

Christianity proceeded from *reasoning*

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How did Christianity begin?

Tacitus¹ in describing events in Nero's time², says that Christians got their name from *Christus*, who had "suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius³ at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus⁴."

Christians rely on this text to show that Jesus was an historical figure. But Tacitus probably received the information about *Christus* from Christians who accepted as a matter of faith that Christ had been crucified under Pontius Pilate.

Contrary to this position my contention is that belief in *Christus* was a consequence of *reasoning*⁵ that certain things, things described in sacred writings⁶, must be so. In other words, "Jesus" was theologically constructed *ex nihilo, from nothing*.

¹ c. 56CE-c. 120, *Annals*, Book 15.44.

² 54CE-68

³ 14CE-37

⁴ 26CE-36

⁵ An example of another belief system created by reasoning without evidence was the geostatic model of the universe. It was argued for example "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." Finocchiaro, 2005, p. 62

⁶ Sacred scripture was also cited to prove Copernicus wrong. In September 1633 the following poster was published in Liege, Holland. "Petrus Aloysius Carafa, by the grace of God and of the Holy Apostolic See bishop of Tricarico, and nuncio with the rank of special ambassador of His Holiness Pope Urban VIII for the Rhineland and Lower Germany. The Sacred Congregation of the Most Eminent and Most Reverend Cardinals of the Holy Roman Church charged with the Index had suspended Nicolaus Copernicus's treatise *On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres* because it asserts that the terrestrial globe is in motion

Those responsible for this construction were Jews who had experienced and sought to explain the Jewish War in 66 to 70CE. They *reasoned* that *Christus, even though unnoticed, must have appeared*. His appearance and death explained among other things God's punishment of the Jews in the Jewish War.⁷

What really happened

Without doubt the most significant event of the first century of the Common Era was the Jewish War. This event, we assert, triggered the birth of Christianity. There was a confluence of factors, all the necessary elements before the War, for the launching of a new religion. In particular, there was a fervent and widespread Messianic expectation, pre-existing beliefs, a favourable social geography and the technological means for its propagation. These elements when combined with the War gave rise to the new religion in its various forms.

In the beginning...

Tacitus was right in saying that Christianity was a superstition that "broke out"⁸ in Judea and spread to Rome. It began as theological speculation. On the tail of the speculation came

but the sun is motionless and is the center of the world, which is an opinion contrary to Sacred Scripture. . . " Finocchiaro, 2005, p. 30.

⁷ The *Letter of Mara bar Serapion*: "For what benefit did the Athenians obtain by putting Socrates to death, seeing that they received as retribution for it famine and pestilence? Or the people of Samos by the burning of Pythagoras, seeing that in one hour the whole of their country was covered with sand? Or the Jews by the murder of their Wise King, seeing that from that very time their kingdom was driven away from them?"

⁸ *Annals*, Book 15.44

"apostles."⁹ The most famous of these and the main one whose writings have survived, more or less intact, is Paul.¹⁰

In the first decade after the Jewish War, Josephus published in Rome his epic *Wars of the Jews*. This book or at least the version that has survived fails to mention Christians or their leader. This presented a crisis to the early church and especially the Jewish-Christians in Rome. Their Jesus was a figure of history. To fill the gap in Josephus they penned the gospel of Matthew or at least an early version of it. (Matthew was the Jewish family name of Josephus) The prophet Joseph Smith did the same for ancient North American history in his epic *Book of Mormon*. Matthew was the first gospel produced and then Luke-Acts after Paul's death, followed finally by the first attempt at gospel harmonisation, Mark.¹¹ The reformulation of the story of the founding of Christianity as a series of events that had occurred decades before the Jewish War was both necessary for the survival of the religion and sociologically inevitable.

⁹ We see this in the example of Apollos. "Now there came to Ephesus a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria. He was an eloquent man, *well-versed in the scriptures*. He had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and he spoke with burning enthusiasm and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John." [italics added] Acts 18:24-25 John's baptism was for "the purification of the body" only. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18.5.2.

¹⁰ We may also have a letter of Paul's associate Barnabas and the writer of Hebrews may be Apollos.

¹¹ These documents also served to thwart heretics. We know that manuscripts were altered to counter alternative theological positions or heresies. (Hull, 2010, p.20) This is not to say that heretics opposed all that was written. The church fathers asserted that heretics modified the "authentic" texts. (See for example: Tertullian, *Against Marcion*, Book 4.3) Heretics were also implicated in authoring complete books. For example, it was rumored that a certain heretic named Cerinthus authored the Book of Revelation. (Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 3.28)

Unlike Joseph Smith ¹² whose sacred writings appeared complete¹³ from the divine realms on golden plates¹⁴, the early Christians took their ideas from the large body of literature already available to them. Only later was a separate body of literature compiled, some of which was eventually endorsed by various groups within the Christian spectrum of belief. The Canon was created. Christianity is a religion infused with respect for writings and developed initially by the interpretation of writings, especially prophecies.

The Christian apologist Justin of Caesarea¹⁵ when addressing the emperor Antoninus Pius¹⁶, makes it clear that fulfilled written prophecies proved his case.

But lest anyone should meet us with the question,
What should prevent that He whom we call Christ,
being a man born of men, performed what we call His
mighty works by magical art, and by this appeared to
be the Son of God? we will now offer proof, not
trusting mere assertions, but being of necessity
persuaded by those who prophesied [of Him] before
these things came to pass, for with our own eyes we
behold things that have happened and are happening
just as they were predicted; and this will, we think

¹² Smith saw himself as the second Mohammed. (Jenkins, 2000, p. 29)

¹³ This is not to say Smith ceased to receive revelations after the publication of the Book of Mormon.

¹⁴ The apocryphal *Apocalypse of Paul* has a similar story. "...there was revealed to him an angel of the Lord, saying: Upturn the foundation of this house, and lift up what thou shalt find. But he thought that he had had a dream. And the angel having persisted even to a third vision, the nobleman was compelled to upturn the foundation; and having dug, he found a marble box containing this revelation."

¹⁵ c. 100-165

¹⁶ 138-161.

appear even to you the strongest and truest evidence.¹⁷

The events that Justin referred to, were the Bar Kokhba revolt of 132-136 and the successful publication of the gospel message.¹⁸ These facts could not be denied. But the bulk of Justin's claim and the evidence lay in the writings, both ancient and modern, and their interpretation. He presented *no other evidence* for his case.

God speaks to Moses

According to ancient Jewish sources Moses was tending some sheep in the desert when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a burning bush. In this encounter God gave Moses a long list of instructions, instructions which he must pass onto his fellow Israelites.

After receiving these instructions Moses pre-empted a difficulty and puts the following question to God; "But suppose they do not believe me or listen to me, but say, 'The Lord did not appear to you.'"¹⁹

The apostles of the new Jewish sect faced the same problem as Moses in the story from Exodus. How to prove it, and how to prove it without the immanent benefit of Moses-like miracles and divine signs.

¹⁷ *The First Apology*, chapter 30.

¹⁸ "...we saw that things had happened accordingly--the devastation of the land of the Jews, and men of every race persuaded by His teaching through the apostles, and rejecting their old habits" *ibid*, chapter 53.

¹⁹ Exodus 4:1.

What did the early Christian preachers do?

They used the only tools available to them.

They leveraged existing beliefs and *reasoned* that things must be so.²⁰

References

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All Biblical quotations in this essay are from the NRSV

²⁰ John has Jesus say, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But if you do not believe what he wrote, how will you believe what I say?" ch 5:46-47.