

STUDIES ON VOLTAIRE AND THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

EDITED BY THEODORE BESTERMAN

VOLUME XXIV

*Transactions of the First international
congress on the Enlightenment I*

INSTITUT ET MUSEE VOLTAIRE

LES DELICES

GENEVE

1963

Voltaire and the New testament

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Ever since John Morley's *Voltaire* (1872), mention has been made of Voltaire's anti-Christian writings, mainly those of the Ferney period. Just prior to Morley's unique and balanced inquiry, and also at the turn of the century, three Catholic scholars published books on Voltaire's life and works, in which several of his writings on the Bible, Christianity, and the church were censured¹. The interbellum period has seen several works emphasizing the sources of some of the patriarch's attacks², his attitude towards Jesus, above all towards Jesus's divinity³, and exactly what was meant by 'Ecrasez l'infâme.'⁴ In more recent years, three studies have appeared which deal with Voltaire's biblical criticism as a

¹ abbé M. V. Maynard, *Voltaire, sa vie et ses œuvres* (1867), ii.542-546; J. F. Nourrisson, *Voltaire et le voltairianisme* (1896), pp.188, 406; L. Crouslé, *La Vie et les œuvres de Voltaire* (1899), i.395-405. French works mentioned were published in Paris.

² N. L. Torrey, *Voltaire and the English deists* (1929); A. Morehouse, *Voltaire and Jean Meslier* (1931). An examination of Voltaire and the French deists is yet to be undertaken, as is the relationship of Voltaire and the Benedictine dom Calmet.

³ A. Bellessort, 'Essai sur Voltaire', *Revue hebdomadaire* (April 1925),

p.193; R. Naves, *Voltaire, l'homme et l'œuvre* (1942), p.21; A. Noyes, *Voltaire* (1936), *passim*; N. L. Torrey, *The Spirit of Voltaire* (1938), *passim*. Bellessort cites examples of Voltaire's works to show that he varied in his attitude towards Jesus. Naves and Noyes feel he revered Jesus as a man, Torrey feels that in most writings he scorns him.

⁴ Nourrisson, p.408; Bellessort, p.195; Noyes, p.492; A. Maurois, *Voltaire* (1935), p.95. These four critics believe that the 'infâme' means respectively Christianity, the church, a 'persecuting and privileged orthodoxy', and superstition.

part of his indictment of the Christian religion⁵. But neither these three nor the foregoing works outline his ideas on the New testament *per se* (hereafter N.T.). This paper will attempt to present these ideas with respect to N.T. texts, to miracles and characters described in them, and to the relationship between the scriptures and organized Christianity.

Voltaire's discussion of the N.T. is scattered over about 75 works, most of them in the *Mélanges*, the *Dictionnaire philosophique* and the *Questions sur l'encyclopédie*⁶. Several references are to be found also in such works as the *Lettres philosophiques*, the *Remarques sur les Pensées de m. Pascal*, the *Essai sur les mœurs*, and the *Bible enfin expliquée*. Examination of the author's correspondence did not turn up any idea not developed more fully elsewhere, and, therefore, this part of his work is not cited.

The critic is concerned with the New testament's reliability as a source of revealed religion. He discusses the events, natural and

⁵ A. Maurel, *Voltaire* (1943), pp.234-236, 260-261, 287; K. M. J. O'Flaherty, *Voltaire myth and reality* (1945), pp.114-124; R. Pomeau, *La religion de Voltaire* (1956), pp.371-378.

⁶ the N.T. is treated in 50 articles in the *Dictionnaire* and the *Questions*, and in 10 first published in the Kehl edition of Voltaire's works. In this study, all references are to the Moland edition. Individual works most often referred to are abbreviated as follows: *L' A, B, C, ou Dialogue entre A, B, C*, (1768): *ABC*; *La Bible enfin expliquée* (1776): *BEE*; *Cinquième homélie prononcée à Londres* (1769): *CH*; *Catéchisme de l'honnête homme* (1763): *CHH*; *Collection d'anciens évangiles* (1769): *CAE*; *Conseils raisonnables à m. Bergier* (1768): *CMB*; *De la paix perpétuelle* (1769): *DPP*; *Dialogue du douteur et de l'adorateur* (1766): *DDA*; *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1765): *DP*; *Dieu et les hommes* (1769): *DH*; *Le dîner du*

comte de Boulainvilliers (1767): *DCB*; *Discours de l'empereur Julien* (1769): *DEJ*; *L'Épître aux Romains* (1768): *ER*; *Essai sur les mœurs* (1756): *EM*; *Examen important de milord Bolingbroke* (1766): *EB*; *Extrait du testament de Jean Meslier* (1762): *EJM*; *Histoire de Jenni* (1775): *HJ*; *Histoire de l'établissement du christianisme* (1776): *HEC*; *Homélie du pasteur Bourne* (1768): *HB*; *Homélie prononcées à Londres. Quatrième homélie* (1767): *HQH*; *Instructions du gardien des capucins* (1769): *IGC*; *Instructions à Antoine-Jacques Rustan* (1768): *IR*; *Lettres à son altesse monsignor le prince de**** (1767): *LSAM*; *Lettres philosophiques* (1734): *LP*; *Les questions de Zapata* (1767): *QZ*; *Questions sur l'Encyclopédie* (1770-1772): *QE*; *Questions sur les miracles* (1765): *QM*; *Remarques sur les Pensées de m. Pascal* (1734): *RPP*; *Sermon des cinquante* (1762): *SC*; *Traité sur la tolérance* (1763): *TT*.

supernatural, narrated in N.T. writings on which this religion is based. He comments on major and minor leaders who contributed to the establishment of Christianity. And he examines the origins of Christian dogmas and institutions, and its scriptural principles compared with its later practices.

Voltaire's attacks against the New testament are based first of all on what he considered to be flaws in its books, namely, their doubtful authenticity, numerous contradictions and gross inaccuracies. On the score of doubtful authenticity, he states in some works that the gospels, whether canonical or apocryphal, were written, or rather forged, in widely scattered places. Elsewhere, Voltaire declares that the gospels were written in Alexandria and Greek because the Jews there all spoke Greek. Whether true or false, the gospels were written years after the events described therein and even after the death of witnesses. In various writings, the *philosophe* sets the approximate interval as 40, 80 and 90 years after Christ's death⁷. Most often mentioned (at least nine times) is the case of the gospel of Matthew, which Voltaire insists could not have been written before the siege of Jerusalem under the emperor Titus in 70 A.D. He points out that the gospel writer, whoever he was, has Jesus refer to the incident of Zacharias, son of Barach, murdered by Pharisees between the sanctuary and the temple altar in Jerusalem, which must have been lifted from Flavius Josephus's *Jewish wars* (iv.xix) composed after the Jewish capital's destruction⁸.

The gospel of Luke, composed late in the first century, was the last true gospel written, according to Voltaire. In other works, however, he claims that the four true gospels were not cited by any church fathers before Justin Martyr and Clement of Rome in the mid-second century, both of whom only cited false gospels

⁷ *QM*, 1^e, 2^e & 19^e lettres, xxv.368, 376, 444; *DEJ*, xxviii.30-40; *DH*, ch.38, xxviii.223; *HEC*, ch.6, 16^e doute, xxxi.65; *DDA*, xxv.130-131; *LSAM*, 7^e lettre, xxvi.506.

⁸ *SC*, xxiv.449; *CHH*, xxiv.536; art. *Christianisme*, 2^e sect., (*DP*), xviii.167; *QM*, 1^e lettre, xxv.362; *EB*, xxvi.233-234; *CAE*, xxvii.451-452, 460.

and regarded them as sacred and authentic. But in two other references, Voltaire quotes a contemporary scholar, Nicolas Fréret (*sic*), to prove that Justin was the first to cite the true gospels along with other gospels as authorized texts. From this evidence, he concludes that the four true gospels were the last written, that until the second century they did not exist, and that only the false ones were known and read by first century Christians⁹.

The scriptures' very limited distribution inspires Voltaire to cast additional doubts on their authenticity. They were forbidden even to the catechumenes or Christian initiates, concealed from unconverted Jews and Gentiles, and unknown to Greek and Roman writers and officials. In various writings, it is asserted that gospels were not known outside Christian communities until Trajan, Marcus Aurelius, Commodus, Diocletian or Theodosius I, that is, until about the years 100, 160, 200, 300 or 400 A.D.¹⁰

Not only were the gospels, true and false, known only to certain members of isolated Christian communities, but their central character, Jesus, was shrouded in mystery. Voltaire erroneously states that the Jewish writers, Flavius Josephus and Philo of Alexandria, and all Greek and Roman writers omit to mention Jesus. Elsewhere, he voices surprise that notable events occurring in public before many people, events such as the Bethlehem star, Herod's massacre of the innocents, god's voice heard at Jesus's baptism, the universal darkness at noon at the crucifixion, and Jesus's miracles, should have passed unnoticed except in the N.T.¹¹

It is improbable that N.T. writings were written by those after whom they are named or to whom they are attributed, in Voltaire's

⁹ *IGC*, xxvii.309; *EM*, ch.9, xi.358-359; *HEC*, ch.12, xxxi.77; *DCB*, xxvi.534; *CAE*, xxvii.451. The *Examen critique des apologistes de la religion chrétienne* (1767), ascribed by Voltaire and others to Fréret, is by Levesque de Burigny.

