



**JEZUS OF NAZARETH WAS CALLED JESUS CHRIST BY HIS CHRISTIAN FOLLOWERS. HE WAS A JEWISH RELIGIOUS TEACHER ABOUT WHOM THE NEW TESTAMENT TELLS US THAT HE, AROUND THE YEAR 30 CE, WOULD HAVE BEEN ACTIVE IN THE PREVIOUSLY KNOWN GALILEA AND JUDAH. HE IS THE CENTRAL FIGURE IN CHRISTIANITY AND IS CONSIDERED THE SON OF GOD BY BELIEVING CHRISTIANS.**

## **Jesus Christ, a critical observation**

**By Drs. Willy Dezutter**

Whenever one chooses to believe what is written in the Bible or gullibly accepts the announcements from the Vatican and the protestant synods, there is no problem. Whenever one combines religious truths combined with historic facts, any further research is unnecessary.

For the opposite we refer you to the book of Prof. Johan Braeckman (Ghent University) 'DARWINS MOORDBEKENTENIS. DE ONTWIKKELING VAN HET DENKEN VAN CHARLES DARWIN'. (Nieuwezijds, 2001, 2008). (Darwin's Murder confession, the development of the thinking of Charles Darwin) Whenever one is blind to historical scientific facts the supernatural phenomena such as wonders will be easy to take for granted. Subjectivity always keeps a personal opinion or view. Also, when a number of people have observed something or have experienced what can be adopted by other people, such as apparitions of Mary in a cave - is this considered a subjective experience? Those psychological experiences - or is it a psychiatric disorder? - exist really, but we have personally never encountered them. We get the best quote from 'the GOD DELUSION ' (Amsterdam, 2006, Second Edition, p. 14) by the acclaimed Richard Dawkins: "if one person is suffering from delusions, it's called 'insanity'. When many people at the same time suffer from delusions that's called religion'. We especially see suffering and evil in this world. An infinitely good and Almighty god would have difficulty tolerating such a thing in his creation. And a personal meeting with a god or one of his messengers has never happen to us, however large the desire was. Therefore we are left with only the scientific method as a starting point for our research.

## The First Critics

The historical reliability of the Gospels was the central point in the initial phase of the historical-critical school. In the 18th century, during the age of enlightenment, there emerged in Germany, under Lutheran Church historians, the historical-critical study of the Bible



About the authenticity of the Gospels are different views. The modern Bible exegesis depends above all on the two sources theory. That theory says that Matthew and Luke have been added later and that both of them independently of each other are based on the Gospel of Mark. The Gospel of John would according to this theory, be considered a theological construction and is, according to most researchers not written by John. It was of a later date (90-110). The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke do not match and point both to the ties of Jesus with David from the Old Testament (O.T.). The four Gospels also disagree about the birth and death of Jesus. Also, there is hardly any historical-biographical information to be found on the twelve apostles, the disciples of Jesus

The purpose of the first historical-critical research was to prove initially that Luther was right against Rome. Martin Luther (1483-1546) was a German religious reformer. He did his job so well that his books in Leuven in 1520 created quite a bonfire! His translation of the New Testament (N.T.) appeared in 1522 in German. He used the recent critical edition of Erasmus. Desiderius Erasmus (c. 1466-1536) published a Greek version of the N.T. with clear improvements on the Vulgate of the Roman Catholic Church. In Luther's translation of the O.T. from 1534 the Apocrypha was omitted. Apocryphal is the term used to describe certain books which qualified to be regarded as part of the Bible, but were not included in the canon of the Bible. That is why Gospels such as the 'Gospel of Thomas' and the 'Gospel of Judas' belong to the Apocrypha.

But there are also Apocryphal books in the N.T. which were rejected for various reasons, by the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches. Luther's theorem that "every believer has the right to explain the Bible in his own way" of course tested the teaching authority from Rome.

The founder of the ' historical- critical Schriftforschung ' was Johann Salomo Semler (1725-1791). His master work was the ABHANDLUNG VON FREIER UNTERSUCHUNG DES CANON ', 4 vols, 1771-1775. In it he came to the conclusion that the selection of the canon might have been by chance. The word of God and the Bible are to him two different things. Semler is still hanging on to Jesus as a revelation of God.

The German Deist Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694-1768) went one step further. As the champion of the ' natürliche Religion ' meant that the actual (true) message could not be proclaimed at the time it developed and was therefore falsified by Christianity. He posthumously became known through the publication of his ' APOLOGY ' by the German philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781). Miracles and other supernatural elements were rejected by Reimarus and Lessing. In addition, they argued that man needed no revelation. They concentrated on the ethical character of religion, rather than going to the revelation of faith. In Jesus this actual ethical religious meaning took shape. Also, David Hume (1711-1776), the Scottish philosopher from the time of the Enlightenment, concluded that the supernatural events about Jesus were not true. Like Hume, Reimarus too found that the divinity of Jesus was an ideological projection of the Church.

### **The ' LEBEN JESU FORSCHUNG '**

The principal investigator from the 19th century was David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874). In 1835-1836 he issued his ' LEBEN JESU KRITISCH BEARBEITET '. In it he called the life course of Jesus a mythological embellished life of a Jewish rabbi. He rejected all supernatural and messianic elements from the Gospels. Though he explained the divinity of Jesus as a result of a historic mythologising-process and not as conscious manipulation. The research quite in line with that of Strauss was done in the 19th century and was called, the ' Leben Jesu Forschung '. Similar to David Strauss, Bruno Bauer (1809-1882) deserves mentioning. This German theologian, philosopher and historian also investigated the sources of the N.T. and came to the conclusion that early Christianity owed more to Greek philosophy (stoicism) than to Judaism. According to him, Jesus was a myth, created in the second century by borrowing from the Jewish, Greek and Roman theologies. That is reflected in his main work ' CHRIST UND DIE CÄSAREN ' (1877). The most influential figure remains Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) for whom God is a projection of human beings. He regarded religion as a compensation for the limitation and the finiteness of life. According to him, religion is nothing more than an illusion. His superb definition over the God concept we do not want to deny you.

**"God is created by men, on whom they project all their own happiness, enjoyment , personal human ideals, needs and wishes"**

The French philosopher and writer Ernest Renan (1823-1892) became best known for his hit ' VIE DE JÉSUS (1863). In it he argued that the life of Jesus should be written and examined in the same way as any other human being. We find ourselves now in good company. The entire ' Leben Jesu Forschung ' reminds us of Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) and his book "GESCHICHTE DER LEBEN-JESU-FORSCHUNG ' (1906). It is a study of earlier biographies of Jesus Christ. He puts himself largely on the side of Johannes Weiss (1863-1914) and his work ' JESU VOM REICHE GOTTES ' that SERMON (1892). Schweitzer came to the conclusion that Jesus is not so much known for his teachings than for his will power which is worth following . In the 20th century, the German philosopher and theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) continued the demythologizing further. He claimed that certain acts of salvation of Christ, such as the crucifixion, resurrection and Ascension are not rationally founded. Also the virgin birth was according to

him a myth, which required demythologizing as well as the entire eschatology (' day of reckoning ') of Christianity.

## The Historical Jesus

For any knowledge of Jesus we rely mainly on the four canonical Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John); as well as the Acts (of the Apostles). The book ' Acts ' is written by the same author as the Gospel of Luke and should be read as its sequel. It deals with the creation of the first community. And then we have the thirteen teaching letters of Paul (Tarsus, ca. 3-Rome, 64 or 67), his greatest propagandist and the actual founder of Christianity.

The data is very minor and mainly deals with the interpretation of the death of Jesus and the appearances of the risen Christ. But the latter we attribute to Apostolic proclamation and no longer to history. The Flemish theologian Edward Schillebeeckx wrote his influential work on: ' JESUS, the story of a living being ' (1974). This publication resulted in an investigation by Rome concerning his sanity because Schillebeeckx, as official Catholic theologian, had denied the resurrection as an objective event. It would be neglectful here to not mention the importance of the Swiss theologian Hans Küng who taught theological Dogma in Tübingen. Especially his book on papal infallibility brought him into collision with the Vatican.

Outside the N.T. the data is extremely scarce .In the "OLD HISTORY of the JEWS" by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (Jerusalem 17-Rome ca. 100) there appear only two passages about Jesus. The historicity of these two texts is however disputed by both historians and linguists. There are also a number of short entries. Tacitus, the great historian of the Roman Empire describes ca. 115 CE in his ' ANNALS ' how the Christians were held accountable by Emperor Nero for the great fire of the year 64. "They are named after Christ who under Tiberius was brought to death by Governor Pontius Pilate". Pliny the younger mentions the Christians in his "LETTERS to the EMPEROR '. The Roman historian Suetonius speaks in his Claudius-Biography about the agitator Chrestus. But as Chrestus occurred in Rome it is not at all sure that it is indeed about the Jew Jesus Christ. The satirist Lucian of Samosata in the 2nd century called Jesus "the crucified sophist".

