

**The Marketing of
Christianity:
The Evolution of
Early Christian Doctrine**

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THE MARKETING OF CHRISTIANITY

The evolution of Early Christian Doctrine

Introduction

We have seen how ritual which once had coherent meaning may be incorporated into a different field altogether (see *The Pagan Saviours*, ICR Monograph No. 38). The durability of ritual helps ensure that residues of practically every idea which has ever occurred to man remain with us to this day. We live among them, like moderns living among the ruins of an ancient civilisation, onto which we have grafted our own edifices. The relics of our ancestors' traditions, preoccupations, methods and ways of looking at the world live on in us. If these thought-structures are invisible to our eyes, it is only because we find it very difficult to see things that are there all the time. They are, however, our heritage – a gift from our forerunners – and are as fundamental to our civilisation as the wheel.

Yet, the process of ritual exchange from pagan to Christian religion raises questions of its own. Surely the early Christians were a homogenous group, driven by their first-hand experience and understanding of the message of Christ? Is it really possible that the first followers of Jesus, who valued their beliefs so highly that they were prepared to suffer martyrdom for their sake, would allow manifestly pagan elements to slip in? If so, given the depth of their faith, we shall surely be able to draw some interesting conclusions as to the nature and quality of human belief. In this monograph, again taking Christianity as a case history, we shall discuss the extent to which the personalities of the first followers of Jesus, and the environment in which they were working may have helped to shape the faith we regard today as Christianity.

The Church of Jerusalem

The apostles, under Peter, who had worked with and known Jesus during his life, began to teach along the lines that they believed represented his message. They based themselves in Jerusalem and preached, at first, only to Jews. They were not at this point known as Christians. Instead, they were seen, and saw themselves, as a sect of Judaism – Acts (24:5)

refers to it as ‘the sect of the Nazarenes’. They were the believers in the promised Messiah.

This view of Jesus’ role is reflected in Matthew (15:24) which quotes Jesus as saying: ‘I am not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’ (Typically, however, Jesus does go on to take pity on the Gentile woman of Canaan whose appeal prompted him to make that remark.) Jesus is, equally, reported in Matthew (5:17-18) to say:

‘Think not that I am come to abolish the law or the prophets. I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.’

In this passage, the author of this particular Gospel, like the Apostles in Jerusalem, stresses that Jesus was part of a continuum, within a tradition of Jewish teaching which stretched all the way back to Abraham and Moses. He was part of a process that had gone on for millennia.

In an outward demonstration of that tradition, they fulfilled all the Jewish laws, prayed at the Jewish synagogue, observed Jewish dietary rules (as Jesus had done). Like Jesus, they had been circumcised in babyhood. Ritual outside the established Jewish custom was minimal: consisting of baptism and the Eucharist meal celebrated in people’s homes. The early Church followers appear also to have gathered in small groups, probably each around a particular apostle, where they would repeat and discuss such sayings and teachings of Jesus as they could remember. This early practice reflects an inner spiritual tradition still current in parts of the East, where, in addition to observing the external religious law, certain students also receive wisdom handed down through a chain of masters.

Fundamentally, there is no indication that they viewed Jesus’ mission as the beginning of a new faith – as Christian commentators admit:

‘In the first place, it must be mentioned that the Jerusalem community showed no sudden or radical break with Judaism. They were still children of their own age. Before their realization of the incompatibility of legalistically ritualist Judaism and Christianity, special divine light and special subsequent events were required. For the time being their religious practices as Jews were not in doubt, but rather kept up. The Christians did not cut themselves off from the temple. On the contrary, they, as the part of Israel which accepted Israel’s messiah, frequented the centre of Israel’s religion and exercised all their religious rights as Jews until their proclamation of Jesus to the leaders of Israel met with rejection. On the other hand, the peculiarly Christian observance of the Eucharistic meal took place in private houses. Thus, to external

contemporary observers, the Jerusalem community looked like, at least for the moment, any other Jewish sect of devout people.’¹

But are we really looking at a later, spontaneous realisation by the early followers of Jesus that they had, after all, to found a new religion? If not, what on earth happened?

Something should be said at this point of the probable impact upon the community in Jerusalem of the tragic and untimely death of their teacher, Jesus, whom they regarded as the (Jewish) Messiah. The curtailment of his time on earth must have remained a terrible human sorrow for these people who had known and loved him. During his life, Jesus preached on a wide variety of subjects; his death, inevitably, cast a shadow over his teachings.

