

# Revisiting the Origins of Christianity: A Proposed Shift in Chronology and the Role of Messianic Rumors Post-Temple Destruction

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## ABSTRACT

It is commonly held that Christianity arose during the reign of Tiberius, around the year 30 CE. This paper proposes that the religion emerged some forty years later, initiated by a rumor that the Messiah had appeared in Judea about the time the Temple in Jerusalem was razed by the Romans. Arguments from analogy as well as theology are presented to show that this is the most likely explanation for the origins of the cult given our understanding of how religions arise and the historical records available to us. In order to shed some light on this question, modern examples of significant rumors and cults are examined. The ancient historians Tacitus and Josephus are discussed in detail to show why they either substituted another narrative or omitted any reference to this phenomenon altogether. Finally other instances of similar phenomena arising in a Jewish context are examined, showing that given the appropriate conditions what has happened before can happen again.

## KEYWORDS

Rumor, sociology, Tacitus, Josephus, Christian origins

## INTRODUCTION

Tradition has it that Christianity arose during the reign of Tiberius from the preachments of a Jewish miracle worker and sage named Jesus but the evidence for this contention rests primarily on texts produced by the early Christian movement itself — documents whose historical objectivity warrants careful scrutiny given their evangelical intent. A notable critic of the standard explanation, Bruno Bauer (1809-1882)

argued that Christianity emerged from a synthesis of Judaism and ancient philosophy and the movement retrospectively created the figure of Christ as its symbolic founder (Van Voorst, 2000, p.9). Thomas Whittaker (1904, p.29) suggested that it arose as a consequence of the first Roman-Jewish War which provided the necessary social and religious impetus for its invention. Combining the insights of Bauer and Whittaker, this paper contends that Christianity began as a socio-religious movement about the year 70 as a response to the dissolution of the Temple cult at the hands of the Romans. Although there is no doubt that there were outstanding figures such as the apostle Paul who organized the movement and set it on a firm intellectual footing, under the scenario proposed here a personal founder such as Jesus as described in the gospels is made redundant. The paucity of evidence for Christians in the middle of the first century is taken as an absence; the religion, however named, did not exist at that time. Furthermore, it is proposed that the movement did not evolve slowly but rather bolted from the starting blocks, as we see for example in Acts 6:7, "The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith;" but this happened after 70 CE and not before that date.

## A MODERN APPARITION

About one hundred years ago — not a long time judged by the great span of human history, a war posthumously declared to be the *Great War* broke out on the European continent. In August 1914, about a month after hostilities began, British forces though vastly outnumbered and outgunned held their positions (albeit temporarily) against German troops at the crucial Battle of Mons. Though fully explicable in military terms this turn of events was put down to divine favor. Angels, it was afterwards claimed, had been seen in the sky during the heat of battle.

The source of this rumor can be traced to an article entitled "The Bowmen" which appeared in *The Evening News* of September 29th of the same year. The author was a Welsh novelist named Arthur Machen.

It was in *The Weekly Dispatch* that I saw the awful account of the retreat from Mons. I no longer recollect the details; but I have not forgotten the impression that was then made on my mind. I seemed to see a furnace of torment and death and agony and terror seven times heated, and in the midst of the burning was the British Army. In the midst of the flame, consumed by it and yet aureoled in it, scattered like ashes and yet triumphant, martyred and forever glorious. So I saw our men with a shining about them, so I took these thoughts with me to church, and I am sorry to say, was making up a story in my head while the deacon was singing the Gospel. (Machen, 1915, pp. 3-4)

Machen was unprepared for the success which his short story enjoyed. His aim had been to entertain the public, but so hungry were his readership for comfort and hope in that desperate age that they *accepted his story as fact*. Even some clergymen, who one might assume to have been adept at divining truth from falsehood, were taken in by the unintentional ruse. And the story persisted. Some twelve months later a Vicar who had just returned home from the Front was interviewed by *The Observer*. He was asked why he believed the rumors and he replied as follows:

The evidence, he says, though not always direct, was remarkably cumulative, and came through channels which were entitled to respect. Supernatural angel forms had, he believed been seen. He was reminded of one of the Biblical prophecies that at the time of a great crisis on the earth "great signs shall there be from Heaven." [Luke 21:25] A lady, whose name and address he holds, while nursing in a convalescent hospital, was told by a patient that at a critical period in the retreat from Mons they saw an angel with outstretched wings, like a luminous cloud, between the advancing Germans and themselves. And at that moment the onslaught of the Germans slackened. Unable to credit the story, she was discussing later with a group of

officers, when a colonel looked up and said: “Young lady, the thing happened. You need not be incredulous. I saw it myself.”<sup>1</sup>

Whether truthful or not Machen’s tale was regarded as *useful*. One woman signing herself *A Daughter of the Church* wrote to the Anglican priest and skeptic Hensley Henson as follows:

If our dear lads who are giving their lives for England can visualize our Saviour and His angels come to help and comfort them in that hell of carnage . . . who shall be so cruel, CRUEL, as to tell them they are wrong? (Wilkinson, 1978, p.194)

## ROMAN RUMORS

That this human tendency to invent and put faith in comforting falsehoods is neither modern nor an aberration but indeed ancient and commonplace we can glean from a maxim penned during the dying days of the empire by the author of the *Historia Augusta*. “... Such are the pious hopes of men, who are quick to believe when they wish the thing to come true which their hearts desire.” (*Elagabalus* 3.3) About two hundred years prior to the writing of these words the Roman historian Tacitus was describing rumors that circulated in Rome during the first century and noticed that, as we find in the case of the *Great War*, a crisis such as a war or insurrection often accompanied their propagation. The tumultuous years 68-69 CE exemplified this phenomenon. The empire was shaken by Nero's fall, the legions were restless, and Galba's advanced age necessitated choosing a successor. This volatile situation created fertile ground for rumor. Says Tacitus in one case:

Piso had hardly left the palace when a report was brought, vague and uncertain at first, that Otho had been killed in the camp. Presently, as is natural in falsehoods of great importance, some appeared who declared that they had been present and had seen the murder. Between those who rejoiced in the news and those who were indifferent to it, the story was believed. Many

thought this rumor had been invented and exaggerated by Otho's partisans who were already in the crowd and spread abroad the pleasant falsehood in order to lure Galba from his palace. (*Histories*, 1.34)

Where there is a dearth of reliable information, and information in general circulates slowly due to distance or for some other reason, people's emotional and mental equilibrium can become disturbed; their fears about personal safety and the potential loss of their property or position make them especially vulnerable. Both from a human and an historical perspective, rumor is a very important and powerful phenomenon, and might have far reaching consequences, even to the extent of bringing about a change of government. In the case of Nero, Tacitus says that he was "driven from his throne rather by messages and rumors than by arms." (*Histories*, 1.89) Shatzman after an extensive analysis of the corpus of Tacitus, concludes: "Almost every event, notably wars, is accompanied by rumors." (1974, p. 544)

Was it a war then which precipitated the rumor that the Messiah had appeared in Judea? Perhaps that which the evangelist warns us against regarding the *second* coming in Matthew 24:6 – "you will hear of wars *and rumors of wars*" (...καὶ ἀκοὰς πολέμων) applied in actuality to the *first* coming.

