



Adult Ed September 27th, 2009

Jesus and Me

On Being a Non-Christian in a Christian Country

Good morning or as we say in “Boker tov.” Welcome to the Jewish Cultural Society (JCS for short) Adult Education program. This marks the third year of Adult Education at the Ann Arbor JCS. Admission is free, at least for the current time, and all are welcome to attend. On a monthly basis, we meet and discuss topics relevant to our heritage. Today’s topic is “Jesus and Me.” I will begin by discussing what it was like for me growing up a non-Christian in what is a predominantly Christian country, but that is only the beginning of what I will discuss. I will share some of the recent findings by archaeologists and historians relevant to an understanding of Biblical times; I will quote scripture, cite historical sources and share with you some of the things that I have learned recently through readings of contemporary experts in Biblical lore.

I should point out, especially in view of the high number of non-JCS members in attendance today, what the JCS of Ann Arbor is and what we believe in, quoting directly from our mission statement¹. “We are a full-service secular humanistic Jewish community welcoming everyone to share in the traditions, history, culture, and values of the Jewish People.

We believe that Judaism is the magnificent creation of the Jewish people over time and in every land. Our Jewish heritage is a source of identity, pride and ethics. Jewish history teaches us much about rights and responsibilities, about human behavior, and about community. Jewish culture enriches and inspires us.

There have always been Jews who identified with Jewish history, culture and peoplehood. We have had various names throughout the ages, some accepting, some less complementary. In response to the Enlightenment, Secular Jews in Eastern Europe began to name themselves and to celebrate Jewish culture in nonreligious ways. In the late 1800's Secular Judaism emerged as a recognizable movement in Jewish life. It was joined in the 1960's by Humanistic Judaism, which has a more Western European flavor and outlook. The two movements together now form the International Federation of Secular Humanistic Jews, with Federations in North America, South America, Israel, Europe, Australia and the former Soviet Union.”

Secular humanism, of which Jewish Secular Humanism is a branch, is often lumped together with or confused with, atheism. It shouldn't be, although most Secular Humanists are non-theists. Humanism is concerned primarily with ethics or morality, with how people should behave. Of course, behavior is affected by belief. The Council

¹ <http://www.hvcn.org/info/jcs/secular.html>

for Secular Humanism defines itself as follows²: “Thus, secular humanists do not rely upon gods or other supernatural forces to solve their problems or provide guidance for their conduct. They rely instead upon **the application of reason, the lessons of history, and personal experience to form an ethical/moral foundation and to create meaning in life.** Secular humanists look to the methodology of science as the most reliable source of information about what is factual or true about the universe we all share, acknowledging that new discoveries will always alter and expand our understanding of it and perhaps change our approach to ethical issues as well.” So if you ask me what sources I draw upon for the moral code that guides me, I look to history, to my own experiences and to rational thought. Having said that, I recognize that religion and religious writings in particular are a part of history. I view the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, as well as other works as being written by the hand of Men, rather than through Divine Providence. To me, that does not in any way lessen the importance of the effort put into creating these works, nor does it degrade the validity of the moral lessons inscribed by the best minds of long-ago generations. In fact, while reading Scripture, I think that this perspective gives me a certain advantage over Biblical literalists, in that I can look at and weigh the moral messages, without getting hung up on whether the Earth is only five thousand seven hundred and seventy years old or whether the Sun stood still for Joshua. And you know what? I like some of the moral messages in both Bibles.

It is not my intent to disparage or to denigrate anyone’s beliefs. Nor is my intent to convert or to proselytize. In short, I have no ax to grind. It is my intent to examine religious beliefs in a historical context, to look at events that were happening at the same time as the books that we refer to today as being Scripture were being written and to ask how these events might have influenced the authors. I would hope that you will find some benefit to this and perhaps will be influenced to reexamine your own beliefs, with a positive impact.

I thank you all for coming out on a Sunday morning and I want you to know that I value your time. I begin every class by explaining why the topic was chosen, what the relevance is, in short by discussing why you should care. Judaism, Christianity and Islam all share common roots. They are referred to collectively as the **Abrahamic religions**, since all recognize the figure of Abraham as having significance. I point that out to show that each of the three faiths shares a common starting point. Moreover, the moral values espoused by the three faiths have much in common. For a third point of commonality, all three faiths originated within the same, relatively small geographic area. With so much in common, why then has there been so much conflict throughout history between people who claim to worship the same G-d? More importantly, why have these conflicts continued to into the modern day, in place like Iraq, Afghanistan, Darfur, Bosnia and Israel? What, if anything, can we learn from our common history that might help us at least understand the nature of these conflicts, to understand why religious wars take place?

² <http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?page=what§ion=main>

That explains why I selected this topic in the first place. As to why this discussion is particularly germane now, at this time, let me offer that in the past sixty-five years many new original sources have come to light:

- In 1945, an amazing discovery was made at Nag Hammadi in Egypt. A number of ancient texts, including purported Gospels long banned by the Orthodox Church, were discovered by two brothers. Most scholars agree that these so-called Gnostic Gospels, such as the Secret book of James and the Gospels of Thomas and Phillip, were forgeries in that they were not written by the purported authors. However, they do shed light on how the beliefs of people who self-identify as Christians have changed over time.
- Between 1947 and 1956 a second amazing discovery was made in the hills near Qumran. Some 900 documents, mostly in the form of papyrus scrolls, were found hidden in a number of caves. The find included some of the only known surviving copies of the Bible made before 100 BCE.
- Most recently, only two months ago, the Codex Sinaiticus, a copy of the Greek Bible including both Old and New Testaments as well as other books removed from the modern Bible and dating from the 4th Century, is in the process of being reassembled and made available for scholarly study via the Codex website. Previously the Codex was held in sections at four libraries.