These are the main extra-biblical sources. All those historians were no eye-witnesses and also make no mention of miracles, a resurrection or Ascension. So, our knowledge is solely based on the four Gospels. And Paul is also not a very reliable witness because he only met the risen Christ! Also the apocryphal Gospels bring us no historical information. Neither do the Dead Sea Scrolls. (Some discovered between 1947 and 1956 in caves in the Judean mountains on the west side of the Dead Sea).

The apocryphal writings deal primarily with the childhood of Jesus and are quite imaginative. Only the Thomas-Gospel (4th century) has points of contact with the synoptic tradition. The Gnostic Writings discovered in 1945 go back to a Greek original from the second century. It does not talk about the birth, life, nor the crucifixion or resurrection of Jesus. These Coptic writings are considered "Saying Gospels" of Jesus and do not have the form of a Gospel story. The Gospel of Judas too is a "Saying Gospel" and dates only from the second half of the 4th century.



THE NAME OF JESUS IS SEEN HERE IN A MONOGRAM WITH THREE INITIALS IHS, IN THE CENTER OF THE CIRCLE OF SUN RAYS

## **EXPLANATION OF THE NAME**

The name Jesus is an Anglicization from the Latin Iesus which is the Latinized form of the Greek Iesou̓s (pronunciation: Jèsous). This in turn is a Greek version of the Hebrew Yeshua, a later form of Yehoshua, whose direct English name is Joshua. The name Jesus means "God saves"/Yehoshua and was around the beginning of the Christian era a common Jewish name. He was also called Jesus of Nazareth or Jesus the Nazarene referring to the village in Galilee from which he came. (now Al-Nasira, an Arab city in Israel). His original call name, according to the Jewish custom, would have been Jesus, son of Joseph/Yeshua ben Josef (Hebrew). The Islamic name for Jesus, who is mentioned in the Koran as an important Prophet and Messenger, is Jesus, son of Mary/Isa bin Maryam (Arabic). Unlike the Christians, the Muslims do not consider Isa the son of God . Islam, as the O.T., believes in one God.

The title Christ comes from the Greek word Christos that in the Hebrew translation means "Messiah" or anointed one. The word "anointed" is in the Jewish tradition used for Kings, priests and prophets. They were expecting the arrival of "God's anointed" who would deliver the Jewish people from Roman rule. The people fervently longed for that Redeemer. This fits in with the General messianic expectation. For the Christians Jesus was the anointed one of God. Christ was thus the proper name for Jesus.

## **JESUS' NATIVE LANGUAGE**

Based on the textual criticism of our sources we start with the assumption that he really existed. We leave it in the middle whether he was a pious Jew, a rebel against Rome, a radical religious innovator or whatever else . So everyone, over the centuries, has formed their own opinion as to who he was . His atypical behavior might cause us to consider him a "hippie of antiquity". Did he smoke weed? It is said that in the oil used by Jesus to perform miracles there was a cannabis extract . What was his native tongue? In the N.T. different instances mention him speaking Hebrew, but none in which he spoke

Aramaic. The fact that certain quotes from him in the Greek manuscripts refer to the Aramaic language, one may conclude that his native tongue was Aramaic. It is therefore quite possible that Aramaic originals formed the basis for the Greek manuscripts. The original Aramaic alphabet is based on the Phoenician alphabet, as is the Hebrew alphabet. It is therefore assumed that conversational language used by most of the Jews in Palestine at the start of the CE was a form of Western Aramaic and that Palestinian Aramaic would then have been the language of Jesus.

In his time Greek was the universal language of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Western Pacific cities of the Roman Empire. It cannot therefore be ruled out that he had a basic knowledge of Greek while there is nothing to indicate that he had enjoyed a high level of education. It also cannot be ruled out that he could have spoken Latin when he was brought before Pontius Pilate, by 26-36 ad the 5th Roman prefect or Procurator of Judea. The legal and official language was Latin for the Roman provinces.

It is generally assumed that because Aramaic was Jesus' native tongue, he could therefore read Hebrew and that he controlled a basic knowledge of Greek.

But could Jesus also write? The scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus difficult questions. He wrote with his finger in the sand of the temple floor but it was never revealed what he wrote. He needed time for reflection !



FRA ANGELICO [1387 - 1455] ANNUNCIATION; FRESCO (230 X 321 CM) - 1438-1445 MUSEO DI SAN MARCO, FLORENCE

## HIS LIFE AND BIRTH

### BIRTH

The exact day, month or the year of Jesus' birth could never be definitively determined until now. The English writer A.N. Wilson assumes that Jesus was most likely born in the year 4 of our era and that he died around the year 30. As an example he uses the writings of a Professor of theology according to whom it is irrelevant for Christianity whether Jesus existed or not. An explanation for the low level of interest in the history is according to Wilson that theologians are suffering a conflict of conscience because of historical data

**"When Theologians begin to doubt between their faith and their reasoning, most of them will choose faith. They are too attached to their position. Half of our Bishops are basically atheists".**

From an interview with NRC Handelsblad (The Netherlands), September 11, 1992

The Jesus of faith and the Jesus of history are two different people. As the central figure within Christianity, Jesus has only a symbolic function. It makes therefore no sense to attribute the birth of Christ on any historical events. In this context, one is often referred to the appearance of Halley's Comet. This comet is then considered as the star of Bethlehem. Of course, this would mean that Jesus was born in the summer and not in the winter. The birth anniversary is simply chosen for December 25, the Roman Festival of Sol Invictus, the winter solstice. It is no more difficult than that Bethlehem was randomly picked as the city of David. Matthew and Luke, just after the death of Jesus, needed to show that he was the son of David. It does not matter whether Jesus was born in a cave or in a stable. These representations have come down to us through the Eastern and Western painting with Italy as a mediator. The virgin birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary shows similarities with the story of the birth of Horus of the Virgin Isis. Horus and Isis belong to Egyptian mythology long before Christ. As does the virgin birth in a cave of the Sun God Mithra also long before Christ and remarkably also dated December 25.

It was a great annoyance to the early Church that the Mithras cult continued to exist. In an attempt to end the Sun worshipping, Pope Julius I (337-352) in the year 340 decided that Christians from now on had to celebrate the "dies natalis solis invicti" the feast of Jesus Christ. Christ had to be worshipped as the light that would drive away the darkness for good and provide eternal life. But the cult of the Sun remained persistent. Pope Leo the great (440-461) complained that some Christians when entering the Basilica still solemnly saluted the Sun in the outer Court.



MADONNA AND CHILD. RAPHAEL (1483-1520).

From the West, Christmas (Christmas is Catholic) and the date December 25, also found entrance to the East in the course of the fourth century. However, the Eastern Church chooses to celebrate Christmas on January 6, Epiphany. That's very perceptively seen: how divine could someone be whose physical birth is recognized? The "year 0" should actually be the year of Jesus birth. But that is not the case. In 533, Pope John I ordered the Roman Abbot Dionysius Exiguus to established the birth year of Jesus. But because he made a number of errors in its calculations, the Julian calendar actually is not correct.

The midwinter solstice has always taken place on December 21 or 22 and one was required to wait three days to make sure whether the reappearance of the Sun was a fact. For us, this is now a explainable astronomical occurrence, but for many centuries different peoples fearfully awaited the birth of the Sun again reassuring them new crops. For the Germans Yule tide was also a midwinter feast when the winter solstice was also celebrated. The midwinter Feast was the most important holiday anywhere in Europe and it is easy to explain why the Roman Catholic Church in its expansionism introduced this feast as the fictional birthday of Jesus Christ. The rising sun as a universal symbol existed for thousands of years. The Church was always very opposed to so-called pagan use but it eagerly adopted the pagan festival of 25 December so as to assure a quiet following. The Roman army officer Sextus Julius Africanus (160-240) referred to it for the first time in 221 and the Church canonised it in 354 by means of a decree by Pope Liberius. The conversion of Constantine the Great to Christianity in 312 had already taken place. Since that time the Church and State formed a United front.