Two researchers of unusual social behavior, Bartholomew and Hassall (2015, p.290) state:

Most rumors arise spontaneously in a cauldron of uncertainty and fear that typify times of financial crisis, political turmoil, and war. The construction and circulation of rumors provides a degree of certainty which reduces tensions. Humans can deal with just about anything, but they cannot cope with uncertainty.

The authors categorize widespread societal delusions into two main types: 'social panics' and 'social enthusiasms.' The belief that the Messiah had arrived could manifest as either a 'social enthusiasm' or

'social panic,' depending on one's position in society. Those yearning for divine deliverance greeted messianic claims with jubilation, while others — particularly among the Roman ruling class — saw such proclamations as a dangerous disruption to the established order.

## TACITUS ON CHRISTIAN ORIGINS

Tacitus is the only near contemporary Roman historian who reports on the origins of Christianity and notably *does not say* that the religion was the outcome of a rumor, whether false or otherwise. What he *does* say though is instructive. His account of the origins of the movement is found embedded in a passage pertaining to the emperor Nero and the catastrophic fire of Rome which occurred in the year 64. (*Annals*, 15.44) Tacitus says that a “rumor” (L: *rumor*) that the fire was the result of an order from the emperor had arisen and to dispel the suspicion Nero singled out a new sect whom the common people called *Christians* or *Chrestiani* for collective punishment.<sup>2</sup> Tacitus further claims that the religion originated in Judea, whence the “pernicious superstition” (*exitiabilis superstitio*) after a period of quiescence had spread to the city of Rome “where all things horrible or shameful in the world collect and find a vogue.” So although the historian implies that *Christus* – crucified under Pontius Pilate, was the founder of the movement, the manner in which the religion spread appears to be similar to that of a rumor.

While Tacitus cites his sources in other passages (though not consistently), he fails to identify his source in this instance.<sup>3</sup> It is also worth noting that the historian freely acknowledges that some of his information in general came from unverified rumors. He says regarding the death of Drusus, for example that:

... I have given the version of the most numerous and trustworthy authorities; but *I am reluctant to omit a contemporary rumor*, so strong that it persists today... This commonly repeated account, *apart from the fact that it is supported by no definite authority*, may be summarily refuted... My own motive in chronicling and refuting the scandal has been to discredit by one striking

instance *the falsities of oral tradition*, and to request those into whose hands my work may have fallen *not too eagerly to accept a widely circulated and incredible tale in place of truth not corrupted into romance*. (*Annals*, 4.10ff) [my emphasis]

In another place he confesses that:

While I must hold it inconsistent with the dignity of the work I have undertaken to collect fabulous tales and to delight my readers with fictitious stories, *I cannot, however, dare to deny the truth of common tradition*.<sup>4</sup> [my emphasis]

This apology is illuminating. Tacitus in the previous passage adopts a skeptical view about unsubstantiated rumor and expects his readers, as sophisticated and rational people, to take a similar view, but as an historian he cannot ignore such material. (Shatzman, 1974, p.553) These reports form part of the *milieu* in which he is working. But if as the above examples show Tacitus as an astute historian was not averse to crediting the folklore (L: *fabulosa*) that assailed him in his *professional* setting, it stands to reason that the masses would be all the more given to accepting as truth a rumor that the Jewish Messiah had lately appeared in Judea in their *social* setting.

In the passage about Nero and the fire referenced above, Tacitus claims that the common people (L: *vulgus*) in Rome had formed a fixed (negative) attitude towards the Christians – even apparently naming them.<sup>5</sup> The Christians themselves were specifically encouraged to disclose the source of their faith taking no account of the danger.<sup>6</sup> Whether through official duties or in casual conversation, Tacitus in the passage above is most likely simply restating what in essence was the *myth of origins* of the cult, which by the time of writing (c. 120 CE) had been incorporated into the *collective consciousness* of Rome.

Pliny the Younger, appointed governor of Pontus and Bithynia by the emperor Trajan says in one of his letters (10.96) that he had heard of Christians but was unclear about how to deal with them. Pliny is silent

regarding their origins only remarking that they were “accustomed to meet on a fixed day before dawn and sing responsively a hymn to Christ as to a god.” After interrogating some members of a congregation he says that he found nothing “other than a debased and boundless superstition.” Pliny was a close friend of Tacitus suggesting revisions to the text of one of his books. (Letter 7.20) We do not possess any records of conversations that might have ensued between the two men upon the subject of the incipient movement, however it seems that Pliny reached the same general conclusions regarding the Christians as his friend. Both men it seems craved literary immortality and Pliny warns his friend not to stretch the bounds of veracity to achieve this end.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps in the case of Nero and the Christians, Tacitus succumbed to the temptation to calumniate the new sect without looking into it too closely. Says David Hume (1748, *Of Miracles*):

In the infancy of new religions, the wise and learned commonly esteem the matter too inconsiderable to deserve their attention or regard. And when afterwards they would willingly detect the cheat, in order to undeceive the deluded multitude, the season is now past, and the records and witnesses, which might clear up the matter, have perished beyond recovery.

The writings of both Pliny and Tacitus reveal that during the early second century, Roman officials viewed Christianity as a dangerous movement that had the potential to undermine both Roman mores and the Roman state. Tacitus’ narrative in particular bears all the hallmarks of a literary response to a *social panic*, much like the response of Machen vis-à-vis a potential British defeat at the hands of the Germans. It should also be noted that any explanation for the origins of Christianity that showed up the faults or mistakes of the Romans would likely have been resisted. Laying the blame squarely at the feet of a certain *Christus* punished lawfully by Pontius Pilate would have been far more acceptable than connecting the cause to any action or inaction by a respected Roman military or civic leader.



