

Introduction

THE RELIGION OF CHRISTIANITY BEGAN AS A JEWISH CULT. MOST scholars are agreed on this point. But despite the assurances of apologists, there is a problem with the historicity of the central figure, Jesus. Burkitt in his preface to Schweitzer's *Quest for the historical Jesus*, calls it "the greatest historical problem in the history of our race."¹

Says one nineteenth century critic,

Originally Christianity was purely a socio-religious or socio-ethical movement of the masses, and so free from individualism that the notion of a personal founder was itself wanting. An individual by the name of Jesus may have lived about the opening of our era, but he had no unique significance for the rise of the new religion. Not Judea but Rome was the seat of its origin; Jewish messianism, Stoic philosophy, and the communistic clubs of the time supplied its source elements; its literature was a poetic creation projecting into the past the more immediate experiences of the present, as when the picture of a suffering, dying, and rising Christ typified the community's own life of persecution and martyrdom. The gospel Jesus was created for practical purposes, thus giving a concrete and so a more permanent form to the principles and ideals of the new faith.²

Since Celsus in the second century and Porphyry in the third, skeptics have declared the gospels to be myths.³

The best and earliest documentary evidence for Jesus are the letters of the apostle Paul. But Paul does not mention that Jesus had any specific followers, family or even enemies except in a general

1 Schweitzer & Montgomery, 1911, p. vi.

2 Case, 1912, p. 41.

3 "More and more the myths put about by these Christians are better known than the doctrines of the philosophers. Who has not heard the fable of Jesus' birth from a virgin or the stories of his crucifixion and resurrection?" Celsus, *On the True Doctrine*

JESUS OF THE BOOKS

spiritual sense. Indeed, these aspects of an ordinary person's career were irrelevant to Paul and his theology.⁴ The only thing that was needed for the religion to be effective in Paul's schema was a belief in the sacrificial death and the vindicated resurrection of the divine figure.⁵ That belief, which was advanced as faith without evidence, was the virtue which could be rewarded with salvation.

The teachers of the new sect were intelligent persons who felt a special calling to save the world. It is my contention that it is unnecessary to postulate the existence of *another teacher* besides the apostles to explain where the religion came from.⁶

Methodology

In this study I have applied a mode of inference which the American logician-philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, described as *abduction*.

“The surprising fact, C, is observed;
But if A were true, C would be a matter of course.
Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.”⁷

Putting this in terms relevant to our discussion,

I have found many surprising facts (especially in ancient documents)
about early Christianity.
If my hypothesis is correct, these surprising facts would be a matter of
course.
Hence, there is reason to suspect that my hypothesis is correct.

I have also aimed at finding not just the *likeliest* explanation for

4 Schweitzer & Montgomery, 1911, p. 342, see 1 Corinthians 2:2

5 Romans 10:9

6 The role of the Jewish Christians will be explained subsequently

7 See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abductive-reasoning>

INTRODUCTION

the origin of Christianity but as Lipton would have it *the loveliest explanation*, “the one which would, if correct, be the most explanatory or provide the most understanding.”⁸

It is sometimes better to work backwards, that is, to apply the *histoire regressive* technique as the great French historian Marc Bloch called it. This is to,

Read the texts in the reverse direction of their canonical order, beginning with the safe anchor of the period of their compilation and reading back.⁹

If we apply this method to *all the relevant documents* (that is both religious and secular) we begin with the existence of Christians at the beginning of the second century. Before that time, it gets very hazy. The letters and the gospels contain few clues as to the exact dates of their compilation. And even more speculative is the task of deciding what was going on in the churches when the documents were written. In this study I have endeavored to avoid oversimplifying a complex problem, while at the same time making the arguments accessible to the general reader.

My contention is that the paucity of evidence for Jesus or Christians in the middle of the first century is no mere aberration. What Brandon described as a hiatus in the development of Christianity¹⁰ is in fact an absence. Christianity, I assert, did not linger for forty years after its legendary inception; it bolted from the starting blocks as all successful religions do. One has only to consider the first twenty years of the Mormon religion, or Islam to see evidence of this. There is no reason to suppose Christianity was any different.

