



**JESUS AND THE MAKING OF THE  
MODERN MIND, 1380-1520**

**LUKE CLOSSEY**



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# 3. The Development of the Jesus Cult

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The most important process in the world history of religion was the rise of the monotheistic cult of Yahweh, one of the oldest names for the god of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Who is Yahweh? Our earliest records suggest a perception of him as a war or weather god in northern Arabia. Around the sixth century BC, sources indicated a new realization of him as the only god, or the only true god.<sup>1</sup> It is beyond the ability of historians to argue whether this reflects a change in the nature of Yahweh or merely a change in human understanding of Yahweh.

This monotheistic cult of Yahweh grew over the centuries. A series of prophets guided the understanding of Yahweh, and disagreements over whether to accept each teacher's new interpretations caused divisions. The first major Yahweh cult was the Jews, with their prophets' revelations codified in scriptures called the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible. The first-century Rabbi Yeshua, the focus of this book, gave teachings recorded in Greek-language texts called gospels. As the Yahweh cult travelled through time, space, and languages, Yeshua has been called dozens of names. Today, Arabic's importance to Islam means that two billion Muslims know Yeshua as Isa, globally his most prevalent name, and only a billion English-speakers know him as Jesus.

Who was Jesus? Who believed what about Jesus? The Christian gospels report that this was an open question even during his own lifetime. When he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that I am?" they could not give a single answer: John the Baptist, or Elijah, or one of the prophets. Jesus was in no hurry to control his own press, and "sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him."<sup>2</sup>

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- 1 Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God*, trans. Raymond Geuss (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674915732>
  - 2 Mt 16:13–20; Mk 8:27–30; Lk 9:18–21.

The confusion about Jesus during his own lifetime increased dramatically after his death. Emerging from the Jewish cult of Yahweh, within its first six centuries the cult of Jesus fractured into the three subcults, each founded by a messenger whose teachings included a unique perspective on Jesus’s nature and importance (see Fig. 3.1). Paul’s followers became known as Christians, Mani’s as Manichaeans, and Muhammad’s as Muslims. Each branch of the Jesus cult had its particularities, but, when seen from outside, were cousins in their beliefs and practices.

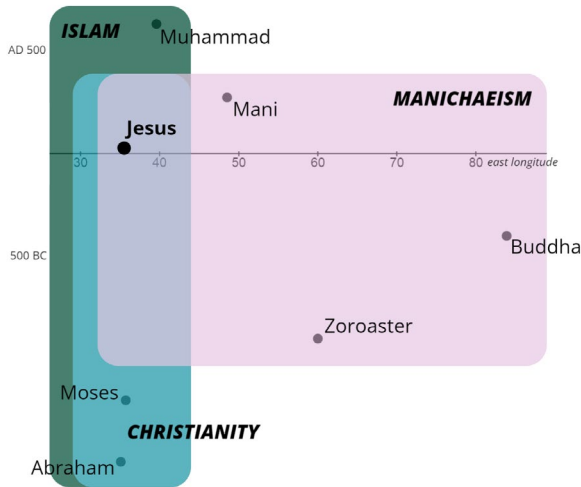


Fig. 3.1 Prophets and Subcults. The prophets are arranged vertically from oldest (Abraham) to most recent (Muhammad), and horizontally from west (the Muslim prophets) to east (Shakyamuni Buddha). Each box shows the prophets of a single subcult. Created by Luke Clossey (2023), CC BY-NC.

Of course, the idea that the Jesus cult existed as a single entity is a construct found only in the mind of the historian looking back; the diversity here was extreme, and one group of cultists might have been hard pressed to recognize their Jesus in another group’s Jesus. In the same way, Buddha enthusiasts in Late Traditional Sri Lanka would have been surprised by any links to contemporary Buddha enthusiasts in Japan—was that really the same person?

In 1400, most people in the Far and Near West and in the Indic Core—roughly half of humanity—were in a position to have acquired substantial knowledge about Jesus. How close could they have come to a consensus about him? Although they had sharp divergences of opinion on some crucial details, Christians and Muslims—who between them made up 99% of the Jesus cult in 1400—shared a common basic understanding of the life story of Jesus.

We do face the problem of knowing who, of how many people, had access to which information. The Christians combined four gospels with other documents to form the New Testament, in contrast to the Jewish Tanakh, which they called the Old Testament. Together Old and New Testaments made up the Bible, the Old still authoritative but reinterpreted in light of the New. Six centuries later, Muhammad revealed the revelations made to him as the Qur'an. He explained that the Christian Gospel had been distorted in transmission: Jesus was in fact not Yahweh, but merely an important prophet and saint. Beyond these canonical texts, both major subcults would have had access, to varied and uncertain degrees, to extra-canonical information called "apocrypha" (from the Greek word for "hidden" or "obscure"). Unofficial gospels featured prominently in the Christian apocrypha, and remembered sayings of Muhammad in the Muslim apocrypha, and Jesus moved between both.

We will first look at a life of Jesus supported by both canons—and thus likely known to almost all Jesus cultists. We will then add details supported by one subcult's canon and the other's apocrypha—and thus likely known to a small majority of Jesus cultists. Finally, we will look at Jesus knowledge unique to single traditions.

### Convergences in Canon

The poet William Langland (ca. 1332–86) was struck by the similarity of Islam and Christianity, a similarity founded on monotheism:

For Saracens have somewhat seeming [similar] to our belief,  
 For they love and believe in one [Lord] almighty;  
 And we, learned and lewed [lay], believe in one god.<sup>3</sup>

Muslims looking in the opposite direction might have struggled to find monotheism in Christian belief in a divine Trinity, consisting of Yahweh, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. However, the majority of the people in 1400 who knew about Jesus at all would agree on the following basic narrative supported by both the Christian and Muslim canons. I use some Arabic names, likely the best known at the time, with English equivalents for reference.

Zakariya (Zechariah), advanced in years, wanted a successor, but his wife was barren. Allah (Yahweh) promised him a son, Yahya (John), who would become a prophet.<sup>4</sup> When Zakariya expressed some doubt, he became mute, but

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3 *Piers Plowman*, Text B, Passus XV, lines 392–94.

4 Lk 1:11–14; Qur'an 3:37–39, 19:1–15.

did indeed become a father.<sup>5</sup> Yahya thus paved the way for Isa (Jesus), even in his doubt-defying miraculous birth.

Allah then sent one or more angels to tell Miriam (Mary) that she had been chosen above all women: she would have a son named Isa.<sup>6</sup> Miriam, incredulous, protested that she was a chaste virgin, and was reassured that Allah could nevertheless make this birth happen, and indeed Isa was born.<sup>7</sup> People shared their own doubts about her virgin birth, but these concerns were resolved, either by an angel or by the newborn Isa himself speaking up for his mother.<sup>8</sup> If Isa was not precocious enough to teach at birth, he certainly did by the time he visited the Jerusalem temple at age twelve.<sup>9</sup>

Thus began Isa's career of preaching the Gospel. Isa confirmed the truth of the Torah, the Jewish Law, but he also emended it by authorizing, or doing himself, some things that it had forbidden.<sup>10</sup> He was a prophet and *al-masih* (messiah, "Christ").<sup>11</sup> Isa announced the coming of a "something," which Muslims would identify as Muhammad and Christians as the Holy Ghost.<sup>12</sup> Isa was a sign, was sent with signs, and carried out signs.<sup>13</sup> Some of these signs were his miracles: he performed impossible feats of food production.<sup>14</sup> He cured lepers and the blind, and even resurrected the human dead.<sup>15</sup>

Isa's teachings and miracles incited opposition and mocking.<sup>16</sup> Some believed he was crucified through the plots of the Jews. However, although people disbelieved Isa and schemed against him, Yahweh remained, in the words of the Qur'an, the "Best of Schemers."<sup>17</sup> Thus Isa survived the Crucifixion, either because the death was an illusion, or because Yahweh restored him to life.<sup>18</sup> Yahweh then raised Isa to Himself.<sup>19</sup>

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5 Lk 1:18–22; Qur'an 19:10.

6 Mt 1:18–21; Lk 1:26–38; Qur'an 3:42–43.

7 Qur'an 2:87, 2:253.

8 Mt 1:19; Qur'an 19:27–33.

9 Lk 2:41–52.

10 Mt 5:17; Mk 2:26, Mk 7:5; Lk 6:4; Qur'an 3:49, 5:46, 61:6.

11 "Messiah" occurs eleven times in the Qur'an, only in reference to Jesus.

12 Jn 15:26; Qur'an 61:6.

13 Lk 11:30; Qur'an 2:87, 2:253, 43:63. For example, in Jn 2, 12.

14 Mt 14:13–21, Mt 15:32–16:10; Mk 6:31–44, Mk 8:1–9; Lk 5:1–11, 9:10–17; Jn 2:1–11, Jn 6:5–15; Qur'an 5:112–15.

15 Mt 8:1–4, Mt 9:27–31, Mt 20:29–34; Mk 1:40–45, Mk 5:21–43, Mk 8:22–26, Mk 10:46–52; Lk 5:12–16, Lk 7:11–19, Lk 18:35–43; Jn 9:1–12, Jn 11:1–44; Qur'an 3:49.