Pope John Paul II himself declared in 1994 that Jesus was not actually born on December 25 but that this date was chosen because it already was the date of a pagan midwinter feast. That caused a big shock because for many ordinary Christians this was something entirely new. This proves that we cannot repeat often enough that this whole Christmas story is a myth. But the Christmas tree (in use since second half 19th century) and the wine on Christmas Eve can stay!!!



GUIDO RENI [1575 - 1642] BAPTISM OF CHRIST IN THE RIVER JORDAN . C. 1623 KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, VIENNA

### **HIS PUBLIC LIFE - JOHN THE BAPTIST**

Around the year 30 CE Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist. (ca. 7 b. the era-ca. 29). That is the time when Jesus public life began. Like Jesus, John was a religious teacher. They were contemporaries and cousins. In Christianity one regards John as a prophet, a divine messenger. As a New Testament prophet he is of course not recognized by Judaism. Islam recognizes from the N.T. the following as Prophets:

Jesus of Nazareth, John the Baptist (Jahja), and Zacharias. The conception of John was as remarkable as the virgin birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary. According to the Gospels John was the only son of the high priest Zacharias and his wife Elisabeth. She was barren, so childless, until the Archangel Gabriel announced the pending birth of their son. They were both of old age by then. That a hero (a pioneer, Prophet) is born of a Virgin is already known in the Hellenistic culture, and also beyond, and is therefore not a strange story form. Matthew and Luke in their opening story about Jesus' birth adopt this image as an expression of their belief that he was sent by God. Thus they also closely refer to the story tradition of the O.T. in which Israel's arch-mothers, initially infertile are by intervention of God, bearing sons. (never daughters!).

According to Christian theology Jesus is conceived in the womb of Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Roman Catholic Church maintains this doctrine to this day: Mary retained her virginity before, during and after the birth of Christ. During the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) the dogma of the virgin birth received its final place in the Catholic creed. Needless to say this has been rejected by all historical-critical Bible research in its totality. It might also be helpful if we were to look at what the reformation (the Protestants) think. Some Protestant theologians reject the virgin birth pointing out that Mary could not have been a Virgin after the birth of Jesus and the birth of additional children, the later brothers of Jesus (Matthew 13:55) Besides, all modern theologians reject this dogma while traditional believers have long since consigned this dogma to the domain of "blind religious fanaticism".

It is therefore not surprising that all these stories are no longer covered in the Roman Catholic religious instruction in the schools. Young adult would, for less, flee along with Joseph, to Egypt. Only very young children (during confirmation studies) one can still, in their childlike innocence, impress with these stories about "the Holy child Jesus" but these fairy tales are saved up for the special preparatory classes. In contrast to the belief in the existence of Santa Claus these stories about Jesus will never be recalled by their parents. The children are left to sort it all out themselves later in life, which becomes fodder for psychologists. The virgin birth is often confused with the dogma of the immaculate conception of Mary. This is a dogma by Pope Pius IX issued in 1854 in which it is taught that Mary unlike any other human being is free from the original sin, that Adam and Eve supposedly have inflicted on all of mankind. Mary supposedly was chosen centuries in advance by God to be the mother of his son.

The dogma of the bodily assumption of Mary (feast day August 15) formed the cornerstone of Mary devotion. Mary did not ascend to heaven herself but was "with body and soul" taken up into heaven by God himself. In 1950, Pope Pius XII pronounced this dogma of assumption of Mary (also known as "ascension") officially. Of course those dogmas are soundly rejected by the Protestants but also by all thoughtful and rational people. In many so-called Catholic countries, including Belgium, it is celebrated as a solemn feast day (15 August) and it is a legal holiday as well. This is not in line with the principle of separation of Church and State and perhaps it is high time to change this. This has now taken on a secular meaning as a mid-harvest solemn feast day (an already established and existing name) we would of course not abolish it. It should continue to be beautifully paid day, allowing us to barbecue to our hearts content. A feast for parents and grand-parents (mother's day in Antwerp!), children and grandchildren. The solidarity of the family. Take advantage of school holidays, there it is! It is also abundantly clear that the Mary cult by inculturation is a continuation of pre-Christian rituals related to

the cult of the Mother goddess. The reformation caused the Marian devotions to be dismissed as a form of idol worship.

John the Baptist preached a message of repentance and remission of all sins through baptism. He already had many followers and many people were baptized by him in the Jordan River. Jesus too was baptized by him and during this event the Holy Spirit is said to have come down in the form of a dove that landed on his head. There is even a divine voice from heaven (!) that says "you are my son, the beloved, in whom I am well pleased". John's baptism of Jesus is mentioned in all four Gospels. (Mark 1, 10: 11; Matthew 3, 16: 17; Luke 3, 21: 22; Johannes 1.32). It is normal for those witnessing the event as well as later theologians to wonder why Jesus had to be baptized. Was he a sinner and subordinate to John the Baptist? Nowhere else in the N.T. Jesus calls himself the son of God. The God spoken words come from the Bible, among other things, from Psalm 2.7 and Isaiah 42.1.

To base theology on an old psalm verse looks a lot like the work of a soothsayer. The book of the Prophet Isaiah was from the second half of the eighth century BC, so 750 years before Christ was born! It is therefore incomprehensible that, as a serious theologian, Edward Schillebeeckx (1914-2009) refers to Isaiah 11.2; 42, 1: 2; 61.1 and Psalm 2.7 to portray Jesus as the new Messiah and perfecter of all Israel's promises and because he allowed himself to be baptized by John. An admission of weakness! (E. Schillebeeckx, 'JESUS, The Story Of A Living '. Baarn, 2000, 10th Edition, p. 452). Even the "virgin birth" he brings back to this psalm verse 2.7 "thou art my son; today I have begotten you" (Schillebeeckx ibidem). With only revealed truths that hail back to ancient prophets we won't get far. A God who speaks from clouds and a Bush remains a hidden Wizard. It is understandable that in Christianity great value is attached to the Bible book of Isaiah because it's full of supposed references to the coming of Jesus as the Messiah. Whole chapters are of interest and were scooped up again as New Testament passages. It also speaks for themselves that the book (originally written on scrolls, only much later a book) Isaiah could not have been written by one person. All those prophecies were afterwards, in hindsight warmed up in the N.T. Using this criteria, it is not difficult to predict. It is incomprehensible that modern theologians remain so uncritical when it comes to saving the "truths of faith". It is clear that it's not about the quality of the Ministers of that religion ( pedophile , no pedophile) but that the message itself is paper thin and just falls back to the humanistic "love thy neighbor". In addition, Jesus in the N.T. speaks Greek and he quotes the Jewish Bible from the Greek Septuagint.

## **MIRACLES**

The Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) published about 1670 (anonymous) 'TRACTATUS THEOLOGICO-POLITICUS '. In it he gives one of the first logical analyses of the Bible. Spinoza was the first to recognize, in his time, the existence of miracles and the supernatural and opened it up for discussion. That was, at that time, still a dangerous suggestion. The Rationalist Baruch Spinoza adds that miracles do not exist because exceptions to the laws of nature are impossible.

A miracle is a very impressive but rationally inexplicable event. That one, at the time of the preacher Jesus Christ, believed in miracles remains somewhat understandable, but even in the 21st century Christianity and Islam consider a miracle as an intervention of God in the universe. So much debility can only be maintained as much by a church institution that benefits from the flourishing of a particular tourist industry (for example, Lourdes). It is reminiscent of the practice which allows the Pope, still today, to declare a dead person a Saint. That is why today we find ourselves in Belgium, since 2009, stuck with a Saint-Damien.

Father Damien (1840-1889) only began to perform miracles in 1998. In 1998 a woman inexplicably was cured of lung cancer after she prayed at the tomb of Damien. Previously a French sister was miraculously cured of colon cancer after having prayed to Damien. Together the two miracles allowed the canonization. Of course tribute is due to Damien for his care for the lepers on Molokai. But that is quite apart from the fact that he was also ' a true servant of God' . It is still easier for the Almighty to cure psychosomatic disorders to grow again shot off legs. There are no known cases from the First World War (1914-1918); not even in the pious Westhoek.(battlefield Belgium, "In Flanders Fields"). Saint-Damien is also the universal Saint of aids patients. Recently we learned how conservative Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard (Belgium) viewed aids as a" form of Justice". But at a press conference, he stressed that he was misunderstood. We let a candle burn for him.

Protestantism does not to canonize or venerate Saints because it is seen as idolatry.