¹⁰ art. *Christianisme*, 1^e sect., (Q), xviii, 163-164; *ER*, xxvii.91; *QM*, 1^e

& 2^e lettres, xxv.368, 376; *DEJ*, xxviii.40; art. *Évangile*, (DP), xix.41-42; *HEC*, ch.6, 16^e doute, xxxi.65; *CMB*, xxvii.41; *DH*, ch.35, xxviii.210; *CHH*, xxiv.533, 536.

¹¹ *DH*, ch.31 & 32, xxviii.195, 200; *QM*, 1^e lettre, xxv.395-360; art. *Christianisme*, 2^e sect., (DP), xviii.166.

opinion. He notes that Mark and Luke were not among the twelve original apostles, and that Peter was thought by the church fathers Jerome and Tertullian to have composed Mark's gospel. In reality, if we are to believe the free-thinker Boulainvilliers, neither the date of writing nor the authors of the gospels is known. If we are to lend credence to the apostate priest Jean Meslier, there is no proof of attribution for writings either within or outside of the canon¹².

As specific cases, Voltaire examines the gospels attributed to Matthew and John. The former contains the word 'ecclesia' and the latter the word 'logos', both of them Greek words unknown to the Jewish apostles. Moreover, churches were only formed long after Matthew's time. According to all church fathers, John's gospel was composed by a Christian platonist in Alexandria¹³.

Similarities in content and phrasing between false and true works tends to invalidate the latter, in the critic's opinion. His long catalogue of N.T. apocrypha entitled *Collection d'anciens évangiles* (1769) includes examples of similarities between the four accepted gospels on the one hand and the gospels of Mary's birth, of Christ's childhood (attributed to Thomas), of Paul, of Nicodemus, and of James the just, brother of Jesus, on the other. Scattered phrases in these 'pious frauds' are also found in Acts, 1st and 2nd Corinthians, 1st Peter, 2nd Timothy, and Revelations. Other writings 'forged' by unenlightened zealots cast discredit on all canonical ones, including alleged letters by Paul, Seneca, Pilate, Mary, and Jesus himself¹⁴.

Voltaire's irony erupts when he quotes the church fathers' contradictory descriptions of the odd manner in which the four true gospels were supposedly chosen, so as to correspond to the four

¹² *SC*, xxiv.451-452; art. *Apôtres*, 3^e sect., (Q), xvii.328; *CAE*, xxvii.461;

DBC, xxvi.533-534; *EJM*, ch.2, xxiv.312-313.

¹³ *EB*, xxvi.234; art. *Eglise*, (Q), xviii.493; *HEC*, ch.6, 12^e doute,

xxxii.62; *DH*, ch.34, & 38, xxviii.207, 228.

¹⁴ *CAE*, xxvii.442-534 *passim*; *SC*, xxiv.450; *EJM*, xxiv.307; art. *Christianisme*, 2^e sect., (DP), xviii.170-171; art. *Paul*, 3^e sect., (Q), xx.191.

animals mentioned in Revelations 4, namely, the lion (Mark), the ox (Luke), the man (Matthew), and the eagle (John), according to Jerome, which reverses Irenaeus's order of John, Luke, Matthew and Mark. Moreover, only four were selected so as to equal the four winds, the four corners of the earth, the four rivers flowing through Eden, the four rings of the covenant ark, and the four days that Lazarus was presumed dead. According to council of Nicea records (325 A.D.), all the authentic and apocryphal books were heaped pell-mell on an altar. After the church fathers present prayed fervently, the apocryphal books fell under the altar, leaving the authentic ones on top¹⁵.

While the authorship, date and place of writing, and canonicity of N.T. books are unknown or uncertain, as Voltaire endeavours to demonstrate, their contents are a mass of contradictions and inaccuracies. The gospels of Matthew and Luke disagree as to the names and numbers of Christ's alleged ancestors in their respective genealogies, and agree only that these ancestors, all descended from Abraham and David, are Joseph's rather than those of his foster-son Jesus. Pious attempts to reconcile these differences have been carried on despite the fact that, although Jesus is said to have been born of a virgin, his genealogy listed in Matthew includes four 'whores'—Thamar, Ruth, Bathsheba and Rahab. Voltaire pretends to be scandalized that Pascal, writing about Christ's genealogy, 'basic to the Christian religion', should have underscored contradictions which 'overwhelmed the mind of the unfortunate and virtuous Jean Meslier.'¹⁶

Altogether, Voltaire alludes to the above contradictions nearly thirty times in a score of works, while fifteen references are made to Luke's error in stating that Jesus was born after Augustus ordered a world-wide census carried out while Quirinius or Cyrenius was governor of Syria. In reality, as the critic scornfully replies, Varus Quintilius was governor at Jesus's birth, Quirinius

¹⁵ *CAE*, xxvii.440-441; *EB*, xxvi. 236-237.

¹⁶ art. *Contradictions*, 2^e sect., (Q), xix.217-218; *TT*, xxv.64; *RPP* (1734) f. xxii.39; *DPP*, xxviii.112-113. C., Pascal, *Pensées*, Brunschvicg 578.

succeeding to this post only ten years later. Furthermore, Augustus only ordered a census of Roman citizens in the city of Rome, as noted by Tacitus. Quirinius, as Syrian legate after Herod's death, held a census of Syria only in the year 6 A.D., according to Josephus's *Jewish wars*. In both cases, Mary and Joseph were excluded from this formality. Imperial annals are supported by contemporary medals and even by Tertullian in recording these facts¹⁷.

Another fifteen allusions are made to the discrepancies concerning whether the holy family fled to Egypt (Matthew) or went from Bethlehem to Jerusalem and on to Nazareth (Luke). It is recalled that critics still insist that if Mary had had to wait thirty days in Bethlehem after Jesus's birth before she could go to Jerusalem for purification, her infant son would have perished in Herod's massacre, which Matthew alone reported. Unbelievers object that either one or the other of the two evangelists has lied¹⁸.

Particular attention is focussed by Voltaire on the star of Bethlehem and the massacre of the innocents, which are referred to twenty times in fifteen separate works. Both of these prodigies must have been observed by many people. It is astonishing that they are recorded in Matthew alone and not even mentioned by any Roman historian, by any astronomer, nor even by Josephus, author of a highly-critical life of Herod to whom he was related by marriage. It is inconceivable that the 70-year-old Herod, surnamed the great and favoured by Augustus and proclaimed by him king of Judea, could possibly have believed that a child of the common people born in a village stable was the king of the Jews destined to dethrone him and to drive him from a kingdom belonging to Rome, which he had received as a gift from Caesar¹⁹.

¹⁷ *IGC*, xxvii.309; art. *Contradictions*, 2^e sect., (Q), xviii.262-263; art. *Noël*, (Q), xx.126; *HEC*, xxxi.78; *QZ*, no.51, xxvi.185; *DH*, ch.36, xxviii.213.

¹⁸ art. *Innocents*, (Q), xix.474; *HEC*, ch.6, 6^e doute, xxxi.60.

¹⁹ art. *Innocents*, (Q), xix.473; *BEE*, xxx.303-304; *QM*, 2^e lettre, xxv.372, 376; *HEC*, ch.6, 4^e doute, xxxi.59; *QZ*, no.53, xxvi.186; *DPP*, xxviii.112; *IR*, xxvii.122.

While Matthew contradicts Luke with respect to Christ's ancestry and birth, John contradicts the other evangelists regarding the length of his ministry. John mentions his master going to Jerusalem for Passover at least three or four times, from which it could be inferred that Christ's ministry lasted three years and three months. The synoptic writers, however, refer only once to Christ's celebrating Passover in Jerusalem, just prior to the crucifixion, from which it would appear that his ministry lasted only three months, including the forty days spent in the wilderness after his baptism²⁰.

Discrepancies connected with Christ's birth and ministry are at least equalled in number and importance by those relative to his death. At the last supper, John omits Christ distributing bread and wine, the basis for the supreme Christian sacrament, but instead has Jesus wash the disciples' feet and give them a long talk. The other gospel-writers have Jesus giving the disciples bread and wine, as he is reported to have said: 'This is my body. . . . This is my blood of the covenant. . . . Do this is remembrance of me.' Then, before leaving the upper room, they all sang a hymn whose words set down by Augustine are ridiculed by Voltaire, as is the story in the apocryphal Acts of St. John, of Jesus dancing with the apostles on the same occasion²¹.

Much confusion surrounds the crucifixion, with Matthew and Luke differing by ten years as regards its date, according to Voltaire. He repeats after Meslier that if it took place at noon the day before Passover, Jesus could not have partaken of the last supper the evening of Passover Day, as claimed by all four evangelists. In short, the day after the last supper could not have been the day before Passover. As regards the hour of the crucifixion, John specifies that Jesus was still before Pilate at the sixth hour, while the synoptists say that he hung on the cross from the sixth to the ninth hour. Moreover, John has Jesus's mother, as well as

²⁰ art. *Contradictions*, 2^e sect., (Q), xxiv.310; *EB*, xxvi.235; *CH*, xxvii.562-xxviii.265-266.

²¹ art. *Messe*, (Q), xx.60; *EJM*, ch.6, 4^e doute, xxxi.64.

Mary Magdalene and the 'beloved disciple' at the foot of the cross, whereas they view the ordeal from a distance in the other gospels²².

