Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth Study Guide

Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth by Burton L. Mack

Contents

Plot Summary

"Who Wrote the New Testament?" is Burton Mack's examination of how a diverse group of writings from the earliest centuries of the Christian era were assembled into the supposedly coherent Christian Bible in use today. Mack traces the formation of various fictional mythologies that were created by the early Jesus movement and Christian congregations in response to the uncertain political and cultural times in which they lived.

Far from being a unified philosophical group, the early followers of Jesus and the first Christian congregations often held widely different beliefs regarding their place in both the Jewish tradition and the political world of the Roman Empire, Mack explains. These diverse movements produced their own interpretations of the teachings of Jesus and what was required of his followers.

Mack provides an overview of the development of the myth that Jesus was a divine being and the son of God that marks the transition of the early Jesus movements into Christianity. He then explains how these early Christians combined earlier sources of the teachings of Jesus with this new mythology to create new texts that supported this myth. As the church grew, a similar process took place as church leaders sought to establish their authority by creating the mythology of the 12 apostles charged with establishing the one true church. At the same time, the early Christians reinvent the Jewish traditions from which Christianity sprung, reinterpreting the Jewish texts as prophetic announcements of the coming Christ. Some of these early texts are included in the present New Testament, some are not.

Very few of the books of the present New Testament can be shown to have been written by any one person by the name that is ascribed to them, Mack explains. Attribution took place long after the appearance of most of the texts, after the mythology of the 12 apostles was in place. Mack charts a probable chronological order and geographical location for these books, based on how much is borrowed from other texts.

It is when Constantine, the eastern Emperor of Rome, converts to Christianity that the modern Christian Bible begins to take form. As the new official state religion, a standard text is required along with the establishment of holy days and feasts. Eventually this approved set of writings was translated into Latin and it is this text that forms the basis for the modern Bible.

Mack concludes by challenging the taboo that he feels exists about questioning the traditional thinking about the Bible that is dominated by the Christian interpretation. He calls for an open and scholarly discussion of the book and its role in American culture.

Prologue: The Mystique of Sacred Scripture

Prologue: The Mystique of Sacred Scripture Summary and Analysis

In a prologue to his examination of the sources of the Christian New Testament, Burton Mack outlines his intent to strip away some of the mystique of the Bible and look at it as a collection of diverse documents created for different purposes and at different times. This approach challenges the widely-held belief that the Bible came into being by a deliberate process and serves as a monolithic source of truth and teaching.

Christians and theologians seem to understand that the Bible contains a diverse number of sources, Mack argues, yet it is treated as if it speaks with one voice. But while the Bible is supposed to deliver a single message, that message is somehow hidden in the text and must be discovered through study and reflection. These contradictions hinder real study of the book, Mack believes.

Mack summarizes his intention to take a scholarly look at the true sources of the texts of the present New Testament and place them properly in the context of the time and place of their creation. By comparing the texts and looking at how they were changed over the first few centuries after the birth of Jesus, Mack intends to show the development of mythologies regarding Jesus, the Jewish scriptures and the authority of the leaders of the early church. Finally, he writes, he will examine the mystique of the Bible itself and its role in American culture.

Chapter 1: Clashing Cultures

Chapter 1: Clashing Cultures Summary and Analysis

The first century of the Christian Era (C.E.) was a tumultuous time in the eastern Mediterranean, where Judaism and Christianity emerged. The new political structure of the Roman Empire was imposed over a region that had social traditions borrowed from both Greece and the Near East, leaving people grappling to make sense of the new world order. Uncertainty bred creativity, Mack argues, and provided the environment in which new ideas such as Christianity could take hold.

The primary question among thinkers of the day, Mack argues, was what the future would look like in the aftermath of conquest by the Romans. The idea of the Greek city-state clashed with the Near Eastern idea of the temple-state, creating more confusion. Roman rule provided political stability, but could not provide any cultural direction so far from Rome, allowing the people of the eastern Mediterranean to search for answers themselves.

These answers found many different forms. People formed associations and clubs to honor various gods or observe certain festivals, borrowing from their own cultural traditions as well as from others they encountered in this newly diverse society. The old ideas of the city-state and the temple-state no longer seemed adequate to encompass this new culture, Mack argues. Thinking about the future shape of society revolved on three essential questions: "(1) how to define law, (2) how to understand political power, and (3) how to describe personal virtue." (p. 32)

Of all the places where this upheaval was taking place, Mack explains, the region of Galilee was almost perfectly situated to foster new philosophies. Geographically and culturally isolated, Galilee had maintained an independently-minded culture while under various external rulers. It was in Galilee that Jesus lived.

Chapter 2: Teachings From the Jesus Movements

Chapter 2: Teachings From the Jesus Movements Summary and Analysis

What Mack calls "Jesus movements" started in the 30s and 40s C.E. in Galilee. They were not coherent religious movements, but were loosely formed around three basic ideas. First was the idea of a perfect society in the form of a kingdom. Second was the notion that any person was eligible to join this "kingdom" regardless of background. Third was the belief that this imagined kingdom should be a diverse place that cuts across all existing political and social boundaries.

While it would seem necessary to begin a discussion of the teachings of Jesus by looking at the life of Jesus himself, this is not possible, Mack explains. Extremely little is known about the historical Jesus except some of the probable facts about his life. This is not a hindrance to talking about the growth of Christianity, Mack argues, because the earliest Jesus movements were not concerned with preserving the facts of Jesus' life, but his teachings.

Mack identifies at least five distinct Jesus movements that existed during this period, devoting a section of the chapter to each. The first Jesus movement he addresses is that formed around the sayings gospel called Q.

"Q" is and abbreviation of the German word "Quelle," which means "source." The text known as Q does not exist as a separate document, but has been reconstructed by comparing the writings by the authors called Matthew, Luke and Mark. Scholars have long noticed that these writers must have been working from an earlier common source of the sayings of Jesus. By comparing these texts, a collection of what must have been some of the earliest sayings and teachings of Jesus can be discerned. From this Mack deduces the existence of an early Jesus movement.

This early movement was active and busy, Mack believes, worried about their present situation and the behavior they should exhibit to bring about the kingdom of God during their own lifetime. Mack compares them to the Cynics, a Greek movement that considered itself outside the mainstream world, observing the workings of society from a privileged vantage point of knowing the "truth."

