

Eternal



A History of the Middle Eastern Monotheistic Religions **3rd Edition**

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A HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN MONOTHEISTIC RELIGIONS

Introduction

Australia currently has members of her armed forces serving overseas in three countries which were or remain theaters of war: Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq.

The conflicts in all these places share one common factor: at least one of the Middle Eastern monotheistic religions is involved. These religions do seem prone to be involved in conflict, since they are, by nature, exclusivist. If there is only one true god demanding allegiance, then persons of another religion must be in serious error. Furthermore, if allegiance to this one god is the only way to salvation, then it is a duty of the faithful to gather everyone else to this fold. Religions, which have a multitude of gods, on the other hand, do not have this tendency, since there is no theological problem in adding a further god to the pantheon.

This monograph is an effort to understand the history of these monotheistic religions, all of which have originated in the Middle East. It is not a theological work but uses the usual methods of historical review; results of archeological research and study of ancient documents. I cannot read these ancient languages myself so perforce much of the monograph relies on secondary sources. With greater historical knowledge we may better understand the background to the conflicts which engage our armed forces.

A History of the Middle Eastern Monotheistic Religions

History according to the Hebrew Bible

The three great Monotheistic religions of the Middle East; Judaism, Christianity and Islam, date their origin to Abraham, who lived almost 4000 years ago. He was a gentleman of some means who left a Babylonian city, usually described as Ur, and headed towards the land of Canaan. It's not clear where he actually came from, since "Ur" is the general Babylonian word for city. The present day Tel el-Mukayyar in Southern Iraq, known today as Ur, is held by many to be the Biblical Ur, though traditionally Ur was thought to be further north in present day Turkey. Canaan, on the Eastern Mediterranean shore, is now the country of Israel, Palestine and Lebanon. He took with him his extended family, loaded camels and his flocks. Somewhere along the way he had the revelation that there is only one God, and was inspired to build altars and temples to this God, usually called Jehovah. God established a series of mutual obligations with Abraham, known as the Covenant. When Abraham arrived in Canaan, he found the land in a grip of famine and moved on to Egypt. He had some adventures in Egypt but returned to Canaan somewhat richer than he had been before. He settled in Canaan and had two sons, the first named Ishmael, by his Egyptian slave girl Hagar, and another named Isaac by his wife Sarah. Isaac is said to be the father of the Jews and God's covenant with Abraham continued with Isaac: Genesis 17:21 *my covenant will I establish with Isaac*. God's plan for Ishmael is a little ambiguous. Genesis 16:12 states *And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him*, then 17:20 *Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation*. Legend has it that Ishmael became father of the Arab race.

It was later revealed to the Prophet Muhammad that Abraham and his son Ishmael had journeyed south to Mecca in Arabia where they built a temple to God. It is the remnants of this temple that form the centerpiece of the Kaaba, the sacred Islamic shrine in Mecca.

Several generations later we have the story of Joseph, a descendent of Isaac, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. There followed another famine in Canaan and his brothers and other Hebrews later followed him into Egypt.

The Hebrews thrived and multiplied for a while until *Now there arose up a new king over Egypt, which knew not Joseph* Exodus 1:8. The Egyptians, then, enslaved the Hebrews who remained in captivity for about 400 years. An Egyptian prince called Moses finally led them out of slavery. Moses turned out to be really a Hebrew whose mother had set him afloat in a reed boat when he was a baby but who was rescued and brought up by Pharaoh's daughter. Moses appealed to Pharaoh to *let my people go* Exodus 8:20, but it took a series of divinely ordained disasters before Pharaoh was convinced of the wisdom of releasing his captives.

Moses led his people through the deserts for some 40 years until all the ex-slaves were dead and a new race of hardened, self-sufficient, people came into being. It was only then that they came to the "Promised Land", Canaan, which they believed had been promised to them by God. Numbers 34:2 *When ye come into the land of Canaan; (this is the land that shall fall unto you for an inheritance, even the land of Canaan with the coasts thereof:)*

Under their General Joshua, the Hebrews furiously attacked the Canaanites and, with the assistance of God, were victorious. Trumpets were sounded and the walls of the Canaanite city, Jericho, collapsed. The triumphant Hebrews occupied the land of Canaan and the unfortunate inhabitants were either dispersed or exterminated.

History according to archeology

For the last 200 years, and more extensively for the last 100 years, the Holy Land has been subjected to extensive archeological survey and there is now has an immense database on this area. There are found to be major archeological problems with these early Bible stories. For example, Abraham could not have used camels as beasts of burden since camels were not to be domesticated for another 1000 years. Secondly, for Abraham's trip to Egypt, the saddlebags of the camels were said to be packed with the valuable gum arabic (a soluble sap of the acacia tree) that was not, in fact, traded for another 1200 years. Many of the towns mentioned in the early biblical stories were not in existence at the time and there is no historical evidence of any of the disasters visited on the Pharaoh. The desert areas around the Sinai show no archeological evidence of ever being inhabited and certainly there was no big tribe of people living there for the 40 years that Moses is supposed to have spent leading his people in the wilderness.

There is, however, historical evidence of a Semitic people called the Hyksos who did settle in Egypt around 1700 BCE, the time in question. They became quite successful and even provided a dynasty of Pharaohs that lasted for several hundred years. Finally the Egyptians revolted and enslaved some of the Hyksos (a Greek rendering of Egyptian words meaning “foreign ruler”) and forced the rest to flee.

The Philistines did not enter the story until 1200 BCE, some 600 years after Abraham. They were an Aegean seafaring people who smashed into the land of Canaan and completely devastated the coastal area. Using their ships to effect surprise, they could land anywhere in strength and overwhelm the local defences. There is much archeological evidence of tremendous destruction at this time with the result that Canaan was essentially depopulated. The Philistines then landed to take up residence.

This classical story of raiding “Sea People” causing the waves of destruction noted throughout the Mediterranean has been challenged recently. The Eastern Mediterranean is a very seismically active area with three major tectonic plates in collision. The Africa Plate is sliding past the Arabian Plate to the east and diving under the Eurasian Plate to the north. The resulting earthquakes create fracture lines where water can come to the surface creating inviting oases. Jericho, the oldest known city, has been built on the Elisha Spring for at least nine thousand years and been destroyed some twenty two times by earthquakes. It appears that this destruction was the cause of the relative depopulation of Canaan. According to this line of reasoning the Philistines, rather than being seaborne raiders, were an indigenous people living in the south around modern Gaza who expanded north and collided with the Hebrews.

Who then were the Hebrews?

The Hebrews it seems had been present in the Holy Land all the time, in the hill areas around Jerusalem. The Canaanites, living on the Mediterranean coastal strip, were Phoenicians, a related Semitic people speaking a very similar language to the Hebrews. Canaan was, at the time, a wealthy Egyptian province and the Hebrews appear to have made their living by raiding. Jericho was a small town at the time and did not have a defending wall since Canaan relied on the Egyptian army for defence. The word Hebrew bears a suspicious resemblance to the Egyptian word “apiru”, sometimes given as “ibiru”, which means outlaw or bandit. With the destruction wrought by the earthquakes or perhaps the raiding Philistines, the Hebrews advanced into the now depopulated Canaan

where they came up against the Philistines who had similar designs on the area.

The Great Hebrew kings

Be that as it may, the Bible continues with the story of the Hebrews. In about 1000 BCE, there arose a great Hebrew king called Saul, who united his people in victorious wars against the Philistines. His most successful warrior had started out as a shepherd boy from that most famous little town of Bethlehem. This shepherd boy later became King David, who further expanded the Hebrew Empire and founded the Davidic Dynasty. The Bible when recounting the early life of David, (1 Samuel) describes him as a bandit leader in the “Robin Hood” (? Apiru) mould who robs the rich and defends the poor of the highlands around Jerusalem against the marauding Philistines.

David’s son Solomon was even greater than he, and built many monuments in Israel, including a magnificent temple in Jerusalem. He was also a powerful war leader and was said to have a cavalry of 40000 horse. He had 700 wives, one of whom was Pharaoh’s daughter, and for his spare time, 300 concubines.

When Solomon died his son Rehoboam took the throne. The dignitaries from the northern part of the kingdom approached Rehoboam and requested relief from the high taxes, which had been necessary for Solomon to complete his building works. King Rehoboam took three days to consider this request and then dismissed them with the famous words *My father made your yoke heavy, and I will add to your yoke: my father also chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions* I Kings 12:14. Facing an attitude like this it is no surprise that the northern part of the kingdom seceded and the state was divided into two parts. In the north there was Israel with the capital Samaria, and, in the south, Judah with the capital of Jerusalem. The northern kingdom soon lapsed into idolatry, particularly under the influence of Queen Jezebel, who had been a Philistine princess and was an enthusiastic pagan.

The Fall of the Northern Kingdom, Israel

Perhaps because of the straying from the path, or because the northern kingdom of Israel had become very wealthy, it was overrun by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. The aristocracy and learned men were dispersed to various part of the Assyrian Empire. The remaining Jews now mixed with

Philistines and Assyrians to form their own version of Judaism based on the capital Samaria, and became known as the Samaritans. It was considered a good idea in those days to worship the local gods, so the Assyrians tended to convert to this version of Judaism. The southern kingdom of Judah remained as a client state of the Assyrians. With the death of the Assyrian king Sargon, the King of Judah, Hezekiah, (sometimes given as Ezekias) took the opportunity to lead a revolt against the Assyrians. The new Assyrian king Sennacherib took several years before he was able to address the revolt in this remote western part of his Empire. He then swept down in 701 BCE and devastated the area surrounding Jerusalem. He was on the point of capturing the city when his army was apparently devastated by a plague. Despite this narrow escape, Judah was forced to remain a tributary of the Assyrian Empire. With the fall of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, Judah however became quite wealthy with the population swollen by the refugees from the north and by now being part of the Assyrian “Global” trade system.

King Hezekiah saw himself as a God fearing man and wished to emulate the achievements of the Great Kings David and Solomon and perhaps in pursuit of these aims he launched the ill-fated revolt against the Assyrians. It was during this time that the Bible started to be written down by the palace scribes and rabbis. Prior to this, writing was an elite occupation practiced exclusively in the royal service. Stories and legends were transmitted orally by professional storytellers who were expected to recite long sagas by heart.

The earliest recognisable version of Hebrew script, Paleo-Hebrew a derivation of the earlier Phoenician, appears at the time of the Great Kings in around the 10th century BCE. The script evolved over time until the final “square letter” Hebrew appeared in the 3rd century BCE.

Learned men were still required to read the early texts. Hebrew was originally written without vowels and a single consonantal symbol could have several meanings. There were no gaps between words and no punctuation or paragraphs. It was simply not possible to read the text without some knowledge of the oral tradition. It was also not possible to copy such long texts without mistakes which were then transmitted to the next copy. Scribes chose between the various readings according to each one’s understanding of the meanings.

In fact it was not until the 4th century CE onwards that groups of Hebrew scholars known as Masoretes worked to produce the final received version. Vowels were added as diacritic points, chosen because they could be added to the text already in place.

It did seem fortunate that in the time of King Hezekiah (715-687 BCE) an ancient scroll of religious instructions said to have been written by Moses himself (who lived long before the invention of Hebrew writing) was “discovered” in the Temple. This greatly added to the authority of the King who used the discovery to aid his campaign to enforce monotheism and to centralise worship on the Temple in his capital of Jerusalem.

