies. Time and speech may be emptied of their usual meanings. In a well-known case, Freud describes the psychotic reactions of Daniel Paul Schreber, a paranoid, who believed that he was in contact with God. Schreber thought that the nerve filaments of his brain were connected with God's. He heard voices and saw these filaments in the form of rays:

With my mind's eye I see the rays which are both the carriers of the voices and the poison of corpses to be unloaded on my body, as long drawn out filaments approaching my head from some vast distant spot on the horizon. . . . The radiant picture of my rays became visible to my inner eye, while I was lying in bed not sleeping but awake. . . ,¹⁶

A student whom I know recounted a similar "mysticlike" experience. An older man, he had lost his wife to cancer and was burdened with raising three children. He lost his job because of "emotional difficulties." One day, he recounted to me, his mind suddenly went blank. The world was bathed in white light and he had no sense of time—he felt buoyant and at peace. Three days later, he found himself in a psychiatric ward. Apparently he had been wandering nude on the streets, but had no remembrance of it. Since then, he has been in and out of psychiatric wards as he tries to make sense out of his life.

One aspect of the life of the mystic that is particularly intriguing is the role that sexual repression and symbolism plays in this experience. Two striking ingredients are present. First, there is repression and frustration, a sense that pleasures of the flesh, especially sexual enjoyments, are

15. Quoted in James H. Leuba, *The Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1929), p. 250-58.

16. Quoted in Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Mystical Experience* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1973), p. 135.

evil and sinful. Second, there is an apparent form of sublimation that some sexual gratification in the mystical encounter. According to Leuba, there are deep-seated psychological and organic needs that help explain the behavior of mystics.¹⁷ There is a tendency for "self-affirmation;"** and "self-esteem," a desire "to devote oneself to something or some hoc • " a need "for affection and moral support," a need "for peace, for mindedness or unity." Last, there are "organic needs," for "sensuous faction," especially in connection with one's sex life. Christian mystics: 'tl under the influence of two ideals of monastic Christianity: "self-surrender-to God's will and chastity." On the one hand there is the ideal of "•-renunciation," in which physical sex is forbidden; on the other, the demand to surrender obediently to a loving and righteous God. Very few, if any. or the prominent mystics led a normal married or sexual life: the mystic*, life in a sense grew out of perturbation and perversion. It expressed a pathological response to the need for sexual fulfillment, by means of a deflected discharge of the libido.

The most notable illustration of this is St. Theresa. Her mystical experience has unmistakable phallic symbols and orgasmic overtones. She says:

I saw an angel close by me, on my left side, in bodily form ... I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron's point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails; when he drew it out, he seemed to draw them out also and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God.¹⁸

A similar sexual element is found in a description by Mme. Guyon, a French mystic (1648-1717). "I crave," she cries, "the love that thrills and burns and leaves one fainting in an inexpressible joy and pain." God, she says, answers her cries, sets her aflame with passion, and after the gratification, still trembling in every limb, she says to him, "O God, if you would permit sensual people to feel what I feel, very soon they would leave their false pleasures in order to enjoy so real a blessing."¹⁹

Pierre Janet, the French psychiatrist, treated a patient, a lonely woman named Madeleine, who was noted for her mystical experience. She reported:

17. Leuba, *Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, pp. 116-17.

18. Quoted in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: World/Meridian, 1972).

19. Quoted in Leuba, *Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, p. 76.

Some naturalistic explanations 101

I feel myself under the spell of a pure and sweet hug which ravishes the whole of my being, an inexpressible heat burns me to the marrow of my bones. . . . The flesh, which is dead to the [sense] perceptions is very much alive to the pure and divine enjoyments. I go to sleep sweetly cradled in God's embrace. God presses me so hard to Himself that He causes me suffering in all my body, but these are pains that I cannot but love....

Madeleine also reveals her desires for children in her fantasies about her relationship with God: "On one occasion she remarks that her nipples are inflamed, 'because He suckles so much.' She is God's mother and wet-nurse, she lets God play, she scolds Him, and so forth."²⁰

Elements of sexuality are also present in male mystics, which tends to suggest a latent homosexuality. The statues and paintings of an almost nude Jesus, which appear in the great cathedrals of Europe, perhaps helped to arouse prurient feelings.

St. John of the Cross graphically describes his union:

O gentle subtle touch, the Word, the Son of God, Who dost penetrate subtly the very substance of my soul, and touching it gently, absorbest it wholly in divine ways of sweetness. . . . What the soul tastes now in this touch of God, is in truth, though not perfectly, a certain foretaste of ever-lasting life. It is not incredible that it should be so, when we believe, as we do believe, that this touch is most substantial, and that the Substance of God touches the substance of the soul. Many saints have experienced it in this life. The sweetness of delight which this touch occasions baffles all description.²¹

Jan van Ruysbroeck says: f

In this storm of love two spirits strive together: The Spirit of God and our own spirit. God, through the Holy Ghost, inclines Himself towards us; and thereby we are touched in love. . . . This makes the lovers melt into each other, God's touch and His gifts, our loving craving and our giving back: these fulfill love. This flux and reflux causes the fountain of love to brim over: and thus the touch of God and our loving craving become one simple love.... For that abysmal Good which we taste and possess, we can neither grasp nor understand; neither can we enter into it by ourselves or by means of our exercises. And so we are poor in ourselves, but rich in God.²²

St. Bernard describes his experience as the "mystic kiss" of Christ. If fundamentalists were to read Catholic devotional literature, they would probably regard the following as pornographic:

20. Quoted in Andrew Neher, *The Psychology of Transcendence* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1980), p. 113.

21. Quoted in Butler, *Western Mysticism*, p. 10.

22. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

102 The appeal to mystic.

[The Kiss of His Mouth] signifies nothing else than to receive the inpouring of the Holy Spirit.... The Bride has the boldness to ask trustingly that the inpouring of the Holy Spirit may be granted to her under the name of a Kiss. When the Bride is praying that the Kiss may be given her, her entreat) is for the inpouring of the grace of this threefold knowledge [i.e. of Father, Son and Holy Ghost], as far as it can be experienced in this mortal body . . . This gift conveys both the light of knowledge and the unction of piety.²³

Another form of sexuality is masochism. In many cases, the mystic is able to achieve his intense rapture only after self-torture and flagellation. The church extolled physical suffering; it found grateful devotees who willingly and lovingly submitted to its demands.

Heinrich Suso (1300-1366), a Dominican monk, recounted his experiences in his *Autobiography*. Like others who were committed to a monastic life, he was plagued by temptations; and he struggled to overcome them by inflicting physical pain and torment upon himself. He thought that only by practicing extreme asceticism and torturing his body could he find expiation for his sins. During a long period of his life, he recounts that he was able to achieve frequent, even daily ecstasies. However, a time finally arrived when the bleeding saint realized that he could not continue in his path and still live. "He was so wasted that the only choice was between dying and giving up these practices." At this point, he tells us, he threw all of his instruments of torture into a stream.²⁴

Interestingly, the Marquis de Sade and others have found similar pleasures in sadomasochistic pain, though they have not called it "divine." The church has exacerbated pathology and psychosis and considered such a state divinely sanctioned and virtuous. It has done so by establishing the monastic life, enforcing celibacy, demanding strict vows of chastity, rewarding penance and suffering, and emphasizing passivity and obedience.

Hallucinogens and mysticism

Of special interest in explaining mystical experiences is the fact that drugs can induce similar experiences. There are many verified accounts of the use by primitive tribes of certain plants to bring on hallucinations. Mexican Indian tribes used peyote, Native Americans smoked stramonium, and the Samoyed shamans of Siberia ate poisonous toadstools to induce ecstatic visions. The Pythia at Delphi in ancient Greece fasted for three days, chewed laurel leaves, and afterwards breathed noxious vapors. The worship of deified wine was found in the Dionysian rites. Some Muslims,

23. Ibid., p. 98.

24. Leuba, *Psychology of Religious Mysticism*, p. 62.

Hallucinogens and mysticism 103

all of whom are forbidden liquor, attempted to gain intoxication by extravagant dancing. The whirling dervishes were Sufi mystics, who could induce exalted states. Apparently there is a deep tendency within the human species to want to alter consciousness by various stimulants and intoxicants; marijuana, cocaine, heroin, alcohol, coffee, tea, and tranquilizers are only some of our modern forms.

In recent years psychedelic and hallucinogenic drugs have been tested under controlled conditions. William James reported that the use of nitrous oxide can induce "ineffable feelings." Sir Humphry Davy wrote that nitrous oxide caused emotions that were "enthusiastic and sublime." In the 1950s Aldous Huxley described a kind of "transcendental religious experience" stimulated by mescaline.²⁵ More recently, the widespread use of psychedelic drugs such as LSD (lysergic acid diethylamide-25) has enabled its study under scientific conditions. Some researchers have reported that LSD can produce something similar to the ecstasy and mystery of a mystical experience. Psychedelic and mystical experiences have common elements. First, there is a slowing down of time perception, and one loses a sense of past or future, being immersed in the present moment. Moreover, there is for some users a sense of an "undifferentiated unity." There is a loss of self-identity. Objects melt and are fused, colors are vividly enhanced, shapes and sizes may be distorted. Many LSD users, like mystics, say that it is impossible to describe the experience, yet claim that they have had a vision of a heightened reality. Some users claim that psychedelic experiences extend the awareness and perception of beauty and complexity, as well as of the self as a person. Unfortunately, many users, particularly those who repeat its use, have had bad trips, in which fearful and loathsome experiences may ensue. Some have suffered psychotic episodes. Involuntary flashbacks are not uncommon. Are the persons most likely to become drug users predisposed to mental illness, or does the drug provoke it? In any case, a change in body chemistry— which mystics of old could stimulate only by long and arduous processes of sensory deprivation, fasting, and prayer—can apparently be triggered immediately by psychedelic drugs. Is God to be found by taking pills or drinking the contents of a bottle?

Are drug and mystical experiences the same or do they differ? Is one genuine and the other artificial? There is a rather famous experiment that suggests that

LSD does produce something like a mystical experience. The experiment, known as the Good Friday Experiment, was conducted by Dr. Walter Pahnke in 1963. The double-blind study involved twenty volunteer divinity students. Half of the students were given a psychedelic

25. Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception* (New York: Harper, 1954).

104

The appeal to mysticism

drug and half a placebo. The experimental group reported "overwhelming mystical experiences," including "encounters with an ultimate reality" or "with God." The control group reported few experiences that could match in depth and intensity those of the experimental group. Moreover, in a follow-up study six months later, it was found that the lives of many of those who took the drug had been "transformed."²⁶

Timothy Leary, during the heyday of the counterculture, reported having deep religious experiences after eating "sacred mushrooms" in Mexico. After his "illumination" in August 1960, which he described as a profound "transcendent experience," he reported that his life was changed and that he has since devoted his time to trying "to understand revelation potentialities of the human nervous system and to make these insights available to others."²⁷ Leary maintains that the LSD-induced experience is religious and that it provides "the ecstatic, incontrovertibly certain, sub-jective discovery of answers" to basic spiritual questions. These include: What is the ultimate power that moves the universe? What is life? What is man? What am I? and What is my place in the plan? Leary also reports that various kinds of psychotic (psychedelic) experiences are similar to those that are described by the mystics.

Evaluating the mystical-psychedelic experience

How shall we evaluate such experiences? They can be examined from the standpoint (1) of someone who has had the experience, and (2) of someone who has not and wonders whether it is evidential. The chief reservations of someone who falls in the second class—and that is most people—is that a classical mystical experience, taken by itself is private and subjective, unanswerable to controlled examination or corroboration, and therefore cannot be easily accepted as evidential. If psychedelic devotees are correct that we can now experimentally induce similar experiences, then these can be studied in the laboratory. What is the moral to be drawn—that we all should rush out and take mescaline, LSD, and other drugs to bring about new forms of insight and truth? Or, do these new powers undermine the credibility of mysticism by pointing to a chemical basis of behavioral perception and consciousness and the possibility that such altered consciousness, rather than being extended, is

26. Walter Pahnke, "LSD and Religious Experience," in Richard C. De Bold and Russell C. Leaf, eds., *LSD, Man and Society* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1967); also Edward F. Heenan, *Mystery, Magic and Miracle Religion in a Post-Aquarian Age* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 32.

27. Timothy Leary, "The Religious Experience: Its Production and Interpretation," in Heenan, *Mystery, Magic and Miracle Religion*, pp. 36-37.

Evaluating the mystical-psychedelic experience 105

distorted? Are psychedelics the key to a new frontier of knowledge, or do they merely induce self-delusion? There are dangers here, given the fact that all too many drug users have provoked what seem to be psychotic re-actions:

enthusiastic students, wishing for transport and release, ended up by blowing their minds; they were burned out by the temptation and quest for a new reality that never arrived. Instead they often became out of touch with the world, and were unable to function adequately in it. One suggestion that has been made is that madness and psychosis take us to another world, and this reveals new "truths" that would otherwise be left unspoken. R. D. Laing, for example, argues that "madness may not be a breakdown, it may also be a breakthrough. It is potentially liberation."²⁸

Is mysticism, at least in its exacerbated form, a kind of madness? And is this a form of truth? Is this religious virtue—madness—justifiable? There is a great danger that the skeptic will simply dismiss his religious opposite on ad hominem grounds. It is all too simple to reject a point of view by questioning the character, motives, and in this case the sanity of those with whom one disagrees. Perhaps it is the skeptic who is blind and ignorant. I have wondered at times: Is it I who lacks a religious sense, and is this due to a defect of character? The tone-deaf are unable to fully appreciate the intensity of music, and the color-blind live in a world denuded of brightness and hue. Is mysticism, indeed psychosis—if these are parallels—a special kind of experience that enables a person to break out of a limited perceptual and conceptual world? Perhaps. One leaves the possibility open.

On the other hand, from the standpoint of one who has not experienced another dimension, there are practical problems that can be raised by common sense and critical intelligence. And one can hardly wish to exchange places with the unfortunate patients in psychiatric institutions, even if we grant them certain kinds of "truths" and visions. We have no doubt mislabeled many people as mad when they were only unconventional nonconformists, as Thomas Szasz has provocatively demonstrated. Nonetheless, to sanctify the world of the schizophrenic as another form of "higher truth" is to abandon all categories of rationality that the human species has evolved over the millennia. It would mean a retreat to frenzy, superstition, and fear, a retreat from reason and sanity into a world of confusion and disorder. For these reasons, one has the right to question the claims of mystics about the "truths" they allegedly have uncovered.

28. Ronald D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), pp. 31-45.

Vlt The Jesus myth

The appeal to revelation and miracles

The sacred texts of the three major monotheistic religions of the world, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are based upon alleged miraculous revelations received from on high. These documents affirm that three great figures, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed, have had contact with God and brought messages to earth as his prophets or, in the case of Jesus, as his son. God supposedly revealed himself in a special way to Moses and Mohammed, and Jesus proclaimed a divine message, which he claimed was transmitted from his father; and he was said to be able to perform miracles. The immediate disciples of Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed were so impressed by the claims made by and for these prophets that they became apostles of new religions.

The question we need to examine is whether such historic revelations should be taken as veridical. Are they special sources of truth? Can we authenticate the declarations by their followers about the divine origins of the prophets' message? Although it is extremely difficult for scientific skeptics to take these revelations

seriously, given the strength and persistence of biblical and koranic belief, such "evidences" cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Appeals to revelation have been made by others: Paul of Tarsus, Joseph Smith, Baha'u'llah, Ellen White, Mary Baker Eddy, Oral Roberts, and the Rev. Sun Myung Moon. How should we deal today with an individual who claims to have prophetic powers or special spiritual or magical gifts? If they do not talk to God, today they at least claim to have unique powers. We will deal with these phenomena in due course. For the present, I wish to focus on historical claims that a few exceptional, God-intoxicated individuals were designated or selected in some sense to proclaim divine truths to humanity. These truths are not simply expressed in ineffable mystical symbols; nor are they held to be true of transcendent realities over and beyond all human experience. They have been communicated to mankind, either by verbal means or in the form of parables

106

Biblical criticism 107

and allegories—often in connection with miraculous works and healing. Since they have a historical dimension, they can be submitted to historical analysis and investigation. I will not treat the three great founders of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in chronological order, but will first deal with Jesus, perhaps the most remarkable religious prophet whose reputation has survived from ancient times into the present.

Biblical criticism

So much has been written and proclaimed about Jesus that one wonders if there is anything new to be added. Unfortunately, since the lion's share of the commentaries about Jesus are by those who have professed faith that Christ is the son of God, it is difficult to get an unbiased judgment about the historical Jesus and the claims made about his divinity. Powerful churches have been founded in his name and persistent warfare has been waged to suppress criticism and heresy. Rather minor differences in textual interpretations have been the basis for the foundation of new sects, and they have engendered intense rivalries and hatreds, as the disputes between Roman Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy and the numerous variations of Protestantism demonstrate. The story of Jesus has so fascinated every generation that each has reread the Gospels in its own terms, interpreting Jesus' life and message in the light of its own needs, interests, and language. The mythology of Jesus is still potent enough to transform behavior and subvert all principles of logic and common sense. This does not mean that there is not a considerable body of critical texts. Many of the great philosophers, such as Spinoza and Hume, read the Bible carefully and published skeptical critiques. In the eighteenth century, biblical religion was submitted to devastating criticism by Voltaire, D'Holbach, Diderot, Thomas Paine, and others. Hermann Samuel Reimarus, in *The Goal of Jesus and His Disciples*, interpreted Jesus as a political revolutionist who worked to deliver the Jews from the Roman yoke. He did not succeed as king of the Jews, and after his failure his disciples misinterpreted his teachings. In the nineteenth century, D. F. Strauss, in his influential *Life of Jesus*, distinguished the supernatural and mythological interpretations of Jesus from Jesus the man; he focused on the latter. Ludwig Feuerbach provided a materialistic interpretation of Christianity and religion. Bruno Bauer tried to show that Jesus was a myth, the personification of a second-century cult. In France, Ernest Renan, in *La Vie de Jesus*, applied rationalistic criteria to the New Testament. The Abbe Loisy also published rigorous textual criticism and was excommunicated for denying the existence of Jesus. John M. Robertson

and others published similar works in England. Albert Schweitzer attempted to naturalize and humanize the teaching of Jesus in his book *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

As a result of this biblical research a number of unconventional, skeptical conclusions were drawn that were highly damaging to the Christian faith. Scholars have argued that there is no strong evidence that Jesus existed. Even if we assume that he did, we know very little about him that can be corroborated. The main Gospel documents and the New Testament are replete with contradictions and inaccuracies, and there is little, if any, independent confirmation of their claims. The Jesus that appears in them is primarily the creation of a newly emerging church of the first and second centuries that needed to justify its views to itself and the outside world. Our knowledge of the birth, ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus is therefore fraught with uncertainty. If the Christian religion rests upon a historical claim, and if that claim is full of mythological additions, then it is difficult to accept Christianity as reliable.

In the twentieth century many theologians, from Barth to Bultmann, have reacted to this impasse by adopting a paradoxical and essentially irrational response. They reject the historical method entirely, or (as Bultmann) accept it only as a strategy to evoke faith in the Gospel. We cannot know anything, they admit, reliably and definitely about the historical personality of Jesus or his life. Once the Christ figure is demythologized, Christianity is viewed essentially as a form of faith in the kerygma (literally, proclamation). It involves belief in the essential message of Christ and in his incarnation and resurrection. This curious posture abandons all standards of objective critical intelligence. It has not refuted the results of skeptical inquiry, only ignored them and instead proclaims an absurdity as true. "I believe because it is absurd," affirms Tertullian, Kierkegaard, and later-day apologists for Christianity. There is a sublime contradiction here that enables some minds to willingly accept belief in the absurd, insisting that it is justifiable, even heroic. The reason for this, of course, is that the quest for the historical Jesus leads to the inference that faith in Christ as God incarnate has no rational foundation. The only hope for Christianity is to insist this is true in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

Today it is important that we take a fresh look at the New Testament and the legends built around its central figure. We should not abandon the rich tradition of biblical criticism, even though some Christian scholars have given up the inquiry, maintaining that it is illegitimate because the true Jesus of history is unknowable. We should continue to pursue biblical criticism as an important field of inquiry and insist that the biblical record be examined in a rigorous manner, using the best methods of textual analysis, linguistic and philological criticism, the findings of the

sciences, history, comparative anthropology, and archeology. New documents have been discovered in recent decades that shed further light on first- and

second-century Palestine. The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Nag Hammadi codices present a clearer picture of the culture from and in which Christianity emerged. Future discoveries may add to our knowledge and demonstrate that Christianity was not unique.

My own point of view in examining the Bible comes from the empirical study of new religious sects as they have flourished on the contemporary scene. In rereading the Bible, I have been struck by the parallels with the paranormal and cultic belief-systems today. We can see the emergence of various Christian or quasi-Christian sects in the nineteenth century, such as the Mormons, Seventh-Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists. All were based on the Bible, but they added new materials drawn from the latter-day revelations of their founders. These sects have grown rapidly, yet their foundations are weak, even flimsy. Similarly for the claims of psychics and faith healers, astrologers and UFOlogists, holding new paranormal faith systems. The analogies with classical religions are remarkable, and they tell us something about a pervasive trait of human nature: a willingness to accept the incredible without sufficient evidence. In addition, the fact that so many of the contemporary religious sects draw inspiration from the New Testament urges us to raise questions about its historical veracity.

What, in particular, shall we say about the historical Jesus? The traditional story is well known: he was born in Bethlehem of a virgin, he grew to manhood and began to claim that he was the Christ (a messiah) as prophesied in the Old Testament, and that he came to deliver mankind. He manifested miraculous powers, was able to cure the sick, raise the dead, exorcise demons, and perform wondrous acts that violated the laws of nature. He also proclaimed an ethic of obedience to God and love of all mankind, an ethic of humility, acquiescence, simple sincerity, and trust. He had many enemies, was seized and brought to trial before Pontius Pilate in Jerusalem, and was crucified. He rose from the dead in three days and appeared to his disciples. His resurrection has been taken as evidence for his divinity and also as a promise to the early Christians that "whoever shall believe in him shall have eternal life."

What is the evidence for these claims? It is largely an assemblage of twenty-seven documents known as the New Testament, including the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) and the letters of Paul of Tarsus and others. There are a number of questions to be raised. First, should these writings be taken as definitive eyewitness testimony for the existence of Jesus and/or proof of his divinity? Second, is there independent confirmation of his existence and divinity?

110

The Jesus myth

Christianity as a religion rests on a historical case and any number of typical empirical claims: (1) that there was an individual named Jesus; (2) that he was born of a virgin; (3) that he performed miracles; (4) that he was crucified and then was resurrected; (5) that he was the son of God; (6) that he proclaimed the end of the world and the kingdom of God; (7) that those who believe in him will be rewarded with eternal salvation. It is possible for one to accept some of these propositions, for example, that Jesus existed, and to reject some or all of the others.

Did Jesus exist?

There is now a strong tradition in biblical scholarship—though today it is only a minority view—that the historical Jesus did not exist. How do we go about settling this question? We can ask the same question about any other famous name in antiquity. Did Socrates exist, Isis, Osiris, Julius Caesar, Alexander? How do we resolve the question of the existence of the historical Jesus? One can read the biblical scriptures themselves. The four Gospels, as we shall see however, can hardly be taken as reliable or objective historical documents for they were testaments written by committed missionaries to justify and extend the Christian faith. In order to evaluate their historical accuracy, it is important that we find independent corroboration. Thus we need to examine nonbiblical literature of the first few centuries C.E. I am referring here (1) to any parallels between Christianity and pagan or Jewish precursors; (2) to any secular references by pagan and Jewish authors; (3) to what the early critics of Christianity had to say; and (4) to the extensive apocryphal literature, gospels, and epistles that were subsequently rejected by the church.

Is the story of Christ a myth comparable to the legends of Osiris, Attis, Krishna, Dionysus, Mithras, and other deities who attracted large followings in the ancient world? In reading the classical Graeco-Roman literature one is struck by the similarities between the story of Christ and other venerated figures. Such stories often involved a divine being who becomes incarnate as a man, enters into our world in order to perform miraculous or atoning deeds, and then returns to heaven. It was common to ascribe to the Roman emperor divine attributes. For example, writing in 30 B.C.E*, Horace composed an ode to Augustus hailing him as the incarnation of the god Mercury. Sons of God and resurrected deities were numerous in ancient times.

*I shall use B.C.E. to designate "before the common era," and C.E. to refer to "of the common era," instead of B.C. (before Christ) and A.D. (anno Domini).

Did Jesus exist? 111

Apollonius, who lived in Asia Minor (Tyana) in the first century and died about 78 C.E., had a career strikingly similar to that ascribed to Jesus. As a young man, he was sent to the Hellenistic city of Tarsus to study. Apollonius eventually became a Pythagorean and adopted the strict ascetic rules of the brotherhood, renouncing meat, wine, and marriage. He distributed his inheritance among his relatives and lived as a penniless monk, wandering through the cities of the Mediterranean world. He taught that behind the world was a supreme unknowable deity. Apollonius' followers maintained that he was the son of God and credited him with many miracles. He was able to walk through closed doors, heal the sick, cast out demons, and was even said to have brought a dead girl back to life. He bade his disciples injure no living creature and to shun hatred, jealousy, and enmity. "We cannot hate our fellowmen," he preached, supporting a very simple brand of communism. Accused of witchcraft and sedition, he went to Rome to respond to charges before Domitian, was jailed but escaped. His followers claimed that Apollonius appeared to them after he died and that he ascended bodily into heaven.¹

There is considerable evidence that Apollonius existed as a real person, as there are numerous references to him in ancient literature. Whether he had divine attributes, as his followers insisted, is another matter. Similar questions can be raised about Jesus: Did he exist? Are the legends built around him and transmitted through his followers accurate accounts of his life and his powers? Was he indeed a messiah uniquely sent by God to save Israel and suffering humanity?

The historical investigation of the origins of the Christian message has been enormously enriched by the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in Jordanian Palestine. Documents of parchment and papyrus first uncovered in 1947 have had a bearing on Christian origins. They were apparently written by a Jewish cult known as the Essenes. What is striking for the religious historian are the many similarities between this literature and the New Testament, between the Essenes and the early Christian communities. The Essenes practiced a form of ascetic exclusiveness and maintained a rigid discipline. This close-knit community expressed mutual love and respect, and it practiced primitive communism (like the early Christians), disagreed with established Judaism, participated in a ritual meal or eucharist banquet of some kind, paid special heed to biblical prophets, and baptized its initiates. Of special interest was their teaching concerning a future messiah, to be born of the lineage of David, who would bring into being a divine world order. This kingdom of God would emerge only after a period of wars and revolutions. The

1. See Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, 2 vols. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U. Press, 1912).

112

The Jesus myth

messiah would lead the forces of light against the powers of darkness through an apocalyptic battle. When the kingdom of God was fully established, the messiah would help liberate Israel and would play an intermediary role between God and men. There are no doubt differences between the scrolls and the New Testament, the Christian savior and the Essene messiah, which Christian scholars are wont to point out. Yet the scrolls undermine the idea that the Christian message was unique. On the contrary, they demonstrate that Christianity, like all other cults, grew out of and manifested beliefs that were common in the period. Rather than being God's revelation in human history, human desire influenced the form and character that the revelation was to take.

The quest for the historical Jesus and the nature of his message are important. But it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the facts, because, outside of the Gospels, there is little reliable confirmation, either of his existence or the actual details of his life.

We will ask: When were the Gospels written? Were they contemporaneous with Jesus? Are they to be taken as reliable? Are the details contained in them supported by independent corroboration? Could Christianity have been developed by Paul, Peter, and others, without a historical figure?

Among the early references to Christ are two passages in the work of Josephus, the Jewish historian (who died about 100 C.E.). But the longer passage has fairly conclusively been shown, even by Christian theologians, to have been an interpolation, probably written by a Christian. It is a highly complimentary description, and it is unlikely that an orthodox Jew such as Josephus would have written it.² Moreover, it appears in the middle of a section dealing with other matters. Josephus' comment that "the tribe of Christians ... are not extinct at this day," is rather odd if written during Josephus' life, but not odd if interpolated much later. Indeed, references to Josephus' quotation do not appear until the fourth century. The second passage consists of only a phrase referring to James, "the brother of Jesus, him called Christ." Whether this is authentic is also open to dispute.³

2. "Now there was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews, and many of the Gentiles. He was (the) Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day." (Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book XVIII, Chap. 3. Trans. William Whiston)

3. See Gordon Stein, *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1980), p. 179.

Did Jesus exist! 113

Another reference often cited is by the historian Tacitus, who in his *Annals*, written about 120 C.E., says: "He from whom the name (Christianus) was derived, Christus, was put to death by the procurator Pontius Pilatus in the reign of Tiberius." In this reference he does not use the name Jesus. Moreover, in another reference he is repeating what was commonly said in his time by the Christians. Tacitus mentions that "an immense multitude of Christiani" were present in Rome during Nero's time. This refers to Christians or those who believed in a messiah (of which there were numerous pretenders), not necessarily to the followers of Jesus, who were fairly small in number. In any case, Tacitus does not refer to Jesus, but only to his followers.

Another reference in non-Christian literature is in a letter of the younger Pliny (c. 110), asking Trajan for his advice on treatment of the Christians. Suetonius (c. 125) mentions similar persecution and says that Claudius banished "Jews who, stirred up by Christ, were causing public disturbances." But all of this demonstrates only the existence of Christians, which is not doubted, and not of the historical reality of Jesus.

What should we make of this? The nonbiblical evidence for Jesus is fairly uncertain. Gordon Stein estimates that some sixty historians and chroniclers lived in the first century in the Roman world. If Jesus had had such an effect on the multitudes as the New Testament writers proclaimed, then one would think that his impact would have been noted by more historians.⁴ The passages cited are fragmentary at best. Should we deny that Jesus existed? Could Christianity, like other ancient mythological religions, have come into being without a historical figure behind it?⁵

Christianity bears some similarities to the ancient mystery religion of Egypt, which involved two key figures: Isis, goddess of motherhood and fertility, and Osiris, her brother and husband, god of the underworld and judge of the dead. According to myth, Osiris lived in a body, and he had suffered, been mutilated, and died; then his body was reconstituted and raised from the dead and into heaven by the god incarnate in him. Both Osiris and Isis appeared on earth as human beings; they were gods who became incarnate in mortal bodies, as was claimed about Jesus.

Mithraism also has many striking similarities to Christianity. The religion had deep roots in Persian and Hindu history and began to attract widespread attention in Rome at the end of the first century C.E. By the end of the second century, the cult had spread rapidly through various

4. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

5. For a recent viewpoint that strongly maintains that Christianity could have developed without the actual existence of Jesus, see G. A. Wells, *Jesus of the*

Early Christians (London: Pemberton Books, 1971); Did Jesus Exist? (London: Pemberton Books, 1975); and The Historical Evidence for Jesus (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1982). See also the Dutch writer Van den Bergh van Eysinga.

114 The Jesus myth

classes of the Roman world, including the mercantile class, the army, and the slaves. Mithraism thrived under the auspices of the emperors because of its support of the divine right to rule; well into the second and third centuries it competed with Christianity for allegiance, but Constantine destroyed it when he established Christianity as the official religion of the empire at the end of the fourth century, though it survived through the fifth century on a much reduced scale.

Extensive temple remains and statuary from the period attest to its great influence. The religion was built around the mythical Mithras, who was regarded as a mediator between humanity and the unknowable God who reigned in the universe. Mithras was allegedly born of rock, a marvel witnessed by certain shepherds, who brought gifts and adored him. Mithras was able to perform great miracles. For example, when a terrible drought was inflicted upon the earth, Mithras discharged an arrow against a rock miraculously bringing water from it. Analogies with early Christianity are unmistakable. The Mithraic communities, composed of people of humble origin, expressed a fraternal and communal spirit. Moreover, the Mithraic priests used bells, candles, and holy water in their communion services, where the worshippers were offered consecrated bread and water; they sanctified Sunday and the 25th of December. Their creed insisted on moral conduct, demanded abstinence and self-control, encouraged celibates and virgins to serve God, and postulated heaven and hell, a primitive revelation, a mediator of the Logos emanating from the divine, an atoning sacrifice, a constant struggle between the forces of good and evil (with the ultimate triumph of the former), immortality of the soul, the last judgment, the resurrection of the flesh, and the fiery destruction of the universe. After death, all men would appear before the judgment seat of Mithras; unclean souls would suffer eternal torment, while the pure would be received into the full radiance of heaven. Mithras was clearly a mythological figure, and eventually the religion gave way under Christian assault. Our knowledge of Mithraism provides another reason to raise the question of whether Christianity could have developed without Jesus.

Nonetheless, it is interesting that few of the bitterest pagan or Jewish opponents of Christianity denied Jesus' existence. These include Celsus, Lucian, and Porphyry. The latter questioned the historical accuracy of the New Testament, and ancient critics recognized the mythic elements in Christianity. Nevertheless, they did not dispute the historicity of Jesus. Although it may be difficult to assert with any degree of certainty that Jesus existed, it seems likely to me that some such man lived, most likely in Palestine in the first half of the first century, that he was crucified or hanged (though he may not have died), and that a sect of Christians developed proclaiming his divinity. (Though I will not venture the same

Did Jesus exist? 115

claim about a historical Mithras). We know very few authentic facts, however, about Jesus beyond this bare outline.

What of the Christian case in his behalf? We need to go directly to the ancient Christian literature, but when we do, we encounter several problems. First, it is difficult to know what is the authentic text of the New Testament and whether it

has been accurately transcribed. The oldest extant fragment we have (consisting of only a few verses from John) is dated no earlier than 150 C.E. Second, there are any number of testaments that have survived. These include the so-called apocryphal literature, containing the writings of Clement, Barabbas, Thomas, Nicodemus, and others, some of which are uncomplimentary to Jesus. At least thirty gospels were known to have existed in the first few centuries of the Christian era. It was only in the fourth century, following the bitter battle at the Council of Nicaea in 325, that a decision was made on what to include and exclude from canonical literature; only the four Gospels we now have were deemed "official." And it was not until 367, more than three centuries after the deaths of the original followers of Jesus, that the first official listing of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament was recorded in a letter from Athanasius, patriarch of Alexandria.

The problem for historical evidence then is that if several pieces of literature about a period survive, can we accept some and reject others? For example, Socrates was surely a historical figure; Plato wrote many dialogues in which he was idolized. Xenophon and Aristotle also wrote about him, as well as the dramatist Aristophanes, who portrays him rather unsympathetically. But we don't refuse to read Aristophanes. The apocryphal literature deals with Jesus as a young boy, who is able to work miracles and has amazing powers. But in one instance, at least, he kills a young playmate.⁶ What is fact and what is fiction? How do we decide?

In any case, it seems clear that none of the New Testament Gospels was written by eyewitnesses who knew Jesus. Indeed, the true authorship of Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John is uncertain. For probably many decades after Jesus lived, the Christian testimony about him was part of an oral tradition. It is most likely that stories about his words and deeds were circulated by his followers, including alleged eyewitnesses. These

6. In the gospel about Jesus' infancy, we read: 22. "Another time, when the Lord Jesus was coming home in the evening with Joseph, he met a boy, who ran so hard against him, that he threw him down; 23. To whom the Lord Jesus said, As thou hast thrown me down, vhalt thou fall, nor even rise. 24. And at that moment the boy fell down and died." *The First Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ, The Apocryphal New Testatment* (London: Wm. Hone, 1820), p. 57. Also we read in Thomas's Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ, chap. 2: 7. "Another time Jesus went forth into the street, and a boy running by, rushed upon his shoulder; 8. At which Jesus being angry, said to him, thou shall go no further. 9. And he instantly fell down dead." *Ibid.*, p. 61.

116

The Jesus myd\

accounts were preached in the earliest Christian communities in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Antioch, and Caesarea. These separated communities developed different traditions. The oral witness was reinterpreted as the people who allegedly knew or had seen Jesus began to die off. Since the average life span was fairly short at that time, this happened quickly. Fearing that the record would be lost, efforts were made to preserve accounts of Jesus' life and teachings. It is generally accepted that the earliest written account was the Gospel of Mark, which was probably written between 65 and 70. According to Eusebius, author of a church history in the fourth century. Mark did not know Jesus, but was a disciple of Peter in Rome. ⁷ According to legend, Mark was

induced by the Christians to write his memoirs, based on Peter's oral recollections, at best a second-hand account. Many scholars now doubt whether Mark actually received his material from Peter; what is thought likely is that he took it from a general oral tradition then existing in his Christian community. Indeed, who Mark was is unknown. Thus the author of the Gospel according to Mark remains anonymous. Oral traditions are notoriously inaccurate. Scholars believe that there did exist another document, one called Q (from the German *Quelle*, meaning "source"), now lost, which may have contained some 250 sayings of Jesus. If so, this was probably written about 50 C.E.. The Gospel of Matthew, probably written between 80 and 85 in Antioch, incorporated most of Mark's account and repeated at least 610 out of 661 passages, but greatly expanded the content and also drew from the Q document. Matthew added a story of Jesus' birth and sought to find prophecies in the Old Testament that he thought Jesus fulfilled.

It was only in 85-90 that Luke, a Gentile, wrote his Gospel reproducing a good portion of Mark and adding other material. Luke is also the author of Acts, which is an account of the early Christian church. Luke is a third-generation Christian, who tells us in his Gospel: "Many writers have undertaken to draw up an account of the events that have happened among us, following the traditions handed down to us by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the gospel" (1:1-2). The interesting point is that neither Matthew nor Luke knew Jesus. The first three Gospels are called the synoptics. It is widely accepted that Luke and Matthew knew the Gospel of Mark and drew upon it, which makes them twice removed from direct testimony.

7. "When Mark became Peter's interpreter, he wrote down accurately, although not in order, all that he remembered of what was said or done by the Lord. For he had not heard the Lord nor followed Him, but later, as I have said, he did Peter, who made his teaching fit his needs without, as it were, making any arrangement of the Lord's oracles, so that Mark made no mistake in thus writing some things down as he remembered them. For to one thing he gave careful attention, to omit nothing of what he heard and to falsify nothing in this." Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book Three, chap. 39. He is quoting Papias, an early churchman (about 140).

117

Did Jesus exist?

The fourth Gospel was apparently the last one written, and is different from the others. Its authorship is unknown. There have been all sorts of speculation about who the author of the fourth Gospel was. The author himself indicates that he was "the beloved disciple." But who is that? Was it John, an early disciple, Lazarus, whom Jesus allegedly raised from the dead, or someone else? There are elements in the Gospel of John not contained in the other Gospels, and the early church fathers acknowledged the differences. Clement of Alexandria notes, in about 200, that, although the other evangelists preserved the "facts of history," John wrote a "spiritual Gospel." The earlier tradition of the church considered John to have been one of the early disciples, who escaped the fate of his brother James, which was execution. However, most scholars now believe that this was not the case. Some have suggested that the author lived about 100 in Ephesus. But there is no consensus, and most commentators take the text as anonymous. The author was evidently familiar with the Gospel of Mark, and he may have consulted Luke. Even so, the Gospel of John leaves out a large portion of the

synoptic story and muddles the sequence of events in many important respects. For example, its account of the Last Supper differs from that related in the synoptics. Moreover, the author reflects the influence of Greek philosophy, especially in his use of the divine Logos in the prologue to the narrative. It seems apparent that John was written later than the other Gospels, and was not an eyewitness account. The author would have had to live a very long time or have known Jesus, and the average life span of people in the Middle East then was fairly short.

Thus far we have not referred to the epistles of Paul, which played an important role in the building of the church. Indeed, many commentators have attributed to Paul the most important role in creating Christianity as a religion. The letters of Paul, which appear in the New Testament, most likely were written before the Gospels. Paul clearly did not know Jesus, though he claims to have seen and heard him in a vision on the road to Damascus. Paul, originally named Saul, was a devout Jew, a Pharisee, in Tarsus, capital of Cilicia, a Roman province in Asia Minor. A Roman citizen, Saul had persecuted Christians but was converted to their beliefs after he had his vision of Jesus.

After his conversion, Paul set himself to spread the Gospel of the dead and risen Christ to the Gentiles. Almost half of Paul's letters are written to various churches in Europe and Asia. What is interesting is that many of the stories that appear in the four Gospels do not appear in the letters of Paul, which were most likely written between 49 and 62. Paul undertook three missionary tours through parts of the Roman Empire, attempting to build the church, and according to legend he was

118

The Jesus myth

eventually imprisoned and beheaded in Rome, about 64. Some accounts of his travels appear in Acts. **"

Who was the historical Jesus?

The questions I would like to raise are: Was the account of Jesus' life in the New Testament (assuming that he existed) accurate? Should the Gospels and Epistles be taken as evidence?

Now we have three problems: First, there are serious contradictions in the various accounts. Second, the writers were not eyewitnesses to the events but propagandists who were interested in attracting followers to the faith. Third, even if their stories and second- and third-hand accounts came from eyewitnesses, who transmitted these accounts by oral tradition and then a written account (in the Q document), still these eyewitness accounts must be held suspect. My general objections to the latter are based on Hume's argument against miracles and on the general unreliability of eyewitness accounts from primitive, uneducated, or illiterate people.

How accurate are the accounts of Jesus' life recorded in the New Testament? Not very, I submit, because of the conflicting, unsubstantiated stories presented in the Gospels.

The Jesus of the Gospels appears as a powerful charismatic figure, but most of his personal history is shadowy, and most of his life is not even accounted for. The Gospels give us legend and myth rather than historical fact. The New Testament is full of fictions introduced in order to justify his messiahship and divinity. Virtually every fact stated in the New Testament is open to historical question. For example, Christians today celebrate December 25 as his birthday.

But December 25 was also taken in ancient times as the birthday of Sol Invictus (Unconquered Sun) and, as I noted, was the chief celebration of the Mithraic cult. The last week of December was a pagan holiday. It also approximated the Jewish celebration of Chanukah, which occurs near the end of December.

Scholars speculate that Jesus was probably born four years earlier, because of the dates of Herod's reign.

There is no certainty about where Jesus was born. Was he born in Bethlehem? We cannot corroborate this place by independent historical sources. What do the Gospels have to say? Here we also encounter difficulties. Luke and Matthew say that he was born in Bethlehem, while Mark and John imply that his origin was Nazareth in Galilee; Paul does not mention his birthplace. Yet this was supposed to have been a remarkable event. John indicates that there was some dispute in his day about whether Jesus was the messiah, because the messiah was supposed

Who was the historical Jesus? >J. 19

to originate from the seed of David in Bethlehem, but he says that Jesus came instead from Galilee (John 7:41-43; also 7:52). In order for Jesus to be the messiah of the lineage of David, he would have to have been born in Bethlehem. Was this birthplace invented by Luke and Matthew to justify him as the messiah to the Jews? If so, even Matthew and Luke disagree about the circumstances surrounding his birth. It is implied in Matthew that Joseph and Mary lived in Bethlehem when Jesus was born, stayed there about two years, and then fled to Egypt. They returned to Palestine after the death of Herod, but moved to Nazareth. Luke, on the contrary, maintains that Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, but traveled to Bethlehem while Mary was pregnant to register for a tax census. (There is no historical confirmation that the Romans had a census that required people to return to their original domiciles, a massive undertaking.) They left Bethlehem some forty days later and returned to Nazareth.

It is clear that Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem, if he was descended from King David. But was this so? Both Matthew and Luke attempt to prove genealogical origins. Matthew traces Jesus to Abraham, while Luke provides the generations all the way back to Adam. According to Luke, there were forty-one generations between David and Jesus; according to Matthew, only twenty-eight (actually, he lists only twenty-seven). The names in these genealogies differ. For example, Luke (3:23-26) had Jesus as the son of Joseph, who was the son of Heli, whereas Matthew (1:15-16) has the father of Joseph as Jacob.

Luke: "And Jesus himself began to be about thirty years of age, being (as was supposed) the son of Joseph, which was the son of Heli." (3:23-24— KJV*)

Matthew: "And Jacob begat Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ." (1:16—KJV).

But if we trace Jesus' ancestry further, we get discordant genealogies all the way. Let us look at only seven generations.

Luke	Matthew
Joseph	Joseph
Heli	Jacob
Matthat	Matthan
Levi	Eleazer
MelchiEliud	
Janna Achim	
Joseph	Sadoc

*I will be using both the King James version (KJV) and the New English Bible (NEB) translation (Cambridge, 1961-70).

The divergence of these genealogies is surprising, as if they were made up by the first Jewish Christian communities independently of each other. Some Christian apologists have suggested that one of the genealogies is that of Mary. But the text clearly denies this, and if Mary is kinswoman to Elizabeth (Luke 1:36), then her background is not Davidic but Levitical, of the house of Judah. One of the books of the apocryphal New Testament, which was not declared canonical by the Council of Nicaea in 325, the Gospel of the Birth of Mary, says that Mary was not of Davidic descent. It identifies her father as Joachim, which does not appear in either Luke's or Matthew's list of Jesus' genealogy. It is very difficult, even today of course, for anyone to trace his or her genealogy back for many generations, but Luke and Matthew attempt to do it, and they differ even about the grandfather and great-grandfather of Jesus, which again suggests that these passages are pure fiction. In any case, both cannot be accurate.

A further discrepancy is that while Matthew and Luke maintain that Jesus was born of a virgin, Mark, John, and Paul do not mention this remarkable fact at all. Again, this miraculous event is referred to in order to demonstrate that Jesus was the Jewish messiah. An unresolved textual problem concerns the virgin birth. According to Matthew 1:18, Mary was "found with child of the Holy Ghost." (KJV) Joseph has a dream which reiterates the virgin conception of Jesus. Luke 1:35 also has an angel appear to tell her: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God." (KJV) If this is the case, then in what sense was Joseph the father of Jesus? And if Jesus was not the son of Joseph, then he could not be descended from David! The Gospels are impaled on an irreconcilable contradiction.

Many scholars have pointed out that the authors of the Gospels were endeavoring to prove that Jesus was the messiah as prophesied by Isaiah in the Old Testament. Now I think that the whole notion of prophecy is questionable. Whether precognitive prophecies are veridical or have ever been demonstrated is open to doubt. Often what is claimed to be a psychic prediction is either an inference based upon empirical or rational expectations (which may turn out to be right) or sheer guesswork! More often, prophecies are so general that they can be made to match any number of future events. I think that this is what happened in regard to Isaiah's prophecies—yet so much of the faith in Jesus Christ is predicated on them. The passage in question is as follows: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." (Isa. 7:14—KJV)

Who was the historical Jesus? 121

In the first place, the meaning of the term virgin is open to dispute. The Hebrew word used by Isaiah is *almah*, which means "young, unmarried female," not *bethulah*, which literally means "virgin." Indeed, the New English Bible translation has helped clear this up: "Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign: A young woman is with child, and she will bear a son, and will call him Immanuel."

All of which means that Luke (who was most likely Greek, not Hebrew) has confused the terms virgin and young woman in the Septuagint, the pre-

Christian, Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Jesus had to be "born of a virgin" in order to fulfill the prophecy of Isaiah, as Luke read it, after the fact. It is highly unlikely, however, that Isaiah was prophesying something scheduled to happen seven centuries later. The passages in Isaiah probably concern the Syro-Israelite conflict of 734 B.C., with the prophet seeking to assure King Ahaz that the invasion of Judah would not succeed. But his prophetic words were stretched by Christian propagandists to prove the messiahship of Jesus by showing its basis in ancient scripture.

Matthew, no doubt, was a Hebrew and thus was in a better position to know the meaning of the term *almah*, "young, unmarried woman," although he probably had also read the Septuagint translation. But serious questions were raised about Mary's morality (as we shall see shortly), particularly the fact that she was pregnant before she married Joseph. Was the virgin birth an invention introduced, in part, to overcome charges surrounding Jesus' illegitimacy? Being born out of wedlock was considered a heinous sin by the Jews. Hence, Mary's betrothal or marriage to Joseph (which it is, is unclear) and her impregnation by the Holy Spirit is supposed to overcome any suspicions about Jesus' illegitimacy. Indeed, the Jews of the day, according to John 8:41, taunted and ridiculed Jesus because of questions concerning his real father and the fact that he was "born of fornication" (KJV). We are not "baseborn," they say (NEB), perhaps implying that Jesus was considered illegitimate.