The Q sayings are placed in three "layers" based on what were probably three stages of development in the community. The earliest layer consisted of the sayings of Jesus about following him. The second layer of sayings presented a more apocalyptic view of the kingdom of God, and the third layer "upgraded" Jesus to a divine being. (p. 53)

The second Jesus movement Mack identifies is based around the "pronouncement stories" of Jesus. These pronouncements are found throughout the gospels, where Jesus is asked about or challenged over something he is doing and makes a pronouncement that ends the conversation. Mack draws another comparison to the Cynic philosophers who used a similar rhetorical technique to defend their sometimes outrageous behavior. Jesus became more than just a teacher in the pronouncement stories, he became an interpreter of the law and a clever debater with a talent for turning the arguments of the scribes and priests against them.

The third Jesus movement identified by Mack is based on the Gospel of Thomas. It dates from the last quarter of the first century, and is proof that early Jesus followers were collecting his sayings into manuscripts. This collection of sayings was discovered in 1945 and looks much like what the Q gospel must have looked like, Mack argues. Indeed, about a third of the material is similar to that in Q. The Thomas gospel deviated from Q over two major issues, however. The Thomas movement apparently did not share the apocalyptic vision that the Q followers did, and also took issue with some of the ritual observances of the Q group.

A fourth movement among early Jesus followers involves the creation of the miracle stories. There are several miracle stories in the gospels, Mack notes, and they seem to follow a certain pattern that mimics the miraculous stories from the Jewish scriptures. The miracles of Jesus crossing water, for example, by calming the sea and walking on water, mirror Moses parting the Red Sea. The miracles of Jesus feeding the multitudes are similar to the miracle of the Israelites receiving manna from heaven. Mack sees evidence that the creators of these miracle stories wished to cast Jesus in the role of Moses, placing themselves within the Jewish tradition.

Mack identifies a fifth Jesus movement he calls the "Pillars in Jerusalem." (p. 67) The existence of this movement is deduced from the letter of Paul to the Galatians, in which he mentions visiting these "pillars" in order to compare his gospel with theirs. Little is known of this movement except the name of the assumed leaders, Peter, James and John, and that they apparently disagreed with Paul over issues of the Jewish purity code and how it applied to the followers of Jesus.

There were probably other Jesus movements as well, Mack writes, but these are the ones for which there is any evidence. That such a diverse group of teachings would spring up so early in the Christian story shows that the development of Christianity was not a unified path, Mack argues. These early Jesus movements were engaging in the creation of very different mythologies around the figure of Jesus, and constantly revising the story.

Chapter 3: Fragments From the Christ Cult

Chapter 3: Fragments From the Christ Cult Summary and Analysis

A drastic and apparently sudden change took place in the Jesus movement around the middle of the first century C.E. The movement shifts from being concerned mainly with how one belongs to the movement and toward the importance of Jesus' death in signaling the beginning of a new age. The prime source for evidence of this shift comes in the letters of Paul.

It is in Paul that the notion of Jesus having died for the sins of his followers was presented in what Mack calls the "Christ myth." (p. 79). Jesus became a martyr figure who purified his followers with his death. Mack aligns this Christ myth with other popular mythologies in the Jewish and Greek traditions of the "persecuted sage," the wise man who was punished for speaking the truth. Socrates, the Greek philosopher who was executed was a similar figure, Mack points out.

Paul's language also points to the development of ritual within the early Christian congregations. He wrote in "literary units" when he described Jesus and the role of his death, indicating that the words were repeated and spoken. There is also evidence in Paul's writings that the early Christians had some kind of ritual meal practice that mirrored the last supper of Jesus with his followers. Paul also includes hymns to Jesus hailing him as the Christ, or savior, in the manner of the Psalms.

This transformation was crucial in the formation of Christianity, Mack argues. It not only transformed Jesus into a divine Christ figure, but also transformed the community of his followers into an independent congregation apart from its political and social surroundings, and as a model kingdom that the world should emulate.

Chapter 4: Paul and His Gospels

Chapter 4: Paul and His Gospels Summary and Analysis

With Chapter 4, Mack begins a section of the book called "Christ and the Hinge of History." This chapter, entitled "Paul and His Gospel," examines what can be told about the author, Paul, and his concept of Christianity, and how it affected the course of the development of the Christian tradition.

Several of Paul's writings are included in the present New Testament, but not all of the books attributed to him are by the same person. Paul was an educated Jew writing in the 50s C.E., and a Pharisee, a conservative group of Jews who actively persecuted the early followers of Jesus. Paul himself was an opponent of the early Christians, according to his own words, but then underwent a conversion and joined them.

One of Paul's primary concerns in his writing was the Jewish law. As a Pharisee, he had followed a strict interpretation of the Jewish purity code, which required that males be circumcised. The question arose of whether these Jewish codes applied to the followers of Jesus. Paul's response was that Christians were free from following the Jewish law. Non-Jews, called Gentiles, were free to join the Christians and thereby join in the Jewish tradition, but without being required to observe the Jewish purity codes such as circumcision.

The letter to the congregation at Thessalonica is the earliest known writing of Paul. In it, he praised the congregation for their faithfulness in the face of persecution, and addressed some apparent questions that had arisen in the congregation regarding the dead. Paul wrote that the dead would be brought back with Jesus when he returned. Mack argues that the traditional explanation for this concern is that the Thessalonians were worried about their family members who had died before receiving the salvation that would come when Jesus returned. This is an incorrect interpretation, he argues, for it would mean that the Thessalonians had developed an apocalyptic story of Christ's return much earlier than the evidence suggests.

Paul's response was certainly apocalyptic in nature, however, Mack argues, marking the true beginning of the "apocalyptic scenario" that would be added and re-interpreted in later Christian thought. In fact, there is evidence that the version of Paul's letter that is in the present New Testament was edited to include specific references to later interpretations of the second coming of Christ by someone wishing to create authority for a new view of the apocalypse.

Paul's letter to the Galatians, he was responding to a direct opposition to his gospel from another group. He criticizes the Galatians for having been swayed by this group into thinking they should be observing the Jewish law, circumcision in particular.

The question struck deep at the identity of the Christians, who still felt themselves to be Jews. They worshiped the same God as before, but were uncertain about their place within the Jewish tradition in light of their beliefs about Jesus. Paul's response was another pivotal point, Mack argues. Paul established a connection between Christians and the Jewish patriarch Abraham. In the Jewish scriptures, it was foretold that Abraham's seed would be spread widely to all nations. The Christians were the children of Abraham foretold in the scriptures, and could claim his heritage directly.

This argument of Paul's created two major themes in Christianity, Mack explains. One was the idea that Jesus Christ was anticipated in the ancient Jewish scriptures, creating a direct link between the Jewish epic and early Christians. The second major idea was the image of Christians as children, with God and Abraham as their "fathers," a relationship that would provide a later structure for the church.