### **THE MIRACLES OF JESUS**

Jesus did not consider himself the Messiah. The word ' Messiah ' comes from the Hebrew meaning ' anointed ', ' Christos ' in Greek. He himself did not want to be the Messiah and certainly no belligerent Messiah. It is specifically Paul who in the N.T. promoted the title as a private name for Jesus. Although Paul makes no mention of the miracles of Jesus in any of his letters. And the evangelists and later theologians were of course very strongly engaged in customizing all kinds of Old Testament prophecies. It is also the Gospels that deified Jesus. But a Messiah has, after all, the power to work miracles and when a Messiah does no miracles no one will follow him. Jesus himself was opposed to miracles because this impaired the truth of his message. "If thou hast not see signs and wonders, ye will not believe" (John 4: 48). But despite his misgivings Jesus continued the miracles to fill the need.

The most likeable miracles for us are of course the miraculous healings. No one likes to see patients suffer. But the first miracle that Jesus did involved wine by changing water into wine. Who among us would not want to learn that magic trick. That is the miracle at the wedding at Cana. According to John this is the first miracle (2: 11 "this has Jesus done as the beginning of his signs").



PAOLO VERONESE [1528 - 1588] THE CANA WEDDING - C. 1562 MUSÉE DU LOUVRE, PARIS

It is curious that none the other evangelists did mention it. It is also the only miracle that John does not relate to healing and therefore does not directly fit into that category. It also does not refer to a simple table wine but to a wine of great quality what makes it all the more astonishing. This miracle story was investigated by Prof. Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976) in his book ' DAS EVANGELIUM DES JOHANNES ' (1962). The commemoration of the wedding at Cana is celebrated on 6 January, the feast of the Epiphany or the feast of the 'Epiphany of the Lord '. On January 6, pagan antiquity celebrated the revelation of the divine power of the Greek wine god Dionysus who also engaged in wine miracles.

"The motif of the story, the changing of water into wine, is indeed a typical pattern in the Dionysus legend, in which this miracle is the miracle of the Epiphany of the god, and therefore it is dated in the night of 5 on January 6, the date of the Dionysus feast. In the old church one understood this relationship when they accepted January 6th as the day of the wedding at Cana". Bultmann, 1962, p.83

In other words Jesus reveals his divine power, on the wedding at Cana, in the same way as one previously told about the Greek god Dionysus. Bultmann says by the way: "there is no doubt that the story of the wedding at Cana was taken from a pagan legend and transferred to Jesus." The true miracle would not be the change of water into wine, but the change of Jesus into a kind of Christian wine God. We also know that myths and miracle stories, from other cultures, crept into the Gospels. Jesus was also not the first ' Savior '. Asklepios (LAT. Aesculapius) who likewise was called ' Redeemer of the world ', served as Greek god of medicine, and was known to perform miracles in his famous sanctuary Epidaurus in the sixth century BC. The Christians, in their eagerness to prove their case changed and used pagan images of victory into Christian images and turned temples into churches, or just destroyed them. The Roman Emperor Constantine (ca. 280-337) was the first Roman emperor who spoke out for Christianity. (Edict of Milan of 313).

Constantine had his soldiers raze the famous structure Asklepiostemple in Aegae, to the ground. Jesus was also a healer of the sick, a kind of doctor. He followed in the footsteps of others from the ancient world. However, the ancients saw disease as a ' punishment from god ' but Jesus resisted this superstitious of a causal link of punishment and disease. He humanized human disease. "Rabbi, who has sinned that he should be born blind", is asked him in the healing of a blind, "he or his parents" (John 9: 2). And Jesus answered: "neither he, nor his parents have sinned" (John 9: 3). He does not see someone who is punished but only someone who should be helped. Guilt as a cause of illness was disconnected by him. That insight is in itself already very innovative. His second miracle was a healing miracle. R. Bultmann shows that the healing of the son of the courtier in Capernaum belongs in the same miracle bundle as the wine miracle which was number one. Also Johannes denotes it as second: "and Jesus did this as the second sign".

4 CENTURY BEFORE CHRIST; ASKLEPIOS ACCOMPANIED BY HYGEIA. MARBLE; ARCHEOLOGICAL MUSEUM PIREAS, ATHENS.



We can, of course not analyze all 30 miracles that Jesus allegedly performed. They are divided into healing miracles (the majority), then the driving out of demons, the raising of the dead, and natural wonders. These natural wonders are described as having power over sea and storm which José Saramago (1922-2010) so beautifully described, as well as Jesus walking on water. All miracles (earlier Fables) were earlier attributed to others. Most miracles that are told about Jesus do not have their origin in the Jewish tradition but in the Hellenistic world. Without addressing the issue in its totality we will try here to clarify a few miracles on the basis of characteristics that were examined by Prof. Uta Ranke-Heinemann. According to known medical science at that time no distinction was made between possession and disease. The sick are called possessed and the possessed are called sick. In the N.T. those considered possessed were epileptics, the deaf and mute, and especially disabled people who were both blind as well as deaf mute and hunchbacks.

There are three essential conditions for a miraculous cure.

1. Not the supernatural miraculous power of the miracle healer brings the healing, but the expectation of the patient. Not because Jesus healed many people did many people come to him, but because so many came that he healed many.

2. Human expectations are particularly focused on sovereigns and other notable people. Until the 19th century people expected healings from the French kings, the successors of the Roman emperors (cf. the wonders of Emperor Vespasian, described by Tacitus). Touch is very important. And when the miracle does not occur it is generally interpreted as a lack of faith by the people.

3. There are also always eyewitnesses. Those witnesses may also believe they have seen things. And those witnesses maintain that they have seen things even though much later and at a time when there is no benefit anymore. Eyewitnesses make it more credible.

### **THE RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD**

Very important in all those stories is the tendency to intensify the miraculous. We can illustrate this by means of the most spectacular, namely the resurrection from the dead. In the N.T. are three revivals from the dead: the 12-year-old daughter of the ruler of the synagogue, Jairus (mentioned in Mark, Matthew and Luke), a young man from Nain (Luke 7: 11-17) and finally, Lazarus (only John 11: 39). Here we prove the tendency to embellish once and for all.

Marcus tells us that, in the case of the daughter of Jairus, Jesus says: "the girl is not dead, she is sleeping". Lucas, subsequent to Marcus, declares the youngster of Nain as really dead. This miracle story clearly reminds us of Kings 1: 17 where Elijah raises a widow's son from the dead. But in the case of Lazarus, John describes a very serious situation. Lazarus is not just dead but has been in his grave already for four days and there is a stench of decomposition of his corpse. Realizing that this story occurs in John only and not in any of the other Gospels it has by modern theologians been referred to the land of Fables. The tendency to accuracy is almost always accompanied by the tendency to intensify/embellish. In the N.T. that fantasy-process is the rule. The oldest Gospel, that of Mark, no longer knew the names, but the younger Gospels know them exactly. Research was also carried out by Rudolf Bultmann. A small illustration. Marcus announces that in the garden of Gethsemane, a slave had one of his ears cut off, but Lucas knows more: it was the right ear. But John, the fourth and final Gospel writer has learned by now also the name of the disciple who cut off the ear: it was Peter. But he also knows what the slave was called: Malchus (John 18: 10). The Gospel writers clearly wanted to make Jesus more important with their miracle stories. They wanted to make him big and impressive.

### **DELFT TILE "THE RESURRECTION OF LAZARUS"**



## PARABLES

The Gospel writers made Jesus larger and more credible with their miracle stories. A Messiah who could not perform miracles could do as much preaching as he wanted to, but eventually no one would listen to him. He also needed to be able to reach the "humble in spirit" and in order to answer theological issues was best done via simple equations. This technique was also sublimely applied by the Belgian Cardinal G. Danneels. Which morphed him into the sympathetic Public Shepherd because he refused to blast the believing masses with such Theological terms such as "immanent justice" (Archbishop André-J. Léonard). When Cardinal Danneels did not know it so well any more he always got away with saying "and thus".

The preaching of Jesus was often done via parables. These similarities are ordinary stories, such as the parable of the sower, the parable of the talents, etc. In reality, they are amusing tales, a rhetorical way to support certain arguments. This teaching-tradition is also found in the O.T. One had to so especially have good ears. The parables of Jesus in the N.T. were not always immediately understood (see Matt. 13: 13-15). This is easily explained. It was often an inferred message in which one was to search for the deeper meaning. Current Church hierarchy still use this form of unclear language so as to come across better in the media. Visual language as deception.

In the Gospel of Luke we find 27 parables, in Matthew 23 and in Marcus, the oldest Gospel, only 9. The Gospel of John contains no parables. The very famous story of the "good Samaritan" and the "Pharisee and the publican" are only found in to Lucas. Jesus told his parables in Aramaic but since the Gospels in the N.T were written in Greek, choices had to be made in its translation. In any case all those parables were meant to teach us something about the establishment of the Kingdom of God on Earth. That was then a strong Jewish expectation.