## THE CRITICAL EVENT

We have discovered from Machen's literary efforts during the *Great War* and examples from the works of Tacitus that an insurrection, war or similar crisis is liable to generate rumors and/or facilitate their promulgation. Although there were several major campaigns and Roman military losses in the first century an event analogous to the *Great War* in scope and significance for Jewry (and the Romans) was without question the Roman Jewish War of 66 to 70 CE (or 73 CE if we allow for Masada). This event was certainly in the right place because we know that Christian thought was inspired by events in Judea.<sup>8</sup> It was also (if we discount the claims that are set forth in the gospels and Acts<sup>9</sup>) at the right time.<sup>10</sup>

The event of paramount import during this war was the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in the year 70. Not only was the precinct desecrated but the priesthood on the orders of Titus were executed (*Wars* 6.322). While Josephus remarks that it was set ablaze by unrestrained Roman soldiery acting against the orders of Caesar (*Wars* 6.257-259), another tradition, believed to stem from Tacitus, asserts that Titus deliberately ordered its destruction to thwart the spread of Christianity as it was believed to serve as the spiritual root of that religion.<sup>11</sup> According to Goldenberg (2006, p.193), in addition to its ritual significance, the Temple was "famous as a tourist attraction and pilgrimage site even for Gentiles, ...[it] made Jerusalem a wealthy city, while the demands of its elaborate cult created a demand for animals and agricultural products that provided constant economic stimulus for the surrounding countryside." Jerusalem was not completely razed and denuded of inhabitants as a result of the War. Josephus says that Titus spared some forty thousand of the city's inhabitants (*Wars*, 6.386) and no doubt refugees began to trickle back into the city as soon as the Roman forces withdrew. Therefore, when Paul mentions visiting the city "after three years" in Galatians 1:18-19, this could potentially be referring to the year 73 CE.

Kraemer (1995, p.51) declares that when the edifice was destroyed the Jews were left without the classical means to atone for their sins<sup>12</sup>,

a situation which opened the door to innovations and reinterpretations of Judaism. Hence we find in the Talmud:

Once, Rabban [our rabbi] Yohanan ben Zakkai, left Jerusalem, and Rabbi Yehoshua followed after him. And he saw the Holy Temple destroyed. [Rabbi Yehoshua said: Woe to us, for this is destroyed -] the place where all of Israel's sins are forgiven! [Rabbi Yohanan] said to him: My son, do not be distressed, for we have a form of atonement just like it. And what is it? Acts of kindness, as it says (Psalms 89:3), "For I desire kindness, not a well-being offering." (*Avot DeRabbi Natan* 4)

To this day *Tisha B'Av* (lit. "the ninth of Av") is an annual fast day in Judaism which commemorates the anniversary of a number of disasters in Jewish history, primarily the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians in 586 BCE and the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. The Jewish sages claim that the Messiah was born on Tisha B'Av at the very time that the Temple was destroyed (*Midrash Eichah Rabba* 1:51).<sup>13</sup> The profound impact that the demise of the Temple had on Jewish religiosity is illustrated by the use of dating from the year of the destruction on Jewish epitaphs; examples can be found on tombstones in Zoar (Wilfand, 2009, pp.516ff) and until the end of the 9th century in southern Italy (Olms, 1880, pp.435-436). Many must have reacted to the catastrophe with despair and total abandonment of Judaism. "Apostates from Judaism (aside from converts to Christianity) received little notice in antiquity from either Jewish or non-Jewish writers, but ambitious individuals are known to have turned pagan before the war, and it stands to reason that many more did so after its disastrous conclusion" (Goldenberg, 2006, p.198).

Kraemer (1995, p.51) suggests that "other Jews, probably relatively few, took the Temple's destruction as evidence of the rupture of the covenant, and turned to a new covenant, tied to the Messiah Jesus, for hope of salvation." The Christian *Christ* is described as the mediator of a new covenant in the *Epistle to the Hebrews* (9:11-15). Aitken (2015) has

dated this letter to the 70's or early 80's arguing that it should be read as a response to the victory of Vespasian and Titus in the Jewish War and in particular the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE.

The underlying theme of the gospel narrative is that the innocent, exemplified by Jesus, will in the end be vindicated and the guilty punished. God's retribution was foreshadowed in the gospels as a *vaticinium ex eventu*. (Matthew 24:1-2, Luke 21:5-6) In the mid second century Justin Martyr maintained that "these things have happened to you [Jews] in fairness and justice, for you have slain the Just One, and His prophets before Him." (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 16) Hippolytus asks, "But why, O prophet, tell us, and for what reason, was the temple made desolate? ... it was because they [the Jews] killed the Son of their benefactor" (*Contra Jud.*, 7). It is clear that this interpretation would only have made sense after the event, and therefore the notion that the Messiah had come as atonement arose or at a minimum would only have gained traction *after the physical cancellation of the previous dispensation*.

The author of the *Gospel of Matthew* is especially mindful of how events in his life of Jesus fulfilled prophecies from the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, whose theme centred on an earlier destruction of the Temple. A Jew living in the latter half of the first century could easily be forgiven for interpreting the prophecies of Jeremiah and other Jewish prophets as being fulfilled *in their own day* as they saw the Romans threaten and then accomplish the destruction of Jerusalem and the holy place.

An ancient letter has been found which shows that the Jewish disaster was integrated into the pagan worldview. We cannot say how promptly but at least by the late second century and certainly post 70 CE (Van Voorst, 2000, p.56). The author of this letter was a Stoic philosopher named Mara bar Serapion. In this letter Mara speaks of Jesus as the "wise king" of the Jews, whose killing God avenged by their dispersion and desolation and the loss of their kingdom. (One is reminded of the words of John 11:47-48. "...If we let him [Jesus] go on like this, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy

place and our nation.”) Reading Mara literally indicates that there was *no delay* in punishing the Jews as the author says that it occurred “at that very time.”

## SOCIOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sociology can aid us in understanding how religious ideas can emerge from situations of heightened anxiety and a search for meaning. The immediate post-World War II era witnessed considerable tension between East and West. Apart from the perceived threat posed by communism, Western society was presented with the possibility that for the first time in history, a global atomic war could break out. This set the scene for the emergence of several UFO cults (Bartholomew & Howard, 1998, Kindle Loc 1988). It is noteworthy that individuals claiming contact with extraterrestrials have been evaluated for psychiatric disorders and have been found to be remarkably devoid of a history of mental illness. However, in about 80% of cases, major characteristics of the fantasy-prone personality (FPP) type have been identified. “While functioning as normal, healthy adults, FPPs experience rich fantasy lives, scoring dramatically higher (relative to control groups) on such characteristics as hypnotic susceptibility, psychic ability, healing, out-of-body experiences, religious visions, and apparitional experiences” (Bartholomew & Howard, 1998, Kindle Loc 2701). Comparable to the behaviors displayed by UFO contactees, the apostle Paul states that he received a special revelation from the heavenly Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12), saw the risen Lord (1 Corinthians 15:8) and claims that on one occasion he “was caught up into paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Corinthians 12:1-4). The apostle from these passages thereby appears to have exhibited those characteristics which are evidence of the fantasy-prone personality.

One group was studied comprehensively by the sociologist Leon Festinger. When the divine visitor, the *spaceman*, failed to appear on a stated date, the belief arose spontaneously that *another miracle* had occurred; *only this miracle was missed*. The dramatic aspect of the

prophecy, the visitation by the *spaceman* had absorbed the believers' full attention and so they inadvertently missed a miracle that had occurred right under their noses (Festinger, 1956, p.164). By analogy the first century *spaceman*, the political Messiah did not appear as anticipated in 70 CE. The besieged inhabitants of the city, naturally preoccupied with matters of survival were defeated and no help came in the form of a political Messiah. But the Scriptures do not lie (Titus 1:2). God had made promises to Abraham (Romans 4:1-25) and David (Matthew 22:41-45), promises which He was bound to honour. He could not, according to the ancient creed, completely cast aside his people (Romans 9:1-5, 19-33, 11:1-32). As typically happens with failed religious prophecies, the core of the prophecy was not abandoned. "Yet in so far as there existed a small community that believed prophecy had been fulfilled their dissonance had been overcome."<sup>14</sup>

The Messiah *did come*, it was alleged by the early Christians – just not in the way expected. Henceforth a search was made of the holy books to explain the misunderstanding. So we find in one apocryphal text:

But we, unrolling the books of the prophets which we possess, who name Jesus Christ, partly in parables, partly in enigmas, partly expressly and in so many words, find His coming and death, and cross, and all the rest of the tortures which the Jews inflicted on Him, and His resurrection and assumption to heaven ... we have believed in God in consequence of what is written respecting Him. (*Clement of Alexandria, Stromata* 6.15)

At his first appearing, they argued, the Christ came humbly; he was not recognized – “taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness” (Philippians 2:5-11). Then after performing his salvific work (in obedience to his Father) he went back to the heavens, whence he is due to return to complete his foreordained and long-awaited political mission. There were no human witnesses to these events, the only proof was contained in post-resurrection appearances (1 Corinthians 15:3-8) but believing

this, Paul says, will save you (Romans 10:9). The correct way to view the new faith was as a mystery now revealed and made plain by a proper interpretation of the prophetic writings (Romans 16:25-26).

All the necessary factors were in place in the first century for the rumor of the Messiah's coming to take hold in Rome. The overthrow of the Jews and the destruction of their Temple were made plain by the magnificent triumph staged by Vespasian and his sons through the streets of Rome; so too the imperial coinage issued shortly after the year 70 served as a continual reminder of the historical reality of the situation. In the face of these immutable facts not only the Jews who lived in Rome but also the class of Gentile supporters of Judaism called "God fearers" must have been perplexed, partially disillusioned and sought answers from their religious mentors and their holy books. Any news however unsubstantiated that offered hope that their communal loyalty and doctrinal affiliation had not been in vain would have been eagerly attended to.

Rome features prominently in the account given by Tacitus of the progress of the religion. He says that the superstition took hold not merely in Judea, the home of "the disease" but in the capital itself. The natural bent of the populace in Rome where reliable information was scarce was to believe. Furthermore the rumor of the coming of the Messiah was something charismatic individuals could exploit, and Paul, although later than the other apostles in adopting the new faith (1 Corinthians 15:8) and in arriving at Rome, belongs to this class of self-proclaimed messengers of God. Each believed they were on the right path (1 Corinthians 1:10-12) and each believed they possessed the heaven sent version of the *evangelion* (Galatians 1:6-9).

There is a noteworthy passage in the *Clementine Homilies* which sets out how the *Christus venit* rumor could have been received in Rome:

*A certain report, taking its rise in the springtime [the east], . . . gradually grew everywhere . . . became greater and louder, saying that a certain One in Judea, beginning in the spring season, was preaching to the Jews the kingdom of the invisible*

God . . . and there was nothing which He could not do. And as time advanced, so much the greater, through the arrival of more persons, and the stronger grew—I say not now the report, but—the truth of the thing; for now at length there were meetings in various places for consultation and inquiry as to *who He might be that had appeared*, and what was His purpose... And then in the same year, in the autumn season, a certain one, standing in a public place, cried and said, “*Men of Rome, hearken. The Son of God is come in Judea*, proclaiming eternal life to all who will, if they shall live according to the counsel of the Father, who hath sent Him...” *The Clementine Homilies*, 1.6-7<sup>15</sup> [my emphasis]

The fact that the message began as hearsay would have been welcomed by those who read the ancient prophecy. “Who has believed *what we have heard*? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?” (Isaiah 53:1) This is quoted in John 12:38 as “Lord, who has believed our message (Gk: τῆ ἀκοῆ ἡμῶν), ...” The word ἀκοῆ is elsewhere translated as *rumor* at Matthew 24:6.

## JOSEPHUS

Josephus (b. 37 CE) was a high ranking Jew who commanded troops during the Roman invasion of Palestine in the year 66, notably switching sides halfway through the war. The *Wars of the Jews*, his first composition covers the period 168 BCE to 75 CE, and being dedicated to Vespasian is reckoned to have been published in Rome between the years 75 and 79 while he could have started work on it as early as the year 71 (*Against Apion*, 1.47, *Wars of the Jews*, 7.158) As the period covered in the history and the territory in question was the backdrop to the Christian narrative we would expect Josephus to have recorded some details from the life of the prominent teacher and miracle worker Jesus of Nazareth as set out in the *Gospels* or details from the life of the early church in Jerusalem as portrayed in the *Acts of the Apostles* — but there is nothing. The various philosophical groups into which the Jews had divided themselves in the first century before the War are mentioned

and discussed by Josephus but Christianity is conspicuously absent from the list.<sup>16</sup> Justus of Tiberias, a rival to Josephus also wrote a history of the Jews, his work covering the period from Moses to 100 CE. Of this work says Photius: “Justus' style is very concise and he omits a great deal that is of utmost importance. Suffering from the common fault of the Jews, to which race he belonged, he does not even mention the coming of Christ, the events of his life, or the miracles performed by Him” (*Bibliotheca*, Codex 23). It seems that not only Josephus but Jewish writers in general were notably silent about the Christ or the Christians, and one might reasonably speculate as to why.