The Jews who were being converted to the faith must have found it all but impossible to believe that his death had been without a purpose, that he had left never to return, before his mission was completed. As *The Catholic Encyclopaedia* said:

‘Christ’s humble and obscure life, ending in the ignominious death on the cross was the very opposite of what Jews expected of their Christ.’²

They were sustained by their belief that they had misunderstood the role of the Messiah. Instead of restoring their kingdom to the Jews on earth as his followers had believed during his lifetime, it was the Kingdom of God that he would herald. They expected him to return again in triumph at any minute, bringing with him the end of the world. In the meantime they lived in the strong sense of his presence – in the form of the Holy Spirit. Peter headed the Church but, for important decisions – and perhaps for everyday ones – that Holy Spirit was referred to, and Divine inspiration sought. Far from founding a new religion, this was a community daily awaiting the conclusion of the current one.

St. Paul

Contrast this with the remarkable character and history of St. Paul. Although he never met Jesus in the flesh and started his life as a fanatical opponent, it is Paul’s utterly convinced, but quite idiosyncratic view of Christ’s significance that has shaped the New Testament, and which created one of the world’s great Monotheistic religions out of a Jewish sect. His story is well worth examination. Saul, as he was known before his dramatic conversion, was a fanatic in the true sense of the word. He appears to have been utterly obsessed in his hatred of the followers of Christ. A Pharisee, well versed in the Jewish law, he feared and loathed what he saw as a group of heretics who were trying to do away with the Mosaic Law.

In the run up to his conversion, this young man's venom against the early Church reached a violent crescendo, when he was the accomplice to a savage murder. Stephen, one of the members of the Jerusalem church, was charged with seeking to destroy the law. There is evidence, in Acts, that Stephen's particular spiritual outlook differed from many in the Church of Jerusalem, and that he was one of the first to believe the new faith could not be contained within Judaism:

‘The whole appearance of Stephen suggests that the cause he pleaded was one which would justify us in calling him the forerunner of the apostle Paul. It is important, however, to notice, that this opposition seems to have existed in the Church of Jerusalem for some time’³

Stephen was dragged outside by extremist Jews. According to Acts, the young Saul watched over the coats of the killers as they stoned Stephen to death, and ‘Saul was consenting unto his death’.

Stephen's behaviour as he was killed was extraordinary, and may have made a subconscious impression upon the young Saul. His last words, after calling upon Jesus to receive his spirit, begged God not to hold his murderers responsible for this sin.

Stephen had become the first martyr among the followers of Jesus. Saul, on the other hand, redoubled his efforts against the embryonic Church. He rushed into the houses of every follower of Jesus he could find, rounding up men and women alike. Next he went to the High Priest, demanding letters of introduction to the synagogues in Damascus, which he proposed to purge of Christ's followers.

The overwrought and highly charged state in which he bent his footsteps to Damascus may be imagined. He never got there. As he approached the city, he was blinded by a bright light, collapsed and heard the voice of Jesus asking why he was persecuting him. Saul remained blind for three days, during which time he neither ate nor drank. A disciple of Jesus called Ananias responded to a vision telling him to restore Paul's sight. This he did, and Paul thereafter became as wrapped up in his fervour for Jesus as he had been in his opposition to him.

In the light of modern medical knowledge, it is hard not to consider the possibility that Saul may have had some kind of mental breakdown – possibly precipitated by guilt and confusion at his part in Stephen's martyrdom. Quite extraordinarily, the man who had feared that the Mosaic Law was to be swept aside, now insisted, quite unlike his co-religionists in Jerusalem, that overturning the Jewish law was absolutely necessary. As one scholar remarks:

‘He had done his utmost to destroy the new sect, the followers of the crucified Jesus, for he saw in them a dangerous threat to the central legal Tradition of Judaism. Yet, when he became a convert... he became an equally zealous opponent of those who wanted to continue that legal tradition in Christianity. No wonder the letters are often polemical and the history of Paulinism has been a history of controversy.’⁴

In his seminal work, *Battle for the Mind* (which is highly to be recommended for anyone wishing to know more about the psychology of sudden conversion), William Sargant carefully documents how an emotional overload can lead in some cases to ‘ultra-paradoxical’ behaviour, where the subject’s conditioning and beliefs are precisely reversed.