I hope that I have established the meaningfulness of what I will discuss and that I have further explained that in the course of this discussion I will try to support the ideas that I will present to you through citing history, including new discoveries, as well as scripture and by applying reason and personal experience.

Which brings to “**Jesus and Me.**” This part is the personal perspective. I was born in 1955, when the world and America in particular, was a different place. There was a lot less discussion of diversity and a lot more emphasis on conformity. As I said in the blurb for this class, growing up in America in the nineteen fifties and sixties, more than now, Christianity was an inescapable part of the culture. By inescapable, I mean that as a kid, you can’t help but to take notice of the holidays celebrating the birth and commemorating the death of Jesus. It is not just that the Christmas and Easter holidays are celebrated by the vast majority of your neighbors; it is that these are STATE holidays, part of the fabric of American society. I did not come from a Jewish home that had Christmas trees; such an idea would have been utterly foreign to my parents, despite the fact that they were not observant and no longer kept kosher. Not celebrating these holidays made me feel not only different but somehow un-American.

Please don’t get me wrong, I am not in any way against Christians celebrating their holidays, but in those days, non-Christian religions were barely acknowledged. As a child there was a sense of unfairness about the whole thing.

Despite these feelings of ostracism, I like the Jesus of the New Testament. I saw then and see now nobility about Jesus that is very attractive. He was, after all, a Jew that stood up against the Romans when they were oppressing our people. He was willing to lay his life

on the line for what he believed in, for values that included freedom of worship. I like the words that are attributed to him, most especially the Sermon on the Mount, which I contend are some of the most beautiful words ever written, whether accurately recorded or not. Someone wrote them and I find tremendous value to them.

Moreover Jesus speaks in parables, often answering a direct question by telling stories. This is a quality that I share as anyone that works with me can verify.

I am not the only Jew to feel a kinship with Jesus. Let me quote the words of singer, songwriter, author and candidate for the position of Governor of the Great State of Texas (pending session, of course), Kinky Friedman: "Like Jesus, I was either cursed or blessed by being born a Jew. Impressed by Jesus at an early age, I made it a point never to get married in my adult life, never to have a home, and never to have a job. Instead, I spent much of the time traveling around the country side with a long-haired band of men, irritating many people. Also, like Jesus, I was a big believer in resurrection. I've had to resurrect my career on at least three or four occasions."

As much as I like the story of Jesus, there are two parts which I just cannot accept. The first is the idea that a Divine Being had a child by a mortal woman; and the second is that this child was sacrificed to redeem Mankind from Original Sin. These two precepts are summarized in John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." These concepts are just unacceptable to me. Yet these concepts are core to modern Christianity. Let me reiterate those words, "modern Christianity."

The concept of G-d sacrificing His Son stands in direct contrast to the Jewish story of the refused sacrifice of Abraham's son Isaac.

Again, I am not the only one to feel this way. Patti Smith added an opening line to her cover of the song Gloria: "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine - My sins are my own, they belong to me". The first time that I heard those lyrics they touched something within me, capturing a feeling that I had experienced. By the way, Patti Smith is NOT Jewish, but her long-time collaborator and guitarist of the Patti Smith Group, Lenny Kaye, is Jewish. Patti Smith claims that she had a strong Christian upbringing and Bible education.³

The other that is most troubling to me about the New Testament, and I will separate this from the story of Jesus, is the anti-Semitism to be found throughout the modern versions of the Gospels. Again, I am going to emphasize the modern versions of the Gospels. I could never understand how so much hatred against Jews could come from books written by Jews, about Jews.

With this background in mind, I began to examine the story of Jesus and the emergence and subsequent changes in Christianity in a Jewish, historical and secular context. How

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patti_Smith

did Christianity and Judaism, beginning from common roots, diverge so strongly on the topic of the Messiah? Let us begin with some historical background.

The Distant Past

Let me recap some of the events that create a context. First let's discuss the Middle East.

At the risk of seeming pedantic, the biggest thing to understand about the Middle East is that it is in the Middle. The western coast of the modern day land of Israel is on the Mediterranean (or Middle) Ocean. People living in this area were on a major caravan road connecting the ancient Sumerian empires, such as Babylon and later Persia, and Egypt. We know that in turn the Persians traded with the empires of far-off India and possibly China as well. Sailors from Minoan Crete, Greece and later Rome, all landed there. Not only did trade goods pass through this area, but ideas as well.

By 1000 BCE, the ancient Hebrews had conquered this land. Under King David (1000 BCE to 962 BCE), they had established an empire that spanned from modern day Iraq in the northeast and included parts of Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and included the Sinai Peninsula which bordered with Egypt to the southwest. (See below.) Under David's son, Solomon (961 BCE to 922 BCE), a great temple was built in the conquered city of Jerusalem.

