

A NEW THESIS

ON
CHRISTIAN
ORIGINS



Paul George

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INTRODUCTION

The book *On Christian Origins* by Paul George argues that Christianity began as a socio-religious movement and not as a result of the actions of a personal founder named Jesus. The author contends that the paucity of evidence for Jesus or Christians in the middle of the first century is an absence, not an aberration. The author suggests that Christianity did not evolve slowly but rather bolted from the starting blocks as all successful religions do.

He claims that the religion was successful due to its solid scriptural foundation and appealing internal logic, and that there was a powerful emotional element that motivated and bound together early Christians – the undeserved punishment of the innocent, a phenomenon no doubt witnessed and experienced by the first adherents to the faith.

The author argues that belief in Jesus arose according to the same psychological and sociological rules as other religions.

The author applies the mode of inference called abduction to argue that the surprising facts about early Christianity would be a matter of course if the hypothesis is correct.

The text is divided into two parts. In Part 1, the Jewish War is covered in detail to understand the psychological and sociological factors that led to the new religion. Part 2 looks specifically at documentary and other evidence for the late arrival of Christianity, and objections raised by orthodox historians are dealt with in the Appendices.

PART ONE

1

The first chapter of the book explores the origins of Christianity and questions whether Jesus, as described in the Gospels, actually existed. Despite the lack of concrete evidence, many scholars of Christianity hold that a non-divine Jesus once walked the earth, while a growing number of dissenters find no evidence that a Jesus of any description ever existed. The chapter explores how religions or cults can arise without a charismatic leader using examples such as the religion of Om Banna, which arose after a motorcyclist was allegedly involved in an accident, and the Pomio Kivung, a Pacific Island cult which started in New Guinea. The chapter also examines how religions are defended, with an example being the Church controversy concerning the geostatic model of the universe, where 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."

The chapter concludes that Christianity could have arisen through an event, such as a tragedy, that triggered belief in Jesus, and through the use of sacred writings from which specific doctrines about Jesus could have been formulated.

2

The second chapter begins with a discussion of the prominent Christian historian Eusebius Pamphili of the late third-early fourth century. Eusebius is best known for his ten-book *Ecclesiastical History*, which documented the history of the church from the time of Christ to his own era. Living during Constantine's reign, Eusebius praised the emperor as the saviour of

Christianity. He resided in the cosmopolitan city of Caesarea Maritima, where his teacher Pamphilus established a school and library containing 30,000 scrolls. Eusebius used this vast resource to compile his history, admitting that it was a lonely task and that his history was flawed and incomplete.

The earliest archaeological evidence for the existence of Christians comes from a Latin graffito found in Pompeii, dated around 79 CE. The best secular documentary evidence is a letter from the Roman governor Pliny to Emperor Trajan around 111 CE, which discusses how to deal with the new Christian sect.

There is a distinct lack of evidence for the existence of Christ or Christians before 70 CE. Prominent writers such as Philo of Alexandria, Seneca, and the Jewish historian Josephus make no mention of Jesus or his followers. Other writers, such as Justus of Tiberias, Pliny the Elder and Plutarch also fail to mention Jesus or the early Christian community.

This absence of evidence, combined with Eusebius's acknowledged flaws in his work, casts doubt on the reliability of his account as a guide to discovering the origins of Christianity.

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1946 near Qumran, date back to between the third century BCE and first century CE. They include texts describing the rules and beliefs of the Essenes, an ascetic Jewish sect, but make no mention of Jesus. Similarly, Jewish literature from the second and third centuries CE, such as the Talmud and Mishnah, discuss Jewish miracle workers from the first century but do not mention Jesus. No physical artifacts, monuments, or inscriptions from the first century provide evidence for Jesus' existence as described in the Gospels.

The lack of genuine Christian relics from the first century strongly suggests that the religion did not exist during that time. The collection and veneration of relics such as the bones of martyrs became popular in later centuries.

Archaeological evidence has shown that the alleged town of Jesus' childhood, Nazareth, did not exist in the first half of the first century.

No archaeological sites were associated with the Gospel stories until the fourth century when Constantine ordered the construction of a church in Jerusalem. Pagan places of worship were often converted to Christian use during this time, but early Christian pilgrimage sites are conspicuously absent in the religion's early history. The emperor Julian, who ruled from 361-363 CE, pointed out that pagan writers from the time of Tiberius and Claudius made no mention of the events or key figures described in the Gospels and Acts.