Chapter 5: Paul's Letters to the Greeks and Romans

Chapter 5: Paul's Letters to the Greeks and Romans Summary and Analysis

Mack continues the examination of the letters of Paul and how they influenced Christian thought. Chapter 5 looks at Paul's letters to the Corinthians, the Romans, to Philemon and to the Philippians.

The Christian congregation at Corinth had developed some disturbingly Greek ideas about Christianity in Paul's view, and his letter to them was a chastisement to change their ways. The Corinthians took a more spiritual outlook, diminishing the importance of the physical world. This view held that since the physical body was not important, it was acceptable to engage in physical pleasures with no spiritual repercussions. Paul responded with a metaphor of the church as a spiritual body that was connected to the body of Christ. For this reason, the Corinthians were to keep their own bodies pure.

There is also evidence in Paul's letter that the Corinthians were being attracted by competing Christian teachers who claimed authority from the Jewish scriptures. Paul's response was the invention of the idea that the Jewish scripture was an old covenant between God and his people that had been fulfilled by Jesus, who had replaced it with a new covenant. This strengthened the notion that the Christian faith superseded the Jewish faith.

In the letter to the Romans, Paul gave his most comprehensive account of his own gospel. The letter is remarkable for its influence, Mack argues, because it introduced a new concept of sin. Prior to Paul, sin had referred to the transgression of specific Jewish codes. Paul now referred to sin as a more general concept that sat in opposition to righteousness. A new contrast took the place of the old contrast between Jews and Gentiles or between Jews and Christians. The population could now be divided between the sinners and the righteous. This indicated a new social position for the Christian congregations, Mack argues. They no longer identified themselves in contrast to other groups, but had developed an independent position based on their own definition of righteousness.

Paul's letter to Philemon displayed an instance of Christian ideals conflicting with the political world. When a slave ran away from his master, Philemon, and joined a Christian congregation, the ideology of accepting all people into the church came into conflict with the illegality of harboring a runaway slave. Paul returned Philemon's slave to him, but entreated Philemon to treat the slave leniently, as he would a wayward child.

Paul's letter to the Philippians displayed a highly personal side of Paul, longing for the transformation he believed was coming through Jesus. This idea of a personal transformation would become a "major stream of Christianity," Mack writes. (p. 146)

Chapter 6: Gospels of Jesus the Christ

Chapter 6: Gospels of Jesus the Christ Summary and Analysis

War began in Palestine between the Greeks and the Jews in the year 66 C.E. and continued until it was suppressed by the Romans in 70 C.E., when the city of Jerusalem was leveled, and the Jewish Temple destroyed.

For followers in Jesus movements who still identified strongly with the tradition of Israel, the destruction of the Temple was devastating. The early Christian congregations had by this time already formed a strong independent identity, however, and capitalized on the destruction of the Temple by interpreting it as God's judgment on Israel. One community, called the "Markan" community after the author of the gospel of Mark, took the opportunity to reinvent the character of Jesus.

The book of Mark was the first appearance of a life story of Jesus. Borrowing mainly from the second layer of Q, it was full of language that anticipated the destruction of Israel and other predictions made in retrospect. Mark redefined the nature of the miracle stories and reinforced the idea that the teachings of Jesus replaced the old Jewish scriptures.

In contrast, the gospel of Matthew displayed a more "Jewish" form of Christianity. Appearing about the year 80 C.E., Matthew combined sayings from Q with the story of Mark, adding some parts and leaving others out. Matthew did not reject the Jewish law, but described Jesus as having been the one who finally correctly interpreted it. Matthew created a genealogy of Jesus as a descendant of Abraham through King David, thus placing him squarely in the Jewish heritage.

The gospel of Luke was also based on Mark and the Q sayings but was apparently written without consultation with Matthew, even though it first appeared about 120 C.E. Writing during a more comfortable time for Christians, Luke's gospel placed the life of Jesus at the forefront, with his teachings secondary. Luke's gospel also included the "Acts of the Apostles," a book that created a connection between the church in the early second century and the disciples of Jesus.

Chapter 7: Visions of the Cosmic Lord

Chapter 7: Visions of the Cosmic Lord Summary and Analysis

In Chapter 7, Mack looks at the books of the present New Testament that cultivated a mythology of Jesus as a "cosmic lord." Mack identifies four such mythologies.

The first cosmic mythology Mack identifies is in the gospel of John. The gospel of John is quite different from the three "synoptic gospels" of Matthew, Mark and Luke that all present a similar version of the life of Jesus.

John's gospel first appeared around 90 C.E. Its story began not at the birth of Jesus, but at the beginning of the universe, with the "logos," or "word" of God, placing Jesus at the very beginning of the cosmos. John's gospel was apparently developed independently from the other gospels, but does borrow the story of the trial and crucifixion from Mark. John also included the five miracle stories, but added two other stories that portray Jesus as a great revealer of cosmic truths to his followers.

Mack locates a second kind of cosmic vision of Jesus in the letters to the Colossians and Ephesians. These letters are traditionally attributed to Paul, but Mack explains they were almost certainly written by someone else under his name. This was not a practice intended to deceive anyone, Mack explains. It was a Greek tradition for later generations of a school of philosophy to create new works in the name of the founder of the philosophical school. The letters to the Colossians and Ephesians were weaker versions of Paul's writings that expanded the idea of Jesus as the lord over an invisible kingdom of God that he helped create and which he holds together. Mack speculates that this idea would not have appealed to the real Paul.

A third kind of cosmic vision is evident in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The author is unknown, Mack explains, but he displayed a rigorous intellect and forceful command of rhetoric. Like Paul, the author seems to have undergone a personal transformation and conversion to Christianity, but his vision of Christianity was quite different from Paul's, and indeed different from any other line of thinking in the letters that have been attributed to Paul. The Hebrews author viewed Jesus as a cosmic being who transcended the Jewish religion by making himself lower and then ascending to heaven, preparing the way for his followers to join him.

The fourth and final cosmic vision Mack addresses is the Revelation to John. This book is an account of a vision received by the author of the return of Jesus to judge the people of the world. Revelation was full of strange creatures and allegorical events that Mack speculates were references to the situation in which the Christian congregations found themselves in the early part of the second century C.E. At this time, the Roman Empire was beginning to cultivate the worship of the emperor as a divinity and Christians were grappling with the requirement that they pay tribute to this false god.