Then in the mid seventh century BCE, a King Josiah took the throne in Jerusalem. His scribes continued the work of writing and editing the stories that would become the Bible. Writing and reading became much more common among the population and the written version of the Bible started to achieve the status of Holy Writ rather than an “aide- memoire” to the storytellers. The first five books of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Torah (teachings) or by the Greek name Pentateuch (five scrolls): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy took shape.

King Josiah also wished to emulate the Empire of David and Solomon and made great efforts to rid the kingdom of polytheism and to reunite the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah. There are clues as to when some of the books were written. For example the Bible frequently uses the phrase “to the present day” as when describing the relationship of Israel and Judah, (The House of David): *So Israel rebelled against the house of David unto this day* 1 Kings 12:19. This places the writing at some time around the reigns of King Hezekiah or Josiah. The Bible continued to be edited and added to over the centuries to come.

The Origin of the First Five Books of The Bible: The Documentary Hypothesis

The Documentary Hypothesis seems to be accepted by most Bible scholars though rejected by fundamentalists who hold that the first five books of the Hebrew Bible were written by Moses himself. A position made more difficult by the fact that the final book, Deuteronomy, describes the death of the proposed author Moses, (De:34:5).

According to this hypothesis the first five books of the Bible represent an amalgamation of several documents. There is the J document, so called because God is referred to as YHWH (Jahwe in German, the language of most of the initial work in the field). In this work, the Hebrews had known God as YHWH since the earliest times and the southern kingdom of Judah is given pride of place. For example it is Judah (after whom the kingdom was named) who saves Joseph from his brothers’ plan to kill him. The

other early source is the E document. Here God is referred to as El, or Elohim (plural) and the name YHWH is not revealed until the time of Moses (Exod 6:2-3). In E it is Reuben, not Judah, who saves Joseph from his brothers. Cities in the northern kingdom of Israel are emphasised eg Shechem is the final burial site of Joseph. Whereas J favors Judah's royal family of David and Solomon, E is critical of the southern royal family. It is in E that the story of the heavy royal taxes which forced the split of the kingdom into Judah and Israel is found. It is thought that J was written in the southern kingdom of Judah and E in the northern kingdom of Israel.

Later documents include the P document which emphasises the role of the priests. Repentance for sin, in this document, must include sacrifices carried out by priests. Clues in the text and linguistic analysis of the Hebrew used place its writing at the time of Hezekiah. If dissected out of the body of the text, the J, E and P documents can each be read as complete meaningful narratives. The final main source is the D document, a rather legalistic document that takes up most of the book of Deuteronomy.

These sources and documents were finally combined and edited by R (redactor of editor) who added connecting text.

The several sources of the first five books seem to be the reason why there are more than thirty "doublets": stories told in two different ways. The Bible opens with the story of creation which is presented in two versions. The first (Gen 1), thought to be from P since it emphasises a ritualistic approach, sets a timetable. On the first day God, here referred to as Elohim, created the sky, earth and light, the second day water, the third day plants, until finally on the sixth day creeping things, then male and female humans. The second version from J (Gen 2) has God, on this occasion YHWH (Jahwe) is used, initially creating earth, then man followed by the Garden of Eden. Animals are then created and are presented to the first man, Adam, who names them. Finally a companion for Adam, Eve, is created from one of his ribs. A connecting verse (Gen 2:4): *These are the generations of the heavens and of the earth when they were created*, is thought to come from the Redactor, R.

The well known story of the flood is again presented in two versions. Mankind prospered but apparently became wicked since God decided to destroy all humanity except for the one righteous man, Noah. The P version (Gen 7:2) has Noah taking onto the ark seven pairs of each clean animal, (some would be needed for priestly sacrificial purposes) and seven pairs of each bird as well as pairs of all the other living things. The usually recounted story from J (Gen 7:15) mentions only a single pair of each kind.

Incidentally, most scholars feel the flood story in the Bible and the similar story in the earlier Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* are a folk memory of the flooding of the settlements on the shore of the Black Sea when the Caspian Sea, swollen by glacial melt water, broke through into the Black Sea in about 5000 BCE. The Sumerian account also introduces the familiar elements of the story such as the ark, dove and olive branch, though in this version Noah is known as Ziusudra.

The Time of the Great Hebrew Kings According to Archeology

Archeology has a lot to reveal about this era. There have been many attempts to find the archeological remains of any major structure built by King Solomon, but none have ever been found. Initially, some archeologists believed that remains of any major structure from the time must have represented the work of Solomon, but all these were found to have been built by the powerful northern kingdom of Israel. Indeed there has never been an archeological finding of any sort relating to Solomon. There are no references to the Hebrew kings in any of the very extensive surviving writings of the Egyptians, Assyrians or Babylonians. The only mention of the kings of this era is an inscription on a basalt block, found in 1993, in northern Israel at the Biblical site of Tel Dan. It was probably written by the Syrian king Hazael around 835 BCE, 100 or so years after the time of the great Hebrew kings and refers to the death of his enemy “ [Ahaz]iahu son of [Jeroham kin]g of the House of David”. Kings David and Solomon of the southern kingdom of Judah, if they existed at all, were minor hill-fort kings operating out of the small iron age town of Jerusalem which at the time had a population of, at the most, 2000 people.

Archeology can also be used to date the time of writing of the various Books of the Bible. The First Book of Samuel goes into great detail describing the armor of the Philistine giant, Goliath, the enemy of the shepherd boy David, 1 Samuel 17:4-7

And there went out a champion out of the camp of the Philistines, named Goliath, of Gath, whose height was six cubits and a span.

And he had an helmet of brass upon his head, and he was armed with a coat of mail; and the weight of the coat was five thousand shekels (about 240kg) of brass.

And he had greaves of brass upon his legs, and a target of brass between his shoulders.

And the staff of his spear was like a weaver's beam; and his spear's head

weighed six hundred shekels of iron: and one bearing a shield went before him.

The incident described was said to have occurred at around 1000 BCE but the armor described is that of a Greek hoplite from the seventh to fifth centuries BCE, placing the writing at least 300 years after the event. The historical Philistines wore little or no armor. It has been noted that the story of David and Goliath is very similar to the story of Nestor in Homer's Iliad. A young inexperienced Nestor also defeats an enemy giant and, like David, goes on to become a great King.

There is virtually no archeological evidence of monotheism prior to the 7th century BCE, some 400 years after the time of the Great Kings. Altars unearthed before this time typically feature a male and female figurine, the female being known as Asherah. An early sample of graffiti asks for blessing from "YHWH and his Asherah". Monotheism appears to have been practiced as the orthodox religion only after the 7th century BCE and the reforms of King Josiah with the Biblical authors retrospectively dating it back to the time of a mythical Abraham some 1300 years before.

The first five books of the Bible seem to be a brilliant compilation of misremembered folk tales in which a Semitic people, the Hyksos, who were forced out of Egypt, became the Bible story of the Exodus, with Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt. The predations of the Philistines in Canaan, and/or the devastation wrought by the frequent earthquakes in the area, became the victories of the Hebrews under Joshua. The fabulous stories of King David and Solomon appear to be the royal propaganda of Kings Hezekiah and Josiah. It was in their interests to portray the ancient kings as being great, wise men with a large empire. If they were to emulate the Great Kings, perhaps similar fame and fortune would be theirs.

The Prophet Isaiah

It was about the time of King Hezekiah that the prophet Isaiah appears. From this time on the Bible is more historical and the books of Isaiah appear to be written, at least in part, by the prophet himself, though much of the prophesy seems to have been added later. He warned against lapsing into idolatry and otherwise disobeying God's laws. If this were to be the case, a jealous God would cause the kingdom to be destroyed. If, on the other hand, the right path were to be followed, great things would happen and it is here that Isaiah writes that such would be the peace that

The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid Isaiah 11:6. Not only that, but Isaiah 9:6-7 also prophesizes that as a reward for righteousness,

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever.

In other words, there would be a child born, of the house of David, who would be a great king, the “mighty God” and his dynasty would last forever. Needless to say, this is of great significance to Christians and it has been said that, with prophecies like this in the Old Testament, the New Testament virtually wrote itself.

The Babylonian Exile

Perhaps the kings and people didn't listen, or perhaps because the southern kingdom of Judah had become rich and powerful, because, in its turn, it was overrun. In about 600BCE, the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Judah and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem. The nobles and learned men were taken as hostages into exile in Babylon. The exile lasted, only about 80 years because King Nebuchadnezzar's empire was to be short-lived and was conquered by the Persians under the famous King Cyrus. When Cyrus came to Babylon, the Jewish rabbis in exile there approached him and warned that God was unhappy with their exile and this was probably the reason why Nebuchadnezzar's empire had been destroyed. King Cyrus, to be on the safe side, ordered the rabbis and Hebrew nobles back to Jerusalem and instructed them to rebuild the temple, no doubt with the hope that some prayers on his behalf would be useful. The re-established Hebrew state lasted for several hundreds of years.

The Contribution of the Jews

The Jews have made enormous contributions to Western Civilization. It has been said that though the furniture of the structure of the West is

Greek and Roman, the walls and roof are Jewish. The Jews were the first to be inspired to Monotheism. This concept, which allows the ideal of perfection in one being, seems to have great emotional appeal. Judaism does not include the being of Satan. It is difficult to maintain the concept of Monotheism in the religions of Christianity and Islam that include an autonomous evil being with godlike powers that in any other religion would be called an evil god. The mistaken idea of a Jewish Satan relates to the story of the fall of Lucifer, Isaiah 14:12 *How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! how art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!* This episode refers to the fall of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar. Kings were often referred to as Lucifer (bearer of light), another name for the morning star that heralds the dawn. Even dutiful wives of the time would address their husbands in this manner. A great mythology of the evil angel has arisen from this mistranslation.

The Jews were the first to write a history that was a linear in direction. There was a definite start, a continuing historical story and there will be an end. Though taken for granted in modern times, this was a great advance. Western thought and culture, which assumes a better future and leads to a forward looking, advancing, society owes much to this idea. All previous civilizations had seen history as being essentially cyclical. What goes round comes round. This state of mind leads to fatalism and the belief that things can't be changed. Western society is the only one that has ever sent out ship after ship for the sole purpose of finding out what was beyond the horizon. This idea of the Jews that the future is unfolding (hopefully for the better) is reinforced by the belief that revelation from God is ongoing.

The exile in Babylon also bought about the concept of separation of church and state. While in Babylon, it was found Judaism could be practiced quite successfully without any political authority at all. This separation has become another major tenant of the Western State. Religions are inherently conservative, even with the concept of ongoing revelation. Separating church and state allows political and intellectual advances to be made, freed from the shackles of religious dogma. The Middle Ages, when this concept was ignored, and church and state were, to a great extent, unified in the West, was a rather dark and gruesome time. The West has advanced greatly with the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and the rediscovery of this ancient Jewish ideal.

The Babylonian Exile also developed the idea of scholarship. The Jews now had a great literature and oral tradition that was in danger of being lost. To preserve this treasure it became a tradition that all Jewish males were taught to read and write. The eldest son of every family of means was to be supported by the rest of the family to enable study of the written

and oral traditions. These keepers of the Jewish Doctrine were no doubt the beginning of the famous Jewish statement “my boy the doctor”. The tradition of scholarship among the Jews has meant that Jews living in the West are awarded Nobel Prizes at a rate some twenty five times that predicted by their numbers. There was a downside, though, to the universal literacy of Jewish males. In Central Europe and Russia from the Middle Ages until recent times, the Jews were the only people apart from priests who were literate and were greatly sought after to be bailiffs for absentee landlords. They were paid by being granted the liquor license or by being allowed to take a percentage of the peasants’ produce, conditions that greatly contributed to their unpopularity. Jews were also virtually the only educated, literate persons among the workers and peasants of the Russian Communists in the earlier 20th century and almost all the Political Officers were Jews.