16 Qur'an 43:57–60.

17 Qur'an 3:54.

18 Mt 27–28; Mk 15–16; Lk 23–24; Jn 19–20; Qur'an 4:156–57.

19 Qur'an 4:158. Qur'an 4:159 suggests that Jesus will be a witness at Resurrection Day. See Mt 25:31–36.

## Convergences in Apocrypha

To this account entirely contained in both canons, we can add a secondary layer of information that was in one canon but only in the apocrypha of the other. Information in this layer would have been known by most Jesus cultists—that is, the half of the cult whose canon testified to it, plus anyone in the other subcult who happened across similar apocryphal information.<sup>20</sup>

Some passages included in the Qur'an were echoed by the Christian apocrypha, and, if we think with the plain ken, might derive from it. Before Jesus's birth, men cast lots to determine who would take charge of the young Mary. Zechariah won, with Yahweh miraculously providing her with food.<sup>21</sup> After the birth, Yahweh gave Mary a stream of potable water and a palm tree of ripe dates. In the Christian version the Baby Jesus commanded these things to happen, but in the Qur'an Mary had to shake the palm tree herself.<sup>22</sup> The

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- 20 Martin Accad, "The Gospels in the Muslim Discourse of the Ninth to the Fourteenth Centuries: An Exegetical Inventorial Table," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14 (2003): 67–91, 204–20, 337–52, 459–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410305261>; Michel Hayek, *Le Christ de l'Islam* (Paris: Seuil, 1959); Mahmoud Ayyoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, 2: The Death of Jesus—Reality or Illusion?" *The Muslim World* 10 (1980): 91–121; Tarif Khalidi, "The Role of Jesus in Intra-Muslim Polemics of the First Two Islamic Centuries," in *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period, 750–1258*, ed. Samir Khalil Samir and Jørgen S. Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 146–56; Oddbjørn Leirvik, *Images of Jesus Christ in Islam: Introduction, Survey of Research, Issues of Dialogue* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute of Missionary Research, 1998); Suleiman A. Mourad, "On the Qur'anic Stories About Mary and Jesus," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 1 (1999): 13–24; Suleiman A. Mourad, "Jesus According to Ibn 'Asakir," in *Ibn 'Asakir and Early Islamic History*, ed. James E. Lindsay (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press, 2001), 24–43; Thomas O'Shaughnessy, *The Koranic Concept of the Word of God* (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1940); Neal Robinson, *Christ in Islam and Christianity* (London: Macmillian, 1991); Jacques Jomier, "Quatre ouvrages en arabe sur le Christ," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales du Caire* 5 (1958): 367–86; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2018).
- 21 Qur'an 3:37–44; Wilhelm Schneemelcher, ed., "Protoevangelium of James," in *The New Testament Apocrypha*, rev. ed., trans. R. McL. Wilson, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2005), I, 421–38.
- 22 Qur'an 19:23–26; "Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew," in Schneemelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 463; Suleiman A. Mourad, "From Hellenism to Christianity and Islam: The Origin of the Palm-tree Story Concerning Mary and Jesus in the Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew and the Qur'an," *Oriens Christianus* 86 (2002): 206–16. Tradition identifies the quiet hill given Mary and Baby Jesus as shelter with either Damascus or Jerusalem. Ibn al-Sabbah al-Andalusi, visiting the Holy Land in the 1390s, located Mary's palm tree on his map of the Temple Mount. See Antonio Constán-Nava, "Edición diplomática, traducción y estudio de la obra Niṣāb

newborn Jesus made an eloquent speech from the cradle, in which he defended his mother and explained his mission.<sup>23</sup> As a boy, Jesus shaped birds out of clay and brought them to life.<sup>24</sup>

Much greater in number are those elements found in the Bible and then echoed in, and perhaps inherited by, Muslim apocrypha.

Some of these were events in Jesus's life, although with differences in details and contexts. Prompted by a star, some men offered gifts to Jesus, to which the Muslim tradition attached deep-ken meanings: gold ("the lord of goods"), myrrh (which heals "what is broken and wounded"), and frankincense (only its smoke enters heaven)—just as Jesus was a lord, was a medium through which Yahweh healed, and would be taken up into heaven. A king of Syria demanded they reveal his birthplace, but an angel communicated that king's murderous intention, and so the gift-givers fled from him.<sup>25</sup>

After the Magi fled, Mary and Jesus evacuated into Egypt. In the Muslim version, this was motivated by a dispute with neighbours. Some parents living nearby refused to let their children play with Jesus, who angrily transformed those children into pigs. Mary thought this a good time to leave town.<sup>26</sup>

Satan took the adult Jesus to the top of the Jerusalem temple, and dared him to jump. In the Christian account Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:16 ("Do not put the Lord your God to the test"), but the Muslim tradition's plain ken heard a less certain, more human reply: "God ordered me not to put myself to the test, for I do not know whether he will save me or not."<sup>27</sup>

Jesus invited disciples to become fishers of men, and introduced himself to them, with the Muslims' Jesus explicitly subordinating himself to Muhammad the "Arabian prophet"<sup>28</sup>—a deep-ken defiance of the normal chronology, as Jesus was born centuries before Muhammad. Jesus later washed his disciples'

al-ajbār wa-taḍkirat al-ajyār de Ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ (s. IX H./XV e.C.)" (PhD thesis, University of Alicante, 2014), I, 709.

23 Qur'an 3:46, 19:29–31; "Arabic Infancy Gospel," in Scheelmelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 453, 460–61.

24 Qur'an 3:49, 5:110; "Infancy Gospel of Thomas," in Scheelmelcher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 444. See Neal Robinson, "Creating Birds from Clay: A Miracle of Jesus in the Qur'an and in Classical Muslim Exegesis," *Muslim World* 79 (1989): 1–13.

25 D1; R39–41.

26 D3; R31–33; Mt 2:13–23. See Thijs Porck, "And Then Christ Turned the Children into Pigs: A Curious Miracle in Late Medieval England," *Leiden Medievalists Blog*, 21 January 2022, <https://www.leidenmedievalistsblog.nl/articles/and-then-christ-turned-the-children-into-pigs-a-curious-miracle-in-late-medieval-england>

27 Mt 4:5–7; Lk 4:9–12; Kh34.

28 D5. See Mt 4:19; Mk 1:17.



feet despite their protests.<sup>29</sup> A Qur'anic reference to Simon Peter الصافي *al-safi* (the Pure) is, in the plain ken, probably a mistaken reference to the Christian name of him, أَلصَّفَا *al-safa* (the Rock).<sup>30</sup>

Jesus miraculously created wine at a wedding party; in the Muslim version this occurred at the home of a man whom he had previously helped by identifying an unusual criminal duo, a blind man who stood on the shoulders of a lame man to steal treasure hidden high and away.<sup>31</sup>

Questioned about his disreputable companions, Jesus compared them to the sick and himself to a doctor.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, Jesus complained about religious and intellectual elites at banquets.<sup>33</sup> Both traditions relayed accounts of an adulterer about to be stoned. In the Christian version this was a woman, and in the Muslim version, a man, apparently set up by Jesus who then ordered the stoning to make a pedagogical point. Jesus announced that only those without sin should throw a stone, and they all desisted, except, in the Muslim version, John the Baptist.<sup>34</sup>

His disciples witnessed Jesus walking on water; one tried to walk towards him but sank due to his lack of faith.<sup>35</sup> The Muslim traditions included Jesus teaching that he could walk because of his "certainty of faith," and the disciples could not because of their inability to see "stones, mud, and gold" as "equal." When they protested that they feared the waves, he admonished them, "Did you not fear the Lord of the wave?"<sup>36</sup>

Jesus sent out his disciples on a great commission to recruit more followers. In an Islamic version some refused, citing their incompetence in exotic languages; Jesus complained to Yahweh, who declared that he would "spare you this trouble" by granting the disciples miraculous language ability, echoing the Pentecost of the Christian canon.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond these narrative episodes, Islamic apocrypha repeated specific teachings Jesus gave in the Bible.

