

## “Christianity 101”

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Sometime around 4 CE, a Jew named Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. He had brothers (James was a disciple) and sisters (*Mark* 6:3). He became a man, preached in the prophetic tradition to Jews, and eventually gentiles (non-Jews). Most scholars believe that Jesus spoke Aramaic, the language of the Jewish people who survived the Babylonian captivity five hundred years earlier, and later returned to Palestine. Scholars believe that he was baptized by a prophet named John. We are not entirely certain what he preached about, although most scholars agree that he preached about the Kingdom of God (that it was “at hand”), created the Lord’s Prayer (similar to the Jewish Kaddish prayer), taught with parables and proverbs, and that he had a ministry of social equality that included the despised and unpure. Most scholars agree that Jesus and his earliest followers shared common meals together with a ritual that modern Christians celebrate as communion.

We are not entirely certain of who his followers were, although there is a good chance he had disciples, and that one disciple, Peter, would go on to become the first Pope of the developing Christian church founded in the name of Jesus. The word “Christian” is a translation of the Hebrew word “anointed one,” meaning Messiah. We don’t know if Jesus preached or believed that he was the Messiah. Most scholars doubt that he did.

Most scholars agree that Jesus was a successful healer and exorcist as well as a teacher, which increased his following. During the life of Jesus, Palestine was occupied by the Romans, and the Jewish people were oppressed and outraged by the occupation of a land they considered holy. The Jewish community was deeply divided on how to respond. Some believe in a strict return to purity laws (as a way to atone because the occupation was understood as divine punishment). Others wanted armed rebellion. Jesus’ inclusion of the “unpure,” tax collectors and sinners was deeply offensive to those who believed that purity was needed to throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. Sometime in the early 30’s Jesus was arrested, tried, probably by a combination of separate Roman and Jewish trials, and crucified.

There is independent confirmation of the life of Jesus in both Roman and Jewish literature. In 112 CE, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote “The founder of this sect, Christus, was given the death penalty in the reign of Tiberius, by the procurator Pontius Pilate; suppressed for the moment; the detestable superstition broke out again.”<sup>1</sup> The Babylonian Talmud writes “On the Eve of Passover the hanged Yeshu [of Nazareth] and

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<sup>1</sup> Tacitus, *Annals* XV. 44 quoted in *The New Testament* by Perrin and Duling, 407.

the herald went before him forty days saying, “[Yeshu of Nazareth] is going forth to be stoned in that he hath practiced sorcery and beguiled and led astray Israel.”<sup>2</sup>

Everything that I have shared with you thus far is a liberal religious interpretation of the life, teaching, and death of Jesus. Our Christian orthodox and fundamentalist friends would be offended by a conversation about whether or not Jesus believed he was the long promised Messiah who would deliver the Jewish people from suffering and usher in the Kingdom of God. For our Christian orthodox and fundamentalist friends, the Bible is literal, true, the unerring word of God, and it is understood in the most limited interpretation that meets their needs in the present age.

What I am telling you is what I learned at Harvard and what progressive *New Testament* scholars research and teach. These scholars do not always agree amongst themselves on specifics, but they agree on general principles. For example, they may argue which of the four *New Testament* Gospels (*Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, or *John*) was written first, but they all agree that none were written during the life, or shortly after the death, of Jesus. I learned that *The Gospel According to Mark* was written first, in the 50s or 60s, this would be an entire generation after the death of Jesus. An entire generation for stories and memories to change in the minds of the author or authors, who may or may not, have known Jesus. In fact, given the language used within the Gospel, most scholars believe it was written outside of Palestine.<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, this “oldest” canonized gospel does not contain a birth story about Jesus. Instead it begins with a proclamation by John the Baptist. In addition, *Mark* does not have a story about the resurrection of Jesus. In fact, there are three different endings to *Mark*. In the first, women, including Mary Magdalene and Mary, arrive at his tomb and find a young man who tells them that Jesus has been “raised.” In the second ending we are told that “Jesus himself sent out through them.” This ending also mentions Peter (scholars believe it was added after the 4<sup>th</sup> century). The third ending, first appearing in the second century, has Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, his disciples, commissioning his disciples, and ascending to heaven.

*The Gospel According to Luke* and the *Gospel According to Matthew*, both written several decades later, contain birth stories about Jesus, but their stories are different. *Matthew* has the wise men and flight to Egypt, while *Luke* has the manger and shepherds. *Luke* does not have the wise men, and *Matthew* does not have the shepherds. *The Gospel According to Matthew* is the first *New Testament* Gospel. I learned that it was placed because it tells the story the developing “catholic” (meaning “universal”) Christian church wanted known. It tells the birth and passion of Jesus, establishes the role of Peter (who went on to become the first Pope), and is specific about laws, such as how to pray. It is the early Christian “How to” manual. It is also very negative towards the Pharisees, one of the many Jewish groups that existed during the life of Jesus.

Today scholars believe that *Matthew* was written in 80 or 90 CE. There is great significance in this date. The Jewish Wars devastated Jerusalem and the surrounding area from 66 – 70 CE. The temple of Jerusalem was burned to the ground, residents fled or were slaughtered. This began the Jewish Diaspora that lasted until the founding of Israel in 1948. The Zealots (one Jewish group) made their last stand at Masada, and killed every last man, woman, and child before the Romans crossed the walls. The only viable

<sup>2</sup> B Sanhedrin 43a, quoted in Perrin and Duling, 407-408.

