

# The Virgin And The Priest The Making Of The Messiah

Mark Gibbs  
2008

## 1 Supremacy of Blood

For modern westerners, it is impossible to comprehend the extent to which life in today's world differs from life in first-century Jewish Palestine. In Western civilization, the development of law, politics, and religion has combined to make the individual the supreme unit of society. Most definitely, a human being is not considered as the living representative of a sacred ancestral bloodline ordained by God, as the individual Jew was regarded in the society of ancient Israel. Nowadays, most people know nothing about their forbears beyond three or four generations at the most; and everyone is free to make a family with whomever they choose.

In stark contrast, the social order of Second Temple Judaism was distinguished by a rigid patriarchal caste system, where more than in any other civilization in the history of the world; maintenance of the purity of one's family line was the principle duty of every member of the community, and the foundation stone of the culture. To guarantee the well being of the nation as a whole, the pureblood Jew was obligated to comply with the decrees on marriage passed down by scriptural tradition in the Torah -- the first five books of the Old Testament, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Deuteronomy, and Numbers.

According to tradition, the Torah was written by Moses. The overwhelming consensus of modern textual critics, however, is that the Torah was composed and edited several centuries after Moses by numerous scribes across several generations. But irrespective of who authored the texts and when, the chief cause of misfortune to the Israelites was identified in them as sexual contact with non-Israelites, or Gentiles. This activity was deemed responsible not only for corrupting the community's bloodstock, but for introducing the worship of foreign pagan gods, considered deeply offensive to Yahweh. Consequently, all matters sexual in Israelite society were rigorously codified in the Mosaic Law; the genders were kept strictly segregated, and sexual contact with Gentiles was anathematized.

By Jesus' time, the religion of Moses had developed into the phenomenal cult of the Jerusalem Temple. Strictly speaking, the acceptance of Gentile converts proved that the term 'Jew' -- a nickname derived from 'Judah,' the name of the dominant tribe in the post exilic era -- was no longer a racial classification. Nonetheless, the majority view was that the final salvation of the Jews, promised in the coming messianic era, would come firstly to Israelite families of untainted lineage. Gentile converts and mixed bloods, therefore, were officially prohibited from marrying into Israelite families of pure ancestry.

### THE CASTE SYSTEM

Within this legalistic structure, the population of the different tribes was divided into three castes of pure blood descent -- priests, who were descended from Aaron; Levites, who were members of the tribe of Levi; and a third group comprised of legitimate Israelites from the remaining twelve tribes. A fourth social caste was for those judged to be of impure blood -- illegitimate Israelites born from sexual unions prohibited by the Law.

The result was a nation defined by genealogy and obsessed with ancestry. Before a fellow countryman would acknowledge another, he needed to know his pedigree, and the importance of caste increased relative to one's proximity to the Temple. The four classes that divided society can be summarized as follows:

### *Priests*

Legend has it that the priesthood resulted from fraternal cooperation between Moses and Aaron, whom Moses anointed as the first High Priest of Israel in the Sinai desert. Thereafter, the priesthood was strictly limited to the sons of Aaron and their descendants.

During the Second Temple era, priests could marry only the daughters of other priests (which was the preferred option), Levites, or pure-blood Israelites. By the first century, there were an estimated 7,200 priests, all understood to be direct descendants of Aaron. The modern surnames Cohen, Cahn, Kohn, derive from the Hebrew *Kohen* meaning priest, though not everyone today with one of these surnames is necessarily a descendant of the priestly clan.

The centrality of the priesthood in Second Temple Judaism was established in the middle of the fifth-century B.C.E. by the priest known as Ezra the Scribe, who determined that the way to prevent future national catastrophes was to strictly enforce the Law of Moses. This applied specifically to the hereditary priesthood, whose propensity for taking Gentile wives and concubines was declared the most significant factor in bringing about God's judgment on His people.