You must be reborn to enter the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>38</sup> Build your house on solid ground, not on sand (Christian) or on the sea (Muslim).<sup>39</sup> Jesus predicted the destruction of a place of worship (in the Muslim version, "God will not

29 Kh269; Jn 1, 3:1–17.

30 Kh80; Mt 16:18.

31 D3; R31–33; Jn 2:1–11.

32 Kh81; Mt 9:10–12.

33 Kh93; Mt 23:5–6.

34 Kh54; Jn 8:3–9.

35 Kh35; Mt 14:22–33; Mk 6:45–52; Jn 6:16–21.

36 Kh47; D43; A160. See also D6; R37.

37 Kh89; D66–67; A211; Mt 28:16–20.

38 Kh273; Jn 3:3.

39 Mt 7:26–27; Kh41.

leave one stone of this mosque upon another”).<sup>40</sup> A camel can more easily pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man can enter paradise.<sup>41</sup> Be as innocent of cunning as doves: as the Muslim commentary explains, “you can take her chicks from under her and kill them, and she will then return to roost in the very same spot.”<sup>42</sup>

An eye that encourages sin should be gouged out. In the Muslim tradition, Jesus once decided to pray for rain, and to improve his efficiency sent away all sinners. One remained, explaining that to the best of his knowledge he had only sinned once, by looking at a woman, and had immediately repented by gouging out his eye and flicking it at her. Out of respect, Jesus decided to have this one-eyed man offer the prayer, reserving to himself only the amen, before the downpour began.<sup>43</sup> In another Muslim account Jesus restored the sight of two blind men, who through some deepened foreknowledge had anticipated this teaching and blinded themselves to avoid damnation.<sup>44</sup>

Both traditions include what has been called the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule: love Yahweh as much as possible, and love your neighbour as yourself.<sup>45</sup>

Much of the Christian Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–8), and of its parallel Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6), reverberated in Muslim apocrypha (see Chapter 21). Jesus’s teachings loom more prominently in Muslim descriptions of his life than in Christian ones. You are the earth’s salt, which maintains its flavour even when watered down.<sup>46</sup> Jesus forbade not only adultery but even the contemplation of adultery; he forbade not only false swearing by Yahweh, but even any swearing by Yahweh at all.<sup>47</sup> Give with the right hand; hide with, or from, the left.<sup>48</sup> When you pray, close the door or curtain.<sup>49</sup> Accumulate treasure in heaven.<sup>50</sup> Concentrate on today, not tomorrow.<sup>51</sup> Do not cast your pearls before

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40 Kh71; Mt 24:1–2.

41 Mk 10:24–27; Lk 18:24–27; Mt 19:23–26; Kh63; Kh283.

42 Kh185; Mt 10:16.

43 Kh204; Mt 18:9.

44 D5–6; R36–37.

45 Mt 22:35–40; Mk 12:28–31; Lk 10:25–28; Kh48; Kh159, 170, 228.

46 Kh7; Mt 5:13.

47 Kh190; Mt 5:27–28, Mt 34–37.

48 Kh4, 29; Mt 6:3.

49 Kh4, 29; Mt 6:6. Kh188 recommends praying alone.

50 Mt 6:19–21; Kh33.

51 Mt 6:34; Kh73, 78, 232.

swine.<sup>52</sup> Pray for those who mistreat you.<sup>53</sup> Jesus also taught a prayer that drew a parallel between Yahweh's power on earth and in heaven.<sup>54</sup>

Yahweh takes care even of birds, so you need not yourself be acquisitive.<sup>55</sup> In the Muslim tradition, one doubter objected that human bellies were bigger than birds' bellies, which prompted Jesus to improve his metaphor: "Then look at these cattle, wild and tame, as they come and go, neither reaping nor plowing, and God provides for them too."<sup>56</sup>

The Christian instruction to answer being struck on one cheek by offering up the second cheek for a second blow was literalized in the Muslim tradition: Jesus and a disciple walked through the Pass of Afīq, near the Jordan River, said to be where Jesus would kill the Antichrist. Suddenly, a ruffian blocked their way: "I will not let you pass until I have struck each of you a blow." Jesus offered him his own cheek, but the disciple refused, so Jesus presented his own second cheek.<sup>57</sup>

## Divergences

In spite of these convergences, some information found in one tradition was unknown or heretical in the other. A modern joke recalls a desert island's sole shipwrecked inhabitant, who builds a church out of palm fronds, but soon abandons it to build a second church next to it, over a doctrinal dispute. The ease of disagreement splintered what was known, or thought to be known, about Jesus.

Let us now take a closer look at each of the three subcults, and the Jesus-beliefs unique to it. Those beliefs originated with the messenger who founded each subcult, but then developed through time. In this section we look at a third layer of information, substantially exclusive to its own subcult: information here is found in the canon of only one subcult (so known by half of the Jesus cultists) or in the apocrypha of only one subcult (so known by a smaller fraction of cultists).

Although the diversity of details can overwhelm, we summarize the nominal theological differences between the three subcults, and among the principle Christian subsubcults, in this chart, before describing them.

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52 Mt 7:6; Kh64, which explains the meaning: "Do not impart wisdom to one who does not desire it, for wisdom is more precious than pearls and whoever rejects wisdom is worse than a swine." Kh200 advises only giving wisdom to the worthy.

53 Kh211; Lk 6:28.

54 R34-35; D4-5.

55 Kh15; Mt 6:26

56 Kh15. D31; A146 has a variation of this, less interesting, but including ants.

57 Mt 5:39; Kh66; D14. A65 is an exact quotation, explicitly attributed to Matthew.

SUBCULT		JESUS: DIVINE OR HUMAN?	WHO SEALS THE PROPHECY?
Manichaeism		divine	Mani
Christianity	Oriental Orthodox	1 person, with 1 (divine/human) nature	Jesus
	Western/Latin	1 person, with 2 (divine, human) natures	
	Eastern/Greek		
	Church of the East	2 (divine, human) persons	
Islam		human	Muhammad

Table 3.1 Subcult Theologies.

## Christians

The first messenger, Paul, a first-century Roman Jew, taught that Jesus was both divine<sup>58</sup> and human, a foundation of Christian doctrine.<sup>59</sup> Paul's teachings about the divine-and-human Jesus were the most complicated, or perhaps the most ambiguous, of our three messengers', and, partly as a result, in subsequent centuries the Christian subcult would shatter into even smaller subsubcults. The fundamental division between them was based on how Jesus could be both divine and human. The Nestorian Christians ("Church of the East"), maximizing the difference between the human and the divine, understood Jesus as having two different personas, one divine and one human. The Chalcedonian Christians reduced Jesus to a single persona, but one that had both a divine and a human nature. From the Nestorian point of view, the Chalcedonian view appeared almost Manichaean;<sup>60</sup> from the Chalcedonian point of view, the Nestorians would appear almost Muslim. Finally, the so-called "monophysites" (Eutychianists, Apollinarists, Miaphysites) emphasized the combination of the divine and human into a single *physis*, nature, that was both divine and human.

58 Much of the disputes revolve around the "divinity" of Jesus, and we take up that language here. It is, however, a false move to talk about "divinity" as a single phenomenon: in the Far West and the Core "divinity" referred to different things, and "divine" to different kinds of beings.

59 Excepting the Ebionites' only-human Jesus and the Docetists' only-divine Jesus.

60 Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Dover, NH: Manchester UP, 1985), 96.

Even among the Chalcedonians we find disagreements on the relationship between the divine nature of Jesus and the divine nature of the Father, with the Arians maximizing the difference between the two.

Beyond doctrinal disputes, each of these three subsubcults would further split over divergences on issues of culture, language, and especially authority. By 1400, Paul's Christian subcult had divided into some forty-two subsubsubcults, in nineteen independent and autocephalous ("having its own head") churches, which can be broadly categorized as Latin/Western or Greek/Eastern (see Fig. 3.2). These ranged from the vast Catholic Church of Rome, with a flock containing a plurality if not an outright majority of Christians, to the tiny Catholicosate of Aghtamar, a single church on an island in Lake Van of eastern Anatolia. Beyond the broad generalizations of this paragraph, these were all relatively united in their understanding of Jesus, and so we will not treat them individually. Geographies overlapped: most noticeably, Jerusalem and Alexandria headquartered two churches each, and Antioch four. This is an academic analytic taxonomy, but it reflects identities on the ground.

What did Christians in our period believe? The main truth distinctive to the Christian tradition was that Jesus was God born human. In the Incarnation, God became the human, and divine, Jesus. For one understanding of the mechanics of the Incarnation, we can turn to Armenia. The theologian Grigor Tatevatsi (1346–1409/10) wrote a ten-volume *Girk' Harc'manc'* [Book of Questions] (1397); the first volume takes thirty-two chapters to explain the Incarnation. We find a synopsis in his creed, which appeared in the *Oskep'orik* [Book of Golden Content] (1407) and became a part of the Armenian mass liturgy: Jesus, or "God the Word," descended into Mary, where "taking of her blood, he united it with his Godhead." Then, for "nine months he patiently remained in the womb of the spotless Virgin, and the perfect God became perfect man, with soul, mind and body [...] God became man without any change or transformation; conceived without sperm and having an incorruptible birth."<sup>61</sup>

If we focus on information about Jesus found only in the Christian apocrypha, the emphasis is on Jesus's power, authority, and awesomeness. Many versions of infancy gospels circulated in medieval Europe, and paint a striking picture of Jesus's younger years. En route to Egypt, Jesus and his family discovered that the cave sheltering them housed dragons, which Jesus then tamed.<sup>62</sup> When child Jesus saw another boy splashing in water, he leapt to its defence, snarling, "You insolent, godless dunderhead, what harm did the pools and water do to you? See, now you

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61 Mesrob K. Krikorian, "Grigor Tat'ewac'i: A Great Scholastic Theologian and Nominalist Philosopher," in *Medieval Armenian Culture*, ed. Thomas J. Samuelian and Michael E. Stone (Chico, CA: Scholar's Press, 1984), 134–36.