In one place, Voltaire says that Luke alone claimed that darkness covered the whole earth; in another, he says correctly that all gospel-writers except John contend this phenomenon occurred at the crucifixion. He remarks on the scepticism of scholars and their amazement that no pagan or Jewish author described this darkness, the earthquake or the dead rising from their tombs to walk the streets of Jerusalem. Such a terrible miracle in plain sight of a whole city under the Roman governor's eyes and in the presence of a Roman garrison, must have made a greater impression even than Christ's death. Many nations must have seen the eclipse, Rome itself must have been plunged in thick darkness for three hours, and this prodigy must have been consigned to Roman records. Yet Pilate never reported any of this, nor did Josephus or Philo of Alexandria. Their silence is a proof of the falsehood of the resurrection²³.

Nowhere are the scripture less in agreement than in their treatment of Jesus's post-resurrection appearances and ascension. Voltaire has Meslier report that Matthew said Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and to another Mary, as well as twice to his disciples who has gone to a mountain in Galilee at his command. But Voltaire mistakenly has Matthew state that Jesus ascended into heaven from that mountain. He is again led into error by Meslier when he asserts that Mark said Jesus spoke only to Mary Magdalene, to the two disciples going to Emmaus (instead of to the fields), and to the eleven disciples at table, whom he chided for their unbelief. Here Voltaire neglects to refer to Mark's mention of the ascension. Luke's version is like Matthew's except that

²² *EJM*, xxiv.310-311; *CH*, xxvii.562; *HEC*, ch.6, 16^e doute, xxxi.65; *DH*, ch.32, xxviii.200. Mark 15 says that Jesus was crucified at the third hour.

²³ *DEJ*, xxviii.66; *LSAM*, 7^e lettre, xxvi.500; *SC*, xxiv.451; *HQH*, xxvi.350-351; art. *Christianisme*, 2^e sect., (*DP*), xviii.167; *BEE*, xxx.311; *ER*, xxvii.92.

Jesus led the eleven disciples outside of Jerusalem to Bethany where he ascended into heaven, according to the critic, on the very day or evening of his resurrection. But in Acts, Luke, if he is the author, has the ascension taking place on the Mount of Olives forty days after the resurrection. John's description is like Mark's except that he adds that Jesus also visited several disciples who were fishing in the Sea of Galilee and fails to mention the ascension. Elsewhere, Voltaire errs by saying that John mentions Jesus's ascension from Jerusalem. For Matthew to have Jesus telling his disciples he would be with them always when he was about to leave them, and for John to omit the ascension altogether is enough to show that N.T. books, inspired neither by divine revelation nor by human wisdom, do not deserve to be believed²⁴.

As a result of all these contradictions, inaccuracies and absurdities, some critics reject Acts as contrary to the gospels, the gospels as opposed to Jesus's conduct reported by them, and the entire N.T. as violating human reason. They assert that books which disagree cannot be inspired by the holy spirit and only concede that many errors may be due to faulty copying. In any case, the gospels were given to teach us to live justly rather than to criticize learnedly. Voltaire sums up his true position ironically, as follows: 'Toutes ces contradictions, reprochées si souvent aux Evangiles avec une si grande amertume, sont mises au grand jour par les sages commentateurs; loin de se nuire, elles s'expliquent chez eux l'une par l'autre; elles se prêtent un mutuel secours dans les concordances, et dans l'harmonie des quatre Evangiles. Et s'il y a plusieurs difficultés qu'on ne peut expliquer, des profondeurs qu'on ne peut comprendre, des aventures qu'on ne peut croire, des prodiges qui révoltent la faible raison humaine, des contradictions qu'on ne peut concilier, c'est pour exercer notre foi, et pour humilier notre esprit. . . . Ni le Nouveau Testament ni l'Ancien ne nous ont été donnés pour éclaircir des points d'histoire, mais pour

²⁴ *EJM*, xxiv.311-312; *CH*, xxvii.563; *QZ*, no.59, xxvi.187; *HEC*, ch.7, xxxi.66-67.

nous annoncer des vérités salutaires, devant lesquelles tous les événements et toutes les opinions devaient disparaître. C'est toujours ce que nous répondons aux faux calculs, aux contradictions, aux absurdités, aux fautes énormes de géographie, de chronologie, de physique, et même de sens commun, dont les philosophes nous disent sans cesse que la Sainte Ecriture est remplie: nous ne cessons de leur dire qu'il n'est point ici question de raison, mais de foi et de piété.'²⁵

Of all N.T. incidents, the accounts of miracles and prophecies aroused Voltaire's critical faculties most keenly. First of all, the decisive events in Jesus's life, from his conception and nativity to his resurrection and ascension, were without exception miraculous in nature and effect. For Voltaire and other deists and free-thinkers, Jesus was a mere man reputed to have led a supernatural existence marked by absurdities and extravagances unworthy of the god that ignorant and mendacious biographers claimed he was. Such absurd stories are essential neither to prove Christ's existence nor to support his religion or ethics. At any rate, had Christ really performed the miracles ascribed to him, he would have been universally admired and statues would have been erected to him as to the gods²⁶.

Voltaire's reaction was to write or to cite five short travesties of Jesus's life and works²⁷. Of the various 'facts' and episodes contained therein, Voltaire almost invariably selected, as most open to ridicule and refutation (1) Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, (2) the water changed into wine at the marriage at Cana, (3) the demons sent into a herd of pigs at Gadara, and (4) the fig tree dried up at Bethany. These incidents are held up to scorn repeatedly as a group and separately. Recurrent mention is made

²⁵ art. *Contradictions*, 2^e sect., (Q), and *Dénombrement*, 1^e sect., (Q), xviii.261, 264, 266, 344-345; *BEE*, xxx.315.

²⁶ *HB*, xxvii.231-232; *EJM*, xxiv.301.

²⁷ *LSAM*, 4^e lettre, xxvi.485; *ER*, xxvii.91-92; *DPP*, xxviii.112-114; *DH*, xxviii, 196, 200; *Relation du bannissement des jésuites*, xxvii, 5-7, 9-10, 13-14; *HJ*, ch.3, xxi.531.

also of the transfiguration, the feeding of the 4000 and the 5000, and resurrection miracles other than Christ's²⁸.

Besides enumerating various miracles, the critic comments briefly on them. Regarding Jesus's baptism, he says that unbelievers reject the story of a dove alighting on Jesus's head while a voice cried from heaven: 'This is my beloved son.' Had this occurred, all of Judea would have been seized with astonishment, fear and respect, and Jesus would have been looked upon as a god. Feigning piety, Voltaire observes that one can only gather that the Jews' hearts were hardened and that by a still greater miracle, the Lord blinded them to the great signs which he showed them continually²⁹.

It is inconceivable that the devil should have transported god incarnate in Jesus into a desert, tempted him for forty days, and carried him up to a summit in Galilee high enough to see all the kingdoms of the earth. Satan's revolting proposal that Jesus should worship him in exchange for all these kingdoms could scandalize many worthy people. Jesus could only have imagined this blasphemous and absurd tale, since there is no peak from which one can see even one kingdom³⁰.

The miracle of the water changed into wine at Cana, reported only in John's gospel, is deemed worthier of a tavern-keeper than of god. Critics have been shocked to hear Jesus twice rebuke his mother, only to convert water into wine for guests already drunk. They hardly consider this act compatible with the eternal and invisible god, creator of all beings³¹. The same must be said of Jesus casting out demons at Gadara and sending them into a herd of 2000 swine which rushed headlong into the Sea of Galilee and were drowned. It is not explained how there could be a large herd

²⁸ N. L. Torrey, *Voltaire and the English deists*, pp. 77, 78, 82 and 86, says the second miracle is alluded to 20 times, the third 26 times, the fourth 24 times, and the transfiguration 12 times. We found at least 28 references to Jesus's temptation.

²⁹ *BEE*, xxx. 305.

³⁰ *HQH*, xxvi. 351; *QZ*, no. 54, xxvi. 186; *EJM*, xxiv. 334-335.

³¹ *QM*, 1^e lettre, xxv. 369-370; *BEE*, xxx. 306-308.

of pigs in a region where these animals were excluded by both Jews and Arabs as unclean and abominable. If this herd was in transit to Tyr, critics observe, the immense loss to the owners was unjust and would amount to about 20,000 florins or even 20,000 crowns. By what right, they ask, did Jesus and the devil drown these beasts and ruin their owner? Critics protest against the loss to the owner of the fig tree at Bethany, which was dried up because it had not borne figs out of season at the beginning of March. Voltaire does not think it is very important for society, morals or virtue to know about this incident, for our duties as citizens, free men, parents, children and brothers must still be fulfilled even if no miracles had been transmitted to us³².

Healings and resurrections are infrequently cited by Voltaire. He does mention twice the case of the deaf-mute in the Decapolis region reportedly healed when Jesus touched his ears and tongue with his fingers upon which he had spat, but only to liken this to the ancient belief that serpents could be killed by human saliva and to the more recent claim made by some eighteenth-century natural scientists that heads grow back on decapitated slugs. Such miracles, Voltaire assures us, were common also to Esculapius's pagan temples and others, and were often surpassed. The *philosophe* likewise refers twice to resurrections supposedly performed by Jesus and Peter on Lazarus and Dorcas respectively. He dismisses as impossible the reintegration after only a few days of the soul and of imperceptible parts of a dead person's body, which had been absorbed into the air and consumed by birds, worms, and other organisms³³.

Among N.T. miracles reported after Jesus's ascension, which engaged Voltaire's attention, is the incident of the holy spirit descending like tongues of flame on the disciples' heads while they were seated in a house in Jerusalem. It is not specified in the

³² *BEE*, xxx. 307-308; *IGC*, xxvii. 309; *QM*, 7^e et 13^e lettres, xxv. 397; 417-418; *HEC*, ch. 6, 9^e doute, xxxi. 61; *DDA*, xxv. 130.