The Revelation is important in that it shows that the Christians were at the time of its composition, an independent enough network of believers to attract the attention of the Roman Empire. It is also important for the cosmic vision it presents, not so much because of the content of the Revelation, which has troubled religious scholars for centuries, but because it demonstrates an early proclivity among Christians for elaborate mythmaking.

Chapter 8: Letters from the Apostles

Chapter 8: Letters from the Apostles Summary and Analysis

By the second century C.E. a kind of "centrist" Christian movement had arisen, according to Mack. These centrist congregations accepted the myth of the Christ, but also recognized Jesus as a wise teacher. They recognized themselves as a distinct community, but also thought of themselves as the heirs of the Jewish traditions. They anticipated an apocalyptic second coming, but developed a code for living in the real world until that time came.

The leaders of these centrist congregations were troubled by the more extreme teachings of other Jesus movements and Christian groups and sought to create a direct connection between their beliefs and the historical Jesus in order to support their own interpretation of the Christian mythologies.

The method they used was the Greek tradition of tracing a school of philosophy back to a single teacher who taught a small group of disciples, who then carried on the teaching of their master and taught it to disciples of their own. Each generation might create new teachings of its own that were attributed to the original founder of the group of thought.

The problem faced by these centrist Christian leaders was that there was no real evidence of Jesus ever having formally taught any disciples. The literature on which the earliest Jesus movements were based, such as the Q sayings, was anonymous. There was reference in the later layer of Q to a group called "the twelve," which were to sit in judgment of the twelve tribes of Israel, but Mack explains that these twelve were a fictional group that had no names.

The author of Mark created a list of twelve disciples in the 70s C.E., probably based on the names of men associated with the various movements he was aware of. This list of disciples conflicted with the names of the three "pillars of Jerusalem," however, which Mark does not adequately resolve. Matthew, also writing in the late first century C.E., includes a list of disciples which for the first time indicates Peter as the disciple chosen by Jesus to lead his followers.

Centrist Christians of the early second century C.E. built on the idea of the twelve disciples and began referring to them as "apostles," or "messengers." They were now envisioned as specially-commissioned deliverers of the message of Jesus to his followers.

The problem still remained, however, that there was no evidence that any of them had produced any texts. The response was to take the texts that were in use and attribute them to an apostle or an associate of an apostle. This is how the previously anonymous gospels of Matthew, Mark and John came to be attributed. New texts were written and

attributed to apostles, as well, many of which are not included in the present New Testament. Mack turns his attention to those texts written after the first century C.E. that were attributed to apostles that supposedly lived and wrote during the time of Jesus.

The letters to Timothy and Titus were attributed to Paul, but were certainly written in the second century C.E., Mack claims. They are addressed to the overseers of Christian congregations and indicate the presence of an organized community of Christians under a structured leadership.

The epistles of Peter and Jude were also probably written in the second century C.E. They are addressed to Christians in general, and firmly develop the tradition of Peter as the leader of the apostles, a development that arose in Rome and was to become the basis for the formation of the Roman church.

The letter of James concerned living a moral life and did not focus strongly on the Christ myth. The books attributed to John seem to indicate the presence of a main stream of Christian thought that initially did not rely on a connection to an apostle for its validity. Mack points out that the apostles were not called such in the gospel of John, and that a chapter seems to have been added at the end that suggests Jesus foretold the death of Peter and the carrying on of his teaching by a "beloved disciple," presumably John. This final chapter also adds a signature of John, taking credit for the rest of the gospel that precedes it.

Chapter 9: Inventing Apostolic Traditions

Chapter 9: Inventing Apostolic Traditions Summary and Analysis

Along with the invention of the twelve apostles came the notion of an apostolic age. The twelve apostles became inseparable from Jesus. They were considered witnesses of his life and teaching that were charged with continuing on his work. As centrist Christians developed their connection to these apostles, they also formed a tradition of apostolic succession that created a blueprint for the leadership structure of the church.

The Acts of the Apostles by the author called Luke was one early attempt to delineate the apostolic age. The version of Christianity encountered in the Acts is not as extreme as some of the other writings included in the New Testament and instead seemed to be an attempt to appeal to a "common denominator" for Christianity that focused on self-control and righteousness rather than the solution of any internal conflict between competing Christian traditions.

In 1875, a manuscript was discovered that purported to be written by the twelve apostles, but was actually probably written in the second century C.E. Called the "Didache," it was a set of instructions to early church leaders that sought to combine the teachings of Jesus with the traditional ten commandments of the Jewish tradition. It is an early and important document of Jewish Christianity from this time.

The Didache is included in a small group of writings that were traditionally ascribed to the apostles or to church leaders who knew them personally. These writings were all probably written during the second century C.E. and so were not actually written by anyone who was alive at the time of Jesus. Traditionally, these writings are grouped under the title "The Apostolic Father," as if they are an authoritative source of evidence for the apostolic tradition. Rather than presenting a unified history of the church from Jesus to the apostles to the church of the second century, however, Mack calls the collection evidence of the diversity of early Christian thinking. It is only tradition and the reliance on the myth of the apostles that keeps them grouped together.

The writings were important in the establishment of the authority of church leadership. In one work, attributed to Ignatius, an analogy was drawn between the bishops, elders and deacons of the church and the hierarchy of God, Christ and the apostles. While the comparison was sometimes muddled, the intention was clear. The church leadership stood in for the hierarchy of the Kingdom of God on Earth, and Christians should follow and obey the bishops as they would God.

Chapter 10: Claiming Israel's Epic

Chapter 10: Claiming Israel's Epic Summary and Analysis

Mack describes the "watered-down" version of the gospels invented by the apostolic leaders as the product of church leaders who were mistakenly confident that loyalty to leadership and the threat of the second coming of Christ were enough to hold the church together. This may have been enough to keep most followers in line, Mack argues, but it did not stop some intellectuals from noticing some of the contradictions inherent in the Christian teaching and trying to make sense of them on their own, especially over the question of the relative positions of Jewish and Christian stories. Mack describes three such "thoughtful" Christians in this chapter, Marcion, Valentinus and Justin Martyr.

Marcion of Sinope was the wealthy son of a bishop and a Christian in the tradition of Paul. Marcion's belief was that the Jewish God and scripture should be completely discarded and replaced by the teachings of Jesus. He was faced with the problem that early Christian writings were full of reference to the Jewish scriptures and that the letters of Paul had been edited and added to reflect the beliefs of later Jewish Christians. His solution was to reject the early writings that embraced the Jewish epic and to remove the language from the books of Paul that had been added. He developed a short list of the texts he thought reliable, mainly the corrected letters of Paul and a version of Luke's gospel. Mack calls this "the first New Testament canon of literature." (p. 253)

Marcion's version of Christianity was simple and based on a life of self-discipline. His rejection of the Mosaic Law was troublesome to church leadership that relied on the connection to the old scriptures for their authority.