The Jews of the middle part of the first millennium BCE did find it a little hard to understand how it was that they, as the chosen race, seemed to meet with so many disasters. The rabbis came to the conclusion that the suffering of the Jews must be atonement, not only for the sins of the tribe, but perhaps for the entire human race.

Alexander the Great and the Hellenisation of the Holy Land

The next major event in the history of the Holy Land was the conquest of Jerusalem by Alexander the Great in 332 BCE. He died as a young man and the empire was divided amongst his generals. Originally the southwest part of the empire, which included Egypt and Palestine, was given to General Ptolemy and became part of the Ptolemaic Empire. The Ptolemaic Empire is perhaps best remembered by being later headed by Queen Cleopatra of Egypt. In time, Palestine became part of the empire given to General Seleucus: the Seleucid Empire. This now led to a Hellenic influence on Jewish culture which was to have immense influence on western civilisation. The Jews already had a tradition of a linear history with unfolding revelation and scholarship that had, up to now, been devoted to the study of theology. They were now exposed to a Hellenic non-God based philosophy and the study of nature. So important was this most powerful combination that the whole of western civilisation could be said to be populated by Hellenised Jews.

With their doctrine of separation of church and state, the Jews were quite happy to recognize the political importance of the Seleucid Emperor. Inscriptions have been found on synagogues of the time “To the glory to

God, in honor of the Emperor". Unfortunately this mutual tolerance was shattered when there arose an Emperor based in Antioch, Antiochus IV (175-163 BCE) whose empire was being challenged by the Romans in the west and the Persians in the east. In an effort to consolidate and strengthen the Empire, he tried to enforce Hellenisation on all subjects. This involved raising a statue of the Greek god Zeus in the Jewish Temple of Jerusalem. A revolt of the Jews was sparked under the brilliant general Judas Hasmonaeus. He was so successful that the temple of Jerusalem was restored (still celebrated in the Jewish Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights) and eventually political autonomy was granted to the Hasmonean state that became the Kingdom of Judea. Judas took the name Maccabeus, meaning "hammer" (of the Greeks).

The Advent of Rome

Then was to occur in the Hasmonean Kingdom of Judea, one of the major problems in history: a disputed succession. One of the protagonists invited a nearby great power to assist him to win the civil war. The arrangement throughout history is always that the King assisted to the throne becomes the vassal of the overlord. This is the way the British came to Ireland. And it was the way the Romans under General Pompey, who had been campaigning in nearby Syria, annexed the Hasmonean Kingdom. This event occurred just as a civil war broke out in Rome as well, pitting Pompey against Julius Caesar. The throne of the kingdom of the Jewish state changed hands several times until there was thrown up a King Herod. The Jews were extremely unhappy about this state of affairs. The Romans had a more "hands on" approach to their Empire than had the Greeks of the Seleucid Empire and a lot of the Jewish autonomy was lost. To make matters much worse, King Herod's mother had been an Arabian princess and under Jewish law he was not even a Jew. The Jews had been expecting a King of the Davidic line to rule them in splendor, but instead had a Roman governor and a king who, far from being of the Blood Royal, was only a convert.

The Coming of Jesus Christ

The Roman province of Judea had become a tinderbox. There then came the Feast of the Passover that commemorated the liberation of the Hebrew slaves, under Moses, from Egyptian captivity. The analogy was not lost on the Romans and the Roman Governor, Pontius Pilate, came down to

Jerusalem from the Roman administrative capitol of Caesarea, on the Mediterranean Coast, and brought his troops with him. He was expecting trouble, and trouble he soon got, since riding into Jerusalem came a Jewish Rabbi of the noble Davidic line. Jesus was riding on a donkey, no doubt to fulfil the prophecy of Zechariah 9:9 *O daughter of Jerusalem: behold, thy King cometh unto thee: he is just, and having salvation; lowly, and riding upon an ass.* His very numerous supporters waved palm leaves, the traditional sign of Jewish victory (1Maccabees 13:51). To emphasise his authentic claim to the throne, he was said to have been born in Bethlehem, the same town as the legendary King David.

The Roman authorities could not accept the challenge to their protégé Herod and marched out troops to arrest Jesus. The New Testament uses the specific word “cohort” (spira in Greek) to describe the soldiers assigned to the task. A cohort was a tenth of a legion, and comprised six hundred men under the command of a Tribunus Cohortium. This Tribune was usually a young Roman nobleman of high rank who was fulfilling his military obligation before entering politics in Rome. It seems unlikely that such a powerful military force would be necessary to arrest a rabbi accused of some theological heresy. Furthermore, Jesus had armed followers, one of whom at least, put up a fight. Jesus, however, was arrested and taken to Pontius Pilate. The New Testament tends to portray Pontius Pilate as being a rather kindly man. The New Testament, however, was written at a time when the Christians were parting ways with the Jews and identifying more with the Romans and this bias is reflected in the Gospel stories of the ensuing events. Pontius Pilate, was, in fact, quite a ferocious person who intensely disliked the Jews and caused so much trouble in Judea that he was later relieved of his governorship by the Roman authorities and died in obscurity.

Pilate asked Jesus the only question which was of concern to the Romans, who were not at all interested in minor points of Jewish theology: *Then Pilate entered into the judgment hall again, and called Jesus, and said unto him, Art thou the King of the Jews?* John 18:33, in other words “are you challenging our protégé King Herod for the crown?” In Roman law, the onus is on the defense, and Jesus did not defend himself at all, but answered in a theological manner that his kingdom was of another realm. The sentence was virtually automatic: that of crucifixion, a punishment for armed insurrection against the Roman state. The New Testament also has Pilate say he could find no fault with this man: *Pilate saith unto him, What is truth? And when he had said this, he went out again unto the Jews, and saith unto them, I find in him no fault at all* John 18:38 which seems rather unlikely given the context of the trial. The crowd points out that to claim to be king is treason against the Roman state: *And from thenceforth Pilate sought to release him: but the Jews cried out, saying, If*

thou let this man go, thou art not Caesar's friend: whosoever maketh himself a king speaketh against Caesar. John 19:12. Interestingly, if a person were to turn up in England today with armed followers and pronounce himself the rightful King of England, he would be liable to execution, if he was not consigned to a psychiatric hospital, since hanging has not been abolished in the UK for high treason. Pilate wrote the sign for the cross: *Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews*, which is usually seen as heavy handed Roman sarcasm, but perhaps it was the truth after all.

Following the Crucifixion

His followers were quite dismayed by this defeat and are said to have gathered in an upper room when Jesus appeared to them again, having risen from the dead. It became clear to his followers that the crucifixion was not a failed political coup but was a much more significant theological event. Jesus Christ (Joshua, the anointed one) was a manifestation of God himself who had given himself in atonement for sins of the Jewish people. It can never be known what happened, but it seems something did, since his followers went from being a frightened group to being confident and enthusiastic propagators of this new belief.

On the other hand, to claim that a Jewish rabbi was divine, was seen as heresy by the Jewish temple authorities and they made vigorous attempts to suppress this new cult. One of the main agents of the temple authorities was a person called Saul, who while on the road to Damascus, in his pursuit of the Christians, was himself converted to the new faith. He changed his name henceforth to Paul and began preaching. We have this story from the New Testament "Acts of the Apostles", though Paul does not mention it in his copious writings. This conversion was of enormous significance to Christianity. He did for Christianity what Lenin was to do to Marxism: essentially change the thrust of the faith. He announced that Christ had come for the benefit of the whole human race and not just the Jews. For some reason, however, this benefice was extended only to persons who believed this to be true. Perhaps just as important was his opinion that the Bible was allegorical or metaphorical and could not be interpreted literally. This new Pauline version of the faith was extremely successful.

The Jewish Revolt

The political problem for the Jews, however, had not been solved. The Romans still occupied Judea. In 70 CE, the Jews in northern Israel at Galilee arose under their leader, Simon Zealotes, and massacred the Roman garrison. The Roman sent out reinforcements from Syria, who were also defeated. The Jews had the reputation of being excellent soldiers, much like the Israelis of today. The Romans then decided that enough was enough and sent a large army, under one of their best generals, Vespasian. He defeated the Zealots who streamed back to their capitol at Jerusalem. The authorities in Jerusalem had not supported this revolt, which outraged the Zealots, who went on the rampage, executing most of the leaders for what they saw as treason. The Romans now besieged Jerusalem and tens of thousands of people died during the siege or the murderous civil war occurring inside the city. So many rabbis had died or were killed that one Rabbi ben Zakkai feared that the accumulated learning would be lost. He pretended to have died and had himself carried out of Jerusalem in a coffin. He somehow made his way to General Vespasian, where he hopped out of the coffin and greeted Vespasian as being the next Emperor of Rome. Vespasian was rather pleased with this salutation. In the ensuing discussion, he agreed that, if he became Emperor, and ben Zakkai were not to interfere in politics, he would allow a rabbinical school to be opened. He did become Emperor and ben Zakkai opened his school. All the Jewish legal opinions and Biblical commentary, which had been previously only preserved in memory by the rabbis, were now written down as the Talmud.

The Zealots, meanwhile, went down hard and the Romans, in 73 CE, only conquered their last mountain fortress at Massada with immense exertion.

During this time, Christianity was spreading throughout the Roman Empire. It seems that often the womenfolk were converted first, since female Christian names tend to precede the male Christian names in a family.

The Gospels are Written

The first of the writings, which were later to be gathered into the New Testament, were those of the Apostle Paul, whom we met above on the road to Damascus. His first works are thought to be the Letters to the Thessalonians and Galatians, written about 48 or 49 CE; 18 years or so after the crucifixion, and the last, Colossians, in 62 CE. There was, in

Paul's time, great tension between himself, with his message of Christ's salvation for all, and the Jerusalem church of James, brother of Jesus, who held that Christ's message was for the Jews only. The Acts of the Apostles, written about 25 years later, makes this tension very clear and seems to embroider the story of Paul somewhat.

Mark, writing somewhere between 65 and 75 CE is held to be the earliest of the Gospel authors, though this was still some 35 to 45 years after the death of Christ. Matthew, is then thought to have been written in the mid 80's and Luke some 10 years after that. There appear to have been additions after this eg. the much quoted line from Mathew 12:33 *the tree is known by his fruit* seems to have been taken from a letter by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch who is known to have died in 110CE. Whole passages of the Gospel of Luke eg 2:41-50 appear to have been taken from the works of the Romanised Jewish historian Josephus who also wrote in the late first century. Other scholars feel that rather than these lines indicating later additions, the Gospels themselves were not written until the second century. This view is reinforced by the failure of any ecclesiastical writer to even mention the Gospels until Aristides of Athens did so in 140 CE.

The first three Gospels share much in the way of content, style, and order of events and are known as the Synoptic Gospels (from the same point of view, literally the same eye). The Gospel of John, the most controversial of the books, was written later in the second century CE. Matthew used most of Mark's material, though there is no evidence that they ever knew about each other, and it was suggested, more than 150 years ago, that they both used a common source, called by the early German scholars the Q document (from the German Quelle meaning source). Q, which was probably just a collection of the reported sayings of Jesus, has since been lost. Luke used much less of the material in Mark, and cleaned up Mark's rather poor Greek. He also added a lot of embellishments, not found in the earlier works, and, for example, it is only from Luke that we get the Christmas Story. There are some major differences in details between the earlier Gospel of Mark and the later one of Matthew. For example, Mark 6:3 says: *Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James...?* Jesus is a carpenter, and the son of a woman, strongly implying that the father was unknown, since in those times a person was always referred to as the son of his father. Matthew changes this to the much more acceptable: *Is not this the carpenter's son?* Matt. 13:55. The use of the word "carpenter" here is something of a mistranslation. The original Greek word is "tekton" which is better translated as "building contractor". The Aramaic word "naggar" which would be used here means "master" as in "master builder", but can also mean "scholar".