³³ art. *Serpents*, (*Q*), xx. 422; *EJM*, xxiv. 334-335; *EM*, *Introd.*, ch. 33, xi. 146-147; *CMB*, xxvii. 45.

scriptures how each disciple could speak his own tongue, presumably Hebrew or Aramaic, and also at least fifteen others simultaneously. Nor it is made clear why Peter, suddenly able to speak all languages at the same time, later had to have Mark as interpreter at Salamis⁸⁴.

Having commented on the impossibility and triviality of N.T. miracles, Voltaire examines the proofs of their validity. In the process, he compares them with later Christian miracles and with pagan legends. He heaps derision on N.T. miracles by comparing them with later ones reputedly performed by medieval saints. He cites Meslier in order to dwell on at least thirty of the most improbable and ludicrous miracles duly set down in the saint's lives of the *Légende dorée*⁸⁵.

Pagan legends, in Voltaire's opinion, constitute almost exact precedents for Christian miracles. The virgin birth resembles the vestal giving birth to Romulus 700 years before Jesus. Before water was changed into wine at Cana, Bacchus gave power to the daughters of Apollo's high priest, Anius, to change water into water and oil. Christ feeding the multitudes was preceded by Jupiter giving the goat's horn in which he had drunk milk as a baby to nymphs in charge of his education as a cornucopia forever filled with whatever they desired. As for the resurrections of Lazarus, of Jairus's daughter, of Dorcas, of Christ himself, Mercury's son Athalide, as well as Apollo's son Esculapius, to say nothing of Hercules and Jupiter, among others, all possessed the power of raising persons from the dead. The idea of resurrection was current long before in Egypt where embalmed bodies awaited their souls. Centuries before Christ's ascension, Romulus was seen in glory after his death, while Ganymede was transported to heaven to serve as Jupiter's cupbearer⁸⁶.

⁸⁴ *QM*, 1^e lettre, xxv.366-367; *HB*, xxvii.227. Acts 13:5 says Paul not Peter used Mark as an assistant rather than as an interpreter.

⁸⁵ *EJM*, xxiv.301-302, 314-315;

Fragment sur l'hist. gén., 6^e art., xxix.238-240.

⁸⁶ *ER*, xxvii.89; *EJM*, xxiv.315-318; *DH*, ch.37, xxviii.218.

The analogies between Christian miracles and pagan legends, according to Voltaire, have not gone unnoticed by scholars. Their doubts concerning Jesus's miracles appear to be confirmed by the allegorical or mystical interpretation given them by Augustine, Hilary, and other theologians. But against this interpretation, condemned as an error by the church, the latter upholds the literal interpretation by proclaiming that Jesus gave the power to work miracles to his disciples and followers, especially the power to cast out demons. The saviour himself acknowledged that Pharisees and even their children had this power. The *philosophe* states that the Alexandrine Jews introduced into Palestine this practice which they had learned from the Greeks, if not from the Egyptians and Syrians among whom it was long established⁸⁷.

The orthodox or literal meaning ascribed to miracles compels true Christians to stifle their reason in order to accept them as articles of faith. It is not reasonable that god should have been a Jew rather than a Roman, who was born of a virgin, and yet had an older brother called James. It is against all reason that god should have performed so many miracles only to be insulted and executed, leaving men more wicked than ever. The miracles allegedly performed do less good to most people than those Christ could have performed and did not. Instead of healing a few sick and lame persons, Jesus could have cured all men of vices and weaknesses, which are far worse than mere bodily infirmities. It is inconceivable that god preserved corpses from corruption, but did not wish to preserve from the corruption of sin and wickedness the souls of countless persons whom he supposedly came to redeem with his blood and that he was to sanctify with his grace⁸⁸.

In addition to flouting reason, N.T. miracles were not publicly recognized. Their occurrence is recorded only in the N.T. whose books, composed at least a century after events told in them, contradict each other at every page and were unknown to other

⁸⁷ *QM*, 1^e lettre, xxv.368; *HEC*, ch.5, xxxi.55; *EM*, Introd., ch.47, xi.213-214.

⁸⁸ *QM*, 2^e et 3^e lettres, xxv.376, 385; *EJM*, xxiv.313.

contemporary authors. Unbelievers contend that one should believe that the record is inaccurate rather than that nature's laws have been violated. Even if the four accepted gospels were identical in content with each other and with the fifty rejected ones, and even if their authors had all been eyewitnesses, no sensible man should believe inconceivable acts unless these acts had taken place in public and the written testimony of resident and trustworthy eyewitnesses had been strictly examined by public officials and placed in public archives³⁹.

Biblical prophesies and their fulfilment have long been used by apologists of religion as evidence of the truth of divine revelation. But it is in the meaning of certain prophesies and specifically in their application to Jesus that apologists disagree. Voltaire exploits their disputes, endeavouring to show that prophesies were misapplied and thus meaningless. Christ himself in Luke 24 declared that all allusions to him in the Mosaic law and in the psalms must take place, while the gospel writer observed that 'he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.' To which Voltaire rejoins that one certainly needs an open mind to understand prophesies, for after eighteen centuries theologians are still disputing over the meaning of those which they try to apply to Jesus. Among examples are Jacob's prediction in Genesis 49 that 'The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs', and the statement in Isaiah 52: 'And behold, my servant will prosper, will be honored and exalted.' These are taken by Jews to mean David, and by Christians to mean Jesus. The famous lines from Isaiah 7 relative to a virgin bearing a son Emmanuel, in the critic's opinion, refer not to Mary but to Isaiah's wife, because the Hebrew word for 'alma' may mean virgin or married woman. Besides, neither Isaiah's son nor Mary's was called Emmanuel. Matthew, who quotes this prophesy, is also blamed for seeing in Jeremiah 31 a prediction of Herod's massacre of the innocents, when in fact it

³⁹ *QM*, 2^e lettre, xxv.375-377; *CMB*, xxvii.41-46.

alluded to King Nabusardan's killing, during Jeremiah's lifetime, of Rachel's descendants from the tribes of Benjamin and Judah at Rama⁴⁰.

The prophesy made by Jesus, Paul, Peter, and the author of John's epistles, regarding the imminence of the world's end, Christ's second coming, and his 1000-year reign with the saints in Jerusalem is touched on by Voltaire at least 26 times. He makes the point that Jesus predicted several things which god did not allow to occur, including the world's end and Christ's arrival in the clouds with great power and majesty during the generation then living. The second coming was foretold even more clearly than the first, since Christ himself and four disciples predicted it. Catholic theologians should be ashamed of N.T. prophesies in view of the fact that none was more specific than this one and none turned out to be more false⁴¹.

The belief that life on earth was shortly coming to a close persisted even beyond the first century, and Christian zealots took advantage of it to command their converts to give them money. Neither healings nor threats of instant death nor preaching of equality was enough to induce people to part with their worldly goods. Voltaire sums it up by declaring bitterly that it was to live in this new heaven and in this new earth that the apostles had all their converts' money delivered to them, and that Peter miraculously put to death Ananias and his wife Saphira for not giving him all their wealth⁴².

In contrast to the supernatural elements of N.T. accounts of miracles and prophesies, Voltaire examines its major and secondary characters. Perhaps partly through secret admiration of Jesus and also partly in order to sharpen the clash between Christ's

⁴⁰ art. *Prophéties*, 1^e et 3^e sect., (Q), xx.283, 289-290; *BEE*, xxx.304-305; art. *Innocents*, (Q), xix.472-473; *HEC*, ch.6, 4^e doute, xxxi.59.

⁴¹ *DEJ*, xxviii.5; *RPP* (1734), xxii.38; *EB*, xxvi.230; *DCB*.xxvi.542.

⁴² *DH*, ch.37, xxviii.216-217; *DEJ*, xxviii.47; *ER*, xxvii.94; *HEC*, xxxi.73-73. Voltaire refers to Egyptian and Roman beliefs in the life of the soul for 1000 years, and to the apocalyptic theme as treated by Epicurus, Lucretius, Ovid, and the Brahmins.

character and principles on the one hand and those of Christianity on the other, Voltaire does not always scorn Jesus. But because of Paul's rôle as a church founder, Voltaire seldom praises him. As for the disciples, he dismisses them generally as coarse, lower-class Jews.

Voltaire's ideal Jesus is portrayed as a gentle, tolerant man who pities his ignorant disciples, forgives his enemies, and deplors the persecution carried on in the name of Christianity. He is pictured as an apostle of toleration and justice, who ate with publicans and sinners, forgave Mary Magdalene and the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well, and preached religious freedom when he declared 'In my father's house are many mansions.' Voltaire's *Traité sur la tolérance* lists at least ten examples of Jesus's toleration and justice. He exhorted his disciples to 'bear with one another', and, like the Quakers, wished to avoid strife and bloodshed⁴³.

Jesus's ethics is incarnated in the parable of the good Samaritan, and the beatitudes and the sermon on the mount equal Epictetus's *Discourses*. Above all, Jesus's message is summed up for Voltaire in the phrase 'Love god and your neighbour', the basis for universal morality written long before Christ in Leviticus 19. It is common to Confucianism, Zoroastrianism, Brahminism, Orphism, and in the worship of the Egyptian deity Thout⁴⁴. This basis of Jesus's principles is the opposite of Christianity in practice typified for Voltaire by divisions between early Christians, Guelphes and Ghibellines, Catholics and Protestants, as well as by the murders of princes and the crimes and vices of popes⁴⁵.