Valentinus was an Alexandrian who wrote in Rome about the same time as Marcion. Like Marcion, Valentinus proposed a simple, practical version of Christianity that challenged the logic and traditions of the dominant Christian beliefs.

Mack takes the writings of Valentinus as an example of Christian thought as it had developed in Alexandria. It is a theology of "gnosis," or the personal knowledge of God. Valentinus was influenced by the philosophy of Plato that proposed that the things that can be experienced by the senses are merely imperfect imitations of perfect forms that can only be known through contemplation. Jesus was sent to reveal this perfect knowledge of the workings of the universe to his followers.

The centrist bishops were now on the defensive, Mack writes, challenged by these alternative views of Christianity that endangered their authority. A writer called Justin Martyr came to their defense.

Justin Martyr was an educated Samarian with strong ties to Rome. He was a philosopher who converted to Christianity and took up the cause of the centrist church in the face of the challenges of Marcion and Valentinus. Justin's argument was that the Jewish scriptures had been written with the Christians in mind all along. He advanced the idea of the "logos," which placed Jesus at the beginning of the universe along with God. He scoured the Jewish scriptures for prophecies that could be interpreted to foretell the coming of Jesus and used them as proof that the kingdom of God was meant for the Christians.

Justin's philosophy was adopted by the centrist Christians, Mack explains, bringing the Jewish scriptures into the accepted canon of Christian texts. Mack's next task, he states, is to explain how these scriptures became bound to the New Testament to become the present Christian Bible.

Chapter 11: Creating the Christian Bible

Chapter 11: Creating the Christian Bible Summary and Analysis

Mack opens the final chapter of the book introducing the concept of the "canon." A canon is a formally defined group of texts, such as the present Christian Bible. He explains that most Christian scholars, from the earliest days to the present, treat the Christian canon as something that was divinely inspired. The included texts were always meant to be in this canon, their place only needed to be revealed to Christians.

The Christians were not the first to develop the idea of a canon of religious texts. Judaism had long identified the five books of Moses as the basis of the Jewish canon, and the Christians adopted them as part of their own, as well. Judaism added other writings to their canon to reflect the changes in their own situation such as the destruction of the Temple, the development of rabbinical system of synagogues and other revisions of the Jewish myth. They also excluded some Jewish texts from their canon, and some of these discarded texts were retained by the Christians and added to their own collection.

Early Christians followed a similar process in developing a list of recommended texts for reading in congregations. Some texts were included or excluded based on a congregations own slant of thinking or to favor its traditional association with a certain apostle.

The turning point that forced the formal definition of the Christian canon was the conversion of Constantine, the eastern Emperor of Rome, to Christianity early in the fourth century C.E. Suddenly, the Christian church found its lot reversed. As the official religion of the Roman Empire, new requirements were placed on the church. The official festival calendar had long been an important part of unifying the Empire. The Christian observances, such as Easter, had to be given specific dates so they could be properly observed.

Likewise, an official text had to be prepared. Constantine ordered a man named Eusebius to prepare an approved list of texts and have copies made for distribution to the churches. The list that Eusebius prepared is not known today, but a later list made by a Christian named Athenasius does survive. It is very similar to the list of texts included in the modern bible. The list of Christian texts recommended by Athenasius was identical to the modern New Testament, although the books were placed in a different order. Mack calls Athenasius' collection the first solid version of the modern Bible.

The final stage of the development of the Bible came in the fourth century when a bishop in Rome asked Jerome, a Christian monk educated in Latin, to prepare a Latin translation of the recommended texts for use at the Roman church. Under the influence

of the list prepared by Athenasius and the lobbying of Augustine, Jerome prepared a single book that collected the Jewish and apostolic books that formed the standard Bible that would be in use for centuries afterward. Mack points out that modern Bible scholars return to the original texts when preparing translations, but Jerome's list of books remains intact.

This concludes the main portion of Mack's book. The influence of the Bible over the centuries is well known, he writes, concluding the book with a proposal to examine the importance of this influence in the present "postmodern" age. (p. 292)

Epilogue: The Fascination of the Bible

Epilogue: The Fascination of the Bible Summary and Analysis

Epilogue: The Fascination of the Bible

The Bible seems to fascinate people everywhere, Mack writes, including in places where one might think it would not, such as Korea. He tells of some of his Christian Korean students who believe that the word of God was meant for the Koreans all the time, but had been delayed in its delivery.

Mack outlines several types of fascination with the Bible. The first is a belief that the Bible is a "transparent oracle" that can provide an answer to any question put to it. This usage of the Bible is practically invited by the set up of the text, which juxtaposes the old allegorical texts with new interpretations. The idea seems to be that one need only know how to interpret the often vague pronouncements of the Bible to receive authoritative answers to modern questions.

A second type of fascination with the Bible treats it as a divinely-authored text that provides a framework and a central pillar for Christian worship. It is inseparable from the Christian church and provides the source of all its teachings.

Here again, the combination of the old and the new in one book has affected the outlook of Christians who view the Bible in this way. The standard Catholic liturgy, which sets out the order of worship and the texts that will be drawn from for each Sunday in the liturgical year, often pairs texts from the Old and New Testaments. One result, Mack claims, is that many Christians view all non-Christians as followers of the "old" ways before the birth of Christ.

A third kind of fascination with the Bible Mack calls "An Unassuming Epic." In this section he turns to the question of the Bible's role in American culture. He repeats some of the Biblical cliches that have been used to describe America's role in the world. These cliches have, at their root, the comparison between Jesus being sent to spread the word of God and the United States sent to spread democracy to the world.

America is supposedly a secular nation, Mack points out, but it still appeals to something called the "Judeo-Christian" traditions. He finds roots in the Christian myths, even for some of the secular American myths, drawing a parallel between the Lone Ranger riding into town and vanquishing the bad guys and the Jesus of Mark sweeping in and casting out demons.

Mack turns to the present day and notes that many people are exploring alternatives to the "Judeo-Christian" traditions. Our awareness of the rest of the world has been heightened, and Americans are coming more and more in contact with other cultures.

As we look at the rest of the world, we see that other societies have developed civilized ways outside the Christian myth. The old view of a world united under Christianity is no longer really a feasible expectation.