As a result, Ezra implemented a policy that required all priests to provide a genealogical listing to prove purity of descent. If a priest failed to meet the stringent criteria, he lost all rights to priestly office, not only for himself but for his descendants. In the Old Testament, several genealogical listings are given for priests, and an archive was maintained at the Jerusalem Temple where records of priestly families were kept. Writing about 100 C.E., the Jewish historian Josephus, himself the son of a priest, listed several generations of his ancestors in order to establish his credentials with the reader, "thus I have set down the genealogy of my family as I have found it described in the public records, and so direct adieu to those who would slander me."<sup>1</sup>

Significantly, Josephus explained that the priestly caste was the Israelite aristocracy, "as the nobility among several nations is of a different origin, so with us to be connected with the priesthood is an indication of the splendor of a family."<sup>2</sup> The High Priest was not only the most prominent member of the priesthood but, in times when there was no king, he was the pre-eminent person in the land and effectively the ruler of a theocracy. His duties were mostly ceremonial but the real importance of the High Priest was as figurehead and symbol of the Jewish nation. By the time of Jesus' public ministry, the political power of the High Priest had been substantially weakened by Herod the Great and two decades of direct Roman rule.

Beneath the High Priest were the Chief Priests, who held different ranks according to their responsibilities. The Chief Priests oversaw management of the Temple, which included finances, security, and overseeing the daily and weekly ceremonial rites of the ordinary priests, who formed the bulk of the priesthood.

There were twenty-four priestly clans, each in turn serving one week at the Temple,

performing liturgical duties. This meant that an ordinary priest spent only two weeks of the year serving at the Temple, and the rest of the time they lived throughout Judea and Galilee as farmers, merchants, landlords, craftsmen, etc.

### ***Levites***

Levites were theoretically the descendants of Levi, from whom Aaron was also descended, thus they were closely related to the priesthood. They constituted a lesser clergy, and were likewise divided into twenty-four courses, each serving one week at the Temple. Levites were singers, musicians, and attendants in the daily services, and carried out necessary menial tasks in the Temple. There were approximately 10,000 Levites at the time of Jesus. Many people today with the surnames of Levy and Levi are among descendants of the Levite tribe.

### ***Pure-Blood Israelites***

The lay population consisted primarily of members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin. Included in their number was a remnant from the lost northern tribes, exiled and scattered after the Assyrian invasion of 722 B.C.E. Purity of descent, which required the production of a genealogy, was essential for any applicant to hold an official position of trust or authority in society. Daughters of pureblood Israelites also needed to prove an unblemished ancestry in order to be married into priestly families, which was often the hope of parents.

### ***Israelites of Impure Birth***

People with unknown fathers, undocumented orphans, children of adulterous or incestuous relationships, Gentile proselytes, slaves and freedmen who were converts to Judaism -- these were all considered illegitimate. Officially, no one with impure blood was permitted to hold public office, and they were refused full participation in Temple ceremonies. In reality, many people inhabited the twilight zone between the pure and the defiled. Not least of which were children of concubines and slave girls -- women kept by wealthier Israelites, priests as well as laity, who could afford them. Predictably, a convenient system was developed that ranked illegitimate Israelites into a hierarchy to differentiate between the varying degrees of impurity.

Among the impure grades, the least sullied were illegitimate children of priests -- born from a priest and a concubine or a woman of impure descent. Sons from such unions were forbidden from becoming priests and from marrying the daughters of priests, though they could marry into the rest of Israelite society.

The lowest grade was the *mamzerim* or bastards. There was disagreement as to how to define a *mamzer*, but once a person was known as such, he was barred from participating in public life and from marrying into the pureblood community. Descendants of *mamzers* were similarly excluded in perpetuity.

Proselytes were the most numerous illegitimate grouping. Herod the Great, from the mixed Semitic race of Idumeans, was the most famous or infamous proselyte. Herod's kingship and dynasty were considered unlawful by most pureblood Jews, who demanded the king be a direct descendant of King David. Like most converts, Herod's brand of Judaism was not fundamentalist or Pharisaic, but he respected the influence that the Pharisees wielded over the people and he did not seek to eradicate them from public life.