Voltaire compares Jesus to other spiritual leaders. Confucius was a just man like Jesus, stated the golden rule 500 years before him, and like him exhorted people to forgive insults, reward kindness in others, and to value friendship and humility. But the

Chinese philosopher differed from Christ in being a royal premier with 5000 disciples in his lifetime, including writers, mandarins and emperors. Moreover, unlike Christ, he did not claim to be an inspired prophet, but lived and wrote as a wise man revered as such in China. Jesus resembled Socrates in that he taught ethics, worshipped one god, wrote nothing, had disciples and enemies, insulted priests, fought superstition, and was executed. Unlike Socrates, however, Jesus remained single, died fearing death, was deified, and left disciples who founded a religion in his name. Voltaire, like Bolingbroke, compares Jesus to George Fox, founder of the Quakers. Both are pictured as ignoramus born of the dregs of the populace, whose training was limited to their becoming carpenter and cobbler respectively. On occasion they preached good ethics, but above all, they preached equality, which flattered the mob⁴⁶.

Voltaire repeatedly stresses the fact of Jesus's orthodox Judaism. This is proven by his steadfast adherence to all Judaic laws and ceremonies. He was presented at the temple in Jerusalem to be circumcized, and later was baptized, even though he never subjected anyone to these Jewish practices. He sacrificed in the temple, observed the Sabbath every week, celebrated the day of the covenant, the Passover, and all other Jewish holidays, and he ate the paschal lamb cooked with lettuce, but abstained from pork, rabbit and other forbidden foods⁴⁷. He urged his hearers to obey the Mosaic law in which he was brought up and which he said explicitly that he came to fulfil together with the Hebrew prophets. Jesus defined the golden rule itself, so basic to Christian faith, as 'the law and the prophets.' Voltaire chides Christians for neither following the Judaic law upheld by Jesus nor adhering to Christian principles as set forth in the N.T. Indeed, Voltaire alias Meslier

⁴³ art. *Esséniens*, (Q), xix.28; art. *Religion*, 2^e sect., (Q), xx.346-348; *Sermon par Josias Rossette*, xxvi.586-587; *LP*, no.5, xxii.95; *TT*, xxv.86-87; *Instruction pastorale*, xxv.3; *DH*, ch.42, xxviii.231-232.

⁴⁴ *HB*, xxvii.229-230; *DDA*, xxv.134-135; *TT*, xxv.106; *QM*, 3^e lettre, xxv.383.

⁴⁵ *HJ*, ch.3, xxi.532; *DH*, ch.33, xxviii.201; *DDA*, xxv.135; *CHH*, xxiv.530, 535.

⁴⁶ *EM*, ch.2, xi.274-275; *Profession de foi des théistes*, xxvii.69; *DH*, ch.35, xxviii.208; *LSAM*, 4^e lettre, xxvi.489; *EB*, ch.11, xxvi.227-228; *HEC*, ch.7, xxxi.66.

⁴⁷ *DDA*, xxv.134; *HB*, xxvii.229; art. *Christianisme*, 2^e sect., (*DP*), xviii.168; art. *Tolérance*, 3^e sect., (*DP*), xx.523; *TT*, xxv.87; *CHH*.xxiv.532-534.

says that the church abolished laws approved by the Jews, which Jesus came among men to carry out⁴⁸.

Jesus's conflict with Pharisees and other Jewish leaders is discussed by Voltaire who notes that they accused him of blasphemy for referring to himself as the son of god and king of the Jews, and for saying he could destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days. They complained that he had declared that one should not pay tribute to Caesar, and that he had driven money-changers from the temple court. They obtained their revenge, for Jesus was condemned by prejudiced judges, who envied him his sway over the multitude, to be executed by crucifixion, the lowest form of capital punishment, which was unknown to the Jews before Roman times⁴⁹. Voltaire dwells on the intense fear and pain of Jesus on the cross due to his deigning to take on all human weakness, but he admits the Saviour's heroism during his fearful ordeal, as he says: 'Son corps tremblait, et son âme était inébranlable; il nous apprenait que la vraie force, la vraie grandeur, consistait à supporter des maux sous lesquels notre nature succombe. Il y a un extrême courage à courir à la mort en la redoutant.' Christianity, according to its severest critic, had to succeed more through his death than if he had not been persecuted by priests for his very virtues, because seventy persons convinced of their leader's innocence, of the purity of his life and of his ethics, and of the cruelty of his judges imparted their faith to many others⁵⁰.

Such unfavourable remarks are counterbalanced by Voltaire's adverse criticism of Jesus's character and motives. In the *Épître à Uranie* (1732), Jesus is presented first as a 'vil ouvrier, le rabot

à la main', who, after preaching three years, 'périt du dernier supplice', and then as a triumphant impostor whose 'trône est cimenté par le sang des martyrs.' Thirty years later, Voltaire has Meslier call Jesus a contemptible nobody and madman, blaming him for wanting to play a leader's part for which he lacked the skill and courage. He agrees with Fréret and Bolingbroke that Jesus was a coarse Judean peasant, ignorant and illiterate, but more alert than most of his countrymen, whose aim was to inspire respect as the founder of one of the many Jewish sects which arose in Syria, motherland of fanaticism⁵¹.

Christ's lowliness and lineage are severely censured. The Christians' god should have made himself known everywhere instead of being disguised as a wretched Jewish carpenter. Julian was indignant and Meslier distressed, Voltaire says, that Jesus, supposedly god, the creator of all the worlds, was simultaneously descended from a race of robbers and harlots and also from David by Joseph, a mere artisan, who was not even his father. The English deist Toland was astounded that Christians preaching humility should wish to have their messiah descend from a king when they know that a king and a carpenter are equal before god⁵².

The critic judges words ascribed to Jesus to be trifling, foolish, unworthy of god, and sometimes inaccurate. He derides comparisons made between heaven and a mustard seed, yeast mingled with flour, a fishnet, a pearl of great price, a treasure found in a field, money loaned at interest, and a marriage feast where the guests are compelled to enter and partake. Unbelievers think it was absurd for Jesus to wander over Galilee telling his disciples to move mountains by faith and preaching repentance and falsely predicting a non-existent kingdom⁵³.

Voltaire's treatment of Paul, more consistently unfavourable than his treatment of Jesus, revolves mainly around Paul's Roman

⁴⁸ *DCB*, 2^e entretien, xxvi.539; art. *Tolérance*, 3^e sect., (*DP*), xx.524; *LSAM*. . . , 9^e lettre, xxvi.515; *DH*, ch.34, xxviii.204; *DPP*, xxviii.167; *QM*, 3^e lettre, xxv.379; *EJM*, xxiv.327.

⁴⁹ *HB*, xxvii.229; *HQH*, xxvi.353-354; *TT*, xxv.87-88; art. *Christianisme*,

2^e sect., (*DP*), xviii.168; *DPP*, xxviii.116-118.

⁵⁰ *RPP* (1734), xxvi.37; *CHH*, xxiv.531; *TT*, xxv.87; art. *Christianisme*, 13^e sect., (*Q*), xviii.162-163. Above quotation is from art. *Christianisme*.

⁵¹ *Épître à Uranie*, ix.360-361; *EJM*, xxiv.333; *EB*, xxvi.222-223; *HEC*, ch.6, xxxi.56. xviii.264; art. *Onan, onanisme*, (*Q*), xx.133-134; art. *Généalogie*, 1^e sect., (*Q*), xix.218-219; *HEC*, xxxi.57.

⁵² *CMB*, xxvii.45; *DEJ*, xxviii.19; art. *Contradictions*, 2^e sect., (*Q*), ⁵³ *CHH*, xxiv.530; *EB*, xxvi.225; *QM*, 1^e lettre, xxv.366.

citizenship, his attitude towards Judaism, his motives in becoming a Christian, his rôle as founder of the church, and the importance of his writings. To begin with, says Voltaire, biblical scholars are in disagreement as to his place of birth, Acts claiming he was from Tarsis in Cilicia, which would appear to make him a Roman citizen, while Jerome, in at least three works, states that he came from Giscala in Galilee, which would make him Jesus's compatriot. Grotius's *Commentary on Acts* is cited to prove that Paul could not have held Roman citizenship because Tarsis did not become a Roman colony until Caracalla's reign nearly a century later, and because Jews had been expelled from Rome by Tiberius. He supports Bolingbroke in claiming that no Jew became a Roman citizen until Philippius and Decius⁵⁴.

Paul's attitude towards Judaism is deemed hypocritical because he circumcized his disciple Timothy even after he had said 'If you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you.' Furthermore, after publicly acknowledging his conversion to Christianity, he entered the temple at Jerusalem, his head shaven, accompanied by four Jews, in order that everyone should see that he continued to observe the Mosaic law. At the insistence of the disciple James and other Jewish Christians, he remained in the sanctuary seven or eight days, publicly observing all the Hebrew ceremonies, and even adding devotions, sacrifices and purifications not required of him. When he was accused by the Sanhedrin of profaning the temple by entering it with gentile strangers, he sowed dissension between the Sadducees who denied immortality and the Pharisees who upheld it by stating that he was a Pharisee, the son and disciple of Pharisees, whom they wanted to condemn falsely for his belief in immortality and the resurrection. This adroit statement broke up the trial, to be sure, but Voltaire insists that there had been no question of resurrection at this time⁵⁵.

⁵⁴ *ER*, xxvii.83; art. *Apôtres*, 3^e sect., (Q), xvii.329; *CAE*, xxvii.445; art. *Eglise*, (Q), xviii.480; *EB*, xxvi.231.