This is a sign of the "postmodern" age, Mack argues, and provides a brief summarization of postmodernism. Modernism was an outlook that human society was advancing toward a single, ultimate goal, and was a natural response to the rapid rise of technology in the 20th century and in the wake of the world wars. Postmodernism, Mack explains, is signified by a rejection of this world view that there is one ultimate goal toward which we are moving. Instead, there are several valid paths that human society might advance along.

This is worrisome to those who still cling to the authority of the Bible as divine text, or as an oracle that can provide guidance and direction, Mack writes. These are not productive ways to use the Bible, in Mack's view. Instead, he proposes, we should look to the Bible as a record of how cultures invent and reinvent their own mythologies in response to the needs of their day. This process is continuous, and understanding how it has shaped Western and American culture can help us better understand ourselves in the new postmodern world.

For this to happen, however, the religious mystique must be stripped from the Bible so it can be properly discussed as a cultural document, and the taboos about questioning it as the divine word of God must be lifted. Mack concludes with the hope that his book might contribute to this new type of understanding of the Bible.

Characters

Jesus

Very little is known about the historical figure of Jesus, Mack writes. He is traditionally believed to have come from Galilee, and indeed this region was a place of cultural transition in the first century C.E. that produced several new ideas including the early Jesus movement.

The facts of Jesus' death are unknown, Mack explains. He does not take the versions presented in the gospels of the New Testament as literal history, as they were written well after the time of the supposed crucifixion of Jesus and with the purpose of substantiating Jesus' position as the divine Christ.

That so little is known of the historical Jesus is not important to Mack's argument, he explains. What is important is how the figure of Jesus was transformed by later generations of Christians. From a wise teacher, Jesus was made a divine being, the savior, or Christ, who was killed but rose again and appeared to his disciples before ascending into heaven. Eventually, Jesus' divine stature in the Christian myth was elevated to the "logos" of God, the word that was present at the beginning of the universe and throughout the ancient Jewish scriptures, and which became human in the form of Jesus to bring God's word to the world.

Paul

Paul was the author of several of the books that are included in the New Testament, although not all of the books attributed to him are by the same author, Mack claims. Differences in style and content indicate that they were written by later authors and assigned to Paul in the tradition of Greek learning that often assigned the teachings of a school of thinkers to the founder of that school.

Paul was an educated Jew, a conservative Pharisee who once persecuted Christians but later converted and joined them, becoming one of the strongest voices in early Christianity and influencing Christian thought for centuries afterward. His writings are mostly in the form of letters written to Christian congregations dispersed across the Mediterranean and Near East. In them, he seeks to clarify questions about proper observances and establish the Christian relationship to the Jewish codes.

Paul is also instrumental in the propagation of the Christ myth, the idea that Jesus was a divine being sent as the savior of his followers. His writings regarding his own personal conversion have served as inspiration for the idea of transformation in the Christian teaching.

Mark

The name traditionally given to the author of the gospel of Mark. Mark presented a biography of Jesus that borrowed from the Sayings Gospel Q and arranged them into stories from Jesus' life. He focused on the plot to kill Jesus and his conflict with the Jewish leaders and Roman authority in Jerusalem. Based on elements from the gospel of Mark, Mack postulates that the author may have undergone some kind of traumatic split from a Jewish synagogue and responded with a story that emphasizes the role of the Jews in the destruction of Jesus.

Matthew

The name traditionally given to the author of the gospel of Matthew. Matthew was a Jewish Christian, and his gospel depicts Jesus as a wise teacher in the Jewish tradition. He borrows from both the gospel of Mark and the Sayings Gospel Q.

Luke

The name traditionally given to the author of the gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. Luke was writing about 120 C.E. and his writings indicate the shift to the mythology of the apostles, supposed disciples of Jesus who carried on his teaching after his death.

John

The name traditionally given to the author of the gospel of John. John's gospel was apparently developed independently of the three "synoptic" gospels and first appeared about 90 C.E. John's writings saw the teachings of Jesus as keys to personal enlightenment.

Clement of Rome

An early leader of the Christian church at Rome, and the author of writings that supported the apostolic vision of the church

Ignatius

An early Christian leader in the apostolic tradition.

Marcion

A Christian intellectual of the second century C.E. who believed Christians should discard the Jewish laws and scriptures completely, a challenge to the centrist Christian view.

Valentinus

A Christian intellectual from Alexandria who infused his Christian beliefs with Platonic ideals about a perfect class of knowledge that was revealed by Jesus.

Justin Martyr

A Roman Christian thinker who defended the centrist Christian beliefs against challenges like those from Marcion and Valentinus. Justin embraced the concept of the "logos" and brought the Jewish scriptures into line with Christian teachings by placing Jesus in the ancient texts.

Eusebius

The person first charged by Constantine to create a list of approved Christian texts.

Athenasius

The first compiler of approved Christian texts for which the list is still known. Athenasius' collection is essentially the same as the modern Bible.

Jerome

A Latin scholar and monk instructed to create a Latin translation of the approved books of the Bible. Jerome's Latin text was the version of the Bible used for centuries by the Roman church.

Constantine

The Eastern Emperor of Rome. Constantine propelled Christianity into the forefront by converting in the early fourth century and making it the official state religion of the empire.

Objects/Places

Israel

Used to refer to the part of Palestine inhabited by the Jews as well as the nation of Jews in general.

Galilee

A region in Palestine that maintained a wide variety of cultural influences. The traditional home of Jesus and the birthplace of the Jesus movements.

Rome

The capital and seat of government for the Western Roman Empire, and the site of the Roman church which came to dominate Christianity.

Roman Empire

The empire that controlled the Mediterranean and Near East at the time of the rise of Christianity. Ruled for a time from the capitols of Rome in the west and Constantinople in the east. Christianity became the official state religion of the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine.

Mosaic Scriptures

The five books of scripture attributed to Moses that formed the basis of the Jewish law and which were adopted by the Christian church as the first books of the Old Testament.

Jesus Movements

The earliest movements based on the teachings of Jesus. They were distinct from Christian movements in that they did not consider Jesus a divine being, but a wise teacher.

Sayings Gospel Q

A reconstructed collection of sayings of Jesus in use by the earliest Jesus movements. While no separate manuscript of the sayings exists, its existence has been deduced by scholars based on the similarities of the words of Jesus found in later texts. Q is short for the German word "Quelle" which means "source."

The Didache

A collection of instructions to the Christian church supposedly written by the twelve apostles.

Apostolic Fathers

A collection of early writings, including the Didache, that supposedly establish the existence and authority of the apostles of Jesus.

Synoptic Gospels

The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke. Called "synoptic" because they share a similar story of Jesus' life.