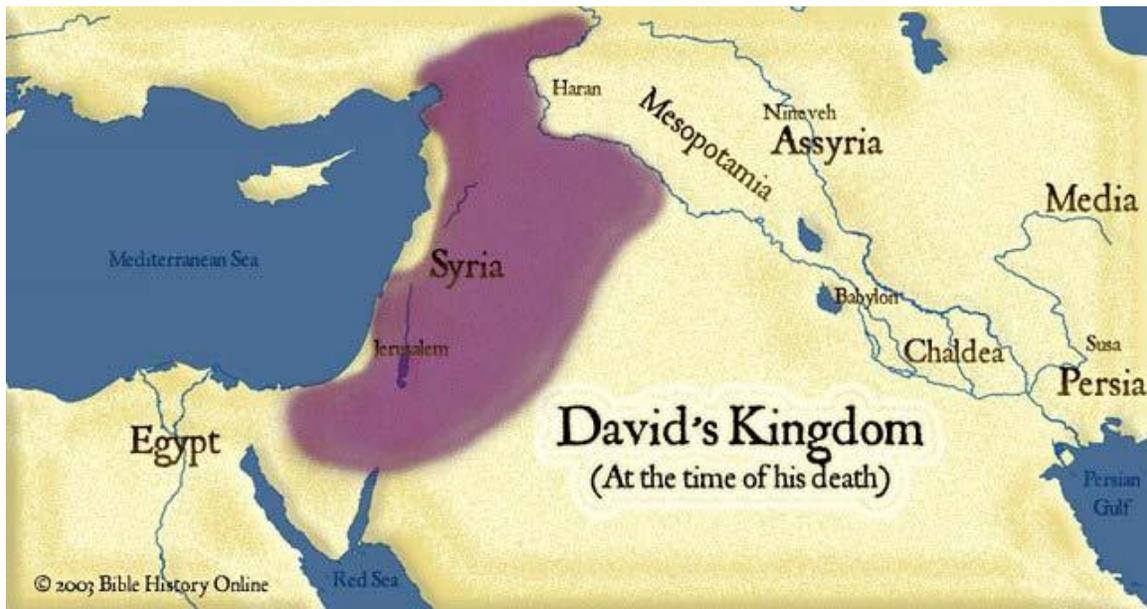


Figure 1 Map of David's Kingdom

The Kingdom of David, the return of which figures in the prophecies of both the Old and New Testaments, marks the high point of Hebrew military power. After the death of Solomon, the Hebrews would quarrel amongst themselves and the land would be divided into two separate kingdoms, Israel and Judea. Not only were these separate kingdoms politically, but they each had their own high priest and city of worship. There was

another temple built at Beth-El. Presumably each area had its own Bible, which were later merged, causing the odd repetitions with slight variations that you find in the Book of Genesis.

After this division, the Hebrew people would be militarily weak and would become essentially a doormat for stronger powers wishing to possess the strategic land. In 721 BCE, Assyria would conquer the north, leading the ten tribes there away into servitude at the fringes of the mighty Assyrian Empire. This explains why there are ancient peoples with Hebrew roots living as far away as Ethiopia and India. Some of these Hebrews-in-exile may return as the Samaritans, a name derived from the Hebrew term “Keepers of the Law.” In 587 BCE, the southern part of the divided kingdom is conquered by the Babylonians, with the nobles and priestly class going into exile in Babylon. After sixty years, some of these people would return, led by the priest Ezra. Others would stay in Babylon, which would become a center for Jewish learning and would produce the Babylonian Torah.

These events are not only recorded in the Bible, they change the Bible. During the time of the kingdom of David, it seemed that G-d’s promises to Abraham (“I will make you a great nation.” “All the land you see, I will give it to you and your descendants forever.” “In your seed all nations will be blessed.”) had been fulfilled. Now, there had to be an explanation for the downturn in the fortunes of the Hebrews. That explanation was that the people had sinned, had failed to follow G-d’s Laws. In order to follow these Laws, the people had to know them. Therefore, the Laws had to be codified in the form of a Book and that book had to be taught to the people. As said in Nehemiah 8 “And Ezra the priest brought the Law before the congregation, both men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And they read in the book, in the Law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading.” This is the first time that we hear reference of the Bible, as a book, being read to the common people. Until this time, organized religion was largely a matter of bringing an animal to the Temple for priestly sacrifice. The idea of reading from a book of Law was so new and so terrifying that many of the people fell to their knees in fear the first time it was read. Until the priesthood had been carried away, there was no need for the common people to know the Law; the priests told them what the Law was. By the time of Jesus, the task of reading the Bible and explaining the Law to the common people would be provenance of the Pharisees.

After the return from exile in Babylon, what we refer to as the First Diaspora, the Hebrews were also exposed to another “new” concept, the belief in an afterlife. This was learned from the Persians, who had conquered the Babylonians. In turn, the Persians had gotten the concept from the people of India.

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great conquers the land of Israel. Around 250 BCE intrigued by this holy book of the Hebrews, the Greek-Egyptian King Ptolemy orders the book translated into Greek. He convenes the Septuagint, a council of seventy-two Jewish scribes, for the translation. The Bible, once exclusively read by Hebrews, becomes widely read all around the Mediterranean, especially in Greece. (This will later set the

stage for Paul's ministry in Greece.) It should be noted that not only did the Greeks absorb ideas from the Jews, but the Jews absorbed ideas from the Greeks as well.

In 168 BCE, Antiochus IV Epiphanes (which means "Manifest God") conquers the land of the Jews and outlaws the practice of Judaism in order to forcibly convert the people to the worship of Zeus. Circumcision is made illegal under penalty of death and the Temple is desecrated. In 167 BCE, Mattathias and his five sons lead a successful rebellion and establish the Hasmonean Dynasty. Despite their place of prominence in Jewish history, this was a brutal regime. Not only were they kinds not of the line of David, but they insisted on holding control over the priesthood as well. The priests of this day claimed legitimacy from the first High Priest, Zaddok, and called themselves Sadducees. This lack of legitimacy alienated religious groups, such as the Pharisees and the Essenes. The Teacher of Righteousness of the Essenes led a group away to live in a small religious settlement at Qumran.