In a persuasive analysis of Saul’s conversion, he argues:

‘...Anger may be no less powerful an emotion than fear in bringing about sudden conversion to beliefs which exactly contradict beliefs previously held...’

In Saul’s vision and blindness:

‘A state of transmarginal inhibition seems to have followed his acute stage of nervous excitement. Total collapse, hallucinations and an increased state of suggestibility appear to have supervened...only after three days did Brother Ananias come to relieve his nervous symptoms and his mental distress, at the same time implanting new beliefs.’⁵

Whatever its cause, there can be no doubt that Paul viewed his conversion as the most important and significant event in his life. It was a turning point of enormous power. He thought of himself thereafter as quite literally a new person.

Just as the drama of Paul’s conversion split his old life completely from his new, so his view of Christianity was of a unique event – a religion in its own right – never to be repeated and wiping away the past. It was quite opposed to the concept of a chain of transmission of a teaching tradition. Not only was the life of Christ unique, but that life itself hinged upon one towering event: the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Unlike the apostles who had known the human Jesus in the flesh, Paul saw the dazzling god Jesus who had spoken to him in his vision. Beside that powerful symbol of godhead, the historical teacher of flesh and bone dwindled into insignificance. While the apostles had several years’ accumulated impact and contact with Jesus’ teachings to draw on, Paul had one emotionally overwhelming moment. It had a fundamental affect on his belief. Rather than being important as a human being once loved and respected, Jesus was important to Paul as a redeeming god:

‘Why should he ask whether what he is teaching agrees with the original teaching of Jesus, and with the discourses and sayings which have been handed down from him, when in the Christ who lives and works in him, he hears the voice of the Lord himself?’⁶

This ‘voice of the Lord’ was foisted on a mind already stuffed full of complicated and often contradictory cultural and religious stimuli. A Jew by origin, a Pharisee by upbringing and a Hellenist by culture, Paul had jumbled in his head all the law of the Pharisees, the Pagan mysteries (of which he had acquired a deep knowledge) and now the consuming new emotion of Christian conversion.

St Paul – the First Spin doctor?

Paul belonged to a different social class to the humble peasants who had listened in person to Jesus’ teachings. He believed he had been divinely instructed to ‘open the door’ of Christianity to the Gentiles and the nature of his conversion gave him utter conviction. This was not a man who felt he had to sit at anybody’s feet and absorb learning. He had been granted a vision of God – and this vision was its own authority. When it came to spreading his message effectively, Paul’s mastery of Greek and Hebrew learning and his political acuteness were to prove extraordinary weapons, which he used to great advantage. He was so utterly successful that no trace today remains of those who believed that Jesus Christ, rather than founding a new religion, had progressed the teachings of an existing spiritual tradition.

However, in the days following his conversion, there was little clue that this rather unstable-seeming convert would prevail. The apostles in Jerusalem were at first so frightened of Paul’s history they would not see him. Eventually, Barnabas engineered a meeting – and they were duly convinced of his sincerity.

The letters of Paul, which as we shall see later in this paper are the earliest surviving documents of the Christian church, provide a fascinating glimpse of the fragmentation of opinion among his followers after the death of a teacher. In *Birth of a Worldview: Early Christianity in its Jewish and Pagan Context*, Robert Dorman shows there may have been as many versions of the path of Jesus as there were followers:

‘As followers of the Jew Jesus, Christians had to ask whether following him also entailed accepting ... traditional literature. If no, then why not? If yes, then how would Christians interpret this literature differently from the many Jews living in the Mediterranean basin? The response of early intellectuals ran the whole gamut – from full acceptance of the Hebrew Scriptures to outright rejection.’

There is scattered evidence in the writings of Paul, and The Acts of the Apostles, that from a very early date the Church had to contend with several factions – all with slightly, or greatly differing views of the Christian message.

For instance, according to Acts, a ‘circumcision party’ was already in existence from a very early date, and took Peter to task for converting a non-Jewish Roman centurion and his family. A similar-sounding group is referred to later as ‘believing Pharisees’. They seem to have been a school of thought extremely concerned about the external aspects of the Jewish law and who believed that Christ’s message was only for Jews. Peter, as far as one can tell, was somewhere in the middle of this dispute (he incurs Paul’s wrath by sitting on the fence), and Paul at the other extreme.