In regards to Josephus, Bond (2015, pp.150-151) proffers the following explanation for this oversight: “... he [Josephus] would not have wanted to admit to his Roman readers that many Jews longed for a future figure who would defeat Israel’s enemies and help to establish the glorious reign of God.” However it is important to note that notwithstanding the possible reluctance of Josephus to point up the Messianic hopes of the Jews he nevertheless makes mention of the unsuccessful careers of several aspiring leaders and one of them, a certain Jonathan, the Roman military victory notwithstanding was remarkably active *after* the War. Furthermore, this man was captured, transported to Rome and investigated by the emperor himself. (*Wars* 7.437-455)

It should be noted that the Greek word for Messiah lit: *the anointed one* — Gr: Χριστός (Hebrew: *Mashiach* מָשִׁיחַ) appears 41 times in the Septuagint<sup>17</sup> and of course hundreds of times in the New Testament but not once in *Wars of the Jews*, nor indeed in any of the works of Josephus.<sup>18</sup> Why did Josephus omit this fundamental pillar (Dienstag, 1983, p.69) of Jewish dogma? Was this a reaction brought on by post war disillusionment? Perhaps Josephus joined the faction of Jewish intellectuals formed about this time championed by Rabban Gamaliel II that rejected Messianic idealism. This movement is recorded in the Mishnah's sobering assessment that the fulfillment of Messianic aspirations would lead to societal breakdown — the Messiah would not



bring salvation but rather upheaval and chaos to Jewish life (Levey, 1992, pp.339-340).

It is often said that Josephus was only concerned with the causes and progress of the War and a digression to expand on Christian beliefs and practices would have been a distraction from that purpose<sup>19</sup> but we find the author devoting hundreds of lines to the philosophy of the Essenes (*Wars*, 2.119-161), a group who in many respects were alleged to have had customs and views similar to ascetic Christians<sup>20</sup> and these sectarians apparently took no part in the War.

The first Christians were Jews, hence the legend described in Matthew 10:5-7 and ascribed to Jesus — “Do not take a road leading to gentiles...”. Paul was a Jew (Romans 11:1) — from northern Galilee if Jerome is to be believed (see Note 10) — and claims to have been uncommonly committed to the precepts of Judaism to the point of actively persecuting the church (Galatians 1:14ff); but he is passed over by Josephus. One does not cease to be a Jew by adopting Christianity. Paul claims he was flogged five times by the Jews to within the legal limit (2 Corinthians 11:24). In the case of Paul, there can be no question as to why he was scourged – his persistent preaching of Christian doctrine; R. Akiba (born c. 50 CE) was likewise punished for theological dereliction (Levey, 1992, pp.338-339). However despite falling foul of the synagogue authorities it appears that neither man ever suffered a permanent ban.

Josephus in *Wars of the Jews* and Tacitus in *Histories* both plainly state that messianic expectations were especially inflated prior to the War:

What more than all else incited them [the Jews] to the war was an *ambiguous oracle* (χρησμὸς ἀμφίβολος) likewise found in *their sacred scriptures* to the effect that at that time one from their country would become ruler of the world (lit: *someone would rule the inhabited world* – τις ἄρξει τῆς οἰκουμένης). This they understood to mean someone of their own race, and many of their wise men went astray in their interpretation of it. The oracle, however, in reality signified the sovereignty of Vespasian,

who was proclaimed Emperor on Jewish soil. (*Wars*, 6.312-314.  
*Histories*, 5.13) [my emphasis]

The text that Josephus refers to as *their sacred scriptures* could have been the Sibylline corpus (Evans, 2019, pp. 324-326) and the passage below, while its precise dating remains unclear might be the *ambiguous oracle* that sparked the conflict:

And then shall God send from the East a king,  
Who shall make all earth cease from evil war,  
Killing some, others binding with strong oaths.  
And he will not by his own counsels do  
All these things, but obey the good decrees  
Of God the mighty. And with goodly wealth,  
With gold and silver and purple ornament,  
The temple of the mighty God again  
Shall be weighed down. (3.817-825)<sup>21</sup>

The first two lines of this oracle was quoted by Lactantius (*Divine Institutes*, 7.18) as applying to the *second* coming of the Messiah, but if it was extant at the time, this oracle could just as easily have been applied in the first century to the *first* coming.

Elsewhere in *Antiquities* (4.100-131) Josephus draws the reader's attention to the prophecies of Balaam. However he passes over the famous star prophecy of Numbers 24:17 ("A star shall come out of Jacob, and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel..."). In the year 66 a portent appeared in the sky over Jerusalem in the form of a sword (actually Halley's comet) adding potency to the prophecy. This was reported by both Josephus (*Wars*, 6.289) and Tacitus (*Annals*, 15.47) but Josephus fails to connect this omen with the ancient prophecy. The importance of the star oracle is borne out by its incorporation into the birth narrative in the gospel of Matthew. Here the celestial object guides Magi from the east to Jesus' birthplace, while the sign is ostensibly unintelligible to the Jewish sages (Evans, 2019, pp.315, 329).

Of profound interest to Josephus was the Book of Daniel. For Josephus, Daniel was ‘one of the greatest prophets’ whose ‘memory lives on eternally’ (*Ant.* 10.266) and he notes that he is ‘still read by us even now.’ The seventy weeks prophecy contained in the Book of Daniel (9:24–27) is alluded to in Matthew 24:15. (“So when you see the desolating sacrilege standing in the holy place, as was spoken of by the prophet Daniel – let the reader understand,...”) Tertullian investigated the chronology surrounding this prophecy in great detail (*An Answer to the Jews*, 8) concluding, “And thus, in the day of their storming [that is 70 CE], the Jews fulfilled the 70 hebdomads predicted in Daniel.” But while Josephus praises Daniel and his prophetic foresight, he notably avoids discussing the messianic implications of his visions. His treatment of the *ambiguous oracle* follows the same pattern — he acknowledges its existence and importance but reinterprets it to support Roman power rather than Jewish messianic hopes.