Also, during the reign of the Hasmoneans, they conquered and forcibly converted the Idumeans, a people who were living in the Sinai Peninsula. The Hasmoneans sought to use the Idumeans against the rebellious Jewish people, but the Idumeans turned the tables on them and by 40 BCE, an Idumean was crowned king. His name was Herod the Great and his son was Herod Antipater. By 6 CE, Rome had conquered Israel, renamed the area Palestine and named Herod Antipas as prefect, with the title of tetrarch or ruler of a quarter. This is the Herod who is infamous for his executions of John the Baptist and Jesus. He was never the anointed King of the Jews and would be removed from authority in 39 CE precisely for requesting that his Roman overlords declare him king.

Not only was there religious unrest, there was political unrest as well. In 6 CE, Judas of Galilee had formed the Zealots, a group that sought to throw the Romans out by force of arms.

This is the land and times of Jesus. The land was seething under the tyranny of Roman rule, the latest in a series of foreign conquerors. There were a number of religious groups, often acting in opposition to each other. The Essenes in particular had gone into the hills close to the wastelands where John the Baptist would preach and near where Jesus would deliver the Sermons on the Mount and the Plain and were hiding holy books in caves, perhaps in anticipation of the end of all things. The Sadducees were constantly scheming and the Pharisees preaching. To the Zealots, operating mostly out of Jesus' home province of Galilee, victory would not come through prayer, but by the sword.

The Coming of the Romans

The effect of the Roman conquest on Judea, which will be renamed Palestine as a Roman conquered territory cannot be overstated. In 63 BCE, Pompey annexes the territory as part of the conquest of the lands ruled by Alexander the Great's generals. The area formerly occupied by Seleucids, the Syrian Greeks as they are commonly referred to, is divided into three areas: Galilee, Samaria, and Judea. Rome has both allies, those who sought to gather power to themselves in return for fealty to the Romans, and opposition.

The opposition comes from the people, led in part by the priesthood. When the patriots refuse to open the gates of Jerusalem to the Romans, Pompey besieges the city. When the city falls to his armies, Pompey himself enters the Temple, the second time that such a desecration occurs. Imagine the religious consequences of this act. If the Jews are in fact the Chosen People, how has G-d permitted such a desecration to occur? The explanation that would be offered was that the Jewish people had become sinful, adopting the ways of their Greek and then Roman conquerors. A number of sects spring up, believing that such an event must presage the end of the world. They would not be far wrong.

Despite the rebellious nature of the Jewish population, Rome initially ruled the land as a protectorate, not a province. That meant that the Jews were allowed to have a king of their own. Of course, the Romans chose one, who they thought would be pliant to the goals. They chose Herod the Great (74 BCE to 4 BCE), an Idumean.

Matthew says of Herod that he was “a madman who murdered his own family and a great many rabbis” and Herod did indeed kill members of his family including his wife. But Herod should also be remembered for rebuilding and expanding the Second Temple. In contrast to this achievement, his faith in Judaism was called into question by the Sanhedrin. He is known for his brutality toward the Jewish people and his decadent lifestyle.

Life in the provinces becomes tied to intrigues in far away Rome. Herod’s family backs Julius Caesar in the Roman civil war between Caesar and Pompey, thus continuing their power under the Romans. When Herod the Great dies in 4 CE, his son, Herod Antipas is given one quarter of his father’s kingdom to hold for Rome. His title is tetrarch, or ruler of a quarter.

The Time of Jesus

It is one of those eras perhaps best described as “the best of times, the worst of times.” The Jewish people were governed by despots, who were largely considered to be Jewish in name only. The Herod dynasty had adopted the Roman custom of crucifixion to put down rebellions. It was a brutal time.

But it was also a time of great spirituality. This was the age of great teachers, such as Hillel and Shammai. Hillel would serve as president of the Sanhedrin, while Shammai, who often spoke in opposition to Hillel, would serve as vice-president. Each would establish schools and each is an important figure in the Mishnah. These great teachers may not be familiar figures to some in attendance, but they would have been well known to Jesus and to Paul.

The Essenes date back to 200 BCE and would attract many followers at this time. They were fewer in numbers than either the Sadducees or the Pharisees. They lived lives dedicated to asceticism, voluntary poverty, and abstinence from worldly pleasures, including marriage. Sometimes dwelling in cities and sometimes living apart, they would gather together in communal groups. They believed that they were the” last generation of

last generations” and expected the coming of the Teacher of Righteousness, the return of a High Priest of the line of Aaron and of the Messiah. In addition to the core group of the Essenes, there were many splinter groups from this sect.

In 6 CE, the Zealots were founded by Judas of Galilee and Zadok the Pharisee. They were both a religious sect and a para-military group. They are perhaps most famous for their last stand at Masada. In describing them, Josephus says that they "agree in all other things with the Pharisaic notions; but they have an inviolable attachment to liberty, and say that God is to be their only Ruler and Lord."