New Testament

The collection of Christian writings that have been assembled as part of the current Christian Bible.

Old Testament

A collection of Jewish writings adopted by Christians as the ancient foundation for Christianity.

Themes

The Diversity of the New Testament

Mack opens the prologue to his book describing the "important role assigned to the Bible in our religious institutions."

"Readings from the Bible are essential to liturgies, lessons from the Bible are felt to be necessary in the construction of theologies by those charged with the intellectual life of religious traditions," Mack writes. "The remarkable thing about this kind of appeal to the Bible, however, is that it does not seem to matter whether all of the theologies and teachings so derived agree."

Even at the highest levels of Christian scholarship, Mack goes on to argue, the Bible is assumed to have a unified, single message that can be understood by properly interpreting its meaning. This ignores the historical facts about the assemblage of texts that is now called the Bible, Mack claims. The story that the Bible is a coherent work divinely inspired and delivered to the world by twelve apostles who were given this specific task by Jesus himself is a myth.

Mack provides evidence that the early followers of Jesus were a diverse group with sometimes widely differing interpretations based on their own diverse backgrounds. As time passed, the figure of Jesus was transformed by some of these followers into a divine teacher. The texts created by these early Christians were partly based on earlier texts of the Jesus movement, such as the Sayings Gospel Q, but introduced new ideas to support their new beliefs.

As Christian congregations spread from the Near East into the regions of Greece, Rome and North Africa, even more ideas and new traditions found their way into the Christian system. These did not always mesh cleanly with one another, Mack explains, and as Christianity entered the second century C.E., Christian intellectuals at Rome began to question some of the central conflicts.

By taking an analytical look at the texts of the New Testament, one can see that they present widely differing viewpoints and interpretations of the Christian epic, Mack explains. These viewpoints indicate that the original authors of the texts were writing at different places and at a time well after the time of Jesus. Mack finds evidence within the texts of the presence of several types of Jesus movements that must have been present at the time of their writing. He refers to other texts such as the Gospel of Thomas that were not included in the New Testament but must have been used by some early Christians.

Centrist Christian leaders responded by creating the myth of the apostles, messengers sent directly by Jesus to deliver his authoritative word. By connecting themselves with these apostles, the centrist Christian leaders claimed their authority over the Christian

community and also created the myth of a single, authoritative teaching that was laid down shortly after the life of Jesus by disciples who knew him personally. This myth has persisted to the present day, Mack claims. The triumph of the Christian leaders, Mack suggests, was to unite these diverse texts under the mythology of the apostles.

Making Room for Scholarly Study of the Bible

Mack's central argument is that Bible is not what the Christian church claims it to be. It is not, he claims, a unified text handed down by apostles who personally knew Jesus describing the one true faith and teachings of a divine being. In Mack's view, this is easily shown by examining the actual historical facts surrounding the production and selection of the texts included in the Bible, placing them in the context of the time in which they were probably written, looking for internal evidence that signifies the changing nature of the early Jesus movements and Christian congregations, and understanding the possible motivations for the inclusion or exclusion of certain texts or ideas from the "official" view of Christianity.

While Mack would argue that this is an obvious way to make a scholarly assessment of the text, it is nonetheless very difficult because of the mystique that surrounds the Bible and the taboo that exists against looking at it objectively. He calls for the lifting of this taboo in the prologue and epilogue of his book, inviting others to join him in taking a truly scholarly look at the diverse collection of texts included in the Bible.

While Mack rejects the Christian claims about the source of the Bible, he does not reject its important role in the "Judeo-Christian tradition" in America, influencing the morals and world view even of those who do not consider themselves religious. The Bible is an important part of our own mythology, Mack argues, but we cannot examine it properly within a purely religious context. Only by making room for objective scholarly study of the Bible can we hope to understand its importance in our culture.

The Importance of Myths

The New Testament is a myth, Mack might argue, or rather, a collection of myths on a similar theme. Some of these myths were created in the first centuries of the Christian Era by people trying to make sense of their changing culture by finding a place where they could fit in. Some of the myths came later, in an attempt to reconcile competing versions of the earlier myths. This was a natural process, Mack explains, and not one that was exclusive to the early Christians. It is a process that continues today, he argues.

The earliest followers of Jesus considered themselves part of the Jewish tradition, Mack explains, but not all of them were Jews. One of the remarkable features of the Jesus movements and early Christianity was that it accepted non-Jews. This necessitated a revision of the Jewish traditions that required adherence to certain rules and beliefs. The writer Paul addressed these issues by creating a new mythology of Jesus that borrowed from the Jewish tradition, but introduced new aspects to it that supported the

diversity of the forming Christian tradition. The myth of Jesus as the divine Christ and savior was put in place, defining the transformation of some Jesus movements into Christian communities.

Paul's mythology was revised in the subsequent century by church leaders who were inventing an even newer mythology, the myth of the apostles. The church had become much more established than in the days of Paul, when several varying viewpoints were still floating around the Jesus movements, but was still facing challenges from Christian intellectuals who challenged some of the aspects of the Christian story. This new mythology invented twelve apostles of Jesus who knew him personally and who had composed the texts now in the New Testament. This provided an unbroken connection between the church of the second century C.E. and the historical figure of Jesus and gave authority to the church leaders of the day. This new mythology also borrowed authority from the ancient Jewish texts by including the idea of the "logos," the word of God that was present at the beginning of the universe and was revealed by Jesus.

Moving rapidly into more recent history, Mack notes in his epilogue that the American mythology owes a lot to the Christian mythology. He sees parallels between Jesus and distinctly American figures such as the Lone Ranger. He points out that Americans have traditionally appealed to the Bible to justify American institutions such as democracy, western expansion and even slavery. It is a complex myth, and one that is difficult to extract from its religious mystique, but understanding how it came to be, and how it is changing and being used today is a worthy endeavor, Mack argues.

Style

Perspective

Mack is writing in the late 20th century about writings that were produced eight to nine hundred years earlier. He describes the time of his own writing as a "postmodern" age, by which he means a time when the "modern" view that civilization was advancing toward one common goal has largely been abandoned. The postmodern age recognizes that there are many different valid paths that societies and cultures might take, and a spirit of open inquiry is encouraged.

This is the perspective Mack hopes to bring to his subject, and one which he encourages others to take. Study of the Bible has been stifled by the mystique that surrounds it, he claims. Most Christians, church leaders and even biblical scholars only study the Bible to find evidence for beliefs they already assume to be true and do not take an objective perspective. Truly objective study of the Bible is also limited by the traditional belief that the book is and has always been a unified collection of divinely-inspired texts that speak with a single voice and with a consistent message.