During the War or during the troubles that preceded it is when we would expect at least one messianic aspirant to surface but Josephus mentions no one who claimed the title of Χριστός. Was he silent because he did not want to call attention to an idea, an idea which if it became popular among Jews threatened to undermine the very foundations of Judaism at a time when it was particularly vulnerable to radical reinterpretation? Some years later in 132 CE a rebel called Simon bar Kokhba took over Judea and managed to establish and maintain a Jewish state for about three years until crushed once again by the Romans. (Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 69.12-14). Even the prominent Jewish scholar R. Akiba was persuaded that bar Kokhba was the promised Messiah (Dienstag, 1983, pp.xxxiii-xxxiv) but according to Josephus no Messianic figure appeared or was rumored to have appeared when the first revolt occurred.

Josephus offers many explanations as to the causes of the War, including theological ones (Bilde, 1979, p.199) but notably does not mention that the War and its outcome constituted punishment of the Jews for killing their Messiah, their “wise king” as attested by Mara bar Serapion. That this idea had currency at that time at least among

Christians is shown by references to the theme in both the gospels and Paul's letters. (For example, Matthew 23:37-38, 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16.)

Josephus in the Preface to his work states that his aim was to counter the false assertions made by others about the War. On a careful reading many of these complaints sound suspiciously like the claims being made by Christians:

Of these [other historians], however, some, having taken *no part in the action*, have collected from *hearsay* casual and contradictory stories which they have then edited in a *rhetorical style*; while others, who witnessed the events, have, either from flattery of the Romans or from *hatred of the Jews*, misrepresented the facts, their writings exhibiting alternatively invective and encomium, but nowhere historical accuracy. [my emphasis]

We find hatred of the Jews in early Christian texts (1 Thessalonians 2:14-16, Matthew 27: 15-26), and we find accusations of sophisticated tales (διηγήματα σοφιστικῶς ἀναγράφουσιν) “edited in a rhetorical style” put about by Christians (2 Peter 1:16 σεσοφισμένοις μύθοις “cleverly devised myths”). We also find hearsay (ἀκοῆ) promulgated as fact by men *not concerned in the affairs themselves*. This is not to say that such perceived faults could only be found in Christians but Christian claims can certainly be included in the items that Josephus finds offensive.

I submit that the reasons for the absence of any mention of Jesus or Christians in the *Wars of the Jews* are twofold. Firstly, the new religion did not exist when the *Gospels* and *Acts* say it did (that is between 30 and 70 CE) and secondly, Josephus, a notable apologist for the Jews and Judaism, was silent on this point because it was mortifying to admit to the world that the impetus for the invention of a universal religion *based on Judaism*, lay in a comprehensive military defeat, loss of statehood and denigration of traditional cult.<sup>22</sup> There is no doubt that Christianity was regarded by orthodox Jews in the first century as a damnable

heresy<sup>23</sup> and Josephus observing this state of affairs was probably hoping that the new movement was only a temporary enthusiasm or else if it prospered he was quietly confident that it would in time be suppressed by the Romans, if not extinguished altogether.

It was not necessary for Josephus to refute the arguments of Christians and others — it was just necessary to write an extensive tome discussing a multiplicity of causes for the War and omit the one crucial item — especially as the work was advertised as having imperial backing. Furthermore, the immediacy with which he produced his account suggests he was responding to an urgent need; the Christians were gaining ground. This interpretation also casts light on the infamous *Testimonium Flavianum* in the much later *Antiquities* — if that passage is a Christian interpolation which seems to be the case<sup>24</sup>; it would mean Josephus maintained a consistent silence about Christianity and Messianism across all his works.

## OTHER MESSIANIC HERALDS

If the Messiah in the first century was the literary product of hearsay then logically we would expect to find other instances of this phenomenon in subsequent Jewish history — that is where an imaginary Messiah has been created *ex nihilo*. Maimonides (c.1135-1204) reports on two such figures from the twelfth century. In the first case, a respected rabbi by the name of Moses Al-Dar'i generated notoriety by claiming that it was revealed to him in a dream that the Messiah had come, and was due to appear on a certain day. He gained the trust of the community by forecasting an imminent 'blood' rain. A few days later there was a downpour and when the liquid that fell was red and viscous it was considered a prophetic sign according to the scripture, "And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth, blood and fire, and pillars of smoke" (Joel 3:3). Despite warnings from Maimonides' father many Jews put their faith in this rabbi, sold their possessions for a fraction of their worth (reminiscent of the alleged response of the first Christians — see Acts 4:32) and awaited the fateful day. When nothing materialized they were financially ruined, and Moses fled to Palestine to avoid the censure

of the authorities (Maimonides et al, 1952, pp.xix-xx). Note that the early Christians seem to have been shrewder than Al-Dar'i. While they too were presented with ambiguous signs of the Messiah's (second) coming, they were specifically discouraged from trying to predict the exact date of his appearance (Matthew 24:36, 2 Thessalonians 2:1-2).

Another case described by Maimonides is instructive:

In Yemen there arose a man who claimed that he was the harbinger of the Messiah, who was supposed to have arrived already in Yemen. Many people, both Jews and Arabs, followed him in his roamings in the mountains. Our co-religionists in Yemen wrote me a long letter concerning his ways, his doings, the innovations he introduced into the prayer book, and his preaching. They asserted that they witnessed such and such miracles of his, and wished to have my opinion regarding this matter. I concluded from their remarks as follows: That poor fellow was an ignorant religious fanatic without any sense at all, and that the miracles he was alleged to have palmed off upon them were a mere imposition... Finally after a year he was taken into custody, and his adherents fled. When the king of the Arabs requested him 'Why have you done all this?' he replied, 'Indeed, I have done these things in accordance with God's behest.' 'Can you prove that it is so?' asks the king. 'If you sever my head, I shall immediately be resurrected,' he responded. 'I do not expect any better evidence than that,' continued the king, 'and if that miracle transpires then not only I, but the whole world will acknowledge that our ancestral faith is false.' Whereupon they immediately killed that poor fellow, may his death be an atonement for him and for all Israel! As a consequence a monetary fine was imposed upon the Jews in many localities. *There are still some fools who believe that he will be resurrected soon.* (Marx, 1926, pp.356-357) [my emphasis]

The careers of the apostle Paul, Moses Al-Dar'i and the unnamed Yemenite harbinger followed essentially the same pattern. They all acted as heralds of the Messiah's coming — none claimed to be the Messiah himself. To convince their respective audiences they performed miracles (Paul's 'signs and wonders' — σημεῖα καὶ τέρατα: Acts 14:3, 15:12, Romans 15:18-19 and note Acts 19:11-12) and their stated mission was to reform Judaism. (For Paul, see Galatians 2:15, 3:28 and note Acts 18:4-6.) Furthermore, all three failed and either fled or were executed by the authorities. What makes Paul stand out from the others is that his message endured, most likely because he widened the appeal to include *goyim* as per Romans 15:7-12 and his writings were preserved by his followers, while the others' careers came to nought. (One could also argue that Christianity had already been invented and it was a hard act to follow.)