3

Chapter three of the book discusses Jewish affairs and the impact they had on the emergence of Christianity. Josephus wrote about the antiquity of the Jewish nation and their sacred writings which were highly respected by the Jews. The Jewish temple in Jerusalem was the centre of religious activity for Jews until the year 70. It was an architectural marvel and played a significant role in the religious lives of the Jewish people.

Jewish law and education were paramount to the Jewish people, and they resisted any change or innovation. Christianity was such an innovation. This resistance can be attributed to the endowment effect, a psychological phenomenon whereby people value what they own more than what they do not but can acquire with little effort. This made the spread of Christianity among Jews challenging.

A critical event in the emergence of Christianity was the Jewish War of 66 to 73 CE. The war attracted foreign fighters, and the Jewish resistance was fierce, particularly in defence of the Temple.

Following the war an annual poll tax was instituted on all Jews throughout the empire and this became a significant financial burden for many

households. The Jewish War's impact on the Jewish people and their resistance to Christianity are essential elements in understanding the development of Christianity.

4

Chapter four discusses the causes of the Roman Jewish War. The impetuosity of Jewish youth and their enthusiasm for action contributed to the troubles leading up to the war. The Romans sought to quell the insurrection, motivated by the depletion of their treasury and the need to restore their economy after the disastrous fire of Rome in the year 64.

The Jews had previously achieved quasi-independence under the Maccabees but faced ongoing strife until Herod the Great established order under the supervision of Rome. The first century saw several Messianic pretenders, leading to the rise of the violent Sicarii sect. The Jewish insurrection was also a civil war, as different factions sought control of the province.

Anti-Jewish sentiment was prevalent throughout the empire, with Roman procurators exacerbating tensions through corruption and maladministration. The Jewish War was a significant event in Roman history, marked by a high number of casualties, wealth transfer, and a large source of slaves. The conflict had far-reaching consequences, including economic losses, implications for the Jewish diaspora, and human costs.

The destruction of the Temple and parts of Jerusalem had a deep impact on Jewish religious and political identity. The war contributed to the emergence of a new form of Judaism, independent of the Temple in Jerusalem.

5

This chapter discusses the concept of divine punishment and how it relates to historical events such as the Great Fire of London and the destruction of

Jerusalem in the Jewish War. The belief in a just world, where good is rewarded and evil is punished, is a common theme in literature and religion. The Bible, especially the prophet Jeremiah, speaks frequently of punishment for disobedience and the coming of a just world. The Jewish War, with its widespread trauma induced mental disorders and these are discussed as a possible source of inspiration for stories of the casting out of demons by Jesus in the synoptic gospels. The chapter suggests that psychotrauma was not uncommon in ancient times where battles and wars were fought on a regular basis. The book of Deuteronomy speaks of the psychological afflictions that would befall the Jews if they disobeyed God, including madness, blindness, and confusion of mind.

The gospel of Mark records at least two cases of psychotrauma that can be compared to modern-day cases. One case is of psychotraumatic blindness where a blind man from Bethsaida is brought to Jesus, and after Jesus lays his hands on him, the blind man sees people, but they look like trees walking. Another case is that of the Gerasene demoniac, who shows symptoms consistent with complex PTSD. This demoniac lived among the tombs, had exaggerated startle response, and avoided stimuli associated with the trauma. Cures conducted by Jesus and therapists during World War 1 show similarities. The emperor Vespasian is also reported to have effected cures of psychotraumatic conditions. It is suggested that the synoptic gospels report such miracles because the mental conditions and the seemingly miraculous curing of those conditions were common when the first gospel was written, that is during the immediate post-war period. The name "Jesus" was also invoked by ancient Jewish exorcists who were not associated with the Christians. The Gospel of John records no such cures, suggesting that the epidemic had passed by the time John was written.

This chapter explores the psychology and sociology of religion. The human brain has been described as a "belief engine" and it naturally looks for patterns and infuses them with meaning. This principle has been observed in the perception of illusory patterns, such as face pareidolia, and in the discovery of religious imagery in natural phenomena, such as the image of "Allah" in Arabic on natural objects. The incidence of magical thinking increases with danger and situational uncertainty, as observed by Malinowski among Melanesian islanders. The perceived lack of control in dangerous situations may also contribute to the perception of illusory patterns, as demonstrated by Whitson & Galinski.

Certain sites such as Mount Olympus in Greece and the Temple Mount in Jerusalem have been judged holy because they possess special features that facilitate communication with God. The phenomenon of the sensed presence, in which people experience the presence of a comforting or advising entity, has been recorded in various cultural contexts and may be related to factors such as monotony, isolation, and stress. This phenomenon is observed in the gospel account of the transfiguration and in ancient Greek cults which were initiated by experiences of gods speaking in waking visions.