Civic rights were denied to anyone even suspected of being of dubious heritage. And to enforce this code of cleanliness on society, Pharisees had installed themselves as a self-appointed 'blood police.' Nobody with high public profile could escape investigation into his family background. On one notorious occasion, the Pharisees unsuccessfully attempted to remove the High Priest on the grounds that his mother had once been a prisoner of war, and thus was potentially 'soiled,' so unfit to be a legitimate wife and mother.<sup>3</sup>

The ordinance forbidding a person of illegitimate status from marrying into priestly families was strictly enforced by the priesthood, who even disallowed the illegitimate sons of priests. Candidates for the priesthood had to prove purity of blood descent at twenty years of age in front of the Sanhedrin -- the Jewish Supreme Court -- in order to be ordained. This policy was in direct opposition to traditions of the Scribes, who recognized precedents that allowed illegitimate sons of priests into the priesthood.

## **SAMARITANS**

Although the Samaritans insisted that they were descended from the Jewish patriarchs, this claim was contested by most observant Jews. Despite their strict adherence to Mosaic Law, Samaritans were classed as a mixed race and excluded from membership of the Israelite community. This was largely due to their perceived idolatrous veneration of Mount Gerizim, where they had built their own parallel version of the Temple, and which the Jews destroyed during the first century B.C.E. Effectively, Samaritans were the outcast caste. No Jew was allowed to marry a Samaritan.

Jewish hostility toward the Samaritans probably reached its peak during Jesus' time. Herod the Great had taken a Samaritan wife and, in defiance of the Pharisees, he had permitted Samaritans access to the inner court of the Temple, a privilege withdrawn shortly after his death. Josephus recounts that during the administration of the Roman Procurator Coponius (6-9 C.E.), Samaritans defiled the Temple grounds by scattering human bones throughout the sanctuary during the night.<sup>4</sup> No explanation was given for the reasons behind this action, but it resulted in the renewal of their outcast status.

Although the New Testament illustrated Jewish antipathy toward Samaritans, it also showed that Jesus did not harbor them the same ill will. Along the road between Galilee and Samaria, he reportedly healed ten lepers, but only one of them, a Samaritan, gave thanks.

Now he was a Samaritan. Then said Jesus, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well."  
Luke 17:17-19

John's gospel alleged that many Samaritans believed in Jesus. On one occasion, Jesus was even accused of being a Samaritan, a charge he did not bother to deny in response. Nevertheless, when he met a Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus let her know that "salvation is from the Jews." So, as a first-century Palestinian Jew, Jesus believed in the concept of the 'chosen people.' Consequently, he regarded Samaritans as "foreigners" whose ancestry disqualified them. But Jesus himself could not escape being stigmatized by his birth status.

The model of Samaritan as pariah was used in the famous *Parable of the Good Samaritan* to show how the Israelite caste system conspired against Jesus so that only outsiders acknowledged his messianic status.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.' Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers? He said, 'The one who showed mercy on him.' And Jesus said to him, "Go and do likewise.'

Luke 10:30-37

The aim of Jesus' parables was not to teach a higher moral ethic, as is commonly thought. His public ministry had a singular message and unique focus -- the kingdom of God. Everything else was secondary. Although confusion still surrounds the meaning of "the kingdom of God," first and foremost it meant acceptance of Jesus as the Jewish Messiah. And *this* was the purpose behind the *Parable of the Good Samaritan*. Addressed to a lawyer (a title for a scribe), it was a scathing condemnation of the caste system and was never intended as a sermon on compassion. The lawyer must acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah, and use his privileged position to teach others the same thing. In the kingdom of God, the rank of Messiah transcended *all* caste designations.

Hence, the unidentified victim on the road represented Jesus. By refusing to help, the priest and Levite rejected him as the Messiah, when, as leaders of Israel, they ought to have been the first to recognize him. Their justification for doing so derived from Jesus' social rank. He was considered impure, and to avoid contamination, the pureblood priest and Levite crossed the road. In direct contrast, the Samaritan's positive response to the injured man signified that only those similarly ostracized by caste status could readily accept Jesus.

## **JESUS' FATHER**

Jesus' social status depended on the identity of his parents. Mary was known as his mother, but although New Testament scholarship has been on a quest to uncover the historical Jesus for over two hundred years, there has been no breakthrough yet on the issue of his paternity. The name of Jesus' father remains unknown and -- to all intents and purposes -- unknowable.