62 "Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew," in Scheelmecher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 462.

also shall wither like a tree.” That boy indeed wilted, but we can count him more fortunate than the child who bumped Jesus in the street and dropped dead. When the doomed children’s parents complained to Joseph, Jesus miraculously blinded them. There was a happy ending: once everyone eventually agreed to respect his authority, Jesus resurrected all the children he had slaughtered.<sup>63</sup>

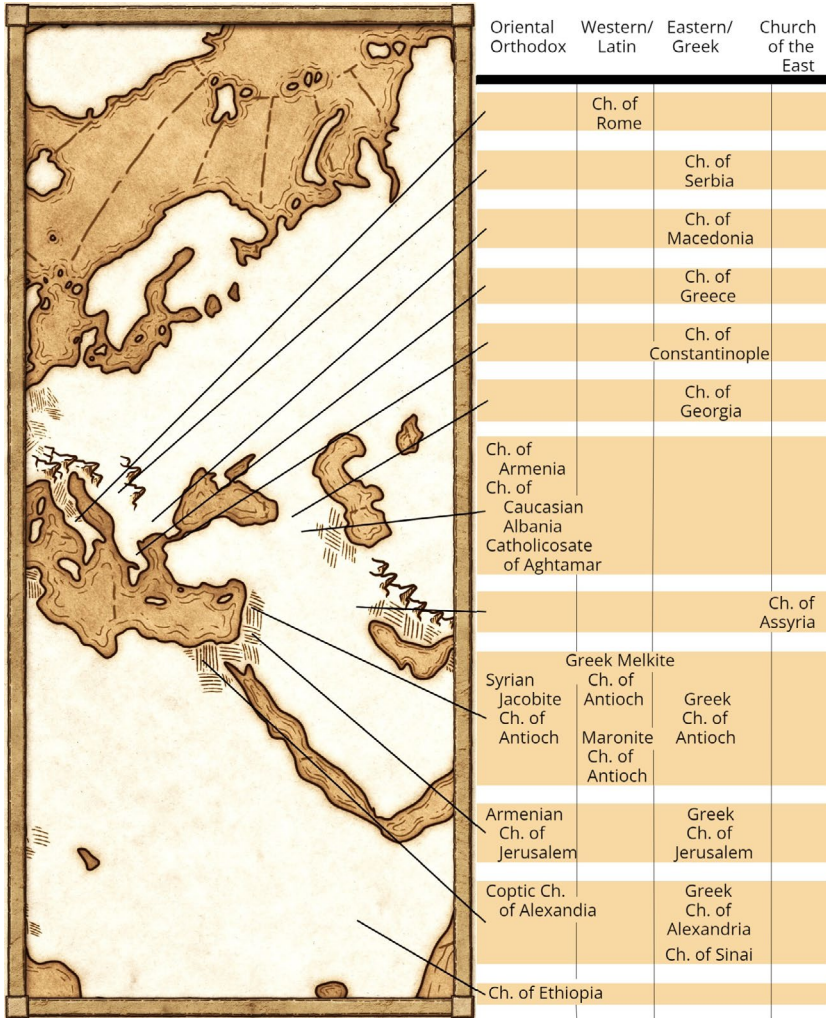


Fig. 3.2 The Forty-Two Subsubsubcults, map by Taf Richards, Arcane Atlas Cartography (@Arcane\_Atlas), CC BY-NC.

63 “The Infancy Story of Thomas,” in Scheelmecher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 444–46.

Other Christian apocrypha filled out the details of Jesus's life. The Proto-Gospel of James had Jesus healing a midwife's hand, which Yahweh had burnt after she had inspected Mary's hymen, intact, after birth.<sup>64</sup> In the Acts of Thomas, Jesus sold a reluctant disciple into slavery as a strategy to take the Gospel to India.<sup>65</sup>

### Manichaeans

Mani, our second messenger, lived in Persian-controlled Babylonia in the third century. After receiving revelations, Mani founded Manichaeism, encouraging followers to seek purity before the backdrop of a cosmic struggle between light and darkness. For Mani, Jesus was only divine. Manichaean doctrine recognized three Jesus figures—to the irritation of the fourth-century Augustine, a convert from that religion to Christianity, who had to ask, "Again, tell us how many Christs you say there are?" First, the Jesus of Splendour, associated with kindness, revealed to Adam that his soul was of divine origin but, mixed with matter, had become imprisoned in his body. Second, the Suffering Jesus lived in all plants and even stones, mystically crucified on a "cross of light" that was capable of feeling pain. This complicated the diets of the strictest Manichaeans. When one of Mani's followers nevertheless harvested vegetables, they cried "just like human beings and like children. Woe, woe! Blood streamed down from the place, which had been struck by the sickle in his hands, and they screamed with human voices as the blows fell."<sup>66</sup> The third Jesus was the historical prophet, Jesus the Messiah, who was the son of Yahweh by virtue of his baptism—the

64 "The Protoevangelium of James," in Scheelmecher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, I, 434–34.

65 "Acts of Thomas," in Scheelmecher, ed., *New Testament Apocrypha*, II, 339–40.

66 Ludwig Koenen and Cornelia Römer, ed., *Der Kölner Mani-Kodex: Über das Werden seines Leibes* (Opladen: Westdeutscher, 1988), 7. See Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*; Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia and China* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Samuel N. C. Lieu, "'My Church is Superior...': Mani's Missionary Statement in Coptic and Middle Persian," in *Coptica-Gnostica-Manichaica*, ed. Louis Painchaud and Paul-Hubert Poirier (Quebec: Laval UP, 2006), 519–27; Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Nestorian Angels and Other Christian and Manichaean Remains on the South China Coast," in *Walls and Frontiers in Inner Asian History*, ed. Samuel N. C. Lieu and Craig Benjamin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2002), 1–17; Eugen Rose, *Die Manichäische Christologie* (Wiesbaden: O. Harrasowitz, 1979); Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, ed., *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (Scranton: HarperCollins, 1993); John C. Reeves, *Prolegomena to a History of Islamicate Manichaeism* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2011); Ernst Waldschmidt and Wolfgang Lentz, *Die Stellung Jesu im Manichäismus* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1926); Alphonse Mingana, *The Early Spread of Christianity in Central Asia and the Far East* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1925); Paul Pelliot, "Chrétiens d'Asie centrale et d'extrême-Orient," *T'oung Pao* 15 (1914): 623–44.

idea of a virgin birth was disgusting—and appeared to die on the physical cross, like the Muslims’ Jesus. All three could blend together. Some saw two Jesus figures, others one with different aspects.<sup>67</sup>

In practice, the Manichaeian denial of Jesus’s human nature could be overshadowed by other priorities, such as harmlessness and vegetarianism. In the Near West, Christians traditionally used various tests to identify hidden Manichaeians, including meat-eating and ant-murdering, for a true Manichaeian would not be able to kill an ant.<sup>68</sup> Augustine, missing the point, could tolerate ascetic vegetarianism, but denounced the excessively delicious vegetarian meals Manichaeians prepared to avoid harming animals.<sup>69</sup>

Among his many roles, Mani recognized himself, alongside Paul, as one of Jesus’s apostles, well positioned to spread his Gospel. Growing up in Babylon, at the heart of a nexus of trade networks linking the Near West to its wider world, Mani knew about many traditions: “Wisdom and deeds have always from time to time been brought to mankind by the messengers of God. So in one age they have been brought by the messenger, called Buddha, to India, in another by Zarâdusht to Persia, in another by Jesus to the West.”<sup>70</sup> Mani, however, self-consciously developed his own to be more global and universal:

He who has his Church in the West, he and his Church have not reached the East: the choice of him who has chosen his Church in the East has not come to the West [...] But my hope, mine, will go towards the West, and she will go also towards the East. And they shall hear the voice of her message in all languages, and shall proclaim her in all cities. My Church is superior in this first point to previous churches, for these previous churches were chosen

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67 H. J. Klimkeit, “Manichaeism and Nestorian Christianity,” in *The Age of Achievement: A.D. 750 to the End of the Fifteenth Century, Part 2, The Achievements*, ed. C. E. Bosworth and M. S. Asimov, History of Civilizations of Central Asia 4 (Paris: UNESCO, 2000), 69–81 (69).

68 For the case of the fourth-century Persian Christian saint Aeithala, who asked a convert from Manichaeism to confirm his Christian acceptance of murder by killing an ant, see Hippolyte Delehayé, ed., *Les versions grecques des Actes des martyrs persans sous Sapor II*, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, 50 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1907), II, 511–12.

69 Augustine of Hippo, *Opera Omnia I*, in *Patrologia Latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris: Garnier, 1877), XXXII, col. 1357.