The author explores the ways in which beliefs and ideologies form and persist, even when they may not align with reality. He examines the auditory verbal hallucination as one example of how cognitive biases can lead to the perception of voices in ambiguous noise, and the ways in which stress and isolation can contribute to this phenomenon. The author also explores the role of authority figures in shaping beliefs, and how Christianity, like Judaism, was successful in creating outgroups that contributed to the formation of authoritarian behaviours.

The chapter examines the ways in which belief systems are rationalized and defended with intellectual arguments, even when evidence may contradict them. It highlights the persistence of false beliefs, such as those formed

through repeated exposure to assertions with no evidence, and the difficulty of undoing these beliefs once they have been formed.

7

In Chapter seven the author argues that belief in Jesus could have arisen spontaneously, similar to the way belief in Om Banna arose in Rajasthan in India. He suggests that Jesus may have been unknown prior to his supposed death, and that the religion named after him could have arisen as a result of his death or even the simple belief that he had once lived and died. The author explores how the catastrophic events of the Jewish War may have helped fuel religious recruitment, citing the breakdown of social attachments as a potential factor.

The author also draws parallels between early Christian practices and those of the Roman army, suggesting that primitive Christians may have modelled their practices on those of the dominant culture as has been observed with cargo cults. They point to evidence such as Pliny's description of Christians holding two meetings on the same day, one before dawn for prayer and the other later for fellowship and discussion, which mirrored the Roman military custom of administering an oath to newly enlisted men. The author also suggests that the Christian cross was chosen as a symbol of power because crucifixion was the Roman form of punishment for those who defied the state.

The chapter explores the psychological aspects of early Christianity, including the role of imprisonment in facilitating delusions, the social networks that facilitated the spread of the religion, and the reinterpretation of events to accommodate changes in beliefs. The author notes that confinement under certain conditions can facilitate delusions, and cites the case of a man imprisoned in East Germany who created a delusional system involving a secret mission from God. Similarly, the apostle Paul's delusions manifested

as a kind of psychological dualism. The chapter also discusses the social networks that facilitated the spread of Christianity, including whole family groups being converted at once, and the appeal of the religion to the middle and upper classes. The chapter also touches on the issue of conspiracy theories, which the author notes were common among early Christians, who saw the destruction of Jesus as a Jewish conspiracy. Finally, the chapter explores the changing beliefs of early Christians, including the eventual abandonment of the hope of a supernatural political kingdom and the turning inward of the movement.

8

In Chapter eight the author discusses the various parties involved in defining what it meant to be Christian including the Essenes, Jewish Christians, and Ebionites. He notes that Toland argued in 1718 that Christianity originated as two parties: the Jewish Christian party or Nazarenes/Ebionites, who adhered to Jewish laws, and the Pauline party. The author points out that although the Acts of the Apostles is the official record of early church history, it is a revision or imaginative reconstruction and should not be accepted as wholly true. He suggests that Acts probably correctly indicates that persecution of Jewish Christians by Jews forced them to flee and that they spoke the word to no one except Jews.

The chapter examines the theological battle lines drawn up between Paul and the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, as recorded in Paul's letter to the Galatians. At this conference an agreement was reached to divide the missionary territory between Jews and non-Jews. He notes that the name "Ebion" likely came from the Hebrew word for "poor," and that there was probably more than one group with these tendencies. It is also likely that James was the paramount leader of the Jewish Christians as it is stated in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas.

The author notes that several themes in the New Testament Epistle of James make it most likely the work of a leader with Ebionite tendencies, including its praise of the Law and practical works of charity, and its disparagement of the rich. He suggests that the teaching of Jesus echoed the idea that those who accept the yoke of Torah (Jewish Law) are exempted from the yoke of worldly cares, and that Matthew was originally written by and especially for Jewish Christians.

The author suggests that communal property was a doctrine held by the earliest Christian believers. As time went on, the Ebionites found themselves in a spiritual no man's land, rebuffed by the Jews and declared heretical by the Church. The Essenes' paramount theological principle was an absolute belief in Fate in preference to human free-will. The idea of submission to the will of God came from the teachings of the Ebionites/Essenes. The author suggests that Jewish Christianity disappeared within the Christian church but was reserved in Islam, which has extended some of its basic ideas even to the present day.

9

This chapter discusses the importance of belief in the coming of the messiah king in Judaism and how this belief affected the first believers in Jesus. The mission of Jesus was to die, rise, and live again, which was all that was required to effect salvation for believers. The message of Paul and the other apostles was a revised version of what had been expected, as the earliest Christians still believed that Jesus would come as a visible political king to restore the kingdom to Israel, as did all believing Jews. However, the concept of the suffering, dying, and rising Christ was now appended to that belief. The Jews' mistake was misunderstanding the first duty of the Messiah.