⁵⁵ *TT*, xxv.44; *ER*, xxvii.84; art. *Tolérance*, 3^e sect., (*DP*), xx.521; art. *Paul*, 1^e sect., (*DP*), xx.187; art. *Économie de paroles*, (Q), xviii.464-465.

Paul allowed Jewish converts to Christianity to continue obeying the Mosaic law, but his emphasis on faith at the law's expense led Christians overnight to ignore this law, which god had established as eternal, because of Paul's words in Romans 10: 'For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified.' After assuring early Christians that what they ate mattered little, it ill behove Paul to censure Peter for eating forbidden food with gentiles as Jesus had done, especially after god had told Peter twice in a dream that all foods were pure. The critic adds that fasting, abstinence and Lent are not authorized by the N.T.⁵⁶

Voltaire repeats several times his contention that Paul became a Christian out of spite against the Pharisees after he parted with one of them, his master Gamaliel. The motive for their estrangement is not made clear, but Voltaire cites some apocryphal Acts of the Apostles by an Ebionite and the spurious Acts of Thecles to prove that Paul had wanted to marry Gamaliel's daughter and had either been rejected or had repudiated her. Whatever the circumstances, the *philosophe* considers a human explanation a more likely basis for Paul's conversion than the vision and the voice on the Damascus road, which he calls a crazy and contemptible legend⁵⁷.

In his attack against Paul, Voltaire cites an apocryphal apostolic history, attributed to Abdias of Babylon, to the effect that Paul not only consented to Stephen's death by stoning, but brought about the murder of James the lesser and Oblia the just. He blames him for persecuting the twelve apostles, for quarrelling with almost all of them and for imposing his rule over the early Christians whom he called idolators, adulterers, perverts, thieves, gluttons and drunkards. The critic accuses Paul of base jealousy of Peter and of others, and of insolence for warning Corinthian Christians

⁵⁶ *LSAM*. . . , xxvi.520-521; *DEJ*, xxviii.54; *QM*, xxv.438; *TT*, xxv.64; art. *Eglise*, (Q), xviii, 482-483; art. *Viande, viande défendue*, (Q), xx.575; art. *Carême*, 1^e sect., (Q), xviii.54.

⁵⁷ art. *Paul*, 1^e sect., (*DP*), xx.186-187; *EB*, xxvi.231-232; *HEC*, ch.8, xxxi.69.

that he would judge them and would pardon non sinner nor anyone else. Somewhat inconsistently, Voltaire calls him a coward, yet admits that he was arrested, imprisoned, lashed, and beaten more often than the other apostles⁵⁸.

If Paul's character and motives are under attack, his ability and learning, on the other hand, are recognized. Paul was learned, eloquent, vehement, tireless, he knew Greek as well as Hebrew, and he drew the most converts to the new sect of Nazarenes and Galileans, acquiring great sway over the people of Thessalonica, Philippi, Corinth and other cities by his indomitable will and fanatical zeal. The very obscurity of his emphatic speeches, it is felt, captivated the mob all the more because it could not understand them⁵⁹.

Voltaire's scattered remarks concerning the disciples are mainly to the effect that they were devout Jews, that they and the early converts were poor, ignorant persons of the lower classes, and that they embarrassed the Pharisees by spreading the story of Christ's resurrection. The critic maintains that the apostles, like their master whom they looked upon as a Jewish prophet, never considered themselves as founding a new religion. They still proclaimed themselves Jews, circumcized, faithful to the Mosaic law, attending synagogue throughout their lives, eating the Passover lamb as prescribed, and abstaining from pork and rabbit. By announcing the resurrection, which the *philosophe* calls an obvious imposture believed by coarse men resembling children believing ghost stories, the apostles hoped to shame the Pharisees into splitting off from temple officials, most of them Sadducees. The announcement was timely, according to Voltaire, for Jewish sects were disputing over whether resurrection was possible⁶⁰.

⁵⁸ *HEC*, ch.8, xxxi.68-69; art. *Apôtres*, 3^e sect., (Q), xvii.328; *DDA*, xxv.133; *DEJ*, xxviii.46; *EB*, xxvi.230-231.

⁵⁹ art. *Christianisme*, 1^e sect., (Q), xviii.163; *HEC*, ch.8, xxxi.69-70; art. *Paul*, 2^e sect., (Q), xx.187-188.

⁶⁰ *HEC*, ch.7, xxxi.66-67; *DH*, ch.35, xxviii.209-210; *CHH*, xxiv.532; *DEJ*, xxviii.54.

The early Christians are all pictured as obscure artisans, like the tanner Simon and the seamstress Dorcas, led by Paul, a tent-maker, and Peter, a fisherman. The gospel writers were ignorant fishermen and minor officials who could not even write an orderly narrative free from contradictions. They took as their motto Jesus's words 'He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor', and their earliest followers were the whores, customs clerks, publicans, and other dregs of the populace who ate supper with their master. By whores (*filles*), Voltaire refers to Jesus's visits to the Bethany home of Lazarus, Martha and Mary. By dregs he means the villagers and townfolk baptized and preached to by Peter, Paul, Timothy and other disciples. The one upper class disciple was the Greek physician Luke who founded a platonist school in Alexandria, according to Voltaire, which was perpetuated by Athenagoras, Panthenus, Origen, and Clement⁶¹.

Having discussed the characters and events of the N.T., Voltaire examines it in relation to Christian dogma. He concludes that church doctrines do not have their source therein, and that neither Jesus nor Paul nor any of the disciples or gospel writers state clearly any doctrines. Such words as dogma and heresy are absent from the gospels, while the word Christian did not occur until over thirty years after the crucifixion, since Christ never thought he was founding a sect. Nothing in Jesus's life has the least connection with Christianity today, least of all with Roman Catholicism, because Jesus did not mention or proclaim any dogmas, sacraments, rites or hierarchy. The critic doubts if Christ would recognize his religion in St Peter's basilica covered with paintings and sculptures, ringing with a choir of 200 *castrati*, and with a crowned man worshipped on an altar, who claimed the god-given right to command kings⁶².

⁶¹ art. *Eglise*, (Q), xviii.480; *EJM*, xxiv.301; *CAE*, xxvii.440; *EB*, xxvi.222; art. *Christianisme*, 1^e sect., (Q), xviii.163.

⁶² *Profession de foi des théistes*,

xxvii.70; *EB*, xxvi.235-236; *DH*, ch.33 & 38, xxviii.203, 225; *Le pyrrhonisme de l'histoire*, 2^e sect., xxvii.237; *CHH*, xxiv.532; *HB*, xxvii.228; *DEJ*, xxviii.44.

Special attention is devoted by Voltaire to such doctrines as Christ's divinity, the virgin birth, redemption, original sin, infant damnation, and immortality. His forty-odd references to Christ's divinity state clearly that nothing is said in the N.T., not even by Jesus himself, that represents him as divine. When he calls himself the son of god, this Hebrew term merely means 'just man.'⁶³ That he considered himself to be a man only is seen in sayings such as 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God' and 'The Father is greater than I.' Voltaire sees here the basis of socianism and unitarianism, but he also sees the phrase 'I and the Father are one' as a pretext for the first Council of Nicea's deification of Christ in 325 A.D. Elsewhere, Voltaire implies that Jesus became god later just like Bacchus, Perseus, Hercules, Romulus, and other mortals deified by pagans⁶⁴.

As for Paul's conception of Jesus, in all but one reference out of twelve, we are assured, Paul never spoke of Jesus except as of a man chosen by god to lead men back to justice. But Voltaire does not mention all Pauline references to Jesus, several of which could be viewed as deifying him. And at least three additional references are from Hebrews which Voltaire, like most biblical critics and scholars formerly ascribed to Paul⁶⁵.

Lack of scriptural basis for Jesus's divinity necessarily supposes the same lack for such dogmas as the trinity and consubstantiation. Not even John's gospel contains the word trinity, and neither the scriptures nor the church fathers made clear the exact

relationship between the father, the son and the holy ghost, much less the doctrine of consubstantiation. The latter did not become official church doctrine until the second council of Nicea in the year 787⁶⁶.

If Christ was to be divine in nature and essence, his incarnation had to be divine in origin, and this theological necessity compelled formulation of the doctrines of the virgin birth and of Mary, mother of god at the council of Ephesus in 431. Jesus, it is recalled, had spoken rather harshly to his mother at the marriage at Cana, he had never called her mother of god, nor is she called this anywhere in the N.T. The saviour neither claimed to be born of a virgin by the holy spirit nor did he ever reveal the secret of his incarnation, which Voltaire protests ironically he reveres too much to try to elucidate. Jesus's birth is compared with that of Remus and Romulus, supposedly born of a vestal, with that of Mars, Argus, Vulcan, and others allegedly born to Juno without a man, and with Minerva reputed to have come forth fully armed from Jupiter's head⁶⁷.

Other doctrines for which scriptural backing does not exist, according to the critic, include redemption and original sin. Unbelievers wonder why the messiah did not use his godly powers to redeem all men and destroy sin on earth, instead of being crucified and leaving so many nations damned. These sceptics question the validity of the damnation through original sin of children who die before they can be baptized, when infant damnation is nowhere to be found in the N.T. or in any of the church fathers before Augustine. Voltaire concedes, nevertheless, that the all-important doctrine of immortality, contained in the words of Jesus and of Paul, is the foremost benefit which the N.T. has left us⁶⁸.

⁶³ *ER*, xxvii.99-100; *HJ*, ch.3, xxi.532; *QM*, 3^e lettre, xxv.380.