Early Christianity was initially successful because there was a powerful *intellectual reason* for accepting the Christian message—its

8 Campos, 2011, p.434.

9 Finkelstein & Mazar, 2007, p. 15.

10 Brandon, 1951, p. 249.

scriptural foundation and appealing internal logic. However, there was also a powerful *emotional element* that motivated and bound together the early Christians. This was the undeserved punishment of the innocent, a phenomenon no doubt witnessed and experienced by the first Christians. Each week when the Christians met, the central rite¹¹ of the Lord's Supper, a proxy for the crucifixion of Jesus was performed and with it was recreated the mental state that is at the core of Christianity. In a real sense, there were probably early believers who could identify with this state, and like Paul point to the "marks of Jesus" on their own bodies.¹²

By comparing the founding of ancient Christianity with modern cults I hope to show that belief in Jesus arose according to the same psychological and sociological rules as those religions did; that is, in a manner consistent with normal human behaviour, and given similar circumstances, a similar sociological landscape and similar dramatic events, another religion like Christianity would arise.

The organisation of this book

The book is divided into two parts. In Part 1 the Jewish War is covered in some detail as this is the key to understanding the psychological and sociological factors that led to the new religion. We also look at modern research in belief formation and apply this to the first century situation. Finally, after some theological considerations we put it all together in some form of a definitive history, at least as far as the sources will allow us to go. In Part 2, I look specifically at some of the documentary and other evidence for the late arrival of Christianity. Objections which are sure to be raised by orthodox historians I have dealt with in the Appendices.

11 Durkheim, 1915, p. 10.

12 Galatians 6:17

PART 1





CHAPTER ONE

The Great Commission

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.

Matthew 28:19-20

The Baptism of Jesus

JESUS' MINISTRY BEGAN WITH HIS BAPTISM. THE RITUAL OF BAPTISM signifies a new beginning, the beginning of a life dedicated to God, and it was fitting that Jesus, as the first of many brethren, should lead by example. In the third chapter of the gospel of Matthew we learn that Jesus was baptised by John.

But who was this John that baptised Jesus? According to the Jewish historian Josephus, there was in the first century, a person called John, who preached baptism. He had a substantial following and was active sometime in the period 34 to 37 CE.¹³ If we are talking about the same John, and it seems that we are, this reference

¹³ *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18.5.2.



Fig. 2: *The Baptism of Jesus*. Fresco art of hidden cave church (Elmalı Kilise) of Cappadocia, Turkey. 11th or 12th Century. VPC Travel Photo / Alamy Stock Photo

places Jesus and the origins of Christianity in the first half of the first century, or more precisely in the last years of the reign of the Roman emperor Tiberius.

But Josephus makes no mention of an encounter between John and the greater prophet Jesus. In fact, he never mentions Jesus at all. This is odd because according to Matthew, Jesus was more popular than John.¹⁴

Early Christian art depicts a naked Jesus submitting to baptism. A third century text known as *The Apostolic Tradition*, has whole families being admitted into the faith on the same occasion—men, women and children—and these catechumens were also baptised naked.¹⁵

14 Matthew states that John attracted people from Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region along the Jordan. (3:5) But of Jesus we read, his fame spread *throughout all Syria* (4:24) and great crowds followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. (4:25)

15 *The Apostolic Tradition*, 21:2-5

No good evidence

The problem with the popular hypothesis of Christian origins is that, leaving aside certain *religious* documents, there is *no good evidence* that *any of the stories* about Jesus as related in the gospels really transpired.

In fact, it is not until we get to the year 79 that we find unequivocal evidence for *the existence of Christians*; that is people who believed that there had been a divine prophet called Jesus.¹⁶

But after discounting what many people regard as untenable, for example the tales of miracles such as walking on water and turning water into wine, *was there a person called Jesus of another ilk*, an ordinary preacher perhaps who initiated Christianity? It must be admitted that it is manifestly more difficult to prove such a character did not exist. Jesus was a common name. But this entails the problem of explaining how a first century itinerant who left no trace in the historical records could have initiated a world shattering religion. His early followers apparently also left no trace.