The chapter also provides a brief life of Paul, who was probably born in Tarsus and received his primary education in northern Galilee and his

secondary education in Damascus. His trade was tent making, and he supported himself while preaching his gospel. Paul was rejected by his fellow Rabbis after his conversion experience, and he fled to Arabia. He returned to Damascus, visited James and Cephas in Jerusalem and then set off on his missionary endeavours to the Gentile lands of Syria and Cilicia. Paul abandoned his Jewish name Saul for the Gentile name Paul and became the designated prophet to the nations, at least in his own estimation.

The chapter concludes by discussing the division between Gentile and Jewish Christianity, which can be traced to the division in Judaism between the rival schools of the Rabbis Hillel and Shammai. Paul claimed to be educated as a Pharisee, but it seems that he followed the school of Hillel, who preached tolerance and kindness.

10

Chapter ten explores the concept of faith in Christianity, emphasizing that the only requirement for Christian salvation is faith in the suffering, dying, and rising Messiah. According to the author, God can only work where there is faith, which is belief without evidence, and reversing this logic means God cannot work where there is evidence. The chapter argues that the original conception of the Messiah was as a secret, hidden figure who performed no miracles, delivered no teachings, and had no disciples. The lack of eyewitnesses was rationalized as being part of the divine plan to hide the message and the messiah from outsiders and reveal him only to the elect few.

The chapter also explores how failed prophecies in Christianity, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses' prediction of Jesus' return in 1914, are accommodated through re-socialization or secondary socialization. It notes that the legacy of the origins of Christianity is seen in Catholic doctrine today which believes in a deposit of faith and in the development of doctrine over time.

The chapter discusses several aspects of Christian tradition and theology, including the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the origin of the Lord's Supper, Jesus' presence in Hades after his death, and Jesus as the offspring of the gods. The author argues that the triumphal entry, reported in the gospels, was a crucial element of the divine script envisioned by Old Testament prophets, but in the way it is inserted into Matthew it makes no theological or psychological sense. The author also suggests that the Lord's Supper, referred to as "the breaking of bread," was likely initially conceptualized as a memorial feast in the presence of angels, rather than a meeting of twelve human disciples in an upper room. Additionally, the author proposes that Jesus' presence in Hades after his death and his status as the offspring of the gods draw on ancient Greek mythology and suggest a connection between Jesus and the gods. Finally, the author discusses the supper of the gods in Greek mythology, which may have influenced the Christian tradition of the Lord's Supper, and he suggests that the handing over of Jesus to suffer and die for the world at the supper was a momentous event initiated by the gods.

The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, was a crucial festival for the Jewish people. Its purpose was to cleanse the people of their sins and impurities, and guarantee God's help in a hostile environment. The festival involved the sacrifice of one goat and the release of another, which had the sins of the people symbolically placed upon it. This goat was sent into the wilderness. Maccabees in book four describes how Jewish martyrs died as a ransom for the collective, and their blood preserved Israel. In early Christianity, the Day of Atonement was also known as *the fast*, and Jesus gave instructions to his followers on how to observe it. There are parallels between the events described in the gospels and the ancient ritual performed by the Jews, suggesting that Jesus died conceptually on the Day of Atonement. Barnabas lists these parallels, such as Jesus being taken outside the city and abused, and the lottery of the two goats. In the Christian myth, Jesus was crucified

while Barabbas was released, similar to the two goats' contrasting destinations. Finally, the confession made by Aaron over the scapegoat and the washing of hands at the end of the ritual find parallels in the Christian myth, where Pilate washes his hands before the crowd and the people say, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

12

The twelfth chapter of the book discusses the importance of Rome in the first century and the role it played in the spread of Christianity. Rome was the largest city in the world at the time and a hub of trade, with many roads serving the city, making it an ideal location as the spiritual headquarters of the church. Additionally, the language of the church was Greek, which was also the language of everyday life in Rome. The Roman churches had resources, such as scribes, books, libraries, and rich patrons, all the things necessary for the writing and maintenance of religious texts.

The chapter also discusses the religious beliefs of the Romans and the cult of the Egyptian god, Isis, which spread to Rome in the first century BCE. The destruction of many pagan temples, including those of Isis and Serapis, in a fire in 79 CE, would have been viewed favourably by the new sect of Christians. Rome had a large population, both slave and free, providing a large pool of persons who could be converted to Christianity.