The issue of preaching to the Gentiles split Church opinion – probably into very many shades of opinion. A central question following on from that was whether such converts should first be required to submit to Jewish Laws (such as circumcision).

The pettiness of the squabbling is preserved in Paul’s writings like insects in amber. From a psychological perspective, we see human nature reasserting itself a mere two decades after what these people saw as the most important event of history – the death and resurrection of the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

‘By the middle of the First century C.E. then, about 20 years after the death of Jesus, there was clear evidence of divergent views on what it meant to be a Christian apostle: very simply, should Christianity emphasize the miracle-working revelation-filled aspect of Jesus’ ministry and see him as another divine man like Moses, or should they emphasize the suffering ignominy of Jesus’ death on a cross? These views... had profound social implications; one stressed continuity with society; the other, a marginal, outcast relationship to the world.’⁷

Paul was clearly in the second camp. In his letter to the Galatians, for instance, he is in fulminating, sarcastic form. It turns out that a rival group of missionaries has turned up on his patch and has been preaching ‘a different gospel’. They’ve been claiming that it is necessary for pagan converts to be circumcised (i.e. to become Jews) before they could be saved.

Behind this quibbling is a serious doctrinal struggle. If they had first, in effect, to convert to Judaism, the followers of Jesus were simply following a well-established Jewish tradition, stretching back to Abraham and Moses. Up until then, the teacher or prophet of the age had simply built upon the foundation of the teachers of the past. Spiritual development was seen as an evolution rather than a revolution.

If on the other hand, the followers of Christ were not required to conform to the Jewish law, then this was something different: an entirely new religion. The centuries' old teaching tradition within Judaism had to be reinterpreted as a collection of writings merely looking forward to this moment:

‘Since Paul consistently uses Christ as the hermeneutical key for interpreting relationship with God... the Old Testament is read theologically, not historically. This means that the linear aspect, the idea of a continuous process, is, if not absent, less relevant.’⁸

Paul believed that the basis of the religion was not the teachings of Jesus, but faith in him – not his life, as it were, but his death. By sacrificing himself for humanity, Jesus had obtained salvation for anyone who would simply believe in him. Of course, it was advisable (and Paul often exhorted his disciples) to do good works and keep oneself free of sin – but from the point of view of eternal salvation, the emphasis was upon faith, rather than the Law. As he put it in his first letter to the Corinthians

‘When the complete comes, the partial will come to an end’⁹

This is, of course, quite a long way from Matthew's saying of Jesus (cited earlier in this paper) that he had not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil: ‘till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.’

St. Paul travelled to Jerusalem to thrash things out. It is a measure of his utter conviction, that he had been preaching his own gospel for fourteen years before he referred it to the twelve Apostles. Even among them it seems that there were several schools of thought, possibly with the Apostle James keener than others to uphold the law. It's clear that Paul thought he would get a more sympathetic hearing from some of the apostles than from others:

‘I laid before them (but privately before those who were of repute) the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, lest somehow I should be running or had run in vain.’¹⁰

Acts says there was a council of apostles, which decided on a kind of twin track approach: Jewish converts would have to conform to the whole law, but Gentiles would not. Paul characteristically interpreted this as a sweeping remit:

‘They saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted to the gospel to the circumcised.’¹¹

Nor does Peter, the chief of the apostles, escape Paul’s sarcasm:

‘James and Cephas [Peter] and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we should go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.’¹²

Even then terrible rows followed – including a stand up argument with Peter over whether Jewish followers of Jesus could eat with formerly-pagan ones:

‘I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from [the Apostle] James, he ate with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party.’¹³

On a practical level, Paul showed himself a shrewd political operator. Perhaps aware of the controversy of his mission among Jesus’ apostles, his letters are full of details about large collections for the Church of Jerusalem. He says in his letter to the Romans:

‘At present however I am going to Jerusalem with aid for the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make some contribution for the poor among the saints at Jerusalem...’¹⁴

He appears apprehensive as to the reception he will get there:

‘I appeal to you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf... that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints...’¹⁵

His fears were well founded. The community at Jerusalem was now worrying about reports that Paul believed even Jewish converts could be freed from the burden of the Law and was teaching:

‘... all the Jews which are among the Gentiles to forswear Moses, saying that they ought not to circumcise their children, neither to walk after the customs.’¹⁶

So great was the disquiet, that the church even forced Paul to publicly attend the synagogue with some Jewish converts, so his critics could see: ‘that thou thyself also walkest orderly and keepst the law.’