70 Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, ed. and trans. Edward Sachau (London: Allen, 1879), 190.



in particular countries and in particular cities. My Church, mine shall spread in all cities and my Gospel shall touch every country.<sup>71</sup>

He travelled widely, and in Baluchistan the king praised Mani as a Buddha.<sup>72</sup>

As the Mani subcult moved east, its Jesus figures also converged with various Buddhas. The second, Suffering, Jesus merged with the Buddha Vairocana. According to one medieval Turkish text, “The essence of the Buddha Vairocana is everything: earth, mountains, stone, sand, the water of streams and rivers, all ponds, brooks and lakes, all plants and trees, all living beings and men.” The third Jesus, the Messiah, sometimes became the Buddha Maitreya, and the idea of Jesus crucified in all living, and some non-living, things also came to influence Buddhism. Jesus’s Crucifixion, in fact, came to be referred to as his “parinirvana,” his final liberation from cyclical existence.<sup>73</sup>

Visual evidence of this Jesus convergence endures in the Himalayas. At Alchi in Ladakh, on the south bank of the upper Indus River, an image of Jesus as the Buddha of Blood (Akshobhya 阿闍) adorned the walls of a three-storey temple. In 1400, it was already a few centuries old. This Jesus looks Buddhist, but the number of crosses suggests otherwise. Instead of Akshobhya’s usual thunderbolt, this Jesus-Akshobhya has a Cross of Light (see Fig. 3.3). Vairocana, we would expect from his own convergence with Jesus, also has crosses. Nearby, Amitabha Buddha has a white cross of his own, and is paired with the sun, possibly in contrast to the common association of the moon with Jesus.<sup>74</sup>

71 James Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337* (London: SPCK, 1968), 282.

72 Jason BeDuhn, “Parallels between Coptic and Iranian Kephalaia: Goundesh and the King of Touran,” in *Mani at the Court of the Persian Kings*, ed. Iain Gardner, Jason BeDuhn, and Paul Dilley (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 52–74 (56–57).

73 Mary Boyce, *A Reader in Manichaean Middle Persian and Parthian* (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 127; Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 126–27, 251; Klimkeit, ed., *Gnosis on the Silk Road*, 63–78; Peter Zieme, “Uigurische Steuerbefreiungsurkunden für buddhistische Klöster,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 8 (1981): 237–63 (242).

74 Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, “Vairocana und das Lichtkreuz. Manichäische Elemente in der Kunst von Alchi (West Tibet),” *Zentralasiatische Studien* 13 (1979): 359–99 (376–78); Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, “Das Kreuzessymbol in der zentralasiatischen Religionsbegegnung,” *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 31 (1979): 99–115 (112–15); Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Manichaean Art and Calligraphy* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 32–33; Peter Van Ham and Amy Heller, *Alchi: Treasure of the Himalayas* (Munich: Hirmer Publishers, 2019), 284–85. For a more skeptical approach, see Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia*, 54–56. Pratapaditya Pal and Lionel Fournier, *A Buddhist Paradise: The Murals of Alchi Western Himalayas* (New Delhi: Ravi Kumar, 1982), S70.

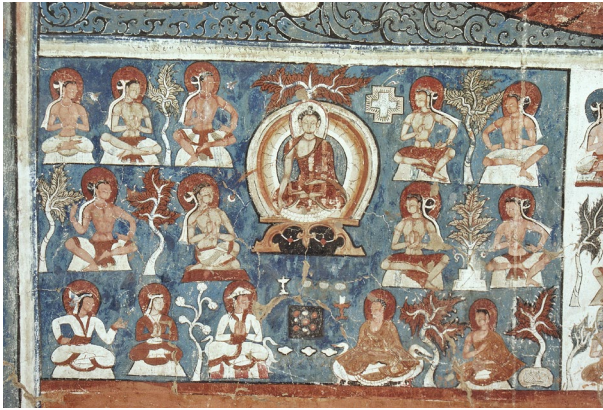


Fig. 3.3 Akshobhya in His Eastern Paradise (late eleventh century), Alchi Monastery, Regents of the University of Michigan, Department of the History of Art, Visual Resources Collections. All rights reserved.

The Manichaeans in China,<sup>75</sup> with their centre at the trading entrepôt of Quanzhou, were called, pejoratively, “vegetarian demon worshippers” 喫菜事魔 (the worshippers were vegetarian, not the demons).<sup>76</sup> The identification of Jesus as a, or the, Buddha was apparently complete—medieval records refer to the Buddha Yishu 夷数, a translation of Isho ܝܫܘܥ, the Eastern Syriac pronunciation of Jesus’s name.<sup>77</sup> Manichaeans were denounced by

- 75 Peter Bryder, *The Chinese Transformation of Manichaeism: A Study of Chinese Manichaeism Terminology* (n.p.: Plus Ultra, 1985); Hans-J. Klimkeit, “Jesus’ Entry into Parinirvāṇa: Manichaean Identity in Buddhist Central Asia,” *Numen* 33 (1986): 225–40.
- 76 “喫菜事魔” occurs in (1) 宋名臣言行錄, 卷十七 (“Words and Deeds of Famous Officials of the Song Dynasty,” vol. XVII, *Chinese Philosophy Texts Electronic Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=606510>); (2) 佛祖統紀第四十八 [0430c28] and [0431a17] (“The Records of the Buddha,” vol. XLVIII, *CBETA Chinese Tripitaka*, [http://tripitaka.ceta.org/T49n2035\\_048](http://tripitaka.ceta.org/T49n2035_048)); and (3) 廬山蓮宗寶鑑念佛正論卷第十(二十五章) [0349b19] (“Lushan Lotus Sect Treasure Book,” vol. X, *CBETA Chinese Tripitaka*, [http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T47n1973\\_010](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T47n1973_010)). See Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 245. Google Translate renders “喫菜事魔” as “foodie”!
- 77 “夷数佛” occurs in (1) 宋会要辑稿, ed. 徐松, 第一百六十五册, 刑法二(上) (“Collected Drafts of the Statutes of the Song Dynasty, ed. Xu Song (1781–1848), fasc. 165, Song Huiyao Collection,” vol. CLXV, Criminal Law II (Part 1), *Chinese Philosophy Texts Electronic Project*, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=441491>); and (2) 摩尼教下部讚 (“Part 2 of Manichaeism,” vol. I, *CBETA Chinese Tripitaka*, [http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T54n2140\\_001](http://tripitaka.cbeta.org/T54n2140_001)). For a translation of (2) see Tsui Chi, trans., “摩尼教下部讚 Mo Ni Chiao Hsia Pu Tsan: The Lower (Second?) Section of the Manichaean Hymns,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11 (1943): 174–219. For the Syriac, see Jingyi Ji, *Encounters Between Chinese Culture and Christianity: A Hermeneutical Perspective* (Berlin: Hopf, 2007), 39. The Chinese name for Jesus literally means “barbarian

a twelfth-century literatus as worshipping Jesus under the titles “Flesh Buddha,” “Bone Buddha,” “Blood Buddha.”<sup>78</sup> This was not a purely external insult; one Manichaean Chinese scroll itself referred to the “Jesus of flesh and blood.”<sup>79</sup> At the same time, a thirteenth-century Daoist scoffed at the idea that the Manichaean Jesus and Cross of Light was the Buddha Vairocana.<sup>80</sup> In 1292, Marco Polo (ca. 1254–1324) encountered Manichaeans in Fujian, but misidentified them as Catholic Christians, despite Nestorian Christians and Buddhists each trying to claim the ambiguous group for themselves. In the confusion, those Manichaeans gamely acquiesced to Marco Polo’s insistence, and agreed that they were probably Catholic.<sup>81</sup>

One ca. 1200 scroll, a painting on silk, depicts the Manichaean Jesus sitting in lotus position on a tiered lotus throne, under a halo under a canopy (see Fig. 3.4). His right hand gestures with deep-ken meaning, and his left holds a golden cross on a red stand.<sup>82</sup> This may correspond to a reference in a broadly contemporary source to a “Jesus Buddha Image” 夷數佛幀.<sup>83</sup> Over the centuries, the scroll found its way to the Seiunji Temple 棲雲寺 outside of Kōshū, Japan, where today its Jesus origins are forgotten.

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number,” perhaps an improvement of the earlier translation, also pronounced “Yishu,” that meant “moving rat” 移鼠. See Antonino Forte, “Deux études sur le manichéisme chinois,” *T’oung Pao*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series, 2. 59 (1973): 220–53; Lieu *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 218.

- 78 This is Lu Yu 陸游 (1125–1210), in a memorial from the 1160s, in the 渭南文集, at 5.8a (“Weinan Collected Works Volume 5,” vol. IX, *Chinese Philosophy Texts Electronic Project*, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=582&page=16&remap=gb>). See Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 245–46; Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in Central Asia*, 16, 54–55, 137.
- 79 歎五明文, 第二疊, in 摩尼教下部讚 T2140, 1276 (“Part 2 of Manichaeism,” vol. I, *CBETA Online Reader*, <https://cbetaonline.dila.edu.tw/zh/T2140>). Tsui Chi translates this as “the flesh and blood of Jesus,” but Lieu prefers “Jesus of the flesh and blood.” Tsui, trans., “摩尼教下部讚 Mo Ni Chiao Hsia Pu Tsan,” 198; Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 246. See Henri-Charles Puech, *Sur le manichéisme et autres essais* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 159–62.
- 80 白玉蟾, 海瓊白珍人语录, 9c (“Hai Qiong Bai’s Quotations,” *Chinese Philosophy Texts Electronic Project*, <https://ctext.org/library.pl?if=gb&file=100526&page=26&remap=gb>). See Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 210. Here Vairocana is 毗遮那. The title that Lieu gives appears to have swapped 珍 with its homonym 真.
- 81 Marco Polo, *The Description of the World*, ed. A. C. Moule and Paul Pelliot, 2 vols. (London: Routledge, 1938), I, 349–50. See Leonardo Olschki, “Manichaeism, Buddhism and Christianity in Marco Polo’s China,” *Zeitschrift der schweizerischen Gesellschaft für Asienkunde* 5 (1951): 1–21; Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Nestorians and Manichaeans on the South China Coast,” *Vigilae Christianae* 34 (1980): 71–88 (76–79).
- 82 See Zsuzsanna Gulácsi, “A Manichaean Portrait of the Buddha Jesus: Identifying a Twelfth-Thirteenth-century Chinese Painting from the Collection of Seiun-ji Zen Temple,” *Artibus Asiae* 69 (2009): 91–145.
- 83 徐松, ed., 宋会要辑稿.