Aside from all these caveats, the most important issue is the evidence put forth for the claim that Jesus was born of a virgin and hence was the son of God. Neither Paul, whose epistles preceded the writing of the Gospels, nor Mark mention the virgin birth. Jesus' conception surely was perceived as a miraculous event by Matthew and Luke. Why the silence by the others? Was it because it was invented by the subsequent tradition and so accepted by Luke and Matthew? There was no one to testify that Mary conceived in a supernatural manner; nor was anyone in the room with her when the Holy Ghost appeared. Hence, there is no corroboration for the claim. According to Matthew:

122

The Jesus myth

Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. (1:18—KJV)

Joseph was disturbed by this, but as he was not willing to make her a public example, he thought to put her away privately. However, he had a dream in which the angel of the Lord visited him and told him that Mary's pregnancy was the work of the Holy Ghost:

But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. (Matt. 1:20—KJV)

Whether this dream actually did occur, we, of course, have no way of knowing. Dreams are notoriously untrustworthy, and to rest a religion on a dream is dubious, to say the least. According to Matthew, Joseph did what the angel told him: he took Mary home to be his wife but had no intercourse with her until her son was born.

Concerning Mary's case, all that we have is her testimony that she was a virgin and that the Holy Ghost visited her. According to Luke, an angel greeted her and told her:

Fear not, Mary, for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb and bring forth a son, and shall call his name Jesus. (1:30-31—KJV)

The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee; and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee. (1:35—KJV)

There are no other witnesses to this event. Luke himself was not a witness. Indeed, writing around c.E. 90, he makes it clear that he is only writing a narrative following the tradition handed down to him by the original eyewitnesses and servants of the Gospel (Luke 1:1-4). To claim that Luke was "inspired" by God is to beg the question, for we need to know on what basis we can validate that he was. To say that it is a matter of faith does not counter intelligent skepticism about the grounds for the authenticity of the Gospel.

In Luke's narrative there is an account of Mary's relationship to Zechariah, a priest, and his wife, Elizabeth, a kinswoman of Mary, who were childless. According to Luke's legendary embroidery, the angel Gabriel also appeared to Zechariah and informed him that his wife would bear a son, apparently John the Baptist, which she did. Mary lived with

The critics of Jesus 123

Zechariah and Elizabeth for about three months. Mary did not remain a virgin throughout her life, since Jesus had several brothers and sisters and nowhere is it stated that they were also conceived by divine interception.

If we think of the context of the next century, when Christianity was developing as a cult, we find an entirely different story about Jesus' parentage and birth. The early Christians claimed that Jesus was the son of God. Many similar legends of divine parentage were familiar to the Roman world. It allegedly applied to the emperors, who were called sons of God, and earlier a Greek myth had it that Danae, mother of Perseus, was impregnated by Zeus, appearing as a shower of gold. Why not Mary for the poor and uneducated Christians?

The critics of Jesus

How did the educated citizens of Rome and the non-Christian Jews view the claims for Jesus' divine parentage? Many apparently found the story incredible, and they provided other versions of his background. It is always a source of amazement that people are willing to believe the most fanciful stories; the more fanciful the exaggeration, the more likely are the convictions to grow in irrationality and intensity. The early Christian claims about Christ were not without their critics and detractors. Indeed, Christianity had to wage a continual battle of apologetics. Many of the early fathers of the church were forever on the defensive. This suggests that even then refutations by critical intelligence were employed against the emerging mystery religion. The philosophers and intellectuals, as well as the dominant political and social forces of the day, sought to refute Christianity, and some used violent means to suppress it. Yet, in the end, Christianity succeeded in overwhelming Greco-Roman culture, one of the great tragedies of human history. Why that happened has mystified thinkers ever since. Why Christianity persists today after two millennia is equally mystifying. The answers do not point to its being true—far from that—but rather to the frailty of critical human intelligence in civilization at large and the willingness of large sections of the human species to devour myths, however weak or fraudulent they may be.

Among the many early critics of Christianity, perhaps the best known today are Celsus, a pagan philosopher who lived in the later part of the second century, and Porphyry, in the third century. There were undoubtedly many more critics; but virtually all the works critical of Christian myth have been censored, destroyed, or lost during the subsequent era in which Christianity dominated Europe and western Asia. Virtually all of Porphyry's books against the Christians, save a few scattered fragments, have

124

The Jesus myth

been lost. We are fortunate, however, that tradition has preserved some of Celsus' views. Ironically, we owe a debt to Origen, an early father of the church who quoted extensively from Celsus' treatise *A True Discourse* (written about 161-180) or paraphrased his views in order to refute him. This we find in the lengthy work *Contra Celsus* (*Against Celsus*), written in the first part of the third century.⁸

According to Origen, Celsus maintained that certain Christian believers were "like persons who in a fit of drunkenness lay violent hands upon themselves, have corrupted the Gospels from its original integrity ... to a many-fold degree, and have remodelled it, so that they might be able to answer objections." This supports the contention that Christian propagandists wrote the Gospels to meet objections to their religion and not as a record of historical fact.

Celsus is a skeptic who wishes to use reason. According to Origen, he recommends "that in adopting opinions we should follow reason and a rational guide, since he who asserts to opinion without following this course is very liable to be deceived." And he "compares inconsiderate believers ... to soothsayers, ... or any other demon or demons." "Amongst such persons are frequently to be found wicked men, who, taking advantage of the ignorance of those who are easily deceived, lead them whither they will, so also ... is the case with Christians." Certain persons "who do not wish either to give or receive a reason for their belief, keep repeating 'Do not examine, but believe!' and, 'Your faith will save you!'"⁹ No doubt Celsus found Christianity a threat to pagan civilization, which he wished to defend.

Origen objects to Celsus' approach and that of other philosophers. He recommends the importance of faith in Jesus Christ, particularly for the vast bulk of mankind who, says Origen, are unable to follow the niceties of philosophical logic.

Celsus goes on to attack the idea of a virgin birth, which he considers ludicrous. He offers an alternate account of Mary's pregnancy:

When she was pregnant she was turned out of doors by the carpenter to whom she had been betrothed, as having been guilty of adultery, and that she bore a child to a certain soldier named Panthera.¹⁰

He follows with an account of Jesus' birth:

8. *The Writings of Origen*, vol. 1, trans. Rev. Frederick Crombie (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1879), pp. 33 ff.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 405.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

The ministry of Jesus 125

Born in a certain Jewish village of a poor woman of the country, who gained her subsistence by spinning, and who was turned out of doors by her husband, a

carpenter by trade, because she was convicted of adultery; that after being away from her husband, and wandering about for a time, she disgracefully gave birth to Jesus, an illegitimate child.¹¹

This view was apparently also maintained by Jews of the time. The main body of Judaism rejected Jesus' claim that he was the messiah. In the centuries following the death of Jesus there was considerable proselytizing by Christians and there was a Jewish response, parts of which are expressed in the Talmudic writings. The Talmud stories maintain, along with Celsus, that Jesus was born without a legitimate father, as the product of an illicit relationship between Mary and a Roman soldier named Pandera, Panthera, or Pantera. Still another scenario inferred from the apocryphal books of the New Testament suggests that Mary may have been impregnated by one of the high priests of the Temple (perhaps Zechariah), who then selects Joseph as her husband as a cover-up.

It is difficult today to ascertain the truth. My main point here is that Mark is silent about Jesus' birth and the other Gospels provide contradictory statements, so that the notions that Jesus was born of a virgin in Bethlehem, is of Davidic descent, and is the son of God are not corroborated by empirical data. Indeed, alternative accounts appeared in the century following Jesus' death; these would suggest plausible, prosaic explanations of his life and career. There is no way to corroborate other parts of the legend: that the infant was born in a manger, under a special astronomical event over Bethlehem, or was visited by three wise men or Babylonian astrologers, or that Herod massacred innocent male infants because of fear of the birth of Christ. All efforts to verify these claims have failed, which points to the mythic aspects of the Christ legend. The ministry of Jesus

Aside from these questions of his origin, one may ask: What about Jesus' ministry? What did he achieve in his own lifetime? What was his distinctive message? What about the presumptuous claim that his word had divine authority?

In regard to these issues, biblical sources are contradictory, and the meaning of the life of Jesus is open to a variety of explanations. Actually we can say very little with certainty about the life, personality, or sayings

11. Ibid, p. 427.

126

The Jesus rrvyth

of Jesus. Many different interpretations of Jesus' life can and have been given. It seems possible that he was a first-century Galilean Jew, who practiced Judaism and did not depart from the Torah. Accordingly, his role must be seen in the context of Jewish society and the times in which he lived. Israel was then occupied by Roman legions, and Jesus—or at least his first Jewish followers—hoped that the Jews might be delivered from their yoke. Much of this interpretation of Jesus is no doubt colored by the fact that many of those who believed in his divine ministry in the next generation and wrote the early Gospels had witnessed the Jewish revolt against Rome, the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 66-70 (approximately thirty-five years after the death of Jesus), and the great slaughter and dispersion of the Jews thereafter. Thus Jesus, as seen retrospectively through the eyes of the Gospel writers, was a messiah, "the King of the Jews" who came to deliver Israel from bondage as prophesied in the Old Testament. Both the Gospel of Matthew, which is appealing to the Jews, and Luke, appealing to the Gentiles, are aware of these latter-day events.

Every person who lives and breathes is influenced by and expresses the needs and aspirations of the time and milieu in which he exists. What was distinctive about Jesus was, first, his moral-political message, preached and practiced with fervor and devotion—this was, in part, an ethics of love and humility. Second, there was the miraculous and para-normal basis of his messianic ministry, which attempted to clothe his words and deeds with special divine authority. This was largely due to the transformation by Paul of the message into one of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ as the savior of mankind.

The ethical teachings of Jesus

Jesus' moral code as it appears in the Gospels was somewhat universalistic in scope and emphasis. In many respects, however, it was not unique but was anticipated by the Old Testament and the Essenes. It was also characteristic of much first-century rabbinical teaching, especially its praise of the pure of heart, the merciful, and the peacemakers. Efforts to build a universal morality are found in pagan sources, such as the writings of the philosophers, especially Plato (of which Jesus was probably unaware), and in the ethical focus of Stoicism, which emphasized the brotherhood of men and was widely held by the educated classes of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, there is something powerful, dramatic, and poignant in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his many parables designed to illustrate a morality that would speak to all of mankind. It apparently had an

The ethical teachings of Jesus 127

overwhelming effect upon many of those who later received his message.

According to the Gospels, Jesus preached that it is not the letter of the law but the spirit that counts. He was concerned not for the rich and powerful of society but for the poor, weak, downtrodden, and helpless, even sinners and fallen women. Instead of the familiar ethic of retribution, "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," Jesus preaches genuine sympathy and empathy, forgiveness and love.

The morality of Jesus is very simple in its eloquence. It is virtually impossible, however, to follow it consistently in practice. There are passages which, when quoted out of context, seem extremely condemnatory and harsh, as when he says:

Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shall not commit adultery. But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. (Matt. 5:27-28—KJV) That surely seems like an extreme dictum to abide by, for it would make sexual desire evil. Yet sexual passions are deep-seated in human nature. Jesus' admonitions furnished a basis for repression and consequent human suffering. Much that followed in the ascetic tradition of Christianity can be traced to passages such as these. This, unfortunately, led to warfare against the body, which was considered by Paul and Augustine to be sinful and corrupt. Similarly for Jesus' statement:

Whosoever shall put away his wife, saving for the cause of fornication, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery. (Matt. 5:32—KJV)

This, no doubt, applies to a patriarchal society in which the place of women is demeaned. Surely there is nothing wrong with marrying a woman who is divorced (the Roman Catholic church notwithstanding); and to prohibit remarriage is harsh and legalistic. Or take the key statement attributed to Jesus:

I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also. (Matt. 5:39⁰—KJV)
In regard to the first, if we were not to resist tyranny and evil, protecting ourselves from aggression or an infamous crime, we would ourselves be evil. How are we to cope with Attila, Cesare Borgia, Hitler, or Stalin? Surely not by becoming defenseless pacifists? In response to Jesus' second

128

The Jesus myth

recommendation, if one is unjustly tried in a court of law, then one should defend oneself as best one can through the legal system and not collapse by giving away a cloak if someone has already taken our coat. Thus, the literal interpretation of many of his prescriptions can lead to more harm than good. I readily grant, however, that Jesus' overall dictum, "Love your ene-mies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you" (Matt. 5:44—KJV), has a ring of moral excellence and nobility to it. It provides some guide for us in much of life, where we should seek to emphasize tolerance, cooperation, and charity. "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you," said Jesus (Matt. 7:12—NEB). This general prin-ciple has much to commend it, and it has shone through in every gene-ration. This moral insight and hope of Jesus thus speaks to every man. Universal love and beneficence, however, is only one principle among others. There are several moral principles and values that we may equally cherish, not the least of which is the need to use reason and critical intelligence as a guide to life. Still others commend themselves especially today: principles of human rights, freedom, equality, and justice. It is the application of such general principles and values to the concrete situations of life that raises moral problems. We cannot simply apply an absolute set of commandments as religious believers would have us do; it is how we interpret these and what to do when they conflict that pose the di-lemma. In moral inquiry, we need to be sensitive to the complexities of moral dilemmas, and the simplified ethic of Jesus is never sufficient to aid us in making wise choices. This is all too apparent to anyone concerned with philosophical ethics, as distinct from religious morality. That Jesus himself followed his own principles is questionable. There seems to have been a double standard—one that applied to his followers, another one that applied to himself. If there was a historical Jesus, was he a follower of the principles ascribed to him by the more zealous advocates of the moral faith of those who called themselves Christians? One can make the case in reading the Gospels that Jesus himself was not an absolutist; he was hardly an ascetic. He ate and drank with tax-gatherers and sinners and did not condemn the pleasures of life. (Perhaps this only describes the social composition of the movement.) Indeed, the Gospels report that he and his disciples were rebuked for not fasting like others and that he was called a "glutton" and "drinker." It is the spirit of the law, not its legalistic letter, that we should follow. Surprisingly, there are many cases in which Jesus abandons his ethic of love and curses those with whom he disagrees. He rebukes those who do not follow his ways: "I never knew you; out of my sight, you and your wicked ways!" (Matt. 7:23—NEB). He attacks the scribes and Pharisees,

The ethical teachings of Jesus 129

saying "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees" (Matt. 23:14 ff.—KJV), calling them hypocrites. All too human, finding it difficult to maintain forbearance, he lashes out against those he deprecates, saying: "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" (Matt. 23:33—KJV). These are hardly the words of one unreservedly given to the ethic of love. In Luke, he rebukes not only Pharisees but scribes and lawyers, exclaiming "Woe unto you also, ye lawyers!" (Luke 11:46-52—KJV). When he is accused of being impure, he retorts: "I tell you this: no sin, no slander, is beyond forgiveness for men; but whoever slanders the Holy Spirit [including Jesus] can never be forgiven; he is guilty of eternal sin." (Mark 3:28-30—NEB). The God of love is consumed by wrath when it suits his purpose.

The Jesus of the Gospels was far from being humble; in fact, he was arrogant at times. The Gospels report that he spoke with great authority and confidence until his trial and crucifixion, when he was facing imminent defeat and death.

Otherwise, he demands that others follow him, even give up their parents, wives, and children in allegiance to him. He insults his mother and his relatives. After he is accused of being mad, his mother and brothers stand outside a house with a crowd and he is told: "Your mother and brothers are outside asking for you." And he replies, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Looking at those sitting around him in a circle, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, my sister, my mother." (Mark 3:32-35—NEB). On another occasion, he addresses Mary in an insulting way, "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" (John 2:4—KJV).

Worst of all, the Jesus of the Gospels had a superiority complex. Did he really believe that he had a divine mission and that all others should submit to him or was it simply an act—or a combination of both? "You must not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth," says Jesus. "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a son's wife against her mother-in-law; and a man will find his enemies under his own roof." (Matt. 10:34-36—NEB). "No man is worthy of me who cares more for his father or mother than for me ... [or his] son or daughter," says Jesus. (Matt. 10:37-38—NEB). If we assume that Jesus were a mere mortal, how should we interpret these statements? At one point, he says to Peter, "Away with you, Satan. You are a stumbling block to me. You think as men think, not as God thinks." Surely, this is extreme self-glorification. When asked what a person should do to get into heaven, Jesus replied that he should give up everything, wealth and family, and follow him. He even promised his twelve disciples great power. They would sit with him at Judgment Day to judge the critics of Israel. When we read the Gospels

130

The Jesus myth

carefully, Jesus appears as an extreme egotist. A woman comes to him and pours a small bottle of fragrant oil over his head. The disciples were indignant at the waste and suggested that it should have been sold and the money given to the poor. Jesus differs with them and applauds the woman. "It is a fine thing she has done for me." (Matt. 26:10—NEB). He expresses indignation, threatening those who disobey his words with eternal punishment. He threatens Judas, who is going to betray him, saying: "Alas for that man. ... It would better for that man if he had never been born." (Matt. 26:25—NEB).

Was Jesus disturbed?

All of this suggests that Jesus was a disturbed personality. It is difficult to be certain, since we have no way of submitting him to intensive psychiatric diagnosis. He usually spoke in parables to both his disciples and the populace, often uttering vague statements, not unlike schizophrenic personalities who are out of touch with reality. He seemed to be especially worried about his cloudy parentage. He called himself the "Son of Man" and said his "Father was God," which suggests a sensitivity exacerbated by possible gossip about his mother's transgression and his own illegitimate birth. Had he not suffered this psychological confusion or psychotic disorder, posterity might never have mistaken him for the son of God, and Christianity would never have been born. Did Jesus really believe himself to be the messiah or the son of God? If he ever had such pretensions of divinity (his disciples thought he did), then he was deranged. He kept preaching that doomsday or the last days were at hand and that only he provided the truth and the light and could save Israel and humanity from impending destruction. "I tell you this: there are some of those standing here who will not taste death before they have seen the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." (Matt. 16:28—NEB). "I tell you this: the present generation will live to see it all." (Matt. 24:34-35—NEB).

Jesus' disciples took all this seriously and indeed expected him to return imminently and to bring the promise of salvation. Much of this was, no doubt, rooted in the false hopes and the fears of his followers, but perhaps he helped to feed their expectations by his psychotic delusions of grandeur, whether as the messiah, the King of the Jews, or the son of God. Several passages in the Gospels tell us that many people in Israel, including his relatives and neighbors, thought that he was mad, "possessed" of a demon. In John, we read: "And many of them said, He hath a devil, and is mad; why hear ye him?" (John 10:20—KJV). "He is possessed, he is raving" (NEB). (See also John 8:52). In Mark, we read:

Was Jesus disturbed? 131

"And when his friends heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, He is beside himself." (Mark 3:21—KJV). The scribes who had come down from Jerusalem said, "He hath Beelzebub,* and by the prince of the devils casteth he out devils." (Mark 3:22—KJV). They accused him, saying, "He hath an unclean spirit." In the New English Bible, we read the following interesting account of his visit to his hometown, Nazareth. Jesus and his disciples had entered a house and apparently had such a crowd collected around them that they had no chance to eat: "When his family heard of this, they set out to take charge of him, for people were saying that he was out of his mind." (Mark 3:20-21—NEB). Surely, if anyone were to come forth today claiming to be a messiah and preaching the message of Jesus, he would be considered crazy. There are thousands of similar bedraggled souls who have ended up in mental asylums. Jesus was so exasperating to the established authorities that they crucified him, a much worse fate. But was one of the reasons that he was psychotic? I do not mean to be unfair to Jesus, and no doubt devout Christians will be offended at the suggestion.

One might also ask the hypothetical question: Was Jesus a homosexual or bisexual? There is, for example, no evidence that Jesus married. There are indications that there were mysterious rites of initiation into the mysteries of the "Kingdom of God" that his closest disciples underwent. One passage relates that a youth was with Jesus the night of his arrest. Perhaps he had participated in such rites. In Mark, we read that following the seizure of Jesus all of his disciples deserted him and ran away: "Among those following was a young man with

nothing on but a linen cloth. They tried to seize him; but he slipped out of the linen cloth and ran away naked." (Mark 14:51-52—NEB).

The recent discovery by Morton Smith of a letter apparently written in the second century by Clement of Alexandria gives some credence to the possibility of erotic practices. This letter suggests that there was a secret Gospel of Mark that was subsequently censored by the church fathers. The author of the letter attacks an early Christian sect, the Carpo-cratians, for engaging in libertine practices and finding some justification for these in Jesus and his disciples. According to the Gospel, Jesus came to Bethany and entered a tomb to raise a youth from the dead. The story is similar to the account given in John about the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The youth, the story goes, "loved" Jesus and "began to beseech him that he might be with him." The Gospel continues: "In the evening the youth comes to him, wearing a linen cloth over (his) naked (body). And he remained with him that night, for Jesus taught him the mystery of the •Beelzebub was considered to be the prince of the devils. In Milton's Paradise Lost, Beelzebub was said to be a fallen angel, ranking next to Satan.

132

The Jesus myth

Kingdom of God."¹² According to Smith, there were various rites that Jesus performed, the communion or eucharist meal, in which he commanded his disciples to "eat my body" and "drink my blood" and also the baptismal rites reserved primarily for his inner circle of disciples. Although these may have had some erotic components, they also imply that Jesus engaged in a form of magic and that his religious celebrations were similar to those performed by other magicians of the day.

Was Jesus a magician?

Indeed, an important interpretation of Jesus' ministry, which should be taken seriously, is the view that Jesus was a conjurer. From what we have learned about how magicians, gurus, and psychics have performed down through the centuries, this hypothesis is plausible.¹³ Indeed, the very fact that many of the pagan and Jewish critics of Jesus (such as Celsus) in the first centuries after his death accused him of being a magician should mean that the possibility bears some scrutiny. Moreover, the Gospel itself reports that Jesus was criticized by his detractors in his own day for practicing sorcery and magic. It was precisely because the disciples of Jesus believed that Jesus could perform miracles that his divinity was proclaimed. In other words, the authority of Jesus' divinity was attributed first to the fact that he was able to do wondrous things and, second, to his resurrection. Indeed, these claims are used to support the basic article of faith of the Christian religion: that the Incarnation had occurred and that God had assumed human form and revealed his plan for salvation for suffering humanity through Jesus Christ, his son.

We know that magic, superstition, and fanaticism were widespread in the first and second centuries. Lucian, a Roman author born in Syria, testifies to how extensive they were. Belief in astrology and omens, psychic mysteries and prophecies, the mystic and occult arts was commonplace. In this social milieu, magicians and jugglers, oracles and seers, prophets and healers had a field day. They promised that they could "put a spell on your enemies," "predict your future," "discover buried treasures," or "re-store you to health." Demonology was generally accepted. Prophets or exorcists insisted that they could drive out

the possessed, cure the sick, heal the lame, and even bring back to life those who had died.

Lucian bitterly castigated the frauds who duped people by means of trickery. These charlatans appealed to superstitious fears and irrational

12. Morton Smith, *The Secret Gospel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 17.

13. See especially Morton Smith, *Jesus the Magician* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), for an extended discussion and documentation of the view that Jesus was a magician.

Was Jesus a magician? 133

hopes and preyed on gullibility and vanity. Since medical science was undeveloped, people desperately sought out anyone who could cure them of their afflictions, whether leprosy, paralysis, blindness, infection, cancer, or various forms of psychiatric disorder. Where else could they turn? So they welcomed faith healers and readily sought out oracles and astrologers, prophets and psychics.

In his essay "The Pathological Liar," Lucian rails against the behavior of such quacks. He pokes fun at "people who exorcise ghosts and cure victims of demonic possession."¹⁴ He graphically describes a Syrian in Palestine who specializes in such cases.

His patients are the sort who throw fits at the new moon, rolling their eyes and foaming at the mouth. Yet he always manages to cure them, and sends them home perfectly sane, charging a large fee for his services. When he finds them lying on the ground, the first question he asks is: 'What are you doing there? The patient makes no reply but the devil explains, either in Greek or some foreign language, who it is, where it comes from, and how it got into the man. Then the Syrian starts swearing at the devil and if necessary, threatening it until it goes away.¹⁵

In his essay "Alexander or the Bogus Oracle," Lucian gives a full-scale account of the famous fraud and swindler who nevertheless made people believe that he had special paranormal gifts, that he was a psychic healer and had other miraculous powers. Alexander of Abonoteichos began as a youthful prostitute who slept with anyone who would pay him. One of his clients was a magician, who taught him the magic arts. He observed that human life is ruled by two tyrants, hope and fear, and that the one thing people want most when they are oppressed is information about the future. With this in mind, Alexander specialized in prophecy. Lucian tells how he concocted a plot to bury in the mud a small snake in an empty eggshell, which he carefully glued together and then contrived to discover before the populace. Alexander uttered some unintelligible sounds as he broke the egg, and the snake slithered onto his palm. This so amazed his audience that they began shrieking and proclaiming it a miracle; they knelt down and prayed. From then on Alexander's career took a dramatic new turn. He installed himself in a home with a large snake (the small one had apparently grown rapidly in a few days!), and began giving readings as an oracle.

Lucian describes the methods by which Alexander fleeced the people who came to consult him. He told each client to write down questions on a piece of paper, fold it up, and seal it with wax. Alexander contrived

14. Lucian, *Satirical Sketches* (London: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 205.

15. *Ibid.*

Was Jesus a magician? 133

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15. *Ibid.*

134 The Jesus myth

ingenious ways to dislodge the paper, read the question, and reseal the wax so that it was undetected. He answered the questions of foolish and naive people, largely relying on his wits and common sense, combined with "imaginative guesswork." His responses, says Lucian, were sometimes obscure, ambiguous, even unfathomable, yet this impressed the people greatly. His reputation spread widely. Not only was he considered good at predicting the future, locating runaway slaves, detecting burglars and buried treasures, but even in some cases "resurrecting the dead." As his fame grew, he sent missionaries out to all corners of the Roman Empire, warning of impending disasters and offering to protect people from these.

Lucian, though otherwise a critic of philosophers, relates how the Epicurean philosophers were critical of Alexander and sought to dissuade people from accepting superstitions and how they attempted to free them from irrational hopes and emotions. The Epicureans sought to get them to face the facts and purify their minds by means of "reason, truth and plain speaking." Alexander hated these critics and condemned their efforts; his fame and influence continued to spread in spite of them. He was clearly a charlatan and magician, yet people believed fervently that he had special paranormal powers. Lucian's account is insightful, for it accurately portrays how psychics, seers, astrologers, and gurus are able to fleece the public even today.

Was Jesus a charlatan? Did he know and practice magic? According to his Jewish and pagan critics, he did indeed. The Talmud maintained that Jesus was a sorcerer and magician who tricked people into believing that he was able to perform miracles. And Celsus asserted that Jesus had lived for a time in Egypt, where he acquired the arts of sorcery. In Origen's *Contra Celsus*, we find the following statement attributed to Celsus:

(Jesus) hired himself out as a servant in Egypt on account of his poverty, and having there acquired some miraculous powers, in which the Egyptians greatly pride themselves, returned to his own country, highly elated on account of them, and by means of these proclaimed himself a God.¹⁶

Celsus maintained that the miraculous works performed by Jesus, such as the cures, his resurrection, and the feeding of the multitude, could be compared to the "tricks of jugglers," who profess to do more wonderful things, and to the feats of magic performed by those who have been taught by the Egyptians, and who "in the middle of the market-place, in return for a few opals will impart the knowledge of their most venerated arts," and will "expel demons" from men, "dispel disease," "exhibit expensive banquets and tables and dishes having no real existence and who

16. *The Writings of Origen*, p. 427.

Miracles attributed to Jesus 135

can put into motion what are not real living animals, but which only have the appearance." Celsus then asks:

Since, then, these persons can perform such feats, shall we of necessity conclude that they are 'sons of God,' or must we admit that they are the proceedings of wicked men under the influence of an evil spirit?¹⁷

Was Jesus much like Houdini, Blackstone, and other stage magicians, or like Uri Geller, Eusapia Palladino, and other fraudulent psychics? Is this the proper interpretation of his work? The New Testament abounds with reports of miraculous feats that Jesus accomplished. Indeed, it was not simply Jesus' moral message or theological views that his followers accepted, but it was also his miraculous deeds that overwhelmed them. The message of Christ was considered to be potent because it was Jesus, a charismatic figure, who enunciated it, and it was held to be authoritative because of the incredible things that Jesus could perform.

Miracles attributed to Jesus

According to Jesus' defenders, Jesus was able to perform remarkable miracles that lacked any natural explanation. He could turn water into wine and was able to feed multitudes. He could still a storm, wither a fig tree, walk on water, and even drive a legion of demons into a herd of 2,000 Gadarene swine and send them rushing over a hillside into a lake to be drowned. Jesus also was a healer able to effect cures. This included healing those who were paralyzed, lame, hemorrhaging, dumb, blind, or leprous. He was an exorcist who was able to drive

out "unclean spirits" and "demons" from people and restore sanity to those who were pos-essed. He was able to raise the dead. He also had psychic powers, being precognitive, able to foretell the future; clairvoyant, knowing what was happening elsewhere; and telepathic, able to read other people's thoughts. Matthew summarizes the kinds of healing power that so astounded his followers: . . . curing whatever illness or infirmity there was among the people . . . sufferers from every kind of illness, racked with pain, possessed by devils, epileptic or paralyzed, were all brought to him, and he cured them. (4:23-25—NEB)
They brought him a man who was possessed; he was blind and dumb; and 17. Ibid., p. 475.

136 The Jesus myth

Jesus cured him, restoring both speech and sight. The bystanders were all amazed. (12:22-23—NEB)

And now some men brought him a paralyzed man lying on a bed. . . . Jesus said to the man: Stand up, take your bed, and go home. Thereupon the man got up, and went off home. The people were filled with awe at the sight, and praised God for granting such authority to men. (9:2-8—NEB)

Whether Jesus actually cured the people as related in the Gospels is uncertain. We do not have expert medical testimony diagnosing their illnesses. The conditions of the afflicted are never precisely described. Nor do we have any clear-cut evidence that they were cured and that these cures were permanent. The Gospel accounts are somewhat contradictory. For example, Matthew reports that a president of a synagogue approached Jesus and said, "My daughter has just died," imploring Jesus to lay his hands on her so that she will live (9:18—NEB). When Jesus arrived at the president's house, he said, "The girl is not dead; she is asleep." Everyone laughed at him. Jesus had everyone turned out of the room. He went into the room and then "took the girl by the hand, and she got up." This, Matthew notes, was the talk of the country (9:23-26—NEB).

In Mark, we read a somewhat different version, with the president of the synagogue saying, "My little daughter is at death's door." (5:23—NEB). He is not claiming that she is dead. In Mark, someone else sends a message to the president that his daughter is dead, which Jesus overhears. When Jesus goes to the president's house, he says, "The child is not dead; she is asleep" (5:39-40—NEB). Mark also reports that everyone laughed at him. In his version, however, Jesus took the child's mother and father and his own company into where the child was lying, took hold of her hand, and commanded her to get up, which she did (5:35-43—NEB). Luke has the president of the congregation only saying that his daughter "was dying." (8:42—NEB). Thus we do not have a reliable indication of what ailed the girl, only a fragmentary and uncertain report that she was dead or near death, with the strong implication that she rose from the dead. What her illness was or what she was cured of, we do not know. It is clear that Jesus' ability to heal or give the impression of healing strongly impressed those about him. It was taken as a powerful sign of his super-natural powers. According to Mark, those who heard Jesus began to ask one another: "What is this? A new kind of teaching! He speaks with authority. When he gives orders, even the unclean spirits submit" (1:27—NEB). In John, we read the words of Nicodemus: "Rabbi," he said, "we know that you are a teacher sent by God; no one could perform these signs of yours unless God were with him" (3:2-3—NEB). The Jesus of the Gospels reinforced this veneration, claiming that his

powers and words came from God, his Father. Thus he says, "It is the word of the Father who sent me." (John 13:24-25—NEB). And again, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." (John 13:9—NEB). And still again: "I am not myself the source of the words I speak to you: it is the Father who dwells in me doing his own work." (John 13:10-11— NEB). Did he really believe this? Was he deluded? Or did he only half-believe it? Did he also practice magic? Does this explain how and why he succeeded? It is clear that Jesus' miraculous faith-healing abilities assume a central role in his ministry. Without them it is doubtful that he would have attracted any following at all. The Gospels report more than two hundred events about Jesus that involves something unexpected or miraculous. It was these strange happenings that convinced his followers that he had a divine mission, and that he was a healing God of mythic proportions.

Objections to miracles

What are we to make of such occurrences today? Were they miraculous? Did they really happen? Should reports of them be taken as veridical? Are the eyewitnesses trustworthy? Are there other causal explanations that we can assume for them?

David Hume, in his famous essay "Of Miracles,"¹⁸ raises serious epistemological objections to miracles. Our knowledge of nature or history, says Hume, must be based upon the evidences of the senses, including reports of reliable eyewitnesses. Our experience of matters of fact discovers regularities within experience. On the basis of the constant conjunctions of sense impressions, we affirm that there are laws of nature, and these are held on probabilistic grounds. Our explanation, based upon habit and custom, is that uniformities observed in the past will be observed in the future. A miracle by definition "is a violation of the laws or regularities of nature." But Hume says, "No testimony should be sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind that its falsehood would be more miraculous than the fact which it endeavors to establish."

Hume poses the question: Is the evidence for historical miracles strong enough so that we may reject the past and present testimony of the senses that there are uniformities in nature, in favor of these exceptions? He answers in the negative. It is a miracle that a dead man should come to life, he observes. This has never been observed in any age or country in the past. If anyone relates to us that he saw a dead man restored to life,

18. From *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. In *Hume's Enquiries*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge; rev. P. Nidditch, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

138

The Jesus mxr.

we need immediately to consider whether it is more possible that thi» person is deceived. Our uniform experience about the nature of death :< equivalent to a proof that dead people do not come back, and this shouk: stand as a refutation of the miracle.

To accept a miracle, says Hume, the testimony upon which the miracle is founded must be strong enough to overturn our belief in the uniformities of nature that are based upon past experience. However, this has no: been the case, he argues, thus far. And he gives a number of reasons wh> First, there have never been found in all of history any miracles supported by a sufficient number of reliable persons of unquestioned good sense education, and learning, so as to guarantee that there is no delusion Second, he says, human nature is

prone to "the passion of surprise and wonder" so that there is a tendency to find satisfaction in such beliefs. There is a strong propensity to accept the extraordinary and marvelous in spite of the fact that history is full of instances of forged miracles and prophecies. Third, such miracles have been chiefly observed "to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations," or to have been transmitted from ignorant and barbarous ancestors to the present. Belief in miracles often has its roots in remote countries, where they have been refuted and exploded, but are held in countries far removed, for their grounds are not examined. Fourth, there is no testimony for any miracle that is not opposed by an infinite number of witnesses. In other words, the miracles of one religion contradict and refute those of all others. The miracles of a particular religious system, such as Islam, differ from those of Christianity or Buddhism. Hume continues his argument by observing that "no testimony for any kind of miracle has ever amounted to a probability, much less to a proof." Belief in religion, he concludes, is thus based upon faith, not reason. And he adds with tongue-in-cheek, "Whosoever is moved by faith to assent to it is conscious of a continued miracle in his own person, which subverts all the principles of his understanding and gives him a determination to believe what is most contrary to custom and experience."

This powerful argument has been used to reject the miracles of the Old and New Testaments in toto. Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence in order to overthrow the uniformities and regularities uncovered in experience. One has to be cautious that one does not reject on a priori grounds a report of an event that is heralded as miraculous. Anomalies do occur in nature. There are bizarre and unexpected events, unique or inexplicable occurrences—"Fortean facts," so named after Charles Fort, who catalogued a great number of strange events. One cannot simply reject all of them out of hand. In evaluating anomalous claims there are at least two questions to raise. First, we may ask, were the alleged facts accurately reported or

Objections to miracles 139

were they based upon mere hearsay, unsubstantiated by expert observation? Second, if they were correctly reported, what is the explanation of them? How may we interpret what happened? Often an event is held to be "miraculous" because people are unaware or ignorant of the natural causes, which they attribute to divine or demonic intervention.

We really have no way of knowing whether all the deeds recorded in the Gospels really occurred. The Gospels, as I have shown, were more likely written by convinced believers attempting to persuade others to accept their religious faith than by objective historians or impartial scientific observers. We may generally doubt that many or perhaps most of the strange events that were reported actually did occur. Many people in the crowds were gullible, all too easily dumbfounded, prone to accept beliefs without proper examination, uncritical in their powers of observation and judgment. They could easily be hoodwinked by a shrewd magician.

Another important point should be made here. Eyewitness testimony, even where it is available, is often unreliable. There have been extensive studies pointing to the inaccuracy of so-called eyewitness reports. Scientific investigations into alleged eyewitness identification of criminals, the reports of crimes by a multitude of witnesses, and the identification of suspects in police line-ups have graphically demonstrated that the memory of witnesses is often prone to error and exaggeration. Judge Nathan Sobel has stated that incorrect

eyewitness misidentifications have led to more miscarriages of justice than all other causes combined.¹⁹

Many researchers have pointed out the pitfalls here. Elizabeth F. Loftus has compiled a great deal of data from recent research to demonstrate the problem.²⁰ In an experiment staged by students at the University of Washington, two young women entered a Seattle bus terminal, placed their belongings on a bench, and went to the ladies' room. As soon as they were gone, a man rummaged through their bags, put something under his coat, and escaped outside. Upon returning, one of the women noticed that their bags had been opened and screamed, "My tape deck was stolen!" Several bystanders who had witnessed the incident later agreed to give testimony about what was stolen and said they would recognize the man. They went into considerable detail describing the color, shape, size, and even the antennae of the stolen tape deck. As a matter of fact, no tape deck had been stolen; the witnesses had been influenced by misinformation supplied by the experimenters.²¹

19. N. R. Sobel, *Eye- Witness Identification: Legal and Practical Problems* (New York: Clark Boardman, 1972).

20. E. F. Loftus, "Eyewitnesses: Essential but Unreliable," *Psychology Today* (Feb. 1984).

21. Joann E. Rodgers, "The Malleable Memory of Eyewitnesses," *Science* 82 (June 1982).

140 The Jesus myth

Interestingly, misidentifications may be made not only by unsophisticated people but also by police and detectives at the scene of the crime. A. H. Tinker and E. Christopher Poulton showed a film depicting a street scene to 24 police officers and 156 civilians. The subjects were asked to report any instances of crime and to identify those involved. The results were that the officers reported more alleged thefts than the civilians, but the latter did just as well when it came to detecting actual crimes. There has been case after case of the wrong people being arrested and convicted on the basis of mistaken identification by witnesses.

The results of such studies conclude first, that the memory is often inaccurate; second, that if a situation involves a good deal of stress or excitement, the perceptions are distorted; and third, if people are led to believe that something is the case, this tends to color their observation of the event.

How much more these factors influencing psychological perception apply to the foundations of religion—and in this case to Christianity! This is especially so when the evidence for miracles is passed along by word of mouth, second and thirdhand, in an oral tradition. What may have been a strange or remarkable event to some original observer is further elaborated in time so that it may end up hardly recognizable in its final form.

Some alternative naturalistic explanations

The term miracle is invoked often by the incredulous when something strange occurs for which there is no known natural cause. But what they may be confessing is that they are ignorant of the real causes at work. The feats of a magician may be attributed to "magic," for they can be easily explained by sleight-of-hand and other physical explanations; the "healing" of a faith healer need not be attributed to God or occult forces but may also have a perfectly natural explanation.

Thus, rather than claiming that Jesus was of supernatural origin and was able to set aside the laws of nature, we should seek for normal causal explanations.

Hume warns us to trust nothing which tradition has transmitted. But perhaps

he has gone too far. I prefer to examine how magicians perform their sleight-of-hand or how paranormal readings and healings are done today. These may explain in part what happened in the time of Jesus.

It is not inconceivable that Jesus, whether believing or half-believing that he had a divine mission, also practiced the arts of deception. The hypothesis has at least some credence, not simply because it was the view of many of his critics in antiquity, but because it can be further corroborated by analogy with how similar methods are used today. Thus,

Some alternative naturalistic explanations 141

what people thought to be miraculous, occult, or paranormal, may have been only natural effects induced by conjuration and the psychological processes of acceptance of the events as supernatural because the causes were unknown. As we have already pointed out, the ancient world was rife with magicians, some of whom were taken as godmen. Some interesting accounts of their work have survived. Simon the Magician was known to early Christians. We read in Acts (8:9-11—NEB) that a man named Simon in Samaria had swept the Samaritans off their feet with his magical acts. Everyone listened to him. "This man," they said, "is that power of God which is called 'The Great Power.'" He had persuaded many to believe that he was an incarnate divine power. Josephus also reports that the magicians of this period, who were numerous, did things similar to what Jesus had done. "Getting a spirit" (as in Jesus' baptism) was the first step for many magicians. And they practiced "secret rites of initiation mysteries" to enable them to gain powers. They were able to cast spells on those about them who were enchanted by their powers. The story of Jesus being driven by a spirit into the wilderness and overcoming a demon, according to Morton Smith, is a common variant of shamanistic initiation. The ability to work psychosomatic cures follows more easily when there is a strong conviction that the charismatic individual is endowed with supernatural powers.

If Jesus had spent time in Egypt, he could have learned the arts and practices of the priests and magicians who were there in abundance. A case in point is Jesus' use of spitting. In John we read that Jesus encountered a blind man. "He spat on the ground," the Gospel reports, "and made a paste with the spittle; he spread it on the man's eyes, and said to him, 'Go and wash in the pool of Siloam.'" (9:6-7—NEB). Afterwards, the man allegedly could see. Ancient Egyptian papyri contain many allusions to spitting, which was considered to be a religious and magical practice and a curative act. Sometimes the saliva was mixed with sand or water and applied to the nostrils or eyes or other afflicted parts. Jesus here was practicing a form of healing that was not unfamiliar to the ancient world.²²

Hippolytus gives an extended and interesting account of Simon Magus.²³ In a treatise written about 200 C.E., he described Simon as being skilled in the magic arts; he preyed upon others and even sought to deify himself. Hippolytus also provides insightful accounts of how other ancient

22. See E. A. Wallis Budge, *Osiris: The Egyptian Religion of Resurrection*, vol. 2, chap. 23, "Spitting as a Religious Act" (New York: University Books, 1961), pp. 203 ff.

23. Hippolytus, *Philosophumena*, trans. F. Legge (New York: Macmillan, 1921), pp. 2-3,4(M5).

142 The Jesus myth

magicians claiming to have divine powers worked. Marcus, for example, was an "expert in magic" who used trickery and demons to lead many astray and

claimed "that there is in him the greatest power from invisible and unnameable places." "Among the things he does by trickery are 'consecrating a cup' and then causing it to appear purple in color and some-times red 'so that the dupes will think that a certain grace has come down, and has given a blood-like power to the draught.'" He spoke incantations over the cup and thus "distracts the dupe and the bystanders, so that he is considered a miracle worker, he fills the larger cup from the smaller so that it overflows."

The Christian communion service has striking magical overtones. Moreover, the turning of water into wine by Jesus could have been done by magic, by switching one for the other. Even the feeding of the multitude—if it ever occurred—may have been a product of trickery, much as a magician can appear to saw a woman in half. Even walking on water is not unlike wading on a sandbar. One can imagine many possible scenarios of how it could have been done. A curious fact is that when one believes that another person possesses superhuman powers, one is more likely to accept the occurrence of any bizarre event and insist that it is inexplicable by natural causes. When such a belief is present, even the slightest deviation from normalcy is taken as evidence of an overwhelming miracle at work.

This phenomenon can be witnessed today. How easy it is for someone to pretend they have psychic powers and to take people in. James Randi, the conjurer and skeptic, in cooperation with two young magicians, Steve Shaw and Michael Edwards, demonstrates how easy it is to deceive people. This is known as project Alpha.²⁴ Randi was convinced that para-psychologists are too easily taken in by people claiming to be psychics— Uri Geller is a notable example—when the "physics" were merely using standard magic tricks. He planted two young boys in a parapsychology lab in St. Louis. The boys pretended to display psychic powers, using the crudest kind of deception, and the experimenters were easily duped. But, more disturbing, when the press reported that Shaw and Edwards were psychics, people everywhere clamored for their services. It was a frightening phenomenon, they report with amazement, illustrating how easily people can be fooled and how they allow their expectations to color their perceptions of what is happening.

The powerful effect that belief in magical or occult phenomena can have upon people was demonstrated by two psychologists, Barry Singer
24. *Skeptical Inquirer*, Summer 1983 and Fall 1983.

Some alternative naturalistic explanations 143

and Victor Benassi.²⁵ They introduced college students in various psychology classes to a person, named Craig, dressed in a long purple robe who performed so-called "psychic" feats. He bent a metal rod, seemingly by psychokinesis. Blindfolded, he read numbers on a concealed note pad. He was able to transfer ashes from the back of a person's hand to his palm. Although these acts seemed to contradict ordinary experience and our notions of causality, they were simple magic tricks that any good magician can perform. In some of the classes, the professors did not tell the students anything about the performer other than that he claimed to have psychic powers, adding that they personally were not convinced. In other classes, they told the students that the performer was a magician and that he would present a magic act. They were surprised to find that in both the "psychic" and "magic" classes about two-thirds of the students believed that the performer was a psychic.

Relatively few students accepted the instructors' description of Craig as a magician in the two classes where he was introduced as such. Psychic belief was still prevalent; it was strong and loaded with emotion. Some students even

covered their papers with exorcism terms and exhortations against the Devil. Many students showed fright and emotional disturbance. Most expressed awe and amazement. By the time Craig was halfway through the "bending" chant, the class was in an excited state. Students sat rigidly in their chairs, eyes glazed and mouths open, chanting together. When the rod bent, they gasped and murmured. After the class was over, some continued to sit still in their chairs, staring vacantly or shaking their heads; others excitedly rushed up to Craig, asking him how they could develop such powers. Singer and Benassi believe they were observing an extraordinarily powerful behavioral effect. If Craig had asked the students to tear off their clothes, throw him money, and start a new cult, they believe some would have responded enthusiastically. Something was happening that they didn't understand. Moreover, many students were experiencing serious emotional disturbance.

Singer and Benassi were so intrigued that they continued the experiments by taking Craig to other classes, changing their introduction to make it clear that they were presenting a magician and that he was doing tricks. This did succeed in reducing psychic beliefs slightly, but never below 50 percent. The most salient result of their test, they said, was their inability to reduce psychic beliefs to any extent even though there were clear explanations that trickery and magic were taking place. Singer and Benassi have concluded that some people will stubbornly maintain a

25. Barry J. Singer and Victor Benassi, "Fooling Some of the People All of the Time," *Skeptical Inquirer*, Winter 1980-81: 17-24.

144 The Jesus myth.

belief about someone's psychic powers, no matter what evidence is presented to them. Interestingly, at no time did Craig say that he was a psychic or make any psychic claim. Singer and Benassi's tests have since been replicated by others, with similar results. They have concluded that their results, as bizarre as they may be, are "of wide generality" and that the psychological processes they have tentatively identified as being involved in supporting psychic beliefs "are present and active in the general population."