⁶⁷ *DH*, ch.40, xxviii.228; *DDA*, xxv.131; *CMB*, xxvii.42; art. *Tolerance*, 3^e sect., (*DP*), xx.523; *HJ*, ch.3,

xxi.531; *BEE*, xxx.301; *QM*, 3^e lettre, xxv.379; *EJM*.xxiv.316.

⁶⁸ art. *Contradictions*, 2^e sect., (*Q*), xviii.264; art. *Christianisme*, 1^e sect., (*Q*), xviii.165; *CHH*, xxiv.529; *EJM*,

⁶³ *Sermon du rabbin Akib*, xxiv.283; *DPP*, xxviii.118; *HEC*, ch.9, xxxi.71; *CHH*, xxiv, 530.

⁶⁴ *BEE*, xxx.310-311; *CH*, xxvii.563; art. *Christianisme*, 2^e sect., (*DP*), xviii.173-174; *ER*, xxvii.99; art. *Divinité de Jésus*, (*DP*), xviii.409.

⁶⁵ *Profession de foi des théistes*, xxvii.70; art. *Paul*, 2^e sect., (*Q*), xx.188-189; art. *Eglise*, (*Q*), xviii.481-482; art. *Papisme*, (*DP*), xx.166; art. *Divinité de Jésus*, (*DP*), xviii.409;

HEC, ch.8, xxxi.70; *EB*.xxvi.232; *DH*, ch.34, xxviii.204-207. The one reference in which Paul appears to call Christ god is based on defective punctuation since corrected. At Romans 9:5, Voltaire read 'Christ, who is God over all', but the Revised Standard Version of the Bible has '...Christ. God who is over all. . .' Voltaire apparently overlooked 2 Cor.4:4, 6; Col.2:9; Titus 2:13, which seem to deify Christ.

Christian institutions and practices are seen under Voltairian scrutiny to possess no N.T. basis, but on the contrary some possess pagan origins or equivalents, and most of them were changed and sometimes abandoned with the passage of time. It will be recalled that the Quaker in the *Lettres philosophiques* says he never took communion, since this practice, called an ordinance by some Protestants and a sacrament by all Roman Catholics, is not based on the gospels. Elsewhere, Voltaire declares that one can serve god without attending mass, for Jesus never did so. He emphasizes the utter contrast between the first lord's supper, at which Jesus and the apostles ate the Passover lamb cooked in lettuce, and morning mass which was only instituted at the end of the second century, while low mass originated only after Charlemagne⁶⁹. Confession's only scriptural basis, says Voltaire, is a single line in James 5: 'Therefore, confess your sins to one another.' No record exists of Jesus going to or receiving oral confession, a practice that has been used for centuries by the Inquisition to trick suspects into revealing their heresy⁷⁰.

Perhaps the best-known religious practice that was abandoned by Christians was circumcision. On the one hand, Jesus, himself circumcised, insisted that he had come to uphold Mosaic law *in toto* and never forbade his disciples from circumcising those who asked them to. On the other hand, although he was circumcised and is reported to have done this to Timothy, Paul authorized frequently the cessation of this practice among Christian converts.

Less widespread but important in apostolic times was the disciples' custom of breathing in the mouths of catechumenes to infuse them with the holy spirit, as Jesus had done to the apostles after the resurrection. Voltaire links this rite to similar ones in

Chaldea and Syria, observing that this very ancient usage is still used by sorcerers to inspire or bewitch those subjected to it⁷¹.

As Voltaire sees it, Christianity's most prominent practice, baptism, has survived despite contradictions surrounding its application, and despite its similarity to pagan ablutions. The Quaker in the *Lettres philosophiques* explains that he and his coreligionaries are not baptized because Christ, although baptized by John, never performed this Jewish ceremony. Acts 18 and 19 are cited to prove that a generation after Jesus' death, there were Christian converts who recognized John's baptism only, and who had never heard that Christ had exhorted his followers to baptize all nations 'in the name of the father and of the son and of the holy spirit.' On the other hand, Acts reports several times that this rite was executed only 'in the name of Jesus Christ.' Voltaire duly notes its antiquity in India and in Egypt whose hot climates favoured the cleansing of body and soul by immersion⁷².

The *philosophe* is most anxious to stress the differences in the policies and customs of early and of later Christianity, as seen in the scriptures. No word is said therein about the disciples and other Christian leaders wearing any special dress or emblems to distinguish them from the laity, nor did they possess distinctive social rank or hierarchical titles. They were all married—James the brother of Jesus, Philip, Peter, Paul, and most of the early church fathers. Indeed, Paul prescribed that elders and bishops should be married, to one wife only, however, unlike Jewish priests who could have several successively. Paul also described in 1 Corinthians 14 how early Christians, circumcised or not, all took part more or less equally in worship assemblies, each member taking his turn to prophesy and to interpret the scriptures. Paul hesitated about extending this privilege to women, declaring here that 'women should keep silent in the churches', while

⁷¹ LP, 1^e lettre, xxii.84; DEJ, xxviii.60-62; art. *Apôtres*, 4^e sect., (Q), xvii.332; DH, ch.38, xxviii.223; BEE, xxx.312-313.

⁷² LP, 1^e lettre, xxii.83-84; BEE, xxx.315; art. *Baptême*, 1^e & 2^e sect., (Q), xvii.540, 544-545; ABC, 3^e entretien, xxvii.337; DEJ, xxviii.46.

xxiv.326; art. *Ame*, 6^e sect., (Q), xvii.145; ABC, 2^e & 3^e entretiens, xxvii.329, 337.

⁶⁹ LP, 1^e lettre, xxii.85; DDA, xxv.130; CH, xxvii.557; *Fragment sur*

l'hist., xxix.249; *Eclaircissement hist.*, xxiv.490-491.

⁷⁰ *Eclaircissement hist.*, xxiv.492; *Sermon du rabbin Akib*, xxiv.283-284; art. *Inquisition*, (Q), xix.482.

previously he would allow them to preach and prophesy if veiled. In Acts 21, it is revealed that Philip's four daughters availed themselves of this opportunity⁷³.

The egalitarianism of apostolic times, in Voltaire's opinion, was based on hatred of the wealthy, on making of poverty a virtuous ideal, and on property held in common. Scriptural support for this radical position is to be found in Jesus's caustic allusions to rich men, and in his life of worldlessness. Jesus and the apostles were laymen with no temporal authority. The messiah recommended equality to his disciples, as did other Jewish and Christian sect leaders. It is obvious that the Catholic hierarchy, headed by the pope, disregards Jesus's words 'Whoever would be great among you must be your servant', 'The last will be first, and the first last', or, 'If you would be perfect, go, sell all what you possess and give to the poor.' This was the basis of the non-hierarchical Christian society during nearly three centuries, for only under Trajan were there bishops, according to Voltaire who elsewhere admits that they existed in Paul's day. The critic interprets the master's saying that 'there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by god' as meaning that since civil law is here sanctioned by God, the clergy holds property by civil law only, and not by divine right. This contrasts sharply with the church's wealth, worldliness and temporal power, established by feudal law, which at one time extended the pope's claims to Naples and to England⁷⁴.

Voltaire sees evidence that Christians once advocated and practiced communal ownership by the reference in Acts 6 to the choosing of administrators of the Christians' money and property at Jerusalem, and by Peter's striking Ananias and Saphira down dead for having withheld their subsistence money. The critic

⁷³ art. *Eglise*, (Q), xviii.484, 495-496; *Instructions pastorales*, xxv.2; *CMB*, xxvii.48; *HQH*, xxvi.351; *HJ*, ch.3, xxi.533; art. *Clerc*, (Q), xviii.195; art. *Paul*, 2^e sect., (Q), xx.188; art. *Apôtres*, 2^e sect., (Q), xvii.323.

⁷⁴ *Les droits des hommes*, xxvii.195; *DH*, ch.41, xxviii.229-230; art. *Biens d'église*, 1^e sect., (Q), xvii.587; *DDA*, xxv.131; art. *Donations*, (Q), xviii.420.

states that this has sanctioned forceful extraction of money and possessions from the faithful ever since. Regular subsidization of the clergy, however, was established when Paul contended in 1 Corinthians 9 that he and his wife were entitled to bed and board at the Christian community's expense. But Quakers cite Jesus's admonition 'You received without pay, give without pay' to justify their not paying priests to help the poor, bury the dead and preach to the faithful⁷⁵.

The pope's temporal power is shown to be without gospel foundation and utterly at variance with Christ's teachings. Papal tyranny in the world and the bishop of Rome's usurpation of power over the entire church are regarded by the critic as based on Jesus' play on words: 'You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.' Surely, he never meant Peter to be supreme in the church, and the disciples never considered him after Jesus as their master. The latter's words to Peter that 'whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven' was used by popes to bind peoples to their oaths of allegiance to their kings, to unbind them, too, to dispose of kingdoms as the popes wished, and even to sanctify the sale of indulgences, according to Voltaire⁷⁶.

As for Peter's trip to and sojourn in Rome as the first pontiff, Voltaire denies it at least fifteen times. He argues that it is preposterous, on the one hand, to believe that Peter, an illiterate, wrote in the epistle attributed to him that he was in Babylon, and on the other hand, to lend credence to discredited sources, such as Hegesippus, Marcellus and Abdias, who insist Peter meant Rome when he wrote Babylon. No mention of this alleged trip or stay in Rome exists in Acts or in Paul's epistles, yet there is mention of Peter's visits to Jerusalem, Antioch, Lappa and Cesarea. In Colossians 4, Paul reported from Rome that he was in prison

⁷⁵ art. *Eglise*, (Q), xviii.496; *ER*, xxvii.84, 93-94; *DCB*, 2^e entretien, xxvi.549-550; *EB*, xxvi.230; *LP*, 2^e lettre, xxii.87.