When it comes to interpreting ancient texts, professional academics, who read them in the original languages, have a right to expect a certain amount of due deference. However, the general approach of biblical scholars is conditioned by a tradition of fear and extreme caution that goes back almost two thousand years. In the past, 'dissenters' of orthodoxy would be tortured, jailed, or killed. Today, when scholars cross that invisible line, they lose their jobs. Consequently, few 'experts' are willing to debunk cherished popular myths in public, and most are quick to distance themselves from those who do. And as the Christmas story is the most beloved myth of all time, so the name of Jesus' father

remains the greatest mystery of all time.

One classic case in point occurred about twenty years ago, when Jane Schaberg of the Catholic University of Detroit, published *The Illegitimacy of Jesus*. The book caused a genuine storm of controversy in the late 1980s. The author was deluged with hate mail, abusive calls, and demands for her resignation. Even her car was set alight and burnt to a cinder. Meanwhile, her academic peers ran for cover. All this was because Schaberg dared to suggest that the text of the infancy narratives in the gospels of Matthew and Luke implied that Jesus was illegitimate. More specifically, that Mary had conceived Jesus after being raped or seduced by a person unknown. She now freely admits underestimating the negative reaction her thesis would generate among fellow Catholics. Perhaps, as an avowed feminist, Schaberg was by nature inclined to regard Mary as an exploited victim living in a brutal male-dominated society. But while adamant Jesus was not conceived miraculously, she found no clues to the identity of his biological father.

The standard academic text on this subject is Raymond Brown's *Birth of the Messiah*. Although it contains a great deal of valuable research, it is nevertheless the paramount scholarly affirmation of the ancient notion, still held by many contemporary scholars, that Matthew and Luke promoted the doctrine of virgin birth. This, despite the idea of virgin birth having no precedent anywhere in Jewish Scriptures, canonical or otherwise, and being totally alien to Judaic thought and rationale. More importantly, the concept of virgin birth negated the genealogical basis of blood descent upon which Judaism was founded.

Strangely enough, Matthew and Luke provide the only surviving genealogies of Jesus. And the very existence of an ancestral listing, however theologically contrived it be may have been, would constitute proof that Jesus had a known father.

## **GENEALOGIES**

Expectancy that the Messiah would come from the line of David, a descendant of Judah, meant that stringent records were kept by the Davidic family, the leading lay family at the time of Jesus. Matthew and Luke claimed that both Joseph and Mary were Davidic, and that Jesus was a direct descendant of David. Yet the names mentioned in the respective lists of Jesus' ancestors differ dramatically, and no attempt to harmonize them has ever been successful. Each genealogy was composed to suit the writer's theological purposes, and neither list of names is likely to be historically accurate. Separate genealogies, however, would have already existed for Joseph and Mary. And if each gospel was based on one or the other's genealogy, then this would explain the huge discrepancy between the names given.

Authentic Jewish genealogies proved the paternal line of descent, but Luke, being a less strictly "Jewish" gospel than Matthew, used Mary's genealogy as his source for ancestral names. Both writers insist that Joseph was not Jesus' biological father, but identifying the father was apparently not a viable option. The father must have been a source of severe embarrassment; otherwise his name would have been used to validate Jesus' credentials. No doubt the early Jewish Christians had reasons to conceal it, but it was a strategy that backfired in the long term.

In the First Letter to Timothy, the author warned against listening to "fables" and "godless and silly myths" associated with Jesus that had spread among the Gentile church outside Palestine. In a transparent attack on writers such as Matthew and Luke, he

demanded that church members did not “occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculation rather than divine training that is known by faith.”<sup>5</sup> This type of literature sparked a great deal of interest among new converts. Evidently, the tendency of these Gentile novices was to interpret them naively and draw the wrong conclusions. If they mistakenly assumed that Jesus had no human father -- that his birth was a miracle -- then belief in him was made all too easy. Genuine faith sprung from ‘divine training,’ not from “silly myths.” Plainly, this was an argument that fell on deaf ears.