There was also a tendency to magnify the significance of events in the later Gospels compared with the earlier writings. For example, after Jesus had risen from the dead, there remained in the tomb a *young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a long white garment* in the earliest work, Mark 16:5. In Matthew 28:2 the man becomes “*an angel of the Lord*” sitting outside the tomb and finally we have two angels outside the tomb in the later Luke 24:4. In Mark, Jesus heals the sick by touch or use of spit, in the later Matthew, by touch or word and finally in Luke, Jesus effects cures by word alone. More significant is the change in emphasis across the texts which relate the trial of Jesus. In the earliest Gospel, Mark 15:6-8, “the multitude” asks the Roman Governor Pilate to release Barabbas (a Zealot involved in the insurrection against Rome). Pilate offers Jesus instead. In Mathew Pilate declares the innocence of Jesus but “all the people” demand Jesus be crucified. Finally in John, it is Pilate who first asks if the wish is for Jesus to be released but now it is “the Jews” who demand the release of Barabbas. The infamous passage in Mathew, 27:24-25, where Pilate says “*I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children*” occurs in no other Gospel and is thought to be a later attempt to shift the blame for the death of Jesus from Rome to the Jews. It has been cited countless times over the centuries to justify anti-Semitism.

There were many other Letters and Books in existence, the most famous being the “Gospel of Thomas” discovered in 1945 and supposedly written by Jesus’ twin brother Thomas (the name means twin in Hebrew). Beginning in the middle of the Second Century, the books that now make up the New Testament were selected and moves were made to close the Canon. It was not always clear, however, which books and writings should be included and disputes on the selection continued for centuries. The modern New Testament includes Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians, but not the Third, a polemic against Gnosticism. The discarded 3 Corinthians, on the other hand, survived up to the seventeenth century in the East in the Armenian Canon. The famous Codex Sinaiticus from the fourth century, one of the oldest Bibles in existence and now housed in the British Museum, contains the complete New Testament and includes the Epistle of Barnabas. This Epistle, along with the Revelation of John, was thought in the early centuries to be of doubtful authenticity. The Epistle of Barnabas was discarded whereas the Revelation of John was not. The definitive list of the twenty seven books of the Western Canon (the Ethiopian Canon includes thirty one) dates from a pastoral letter from Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 CE. Athanasius is one of the great figures of the Christian faith and was a fiery and determined opponent of what he saw as heresy, leading to his being exiled half a dozen times by the Roman Emperors of the time and the title “Athanasius

contra mundum” (Athanasius against the whole world). He was finally triumphant and died peacefully in retirement.

There was also a tendency for scribes copying the Bible to edit the text to support various theological positions. Early versions of the New Testament, for example, recount the presentation of the infant Jesus at the Temple “*And his father and mother marveled at what was said about him*” (Luke 2:33), implying that Joseph was the biological father of Jesus. Somewhere along the line this was changed to “*And Joseph and his mother...*” - the modern text supporting the received Trinitarian view of Jesus.

A famous, or at least much referred to, passage is Matthew 16:18-19: *And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.* Much of the authority of the Catholic Church is derived from it; the Papal Arms always include the crossed “Keys of Peter” since the Pope is said to be successor to the Primate Peter. The parallel verses in Mark and Luke, however, make no mention of the primacy of Peter, nor does Peter ever refer to this signal honor in the several Epistles attributed to him. Moreover, the Greek word “ecclesia”, meaning political gathering, only came to mean “church” centuries later. There was no suggestion of any such organisation in the time of Jesus. This passage appears to have been added to bolster the authority of the Christian Church at a much later time.

One of the most moving scenes in the New Testament depicts Jesus in the Mount of Olives before his arrest, terrified of the coming crucifixion “*And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground*” Luke 22:44 . A scene well portrayed in Gibson’s recent film “The Passion of the Christ”. The problem is that it is not included in the other Synoptic Gospels and is not even found in the first known versions of Luke. It appears to have been added at a later time by scribes to support the Trinitarian view that Jesus was “wholly man” and therefore really did suffer for humanity as well as being “wholly God” and therefore presumably beyond human experience.

The rejected works are grouped under the title of the New Testament Apocrypha (hidden writings) and Pseudepigrapha (false writings) and do not share the authority accorded to the Old Testament Apocrypha, which is often included in the Bible. Perhaps the most interesting of the Pseudepigraphic writings is the “Book of Enoch” which was included in the Canon for a short time. It displays significant Persian influence and is

probably the origin of the story of The Three Wise Men (Magi) seen in Matthew 2:1-12. The Magi were a Persian priestly caste thought to have profound religious insight.

As well as deliberate alterations to the text, many mistakes were made in copying the texts by hand. This was particularly the case in the early days of Christianity when the copying was done by amateurs rather than by professional scribes as became the case in the Middle Ages when copying was performed by trained monks. The problem was compounded by the fact that the early Greek texts were written without punctuation or even gaps between words. Text was simply written in two columns per page with each row consisting of twelve capital letters. Mistakes were repeated into the next copy. The differences between texts became so marked that by the early 18th Century an English Bible scholar, John Mill, found thirty thousand differences between the various hand written texts available. The many deliberate or accidental variations were to cause enormous difficulties for scholars forced to make decisions as to which texts to use as the basis for the printing of, among others, The King James Bible in 1611.

Alternative View of the Life of Jesus

For more than two hundred years, scholars have voiced doubts as to whether there ever was such a person as Jesus Christ. The Romanised Jewish historian, Josephus, who wrote in the first century CE was author of three famous works: *The Jewish War*, *The Antiquities* and *Against Apion*. He details the life of John the Baptist but doesn't include Jesus. (The two brief mentions are thought to be later additions –the Christian author Origen writing in 240 CE quotes other passages but not these which would have been the most important). Another Jewish historian Justus of Tiberias, a contemporary of Jesus who lived at Capernaum, close to Jesus' ministry also fails to mention Jesus. The first century texts, eg Epistles of Paul, The Shepherd of Hermas and the Didache (an early Christian instruction manual) were more concerned with the spiritual meaning of "The Risen Christ" and virtually ignored the earthly Jesus. The several Roman historians of the time eg Plutarch, Seneca and Pliny the Elder make no mention of Jesus, despite the Gospels listing his followers as in the thousands and on a par with other often mentioned Jewish groups such as the Pharisees and Sadducees. The only works on the life of Jesus are the Gospels, which as we have seen, were written in the Second Century, well over one hundred years later.

In this version of events, Jesus either did not exist at all or was a Jewish rebel involved in a minor insurgency, who was crucified by the Romans. Interestingly, a recent discovery in the Holy Land of an inked stone tablet, dated some decades before the proposed time of Jesus, mentions another Jewish insurgent to whom God, through Gabriel, promised resurrection on the third day. The tablet may refer to a Jewish rebel named Simon who is mentioned by Josephus. It does suggest that a suffering messiah, rather than a messiah in the majestic King David mould, might have been part of the Jewish tradition of the time.

Sometime in the early Second Century the idea of God appearing on Earth and being sacrificed to redeem humanity evolved. The later written Gospels then “backfilled” the life of Jesus. Many details were deliberately added to fulfil Biblical prophecy. Isaiah not only refers to the coming of a great king of the House of David who would be “*the mighty God*” 9:6, but also mentions the suffering endured to redeem the Jews: *he was bruised for our iniquities* 53:5, *thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin* 53:10. Matthew 2:16-18, refers to the “Slaughter of the Innocents”, said to have been instigated by Herod to prevent Jesus, the prophesied future king, from threatening his throne. This event is not mentioned in Mark or Luke, (not to mention the secular historians of the time) and is openly said in the next verse in Matthew to have occurred to fulfil a prophesy in Jeremiah (31:15).

Virgin birth was a common way for deities to make their appearance in those times: Mithra, Horus (an Egyptian God whose mother Isis was known as “Queen of Heaven”), Bacchus and Tammuz (a Babylonian God) were all born of earthly virgin mothers and godly fathers. It appears to have been inserted to add gravitas to the otherwise hardly mentioned early life of Jesus. In more modern times, the “Star Wars” series of movies portrays the protagonist Anakin Skywalker as being fathered by “The Force” to a virgin mother. As well as the virgin birth, other features of the Christmas story of Luke do seem to have been borrowed from Egyptian mythology. Inscribed about 3500 years ago on the walls of the Temple of Luxor were images of the Annunciation, Virgin Conception with Kneph, “The Holy Ghost” impregnating the virgin queen Isis and Thoth announcing to Isis that she will conceive Horus. The scene is completed with the Adoration of Horus by three kings bearing gifts.

Some anachronisms crept in. Jesus was said to be from Nazareth: Matthew 2:23: *he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.* Archaeological research, however, has revealed that Nazareth as a town was not founded until after the time of Jesus. Needless to say, Nazareth is never mentioned in the Old Testament. The Talmud, a collection of

rabbinical opinions and discussions, names some sixty three towns in Lower Galilee but does not mention Nazareth. Matthew probably meant “Nazarite”- someone who had made a vow to God, as in Judges 13:5 *the child shall be a Nazarite to God from the womb to the day of his death*. The word “Nazarene”, on the other hand, did come to be used in reference to Jewish Christians in the early centuries.

Other anachronisms include the census which is said to have caused Joseph to take his pregnant wife to Bethlehem. The Romans did take a census every fourteen years, but the dates don’t match, and, as might be expected, the Romans required persons to return to their dwelling place, not their place of birth. Luke places the Nativity of Jesus in the reigns of both Herod the Great and the Roman governor Quirinius though historically they were separated by a dozen years.

These problems are widely acknowledged in some sections of the Christian Church, but debates about the literal truth of the Christian Bible have never seemed to compromise the basic Christian message. The whole story of Jesus and his crucifixion is seen as a parable for God’s love of his creation.

The Contribution of Christianity

Christianity was extraordinarily successful and spread like wildfire throughout the Roman Empire. It offered a personal view of God, one who was prepared to manifest himself as a human being, and to undergo great suffering for the benefit of the human race. Suffering became something shared with God and even had meaning: “Joining Christ on the Cross”. Christianity continued the concept of Isaiah that God communicated with the individual and not just through the great priest-kings. Salvation was individual and not something that happened to nations as a whole. There was also the concept of the Holy Spirit who was one of the three persons of the apparently single God who remained on Earth after Christ ascended into heaven, as in John 14:16 *And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever*. The Holy Spirit continued God’s revelation to the individual. This concept of the Holy Spirit, however, is probably the most debated point of Christian theology. The Hebrew Bible does refer to the holy spirit without capitals on several occasions, for example in the Psalms, David appeals for God’s mercy: Ps 51:11 *Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me*, but this is thought to refer not so much to a divine presence as to an individual inspiration. The Qur’an also has many

references to the Holy Spirit eg Sura 16:102 *The Holy Spirit (Ruh-ul-Qudus) has revealed it from your Lord with the truth, that it may establish those who believe and as a guidance and good news for those who submit.* Again this is thought to refer not to a divine presence as in Christianity but to the Archangel Gabriel who is only sent to certain appointed persons such as the Prophet Muhammad. The Muslim concept of the Holy Spirit as one who does God's bidding is closer to the view of the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism. The Christian view is that the Holy Spirit dwells in every Christian. 1 Corinthians 3:16 *Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you?* The more personal view of God embodied in Christianity had great emotional appeal.