The renowned Biblical scholar, Bart Ehrman admits that,

- ... there is no hard, physical evidence for Jesus.
- We ... also do not have any writings from Jesus.
- ... no Greek or Roman author from the first century mentions Jesus.
- We do not have ... a single reference to Jesus by anyone—pagan, Jew, or Christian—who was a contemporary eyewitness, who recorded things he said and did.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls ... do not mention or allude to Jesus¹⁷

Despite this dearth of evidence, Ehrman and many other academic scholars of Christianity hold that a non-divine Jesus once walked the

16 See Appendix 2 for the refutation of common arguments used to support mid first century Christianity.

17 Ehrman, 2013, pp. 42, 43, 46, 56.

earth. There is however a small but growing number of dissenters, and the present author is one of them, who find no evidence that a Jesus *of any description*, as the source of Christianity, ever existed. That the religion started without Jesus fits the evidence better and is more likely from what we know about human religious behaviour.

How religions arise

How could Christianity have arisen without a Christ? Is it possible for religious beliefs to arise *spontaneously*?

Religions can arise without a charismatic teacher or cult leader and there are documented cases which illustrate this. There is, for example, the religion of Om Banna which arose in 1991. This religion had no cult leader. It began when a motorcyclist was allegedly involved in an accident on a highway in the Indian province of Rajasthan. The out of control machine ran into a tree which instantly killed the rider Om Banna. Miraculously the Royal Enfield, despite being impounded by the police, continued to reappear at the site of the accident. Today, the practice of the religion includes singing hymns and making offerings to the god Om Banna who is said to protect travellers on this dangerous stretch of road.

After Om Banna's demise, it is reported that,

One day Om Banna showed miracle to his grandmother by appearing at night and saying I am not dead, I am alive. He also requested his grandmother to donate two bigha land to Hemraj Purohit which was done. They say only after six months of death Om Banna started showing miracles to village people and faith developed among them. Many truck drivers driving at National Highway 65 said they felt that someone sitting with them during night hours and many stories how Om Banna saved few accidents.¹⁸

18 Accessed at <http://wikimapia.org/14857526/Bullet-Baba-Shrine>

Om Banna, the man, was unknown to the world prior to his death. The religion named after him arose as a consequence of his death, and Om Banna was neither a cult leader nor a divine teacher.

In New Guinea, the Pomio Kivung, a kind of cargo cult, started around 1964, which was when other major cults emerged on the island of New Britain. Pomio is a district on the island. Central to Kivung theology is the *Tēnpela Lo* which is a modified version of the Biblical Ten Commandments. Although the Pomio Kivung can trace their earthly origins to a man named Koriām Urekit, the true source of their wisdom was a mysterious white man who appeared briefly to Koriām while he was out fishing in his canoe. This white man wished to be called *Brata*. After this encounter, Koriām is said to have gone missing for many years and was presumed dead. Many suspect he was secretly in Rome being schooled in the moral-ritual work of the *Tēnpela Lo* whose posts are carved in Roman numerals.¹⁹

How religions are defended

The defenders (or apologists) of religious tenets will often appeal to reasoning, in the face of contrary evidence.

An example of this phenomenon is the famous Church controversy concerning the geostatic model of the universe—the belief that the sun and other heavenly bodies move around a stationary Earth. This appeared intuitively obvious to those 17th century observers, as it still does to us today, and certain physical arguments were advanced to support it, but the idea received ecclesiastical blessing because this was the opinion expressed in the scriptures and confirmed by the church fathers.²⁰ We read for example in Genesis,

19 Cargo cults and cognitive science: the dynamics of creativity and repetition in the Pomio Kivung, in Trompf, Cusack & Hartney, 2010, p. 105.

20 “The heavens, revolving under His government, are subject to Him in peace.” Clement of Rome, *Letter to the Corinthians* 20, c. 97 CE.