The chapter mentions several prominent figures in the early church, including Paul who preached his own "divinely inspired" version of the gospel, and Clement who followed Paul. Clement's authority over the church in Corinth, as well as his authority within the universal church, was believed to have been ordained by God and directly imparted to him by the apostles.

The earliest Christians in Rome were Jewish Christians, who believed in Christ but still followed the Jewish law. This led to tension between Gentile and Jewish Christianity, which is manifest in Paul's letter to the Romans where he

argues energetically for the adoption of Gentile Christianity. The compromise position was the two-church solution, with Paul entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised and Peter with the gospel for the circumcised. The Basilica of Santa Sabina in Rome celebrates the establishment of the church with two female figures, one representing the party of circumcision and the other representing the Gentiles.

Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians can be dated to around 80 CE and addresses the wrath that is coming on unbelievers, which is likely a reference to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in October 79. Paul's failed prediction of the end of the world with the execution of the false Nero and the destruction of the temple of Jupiter in Rome making it impossible for his prophecy to be fulfilled, may have led to his rejection in Asia and prompted the writing of the more robust Revelation/Apocalypse of "John."

13

In this chapter the author begins with the observation that the origins of Christianity are shrouded in mist. He claims that the exact process by which the key Christian literature, the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, came to be written is lost or obscured by the Church. Certainly, he says, they were produced by fallible men toiling over manuscripts, and not, as preached by the church, by plenary inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

He suggests that Paul's magnum opus was his letter to the Roman church, probably written in late 79 or early 80 and not in the 50s as is usually put forward by orthodox scholars. The author contends that the gospel of Matthew was written in Rome shortly after *Wars of the Jews* was published in the middle to late 70s as a response to the omission by Josephus in that work of the history of the Christians. He suggests that Matthew, in virtually the form in which we possess it, was used by the writers of the two other synoptic gospels, and they had no other source or sources. The author argues

that Matthew was not written in Judea as claimed, but rather in Rome by a Jewish Christian or Christians. The use of Hebraisms in the gospel was intentional, as a way to make the document appear to have originated in Judea. Placing the literary character of Jesus in Palestine would not have been difficult for the writer of the first gospel as many Roman Jews would have visited and become familiar with Judean holy sites or traded with their kinsmen in the halcyon days before the destruction of the city and the Temple.

The legends surrounding the deaths of Peter and Paul were used to legitimize Rome as the center of Christianity, despite Jerusalem being the original holy city. Peter was chosen as a symbol of unity in the early Church, although Paul played a larger role in its development. The pre-eminence of Peter in the Catholic Church remains a cornerstone of its dogma to this day.

14

In Chapter fourteen, the author discusses the relationship between the works of Luke and Josephus. Both authors wrote Hellenistic histories, provided prologues, speeches for their characters, and emphasized the antiquity and virtues of their own group. There are indications that Luke copied details from Josephus's *Antiquities*, making careless errors in the process. The author points out several examples of discrepancies between the two works, including the census, Lysanias, the famine in Judea, and the order of the appearances of Judas and Theudas.

The author also discusses the possible connections between Augustus and Jesus. He argues that the mention of Augustus in Luke's account of Jesus's birth associates Jesus with the themes of the Imperial cult. Augustus was declared son of God and Saviour for his restoration of the Republic, and the cult of the deified Emperor developed after his death. The author suggests that the cult of Jesus as a humble son of God developed after *his* death, and

Augustus provided the model for the character of Jesus by adopting humility during his lifetime.

The chapter discusses three topics related to early Christian literature: Rabbinic parables, the sermon on the mount, and the influence of Cicero on the moral precepts of Christianity. It highlights the similarities between the teachings of Jesus and those of Cicero, suggesting that Jesus' teachings were not unique or superior. The author also delves into the origins and purpose of Mark's gospel, stating that it may have been written to defend Paul's vision of Christianity against Jewish Christian opponents, and may have borrowed from Paul's epistles. He notes that Mark's gospel was likely written as a summary or epitome of Matthew, with its simple construction and economical use of words aimed at generating authenticity. He notes that questions about such topics as homosexuality and abortion are absent from both the gospels and Cicero. Overall, the chapter presents a nuanced perspective on early Christian literature and its relationship to other philosophical and religious traditions of the time.

15

In Chapter fifteen the author discusses the early history of the gospels and how they were used by early Christians. Justin Martyr in the mid second century referred to the gospels as the "memoirs of the apostles," without assigning names to them. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, was the first to name the gospels, and it is suggested that Matthew was named after the family name of Josephus, its inspirer, and Luke was named after Paul with whom he was associated. The Old Testament was used to provide evidence that Jesus was the predicted Messiah, and early church meetings included readings from both the Old and New Testaments. *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*, a Christian text of the second century written to showcase the piety and courage of women believers, was condemned by the church father Tertullian

as a fabrication, but despite his censure the story spread and to this day shrines to Thecla can be found in many churches around the Mediterranean.