All of this suggests that there is a deep-seated tendency toward magical thinking. Surely the transcendental temptation was as strong in the days of Jesus as it is today. The willingness to believe in occult magic is greatly enhanced when the individual who performs the deed, such as Jesus, is a powerful personality. Such charismatic individuals are able to cast spells of enchantment. Incantation and other rites only contribute to the suggestion that such an individual has divine powers. A strong belief in the efficacy of magic especially applies to the phenomena of faith healing and helps in large part to explain it. People desperately want to be cured. Since many illnesses are psychosomatic in origin, the psychological disposition of the person can influence his behavior. This may provide the explanation of the powerful effect that faith can have on some illnesses. Healing is not God intervening in nature; it occurs because a psychological state influences and creates a change, as Freud noted in hysterical patients, who were affected physically by their neurosis. As we have seen, we have no way of knowing what ailments the people alluded to in the New Testament suffered, what the clinical symptoms were, or indeed whether their illnesses disappeared permanently or only temporarily. The claimed cures are based on fragmentary evidence offered by the Gospel authors. We do not know whether all of the cures Jesus attempted worked. In no case did Jesus cause a limb to grow or do the completely miraculous. Most of the so-called cures seemed to concern psychosomatic illnesses. It is not improbable that many of

Jesus' cures may have been effected by methods similar to those attributed to Alexander by Lucian. For example, Jesus apparently utilized seventy "advance men," who were sent ahead in pairs to every town that he intended to visit (Luke 10:1-2). It is possible that these individuals reported back to Jesus the conditions of some of those to be "cured" or of whom he was to make "prophecies"; hence, some of the paranormal events attributed to Jesus could have occurred because of his prior knowledge of the individuals involved. There is an interesting story in John about Jesus' psychic powers. Jesus allegedly was able to tell a woman a great deal about herself. The disciples had left for a town in order to buy food, leaving Jesus alone

145

Some alternative naturalistic explanations

near a well. Meanwhile, a Samaritan woman came to draw water. Jesus asked her for a drink and engaged her in conversation, uttering a parable about the water of eternal life. She replied that she wanted such water. Jesus said to her, "Go home, call your husband and come back." She answered, "I have no husband." "You are right," said Jesus, "in saying that you have no husband, for, although you have had five husbands, the man with whom you are now living is not your husband; you told me the truth there." The woman is stunned about his knowledge of her and exclaims in the town, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" (John 4:8-30—NEB). Was this a "cold reading" (based upon cues Jesus received from her on the spot) or was it a "hot reading" (based upon facts gathered and reported to him)? Jesus could easily have discovered facts about the woman from advance information supplied by his confidants. If so, then Jesus used familiar techniques used today by so-called psychic readers.²⁶

In Luke, we read that there were many who were suspicious of Jesus' powers. After he cured a dumb man by driving out the devil, Luke reports that "the people were astonished, but some of them said, 'It is by Beelzebub prince of devils that he drives the devils out'" (11:14-15—NEB). Jesus was not believed by the people in his own town to be a miracle-worker, but was considered either mad or a sorcerer. Often when they asked for a sign from God, he gave none. Thus we see that Jesus was not always able to perform on demand, which raises suspicion that he needed some advance preparation. Matthew confirms that Jesus did not work many miracles in his own town (13:55 ff.—NEB), so "they fell foul of him." This led Jesus to say, "A prophet will always be held in honor, except in his home town, and in his own family." "And he did not work many miracles there," reports Matthew, adding "such was their want of faith," as if to reinforce the view that miracles depend upon a state of belief in the audience. Where faith is absent or minimal, it is difficult to succeed. Mark also reports that Jesus healed "only a few people" in his own town. And John says that at that time "even his brothers had no faith in him" (7:5—NEB). Luke likewise reports that "others, by way of a test, demanded of him a sign from heaven." To which Jesus replied equivocally, "This is a wicked generation. It demands a sign, and the only sign that will be given is the sign of Jonah. For just as Jonah was a sign to the Ninevites, so will the Son of Man be to this generation." (Luke 11:29-30—NEB). In Mark we also read that the Pharisees demanded a sign from heaven, to which Jesus replied, "Why does this generation ask

26. For a discussion of how psychics do many readings, see Ray Hyman, "Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers That You Know All About Them," *Skeptical Inquirer* 1, no. 2 (Spring/Summer 1977).

146 The Jesus myth

for a sign? I tell you this: no sign shall be given to this generation. With that he left them." (8:11-13—NEB). Thus Jesus could not perform any-where and everywhere, or on demand, so he may have needed adequate preparation before he could display his paranormal powers.

One famous miracle, which is open to suspicion, concerns his friend Lazarus, whom Jesus allegedly raised from the dead. The entire story may have been borrowed from Egyptian mythology and embellished by the Gospel writers. We can only speculate about what actually happened; the circumstances are curious, to say the least. According to John (11:1-44—NEB), Jesus knew Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, and "loved all three." The sisters sent a message to Jesus to the effect that "your friend is ill." But instead of proceeding directly to Lazarus' side, Jesus waited two days. Finally, when he arrived at the village of Bethany, he is told that Lazarus has been four days in the tomb. Jesus goes to the tomb, a cave, and asks that the stone be removed from the entrance. He raised his voice in a loud cry, "Lazarus, come forth," and Lazarus com-plies "with hands and feet and face still swathed in linen bands."

The incident has all of the hallmarks of a subterfuge. Why did Jesus wait two days to visit his friend? This is highly suspicious. Moreover, how do we know that Lazarus was dead when Jesus arrived? It would have been a marvelous feat to perform for the doubters—for Lazarus to feign death so that Jesus could demonstrate that he had miraculous powers. Lazarus, at least (and possibly others), would have had to have been in league with Jesus in deceiving people. Lazarus was a close friend of Jesus, since we hear of him again when Jesus has a supper, at which Martha served and Lazarus sat among the guests of Jesus. The idea that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead certainly would have been a great boost to his reputation.

The existing Bible is a product of many different authors and of selection and censorship by church councils. Much material has been excised and manipulated. We do not know if what has survived is authentic. We earlier alluded to the Secret Gospel of Mark, according to which Jesus had a special relationship with a youth (Lazarus?) whom he raised from the dead. The youth "loved Jesus," and at one point spent the night with him. Jesus taught him "the mystery of the kingdom of God," which suggests a very close relationship. If Jesus was a magician, Lazarus might have been his skill.

For many, Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead was one of the most remarkable feats he accomplished. However, far more impressive was Jesus' own disappearance from the cave tomb in which he was buried and his rising from death. Indeed, the resurrection of Jesus is, for pos-terity, the single most important event of his entire career.

The crucifixion and death of Jesus 147

The crucifixion and death of Jesus

The cornerstone of Jesus' claim to fame rests upon his crucifixion, death, and alleged resurrection. I will not examine the trial of Jesus, the basis of the charges leveled against him, or his conviction. It is what happened after the crucifixion that is essential to Christianity. According to Paul, without the resurrection all of the Christian faith is in vain. Christianity promises eternal salvation for those who believe in Jesus; but if he was not raised from the dead, then the main article of Christian faith is without basis.

Now if this is what we proclaim, that Christ was raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there be no

resurrection then Christ was not raised; and if Christ was not raised, then our gospel is null and void, and so is your faith; and we turn out to be lying witnesses for God, because we bore witness that he raised Christ to life. (1 Cor. 15:12-15—NEB).

What is the evidence that this miraculous event occurred? Jesus was mocked by the bystanders as he suffered on the cross:

"He saved others," they said, "but he cannot save himself. King of Israel, indeed! Let him come down now from the cross, and then we will believe him. Did he trust in God? Let God rescue him, if he wants him—for he said that he was God's Son." (Matt. 27:40-43—NEB).

Their logic was unassailable. If Jesus was a deity, then surely he should have been able to turn events in a more positive direction. If he was the son of God, why did God not intervene? The great paradox is that Jesus had virtually collapsed in his own defense at his trial—as if he knew he was guilty. On the cross at the final moment of impending death, he cries out: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34-35—NEB)—as if he had half-believed his own powers and yet had discovered, at the end, that they were for nought. But ironically the ultimate defeat of Jesus is used by his disciples to make it appear that he was victorious. They were able to do so by building up and inflating his resurrection.

What are the facts surrounding Jesus' death and return? Since it is this event—even more than the fictions surrounding his birth—that is crucial for the Christian religion, one would think that it would be well corroborated by unimpeachable eyewitness testimony. Unfortunately, the only "evidence" we have is contained in the New Testament. No inde-

148 The Jesus myth

pendent accounts have survived, if they ever existed, to give credence to this world-shattering event. Even so, the biblical accounts are fragmentary and contradictory. If we read the four Gospels side by side, we are struck by the inconsistencies. This should tend to make us doubt the received story. Was Jesus dead when he was taken from the cross? Or had he simply swooned and was thought to be dead, only to be revived and spirited out of the tomb by his disciples? Had he appeared for a brief period after his crucifixion, partially in disguise, and then escaped in haste, and either disappeared or eventually succumbed to his wounds¹ There are many possible scenarios that we can speculate about. What is clear is that the case for Jesus' resurrection is extremely weak.

What is especially perplexing is that if Jesus appeared, he appeared only to those who believed in him, not to neutral observers or to those who had opposed him. Moreover, he did not punish those who had persecuted him or had complicity in his trial and crucifixion. Given the fact that God is wrathful toward sinners—helpful only to those who believe in him and are obedient to his will—it is a wonder that he did not come back and inflict divine retribution. What a display of divine power that would have been! Instead, we have him returning secretly. If Christ was really sent by God to proclaim his message, then surely a major public event, staged with great fanfare, would have been far more effective. It could have been staged simultaneously in Jerusalem before Pilate and the Sanhedrin and in Rome before the emperor and the Senate. At the very least, God could have made the sun stand still at midday (as he was reputed to have done according to the book of Joshua) so that every historian in the world would note and record the event.

What is the main outline of the resurrection story according to the four Gospels? Let us first examine Mark (15:25-39—NEB). We read that Jesus was crucified between two robbers at nine in the morning. On his cross was the inscription: "The king of the Jews." At midday, darkness fell over the whole land, lasting until three in the afternoon. Jesus cried out, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabach-thani?" "Hark, he is calling Elijah," some bystanders said. Using a cane, a man held a sponge soaked in sour wine to his lips. "Let us see if Elijah will come to take him down." "Then Jesus gave a loud cry and died," and the curtain of the Temple was torn in two. The centurion who was standing opposite him saw how he died and said, "Truly this man was a son of God." A number of women were standing at a distance watching; among them was Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joseph, Salome, and several others. He died after six hours, a relatively short duration. In the evening Joseph of Arimathaea bravely went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. "Pilate was surprised to hear that he was already dead." (Mark 15:44-

The crucifixion and death of Jesus 149

45—NEB). He sent for the centurion to learn if it was true, and when he heard their report he gave Joseph permission to take the body.

In Luke (23:26 ff.—NEB) other circumstances are introduced. For example, one of the criminals who hung with him taunted him, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." But the other rebuked the first saying, "This man has done nothing wrong," adding, "Jesus, remember me when you come to your throne." To which Jesus replied: "I tell you this: today you shall be with me in Paradise." The inscription, according to Luke, read: "This is the king of the Jews." Luke reports that earlier Jesus had said, "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." Luke has Jesus dying at three in the afternoon and proclaiming "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit." But Luke has the centurion who saw it also utter the statement, "Beyond all doubt, this man was innocent." Luke reports that Jesus' friends had all stood at a distance, including the women who had accompanied him from Galilee.

In Matthew, we find that the inscription on Jesus' cross read: "This is Jesus the king of the Jews." (27:37—NEB). The inscription is not exactly the same in the synoptics, which makes one wonder how accurate the eyewitnesses were.

Matthew says: "Even the bandits who were crucified with him taunted him in the same way." (27:44—NEB). Not only was the curtain of the Temple torn but there was also an earthquake, and rocks split, graves opened, and God's saints were raised from sleep. Matthew maintains that after Jesus' resurrection they entered the holy city, where many saw them. This event is not even mentioned by Mark or Luke. However, Matthew has a centurion and his men watching, filled with awe, proclaiming, "Truly this man was a son of God." (27:54—NEB). Among those standing at a distance was Mary of Magdala, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

John's account of the crucifixion differs in many important details. For example, Matthew (27:28-29—NEB) gives an account of Jesus being mocked by Pilate's soldiers after the trial and prior to his crucifixion: "They stripped him and dressed him in a scarlet mantle," and placed on his head a crown of thorns. The Roman soldiers then removed these and dressed Jesus again in his own clothes.

According to John, however, they "robed him in a purple cloak," not a scarlet one. (19:2-3—NEB). According to John, the crucifixion took place the day before Passover. According to Mark, Luke, and Matthew it occurred the day after. Other facts differ. John says the inscription read: "Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews" (19:19-20—NEB). Thus we have four slightly different inscriptions. There

are other discrepancies in John's account. He claims that there were additional followers of Jesus present and that they were standing nearby: "Near the cross where Jesus hung stood his mother, with her sister, Mary,

150 The Jesus myth

wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala . . . (and) the disciple whom he loved." (19:25-26—NEB). In fact, Jesus converses with his mother. John has someone give Jesus a sponge soaked in sour wine fixed on a javelin (a slender spear, not a cane). One would think that Jesus' last words would be of crucial importance, yet even here we have contradictory accounts. Differing from Luke, John reports: "Having received the wine, he said, 'It is accomplished!' He bowed his head and gave up the spirit." (19:29-30—NEB).

John provides other interesting details. Because it was Passover eve, the Jews were anxious that the bodies not remain on the cross for the coming Sabbath. So they requested Pilate to have the legs broken and the bodies removed. The soldiers broke the legs of the two criminals, but they did not break Jesus' legs, since they found he was already dead. Cruci-fragium can imitate shock and cause rapid death, but it is not clear whether this was the case with Jesus. An interesting question that might be raised is whether Jesus had drunk a drugged wine that caused him to faint. All sorts of hypothetical scenarios are possible about the collusion of his confederates to provide him with drugs so that he would swoon and then possibly, if taken down from the cross in time, escape capital punishment. If there was a Passover plot, alternative medical explanations of what might have transpired have been made.

According to John, one of the soldiers stabbed Jesus' side with a lance, "and at once there was a flow of blood and water." John maintains that this is "vouched for by an eyewitness, whose evidence is to be trusted." (19:31-36—NEB). Dr. Janet Caldwell, a pathologist, provides a possible post hoc diagnosis of Jesus' condition, maintaining that the piercing of a victim between his ribs was a standard test of death.²⁷ The emission of water indicates, she says, that there was fluid in the chest. This strongly suggests that Jesus had "tuberculosis pleurisy with effusion." She maintains that this condition is also suggested by an account in Luke, who maintained that when Jesus spent the night in the garden "his sweat was like clots of blood falling to the ground" (22:44—NEB). Moreover, he was unable to carry his own cross to the crucifixion. He had been flogged, which no doubt weakened him; but the account also suggests that he may have had an illness. If Jesus suffered from this condition, Dr. Caldwell maintains that modern medicine can provide an explanation of his pseudodeath, in the form of unconsciousness or coma. To sum up the possible scenario: Jesus suffered pleurisy with effusion in the right chest cavity, which during crucifixion resulted in a state of shock with loss of consciousness and the appearance of death; tapping the fluid from the

27. Janet Caldwell, *Jesus: A Psychobiography and Medical Evaluation* (New York: Carlton Press, 1976).

I

The crucifixion and death of Jesus 151

chest cavity made his recovery possible, aided by his removal from the cross and being put in a horizontal position in a cool chamber, which according to the Gospels is what happened when he was placed in the tomb.

Dr. Pierre Barbel maintains that the agony of crucifixion is caused by the raised position of the arms, which causes the crucified person to have the feeling of progressive suffocation.²⁸ Such a position causes extremely disagreeable

dyspnea, or painful respiration. Oxygenation is not properly produced in the lungs, which are not working efficiently, and the additional burden causes a kind of tetanic condition of the entire body. Thus asphyxiation develops. If Jesus had pleurisy, this condition would have rapidly intensified by alternating asphyxia-respiration during crucifixion, and a state of shock would have been induced fairly rapidly. Thus Jesus might not have been dead when he was taken down from the cross.

The next stage of the Gospel story also has contradictory elements. Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus (according to Matthew); he wrapped it in a clean linen sheet and laid it in his own unused tomb, cut out of the rock. He then rolled a large stone against the entrance. Mark and Luke agree with this account. John, however, says that he was joined by Nicodemus and that they wrapped the body "in strips of linen cloth" according to Jewish burial customs (19:40-41—NEB).

This raises questions concerning the so-called Shroud of Turin, which many people today believe is the burial shroud of Jesus. John later reports that there were "linen wrappings" and a "napkin, which had been over his head." (20:6-8—NEB). If John is correct, it was not a shroud but linen wrappings. But if Matthew, Mark, and Luke are correct, they contradict John's account, which implies that the body was perhaps wrapped like a mummy. Some versions of Luke have Peter peering into the tomb and observing wrappings (24:12—NEB), which would reinforce John's account of multiple cloths. The existence of a separate face napkin would contradict the legend that there was a shroud.

The persistence of the fame of the Shroud of Turin is a classic illustration of willful belief. It is dismaying to learn that large sectors of the population today believe it to be the authentic burial shroud of Jesus. If this were true, it would be the only corroboration of his resurrection. What are the facts?

There have been numerous reports of relics and other religious artifacts that have been venerated and even accounts of other shrouds. The Shroud of Turin surfaced in Lirey, France, in about 1353. It is a 14-foot-long linen cloth allegedly showing a print of the body of Jesus. The figure is wearing a crown of thorns, with bloodstains on its hands, feet, and right

28. Pierre Barbel, *A Doctoral Calvary* (New York: Doubleday, 1963).

152 The Jesus myth

side. In 1357 the shroud was placed on exhibition and great crowds of pilgrims flocked to view it. Bishop Pierre d'Arcis undertook an investigation of its authenticity in 1389, and a lengthy report was sent to the Pope; the bishop maintained that the shroud was a forgery. He also said that the motive for exhibiting the shroud was one of avarice and financial gain; moreover, he wrote that it was done by clever sleight-of-hand. Indeed, the artist who painted the cloth came forth and confessed. Meanwhile, the cloth was used to attract the multitudes, and claims were made that it could work miracles, including cures. The bishop complained that certain men were paid to represent themselves as healed at the time of the exhibition. The shroud eventually ended up in Turin as the property of the royal house of Italy.²⁹

One would think that if the shroud was genuine—a remarkable fact indeed—some mention of the fact that the image of Christ was impressed upon it would have been made in the Gospels. The authors were surely interested in heralding the divinity of Jesus. If such a shroud had been found, it would have been a powerful support of the miracle of the resurrection. But they are silent about it.

The Shroud of Turin has had a lengthy history, and its authenticity is hotly contested today. There is a team of scientists (or pseudoscientists) who believe

in its authenticity. This team is called STURP (Shroud of Turin Research Project). Members claim that no method of transposing the image of the body of a man onto linen clothing was known in ancient or medieval times. The image of Jesus appears like a photographic negative, and this, they maintain, could only have been caused miraculously by a supernatural light, as it scorched the linen at the moment of resurrection.

Exhaustive analysis by Joe Nickell and a team of skeptical scientists show that it is possible to duplicate the shroud by a rubbing technique. Moreover, if Jesus had died, he would have been shaved and washed before the burial spices were applied, following ancient Jewish burial methods. But the shroud depicts him both bearded and bloodied. Microscopic analysis of the red "blood" on the shroud, by Walter McCrone, a Chicago scientist, has shown the presence of ochre, a dye paint pigment. Interestingly also, the individual on the shroud is over six feet tall, whereas first-century Jews were generally short. One question that is raised is how a twenty-centuries-old piece of cloth can be so relatively well-preserved. Although the Catholic church has permitted some testing, it has not given permission thus far for carbon-14 dating,* which might determine its age. Joe Nickell, *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 12-13, 23.

*The church has since permitted carbon-14 dating. On October 13, 1988, the results were announced, confirming that the shroud was of medieval origin. This supports the interpretation of forgery.—PK, September 20, 1990.

The resurrection: What is the evidence? 153

its age. But even if the shroud were as old as its supporters claim, this would not necessarily prove that it is the shroud of Jesus. Thus the Shroud of Turin cannot be cited as physical evidence for the reality of the resurrection.

The resurrection: What is the evidence?

We must now examine the claims for the resurrection, since this event is the bedrock of Christian faith. Did it occur? What is the evidence for it? Again, we have absolutely no independent supporting data in the extant literature of the period. Nor is there any circumstantial evidence. Thus we must rely solely on New Testament sources. Yet the stories told in the Gospels are so inconsistent that the resurrection story collapses under careful scrutiny. The conflicting eyewitness testimony is so unreliable that it would not stand up to critical cross-examination in any court of law. Yet an entire religious faith is based upon the legend.

According to Matthew, after Jesus was removed from the cross and placed in the tomb, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary sat opposite the tomb. The next day the chief priests and the Pharisees visited Pilate, reminding him that the imposter Jesus said that he would be raised in three days. They asked him to secure the tomb until the third day. "Otherwise his disciples may come, steal the body, and then tell the people that he had been raised from the dead; and the final deception will be worse than the first." (27:62-65—NEB). So Pilate authorized a guard to seal the tomb. Still, at daybreak on Sunday, when the two Marys came to look at the grave, there was a violent earthquake, and Matthew says that an angel descended and rolled the stone away and sat on it. His face shone like lightning and his garments were white. At the sight of him, the guards shook and lay like dead. The angel addressed the women, saying that Jesus was not in the tomb and that he had been raised from the dead. "Come and see the place where he was laid," the angel said, "and go tell the other disciples" (Matt. 28:6-7—NEB). The two Marys hurried from the tomb in awe and great joy and ran to tell the disciples. Suddenly, Jesus appeared and they fell prostrate before him.

"Do not be afraid," said Jesus. "Tell my brothers that they are to leave for Galilee, where they will see me."

Mark's account (16:1-8—NEB) diverges significantly from Matthew's. In addition to Mary of Magdala and Mary the mother of James, we have Salome going to the tomb very early on Sunday morning. When they got there they saw that the huge stone at the entrance of the tomb had already been rolled back. They went inside the tomb (not outside), where

154 The Jesus myth

they saw a youth (not an angel) sitting on the right side wearing a white robe. Jesus' body was missing. They were told to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus had risen and that they would see him in Galilee. But here we are told that they ran away from the tomb "beside themselves with terror." "They said nothing to anybody, for they were afraid," which is the direct opposite of Matthew's account. Moreover, there is no mention of their meeting Jesus. Whose description should we trust?

Reading Luke (23:55-56; 24:1-11—NEB) only exacerbates the confusion. We are told that the women who accompanied Jesus from Galilee took note of where the tomb was. In this version they also went back early on Sunday, and found that the stone had been rolled away. They went inside the tomb and were at a loss that Jesus' body was not there. Suddenly, two men (not one) in dazzling garments were at their side. Remember, they are told, that the Son of Man would be crucified and rise on the third day. Returning from the tomb, they reported all this to the eleven disciples and all the others. There is no hint that they met Jesus, as Matthew claimed. Luke finally enumerates the women present: Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and "other women." But we are informed that the story "appeared to be nonsense," and the apostles did not believe it.

And nonsense it appears to be, for it involves contradictory accounts. To sum up, the synoptic Gospels report:

1. An angel outside of the tomb. A youth inside. Two men inside.
2. The rock is in front of the tomb. It is moved from the cave entrance in front of the women and the guard. The rock has already been removed when they arrive.
3. The women present are the two Marys. Salome in addition. Joanna in addition, and other women.
4. The women are in awe and great joy, hurrying to tell the disciples; they meet Jesus on the way. The women are beside themselves with terror, saying nothing to anybody. The women report the story to the apostles, who don't believe them. If only the witnesses—whoever they were—could be put on the witness stand. These stories have all the trappings of hearsay, embellished by many retellings. What the original version was is difficult to ascertain. Matthew maintains the women were on their way to Galilee when the guards reported the incidents to the chief priests. The priests offered the soldiers substantial bribes and told them to say that the disciples came by

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The resurrection: What is the evidence? 155

night and stole the body while the guards were asleep. According to Matthew, this story of what had happened became widely known and was current in Jewish circles of his day.

Can John help us solve the mystery of the empty tomb? We have seen that this Gospel often deviates from the synoptics. Was there another cave trick (like the Lazarus cave trick)?

John has only Mary of Magdala (and not the other Mary, Salome, Joanna or any other women) come to the tomb early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark. Mary saw that the stone had been moved from the entrance and ran to tell Simon Peter and the other disciple (the one whom Jesus loved) that they had taken the Lord out of the tomb. No men in white are present, nor does she enter the tomb. Peter and the other disciples run to the tomb. They enter and see the linen wrappings and the head napkin lying about. Then the disciples went home, but Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. Finally she peered in and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been. They asked why she was weeping. As she starts to reply, she turns around and sees Jesus standing there; but she did not recognize him. She thought at first he was the gardener. Had Jesus revived from a pseudo-death and was he in disguise? Jesus tells Mary to go tell the disciples that he is ascending to his Father. Mary goes to the disciples with the news that she has seen the Lord. And so here we have a fourth story different in important details from the other three. Which is correct, if any? Should the first-hand report by Mary be accepted, if no one was present to verify it? Did Jesus survive death? In the synoptic Gospels, Jesus tells Mary and the other women to meet him in Galilee. Was he escaping to his own province, a safer place? After having been crucified and just missing a narrow brush with death, in fear and anguish, did he decide to flee, telling the others to rendezvous with him there? Did he subsequently succumb to his wounds? If he had pleurisy, his condition might have so weakened him that he died shortly thereafter. It is, of course, difficult to say.

What happens next? In Matthew (28:16-20—NEB) we read that the eleven disciples made their way to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to meet him. They fell prostrate before him, though some were still doubtful. Jesus told them to go forth and spread the gospel and to baptize men everywhere in his name.

In Mark, however, different events are reported (16:9-26—NEB). Not all of the earlier versions of the Gospels have this account, which raises a question as to whether it was later interpolated. In any case, Mark says that on Sunday morning Jesus appears first to Mary of Magdala. But they did not believe her, again raising for us the question of her credibility as a sole eyewitness. Later, Mark says, Jesus appeared in a different

156 The Jesus myth

guise to two of the men as they were walking. But again no one believed them. This again suggests that Jesus was incognito, or was it someone they mistook for Jesus, some stranger they decided was Jesus because Mary had told them she had seen him? Later, while the eleven were at the table he appeared to them and admonished them for their incredulity. Mark does not report whether this appearance occurred in Galilee. Again Jesus commissions them to carry the word to the world.

In Luke (24:13-53—NEB), we have the report that two of the men were on their way to the village of Emmaus, which was seven miles from Jerusalem, and that on the way Jesus came up and walked alongside them. Luke reports, "but something kept them from seeing who it was." But by the time they had reached the village, as he was about to continue his journey, they pressed him to stay with them as evening was falling. So the man stayed and broke bread with them. Only then does Luke report that "their eyes were opened, and they recognized him." At that point we are told that "he vanished from their sight." So the same question arises: Who was the stranger the two men met? Was it Jesus, in

disguise fleeing in fear, or was it someone else they did not recognize but thought resembled him? Or was it their fertile imagination?

The men then returned to Jerusalem (not Galilee), where they found the eleven and the rest of the company. They interpret that Jesus had arisen and appeared to Simon (no one else corroborates this). As they are talking, Jesus then appears and this startles everyone. They think they are seeing a ghost. Jesus asks them for something to eat, and they give him a piece of fish, which he eats. This would be hardly necessary for a dead man but no doubt necessary for someone escaping his executioners. He asks them to carry his message and he leads them out as far as Bethany, when he departs. (Some versions of the Gospels say that he was carried up to heaven.) They return to Jerusalem with great joy.

Thus far in the Gospels, we have Jesus appearing to: (1) Mary of Magdala alone; (2) two men on the road, who do not recognize him and barely make him out; he breaks bread with them but then disappears or departs; (3) the eleven plus others following him from Jerusalem.

This is hardly strong evidence for the resurrection. Jesus does not appear to any who are not his followers, to other Jews or Romans, but only to a silent and demoralized band of believers. The reports of the witnesses are questionable—Mary by herself or two men who are not even certain whom they saw. If Jesus appeared to his eleven disciples, was it a last farewell, as he takes his departure? Or was this a kind of mass self-deception in a small harassed community of superstitious folk, who had followed him and wished to believe in him, now grasping at any shred of evidence that they could. All of this is within the realm of human

The resurrection: What is the evidence? 157

imagination. What is unlikely is the veracity of the claim that Jesus died and then came back from the dead.

Does the Gospel of John add anything to support the case of a dead and resurrected Jesus? There are significant new additions to the story. One wonders whether the oral tradition had already embroidered the Christ legend so as to strengthen what appeared to be a weak case.

Again, it is late on Sunday evening when the disciples are huddled together behind closed doors. We are now told that Jesus appears to them (20:19 ff.—NEB). The disciples are at first doubtful, but in great joy. John reports that one of the twelve, Thomas, was not with the rest. If Judas was no longer with them or dead, then there should have been only eleven disciples, not twelve. Has John forgotten that important fact? He says that a week later Jesus appeared to the disciples and managed to come through locked doors. Thomas, who doubted the reports of his earlier appearance, is told to touch the marks of the nails in Jesus' hands and the wound in his side.

Some time later, John maintains, Jesus showed himself to several of his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias in Galilee. Again at first they did not recognize him. There Jesus told them where to fish; he ate breakfast with them, including bread and fish, which was cooked on a charcoal fire. This was the third time, said John, that Jesus appeared. Had he made his way to Galilee and was he again in disguise, apprehensive that the Romans or the Sanhedrin might recapture him? And did he appear only fleetingly to his former disciples? After breakfast, Peter saw Jesus leave, and the disciple whom Jesus loved followed him. Did Jesus make his final escape with the help of a companion? Was this disciple his accomplice through-out Jesus' brief career as a magician and conjurer? And was it he who helped him out of the cave after it was discovered that he did not die on the cross and had revived? Or was it his beloved friend Lazarus, as some have

suggested? Was it the author of the Gospel of John, who still remains unidentified?

All of this is no doubt pure conjecture. We do not know. But one thing that seems clear is that the evidence in the four Gospels for Jesus' alleged historical resurrection is flimsy. Indeed, it is totally untrustworthy and inconsistent. It may all have been the product of literary imaginations. We don't know whether Jesus did or did not die on the cross and escape from the tomb, or whether his dead body was simply spirited out of the tomb by his followers, as the pagan and Jewish critics of Jesus claimed, or whether the entire tale was concocted by them to save face. What is clear is this: the evidence presented is neither remarkable nor convincing. This momentous event in history—the supposed resurrection of the son of God—is thus unproven. It is not even likely or probable. It

158 The Jesus myth

remains, in the last analysis, only an article of faith.

The alleged resurrection of Jesus is not unique. The scriptures provide many other accounts of people rising from the dead. As we have seen, Lazarus allegedly rose from the dead. Elijah raised a child from the dead (1 Kings 17:7, 21-22) and Elisha raised the dead son of a Shunammite (2 Kings 4:32, 34-35). After Jesus, Peter raised Tabitha, and Paul raised Eutychus from the dead. Why then, is the resurrection of Jesus so vital to Christianity? Because only Jesus was the son of God. The reality of the resurrection is crucial to the entire Christian theology. It was allegedly based on scriptural prophecy, and we are reminded over and over again that Jesus is fulfilling the prophecies of scripture. Thus, his disciples believed he would rise in three days, more precisely three days and three nights. In Matthew we read: "Jonah was in the sea-monster's belly for three days and three nights, and in the same way the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the bowels of the earth." (12:40—NEB). Actually, however, if Jesus was hung on the cross at nine on Friday and died at three in the afternoon, after about six hours, and was taken into the tomb on Friday night, it was not after three days and nights that he was raised, but about thirty-six to forty hours until early Sunday morning.

If the four Gospels fail to provide adequate evidence for his resurrection, are there other passages in the New Testament that support the claim? There are, but these do not advance the claim very much. In the Acts of the Apostles (1:1-11), most likely written by the author of Luke, we read that Jesus appeared to the apostles for a period of forty days, a new fact that is not mentioned in the Gospels and is uncorroborated elsewhere. Here we also read that he was lifted up and a cloud removed him from sight. To the primitive mind, God was in the sky and upon entering Heaven, the person departed upward. There were two men in white who appeared at the same time. How reliable is this account? Immediately following it, the author tells us that Judas, who had betrayed Jesus, after buying a plot of land with the payment for his villainy "fell forward on the ground, and burst open, so that his entrails poured out" (Acts 1:18-19—NEB). This again contradicts Matthew, who tells us that after Judas betrayed Jesus, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver, hurling it into the Temple and hanging himself (27:3-6—NEB). How reliable is the author of Acts, who behaves more like a propagandist for a new faith than a historian seeking to research the factual truth? Luke reports the rapid growth of adherents to the early church, as they were aroused by the mission of Jesus. The resurrection, however ill-founded, was apparently vital to attracting followers to the new creed. Interestingly, people of the early church practiced rites of magic and exorcism, similar to those of Jesus. Had some learned from Jesus the craft

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The resurrection: What is the evidence? 159

of deception, or were they all true believers, deceived as to his divine mission but also practicing the art themselves?

The other major source for belief in the resurrection of Jesus was Paul. As I have pointed out, it is most likely that his letters were written before the Gospels. It was Paul who transformed Christianity into a religion beyond the small band of early Jewish-born believers. For Paul it is faith in Christ that is the central tenet of Christianity. Paul never knew Jesus; he was not a direct eyewitness of his ministry or of the resurrection. Yet the entire fabric of Christianity depends upon an article of faith that Jesus is the messiah, the son of God, who came to save mankind, was crucified, and resurrected. Paul knew of the spreading Jewish Christian cult, which he had at first persecuted. He came to accept at face value its belief in the resurrection. He adds a significant new piece of data, however, that does not appear in any other Gospel and is no doubt an exaggeration. Yet it was perhaps a necessary reinforcement, if Paul were to convert the Gentiles to his belief in Christ.

In 1 Corinthians (15:3-7—NEB), Paul says that certain facts had been imparted to him: "that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with scriptures; that he was buried; that he was raised to life on the third day; according to scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas" (this is the first that we hear of this) "and afterwards to the Twelve" (since the Gospels said Judas was dead, how was this possible?). Paul then adds a remarkable fact, which none of the other Gospel writers cite: "Then he appeared to over five hundred of our brothers at once, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James" (this does not appear in the Gospel stories) "and afterwards to all the apostles."

Most of the preceding varies from the accounts already cited where Jesus appears to Mary and two men before the apostles. Then Paul adds the coup de maitre to support his case: "In the end, he appeared even to me." (1 Cor. 15:8—NEB). This is the famous vision that Paul had on the road to Damascus. In Acts 9:3-9 we have an account of this conversion. Saul, a persecutor of the Jewish Christians, while nearing Damascus, reports that a light suddenly flashed from the sky all around him. He fell to the ground, hearing a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Saul asks, "Who are you?" The voice answers, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and go into the city and you will be told what you have to do." According to Acts, the men who were traveling with Saul were speechless. We are informed that they heard the voice, but they "could see no one." Saul got up, but "when he opened his eyes he could not see." Saul "was blind for three days" and took no food or drink. The real question is whether this was a genuine vision, a psychotic reaction, an epileptic seizure, or something else. How did Paul

160 The Jesus myth

know that those accompanying him were speechless or heard Jesus' voice, if he could not himself see them? There is no independent verification; not even his companions could confirm Jesus' appearance. This revelation from on high is a subjective experience, yet it stands out as possibly the strongest single and most important event in Christendom after Jesus' death. For it is Paul, perhaps more than anyone else, who converts Christianity into a creedal belief for the next generation of people who did not know Jesus, but he based it on his inner soliloquy, a nonevidential excursion into private pathology.

Conclusion

From our study of the historical Jesus we can draw the following conclusions. Although Christianity claims to be a historical religion, built upon the life, ministry, and death of Jesus Christ—the central claim being that God became incarnate in human form—as we examine our historical knowledge of Jesus we find that we cannot say with certainty that he ever existed. But assuming that he did, there are still several alternative, rationalistic interpretations of his life and ministry.

First, there is the traditional Christian view that Jesus was God incarnate sent to save suffering humanity. There is inadequate evidence for this claim and no independent corroboration of his ability to perform paranormal healings or miracles.

Second, even if we could attribute directly and solely to Jesus an ethical code, there is limited merit to the ethic of the Gospel (and it is not exclusive to Christianity), and the Christian code hardly serves by itself as a reliable guide for informed ethical conduct.

Third, if Jesus existed, then he can only be understood in the context of first- and second-century Jewish society, a man influenced by the social, cultural, political, and religious traditions of his day. Neither his appearance nor his message is unique.

Fourth, if Jesus existed and performed any of the feats that the Gospels claimed he did, then it is not implausible that he was a disturbed though charismatic personality who practiced magic, using familiar conjuring techniques. The fact that Christianity has succeeded in vanquishing so many other religions in the world and in challenging the scientific method and rationality for so long suggests that Jesus was extremely successful at his craft, perhaps the most successful magician who has ever existed. The mythology that surrounded his career was hungrily devoured by countless millions of believers, who found in it a message that satisfied their need for salvation and redemption. Others have also succeeded in

Conclusion 161

their craft, but none have been deified with quite the same degree of drama, fervor, and conviction. With the possible exception of Islam, no other religious institution or church has been quite as powerful as the one dedicated to Jesus Christ.

VIE: Moses and the chosen people

Judaism as a religion is also based upon divine revelation as it is recorded in the Old Testament. The Jews, a tenacious and heroic people, have been inspired by this revelation ever since the Pentateuch was written. They have clung to a religious heritage that is harsh and demanding, yet which provided them with a powerful motivation that has enabled them to survive for over three thousand years. The Old Testament is presumptuous, for it arrogantly proclaims the Israelites to be the "chosen people," special favorites of God. This has aroused intense animosity among Gentiles.

The Hebrew God was a possessive deity, demanding unquestioning obedience. He was viewed as favoring the Hebrews in some special way, having delivered them from Egypt and bequeathed them the Promised Land. He nevertheless allowed them to be dispersed and defeated whenever they disobeyed him, and

this culminated in the great diaspora after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in C.E. 70. Throughout their history, Jewish prophets, priests, and rabbis taught that their supreme obligation was to obey the law of God as handed down by Moses. Some-day, they believed, a messiah would emerge who would deliver them to Israel. This belief has been nourished in open or in secret by the remnants of Israel throughout the ages, as they suffered persecution. Anti-Semitism is as old as the Jews. In Egypt, before the Mosaic code was enunciated, they were persecuted. Their homeland was later invaded and they were dispersed; some were carried away at different periods, by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Persecution continued intermittently at the hands of the Romans, who slaughtered great numbers, as did the followers of Mohammed later. They were cruelly persecuted during the Spanish Inquisition, the Russian pogroms, and the Nazi-produced Holocaust. In the twentieth century, many Jews reenacted the exodus from Egypt by returning to Palestine and establishing a new state against the bitter opposition of the displaced Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world.

In Roman days, the Jews were spread throughout the cities of the Mediterranean world. Strabo, the Greek geographer in the first century B.C.E. reported that "it is hard to find a place in the habitable earth that has not admitted this tribe of men, and is not possessed by it."¹ Often

1. Quoted by Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book XIV, Chapter 7.

162

Moses and the chosen people 163

intensely religious, practicing their customary worship in isolation from the societies in which they sojourned, a hard core has clung to the Mosaic law and traditions. Since many intermarried with the peoples among whom they lived—in violation of a prohibition against it—it is doubtful today that the Jews who have survived are of the same stock as their fore-bears. Hitler was mistaken, for modern Jews have mixed blood flowing in their veins. Wherever they settled they mixed with those about them, and they became blondes, brunettes, and redheads as well as black haired, as—similating Egyptian and Canaanite blood at first, but later Greek and Roman, Spanish and Moor, European and modern-day American and Latin American. In medieval times the Khazars of the Russian steppes converted to Judaism, adding yet another strain to the Jews.

Dissident Jews abandoned Judaism and founded the two great competing religions of our day, Christianity and Marxism, both of which, although initially established by the Jews, ended up by persecuting them. Major contributions to world civilization have been made by Jews who transformed or rejected their faith: Paul, Spinoza, Marx, Freud, and Einstein. The Jews numbered an estimated seven million in the Roman Empire of the first century (7 percent of the population). Their numbers have only managed to double, to fourteen million, two thousand years later, given the continued attrition by conversion and the loss of six million Jews in the Holocaust.

The Jews of modern times again live in virtually every country of the world. In the West they provide creative talent and energy in the professions, business, commerce, and the arts and sciences. In every generation, scores leave the faith of their fathers or are assimilated. In some periods they have had enormous families (as among Russian Jews); in others, the birth rate has declined drastically (as in 20th-century United States). Yet an impressive number have loyally clung to the ancient doctrines.

The Jewish saga has taken on special meaning today, for the Jews, in returning to Palestine, have attempted to provide a continuity with their ancient biblical

hopes and aspirations. Had it not been for Theodor Herzl and Zionism, which began as a secular movement, and the extermination policies of the Nazis, it is unlikely that the state of Israel would have been established. Most likely, the Jews in large sectors of the world might have further assimilated into the mainstream of other nations. To-day there has been a resurgence of nationalistic sentiments among the Jews, reminiscent of the Old Testament, and a fervent belief that Israel was promised to them by God and that the Jews should possess it as a divine right. Most Orthodox Jews look upon Israel as God's special creation. Even fundamentalist Christians see the return of the Jews to Israel as fulfilling biblical prophecy. Those who take the Bible literally

164 Moses and the chosen people

wait for Armageddon to be ushered in—after the rebuilding of the Temple; in Jerusalem—as foretold in Daniel and the Book of Revelation.

Explanations for the continuing persecution of the Jews are many. They were a visible minority wherever they went, following strange religious customs and practices. The Jews have had strong ethnic allegiance, cemented by the memory of their past, strict laws against intermarriage and conversion, and a close family structure, which was rigorously guarded and which enabled them to provide continuity as they survived. Their intellectuality and hard work have given them positions of prominence and wealth in many societies. Interested in defending freedom against the establishment, they often adopted liberal and radical causes and founded or joined protest movements. And so they became easy targets for anti-Semites. They have been the eternal scapegoats for demagogues seeking political power or economic gain. The victims of invective and innuendo, rumor and gossip, they were cruelly persecuted—unfairly and unjustly—to the moral shame of mankind.

Christianity and Islam also present unique systems of belief, and both have their original inspiration in the Old Testament and the Hebrew prophets. However, they are universal missionary religions seeking to recruit new believers. Anyone who embraces the faith can join, and conversions are welcome. The Hebraic message, on the contrary, is specialized to one people and is highly chauvinistic: God intervened in history and endowed the Jews with a special role. Jehovah is the God of the Jews. Thus Judaism is an inward-looking religion only applicable to those born to a Jewish mother. Only grudgingly do the Jews allow those who marry non-Jews to convert. Even then they are not considered to be bona-fide Jews. Moreover, to qualify, males have to be circumcised, a primitive initiation rite that one can impose on infant boys but which is difficult to require of adults. In one sense, the survival of the Jews over the millennia is based on a neurosis, which has been supported and maintained by the authority of tradition. The entire history of a people has remained out of touch with reality. Their interpretation of their existence is based upon a delusional belief-system that has no basis in fact. This neurosis has enabled the Jews tenaciously to survive, but it meant that they would be condemned to stand huddled together in the midst of hostile groups, nourished by their faith in the Mosaic legends, hopeful of a future messiah. They imposed upon themselves a religious system that strictly regulated their life and a moral code in which repression in the name of God was justified. Out of this developed an addiction to hard work, family fidelity, and an appreciation of intellectual and spiritual values. As a minority, they lived in a state of alienation from the social worlds of their neighbors.

Was Moses an Egyptian? 165

The nations in which Jews settled often appreciated their hard-work–ing abilities, and sometimes gave them the freedom to excel and prosper. But often they would be despised because of their separateness and envied for their achievements. Because they carefully tutored their young in the family and the synagogue that they were God's chosen, a superiority complex developed. If those about them hated or rejected them, they considered themselves special. Being able to read the ancient language of Hebrew, which no one else understood, had profound mystical sig–nificance for them as they pondered their sacred books. And it provided them with the support to maintain their separate heritage. They were able to resist the mythologies or beliefs of the alien cultures in which they lived, and they could withstand the conversion entreaties of pagan religions, Christianity, and Islam. Many Jews did convert and were lost to the tribe, for they wished to be accepted; yet a hard core remained and persisted in every age, comforted and sustained by a delusional system of beliefs and aspirations. Although Jews had to learn the language and culture of the lands in which they lived and had to pledge allegiance to their new nationalities, their old ethnic heritage and religion persisted side by side with their new citizenships.

Was Moses an Egyptian?

Basic to Judaism is the Old Testament, especially the first five books, known as the Pentateuch, or the Torah, and central to this is the figure of Moses, which every young Jew, nurtured in the faith of his fathers, learns about. Moses is the greatest figure in Jewish antiquity: the inspiration of Judaism. We know nothing about Moses beyond what has been related in the Old Testament and the written and interpretive traditions based upon it. The Torah was at first the product of an oral tradition, and of the legends that grew up surrounding it. People have a curious veneration for remote antiquity. The great religions have their roots in legend, myth, and some historical facts, so intertwined that it is difficult to separate reality from fantasy; and apologetics are composed post hoc to dramatize and maintain the authority of the tradition. How many of the biblical stories are fiction and how many actually happened is difficult to say. No independent, corroborative evidence of Moses' existence has ever been found. Indeed, there are scholars who have questioned whether Moses even existed.² Our chief source is the biblical narrative, and this narrative was no doubt revised, altered, and enlarged upon many times before it was codified in the version that we now have.

2. See especially Eduard Meyer, *Die Israeliten und Ihre Nachbarstämme* (1906).

166 Moses and the chosen people

The books of the Old Testament were written over a period of a thousand years as part of the religious, political, and ideological tradition of the Jews. Biblical scholars have been able to disentangle different accounts in the Bible. The first is called Yahwist, simply because of the relatively consistent use of the name Yahweh for the Hebrew God. This is usually called the J form (after the German Jahweh); it was thought to have been written down about the tenth century B.C.E. Beside the Mosaic accounts, there are two later sources, designated as the Elohist (E) because it uses the term Elohim for God, and much later the Priestly code (P). The orthodox religious tradition, of course, attributes the authorship of the first five books of the Bible to Moses—even the description of his own death at the end of Deuteronomy. But there is no evidence to support this claim of authorship. The Pentateuch in the form we have today was written about 400 B.C.E. after the mission of Ezra, who pre–sented a canonized and revised Torah to the Jewish community. This was accepted as sacred and complete and became the foundation of Judaism as a national religion.

If there was a real Moses, he probably lived in the thirteenth or fourteenth century B.C.E. His main claim to fame was that he was the liberator of the Jews, leading them from bondage in Egypt to conquer and settle in Canaan after they wandered many years in the desert land east of Egypt. The story of Moses' birth and upbringing is similar to that of other great founders of religions: it involves a noble background. Indeed, Moses' origin bears similarities to other hero-child legends. It is similar to that later told about Jesus, but it also bears a likeness to the birth stories of Sargon of Akkad, Gilgamesh, Oedipus, Cyrus, Romulus and Remus. According to Akkadian lore, Sargon's mother cast him adrift in the Euphrates in a pitch-covered basket. A farmer rescued the infant and raised him. Sargon later rose to displace the Sumerian king Ur-Zababa and became king of the Mesopotamian empire. This legend predates the Mosaic story by many centuries.

A common theme in such stories is that a child is born who is viewed as a threat to the throne. A king gives orders to kill the child, and only by God's intervention is he able to grow up and fulfill his divine mission. (In the New Testament Jesus was spared Herod's order to kill all male children and grew up to be called king of the Jews.) According to the story, the Pharaoh was fearful of the high birth rate of the Hebrews and ordered their first-born to be slain. To save him, Moses' mother put him in a rush basket made watertight with clay and tar and left him to float in the Nile, hoping he would be discovered by the Egyptian princess. Indeed, she found him and had him nursed by a Hebrew woman (who turned out to be his mother). Moses was adopted by the royal family and

Was Moses an Egyptian? 167

reared in their household. Later he went on to challenge the Pharaoh and thus fulfill his destiny.

The princess called him Moses because, as she said, "I drew him out of the water" (Exod. 2:10).^{*} In the biblical account, Moses was a Hebrew, a descendant of the Levites, though he was raised as an Egyptian. Some biblical scholars have raised the question whether Moses (if he indeed existed) was an Egyptian. The name Moses is Egyptian, meaning "child," as in the royal names Thutmose (Thotmes) and Ramose (Ramses). The Hebrew philological interpretation thus has been held to be untenable. Sigmund Freud makes this point central in his novel interpretation of the rise of monotheism.³ There is even some biblical evidence for the possibility that Moses was an Egyptian. Later, when he is living in Midian, he is described by the daughters of Reuel as an Egyptian who rescued them from the shepherds (Exod. 2:19). No doubt Moses had the bearing and dress of an Egyptian and thus would have been so identified. Yet whether or not he was a Hebrew or an Egyptian is still unclear. It would have been a great assault to Hebrew identity to have their national liberator and the founder of their religion to be a foreigner. The Moses that legend invented is reminiscent of other legends; it is made to fulfill an ideological end in order to give a tradition and a purpose to a people.

Freud's radical theoretical reconstruction goes still further. He pointed out that Moses did not discover or enunciate a new religion but rather imposed a version of an Egyptian sect, the Aton religion, which had already been introduced by Ikhnoton in Egypt and propagated in opposition to the dominant polytheism. This new religion did not worship the fire god or animals; nor did it focus on a doctrine of the immortality of souls. According to Freud, Moses was a dissident Egyptian priest who followed the new religion. It is not clear whether Moses believed in the form of strict monotheism later developed by the Jews; certainly one can read the early Mosaic books as defining and defending one god—the god

of the Jews—who competes with other gods. While the narrators proclaim that the children of Israel are to have "no other gods" before them, they do not clearly state that the other gods worshipped by other peoples do not exist. Indeed, it is clear that the Pentateuch is as much a nationalistic statement as it is a religious statement; for it defines a national existence written after the fact; and God is first and foremost the god of the Jews.

* All references in this chapter are from the New English Bible.

3. Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1939).