JESUS OF THE BOOKS

And God said, “Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth.” (1:14–15)

The invention of the telescope in 1608 changed everything. The principles of optics however had been discussed since at least 300 BCE with the publication of Euclid’s *Optics*.²¹ In the first century, Seneca wrote: “Letters, however small and indistinct, are seen enlarged and more clearly through a globe or glass filled with water.”²² Nero is said to have watched the gladiatorial games using an emerald as a corrective lens.²³ Ptolemy (c. 100–c. 170 CE) whose interests included mathematics, astronomy and geography wrote a work on Optics²⁴ in which he explained optical illusions, but surprisingly and tragically more than a thousand years passed before anyone made use of the properties of lenses for studying the natural world.

The new students of the heavens, including Kepler and Galileo, saw things that did not accord with Christian dogma. Undeterred, the Church argued on logical grounds that “since God is all-powerful, He could have created any one of a number of different worlds, including one in which the earth is motionless; therefore, *regardless of how much evidence there is in support of the earth’s motion*, one can never assert that this must be so, for such an assertion would be an attempt to limit God’s power to do otherwise.”²⁵ [italics added]

The Sacred Congregation of the Most Eminent and Most Reverend Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church suspended Nicolaus Copernicus’s treatise *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*

21 Darrigol, 2012, p. 20.

22 Seneca, *Physical Science*, Book 1.6.

23 Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 37.16.

24 Darrigol, 2012, p. 25.

25 Finocchiaro, 2005, p. 62.

because it asserted “that the terrestrial globe is in motion but the sun is motionless and is the center of the world, which is an opinion contrary to Sacred Scripture.”²⁶

The matter came to a head in the year 1633. The previous year Galileo’s *Dialogue of the Two World Systems* had been published. To combat the implications of these scientific findings, the Church employed three theologians to assess Galileo’s work and one of those chosen for this task was Melchior Inchofer, a Jesuit priest, and a teacher of mathematics, natural philosophy and theology. He had been born into a Lutheran family in Hungary and later converted to Catholicism.

But Inchofer himself was suspect. While teaching in Sicily, he became convinced that a locally held church document and blatant forgery purporting to be a letter from the Virgin Mary to the city of Messina in 62 CE, was genuine. Inchofer went so far as to publish a book in defence of the authenticity of the letter. In an ironic twist, *this book* was placed on the *Index of Prohibited Books* while Inchofer was at the same time denouncing the works of Galileo and Copernicus, and recommending *them* for the *Index*.²⁷

Inchofer’s findings and arguments against Copernicanism were published in the *Tractatus syllepticus* which a modern scholar sums up as follows.

The overall impression throughout the book is that it is a blizzard of quotations from scripture and the church fathers, as Inchofer employs the standard theological method of his time in arguing by the citation of authorities... Out of this blizzard of texts comes a long list of *de fide* truths, which include the following: (1) God created the firmament in the middle of the waters. (2) The heavens are up, and the earth is down.

26 Finocchiaro, 2005, p. 30.

27 Blackwell, 2008, p. 32. In defence of Inchofer’s character a posthumously (1653) published booklet was his *De eunuchismo dissertatio* in which he argued on moral grounds against the practice, then in use, of castrating young boys to prepare them for later service as singers in church choirs.

JESUS OF THE BOOKS

(3) God suspended the earth above the void. (4) During the suffering of Christ the sun experienced a miraculous disappearance for three hours. (5) The sun moves in a circle around the earth. (6) The heavens have a circular motion and a spherical shape. (7) The earth is at rest at the center of the universe.²⁸

The Copernicus/Galileo-Inchofer affair points to the folly of relying on holy books, and their interpretation to establish scientific facts. Today we laud those Renaissance heroes of old, people like Copernicus and Galileo who stood firm and whose names have continued to echo down the ages, while the name of Inchofer, who was sincere but mistaken, has largely been forgotten.

These three examples provide clues as to how Christianity could have arisen. Firstly, we might look for an event—a tragedy perhaps, as in the case of Om Banna—that triggered belief in Jesus and secondly, sacred writings from which specific doctrines about Jesus could have been formulated—something like the way scripture was used by Inchofer in the *Tractatus syllepticus*, to refute erroneous views and establish theological truths.



It was Galileo who said, “In questions of science, the authority of a thousand is not worth the humble reasoning of a single individual.”

28 Blackwell, 2008, p. 57.