

## *Preface*

This book is not a History of Early Christianity. It rests on a careful philological analysis of the texts, and by highlights from those texts, it seeks to give a *sense* of that history by listening in on the early Jesus followers and their opponents. Those who followed Jesus' teachings during his lifetime and after, I call the Alpha Christians.

Later arose doctrines (the Resurrection and the Atonement) based on Jesus' death as *itself* having power to save. These ideas found a hearing among the Beta Christians; theirs is the Christianity of Paul. Alpha and Beta were hateful to each other, and both were hateful to Temple Judaism. This book introduces Alpha, then Beta, then watches as that three-way opposition plays itself out. Only brief space is given to a more individual or Gnostic variant, where people are saved by gaining knowledge of their own divine origin; it might be called Gamma Christianity.

These texts are often read as having the same message, as though they all came from the same moment in time. This book looks instead for the history connecting them, the evolution and sometimes the conflict of ideas that link one text to another, and ultimately to ourselves, in the present century. There is also history *within* some of the texts, as later material was added to keep that text current with the latest thinking about Jesus. That is where the philological analysis comes in: to identify those additions. This is not especially difficult. Here is Jesus in Mark, predicting that his followers will soon abandon him:

Mark 14:27. And Jesus saith unto them, All ye shall fall away, for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered abroad.

[28] *Howbeit, after I am raised up, I will go before you into Galilee.*

[29] But Peter said unto him, Although all shall fall away, yet will not I.

Peter looks right past the encouraging reassurance of verse 28, and responds instead to the challenge in verse 27. Then when Mark 14:29 was first written, Mark 14:28 *was not yet there*. This is how we recognize interpolations. And this interpolation is part of how we know that the doctrine of the Resurrection was not originally part of Mark's story of Jesus. In this way, it is possible to put the growth texts back to their original state. But identifying interpolations arouses opposition, and progress has thus been slow. Picking up on some results of previous scholarship, I have tried to continue that task for the texts here included (see further the footnotes and the list of Works Cited, page 185). For a text in both its original and its expanded form, see Chapters 52 and 53.

This book takes a historical view. Its Jesus is a human Jesus. He makes mistakes. His later followers also make mistakes. The Temple priests, turning away from what was widest in their own tradition, make their mistakes too. Some have found it helpful, and even liberating (not every churchgoer is comfortable with some Church doctrines) to have these changes traced out.

This book is for them.

Each chapter centers on a passage from the Bible or the related literature; it has an introduction (to identify the text, when it may not be widely familiar) and concluding Reflections. Readers are welcome to do their own reflecting; the book might provide material for an informal discussion group.

No apology for the Chinese characters which appear on a couple of pages. These people lived in a much wider world than we are accustomed to imagine.

My sense of the Gospels is that Mark was begun soon after Jesus' death, and updated well into the Forties. Matthew and Luke appeared in the Sixties, after the deaths of the leading Apostles. John came last of all, in the Eighties. The Gospels thus reflect three generations in the early history of Christianity. For these and other texts and events, see the Chronology on page 183.

What we call "texts" were more intensely regarded in ancient times. They were persuasions, as when someone is telling people what to do, in a sermon or an exposition. Or they were affirmations, as when people repeat something they already believe, and thereby strengthen themselves in that belief. The prayer Maranatha (Aramaic for "Come, Lord") is a wish that the Last Day should come *now*. When a singer finishes a hymn, and the hearers respond with "Hallelujah" ("Praise Jehovah") they are uniting with what has just been sung. I have tried to preserve something of that immediacy in these pages.

I have used the grammatically accurate American Standard Version (ASV), adjusting it where its archaism may mislead. One of its virtues is that it retains the historical present verbs which add so much vividness to Mark's story.

Readers with a Jewish perspective will note, perhaps with sadness, that with just a few differences in the direction it took, the Jesus movement might have remained what it was when it began: a Jewish sect. But a *universal* Jewish sect, attracting adherents from without as well as within the parent religion.

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Some early readers, those with missionary experience, have noted a certain missionary quality in this book. The book more or less wrote itself when I wasn't looking, but yeah, I suppose so. It goes beyond noting what happened, and prefers some things to others. It points out a very early form of belief which did not remain dominant, but may have its appeal for some today.

Claude G Montefiore, the most interesting of Jewish commentators on the Christian texts, did somewhat the same thing. His idea of Liberal Judaism included some preferences that readers of this book will recognize. Our views of the mistakes of Christianity and Judaism are not identical, but they run in similar directions, and I have thus felt it right to recognize him as a precursor. This book is dedicated to him.

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