But praying "Thy Kingdom come" continues! No one today knows what that means. The purpose of the preaching of Jesus we find back at Matthew 4: 17-19 From then on Jesus started to preach and say "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". That preaching in synagogues, in people's homes and in the open, Jesus did not do alone. He had twelve disciples.





## ORIGINAL SIN

It was of course not because of obscure language as used in the parables that Jesus was nailed to the cross. We have started out from the beginning that Jesus was a historical figure; and that currently Christianity has more than 1.5 billion followers worldwide can hardly be denied. In past centuries, many population groups violently forced to accept the Christian faith, but even today we can safely assume that quantity is no guarantee for the quality. These are, of course, not all active Christians in the sense of conscious followers but rather sociological church members (Catholic, protestant, orthodox). The power in numbers does not make the doctrine true! But, according to Cardinal Danneels, we ask ourselves "how beautiful is this belief but not how true". (G. Danneels, 'The JOY Of BELIEVING '. Mechelen, 2007, p. 4). So the crucifixion of Christ goes back to the doctrine of "original sin" rather than to the fact that he was suspected of a conspiracy against the Romans.

Original sin, according to the Christian doctrine, is the sin that every human inherited by birth as a result of the fall of Adam and Eve. The doctrine of original sin is central in Christian Dogmatics. Original sin caused the mortality and suffering of mankind, and sinning mankind requires salvation. This redemption and reconciliation between man and god came through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As everyone knows (according to the Roman Catholic doctrine) the baptism washes away original sin. Thus one man, Jesus Christ, would have, by his suffering and death, brought redemption for that Adam's one sin. This supports Paul ROM. 5.12 but he read it in Genesis (O.T.) 2-3, an old folk tale! Based on the Apostle Paul, Augustine (354-430) worked out the theological teachings on original sin and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), confirmed it as the infallible teaching authority. The doctrine of original sin is currently also in the Church very much at issue. Totally understandable considering when one looks at this in light of evolution.

But the Church made a capital error: if they repeal this doctrine they are no longer the undisputed authority in matters of faith, the guardian of the revealed truth. There is unfortunately no way back for them so we can safely say that Christ died for nothing. Suffering and death are no longer punishments that we have to sit out. We are born with the body that we have and we should, as much as possible, try to avoid suffering. Of course suffering exist but it is clearly unjustifiable. The traditional doctrine of original sin is false but the Church hangs on to it.

For liberal humanists, however, there is no problem because we reject the idea that god stands at the beginning of creation. We were not waiting for a supernatural intervention of a god who brought suffering in the world. The doctrine of original sin is therefore pointless. When the colonizers came into contact with the Indians they doubted whether they had a sense of original sin and whether they had a soul which could be saved. Speaking about Christianity: "one must without a doubt come to the conclusion that no singular religion throughout history has left behind a similar trail of blood, suffering, misery and innocent."

(E. Vermeersch (Ghent University), "Short DISCOURSE ", 1997, p. 122).

## **THE CRUCIFIXION**

The Gospels stories tell us about the three years that Jesus taught in Palestine. We refer to this as his "public life". The passion-stories cover about a third of each Gospel. We don't want to make the crucifixion of Jesus needlessly complicated and assume therefore that it actually occurred notwithstanding that fact that despite the four Gospel writers there were no eyewitnesses . Of course we do not see it as an atoning death, a dogma of Christianity. Besides the founders of Christianity do not see the cross-death but the resurrection as the core of their faith. Not one thought is offered to the possibility that Jesus was taken from the cross before he died. We do not need a refutation of the resurrection through medical hocus pocus. Whether he died by pain or suffocation we also find irrelevant. The box of nails, the Crown of thorns and all torture we lock up.

Believers and non-Christians are in agreement over the following: Jesus travels to Jerusalem and is welcomed by the people. There he enters into another debate with the religious leaders. The "Sanhedrin" (Jewish Court) takes him prisoner and delivers him to the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate (Roman prefect or Procurator of Judea from 26-36).

The Jews had already demanded the death penalty (but were not allowed to carry it out) and in the end he was convicted by Pontius Pilate to the cross because of blasphemy. He did so out of fear of a rebellion of the Jewish people. A condemnation to death on a wooden cross at the time was common for rioters. According to the Bible on that day a Solar Eclipse and an earthquake (only mentioned by Matthew) took place, but that is considered legendary.

The date of death cannot be determined exactly but since Easter (Passover) fell just after the crucifixion this was probably in the year 30 ad. It is debatable whether the many images of a suffering Christ in the Western painting of the 13th-15th century were such a good advertising for the image of that religion. Japanese colleagues who were shown around by me at the Groeninge museum (Museum of Fine Arts, Bruges) or in the Our Lady Church (painted burial vaults in the presbytery) were always full of disgust as they looked to that Savior on the cross. For a god who allowed himself to be crucified (a powerless god) they had little admiration. For them it could have been a bit more serene like the image of the Buddha.

Under the influence of Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and few other great figures of that time, Christ is presented as the victim who voluntarily sacrifice himself for the salvation of all people. The figure on the cross became ever more portrayed as a suffering man. The reserved and majestic Byzantine type, the so-called "Christus triumphans", was already humanized in the middle of the eleventh century. Under the influence of the 'franciscanisme', but also the German mysticism, came the change that led to the realization of the boundaries of human suffering. Christ is now pictured as dying or already dead, the stature is bared and carries only a low loincloth. The arms sag down under the weight of the body, the head to one side, the eyes are closed and the blood runs down the cross. The wound in his side sprays blood like a fountain. The sagging and twisted body is now shown with crossed legs and feet nailed to the wooden cross. The medieval art is a sentimental art: Maria falls into swoon under the cross, the dead body of Jesus on the lap.

Christ is introduced at Calvary while the executioners prepare for the crucifixion. Art reflects that now should generate compassion. Christian Mystics now figured out new themes such as "the lamentation" (Lamentatio) and the Entombment of Christ which since the 14th century appears more and more. The Visual Arts was fed by the contemporary literature. The people's devotion was born. Our position is therefore that the knowledge and the understanding of Christianity was caused by the easily accessible Visual Arts and not by reading the banned book par excellence: the Bible!



PIETER PAUL RUBENS [1577 - 1640] ERECTION OF THE CROSS, OIL ON PANEL (460 X 340 CM) - 1610 O.L.VROUWEKATHEDRAAL, ANTWERP

Today the Gospel is also spread through film. Jesus as an actor! We think then particularly about the (horror) movie 'The Passion of The Christ' (2004) by Mel Gibson. This film about the life of Christ, according to the Roman Catholic tradition, exhibits a very violent crucifixion. Quite a few scenes do not come from the N.T. This is referred to as "artistic freedom". But this film has now become historical reality for a wide film audience. The silver screen with its layers of face paint is the new gospel. It can only lead to scaring away new converts or confuse them. Not only did Gibson's film serve to evangelize in the theatre, it also became the servant of "our Lord" when it was broadcast on television. On Easter Saturday 2006, the film was broadcast by Dutch broadcaster RTL and on Easter Saturday 2007 by Flemish Kanaal2. Both commercial broadcasters broadcasted the film without advertising. The iconography is the boss, not theology. We are done with staring at old school plates.

## **THE RESSURECTION**

According to Christian Dogma, Jesus was crucified, sacrificing his life to atone for our sins. He came too late for the Neanderthals; they were already extinct and for the Aztecs he came too soon. Only in 1492 was America discovered by Christopher Columbus and Hernando Cortés; in search of gold, the latter destroyed the Aztec Empire in 1511. Apparently it was God's will. The Church always has tailor-made answers to the questions they ask themselves. Also these 'souls' were saved. In the second half of the fourth century they just added an article to the Apostles' Creed (the twelve articles of faith): "came down to hell". In the time between his death and his resurrection, Christ evidently descended temporarily into Hades (hell). Here one could not say "it is written" (so PERIOD!) because there is no Bible text. And then one is surprised that people can't believe theology's sincere search for the truth. To give Christianity (and those who believe in it) a fair chance, we have always assumed that his life was not a mythical happening but a historic lifetime. In the recent book by Dirk Verhofstadt (Ghent University) about Prof. dr. Etienne Vermeersch says the latter however: "the person as described in the Gospels has certainly not existed". ('DIRK VERHOFSTADT IN CONVERSATION WITH ETIENNE VERMEERSCH. A SEARCH FOR TRUTH'. Antwerp/Utrecht, 2011, p. 185). But now it becomes difficult. The crucified Jesus is risen! Prof. Geert Lernout (op. cit. p. 159) remains silent at the resurrection of Jesus. He studied the Bible in a scientific way and since modern science in principle excludes miracles he does not address it. A critical approach, as we are advocating, leaves no room for any description of a reality based on miraculous events.