⁷⁶ *ER*, xxvii.90, 102; *DCB*, xxvi.558; *DPP*, xxvii.118; *ABC*, 3^e entretien, xxvii.336; art. *Pierre*, (DP), xx.213-214; art. *Taxe*, (DP), xx.484; *HJ*, ch.3, xxi.530.

with Mark, Jesus called Justus and Aristarchus, but does not name Peter. Had he died upside down on a cross, it is likely that the first Christian church would have borne his name instead of that of St John Lateran. Paul would not have written in Galatians 2 that he was to preach to the gentiles while Peter was to preach to the Jews, if Peter was to go to Rome⁷⁷.

Up to this point, we have outlined Voltaire's criticism of N.T. writings, characters and events, including miracles, of Christian dogmas, institutions and practices, lacking scriptural support in many cases, and the differences between early and later Christian ideals and traditions. Yet Voltaire's main grievance against the Christian religion was, in his mind, intolerance. For this aspect of Christianity, he claims to have found all too much scriptural support, even in the teachings of Jesus. The critic alludes almost twenty times to 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword', observing that this frightening expression turned out to be a prophesy of early divisions among Christians and of civil wars and persecutions lasting fourteen centuries. It is edifying, says Voltaire in pious tones, to know that the words refer only to the heart's inner struggle, and the sword is that with which one cuts the ties that bind one to the world⁷⁸. The *philosophe* refers a dozen times to the command 'Compel the people to come in' uttered by a banquet host to his servant charged with rounding up guests from streets and highways. Christ is seen here as intolerant, although Voltaire admits that the word 'compel' means that the servant was to implore strangers to accept a pressing supper invitation. Nevertheless, he feels that this phrase has long served as a convenient excuse for the Roman Catholic church to force heretics to abjure under torture or threat of torture or execution, and to starve people into submission⁷⁹. According to Voltaire, the bigot's motto 'Hors de l'église, point de salut' has its origin in

⁷⁷ *EM*, ch.8, xv.349-350; *CMB*, xxvii.44; art. *Apôtres*, 3^e sect., (Q), xvii.326; art. *Voyage de St. Pierre à Rome*, (Q), xx.593-595.

⁷⁸ *CHH*, xxiv.531; *HQH*, xxvi.353; *Le Pyrrhonisme de l'histoire*, xxvii.286.

⁷⁹ *DPP*, xxviii.118-119; *TT*, xxv.64; *HQH*, xxvi.353; *Essai hist.* . . , xxvi.458.

Jesus's words 'If he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a gentile and as a tax-collector', which is cited ten times.

Among Jesus's parables which are alleged to have inspired ecclesiastical abuse and violence is the marriage feast at which a guest without a wedding garment was 'cast out into outer darkness' and also the parable of the talents in which the timid servant who did not invest his master's money at interest was also consigned to oblivion. As for Christ expelling the money-changers and pigeon-venders single-handed from the Jerusalem temple court, this episode is deemed more extravagant than any in *Don Quixote*⁸⁰.

Intolerance and violence at times characterized the disciples. Paul's early persecution of Christians and, after his conversion, his frequent heated quarrels with other Christian leaders, have already been noted. Voltaire alludes to Peter cutting off the ear of the soldier Malchus at Gethsemane, and above all to his miraculous killing of Ananias and Saphira referred to eleven times. He is revolted by this fatal miracle (the only one he appears to accept, since it discredits Christianity), because Peter did not warn Saphira after her husband's death that she too would be killed if she withheld any money. Voltaire seems undecided regarding Peter's responsibility, calling him merely the mouthpiece of Christ and the holy spirit, but judging him nonetheless worthy of the wheel or of god's punishment for murdering people for their money. It proves that from the first, the disciples only thought of amassing money from the sale by converts of lands, houses and other possessions, threatening those who kept back any money with death and damnation⁸¹.

Voltaire asserted that, to their intolerance and violence, the early Christians added seditiousness. Peter's bold declaration that 'it is better to obey God than man' encouraged the members of the new sect to violate Jewish and Roman laws. Paul took full

⁸⁰ *HQH*, xxvi.353; art. *Esséniens*, (Q), xix.27; *EB*, xxvi.224-225.

⁸¹ *CHH*, xxiv.531-532; art. *Apôtres* 4^e sect., (Q), xvii.330; *HB*, xxvii.231; *HEC*, ch.7, xxxi.67-68.

advantage of Rome's extreme religious toleration to give form and direction to the new Galilean cult. But Paul, who enjoyed the protection of Roman laws and Roman courts, and who successfully appealed to Caesar, yet exhorted his followers to settle their differences among themselves rather than to submit them to the arbitration of infidels. And Voltaire sees this attitude developing into a fixed policy among Christians of trying to avoid Roman law courts and Roman armies, in order to create a state within a state whose members would be ready to rebel against Rome or gain control by subversion⁸².

Voltaire's opposition to the Christian religion leads him on the one hand to trace its shortcomings to words and deeds in the N.T., and on the other to stress differences between the Christian movement originating in the N.T. and the church of subsequent periods of history. The spirit of Christianity, which in Voltaire's view, is compounded of intolerance, rapacity and seditiousness, is already present in the scriptures. The letter of Christianity, however, which includes dogmas, institutions, practices and other formal aspects of an organized church, has little or no scriptural basis. Of all dogmas, that of Christ's divinity is felt to possess least N.T. support, together with its corollaries the incarnation, the virgin birth and Mary, mother of god. Voltaire suggests that the choice of baptism as the most distinctive Christian rite was purely arbitrary, for circumcision or breathing in the mouths of converts, both of them associated with Jesus, could have been chosen with equal justification. A wide dissimilarity exists between the Roman catholic hierarchy headed by a pope with temporal power, utterly without N.T. foundation, and the scripturally-inspired egalitarianism of the Christian era's first three centuries based on Jesus's sayings and example, on communal ownership, and on the fact that most leaders and members of the new sect were of low social rank.

⁸² *TT*, xxv.44-45; *HEC*, ch.8 & 13, xxxi.68, 81; *CHH*, xxiv.538.

Of Christianity's two founders, Jesus and Paul, the former was at most the leader of one of several Jewish sects, but essentially his message was ethical in nature and reducible to 'love god and your neighbour', a principle propounded long before Jesus. The latter's character and ethics are highly regarded by Voltaire who makes him equal in this respect to Socrates and almost to his favourite Confucius. Despite certain of Christ's sayings, later misconstrued to justify persecution, Voltaire praises the saviour's kindness, compassion, forgiving spirit, sense of justice, and above all his toleration, displayed in most of his actions and teachings. Such qualities throw into sharp relief the contrast seen between Jesus's life and ministry and the Christian church's activities and the lives of its members.

Conversely, Voltaire is little impressed with Jesus's intelligence and learning. He underscores the narrowness of the messiah's religious outlook limited to Judaism and of his social horizon confined to the poor and lowly of Palestine. He deplores the presence, among Jesus's miracles and utterances, of so many asinine ones unbecoming god incarnate on earth. However, Voltaire as a deist and free-thinker rejects Christ's divinity. If god had really been embodied in Christ, the latter would never have hidden his light under a bushel, a practice he himself denounced, by being born into an obscure Jewish family classed by Voltaire among the dregs of the populace. Nor would Christ, the son of god, have permitted his shameful execution, leaving most nations unaware of his existence and all mankind as sinful as before.

As for Paul, while impugning his motives, Voltaire concedes that he possessed to a marked degree the traits of a successful religious leader. Paul's intelligence, perseverance and courage are noted by Voltaire who, however, considers him hypocritical and ambivalent for retaining his allegiance to Judaism after his conversion to Christianity out of spite against his would-be fiancée's father. As a clever opportunist, he sought Rome's protection by falsely claiming Roman citizenship, and he divided his accusers before a Roman judge by professing his belief in

immortality. The *philosophe* also censures Paul for his fanaticism and domineering, which led him first to persecute Christians and later to reprimand and exploit the leaders and members of Christian communities.

In his ceaseless attacks on Christianity, Voltaire used against it as one of his major weapons an examination of the miracles on which its validity reposes. The critic denies that any miracles, either those surrounding Jesus's earthly sojourn or those avowedly performed by him or by his disciples, are indispensable to the truth of Christianity. He regards all miracles as impossible because they violate nature and reason, many of them being risible or contemptible and several similar to pagan legends. At any rate, N.T. miracles are mentioned only in N.T. writings composed at least a century after the miracles supposedly took place. For miracles to be believed, Voltaire sets down even higher standards of reliability for the records of their occurrence than for that of natural events.

According to Voltaire N.T. records do not meet such standards. The gospels and other books were transcribed long after the death of eyewitnesses to events which they narrate by unknown authors in many different localities. None of the incidents are confirmed anywhere outside of the N.T. and biblical apocrypha. The reliability of canonical works is impaired by a certain similarity of content with that of apocryphal works, as well as by the arbitrary fashion by which canonicity was determined. Further doubts are cast on the N.T.'s reliability by the numerous errors and contradictions contained in it. Because of all these deficiencies, Voltaire repudiates the authenticity of the N.T. and the validity of the revealed religion founded thereon.