Christianity went through a crisis after the first wave of enthusiasm died down and records show a Christian apostasy around 90 CE. New literature was created to support competing claims for authenticity, resulting in various gospels and Acts of Jesus that never made it into the Canon. One of the main heresies to be countered was the heresy of uncertain or substitutionary crucifixion, which was carried forward into Islam. The Gospel of John was written according to Jerome to thwart the teachings of heretics.

The chapter discusses the similarities between the bringing of the religion of Cybele to Rome in 204 BCE and the introduction of Christianity to Rome in 70 CE. In both cases, Rome was facing a crisis, and sacred ideas were imported from far-off lands. The Cybele cult involved bringing to Rome a goddess in the form of an unshaped stone of black meteoric iron from Pessinos in Phrygia. From 70 CE Christianity spread throughout the Roman Empire, attracting God-fearing Gentiles as well as some Jews. The chapter includes a timeline of significant events in the development of Christianity, starting with the Roman-Jewish War in 66 CE and ending with the death of Trajan in 98 CE. The timeline covers the major events of Paul's life, the writing of the Gospels, and the early development of the Christian Church. The chapter highlights the influence of political and social events on the spread of Christianity and the challenges that early Christians faced in promoting their faith.

CONCLUSION

The author argues that Christianity was not reborn as a result of the Jewish catastrophe of 70 CE, but rather was born in that year. Jesus was the invention of disappointed Jewish religionists when the War did not produce the predicted Messiah to save them from the Romans. The rumour that the

Messiah had appeared secretly then arose spontaneously in both Jewish and Gentile circles, and this vague but popular superstition was channeled and molded by the apostles into a formal set of ideas. The author critiques the absurd conspiracy theory that the Jews killed Jesus for which they were justly punished and calls for an end to the madness of superstition. He suggests that we should turn to the great thinkers of the past and proposes Cicero for especial mention.

PART TWO

The Late Appearance of Christianity

In PART 2 the author challenges the orthodox view of the early origins of Christianity, arguing that many Christian writings and traditions are of a later date than previously believed. The section highlights many pieces of evidence that suggest the later emergence of Christianity, pointing to the lack of accurately dateable Christian writings before Justin Martyr (circa 150).

ITEMS 1 TO 10

The author here presents ten pieces of evidence from early Christian sources that suggest a different chronology for Jesus and the early church than the traditional account. These include accounts of Jesus living into his fifties, the unbelievable longevity of some early Christian leaders such as John and Symeon, and the destruction of the Temple occurring before the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. The author also discusses the origin of the first Christians as Jewish Christians in the Decapolis in Galilee, rather than in Jerusalem, as commonly believed. Other evidence includes accounts of

people who were "raised" by Jesus living until the reign of Emperor Hadrian and Aphrahat's statement that Jesus "abolished the observances which are of the law" in the year 70, the same year that Jerusalem was destroyed. Finally, the author cites the letter to the Corinthians assigned to Clement of Rome, which suggests that he and Paul knew each other and both lived in the late first century after the Jewish War. These pieces of evidence challenge the traditional chronology of Jesus and early Christianity and suggest a need for a reconsideration of the historical record.

ITEMS 11 TO 16

The author presents six more items of evidence to suggest that Jesus may not have existed as a historical figure. Jerome's writings indicate that Paul was active after the War, which conflicts with the version of events presented in the Acts of the Apostles. The heresies mentioned by Paul were not documented until the late first or early second century, which suggests that they did not exist during the supposed lifetime of Jesus. The first general persecution of Christians may have occurred during the reign of Domitian, rather than under Nero as previously thought. The appearance of Halley's comet in 66 CE was seen as a sign of the impending desolation of Jerusalem, and was referenced by both Jews and Christians as evidence of the end-times. Ignatius of Antioch specifically refers to Jesus as a star heralding the ruin of the ancient kingdom. The appearance of the sword over the city is associated with the coming of the one whose right it was to govern, as prophesied in Ezekiel. Overall, the author argues that the evidence for the existence of Jesus is weak and that much of the early Christian narrative may have been invented or embellished.