There are some obvious differences between the circumstances of the Jews in the first and twelfth centuries however both periods exhibited a crisis for Jewry. In the twelfth century there was widespread persecution of Jews beginning in 1096 when crusader forces launched violent attacks against Jewish communities across several major cities in the Rhineland and Central Europe. The attacks resulted in massacres, destruction of property and forced conversions, with many Jews choosing death or suicide over baptism (Bronstein, 2007, p.1268). The period also witnessed the emergence of new economic restrictions in many European regions, with Jews being increasingly limited to moneylending while being excluded from guilds and many traditional occupations.

## SUMMARY

Stress and anxiety can lead people to believe comforting fiction when such fiction fits the prevailing *zeitgeist*. Such fiction is prone to elaboration after its initial manifestation.<sup>25</sup> Research has shown that people are reluctant to let go what they doubt or even know to be false<sup>26</sup> especially if it means a loss of psychological comfort for themselves or others. Some Jews saw in the destruction of the Temple a clear and

comforting message from God — the Messiah had come to replace the physical structure with something better — the church (Ephesians 2:19-22); and in his role as heavenly high priest Jesus would stand in for what was lost in the Temple ritual replacing it with something better — a means of *universal* absolution. (Hebrews 4:14-16) The rumor of the Messiah's appearance quickly spread beyond Judea, reaching Jewish communities throughout the Roman Empire. These communities, already familiar with messianic prophecies, were eager to believe that the Messiah had come and was about to return to restore the state of Israel. (Acts 1:6) Meanwhile Josephus omitted any mention of Jesus or Christians in his literary works because he did not want to legitimize the rumor (highly offensive to Jews) that the cause of the War was the Jews' impious crime of killing their own Messiah.

It is proposed that the catastrophic events of the first Jewish-Roman War served as the catalyst that launched the religion. Rather than reawakening what has been described as a hiatus in Christian development<sup>27</sup> the crisis of 70 CE sparked the circulation of coherent but historically unfounded reports about a Messiah (L: *Christus*) appearing in Judea; later to be amplified by missionary zeal and fortified by apologetic rationalization, it was this rumor that was the first cause of the new movement.

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January 2025



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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> "THE MONS "ANGELS.": VICAR GIVES HIS REASONS FOR BELIEVING IN THEM." 1915.*The Observer (1901- 2003)*, Aug 22, p.9.

<sup>2</sup> Oddly, neither the apostle Paul, his co-workers, nor the earliest official history of the early church, the *Acts of the Apostles* appears cognizant of this momentous event, and the lengthy *Letter of Clement to the Corinthians* dated to the year 96 is equally silent. According to Shaw, "The elder Pliny's only explicit statement regarding the fire of 64 holds Nero to blame for it and, in consequence, for the destruction of an important rare species of tree. But nowhere in the more than 20,000 facts collected from 2,000 books and 100 different authors in his *Natural History* does Pliny so much as refer to any people called Christians or *Chrestiani*, much less does he make any connection of them with the fire that destroyed large parts of the imperial metropolis." "In the *Annales*, Tacitus lays stress on the execution of Jesus by Pontius Pilatus under Tiberius... Yet in the *Histories* he had nothing to say about any of this. His sole remark, in just three words, is that everything in Judea was just fine: 'sub Tiberio quies'. (*Histories*, 5.9)" (2015, pp.82, 92) Nevertheless at least one scholar rightly points out the dangers inherent in Shaw's use of the *argumentum ex silentio*. (Granger Cook, 2020)

<sup>3</sup> Examples of professed sources include: 1. Pliny the Elder, named as a source for German affairs (*Annals* 1.69) and for information about Nero's reign (*Annals*, 13.20, 15.53). 2. Cluvius Rufus, mentioned along with Pliny and Fabius Rusticus in discussing Nero's potential incest with his mother Agrippina (*Annals*, 14.2). 3. Fabius Rusticus, named particularly in the context of Nero and Agrippina. (*Annals*, 13.20, 14.2), and 4. Agrippina the Younger, mother of Nero. (*Annals*, 4.53)

<sup>4</sup> *Histories*, 2.50. Latin: ut conquirere fabulosa et fictis oblectare legentium animos procul gravitate coepti operis crediderim, ita vulgatis traditisque demere fidem non ausim.

<sup>5</sup> This appears to run counter to the declaration in Acts (11:26) which states that the believers were first called Christians (τοὺς μαθητὰς Χριστιανούς) in Antioch.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Peter 3:15. "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you." The context of this letter appears to be the onset of a period of persecution both in Rome (designated in the letter as *Babylon*) and Asia. "...if any of you suffers as a Christian, do not consider it a disgrace, but glorify God because you bear this name." (4:12-16)

<sup>7</sup> "... I am not demanding that you exaggerate what really happened. History must not go beyond the truth, and for honourable deeds the truth is enough." (7.33.10) See also Edwards, 2018, p.75.

<sup>8</sup> *Annals* 15.44 already discussed and from Galatians 1:17ff.

<sup>9</sup> According to the official history of the church as recorded in Acts 21:27ff the Christians were implicated in a widespread furore in the city when Paul was set upon in the Temple by a mob of enraged Jews. In the ensuing riot we are told that the apostle was only saved by the timely intervention of the Roman tribune with a cohort of soldiers. The next day Paul was permitted to defend himself before the full Council of Jews, but the hearing was cut short when the Council members began arguing amongst themselves on a point of doctrine. Then following a report that some forty men had conspired to assassinate him, a contingent of two hundred soldiers, seventy horsemen, and two hundred spearmen was assembled to escort Paul to Caesarea so that he could present his case before the governor Antonius Felix. (21:27ff) But of this sensational religious and military matter the Jewish historian Josephus says not a word; and this despite Josephus' long term relations with the political and religious

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hierarchy in Jerusalem and according to his own account, Agrippa the king himself. (*The Life of Flavius Josephus*, 65).