## **VIRGIN BIRTH**

Insiders, who remained loyal followers despite knowing the facts, lacked confidence in the ability of outsiders to do likewise. Paul, for example, decided the best way to deal with Jesus’ paternity was to avoid any mention of it. He knew that such a strategy could never succeed in converting Palestinian Jews, but they were not his target audience. In any case, the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. effectively ended the influence of the Palestinian Church on the future development of Christianity. Thereafter, the missionary focus was overwhelmingly on the Gentile nations.

Nevertheless, the problematical subject of Jesus’ father lingered, and the Roman church needed to unravel it. It could not claim that Jesus was God outright because he had addressed God as *Abba* or ‘Father.’ This was taken as proof that he was at least the ‘Son of God.’ But this was not good enough. Gentiles were accustomed to legends of gods descending from heaven to impregnate women on earth, and so already had a long tradition of worshipping ‘sons of gods.’ The danger existed that Jesus would be understood as just another son of Zeus.

A human father, however, would have contradicted Jesus’ divinity. Worse still, it would have meant that the unmarried Mary had participated in an adulterous sexual tryst to conceive him. And that was unthinkable. The solution was to transform “fables” and “myths” into absolute truths. Mary, it was decided, had conceived a child miraculously and given birth as a virgin. But if Jesus had no human father, then exactly who, or what, was he?

Ironically, the dynamics of how Mary conceived while preserving her virginity intact provided fertile breeding ground for all manner of cerebral hypotheses by Greek-speaking intellectuals. After a great deal of deliberation and heated dispute, the Church eventually nailed its mast to the high theological concept of the Trinity. No longer could he be regarded as a first century Palestinian Jew. Simultaneously God, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit, Jesus was Master of the Universe. The world’s first and only hermetically sealed individual; spontaneously generated inside the womb of his mother; without sexual intercourse, lacking the sperm, chromosomes, and DNA of a human father, and devoid of the particular genetic signature of a paternal ancestry. Pagan legends of virgin births were simply satanic imitations of the real thing. The devil, it was argued, always preempts God in order to lead the ignorant masses astray.

## **SON OF GOD?**

The Jews, meanwhile, had heard it all before. Alexander the Great had claimed to be the son of God, and even though he was still venerated as a quasi prophet among many Jews,<sup>6</sup> they were not about to tolerate the same idea about one of their own kind. Yahweh did not impregnate women. He was spirit only, and had given the responsibility for

human reproduction to Adam and Eve when He commissioned them to “be fruitful, multiply, and have dominion.”<sup>7</sup> The precondition for the creative process was that “the two shall become one flesh,” otherwise Adam was superfluous. Since the earliest Christians were Jews, they did not believe nor did they teach that Mary conceived a child without a human sexual partner.

On the other hand, an event of such monumental significance for Judaism and the whole world -- a woman producing a child directly by God -- would surely have been proclaimed ceaselessly and unambiguously by those who knew it. That God’s only Son was living on the earth would have had immense repercussions for everyone alive at the time. He would be tracked down and followed everywhere, twenty-four hours a day. His words would be Law; every syllable recorded instantly, copied, and disseminated as quickly as technology allowed. No Emperor, King, or Priest would dare contradict him. Human society could never be the same again.

But the truth is that while Jesus was alive, nobody knew him as the Son of God. Had they done so, he would not have been left to die alone. None of his disciples, or even the members of his own family (according to Mark, Matthew and Luke), were present at his public execution. Reportedly, Mary and her other children even tried to “seize” Jesus to prevent him from speaking in public.<sup>8</sup> So either his mother had forgotten about the miraculous nature of his conception, or there was nothing miraculous about it.

Others, who supposedly knew the truth of Jesus’ divine status, did little or nothing constructive to help him while he was alive. The so called ‘wise men’ dropped off their gifts and sped back home never to show again, leaving Mary alone with the baby and at the mercy of Herod. Joseph played no part whatsoever in Jesus’ adult life. John the Baptist did not become a disciple, but maintained his own separate group of followers who constituted a rival sect. Peter, supposedly the ‘rock’ upon which Jesus built his church, denied any knowledge of him once the going got tough. Such embarrassing information was only included in the gospels because it was common knowledge and, despite the awkward questions it raised, could not be edited out.