Fitting Jesus In

Having laid the framework from a historical perspective of the times in which Jesus would have found himself, let us examine how Jesus interacted with these groups. There are virtually no historical records of the existence of Jesus, written before the foundation of the Christian church. The major source, often cited, is two passages in the book *The Antiquities of the Jews* by the historian Josephus. Josephus was born a Jew, with the name Yosef Ben Matiyahu. He fought against the Romans in the First Jewish Roman War (66 CE to 73 CE.) He would eventually find himself trapped in a cave with about 40 fellow Jews. Joseph wanted to surrender to the Romans, but his companions would not let him. Joseph eventually talked his companions into committing mass suicide, as Jews would later do at Masada. If you think about how this might work, with half the surviving soldiers killing the other half in successive rounds, you can understand that at the end, you rely on the last soldier to take his own life. But how can you be sure that he will? This is what is known as the **Josephus problem**. At the end, Josephus walks out and surrenders to the Romans. He goes on to become a Roman citizen and a major apologist for Roman policies.⁴

In his works, and there were several, Josephus rails against false prophets, not because they are false, but because they are a disruption to Roman order. The exception is Jesus. The key paragraph from *The Antiquities of the Jews* known as the Testimony of Josephus reads as follows:

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

The problem with that paragraph is that since the 18th century most scholars agree that it is a forgery, inserted well after the fact by pro-Christian scribes. There are inconsistencies in the writing style and the vocabulary used. But most the most damning evidence is that,

⁴ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus>

writing in 240 CE, the Christian author Origen (more about him later) criticized Josephus for "not believing in Jesus as the Christ" and further stating of Josephus that "he did not accept Jesus as Christ." But by 324 CE, author Eusebius cites the passage above as support for the historical Jesus. Clearly something changed. In fact no fewer than 17 church fathers prior to Eusebius cite the works of Josephus without mentioning the so-called Testimonium above.

Other historians, notably Tacitus, write well after the time of Jesus and do not offer direct sources. "Consequently, to get rid of the report, Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judaea, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their centre and become popular." In this passage, Tacitus repeats a mistake made in the Roman translation of Josephus, calling Pilate a "procurator" when his Pilate's actual title was prefect. At any rate, Tacitus, writing in 64 CE, is repeating what he has heard.

Thus the only eye-witness accounts that we have of the life of Jesus are the Gospels. But do we have the original versions?

Before we go on, let me speak for a moment about the nature of books in ancient times. We live in a post-Gutenberg time, when we assume that identical copies of a book will come off a printing press. Barring the occasional error, smudges and such, we assume that if we pick up two copies of the same book, they will be identical. Not so in the times of Josephus, Origen and Eusebius. Books were copied out by scribes, many of whom could not actually read what they were copying, but copied letter by letter. Those who could read often felt that they had the latitude to "correct" the author's errors, improving the work. Moreover, Josephus wrote on scrolls. It was impossible to know in advance how long a work would be, so a series of smaller, subsidiary scrolls called "minuscules" were used, the sum of these comprising the greater work.⁵

Thus it was relatively easy for a scribe to change the work that they were copying or to insert a paragraph as above.

Lacking outside corroboration from other sources, some claim that therefore Jesus never existed. In view of subsequent events and influences, I can't accept this. There are many people living in every age whose lives are never recorded in the histories of those times.

Our main sources about the life and times of Jesus are then the Gospels. Let's take a look at when these might have been written. Scholars use a technique called "higher criticism" to compare language, writing style and outside references to the work to determine when a book might first have been written. If someone cites a reference from a work in say the year 100 CE, you can be pretty confident that the original work had been written by that

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josephus_on_Jesus

time. Based on this technique, the earliest dates assigned to the four Gospels known as the Canonical Gospels are as follows:

Mark - between 65 CE to 75 CE.

Matthew - between 70 CE to 100 CE.

Luke – between 80 CE to 100 CE.

John – between 90 CE to 100 CE.⁶

In 1905, before beginning medical school, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book entitled *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*⁷. It is a rather heavy tome, even by the standards of religious texts. But his basic position was that Jesus is only properly understood in the context of Jewish eschatology. (Eschatology is that part of theology or concerned with the end of the world or the end of the universe. Examples of well-known religious works in this area include the Jewish Book of Isaiah and the Book of Revelations.) In other words, the message of Jesus was not something new to the only people that heard it, but the latest in a long line of prophets.

But wait, there are many ideas in the New Testament that are radically different than anything in the Old Testament. But did Jesus actually say those things?

Dr. Schweitzer presents a far more thoroughly documented treatise than either time or my limited abilities would allow me to offer and concludes that the ideas of Christianity and the Gospels themselves changed over time. Nor is he the only author to think that. However, many of the quotes attributed to Jesus support the position that he thought that within his own life he would be crowned King of Jews and see the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth.

Matthew 24:32-34 reads “From the fig tree learn this parable. When its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also you, when you see all these things you know that he, the Son of Man is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass before all these things take place.”

It seems clear that there is an expectation of the immediacy of the prophesied events. The fig tree is usually taken to refer to the Nation of Israel. In this context it seems that he is saying that the nation of Israel will be restored and the time frame, this generation, is quite clear.

Jesus appoints Twelve Apostles, one for each of the tribes of Israel, to be the kings of this reemerging nation, saying “so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” The twelve are not to be kings over the other nations of the world, but over the tribes of Israel.

⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gospels#Dating

⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Quest_of_the_Historical_Jesus

Let us examine the words ascribed to Jesus and see how they fit into the historical context that we have laid out.

What Jesus Said

The Sermon on the Mount is contained in Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7. There is dispute as whether Jesus actually delivered the sermon to a multitude, or whether he spoke only to the Apostles or whether the Sermon was never actually spoken but instead was written down later to frame the sayings of Jesus. If the sermon was actually delivered, the location generally presumed to be most likely was a hill on the north end of the Sea of Galilee, near Capernaum.

The Sermon itself addresses the flaws Jesus finds in Jewish Law (Halaka) and offers corrections. It begins with the Beatitudes, the nine sayings that begin with the word “blessed.” Then Jesus begins to speak about the Law:

5:17 Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.