Paul's view of the world and religion was not only tinged by his sense of alienation from past tradition, but by his conviction that neither was he building for very many years in future. He thought the end of the world was imminent.

‘The appointed time has grown short. From now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world, as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of the world is passing away.’¹⁷

The one thing needful was to save as many souls as possible before that deadline, by tricking them if necessary into accepting salvation through faith in Christ. This imperative for clever marketing is surely responsible for many of the apparent contradictions in his letters – and the consequent squabbling of scholars as to where he really stood. Paul's superlative spin-doctoring skills meant that, as he boasted, he could make his beliefs acceptable to whichever audience he was addressing:

‘To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win Jews; to those under the law I became as one under the law (though not myself being under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law (not being without law toward God, but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.’¹⁸

His marketing skills, his extraordinary powers of communication, his constant contact with individuals from different Christian communities and his habit of issuing written advice and direction in his letters gave Christianity its corporate unity and enabled it to develop into a highly organised and disciplined state within the State.

The Role of Ritual

In taking the Christian message to the Gentiles Paul had other problems than ensuring their freedom from the Jewish law. At the time, the pagan Mystery religions were in full flow – and offered their devotees the pomp, wonder and excitement that early Christianity lacked.

‘From their Eastern homes the new cults had brought with them the appeal of sensuous pageantry and of solemn emotional ritual performed by, or under the direction of an official and consecrated,

professional priesthood. The impressive external features of their public ritual appealed to popular imagination, and lent them dignity and importance. The daily services at definite times of day produced the psychological effects of regular reiteration, and helped to establish them as a solemn but integral part of the recurring daily round. The members of the sacerdotal hierarchy were distinguished from laymen by the majestic garb of their calling, and in things spiritual they were vested with an authority which no layman, whatever his rank or worldly status, could challenge.¹⁹

In another monograph²⁰ we described striking similarities between Christian ritual, as we know it today, and various pagan cults current in the centuries preceding and following the birth of Jesus. Now it is time to try to piece together why and how these similarities may have come about.

First of all, let us recap the salient features of such cults – what, exactly, were they providing their initiates?

- Mysteries and exciting ritual
- Respect for authority of priesthood, even their infallibility.
- Self-abasement and consciousness of sin
- Automatic forgiveness of personal sin through sacrifice of the god

We may compare this with the teachings of Jesus as reported in the New Testament:

- Continuing tradition of teaching within the Jewish law
- Strong sense of individual responsibility
- Challenge to the religious authorities
- Personal development beyond the letter of the law (love thy enemy, etc)
- Lack of concern for ritual, outward show or worldly wealth

Paul had a foot in each tradition. As a young man, he had trained to be a rabbi. His use of pagan imagery, in phrases such as ‘buried with Christ’ and ‘planted in the likeness of his death’, points to the likelihood that he was also an initiate in the Mysteries. As one commentator puts it:

‘The Hellenistic religious literature must have been read by him; he uses its terms and is saturated with its thoughts.’²¹

Like his Pagan clientele, Paul believed the essence of the religion was not a moral code, the law (which its followers should adhere to strictly) but

the mystical sacrifice and protection of the god, in his case – Jesus. For instance, he asks:

‘Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law.’²²

In preaching to the pagan Gentiles, Paul was addressing people who were already keyed up to a high state of excitement, and whose expectations revolved around miraculous deeds, mysterious ritual and exciting new gods. To his pagan followers, the description of his spectacular vision of Christ, the god, must have resonated with the mysteries of pagan religions which worked through whipping their devotees up into an excited state which culminated in their believing themselves to come face to face with their own saviour gods:

‘The strange masks and robes of the officiants, the weird decorations of the subterranean chamber, which were rendered the more impressive by the flickering half-light of flaming torches, the awe-inspiring character of the rites themselves, the nervous stimulant of the mystic draught of wine and the music with which the service was accompanied – all these must have worked the congregation into a high pitch of religious emotion, and have prepared them for the culminating experience of the revelation of the Saviour God and of communion with Him.’²³

The excitement and strong social element of the mysteries proved too great for some of his converts. In Corinthians, it is evident that some of the new Christian converts are still attending social occasions at the local pagan temple – where they may be called upon to share food that has been offered to the idols. Interestingly, Paul stops short of prohibiting attendance, merely suggesting eating sacrificed food will cause a bad example to the Christian converts who still do not entirely understand the difference between the One and the many gods:

‘We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. Only take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. For if anyone sees you, a man of knowledge, at table in an idol’s temple, might he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols?’²⁴

Paul was obviously working amidst people who were inclined to add this new faith into the mix-and-match atmosphere of pagan belief. In Corinthians, he rails against his new converts’ apparent willingness to adapt their old ways to the new faith: as ‘factions’ appear in the church, the former pagans believe that they can be baptised in the name of ‘Paul’ or

‘Peter’ – an obvious comparison with pagan initiation rites. Others are suing each other in the pagan courts.

Paul is firmly against such practices. But his own particular brand of Christianity was calculated to appeal to those brought up in the spirit of the pagan cults. As one Christian commentator, who approves wholeheartedly of Paul’s mission, puts it:

‘The whole pagan world was in a quest for a saving religion and for a Saviour. The cosmopolitanism of the Roman Empire had opened the mind of the people to universal ideas. There was a ripe background against which Christianity could operate competitively and fruitfully. The contribution of the pagan world of the Greco-Roman empire and its rulers to the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles cannot be undervalued.’²⁵

Paul fulminates against the idols of the Pagans – but in similar terms to which those idols were understood. They should cast aside their false gods – and accept the true God, Jesus Christ, for very much the same reasons. In many ways this again resembles the ‘paradoxical reversal of symptoms’ featured by Pavlov and others. No fundamental difference in thought has taken place.

At the same time as abhorring the Pagan gods, Paul’s contempt for the Jews is clear from his writings. At the time, the worst of the Roman persecution had not yet begun – but again and again the very Jews who had been allies of the old Saul, did everything they could to destroy and humiliate him. Again Paul reveals the ‘ultra-Paradoxical’ in his thought. Before his conversion he had been preoccupied with a fear that the Jewish law might be swept away. Now he was preoccupied with the necessity to get beyond the law. The common element was his preoccupation with the law.

To sum up, it is clear from his epistles, that Paul was facing serious challenges to his interpretation of the Christian message – not least from some of the Apostles who had known and learnt from Jesus during his lifetime. Christian scholars like to hail Paul as the man who freed Christianity from Judaism – the logical corollary is that he actually invented a new religion. He was an extraordinarily adept missionary and communicator. But it is not certain whether his personal vision of the Way of Jesus would have prevailed, had not a disastrous event befallen the early Church.

The First Gospels

Some years after the deaths of Paul, Peter and many other eyewitnesses to Jesus' mission, a terrible calamity befell the Church in Jerusalem. In AD 70 the Jews were expelled from the city, their temple destroyed. The Christian church that was part of the broader Jewish community was quashed. It was upon the network of churches run by Paul's formerly Gentile converts outside Jerusalem that the survival of Christianity depended.

'The posthumous victory was St Paul's. He had made the ark, his churches and doctrines, which survived the flood intact. It was thanks to him that later Christians were able to take a surprisingly positive view of 70 C.E., compared with the more rational, penitential sorrow of Jerusalem.'²⁶

And to the victor the spoils. As we have seen, the first followers of Jesus had waited with breathless anticipation for his imminent return. Consequently, they had no need to provide a written record of his doings and sayings for generations to come. Now it was the inheritors of Paul's tradition that gained editorial supremacy over that process.

The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem is referred to in all four Gospels, which shows they were written not less than forty years after Christ's death. Interestingly, it has been said that with the exception of Papias, who speaks of a narrative by Mark and a collection of sayings of Jesus, no Christian writer of the first half of the second century quotes the Gospels or their reputed authors.²⁷ This suggests that they were written after that date.

So, what sources were available to the early gospel writers? The letters of Paul, untouched by the destruction of Jerusalem, along with the Churches that revered him, must have been a central resource.

It may be that what became the basis for Mark's gospel was begun in response to the tragedy at Jerusalem, fairly soon after the event. There have been attempts to construct a prototype 'Mark', which may have consisted merely of such of Jesus' teachings as the writer could remember, in no particular biographical order and beginning simply with the beginning of his ministry. Interestingly, 'Mark' as it has come down to us is strongly Pauline. Notably it has the least biographical information about the historical Jesus.