168 Moses and the chosen people

Nor is it even clear at this point that Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt or that they had a distinct ethnic or racial character before this. Indeed, if one reads ancient sources, one finds a widely held view that Moses led a dissident class of Egyptians, perhaps diseased lepers, from Egypt and that the Hebrews did not even exist at that time. It is generally accepted among scholars that the term Hebrew was an appellation meaning "foreigner" long before it was used to identify an ethnic group. It is also interesting to note that circumcision was practiced among the Egyptians and other ancient Bedouin tribes; so that was not unique to Moses. It was subsequently adopted by the Hebrews because of divine sanction, and they gave it some kind of magical significance.

What do pagan sources say?

Pagan anti-Jewish sources in the first centuries B.C.E. and C.E. held that Moses was of Egyptian descent. In the writings of Pseudo-Manetho, Chaeremon, Apion, Hecataeus, Strabo, Pompeius Trogus, and Tacitus, Moses was held to be an Egyptian priest who was expelled from Egypt along with a group of inhabitants who may have been contaminated.

According to the biblical account, the Hebrews, who became slaves in Egypt, traced their lineage to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph—originally shepherds from Canaan. In the familiar biblical narrative, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. While in Egypt he prospered as an advisor to the Pharaoh and eventually invited his entire family to live in Egypt. As time went on, they proliferated. The Bible says they were in Egypt for 430 years, but it also mentions only four generations (about 80 years), so there is a contradiction on this point. By the time of Moses they were doing all the menial labor and were downtrodden. They were so numerous that they may have outnumbered the Egyptians. The Bible says that some 600,000 male warriors left Egypt, which, if taken literally, would suggest a total population of two and half million. What an enormous exodus that would have been! It is probable that the biblical text is exaggerating, perhaps to bolster national pride. According to biblical sources the Hebrews had a national identity while in Egypt. There are some indications that this may have been invented post hoc by the priests and scribes, who wished to keep alive Hebrew national awareness and to sanctify their own hegemony and control of the populace.

After the exodus from Egypt, the Hebrews defeated other tribes in battle and often married their women. In one case, we are told that the Hebrew warriors took 32,000 virgins as their wives, killing everyone else. This again seems like an inflated figure. Still there is the constant infusion

I

What do pagan sources say? 169

170

Moses and the chosen people

God. They took over in toto the received Hebrew doctrine about Moses. The pagans on the other hand, writing a thousand years or more after Moses, took him to be a renegade Egyptian priest, who abandoned his former religion and counseled his followers, a group of exiles, to despise anything foreign and to destroy foreign temples and religions wherever they went. He gave them a bizarre new religion, which was strange to pagan ears but is less strange to us, for it has captured large sections of the world in its Christianized form.

Hecataeus of Abdera, a Greek writing in the fourth century B.C.E., gave his own account of the Jews and their customs, which differed from the account in the Bible:

When a serious pestilence arose in ancient Egypt, the populace attributed the cause of the difficulties to the divinity. Inasmuch as many different groups of foreign aliens were living there and followed foreign practices with respect to the temples and the sacrifices, the result was that the traditional worship of the Gods had been neglected. Thus the natives supposed that unless they removed the foreigners there would be no end of their difficulties.⁴

Hecataeus then relates that "the foreigners had been banished." Many of them, he says, went to Greece and other regions; the largest group, however, went into what is now called Judea. This account has the Egyptians expelling all foreigners from Egypt, not just the Jews.

Another account is by the Egyptian author Manetho (about 300 B.C.E.). His story of Moses runs as follows:

It is said that the priest who laid down for them their constitution and the laws was a Heliopolitan named Osarsiph after the God Osiris in Heliopolis; when he went over to this nation (the Jews) he changed his name and was called Moses.⁵ Josephus, the Jewish historian, writing in the first century, quotes Manetho in a book defending the Jews against their detractors. He writes to refute the claims that the Hebrews were expelled from Egypt to Syria along with 80,000 lepers who allied themselves with them under the priest Osarsiph in order to battle the Pharaoh. Josephus attributed this to "mere legend," but it is interesting that it was a view then current. Josephus' own account of Jewish antiquity is based largely on the biblical account, which he accepts uncritically, miracles and all. He denounced all the pagan stories as fabrications. He insists: "Our fathers were not origin-

4. Quoted in John G. Gager, *Moses in Graeco-Roman Paganism* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 26.

5. *Aegyptiaca* 1.250. Quoted in Gager, *Moses*, p. 114.

I

What do pagan sources say? 171

ally Egyptian, nor were they expelled, either on account of bodily diseases or any other calamities of that sort" (Flavius Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book II).

In the first century c.E. other stories of Jewish history appeared in Strabo's *Geography*. The Greek text has been attributed to Posidonius-Strabo.

Although they (the inhabitants of Judea) are thus of mixed origins, the predominant report of those currently held concerning the temple in Jerusalem affirms that the Egyptians are the ancestors of those people who are now called Jews.

For a certain Moses, who was one of the Egyptian priests, held a section of what is called the (lower) region (chora). But he became dissatisfied with the way of life and departed thence, to Jerusalem, in the company of many who worshipped the deity.⁶

Here Strabo was repeating the belief widely held by his contemporaries about the Egyptian origin of the Jews. This was supported by the Roman historian Tacitus (first century C.E.), who lists five different theories about Jewish origins but nevertheless maintains that the most prevalent theory was that Jews were descended from the Egyptians.

Another Roman historian, Pompeius Trojus, wrote in *Historiae Philippicni* about the expulsion of Moses and his followers from Egypt. He claimed that the Egyptians were exposed to "scabs" and "a skin infection," and expelled Moses together with the sick people beyond the confines of Egypt "lest the disease should spread to a greater number of people."⁷

Interestingly, Pompeius offers an explanation for Jewish separate-ness. It was not because they were the chosen people, but rather:

. . . because they remembered that they had been expelled from Egypt due to fear of contagion, they took care not to live with outsiders lest they become hateful to the natives for the same reason (i.e., fear of contagious infection). This regulation, which arose from a specific cause, he (Moses) transformed gradually into a fixed custom and religion.⁸

Whether this explanation is correct is hard to say. It was prevalent during that period. Tacitus supports the view when he maintains that the Jews "abstain from pork in recollection of the plague, because the scab which attacks this animal once infected them."⁹ The expulsion legend is

6. Quoted in Gager, *Moses*, p. 38.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

172 Moses and the chosen people

repeated by Chaeremon and his contemporary, Apion, two Alexandrian writers who claimed that the Egyptian Pharaoh "collected 250,000 infected people and expelled them."¹⁰

But we may ask, who were the people who left Egypt? Again a vast number of people, according to the non-Jewish version; they apparently had no common religion or national identity. Why should we accept the biblical narrative as objective history, which already had been transformed into an article of religious faith? Why not admit an alternative account of Jewish history? Perhaps both are biased. Perhaps the truth lies somewhere in between.

The revelations of Moses

Let us now resume our analysis of the Old Testament account of Moses and the exodus. The central thesis of both Judaism and Christianity is that Moses was a prophet appointed by God to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt. This divine mission was entrusted to Moses by means of special revelations. The basic question we must raise is: "Who instructed Moses with this task and what is the evidence for it? How do we know that it was God?" The major testimony is from Moses himself, as recorded in the Bible. There is circular reasoning here. Moses is the prophet of God because he said that he was. How do we know that it was God who said he was? Because Moses (the author of the Pentateuch) tells us he did. At least that is the structure of the argument of the Pentateuch.

The Moses legend of the Bible runs as follows: As a grown man, Moses saw an Egyptian strike a fellow Hebrew. Seeing that there was no one about, he struck the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand. When Pharaoh heard about it, he tried to put Moses to death; but Moses escaped and settled in Midian and there married Zipporah, who bore him a son. We are told in one place that his father-in-law was Reuel and in another Jethro, priest of Midian. There are contradictions

in the account, for his father-in-law has still other names: Jethro, Cain, Hobab, or Hobabben Reuel.

Of great importance is Moses' first encounter with Yahweh. While minding the flock of Jethro, he went to Horeb, the mountain of God. There we are told "the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the flame of the burning bush" (Exod. 3:2 ff.). Moses noticed that though the bush was on fire, it did not burn. He was on his way to see the wonderful sight when Yahweh called out of the bush: "Moses, Moses." Moses replied,

10. Aigyptiake Historic 288-92. Quoted in Gager, Moses, p. 121.

The revelations of Moses 173

"Yes I am here." And God told him to take off his sandals for he was standing on holy ground. Then God said, "I am the God of your fore-fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses covered his face for he was afraid to gaze on God. God next told him that he had witnessed the suffering of the Jews in Egypt under their slavemasters and that he will send Moses to Pharaoh to lead the Israelites, his people, out of Egypt.

Moses demurred, "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" And God answered, "I am with you. This shall be the proof that it is I who have sent you," and he told Moses that he and the people should worship God on the mountain (Exod. 3:11-12). Then Moses asked what he should say if the people asked the name of God. God replied, "I AM; that is who I am. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them." This quest for the name is based on the age-old belief that knowledge of the right name confers on man some magical power, including power over the deity. But the deity is evasive and will not give his name or power over himself. This belief persists among many Jews even today; they are still unwilling to spell his name. Is God a transcendent being? How is he able to enter into human affairs, influence events, and communicate with special persons?

Now taking the text on its own terms at face value for the moment and leaving aside all historical interpretations, it should be clear that we have the so-called testimony of one man, who says that he encountered God. There were no impartial witnesses on the scene, which provides excellent ground for the skeptic to withhold any kind of assent to the uncorroborated claims of Moses' divine authority. Interestingly, passages of the Old Testament, upon which so much depends, are rooted in uncorroborated appearances or dreams.

The text itself is troubled on this point, for it seeks to reinforce the divine mission. Moses is to tell the elders that he is to lead them out of Egypt to a promised land. Moses himself says, "But they will never believe me or listen to me; they will say, The Lord did not appear to you." (Exod. 4:1-2). And at this point, the Lord is to provide Moses with the power to work miracles as a sign of his power. God commands him to throw his staff on the ground. He does so, and it turns into a snake. He is told to seize the snake by the tail, and when he does, it turns back into a staff. Moses puts his hand inside the fold of his cloak and when he pulls it out it appears diseased and as white as snow (as if leprosy); when he puts it back it returns to health. He also pours water from the Nile onto dry ground; it turns into blood. Thus we have the biblical text supporting the truth of the revelation by reference to signs of miraculous powers that Moses allegedly had. Moses also says that he is bashful and slow of

174 Moses and the chosen people

speech, and God tells him that his brother Aaron will be his mouthpiece to plead with the elders and the Pharaoh.

There are two key issues here: First, the use of uncorroborated testimony by the prophets to lend credence to the belief that they had divine revelations, and second, the use of magic to stimulate belief in a credulous audience that they were indeed God's prophets. I will return to the question of whether Moses was a magician, but now I wish to focus on the claim to divine knowledge by means of revelations.

If we look at earlier passages in Genesis, we see that God often appeared to the forefathers in private encounters. At one point, Yahweh speaks to Abram alone and shows him the land of Canaan in the distance, saying that he will give all of the land to him and his descendants forever (Gen. 13:14-16). Later we read, "The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision" (Gen. 15:1). When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord again appeared to him, making a covenant with him and changing his name to Abraham (Gen. 17:1-6).

Among the most famous stories was the effort of Yahweh to put Abraham's faith and obedience to the test. The Lord commanded Abraham to take Isaac, his only son by Sarah, to one of the hills and offer him as a sacrifice. The biblical narrative has Abraham saddling his ass and taking with him two of his men and Isaac. When they reached the place he said to his men, "Stay here with the ass while I and the boy go over there; and when we have worshipped we will come back to you" (Gen. 22:5-6). Abraham goes alone with Isaac and is prepared to do God's bidding. He tells Isaac to come, and he lays him on the altar on top of the wood. As he takes his knife to kill his son, the angel of the Lord calls from heaven and tells him not to sacrifice his son, since he has proved that he was God-fearing and obedient. Instead, Abraham sacrifices a ram that is nearby. This is an important moral lesson that the Old Testament presents against the barbaric practice of human sacrifice. But it is described as a private revelation to Abraham. We do not even have a word from Isaac to confirm his father's encounter with God.

Later, when Isaac is a grown man, he has a revelation from God while in Beersheba. We read: "That same night the Lord appeared to him there and said, 'I am the God of your father, Abraham. Fear nothing, for I am with you. I will bless you and give you many descendants for the sake of Abraham my servant' " (Gen. 26:23-24). Later, we read in Genesis of Jacob's dream about a ladder, which is resting on the ground with its top reaching to the heavens. The Lord tells him again that the land on which he is lying will be given to his descendants. Jacob wakes up from the dream and says, "Truly, the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it" (Gen. 28:16-17).

I

The revelations of Moses 175

Dreams have always intrigued men and women, and they no doubt held a special fascination for the uneducated mind. Were dreams prophetic? Should they be taken as messages from God? Joseph, while in Egypt, is said to have been able to interpret the hidden meaning of dreams. Dreams were cited by the authors of the Bible to justify the existence of God. But subjective experiences are notoriously unreliable, and the stuff that dreams are made of is human desire, imagination, and wish-fulfillment. That God should convey such important knowledge to selected individuals while alone or in a dream state is highly suspect. A careful reading of biblical scripture should make one wary of claims made in God's behalf, whether by Moses or anyone else. Interestingly, the number of occasions when God appears to the multitude are fairly rare in the Pentateuch, in comparison with his personal visitations.

There is an incident involving Moses that is rather strange; it suggests the primordial mythological mysteries from which ancient Judaism emerged. God spoke to Moses in Midian and told him to go back to Egypt, for all those who wished to kill him were dead. Moses took his wife and children, mounted them on an ass, and began his journey back to Egypt. "During the journey, while they were encamped for the night, the Lord met Moses, meaning to kill him, but Zipporah picked up a sharp flint, cut off his son's foreskin, and touched him with it, saying 'You are my blood-bridegroom.' So the Lord let Moses alone. Then she said, 'Blood-bridegroom by circumcision.'" (Exod. 4:24-26). Here not only Moses but also his wife encounters the Lord. Why did the Lord wish to kill him by night after having met him by day in the burning bush? Is it because Moses had invaded sacred ground where Yahweh dwelt? Did Yahweh encounter Moses and seek to kill him, much the same as a demon might seek to preserve his domain from any intruder? And what is the meaning of Zipporah's offering the deity the foreskin of her son in this coarse and obscure story? Does it point to the symbolic role that circumcision is to take in placating the deity from harming his people? The symbols of sacrifice and blood are full of sexual possibilities. Freud considered this to imply the intermixing of a castration complex and the fear of God. Magic and mystery survived this fictitious event. Perhaps the most important incident in the life of Moses was his encounter with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai. Indeed, Moses' reputation rests on the conviction that he was the lawgiver of the Jews because he had received the Ten Commandments and other laws directly from God. According to the Exodus story, the Jews were wandering in the wilderness. In the third month after they had left Egypt, they reached the Sinai and pitched their tents opposite the great mountain. Moses went up the mountain and received a message from Yahweh, telling him to speak to the

176 Moses and the chosen people

sons of Israel and tell them: "If only you will now listen to me and keep my covenant, then out of all peoples you shall become my special possession; for the whole earth is mine. You shall be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation" (Exod. 19:1-6).

Here it is Moses alone who visits with God on the mountain (though on occasion God also communicates with Aaron and even Moses' younger accomplice, Joshua of Nun, who would become his successor). Moses has God strictly forbidding anyone else to go up the mountain to communicate with Yahweh upon pain of death. He says: "You must be barriers around the mountain," and he warns others, "Take care not to go up the mountain or even to touch the edge of it. Any man who touches the mountain must be put to death" (Exod. 19:12). It seems apparent that Moses seeks to strike terror in the hearts of his band of followers. He alone is permitted to communicate with God and bring his message back, and anyone else who attempts to see or talk to him will die. Moses reiterates: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Go down; warn the people solemnly that they must not force their way through to the Lord to see him, or many of them will perish'" (Exod. 19:21-22). This prohibition also applies to the priests. "Go down; then come up and bring Aaron with you, but let neither priests nor people force their way up to the Lord, for fear that he may break out against them" (Exod. 19:24). "Moses shall approach the Lord by himself," we are again told, "but not the others. The people may not go up with him at all" (Exod. 24:2).

The tale thus has Moses going up and down the mountain. On the most dramatic occasion, there are heavy clouds and thunder, even the peals of a trumpet. No one is permitted to go up to the Lord; thus only Moses can deliver God's

commandments and prohibitions. These laws, if carefully read, create a new priestly class, shower them with sacrificial gifts, and place Moses and the tribe of Levi in charge of the lives of the people. Moses has established a theocracy and a new privileged elite—all in the name of the invisible God, who speaks to him alone.

Did Moses really experience the incident of the burning bush? Did he genuinely hear voices or did he imagine it? Was he emotionally disturbed? Was his conviction so strong that he had heard the voice of God that he was able to convince his fellow exiles to heed him, for fear of the wrath of the Lord. (When Pharaoh allowed the Jews to depart from Egypt, Moses claimed this was due to great plagues sent by God.) Or did Moses use deceit to achieve his ends, and did he trick and betray his followers into believing that he had revelations from on high, simply so that he could manipulate them? Or was the story a way of giving concrete expression to a people's ethical growth and political needs?

When we come to the receiving of the Ten Commandments, the

Was Moses a magician? 177

question can be raised: "In what sense did Moses use this crucial incident to frighten his followers into obeying him?" It surely would solidify his rule if the people believed that he was divinely appointed to be the leader-priest of the new theocracy he was establishing. Since the other monarchs of his day, including the Pharaohs, were commonly believed to have been divinely invested, it should not be surprising for Moses also to make this claim. But his powers were self-proclaimed.

We have at least four possible hypotheses to consider in interpreting the events of the day:

1. The traditional one: that Moses did speak to God and was divinely appointed to receive the revelation. There is absolutely no evidence for this extraordinary claim, even though the faithful have accepted it ever since.
2. An opposite interpretation has been provided by skepticism, and seems plausible. The Humean-type of argument runs: The stories of Moses were inventions of the superstitious mind. They were transmitted in the oral tradition and embellished by later writers. These fictitious stories are the products of the primitive imagination, especially in regard to the fanciful miracles. Whether any part of these events actually happened, we have no way of knowing, but if they did they can be given naturalistic explanations.
3. Perhaps part of the traditional tale is true. One explanation is that Moses believed, at least in part, that he had heard voices; and he thus attributed events in his natural environment to divine forces. Perhaps he genuinely thought that he had a divine mission. This would mean that he was overpowered by religious experiences and that he believed that God was speaking to him and that God had entrusted him with a special task. This has been true of other disturbed individuals historically. Moses undoubtedly was influenced by a culture that accepted the reality of occult forces, and he thus may have been psychologically disposed to believe that some divine force had entered his life. His faith-state, however mis-taken in fact, may have been real to him; and it may have moved him to embark with zeal and passion upon his mission.
4. A fourth possible explanation for what occurred was that Moses was a magician-charlatan, with megalomaniac tendencies. Interested in power and control, he deceived a group of ignorant peasants to follow him as the prophet of God. Let us examine this hypothesis.

Was Moses a magician?

The close union of magic with religion in ancient times has been well-documented. The priest, like the magician, was capable of wondrous things that seemingly defied natural explanation: in ceremonies and cele-

178 Moses and the chosen people

brations, he was able to invoke magical powers in which deities and demons seemingly made their presence known. These mystical rites called up forces which, it was believed, enabled men to fulfill their aspirations and allay their troubling fears. Sir James Frazier in *The Golden Bough* maintained that "among primitive peoples, the king is frequently a magi-cian as well as a priest; indeed he appears to have often attained power by virtue of such supposed proficiency in the black and white art."¹² Frazier also points out: "Nowhere, perhaps, were the magic arts more carefully cultivated, nowhere did they enjoy greater esteem, exercise a deeper influ-ence in the national life than in the land of the Pharaohs."¹³

It is likely that Moses would have been acquainted with the arts of magic practiced in the Egyptian religion of his day. Many of the cere-monies performed by the priests of his day were similar to those that Moses was to perform later. The Egyptians feared the wrath of the gods, and they believed that their anger could be deflected by offerings and sacrifices. The gods were often jealous gods who would tolerate no dis-respect, but who could be placated by obedient servants. Holy men in particular could communicate with the spirits of the gods, and they used their occult power to impress their devotees.

Was Moses also a magician? Did he and his confederates resort to the arts of conjuration in order to deceive their unsuspecting followers and elicit their obedience? The Bible itself testifies that the Pharaoh thought that Moses and Aaron were using magical spells, and he sought to have his own magicians and sorcerers compete with them.

We read that Moses and Aaron performed various feats in front of Pharaoh as a sign of Yahweh's power. "At this, Pharaoh summoned the wise men and the sorcerers, and the Egyptian magicians too did the same thing by their spells" (Exod. 7:11-12). Moses had Aaron throw down a staff, which immediately turned into a serpent. This the Egyptian magi-cians did also, but their serpents were swallowed by Aaron's staff. Similarly, Moses and Aaron were able to turn the waters of the Nile into blood; the fish died and the river stank. "But," we are told, "the Egyptian magi-cians did the same thing by their spells" (Exod. 7:22). Then there was a great plague of frogs. Again the magicians were able to do the same. How much truth and how much fantasy lie in these reports is difficult to say. According to Josephus, who was no doubt aware of the charge that Moses was a magician, Moses approached Pharaoh and told him of the "signs" that were done at Mt. Sinai. The king accused Moses of being an "ill man," who came to him with "deceitful tricks, and wonders, and

12. James George Frazier, *The Golden Bough*, abridged ed. (New York: Mentor Books, 1964), p. 34.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Was Moses a magician? 179

magical arts to astonish him." The Egyptians were skillful in this kind of learning, said the Pharaoh, and noted that Moses had "pretended then to be divine," and such "wonderful sights could only be believed by the unlearned." Moses replied that "what I do is not done by craft or counterfeiting."¹⁴

According to the Pentateuch, the Egyptians were again and again visited with terrible calamities: maggots, locusts, swarms of flies, pesti-lences that infect

cattle, boils on man and beast, a violent hailstorm, and famine. The Pharaoh's magicians were unable to replicate these events— all natural occurrences (if they occurred) that Moses attributed to divine agency. The last plague, which struck all the first-born sons of the Egyptians and spared the Hebrew slaves, was the final blow; with that the Pharaoh consented to their departure. Overloaded with treasure given to them by the Egyptians, the Hebrews fled. The Pharaoh had second thoughts, however, and sent an army after them to bring them back. When the army was overtaken by a heavy storm, the Hebrews escaped through the Sea of Reeds, the Egyptians were inundated, and gave up the pursuit. This was the "miracle" of the Red Sea.

The pagan literature, as we have seen, offered another explanation for the exodus. Plagues had struck the population. (Such diseases were apt to occur, given the poor level of sanitation, and it probably decimated large sectors of the population, as the Bubonic plague did in the Middle Ages.) The Egyptians, in response, expelled slaves and foreigners, believing that they had contaminated the population. They sought to placate their gods, whom they thought might have caused such terrible misfortunes. Unable to comprehend the cause and prevention of disease, they were wont to find scapegoats in men or gods, and out of fear they took desperate measures. The interaction of coincidences may have led them and the Hebrews to believe that these events were caused by divine forces. It is only too easy for the animistic mind to read into nature occult powers, which cause human diseases and mete out punishment and reward. The departing escapees inferred that Moses' God was responsible for inflicting these awful things on their Egyptian masters and that they were being saved by Yahweh's hand.

The testimony of the Bible strongly suggests that Moses did indeed use sorcery to impress Pharaoh and his court. The ancient, non-Jewish literature reinforces this view. This appears not only in the literature hostile to the Jews, which was abundant, but also in the ancient literature on magic and alchemy, fragments of which have survived. These parchments point to Moses as a figure of great authority in the field of magic.

14. Josephus, *Antiquities*, Book XIII.

180 Moses and the chosen people

One body of magic papyri was collected and edited by K. Preisendanz.¹⁵ There are also ancient alchemical texts in which Moses is mentioned. They point to Moses as one who had a special relationship to God but who also authored secret magical texts.

Other pagan sources reinforce this view of Moses. Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (first century C.E.), sketches a brief history of magic and writes about a sect of Jews "deriving from Moses" and others who practiced magic. Similar citations of Moses as a magician appear in Apuleius' *Apology* and Numenius' *On the Good*. Celsus also considered Moses to have been a magician and to have made his way by clumsy deceits: "Those herdsmen and shepherds who followed Moses as their leader had their minds deluded by vulgar deceits and so supposed that there was one God."¹⁶ Celsus defended the polytheism of Rome against the monotheism of the Jews and Christians. He said disparagingly of the Jews: "They worship angels and are addicted to sorcery, in which Moses was their instructor."¹⁷ He also rejected the attempt to establish Jewish antiquity by tracing the Jews back to the patriarchs of the Bible, whom he calls the "first offspring of jugglers and deceivers."¹⁸ Harsh words, but is there any evidence in fact?

Origen reports in *Contra Celsus* on a conversation with some Jews about Egypt: How do they meet the charge of the Egyptians, he asks, who rejected Moses "as a sorcerer who appeared to have performed his great deeds by jugglery (magic)."¹⁹ He reports on additional Egyptian criticisms of Moses by saying that "they do not deny entirely the powerful miracles done by Moses, but claim that they were done by sorcery and not by divine power."²⁰ For Celsus, belief in such miracles is limited to "uneducated people" and those of "depraved moral character."

I will not extensively detail the various miraculous events that allegedly happened to the Hebrews during the wandering in the desert. Whether these events happened as rendered in the Bible is difficult to say. Events that could be given natural explanations were often attributed to divine agency by the ancient mind. Elias Auerbach has attempted to put what happened during the Hebrews' wanderings in the wilderness in a more realistic perspective.²¹ He suggests that the number of persons involved were no more than 12,000 to 13,000, not the huge numbers given

15. *Papyri Magicae Graecae die griechischen Zauberpapyri*, ed. and trans. into German by K. Preisendanz, vol. 1 (1928), vol. 2 (1931).

16. Origen, *Contra Celsus*, 1:23.

17. *Ibid.* 1:26.

18. *Ibid.* IV:33.

19. *Ibid.* 1:43.

20. *Ibid.* 111:5.

21. Elias Auerbach, *Moses* (Amsterdam: G. J. A. Ruys, 1953). Eng. trans. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1975).

Was Moses a magician? 181

in Exodus and that they spent most of their time at Kadesh, a large, relatively lush oasis in the desert. Moreover, the refugees probably did not wander continuously for forty years. The wandering tribes are thirsty, and they find water; they are hungry for meat, and they find quail; they need bread, and they receive manna—all thought to have been brought about by divine intervention. Auerbach speculates that the spring which Moses is supposed to have brought forth by striking his staff upon a rock was a preexisting spring at the oasis Kadesh. There is, similarly, a natural explanation for the so-called miracle of quails. It is not rare for migrating birds tired of flying across a hot desert to land suddenly in large numbers at an oasis to quench their thirst. The Bible describes the manna that appeared one morning "like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey." Seeds that fit that description may still be found today in oases; they are the sweet, resinlike product of tamarisks, which are found to fall from trees. To consider manna food for forty years was no doubt an exaggeration of the actual event.

Is it not plausible that Moses consciously deceived his people into believing that he possessed powers from God that worked through him? If Moses was to forge a new nation and a new consciousness out of the ragged tribes that followed him, then invoking the power of the deity, with all of the drama of magic, incantation, and sorcery, was a method that he and his accomplices might use with success. Moses undoubtedly was a charismatic individual who was able to awaken fervent support, but this depended in large part in his being a miracle worker. Here is a mortal man attempting to demonstrate his importance and solidify his power over his flock, constantly needing to convince them of his superhuman status.

We have already discussed the curious sequence of events in which Moses ascends the mountain alone to speak to God and then descends with the Covenant. On one occasion he finds the camp in disarray, the Hebrews dancing, singing, and worshiping a graven image. It is obvious that his people easily revert to their old ways. He needs to again frighten them by invoking a power higher than himself. This he succeeds in doing. But his authority is often contested. There is no constitution and no system of law that governs their behavior. Thus he needs to produce one, which he based on earlier legal codes, such as the Code of Hammurabi, which he could have learned as an educated Egyptian. But he attributes the authority for such a code to a new god, Yahweh, whose name he often elicits.

It is both pathetic and amusing to speculate about the possible devices that Moses used to hoodwink people to engender fear and respect for his sovereignty. When we view the Pentateuch in this way, Moses emerges as a master

182 Moses and the chosen people

of guile, with some unadmirable traits; he was imperious, vain, cunning, hot-tempered, vindictive, all too ready to murder those who opposed him. Unlike Jesus, he shows little compassion for those who differed with him. This appraisal may appear harsh about an individual who has been revered as a great prophet and lawgiver, but whose place in history is shrouded in mystery. Yet a careful reading of the text in modern terms lends credence to my analysis of his personality. I do not deny some important qualities of Moses the lawgiver, who, if the Bible is roughly accurate, had the great courage to challenge the Pharaoh and a dogged persistence to lead his flock through great adversity. The Egypt of his day was corrupt; the life of the ordinary man was cheap; human sacrifice, even cannibalism, had been practiced. Moses was limited by his times, and he borrowed moral principles from others, but he made important contributions in the laws he gave the Hebrews.

If one examines the biblical record, it is clear that the circumstances surrounding the appearance of the Lord to Moses and the Hebrews are wrapped in obscurity. As we have seen, no one was permitted to ascend to Mt. Sinai "because the Lord had come down upon it in fire." Moreover, there was smoke, which "went up like the smoke of a kiln." "And the sound of the trumpet grew ever louder" (Exod. 19:18-19). Was Mt. Sinai a volcanic mountain with pillars of smoke that Moses knew about because of his early visitations to Midian? And did he use this conveniently for his own ends? Or did he also employ crude props and paraphernalia to achieve his aims? The Egyptians had the technology to build the pyramids. Had Moses mastered some skill that let him practice deception on a vast scale? We do not know for certain. Whatever the explanation, the people were terrified by the scene.

In Exodus we read of the delivery of the Ten Commandments to Moses. The people heard peals of thunder and saw flashes of lightning. What a dramatic stage for Moses to make his appearance on, just when a thunder and lightning storm is threatening. Perhaps an accomplice blew a trumpet or lit a kiln. Cecil B. DeMille could not have done it better! And the people "trembled and stood at a distance" (Exod. 20:18-19). They were fearful to speak to the Lord, since if they were to do so, they believed they would die. Moses kept reiterating dire forebodings. Only Moses was permitted to approach the dark cloud where God was. It was in this dramatic context that Moses delivered the laws that were to govern the Hebrews.

Later, after Moses' power is challenged, he permits Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy of the elders to approach Yahweh at a distance and bow down (Exod.

24:1-2). But again, Moses alone approaches the Lord and does not let the others come near. The text is obscure as to

183

Was Moses a magician?

precisely what occurred. This party went up to see the God of Israel. "But the Lord did not stretch out his hand towards the leaders of Israel." Nonetheless, "they stayed there before God; they ate and they drank" (Exod. 24:9-11). Again the Lord told Moses to come up to him in the mountain. This time "Moses arose with Joshua his assistant and went up the mountain of God." As he left he told the elders, "Wait for us here until we come back to you" (Exod. 24:13-14). Then Moses went up the mountain and a cloud covered it. He stayed there for forty days and forty nights before he brought down the commandments inscribed on two tablets of stone. Apparently, it took Moses a considerable amount of effort to chisel out the commandments, though the faithful no doubt believe that it was the finger of God that engraved the tablets. Joshua emerges in this scenario as a key figure. Was he responsible for the accouterments of the act on the mountain—the trumpet and the smoke? A good magician usually needs an assistant to help with the props.

The numerous rules and regulations that Moses proclaims are designed to ensure that he and his priestly entourage of the tribe of Levi would receive many offerings. It is commanded that food and treasures be offered to Yahweh to placate him, but these are consumed by those in charge of the priestly functions, a new elite that serves in Yahweh's name. In spite of the bravado of his act, it was difficult for Moses to maintain his tight control constantly; even his brother Aaron and sister Miriam contested his hegemony at times.

Moses later effectively struck fear and awe into the hearts of his people with his use of what the Pentateuch calls the "Tent of the Presence" (translated as the "Tabernacle" in the King James version or the "Tent of Meeting" in the Jewish Torah). We read: "Moses used to take a tent and pitch it at a distance outside the camp. He called it the Tent of the Presence, and everyone who sought the Lord would go out to the Tent of the Presence outside the camp" (Exod. 33:7-8). When Moses went to the tent the people would all stand and follow him with their eyes as he entered it. "When Moses entered it, the pillar of cloud came down, and stayed at the entrance to the tent while the Lord spoke with Moses" (Exod. 33:9-10). According to Exodus "there was fire in the cloud by night" (40:38). The burning substance emitted not only smoke but sparks. As soon as the people saw this, they would prostrate themselves, as the Lord spoke face to face with Moses. We then read that Moses would return to the camp, but revealingly, "his young assistant Joshua, son of Nun, never moved from inside the tent" (Exod. 33:11). We may speculate on what occurred. Did a divine, anthropomorphic entity truly speak to Moses as "one man speaks to another?" Or, were Moses and Joshua able by means of magic to produce a cloud of some

184 Moses and the chosen people

unknown substance, which hovered over the tent? Joshua is a central figure, for he had been with Moses since he was a boy, and it was he who assumed the mantle of power after the death of Moses. This same Joshua must have been privy to Moses' secret sorcery and indeed aided him in the conjurer's tricks that they perpetrated on the Hebrews. Indeed, it is Joshua who was responsible for giving Judaism its form after Moses passed from the scene.

The Tent of the Presence plays a central role in Moses' career because, aside from Moses' visitation to the mountain to see the burning bush and produce the Ten Commandments and the laws, it is in or near the tent, the house of mystery and magic that contains the Sacred Ark of the Covenant, that Moses as priest, monarch, and showman performs his act.

As the saga unfolds, Moses took Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the Tent of Presence, where he anointed and consecrated them as priests. Here, a new hereditary priesthood is established by Moses. The Levites in the second year after the exodus are put in charge of the Tabernacle and all its equipment. They are responsible for pitching the tent and taking it down when they move. So fearful does Moses appear to be of being detected that he places a guard. The text reads: "Any unqualified person who comes near it shall be put to death" (Num. 1:51).

At one point there seems to have been a serious danger of detection. Apparently only Moses, Joshua, and Aaron were permitted into the innermost sanctuary of the Tent of the Presence. On one occasion "Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, took their fire pans [offering vessels], put fire in them, threw incense on the fire and presented before the Lord illicit fire which he had not commanded" (Lev. 10:1-2). We are then told that they are burned to death by Yahweh because of that transgression. "Fire came out from before the Lord and destroyed them; and so they died" (Lev. 10:2-3). Moses sternly warns people to be careful in approaching the holy tent and God, and also not to mourn for the sons. Aaron is dumb-founded, but he is left with his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. The use of fire to kill those who contest Moses' power appears later—as if a crude kind of flamethrower were being employed from within the tent to sear and singe those outside.

Any explanation of such rituals and events in the Pentateuch is difficult and must be based upon conjecture. We have no way of knowing whether the events related actually transpired. They may at best be only distant echoes of real events. Still if we assume they did, then I think we may substitute an alternative hypothesis for the traditional view of Moses. He may have believed that he talked to God—a form of schizophrenia that occurs in those who hear voices or have experiences of revelation—

Was Moses a magician? 185

and he may have used all of the dramatic means at his disposal to convince his followers that he did.

There are some rather interesting challenges to Moses' authority that call for further analysis; for they suggest the use of cunning on his part to interpret events in his way. Things were at times very difficult for the Israelites as they wandered in the wilderness. For example, "there came a time when the people complained to the Lord of their hardships." When Yahweh heard of this, according to the biblical account, he became angry. As a result, fire broke out and raged at one end of the camp. Moses is said to have interceded with Yahweh, and the fire died down (Num. 11:1-3). Moses, in any case takes credit for soliciting Yahweh's help in extinguishing the blaze. The people complain about the lack of abundant food or meat. Moses feels a great responsibility about their burden. How does he deal with their constant pestering? Moses brings seventy elders to the Tent of the Presence. Here we learn that "for the first and only time" the Lord ascended in a cloud and spoke to them. He conferred the same spirit on them that he had on Moses. And they fell into a "prophetic ecstasy" (Num. 11:24-26).

What happened here is difficult to say because the details are so sketchy. Did they have a "religious experience?" Did they imagine that they were able to contact the divinity? We read further that two men, Eldad and Medad, who were part of the seventy, did not go out to the tent, but the spirit alighted on them and they fell into an ecstasy in the camp. When news of this is brought to Moses, Joshua becomes agitated and cries, "My lord Moses, stop them!"—as if to say that only he and Moses can claim such a power. Moses, however, admonishes Joshua not to be so jealous and wishes that all of his people could become prophets. The next day a wind from Yahweh drives a huge flock of quail, which falls to the ground and provides food for the people. But they are again struck with a deadly disease, which is attributed to Yahweh's anger.

On another occasion, Moses is challenged by Aaron and Miriam. They ask, "Is Moses the only one with whom the Lord has spoken? Has he not spoken with us as well?" (Num. 12:1-3). Moses becomes furious at them. He summons all of them to the entrance of the Tent of the Presence. There Aaron and Miriam are chastised by Yahweh. Interestingly, he punishes Miriam, who is inflicted with a skin disease and confined for seven days outside the camp.

The people again complain about their life; they are fearful of reports about the men of Canaan, who appear to be of gigantic size, and they are leery about seizing the promised land. They begin to talk about returning to Egypt and choosing someone to lead them back.

The Bible tells us that Yahweh is grieved and says that none of those

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Was Moses a magician? 187

Another ruse performed by Moses is appalling. Moses assembles the heads of the twelve tribes before the Tent of the Presence. Each chieftain is to bring a staff, on which his name is written. The name of Aaron is inscribed on the staff of the Levites. Each of the chiefs hands Moses his staff, which Moses takes inside the tent. And then we read that the "next day when he entered the tent, he [Moses] found Aaron's staff, the staff for the tribe of Levi, had sprouted. Indeed, it had sprouted, blossomed, and produced real almonds" (Num. 17:8-9). Lo and behold what a miracle! One can imagine Moses and Joshua and Aaron carefully substituting a new staff, identical with the earlier staff of Aaron, inscribed with his name, but cut from the branch of an almond tree. No one save the trusted confederates is permitted in or near the tent on pain of death. One may ask: Was it Yahweh who made the staff sprout or human contrivance?

Moses again has Yahweh cautioning Aaron that he and his sons, together with the members of the Levite tribe, shall be responsible for the sanctuary and the Tent of the Presence. They shall be in attendance at the tent but they "shall not go near the holy vessels and the altar or they will die" (Num. 18:1-4). They shall be careful to perform their priestly duties in everything pertaining to the altar and what is behind the curtain or within the veil, but any outsiders who intrude in it "shall be put to death" (Num. 18:7). And we may ask: What is it that is so secret within the tent that Moses wishes to guard it at all costs and kill anyone who attempts to peek?

Moses' full vindictive fury is unleashed when he finally has his brother Aaron killed, because, according to the text, he "rebelled against my command" (Num. 20:24-25). Moses takes Aaron and his son Eleazar up Mt. Hor, strips Aaron of his robes, and invests Eleazar with them. "There Aaron died on the mountain top ... as the Lord had commanded" (Num. 20:27-29). Moses descends with Eleazar

and the people mourn for thirty days. Though the Bible condemns Cain for slaying Abel, it does not likewise condemn Moses. Moses is able to rule his flock only by using the bloody fist. An absolute dictator, he allows no questioning of his (or Yahweh's) authority. Anyone who thwarts his will, even his own brother, who stood beside him for years, is liquidated. It is a wonder that the judgment of history has not condemned Moses. Perhaps it was because he began his career as a liberator, and there is a human tendency to view with favor those who seek to free a people from oppression, however oppressive and corrupt they may themselves become in the process and however much they may betray their own code of morality.

188 Moses and the chosen people

Moses the lawgiver

Moses' reputation is based on the assumption that he not only was a national liberator but was also a great lawgiver, handing down a moral code of great grandeur for future generations. If this is the case, it is time that we turn to an analysis of the moral code and the commandments proclaimed by Moses. No doubt, what is contained in the five books of the Pentateuch was developed over the centuries; and so how much was original with Moses and how much was interpolated or codified by later generations is difficult to say. Many people take Judaism basically as an ethical religion, and they tend to minimize its miraculous or supernatural elements, focusing on its moral insights. But in the twentieth century we are entitled to ask: Is the Mosaic code the model of righteousness we have always been told that it is?

Religious believers usually cite the Ten Commandments as an expression of ethical eloquence, but they rarely submit these tenets to careful evaluation, nor do they seem to notice that many of the other regulations are sadly deficient in morality—at least by the standards of the developed moral conscience. No doubt in the context of the times, they may be said to have represented an advance, but this is not unqualifiedly so. The moral code of the Pentateuch has its precursors and analogues in ancient times and is not original with Moses. For example, King Hammurabi of Babylon codified ancient Sumerian and later Semitic laws and anticipated many ordinances found in the Pentateuch. The Hammurabi Code has been dated by scholars as being framed anywhere from 2100 to 1700 B.c.E. Etched on a block of black diorite and standing some eight feet high, it was erected in the public square of the Babylonian city of Sippar. It was uncovered at Susa by archeologists and is now on exhibit in Paris.

Interestingly, carved at the top of the Hammurabi stone is a picture of the Babylonian king receiving the laws from the sun god, Shamash, similar to Moses' reception of the law from Yahweh.

Many of the ordinances bear a striking resemblance to the Mosaic covenant in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. For example, the notion of justice "eye for eye, and life for life" (lex talionis) is found in the Hammurabi Code as well as in the Pentateuch. The laws of the code are framed in a similar conditional form. "If A is done, then B will be the punishment." In many cases similar penalties are imposed for the same offense, such as the death penalty for incest (which was practiced in Egypt by the ruling class). There are also some humanitarian elements in the code. It is particularly strong in its prohibition against defrauding

Moses the lawgiver189

out with a strong hand and an out-stretched arm, and for that reason the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

How can we explain the divergent statements other than to recognize that the Bible is the product of many authors and that it evolved over a period of many centuries. What about the content of the commandments themselves? Are they universally applicable? Are they models of moral inspiration? I very much doubt that an unbiased reading of them today would agree.

The first two commandments concern one's religious obligations. These are not necessarily ethical duties, but religious injunctions toward piety and devotion, and they have little to commend themselves to the freethinker or skeptic. A succinct statement of the first commandment as taken from the version in Exodus reads as follows:

1. I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. You shall have no other god to set against me (Exod. 20:2-3).

This is directed to and applies first and foremost to the Israelites, and it is from their national god. It does not necessarily apply to all men, for they were not brought out of Egypt. This is a highly partial conception of the deity.

The second commandment states:

2. You shall not make a carved image for yourself nor the likeness of anything in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God (Exod. 20:4-5).

Moses the lawgiver¹⁹¹

Here the commandment is obviously addressing itself to rival religions of the day, which engraved the rival gods they worshipped in animal or human form, such as a sacred cow or bull. The Israelite god could not be easily named, let alone seen face to face—except by Moses, of course. The meaning of this commandment clearly is limited by the cultural context. How would this commandment apply to the many statues and paintings depicting Jesus? Would they violate it? Or the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel by Michelangelo? Is the Roman Catholic church, which fills its cathedrals with images of the holy family and saints, in violation of this commandment? The God of this commandment is not a god of love, mercy, or forgiveness, but is a jealous god, demanding absolute obedience. He is hardly a model of justice, but appears arrogant. This, no doubt, reflects Moses' own personality, as he demands obedience and permits no opposition or dissent. One would think that a rational God would not want his creatures to act like submissive children, but rather to be inquiring, independent, autonomous persons. Why couldn't Yahweh share the beautiful earth with his creations, rather than being so jealous, demanding and possessive.

The rest of this commandment is often not read, and the short published summaries usually omit the following passage. But it is in the Decalogue and seems to me particularly iniquitous. It reads:

I punish the children for the sins of the fathers to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me. But I keep faith with thousands, with those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod. 20:5-6)

Now this part of the second commandment seems immoral, for it assumes the validity of collective guilt. God is seen as visiting punishment on the children of sinful parents, even unto the grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In what sense can this express an exemplary form of righteous conduct? It seems especially barbaric to blame a man's children for the sins and omissions of their parents. No civilized community today would ever justify a law of retribution against the innocent children of dissidents or criminals. How can one say that a

just God is willing to affix responsibility and blame on them and to consider this a worthy deed? This is a holdover from the barbaric practices of retaliating against a person's whole family or tribe, when one feels wronged. But it goes further, for it applies to their descendants still unborn. What unmitigated cruelty! This part of the second commandment should be rejected by every morally decent person.

The third commandment states:

192 Moses and the chosen people

3. You shall not make wrong use of the name of the Lord your God; the Lord will not leave unpunished the man who misuses his name. (Exod. 20:7).

Again, we can object to the severity of the crime. Freedom of thought by dissenters and nonbelievers is prohibited and punished and those of other religions are proscribed. Later, one reads that those who blaspheme the name of God shall be put to death. The commandment is an expression of religious intolerance and bigotry; it is hardly a paragon of moral virtue.

The fourth commandment requires that we keep the Sabbath day holy.

Presumably in a society in which the rights of others are violated, it was an advance to ask for one day a week off, especially for slaves, servants, cattle, and aliens. Today, however, most societies observe a weekend free of labor; and in advanced societies there are two or more weeks of vacation per year. If we were to rewrite this commandment today, it might read: "You shall work no more than five days and have the weekend free for leisure, rest, and cultural activities and enjoyment." My only caveat is that I happen to like to work seven days a week and, indeed, am writing this chapter on Saturday and Sunday, which is a violation of the commandment. Yet orthodox Jews have taken the Sabbath to be so holy that they were afraid to do anything lest they stir the wrath of God. The last six commandments are more directly ethical and have much to commend them. They should be taken as general moral principles, not universal in form, for how they are interpreted or applied depends upon the context:

5. Honor your father and your mother. . . .

6. You shall not commit murder.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not give false evidence against your neighbor.

10. You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, his slave, his slave-girl, his ox, his ass, or anything that belongs to him. (Exod. 20:12-17).

Should moral principles be taken as absolute rules or are they only general guides to conduct. As general guides, Commandments 5-10 express considerable moral insight, for they summarize the wisdom of the race. Unfortunately, they sometimes are taken as inviolable. "Thou shall not murder" is a fundamental principle that we ought to obey and we can give reasons to justify it. But there may be some exceptions, such as in time of war, self-defense, or euthanasia. How the principle is to be in-

193

Moses the lawgiver

terpreted depends upon the context. Moses surely violated the commandment (as did Yahweh), and the countryside was littered with those he had slaughtered.

Similarly, for the absolute commandment forbidding adultery. One may say that this is a wise prohibition, particularly where a marriage is viable and is based upon sincerity and trust. However, it is only a general rule and it involves a hypothetical rather than a categorical imperative. Under some conditions, such as those faced by Lady Chatterley (whose husband was rendered impotent in World War I and incapable of making love to her), it may be violated; at least Lady Chatterley thought so and deemed it advisable to take a lover. Moses violated the principle against adultery with impunity. He took a second wife and also distributed the Midianite women to his soldiers (but only after he had their husbands killed). Moral conduct involves the consideration of many other values and principles besides those enunciated by the Ten Commandments. Even Moses recognized this, for he went on to issue hundreds of other commandments. Most readings of the Pentateuch, however, stop with the Ten Commandments. But there is no good reason to do so, save perhaps the desire to avoid acute embarrassment. If we read Exodus 21, which follows the Decalogue, we find numerous other laws and judgments, as well as in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Many of these laws are extremely harsh and legalistic, and they are offensive to a developed moral conscience. They are hardly appropriate models for a civilized society today; they were limited by the social milieu in which they were promulgated.

For example, we read that "when you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall be your slave for six years, but in the seventh year he shall go free and pay nothing." If he is married, his wife can leave with him. But "if his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons and daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to the master" and cannot be set free. If he protests, his ear will be pierced with an awl and he will be enslaved for life (Exod. 21:2-6). Evidently this morality is relative to a hierarchical caste society in which some human beings are considered to be mere chattel. Nor do equal rights apply to women, who are considered inferior to men. Thus, if a man sells his daughter into slavery, she does not enjoy the same rights as a male slave and will not be freed (Exod. 21:7-8). The master should not mistreat her, however. He is allowed to take another woman, but if he does he must still provide for her. Moses himself practiced polygamy.

This same double standard applies to punishment. If a man intentionally strikes another and kills him, then he shall be put to death. However, if he strikes and kills his slave or slave-girl, so that the slave

194 Moses and the chosen people

dies on the spot, he "must be punished," but not put to death. However, if the slave survives for one or two days, then he shall not be punished, "because he is worth money to his master" (Exod. 21:20-21). Neither women nor slaves have the same rights as free adult males.