5:18 For truthfully I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one small mark shall in no way pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.

5:19 Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Then come nine sections that begin with either “You have heard it said” or “But I say unto you.” Almost as if Jesus is responding to specific earlier work. But whose work could that be?

One of the Dead Sea scrolls found in Cave 1 is the Community Rule of the Essenes, a document that lays out the beliefs of the sect. There are sections of the Community Rule that Jesus seems to be specifically refuting. For example, the Community Rule states that the righteous Chosen ones must actively oppose evil. Is this what Jesus is responding to when he is quoted as saying in Matthew 5:44 “But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for those who despitefully use you, and persecute you?”

If the story of Jesus ended with only the words of Jesus, I offer that he would be viewed much as Albert Schweitzer says, as a prophet of Judaism, whose words were consistent with the works of other Jewish prophets. Yes, Jesus was critical of the Judaism of his

time, as were others preaching at the same time. But there was good reason for this. The priesthood had been passed from the heirs of Aaron to the Hasmoneans to the appointees of the Idumeans. There was good reason to object.

This is the position that the group of Gnostics who accepted the Gospel of Thomas took. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings attributed to Jesus. Many of the sayings are identical with the words in the four Canonical Gospels, the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. The author claims to be Didymus Judas Thomas, the twin brother of Jesus. (Both Didymus and Thomas mean twin in Greek and Hebrew respectively.) The Hebrew pronunciation of Judas is Yehuda, and for those who have watched The Lost Tomb of Jesus, he is identified as one of those whose Ossuary is found in the Talipot tomb⁸. Thomas was one of the Twelve Apostles, called “Doubting Thomas” because he at first disbelieves in the Resurrection. The followers of this “heretical” Gospel believed that Jesus lived, spoke and died. All wisdom was to be found in the words of Jesus, who was a Prophet. By studying those words, one achieves wisdom. We know from references by the authors Hippolytus and Origen that the Gospel of Thomas was being read at least as early as 222 CE, and may date back as far as the first century.

But of course for Orthodox Christians the story doesn't end here. Jesus is arrested, tried and crucified. If you were a follower who believed that this would be the generation that would see the coming of the Kingdom of G-d, this event would have been shattering....were it not for the Resurrection.

In 1 Corinthians, Paul says “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. . . .We are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead.”

The concept of Resurrection did not begin with the Christians, the most quoted antecedent comes from the Book of Daniel 12:2, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

But what does Resurrection mean? Are we talking about spiritual resurrection, the spirit continuing on after the body dies, or a physical resurrection, where the body is reanimated after death?

If you accept the order of the canonical Gospels previously offered, the story of the Resurrection is told in the last twelve chapters of Mark. Jesus rises from the grave, appears first to Mary Magdalene, then to 11 of the 12 Apostles (excluding Judas Iscariot, of course) and upbraids them for failing to believe. He then commands them to go forth and proclaim his Gospel to the whole of creation.

⁸ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_the_Apostle

However, we know from the recently available Codex Sinaiticus that these 12 chapters were not in that Bible until after 300 CE. The details of the Resurrection were added later⁹.



Figure 2 Codex Sinaiticus

Another section of the Gospel where we can see changes in order to ensure that doctrine is unquestioned is that dealing with the Virgin Birth. Matthew offers a genealogy that begins with Abraham and ends with Jesus. Originally reading:

Jacob, who was the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, from whom was born Jesus, who is now called the Christ.

At some point this was determined to be too ambiguous; it might be construed that Joseph was the father of Jesus. So the Gospel was changed to read:

Jacob, who was the father of Joseph, to whom being betrothed the virgin Mary gave birth to Jesus, who is called the Christ.

Joseph has changed from being the husband of Mary, to the betrothed of Mary, the virgin.

Other commonly accepted sections of the Bible that were added afterwards include the story of the Adulterous woman (“Let he who is without sin cast the first stone”) and the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke. The parable of the Good Samaritan is important

⁹ Bart Ehman, *Misquoting Jesus*

because, like Jesus instructions to the Apostles, it broadens the audience of who was to hear the Good News, increasing the scope to include non-Jews.

Then Came Paul

The Stoning of Stephen is part of Acts 7. Stephen is brought for trial before the High Priest for heresy. He initially responds by referencing the stories of Abraham and Moses, very much in keeping with traditional Jewish law. But when he sees that this will do him no good, he says "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him- you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."

The response is swift. "At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul."

This Saul will encounter Jesus on the Damascus Road, undergo an epiphany, and take the name Paul as a symbol of his rebirth. In Galatians 1:11 and 12, Paul says "I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ."

At his trial before the Sanhedrin, Paul describes his early life as follows: "Then Paul, knowing that some of them were Sadducees and the others Pharisees, called out in the Sanhedrin, "My brothers, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee. I stand on trial because of my hope in the resurrection of the dead." In Acts 24, Paul continues in a manner that sheds light on how early Christians and Jews interacted, "You can easily verify that no more than twelve days ago I went up to Jerusalem to worship. My accusers did not find me arguing with anyone at the temple, or stirring up a crowd in the synagogues or anywhere else in the city. And they cannot prove to you the charges they are now making against me. **However, I admit that I worship the God of our fathers as a follower of the Way, which they call a sect. I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets, and I have the same hope in God as these men, that there will be a resurrection of both the righteous and the wicked. So I strive always to keep my conscience clear before God and man.**" This is pretty clearly a reference to the verse from the Book of Daniel previously cited.