Scholars generally agree that Matthew and Luke used Mark as a basis and were written during a period of at least thirty years afterwards (possibly considerably longer). Matthew and Luke also draw on another source (or sources) – which scholars have tentatively called Q. It seems to have been a collection of sayings and doings of Jesus. John, which is probably later, is

clearly of different provenance from the other three gospels, but still within the Pauline fold. 'With him we are back in the heart of St. Paul: Christ present in the believer, Christ present in the Christian community'²⁸

Minute examination of the differences in emphasis between the Gospels has tended to obscure the broader point: that Paul's school was now firmly in charge of Christianity's direction.

The Gospel-writers fleshed out biographical detail on Jesus with Old Testament sources. As they believed the prophets of old had foretold his coming, 'they may well have regarded them as more authoritative and dependable sources than Christian oral tradition.'²⁹ Hence Matthew tells: 'a string of stories about Jesus' birth, visit by the wise men, exile and return, and the massacre of the innocents. Each has an Old Testament quotation at its heart: probably the kernel from which he grew it.'³⁰

How unsurprising, then, that these marvellous stories bear an uncanny resemblance to the finest mythological tales of the day – the birth and lives of the gods and goddesses of the Pagan religions.

Similarly, while there is very little of the historical Jesus, we see a mythical personality develop before our eyes. If, like many scholars, we count the last verses of Mark as late additions, his gospel ends with the women who had gone to seek the body of Christ fleeing from the tomb after finding it missing. Including these verses, Mark ends with a brief account of Jesus' appearance before his followers, and the rather matter-of-fact 'he was received up into Heaven'.

In Matthew, the account is slightly more elaborate, including a detail of Pilate sealing the tomb of Jesus and of the guards cooking up a cover-story. Luke, with true story-teller's panache, has come up with a great tale: Jesus tells the worried disciples that he is flesh and bone, not a spirit, and eats a boiled fish and a honeycomb, before being 'carried up to Heaven'. And in John, the story becomes much longer and even more astonishing – Jesus even invites Thomas to thrust his hand into the wound in his side.

So, if, for the sake of argument, we strip away the suspect biographical detail, the more outrageous and derivative miracles, the Old Testament borrowings and the pagan elements of sacrifice and redemption, what is left? Perhaps a collection of sayings and parables in raw form, a record of a teacher, devoid of historical context or overt political message.

It seems likely that many such fragmentary versions along these lines – of greater or lesser reliability – were in circulation for some time, the property of the different schools of followers of various Apostles, handed down through the generations. Such documents – rather like the source Q mentioned above – sound very similar in nature to the sayings and traditions

of, say, the Prophet Mohammad in the Muslim religion, which were carefully gathered together and eventually collated.

The would-be analyst's task of such documents is greatly complicated by a fad, well into the third century AD, of 'pious fraud' in which a mass of 'evidence' was fabricated – gospels, epistles, sayings of Jesus – each one designed to push the preoccupations, political and religious biases of the myriad communities which had grown up around the followers of Jesus.

'Almost every one of the Apostles had a gospel fathered upon him by one early sect or another'³¹

The Church, growing worried about the many conflicting accounts of Jesus' life and teachings, eventually gathered together all it could find and suppressed all but the four we know today.

That being said, various rival gospels and pseudo-gospels have emerged. Of course, at this distance, it is often impossible to tell their provenance. However, with that health warning, some of them yield tantalizing clues as to the kind of early material about the life of Christ that never made it into the official histories.

For instance, in 1945 an interesting Coptic text came to light. A group of Egyptian fellahs, including one Muhammad Ali, unearthed a large storage jar sealed on top, near Jabal al Tarif in Upper Egypt. Understandably nervous that such a remarkable object might contain a jinn, he hesitated before opening it, until the suspicion that it might on the other hand be buried treasure grew too great. Muhammad Ali had discovered treasure, but not of the kind he anticipated. In the jar were the thirteen papyrus books of the Nag Hammadi library, and the Gospel of Thomas within the library.

The oldest papyrus was dated to 200 AD. As it was already a translation, it may have originated as early as 150 AD. It was obviously a version current among the followers of the Apostle James, who belonged to the Church of Jerusalem that followed the Jewish law rather than the Pauline view of Christianity.

The Gospel of Thomas is probably very similar in format to 'Q', the collection of sayings of Jesus that Matthew and Luke seem to have drawn on. Some of the stories are the same, some different. There is no biographical material, no chronological order, only the collected wisdom of a spiritual teacher.