The law of retribution is a key element in the Mosaic conception of justice, and it is especially stringent: "Wherever hurt is done, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot. burn for burn, bruise for bruise, wound for wound" (Exod. 21:23-25) The application of this principle in some cases and the severity of retribution seem to far outweigh the original transgression.

The relations between children and parents is particularly authoritarian. The fifth commandment obliges all "to honor your father and your mother." Filial piety serves as the basis of the family structure. Reading further in the Pentateuch, however, many will no doubt be shocked as to how it is interpreted: "Whoever strikes his father or mother shall be put to death" (Exod. 21:15).

The penalty is equally severe for lesser infractions. "Whoever reviles his father or mother shall be put to death" (Exod. 21:17). Incredibly, in Leviticus parents are told that if they cannot control their irascible children, that they can have them stoned to death by the community. What more horrendous form of child abuse can be found in literature than the following passage:

When a man has a son who is disobedient and out of control, and will not obey his father or mother, or pay attention when they punish him, then his father and mother should take hold of him and bring him to the elders of the town at the town gate. They shall say to the elders of the town: "This son of ours is disobedient and out of control; and he will not obey us, he is a wastrel and a drunkard." Then all of the men of the town shall stone him to death, and you will thereby rid yourself of the wickedness (Deut. 21:18-21).

The harshness of the Mosaic code may also be seen by its frequent resort to capital punishment. The death penalty is exacted for murder. But it also applies to the following transgressions: adultery, homosexuality, incest, blasphemy, rape, loss of virginity before the wedding night, sexual relations with animals, failure to keep the Sabbath, sacrifice to other gods, practice of witchcraft, prostitution by priests' daughters, the attempt to contact ghosts or spirits.

Another form of justice that is extremely vindictive concerns children born out of wedlock. The Bible says: "No descendant of an irregular union [i.e., a bastard], even down to the tenth generation, shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 23:2). So tainted is a person from an illegitimate birth that his entire line of descendants are banished

Moses the lawgiver¹⁹⁵

from the Temple for generations to come. Interestingly, the severity of this punishment did not apply to Jesus, who had questionable parentage and clearly came from a highly irregular union, which only demonstrates the ability of the religious temperament to excuse inconsistencies or rationalize hypocrisy. Many Old Testament regulations lack any expression of human kindness or sympathy. Moses expels from the camp anyone who has a malignant skin disease or discharge, perhaps to maintain cleanliness, but this is hardly the mark of human charity. Some of the regulations are amusing. "No man whose testicles have been crushed or whose organ has been severed shall become a member of the assembly of the Lord" (Deut. 23:1). This means that eunuchs were barred from the congregation, even though they did not consent to be castrated. No doubt the laws enunciated in the Mosaic code express the irrational phobias of the times. A man may not have intercourse with his wife during menstruation, nor touch anything of hers during that period. A menstruating woman was considered unclean. A woman is also enjoined from wearing any article of men's clothing. Nor can a man wear any article of women's dress. Circumcision is required of all male Jews. Then there is the well-known injunction against eating pork. As we have seen, some of the pagan authors believed that this was due to the fact that the early Hebrews contracted a disease common to swine and for that reason were expelled from Egypt. If so, this might provide some rational justification for the prohibition. Yet most of the dietary prohibitions seem to lack a rational basis, at least in retrospect. If unsanitary pork is the cause of trichinosis, for example, it is prudent to avoid it. But a total abstinence seems ridiculous. Many of the prohibitions are arbitrary. The statement "You shall not boil a kid in its own milk" has been used ever since by Orthodox Jews as a basis for an injunction against eating dairy and meat products together. There seems no reasonable basis concerning health for this phobia. There are also rules governing the ritual slaughter of cattle. One must not eat meat with blood and

thus one must drain the blood. Jews are prohibited from eating lobster, oysters, shrimp, and clams, seafood that, if properly prepared, is nutritious and delicious. No wonder that the Gentile world found Jewish dietary rituals strange.

There are also many rules offering advice about how to treat disease, including skin disease and leprosy, much of it based upon the crude standards of medicine then prevalent.

A great number of the regulations concern a person's duty to God by way of prayer and sacrifice; in particular the Bible lays down the mode and method of offerings and gifts. If nothing else, Moses is ensuring that his priestly class will be supported by their vassals. We read: "Every

196 Moses and the chosen people

contribution made by way of holy-gift which the Israelites bring to the priest shall be the priest's . . . whatever is given to him shall be his" (Num 5:9-10). The priest presents mythological opium concerning God and his powers to the masses. The people in return swear undying allegiance to Yahweh and to his interpreters. This conveniently provides adequate economic sustenance for the priestly class. The Jews were not, of course, unique in this, for it was the common practice of most nations to support their god men and to shower them with gifts and power.

The ethics of the Pentateuch is surely not without its redeeming social and moral virtues. One can find passages that are truly humane and that recommend charitable attitudes toward the weak and helpless, as well as righteousness to one's neighbors. In addition to the commandments against stealing, cheating, and coveting, we read that one should not slander or deceive a fellowman. Nor should one oppress or rob one's neighbor. Nor should one keep back a hired man's wages until the next day. Nor should one treat the deaf with contempt, nor obstruct the way of the blind. A person should not prevent justice either by favoring the poor or being subservient to the great and powerful. One should apply justice impartially. One should not harbor hatred against one's brother, seek revenge, or cherish anger against one's kinfolk. We read a form of the Golden Rule: "You should love your neighbor as a man like yourself" (Lev. 19:11-18). And there are other special rules based upon practical common sense that seem eminently fair. If you leave your well uncovered, and if a neighbor's ox or ass falls into it, the owner of the well shall make up the loss.

Most of these principles of moral decency were not invented by Moses, nor were they unique to the Israelites but have their analogues in neighboring nations. They express the common heritage of most civilized communities. The fact that they were proclaimed by the Israelites as divine commandments no doubt gave them added force and sanction. (Though I might add that a mature moral person is one who practices the moral civilities not out of fear of the Lord's wrath, nor out of blind obedience, but because he or she has developed a moral conscience and sympathies concerning others. It is possible to find a basis for moral development without the postulate of the fatherhood of God. Ethical conduct can be justified on the basis of reason, as philosophers from Plato and Aristotle down to Kant and Mill have pointed out. One can thus live an ethical life without benefit of God or clergy. What one ought to do should not depend on the automatic application of absolute rules but on reflective decision in facing moral dilemmas.) Interestingly, Hebrew scholars themselves discovered that the early moral code of the Pentateuch had to be expanded and interpreted, and the later books of the

197

Moses the lawgiver

Bible and the Talmud do just that. The application of moral rules often depends upon unique circumstances, and so some degree of sensitivity and practical wisdom is required. Although this developed within the tradition of Talmudic scholarship, the original inspiration for rules of morality are always traced back to the Torah, whose ultimate authority rests with Moses and God.

The important question that can be raised about the Mosaic code concerns the range of applicability of its moral principles. They were originally intended to apply to the Hebrews. But what about people other than the chosen? It is clear that the Pentateuch extends the ethics of consideration to aliens and strangers: "You shall have one penalty for alien and native alike" (Lev. 24:22). Moreover, "When an alien settles with you in your land, you shall not oppress him." We also read, "He shall be treated as a native born among you, and you shall love him as a man like yourself." And there is the reminder: "because you were aliens in Egypt" (Lev. 19:33-34). Thus there is a clear recognition that one's moral responsibilities apply equally to strangers and aliens. There is also an awareness that the moral law is universal and should be extended to all men. On the other hand, implicit in the concept of "chosen people" is a clear distinction between the Jews, who are supposedly favored by God, and other peoples. And there are limits to moral toleration and civility concerning one's enemies. This kind of chauvinism is not unique to the Jews; other tribes and nations have continually waged war and have resorted to infamous activities against each other—often in the name of the highest principles of patriotism, nationalism, or religiosity. Yahweh affirms in the Bible, "I have made a clear separation between you and the nations . . . [and] between you and the heathen" (Lev. 20:24-27). The Jews interpreted that to mean that the laws governing their conduct within their own house or tribe did not necessarily apply to others living outside.

Interestingly we read in Deuteronomy a contradictory rule concerning money-lending: "You shall not charge interest on anything you lend to a fellow-countryman." It then goes on to apply another rule to foreigners by declaring: "You may charge interest on a loan to a foreigner" (Deut. 23:19-20). The Jews became moneylenders throughout the world, often because they were not accepted as equals and were barred from other professions or land owning in the countries in which they sojourned. Deuteronomy provides a justification and perhaps an explanation for their success in business and finance, though it also advocates honesty: "You should keep true balances and weights."

Most offensive to modern readers, no doubt, are the standards that are often applied to nations at war. Thus we read that if the Hebrews

198 Moses and the chosen people

wage war against their enemies and take captives, they could take attractive women as wives, apparently even against a woman's will. "If you see a comely woman among the captives and take a liking to her, you may marry her," we are told, and "you may have intercourse with her." There is a tempering of one's right of possession, however, and a restraint on what a man can do. If a man no longer finds a woman pleasing, he should let her go free. "You must not sell her, nor treat her harshly" (Deut. 21:10-14).

Moses' own attitude toward other peoples who stood in his way was particularly bloodthirsty. The first act we hear about after he is grown is that he kills an Egyptian for striking a Jew and then hides the body. His lack of compassion for the Moabite nation in particular contradicts the view that he was a noble giver of

moral laws for humankind. In Numbers, we read of the approach of the Hebrews to the promised land. The battle with other tribes and nations, capturing villages and slaughtering all inhabitants. The reaction of Moses after the battle with the Midianites is particularly cruel. The Hebrews made war on Midian, killed all the men, burned all of their cities, and took captives, spoil, and plunder. The officers returned from the campaign and encountered Moses, who was angry at them. "Have you spared all the women?" he asks, complaining that the Midianite women had seduced the chosen people into disloyalty. And so he demands vengeance, "Kill every male dependent," he orders. "and kill every woman who has had intercourse with a man." They are allowed to spare only the virgins, who, according to the Bible, numbered 32,000 girls (Num. 31:13-35). The Hebrews then divided the spoils, with Moses taking his share, "as the Lord had commanded him."

Moses' barbaric strategy as they advance is to savagely destroy the inhabitants of the lands they take, showing no mercy. Otherwise, he says they "will become like a barbed hook in your eye and a thorn in your side" (Num. 33:55-56). As they proceed, they tear down the sanctuaries and altars of the conquered. There is no tolerance for the deities of competing religions. "You shall demolish all the sanctuaries where the nations whose place you are taking worship their Gods . . . and shall pull down their altars and break their sacred pillars" (Deut. 12:2-3). A scorched earth and extermination policy is justified by Moses. He guarantees his people that the Lord God will "exterminate" the nations "as you advance" (Deut. 12:29). Moses was no peacemaker. Nor was he a paragon of virtue. The Hebrew invasion of Canaan was not unlike the Nazi onslaught in World War II, the invasions of the Huns or Mongols, or of other advancing armies in history. It does not intimate any appreciation for a higher humanistic morality in which all nations and people are considered as part of a world community.

i

The promised land 199

The promised land

Moses never made it into the promised land, nor did most of the adults who had left Egypt with him. Thus he failed in his promise made on behalf of Yahweh that they would settle in a new land, flowing with milk and honey, which was just over the nearby hills. He shifts responsibility for this failure to their lack of absolute fidelity to the commandments of Yahweh. One may speculate about the reasons for Moses' indecision and why he failed to move ahead. Was it fear of the unknown enemy on the other side of the frontier? Was it his belief that he could keep his passive nomadic horde under his control by not going further? Did he, as he grew older, harbor doubts about his own mission, knowing that no god had promised him a new land and that it was not available for easy picking. Was Moses killed by his own people, as Freud speculates, with this act of regicide hidden from future generations? In any case, it was left to Joshua and Eleazar to cross the Jordan River and lead the next stage of nationhood. Thus it is Joshua, not Moses, who may be truly said to be the founder of the new nation, although Moses provided the framework and ideology for Joshua to exploit. Under Moses' tutelage, Joshua learned his craft well, and he succeeded where Moses failed. How paradoxical that, in spite of reneging on the most basic promise Moses made to the escapees, he nevertheless is considered the savior of the Jews. This is not unlike what befell Jesus, who did not live to see the end of the world he predicted, nor the New Kingdom of Heaven. This suggests that religious believers are all too eager to overcome the defeat of their tragic heroes, who die with their promises still unfulfilled by God by elevating them to sainthood. Is the

hunger for commitment so strong and blind that no matter how contradictory the message, how false the promises, how lacking in proof the authenticity of the prophet, or how abundant the evidence that he is a fraud and/or disturbed, faith in him will persist and grow in succeeding generations?

The failure of Moses was redeemed by Joshua, who saw to it that the vision of Moses was made secure and that it would not be forgotten by future generations of his countrymen. I will only briefly review the course of events after the death of Moses. Again, it is impossible to reconstruct the historical record, for there are few if any corroborating facts outside the Bible. It is likely that the population that fled Egypt had grown considerably, especially with marriages to captive women. Perhaps the leaders then felt strong enough to invade Canaan. Joshua now had a religion, fashioned for him by Moses, and this he consecrated: the Ark of

200 Moses and the chosen people

the Covenant, the laws and commandments, a priestly class, and a tribal structure. All of the males, according to the Book of Joshua, were circumcised. They were now ready to cross the Jordan to engage in new battles. New miracles pave the way: the waters of the Jordan are brought to a standstill and even the sun (and moon) at one point stand still. Joshua has learned well the art of theocratic statecraft, for it is now he who deceives the people into believing that Yahweh talks to him. As his minions engage in battle, they slaughter their enemies and show no mercy. At long last, they take the land they believe was rightfully theirs, divide the spoils, and settle down. Joshua, an old man at the end of the Book of Joshua, proclaims the message of Moses: the Israelites must observe and perform everything written in the books containing the law of Moses. They must obey their covenant with God.

And uncounted numbers of future generations of the chosen people do obey, looking back to their forefathers' years in bondage in Egypt and celebrating their rescue by God. The tragedy of Jewish history is that the Jews have believed fervently in the man named Moses. But it is probable that he neither spoke to God nor received a revelation from on high, and he clearly used cunning and deceit to make his followers believe that he had a supernatural role to fulfill. Moreover, in the last analysis Moses failed in the solemn promise he made to them. The belief that they were a "chosen people" and that they had a covenant with God and a divine mission to fulfill in history has no foundation in fact, and it remains one of the major myths in human history.

Some will respond that the ethnic traditions of the Jews, who have survived throughout history, have an intrinsic beauty and value in spite of the mythology. I am not denying the great contributions of Jewish culture to human history—in literature, science, morality, art, commerce and industry, indeed in all fields of human endeavor. Living as aliens through-out most of their long history, enduring persecution, estranged and forlorn, the Jews were capable of tremendous bursts of creative insight and discovery. Many Jews will assert that the fact that Jewish identity has endured for over 3,000 years—in the face of untold suffering and the hatred of others—only demonstrates the strength of their system of beliefs and practices. To which I add—perhaps there is some saving grace, but what a price to pay for a myth, when one considers the bitter anti-Semitism the Jews have endured, the countless pogroms, and the Holocaust. A religious Jew can only ponder the question: "Eli, Eli, oh God, why hast thou forsaken us?" The cruel paradox of the historical existence of Jewry is the fact that the Jews mistakenly believed that they were the chosen people:

that is the basis of their identity but also the seedbed of their alienation and persecution.

201

Postmodern postscript

Postmodern postscript

What should be said of Jewish history today in this post-modern period? In my view, anti-Semitism cannot be attributed simply to a long-standing and irrational antipathy of the Gentiles against the Jews or the psycho-logical need for a scapegoat. It has its roots in part in exclusive Jewish practices and convictions. And it can be traced back to the mythological basis of Judaism: the very concept of a transcendental deity, selecting the Hebrews as his chosen people. This egregious myth has withstood the heavy blows of time and oppression. It led to a siege mentality, where survival and achievement—in whatever culture the Jews lived—were the highest virtues to be attained. Today it is important that religious Jews reexamine critically the origins of their biblical faith, for their devotion to Judaism is based upon cultural practice, ethnic and genetic loyalty, not divine grounds. The Jews today have come under the influence of modern-ism in science, philosophy, and literature, and many have been liberated from the blind allegiance to the synagogue and the religious tradition. A distinguished roster of secularized Jews—Spinoza, Marx, Freud, Einstein, and others—have taken new directions and made significant contributions to world culture.

Regrettably, in some societies the Jews who abandoned the faith of their fathers were still labeled as Jews and hated in spite of it. The Nazis decreed that one was still Jewish if he or she had a Jewish grandparent. The Jew was sometimes defined by his enemies rather than himself, in spite of the fact that a human being should be evaluated by what he or she believes and does, his values, aspirations, convictions and commitments. One can abandon Catholicism or Protestantism, Buddhism or Islam and be assimilated into the culture and bloodstream of other so-cieties and nations. New nationalities are constantly emerging; for exam-ple, the American today has the blood of many ethnicities and races flowing in his veins. The wandering Jews have survived as a separate cultural identity almost longer than others, but given the growth of secu-larism, they, as all others, need to become infused into the mainstream of humanity. The Jews have been cosmopolitan and international, citizens of all nations. The barrier against taking a step beyond to full integration and assimilation is often their religious faith—which, under examination, is seen to be simply the faded memory of a national past, based more upon myth than reality. Had it not been for the enormous horror of the Holocaust and its aftermath, contemporary Judaism might have continued to decline, par-

202 Moses and the chosen people

ticularly in secularized Western societies. Bitter memories of persecution during the long saga of Jewish history have reawakened affection for the roots of Jewish ethnicity and inspired intense and often uncritical loyalty to Israel.

The state of Israel today exists as a political-geographical entity. As such, it has as much right to exist as any other national state. Viewed from a humanistic perspective, however, the goal should be to create a humanistic secular state (as the original Zionists wanted), open to persons of all ethnic and religious persuasions. Anything less than that would be a violation of human rights. One

must recognize, of course, that few if any Arab states today are secular or democratic, and that most of them are dogmatically committed to the religion of Islam. It would no doubt be an unfair burden to impose an absolute political demand for open borders and immigration on the Israelis until they can be assured of survival.

Modern-day Israelites, fearful of another holocaust, battled Arab armies against insurmountable odds; many thought they were fulfilling the ancient prophecies that this was their land as promised by God. They either drove the Palestinians out or did not permit those who fled to return, much the same as long-settled Jewish populations in neighboring Arab lands either fled or were expelled. This is not unique and has historical precedents. European settlers of the American and Australian continents seized land from the aborigines and Indians; the Russians conquered various ethnic peoples in the vast lands under their hegemony; and the Arabs invaded and imposed Islam on large sections of North Africa.

Geographical claims are based upon historical, political, military and economic factors. They are not divine or eternal rights, only rights conferred by residence and the passage of time. In this sense, modern-day Israelites have as much a claim to Palestine today as the former Pales-tinians now have to Jordan. The Jews living outside of Israel, especially where they have abandoned Judaism, have no special stake in Israel other than sentiment or remembrance of persecution; no more than the Irish, Italians, Greeks, Spaniards, Portuguese, or English who have taken ships to North or South America, Africa, Asia, or Australia and become residents of virgin lands with new opportunities, have a stake in their original homelands.

The wider moral challenge is for all separatist communities to out-grow archaic ethnic or religious fixations and to develop new and more in-clusive commitments to humanity as a whole. The common history of hu-mankind is rooted in the faded memories of ancient civilizations. Jerusa-lem, Athens, Rome, Damascus, Mecca, and Peking have all contributed to world culture; but they have no independent political status; they have provided the culture bequeathed to civilization in general. They are today

Summary Some humanistic reflections 203

the common and nonexclusive heritage of all mankind. The new chosen are citizens of the global community; the humanistic mission is to create a world beyond race, nationality, religion or ethnicity, in which a person's right to equal dignity and value is based only upon the fact that he or she is a member of the human race.

Summary: Some humanistic reflections

What conclusions do I draw from the preceding analysis? In the place of the Ten Commandments, I propose the following ten points:

First, Moses, if he existed, may have been an Egyptian.

Second, he was probably a magician.

Third, we have no evidence that he communicated with God or had any revelations from on high, though he may have believed that he did.

Fourth, the Jews are no longer a clearly identifiable ethnic stock, but have the blood of many people flowing in their veins.

Fifth, they are not the "chosen people." This myth was proposed by Moses and perpetuated by latter-day prophets and priests.

Sixth, Jewish identity, neurosis, and alienation is in large part rooted in this myth.

Seventh, the moral code of the Old Testament is limited by the time and place in which it was proposed, and it needs to be radically modified and supplemented, or else rejected.

Eighth, Jews and others who live in Israel and have some sort of political, cultural, or linguistic identity should be permitted to do so.

Ninth, it would be more meaningful if the Jews (and Judaism) were assimilated into the mainstream of world humanity, and similarly for all other ethnic groups.

Tenth, the true prophets of the Jewish people in the modern world today are those who emerged after the Enlightenment—the scientists, artists, writers, and philosophers. Their new ethical mission is the liberation of humanity from blind obedience to divine authority and the cultivation of rationality, creativity, and secular universalism beyond frontiers.

DC: Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

The religion of Islam was founded by Mohammed in the seventh century. It is based upon revelations received by Mohammed during the latter part of his lifetime. Mohammed's revelations, forthrightly proclaimed and recorded in the Koran, so impressed those around him that they followed the prophet with dedication and devotion. Mohammed began attracting large numbers of believers under his banner during his lifetime. Incredibly, in less than a century after the death of Mohammed, the armies of Islam conquered and converted vast areas of the world, stretching from Spain and Morocco in the west, all the way to the Indus River and the Punjab in the east. Today Islam incorporates about a billion Muslims in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere, who are committed to Mohammed's precepts, and it vies with Christianity for the hearts and souls of men and women.

The term Islam means "submission to the will of God." A Muslim is a believer in the faith established by Mohammed, that is, one who "surrenders to God."

Mohammedan is a misnomer, for the Muslims do not worship Mohammed nor do they consider him divine. He did not work miracles, as did Jesus, but was simply a prophet of Allah (in Arabic, "the God") who had received revelations similar to those of the prophets of the Old Testament.

Mohammed accepted the prophets of the Old Testament, and he traced the lineage of the Arabs back to Ishmael, eldest son of Abraham. He also accepted Jesus, not as the eldest son of God but as one of the most important prophets. Muslims today insist that if one believes that God revealed himself to the biblical prophets, then one must, to be consistent, also accept the revelations to Mohammed as divinely inspired.

Background

The life of Mohammed and the rapid growth of the religion founded by him is a fascinating tale. Although the exact details of his early life are somewhat obscure, it is commonly believed that he was born in 570 in Mecca, a city in Arabia. His father, Abdullah, died before he was born.

204

Background 205

His mother died when he was six, and so he was brought up by his grandfather, and then his uncle, Abu Talib.

Mecca is situated in a gorge of a range of mountains about forty-five miles inland from the Red Sea. It was strategically located at the midpoint of the Arabian peninsula, and became an important trading center which was visited by

numerous caravans. Mecca was also some sort of ancient religious center, for it was the home of the Kaaba, a sacred shrine containing the Black Stone. This had magical and superstitious significance, and numerous pilgrims were already visiting it from all over Arabia by Mohammed's day. The Quraysh people who lived in the Mecca area believed in a form of animism; spirits (Jinn) lived in the land and occupied animals or objects. Polytheism prevailed, as different tribes had their own local deities. Slavery was commonplace. Slaves were obtained either from war or the plunder of hostile territories, or they were the offspring of slaves already possessed. Aside from a few oases and trading centers, Arabia was a barren desert, and the life harsh and demanding. The inhabitants pursued either an agricultural occupation, where the soil permitted, or they lived as nomads. There was no unifying central political order. The various tribes were composed of family units, each headed by a tribal chief or sheikh, who would protect all of those who lived under his tutelage. Raiding parties were a common source of income. The only protection came from blood ties. Each tribe guaranteed the safety of its members, and vengeance and the law of retribution governed the loosely knit fabric of society.

Mohammed, as a poor orphan, was taken in by his uncle, who as head of the Hashim clan, was highly esteemed in the area. Mohammed began his adult career as a camel driver, participating in the rich camel trade. At the age of twenty-five, he married a wealthy woman, Khadijah, who was fifteen years older than he. Before the marriage, she tested his abilities by dispatching him as her agent on a caravan to Syria. He was successful in her employment and she proposed marriage to him. A man of some business acumen, Mohammed was able to prosper in the commercial life of Mecca. He sired several children by Khadijah. All of his sons died young, but he was able to marry off his four surviving daughters to well-to-do husbands. Moreover, the marriage eventually freed Mohammed from the pressures of earning his daily keep, and it also provided him with some leisure to follow other interests. No doubt the moment of greatest significance for Islam was the call that Mohammed first received when he was forty years old. This marked the beginning of his profound religious conversion and of the revelation that he was supposed to have had.

206 Mohammed; The prophet of Historical documents

One can raise an important question about the origins of the three great monotheistic religions. We have already seen the difficulty in determining the veracity of the Old and New Testament texts, and particularly of the accounts of the prophets portrayed in them. This is much less the case with Mohammed and Islam. Indeed, a vast literature has been developed by Muslim scholars and historians. In recent years, Western scholars have attempted some kind of historical reconstruction. Like Judaic and Christian sources, the Islamic historical record is pregnant with legends and myths. Moreover, there does not seem to have survived—if indeed there ever existed—any extensive heretical or critical literature written by Muslims or religious groups they overran and superseded. Accordingly, there is a compelling need today for the application of scientific tools of investigation to the study of the origins of Islam.

Let us examine the two major sources we now have. First, the Koran itself. According to fundamentalist Muslims, every syllable of the Koran is of divine and eternal origin. Actually, however, the method by which this book was compiled is well-known. The Koran is comprised of surahs or chapters, which are divided into ayat or verses. It consists entirely of the commands and revelations of Mohammed, which he said were received either from the angel Gabriel or directly

from God. Mohammed would be "inspired," and at that moment or shortly thereafter, the passages received were recited by Mohammed to relatives, friends, or followers who were present. These sayings were later committed to writing by someone who could write (Mohammed couldn't): on leather, stone, palm leaves, or whatever crude materials were available. The revelations were numerous, beginning when Mohammed was forty and continuing for twenty-three years until his death. We do not know in what state the original writings were preserved. Many of the revelations had only a temporary purpose, growing out of a specific practical situation. Whether all the revelations were retained is uncertain, but it seems unlikely that when Mohammed died there was a complete collection of all the original transcriptions.

The method of communicating such revelations was by means of oral recitation, an art which Mohammed himself cultivated. Members of his entourage would commit these recitations to memory and repeat them to others. In later years they were read in the mosques and intoned in the religious schools and public places. Since the words of Mohammed had aroused such deep awe and reverence, great efforts were made to see to it that the oral recitations were accurately rendered, and the reciters were

I

Historical documents 207

proud to be able to memorize and deliver the recitations intact. It is common knowledge that an oral tradition is often elaborated upon, however slightly at first, as it passes from mouth to mouth. So we have no guarantee that the Koran preserves the revelations exactly as they were first delivered. In any case, it was only after the death of Mohammed that his early disciples—close relations and friends—assembled all that they could locate of the written record. This became known as the Koran, which means "recitation."

The first individual to assemble the written documents was Zayd, Mohammed's adopted son and one of the first converts. Zayd attempted to gather whatever he could locate within two or three years after Mohammed died. The surahs were not arranged in chronological order; generally the longer surahs were put first and the shorter ones last. Since Zayd had often recited the Koran in the presence of Mohammed, it was thought to be a reliable version. Varieties of expression soon crept into Zayd's edition, and different versions appeared. Accordingly, another effort to compile a faithful reproduction was made by Othman, an early disciple, who several years after the death of Mohammed assumed power as caliph. As best as can be determined, it is this version of the Koran, perhaps assembled twenty years after Mohammed's death, that Muslims now possess; and scholars believe that it is more or less an accurate rendition of a good part of Mohammed's revelation.

Unfortunately it is often difficult to date precisely when the revelations occurred or to ascertain the context in which they were uttered. Many passages of early revelations were abrogated or contradicted by later passages. Thus one cannot always interpret the meaning of the revelations or determine the precise intention of the author. It is believed that the shorter verses at the end of the Koran were from the earliest days of the prophet. Nevertheless, the Koran remains as a unique book, able to arouse intense feelings of devotion for countless generations of believers, moved by its eloquent poetry and powerful message.

The second source of early Islamic history which helps interpret the Koran and the life of Mohammed is known as the Hadith ("the tradition"). This source is

more difficult to accept as reliable. It consists of recollections of the sayings of Mohammed and tales about him told by his friends and followers, handed down from generation to generation by oral means and eventually collected and recorded in writing. A'isha, the favorite wife of Mohammed, was alone responsible for 1,210 traditions allegedly uttered by him. The first followers of Mohammed were evidently deeply impressed by his forceful and charismatic personality. Known as the Companions of Mohammed, they were largely simple nomads or warriors, mostly illiterate. It is doubtful that their testimonies can be accepted without quali-

208 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

fiction, particularly since, like the authors of the New Testament, virtually all of Mohammed's companions were propagandists for the new faith; after the death of Mohammed many assumed positions of power in the expanding Islamic empire, and might have been tempted to inflate the Mohammed legend to justify their own positions. It is most likely that the second and third generations of Muslims embellished on these early stories still further, as was surely the case with the Jesus legend.

Intense veneration developed about the person of Mohammed, and any tale about him, even a shred of his hair, was considered to be of inestimable worth. As Islam expanded into Africa and Asia, so did the storytellers, known as Collectors, who wove legends about the prophet. The Hadith thus took on majestic and supernatural dimensions, so that by the second century after the death of Mohammed a large body of fictional material had been gathered. One of the main problems in scholarship is to separate fact from fiction. An insuperable difficulty faced by the objective scientific inquirer is that Islam imposed strict limits on free inquiry, and the penalty for any dissenting interpretation was sometimes death. We know that Mohammed faced great opposition when he first proclaimed his message; his critics thought he was mad. Reverberations of this appear in the Koran and the Hadith. But we do not have many details of their skepticism nor their arguments as to why they rejected the revelations. Thus there is a dearth of skeptical Muslim accounts of Mohammed's life, though there were numerous Jewish and Christian critics in later centuries. The earliest biographies of Mohammed were written 120 to 200 years after his death, and these abound with tales of miraculous events, which are difficult to corroborate. Leaving aside these obviously exaggerated extrapolations, it is nonetheless possible to fathom some of the key details of Mohammed's life, and even of his revelatory experiences.¹

First revelations

Mohammed's revelations began under curious circumstances. He was accustomed to visiting a rocky hillside just outside Mecca, where he spent much of his time alone in meditation. Sometimes he would spend several days and nights in seclusion in a cave at the foot of Mount Hira. At times his faithful wife (or family) would accompany him on his sojourns.

1. The Moslem calendar (A.H.) begins with the Hijra, the flight of Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622, ten years before his death. Among some of the early Muslim historians whose works have survived and are often cited as reasonable reliable are Mohammed Ibn Ishak (who died about A.H. 151), Ibn Hisham (A.H. 2131), Al-Wakidi (A.H. 207), his secretary Ibn Sai'd (A.H. 230), and At-Tabari (A.H. 310).

First revelations 209

As far as we can tell, Mohammed was experiencing a time of great inner turmoil, and he apparently suffered intense depression, perhaps a midlife crisis. Tradition has it that he seriously contemplated suicide by hurling himself from a rocky precipice. During this period, his vivid dreams and mysterious visions disturbed him greatly. Mohammed was apparently undergoing a profound religious conversion, questioning the deities and morality of his polytheistic culture, and groping towards the kind of monotheism expressed in ancient biblical scriptures. It is said that he could not read or write, but he was aware of the religious traditions of the Jews and Christians, whom he encountered on his caravan treks, and of their beliefs in divine revelation. If these people had great prophets who received messages from God, why not the Arabs? And so Mohammed began to have his own revelations, expressed in rhapsodic poetic form.

Most historians consider the first and one of the most important revelations to be Surah 96, lines 1-5. In this he tells of his encounter with a divine presence. One day, after wandering among the peaks of Hira, perhaps lost in deep meditation and intense anxiety, a vision suddenly appeared before him. It was a mighty being coming out of the sky, who descended very close to him. Muslim tradition identifies him as the archangel Gabriel, a messenger of God. This mighty being repeated the word iqraa (recite, read, proclaim) three times. "What shall I recite?" asked Mohammed in exhaustion. Finally the following words were uttered:

Recite! In the name of the Lord who created— Created man from a mere clot of congealed blood— Recite! For the Lord is most bountiful. It is He who has taught (to write) with the pen— Has taught man that which he knew not.²

The voice was forceful, commanding him to proclaim a message sent to him from on high. The effect on Mohammed was overwhelming. He fell to his knees and dragged himself along while the upper part of his chest was trembling. He eventually recovered and rushed home to tell Khadijah about his terrifying experience. According to the Hadith, Khadijah comforted him and assured him of his sanity. She also reinforced the conviction that he was receiving prophecies. She consulted her cousin Waraqa, who knew both Jewish and Christian scriptures, and he said that Mohammed was receiving prophetic revelations. Some commentators believe that were it not for Khadijah's moral support, Mohammed would

2. The text that I have used is *The Holy Qur'an, translation and commentary* by A. Yusuf Ali (Washington, D.C.: Islamic Center). I have modernized some of the spellings.

210 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam never have presumed to don the mantle of the prophet.³

Although the exact personal chronology is uncertain, there was apparently a hiatus of several months after this first encounter, during which Mohammed did not experience another visitation from Gabriel though he kept having inexplicable experiences. This raised his doubts anew. Undergoing considerable psychological distress, he needed reassurance that he was not mad or possessed by the Jinn (evil spirits). At last, Gabriel again visited him, proclaiming him to be a true prophet of the

3. The following account of Mohammed's first religious soliloquy is from Al-Wakxi—"The first beginnings of Mohammed's inspiration were real visions. Every vision that he saw was clear as the morning dawn. These again provoked the love of solitude. He would repair to a cave on Mount Hira, and there pass whole days and nights. Then, drawn by the affection of Khadijah, he would turn to his home. This went on till the truth burst upon him in the cave. It happened on this

wise. Wandering in the hills around, an angel from the si.;. cried to him, 'O Mohammed, I am Gabriel!' He was terrified, for as often as he raised his head, there was the apparition of the angel. He hurried home to tell his wife. 'Oh, Khadija-' he said, 'I have never abhorred anything as I do these idols and soothsayers; and now verily I fear lest I should become a soothsayer myself.' 'Never,' replied his faithful wife; the Lord will never suffer it thus to be,—and she went on to speak of his many virtues, upon which she founded the assurance. Then she repaired to her cousin Waraka, and told her all. 'By the Lord,' cried the aged man, 'he speaketh truth! Doubtless it is the beginning of prophecy, and there shall come upon him the Great Name, like as it came upon Moses. Wherefore charge him that he think not aught but hopeful thoughts within his breast. If he be raised up a prophet while I am yet alive, surely I will stand by him.'

"Now the first Sura revealed to Mohammed was the 96th, verses 1-5, Recite in the name of the Lord, etc.; and that descended on him in the cave of Hira. After this he waited some time without seeing Gabriel. And he became greatly downcast, so that he went out now to one mountain, and then to another, seeking to cast himself headlong thence. With this intent on self-destruction, he was suddenly arrested by a voice from heaven. He looked up, and behold it was Gabriel upon a throne between the heavens and the earth. who said: 'O Mohammed! thou art the Prophet of the Lord, in truth, and I am Gabriel. Then Mohammed turned to go to his own house; and the Lord comforted him, and strengthened his heart. And thereafter revelations began to follow one upon another with frequency." Quoted in William Muir, *The Life of Mohammed: From Original Sources*, ed T. H. Weir (Edinburgh: John Grant, 1912), pp. 49-50.

The following outline from Ibn Hisham and At-Tabari of Mohammed's first inspiration is at some variance from Al-Wakidi's, since Mohammed is not alone in the cave: "On the night whereon the Lord was minded to deal graciously with him, Gabriel came to Mohammed as he slept with his family in the cave of Hira. He held in his hand a piece of silk with writing thereon, and he said Read! Mohammed replied, / cannot read. Whereupon the angel did so tightly grip him that he thought death had come upon him. Then said Gabriel a second time Read! And Mohammed, but only to escape the agony, replied, What shall I read? Gabriel proceeded:—Read [recite] in the name of thy Lord, etc., repeating the 96th Sura to the end of v. 5. When he had ended the angel departed; and 'the words,' said Mohammed, 'were as though they have been graven on my heart.' Suddenly the thought occurred to him that he was possessed of evil spirits, and he meditated suicide; but as he rushed forth with the intention of casting himself down a precipice, he was arrested by the appearance again of Gabriel, and stood for a long time transfixed by the sight. At last, the vision disappearing, he returned to Khadija who, alarmed at his absence, had sent messengers to Mecca in quest of him. In consternation he threw himself into her lap, and told her what had occurred. She reassured him, saying that he would surely be a prophet, and Waraka confirmed her in the belief." *Ibid.*, p. 50.

211

A psychophysiological diagnosis
 Lord. Thus we read in Surah 68:1-5:

... By the pen and by the (record) which (men) write—
 You are not, by the grace of thy Lord, mad or possessed.
 Nay, verily for you is a reward unailing.
 And you (stand) on an exalted standard of character.

Soon you will see, and they will see
Which of you is afflicted with madness.

Mohammed now began to believe that the voices he was hearing were real, and he became convinced that they came from outside himself; he was certain that he could distinguish between his own inner thoughts and the revelations which came from God. At first he attempted to keep these events secret, confiding them only to his wife, who kept reassuring him that he was receiving divine messages. Gradually, believing that he was indeed a prophet of God, he became bolder and began to express his convictions openly: he had a divine commission to spread the word of God, to preach and summon people to faith in Allah. They must believe in one God only, the source of all creation and the judge of men. Eventually, Mohammad began to preach in public. According to the Koran, he was taunted at first by those who heard him. They considered him to be possessed by demons and accused him of sorcery and magic. Tradition has preserved various stories about the fact that he continued to experience revelations. One is that on one occasion, fearful of his sanity, Khadijah tested the character of a spirit confronting Mohammed, by making him sit first on her right knee, then on her left. Mohammed kept experiencing the apparition, no matter what his position. She then took Mohammed in her lap, removing her veil or uncovering her body, at which point the spirit disappeared—which seemed to demonstrate that the being was virtuous or modest. Khadijah said: "Rejoice, my cousin, for by the Lord! it is an angel and no devil." On another occasion, terrified by such an experience, Mohammad asked Khadijah to cover him, which she did, constantly administering to his fright.⁴

A psychophysiological diagnosis

What are we to make of Mohammed's experiences? Were they caused by God, or is there some physiological explanation? It is not easy, given this late date, to offer a comprehensive diagnosis of his condition. Nonetheless, some of the reports of his earlier revelations suggest (1) that he may have

4. From Ibn Hishatn and At-Tabari, in Muir, *Life of Mohammed*, p. 51.

212 Mohammed: The prophet o

suffered from hallucinations, which indicate pathological episodes, and (2) that he may also have had a condition similar to epilepsy. In the first case, he thought that the revelations were communicated by Gabriel from God. In the second he suffered a "brainstorm" or some kind of epileptic-ecstatic seizure. Epilepsy was known to ancient civilizations; some even considered it to be "the divine madness."

Most cases of epilepsy begin in early life. There are some intimations* that Mohammed may have suffered this condition in early life, even as a child, but it is not certain that this was the case, since there is little reliable testimony about him before the age of forty.⁵ Epileptic seizures come on suddenly and without warning. They are characterized by a loss of consciousness and usually involve convulsions, biting of the tongue, muscle stiffness, and arrest of breathing. The individual has no memory of what transpired during the attack and is apparently exhausted by it.

The testimony we have about Mohammed's condition and the symptoms of his affliction according to his defenders do not follow the classic epileptic syndrome exactly. Usually his attacks came on suddenly and without warning. He would often fall into a deep faint and manifest a high fever, since he was reported to have been sweating profusely. Some reports were that he trembled or shuddered violently and that he was exhausted by his attacks. The following account of

what occurred during one such seizure late in his life is revealing, for it clearly suggests a physiological disorder. According to Ibn Sai'd:

At the moment of inspiration, anxiety pressed upon the Prophet, and his countenance was troubled. He fell to the ground like an inebriate, or one overcome by sleep; and in the coldest day his forehead would be bedewed with large drops of perspiration. Even his she-camel, if he chanced to become inspired while mounted on her, would be affected by a wild excitement, sitting down and rising up, now planting her legs rigidly, then throwing them about as if they would be parted from her. To outward appearance inspiration descended unexpectedly, and without any previous warning to the Prophet. When questioned on the subject he replied: "Inspiration cometh in one of two ways; sometimes Gabriel communicateth the Revelation to me, as one man to another, and this is easy; at other times, it is like the ringing of a bell, penetrating my very heart, and rending me; and this it is which afflicteth me the most."⁶

5. There is some suggestion that he may have had an epileptic attack at the age of six, being "visited by angels" even then. Abu Talib is reported to have said, shortly after taking Mohammed under his care: "I fear that the boy may have had an attack. Take him back to his family before his disease declares itself." Ibn Hisham, *Sura, Das Leben Muhammeds*, ed. F. Wustenfeld (Gottingen, 1859-60), p. 105. Quoted in Maxime Rodinson, *Muhammed* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971), p. 56.

6. From Ibn Sai'd, in Muir, *Life of Mohammed*, p. 52.

213

A psychophysiological diagnosis

Describing the character of a seizure and what followed, 'Abd ar-Rahman relates that many years later in returning from Al-Hodeibiya, when Mohammed was fifty-eight, suddenly people began to urge their camels on. What was the reason for the rush? "Inspiration has descended on the prophet," was the reply. Al-Rahman also hurried on his camel and reached Mohammed. When Mohammed noted that a sufficient number of people had gathered around him, he began to recite Surah 40.⁷ According to the Hadith, Mohammed was generally unaware beforehand that inspiration was about to overcome him. After the seizure, Mohammed was apparently able to compose himself sufficiently to recite a surah. Later in life, Mohammed is reported to have remarked that the white hairs that began to appear in his beard were hastened by these experiences. He is alleged to have replied to his devoted friend Abu Bekr that the "terrific" surahs were responsible for his gray hairs.⁸

Tradition indicates that when Mohammed awoke and was being questioned about his experience, he reported his revelation. An important question to be raised is whether Mohammed underwent a hallucinatory revelation while he had his seizure (he seemed to have been unconscious), or if he had no conscious memory of his experience, had he engaged in a ploy to spin out a story to deceive his followers after the fact, since they had already accepted a supernatural interpretation of his seizures.

Many commentators who are sympathetic to Islam deride this explanation, and maintain that Mohammed was sincere. They say that he genuinely came to believe that his revelations were from God. How do we test the sincerity of a man whom countless millions have honored and revered as a great and noble prophet? Mohammed must have been a man of enormous personal magnetism, able to bring those about him under his sway. Critics have said that his character showed a calculating cleverness, premeditation, and a predilection for using sly

methods of intrigue— a view which is hard to reconcile with the belief that he was of a peerless and honorable character.

Was Mohammed's religious ministry dominated by a lust for power? Perhaps not at first. But it is clear that he wielded great power when he finally was in a position to do so at the end of his life. In time he may have come to believe that his visions and strange seizures were indeed from God; since his reports were accepted by those about him as authentic, they could only reinforce his own delusions. Later on, as we shall see, Mohammed (like Moses earlier) was able to turn some of his revelations off and on at will, to meet urgent personal and political needs, and these revelations were taken by those about him as the final law of God.

7. Ibid., p. 52.

8. Ibid.

214 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

Let us examine his experiences more closely by consulting further details supplied by the Hadith. According to Ibn Sai'd, A'isha, Mohammed's favorite wife, relates: "Once I witnessed how the revelation came to Allah's apostle on a very cold day. When it was completed his brow dripped with perspiration." According to Abdullah Ibn'Umar, who asked the prophet. "Do you know when the revelation comes to you?" he replied, "I hear loud noises and then it seems as if I am struck by a blow. I never receive a revelation without the consciousness that my soul is being taken away from me," which strongly suggests a loss of consciousness.⁹

Mohammed seems to have had visions of Gabriel only at the beginning of his career. After that his revelations were generally auditory. Some witnesses tell of his intense suffering and physical pains at the time of inspiration, which again suggests some kind of epileptic seizure. "When the revelation came to the prophet, they pressed hard upon him and his countenance darkened." Falling to the ground as if intoxicated, it is said that he even "groaned like a camel's colt."¹⁰

These descriptions seem to confirm that Mohammed suffered from a serious affliction. When he first encountered Gabriel, he may have been suffering from hallucinations brought on by fasting and exhaustion. He may also have suffered from epileptic-estatic seizures, which incapacitated him. Unable to explain his condition in medical terms, he interpreted it in miraculous terms. In any case, Mohammed and those about him came to believe that it was a divine calling. The paradox is that one of the great religions of humanity is based upon ignorance of the natural causes of the phenomena that may have afflicted its key prophet, and that a super-natural cause is invoked to explain it. The transcendental temptation is so strong that there is a willingness to read a divine cause into anything in spite of no credible corroborating evidence.

The elementary criteria that believers completely overlook is this: Why accept uncorroborated, firsthand, subjective reports as true? Perhaps Mohammed's claims were taken at face value because of the success of his enterprise.

Certainly as he gained adherents, his fame and influence spread, although he had many enemies who considered him insane and opposed him from the beginning. His critics were eventually defeated by the persuasive appeal of the new faith and the power of the sword.

The question the reader may very well raise is whether there was any trace of fraud in Mohammed's career. The Koran itself relates some of the accusations made against him by the Meccans and later by the Jews: that he practiced sorcery and downright fraud and that he got his early

9. Quoted in Tor Andrae, *Mohammed: The Man and His Faith*, trans. Theophil Menzel (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 49-50.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 50.

215

The first converts

ideas from some foreigner—some Jew or Christian—with whom he had conversed daily. It is difficult to ascertain with precision what did occur, since negative comments generally have not survived, though I did locate one suggestion of this. The *Musnad*, or the collection of Traditions of Ibn Hanbal, who died in 855 (A.H. 241), reports that one of the scribes employed to take down Mohammed's sayings became convinced that Mohammed was an impostor, and abandoned Islam as a result.¹¹

Was Mohammed feigning revelations as a result of his seizures or could he eventually produce a revelation at will without having had a seizure? The best evidence that I can uncover suggests that later in his life Mohammed deviously resorted to "making up" revelations to suit his political and private purposes.

The first converts

What happened to Mohammed's career following his first visitation from Gabriel in the cave at Hira is remarkable. Glimmers of light had no doubt been struggling within the dark recesses of Mohammed's soul as he sought to make sense out of his experiences. And this he did by attributing them to a divine source. Gradually he began to believe that God was the sole creator, judge, and ruler of humanity. The people of his society were hopelessly mired in idolatry and heathenism. He felt that he had a divine mission. His great task was to teach them by means of his new religious awakening. He would impart to them an appreciation of God's majesty and their utter need to obey him. Only by this means could they achieve salvation. This was not novel, for it was essentially the Judaic-Christian monotheistic message. What was new was that he interpreted his own visions as a sign that he, Mohammed, was appointed by God to be the last prophet, bringing the final message. This was made directly relevant to the Arabic cultural context, and it led to needed moral and spiritual reform. Mohammed's convictions were expressed in impassioned poetry, always warning his fellow countrymen to find God. His pronouncements were couched in words of great beauty and force. Surah 95 reads:

I swear by the fig tree and the olive,
By Mount Sinai and by this land inviolate.
Verily we made Man of the choicest creation,
Then we rendered him the lowest of the low—
Except such as believe and work righteousness
Unto them shall be given their reward that fadeth not away.

11. Cairo, 1890, vol. 3, p. 212. Quoted in David S. Margoliuth, *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1972), p. 89.

216 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

Then, after this, what shall make thee deny the day of reckoning? What, is not God the justest of all judges?

Mohammed most likely expressed these feelings to those in his inner circle before he ventured forth into the world to proclaim them. The friends and relatives of Mohammed were no doubt perplexed as they listened to his

reverential admonitions. Revelations continued to descend upon him, and he insisted that he was a prophet of the Lord. It was only after three years, when Mohammed was forty-three, that he ventured forth to announce openly his message in the streets of Mecca. It is clear that if a cult is to grow and eventually gain mastery, it must be built on solid foundations. Who the first converts close to the master are and how willing they are to sacrifice, even die for the cause, is crucial to its success. Among his first converts to Islam were his wife Khadijah and two young members of his household, Zayd, formerly a slave who was adopted as a son by Mohammed, and Ali, his cousin who was only thirteen or fourteen.