The concept of the Holy Spirit, allowing revelation to continue and theology to evolve, has meant that Christianity has been a dynamic religion, capable of change. For example, it was thought, until recently, that it was necessary to be a Christian, to accept Christ and his message, to be able to attain salvation. It is now the feeling of the mainstream of both Protestant and Catholic streams of the Western Church that Christ's beneficence is for everyone of good will. A position supported by the First Letter of Timothy. *"For God is the saviour of everyone, but especially of those who believe."* 1 Tim 4: 10.

Christianity, however, was left with the difficult concept of the Trinity. While maintaining the Monotheism of Judaism, it now proposed that the single God actually consisted of three persons: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Even committed Christians, such as the evangelist Billy Graham, have said, "Don't ask me to explain the Trinity, because I can't". The difficulty of the Trinity was to be a major stumbling block for the unity of Christianity and remains so to this day.

The Challenge of Gnosticism

No sooner had Christianity made a start, than it was under challenge from an alternative form of understanding of the meaning of Christ's mission; that expounded by the Gnostics. The Gnostics held that there was a transcendent God who was not involved in the trivial day-to-day problems of the creation. The human soul was "consubstantial" with this God, but the human body was forced to live in the evil material world which been created by the Jewish Jehovah, a flawed lesser god, or demiurge. Christ's mission was to save mankind from this evil world by allowing access to a divine knowledge (gnosis) of the transcendent God.

The Gnostic heresy, though eventually unsuccessful, did force the early Christian Church to reevaluate its theology, to close the Canon of the New Testament and to emphasise Episcopal authority. The major problem with having ongoing revelation, provided by the Holy Spirit, is that it leads to fragmentation of the faithful. It became necessary in the face of the Gnostic challenge to assert the authority of the elders (presbyters) to maintain the cohesion of the Church. In time this authority was devolved to a single person, known as the Bishop, derived from the Greek *episkopos*, (literally “overseer”). Later it became tradition that there had always only ever been one Bishop in each congregation, and this Bishop derived authority by direct line of consecration going back to the Apostle Peter. Paul’s early letters, however, were addressed to congregations themselves, for example ‘The Corinthians’ rather than to any persons of authority. One imagines that he would not have “gone over the head” of the local Bishop, had there actually been one.

The Roman Empire becomes Christian

By the third century, Rome was itself coming under threat from German tribes in the north and the Persians in the east. The great Emperor Diocletian assumed control of the Roman Empire. He was a pagan, (a Roman military term meaning a person not in the army, and now meaning one not of the Christian faith), and carried out the last great persecution of the Christians. He also decided that the Empire had become too large for one man to handle, and divided it into two. He took control of the eastern half himself and his co-emperor Maximian the western half. Each Emperor was to select a second in command or Caesar, so that in the event of the emperor’s death or resignation, the Caesar would assume the throne, ensuring that the succession would be trouble free. This unfortunately did not happen as smoothly as predicted. In 312 CE, in the northern British Roman garrison town of York, General Constantine was proclaimed Emperor by his troops. He advanced on Rome with his army to take up the throne. At Milvian Bridge outside Rome, prior to the battle for the throne, he had a vision of the Christian symbol chi-rho (the initial letters of Jesus Christ in Greek) in the sky with the legend *In Hoc Signo Vinces* (in this sign conquer). He vowed that, if victorious, he would convert to Christianity. He was indeed victorious and became the great Emperor Constantine. He reunited the east and west portions of the Empire and moved the capital from Rome to Byzantium in the eastern part of the empire, renaming it Constantinople.

The Arian Heresy

Constantine had hardly taken up the Imperial Purple and encouraged conversion of the population of the Empire to Christianity, when a major theological problem arose, concerning the nature of Christ. A Christian priest, Arius of Alexandria, in about 323 CE, had proclaimed the opinion that Christ was not a divine manifestation but a lesser being. There were various versions of Arianism ranging from Jesus as a simple man as were, say prophets Abraham and Moses (the current position of the Islamic faith) to Jesus as second only to God in heaven, though still a being created by God (the position of the sole remainder of Arianism in Christianity today; the Jehovah's Witnesses). This was a major embarrassment to Emperor Constantine. He directed all the Christian Bishops to meet at one of the imperial resorts, Nicaea, across the straits from Constantinople. He himself opened proceedings and directed the Bishops to arrive at a consensus that would then be enforced. From this council we have the Nicene Creed which states that Christ is "*of one substance with the Father*" and therefore different in nature to the previous prophets. Arianism was proscribed in 381 CE, and many of the Arian Christians fled south into Arabia. In fact, when Islam arose some centuries later, it was initially thought to be merely a version of Arianism returning from the desert. The Islamic perception of Christianity, that it claims "God has a Companion" follows the Arian rather than the orthodox view of Christ.

Rome Falls

Arianism was not completely destroyed; many of the Germanic tribes to the north of Rome had converted to the Arian version of Christianity. In 410 CE, the Visigoth King Alaric, who had been an ally of Rome and had even been promoted to the rank of Roman General, revolted and entered Rome with his troops. He treated the population with some respect, but this was a devastating loss of prestige to the western empire. By the early sixth century, all of Western Roman Empire had been overrun by Germanic tribes, leaving the eastern empire based at Constantinople holding the flame.

The Coming of Muhammad

In 570 CE there was born, in the Arabian town of Mecca, a person called Muhammad. There is almost nothing known about him from independent sources. The earliest documentation of his life was written by Ibn Ishaq about one hundred and twenty years after Muhammad's death in 632 CE, and even this is second hand since the original has been lost and what is known comes from extensive use of Ibn Ishaq's work by Ibn Hisham one hundred years after this. As far as is known, he was orphaned at a young age and brought up by his uncle. As a young man he became the agent for a wealthy merchant widow Khadijah. He ended up marrying her and became a very successful merchant himself. Muslim tradition has it that he was illiterate, (and the tradition is backed by an interpretation of Qur'an 29:48). On the other hand, this does seem most unlikely for a person in such an occupation, and it has been suggested that the illiteracy was added later to infer that Muhammad's extensive knowledge of the Jewish and Christian faiths was derived from revelation and not study. He was a very thoughtful man and was traditionally said to be most disturbed by the fact that most of the Arabs were pagans. There were, however, many Jewish tribes in the area that had either fled to Arabia with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, or were actually ethnic Arabs, who had converted to Judaism. One Arab King, Dhu Nuwas, had done so, and, in those times, it was considered wise to follow the religion of the king. On the other hand, a fifth century Greek source *The Ecclesiastical History* of Sozomen, states that the Arabs of Northwest Arabia were already monotheists who dated their origin to Abraham and Hagar and followed certain Jewish customs such as the avoidance of pork. As well, recent archeological surveys of the Hijaz (the region of present day Saudi- Arabia bounding the Red Sea and containing the cities of Mecca and Medina) have found almost no evidence of pagan worship after the 4th century CE though pagan practice persisted in the north in the Negev desert for several centuries.

The Arabs were also greatly influenced by the religion of the nearby great power, Persia. This religion, Zoroastrianism, had both monotheist and dualistic features. There was one God as overlord, Ahura Mazda, who had twin sons, one of whom chose the path of good, and the other that of evil. The sons were involved in an eternal battle for dominance on Earth. Zoroastrianism introduced the concept of six Holy Spirits, as an expression of God's will, and angels who did God's bidding. As a merchant, Muhammad would also have had contact with Christians, particularly those of heretical belief, who had fled into the Arabian deserts to escape persecution in the Byzantine Empire. A cousin of his first wife Khadijah, for example, was a Christian who was able to read Hebrew text.

Muhammad retired to a cave outside Mecca to meditate on the state of the Arabs for some years. Finally, in 610 CE at the age of 42, he was apparently visited by the Archangel Gabriel, who started to dictate God's directions. In time, it was revealed to Muhammad that he was the latest, and in fact the last, prophet in the tradition of Abraham and Moses. In 620 he recounted to his friends a miraculous journey in which he had visited Jerusalem, mounted on a white winged creature, Al-Buraq, accompanied by the Archangel Gabriel and had then toured Heaven and Hell and had conversed with the Prophets Moses and Jesus and even with God himself. The pagans of Mecca, however, were by and large unimpressed, and he was forced to flee to a town called Yathrib, 150 miles to the northeast. This flight to Yathrib in 622 CE, known in Arabic as the Hijra, marks year 1 of the Arabic Calendar. Yathrib later became known as Medina, meaning "the City (of the Prophet)". The major disappointment of Muhammad's life was said to be the fact that the Jews did not recognize him as the latest, and last, of the Prophets. The Jews apparently were reluctant to recognise a prophet who did not demonstrate his authenticity by performing miracles. In response to this rejection, he now directed that the faithful pray facing Mecca, whereas, previously, Muslims and Jews and had prayed together facing Jerusalem.

In Medina, Muhammad became a very successful war leader and led his men in between 42 and 78 battles (the number varies between sources). Only one of these was defensive: the Battle of the Trenches. In most of these he was successful, though sometimes with the assistance of an invisible army sent from heaven (Sura 9:26). On some occasions, however, he was defeated. He was by no means a mild leader and, on one occasion, massacred some 800 Jewish prisoners and sold their wives into slavery, reserving one beauty, Rihana, for himself. He finally returned in triumph to Mecca, where he rededicated to God the ancient stone which had been the focus of pagan Arab worship, but which was revealed to Muhammad as actually being the corner stone of the temple built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Muhammad died shortly after his return to Mecca, at the age of 62 in 632 CE.

Alternative View of the First Muslims

Some scholars, in particular Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, originally from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, have pointed out that there are no independent sources for this classical Muslim history. They note the great similarities between Islam and at least the Samaritan version of Judaism. The Exodus of the Hebrews is paralleled by the flight to Medina and the person of Moses by

Muhammad. The confession of faith “There is no God but God” is common to both religions and the Prophet Muhammad seemed unaware of any of the Hebrew Bible apart from the first five books, the Pentateuch; the Canon of the Samaritans. The later prophetic writings such as Isaiah, so important to the Christians, are ignored. In this scheme of things, the Arabs followed a version of Samaritan Judaism. The conquest of Palestine was done in conjunction with the Jews and was an effort to retake the Holy Land from the Christians. The Arabs were by tradition small time raiders and now enthusiastically joined an enterprise that promised conquest and the spoils of war, but even better was divinely ordained. Only after the conquest of Jerusalem did the Arabs and Jews divide. This sequence follows that of an Armenian chronicle of the 660’s CE- written only a couple of decades after the conquest of the Holy Land. Only then did the Arabs devise a religion heavily influenced by Samaritan Jewish doctrines complete, in time, with a supporting history which now had the Arabs as the latest of the Chosen People and Arabic as the Holy Language. This relative unity of religion and purpose would explain why for the first 60 years after the death of the Prophet, mosques were orientated in the general direction of Jerusalem in Palestine. For example the first mosque built in Kufa, Iraq in about 670CE was aligned to the south-west when it should have pointed to the south if it were built to face Mecca, the difference being 30 degrees. The Great Mosque at Wasit, near Kut in Iraq, was built over an earlier mosque which was also “out” by 33 degrees. After Jerusalem was conquered by the combined forces in 637 CE, the Muslims built a mosque, The Dome of the Rock, on the site of the ancient Jewish Temple, completing it in 691 CE. It was octagonal rather than rectangular since it was built on the very spot that previous mosques had been aligned towards. Only after the split from the Jews were mosques aligned towards Mecca.