"Suffered under Pontius Pilate was crucified, died and buried" that are measurable facts that can be said about other people. But "the third day rose from the dead" that sounds just a bit less normal. Here we no longer dwell in the world of science but we come into the atmosphere of faith. You can easily say highly unlikely and the impossible. The Jesus of faith and the Jesus as historical figure are two different people. Recently the Japanese writer Haruki Murakami was asked why so many people traditionally believe in supernatural phenomena and occult matters: "because the vast majority of people do not believe in the facts as they are, but in the facts as they would like to have them be". Also the anxious and distraught disciples of Jesus, who certainly met in Jerusalem, opted for a construction afterwards. They chose resolutely for self-deception.



Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The crucifixion did not mean the end. Known is the word of Paul to the Church in Corinth: "If Christ be not risen, then is our preaching is vain, and your faith is also vain" (1 Cor. 15: 14). Paul wrote that in 56 or 57 CE when the Gospels had yet to be written. He never knew Christ and only met the risen Lord! Then he was the Apostle to the

Gentiles and the actual founder of Christianity. Jesus appeared to Paul as a "spiritual body". Long before Jesus appeared on the scene, the Jews (except the Sadducees) believed in resurrections so that it was opportune to adopt that Pharisaic thought. The death, the stay of three days in the underworld, and the resurrection of a god, was already known for quite some time in antiquity. All we have to do is think about the god Attis who arose from the dead. His mystery-cult spread about ancient Greece and the Roman Empire.

One encounters the resurrection stories in all four Gospels. Just think of all those predictions "on the third day he will rise" by Matthew 16, 21; Mark 8, 31; Luke 9, 22. The Gospels sole purpose seem to have been, that Jesus fulfilled the predictions from the Jewish Bible (Old Testament).

That Gospel writers (Mark 69-70), Matthew and Luke (around 80-90) also brought all sorts of embellishments. They had to prove that, above all, the students themselves had not stolen the body. The story about the "empty tomb" appears in all four Gospels (including John 11, 25 and Jo. 20, 9) but not in any of Paul's writings. He knew nothing off of that legend as he also had no knowledge of a virgin birth (first letter to the Corinthians, 15, 8). In the apocryphal Gospels everything is of course exaggerated: there the grave was sealed all of seven times!

The Gospels contain not only beautiful legends (such as the story about the supper at Emmaus, Luke 24: 13-35) but also a magnificent love story set at the empty tomb, where according to the tale from John 19.25 the weeping Mary Magdalene met the gardener. We cannot emphasize enough that this atypical Gospel only dates back to the second century (Lernout, op. cit. p. 170) but that it is now still being told as if John was an eye-witness. The New Testament resurrection stories contain many legends, contradictions, differences and inconsistencies.

## **RESURRECTION OF JESUS**

A reliable reconstruction is almost impossible and many theologians consider it a hopeless enterprise. From the start, the resurrection narrative was presented wrong from the start. Quite possibly one may not have considered that there would be limits to the credulity of the people. It was theological represented as the reanimation of a dead person, but that was (to use common language) bad marketing. A fantasy or dream turned out to still have worked for compliant believers and continues to do so to this day. Whether explained in physical or psychological terms it remains out of the realm of any reality. We are not dealing here with a historical narrative but with declarations of faith. Christianity was thus reduced to the faith in traditional tales. Their intense eagerness to justify their beliefs rest in the explanation that god himself rose Jesus from the dead. Jesus then becomes the true sign of God's reality in the world. God has revealed himself In Jesus of Nazareth. This is how Christ became the son of God. To call on God (which does not exist) as the healer of all evils is of course an adequate solution. We do not dispute, of course, that Christianity is a source of inspiration for social commitment but a liberal humanist needs no god to achieve the same recognition.

In the end, we will certainly succeed in that what we deep down desire the most: survival after death and reuniting with the people we love. A god who promises that cannot exist.

## **THE GOOD NEWS CONTINUES**

The belief in the resurrection of Jesus (or anyone else) we can completely dismiss. The disciples of Jesus who had shared so much with him suddenly were alone; Jesus was gone now he was suddenly no longer there. For them he was not dead, they still felt his presence. Paul had the irresistible conviction that Jesus continued to live in him. He had no empty tomb. When you believe in Jesus you can order the "Resurrection" . One should never question what exactly happened to that body. The N.T. is silent on the subject and we agree. Believers (as well as infidels!) are not interested in his DNA. It suffices to believe that Jesus is present. Such a presence (hallucination) rarely leads to permanent psychiatric observation.

On the contrary, one can a still today be canonized. Breaking and the sharing of bread could be continued by subsequent generations. The memory was an old reality. The death of Jesus has indeed not prevented his teachings from becoming distorted and embedded in the most powerful Church Institute since centuries. The resurrection has thus completely succeeded.

Theologically is that for many, most likely, too minimalist but not more than that. The disciples were so strongly impressed by the personality of their charismatic Prophet that they simply could not believe he was dead. The early Christians did not take account of historical facts but they believed in the person of Jesus. For them he was risen indeed. Their mission was their truth. Jesus himself was not there anymore so they switched to the ecclesiastical teachings of Christ. The transition from Jesus himself to the Church's proclamation. Thus one could save the furniture. The historical Jesus became the Christ preached. Christianity originated as a rumor: "there was supposedly a Messiah born", but now look with how many they are! One can also explain a lot from the "theory of the cognitive dissonance" by the American social psychologist Leon Festinger. That was successfully applied to Christ by Prof. Etienne Vermeersch. According to him, the followers of Christ of the cross death were no accident but a deliberate choice. Jesus came to earth in order to, through his death and resurrection, bring redemption (see Dirk Verhofstadt, op. cit. p. 188-189 and 190 et seq.).

But if it is true that the resurrection is the essence of the Christian faith then it is equally true that god had his own son executed.

If the subject of discussion is religion it quickly changes to whether belief is more important than knowledge. After the crucifixion came the resurrection. The resurrection already requires quite a tour de force, but to make it even more complicated one adapted, in the first centuries of Christianity, also an expansion of articles of faith or creed (credo) also known as "the twelve articles of the faith". Belief in the Holy Spirit, belief in the Church and belief in the communion of Saints we like to forget. Three still remain however: the Ascension, the second coming and the "Day of Judgment". What those three concepts, we are tempted to say: "our father who art in heaven, stay there". There are more insane ideas with which one can become famous and rich.

## **THE ASCENSION**

Ascension Day is for everyone, faithful and faithless, very interesting because of the long weekend. (Thursday, Friday, bridge day, Saturday, Sunday). Christianity commemorates that day that Jesus Christ ascended to god, his father in heaven. That happened on the 40th day after his resurrection. This event is described in Mark 16: 19, Luke 24: 51 (who actually constructed this happening) and Acts 1: 1-12. His disciples were present at the Ascension and Jesus promised them to soon send them, the "Holy Spirit" to support them. That supposedly happened ten days later (Pentékosté, 50). This Pentecost of the "outpouring of the Holy Spirit" was in fact a form of revival, an attempt to reinvigorate the courage not

to lose faith. In "Heaven" Jesus sits at the right hand of "God the father" to govern. At the "second coming" he will return to Earth for the "Last Judgement" Today mankind cannot do anything with such statements; that's ancient cosmology.

In order to prevent the loss of faith, modern theologians in the 20th century soon claimed that we are not to think to a movement in space. It is, of course, a cheap joke "Jesus, the first astronaut". It has nothing to do with space but with the recognition that Christ directly "took off" to heaven (independent of time and space) to return to where he came from: his father. It is a symbolic story, a fantasy tale that explains the assumption although words fall short. E. Schillebeeckx (op. cit. p. 436) does not speak about Ascension but about "heightening". Easter is the resurrection and ascension for him is the heightening. The Lutheran preacher and theologian (and resistance fighter against Nazism) Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945) admitted that when the moment is reached when a fairy tale no longer needs to be explained : "it seems to me that it is better to stop at the boundaries of our knowledge".