The neighbors who first heard Mohammed's teachings mocked and taunted him. He was considered a lunatic. But he soon added other believers to his little circle of followers. First there was an old friend of Mohammed's, a man by the name of Abu Bekr, about the same age, a successful merchant who shared Mohammed's religious concerns. Abu Bekr's role was very important, for he helped bring in some of the earliest converts, including Othman, and later he even purchased slaves who would convert to Islam. Abu Bekr and others were to play a powerful role after the death of Mohammed, but they were also crucial in the first stirrings of the new faith. The slaves of Mecca were especially sympathetic to the preachings of Mohammed, as were dissatisfied young men and women, generally people without power or influence. After three years of public preaching, it is estimated that Mohammed had attracted nearly forty persons to his cause. A noticeable change now occurred in the relationship of Mohammed to the people of Mecca. At first they considered his teachings to be rather harmless, but as his influence grew, their hostility was aroused; believers in Islam began to be harassed. The initial cause, no doubt, was that Mohammed seemed to threaten the attachment of the Quraysh to the Kaaba. Mohammed abused their pagan idol worship. He preached the unity of God, the judgment after death of good and evil acts, the resurrection of the dead, prayer, charity, fasting, and obedience to the prophet "Allah-o-Akbar!" he would cry aloud—"God is great!" And people would become angry. Although they were familiar with the idea of a monotheistic deity, such as confessed by the Jews and Christians in their midst.

217

Medina: The sword of Islam

the ruling council no doubt feared that they would lose control if Mohammed prevailed. The persecution of the Muslims thus intensified.

All during this period, Mohammed was protected by his uncle, Abu Talib, though other members of Mohammed's family were incensed by his behavior. Another uncle, Abu Lhab, disdained his appeals and even insulted him. As the sect grew in numbers, Muslims were further ostracized and castigated. Converted slaves and strangers from the lower classes were especially vulnerable, and some were imprisoned or physically attacked. Yet the more they were persecuted, the stronger became their fidelity to the prophet's message. A psychological factor was operating: the more true believers were oppressed for their belief, the more intense it became. The fact that Mohammed was accused of deceit and fabrication only reinforced his followers' dedication to him. During this period Mohammed lived in virtual isolation in one quarter of the city, protected by his uncle. He occupied a house owned by an early convert, Al-Arkam, yet he was surrounded by his spiteful wrath of his neighbors.

In time, Mohammed was able to convert some men of considerable standing, such as Hamza and Omar, both of whom had previously abused him. His

followers then approximated one hundred persons. A turning point in Mohammed's ministry occurred in 619, with the death of Khadijah, and about the same time his uncle died. (Incidentally, Abu Talib had remained an unbeliever until the end.) The death of his wife of twenty-five years was an especially grievous blow to him. Abu Talib was succeeded as head of the Hashem clan by Abu Lhab, who at first agreed to extend his protection to Mohammed, but later angrily withdrew it when Mohammed warned him that Abu Talib was suffering the torments of hell because he was an unbeliever. From then on, the situation of the Muslims rapidly deteriorated. Defections now set in, and there were few new converts. Another base had to be found for Mohammed's group if they were to survive. If Mohammed had not found new soil, then his small cult, like the countless thousands that have existed before and after, would no doubt have declined and disappeared. But fortunately, the possibility for expansion presented itself elsewhere, and Mohammed capitalized on this new opportunity.

Medina: The sword of Islam

The observation that a prophet is without honor in his own town proved to be true for Mohammed. For it was only when his message was taken to Medina, where it began to take root, that a dramatic change occurred. Medina (or Yathrib) was a town—or more accurately a cluster of houses

218 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

on an oasis—180 miles north of Mecca. It had been embroiled in blood feuds between contending tribes for many years, and it was at the point of erupting again into wholesale slaughter. Mohammed had visited the area as a child. Moreover, his father had been buried there and he had relatives living there as well. The people of Medina needed some peace and tranquility, particularly since they depended upon agriculture and harvests for their livelihood. Some of them had already visited Mecca to partake in the pilgrimage to the Kaaba. Mohammed was able to win some of them to Islam. He even dispatched one of his disciples to Medina to recite verses from the Koran and to convert new believers. At one point seventy-five citizens of Medina came south to Aquaba to meet with Mohammed. He promised them that Allah, through him, would end internal tribal conflict and arbitrate future differences. They agreed to pledge their protection to him if he would move to their city.

The migration of Mohammed and his followers from Mecca to Medina occurred shortly thereafter. This was known as the Hijra, a decisive moment in Islamic history, since all calendars are dated from that point forward. Thus the year 622 in the Christian calendar is designated A.M. 1. Once Islam was taken to Medina, there was a rapid growth in the movement. Mohammed assumed leadership of the area. He established his own army, which became vital to the success of his efforts. It now became clear that it was no longer the revealed word by itself but also the sword that would extend his horizons. A transformation of great significance occurred. Mohammed was no longer a weak prophet, imploring his followers to virtue or pointing the way to salvation by example; he could impose his will by force. It was not pure revelation itself that established the new religion—though obviously this was the dramatic factor that appealed to men's hearts and their longings for Paradise. Rather, it was the union of religious fervor with political and military power that catapulted the Muslim faith forward. The separation of church and state that ultimately came to be so cherished in Western democracies is foreign to Islam; for it was the union of mosque and state that laid the foundations of a new holy empire that was to emerge. If a religious leader cannot convince believers to accept the faith, he can compel

them not to reject it and can dominate their lands. This is not unique to Islam, for the establishment of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire by Constantine in the fourth century had already transformed the Bible into an ideological weapon. No doubt without the messianic idea at the heart of their new faith, the sword could not have cut so sharply or deeply. Without the belief that God had sanctified the Prophet to perform his will, the legions of the Prophet might not have dashed forth so rapidly. The victories that

i

Medina.: The sword of Islam 219

Mohammed achieved in the next decade of his life were breathtaking; and they revealed him to be a complex personality, deeply motivated by religious impulses, capable of generosity and moral virtue, yet also willing to use consummate political strategy and ruthless methods when deemed necessary to achieve his ends.

Mohammed was welcomed to Medina with open arms. The immediate attention of Mohammed and his followers was turned toward building a mosque and homes for themselves. The first major problem to be faced, however, was economic sustenance. The new Muslims in Medina did not have the money to purchase land or flocks to support themselves. Mohammed resorted to a traditional Arab solution. He assembled a raiding party. The target was the rich Quraysh caravans from Mecca, which passed only sixty miles from Medina as they made their way north to Damascus. After some successful raids, the Quraysh became incensed and began to raise an army against the Muslims. The first major battle was at Badr. Mohammed had assembled a party of 300 men, the Meccans fielded 900. A pitched battle ensued, and the Meccans were defeated by the Muslims, who were no doubt spurred on by Mohammed's promise of Paradise. The spoils were divided equally among the Muslims, though Mohammed himself took only one-fifth of the booty (instead of one-fourth as was customary in such affairs). The Muslim victory, with inferior forces, was taken as a sign of God's favor. This belief rallied other converts to the holy cause.

Meanwhile, the Quraysh, disheartened by their defeat and intent on revenge, were determined to put an end to the Muslim threat. They now raised an army of 3,200 men and cavalry. Mohammed could field only 1,000 soldiers, a number quickly reduced by defection to 700. This time Mohammed himself was wounded in battle at Uhud, and the Muslims were defeated, with many dead and wounded. However, the audacious Prophet rallied his forces, and set about in hot pursuit of the Meccan army, lighting many night fires so that they would think that his forces had greatly increased. The Meccan army had blundered by not pursuing the retreating Muslims to finish them off. Nevertheless there was no reengagement, and the position of Mohammed was now challenged by his opponents. If the victory at Badr was a sign of God's grace, did not the defeat at Uhud mean that he had lost God's favor? Mohammed attempted to quiet doubts by proclaiming a new revelation. God had not abandoned the faithful; this was only his way of testing those who truly believed and separating them from those who professed the faith but in the inner recesses of their hearts were not believers (Surah 3:1-19). The Quraysh resolved that they had to destroy the Muslims once and for all. They now marshalled three armies of 10,000 men and 600 cavalry. Mohammed was

220 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

able to bring together only 3,000 men. His people dug a deep ditch with high ramparts around the perimeter of the oasis at Medina, which they heavily

fortified. The Meccans' siege was unable to break the barrier, resulting in a stalemate; the Meccan forces eventually withdrew. This was interpreted as a victory for the Muslims, for it demonstrated that Mohammed could not be defeated by force.

All during this period, Mohammed's relationship with the Jewish tribes in the Medina area grew worse. They rejected his message, and he questioned their loyalty to him. He believed that he had to put an end to their opposition. The relationship between Islam and Judaism during the long history of these two religions is far too complex to be fully summarized here. I will focus only on Mohammed's use of Jewish scriptures— at first, to gain the Jews' allegiance, and when this failed, his later effort to defeat the Jewish tribes in the area. It is clear that a good part of his theological outlook was derived from the Old Testament. Mohammed was familiar with Jewish customs and beliefs, for there were a great number of Jewish settlements in Arabia. The early part of his message drew heavily on Jewish sources: first and foremost, he accepted monotheism. Early in his ministry, he had his followers face Jerusalem to pray. He observed the fast of Yom Kippur (the day of atonement). He instructed the faithful to pray on Fridays. He also set aside a time for prayer in the middle of the day, as did the Jews, and he bade his followers to adopt similar dress, hairstyles, and dietary rules. Mohammed revered Abraham as the founder of both Judaism and Islam, and he even mentioned that the Kaaba had been built by Abraham for the worship of God. He expected the Jews to accept him as the last in a long line of Hebrew prophets, as he had accepted their scriptures. God had sent other prophets to bear witness to his divine glory, including Moses, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Mohammed taught that his new revelations must supersede all others. But when the Jews rejected his call and remained "unbelievers," content in their practices and scriptures and believing that they were God's chosen people, he turned against them.

Thus a revelation was introduced by Mohammed in 623 to mark a decisive shift in his religious policies. The circumstances were as follows: About sixteen or seventeen months after arriving in Medina, when there seemed no longer any hope of reconciling Judaism and Islam, Mohammed made a change in the method of praying. According to the Hadith, one day as he was praying, turning his face upward to Jerusalem, a divine revelation came upon him unexpectedly: Turn then thy face in the direction of the sacred Mosque: Wherever you are, turn your face in that direction (Surah 2:144).

221

Medina; The suitor of Islam

Mohammed had already made two prostrations with his face toward Jerusalem. When he received this revelation, he suddenly turned around, looking to the south toward the Kaaba in Mecca, and he finished the service in that direction. As he did, all of the worshippers in the mosque followed his example and turned south as well, and that has remained the Muslim practice ever since. The circumstances of the revelation did not require that he go into a trance; he merely uttered the revelation in the mosque.

Meanwhile, Mohammed's controversy with the Jews erupted into open warfare. Some of the pagan tribes of Medina who welcomed Mohammed had been formerly allied with the Jews in their internal conflicts. They had hoped that Mohammed would honor their longstanding alliances. This, Mohammed now refused to do. His uncompromising attitude was reinforced when he learned that some of the Jewish tribes had made formal alliance with the Meccans against

him. He considered the existence of such tribes a threat to his control. The first conflict arose with the Jewish clan known as Qaynuqa. A trifling incident between a young Arab girl and some Jewish youths was blown out of proportion, and retaliation led to retaliation. When Mohammed's army attacked the Jews, they sequestered themselves inside their fortress, which was blockaded for fifteen days until they surrendered. Mohammed was prepared to condemn all the inhabitants to death, but he relented when their Medinan allies demanded their freedom. Not wishing to break relations with his newly found friends in Medina, he lifted the death penalty but insisted that the Jews evacuate Medina within three days, leaving behind all of their goods to the victors.

A bloody massacre of a Jewish tribe occurred in May of 627, after the battle of the Great Ditch. It was with the Jewish tribe Qurayza. Mohammed's army laid siege to their fortified village and demanded that they surrender, which they did, unconditionally. Mohammed offered to spare them if they embraced Islam, which they refused. A terrible penalty was exacted: All adult males were executed, the women and children sold into slavery, and their property divided. The men were imprisoned in a yard separate from their women and children. They spent their last hours of darkness in prayer, chanting passages from the scriptures.

Meanwhile, Mohammed had trenches dug during the night across the marketplace of the town. In the morning, he ordered the male prisoners to be brought forth five or six at a time. Each group was forced to sit down in a row at the edge of the trench. They were then beheaded and their bodies pushed into their grave. The killing that began in the morning continued all day and into the night, lit by torchlights. The blood of an estimated 600 to 800 victims bathed the marketplace. All during these

222 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

proceedings Mohammed was a spectator. He gave orders to fill in and cover over the trenches, and then distributed the spoils. The land, possessions, cattle, and slaves were all divided, Mohammed keeping one-fifth of each for himself. He presented slave girls and female servants to his friends as gifts. The rest of the women and children were sold into slavery. He kept for himself, however, Reihana, a beautiful Jewess whose husband and male relatives had perished. Although he asked her to be his wife, she declined, but having no choice, lived with him as his concubine or slave.

What happened to the messages of the Lord? Why in so brief a time was Mohammed transformed from a lonely prophet seeking the truth of God into one willing to massacre those who refused to accept his rule? The same kind of brutality that Mohammed resorted to against the Jews he used against his pagan Arab enemies in quelling opposition. Mohammed was not unique in his religious vindictiveness, for Moses and Joshua had also massacred those who opposed them in their quest for power over conquered tribes and territories. It does raise questions about the sincerity and nobility of character of some of those who believe that they talk to God and seek to impose his law on humanity.

Mohammed later subdued other Jewish colonies, one by one, but he was not as harsh. They were allowed to keep their property, and he spared their lives on the condition that they pay taxes. This became a model for future armies of Islam, who after conquering native people often only exacted tribute from them.

Mohammed revised his attitude toward Judaic practices and beliefs still further. The fast of Ramadan, for example, replaced the feast of Yom Kippur, and most Jewish dietary practices were rejected. The Old Testament was much less important than it had been in the past, for this daring new religion now relied primarily on a single prophet, namely Mohammed. All opposition from the Jews

in Arabia was now crushed, and they would no longer be an impediment to the expansion of Islam.

The next major effort of Mohammed was to subdue Mecca. The leaders of Mecca, including Abu Sufyan, apparently decided that it was in their own self-interest to reach an agreement with the Muslims. At one point they even permitted the pilgrims from Medina to enter Mecca to visit the Kaaba. They were impressed by their discipline and apparently believed that they could reach an accommodation. They reopened negotiations. Meanwhile, Mohammed was able to raise a large army of more than 10,000 men, including many new recruits, and he again marched south. The Meccans panicked. Abu Sufyan again met with Mohammed, and was converted to Islam. Mohammed presented his terms. The lives and properties of the inhabitants would be respected if they permitted the Muslim army to enter peacefully.

Prophet of Allah
223

Thus, on January 11, 630, eight years after he had fled Mecca with his small band of Companions, Mohammed and his army reentered the city in victory. He immediately visited the Kaaba, touched the Black Stone, and cried out "Allah-o-Akbar!" He destroyed all of the pagan idols in the shrine, and urged the Quraysh to swear allegiance to him as the true prophet of God. In the succeeding two years before his death in 632, Mohammed engaged in battles with other tribes, particularly the Hawa-zin, and was able to unify the entire Arabian peninsula under his rule. His personality matured, and he was given to beneficence and kindness. In the later surahs, he emphasized the virtues of obedience to God, honesty, and charity toward others.

After his death, Abu Bekr, an old friend and confederate, was named his successor and became the first caliph. Bekr died two years later and was succeeded by Omar, another early companion of the prophet. He was succeeded in turn by Othman in 644, and he by Ali, Mohammed's cousin, now married to Fatima, his daughter. Ali ruled until 661. All these rulers were either close relatives or friends of Mohammed. Much of the Hadith was derived from their memories. Whether their reminiscences of Mohammed were influenced by the exigencies of maintaining power is difficult to say, but it is not unlikely that this occurred. There were bitter disputes about succession within the Muslim world, which have not been resolved even today, yet the caliphs succeeded thirty years after the death of the prophet in extending Muslim control beyond the borders of Arabia. They conquered Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, which formerly had been under Christian hegemony, and Iran; and within eighty years of the death of Mohammed, the message of the prophet and the sword of Islam ruled all the way from Spain in the West to the Indies in the East. In successive centuries, four great Muslim empires flourished in turn—the Seljuk and the Ottoman, based in Istanbul, the Safavid in Iran, and the Moghuls in India—all in the name of Allah and his messenger.

Prophet of Allah

Let us return to analyze more carefully the personality of Mohammed. As we saw, he began his life as a poor orphan. Later wedded to Khadijah, he succeeded as a prosperous merchant. At the age of forty, he received his religious calling, probably having suffered from hallucinations and/or epileptic seizures. The latter part of his life was spent as the prophet of Islam but also as its military and political leader.

Shortly after the death of Khadijah, Mohammed, who was then fifty, was persuaded to remarry. He took two new wives: the first, Sauda, was

224 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

a widow and one of his early converts, and the second, A'isha, the daughter of Abu Bekr, was only six or seven years of age (their marriage was not consummated for three years). Since polygamy was widely practiced among the Arabs, Mohammed was not unusual in this respect.

After eight years, Mohammed divorced Sauda, who was growing older, spent most of his time with A'isha, who had become his favorite. Sauda promised to yield one of her days (Mohammed spent a day with each of his wives in turn), if he would take her back. She wished to rise on Judgment Day as his wife.

Mohammed assented, revealing a new surah (4:128), which allowed a husband and wife to seek mutual agreement:

If a wife fears cruelty or desertion on her husband's part There is no blame in them If they manage an amicable Settlement between themselves; And such settlement is best.

How convenient it was for Mohammed to have God deliver a new commandment for mankind, just when Mohammed needed one. The revelations that flowed from the prophet now clearly had concrete, practical ends to fulfill, those that satisfied the private and political needs of the prophet. Still, his decision about Sauda was a charitable one.

In 628 A'isha accompanied Mohammed on an expedition, but was inadvertently left behind. A'isha managed to catch up with Mohammed's party with the aid of a young man who happened along. Suspicions of adultery grew, and Mohammed was urged to renounce his wife. The prophet was reluctant to do so, and he resolved the quandary by a new revelation. The circumstances under which such a revelation came to be pronounced is related in the Hadith, an account, no doubt, based largely on the testimony of A'isha. Apparently the scandal about A'isha's virtue dragged on for several weeks, and was intensified by Ali, a member of Mohammed's inner circle, who thought that Mohammed should punish his wife for adultery. Mohammed was apparently weighed down by sorrow because of the quarrel. According to tradition, he visited the chamber of A'isha, who was sitting with her parents. She was overcome with grief. Mohammed apparently told her that if she were guilty, she should repent. She burst into a flood of tears, declaring her innocence.

Then, as all were silent, the prophet appeared to fall into a trance Those present covered him and put a pillow under his head. A'isha was confident that he would vindicate her. In a little while he recovered, sat up, wiping the sweat from his forehead, and told his wife to rejoice, for God had found her innocent.

Mohammed then went out to the people and recited a new commandment concerning adultery.

Prophet of Allah 225

The Koran provides that those who are guilty of fornication should each be flogged one hundred strokes. Mohammed adds the qualification, however, that one needs four witnesses to prove the charge of adultery, which makes it a very difficult charge to prove. The Koran then continues:

And those who launch

A charge against chaste women

And produce not four witnesses

To support their allegation

Flog them eighty stripes

And reject their evidence. (Surah 24:4)

Since there were not four witnesses at the time A'isha was suspected of having committed adultery, she was to be considered innocent.

Mohammed, like the Arabs and other peoples of his time, was an extreme sexist in his attitude toward women, an attitude that dominates Muslim customs and law today.

All told, Mohammed took ten wives and had at least two concubines. Some of these marriages had a political motive, but others no doubt satisfied his sexual proclivities. Tradition tells us that Mohammed liked three kinds of pleasures best: women, good food, and scents. His taste for women was well known, and indeed even scandalous. One story in particular illustrates this point, for it concerns the wife of Zayd, Mohammed's adopted son. Zayd's loyalty and devotion to Mohammed throughout his life was total. One day, Mohammed called at Zayd's home and happened to see his wife, Zaynab, who was scantily dressed.

Mohammed left the home in confusion, having been overcome by her beauty.

Upon learning of this encounter, Zayd immediately offered to divorce his wife and give her to the Prophet if that was what he wished, since apparently it was Mohammed who had earlier arranged Zayd's marriage to Zaynab. Mohammed turned him down, but Zayd divorced Zaynab anyway and Mohammed went on to marry her—but not until he secured permission from God in the form of a revelation (Surah 33:36). Many members of the community were displeased by the marriage. Since Zayd was Mohammed's adopted son, they considered the marriage to be incestuous. Mohammed was able to get his way and abort their criticisms by receiving a specific revelation from on high. In the Koran we read the following:

Then when Zayd had dissolved (his marriage)

With her, with the necessary (formality),

We've joined her in marriage to you:

In order that (in the future) there may be no difficulty

To the believers (in the matter of marriage)

With the wives of their adopted sons

226 Mohammed: The prophet of Is for-

When the latter have dissolved with the necessary (formality) (Their marriage) with them. (Surah 36:37)

Mohammed concludes the revelation, "And God's command must be fulfilled." To make sure that everyone would understand his marriage : Zaynab had divine sanction, he issued the following revelation:

There can be no difficulty to the prophet in what

God has indicated to him as a duty

It was the practice (approval) of God

Amongst those of old that have passed away

And the command of God is a decree determined. (Surah 33:38)

That Zayd would willingly give his wife to Mohammed is itself a cause for considerable amazement, and that he would accept Mohammed's justification as divine borders on the incredible. This case illustrates the character of many of Mohammed's latter-day revelations. They were often contrived for his own gain and advantage. Interestingly, Mohammed seemed on occasion to be able to induce them at will, which suggests that even if he had genuine epilepticlike seizures, on some occasions the seizures may have been feigned. They were used to resolve his marital problems and amorous desires. That they were taken as eternal dictum in order to govern the affairs of all men and women under Islam is hard to believe. It reinforces the observation that once a forceful

individual .> determined character is able to convince his flock that his rule is divi-K he can get away with almost anything, however transparent his motr-r* may appear to history.

The revelations of Mohammed were also introduced to serve politics. ends. They were resorted to in order to pronounce general orders .: military campaigns and to provide the regulations of a theocratic ge.-ernment concerning the treatment of allies and the disaffected, the \c--mulation of treaties, and the acceptance of terms. They contained e-r ments of a civil and criminal code. Legislation is likewise enunciated i> the care of orphans, marriage, divorce, wills, usury, and other practice concerns. In this regard, the Koran is not unlike Leviticus and Deir.t ronomy, which Moses gave to the children of Israel to govern the/ behavior and to exalt himself as the prophet of the Lord.

The Koran evidently gave Mohammed a powerful weapon with whic-to intimidate his followers. Mohammed's word alone was final and ccr stituted Islamic law. All disputes must be referred to him for resolutior Although he was not to be considered a deity, he nonetheless ruled lik: an absolute sovereign. When he appeared on the scene, everyone in th; assembly rose and gave place to him and his entourage. Muslims werr

Obedience to God—the highest virtue 227

required to approach him reverentially, speak quietly in his presence, not to crowd around him. They were to keep their distance. They could not visit him uninvited. His wives were to be shielded from public gaze. As the Favorite of Heaven, he had special privileges not due others. Reve-lation, it turned out, was the instrument by which he first established and then enforced absolute obedience to his will. God alone had anointed Mohammed to be his messenger. All others must obey or else.

Thus from the first vague, indecisive visions of Mohammed, there developed a body of explicit prescriptions that became the method by which he could have his wishes and political and ethical notions fulfilled. His followers were never allowed to question Mohammed's word, for it was the word of God. Revelation in this sense expresses a form of paranoia. A disturbed individual acting out his fantasies, persuading others to accept his distorted images of the world as God's truth, now becomes an all-powerful being, himself ruling the lives of men and women. Mohammed's quest for power—submit or ye shall die—depended on the other side of the social transaction; those who believed that his message had a transcendental source abandoned all their claims to critical intelligence and agreed to submit to his pronouncements.

Obedience to God—the highest virtue

Are there any redeeming virtues to Islam and the ethical political system that Mohammed bequeathed? Surely an ethical-socio-political system that has endured for almost 1,400 years and still continues to exert a profound influence on the lives of hundreds of millions of Muslims must have some deep functions to perform. First, it established a degree of order and harmony in those areas where it predominated. It substituted for the hap-hazard custom, anarchy, and chaos that had existed before a system of law and regulation. Second, it provided an ethical code that has governed the lives of countless generations of human beings, given stability to social life, and provided parameters for guiding conduct. Third, Islam gave new existential meaning to men and women, who had lived in harsh and ignoble conditions. It helped to negate the pain and anxiety endured in life, soothed the dread of death, and it thus provided some solace for suffering souls who looked forward to Paradise as a relief from their worldly

troubles. Fourth, Islam has inspired beautiful art, poetry, and philosophical and intellectual inquiry.

The Islamic religion represented in its time an advance over both Judaism and Christianity. If one accepts the unity of God, then Mohammed's form of monotheism, unlike Judaism (which is directed only toward

228 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

the "chosen people"), is more universal in scope, for it is available to all peoples, irrespective of race, ethnicity, or nationality. It thus implies a form of equality: it applies to the rich and the poor, men and women, rulers and their subjects. Unlike Christianity, Islam did not develop a supernatural mythological tale about a risen deity who wrought miracles. Moreover, it has not developed a strong priestly class or ecclesiastical hierarchy, except recently in Iran. The religion has no complicated rites and rituals, nor is it mired in mystical abstractions, incomprehensible to the ordinary person. The Muslim must pray five times a day, by prostrating himself before God; he must fast during the daylight hours during the month of Ramadan; he must, if he can, make a pilgrimage in his lifetime to Mecca; and he must contribute to charity and be righteous. Although there are strict regulations against alcohol, gambling, usury, and adultery, Islam did not rail against the pleasures of the body or of sex, as did Christian ascetics and priests (down to our own time), but it tried to balance physical enjoyment with spiritual devotion. Paradise was not an austere place where one sang hymns throughout eternity (Hell could not have been worse), but a place where one could continue to enjoy the familiar earthly pleasures. This simplified religion had broad appeal, and enabled Islam to grow so rapidly that it supplanted Christianity in many areas of the world.

Unfortunately, Islam has serious negative features. It has enshrined a set of moral values of which not all are any longer relevant to the postmodern world. The primary failure of the system, for the humanist at least, is its first premise: that we ought to submit obediently to God. This is rooted in faith in the Koran and its message, but we have no reasonable evidence that God/Allah exists, that Mohammed received revelations from God, or that there is an afterlife. Why should we entrust our entire destiny to a false doctrine and submit to its authority?

What are we to say about an ethical system that applauds total psychological submission and prostration, and that has insufficient faith in the ability of human beings to use their powers to achieve a good life? Adoring God as the source of all wisdom and law demeans man. Elevating faith deprecates critical intelligence. Insisting that we are dependent undermines independence. Seeking to derive ethical obligations from the fatherhood of God impairs efforts to create autonomous ethical principles and values based upon reason and tested by their concrete consequences for human good. In enshrining what a self-proclaimed prophet said 1,400 years ago, Muslims limit the application of free intelligence allied with critical scientific inquiry to develop ethical values and to reform social institutions appropriate to the changing contexts of life.

The Muslim tradition attempts to regulate all aspects of life; and this

Obedience to God—the highest virtue 229

leaves little room for independent freedom of choice or conscience. Thus it denegrates the ability of individual persons to discover their own resources of truth, beauty, and virtue, independent of the religious tradition, or to adopt

alternative lifestyles. It restricts any moral freedoms not recognized by the Koran or Islamic law. Conforming to religious conventions blots out individuality. In its most narrow application, Islam prevents women from sharing equally the opportunities for enjoying and realizing their full powers in the world. Sexist discrimination is codified by Islam, because the Prophet so decreed it. However, it is granted that Mohammed helped in his own day to emancipate women from some barbarous customs that had prevailed. For example, fathers who preferred male offspring would sometimes bury their female children alive, and Mohammed forbade this to continue. And although Mohammed practiced polygamy, women were given some rights, such as the right to own or inherit property, and men were enjoined not to mistreat their women. But still, most women lived shielded from the world, and were unable to participate fully in economic, social, and political life. True, Judaism and Christianity likewise expressed the sexist prejudices of the times in which they were being developed, but insofar as one submits to an orthodox reading of the Koran, it is difficult to achieve recognition of the rights of women, to grant them equality in dignity and value as persons. So deep is obedience to Islam that not only do men continue to follow these outmoded customs but in many Muslim countries women also willingly submit to the hegemony of their husbands and fathers—since God decreed it.

The right of free thought and freedom of conscience, as basic human rights, are insufficiently recognized by Islam. Granted that after the death of the Prophet, Islam developed a rich philosophical and intellectual civilization, in which learning and the arts flourished. Indeed, were it not for Islam, much of the great literature of the pagan world, interpreted and elaborated by Islamic scholars, would have been lost to Christian Europe. It was the rediscovery of these works in the monasteries of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that contributed to the revival of learning and the eventual emergence of the Renaissance.

Since Islam means the comprehensive governance of the entire life of a society, which must be dedicated to God, there is little or no appreciation for the principle of the separation of church and state, which developed in the West and which permitted the secularization of culture and the emergence of religious liberty and the free mind. It is true that Islam did develop a measure of tolerance for the other religions in its midst, and so there is a kind of *modus vivendi* extended to Jews and Christians, who were usually permitted to follow their own religious practices. But this

230 Mohammed: The prophet of Islam

toleration did not extend to those who were born into the Muslim world. Heresy and the right of dissent are not recognized, and the greatest sin for a Muslim is apostasy or unbelief. This has led to a new spate of fanaticism among Shiite Muslims, in Iran and Lebanon.

Until the Islamic world undergoes its own Renaissance and Enlightenment, the respect for human freedom enjoyed elsewhere will have difficulty in developing. And this means an appreciation for religious freedom, including liberty of thought and conscience—for unbelievers as well as believers. Perhaps the secularization and democratization of values and the recognition of the right of dissent will emerge as Islam comes into contact with other areas of the modern world by means of trade and communication. Perhaps continued economic and technological developments will make clear the necessity for also developing scientific research, which can only flourish under conditions of free inquiry. These important changes will be facilitated only when those within the Islamic world come to recognize the uncorroborated nature of the claim that Mohammed

was the prophet of God and realize that it is not one's obligation to obey all of his alleged revelations.

X: Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

Since the origins of the chief monotheistic religions are dimly clouded in a distant past, it is often difficult, if not impossible, to corroborate the claims made on behalf of their exalted personalities. I have noted nevertheless that there are similar psychological and sociological processes at work in the historic religions. Although Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed all proclaimed some kind of divine credentials, it is possible to consider alternative interpretations of their ministries. Perhaps they were disturbed individuals, half-believing that they had a divine mission yet cunningly using subterfuge and conjuring tricks to convince their credulous followers that they had had revelatory experiences and spoke in the name of God. Critics may say, of course, that my interpretive hypothesis has not been verified and that, although there may be some evidence to support it, it remains a speculative though suggestive hypothesis.

The question that should next be raised is: Do we have any recent or contemporaneous evidence of analogous processes, which would support my thesis? There are many cases of God-intoxicated individuals who have made revelatory claims, but their influence has not survived their day and religions were not founded in their names. Either the absurdity of their claims were exposed or else they never enlisted the disciples who could effectively carry their message into the future. The historical record demonstrates that of the many competing prophets, most lost out in the great struggle for souls. Surprisingly, some have managed to succeed. Often their claims were found preposterous in their own day, yet they survived their critics and their detractors. We are close enough to the historical record of some of these newer religious sects to apply the skills of historical analysis and to test their claims of prophetic revelation. North America, for a number of reasons, has spawned a wide variety of cults, many of them so bizarre that they flaunt all standards of logic and evidence, and yet they have persisted, and have even thrived. Perhaps it was because the United States was a frontier society to which countless immigrants came; they were rootless and on their own, seeking meaning and guidelines, and hence they fell easy prey to absolutist doctrines. At least four major "prophets" and the sects that developed around them in the nineteenth century come to mind: the most influential were Joseph

231

232 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

Smith and the Mormon Church, Ellen G. White and the Seventh-Day Adventists, Charles Taze Russell and Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mary Baker Eddy and Christian Science. All of these churches claimed to be based on the Bible, yet they went far beyond it by proclaiming the latter-day revelations of their founders.

It is puzzling for the skeptic to note that the intense religious revival on the frontier during the early nineteenth century followed swiftly after the period of the American Revolution when the winds of rationalism, deism, and anticlericalism were blowing strong. After the establishment of the Republic a reaction set in. What does this say about human nature? Are people so unsatisfied spiritually by skepticism and rationality that they will embrace

absolutistic doctrines that claim to answer the questions they pose about the meaning of life?

Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon

Joseph Smith, money-digger

I will devote the major part of this chapter to a case study of Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon. The similarities to the career of Mohammed and the growth of Islam are striking. The Mormon religion was founded by Joseph Smith, a young man living in the Palmyra area, a small community in upstate New York near Rochester. Born in 1805, Smith was a charismatic and highly controversial personality. His most important visions were revelations from Moroni, an angel of the Lord, who appeared to him and told him where to uncover gold plates; from these he "translated" the Book of Mormon, which Smith published in 1830. He continued to have revelations throughout his life, and he gathered a dedicated band of true believers around him, who grew in number. Often compelled to move, he forged an army of apostles ever ready to work mightily for his word, even to die for it. Smith was eventually shot to death by an angry mob in Carthage, Illinois, in 1844, but not before he had aroused the intense devotion or hatred of tens of thousands of people. Interestingly, Mormonism did not perish with the murder of its prophet and founder, but it has continued to grow, for a long period of time ever in the face of tremendous opposition and persecution. His beleaguered band of followers trekked westward to Salt Lake City, Utah, which was not yet a state, to build a new Zion in the wilderness. Today the Mormon Church has an estimated six million adherents worldwide and is one of the fastest growing religions, with missionaries fanning out all over the globe recruiting new converts. Moreover, it has spawned about fifty dissi-

233

Joseph Smith, money-digger

dent offshoots, the largest being the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (RLDS).

Mormonism is important for the thesis of this book because it provides us with an opportunity to empirically investigate the birth of a relatively new religion and study its growth in subsequent generations. The Mormon Church has been transformed from a radical cult persecuted by the establishment of its day into today's defender of a new orthodoxy. Dedicated Mormons are regarded as industrious and highly moral individuals. They do not drink liquor, coffee, or tea; they do not smoke. They are models of the traditional moral virtues and are highly patriotic. Mormonism is the most nativistic of American religions, for it grew out of and adapted to the frontier conditions, as it attracted new settlers who were arriving from Europe. Moreover, it found a place for Native Americans and the new continent in the divine scheme, things that had been left out of the Bible.

One may ask: Was the founder of Mormonism a divine prophet? Had he received a unique set of revelations from God or was he a clever imposter, paranoid personality, and lecherous rogue, as the critics of his day charged?

The life and works of Joseph Smith have been heavily researched and documented, both in his own day and today. There are the official church histories, including Smith's own account of his ministry.¹ But there are also critical biographies, based upon painstaking research, many of them by Mormon or ex-Mormon scholars. I have in mind especially the works of Fawn Brodie, Ernest Taves, Jerald and Sandra Tanner, and E. D. Howe. I shall draw upon their biographies heavily in the following discussion.² Scholars and historians who

have published skeptical studies were excommunicated from the Mormon Church, including Fawn Brodie and the Tanners (at their request), and other forms of pressure are exerted on dissenters. Official church histories and translations have often been modified, interpolated, and even fabricated by church leaders in order to preserve the faith. This is somewhat analogous to what happened earlier in the historical development of Christian dogma.

Joseph Smith had fairly humble beginnings. His family changed resi-

1. See Joseph Smith, *The Book of Mormon, Doctrine and Covenant, and Pearl of Great Price*; Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 7 vols. (Salt Lake City, 1932-51. See also James E. Talmage, *The Articles of Faith*, 16th ed. (Salt Lake City, 1930).

2. See Fawn Brodie, *No Man Knows My History: The Life of Joseph Smith*, 2nd ed. (New York: Knopf, 1971); Ernest Taves, *Trouble Enough: Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1984); Jerald and Sandra Tanner, *The Changing World of Mormonism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980); E. D. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled* (Painesville, 1834; reprinted by the Tanners' Utah Lighthouse Ministry, Salt Lake City).

234 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

dences several times in search of a better living. They moved from Vermont to western New York in 1816, and lived there during the building and opening of the Erie Canal. The atmosphere of the day was heavily charged with constant revivalist and spiritualist ferment. Unfettered religious interests bred bizarre cults.

Ann Lee (1736-1784), a mystic, had claimed that she was the reincarnated Christ. She preached celibacy and cleanliness and helped found Shaker communities in the American colonies. The Shakers had originated in mid-eighteenth century England among the Society of Friends. The group was known as "Shaking Quakers," because of the physical manifestations of spiritual fervor, especially during public worship. The Shakers advocated a community of shared possessions, separation from the world, sexual equality, and they engaged in singing, dancing, and marching during worship services. Ann Lee claimed to have received a revelation that proclaimed that the maternal element of Christ's spirit was resurrected in her. She emigrated to New York state in 1774. After her death many Shaker communities were established. The cult believed in the dual nature of deity; the male principle appeared in Jesus, the female in Mother Ann Lee. Since the group preached celibacy, it eventually disappeared.

Many other gurus appeared after the Revolution. Isaac Bullard, clad only in a bearskin girdle, led a band of "pilgrims" and championed free love and a primitive form of communism; he considered washing a sin and wore the same clothing for years. Jemima Wilkinson believed herself to be the Christ, said she was eternal, and governed her flock by means of revelations from heaven. Abel Sargent likewise received revelations and talked with angels. He toured New York state in 1812 with twelve women apostles, claiming that he could raise the dead and preaching that if one were pious one could exist without eating. There were faith healers, bible thumpers, and evangelists galore, as one awakening after another inundated the state. There was also a renewed interest in occult beliefs and practices.

Joseph Smith began his career as a "necromancer," a "glass looker," and "treasure hunter." He and his father attempted to make a living helping people uncover lost treasure for which they employed a form of dowsing. Joseph's father used a divining rod. Rumors spread great excitement about there being hidden Indian treasure, Spanish gold, and silver mines in the area. Joseph's primary

method of treasure hunting was to use a "seer stone," which was something like crystal gazing. He maintained that he could see things by looking into the stone. Interestingly, Joseph Smith was indicted and tried in 1826, at the age of twenty-one, for

Joseph Smith, money-digger 235

being "a disorderly person and an imposter." He was convicted on the testimony offered, including his own admission that he practiced the magic arts, spells, and incantations. He was invariably unsuccessful in his diggings; when his clients thought that they had struck something, the treasure would move down still further. He was unsuccessful, that is, until he uncovered a new lodestone, the Book of Mormon.

Joseph Smith maintained that on September 21, 1823, when he was seventeen, an angel by the name of Moroni appeared to him and revealed the whereabouts of gold plates, which were conveniently buried on the Hill Cumorah, not far from his home. These plates were translated by him and became the Book of Mormon. Much later in life, in his autobiographical writings, Smith maintained that he had had a still earlier revelation at the age of fourteen, this time right across the road from his house in a grove of trees, now called the "sacred grove." In this revelation, Smith said that two personages "whose brightness and glory defied all description" stood above him in the air. He asked which of the numerous contending sects he should join, and the reply was as follows:

I was answered that I must join none of them that: "they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach for doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof."³

This revelation proved to be a basis for justifying the foundation of a new religion.

One may today visit Palmyra and Manchester, New York, to see the various sites of Joseph's revelations. The Mormon Church has purchased Joseph Smith's home, the land surrounding the Hill Cumorah (where a statue of an angel has been erected), the "sacred grove," and other landmarks, and has turned them into Mormon shrines. Thousands of Mormons make their pilgrimages to the area. Yet a critic is stunned by the presumptive belief that Joseph's reports of his revelations are veridical. We have no corroborative evidence that Joseph had any visions on the hill or in the grove; or if he did, that they were divinely sent. Like other reports of prophets and mystics, his accounts are purely subjective and without witnesses.

Western New York in the early nineteenth century was replete with Indian burial mounds, and the white inhabitants of the region speculated about their origin. Joseph Smith provided a truly fanciful solution. He maintained that the gold plates he dug up had been in the ground since C.E. 421. Described at a time when things Egyptian were in fashion

3. Joseph Smith, History 1:11-19.

236 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

throughout Europe and North America, these plates were engraved in "reformed Egyptian" characters. They revealed that the American Indians were descended from two remnants of the lost tribes of Israel (Ephraim and Manasseh) and from the tribe of Judah, who left the Middle East and set sail for the new world about 600 B.c.E. There were two main peoples, the Jaredites from the Tower of Babel and later the Nephites and Lamanites from Jerusalem. The Jaredites who came first spread out over the entire American continent and built great towns and

cities. After many generations they destroyed each other because of their pride and sin. The Nephites and Lamanites, descendents of the prophet Lehi, fled Israel before the Babylonian invasion. They too spread over the face of the land. The Lamanites "dwindled in unbelief." Their skin became "dark and loathsome" and eventually they killed off the industrious and pious Nephites. In this account, Christ visited America in c.E. 34, and after his resurrection and ascension manifested himself to the Nephites, performing miracles. The Book of Mormon provided for the salvation of the Indians and a new revelation to supplement the Bible. Moroni, the last remaining Nephite and the son of Mormon, who had collected the stories of his people's prophets, sealed up the record and buried the plates. It was the same Moroni, then an angel, who visited Joseph in 1823 and subsequent years. It was not until 1827, however, that Joseph was finally allowed to receive the plates.

The question that has been raised is whether Smith's account is true. Where did Joseph Smith get the Book of Mormon? His story appears to be a far-fetched tale, for it has not been confirmed by archeological or anthropological investigations. There is no independent, verifiable evidence for the existence of the tribes mentioned or their Middle East origin.

In Joseph Smith's day it was commonly believed that the Native American Indian tribes were related to the lost tribes of Israel. Many critics of Joseph Smith have pointed out that a book with a similar thesis had been published in 1825 by Ethan Smith in Poultney, Vermont. It was entitled *A View of the Hebrews*, and likewise argued for the Hebraic origin of the Indians. Commentators have shown many textual analogies between the Book of Mormon and *A View of the Hebrews*. Most likely, Smith was familiar with the commonly held nineteenth-century beliefs referred to in the book.

Those who are devotees of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormon Church) nevertheless maintain that, like the Bible, the Book of Mormon is the word of God and that it was given directly to Joseph Smith to be translated from the ancient gold plates. Mormon apostle Orson Pratt wrote in 1851:

i

Joseph Smith, money-digger 237

The Book of Mormon claims to be a divinely inspired record written by a succession of prophets who inhabited ancient America . . .

This book must be true or false. If true it is one of the most important messages ever sent from God to man If false, it is one of the most cunning, wicked, bold, deep-laid impositions ever palmed upon the world. . . .

The nature of the message in the Book of Mormon is such, that if true, no one can possibly be saved and reject it.⁴

Although the Mormon Church accepts the Book of Mormon in toto as the revealed word of God, it is difficult for noncommitted historical researchers to do likewise today. There are many contradictory and unsubstantiated claims surrounding the origin of this work. According to Joseph's account, he first had a visitation from Moroni on September 21, 1823. The angel appeared to him after he had gone to bed:

A personage appeared at my bedside, standing in the air. . . . He had on a loose robe of most exquisite whiteness. . . . I was afraid; but the fear soon left me. He called me by name, and said unto me that he was a messenger sent from the presence of God to me, and that his name was Moroni; that God had a work for me to do; and that my name should be had for good and evil among all nations, kindreds, and tongues. . . .

He said that there was a book deposited, written upon gold plates, giving an account of the former inhabitants of this continent, and the sources from whence they sprang. He also said that the fullness of the everlasting Gospel was contained in it as delivered by the Savior to the ancient inhabitants; also that there were two stones in silver bows—and these stones, fastened to a breastplate, constituted what is called the Urim and Thummim. . . . The possession and use of these stones were what constituted "Seers" in ancient or former times; and. . . . God had prepared them for the purpose of translating the book.⁵

According to Smith he was warned not to show the plates and the Urim and Thummim to anyone under pain of death. (This is reminiscent of Moses' warning to the children of Israel never to ascend Mount Sinai, the residence of Jehovah, or they would be struck dead.) Moroni returned twice that night. The next day, Smith went to work in the fields, but since he looked pale, his father told him to return home. On the way he climbed a fence and fell unconscious. Did he have an epileptic seizure like Paul or Mohammed may have had? Moroni again appeared and told him to tell his father, Joseph Smith, Sr., what had occurred. His father told Joseph that he must do what the angel had requested. The Smith parents were

4. Quoted in George D. Smith, "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," *Free Inquiry**, no. 1 (Winter 1983-84); from Orson Pratt's *Works* (Liverpool, 1851), p. 1.

5. Smith, *History* 1:28-50; quoted in Taves, *Trouble Enough*, p. 27.

238 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

both believers in supernatural events and even witchcraft, and his father had many paranormal visions and dreams; and so both adults were no doubt receptive to the tales related by their son. Joseph said that he visited the Hill Cumorah each year for four years until he was finally informed by the angel that he could remove the tablets.

According to Ernest Taves in his study of Joseph Smith, other accounts of these early events were available at that time. Joseph's father told a nearby neighbor, Parley Chase, that on Joseph's first visit to the plates, the angel Moroni was not present but that "a toad-like being that transmogrified into a man" was. Parley Chase said that "they scarcely ever told two stories alike."⁶ Another critic maintained that the story of the gold scriptures was begun as a "speculation," i.e., for profit. And still another said that they intended to use the profits gained from the sale of the book to continue their money-digging business. Another reported that when Joseph returned to the plates a year later with his wife, a "host of devils" screeched and screamed at him.

After an early follower, Philastus Hurlburt, defected, he gathered a great number of defamatory testimonials about Smith from his neighbors, friends, and ex-Mormons. This material was published in a book in 1834, edited by E. D. Howe and entitled *Mormonism Unveiled*. The book contains a statement by Peter Ingersoll, who maintained that in 1827 he was a close confidant and friend. Joseph allegedly told Ingersoll, in a humorous vein, the following story. His family was eating dinner and asked what he had in the frock. "So I very gravely told them it was the Golden Bible."⁷ Much to his surprise the family believed him. Anyone who looked at it, he warned, would be struck dead. "Now," Joseph informed Ingersoll, "I have got the damned fools fixed, and will carry out the fun."⁸ Ingersoll continued his account:

Notwithstanding, he told me he had no such book, and believed there never was such book, yet, he told me that he actually went to Willard Chase, to get him to

make a chest, in which he might deposit his golden Bible. But, as Chase would not do it, he made a box himself of clapboards, and put it into a pillow case, and allowed people only to lift it, and feel of it through the case.⁹

This story is corroborated by Willard Chase. The Mormons reply that out of envy and hostility all kinds of stories were made up about Smith. i.e., people were persecuting him.

6. Taves, *Troubk Enough*, p. 28.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*

Joseph Smith, money-digger 239

How do we know that Joseph Smith received a visitation from Mo-roni? We only have his word for it. Was he self-deceived or did he make up the entire story? And once it was out, was he so inspired by the gullible reaction of those who believed him that he continued the deception? Fawn Brodie speculates that Joseph Smith began as a "bucolic scryer" using the rude techniques of magic common to his area and time, and only later as he attracted a following, did he develop his skills as a preacher-prophet.

From what we can learn of Joseph Smith, he was an affable man, striking in appearance, charismatic to those he attracted, and also a man of fertile imagination. A resident of Palmyra at that time, Daniel Hendrix, describes him as follows:

He was a good talker and would have made a fine stump speaker if he had the training. He was known among the young men I associated with as a romancer of the first water. I never knew so ignorant a man as Joe was to have such a fertile imagination. He never could tell a common occurrence in his daily life without embellishing the story with his imagination; yet I remember that he was grieved one day when old Parson Reed told Joe that he was going to hell for his lying habits.¹⁰

As we saw, Smith had been tried and convicted for his sting operation.