There is, as well, evidence of a lot of Christian influence in early Muslim theology. The many vivid descriptions of Heaven and Hell, the acceptance of the being of Satan and the depiction of Jesus as a prophet (though not, in this case, a divine manifestation of God) are thought to be of Syriac Christian origin. The Qur’anic statement that Jesus was not actually crucified but another died in his place (Sura 4:156-159) follows the beliefs of several Christian sects, eg the Gnostic Basilidians that date back to the very dawn of Christianity. Apocryphal Jewish and Christian writings also have been incorporated into the Qur’an. The account of Mount Sinai being held over the head of the Jews as a threat for abandoning the Law (Sura 7:171) comes from the Jewish apocryphal book *The Abodah Saran* and the story of the infant Jesus creating birds from clay (Sura 3:49) is from the Christian apocryphal *Thomas’ Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ* (Chap2:4).

Alexander the Great was greatly admired in classical times and the subject of much legend and mythology which is now referred to as the “The Alexander Romance”. Though actually a pagan, in time he came to be thought of in Jewish and Christian legend as a monotheist and even a prophet, occupying a similar place to King Arthur in British tradition. The story of Dhul-Qarnayn (Sura 18:83-98), who is identified by Arab historian Ibn Ishaq as Alexander, closely follows some passages of the Alexander Romance, though the legends are treated as fact in the Qur’an.

The religion of the great Persian Empire, Zoroastrianism, also appears to have influenced the writing of the Qur’an and the accompanying traditions. In particular the mystical night journey of the Prophet when he toured Heaven and Hell mounted on the flying creature Al-Buraq (Sura 17:1) closely resembles the tour of the Zoroastrian emissary Arta Viraf described in a book written 400 years before the Islamic era. The Islamic doctrine that the souls of the dead must cross a bridge, al-Sirat, before entering paradise follows a Zoroastrian belief and the Islamic belief in Jinns, malicious shadowy creatures frequently described in the Qur’an (eg Sura 72: The Jinn) seems to be of Zoroastrian origin. Indeed the word Jinn is of Persian derivation.

Many inscriptions of a Qur’anic nature dating from the first fifty years after the death of the Prophet in 632 CE have been uncovered in Arabia. None, however, mention Muhammad’s name at all and it is not until 692 CE, sixty years later when the classical Islamic formulation “There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet” first appears, inscribed on the walls of the newly completed Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. The first rock inscriptions that do mention Muhammad as Prophet (starting from around 730 CE) also invoke God’s forgiveness for his sins- whereas later Muslim doctrine holds Muhammad to be incapable of sin. The first caliphs were known by the title Khalifat Allah (Deputy of God) and only later was the title changed to Khalifat Rasul Allah (Deputy of the Prophet of God). On the other hand a Greek Syrian text around 634 CE refers to a “false prophet among the Saracens”, dismissing him on the grounds that prophets are not supposed to be war leaders. The *Doctrina Iacobi*, circa 636 CE, a Greek anti-Jewish tract mentions an Arabic leader who preached of “an anointed one who is to come”. This is confirmed by two contemporary Jewish apocalyptic documents which mention Muhammad as the prophetic herald of Umar, the messiah. As brother descendants of Abraham, the Jews were prepared to follow an Arabic leader if it led to the reconquest of the Promised Land where the messiah must manifest himself. In fact it was the failure of the promised messiah to appear that probably led to the rupture between the Jews and the Arabs. Muhammad is also mentioned by name as a monotheistic preacher in an Armenian text dated to 661 CE. From this viewpoint there does seem to have been a

military leader who advocated a version of monotheism, though the elevation to a prophet who received revelation from God seems to have occurred later.

Other scholars take an even more radical position. They review the engraved inscriptions on official monuments, results of other archeological findings, coins, and documents from the time to cast doubt as to whether there ever was a single major historical figure called Muhammad, though there may have been one or more minor persons of this name.

The Traditional Islamic history has it that Muhammad himself led his men in several battles to capture the Hijaz before dying in 632 CE/10 AH. His followers then led an Arab army north and after a series of mighty battles with the Byzantine forces captured Palestine and Jerusalem. The actual border of the Byzantine Empire, however, was further north around Antioch and the Empire relied on client Arab kings or chieftains to defend against Bedouin raiders from the south. These Arab leaders received subsidies to help maintain their authority provided they followed at least a version of the Christian faith. The Patriarch of Jerusalem, writing in 634/12, states that “the Saracens, who on account of our sins, have risen up against us unexpectedly”, strongly suggesting that they were not members of a conquering army but resident Arabs staging an uprising. (The name Saracen indicates a person of the family of Abraham but descended from the slave girl Hagar and not from his wife Sarah-relegating the Arabs to a position of inferiority compared with the Jews, descended from Sarah, and the Christians with their Divine Prophet). There is no mention of the battles between the Arab forces and the Byzantine Empire in any other chronicles of the time though mighty battles between the Persians and Byzantines just prior to this time are well documented. It appears that the client Arab leaders on the spot usurped authority after the Byzantines were exhausted by the war with Persia in much the same way that the client European kings had declared independence with the decline of the Roman Empire several hundred years before.

Arab coins issued from Palestine continued to display a cross on the obverse side for some 60 years until the reforms of Caliph al-Malik (ruled 685-705 CE - the fifth Caliph in the Traditional Islamic history). Arab official documents continued to be produced in Arabic and Greek with the Greek versions also beginning and ending with the traditional Christian Cross until this practice abruptly ceased with al-Malik (the name means “the King” in Arabic). In this line of reasoning the Arabs followed a monotheistic religion which was not anti-Christian until al-Malik instituted the tradition of an Arab prophet named Muhammad- the name

simply meaning “the praised one” or “the chosen one” in Arabic. The familiar Muslim formulation “There is no God but God and Muhammad is his Prophet” appeared on official documents and coins “overnight”. Al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock, completed in 692/70, which has many prominent anti-Trinitarian inscriptions in keeping with this new more assertive and particularly Arab version of monotheism. The Prophet Muhammad “The Seal of the Prophets” sent to the Arabs instantly changed a perception of inferiority of the Arabs to the Jews and Christians to one of superiority.

An historical Arab leader, Muawiya, is traditionally held to have been one of the small band of Companions to the Prophet Muhammad. After the Arab conquest of the Holy Land he became Governor of Syria (at that time the name Syria referred to much of the Middle East). In his capacity as Governor, he restored some Roman baths and as is customary, left an inscription to record the fact. This stone inscription starts with a Greek cross, then goes on to state that Muawiya “servant of God” restored the baths in the “forty second year of the Arabs”. There is no mention of Muhammad or Islam and this from a Companion of the Prophet himself! When considered with the fact that Arab coins of the time also displayed images of rulers holding crosses, this inscription has led some scholars to come to the conclusion that the word Muhammad “The Chosen One” does not refer to an Arab Prophet at all but is in fact a reference to Jesus from the Arian Christian view. In this version of Christology, Jesus was not a manifestation of God Himself (the orthodox Trinitarian view) but simply a man “chosen” by God to be a prophet in the tradition of Moses. Viewed in this light, the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock built by Caliph Malik 692/72, eg “There is no God but God...The Chosen One is his servant and messenger...” do not refer to traditional Muhammadan Islam at all but are simply a statement of anti-Trinitarian Christianity.

The Qur’an as a single Holy Book does not seem to have been compiled, or at least canonized, until later still. Bar Penkaye, a Nestorian Christian writing in Syriac in about 690CE/69AH, details the Arab conquests of the time but makes no mention of an Arabic sacred text. A manuscript from 876 CE tells of a meeting between an Arab governor (probably of Syria) and a Christian Patriarch held about 644CE/23 AH. The discussion revolved around the nature of Christ and the fact that the Arabs only revered the first five books of the Hebrew Bible- the Pentateuch. There is no mention of the Qur’an (or of Muhammad or Islam in general). As well a mid 8th century statement of the Muslim creed, the Fiqh Akbar 1, also does not mention the Qur’an, a finding as unlikely as a statement of the Christian faith not mentioning the Gospels. In fact the first reference to the Qur’an from a Christian source is “*Concerning Heresy*” by John of Damascus, writing about 750CE/133AH, which mentions several chapters

including “The Camel” though this last is not in the canonized version and may represent a remnant of a lost Arabic apocrypha. The first official Muslim mention of the Qur’an is from 752/135 in an inscription in the Prophet Mosque of Medina which quotes Sura 8:41 in urging persons to obey the Caliph and pay their taxes.

The written history of the Muslims does seem to become more complex with time. For example, a raid might be mentioned by the first Arab historian, Ibn Ishaq, but the next account will mention the number of warriors involved and finally the definitive account, written perhaps a hundred years later, will be complete with dates, times, numbers of casualties and prisoners taken. The received history of Islam does seem to have taken several centuries to reach its final form.

By whatever means, there is no doubt that the most recent version of Monotheism, Islam (meaning to surrender oneself to God’s will), was extraordinarily successful and within a short time was dominant throughout most of the Arabian Peninsula.

The First Four Caliphs

Muhammad died without leaving a designated successor. By consensus, it was his father-in-law, Abu Bakr, who became the first Caliph (meaning successor). Abu Bakr’s daughter, Aisha, had married the Prophet at the age of nine, and became his favorite wife. She was only sixteen when the Prophet died. Abu Bakr found that the Arab forces were starting to dissolve with the death of the Prophet, and, that many of the Arab holy men had started to claim divine revelations themselves. In response, Abu Bakr made two very important decisions. The Prophet had said that he would be the last prophet before Doomsday, and Abu Bakr decreed that this meant there would be no further revelations from God at all. This was to have enormous implications for the future of Islamic culture. A person desiring to know God’s will was unable to pray for guidance, interpreted as a revelation, and therefore now forbidden, but was expected to be able to discern God’s will by reading the collection of the revelations God had made to Muhammad, or by studying the sayings of the Prophet.

Abu Bakr also announced that any person who defected from God’s path, as laid down by the Prophet, was guilty of treason and therefore would die. This decree, that apostasy meant death, remains a fundamental precept of Islamic dogma and continues to cause serious problems in a pluralist society. It means that anyone raised as a Muslim is unable to choose his own religion, in contradiction to the United Nations doctrine of freedom of religious choice. Abu Bakr only lived another two years and another of the

prophet's companions, Umar, who ruled from 634 to 644, then took his place. At this stage, the Islamic world was undergoing a dramatic expansion with the defeat of both the Byzantine forces in the north, in Palestine, and the Persian forces to the northeast. The world was divided into the Dar al-Islam (the House of Islam), where God's laws were kept, and the Dar al-Harb (the House of War) where the struggle to institute God's laws was ongoing. All acts of war were permitted in the Dar al-Harb. Umar made the farsighted decision that the Arab troops were to be kept in camps to maintain a state of warlike readiness and not to be billeted in the captured towns, where their enthusiasm might diminish. He also decided that any booty taken by the Arab troops belonged to the state, and not to the individual who captured it. He took a major share himself. When he died, the next Caliph, Uthman, who ruled from 644 to 656 CE, realised that many of the persons who had personally known the Prophet were either dying, or were being killed in battle, and the revelations were in danger of being lost. He directed his holy men to collect the revelations, which the Prophet had received from Gabriel. Since the Prophet was said to be illiterate, these dictates had been written down on anything that was to hand, including scapulae of camels and scraps of leather. It was often difficult to decide which were the Prophet's revelations from Gabriel and which were just recorded sayings of the Prophet himself. There were collections of both of these in each of the major Islamic centers. Uthman decreed that his collection was now the official one, named the Qur'an (recital), and that all others were to be destroyed. Needless to say, the owners of the other collections objected to the destruction of the holy words, and, therefore, there came into existence at least seven major and substantially differing versions of the Qur'an. There is also no reason to suppose that Uthman's collection was complete. As the famous 15th century Qur'anic scholar As-Suyuti pointed out "Let no one of you say that he has acquired the entire Quran, for how does he know that it is all? Much of the Quran has been lost, thus let him say, 'I have acquired of it what is available'". In support As-Suyuti mentions a tradition in which Muhammad's young wife Aisha relates that she kept a written revelation from the Prophet (regarding stoning for adultery) under her bed but it had been eaten by a goat.