Paul's role is primarily known through the Book of Acts and his 13 epistles or letters. After his conversion, Paul is made Apostle to the Gentiles and goes to preach in Greece. Why Greece? Greece was the cultural center of the Roman world, but perhaps more importantly, the Greeks already had a translation of the Old Testament, made by the Septuagint in Alexandria. The Old Testament was already popular in Greece, which had a large population of Jews, either from Judea or converts. There would have been more converts among the Greeks, except for the requirement for adult circumcision. At the

onset of Paul's ministry, this was a requirement for conversion to Christianity as well; you had to become a Jew before you could become a Christian. Paul would remove this obstacle and thanks to his letters, we even know when.

In Acts 15, Paul argues the case against requiring circumcision at the Council of Jerusalem and wins the point. He changes the mind of James, brother of Jesus, saying Paul says "they recognized that I had been entrusted with the good-news for the uncircumcised". James agrees and is quoted as saying, "'It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood."

Not everyone is persuaded though, with Peter and Paul's long-time associate Barnabas, remaining unconvinced. At the Incident at Damascus referenced in Paul's Letter to the Galatians, he confronts Peter; "'When Peter came to Antioch, I stood against him face-to-face because he had condemned himself: previously he had been regularly eating with Gentiles until associates of James came. Fearing the circumcised ones, he separated from the Gentiles. The rest of the Jews joined in this charade and even Barnabas was drawn into the hypocrisy. When I saw they were not walking in the gospel truth, I said to Peter in front of the others, "You are a Jew who lives as a Gentile. How, then, can you pressure the Gentiles to live as Jews?"'

This is a pivotal moment for Paulian Christianity. I say Paulian Christianity, because the creed espoused by Paul was not the only form of Christianity being practiced. The Ebionites were a group of Christians that believed that Jesus was the Jewish Messiah sent by the G-d of the Jews in fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures; they observed the Jewish Sabbath, kept kosher and circumcised all males¹⁰. When they prayed, they faced Jerusalem. They believed that you had to keep the Law, the entirety of the Law, in order to find salvation. In this, they would have agreed with Peter. This belief was held by not only the Ebionites, but by others who would be referred to as Judaizing Christians.

The Marcionites were at the opposite end of the spectrum. They believed that the wrathful G-d of the Old Testament was so different from the forgiving G-d of the New Testament that there must be two G-ds. Because the Jews continued to worship their G-d and did not accept Jesus, they must be evil¹¹.

From a marketing perspective, Paulian Christianity had the widest reach. The Ebionites would accept only Jews or Gentiles who had first undergone a Jewish conversion. The Marcionites who accept only non-Jews or Jews who had forsaken their Jewishness. Paul accepted both Jew and non-Jew alike. The success of this strategy is evident from the fact that only people who study the history of religion have ever heard of the Marcionites and Ebionites.

¹⁰ Bart Ehrman, *Lost Christianities*

¹¹ Ibid

The struggle to become the dominant form of Christianity would continue for centuries and was sometimes violent. In 386 CE, John Chrysostom (who would later be canonized) delivered a sermon against Jews and Judaizing Christians. His specific target was Christians who participated in the Jewish Sabbath observances and Jewish festivals, which they found appealing. The result of this sermon, delivered in Antioch, was a riot and the destruction of a synagogue, with six Jews left dead.

It would not be until well after Nicea and the Nicene Creed that the issue of whether you had to first be Jewish before becoming Christian would be settled. In 325 CE, after Christianity would become the official, state religion of the Roman Empire, the Emperor Constantine would convene a council of Christian bishops and would determine the shape of Orthodoxy.

The adoption of Christianity by the Roman Empire was a most significant event. As a counterpoint, remember that in 100 CE, fearful of the growing numbers of Jews within the Roman Empire (estimated at over 4 million by birth and through conversion) Rome had enacted a series of laws aimed at stopping the spread of Judaism and specifically outlawing attempts by Jews to gain converts.

Why was Christianity accepted while Judaism was an outlaw religion?

Back to Judea

We left Judea at the time of Jesus crucifixion, circa 30 CE. We had the Zealots in the north. In 66 CE the first of the Jewish-Roman wars broke out. In 70 CE, the Romans would besiege and eventually take the city of Jerusalem. They would destroy the Second Temple (on Tisha B'av, 656 years to the day from the destruction of the First Temple by the Babylonians.) Estimates of the number of casualties of the war vary widely, from a figure of 1.1 million cited by Josephus, to 600,000 cited by Tacitus, to a more manageable number of 100,000 cited by some modern historians. Revolts against the Romans would continue through the Bar Kochba Revolt beginning in 132 CE and ending at Masada in 135 CE.

After the rebellion, the Sanhedrin would move their seat to Yavneh, an event which is usually accepted as the beginning of Rabbinic Judaism. With the destruction of the Second Temple, the authority of the Sadducees had ended. The spread of Jews throughout the Roman Empire marks the beginning of the Second Diaspora. The province of Judea would become part of the Syrian Palestinian province and there would not be another Jewish State until modern Israel.

The Origins of Anti-Semitism

There was a period of time when Judaism and Christianity were competing for the hearts and minds of the people of the Roman world. It is hard to believe that there was a time when the Jewish population significantly outnumbered the Christian population. When groups are in competition for the same thing, say a resource, it is only natural that a

certain amount of enmity results. But for Christians trying to convert the Gentile population of the Roman world, the Jews present a special problem. Understanding that Jesus was certainly raised a Jew and that all the Apostles were Jews, how does one explain why the man that is claimed to be the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament never accepted by the majority of his own people? And the answer that was given is that the Jewish people were evil, increasingly evil in their portrayals as successive Gospels are written. An interesting corollary to this is that Pontius Pilate becomes increasingly Jesus' defender.