Fig. 3.4 Buddha Jesus (ca. 1200), Seiunji Temple, Kōshū City. Wikimedia, public domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesus\\_as\\_a\\_Manichaeen\\_Prophet,\\_13th\\_century.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jesus_as_a_Manichaeen_Prophet,_13th_century.jpg)

A new dynasty in China brought disaster for the Manichaeans there. With the Mongol-Chinese Yuan dynasty in decline, sectarian rebel groups hoped that when the misery bottomed out a new Buddha would appear with the Manichaean Light, as the “Prince of Radiance” 明王, to issue in a new age. In 1368, with the help of the Buddha Maitreya, who had his own Jesus links, the rebel commander Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–98) established a new dynasty, with a name suggesting that these hopes were sincere and enduring: *Ming* 明, “radiant brilliance,” the same character as in the Manichaean title. Perhaps this was a reference to Confucian clarity, or to the Manichaean Light, and thus indirectly to Jesus. Strategically, Zhu Yuanzhang issued, unusually, no official explanation.<sup>84</sup> The establishment of the Ming Dynasty placed a taboo on the

84 John Dardess, “The Transformation of Messianic Revolt and the Founding of the Ming Dynasty,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970): 539–58 (539); Romeyn Taylor, “Social Origins of the Ming Dynasty,” *Monumenta Serica* 22 (1963): 1–78 (61).

character *ming* 明; people and places called Ming abandoned their names for alternatives that would not offend the imperial sensibility. Oblivious or proud, the Manichaeans, followers of the Religion of Light, of Mani and the Jesus of Splendour, did not surrender the name they had unwittingly usurped from the dynasty a half millennium before its founding. The emperor ordered the strangulation of the Manichaean leadership, and the flogging (“with a hundred strokes of the heavy baton”) and exile (“to a distance of 3,000 *li*”) of its rank and file. When they ceased to be a threat, the emperor revoked the persecution.<sup>85</sup>

So widely oppressed, the Manichaeans declined over the centuries. Language continued to present problems: Mani’s name was sometimes transliterated using a character that means demon 魔; in the West, his followers doubled his “n,” so that “Manni” would look less like the word “maniac.” In 1400, we still see some actual Manichaeans only in China; by 1600, only a single Manichaean shrine 草庵寺, near Quanzhou, was known to exist there. Perhaps traces of Manichaean beliefs endured among the Bogomils of Bulgaria and Serbia. The name loomed larger than the people: In the Far West, Church authorities conceptualized heresies with references to their founders, so the Poor of Lyons became called Waldensians after Valdes (Peter Waldo, ca. 1140–1205), and the Cathars became—with a bit of intelligent speculation—Manichaeans.<sup>86</sup> This decline was such that the Manichaeans make little appearance in this book beyond this chapter.

85 明律集解附例, quoted in É. Chavannes and P. Pelliot, “Un traité manichéen retrouvé en Chine [deuxième partie],” *Journal asiatique* 11.1 (1913): 368–69; 閩書, by the sixteenth-century scholar He Qiaoyuan 何喬遠, quoted in Paul Pelliot, “Les traditions manichéennes au Foukien,” *T’oung Pao* 22 (1923): 193–208 (198–99). See Hellmut Wilhelm, “On Ming Orthodoxy,” *Monumenta Serica* 29 (1970–71): 1–26; Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire*, 259–64.

86 Peter Biller, “Christians and Heretics,” in *Christianity in Western Europe c. 1100–c. 1500*, ed. Miri Rubin and Walter Simons, Cambridge History of Christianity 4 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2009), 170–86 (173), <https://doi.org/10.1017/chol9780521811064.014>; Peter Bryder, “...Where the Faint Traces of Manichaeism Disappear,” *Altorientalische Forschungen* 15 (1988): 201–08; Samuel N. C. Lieu, “Polemics against Manichaeism as a Subversive Cult in Sung China (A.D. c. 960–c. 1200),” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 62 (1979): 132–67; Victor N. Sharenkoff, *A Study of Manichaeism in Bulgaria* (New York: Columbia UP, 1927); Dimitri Obolensky, *The Bogomils: A Study in Balkan Neo-Manichaeism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1948); Steven Runciman, *The Medieval Manichee: A Study of the Christian Dualist Heresy* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1947).

## Muslims

Our third messenger, Muhammad, was born at the end of the sixth century in Arabia. According to some Christians, Muhammad started a new subcult because he was annoyed at having not been chosen as pope.<sup>87</sup> The reality was different: Muhammad's prophecy, given to him by Gabriel and recorded in the Qur'an, denounced any deviation from monotheism. Jesus, though a great prophet, was only human. Muhammad's new prophecy complemented and effectively replaced Jesus's. Unlike Paul or Mani, Muhammad was in no way subordinate to Jesus. Muhammad sealed—closed—the prophetic tradition, and the Qur'an complimented and replaced Jesus's teachings. Thus in the seventh century a new, Islamic branch of the Jesus cult emerged.

This human Jesus remained of importance in Islam.<sup>88</sup> The Qur'an included Jesus references in some ninety verses spread across fifteen chapters. We have seen Jesus traditions that Muslims shared with Christians. A number of Qur'anic traditions about Jesus were unique to Islam, as when Jesus brought down a food-laden table as an edible proof (*ayah*) of his prophethood.<sup>89</sup> Much of Islam's distinct understanding was not about what Jesus did, but about what he was.

Let us look first at the Qur'an's account.

Jesus was one of many messengers, and those before him have come and gone.<sup>90</sup> There was no essential distinction among them, and Jesus's name found itself on a longer list of prophets.<sup>91</sup> Extraordinarily, Yahweh raised Jesus to be the second prophet.<sup>92</sup> One of Jesus's roles was to prepare for Muhammad; another was to prepare for the end of the world.<sup>93</sup> All the prophets were mortal.<sup>94</sup> Jesus, unique among the prophets, was misunderstood by his followers, who distorted his message, but the Qur'an corrected this. Muhammad completed Jesus's prophecy.

87 Aziz Suryal Atiya, *The Crusade of Nicopolis* (London: Methuen, 1934), 122.

88 In later Muslim tradition, Jesus would be described as the "seal of the saints." See Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn 'Arabi*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Cambridge, UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 74–88, 116–29; Zachary Markwith, "Jesus and Christic Sanctity in Ibn 'Arabi and Early Islamic Spirituality," *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* 57 (2015): 85–114; Louis Massignon, *The Passion of Al-Hallaj, Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, trans. Herbert Mason, 4 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1982), III, 208–09.

89 Qur'an 5:111–14.

90 Qur'an 5:75.

91 Qur'an 2:137, 3:84, 4:164, 6:84–86.

92 Qur'an 2:253.

93 Qur'an 61:6.

94 Qur'an 2:136, 14:11.

The greatest distinction was the Muslim insistence that Yahweh was one, and therefore Jesus was not Yahweh. God was one, the creator. Polytheism was incompatible and offensive. The goal of all this was the straight, even path. The Qur'an emphasized monotheism and the better treatment for those economically or culturally marginalized. Those who believed in one God and lived good lives would be judged worthy of paradise.<sup>95</sup>

Jesus, therefore, was not "the third of three."<sup>96</sup> The Qur'an condemned the Christians' Incarnation as divine reproduction, and their Trinity as tritheism. Jesus and his mother, like normal created non-divine beings, ate food.<sup>97</sup> At one point, Yahweh directly asked Jesus, "Did you say to people, 'Take me and my mother as two gods alongside God?' Jesus replied, 'I would never say what I had no right to say—if I had said a such a thing You would have known it: You know all that is within me, though I do not know what is within You, You alone have full knowledge of things unseen.'"<sup>98</sup> These reasons and testimonial served to give disbelievers an opportunity to avoid the doom awaiting them—exile from the Garden, banishment to Hell.<sup>99</sup>

Jesus was not even the son of Yahweh.<sup>100</sup> Indeed, Yahweh was one, incomparable, and eternal, so he could not beget children.<sup>101</sup> It was not appropriate for Yahweh to have children, as he was far above that.<sup>102</sup> Such an outrageous statement, the Qur'an warned, "almost causes the heavens to be torn apart, the earth to split asunder, the mountains to crumble to pieces."<sup>103</sup> Just as the Christians claimed "sonship" for Jesus, some Jews also claimed sonship for the fifth-century priest Ezra. Here the Qur'an takes up a plain-ken argument: so many people making such a claim weakened it.<sup>104</sup> Moreover, how could Yahweh have a son if he has no spouse?<sup>105</sup> Yahweh admonished Muhammad to promise to be the first to worship the son of Yahweh should one exist. That Muhammad nevertheless worshiped no son proved that none existed.<sup>106</sup> In the 1480s, Christian reports from Jerusalem and Egypt described contemporary Muslim arguments against the divine sonship of Jesus: the existence of a son of

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95 Qur'an 19:36, 42:15, 43:64.

