

What
Helen Bond
gets
wrong
(and what she gets right)

A critique of Helen Bond's book:

The historical Jesus: A guide for the perplexed

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INTRODUCTION

The historical Jesus: A guide for the perplexed is authored by Professor Helen Bond from the University of Edinburgh.¹

As one reviewer has put it:

'Written by an expert in the historical context of the emerging Christian movement, this is a thoughtful, lucid and intelligent introduction to the historical Jesus, ideal for the new student and the general reader.'²

HELEN BOND'S BOOK

Helen Bond takes it as given that a person called Jesus existed in the first century and that he authored the religion of Christianity. In her Introduction she begins by saying, "Jesus of Nazareth was arguably *one of the most significant men* ever to have lived." Bond mentions some of the more outlandish theories about Jesus vis-à-vis the steady and sensible theories of orthodox scholars and then admits that Jesus is an "enigmatic character." The fascination with Jesus she notes is of course with *the character*, who may or may not have been a real person. Was King Arthur a real king? His endurance in the national consciousness is

¹ Professor Helen Bond (MTheol PhD) is Professor of Christian Origins, Head of the School of Divinity, The University of Edinburgh. From July 2011 to July 2018 she was Director of the Centre for the Study of Christian Origins (CSCO). Accessed at <https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/professor-helen-bond>

² Mark S. Goodacre, Duke University, USA accessed at <https://www.bloomsbury.com/au/the-historical-jesus-a-guide-for-the-perplexed-9780567125101/>

impressive, but it would be difficult to find a modern historian who claims he actually existed.

Bond says "Most people in the Western world, even those with no particular Christian commitment, find it almost impossible to escape the legacy of Jesus." But is this the legacy of Jesus that we see or rather the legacy of the religion of Christianity. Every major religion has a legacy.

As an example of the legacy of Christianity, Bond names the sixth century introduction of BC (Before Christ) and AD (Anno Domini) into the Julian calendar. This innovation was supposed to be based on the date of Jesus' birth or incarnation but as Bond admits in Chapter Four of her book, there is no agreement in the gospels as to the date or circumstances of Jesus' birth. The gospels of Mark and John, and the letters of the apostles are completely silent on the issue.³ Does Easter and Christmas prove Jesus lived? Well hardly.

The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is cited as evidence of superior ethical teachings, but as I have shown in my book *On Christian Origins* at least twenty-four of the teachings elucidated in the gospels can be found in the works of the Roman statesman/philosopher Cicero. Cicero preceded the New Testament writers by at least a hundred years.⁴ The sayings imputed to Jesus were anything but original.⁵

Helen Bond makes it crystal clear that she believes Jesus was a historical person — "a man who lived at a definite time (the early first

³ THJ p.67-8. The version of the story recorded in the Koran is clearly based on one of the Judea Capta series of coins issued in the year 71. OCO p.257ff

⁴ Ibid p.192ff, p.319.

⁵ Ibid p.191. The Sermon on the Mount.

century C.E.) in a definite place (Galilee)."⁶ She then concludes that Christianity is grounded "in a historical person" and that "historical research can help to bring the human Jesus to life." She says she will describe the places and kinds of people who existed in the first century and this apparently will achieve her aim. I wonder whether a description of sixth century Britain is all that is required to bring the human King Arthur to life.

Did Jesus rise from the dead as the gospels claim? Bond is hesitant here and merely states this as a first century belief. Now Bond divides Jesus into two parts. There is "the 'historical Jesus' (the man who breathed the air of first-century Galilee) and the 'Christ of Faith' (the risen Lord as he was remembered by the Church)." This is a handy way to keep the believable bits as recorded by the gospels and discard what is now classified by academics as myth — she calls it "speculation", that accreted around the actual man. Rightly, Bond states that the gospels were not written until the late first century,⁷ some forty years after the reputed career of this person ended.