From Mark 15:

And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them. But Pilate answered them, saying, Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews? For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy. But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. And Pilate answered and said again unto them, What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews? And they cried out again, Crucify him. Then Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath he done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him. And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.¹²

In this version, the crowd is moved to demand that Jesus be crucified by the priests; it is also mentioned that they wanted to see done to Jesus what had been done to them. Pilate feels that Jesus is innocent, but isn't particularly passionate about the outcome.

By the next Gospel, Matthew, the crowd is more maleficent and Pilate more sympathetic. From Matthew 27:

Pilate saith unto them, What shall I do then with Jesus which is called Christ? They all say unto him, Let him be crucified. And the governor said, Why, what evil hath he done? But they cried out the more, saying, Let him be crucified. When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it. Then answered all the people, and said, His blood be on us, and on our children. Then released he Barabbas unto them: and when he had scourged Jesus, he delivered him to be crucified¹³.

By the time that we reach John 19, Pilate is actually defending Jesus and the crowd is evil:

¹² <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Mark+15&version=KJV>

¹³ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=matthew%2027&version=KJV>

*Pilate therefore went forth again, and saith unto them, Behold, I bring him forth to you, that ye may know that I find no fault in him.
Then came Jesus forth, wearing the crown of thorns, and the purple robe. And Pilate saith unto them, Behold the man!
When the chief priests therefore and officers saw him, they cried out, saying, Crucify him, crucify him. Pilate saith unto them, Take ye him, and crucify him: for I find no fault in him¹⁴.*

Pilate actually goes so far as to recognize Jesus' legitimacy:

*And he bearing his cross went forth into a place called the place of a skull, which is called in the Hebrew Golgotha:
Where they crucified him, and two other with him, on either side one, and Jesus in the midst.
And Pilate wrote a title, and put it on the cross. And the writing was JESUS OF NAZARETH THE KING OF THE JEWS.
This title then read many of the Jews: for the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city: and it was written in Hebrew, and Greek, and Latin.
Then said the chief priests of the Jews to Pilate, Write not, The King of the Jews; but that he said, I am King of the Jews.
Pilate answered, What I have written I have written.¹⁵*

I can accept the Pharisees and the Sadducees as being portrayed as evil; history tells us that they were not nice people. The Christians were competing with the Pharisees in preaching to the common people. The Sadducees of that day were scheming to hold onto their power. I can't accept the Jerusalem crowd saying "His blood be on us, and on our children." That just doesn't make sense in the context of human behavior. Nor can I envision the Roman governor caring what the crowd thought. But to portray Pilate as acknowledging that Jesus was the Messiah is just ludicrous. Yet so much evil comes from the portrayal of the Jewish people killing Jesus and accepting the sin not just on their heads but on the heads of generations of Jews to come.

Conclusions

One of the many books on religion that I read this summer is *The Evolution of God*, by Robert Wright. Wright's basic concept is that religions change over time, both in terms of who or what we worship, the basic core of what religion we chose, and also more subtly in terms of the nuances of those religions. These changes are caused by material factors, historical events for example. I recommend the book, especially as the author makes an attempt to approach the topic respectfully, often quoting Scripture and responsible sources to make his points. This evolutionary view of religion, that our understanding of the Universe including what some term the Divine, grows over time, advancing like other branches of knowledge, was popular among Christian theologians through the 19th

¹⁴ <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John+19&version=KJV>

¹⁵ Ibid

Century. At first glance, it seems very favorable to the Christian faiths. Mankind begins by worshipping the forces of nature, ascribing human qualities to these forces, practicing what is called animism. Then religion evolves into the worship of many gods, paganism. The next phase is the worship of one God, with Judaism as the primary example. The New Testament seeks to build on concepts introduced by the Jewish apocalyptic prophets, most notably Isaiah. Christians, by and large, believe that this was good, but their vision is even better. This idea of religion evolving is fine....until Islam becomes a force to be reckoned with. By the way, Muslims accept Jesus (or Isa, as they translate the name) but warn Christians in the Quran 4:171 “O People of the Book! Commit no excesses in your religion: Nor say of Allah aught but the truth. Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) a messenger of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a spirit proceeding from Him: so believe in Allah and His messengers. Say not "Trinity": desist: it will be better for you: for Allah is one Allah: Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son. To Him belong all things in the heavens and on earth. And enough is Allah as a Disposer of affairs. ” (Yusuf Ali translation.) To a Muslim, Christianity is based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus was, an error that is corrected by the more “evolved” Islamic understanding.

Religions change over time and the texts that support these religions are changed to reflect the new directions. At Nicea, a decision was made to change the date of the Easter to separate it from the Jewish holiday of Passover, the celebration of which is reflected in the Last Supper. But Christians did not want to raise the point of Jesus and the Apostles having a Seder meal. The date whereon Christians celebrate the birth of Jesus was changed by the Roman Emperor Aurelian to coincide with the solstice, because Aurleian was a Sun-worshipper.

Most of these changes are trivial, mattering only to people who are of the faith. Other changes are made to support a particular doctrine or point of view. But still other changes are made maliciously; with the intent to cast opponents of an opposing doctrine or faith in the worst light possible.

It is possible, if you examine multiple sources and external historical sources to determine what is most likely, though it is often impossible to know with certainty.

Let me end with offering this quote from Paul, which is a paraphrase of the words of Rabbi Hillel:

“Only don’t use your freedom for gain to the flesh, but through love be servants to one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

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