96 Qur'an 5:73, 4:171.

97 Qur'an 5:75.

98 Qur'an 5:116.

99 Qur'an 5:72.

100 Qur'an 4:171.

101 Qur'an 112:1–3.

102 Qur'an 19:35.

103 Qur'an 19:90.

104 Qur'an 9:30.

105 Qur'an 6:101.

106 Qur'an 43:81.

God created the possibility of that son rebelling against his father, thus dividing the faithful, and Muhammad had stated that Jesus himself denied the sonship.<sup>107</sup>

Yahweh was angry that Christians divided Him into multiple beings, and that this division in turn divided his followers. He commanded Jesus and the other prophets to uphold the faith and work against creating factions, for the existence of such divisions contradicted the power of Yahweh: Christians, for example, could not have special status as “beloved” since that would obstruct the power of Yahweh to forgive and punish freely.<sup>108</sup>

Another disagreement with Christian truth concerned whether Jesus had died. Yahweh created Jesus, and had the power to destroy him,<sup>109</sup> but from the Muslim perspective, a great prophet could not be crucified ignobly, and so we know that he was not crucified. Christian Morgenstern (1871–1914) wrote a poem entitled “Die unmögliche Tatsache” [The Impossible Fact] about a man fatally struck by a car, who survives his death only because he was somewhere cars were forbidden. He could not have been killed by a car (legally), and so he was not killed by a car (biologically). The humour works because of the disjunction between the legal and the biological. In the case of the Muslims’ Jesus, the contrast comes between the will of Yahweh and biology; unlike the motor-vehicle code, the will of Yahweh is not restricted to a single sphere, and so his deep-ken authority overrides the plain-ken conditions of biology. The details here varied among different Muslims. Some, a minority, found the Qur’an’s description (surah 4) compatible with a later natural death for Jesus, and the tiniest of minorities even allowed for his death on the cross. Opinions differed on who was crucified in Jesus’s place, with Judas or Simon of Cyrene the most frequently proposed candidates.<sup>110</sup>

If we go beyond the Qur’an to look specifically at Muslim apocrypha, the emphasis shifts from Jesus’s humanity to his asceticism. We also see a greater diversity, for the apocryphal Jesus changed tenor across time and genre in the Muslim sources: he was more apocalyptic in the hadith—the collection of handed-down traditions about Muhammad—yet more austere in the Tales of

107 Denis-Charles Godefroy-Méniglaize, ed., *Voyage de George de Lengherand* (Mons: Masquillier and Dequesne, 1861), 181.

108 Qur’an 5:18, 21:93, 42:13, 43:65.

109 Qur’an 5:17.

110 Qur’an 3:48, 4:156–57; D8; D40–42; A128. Daniel A. Madigan, “Themes and Topics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur’an*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2006), 79–96 (89), <https://doi.org/10.1017/ccol0521831601.005>; W. Richard Oakes, Jr., “The Cross of Christ: Islamic Perspectives” (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2013), <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/429710455.pdf>. Manichaeans also claim that Jesus avoided crucifixion by a last-minute substitution, whereby the one executed was the son of the widow of Nain, or even the devil. See David Sox, *The Gospel of Barnabas* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1984), 99.



the Prophet. In the ninth century, he was more urbane, but by the thirteenth, he fought against straight-laced legalists. These trends in the Muslims' Jesus echoed trends in wider Muslim society, such as the conflicts between scholars and Sufi mystics.<sup>111</sup>

"In times of distress," Jesus "was happy, and in times of ease he was sad,"<sup>112</sup> when he might weep until tears soaked his beard.<sup>113</sup> Explaining that sane people did not joke around, Jesus rejected worldly priorities.<sup>114</sup> When asked what his greatest feat was, Jesus replied, "Leaving alone that which does not concern me."<sup>115</sup> In his asceticism, Jesus owned only a cup and a comb, but abandoned both upon noticing others using their fingers as alternatives.<sup>116</sup> Jesus's asceticism justified the Sufis' own asceticism.<sup>117</sup>

Sometimes the Muslims' Jesus could be surprisingly worldly. When Jesus met a man wanting to divorce his wrinkled wife, he simply advised her to diet, "for when food piles up in the stomach and grows excessive, the face loses its smoothness." When she did eat less, her face shed its wrinkles and the marriage was saved.<sup>118</sup> Jesus advised washing food before cooking it, and sleeping with the mouth open to allow gas to escape.<sup>119</sup> This passage speaks to the plain ken; nothing here invites the deep ken to find subtle meaning in the flatulence.

Perhaps such advice reflected Jesus's kindness. Multiple stories remembered Jesus helping a cow give birth.<sup>120</sup> One man spent three hundred years worshipping Yahweh between the graves of his parents and hoping to meet Jesus; Jesus arrived, gave his thigh to the dying man as a pillow, and draped his cloak over the corpse.<sup>121</sup> Jesus was also a witness to the power of the love of Yahweh. In one instance, he refused to grant someone an atom's weight of Yahweh's love, as the intensity of that would be more than the man could bear; Jesus agreed to give a half-atom's weight of Yahweh-love to the man, who, upon receiving it, went mad and fled into the mountains.<sup>122</sup>

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111 Kh 79, 202. See Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1994), 210–15.

112 Kh135.

113 D64; A201.

114 Kh163.

115 Kh88.

116 Kh222.

117 Suleiman A. Mourad, "A Twelfth-Century Muslim Biography of Jesus," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 7 (1996): 39–45 (43–44), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596419608721066>

118 Kh152.

119 Kh154.

120 Kh103, Kh108.

121 D66–67; A222.

122 Kh238; D63; A189.

Later theologians continued the Qur'an's defence of Jesus's humanity. 'Abd al-Jabbar (935–1025), a magistrate at Rey, today a district of Tehran, noted that Jesus ate and defecated, and therefore could not be divine.<sup>123</sup> Ibn Hazm (994–1064) and al-Ghazali (ca. 1058–1111) used the gospels' characterization of Jesus not having knowledge of the Last Hour to prove his lack of divinity.<sup>124</sup>

These theologians also concentrated their attention on the latter parts of Jesus's life. Among opinions about Jesus's death, most sided with al-Tabari's (839–923) declaration that Jesus would only die once, in the future.<sup>125</sup> The Passion account of Ibn Kathir (ca. 1300–73) offered a number of details. In it, the Jews convinced the astrologer-king of Damascus to direct the governor of Jerusalem to arrest and crucify Jesus. A delegation of Jews and soldiers surrounded his house. Inside, Jesus asked his disciples, "Who among you would consent to bear my likeness and be my companion in paradise?" The sole volunteer was so young that Jesus only accepted his offer the third time it was tendered.<sup>126</sup> Jesus then ascended to heaven through a sudden gap in the ceiling, and the disciples surrendered the youth to the authorities, who executed him. Ibn Kathir noted, without confidence, that Mary might have wept at the cross, "but God knows best." He sniffed that the switch succeeded, despite the fact that some of the disciples had seen Jesus go through the roof, because later Christians were too stupid to trust eyewitnesses.<sup>127</sup>

The Ascension of Jesus could challenge Muslims because Muhammad, the greater prophet, merely died, a lesser fate. Probably inspired by Christian images of Jesus enthroned in Heaven, Muslims began asserting that Muhammad, or at least his soul (*ruh*), had also ascended to Heaven. Authorities differed in their opinions. Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib (642–715) held that Muhammad was resurrected forty days after his burial, a tradition cited in our period, as by al-Samhudi

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123 'Abd al-Jabbār, *The Critique of Christian Origins*, trans. Gabriel Said Reynolds and Samir Khalil Samir (Provo: BYU Press, 2010), 32–35 (part 2, 29–64), <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405825>; Gabriel Said Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian in the Sectarian Milieu: 'Abd al-Jabbār and the 'Critique of Christian Origins'* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2004), 177, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789047405825>

124 *Pace* Qur'an 43:61.

125 Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1991), 132.

126 Al-Suyuti, citing Ibn Abbas (619–87), reported that Jesus accepted a third volunteer, after rejecting the first two. See Todd Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an: A Study in the History of Muslim Thought* (New York: Oneworld Publications, 2014), 113.

127 Mahmoud Ayyoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology, 2: The Death of Jesus—Reality or Illusion?," *The Muslim World* 10 (1980): 91–121 (100), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-1913.1980.tb03405.x>; Lawson, *The Crucifixion and the Qur'an*, 111; Madigan, "Themes and Topics," 89.