'In contrast to the way in which he is portrayed in other gospels, particularly New Testament gospels, Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas performs no physical miracles, reveals no fulfilment of prophecy,

announces no apocalyptic kingdom about to disrupt the world order and dies for no one's sins. Instead, Thomas's Jesus dispenses insight from the bubbling spring of wisdom and offers a way of salvation through an encounter with the sayings of 'the living Jesus'.³²

When the dazzling biographical material is stripped away, the wisdom of the parables themselves is allowed to shine. For instance, one unique to Thomas:

'The father's kingdom is like a woman who was carrying a [jar] full of meal. While she was walking along [a] distant road, the handle of the jar broke and the meal spilled behind her [along] the road. She did not know it; she had not noticed a problem. When she reached her house, she put the jar down and discovered that it was empty.'³³

And some teachings in this Gospel directly contradict the Pauline view that the Kingdom of God will arrive with a bang, although they do suggest the frame of mind of some of Jesus' followers:

'His followers said to him, "When will the kingdom come?" "It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said 'Look here it is,' or 'Look there it is.' Rather the father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it."³⁴

This sort of subtlety, it is to be feared, was lost with the destruction of the diversity of schools within Christianity. Material like this suggests that we have at best a fragment of the whole tradition. It is as if each Apostle or follower had a part of the page upon which the story of Christianity was written – and we have received only a tiny scrap of that paper.

Conclusion

The story of early Christianity is instructive as a case study of the almost inevitable process following the death of a teacher. However carefully guarded the message, the individual obsessions and preoccupations of his followers are bound to leave a mark. Personal ambition causes splits and wrangles. Greed for the miraculous and the astonishing, for glittering or comforting ritual overlay the actual teaching, and finally replace the content of that teaching itself.

Christian commentators have suggested that a certain distortion of the message of Christ was a price worth paying for the strong hand of Paul that held the church together. Here is a not uncommon example:

'However much the... loss of spiritual values may be regretted, the hardening of the conception of orthodoxy and the stern imposition of

doctrinal discipline was an absolute necessity to which, in fact, there could have been no practical alternative. Had it not been achieved, Christianity would have become a mere aggregate of small sects united but by the vaguest common denominator.³⁵

For the uncommitted student, however, the archaeological exercise of stripping away the accretions of centuries – including their overlay of ritual – is vastly rewarding, if it affords even the tiniest glimpse of the original teachings of Jesus.

Notes

1. Iwe, The Rev. N. *The Early Christian Beginnings*.
2. Quoted in Wheless, J. *Forgery in Christianity*.
3. Baur, Ferdinand. *Hebraists, Hellenists and Catholics*, 1860, quoted in Meeks.
4. Meeks, W. *The Writings of St. Paul*.
5. Sargant, W. *Battle for the Mind*.
6. Baur, Ferdinand. *Op. Cit.*
7. Dorman, R. *Birth of a Worldview*.
8. Christiansen, E. *The Covenant in Judaism and Paul*.
9. I Corinthians, 13:10–11.
10. Galatians, 2:2.
11. *Ibid*, 2:7.
12. *Ibid*, 2:9.
13. *Ibid*, 2:11–12.
14. Romans, 15; 25–26.
15. *Ibid*, 15:30–31.
16. Acts, 21:17.
17. I Corinthians, 7:29–31
18. *Ibid*, 9:20–23
19. Halliday, W. *The Pagan Background of Early Christianity*.
20. *The Pagan Saviours: Pagan Elements in Christian Ritual and Doctrine*, Institute for Cultural Research, London, 2000.
21. Reitzenstein, *The Hellenic Mystery Religions*, quoted in Richard Ince, *A Dictionary of Religion*, Cambridge, 1935.
22. Galatians, 3:2 and 3:13.
23. Halliday, W. *Op. cit.*
24. I Corinthians, 8:8–10.
25. Iwe, The Rev. N. *Op. cit.*
26. John Drury's introduction to *The New Testament*, Everyman's Library edition
27. Quoted in Wheless, *op. cit.* at 2.
28. John Drury. *Op. cit.*
29. *Ibid*.
30. *Ibid*.
31. Wheless, J. *Op. cit* at 2.
32. Meyer, M. (Trans.) *The Gospel of Thomas*.
33. *Ibid*.
34. *Ibid*.
35. Halliday, W. *Op. cit.*

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