But having opened Pandora's box to the possibility, indeed likelihood that stories around Jesus are Christian "speculation," where to draw the line? We can logically proceed along that path until there is nothing left. Bond sees the problem and quickly slams on the brakes. "Of course, we cannot drive too firm a wedge between the two," she insists, without saying why.

Bond talks about the problem of doing history in general and then admits that "a 'full portrait' of Jesus is beyond our grasp." She goes on

⁶ THJ p.2.

⁷ THJ p.2.

to make the bold and unprovable claim that details of his first 30 years *are now lost*.⁸ A more likely explanation is that in an age when books were expensive the early Christians would have regarded such details as irrelevant to the core tenets of their religion, and simply left them out of the story for the sake of brevity. This seems to be what Bond is saying in Chapter Four⁹. But one can legitimately wonder why Matthew and Luke were so unconcerned with truth, if as Bond claims by the time they were writing little was known or remembered about the man. Either there were records and they were lost presumably before the gospels were written or they were never there in the first place. It seems to me more likely that the records were never there in the first place and the tales were simply invented later in the century for polemical purposes and to shore up the faith of incipient disciples.

While bemoaning the fact that contemporary historians said little or nothing about Jesus (or Christians) Bond claims that "we should not expect a first-century peasant to have left much of a mark in contemporary history."¹⁰ Now this statement has a ring of truth and would be true if we were discussing an *insignificant* individual who led an *insignificant* life but Bond has already stated that Jesus was "one of the most significant men ever to have lived." Clearly, she cannot have it both ways.

To quote from Chapter One of my book *On Christian Origins*,

The problem with the popular hypothesis of Christian origins is that, leaving aside certain religious documents,

⁸ Ibid p.3, 68.

⁹ Ibid p.68.

¹⁰ Ibid p.4.

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 79¹¹ that we find unequivocal evidence for the existence of Christians; that is people who believed that there had been a divine prophet called Jesus. 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.¹²

The reason first century sources said nothing about Jesus or Christians is not that Jesus was an insipid peasant who attracted insipid followers but that in the period under consideration, the first two thirds of the century, there was no Jesus and there was no Christian religion.

In Chapter One Bond attempts to summarize the 200 odd years of biblical scholarship which has been as she says, "in quest of the

¹¹ Graffiti found at Pompeii. See OCO p.16ff.

¹² OCO p.9.

historical Jesus." The first scholar Bond cites is the 18th century German philosopher Reimarus, who lived in an era which did not encourage views inimical to the sovereignty of Christianity to be aired publicly. In 1697 a twenty-year old Scottish student from Edinburgh had been hanged for blasphemy. Perhaps with this incident in mind, Reimarus kept back his most critical work until after his death.

According to Bond the gist of Reimarus' thesis is as follows:

Reimarus argued that Jesus was a political claimant who hoped to be made king, but in the end his hopes were frustrated and he died on a Roman cross. The disciples, however, had invested everything in him and, in an attempt to obtain power and worldly esteem, stole the body from the tomb, concocted the story of a resurrection, and transformed Jesus into a universal saviour who would return in glory.¹³

In short, according to Reimarus, the religion of Christianity was and is a fraud.

It is instructive to quote Reimarus himself.

First, it should be known that the Jews themselves had two different systems of their Messiah. Most of them, indeed, expected in such a person a worldly sovereign, who should release them from slavery, and make other nations submissive to them. In this system there was nothing but splendour and glory, no previous suffering, no return; the long-wished-for kingdom was to begin immediately upon

¹³ THJ p. 8.