Mack's perspective is to approach each text of the New Testament independently and place it in context of its time and its relation to the other texts it has been linked with. He temporarily ignores the traditional grouping of the texts into a single New Testament, returning to this idea later in the book to examine it and the mystique it holds in an objective way.

Tone

The thesis of Mack's book is to challenge the accepted beliefs about the authors of the new Testament scriptures, and his tone is that of a reasoned and objective argument intended to debunk a popular myth.

While Mack is dismissing as fiction what most moderns Christians hold to be fundamental religious truths, he does not employ an overly critical tone or imply that the true authors or compilers of the New Testament were acting dishonestly or maliciously. Instead he provides positive theories on why the authors interpreted and wrote about their beliefs the way they did. He employs a scholarly, objective tone in his reasoning, sometimes offering informed speculation about the actual events that led up to the creation of certain texts.

While Mack is rejecting one of the major beliefs held by millions of Christians, he is not scornful toward those who hold such beliefs. Nor does he reject outright the Bible or its importance to American culture. Mack recognizes the importance that myth holds in all societies, and concludes his book on a hopeful note that others might follow him in examining the mythologies of the Bible and why they have resonated so strongly. He is respectful of the fact that others may find his ideas counter to their deeply-held beliefs.

Structure

"Who Wrote the New Testament?" is divided into eleven chapters in three parts, with a prologue and an epilogue. Maps of Palestine and the Mediterranean region in the first century C.E. are included for the reader's reference. Three appendices outline the instances of the Q sayings as they appear in Luke, provide an outline of the subjects of the Q sayings, and a summary of the pronouncement stories in Mark.

In the prologue, entitled "The Mystique of Sacred Scripture," Mack explains the religious traditions that have hampered the objective study of the Bible and his intention to approach the subject objectively.

The first section of the book is called "Jesus and the Christ," and includes Chapters 1-3. In this section, Mack explores the texts that indicate the emergence of the early Jesus movements and the development of the Christ myth that views Jesus as a divine teacher and savior.

The second section of the book contains Chapters 4-8 and is called "Christ and the Hinge of History." In this section, Mack examines each of the texts of the New Testament individually, beginning with the letters of Paul, moving on to the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew and Luke, and then to the remaining books. He finished the section with a look at the "Letters from the Apostles" (Chapter 8) which indicate the development of the apostolic tradition.

The final section of the book is called "History and the Christian Myth" and is where Mack brings the threads of his argument together. The section contains Chapters 9-11. In it, Mack looks at the apostolic tradition and how it helped form the early list of recommended and accepted Christian texts. He examines how the Jewish scriptures became attached to the Christian ones and finally how the Bible was assembled after the conversion of Constantine in the early fourth century.

Mack concludes with an epilogue called "The Fascination of the Bible" in which he looks at the different ways the myth of the Bible is used today and a call for a more objective look at the importance of this myth in American culture.

Quotes

"Despite the enormous investment in biblical studies in our society, there is actually very little public knowledge about the Bible." Prologue, p. 3

"That Christianity emerged just when it did, that it drew now upon some Jewish roots, now upon Greek ideas, and that it eventually found itself infatuated with the thought of Roman power, are all crucial for the story about to be told. " Chapter 1, p. 41

"The common strategy was to attribute the wisdom they had achieved to Jesus, putting it in the form of instruction by him by revising his teachings to match the school of thought they were developing. They did this just as any Hellenistic school of philosophy would have done." Chapter 2, p. 70

"Beginning somewhere in northern Syria, probably in the city of Antioch, and spreading through Asia Minor into Greece, the Jesus movement underwent a change of historic consequence. It was a change that turned the Jesus movement into a cult of a god called Jesus Christ." Chapter 3, p. 75

"After Jesus, a single personality dominates the traditional picture of the way Christianity began. This person, an intellectual Jew named Paul, looms so large in the pages of the New Testament that what he called his gospel has served for the Christian church as the definition of the new religion." Chapter 4, p. 99

"A Jewish penchant for personified abstractions and divine agency merged with a Greek predilection for conceptual abstractions and cosmic order. The Christ had become an overwhelming, all-encompassing symbol of the agency of a Jewish God in a Greek world." Chapter 5, p. 146

"Forever after Christians would think of Luke, not as a storyteller, but as a historian or even as a reporter of historic events. They would always think that Luke knew something they did not know." Chapter 6, p. 173

"[John] raised the metaphor of the martyrdom of Christians to mythic status solely in order to imagine the ultimate vindication for the truth of the Christian faith. In so doing, he shaped a literary legacy for Western Christian imagination that continues to haunt us." Chapter 7, p. 197

"The leaders from congregations of this [centrist] type began to be worried about losing their claim to represent the true Christian teaching. Their answer was to anchor the truth of their gospel in the claim that they 'received' it directly from a disciple who had known Jesus personally. " Chapter 8, p. 199

"Christians imagine the disciples as apostles whenever they picture the way Christianity began. It is as important for the disciples to be apostles as it is for Jesus to be the Christ." Chapter 9, p. 225

"It was the concept of the logos that made it possible to merge the notions of being, person, power, and text in a singular configuration and so account for both creation and redemption in a unified system of thought. The concept of the logos made is possible to position Jesus at the point where two great traditions of thought met and merged to form the religion we call Christianity." Chapter 10, p. 266

"The fact the the Bible is the Christian myth has made it difficult to be critical and analytical about its composition. The fact that it is thought of as the Christian canon has made research about its formation extremely difficult to pursue." Chapter 11, p. 276

"The Bible is not the private property of the Christian churches. The biblical epic belongs to us all in the form of the Judeo-Christian heritage that is supposed to have given our nation its values and ethical foundation. The taboo is the sign that we are all complicit in the unacknowledged agreement to let that story stand. It is time to find out whether we think that wise." Epilogue, p. 310

Topics for Discussion

How does Mack describe the struggle of early Christians with the Jewish roots of their beliefs?

What is Mack's opinion of modern religious scholarship?

Mack claims that the actual historic facts of Jesus' life are not important to the myth of Jesus Christ. Does he make a compelling argument?

What purpose does the myth of the apostles serve, according to Mack?

How and when does the myth of the Christ originate? Why does this happen?

What are the unique social and political conditions that allow for the rise of the Jesus movements, according to Mack?

How does the change in the relative social position of the Christian community change over time, and how does this affect the choices of approved Christian texts?

How does Mack challenge the traditional religious approach to studying the scriptures?