## **FORESKIN, SHROUD AND HOLY BLOOD**

To this day, there are priests and believers who continue to see the Ascension as a literally happened fact. That indicates a lack of intelligence. Relics associated with Jesus himself are rare because his body rose and later he rose to heaven. Still, there are primary relics preserved. We list them here: after his birth, the umbilical cord after his birth; the baby teeth, the foreskin after circumcision, hair from his beard, he was shedding tears and of course his blood shed on the cross. And then there are the secondary relics such as the Crown of thorns, nails and, of course, wood splinters of the cross. The number of splinters are so numerous that they would easily allow for the creation of hundreds of crosses! A thorn from the Crown of thorns of Jesus is reason for the construction of many cathedrals, for example la Sainte-Chapelle in Paris. Those relics served solely to make the meaning of Jesus more real and provide a historical footing. At the same time they were sources of income (but also prestige) to the owners as a draw of pilgrims. Needless to say that all those relics were found to be not authentic after objective research and that there also was never any concrete evidence that would confirm the historicity of Jesus. The reformation in the 16th century rejected this religious economy. In Roman Catholicism that folk devotion remains to on today. But it is not limited to the candles industry alone. Also the Trappist beer has now made its appearance. Clever marketing by monks who call themselves brothers, Westvleteren, (Belgium) I see Madonna weeping again.

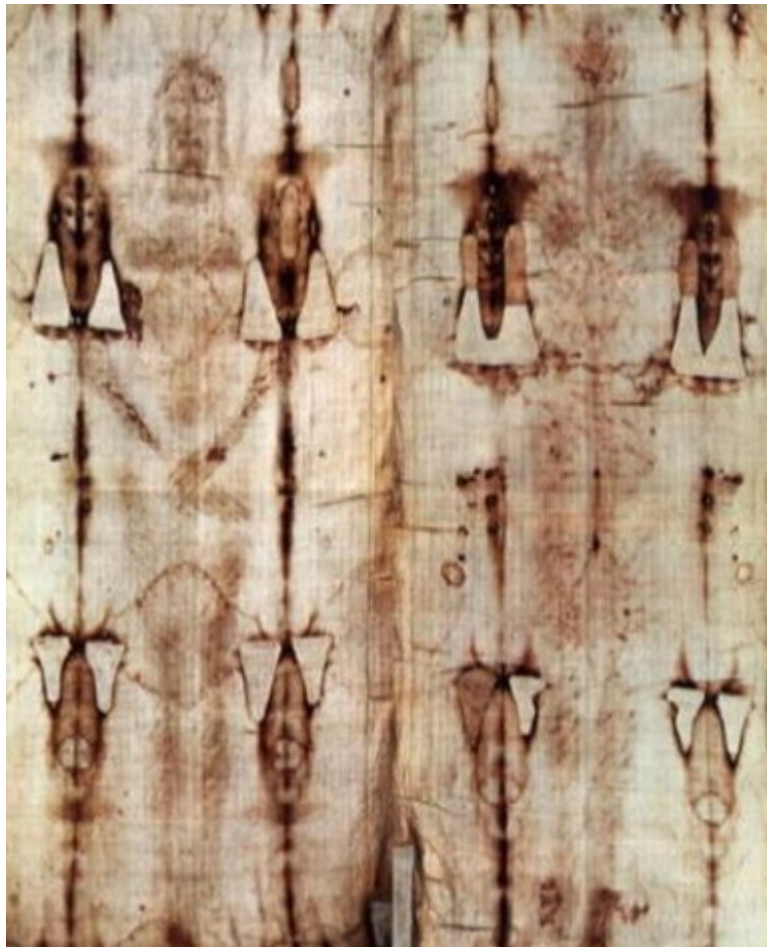
## **THE FORESKIN**

This is a somewhat distasteful subject. Jesus was according to Jewish tradition circumcised eight days after he was born.

His foreskin (Preputium Domini) according to the reasoning of the theologians was the only body part left behind when he ascended to heaven forty days after Easter. In Europe there are 18 churches that claim to have the Holy foreskin, or a part of the foreskin, as relic. Jesus became only known in the year 33 but that piece of excised skin still had lost none of its freshness. Also the Cathedral of Antwerp (Flanders, Belgium) possessed such a relic, which supposedly was brought back by Godfrey of Bouillon (1060-1100) on his crusade. Crusades (the bloody "holy war" of European Christianity against Muslims and Jews) and savings of Relics sounds familiar to us; it is thus that folks in Bruges got stuck with the Holy Blood. The inhabitants of Calacata (Calcata), a village north of Rome, have always maintained that their foreskin was the only real one.



An Angel (!) at the end of the 8th century handed the foreskin to Carl the Great ( Charlemagne) during prayers in the H. Graf Chapel . He gifted this during his coronation as Emperor in 800 to Pope Leo III who placed it in the Church of St. John Lateran in Rome. In the 16th century Rome was plundered by German mercenaries. One of these soldiers settled in Calcata and brought the stolen relic there. Every year on January 1st, the local residents organize a procession. The relic was kept in a bronze casket under the altar but was stolen in 1984. Since then, the "foreskin of the Saviour" is still without a trace and no longer attracts the procession through the streets. Let us mention in passing that it was Charlemagne, Charles I, Holy Roman Emperor, who under force converted the Saxons to Christianity. He used the death penalty against anyone who continued to exercise their traditional Germanic religion. In the 12th century, Charles beatified!



## THE SHROUD OF TURIN

### THE SHROUD OF TURIN

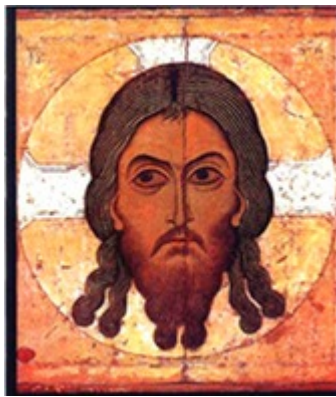
It is of course a bit too cheap to scoff at that foreskin but on the other hand there are believers who against their better judgment, continue to claim that the Shroud of Turin is a true picture of the dead Jesus. It consist supposedly of a true reflection of his appearance created by a cloth in which Jesus supposedly was wrapped after his death and which would display a negative image of the body.

Let us be clear. It is a counterfeit. That has been known for a long time and for which no actual research was needed. In 1357 the Bishop of Troyes (France), Henri de Poitiers (Bishop of 1354-1370), wrote a letter to the Pope in which he announced that in the Church of the village of Lirey was in possession of a painted canvas that falsely is being portrayed as the shroud of Jesus with the goal to earn money. According to the Bishop the "artist who painted had" had already admitted. From the context of the letter one learns that the canvas was painted around 1355. Bishop Pierre d'Arcis in 1389 confirmed the assertion of its predecessor.

The shroud of Turin in 1578 ultimately ended up where it still is today in the Dom. Since 1983 the Vatican is owner of the shroud. The Roman Catholic Church has always regarded the shroud as a forgery. In 1988 they gave permission to have samples of the linen investigated scientifically in three independent laboratories in Oxford (GB), Zürich (Switzerland) and Tucson (US).

Using the carbon 14 method, all three laboratories agree to the dating: ca. 1260-1390. This matches the archival source. The devotion however nevertheless stands.

## IMAGES OF JESUS



In the four Gospels, no pronouncements appears about the appearance of Christ. All attempts to visualize Jesus (also via computer animation) are doomed to fail. We have therefore no knowledge of how the founder of this world religion and son of god looked like! There is an iconographic tradition dating back to the fourth century, and via Byzantine art in the 11th-12th century in the West. In Italy earlier than in France and Flanders. All the pictures of Jesus in painting and printmaking are stereotyped interpretations of a type or model. The "sweat cover of Veronica" is such a type example of an interpretation. That Veronica-legend was also very popular in the 13th century with us and got in the painting of the Gothic age the first full-term expressions (see bibliography, Dezutter, 1982).

Today Jesus regularly appears in food. So we hear that in Ontario a portrait of Jesus appeared in a fish stick and in Florida in a potato. In the Roman Catholic Church of Saint-André in Reunion Island the image of Christ appeared in the folds of the seat cushion of the local priest. Hardly a month goes by without reading in the newspaper such faits divers. Such signs of god are normally only observed by Catholics and never by Protestants who are more rational and do pay little credence to visions and images of the Blessed Virgin Mary on a sandwich.