## **PRIMACY OF DOCTRINE**

Absence of clear and explicit statements on Jesus’ parentage enabled the Church to force its own interpretation onto the biblical texts. The doctrine of virgin birth was justified mainly by the inclusion of the Greek word for “virgin” in the nativity accounts of Matthew and Luke. However, the literal reading of “virgin” adopted by the Church was entirely out of context. All Jewish girls were described as virgins before marriage, and nothing special or extraordinary was invoked by use of the word. Conveniently overlooked, ‘virgin’ was no longer used by the gospel writers to describe Mary after Jesus was born, which was the whole point of the doctrine.

Mark’s gospel, usually dated the earliest, recorded nothing of the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. The author afforded no special honor to Mary, and Joseph was not even mentioned. Mark recorded an incident when neighbors used the highly unorthodox genealogical phrase, “son of Mary” to describe Jesus, an insult in a society where maternal identification was used only for somebody whose father was either unknown or unmentionable.

“Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at



him.

Mark 6:3

The idea that Jesus' father was incognito among his own townsfolk is not credible. The neighbors' comments simply reflected the common gossip that Jesus' father was not the father of Mary's other children. People living in tightly knit communities, especially in first century Palestine, generally thrive on scandal of this sort. Realistically, the reason why they "took offense" at Jesus was linked to his status in the community, which was derived from his parentage, not from his employment.

The Gospel of John mentioned no details of Jesus' birth, and the famous *logos* introduction circumvented it. Paul wrote only that Jesus was "born according to the flesh,"<sup>9</sup> which carried no implication of supernatural involvement whatsoever.

Following ratification of the Nicene Creed in 323 C.E. the official Church position was that the truth was signed, sealed, and delivered. Although most new converts were illiterate, they still needed protection from manipulation by unscrupulous heretics, who might exploit apparent contradictions in the New Testament. The Church, therefore, banned the reading and disseminating of Holy Scripture to all who were not its own officers. Even low-ranking priests were restricted access to many texts.

Now that the general public has unfettered access to the scriptures, the nativity stories of Matthew and Luke are probably the two most widely read sections of the entire Bible. The colossal Christmas phenomenon has evolved out of them, and even if people know little about the Old Testament, and next to nothing about Jesus' life, at least they know something about his birth. And the popular interpretation of the Christmas story still rests on precisely the same pseudo-literal reading of the narrative, isolated from any historical, sectarian, or literary influences that the ancient Church stipulated.

## **MATTHEW AND LUKE -- JEWISH SCRIBES**

Because their accounts of Jesus' birth referenced ancient Jewish texts, Matthew and Luke kept within the parameters of Jewish tradition. Clearly, both understood that the circumstances of Jesus' birth proved he was the Messiah, but if he were not the child of a normal married Israelite couple, then they also understood that in certain special cases an illicit sexual union could produce divinely ordained progeny.

This was not mainstream Jewish philosophy. Sexual relationships outside the confines of the Law could be life-threatening for Second Temple Jews, and extremely prejudicial against the child itself. The Bible, however, contains numerous tales of sexual intrigues and shenanigans. Seduction and betrayal were constantly recurring themes in the lives of Jewish heroes, and even if much of the content was obviously mythologized, most of the stories have credible human characterization and incident, and often portray the central figures unflatteringly. These illicit sexual activities baffle modern readers of the Bible, but the specialty of Jewish scribes was to interpret and explain issues not directly covered by the Law of Moses. And the extraordinary circumstances of Jesus' birth necessitated an explanation based on these *extra*-legal scriptural precedents. This is the key to understanding the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke.

Responsible for preserving the literary heritage of the community, scribes were also the keepers of an important legacy of oral traditions closely guarded secret teachings, knowledge of which contributed to the scribes' aura of wisdom and learning, and gave

them an elevated status in society,<sup>10</sup> not just in Palestine, but also in the large Jewish communities of the Diaspora. The works of Josephus, the New Testament, and the Dead Sea Scrolls prove that first century scribes were not limited to any particular branch of Judaism.