(1440–1506). Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328) insisted Muhammad was absolutely dead and incapable of helping anyone. On the other extreme, Jalal-al-Din al-Suyuti (1445–1505) suggested that Muhammad was now everywhere at once. The convert-from-Christianity ‘Abd Allah al-Tarjuman (1355–1423) criticized the Christian argument that Jesus must be God because he ascended into heaven, since Enoch and Elias had also ascended into heaven, but were not God.<sup>128</sup>

These same theologians worked out the specifics of Jesus’s eschatological role. Many held that Jesus would return from heaven to defeat the Antichrist and correct the Christians—by destroying crosses, exterminating pigs, and helping them become true Muslims. He then would retire, until he died of natural causes, and would be buried at the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina.<sup>129</sup> Often this was an unknown future, but Ibn ‘Asakir (ca. 1105–75) expected Jesus to return soon, to fight the contemporary crusaders.

These deeds were sometimes linked to a shadowy eschatological figure called the “Mahdi.” Jesus’s relationship with the Mahdi changed over time. Before our period, some thought Jesus himself was the Mahdi, but over the centuries the Mahdi became understood as a descendant of Muhammad, making identity with Jesus chronologically impossible to the Muslim plain-ken sensibility. Especially in the Shi’a branch of Islam, Jesus would herald the Mahdi’s return. The eminent scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), one of the last great sociologists, believed Jesus and the Mahdi were distinct, but had different theories of whether they descend together or separately, and whether the Mahdi would help Jesus kill the Antichrist.<sup>130</sup>

128 Miguel de Epalza, *La Tuhfa, autobiografía y polémica islámica contra el cristianismo de Abdallah al-Taryuman (fray Anselmo Turmeda)* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1971), 344–45, 444; Fritz Meier, “A Resurrection of Muhammad in Suyūṭī,” in *Essays on Islamic piety and Mysticism*, trans. John O’Kane (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 505–47 (509, 514, 538).

129 Qur’an 43:61. Gerald T. Elmore, “The ‘Millennial’ Motif in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s *Book of the Fabulous Gryphon*,” *The Journal of Religion* 81 (2001): 410–37 (423), <https://doi.org/10.1086/490880>; Sebald Hofbeck, “Christological Doctrines in Islam,” in *Laeta Dies: 50 Jahre Studienkolleg St. Benedikt*, ed. Stephan Amon and Ulrich Märzhäuser (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag, 1968), 185; Zeki Saritoprak, “The Legend of al-Dajjāl (Antichrist): The Personification of Evil in the Islamic Tradition,” *Muslim World* 93 (2003): 291–307, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-1913.00024>

130 Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, 3 vols. (New York: Pantheon, 1958), III, 156–57, 184–86, 192–95 (ch. 111, sec. 51). See Zafar Ishaq Ansari, “Taftāzānī’s Views of *taklīf*, *ḡabr* and *qadar*: A Note of the Development of Islamic Theological Doctrines,” *Arabica* 16 (1969): 65–78; Gabriel Said Reynolds, “Jesus, the Qā’im and the End of the World,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 75 (2001): 55–86; Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004), 60–70, <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195156498.001.0001>; Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood*

Medieval Muslims were horrified both by Christianity's distorted version of truth and by its division into various subcults. They believed that the falsehood and the division encouraged each other. Ibn Taymiyya mocked the "muddled, differing, and contradictory" Christology of the Christians as being "neither reasonable nor indicated by any sacred book," which caused the splintering of their subcult, with "each sect declaring the others unbelievers."<sup>131</sup>

A number of Muslim thinkers used the plain ken to explain these catastrophes. 'Abd al-Jabbar launched a plain-ken attack on the gospels' Crucifixion by appealing to various skepticisms: humans were flawed witnesses, and copyists flawed transmitters. He ended up carefully staying within cautious language ("might have changed" "it was possible" "the validity of which [...] is unknown"). He even argued that because historically Christians were not circumcised, Jesus's circumcision proved that he was not Christian. 'Abd al-Jabbar saw the Trinity as merely a reflection of the three facets of the mind in Roman psychology, that is, intellect, perceiver, and perceived. Several theologians saw Christianity as a false version of Jesus's teaching that had been Hellenized through the course of history.<sup>132</sup>

Already in the eleventh century Ibn Hazm and al-Ghazali were writing about the subcults of Christianity. Abu Ishak Ahmad al-Tha'labi (d. 1035) blamed Paul for perverting the Islamic message of Jesus, and thus engineering this division. In the twelfth century, al-Shahrastani (1086–1153) argued that Paul had created the divisions by corrupting the actual teachings of Jesus, while Ibn 'Asakir (1105–75) instead put the blame on Satan. Similarly, al-Suyuti used three Crucifixion volunteers to clarify the subsequent history by linking them to the three kinds of believers: the rejected volunteers led to the Jacobites and Nestorians, while the volunteer whom Jesus accepted generated the Muslims.<sup>133</sup>

To better understand this process, we can return to the account of 'Abd al-Jabbar, whose plain ken saw Paul, Mani, and Constantine conspiring against Jesus.<sup>134</sup> In this version, the "wicked and evil" Paul thrived on dissension. After

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*in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-'Arabi's Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 175–79; Hofbeck, "Christological Doctrines in Islam," 185.

131 Ibn Taymiyya, *A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity: Ibn Taymiyya's al-Jawab al-sahih*, trans. Thomas F. Michel (Delmar, NY: Caravan Books, 1999), 308.

132 'Abd al-Jabbar, *The Critique of Christian Origins*, 105. See George F. Hourani, *Reason and Tradition in Islamic Ethics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1985), 109–17; Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian*, 128–29, 131, 177, 227.

133 Hofbeck, "Christological Doctrines in Islam," 186–91; Mourad, "Twelfth-Century Muslim Biography," 42; Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian*, 164–65; W. Montgomery Watt, "Ash-Shahrastani's Account of Christian Doctrine," *Islamochristiana* 9 (1983): 249–59.

134 *Tathbit dala'il al-nubuwwa* [Confirmation of the Proofs of Prophecy] is 'Abd al-Jabbar's work. Reynolds calls the part of it dealing with Christianity "the

persecuting Christians, he became a Christian himself to engineer a split between the Jews and Christians. The Jews surrendered him to the Roman authorities, whom he then turned against the Jews. By convincing the Roman Christians to ignore Jewish dietary laws and their circumcision requirement, Paul degraded Christianity into a mere Romanism. "If you scrutinize the matter," 'Abd al-Jabbar explained, "you will find that the Christians became Romans and fell back to the religions of the Romans. You will not find that the Romans became Christians." Similarly, Constantine "made an outward [show] of revering Christ and the Cross" but made no substantial change in the Roman religion, and Mani, "a liar and a deceiver," gave the Persians a Christianity watered down into Persianism. This was a plain-ken view of religion: Paul, Constantine, and Mani, driven by their own human psychologies, created false religions that only dimly reflected any deep-ken truth. In contrast, Jesus was beyond plain-ken expectations and "did not act in any way like us his whole life long." With a plain ken, 'Abd al-Jabbar recognized the gaps between Jesus and Christianity, and then intentionalized those differences and located them within history.<sup>135</sup> We will see more examples of this precocious Muslim plain ken when we examine canon (see Chapter 11).

In contrast, Muhammad ibn Yusuf al-Sanusi (ca. 1429–90) took a more deep-ken and philosophical approach. God and Jesus could not both be divine, because unity and plurality could not exist together. To refute the statement that some aspect of God united itself to the human nature of Jesus, al-Sanusi mostly recycled old arguments. The only explanation he thought might be plausible was to understand this union as the attachment of a human appearance (the "accident") to a divine substance, but even this he found impossible to reconcile with the Christian metaphysical understanding of the Trinity. Al-Sanusi shows that the medieval Islamic plain ken was never dominant enough to prevent later deep-ken argumentation.<sup>136</sup>

## Envoi

This, then, are the understandings of Jesus that had evolved by 1400. Muslims had the Jesus of the Qur'an, and Christians had the Jesus of the Bible. Each group might have been surprised by the amount of overlap, or horrified by the fundamental differences. Beyond these canonical accounts, we confront a riot of Muslim, Christian, and Manichaean apocrypha using additional knowledge to

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Critique."

135 'Abd al-Jabbār, *The Critique of Christian Origins*, 90–91, 100–09, 119–21. See Reynolds, *A Muslim Theologian*, 108–13, 163.

136 Hofbeck, "Christological Doctrines in Islam," 193–94.

flesh out, or fill holes in, the canons—such as explaining why Mary went to Egypt with a story about neighbours accusing Jesus of being a sorcerer and a bully.

Such accounts are today not well known to Jesus cultists, who would be more likely to dismiss them as medieval fantasy than to value them as new information. Today, even some historians outside the Jesus cult distinguish between the true, “historical” Jesus and such fantastic representations of him, which tell us more about the society that promulgated them than about the actual Jesus. Most cultists in 1400 would, perhaps, have been more nuanced in their thought: less hostile to the unlikely, and less certain of the accepted.

The idea of questing for a true, historical Jesus was neither contemplated, nor pursued. That is a plain-ken attitude that developed over the period this project studies. To be candid, my own plain-ken instincts push me to seek a historical Jesus lurking buried beneath the diversity of the details presented here, to find truth in accounts that are oldest or most widely spread or shared, to roll back the centuries to allow him to emerge. We do occasionally meet pre-1400 thinkers who approached the Jesus cult with the plain ken. Even if we disagree with his priorities and speculations, ‘Abd al-Jabbar wrote with a plain ken intelligible to a twenty-first-century historian.