<sup>3</sup> Harper Collins Study Bible, 1915-1917.

remaining Jewish group was the Pharisees, who stabilized the remnants of Judaism by focusing on the law and establishing rituals within the family (since the former place of ritual, the temple, had been destroyed). With their emphasis on the law, they were hostile to early Christian groups who accepted “unclean” members and gentiles, and did not follow Mosaic Law. Although the early Christians wanted to remain within the Jewish fold with Jesus as the recognized Messiah, the Pharisees thrust them out. This led to bitterness, feuding, and riots (one of the reasons the Romans detested the Christians and their missionaries so much – because they riled up Jewish residents and others and caused public turmoil).

When *Matthew* was written, the Pharisees had already refused to allow early Christians to be part of the Jewish community, which is why *Matthew* contains so many vehement attacks on the Pharisees in particular. It is highly doubted that Jesus would have been so angry at the Pharisees fifty years earlier during this lifetime. Unfortunately, when *Matthew* became the first gospel of the developing Catholic Church, it fostered centuries of violent anti-Semitism that would only accelerate after Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire by decree of Emperor Constantine.

Many of you look at me today and say “I just don’t understand the appeal of Christianity.” Consider what you might feel if you had lived in Palestine in 30 CE. You were taxed beyond reason, lived in an occupied country, and your family and neighbors fought about religious laws and who belonged and who did not belong. Into this comes Jesus who accepts everyone, refuses to see differences between the “clean” and “unclean,” heals, and said things like “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (*Matthew* 22:37-39).

Perrin and Duling note that the sayings in the *New Testament* most likely to belong to Jesus are the parables (Good Samaritan, Mustard Seed, etc.) and proverbs (“Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his lifespan” *Matthew* 6:27). Parables have no single ending, but can be re-interpreted in different times and places. Likewise, proverbs are intended to provoke questions, not obedience. Parables and proverbs are meant to make the listener uncertain, to turn the world upside down, but they are not to provide one literal, permanent meaning. The message of Jesus was not one of conformity or laws. However, when the *New Testament* was written, early Christian authors turned the parables into allegories, with direct correlations and symbols that limit the listener in his or her contemplation.<sup>4</sup>

The combination of social equality and compassion, with intelligent, provocative parables and proverbs was enough to make Jesus popular while he lived. After his crucifixion, the developing Christian church did the rest. They created the star child birth narratives for Jesus, similar to those of other hero gods in the Greco-Roman world. Then they created the theology of Christianity that established the teachings of Jesus into a world religion.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, his followers were in an uproar. Their leader was gone and the Kingdom of God on earth had not come. What was next? Many scholars argue, and I agree, that Christianity would have faded, if not for the conversion of a Jew named Saul. Saul, although Jewish and a contemporary of Jesus, never met Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup> 415 – 422.

Rather, he, according to his own words, persecuted Jews. However, two or three years after the crucifixion of Jesus, Saul converted to Christianity, and changed his name from the Hebrew “Saul,” to the Greek version, “Paul.” Today the *New Testament* contains 14 letters from Paul, 7 undisputed (meaning scholars agree they were written by Paul), and 7 disputed (meaning scholars believe they were written by someone else and attributed to Paul). These are the earliest writings of the *New Testament*.

The letters indicate that Paul had his hands full. He met with Peter in Jerusalem. It is not certain if he was ever given the designation of “apostle,” and he was constantly defending his role inside and outside the community. He was given the ministry to gentiles (Peter took the ministry of the circumcised, or Jews). His letters attempt to settle disputes on speaking in tongues (not as important as love), the role of women, the rich eating communion food first, etc.

Ultimately, Paul would be the more successful missionary, traveling and communicated with gentile Christian communities from Syria to Macedonia (Asia Minor). Paul’s surviving letters (we have but 7 out of a career that spanned almost thirty years until his crucifixion – I have often wondered what the hundreds or thousands of un-surviving letters said) developed the theology of “justification by faith,” so that Christians are saved by faith, rather than by following the holy or Mosaic laws (“justification by works”) or ruminating on the parables of Jesus. In *Romans* Paul writes “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (8:34). Paul continued Jesus’ message of love (which we heard in *I Corinthians*), and added the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross and the subsequent salvation of followers. He rarely looks at the radical dimensions of the parables or proverbs.

After Christianity became the state religion, work was needed to clarify “orthodox” theology. In 325 CE, the Council of Nicea determined that God the Father is equal to Christ the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Individuals, such as Arius, who argued that Jesus was lesser than God (and there were many who agreed with him), were declared heretics. This Council developed the Nicene Creed which established the concept of the Trinity. The characters of God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost had all existed prior to 325 CE, but no one had yet clarified how they related to one another. Over the next four hundred years the “Apostle’s Creed” was written, containing much of the language of the Nicene Creed and the formulation of the Trinity.

Today liberal religious scholars agree that Jesus did not know or preach on the Trinity and seemed disinterested in his relationship to God. Rather he focused entirely on the Kingdom of God and bringing it to life, faith in God, and love of neighbors. Statements in the *New Testament* gospels where Jesus speaks of himself as the Messiah are thought to be later additions. This theory has been supported by the discovery of other gospels, such as the Gospel of Thomas, discovered in Nag Hammadi, Egypt. This gospel written by the Gnostic Christian community, contains sayings of Jesus such as

Jesus said, "If your leaders say to you, 'Look, the (Father's) kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is within you and it is outside you.

When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father. But if you do not know yourselves, then you live in poverty, and you are the poverty." <sup>5</sup>

The conclusion to this sermon was extemporaneous.



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<sup>5</sup> The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version.\* Copyright 1992, 1994 by Polebridge Press.