It was forbidden to write down the oral teachings, and they could not be divulged to ordinary people lest they be misused. After the destruction of the Temple some of the oral traditions were recorded, surviving in the rabbinic writings of the Mishnah and the Talmud, which date between 150 C.E. and 450 C.E. The most secret teachings were not written down until early medieval times, when the literature of the Kabbalah was compiled.

Evidence this policy of cautious discretion permeated early Jewish Christian literature comes from the letters of Clement of Alexandria (c.150 -- 250 C.E.), a leading apologist and missionary to the Gentiles. Clement wrote to man named Theodore, and though only parts of his letter remain, he throws light on the origins of Mark's gospel.

As for Mark, then, during Peter's stay in Rome, he wrote an account of the Lord's doings, not, however, declaring all, nor yet hinting at the secret ones, but selecting those he thought most useful for increasing the faith of those who were being instructed...he yet did not divulge the things not to be uttered, nor did he write down the hierophantic teachings of the Lord. In a short treatise entitled *The Mysteries of the Faith not to be Divulged to All*, Clement expanded on this tradition;

The wise do not utter with their mouth what they reason in council. "But what you hear in the ear," says the Lord, "proclaim upon the houses," bidding them receive the secret traditions of the true knowledge, and expound them aloft and conspicuously; and as we have heard in the ear, so to deliver them to whom it is requisite; but not enjoining us to communicate to all without distinction, what is said to them in parables.

One of the scribes' most important duties was to compose the mandatory genealogies required of candidates for public office. As the lawyers of their day, they were adept at camouflaging harsh truths and putting a spin on information to suit their clients. As highly educated scribes, albeit from different schools, Matthew and Luke wrote genealogies of Jesus principally for clients familiar with an esoteric methodology of scriptural exegesis. Gentile readers and uninformed Jews were unlikely to grasp the deeper meaning embedded in the narrative.

Creative scribes, as opposed to copyists, had to satisfy the soul of the reader. This meant conforming to certain conventions. As with sacred architecture, religiously inspired manuscripts were constructed on symmetrical principles. A text required a subtle inner harmony to complement its obvious outer structure; or else it read as nothing more than inventory. Code, symbol, and cryptic allusion were among the literary techniques used to preserve the sanctity of core truths and protect them from outsiders. An effective composition was far greater than the sum of its parts.

The Church, on the other hand, was primarily concerned that the content of any given text did not threaten the Church's theological underpinnings. It was believed, rightly or wrongly, that the four gospels selected for inclusion in the New Testament fulfilled this need better than any others. Each gospel had a different emphasis, but the Church intended that its appeal would come only from a fundamentalist reading of the prose. In

some ways, this succeeded in gratifying the religious impulse of the masses, but by stressing only the blatant externals of the narrative, its subtle internal qualities were neglected. Consequently, half-truth became the foundation of Christian faith; belief, not understanding, the traditional message of the Church.

Most people today read scripture in the same way as they read biography or journalism. Even if sacred literature is appreciated in general terms, readers usually remain ignorant of the point intended by the author. This is never truer than of the opening chapters of Matthew and Luke.

Both writers made extensive use of Mark's gospel to compose their much longer versions, but included identical sayings of Jesus not found in Mark, believed to originate in a lost collection of teachings known for convenience sake as 'Q.'<sup>11</sup> The significance of this is that they did not borrow one from the other; each was unaware of the other's account. Their respective infancy narratives and genealogical lists are radically dissimilar because they were drawn from unrelated sources. The only obvious thing they have in common is the affirmation that Joseph was not Jesus' father. But as they accepted that Jesus' ancestry was the determinative factor in fixing his messianic status, the implicit identification of his father was *the* central component of their opening chapters.

It is worth repeating -- every Palestinian Jew belonged to a social caste. Jesus was no exception. His comment, "the harvest is great, but the laborers are few," was a typical agricultural metaphor to bemoan the lack of manpower his ministry had attracted. It would be naïve to imagine that, in a society obsessed with bloodline, the reason why Jesus was snubbed by fellow Jews had nothing to do with his birth status. Mathew and Luke wrote that "nothing is covered that will not be revealed, or hidden that will not be known."<sup>12</sup> Two thousand years have passed -- it is time we knew the truth, and let the chips fall wherever they may.