the coming of the Messiah. However, there were some few others who said their Messiah would come twice, and each time after quite a different manner. The first time he would appear in misery, and would suffer and die. The second time he would come in the clouds of Heaven, and receive unlimited power. The Jew Trypho in Justin Martyr acknowledges this twofold future of the Messiah. It is to be found in the Talmud and also in other Jewish writings. . . The Jews, at the time of their bondage, had indeed tried so hard to strengthen the sweet hope they entertained of a deliverer, by so many Scripture passages, that, with the assistance of pharisaic allegories, they found their Messiah in countless sayings, and in almost all directions. For this reason, the passages, which in themselves contained no such allusion, ran so contrary to one another that in order to make them all rhyme together the Jews could help themselves in no other way than by imagining a twofold Messiah.¹⁴

Reimarus was close to the truth, when he insisted that the failure of the Messiah, the one viewed as the political saviour, gave rise to the religion.¹⁵ He is also astute when he observes that the Jewish holy writings were used to explain the dual nature of the Messianic figure. The mistake Reimarus (and Bond) makes is to place too much credence on the gospel accounts, and to ignore the main event which gave rise to the religion — the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple

¹⁴ Reimarus & Voysey, 1879, p.48.

¹⁵ THJ p.12. Schweitzer also saw Jesus as a failed Jewish prophet.

in the year 70. It was then quite obviously that the political Messiah failed to appear to save the Jews from the Romans. It wasn't necessary for a real person to have come and preached the idea, only the belief that such a person had been there, had suffered anonymously and now was gone, would have been sufficient.¹⁶ It has been observed that failed prophecies, no matter how absurd, strengthen belief. Note for example the work of Festinger in his research of doomsday flying saucer cults.¹⁷ In the introduction to his book *When Prophecy fails*, Festinger states,

We have all experienced the futility of trying to change a strong conviction, especially if the convinced person has some investment in his belief. We are familiar with the variety of ingenious defenses with which people protect their convictions, managing to keep them unscathed through the most devastating attacks.¹⁸

Such a belief, in which the Jews were highly invested, would have existed in the year 70, and also been disappointed at that time. To accept that the Messiah had come despite no evidence of such a visitation would have seemed perfectly logical, at least to some zealous Jews.

¹⁶ OCO, p. 110ff.

¹⁷ Ibid p.126.

¹⁸ Festinger, p.3.

In what order were the synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) written? Bond favours the 'Two Document Hypothesis.'

Mark, . . . was the first Gospel to be written and . . . served as a major source for both Matthew and Luke (hence, the presence of passages where all three Gospels are virtually identical). But the two later evangelists had also used another written source known as Q (the first letter of *Quelle*, the German word for 'source'), which explains why sometimes these two Gospels are in close agreement.¹⁹

It is noteworthy that no physical evidence of Q has ever been found; its existence is surmised from literary analysis alone. Bond ignores the work done by Farmer²⁰ and Powell²¹ which show clearly that Matthew was the first gospel written, followed by Luke, then Mark. This view may be unpopular, but a close comparison of the texts shows that this is indeed the right order.²² One of Mark's aims was to harmonize and epitomise Matthew and Luke. What was impossible to harmonize he has omitted.²³

Bond finds the idea that Jesus may never have existed "disturbing" and names Arthur Drews as a key proponent. She doesn't present any of the arguments for this position and quickly moves onto an even more

¹⁹ THJ p.10.

²⁰ Farmer, 1990, pp. 558ff.

²¹ Powell, 1994.

²² OCO p.165ff, p.195ff. This was also the opinion of the ancients. A brief exercise should be enough to convince anyone. Compare the story of the Gerasene demoniac in Matthew and Mark. Mark's version is clearly an elaboration of and improvement upon the story told in Matthew.

²³ Ibid p.165ff. Matthew was the source of the other gospels and it was written by Jewish Christians in Rome. It was extensively edited and consequently adopted for use by the Gentile church.

disturbing development from the 20th century, the appropriation of Jesus as Aryan by Nazi ideologues.²⁴

Bond correctly identifies an important feature of modern research into Christian origins, the interdisciplinary approach, which draws "on the social sciences, such as cultural anthropology or sociology."²⁵ This is my approach and it has been the most fruitful.