The Umayyad Dynasty

Meanwhile Uthman's troops in the field were starting to have major objections to being kept in camps, while the booty from their endeavors was going to the state, with the lion's share going to the Caliph himself. They sent an armed delegation to make their objection in person. Uthman, however, brushed their arguments aside with the opinion that he was the

Caliph, or successor to the Prophet, and was beyond criticism from his troops. The delegation was not impressed and Uthman was assassinated. There then followed a war of succession. The Prophet's son-in-law, Ali, who had married the Prophet's daughter, Fatima, was the major contender, but was challenged by several others, two of whom were supported by the Prophet's widow, Aisha, still a vigorous young woman. Ali was successful and became the fourth Caliph, but was assassinated by disaffected members of his own force. If that were not bad enough, Ali's son, Husayn, who was of the Blood Royal, being the grandson of the Prophet, was later also assassinated, along with his entire family, by members of the family of the second Caliph, Umar. The supporters of Ali were outraged at what they saw essentially as sacrilege. From this arose the major schism in the Islamic world, with the supporters of Ali becoming known as the Shiites, derived from the Arab words meaning "the party of Ali". The descendants of Umar reclaimed the Caliphate and the capital of the Empire was moved from Mecca to Baghdad, to be closer to the other major centers of Islam. The Umayyads were very successful in consolidating the Islamic conquests, concentrating on administration rather than points of theology. The Umayyad Caliphate successfully ruled over an Islamic Empire that extended throughout the Middle East and North Africa and into Spain. Jerusalem was captured early on, and, in 692 CE, the Mosque, known as "The Dome of the Rock", was built on the site of the Second Jewish temple, which had been destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE. This remains a very sore point with the Jews, and it was the Israeli General Sharon's visit to this site that sparked the latest uprising of the Palestinians.

The Abbasid Dynasty

In 750 CE, the Abbasids overthrew the Umayyad Dynasty. The name, Abbasid, being derived from that of the Prophet's uncle, al-Abbas, who had died in 653 CE. The Abbasids changed the focus of Islam from the west and south, to the east, and moved the capital to Damascus. Because they were led by descendants of the Prophet, they were supported by the Shiites, the party of Ali. They moved away from the focus on Arab ethnicity and administration, to an emphasis on the community of the faithful and support of religious law. Several Islamic communities in North Africa and Spain took the opportunity to declare independence under their own Caliphs.

The Qur'an and The Hadith

As we have seen, the Holy Book of Islam, the Qur'an, came into being when the Caliph Uthman directed that all the revelations to the Prophet, which he had dictated to others, be gathered into one official collection, and that other collections be destroyed. The owners of the other collections were loath to destroy the Holy Words, and thus, at least seven major versions of the Qur'an came into existence, some of which may differ to a significant extent.

Traditionally worn out copies of the Qur'an were not destroyed but stored in mosque "graveyards". Restoration of the Great Mosque of Sana'a in Yemen in the 1970's uncovered thousands of fragments of perhaps one thousand ancient Qur'ans. Included were the oldest copies of the Qur'an ever found and even some of these were palimpsests- written over previously "rubbed out" texts. Significant textual variations and differences in text organisation have been noted. The Yemeni authorities have put further work in the hands of German paleographers, but all concerned are aware of the political and religious consequences of these findings and few further details have been released.

The script in which the original Qur'an was written was much more difficult to read than modern Arabic script. There were fifteen symbols (to represent twenty eight sounds), and no diacritic points to differentiate between the several letters represented by a single symbol. The Qur'an itself states that it is intended only as guidance for the faithful, as pointed out in Sura 2:2. Arabic script itself was only developed in about 500 CE (just 70 years before the birth of the Prophet) by Christian Arabs at al-Hira. It was derived from a version of Aramaic which itself was derived from the earlier Phoenician script. Until the addition of the diacritic points more than 200 years later, and vowel symbols after that, the Qur'an, like the Hebrew Bible before it, probably could not have been read by any person without prior knowledge of an oral tradition. Even today there are verses consisting of only three letters eg *Alif lam mim* of Sura 2:1, the meaning of which is unknown and which are described in the accompanying commentary as being "one of the miracles of the Qur'an and none but Allah knows their meaning". They are probably remnants of the original proto-Arabic script, the meaning of which was lost to later scholars who were unable to translate the verse into the more modern Classical Arabic.

As well as the verses which are undecipherable, the lack of diacritic points and vowels in early Arabic has meant that perhaps twenty percent of the Qur'an is also either unable to be understood or subject to various interpretations. The early scholars added the diacritic points according to

each writer's understanding of the text. The mid 15th century Spanish scholar, John of Segovia, noted that one of his copies of the Qur'an had "far more vowel marks for case endings" than did another. Islamic scholars traditionally divide Qur'anic sentences into *Zahir* (obvious) and *Khafi* (hidden). Highlighting the difficulty in understanding the meaning of some of the sentences, a group of Islamic scholars has recently published an eight volume magnum opus *Al-qur'aniyyah* which lists some ten thousand variations of the reading of the text of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an is usually organized on the basis of the length of the verses, and has no chronological sequence. There are, however, two major sections of the Qur'an. The first consists of revelations received in Mecca, and are mainly concerned with theological issues and may be very conciliatory. So much so that Sura 53 originally allowed prayer to pagan goddesses: the "Satanic Verses", made famous by Salman Rushdie. These were later removed, following further revelation from Gabriel. The second major section is the collection of the Medinan revelations. These came at a time when the Prophet was a great political leader and so the verses are concerned with organization and rules for conduct. The tone of this part is much more warlike: Sura 9:29 *Fight those who do not believe in Allah, ... until they pay the tax in acknowledgment of superiority and they are in a state of subjection*. Other parts of the Medinan collection do seem to be rather self-serving. When accused by his wife, Hafsa, of continuing an affair with a Coptic slave girl, which he had promised to end, a divine revelation allowed it to continue, and to threaten the wives with divorce if they objected: Sura 66.1 *O Prophet! why do you forbid (yourself) that which Allah has made lawful for you; you seek to please your wives; and Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.....66.5 Maybe, his Lord, if he divorce you, will give him in your place wives better than you, submissive, faithful, obedient, penitent, adorers, fasters, widows and virgins*.

Though the rules and punishments may seem severe, the Qur'an codified behavior in brutal times, and did, for example, accord women many more rights than they had had, at least in Arabia, before this time.

The second part of Islamic law is based on the Hadith: the collections of the sayings of the Prophet, or of actions that he may have witnessed and did not object to. The Hadith holds second only to the Qur'an itself in importance. The major problem in collecting these items was in determining which of them were authentic, especially since they were being manufactured wholesale to support various political or ideological positions. Aisha, the Prophet's youngest and favorite wife, contributed about 1000 quotes from the Prophet, and who could gainsay her? It became practice to precede the Prophet's reported sayings by presenting an authentication chain (Arabic *isnad*), as to who told it to whom etc, and

when it had been written down. Unfortunately, persons in the business of fabrication can just as easily produce false chains, and it does appear that the more authentic the pedigree of a quotation is, the more likely it is to be false. There was a tendency for the Hadith quotation to be given ever higher attribution as time went on. For example, a quote may have been originally sourced to one of the Prophet's successors (Caliphs), but some time later this same quote would be attributed to one of the Prophet's Companions and later still to the Prophet himself. Sunni Muslims of today recognize six legitimate collections of the Hadith but all these were written down several hundred years after the event. The most famous collection was that of Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (810-870CE). He travelled widely through the Abbasid Empire and reviewed some 600,000 traditions attributed to the Prophet. He finally accepted 2602 (0.4%) as authentic.

The combinations of God's revealed will in the Qur'an, and the sayings of the Prophet, as well as some unattributed traditions, make up Islamic law, or Sharia.

The Contribution of Islam

The monotheistic faith expounded by Muhammad was emphatically not a new religion, but an effort to return to the simpler faith of the Patriarchs of early times. The Jews and especially the Christians, with their doctrine of the Trinity, had strayed from this path and Islam was seen as being an expression of God's will of a restoration to the true faith. Islam was sternly monotheistic, though it shared with the Christians, though not the Jews, the existence of an autonomous evil being, Satan, which weakened this monotheistic stand. The Islamic view of the Trinity does appear to be mistaken in that apart from following the Arian view of seeing Jesus as a "Companion" to God it also portrays Mary as the Third Person of the Trinity: Sura 5:115. *And when Allah will say: O Jesus son of Mary! did you say to men, Take me and my mother for two gods besides Allah...* The great 12th century Muslim theologian Zamakhshari interpreted this to mean that Jesus was the child of a union between God and Mary.

It was seen as a way of life for all people that governed every part of their existence, and, therefore, there could be no "separation of Church and State". Because Islam provides a complete formula for living, it has great emotional appeal, especially for persons dissatisfied with the current state of their lives. Islam also appeals to persons unhappy with the dominance of the United States and Europe in world affairs. This appeal has a historical basis, since it was the dominance of the Middle East, by the great powers of the Persian and Byzantine Empires, which first lead

Muhammad to ponder the relative impotence of the Arabs and to decide, (or be directed by God), to take decisive action to rectify the situation.

Revelation from God was thought to have ceased with Muhammad, the “Seal of the Prophets”, and that all that was needed to understand God’s will is contained in the Qur’an. This lack of separation of Church and State, when combined with the cessation of revelation, was to have enormous significance for the future of Islamic Culture. Both the Christian and Jewish Faiths perceive revelation to be ongoing, the Christians through inspiration from the Holy Spirit and the Jews by their doctrine of regarding the Bible as an “open book” capable of continual reinterpretation by their Rabbis. Furthermore, at least since the Enlightenment, the state in the West has been freed from the conservative grip of the Church. The combination of these two factors has meant that cultures originally based on Christianity and Judaism tend, by and large, to be forward looking and progressive.

The lack of ongoing revelation seen in Islam, compared with that of Judaism and Christianity, or the concept of the Holy Spirit seen in Christianity, means that there was no need to have a priesthood to control the tendency to fragment which accompanies individual revelation. Since the Reformation, this fragmentation has been a major force driving the profusion of nonconformist Protestant faiths that have not retained Episcopal authority after being released from the control of the Catholic priesthood.

Islam is based on the simple concept of acknowledgement of one God, with Muhammad as his Prophet, and, unlike the Christian Church, has never been involved in fine points of religious dogma. Islam has emphasized Orthopraxy (the correct way of doing things) over Orthodoxy (the correct set of beliefs). The only real requirements of the Muslim faith are the “five pillars of Islam”, which consist of: *shahadah*, the Muslim profession of faith; *salat*, or ritual prayer, performed in a prescribed manner five times each day; *zakat*, the alms tax levied to benefit the poor and the needy; *sawm*, fasting during the month of Ramadan; and *hajj*, the pilgrimage to Mecca, expected of every Muslim, who is able to afford it, at least once in a lifetime.

