

Scholars generally acknowledge that the Christianity — as we know it today — was simply one among the many varied and competing sectarian beliefs amongst the early Christians in the first three centuries. This form of Christianity was, in fact, a minority faction in many localities and only much later did it attain dominance. In fact, the term “Christian” was in fact first used at Antioch Acts 11:26 and as such, Jesus<sup>(P)</sup> during his ministry would not have known it and would not have identified himself with it.

Thus, in the first three centuries of Christianity, we are faced with a variety of competing beliefs and sects, with no one dominant or "orthodox" form of Christianity. The prominent New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, explains:

*Christianity in the second and third centuries was **in a remarkable state of flux**. To be sure, at no point in its history has the religion constituted a monolith. But the diverse manifestations of its first three hundred years - whether in terms of social structures, religious practices, or ideologies - have never been replicated*  
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He continues further with:

*Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the realm of theology. In the second and third centuries there were, of course, Christians who believed in only one God; others, however, claimed that there were two Gods; yet others subscribed to 30, or 365, or more. Some Christians accepted the Hebrew Scriptures as a revelation of the one true God, the sacred possession of all believers; others claimed that the scriptures had been inspired by an evil deity. Some Christians believed that God had created the world and was soon going to redeem it; others said that God neither had created the world nor had ever had any dealings with it. Some Christians believed that Christ was somehow both a man and God; others said that he was a man, but not God; others claimed that he was God but not a man; others insisted that he was a man who had been temporarily inhabited by God. Some Christians believed that Christ's death had brought about the salvation of the world; others claimed that his death had no bearing on salvation; yet others*

*alleged that he had never even died.*<sup>2</sup>

In a later work, Ehrman further expands on this by saying:

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Similarly, James Dunn — who is no radical in New Testament studies — concludes that:

*...there was no single normative form of Christianity in the first century. When we ask about the Christianity of the New Testament we are not asking about any one entity: rather, we encounter different types of Christianity, each of which viewed the others as too extreme in one respect or another — too conservatively Jewish or too influenced by antinomian or gnostic thought and practice, too enthusiastic or tending towards too much institutionalization. Not only so, but each type of Christianity was itself not monochrome and homogeneous, more like a spectrum. Even when we looked at individual churches the picture was the same - of diversity in expression of faith and life-style, the tension between conservative and liberal, old and new, past and present, individual and community.*<sup>3</sup>

This "diversity" among the early Christians is most prominent from a comparative study of the New Testament writings. In the New Testament books, we are faced with a variety of diverse theological beliefs and images of Jesus<sup>(P)</sup>.

It is important to note that the early Christians in the second and third century have varying apocryphal texts that each sect hold as "inspired". This state of "flux" will be made more evident in the following sections, insha'allah.

The purpose of this article is to hence document some of the varying and sometimes even bizarre beliefs of the early Christians regarding the nature of God, the Prophet Jesus<sup>(P)</sup> and his blessed mother, Mary<sup>(P)</sup>.

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## Nature of God

In a second or third century collection of Christian hymns, the ***Ode of Solomon***, the nineteenth ode celebrates God the Father as **a woman with breasts**:

*The Son is the Cup and he who was milked is the Father; the Holy Spirit is she who milked him. Because his breasts were full, and it was undesirable that his milk should be spilled without purpose, the Holy Spirit opened her bosom/womb and mixed the milk of the two breasts of the Father.*

It should be noted that the imagery of the Trinity as presented here — in its description of the conception of the Son — is striking with its preconceived ideas of Trinity, and also of God and gender.

## Nature of Jesus

On the nature of Jesus, some Christians of the time hold that:

## Nature of Mary

St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Constantia, in Cyprus, writing in the fourth century against the Collyridians, says:

*After this a heresy appeared, which we have already mentioned slightly by means of the letter written in Arabia about Mary. And this heresy was again made public in Arabia from Thrace and the upper parts of Scythia and was brought to our ears, which to men of understanding will be found ridiculous and laughable. We*

*will begin to trace it out, and to relate concerning it. It will be judged (to partake of) silliness rather than of sense, as is the case with other like it. For, as formerly, out of insolence towards Mary, those whose opinions were such sowed hurtful ideas in the reflexions of men, so otherwise these, leaning to the other side, fall into the utmost harm..... For the harm is equal in both these heresies, the one belittling the holy Virgin, the other again glorifying her over-much. For who should it be that teach thus but women? for the race of women is slippery, fallible, and humble-minded..... For some women deck out a koutrkon that is to say, a square stool, spreading upon it a linen cloth, on some solemn day of the year, for some days they lay out bread, and offer it in the name of Mary. All the women partake of the bread, as we related in the letter to Arabia, writing partly about that..... Yea, verily, the body of Mary was holy, but was surely not God. Verily, the Virgin was a virgin, and was honoured, but was not given to us to worship; but she worships Him who was born from her according to the flesh, having come from heaven out of the Father's bosom....." This offering and eating of cakes was probably derived from the worship of Artemis.<sup>4</sup>*

## Conclusions

Joachim Jeremias, one of the foremost exegete of the New Testament in this century, who after a lifetime of study of the original, finally agreed with the German theologian Rudolph Bultmann that:

*"[W]ithout a doubt it is true to say that the dream of ever writing a biography of Jesus is over.<sup>5</sup>*

Meaning that even the chronology of the life of Jesus could not be established from the New Testament. From the above exposition, it is clear that one now may be lead to ask, if this was the state of Christians who cannot even agree on their basic theology, how are we expected to trust the Christian interpretation of events on even larger issues such as

Christian ethics and *Weltanschauung*?

Certainly, it is mind-boggling to swallow the present-day missionaries' preaching of *their* version of Christianity, when it is clear that their forefathers certainly do not believe what they do today. That the "Christianity" of today is simply one of the many, varying beliefs during its earlier state of existence is evidence to us that what Jeremias said remains true. Yet we still wonder why the missionaries are anxious to proclaim their "one out of many" **deviant** versions to the Muslims.

And only Allah knows best!

**Footnotes:**

1. Bart D. Ehrman, *The Orthodox Corruption Of Scripture: The Effect Of Early Christological Controversies On The Text Of The New Testament*, 1993, Oxford University Press: London & New York, p. 3
2. *ibid.*
3. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, 1977, SCM Press and Westminster Press, p. 373
4. C. H. H. Wright & C. Neil (ed.), *A Protestant Dictionary*, 1904, Hodder & Stoughton, London, p. 390 (Under "Mary, The Virgin").
5. J. Jeremias, *The Problem of the Historical Jesus*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972, p. 12