There is no agreement amongst modern scholars as to what Jesus was. We have scholars who claim he was a magician, a charismatic healer and exorcist, a prophet, a rabbi, a Pharisee, a wisdom teacher preaching a radical egalitarianism, a social revolutionary, a well-educated Jewish carpenter, even a Cynic philosopher. Bond admits that "the differences between them are considerable," and laments that, "This very diversity has led some to question the whole attempt to uncover the historical Jesus."²⁶

What this shows to me is that in 200 years the task to solve conclusively the problem of Christian origins, has not been achieved. The main stumbling block has been in my view the inordinate amount of credence given to the religious writings of the Christians, the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles.

In this chapter Bond aims to present herself as an impartial observer of the scholarship, but her selection is partial. She either doesn't know

²⁴ THJ p.15.

²⁵ Ibid p.21.

²⁶ Ibid p.22.

about the work of the nineteenth century rationalists or has decided to ignore them. One in particular deserves much more attention — the English metaphysician and philosopher Thomas Whittaker (1856 – 1935).²⁷

In 1904 Whittaker published *The Origins of Christianity*, in which he posed the question, "When did the cult first draw to itself a new myth in a concrete form?" This indeed is the crucial question. And Whittaker replies,

The answer I propose is, that it was not until after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. That great crisis unloosed ideas which had long been preparing. We know both from Josephus and from Tacitus that prodigies were reported to have taken place before the fall of the Temple. A voice louder than human was heard proclaiming the departure of "the gods." But few, says Tacitus, interpreted this in the sense of fear: most were persuaded that it was contained in the ancient scriptures of the priests that at that time the East should wax strong, and that men going forth from Judaea should possess the world. . . Thus it seems probable that, just after the catastrophe of the year 70, those Jews or semi-Jews who for any reason were discontented with the hierarchy and the Rabbis would show quite exceptional activity. For they too were penetrated with the national hopes, and the accepted leaders of the people had failed. Let a rumour go forth that

²⁷ Whittaker is probably more known now for *The neo-Platonists: A study in the history of Hellenism*. Cambridge University Press. 2016 being the latest reprint.

the Messiah who was to suffer, and then to triumph, had already appeared and undergone that which was foretold by the prophets. Would not this gain instant credence with many? And here is such basis as may be found for a myth.

This thesis, ignored by Helen Bond and biblical scholars in general, is well supported by the findings of sociologists like Festinger as already mentioned, and as I have published in my book *On Christian Origins* by more than fifty items of evidence from multiple sources.

In Chapter Two Bond is correct when she states that, ". . . Jesus left no first-hand trace in the historical record: no letters, no diaries, no inscriptions. All reconstructions, therefore, have to depend on literary sources written by others."²⁸

But did Jesus leave no trace? Eusebius, the fourth century Bishop of Caesarea reproduced in his major work on Church history, letters written by the king of Edessa to Jesus and from Jesus to the king. The overwhelming consensus is that these texts are late third century forgeries probably written to enhance the claims of Christians in the city of Edessa. However, Eusebius living at the same time as these forgeries were produced, declared that he obtained the record of the correspondence from ancient public registers which he says, "we have literally translated from the Syriac language."²⁹ This example shows the willingness of Christians to engage in sophisticated pious fraud. Many

²⁸ THJ p.37.

²⁹ OCO p.291.

other examples could be cited: forged letters of Pilate to Tiberius,³⁰ forged correspondence between Paul and Seneca,³¹ and a forged letter between Mary and the city of Messina.³² The popular second century book called *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* was even denounced by the early Church scholar Tertullian as a fabrication.³³ Bond admits that these are examples of *apocryphal writings*³⁴, while accepting on face value the veracity of the gospels. This is special pleading.

Bond writes, "It can come as something of a surprise to realise that no Roman author seems to have taken much notice of Jesus until the early second century." But this is only surprising if one is backing the wrong thesis. It is not surprising if one accepts the thesis that Christians did not exist in the first century until after the year 70.