## THE RELIC OF THE HOLY BLOOD (BRUGES)



### RELIC OF THE HOLY BLOOD IN BRUGES (FLANDERS)

Since the beatification of Pope John Paul II on 1 May 2011 the 5 blood tubes taken shortly before his death are now venerated as relics. The Mexican Bishops Conference has now requested one of those tubes with which they aim to travel the country in the hope that this puts an end to the drug war and provides peace. That is why the Vatican sent one blood tube to Mexico. The residents of Bruges or anyone else who wishes to come on a pilgrimage every Friday can be blessed with the relic of the big boss himself: the blood of Jesus Christ. According to tradition, this relic came to Bruges in 1150 at the hands of count Diederik van den Elzas who, due to heroic acts during the second crusade received the relic with the consent of the Patriarch of Jerusalem. More than eight centuries, this tale remained in effect notwithstanding that Dom Nicolas Huyghebaert o.s.b. in 1963 already pointed out that the relic at the earliest reached Bruges at the beginning of the 13th century, after the Fourth Crusade (1203-1204). The Crusaders, at that time, under the leadership of count Baldwin IX, plundered Constantinople. Not so nice to be able to display in a procession. The commemoration of the blood procession, which is organized every year on Ascension Day, were never adjusted. In 2009, Dr. Noël Geirnaert, head Archivist of the city archives of Bruges, found the Bull of Pope Clement V from 1 June 1310 (issued in Avignon) in which there is mention of a procession around the city with the Holy blood. That took place for the first time on 3 May 1304. In 2011, the Noble Brotherhood of the Holy Blood considered it appropriate to dedicate a float to Clement V. but that is, of course, just fringe. The essential question remains: is this really human blood? That was never investigated. The age of the rock crystal vial is known; which dates back to the 11th century.

The most famous Pharaoh of Egypt Tutankhamun was born out of incest. This is shown by DNA testing. This fossil DNA was taken in 2008. His father and mother were brother and sister. Scientists have also found his cause of death in 2010. The Pharaoh died of malaria, in 1324 for our time-account. He was 19 years old.

The technique of old DNA testing is similar to the methods of forensic specialists. In the case of the Holy Blood in Bruges, the research question should be: is it really human blood? In the Netherlands such physical anthropological and DNA testing are done for archaeological purposes at the Leiden University Medical Center (molecular archaeology). Also the KUL/Faculty of medicine, Department of human genetics (Catholic University Louvain) such research can be performed. The same applies to the UZ

Leuven (Academic Hospital Louvain) where the "Activity Center forensic genetics and molecular archaeology" is established. Why no independent research in Leiden and Leuven? Regardless of the outcome that will not lead to tarnishing of the existing devotion. We mean that in earnest. It's not about breaking a taboo: unraveling the DNA of Jesus, the son of god. To shatter a myth no DNA testing has been necessary. It's like dr. Noël Geirnaert wrote: "In the Holy Blood procession and the presence of the relic in Bruges flow religion, history, tradition and legend into a single urban tradition".

## **THE SECOND COMING**

The second coming (Parousie) is Jesus ' promise that he will come back after his resurrection on Judgment Day. In the N.T. the second coming was still expected during the life of the Gospel writers. In Christianity, the second coming is seen as the final revelation of god to mankind. According to acts 1: 11 second coming will be the same as the way Jesus went to heaven was recorded. In the book of Revelation 1: 7, people will witness the return of Jesus Christ on the clouds. The Apostle Paul spoke in his letters the expectation that Jesus would return soon and during his life (Romans 16: 20-1, Corinthians 1: 7-8, 10-11 and 15: 51). The N.T. states in several places that Jesus would return during the life of his audience at the early end of time. In Matthew 24: 4-44 on the Mount of Olives, Jesus tells what the omens are for his return: rise of many false prophets, wars, persecution of the Christians. But according to the Bible, Jesus is coming back only if the Gospel is spread all over the world and everyone has gotten their chances to repent. It seems to us that there is still much work to do in China, ask it to the missionaries of Scheut. This congregation was founded in 1862 specifically for the evangelization in China. The world's population now consists of 7 billion residents and that rises to 9 billion or more, a race against the clock that can't be won. But there is also a task for Christ after the second coming. He will, in fact, have a large army and fight against the antichrist with its army creating Armageddon. And then there's a tricky chore: Satan will have to be locked up for a period of a thousand years. We are far removed from the "sermon on the mount" and the eight Beatitudes where Jesus compete for the poor and weak.

Matthew 24: 10 states the sign that there will be a great falling away of believers. We understand now why.



MICHELANGELO BUONARROTI [1475 - 1564] LAST JUDGEMENT; FRESCO (1.370 X 1.200 CM) - SIXTINE CHAPEL, VATICAN CITY

## **JUDGEMENT DAY**

Both in Jewish, Christian and Islamic holy books it is that day upon which to, all men, a judgment will be struck down by god. Both in the O.T. as N.T. it is referred to us as end time, in which the living and the dead will be judged. According to the book of revelation this will occur after the Millennium (Revelation 20: 11). Then all the dead shall rise from their graves along with the then living to receive the wages of their sin. In addition to the devil and his fallen angels, there are the people who have rejected the mercy of god and were banished to the "outer darkness", where the "weeping and gnashing of teeth". They are forever cut off from God's presence. Those who have adopted the grace of god through Jesus Christ as Saviour of sins and mediator between god and the people, are justified in God's eyes and will inherit eternal life under a new sky, on a new Earth. And god will dwell in their midst. This goes back to typical

apocalyptic writings that burst with fantastic imagery. Modern Christian theologians hold these texts as no longer relevant to our time. It did however provide beautiful artwork such as the Last Judgment by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel in Rome. These frescoes were executed between 1508 and 1512.

Sensible people have no need for violent oracles dealing with the end times.

### **A DECISION ON THE USELESSNESS OF JESUS AND THE ABSENCE OF HIS FATHER**

When a personal god, who let thousands of malnourished children to die in the Horn of Africa, we can easily abandon the hope of immortality. There is no good reason for faith. God did not create man, but man created god. Perhaps it is not possible to provide evidence that god does not exist but it is equally impossible to experience him without a trance. There is however good, recent, and easily accessible Dutch literature in which critical arguments are made on this topic. (Anne Provoost, ' Beminde ongelovigen. ATHEIST SERMOEN '. Querido, Amsterdam, 2008; E. Vermeersch, ' ATHEISM '. Luster, Antwerp , 2010). The whole of Western culture is infused with the name "god" but critical thinking remains the best antidote against a forced of "mercy" against our better judgment. We do not need God's grace in order to decide our own destiny and certainly not to reach a perfect "Heaven". The latter we simply do not want. We do not want to fall victim to the irresistible grace. Rather rejected than chosen.

### **While Atheism cannot be "confessed" but the followers are certainly not people who are immoral or lawless.**

Without god does not mean without commandment. We have no need for such a Post Modern escape that claims that we can experience god by opening ourselves to him. We have, as humanists, no need for god to accept ourselves and other. There is no doubt that a world without god is also a world vision. Unbelievers, agnostics, and atheists also believe; they believe in themselves and their fellow man without accepting illusions such as reward in the hereafter. People who like "the good do to the good" are no less worthy citizens. It is not about prayer but about acts of solidarity by real people. It is better to do something good rather than search lifelong for an unreachable god. Also, the alleged son of god, Jesus Christ has no monopoly in the world of faith. The current cultural atheism is equivalent to the Western and Eastern Christian theism, the Jewish religion, Islam and the Indian world vision (Hinduism, Buddhism). So there is at least more than one god. Those who proclaim that there is only one god are dangerous people because they fight the god of someone else. Those who look for support in their faith is convinced of the certainty and the evidence of things not seen. They must believe without understanding. There is no believer neo-capitalist who dares to do business that way! Also the bankers of the Vatican do not do Islamic banking.

The compassion of Buddha is not less valid than the (rarely showed) mercy from the Christians. The interfaith cooperation we leave to those who continue to be busy with "sanctification". Wanting to meet God is a barren (but sometimes quite lucrative) exercise. Think of Monks who pray and brew beer. Making sense of life (while always mindful of our pending death is experienced differently by the humanist: they forgive others without the help of higher powers.

Don't seek the "elusive", the speaking clouds and other signs, but maintain the commandments. "For this is the whole duty of all man on". (Ecclesiastes 12: 13)

You don't have to fear "the Lord". Salvation is not in the offing. The Almighty sleeps a peaceful sleep and thus cannot enter you. Also here: don't be afraid. It would be really bad if you could only be happy by fearing of the Lord. (Psalms 128: 1-4).

During the first Council of Nicaea, convened in 325 by Emperor Constantine, the official doctrine of the Church was laid down. The divinity of Jesus was then defined, nearly three centuries after his death.

At the Council of Constantinople, held in 381, the doctrine of the Trinity. (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) became official. At those two Councils the official creed was captured as a theological dictation that applies to this day. Christianity as Church Institute no longer has anything to do with the Jesus of Scripture.

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