ITEMS 17 TO 23

Here the author discusses further evidence from the New Testament that can help determine the approximate date of some events and writings. In Paul's writings, the defeat and humiliation of the Jews are referred to as past events, indicating that they were written after 70 CE. The letter to the Ephesians was recognized by the early church as being authored by Paul and refers to the destruction of the dividing wall in the Jerusalem Temple, which occurred in 70 CE, suggesting that it was written after that time. Paul never mentions John the Baptist, who died in 36 CE, which is odd considering his central role in the Gospel narratives. The witness of James as recorded in Acts makes the mission to the Gentiles contingent on the rebuilding of Jerusalem, which can only occur after its destruction.

The author also explores the significance of certain events described in the New Testament. For example, the parable of the widow and the unjust judge may be based on the experiences of the Jews suffering under Roman oppression during the time of procurator Gessius Florus. The Palm Sunday exclamation "Hosanna in the highest" may have originally been an urgent appeal to God to save the Jews from the Romans. Finally, the story of Jesus raising a young man from the dead in the town of Nain may be set after 68 CE, as the town only had a gate after a wall was built by Simon bar Giora during the Jewish revolt against Rome.

ITEMS 24 TO 33

In this section various biblical passages and their historical context are discussed. The murder of Zechariah by Zealots in the Temple court in 69 CE is referred to by Jesus in Matthew 23. Jesus also predicts division within families in Luke 12, which Josephus confirms occurred in Jerusalem around 68 CE. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit, linked to the theme of fire, is also discussed in Acts 2 and was experienced by nascent believers trapped in

Jerusalem during its destruction by the Romans. Poverty in Palestine after the War is mentioned in Galatians and Romans. The failed and violent attempts to set up a Jewish kingdom, which culminated in the general insurrection of 66-70 CE, are discussed in Matthew 11. The destruction of the physical temple is mentioned in Matthew 26, and its connection to the building of a new temple, the church, is significant. The idea of the "consolation of Israel" is discussed in Luke 2 and would have been sought after 70 CE. The Acts of the Apostles is noted to be out of sync with its literary setting, as are Paul's quotations from an anonymous text called *Biblical Antiquities*, which was written after 70 CE. The author suggests that the child born to the pregnant woman in Revelation 12, who is identified as the potential political Messiah Jesus, is born during the reign of the dragon with seven heads, which is identified as Titus.

ITEMS 34 TO 38

This section presents evidence from extra-canonical works, numismatics, and the Koran to support various arguments related to early Christianity and the Jewish revolt against Rome. The Epistle of Barnabas, written by Barnabas the Cyprian after 70 AD, was accepted as genuine by early church fathers and speaks of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple. Simon Magus, an arch-heretic, preceded Peter and not the other way round, according to the theological principle that darkness always precedes light. Clement of Alexandria asserts that Peter did not preach to Gentiles until twelve years after preaching to Jews. A Muratorian fragment states that Jesus was born in 9 AD, baptized in 46 AD, and died in 58 AD, and his ministry lasted twelve years. The phrase "for the redemption of Jerusalem," a catch cry during the Jewish revolt, appears in the gospel of Luke and on a coin minted in Gamala in 66 AD. The Koran depicts the birth of Jesus under a date palm, and coins minted in 71 AD depict a date palm next to a disconsolate woman with the additional detail of a river on the coin also mentioned in the Koranic account.

Coins were used to settle questions of doctrine, as illustrated by Matthew's use of the Roman denarius in teaching about paying taxes.

ITEMS 39 TO 45

This section discusses various items of evidence regarding the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. The first piece of evidence comes from the Barcelona Disputation of 1263, in which a Christian disputant argued that the Talmud stated that the Messiah had already come, citing an Aggadic text from the Midrash of Lamentations. Another Aggadic text mentioned in the *Vikuah* of Nahmanides suggests that Jesus is invisibly present in Rome until he causes its ruin, as an act of revenge for the Roman treatment of the Jews and the destruction of Jerusalem. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* links the coming of Jesus and Christianity with the destruction of Israel, stating that Christianity caused the Jews to be slain by the sword, their remnants to be scattered and humbled, the Torah to be altered, and the majority of the world to err and serve a god other than the Lord. The section also discusses evidence from Roman historians, such as Suetonius, who records fervent Messianic expectations during the reign of Vespasian. A fragment which could be authored by Tacitus suggests that the emergence of Rabbinical Judaism and Christianity were linked to the same event, the destruction of the Temple. Finally, the author discusses Paul's disavowal of the Jewish custom of circumcision and his siding with the Romans under Vespasian, Titus, and Domitian, creating a theologically acceptable way for his Gentile followers to avoid paying the poll tax.