Bond cites Tacitus who writing about the year 120 mentions Jesus crucified under Pontius Pilate but admits that ". . . maybe he [Tacitus] picked up this rather basic piece of information from Christian preachers in Rome." The source of his information could also have been Jews, who had had disputes with Christians.³⁵

But Bond is mistaken in claiming that Tacitus is the earliest reference. The first pagan source is not Tacitus but Pliny the Younger.³⁶ But there was recorded some graffiti in Pompeii that predates both sources. This graffiti provides evidence for the existence of Christians on the Italian

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid p.20.

³² Ibid p.13.

³³ Ibid p.201ff.

³⁴ THJ p.42.

³⁵ OCO p.298ff.

³⁶ Ibid p.17ff.

peninsula in 79 CE, the year of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.³⁷ Bond seems unaware of this evidence.

Bond then directs our attention to Jewish sources, and here she also draws a blank.

Strangely, perhaps, non-Christian Jewish sources also turn out to have little to say about Jesus. Contrary to much popular belief, there are no references to him in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Rabbinic writings, too, contain only a handful of highly negative references to Jesus and his family, most dating to the fourth century or later.³⁸

But Bond leaves out the Jewish sources that say that Jesus came in the year 70. She would be aware that theological disputations between Christians and Jews took place in the Middle Ages and there are detailed records of these. The Barcelona Disputation of 1263 before King James of Aragon was recorded by Nahmanides, one of the greatest figures in the history of Jewish learning, and Jewish spokesman at the disputation. He reports as follows,

Fray Paul [the Christian disputant] now resumed and argued that it is stated in the Talmud that the Messiah has already come. He cited the Aggadah in the Midrash of Lamentations [II: 57]: A certain man was ploughing and his cow lowed. An Arab passed by and said to him, "Jew, Jew, untie your cow, untie your plough, untie your coulter, for the Temple has been destroyed." He untied his cow, he

³⁷ Ibid p.16ff

³⁸ THJ p.39.

untied his plough, he untied his coulter. The cow lowed a second time. The Arab said to him, "Tie up your cow, tie up your plough, tie up your coulter, for your Messiah has been born."³⁹

More details concerning these legends can be found in Part 2 of my book *On Christian Origins*.

Bond then discusses the famous passage in Josephus which allegedly proves the Christian myth of origins. I discuss this passage at length in Appendix 2 of my book.⁴⁰ Bond thinks *part* of the passage is a Christian interpolation. I think it *all* is. I agree with her summary finding.

By about 324 CE, however, Eusebius knew the passage as we have it, suggesting that it was altered sometime around 300 CE. Unfortunately, our earliest manuscripts of Josephus date to the eleventh century, and since his works were preserved exclusively by Christians (Jews regarded him as a traitor), there is little chance of ever finding an 'untampered' manuscript.

As we see evidence of *addition* by Christians to the famous works of Josephus, then we just as likely have had *subtraction*. It is therefore likely that especially in Josephus' later work, *Antiquities of the Jews*, published c. 94AD, he *did* talk about Christians but not in the way Christians approved. When it came time to make a new manuscript of his work, as these decayed with time and use, the Christian scribes simply omitted to copy those passages which offended them.

³⁹ OCO p.260ff.

⁴⁰ Ibid p.290ff. See Appendix for a full quotation of this passage.

Bond now discusses non-canonical sources, that is texts that didn't make it into the collection we now know as the New Testament. Bond admits the forgery known as the *Acts of Pilate*. Regarding the interesting but novelistic *Gospel of Peter* she says, "The majority of scholars, . . . continue to regard the *Gospel of Peter* as a later work, largely inspired by the canonical Gospels, with no historical significance."⁴¹

The *Gospel of Thomas* gets the same treatment from Bond and I think she correctly sums it up as follows.

