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# HOW JESUS BECAME CHRISTIAN

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THE EARLY CHRISTIANS AND THE  
TRANSFORMATION OF A JEWISH  
TEACHER INTO THE SON OF GOD

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## THE COVER-UP

Jesus was thoroughly Jewish. Mary, his mother, was Jewish, and Judaism was the religion he practiced throughout his life. Jesus' teachings focused on the important Jewish issues of the day—how to interpret the law correctly, when the Kingdom of God would appear, and how to behave righteously. He was executed as “the King of the Jews,” a political claim that the Roman authorities could not have tolerated. His earliest followers in Jerusalem were Jewish, and they, too, observed Jewish law. They thought of him as a teacher and as a Messiah figure.

But all this exploded. Within a few years of his death, around A.D. 30<sup>1</sup>, Jesus began to be thought of as much more than a teacher and possible Messiah. He came to be spoken of as a Christ, a divine being—a God-human, in fact, who had preexisted his earthly life and who had become human in order to save humanity. What happened? How did Jesus the Jew become a Gentile Christ? That's one of the questions this book explores.

### TWO DISTINCT MOVEMENTS

In the course of some twenty years studying and teaching early Christian writings, I have come to some startling conclusions. For one thing, I contend that the religion of Jesus no longer exists. The movement that emerged out of Jesus' teachings and practices, the Jesus Movement, was led by Jesus' brother, James, in Jerusalem. It honored and treasured what the Jesus of history stood for and proclaimed. That original religion, however, was replaced, in time, by a much more successful movement. Paul, in the Jewish Diaspora around the

Mediterranean, forged a new religion, the Christ Movement. We tend not to notice how truly distinctive this movement was. Part of the excitement of this book consists of exploding the commonplace notion that Paul was somehow a faithful disciple of Jesus. He wasn't. While Paul's innovative Christ Movement offered its members many advantages over Judaism and the Jesus Movement, it was something quite different. It was much simpler and easier to follow, and it focused on a familiar figure known throughout the Mediterranean world, that of the savior. This Christ Movement came to cover up the original teachings of Jesus. "Christifiers," as I call them—leaders who packaged Jesus into a Christ—took charge of the early Christian movement. The original followers of Jesus—members of the Jesus Movement—faded away, being overshadowed by the more popular Christ Movement. But that process took time, some five or six centuries, before the Jesus Movement disappeared entirely.

While developing a robust theology of the divine-human Christ and creating an impressive infrastructure, the Christ Movement angrily steered its members away from Jewish practices. Why did early Christianity think it had to attack Judaism? Why was it the focus of attention, so much so that anti-Semitic sentiments are ingrained in the pages of the New Testament? There's much more to this aspect of the story, however. As we investigate some of the writings of Paul's religion, reflected in the New Testament and second-century Christianity, we will make a remarkable discovery. We will come to see the real roots of Christian anti-Semitism.

## THE JESUS COVER-UP

Looking ahead, you will discover that I contend the tradition "miscarried," that Christianity became over time something radically different from what its originator intended. The faith that emerged was not the religion practiced by its founder. There was a switch. I call this the Jesus Cover-Up Thesis. This stance has three components.

*First of all, the Jesus Cover-Up Thesis contends that the original message of Jesus and the Jesus Movement, Jesus' earliest followers in Jerusalem, became switched for a different religion.* This other religion, one that in *origin, beliefs,* and *practices* differed from the Jesus Movement, was the Christ Movement developed by Paul in the Diaspora. A few decades after the death of both Paul and James in the 60s, the religion of Paul became grafted onto the original religion led by James. This was the impressive accomplishment of the author of the Book of Acts around the turn of the second century. The Christ Movement replaced the original Jesus Movement at least in the popular imagination as the dominant expression of the new religion.

*Second, according to the Jesus Cover-Up Thesis, there was an important*

*shift away from the teachings of Jesus to those about the Christ.* That is, beliefs about the person of Jesus conceived of as a Christ came to obscure what he said and did. Thus, the religion of Jesus, the one Jesus practiced and taught, became transformed into a cult about the Christ. Speaking of Jesus as a Christ had a tornado effect. Much like the bewildering effect of *The Wizard of Oz*, the Christ Movement swept Jesus up out of his Jewish context and landed him down right in the midst of a new, strange Gentile environment. That changed everything, since the Christ figure is not a Jewish Messiah. The whirlwind caused by Paul has had a profound effect on how we understand the Jesus of history, his teachings and his mission. Everything is now seen through the eyes of Paul and his new landscape.