Fortunately, we have a court record of the trial, March 20, 1826. Several witnesses reported on how he performed. Joseph would look into a hat in which he had a seer stone, claiming that he could find lost treasure. Two witnesses, Arad Stowell and A. McMaster, said that they went to see the prisoner (Joseph Smith) to be convinced of his skill, but that they "came away disgusted, finding the deception so palpable."¹¹ According to them, Smith pretended that he could discern objects at a distance by holding a white stone to the sun or a candle, but he declared that at that time looking into his hat hurt his eyes. In this regard Smith is not unlike present-day fortune tellers or clairvoyants, who claim they can see things from afar and that they possess paranormal powers.

We also have the testimony of Joseph Smith's father-in-law, Isaac Hale, of Harmony, Pennsylvania, about Smith's career. Joseph had sought the hand of Emma Hale. Peter Ingersoll went with Smith to help him move Emma's household furniture from Harmony to New York state. According to his account, Emma's father reproached Smith for stealing his daughter. "You spend your time digging for money—pretend to see a stone, and thus try to deceive people."¹² Ingersoll reports that

10. *Ibid.*, p. 16. Hendrix's view of Smith is stated in a letter he wrote to the *St. Louis Globe-Democrat*, Feb. 2, 1897.

11. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 428. This record of Smith's trial was first unearthed by Daniel S. Tuttle, Episcopal bishop of Salt Lake City.

12. Ibid., p. 433.

240 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

Joseph wept, admitted that he could not see in a stone, and that his former pretensions were all false. And he promised to give up his habits of looking into stones and digging for money.

The question that can be raised about a paranormal, occult, or revelatory story is: Who are we to believe? Are we to believe the sworn statements from almost a hundred neighbors and former friends in and around Palmyra and Harmony, Pennsylvania, that Hurlburt collected? No doubt many were biased against Joseph Smith because of his trial and conviction and the fact that his religious views were unorthodox. We must recognize that a prophet is often unappreciated in his own town. Yet Howe published several statements by people who went to the trouble to attest to the widely held view in the area that the Smiths were unsavory. Their statements all point to the view that Joseph Smith and his family were considered to be of "questionable character," engaging in "dubious" money-making schemes.

All of the evidence seems to support the view that Smith drew deeply on folk magic and that he skillfully merged the occult arts with biblical interpretation. He used divining rods, seer stones, and ritual magic early in his career, but the aura of magic persisted throughout his colorful life. The striking similarity of Joseph Smith with latter-day mediums and psychics is apparent. He claimed not only to have special revelations from on high, but to possess unique paranormal powers and gifts. He so aroused the transcendental temptation in those about him that they were inspired to follow him and, indeed, to build a new religion. The close affinity between magic and religion, the magician and the prophet, is especially evident in the first stirrings and early development of Mormon-ism. For Smith appears to be using the arts of the magician and the conjurer and to draw upon his elementary knowledge of the methods of deception to enhance his image. His ontological world-view is surely akin to the magical world-view of the wizard and the seer. His earlier efforts at treasure dowsing proved to be abortive and did not earn him much money. A profound shift in his life occurred when he transformed his alleged paranormal talents into a new religion, and this had a far-reaching effect not only on his own life but on those who followed him in this new venture. An uncharitable writer would conclude that the most profitable phase of Smith's life was his fabrication of the Book of Mormon; for this proved to be a tremendous boon to his career, launching him on the road to prophet-preacher fame and eventually martyrdom.

Was there any corroborative evidence to substantiate the divine origin of the Book of Mormon? Following Joseph Smith's personal account ;•:

Joseph Smith, moneydigger 241

his revelation, we have the testimony of a total of eleven witnesses. These are reported in the Book of Mormon.

Be It Known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That we, through the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, have seen the plates which contain this record, which is a record of the people of Nephi, and also of the Lamanites, their brethren, and also of the people of Jared, who came from the tower of which hath been spoken. And we also know that they have been translated by the gift and power of God, for his voice hath declared it unto us; wherefore we know of a surety that the work is true. And we also testify that we have seen the engraving which are upon the plates; and they have been shown unto us by the power of God, and not of man.

And we declare with words of soberness, that an angel of God came down from heaven, and he brought and laid before our eyes, that we beheld and saw the plates, and the engravings thereon; and we know that it is by the grace of God the Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ, that we beheld and bear record that these things are true. And it is marvelous in our eyes. Nevertheless, the voice of the Lord commanded us that we should bear record of it; wherefore, to be obedient unto the commandments of God, we bear testimony of these things. And we know that if we are faithful in Christ, we shall rid our garments of the blood of all men, and be found spotless before the judgment-seat of Christ, and shall dwell with him eternally in the heavens. And the honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, which is one God. Amen.

Oliver Cowdery David Whitmer Martin Harris

Be It Known unto all nations, kindreds, tongues, and people, unto whom this work shall come: That Joseph Smith, Jun., the translator of this work, has shown unto us the plates of which hath been spoken, which have the appearance of gold; and as many of the leaves as the said Smith has translated we did handle with our hands; and we also saw the engravings thereon, all of which has the appearance of ancient work, and of curious workmanship. And this we bear record with words of soberness, that the said Smith has shown unto us, for we have seen and hefted, and know of a surety that the said Smith has got the plates of which we have spoken. And we give our names unto the world, to witness unto the world that which we have seen. And we lie not, God bearing witness of it.

Christian Whitmer Hiram Page

Jacob Whitmer Joseph Smith, Sen.

Peter Whitmer, Jun. Hyrum Smith

John Whitmer Samuel H. Smith

Do the preceding statements satisfy the need for corroborative testimony? Three men saw the plates in a vision and eight family members supposedly confirmed their existence. Isaac Hale, Smith's father-in-law, maintained

242 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

"that the whole 'Book of Mormon' (so-called) is a silly fabrication of falsehood and wickedness, got up for speculation, and with a design to dupe the credulous and unwary—and in order that its fabricators may live upon the spoils of those who swallow the deception. . .,"¹³ Lucy Harris, the wife of Martin Harris, later maintained that Harris first entered the Golden Bible business to make money, though "he believed that Joseph could see in his stone anything he wished."¹⁴ The question to be raised is what it is in the psychology of believers that enables them to accept as genuine what seems to be a patent fabrication and to abandon all standards of critical intelligence. Was Smith, for example, such a compelling personality that his followers were unable to detect that he was a flim-flam man and a consummate actor? Is there something in the psychology of true believers that tends to break down their defenses and cause them to swallow whatever is fed them? Is there a need to do so? Is there something in the cultural milieu that makes them receptive to mythological doctrines? Or is psychological craving so intense that it blocks any doubts that may arise about incredible tales?

Joseph Smith, the prophet

The next stage of the Joseph Smith story is fascinating. Here we have an evidently known "impostor," with an apparent "personality disorder," attempting to convince a close circle of family (were any of them in on his act?) and friends. It is no doubt difficult to make a clinical diagnosis of an individual who died more

than a century ago. Fawn Brodie suggests that Smith may have suffered from "pseudologia fantastica."¹⁵ She quotes the psychiatrist Dr. Phyllis Greenacre to show that celebrated imposters are not mere ordinary liars but people of intense conflicts. Quoting the psychiatrist further, she sees in such people a struggle between two strong tendencies: the strongly assertive and temporarily focused imposturous one and the often crude and poorly-knit one from which the impostor developed. There seems to be an extraordinary and continued pressure for the impostor to live out his fantasy, and this may assume the form of a delusion—though there may be some formal awareness that the claims are untrue. The impostor has some sense of reality, especially a keen sense of guarding himself against detection. His overall sense of reality is nonetheless impaired.

13. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 440.

14. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, p. 255.

15. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 418 ff.

Joseph Smith, the prophet 243

Great imposters rely on "omnipotent fantasies." They are invariably good showmen, absolutely dependent on an audience. "The impostor," writes Dr. Greenacre, "cannot be sustained unless there is emotional support from someone who especially believes in and nourishes it." There seems to be a transactional effect. This characterization would seem to apply also to some kinds of political leaders, to economic con men, gurus, and various kinds of imposters from many walks of life. The impostor feeds his flock's fantasies by promises; and he defends himself adroitly against detection and misadventure. They in turn grant him money, power, adulation, and even extraordinary reverence, as in the case of a religious prophet. This only feeds the impostor's ego further. There is no going back. Once a ruse is perpetrated, its success may be such that he cannot admit his earlier deception. He may even half-believe or fully believe that he possesses special powers or that he has been appointed to carry out a unique mission. The imposture, if successful, then feeds its further development, having a life of its own: this is a network of deceit and subterfuge. At some point the deception may lead to a distorted picture of oneself, megalomania, and corruption. Imagine a poor uneducated man, secretly harboring doubts about his own ability, discovering that if he plays the role of a prophet, many people will be duped and will attribute superhuman powers to him. His ego-involvement may become so great that it needs constant reinforcement and reassurance. And so he continues in his fantastic illusion. If we examine Joseph Smith's letters and personal journals, we realize that Smith apparently came to believe in Jesus' second coming, viewing ordinary events in his own life in apocalyptic terms.¹⁶ But what of those in the immediate circle who accept the illusion, knowing the criticisms of the man and his idiosyncratic imperfections and faults and yet managing to overlook them? Are they so blinded by his magnetism, charisma, and his heady rise to prominence that they manage to suppress their doubts? Are their lives so tied up with his that they too cannot turn back? And what of the next circle of admirers he attracts? How much of the deception are they aware of? How much do they really believe? Can the impostor be on guard all the time, or are there cracks in his armor? Is it because his followers are given power and influence that they are sucked into the masquerade, overlooking its comic features? In time, the message of the impostor may be carried far and wide, beyond his immediate circle of contacts, cronies, and original disciples. Standing at a distance, these new converts may find it difficult to evaluate whether or not his claims are true. There may soon develop around such a

16. Dean C. Jessee, *The Personal Writings of Joseph Smith* (Salt Lake City: Deseret, 1984).

244 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

personality a mystique, much of it exaggerated, and yet it compels men and women to follow any sort of commandment. This phenomenon is true not simply about religious leaders, but of great generals, such as Alexander the Great and Napoleon, who led men to their death in battle. or political figures, such as Hitler and Stalin. Demonic figures though they be, while the world hated them, they were adored by their legions.

We have quoted eleven early witnesses, who each affirmed the truth of the revelation of Joseph Smith. How reliable was their testimony? In no case do they say that they had themselves actually read the gold plates. which were engraved in a "reformed Egyptian script." (It was about this time that Champollion, the great French linguist was hard at work at—tempting to unlock the key to the Rosetta Stone and thus translate the ancient Egyptian demotic and hieroglyphic scripts.) Nor was any effort made to determine whether the plates were accurately rendered into English by Joseph Smith—no doubt a difficult task, since Egyptian script was still indecipherable. All that the witnesses testified to was that they saw gold plates. Does this authenticate the Book of Mormon or its meaning? It would have been easy for Smith to fabricate the alleged plates. If he kept them hidden and allowed them only to be peeked at. they may never have been examined carefully and critically.

After Joseph announced his "find," in 1827, considerable interest in it developed in the Palmyra area. He then began the task of translating the plates. Like Mohammed, Joseph dictated his major revelations; his wife. Emma, was his first scribe. Joseph placed his magic stone over his eyes. covered his head with a hat, and dictated. He also used a breast plate, which he called the "Urim and Thummim" (mentioned in the Bible) and allegedly had found with the plates, for the first 116 pages of translation. Joseph never let Emma look at the plates. She said that he did not consult the plates as he dictated and that she came to believe they were authentic. (Emma was a tragic figure, for she stayed by his side until his death, even after he had taken several dozen other wives. After Joseph's death, she refused to follow Brigham Young and held fast until her son could take over for the Reorganized Church.) Even Joseph's father apparently believed that God was speaking through his son.

Smith's second scribe was Martin Harris, a successful farmer who lived down the road from Joseph. Harris became a convinced devotee. In the translation process, Smith invariably sat behind a makeshift blanket curtain, the box containing the plates beside him or wrapped in linen on a table. He read out the alleged contents of the plates, his scribes writing down what he dictated. Joseph was uneducated in the art of writing, though he had a highly developed imagination and knew the King James translation of the Bible. As in the case of Mohammed, his friends and

Joseph Smith, the prophet 245

relatives asked how one so unlearned could compose such a book, if it were not divinely inspired.

Martin Harris was intrigued by the discovery of the plates and later provided the funds to get the manuscript published. In a recently discovered letter written by Harris to William W. Phelps on October 23, 1830, Harris describes his relationship to Smith and the translation process. He said that Joseph "found some giant silver spectacles with the plates, he puts them in an old hat and in

darkness reads the plates." Did he ever have any doubts that the Book was authentic? His wife, Lucy Harris, bitterly protested that Harris was being taken in, that he gave Joseph money, and neglected his otherwise prosperous farm. Harris asked Joseph to let him view the plates, but Joseph adamantly refused to do so. Harris was permitted to lift them several times in their clapboard box; he calculated that their weight was about forty to fifty pounds. He was never allowed to open the chest or examine them directly, although he signed the statement attesting that he had seen the plates.

Harris then asked Joseph for a transcript of some of the inscriptions, which Joseph finally consented to copy from the plates and give to him. Harris took this to Professor Charles Anthon, a classicist at Columbia University in New York City. Official church history reports that Anthon attested that the characters on this sheet were "true Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac and Arabic," and that the translations were "correct." This is odd since it is highly unlikely that Anthon could have read Egyptian, Chaldaic, or Assyriac script, much of which had not been translated at that time. Harris said that during his visit to Anthon, the professor first wrote a certificate to testify to the accuracy of the translation. As he was about to depart, however, Anthon inquired about the history of the symbols. When Harris reported that they were revealed by an angel of the Lord, Anthon retrieved his certificate and tore it up. Anthon suggested that the gold plates be brought to him for translation. Harris told him that this was strictly forbidden. Anthon replied, "I cannot read a sealed book." When Harris related the details of his interview with Anthon, Joseph leafed through his Bible. He came to Isaiah 29:11-12:

And the vision of all is become unto you as the words of a book that is sealed, which men deliver to one that is learned, saying, Read this, I pray thee: and he saith, I cannot; for it is sealed: And the book is delivered to him that is not learned.¹⁷

Harris was astounded, for he thought that Joseph had truly fulfilled a
17. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 52.

246 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

prophecy. What convoluted logic! Harris was now willing to risk his farm to finance the Golden Bible.

Upon learning that his name was being used to authenticate the Book of Mormon, Professor Anthon denied it and stated in a letter dated February 17, 1834, that "the whole story about my having pronounced the Mormonite inscription to be 'reformed Egyptian hieroglyphics' is perfectly false." He went on to state that he came to the conclusion that someone was attempting to perpetuate "a hoax upon the learned" or a "scheme to cheat the farmer of his money."¹⁸ Anthon's statements nevertheless had no effect in dissuading Harris from his folly. Later, after the Book of Mormon had been published, Anthon reported that Harris visited him again, bringing a copy which he tried to sell him. When Anthon declined to buy it, Harris asked permission to leave the book anyway Anthon again told Harris that a "roguery" had been practiced upon him. and he advised him to get a magistrate and have the trunk containing the gold plates examined. Harris responded that the "curse of God" would come upon him if he were to do this, but finally said that he would open the trunk if Anthon would take the curse of God himself. Anthon said that he would do so. Harris then left, but Anthon never saw the plates.¹⁹

A copy of the sheet given to Anthon on the first visit was discovered in an old family Bible. It is clear that these characters do not resemble Egyptian, Chaldaic, Assyriac, and Arabic script and that they were men gibberish. Martin Harris was

willing to grasp at any possible shred of evidence that the translation by Joseph Smith was authentic, and so he dismissed Anthon's later denials that it was accurate.

Harris asked to take the first part of the translated manuscript (11⁺ pages) home with him, obviously to placate his skeptical wife. The manuscript disappeared and could not be located. Had Mrs. Harris hidden or destroyed it out of rage? Smith was upset by this turn of events and had to start over. If the old translation were found and his new translation was not the same, someone, in comparing the two versions, might accuse him of a fabrication. Smith devised a pretext. He told Harris that he would begin an entirely new translation. The earlier translation, he informed him, was only an abridgment and he was providing a full account. Harris accepted this explanation. Now there was no way that anyone could claim that the two versions did not match, should the fine be discovered. How naive must Harris have been! He was now firmly convinced that the Book was of divine origin. Joseph Smith would never again let it out of his possession until a second copy could be made.

A third transcriber, Oliver Cowdery, who had heard of the discovery.

18. Ibid.

19. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, pp. 270-72.

Joseph Smith, the prophet 247

of the plates, showed up. Cowdery, a third cousin to Smith, was also born in Vermont. He befriended Joseph and volunteered to help with the work. Cowdery was a twenty-two-year-old blacksmith and school teacher. He apparently was impressed by Joseph's demeanor and had confidence in his powers, though later in life, Cowdery admitted that he had had misgivings about how Joseph could translate by means of the seer stone, without the plates in sight. Sometimes Joseph would not even pretend to use the stone but simply close his eyes and dictate. Joseph Smith would render the first version, which would be written down by Cowdery, who then read it back to see if there were any corrections. They worked at a fast pace. Cowdery did not put in periods or commas, but wrote down verbatim what Joseph dictated. It was the typesetter in Palmyra who set the book in proper grammatical form. A friend of Cowdery, David Whitmer, was also brought in and watched the translation process. Like Cowdery, he later claimed that "the Book of Mormon was translated by the gift and power of God, and not by any power of man."²⁰ Note that Cowdery and Whitmer also claimed to have seen the plates.

Sometime during 1828-1829, the career of Joseph Smith underwent a radical transformation. No longer would he be interested simply in transcribing the golden plates; nor was he intent on publishing them in book form for a profit (the first edition had listed Joseph Smith as "owner and proprietor"), as was his original motive. He now began the process of building a new church, for apparently he had so duped Harris, Cowdery, Whitmer, and others into believing that a supernatural dispensation had been conferred upon him that he took the giant step of founding a new Aaronic priesthood. He must have been amazed at the credulity of his original disciples and the fact that they actually believed his words had a divine sanction. Martin Harris trusted Joseph so completely that he was willing to provide him with all the money needed to finance his efforts. During this period Smith and his family were in financial straits, and this newly found friend provided them with support. Harris agreed to mortgage his farm for \$3,000 in order to print 5,000 copies of the Book of Mormon; later he had to

sell some of his land to pay for the note that came due. The enthusiasm and adulation of Cowdery and Whitmer were also apparent.

Is there an important lesson to be learned about the founding of a new religious faith? Some poor souls are so easily duped that they willingly give everything to one who claims to be a divine prophet and acts out the role with masterful deceit. Perhaps something latent in their personalities was watered by Joseph, and they were encouraged in their belief and

20. Taves, *Trouble Enough*, p. 43. David Whitmer, *Address to All Believers in Christ* (1887), p. 12.

248 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

hope that they were part of his inner circle and would be given a special place in the divine scheme. He baptized and ordained Oliver Cowdery into the priesthood, who in turn did the same for Joseph. Shortly thereafter others were added to the inner circle of priests: David and Peter Whitmer, Hiram and Samuel Smith, and later Martin Harris and others. After Whitmer broke from the church, he reported that Joseph had early expressed a strong desire to be the leader of a new church. He abandoned the peep stone and thenceforth uttered revelations as if they came directly from God. His new vocation was now solidly launched.

And with his new role sanctified, he began to attract numerous followers.

What can we make of their claim quoted earlier from Harris. Cowdery, and Whitmer that they saw the golden plates? They were repeatedly denied the opportunity by Joseph. Eventually Joseph realized that he would have a credibility gap, unless he could show others his golden plates. Finally, he said, that he would, if they demonstrated sufficient faith. At last, he led the three men into the woods to pray.

Joseph Smith apparently had a magnetic influence over his associates: Cowdery and Harris were caught in his spell. Later, Cowdery described Joseph as having a "mysterious power," which he could not fathom. He seemed to have an intuitive understanding of those about him, which led them to think that he had psychic powers and could read their minds. Was his personality so strong that he became at times hypnotic, causing his followers to see visions? Both Whitmer and Cowdery reported that as they were engaged in prayer in the woods, they beheld a bright light in the air and that an angel stood before them. In his hands the angel held the plates, turning the leaves one by one, so that they could see the engravings. The voice informed them that the plates were revealed and translated by the power of God. Meanwhile, Harris had left the others to pray alone. Joseph went after him. The same vision, we are told, was beheld by Harris who cried out, " 'Tis enough; 'tis enough; mine eyes have beheld." Interestingly, according to the local newspaper, the three witnesses subsequently related somewhat different versions of their visions. Was it the power of faith or simply imagination at work? Were they hallucinating? Did Joseph somehow stimulate their visions? Why had he not shown the plates to anyone during or after the process of translation? Since the plates are so crucial and so holy, why were they not preserved? Why have they disappeared? We have seen in an earlier chapter the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Where there is a strong predisposition to believe, people will imagine that they have seen almost anything.

The eight additional witnesses who attested to the existence of the plates were friends of Joseph or members of his immediate family, including his brothers and father. According to later accounts, the eight

were set to continual prayer and spiritual exercises. Joseph finally produced a box, which he insisted contained the plates. The lid was opened and they looked within but could see nothing. After two more hours of intensive prayer on their knees, they finally claimed to have seen the plates. Was there a kind of contagious mass hysteria? The eyewitness testimony of witnesses can become clouded if the belief-state is allowed to interfere with the powers of observation. Did the great anticipation and desire to see these venerated objects or hallucinations brought on by exhaustion finally lead them to believe that they had seen the golden plates?

Did Joseph Smith construct some counterfeit plates—easily done— and store them in a box, allowing his followers at some point to peep in? Some of the witnesses talk about the weight, size, and metallic texture of the plates. In any case, whether or not the plates ever existed, they eventually disappeared; Joseph informed everyone that the angel who had revealed them to him carried them back to heaven!

As best we can reconstruct, we have the following scenario: (1) Joseph repeatedly refused direct access to the plates to anyone during the translation process or afterwards, on pain of death, thus instilling fear. (2) He claimed that he eventually allowed eleven witnesses to see the plates or have a vision of them, but at no time did anyone pore over them leaf by leaf or check the plates as they were being transcribed. (3) Joseph did not directly read the plates as they were being transcribed. (4) When their usefulness ended, they conveniently disappeared. Was this a hoax?

Two of the original witnesses, Cowdery and Whitmer, were later excommunicated from the church by Joseph Smith. Martin Harris, the third witness, later left the church in a dispute with Smith, whom he accused of "lying and licentiousness." The Mormon leaders in a journal edited by Smith, in turn charged that Harris and others were guilty of "swearing, cheating, swindling, drinking, with every species of debauchery."²¹ Cowdery in the same year accused Joseph of "adultery, lying, and teaching false doctrines." Whitmer maintained that "all of the eight witnesses who were then living (except the three Smiths) came out" of the church. Cowdery and Whitmer were attacked by Smith and other Mormon leaders and accused of having "united with a gang of counterfeiters, thieves, liars, and blacklegs of the deepest dye, to deceive, cheat, and defraud the saints out of their property."²²

Harris was especially unstable. He was said to have been converted to various sects (Quakers, Restorationists, Baptists, Universalists, Presbyterians, Mormons, and Shakers), changing his religious position frequently. Later in life, he accepted the Shaker holy book (Sacred Roll and Book,

21. Quoted in Tanner, *Changing World of Mormonism*, p. 96, from the *Elders Journal*, August 1838, p. 59.

22. Tanner, p. 97, from David Whitmer, *Address to All Believers in Christ*, pp. 27-28.

250

Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

published in 1843) as divinely inspired. The Shakers believed that Christ had made his second appearance on earth in the form of Ann Lee. Interestingly, like the Book of Mormon, the Shaker holy book has a section in which eight witnesses maintained that they saw a holy angel standing upon a house top holding the Sacred Roll and Book. Martin Harris became such a firm believer in Shakerism that he said that his testimony in its favor was greater than it was for the Book

of Mormon.²³ Harris' first wife had divorced him a few years after he had mortgaged his farm. His second wife moved out to Salt Lake City, as did Harris at the end of his life. He never took back his earlier testimony about the divine origin of the Book of Mormon however, nor did Cowdery or Whitmer; indeed, Harris and Cowdery were later rebaptized into the church.

The Book of Mormon was most likely the product of a number of sources that influenced the fertile imagination of Joseph Smith. It contains many contradictions and inaccuracies. George D. Smith points out that it incorporates many passages taken directly from the King James translation of the Bible, though they are often used in the wrong historical context. Several Old Testament prophets (for example, Malachi and Isaiah) appeared earlier than they lived. Nephi is supposed to have left Jerusalem about 600 B.C.E. for America, but Old Testament passages of a later era are placed in the wrong time-frame. Moreover, New Testament sources appear in an Old Testament context. Smith was no stickler for details, and his imagination embellished the historical record.²⁴

The main thesis of the Book of Mormon—that America was settled by the Hebraic peoples of the Middle East and that Jesus visited the American continent—has not been proved by any scientific evidence. Though the Mormons have gone through great efforts to try to do so there has been inadequate archaeological evidence pointing to the existence of the Nephi, Jared, or Lamanite peoples. If there had been such vast civilizations, as Joseph Smith maintained, surely some of their artifacts would have been discovered. On the other hand archaeologists and anthropologists believe that the most likely explanation of the American Indians is that they came from Asia over the Bering Straits ice bridge some 30,000 years ago and settled in North and South America. Smith has many other errors. He attributed horses and the use of steel to the Indians, long before they were introduced. According to Smith, the Book of Mormon was compiled by numerous prophets. Yet Ernest Taves has demonstrated by stylometric analysis that the various parts of the Book of Mormon (and later the Book of Abraham) did not have multiple authorship but were probably written by the same author.²⁵

23. Tanner, pp. 106-107.

24. George D. Smith, "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon."

25. Taves, Trouble Enough, Part Two.

Building a new church 251

Many devout Mormons, when confronted with these discrepancies, respond in a way similar to those who believe that the Bible is the inspired word. They appeal to faith, or claim that the Book of Mormon is "inspired allegory," or say that they do not wish to question "the mysteries."

Building a new church

There were so many flaws in Joseph Smith's story about the divine origin of the Book of Mormon that we can only be amazed at the credulity with which those about him accepted his account. But they were not the first to be taken in; and similar psychological patterns most likely have been repeated in other cults by guru-leaders who applied their talents to deceiving their disciples and recruiting new followers. Smith's new Church of Latter-day Saints quickly grew. As it did, he was virtually hounded out of western New York. Suddenly thrust into prominence by the publication of the Golden Bible, he began to attract followers but also adversaries and enemies, who claimed that the Golden Bible was a product of "fraud, blasphemy, credulity and hocus pocus." Within a month Joseph had forty followers, but for every person he baptized, others were reminded that

he had been tried and convicted as a money-digger and they accused him of being a false prophet. Fawn Brodie perceptively observed that Smith used the persecution of the Mormons to his advantage. As he became a martyr, his mission took on added significance to those who believed in him, for they were given a special role in the church he was building. He had ingeniously created a new chosen people, who would fight fervently to convince others of the divine origin of the revelations. Smith appealed not to the literati or to the intelligentsia but to common folk like himself without sophistication, education, or training in logic. They were dedicated to advancing their station in life.

The main body of believers was forced to move to Kirtland, Ohio, where Sidney Rigdon, leader of another church, and his entire congregation were converted to the new religion. The early critics of Mormonism speculated that Joseph did not compose the Book of Mormon at all, maintaining that it was an artful plagiarism and that Rigdon was in on the scheme from the start. His foes could not believe that this unschooled man had composed it himself. It was rumored that another unpublished manuscript written by Solomon Spaulding two decades earlier presented an outline similar to that contained in the Book of Mormon. At least, some people who had read Spaulding's manuscript claimed that there were striking similarities and implied that Smith had cribbed his book from Spaulding. This theory, though intriguing, has never been confirmed; for

252 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

the suspected manuscript has never been found, even though another manuscript by Spaulding was later uncovered. According to the official Mormon account, it showed no similarity to the Book of Mormon. Some writers have since claimed to find similarities between Spaulding's Manuscript Story and the Book of Mormon. Vernon Holley suggests that Spaulding's work might have been the basis for the Book of Mormon.²⁶

In any case, Joseph Smith now concentrated on developing his talents as a preacher-prophet in Kirtland. He was able to arouse an audience to passionate conviction. His voice was so powerful and eloquent that he held his listeners spellbound. People reported that he had a lively sense of humor, yet he manifested dignity and he behaved as if he truly was a prophet of God. Reports also began to circulate about his powers of healing and exorcism. Fasting, sleep deprivation, chanting, and singing were often a prelude to group revelations in the Kirtland Temple. Like Jesus and other "faith-healers," Joseph found that some individuals who believed in his message might be restored to health. In some cases, hysterical symptoms of psychosomatic origin could apparently be relieved. Whether such people were permanently cured, we have no way of knowing, yet news of cures led to still other conversions. Did Joseph now take himself so seriously as a prophet that he did not relax his role even in front of his wife, Emma? He was, people said, "bewitching and winning."

He established early hegemony. Although the church he built had a bureaucratic structure and there was widespread lay participation in running its affairs and preaching the new gospel, during his lifetime Joseph was its absolute master. He constantly had to resort to new revelations and commandments from God—"Thus saith the prophet!"—to set things in order. He usually invented these to deal with the practical issues of the day that developed within the church. Interestingly Joseph was following in the footsteps of Moses and Mohammed, who convinced their followers that they were receiving constant communications from God. Ezra Booth, an early Mormon convert, confesses how at first "the magic charm of delusion and falsehood" had "wrapped its sable mantle around him." But he soon came to the conclusion that Joseph's revelations were not of divine origin but

were simply human solutions to the problems they faced. The prophecies of Joseph often failed, they contradicted earlier ones, and they bore the marks of human weakness and wickedness, some—times masking Joseph's own self-interest. Yet Joseph by now was called the prophet, seer, revelator, and translator, and when he spoke "by the Spirit," it was "received as coming directly from the mouth of the Lord." When he said that something must be so, it was accepted without con-

26. Vernon Holley, *Book of Mormon Authorship: A Closer Look* (Ogden, Utah: Zenus Publication, 1983).

BuiZding a new church 253

troversy. For example, two elders of the church argued about whether a bucket of water would become heavier by putting a live fish in it. After awhile Joseph decided in the negative: "I know by the spirit, that it will be no heavier." Booth noted that a person could by an actual experiment clearly decide on his own whether the Prophet was influenced by a true or false spirit. Joseph was adamant that no one in the church except him could receive commandments or revelations for the whole church. On one occasion, according to Booth, a woman turned up in Kirtland, claiming to be a prophetess. She ingratiated herself with some of the elders and was welcomed by Rigdon. Joseph viewed her as an "encroachment" upon his sacred domain, and she was ejected from their midst.²⁷

I will not recount here the entire subsequent history of Joseph Smith and the church he built but will provide only an outline. It is truly a dra—matic and unbelievable story. The early church demanded utmost dedica—tion and commitment from its members. At Kirtland, Joseph was given an important new revelation, which became known as the "Law of Consecra—tion." This meant that goods and properties were to be consecrated to the church, and a form of communal living was established. This conveniently provided funding for the church and was a constant source of new wealth. Kirtland was not to be the promised land or the new Zion, however, and so the early Mormons again moved westward and established com—munities in Independence and Far West, Missouri, which was then on the western frontier of the United States. Meanwhile, dissension broke out in the ranks of the church, and Joseph was first accused of adultery. In 1832, a mob dragged Joseph from a home in which he was living and tarred and feathered him. Sidney Rigdon received the same treatment. Building the new church against such odds was no easy task. Nevertheless, the church continued to grow, attracting a constant flow of new believers. Among them was Brigham Young, a young convert who was enthusiastic about the doctrines being proclaimed. Young, according to Ernest Taves, had considerable administrative talent, which was an important asset if the church was to develop efficiently.²⁸ Young also "spoke in tongues," which others interpreted as a sign he was "filled with the spirit of the Holy Ghost." By 1833, incredibly, there were more than a thousand Mormons living in Missouri. Hardworking, preaching a strange and apparently blasphe—mous new gospel, clannish in their ways, even fanatic, they were consid—ered dangerous by other settlers. Again warfare broke out. The lieutenant-governor of the state, Lilburn Boggs, later governor, led a militia against the Mormons. There was bloodshed on both sides, as the Mormons

27. Howe, *Mormonism Unveiled*, pp. 171,216

28. Taves, *Trouble Enough*, p. 81.

254 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

armed and defended themselves. Everywhere there were vociferous critics and detractors. Philastus Hurlburt, whom I have already quoted, had been excommunicated from the church. He became a bitter foe, digging into Joseph's past in Palmyra and publishing damning testimony about him. He accused him of being a fraud and charlatan and said that the Book of Mormon was a forgery. Joseph brought suit against him, was successful, and Hurlburt was ordered to cease and desist for six months and to pay \$300 in fines and fees. The people of the church shrugged off all criticism and charges, which they attributed to the "doings of the devil."

The detailed criticisms and skeptical doubts about Joseph Smith's veracity and honesty in his own day did not affect the people who flocked to his banner, nor did they dampen the fervor in his behalf. It may even be the case that the surest way to enhance the growth of a new revolutionary or religious movement is to attack it. This brings it to the center of the stage; and the attacks and vilifications seem to attract the disgruntled, the dispossessed, and the disenfranchised to the new faith. Although attacks may arouse suspicion and antipathy, even hatred in the larger population, they may also arouse sympathy and enlist support in others. For those human beings already deeply attached to the cause, vilification may only help to reinforce their siege mentality; and it produces a drawing tighter of the hard core of believers. We are the chosen people. They hate us and seek to destroy us. We will fight with even greater dedication and frenzy for our beliefs. This apparently is what happened with the beleaguered and harassed followers of Smith.

Meanwhile, Joseph's stature had been elevated for those who accepted his mission as divinely ordained. No longer was Joseph the simple money-digger nor even the translator of the Golden Bible. He now became the commander-in-chief of battalions of men, women, and children who were willing to do his every bidding. One can but wonder what happened to Joseph's already inflated ego when he realized that he was able to centre the destiny of thousands of human beings and that he was able to give meaning to their lives. All of this had emerged from fantasies concocted in his own imagination, which were now accepted as the gospel truth by the members of the church he founded. Did Joseph, like others, need constant approval? Did he crave self-reinforcement? Did this drive him on? The psychosexual motives of a person are highly complex and difficult to fathom. Quite early, rumors began to circulate that he was an adulterer; indeed, he had an excessive interest in the ladies and even in other men's wives. It seems that Joseph had affair after affair. Although these were usually discreet, there were constant complaints from aggrieved husbands and brothers about Joseph's indiscretions. We will return to the subject of polygamy shortly, for /.

Building a new church 255
became a burning issue within the church.

The early Mormon saga was fraught with conflict and danger. Constantly persecuted and expelled because of their heretical views, the main body of Mormons moved from Missouri, where they were unwanted, to Illinois, where there were already numerous followers. The Mormons were at first welcomed to the state, where they flocked to receive protection. Here they planned to build their Zion; and in 1839 they changed the name of Commerce, a small town in Illinois, to Nauvoo, which according to Joseph was the Hebrew word for "beautiful plantation." The Mormons, indefatigable in their labors, set about reconstructing their city, following Joseph's architectural plans. As the city grew and prospered, Mormon missionaries in Great Britain proved to be extremely effective, and there

was an influx of new converts, who were dispatched to the United States through the efforts of Brigham Young, using a special emigrants' fund he established to help pay for voyages. During this period Smith developed a closed theocracy, replete with a militia, and he named himself lieutenant-general of the Nauvoo Legion. He had grandiose political ambitions.

It was also during this time that the church's structure was further elaborated and consolidated. Fawn Brodie describes strange new religious practices that were introduced and sanctified by Joseph.²⁹ Many of these were similar to those practiced by the Freemasons, from whom Joseph no doubt borrowed. Secret rites held within the Temple involved the washing and anointing of parts of the body. Moreover, Mormons were com-manded to always wear a church garment (a suit of long underwear) with Masonic symbols cut into it, as a protection against evil. And there were other Masonic symbols and ceremonies, such as the Mason's apron.

Secret Mormon Temple rites transformed the church into a mystery cult. These were related to Joseph's newly hatched theories of the afterlife. After death, he said, a person's soul was transported to the world of the spirits, where it awaited judgment day. However, only those souls who had affiliated with the Mormon church could attain the highest level within the celestial kingdom. However, souls in the past, who had not lived long enough to receive the Mormon gospel, could be liberated from the world of the spirits and reach the highest level by the intercession of a proxy form of baptism. Accordingly, any Mormon could "seal" his dead relatives or friends, or the great figures of history, simply by baptizing them by proxy.

In Salt Lake City today there are genealogical records numbering hundreds of millions of dead persons. Many of these have apparently been saved (without their permission), by post mortem baptisms. This ritual may seem odd to the non-Mormon, but perhaps no more so than the

29. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, pp. 278-83.

256

Sundry prophets: Greater and Jesse-

communion service of the Roman Catholic church, where the blood and flesh of Christ are consumed, or the Mosaic dietary customs. If given the sanction of a prophet, the faithful will obediently perform strange prac-tices for countless generations in the conviction that they are following the commandments of the diety.

Mormonism had an allure for settlers on the prairies and frontiers of America, perhaps because it was an indigenous religion, relating the Old and New Testaments to the virgin continent. Not only did it have a place for the red man, but it also taught a new promised land (out West), and alleged that the original Garden of Eden had been located near Independence, Missouri. All of the ingredients were homespun, the language: the religion was camp-fire style, and its prophet was a native-born Amer-can. How beautifully it blended with the environment!

Polygamy

It was during the Nauvoo period that the issue of polygamy came to i head. Rumors that the leading Mormons practiced plural marriage brcir into the open. Fawn Brodie has provided a list of Smith's wives: >h: recorded forty-nine women who were "sealed to the prophet," many :>• whom were currently married to other men.³⁰ Brodie says that her lis: .-incomplete and that there were many more who were not sealed b> t ceremony. Marriages could be performed either

"for time" (this life) ;•• "sealed for eternity." The marriages of these women to Joseph were r.:> simply in this life but lasted throughout eternity. If his wives were marr.^: to others, this was merely "for time." A large number of Joseph's ma • riages permitted sexual relations; others were merely "sealed" to him :":•• the afterlife. As Joseph's power and influence grew, he seemed to take nr» wives with complete abandon. Other church leaders, such as Bright-Young and Heber Kimball, likewise took dozens of wives.

In the Book of Mormon, polygamy had been expressly forbiddr-There is some intimation, however, that as early as 1831 Joseph hac i revelation foreshadowing plural marriage. After many years of den\ -4 charges of polygamy, Joseph finally came forth with an explicit revela: :t in 1843 justifying plural marriages on biblical grounds. It was no dc_i concocted to legitimize his way of life. After all, if Abraham, Solom;•:. David, and the ancient patriarchs had many wives, why not Joseph Sir. : and his brethren? His first wife, Emma, witnessed many of the affairs rr engaged in with other women, and she was even forced to be presr-: during the special sealing ceremonies. She objected strenuously to Jose- • 30. Ibid., pp. 457-88.

Polygamy 257

philandering. Joseph replied through the voice of revelation, commanding Emma to "receive all those that have been given unto my servant Joseph" and "to cleave unto my servant Joseph, and to no one else."³¹ The penalty for disobedience, he admonished her, was that she would be destroyed. Joseph then proclaimed a new law:

If any man espouse a virgin, and desire to espouse another, and the first give her consent, and if he espouse the second, and they are virgins, and have vowed to no other man, then he is justified; he cannot commit adultery . . . and if he have ten virgins given unto him by this law, he cannot commit adultery, for they belong to him.³²

This revelation was kept secret from the public and even withheld from those who lived in Nauvoo, though it led to a schism when the subject was openly broached within the high council of church leaders. Critics were aware of the doctrine of polygamy, and they charged that the Mormon church encouraged promiscuous sexuality. This issue became a bitter bone of contention with the broader public, many of whom hated Joseph Smith and his followers with a ferocious intensity. To demonstrate the low reputation of the Mormons, Ernest Taves quotes a Protestant minister, W. M. King, who wrote in 1842: "I presume Nauvoo is as perfect a sink of debauchery and every species of abomination as ever were Sodom and Nineveh."³³ The Mormons were accused of every moral crime. Anti-Mormonism paralleled anti-Semitism. Considered to be haughty and proud, staunchly dedicated to their religious commitment, practicing strange customs, and holding bizarre beliefs, they irritated non-Mormons. When word that they practiced polygamy leaked out, this proved to be explosive; it may even have been the key factor that precipitated the death of Joseph Smith. Many forces no doubt contributed to Joseph's premature demise. He had gathered thousands of supporters, was commander of an army, and sought political power in the states in which the Mormons were strong; he even declared himself a candidate for the presidency in 1844. He had courted political leaders by promising them black voters, but when he declared his candidacy, their political protection evaporated. By then, his critics were charging that he had become a law unto himself: his followers did his bidding blindly, and he had imposed a tyrannical rule that threat-ened to spread to the adjoining states. Some thought that a despotic new religious empire would be forged by Joseph

Smith with himself as emperor-pope. For example, Joseph wished to separate Nauvoo from the

31. *Ibid.*, pp. 340-41; also see *Doctrines and Covenants*, Sect. 132.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Taves, *Trouble Enough*, p. 169.

258

Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

legal system of the state of Illinois and the federal government. Hence, those who were responsible for applying the laws of the United States sought to incarcerate and punish him and to disband the army under his control.

An incident that especially aroused public ire was Smith's destruction of an opposition newspaper in Nauvoo. The newspaper was founded by William Law, a dissident Mormon, who rejected the doctrine of polygamy and thought it improper for Joseph to be so heavily involved in real estate. After being excommunicated, Law dedicated himself to publishing attacks on Smith. Smith retaliated by destroying his news plant. Public opinion turned against Joseph. He was charged with suppressing the freedom of the press and flouting the First Amendment. Taves notes that in his last years there were signs that Joseph was delusional, out of touch with reality.

The last days were rapidly approaching. Joseph and his brother Hyrum, who was always at his side, were taken to Carthage, Illinois, in 1844 to await trial on a variety of charges. An unruly mob broke into the jail and shot both Joseph and Hyrum. What a shock to the Mormon community when their bodies were solemnly returned to Nauvoo. With the death of its leader and prophet, many Mormons became disconsolate and left the church. It was the enormous ability of Brigham Young, the St. Paul of Mormonism, that saved the church from collapsing. There are, of course, differences within this analogy. Paul wrote doctrine; Brigham administered. Paul was ascetic; Brigham indulged in women and land. Nonetheless, both men helped give their respective churches new foundations. There was some dispute about Joseph's success, but Brigham prevailed. Mormonism was able to continue, for a new element had been introduced: Joseph had been murdered; he was a martyr, like Christ, and he had died for the Mormon cause. The chosen people must now escape still further west to build a new Zion. Smith was like Moses, who did not make the promised land, but his faithful children would.

A short time after Joseph's death, the Mormons again pulled up stakes and transplanted themselves to the Utah territory, where they thought they would be free to start anew. But there were many problems in building the church and constant battles with the federal government. Brigham Young ruled the church with an iron hand. He officially proclaimed polygamy in 1852, and that issue proved to be a festering one with the rest of America. The church leaders were forced to abandon it in 1890, unable to withstand the full weight of the federal system. The Reorganized Church, a much smaller and dissident group, did not practice polygamy, and hence did not suffer the same persecution.

Today the Mormon church is a powerful institution of great wealth and influence, still growing, sending missionaries to all parts of the globe

The Book of Abraham 259

(like the early Christians), and recruiting new believers to the faith. The church has long since been transformed from a radical, nonconformist cult everywhere despised to a powerful conservative institution, a defender of a status quo and

the socioeconomic establishment. In the relatively short period of 150 years it showed a process of birth, development, and maturation similar to that of ancient religions, whose origins are buried in an uncertain past but whose prophets are nevertheless revered because of their alleged revelations from God. Today we may ask, with some assurance that we can give a reasonably definitive response: Was Joseph Smith an authentic prophet? Or was he merely a human being who used "divine revelation" to suit his own purposes? Did Smith receive a revelation in the form of the Book of Mormon? There is little to support this assertion. The preponderance of evidence suggests that the Golden Bible was Joseph Smith's creation. The devout Mormon will, of course, insist that Joseph was a true prophet of God and that the Book of Mormon was a product of revelation. It may be impossible to convince him of the contrary, especially when faith, custom, authority, and tradition dictate otherwise and especially since the religion of Mormonism, whatever its intellectual foundation, has developed a strong new ethnic tradition. It has been inculcated by numerous fathers and grandfathers into their young. As a belief-system it not only sets forth a creed and dogma held by a group of closely related people; it also defines their way of life, their self-image as a chosen people, preexistent with God and destined for a special afterlife. This especially applies to the American Mormons centered in Utah and neighboring states, if not to the newly converted in other parts of the world who will no doubt bequeath their new ethnic heritage to future generations.

Today, for the critically minded skeptic (whether Mormon or non-Mormon), Joseph Smith's veracity must be thrown into doubt. Two further discoveries that he "translated"—the Book of Abraham and the Kinderhook plates—provide additional confirmation of the hypothesis that Smith, though seemingly convinced of his prophetic role, nevertheless practiced deception.

The Book of Abraham

In 1835, Joseph Smith was visited by Michael Chandler in Kirtland, Ohio. Chandler was exhibiting throughout the country four Egyptian mummies along with several Egyptian papyri. Learning of Smith's reputation, he sought his aid in translating the ancient documents. Joseph became so interested in the findings that he purchased them. He declared that the

260

Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

papyri contained the writings of the Hebrew prophets Abraham and Joseph. (The general public in 1837 was unaware of the fact that Champollion had by now succeeded in unraveling Egyptian hieroglyphic—Smith resorted to the same method he had used earlier. Claiming inspiration from God, he "translated" the papyri into the Book of Abraham*, published in 1842. (He never translated the papyri of Joseph.)

The Book of Abraham (part of the Pearl of Great Price) is perhaps the most unfortunate publication in the entire corpus of Mormon literature. It provided an account of the creation of the cosmos and Joseph's speculations about the planets and the stars. It also contained reflections on the origins of the black man. According to the Book of Abraham, the Negroes were descendants of the "loins of Ham" of the blood of the Canaanites. From Ham, it said, "sprang that race which preserved the curse in their land."³⁴ The blacks allegedly were destined to be the servants of other races. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, was the son of Egyptus, daughter of Ham. All Egyptians had inherited black skin, and with this curse they did not have the right to be ordained into the Mormon priesthood. These views were published

before the Civil War, supported the position of white slaveholders, who sought a biblical justification for the lower status of Negroes. '

The point of introducing the Book of Abraham is that, unlike the golden plates, which had mysteriously disappeared after translation, the mummies and the papyri that Joseph allegedly translated were exhibits in Kirtland and Nauvoo. At the time that Joseph published the Book of Abraham, the science of Egyptology was still in its relative infancy. But it was developing rapidly. After Joseph's death, in 1860, the Egyptian facsimiles printed in the Book of Abraham were translated by Egyptologists, they differed completely from Joseph's version. Scholars showed that the papyri were ordinary funeral scrolls taken from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, a revised form of the Book of the Dead, commonly buried with the dead and found in thousands of Egyptian tombs of the pence they represented the gods Maat, Osiris, and Isis.

Later, the scholar Arthur Mace of the Metropolitan Museum of Art described Smith's translation as "a farrago of nonsense from beginning to end." And Dr. W. M. Flinders Petrie of London University stated: "I may safely be said that there is not a single word that is true in these interpretations."³⁶

In 1967, eleven fragments of the papyri turned up at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

34. Book of Abraham 1:21-24.
35. Only after well over a century had passed, on June 9, 1978, did the president of the Mormon church, Spencer W. Kimball, revise this racial doctrine and announce a revelation. Thenceforth black males could hold the priesthood and be ordained in the Mormon church.