The second-century compilers of *Gospel of Thomas*, facing the lack of fulfilment of these sayings [about the end time], readily de-eschatologized Jesus' teaching, focussing on the present reality of the Kingdom, and moving in a gnostic or mystical direction. The *Gospel of Thomas*, then, though possibly containing one or two older forms of Jesus' sayings, is not to be regarded as a major source for the life of Jesus, still less a Jesus radically different from that of the synoptic Gospels.⁴²

As already mentioned, there were many other spurious gospels produced, either made from whole cloth or based on earlier writings.

Bond claims without providing any evidence that "The earliest sections of the New Testament are the letters of Paul, dating to the 50s CE." She

⁴¹ THJ p. 44.

⁴² THJ p. 46.

accepts, as I do, that Galatians is to be trusted where Paul talks about meeting the leaders of the Jerusalem Church on two occasions (Gal 1.18-2.10), but she has the dating wrong.

She says that "Paul has little to say regarding Jesus' earthly life,"⁴³ and in this she is correct. But Paul's eschatology is completely different from that of "Jesus" recorded in the gospels. (See 2 Thessalonians 2:1-12) Paul makes no mention of the destruction of Jerusalem or the Temple in his end time scenario; in fact he alludes to it as a past event.⁴⁴ Bond correctly sums up Paul's teaching as primarily to do with the cross and Resurrection. She says ". . . such was his stress on the atoning significance of the cross that details of Jesus' life simply paled into insignificance." Bond ignores the very public dispute between the Jewish Law abiding Christians and those championed by Paul who abrogated the Law, as if Gentile Christianity was the only game in town.

Bond is correct when she dates Matthew and Luke to 80-90 CE, but she is wrong about Mark. Biblical scholars are right in dismissing the *Gospel of John* as unhistorical.⁴⁵

Regarding the Synoptic gospels Bond says,

They were not written by eye-witnesses, nor are they *primarily* historical accounts of the life of Jesus (though they are presented in biographical form). Instead, they are declarations of the true identity of Jesus as Christ and Son

⁴³ Ibid p.48.

⁴⁴ OCO p.235.

⁴⁵ THJ p. 49.

of God, written with the intention of encouraging or strengthening the faith of their earliest readers.

Bond is right but there can be no dispute that the gospels were intended to be read as true history. She is right when she says they have a close literary relationship.

The Gospels reflect the impact Jesus made on his earliest followers, and to a large extent this impact *is* the historical Jesus, or as close as we are ever likely to get to him. While we may be able to disentangle some of the clearly later elements in the Gospels (post-Easter theology, pastoral concerns reflecting the later church and so on), we will never be able to present an uninterpreted Jesus, completely cut free from the hopes and dreams of those who followed him.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

In numerous ways Helen Bond gets it wrong. The rest of her book repeats the errors found in the beginning of the book and it would be tedious to repeat the same counter arguments. Her theory of Christian origins is built on sand.

Whittaker was right. The religion of Christianity was instituted as an unintended consequence of the Roman Jewish War of 66 to 70 CE. Jesus is a literary character whose existence was inferred from traumatic events and the Jews' holy books. The gospels are attempts

⁴⁶ Ibid p.52.

to explain where the religion came from. The New Testament gospels are not uniquely true or even half true. They are part of a larger set of pious forgeries which were created by the early Christians to shore up faith and persuade pagans of the truthfulness of their claims.

Paul's letters are genuine, but they were written after the year 70. Jerome was entirely correct when he said,

Paul, formerly called Saul, an apostle outside the number of the twelve apostles, was of the tribe of Benjamin and the town of Giscalis in Judea. When this was taken by the Romans [in the year 67] he removed with his parents to Tarsus in Cilicia.⁴⁷

A wise man once said,

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!

But he was not Jesus.

⁴⁷ OCO p.225.

APPENDIX

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 18.3.3.

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