There remain several controversial aspects of Islam. The first one relates to the status of women in modern society. All three Monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam stem from a time when women were thought to be not so much a separate sex but a smaller, weaker and generally less perfect form of males. The Hebrew Bible states that a husband will “*rule over*” his wife as punishment for Eve offering Adam the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden, Gen 3:16. A daily prayer by

Jewish men offers thanks to God “for not making me a woman”. The Jewish tradition of regarding the Bible as “an open book” capable of endless reinterpretation by scholars, however, has meant that there are now female Rabbis in some parts of the world. The early Christian tradition followed the Jewish law: *Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law*, 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1Tm:2:12: *But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence*. Again, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and ongoing revelation has meant the ordination of female Bishops in at least some Christian congregations. Islam, on the other hand, does not accept ongoing revelation by any means. Revelation ended with the Prophet Mohammad. Ayatollah Muhammad Mesbah-Yazdi, spiritual advisor to the devout President of the Republic of Iran, stated in November 2006 “if someone tells you they have a new interpretation of Islam, punch them in the mouth.” The statement in the Qur’an remains valid: *Men are the maintainers of women because Allah has made one of them to excel the other and because they spend out of their property; the good women are therefore obedient, guarding the unseen (their chastity) as Allah has guarded; and (as to) those on whose part you fear desertion, (sometimes translated as disobedience) admonish them, and leave them alone in the sleeping-places and beat them; then if they obey you, do not seek a way against them*. The Women 4:34. The Secretary-General of The International Union of (Islamic) Scholars, Mohamed El-Awa, stated in the Cairo Newspaper Al-Ahram, issue 736, April 2005, “Islam has been around for 15 centuries and not once have its followers approved of women as imams. This view is an invention alien to the faith and as such is a breach of Islamic jurisdiction.”

The second and probably the most controversial aspect of Islam remains that of Jihad. Traditionally this referred to a duty, established in the Qur’an and the Hadith, and incumbent on all Muslim males to advance the cause of Islam. The most important collection of the Hadith mentions Jihad almost 200 times, and in all cases it is in the sense of armed warfare against non-Muslims. For example, *Volume 4, Book 52, Number 317: (Narrated Abdullah) When the Prophet returned from Jihad, he would say Takbir thrice...Allah fulfilled His Promise and helped His Slave, and He Alone defeated the infidel clans.*”

Osama bin Laden uses it in this sense in his organization “The Islamic Front for the Jihad against Jews and Crusaders”. More moderate Muslims tend to emphasize Jihad as being a fight to purify ones own heart and as the struggle to advance the cause of justice in the community.

On the other hand, the Qur'an dictated that "People of the Book", Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians, were to be allowed to practice their religion without hindrance. This was in marked contradistinction to the Christian churches of the Middle Ages and the times of the Reformation, which relentlessly persecuted persons seen as heretics. In the Islamic world, the "People of the Book" might have to pay a special tax and, for example, not build a house higher than a Muslim neighbor, but were not at risk of torture or being burnt at the stake. There was a large flow of refugees fleeing persecution in the West to Islamic countries, and the Ottoman Empire had large, and loyal, European communities.

The Great Schism in the Christian Church

There had always been tension between the Western Catholic Church based in Rome, with theology influenced by Roman law, and the Eastern Orthodox Church, based in Constantinople, with theology influenced by Greek philosophy. Initially, the Eastern Church had been ascendant, especially with the fall of Rome to the Germanic tribes. The march of Islam, however, greatly weakened the Eastern Church, as did the fall of Constantinople to Latin crusaders in 1204 CE. The theological calmness in the West contrasted with the Eastern Church, which was riven by endless religious controversies. The Iconoclast dispute, in particular, raged throughout the 8th and 9th centuries in the Orthodox Church. Opponents to the use of religious icons, the Iconoclasts, cited the Biblical prohibition on images, Exodus 20:4, *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:* and the danger of magical powers, eg the ability to effect cures, being invested in images themselves, rather than their being merely symbols of faith. This position was strengthened by the rise of Islam, which was sternly opposed to the use of any religious images. Supporters of the use of icons replied that these images were to the illiterate what books were to the educated and gained support by the fact that icons could be seen as a very visible statement against Islam. Byzantine Emperors might support one or other camp, with their opponents being persecuted, until a new Emperor would take the throne and reverse the situation. Icon veneration was finally restored to the Eastern Church in 843 CE, an event still celebrated in the Orthodox world.

The "Filioque controversy" was to be a major cause of friction between the Orthodox and Catholic Churches. The Western Church had begun to insert the word, *filioque* (Latin, "and from the son") into the Nicene Creed 6th century, in an effort to counter the Arian Heresy.

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father **and the Son.***

It was finally accepted by the Papacy in the 11th century, and has remained part of the service in the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, though has always been rejected by the Eastern Churches

In 1054 CE, there was a final break between the East and West with mutual excommunications and ceremonies of anathema with dramatic dashing out of candles and prayers for God's vengeance to be visited on the opposing camp. This schism has never been repaired.

The Advent of the Turks

Unfortunately, no sooner had there been a break between east and west, than a Turkish people from Central Asia threatened Byzantium. These tough horsemen, known as the Seljuq Turks, after their leader, had converted to Sunni Islam. They moved to invade Anatolia, the Eastern part of the Byzantine Empire. The Byzantines marched out a huge army and confronted the Seljuqs at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. The Imperial Army was decisively defeated and the victorious Seljuqs advanced into Anatolia, coming virtually to the gates of Constantinople. Byzantine prestige also suffered another blow when the city of Antioch in Syria, the seat of the senior Orthodox Patriarch, fell to the Seljuqs in 1085 CE.

The Crusades

The Byzantine Emperor, Alexius Comnenus, appealed to the west for help. Western Europe was ready to respond, having undergone an economic and political, not to mention religious, revival at the beginning of the second millennium. At the Council of Clermont, in 1095, Pope Urban II of Rome preached the First Crusade. There was a very enthusiastic response from European chivalry, especially in France. Many knights and common people were inspired to make the perilous journey to the Middle East to try to wrest control of Jerusalem, with its many sites holy to Christianity, back from the Muslim conquerors. They did this at a fortunate time, since Jerusalem was situated near the front between the Seljuq Turks, moving south, who were Sunni Muslims, and the northern reaches of empire of the Fatamid Caliphate of Egypt. The Fatamids were so-called because their Caliph claimed descent from Fatima, daughter of

the Prophet, through her son, Husayn, whom she had with her husband, Ali. Needless to say, the Fatamid Caliphate was Shiite: the Party of Ali.

Probably because of this disunity between the Muslim forces, the Crusaders were able, after three very difficult years of struggle across Asia Minor, to capture Jerusalem. There followed an act of slaughter of the inhabitants of Jerusalem that left an indelible stain on the reputation of the crusaders.

In the early 12th century, however, there arose in Egypt a great Islamic leader, of Kurdish descent, who began his career as vizier of Fatamid Egypt. His name was *Salah Ad-din*, usually referred to in the west as Saladin. He became sultan of Egypt, overthrew the weak and ineffectual Fatamid Caliphate, and managed to convert the Egyptian Shiite Muslims to the Sunni faith once more. With a combination of diplomatic skill and military genius, he reunited the Egyptian forces, with those of Syria and Palestine. With his now combined army, he confronted the 88-year-old Frankish Kingdom of Jerusalem. He drew the crusaders into the desert where, half-crazed with thirst, they were decisively defeated at the Battle of Hattin. He was then easily able to recapture Jerusalem in 1187. His disciplined troops, on entry into Jerusalem, treated the inhabitants with respect, in marked contrast to the massacre that had occurred with the previous entry of the Crusaders.

The fall of Jerusalem to Saladin was greeted with dismay in Europe. The Third, and probably most famous crusade, was launched in an attempt to win Jerusalem back. King Richard of England, a knight of great renown and a brilliant military leader, took part in this crusade, but was checkmated by the genius of Saladin and the crusaders were unable to retake the holy places.

Several more crusades took place, but these were all unsuccessful, and the last crusader stronghold, Acre, fell to the Islamic forces in 1291.

The Flowering of Islamic Culture

The beginning of the second millennium of the Christian era was a turbulent time for the world of Islam. The Abbasid Caliphate did not have as firm a grip as did its predecessor; with many local areas claiming independence, the Persians were being threatened by the Central Asian Turk tribes and the Fatamid Caliphate in Egypt challenged the Abbasids for dominance. It was at this time that Islamic Culture came to its greatest

expression. The most famous physician of the time was *Ibn Sina*, known in the West as Avicenna. His textbook, the *Canon of Medicine*, was to serve as the standard in both the Muslim and Christian worlds for five hundred years. The great Arab mathematician, Al-Kwarizmi, had lived somewhat earlier, but his works were introduced into the West in the 11th and 12th centuries. It was only necessary to state “dixit Algoritmi”, (thus speaks Al-Kwarizmi) and a proposition could be taken as proven. His name lives on in the words algebra and algorithm. Other great names of this “Islamic Golden Age”, to name just a few, include Ibn Al-Nafis, a physician who discovered the circulation of the blood 300 years before Harvey, and Jabir Ibn Haiyan, (known in the West as Gerber), father of modern chemistry. The very word chemistry comes from the Arabic word, al-Kimya. Al-Razi, (Western name Rhazes) a physician and chemist who first synthesised sulphuric acid and whose classification of nature is still largely valid was also one of the “Freethinkers of Medieval Islam”. His publications included “The Prophets’ Fraudulent Tricks” and “On the Refutation of Revealed Religions”. While accepting a supreme God, he opposed the idea of prophets on ethical grounds, feeling it unlikely that the “Wise One” would promote one human above all the rest, resulting in hostility and bloodshed between the prophet’s followers and the others. Though clearly attacking the central tenant of Islam his works were tolerated at the time and he was not persecuted. The rise of religious intolerance in the Islamic (and Christian) worlds resulted in his books being destroyed and it is only from quotes in works opposing his ideas that they have survived at all.

The crusaders brought back to Europe much learned from the Islamic world. The practice of desert after the main meal, the use of table forks, luxury items like silks from China, and a general improvement in standards of personal hygiene, were all from the East.

The reestablishment of a greater central authority with the rise of the Ottoman Empire, however, meant that the religious authorities gained control over education once more. The emphasis was directed away from secular learning to the study of religion. As for science, one Caliph stated, “if findings agree with the Qur’an, they’re not necessary, and if they disagree, they are wrong.” Another famous statement ran “He who studies logic is an atheist” – a capital offence at the time. The Islamic world lost its predominance in the fields of art and science, never to be regained.

The Ottoman Empire

The new Turkish tribal group, the Ottomans, named after their leader, Uthman, (translated as Osman in the West) gradually extended their control over Anatolia from around 1300. The Ottoman Empire brought new standards of organization, learned mainly from the Persians, as well as instilling a great discipline into the civil service and army, all of whom were required to accept the formal status of “slave of the Sultan”. The weakened Byzantine Empire was defeated in several engagements and the Ottoman Sultan, Mehmet II, finally captured Constantinople itself in 1453. The Ottoman Empire reached its greatest glory under the reign of Suleyman the Magnificent in the mid 16th century, but went into steady decline after that. The last great effort at expansion came in 1683, when the Ottomans unsuccessfully besieged Vienna. Since then, however, the Ottoman Empire and its influence continued to decline, until by 1918, European forces had either colonized, or were in occupation of, all the Ottoman lands. So complete was the relative decline, that by the end of the 20th century, it was possible to stand in the center of any capital city of the Islamic world and not see anything that did not originate in the West.

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