ITEMS 46 TO 56

This section discusses various connections between early Christianity and events in the Roman empire. According to Josephus, Ananus, the high priest, predicted the emergence of a new and better religion with Roman

sensibilities in 69 CE. Paul's instruction to pray for kings and those in authority in 1 Timothy 2 echoes Josephus's statement in his history of the Jewish Wars, where he stressed the importance of respecting the authority of Caesar to avoid another war. There is no mention of Paul or any other Christians in Josephus's histories. (This point is discussed elsewhere in the Appendix.)

The author also draws parallels between the father-son motif in Christianity and the partnership between Vespasian and Titus, who celebrated their victory over the Jews with a triumphal entry into Rome. The author provides examples where the son basks in the glory of the father, and the son hands out punishments and blessings. The splendid appearance of Vespasian and his two sons, Titus and Domitian, acts as a parallel to Jesus's proclamation of the Holy Trinity.

The author argues that Paul's attitude toward the Mosaic Law was shaped by the events of 66-70, during which the Jews insisted on keeping the letter of the Law. Paul believed that God had "abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances" through the sacrifice of Jesus.

The writer argues that the emperor Domitian's abhorrence for the shedding of blood and his intention to publish a proclamation to forbid the sacrifice of oxen coincides with the new religion's tenet that Jesus' death put an end to the Temple sacrifices. The author further argues that the destruction of the Temple left a prophetic vacuum that needed to be filled, and the theological void was filled by Jesus. The writer also suggests that the term used for the new religion, "the Way" gained currency in the aftermath of the War as it was linked to key prophecies that cited Jerusalem.

COMMON OBJECTIONS

Josephus

The authenticity of the passages in Flavius Josephus's *Antiquities of the Jews* that mention Jesus and James as historical figures has long been a matter of debate among scholars. While some scholars have argued that these passages support the existence of Jesus and James as historical figures, others have claimed that they are later Christian interpolations. This section examines the objections to the authenticity of these passages, including the lack of mention of the passages in the works of earlier church fathers such as Irenaeus, the questionable reliability of Eusebius as a source, and the inconsistencies in the language and placement of the passages within Josephus's narrative. The text concludes that the Jesus passage is a Christian interpolation, and that the James passage, which refers to the brother of Jesus who was called Christ, is likely a later scribal addition.

Tacitus

The author discusses the historical accuracy of Tacitus' *Annals*, specifically regarding a passage linking Nero, the Roman fire of 64 CE, and Christians. While the passage has been used as evidence supporting the founding myth of Christianity, a closer examination reveals issues with this assessment. Tacitus wrote some 56 years after the event and his work covers only a portion of the period in question. Fires in ancient Rome were common, and there is no record of the fire during the reign of Claudius being blamed on Christians. Tacitus mentions that the fire could have been caused accidentally and that Nero himself was absent when it started. Conspiracy theories often arise following major disasters and the popular obsession with Nero, which continues to this day, led to the blame being placed on him for the fire.

While Nero was widely despised, this narrative does not receive support from Christian sources, including the Acts of the Apostles, the Epistle of Barnabas, Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr, and Irenaeus. None of these writers mention Nero's persecution of Christians. Additionally, Josephus, who defends Nero's character, does not mention the incident, and Suetonius, who repeats the rumor of Nero being responsible for the fire, fails to mention Christians as the arsonists or accused arsonists responsible for the fire. The author argues that Tacitus may have combined two separate stories, or elements from Christian confessions about their origins and popular rumors. He concludes that Tacitus was motivated to include the tale in the *Annals* to entertain his pagan readership.

Suetonius, the Brothers of the Lord and Pontius Pilate

The author discusses three topics in this section: Suetonius' mention of Christians during Nero's reign, the concept of "brothers of the Lord" in early Christianity, and Pontius Pilate's mention in the New Testament. The passage from Suetonius, which describes punishment inflicted on Christians, is argued to be out of context and not reliable evidence for the existence of Christians before 70 CE. The concept of "brothers of the Lord" is examined in relation to the physical lineage of Jesus and how it was significant in early Christianity. It is suggested that the term may have originated from the strictest Essenes, who believed in non-genetic kinship. The author suggests that the "brothers of the Lord" may have been the same people as the twelve disciples listed in Matthew, and the Roman institution of the Arval Brethren was used by the early Christians as a model for the concept. Finally, the author briefly touches on the mention of Pontius Pilate in Paul's first letter to Timothy, suggesting that the passage may have been borrowed from 2 Peter (which it is agreed is spurious) noting that passages can migrate between books. An example of this phenomenon is the story of the woman

caught in adultery, which appears in John chapter 8 in our modern Bibles, but elsewhere or not at all in some other ancient manuscripts.