<sup>10</sup> A reading of Jerome implies that Paul was active *after the Jewish War*. In his *Lives of Illustrious Men*, he declares that: "When this [town of Giscalis/Gischala] was taken by the Romans [c. 67 CE Wars, 4.112–120] he [Paul] removed with his parents to Tarsus in Cilicia." Again in his *Commentary on Philemon*: "They say that the apostle Paul's parents were from the region of Giscala in Judea; and that when the whole province was laid waste by the hands of the Romans, and the Jews were dispersed into the world, they were moved to the city of Tarsus in Cilicia." Furthermore, Jerome chronologically equates the Temple's demise in the year 70 with the crucifixion. "The veil of the temple has been rent [Matthew 27:51]; an army has encompassed Jerusalem; it has been stained by the blood of the Lord. Now, therefore, its guardian angels have forsaken it and the grace of Christ has been withdrawn. Josephus, himself a Jewish writer, asserts that *at the Lord's crucifixion* there broke from the temple voices of heavenly powers, saying: Let us depart hence." Letter 46. [my emphasis] See Josephus at Wars, 6.300.

<sup>11</sup> "...but others, and Titus himself, judged that the temple should be destroyed first of all, so that the religion of the Jews and Christians might be more fully abolished: for these religions, although opposed to each other, had nevertheless sprung from the same authors; the Christians had emerged from the Jews: with the root removed, the stem would easily perish." (Chronica II. 30. 6f.) It seems to me that this is not the real reason but rather an *ex post facto* interpretation of events. For discussion of this question see Montefiore, 1962, pp.156–70.

<sup>12</sup> "Whatever the difficulties of the decades and even centuries leading up to this event, nothing could have been as shattering as this loss. Before, at least, the divinely commanded service, as spelled out in detail in the Torah, could be observed. Now, in a single catastrophic instant, the entire priestly code was rendered irrelevant and, with it, whatever stability and confidence it provided."

<sup>13</sup> Also from Nahmanides (the Barcelona Disputation of 1263), "Fray Paul asked me [Nahmanides] whether the Messiah of whom the prophets spoke has come, and I said that he has not come. And he cited an Aggadic book in which it is stated that on the day that the Temple was destroyed, on that very day, the Messiah was born." A Jewish tradition states that the Messiah was born in the year 70 and lives in Rome *incognito* or *invisibly* until that city is a ruin. (Maccoby, 2006, pp.110, 117)

<sup>14</sup> "A special case of reinterpreted prophecy along such lines can be seen in the treatment of prophecy in the New Testament where the early Christian communities regarded the life and teaching of Jesus as the fulfilment of biblical prophecy and also viewed themselves as participants in the eschaton.... There was no public fulfilment of prophecy (i.e. clear, unequivocal and demonstrable to the public at large): no David occupied the throne, there was no transformation of nature or the nations, the enemies of Israel had not been destroyed, universal peace and prosperity had not set in nor was the temple the focus for international worship. Yet in so far as there existed a small community that believed prophecy had been fulfilled their dissonance had been overcome" (Festinger, 1956, p.216).

<sup>15</sup> One of the many apocryphal but nevertheless popular writings which circulated in the early Church under the name of Clement of Rome.

<sup>16</sup> Wars 2.119-166. Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes.

<sup>17</sup> For example: Daniel 9:25. "ἕως χριστοῦ ἡγουμένου" (until an anointed leader) and Psalm 2:2. "καὶ οἱ ἄρχοντες συνήχθησαν ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτὸ κατὰ τοῦ κυρίου καὶ κατὰ τοῦ χριστοῦ αὐτοῦ" (and the rulers gathered together against the Lord and against his anointed)

<sup>18</sup> The two references in *Antiquities* (18.63, 20.197) are much disputed. See Olson, 1999.

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<sup>19</sup> “Mention of a possibly still obscure sect which had probably played no part in the war was not a necessary part of his undertaking.” See Paget, 2001, p.608. See pp.608-616 for further discussion of this matter.

<sup>20</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea: *Praeparatio Evangelica* (Preparation for the Gospel). Book 8.11-12.

<sup>21</sup> Whether this citation formed a portion of the Sibylline books once kept in Rome we cannot now determine, but it is possible. (Terry & Rzach, 1899, p.33)

<sup>22</sup> “It would be wrong to assume that such people simply knew nothing about Christianity, or that they were unacquainted with Christians. Their silence could have been illustrative of their contempt for, or embarrassment about, Christianity, rather than their ignorance” (Paget, 2001, p.615).

<sup>23</sup> The story of the martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 6:8 – 8:3) though uncertain as to its veracity is nevertheless indicative of the reaction likely provoked in Jewry to the earliest Christian preaching (Katz, 2006, p.259).

<sup>24</sup> The simplest explanation is that “the entire passage was taken from a single source, the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, by Christian scribes who accepted it on Eusebius' authority and inserted it into Josephus' account of Pilate's administration, breaking the continuity of the text, and placing the passage before, not after, Josephus' account of John the Baptist” (Olson, 1999, p.322).

<sup>25</sup> Berger and Luckmann state that *to forget completely is notoriously difficult*; it is relatively easier *to invent things that never happened* than to forget those that actually did. “Hence the inventors fabricated and inserted events wherever they were needed to harmonize the remembered with the reinterpreted past. This point is very important if one wishes to understand adequately the motives behind the historically recurrent falsifications and forgeries of religious documents” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p.180).

<sup>26</sup> A variety of evidence suggests that people tend to believe what they should not. In particular, 1. Repeated exposure to assertions for which there is no evidence increases the likelihood that people will believe those assertions. 2. Once such beliefs are formed, people have considerable difficulty undoing them. 3. Under some circumstances people will believe assertions that are explicitly labelled as false (Gilbert et al, 1993, p.222).

<sup>27</sup> “It would indeed not be an *exaggeration* to say that Christianity was in a certain sense reborn as a result of the Jewish catastrophe of A.D.70” (Brandon, 1957, p.249).