36. Brodie, *No Man Knows My History*, p. 175.

I

William Miller and doomsday prophecy 261

Museum of Art. Scholars again verified the earlier scholarly analyses. Indeed a translation of the papyri was published in 1968 in the independent Mormon journal *Dialogue*. It showed that Joseph Smith had concocted his inspired translation from beginning to end and that it bore no relation to the original. A similar disconfirmation of Joseph Smith's prophetic abilities occurred with his partial translation of the so-called Kinderhook plates. Here a deliberate trap was set and Joseph fell for the bait. Three men living in Kinderhook, Illinois, claimed that in April 1843 they had discovered in an old earth mound six bell-shaped brass plates, which were engraved in hieroglyphics. Two Mormons were present when the corroded plates were dug up and carefully cleansed. Upon receiving them in Nauvoo, Joseph Smith immediately declared that the plates were genuine and proceeded to translate part of them. He said that they contained the history of a person whose bones lay nearby and who was "a descendant of Ham, through the loins of Pharaoh, king of Egypt."³⁷ Smith never published a full translation of the plates. Perhaps he was now somewhat more cautious, for the *New York Herald* had reported on December 28, 1842, that the ancient Egyptian language had finally been deciphered and that a grammar had been published in England. Many years later, it was admitted by one of the three men that the Kinderhook plates were a complete hoax, that they were cut out of copper, etched with acid and nitric oxide, and buried in the mound in order to trap Joseph Smith. Joseph, true to form, had again fabricated a "translation."³⁸

William Miller and doomsday prophecy

During the days of Joseph Smith another bizarre, apocalyptic movement began to develop. Its origin was in the spiritual climate of New York state and neighboring New England, under the direct inspiration of William Miller, a farmer, an avid fundamentalist Baptist, and a diligent student of the Bible. Miller's

reading of the Bible convinced him that the end of the world was imminent. His reasoning was rather contrived, but it was based on his taking the Bible as the literal word of God, and especially focusing on the Book of Daniel in the Old Testament and the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, which allegedly prophesied the last days, Armageddon, and the Second Coming of Christ. There have been many efforts to draw prophecies from the Bible. The

37. Ibid., p. 291.

38. See George D. Smith, "Joseph Smith and the Book of Mormon," p. 23. A letter from William Fugate, June 30, 1879.

262 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

Millerite movement is a classic case of the often tragic character of such predictions. The books of the Bible were written over many centuries, and they reflected the idealized, historical account of the Jews and their yearnings for national identity and liberation from a foreign yolk. To read into the Bible more than that and to attempt to interpret it so that it becomes a plan for the entire future of humanity is a deceptive snare for the unwary. It is always presumptuous of us to read our own times into earlier documents, which express other political, religious, or social interests, or to believe that what is happening now or is about to happen was provisioned long ago by some ancient prophet.

A good illustration of this can be seen with the continued fascination with Nostradamus, a 16th-century French astrologer. Nostradamus composed four-line verses (quatrains), which are arranged in groups of one hundred, appropriately known as centuries. His quatrains were supposed to be used to predict the future, but they are so vague and general that they do not clearly say what is to occur. Indeed, they could not be understood until they were interpreted retrospectively after an event had happened. Thus the latter-day interpreter is left to his own devices to fit the facts to the prediction. But which facts apply to what period? The game is open to ad hoc prophecy and a wide range of permissive interpretations, so that virtually anything can be made to fit. Let us take for example a famous quatrain, Century I, verse 60. Nostradamus writes:

An emperor shall be born near Italy Who shall be sold to the Empire at high price
They shall say, from the people he disputed with, That he is less a prince than a
butcher.

To whom does this apply? Napoleon, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, fits the prediction, since he was born in Corsica and became emperor of France, and the armies he led contributed to the slaughter of great numbers of people. But it also applies to 20th-century Hitler, who was born in Austria (near Italy), became an absolute dictator and butchered millions. It can likewise be applied to Ferdinand II (1578-1637), king of Bohemia and Holy Roman emperor, who ruled during the bloody Thirty Years War. The interpreter is free to choose whatever he wishes after the fact. This is the difficulty in going back and finding mysterious prophecies in earlier writers. Nostradamus is being widely appealed to in the 20th century to prophesy grave forebodings and a massive war. Is the universe fulfilling a plan? Is the future fixed such that some prophetic minds can peer into it? Claims have been made on both para-normal and religious grounds about this ability. But precognitive clair-

William Miller and doomsday prophecy 263

voyance has never been empirically demonstrated in the laboratory; and the fact that it has religious embroidery does not make it any more true.

The Bible has been and still is being read in order to prophesy the future course of history. Most specific Bible prophecies fail, and they can be disconfirmed easily if they do not occur, unless they are taken so generally that they can be stretched and interpreted to apply to whatever is wanted in the future or the past. Jesus' own prophecy—that his generation would not taste death and would live to see the end of the world and his return to save them—did not occur in his own time. But it did not dishearten his disciples. In virtually every age, including our own, Bible prophets utter grave new forecasts of doomsday for the world and of salvation for true believers. There is a fatalism in the view that we can do nothing but passively await the unfolding of foreordained events and hope that we will be spared the terrible destruction awaiting sinners and nonbelievers. Perhaps the most pointed illustration of the misuse of biblical prophecy is the saga of William Miller. It borders on the ridiculous, and yet he was taken seriously in his own day. Unfortunately for Miller and his followers, known as Millerites, his predictions were framed in such a specific form that they could be readily proved false. As we shall see, however, this did not weaken the next generation's faith; they only redoubled their conviction that the end of the world was near.

Miller announced that in 1818, after poring intensely over the Bible, he came to the firm conclusion that in twenty-five years our present state of affairs would be wound up. At that time all the pride, power, pomp, vanity, and wickedness of the world would come to an end and the Kingdom of the Messiah would be established. The Old Testament passages he used as the basis for his inference were in the Book of Daniel. According to that, Daniel had dreams and visions, sometimes when in bed, or once when he had fallen, or when he was sick. In Chapter 8 there is an account of an elaborate vision. One saint speaks to another, asking how long impiety will cause desolation and the land to be trodden down. In response, Daniel says:

And he said unto me, unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed (8:14—KJV).

Incredible as it may seem, Miller interpreted days to mean "years" (as many others of his time did). Miller was convinced that many events in the Bible had been predicted to occur within a specific time: the flood, 120 years; Abraham's descendants' sojourn in Egypt, 400 years; the time in the wilderness, 40 years; the exile, 70 years; etc. Similarly, for the 2,300 years which would mean the end of the world. He estimated that Daniel's prophecy was made about 457 B.C.E. This he identified with the command-

264

Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

ment of Artaxerxes, which was mentioned in Ezra. Ergo, the prophecy would be fulfilled 2,300 years later in 1843! Inasmuch as there had been many changes in the calendar, Miller could not say with certitude the exact day or year in which the prophecy would be fulfilled, but he thought: that it would be sometime between March 21, 1843, and March 21, 1844. He interpreted the phrase "the sanctuary would be cleansed" to mean that: the earth would be purged of sinful wickedness by fire and destruction. Judgment Day, the Second Advent, or the Second Coming of Christ: would be ushered in. At the fateful hour, the sky would open up to reveal the heavenly host, the dead would rise from their graves, the believer-would be taken up to heaven in the form of "the rapture," and the sinner-would be cast into the hell they so rightly deserved.³⁹

Miller began to espouse his theories in 1831; he published and lectured on biblical prophecy and carried on a vigorous propaganda campaign. Large crowds flocked to hear him. Enthusiasm gained momentum and the Millerite movement began to grow rapidly. Great numbers of people left the established churches and converted to his apocalyptic doctrines. But there was widespread rejection of Miller's prophecies by critics: scientific skeptics found them absurd, and other ministers thought they were overly simplistic, fanatical, and deficient even on biblical grounds. Nevertheless, by 1839 the movement had been transformed from a small rural phenomenon to a mass movement with large urban churches. Estimates of the number of adherents run anywhere from fifty thousand to hundreds of thousands. In 1842 and 1843, as the end-days supposedly were approaching, interest in Miller's prophecies continued to grow. If a cataclysmic end of the world was really in store for everyone, what should one do to prepare for it, people asked in fear.

In November 1833 there was a bright meteor shower—the Leonid shower, so-called because meteorites were seen so close to the constellation Leo. This shower, incidentally, appears periodically. A bright comet appeared in 1843. To the credulous, who are untrained in astronomy, these were taken as divine omens that portended the imminent end of the world. In 1843 a rumor swept the Millerite group that D-day would be April 10, 1843, even though Miller and his church leaders never officially accepted this date. The day passed without any untoward event. Similarly, at the end of 1843 there was great anticipation and consternation about what might ensue. When again nothing happened by March 21, 1844, the Millerite movement faced a real crisis; opponents mocked them. In anticipation of the end of the world, many true believers had sold their

won,:

39. See Daniel Cohen, *Waiting for the Apocalypse* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1983), pp. 7-34. See also Elmer T. Clark, *Small Sects in America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1947).

William Miller and doomsday prophecy 265

goods and awaited the end in high emotional expectation. Farmers even refused to plant their crops. Since they would not need any money, they gave away their funds and discharged their employees, all in preparation for the appointed day when the Lord would arrive to deliver them. Miller and his followers were dejected when again nothing happened. The faithful had banked everything on the hope that the world would be destroyed and they would be saved. Miller still kept insisting that "the day of the Lord" was near, perhaps in a few more months.

Early in 1844 another Millerite, Samuel S. Snow, declared that D-day would be in the fall of 1844, October 22nd to be specific. Most of the Millerite leaders now focused on that day, and even Miller eventually came to the same conclusion. Finally committed to October 22, 1844, the Millerites again made preparations to meet their maker. There were camp meetings and intensified missionary activities; stores, businesses, and farms were again shut down. An interesting sidelight to the events was the fact that Miller reaped a considerable sum of money by selling his followers white "ascension robes." Miller insisted that he was simply doing God's work by providing an abundant supply of the recommended attire for the faithful to meet their maker. Many Millerites, dressed in their white robes, made their way to hillsides to await the coming of the Lord. There was much excitement, crying, and shouting, all in anticipation of the great event. Several sought to leap into the air and take off like birds. "One man put on turkey wings, got up on a tree and prayed that the Lord would take him. He

tried to fly, fell and broke his arm."⁴⁰ Many were deeply frightened at what might happen to them. Twelve o'clock midnight passed and again nothing happened. This time their hopes were truly shattered. People wept openly; for the great expectation was not fulfilled. Miller confessed his mistake about the date and showed surprise, chagrin, and disappointment. But he still held steadfast in his faith that the Second Coming would occur shortly. He died a grief-stricken and virtually broken man. Most of his followers had by then disappeared. His prediction has been decisively disconfirmed.

What are we to make of this prophecy? First, it should be pointed out that many biblical scholars are uncertain as to who the author of the Book of Daniel was. Second, they are uncertain of the date the book was written. Some scholars think it was written during the Babylonian captivity of the Jews, about the 5th or 6th century B.C.E. If so, Daniel spent his career at the court of the Mesopotamian rulers, seeking to remain faithful to Jewish law, even in the Persian court. In this historical context, Daniel was predicting, at best, events that would occur within his own lifetime, and he was probably mourning of the loss of his brethren's faith

40. Cohen, *Waiting for the Apocalypse*, p. 31.

266 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser and hoping for a revival of Judaism. Others have said that the Book of Daniel was set in the second century B.C.E. There is some question as to whether parts of it are canonical or apocryphal. Daniel may even be a fictional character. Thus Miller even erred in specifying a date on which Daniel's prophecy was first made. Third, even if one takes the passages at face value and assumes that they described what happened to a real person, what are we to say about the dreams and visions of a sick man? The prophecy is very subjective. How do we know that Daniel had a vision or dream? Perhaps it was only his imagination at work. Is it not perilous to predict the destruction of the entire world at some future time based on an individual's visionary fantasies? Fourth, these prophecies were stretched out of all proportion to apply to the nineteenth century, and we have seen that they were false.

As we approach the end of the second millennium after Jesus, people are again prone to apply doomsday forecasts to the near future. Today some fundamentalist prophets are preaching that we are living in "the last days," and they view earthquake tremors, wars, and rumors of war, as signs of the impending apocalyptic disaster. The last great battle of Armageddon is approaching, we are warned. Indeed, this generation, many of them insist, is the last generation, and this was all foretold in the Old and New Testaments. In *The Late Great Planet Earth*, Hal Lindsey claims that Armageddon is around the corner.⁴¹ According to biblical prophecies, seven years of terrible tribulation will soon befall mankind. This period is about to begin because the Jewish people, after their long Diaspora, have finally returned to their ancient homeland in Palestine, which they left after the destruction of Jerusalem in C.E. 70. Next, Lindsey says, the Jews will rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Then a whole series of terrible events will trigger the final Armageddon. A world war will ensue. Israel will be invaded from all sides: by a confederation of nations from the north (said to be led by the Russians), by the Arab nations, and by a great power from the East (said to be the Chinese), with an army of two hundred million soldiers. During the period leading up to these cataclysmic events, there will also emerge a ten-nation confederation—this was the old Roman empire, now the European Common Market—headed by an anti-Christ preaching a new religion. These years will witness the greatest devastation mankind has ever seen. Valleys will flow

with blood and cities will be destroyed by torrents of fire and brimstone. This, it is said, represents a thermonuclear war, the most terrifying holocaust of all time. But then Christ will return to rescue in rapture all true believers. Christ will reign for a thousand

41. Hal Lindsey, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1970).

Ellen G. White: Inspired prophet 267

years and eventually bring into being his final kingdom, which will last throughout all eternity.

We may ask the following questions: Is the Bible reliable as the basis for prophecy about the future? Why should its predictions be viewed as applying to this generation? Why should the Bible be taken literally? I would, of course, deny the very possibility of prophecy. The true Christian has waited almost 2,000 years. He can always extend into the future his hopes for the Second Coming. Such a general statement—that there will be a war of Armageddon and a Second Coming—is impossible to confirm, for it is always being pushed into the future. Not yet, say the true believers, but soon.

Ellen G. White: Inspired prophet

Revelations and visions from on high

The Millerite movement, however, did not die. One would have thought that a specific prediction that failed would have put an end to the matter. But the transcendental temptation was so strong that the faithful were not to be daunted. Those who followed the Millerites and believed that the Bible was the inspired word of God needed some explanation as to why Jesus did not come.

This they managed to manufacture. In doing so, they repeated a familiar psychomythological pattern: paradoxically, it is often out of failure that a religious movement gains new momentum. The post-Millerites reasoned as follows: It is our fault, not God's, that the end of the world and the salvation of man did not occur; it is we who have misread God's real intention.

The leader in this new movement was Ellen G. White. William Miller never claimed to have revelations, but Ellen White did. Her many visions led to the founding of the Seventh-Day Adventist church. This church, like the Mormon church, had its roots in the nineteenth century; and it has grown rapidly until it now has over four million members. Like the Mormons, it claims to have a divinely inspired message received by Mrs. White. I will not describe all of the features of the faith, nor will I trace the historical growth of the church; rather I wish to focus on its founder's crucial claims that rested on revelation. I submit that her case illustrates the same syndrome that I have been delineating concerning the foundations of other religions. Ellen White is a false prophetess, claiming to receive visions and revelations from on high and founding a church in the name of God. Yet it has now been fairly well documented that her much heralded prophetic powers were based on a physical and emotional dis-

268 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

ability and were not received from some divine being but were borrowed from other sources.

Ellen White and her fellow Adventists attempted to overcome the tremendous psychological letdown of the failed prophecy by offering a new explanation for "the great disappointment" of October 22, 1844. They would not accept the fact that their calculation of when Christ would appear was mistaken. Instead they reasoned that they must have been mistaken only in depicting the kind of event that was prophesied.

Ellen Harmon, a seventeen-year-old girl from Gorham, Maine, began to have frequent visions. These visions offered explanations for the ap-parent failure. In 1846 she married James White, another avid Adventist. and assumed his name. At first they promulgated the "shut door" thesis namely, the belief that on October 22, 1844, the chance of salvation had been terminated for the wicked world. Only those who had been faitht _ would be saved. This was a rather harsh doctrine, for it closed the doc-for all others to be saved. Why bother, if everything had already bee-decided? This thesis is reminiscent of the Calvinist theory of predestina-tion. Such a harsh thesis had to be modified, if a church was to be bui!: hence it was transformed into the "sanctuary doctrine." The explanatic-offered for the great disappointment was that on the fateful day in 1 M-i Christ had indeed interposed himself, but he had moved from one pan c: the heavenly sanctuary to the "most holy part" of the sanctuary. Beginnir.; on October 22, 1844, Christ began the intensive work of "investigatr. t judgment"; that is, he began to examine the records of all his professec followers throughout history and in the present in order to determine w h: merited eternal salvation. Let us outline the details of the emergence of this new theologies notion. Ellen Harmon was born on November 26, 1827. She dropped o_-of school at a young age. Her family was intensely religious. In 1840 w he-she was thirteen years old, she heard William Miller preach about th< imminent end of the world. Frightened, she returned home and spent a~ night in tearful prayer. She continued in the same anguished state fc-months after undergoing a conversion experience. In 1842 she again heard Miller preach and was again terrified by his claims. She recounts ho1* condemnations rang in her ears day and night, that she feared "she wou!: lose her reason," and that she was overcome by hysterical despair. Shr reports that she often remained in prayer all night groaning and trer--bling. She further states that she was taken to heaven, where she met Jes_> and felt relieved. She often attended prayer meetings, would fall unco--scious, and would remain in such a state all night. She maintained thi during such experiences the "spirit of God" took control of her. She a-,: her family accepted Miller's teachings and were wrapped up in :-•:

269

Revelations and visions from on high

spiritual fervor of the day. The young girl showed all of the signs of emotional instability. And she suffered terribly along with her fellow believers at the great disappointment. It was a short time after the failure, in December 1844, that she reported having visions, and she had them virtually every day. The early Adventists at first regarded these visions as hallucinations caused by her feeble physical condition and influenced by those around her. Only later did they begin to attribute these visions to a divine source. Notice the analogy with Mohammed's psychic pathology.

Mrs. White continued to elaborate the "sanctuary doctrine" through-out her career, supporting its truth by new revelatory visions. This expla-tion as to why Christ had not come was a post hoc rationalization if there ever was one. Miller's interpretation of biblical prophecy had pre-dicted Christ's return on a specific date. The fact that it did not occur was clear empirical evidence for its falsity. Mrs. White attempted to ignore that rational conclusion by maintaining that something did occur, namely, that Christ had intervned, that a process of investigative inquiry had begun, that one day Armageddon would still ensue, and that the true faithful would be saved.

The objections to this speculative rationalization are so abundant that were it not for the fact that the thesis was based on the authority of religious faith—that one person had a revelation from God—it would have been rejected out of hand. To illustrate, let us suppose that someone had predicted that a destructive earthquake would occur in Chicago on April 10, 1950, and that in fear of this he moved all of his belongings, sold his property, and got his friends to do the same. The event did not occur. Was he wrong? No, he says, there was an "indiscernible" shift in the underlying geological structure on that day, and he insists a terrible earth-quake will still occur. It may occur in the future, but how does he know that there was an "indiscernible" rearrangement if it is not discernible by others? If he answers "because I had a vision about it," one would laugh at him. Yet this is precisely what Mrs. White had done.

Thus, we have to raise the question anew: Did a self-proclaimed prophetess, Ellen White, really have such visions about God's investigative judgment? Had God opened up to her "the precious rays of light shining from the throne?" We have only her testimony to the occurrence. (It is estimated that she wrote over twenty-five million words in her lifetime presenting her revelatory visions.) If one accepts Moses, Jesus, Moham-med, and the Old Testament prophets, why not a nineteenth-century prophetess with latter-day revelations? Many Seventh-Day Adventists take her word as divinely inspired and hence authoritative.

The beginnings of Ellen White's career revolved around the shut-door thesis. According to D. M. Canright, a Seventh-Day Adventist who knew

270 Sundry prophets: Greater and

the Whites intimately and later defected, this thesis was first suggested by O. R. L. Crosier, an Adventist whom Ellen knew. She accepted the thesis because she said she had a vision attesting to its veracity. According to the thesis, Moses had built a tabernacle or sanctuary, which had two rooms or apartments. The first room was the "holy place" and the second, the "most holy place." Ordinary priests were allowed in the first room; no one was allowed to enter the second room except the high priest once a year when he "cleansed the sanctuary" with a blood offering in order to atone for the sins of the people.

According to the thesis, the earthly sanctuary was similar to what existed in Heaven, and this sanctuary in Heaven is what Daniel 8:14 was referring to. Jesus was the high priest, who ministered in the first room, the "holy place," where he received believers and forgave those who had confessed their sins. On October 22, 1844, he moved to the next room, the "most holy place," and began the task of cleansing the sanctuary. The shut-door doctrine said that probation for sinners was now at an end and that Christ had moved into the "most holy place" to prepare salvation for believers. This shut-door thesis was reinforced by quoting the parable of the ten virgins recorded in Matthew 25:1-13, in which Jesus said that one should always be ready, for one never knows when the Second Coming will occur. The parable tells the story of the ten virgins. Some were wise and some foolish. The wise ones took their lamps with sufficient oil and went to await the bridegroom. Five tarried because the bridegroom had not yet arrived. They went to purchase oil for their lamps. While they were gone the bridegroom appeared and took those who were ready with him to the marriage feast. "The door was shut" says the scriptures, and when the five foolish virgins came later and asked to be admitted, they were not let in by the bridegroom. This was interpreted to mean that those who had waited for the Second Coming on October 22, 1844, did not do so in vain for they would be admitted eventually to the "most holy place" if Christ deemed it available. Jesus had become the

advocate for the saints, the true believers. Those who did not believe or who had sinned would never be admitted; the door to salvation was now closed to them. This doctrine proved to be too harsh, for it did not allow for new converts to be brought into the faith; it tended to promote a passive apathy, since everything had already been decided and there would no longer be probation for sinners. How can one possibly build a church if new converts cannot be let in? This led to a new doctrine that was put forth in 1849. The shut-door thesis had applied to the remnant church. that is, to the first Adventist believers who had been disappointed. The new theory propounded was now called the open-door or sanctuan theory; it would allow people to enter the church as new members. Under

Revelations and visions from on high 271

the shut-door thesis, the Adventists could not even bring in their own children, who had been born recently or were growing up. To be saved, however, a person must know about the change that Jesus underwent in heaven in 1844, as he moved to the most holy place. The only ones who had knowledge of this were in the Seventh-Day Adventist church. All other Christians, who remained in ignorance of this doctrine, could not hope to achieve salvation. Any prayers that they made were to Jesus in the first room, but the prayers were lost since he was no longer there. This put the Adventists in opposition to all other Christian churches, since they alone had the exclusive key to salvation.

Mrs. White reinforced her divine authority by claiming that she had talked to angels in her visions and that she went up to Heaven to converse with Jesus. Her critics have pointed out, however, that her visions changed over time, which meant that God's revelatory messages were often contra-dictory. D. M. Canright denied her claims to divine revelation and con-cluded that "her revelations were not from God, but were the unreliable products of autosuggestion and an abnormal state of mind. . . . Her professed revelations were simply the products of her own mind reflecting the teachings of those around her."⁴² Canright also maintained that these visions were most likely "the results of her early misfortune, nervous disease, and a complication of hysteria, epilepsy, catalepsy, and ecstasy. That she may have honestly believed in them herself does not alter the fact."⁴³ Canright tells of other hysterical Adventist women who had visions, who were rejected by the church and eventually abandoned them. When Mrs. White's so-called revelations were accepted by those around her as divine, did this only encourage her further in her misapprehensions? Canright is mystified that any sane person would accept these theories simply on the say so of Mrs. White.

Moreover, critics of the Adventist church have charged that the ear-lier writings of Mrs. White, outlining and defending the shut-door policy, were suppressed. Although they had been published, they were censored by the church because they contradicted later doctrines. Canright shows, for example, that a vision revealing that "all the wicked world which God had rejected" was lost forever and would not be saved was deleted when her "early writings" were later republished. Here she was arguing that there was no sympathy for the ungodly, nor must we pray for them in the hopes that they would be saved. It is only natural that a person's views would change over a period of years, but this is difficult to reconcile if one claims that each point of view is the infallible word of God.

42. D. M. Canright, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White* (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co.), p. 25.

43. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

272 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

Mrs. White constantly borrowed doctrines from those about her and promulgated them as her own. Her husband came up with a scheme to have each person make a pledge to the church each year based on his net worth; this was called "systematic benevolence." Mrs. White then divulged in her Testimonies that "the plan of Systematic Benevolence is pleasing to God."⁴⁴ Canright maintained that Mrs. White rarely initiated a new revelation herself but that men in the movement came to her with suggestions, which she then adopted as her own. They sought to control her, especially; her husband.

Can a physiological, as well as a psychological, explanation be given for Ellen White's visions, as Canright suggests? At the age of nine Ellen was dealt a blow to her face which broke her nose and rendered her unconscious, so that she lay in a stupor for three weeks. Did this cause her to suffer visions later? There are reports that she fainted frequently, had heart palpitations and pains, and was violently ill. Many of her visions apparently were preceded by a fainting spell and occurred when she was very ill. She reports that her blackouts were so severe that her friends did not think she would live, and she did not seem to be breathing. She became violently sick, then appeared almost to be dead; only then did she have a vision. This process is apparently repeated throughout her life. Most of her visions occurred in front of other people while she was praying, speaking earnestly, or when ill, and not while alone. She had been diagnosed as subject to hysteria; her experience resembles an epileptic fit. After coming out of the spell she remembered and repeated her thoughts and feelings, and recorded them. A description of the trance-state follows:

For about four or five seconds she seems to drop down like a person who swoons, or one having lost his strength; she then seems to be instantly furnished with superhuman strength, sometimes rising at once to her feet and walking around the room. There are frequent movements of the hands and arms pointing to the right or left her head turns. All these movements are made in a most graceful manner. In whatever position the hand or arm may be placed, it is impossible for anyone to move it. Her eyes are always open, and she does not wink; her head is raised and she is looking upwards, not with a vacant stare but with a pleasant expression, only differing from the normal in that she appears to be looking intently at some distant object. She does not breathe, yet her pulse beats regularly.⁴⁵

Mrs. White's visions were interpreted by uneducated people as being from God since they were ignorant of medicine and psychology. Can her "transcendental experience" be given a natural explanation? Was it a result of:

44. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, pp. 190-91.

45. Canright, *Life of Mrs. E. G. White*, p. 185.

273

Was Ellen White a plagiarist?

brain disorder that was precipitated by an emotional state? An epileptic seizure usually begins with a loud cry, and after the seizure there is no memory of what occurred. Mrs. White did not begin her trance with convulsions; her physiological state is more akin to an ecstatic state, where the body is immobile and breathing is reduced markedly. Quoting a Dr. Wood, Canright says that "both ecstasy and catalepsy can co-exist in the same person and may alternate." The strong, direct character of her visions apparently decreased as she got older; she often stated that her revelations came from a voice or someone speaking to her, reporting that she was "instructed." Earlier in her life she always said "I saw."

The Adventist church accepts both the Bible and the writings and visions of Mrs. White as the "word" of God. On February 7, 1871, the General Conference of the church stated that "we reaffirm our abiding confidence in the Testimonies of Sister White to the Church, as the teachings of the Spirit of God."⁴⁶

In 1914, church publications declared that Mrs. White expressed the "Spirit of Prophecy" and that Mrs. White was "a prophet of God."⁴⁷ Many even go so far as G. A. Irwin, for many years president of the General Conference, to claim that the "Spirit of Prophecy is the only infallible interpreter" of the Bible and that it is "Christ through this agency giving the real meaning of his own words."⁴⁸

Mrs. White supported this interpretation of her work by saying, "In ancient times God spoke to men through the mouths of prophets and apostles. In these days he speaks to them by the Testimonies of his Spirit,"⁴⁹ and also, "It is God, and not an erring mortal that has spoken."⁵⁰ This allegedly applies to all of her writings! They are not her words but God's. "I am presenting to you that which the Lord has presented to me. I do not write one article in the paper expressing merely my own ideas"; rather they are "the precious rays of light shining from the throne."⁵¹

Was Ellen White a plagiarist?

It now seems abundantly clear that what Ellen White alleged to be the result of divine revelations was often the crudest form of plagiarism. Many of her writings can be shown to have been lifted in toto from other

46. A statement by the General Conference Committee, May 1906, Nov. 10, 1906.

47. Seventh-Day Adventist Year Book, 1914, p. 253.

48. G. A. Irwin, *The Mark of the Beast* (Washington, D.C.: RHPA, 1911), p. I.

49. Ellen White, *Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 148; vol. 5, p. 661.

50. *Testimonies*, vol. 3, p. 257.

51. *Testimonies*, vol. 5, pp. 63, 67.

274

Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

authors. Scholars have carefully compared her writings with others and found that she borrowed on an enormous scale, without quotation marks and without footnotes, maintaining all along that they were "the word of God" given to her in a vision or trance.

A charitable observer might say that Mrs. White had read various writings, that they had entered her subconscious, and that they returned in a trance state. If this is the case, then they are not of divine origin. Ellen and her husband, James, repeatedly denied that she read any books or that she used books as sources for her "inspirations." She says, "Although I am as dependent upon the Spirit of the Lord in writing my views as I am in receiving them, yet the words I employ in describing what I have seen are my own, unless they be those spoken to me by an angel, which I always include in marks of quotation."⁵² Her husband, who collaborated and edited her writings, insisted that her words were not contained in books by others.

A second inference that might be drawn is that Mrs. White consciously borrowed from other writers without giving credit—the most blatant form of plagiarism. This charge has been leveled by some recent defectors from the Adventist church, notably Walter T. Rea, Ronald L. Numbers, and Douglas Hackleman, and it has caused quite a stir.⁵³ We now have the tools that enable us to test the claims of a prophet or prophetess. After her death, it was discovered that Ellen White had an extensive library. When we compare her

writings with those of others, it is clear that many of her books, magazine articles, letters, testimonies, and diaries, written over a seventy-year period, were full of plagiarisms. She frequently began a statement or passage with "I saw" or "I was shown," implying that she had had a vision. Yet what followed were generally passages taken from other writers. Even when Christ or an "angelic guide" spoke to her in a vision, their "words" came from other authors. Yet Ellen White repeatedly insisted that the passages contained in her visions were "not of human production" and that her "views were written independent of books or of the opinions of others."⁵⁴

Douglas Hackleman points out that Ellen White was sometimes confronted by the similarities between what she claimed to be a divine utterance and the writings of others, but that she repeatedly denied that they influenced her. In a letter written on July 13, 1847, to Joseph Bates, who noted the similarities between her "shut-door thesis" and that proposed

52. Douglas Hackleman, "Ellen White's Habit," *Free Inquiry* 4, no. 4 (Fall 1984): 1. Quoted from Ellen White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1.

53. See Walter T. Rea, *The White Lie* (Turlock, Calif.: M & R Publications, 1976); and Ronald L. Numbers, *Prophetess of Health: A Study of Ellen G. White* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

54. Ellen White, Manuscript 7, 1867.

275

Was Ellen White a plagiarist?

by another, she denied that she had read a paper delineating this thesis, insisting that she "took no interest in reading," for it made her "nervous."⁵⁵ Many years later another Seventh-Day Adventist, J. N. Anderson, noted the remarkable similarity between John Milton's epic poem *Paradise Lost*, depicting man's fall from divine grace, and her own "great controversy" vision that culminated in her book *The Great Controversy* in 1858.⁵⁶ When confronted with this similarity, she denied ever having read Milton; yet recent researchers have shown the striking parallels between the two and the fact that there were little or no differences between *Paradise Lost* and Ellen White's vision. A charitable—or sarcastic—critic might suggest that both Milton and White received the same vision from God "independently." But Milton never claimed divine revelation; it was his artistic and creative imagination that produced the great epic. Hackleman also shows that there were strong similarities between *The Great Controversy* and a similar book published by G. H. L. Hastings.⁵⁷ Hastings' book had been reviewed in the *Adventist Review* and *Sabbath Herald*, published by her husband, and so one could say that Ellen White was probably familiar with it. Incidentally, to support the thesis that Ellen White was a plagiarist, Canright reports that an Adventist woman once saw Mrs. White copying from a book in her lap and that when someone came in the room she covered the book until he or she left and then resumed her work.

Various other charges made about Ellen White: that she made large sums of money by selling her books; that she revised her works, which means that they could not be the inerrant word of God; that her writings were edited, corrected, and compiled by members of her staff, etc. All of this would be natural, except for one who claims to be a "prophetess of the Lord." Critics have also pointed out that Ellen White made a number of predictions based on her "divine visions" that did not come true. For example, during the Civil War she prophesied that the war would be a failure and that slavery would not be abolished. She also advocated vegetarianism and forbade the eating of meat. Yet it has been said that she

herself was a secret meat-eater all of her life. All of this no doubt points to the fact that Ellen White was all too human, not a messenger of God, but a fallible person.

The moral of the story is that we are close enough to White's life to see her idiosyncrasies and frailties, whereas the prophets and saints of ancient times who have been deified by later generations of believers are

55. Hackleman, "Ellen White's Habit," p. 18.

56. Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels, and Satan and His Angels* (1858).

57. G. H. L. Hastings, *The Great Controversy Between God and Man, Its Origin, Progress, and End*.

276 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

beyond the reach of our historical binoculars. What they did has receded into the past beyond our scrutiny; that they behaved in ways not dissimilar to Ellen White is not beyond the realm of plausibility.

False Prophets

One possible inference that can be drawn by a believer in orthodox religions after reading this chapter on the lesser prophets is that they are all "false prophets" masquerading as divinely anointed ones. But then should the same inference be used to strengthen a belief in the prophets of the Old and New Testaments? On the contrary: If the credentials of modern prophets are questionable, why not apply the same standards of critical skepticism to the ancient ones? Of course, the historical record is spotty and much of it has been lost; but this is all the more reason why we should doubt the older prophets' claims. We have seen similar processes: self-proclaimed prophets or prophetesses claim to speak for God and a gullible multitude eventually accepts them. Later an authoritarian church must be built if his or her word is to survive. If it happened in the cases of Joseph Smith and Ellen White, can we not wonder if this is how Judaism, Christianity, and Islam began?

I do not believe we can say that all prophets, mediums, and psychics are or were conscious frauds. Many individuals may have genuinely believed that they had special powers; because of this sincerely held conviction, they were able to convince others. A psychotic may be so convinced of the reality of his or her delusional system that there is no crack in the armor. Actually, however, different psychological characteristics can be applied: (1) In some cases we have clear-cut fraud; (2) in others, partial fraud appears in times of crises or of waning faith; (3) in still others, a person may believe or half-believe in his or her divine powers, but this may be due to a serious emotional or delusional disorder. Many prophets and prophetesses who have appeared in history were schizophrenic; disturbed personalities; they truly believed that they had visions of God. Yet no one believed them, because they lacked the ability and talent to convince others of their authenticity.

There are any number of other individuals who have founded religious movements that survived their deaths. In the late nineteenth century, Mary Baker Eddy founded the Christian Science church, which was based on her reading of the Bible. Her devout followers believe that her message is divinely inspired revelation. Christian Science denies the existence of sickness and considers it to be an error of the mind. Christian Science practitioners offer prayer as an alternative to medicine; the church is headquartered in Boston.

False prophets

277

on biblical readings and the revealed word of Mary Baker Eddy.

Charles Taze Russell, a haberdasher from Allegheny, Pennsylvania, founded Jehovah's Witnesses. He maintained that the millennium began in 1873, the apostles were raised in 1878, and the end of the world would occur in 1914. Russell preached that he was the angel referred to in Ezra, and was the seventh messenger of the church. Since his death the leaders of his movement have prophesied the end of the world and still continue to attract avid followers. Armageddon will happen, they allege, as soon as the work of the Witnesses is completed, and this will be followed by the millennium period in which sinners will have a second chance at salvation. Their by-word is the statement "millions now living will never die."

In the twentieth century other prophets have come forth claiming divine revelation; the Reverend Moon, for example, implying that he had a revelation as a young man in Korea, went on to create the Unification church. The soil fertilized by the Bible is so rich that self-proclaimed prophets are ever ready to crop up. Most of these growths fall by the wayside. Some, however, are able to plant their roots deep in subsequent generations, and their influence grows and develops. Believers are willing to renounce all their critical faculties in the hope of obtaining the peace of transcendence. In extreme cases people have even followed their prophet to their death, as befell hundreds of people who obeyed the Reverend James Jones in Guyana and committed suicide. Jones had used all sorts of paranormal tricks to convince his followers of his divinity.

Beginning as a sect or a cult and rejected by the majority in its own day, the institution founded in the name of the prophet survives in the hearts of his followers. Eventually it may develop into a church, and loyalties are nourished, much as in a family or a nation. The prophet is accepted by later generations as a "messenger of God." Since large sections of the population, in the past and in the present, believe in divine prophecy, one should not be surprised by this recurrent phenomena. It will persist until the entire basis for prophecy and revelation is questioned by skeptical rationality and scientific investigation. Yet to do so freely and openly always risks hostility, enmity, and suppression at the hands of the believers, who, when they gain sufficient political control, usually condemn as heretics those who dare question the foundations of their own unquestioned faith.

Conclusion: The argument from revelation reappraised

The argument from revelation is central to many religions. Did God enter into human history at various times in the past? Did he reveal himself to

278 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser men and women especially chosen by him? Did God convey messages to these individuals and were his messages accurately transmitted to us?

The claim that there is a revelatory God is an empirical claim; we can examine its factual content in order to determine the strength of the evidence and the probability of its truth.

As we examine the "logic" of the argument from revelation, let us ask how much evidence is required before we would be warranted in accepting the claim that divine revelation is true. The argument from revelation is a quasi-inductive argument; it generally takes the following form. (1) Some divine being—Jehovah, Allah, God the Father, etc.—has manifested him-self to especially appointed individuals (a prophet, disciple, or saint) and communicated unique messages through them to us. God has made his presence and intentions

known either directly or by means of an emissar. —an angel, the Holy Ghost, or even his son Jesus. (2) The message conveyed are in the form of truths, sayings, commandments, or prohibitions. These are prescribed as obligatory and are supposed to govern beliefs and moral conduct. (3) The reality of God's revelations is, however, based upon some human testimony. It is claimed that some prophet witnessed the divine presence and/or received information about God's intentions. God's revelatory manifestations are relatively rare phenomena. Since divine revelations occur so infrequently, our knowledge of their nature is largely historical. (4) Nevertheless, on the basis of these alleged revelations, it is inferred that God exists. The argument from revelation is used to demonstrate that some divine being exists and that he has manifested his intentions known to humanity.

We have recounted various cases of revelation accepted as sacred in different religious traditions, as reported in texts associated with Moses, Jesus, Paul, Mohammed, Joseph Smith, Ellen White. Should we accept them as divinely inspired? Are the later revelations from God superior to earlier ones, or vice versa? Many of the revelations in the New Testament supplant those in the Old Testament, and are held by Christians to correct or replace them. The Koranic revelations, Muslims maintain, are supposed to supplement and supersede those of Judaism and Christianity. Mormon revelations supplement the Old and New Testaments (though Mormons reject Islam) but are rejected by other Christian churches.

Is there any explanation for the contradictory character of the revelations? Since God revealed himself at different times in history, perhaps he had to send different messages. But which should be our ultimate guide? Perhaps we should compare the revelations and accept only those that predominate? For example, Moses, Mohammed, and Joseph Smith practiced polygamy and maintained that it was divinely ordained. Does this mean that Christianity's defense of monogamy as the only legitimate form of marriage is wrong? *

Conclusion: The argument from revelation reappraised 279
 form of marriage is wrong? Whose revelations are genuine and whose are specious? It is unsettling to have God talking in so many different tongues and in so many different ways, and to have alternative systems of priesthood following divergent revelatory traditions and providing different sets of rules and prohibitions. Which of these express the authentic word of God and which do not? Should we accept the Old Testament, the Koran, the Book of Mormon, and also Ellen White, Mary Baker Eddy, the Reverend Moon, and all others who have claimed to have had divine revelations? Or should we be selective and argue, as virtually all separate religious systems do, that only some of the revelations are true? Christians adamantly reject Mohammed as a false prophet who denied that Jesus was the son of God. Thus, the internal contradictions within the entire body of alleged revelatory experiences are difficult to reconcile.

I submit that none of the claims to revelation should be accepted as veridical for another reason, and that is because they egregiously violate certain elementary canons of common sense and inductive evidence as the latter are used in ordinary life and in science. Unfortunately, belief in a revelatory tradition is often considered to be immune to critical inquiry. A person's faith is usually based upon his or her ethnic background (the exception being conversion), and one usually accepts the faith of his forefathers and rejects those of other groups. Thus it is often difficult to examine the foundations of religious faith objectively. Nevertheless, a number of critical issues can and should be raised.

Several key questions come to mind. First, did the revelation in fact occur as reported? (1) How many people witnessed the event and can attest to its having occurred? As far as we know Moses, Mohammed, and Smith were either alone when they had their experiences or underwent them subjectively. (2) Who first recorded the report of the revelation? Has anything of the original account been lost? Was it transmitted by an oral tradition? Was it distorted by propagandists in favor of the faith? The Old and New Testaments and the Koran underwent some transformation, and whether the surviving account is accurate has been questioned by critical scholars. (3) Most important in evaluating a revelatory claim is the question: Were objective and impartial observers present, persons who are able to confirm the occurrence of the revelation? Is there any independent physical or circumstantial evidence in support of this claim? In none of the preceding instances is this latter condition satisfied, though those near Mohammed and Ellen G. White sometimes observed them to go into a trance. What constitutes adequate corroborative eyewitness testimony? There is, of course, firsthand testimony based upon direct observation. But if a prophet is alone when he undergoes an experience, then we can question

280 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

whether or not he is accurate in portraying what transpired. We can ask, was he truthful? Was he a disturbed personality? Did he suffer hallucinations? Did he believe in it himself? It is clear that reports of bizarre, purely private experiences are to be taken with great caution. People have seen everything from pink elephants to the tooth fairy, and we surely cannot accept their accounts simply because they say they saw them. Now, it is important that some secondhand testimony be available to support a revelatory claim. This independent corroboration can be of two sorts. (1) There is a weaker kind, where some observers were actually present when someone claimed to have heard voices, seen a vision, or had a visitation. even though they may not have had the same experience themselves. At the very least they can testify that the prophet in question believed that he was having an experience. In Acts, it is said that those present on the road to Damascus with Paul were left speechless and heard the voice, but they did not see anything. We have no independent confirmation that this was indeed the case, since the observers were not named, nor is their testimony recorded. Moreover, it is not claimed that they saw what Paul saw. (2) There is a stronger kind of testimony, however, where other individuals are present and actually hear and see the same phenomena. In none of the preceding cases is even minimal testimony available.

Another question that can be raised about revelation is this: How are we to interpret the alleged experience, even if we assume that the experience occurred? There are at least two possible explanations: (1) the revelatory experience was divine in origin and was a unique message being conveyed by some deity or by his messenger to the person who received it. or (2) there are alternative naturalistic causal explanations for what occurred. What might some of these natural explanations be? Perhaps the person who had the revelatory experience (if it was an entirely private and subjective phenomena) was schizophrenic, or delusional, or a psychotic Perhaps he or she confused a hallucinatory experience with reality. We know from the abundant psychiatric literature that millions of people suffer delusional states, many of whom claim to hear voices or see visions, which they are convinced are genuine. Perhaps the prophet had an epileptic seizure. It is difficult to conduct post hoc medical diagnoses, but: plausible and rational interpretations of "revelatory states" are possible.

Another explanation for some of the behavior of so-called religious prophets who claim to have extraordinary powers is that some may have skillfully used the arts of magic and conjuring to deceive their followers. Their claims to revelation were designed to arouse awe and mystery. If ancient emperors could claim divine authority for their hegemony, why not the prophets?

The claim to divine revelation has powerful political implications. A

Conclusion: The argument from revelation reappraised 281

leader is better able to direct armies and do battle with enemies if those who follow believe devoutly that he is divinely appointed for the task. This provides a powerful psychological motive for a religious prophet to resort to revelation whenever it suits his fancy: this commandment does not come from me alone, he insists, but from God. What a way to strike terror into the hearts of simple folk! What an effective way to exact allegiance and sacrifice for the holy cause! There may have been a mixture of causes and motives to explain the resort to revelation by the prophets: psychiatric disorders, the desire for political power, economic gain, or adulation. Even if at first a prophet has a vague and confused belief that he has a divinely appointed mission, if it is in time accepted by other people, this may only induce him to continue his efforts to persuade others. And having once succeeded in convincing them that he is special, he may continue his deception. Eventually his power, influence, and fame may grow to such an extent that the temptation to continue the deception that he received messages from God may be too strong to resist. The revelatory impulses may feed on themselves, and in convincing others that he has a special connection to the deity, he may come to believe or half-believe that his powers are divinely ordained. This explanation for the behavior of religious prophets seems far more applicable to the data than any fanciful notion that God came down and talked to a limited number of prophets in history.

Revelations in large measure are buried by the sands of history, and thus resist definitive empirical analysis. I have only suggested a few possible alternative explanations. But let us ask: How should we deal with a revelatory claimant who might appear today? Let us suppose that we encounter an individual who proclaims that he spoke to God and that the latter gave him special commandments we are obliged to follow. (I have occasionally encountered such individuals on street corners; perhaps you have too). What should we say about such a person? Is he mad? Does he belong in a mental institution? Is he a danger to himself or to others? Should we humor him as we would a harmless crank? If he has a group of disciples who follow him around, we might wonder if they are a threat to our security or safety. What is his motive, we ask. Is he a charlatan? Perhaps we should consider that he might be genuine. Perhaps the Lord did send him.

There are certain tests of his legitimacy that common sense would have us apply. If we have the opportunity, we might cautiously inquire: (1) Was the man or woman alone when he or she spoke to God, or were others present? If alone, we probably would laugh at the gullibility of his followers. (2) Can anyone corroborate his startling claims? Were there any other eyewitnesses, and are they his confederates? If so, perhaps they are

282 Sundry prophets: Greater and lesser

insincere. Are any of these witnesses reliable? Are they careful in their observations, objective in their judgments, trained to detect chicanery, fraud, or delusions? (3) Can perfectly normal explanations be given for the alleged

revelatory experiences? Is the "prophet" hallucinating? Was it a ruse or a joke? Were there hidden microphones and loudspeakers that would account for his hearing voices? Is he taking drugs?

Common sense bids us exercise reasonable caution. Let us develop this illustration and in so doing suppose that the "prophet" insists that he is sincere and commands you to give him all your worldly goods, to leave your family, sacrifice everything, including your life, for him and his cause. What would you do? Would you be prepared to follow his bidding? Or would you be annoyed by his audacious presumptuousness?

Surprisingly, none of the classical cases of revelation satisfies the demands of reasonable common sense. We found that the claims made to divine revelation were uncorroborated.

Moses was alone when he claimed to have encountered God. At the very least we might ask: Is the Pentateuch the accurate word of God? Has it been garbled and embellished by later generations? According to the Bible, Moses was able to convince the ancient Israelites that he was the prophet of the Lord, and he had revelations throughout his life—which included slaughtering his enemies with abandon, all in the name of God. If the biblical rendition is accurate (and we have no way of knowing that it is), Moses forbade anyone to enter the innermost sacred Tent of the Presence or to climb the Mountain of God (except Joshua), from whence he brought forth the Ten Commandments. It is apparent that the momentous encounter of Moses with Yahweh on Mt. Sinai, on which so much religious faith has been focused, was unwitnessed. Why should we accept the argument for divine revelation in this case as trustworthy?

None of the authors of the New Testament knew Jesus directly. The synoptic Gospels are based on contradictory hearsay accounts and an oral tradition later written down and elaborated upon by propagandists for a new faith. The claims of miraculous events and cures allegedly performed by Jesus have not been verified by independent or impartial observers. Similarly, in regard to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. No one but him encountered Jesus. No one can independently corroborate the truth of his claim.

Mohammed was also alone when he first encountered the angel Gabriel. Afterward, he ran home to tell his wife. Though she accepted his account, he had difficulty at first in convincing his neighbors of his divine mission, and they mocked him. It was only after he conquered a nearby city that he was able to come back and vanquish his own people. Yet it is on Mohammed's initial and repeated ecstatic trance experiences that the

283

Conclusion: The argument from revelation reappraised

entire Islamic faith is grounded.

Joseph Smith had revelations from the angel Moroni, son of Mor-mon, on a hill near his home and earlier in a grove across the road. But these revelations are unsupported.

There is a fourth criterion we should apply to all eyewitness reports, especially when they are appealed to in support of extraordinary claims that run contrary to normal experiences based upon past experience: extraordinary claims require extraordinarily strong evidence. Human eye-witness reports are often confused. This is particularly evident when a situation is charged with excitement and

emotion. Where there is a strong will-to-believe there is a tendency to leap in and color the facts to suit the individuals involved. Where a powerful charismatic personality is present, his ability to influence and persuade may be greatly enhanced.

I think that we should be extremely cautious of all the claims made in the so-called sacred books. They have not been adequately corroborated. The evidence adduced in their behalf is based upon hearsay, or often the vision of revelation has no more to support it than a report that someone has had a dream. There was a tendency for the ancient mind to accept such reports at face value without exhaustive investigation. Accounts of revelations were written by dedicated proponents who believed in them and attempted to persuade others to do so as well. They were not written by neutral, objective, or dispassionate reporters, who attempted to ferret out the facts. Thus we should be extremely wary of the claims made on behalf of revelation.