Early Christianity separated from Judaism, but it did so in an exceptionally angry fashion. Over and over again, leader after leader lambasted Judaism. Why they felt they had to do so represents an interesting story that we will come to in due course. In fact, as you will see, *the third component of the Jesus Cover-Up Thesis is this: it proposes a new way of understanding Christian anti-Semitism.* Early Christians were very much aware that they had created a shift in the religion and had substituted the Christ of experience for the Jesus of history. They were also conscious of the fact that the Jews were witnesses to this event. Jewish leaders recognized and understood how dramatically Christianity had changed since leaving the fold. We will discover how this dynamic plays out and what it means for how Christianity traditionally views Judaism.

My intent in this book is positive. It is simply to understand the roots of Christianity better. I am aware that there are ideas in this book that may startle or even shock some readers. You will find I argue the following:

- Paul's religion was not the religion of Jesus.
- There was a cover-up. The divine Gentile Christ was switched for the human Jewish Jesus. A religion about the Christ was substituted for the teachings of Jesus. Moreover, the religion of Paul displaced that of Jesus.
- The New Testament is not a neutral collection of early church writings. It was produced, selected, and approved by one—but only one—faction of early Christianity, the very group that endorsed the cover-up.
- The Book of Acts presents us with a fictitious history of early Christianity and represents an unreliable source of information.
- Anti-Semitism is rooted within New Testament writings and is the result of the cover-up.

Some things I say about Paul and the Book of Acts are not run-of-the-mill observations. I point out, for example, how Paul's religion emerged out of a

*separate* revelation, not from the religion of Jesus as is often assumed. That is new. I also argue that the Book of Acts glued Paul's Christ Movement onto the earlier Jesus Movement, switching the Christ for Jesus. That also is new, and I contend that this represents historical fiction on the part of whoever wrote the Book of Acts. Why the author of this work felt he had to invent this linkage is interesting and we will probe his probable motivation.

So, who killed off the historical Jesus? And why? How was the switch made? Who covered it up? What does it mean for us here today? The Jesus Cover-Up Thesis helps us unravel a mystery. *How Jesus Became Christian* is a detective story, using the results of modern scholarship, to uncover a "crime" committed close to two millennia ago.

Religion then, and I suspect now, was thoroughly political, as well as spiritual. Jesus in particular made strong political statements and claims. His followers did so as well, seeing him as a Messiah claimant. That staked out a very important political role for their rabbi. On its journey from being a small struggling group into becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, Christianity was politically engaged. Power struggles erupted in early Christianity as groups fought for supremacy over their rivals. So we will examine the contest between the religion of Jesus and that of Paul—the Jesus Movement versus the Christ Movement—as each strove to achieve a place of prominence within the Roman world against all their competitors, Judaism and the mystery religions included.

## LOOKING AHEAD

The story is organized historically. It covers three hundred years, from roughly 150 B.C. to A.D. 150. These were exciting and confusing times as Judaism reshaped itself and Christianity was born. People were faced with many different choices, not only because they lived in a multicultural world that offered many religious options, but also because, within each religion, there were so many varieties. There were, for instance, many ways of being Jewish and Christian. Neither religion was monolithic.

Our story starts in the Hellenistic world with the religious and political realities that Judaism faced in the second and first centuries B.C. We then move into the time of Jesus, James, and Paul in the early decades of the first century A.D. This will allow us to see the challenges that the Jewish people at that time faced, and the problems they tried to solve, being a small colonized minority within a much larger world. Jesus did not exist in a political vacuum and the New Testament writings do not always fill us in on the policies and players of his place in history. Without these background nuances, understanding Jesus is much like trying to make sense of a presidential State of the Union address

without knowing current foreign and domestic policies or the stances of Republicans and Democrats on key issues at the time. Understanding the religion and politics of the period places Jesus in his historical context. That way, we can better appreciate the vitality of his message to his audience. More importantly, we can recognize the powerful and radical solution he put to the people of his generation.

Growing out of the teachings and practices of Jesus was the original religion of Jesus, led by his brother, James. We will profile this movement and contrast it with the dramatically different religion of Paul. Today we tend to think of Paul as a faithful follower of Jesus, one whose organizational genius led to the formation of what became Christianity. We'll learn more about Paul, how he emerged on the scene *after* the death of Jesus, never having met him in person, and how he cleverly crafted a new religion that succeeded in capturing people's imaginations.

Key discoveries will be made along the way. For one thing, how and why Paul's Christ Movement had so little to do with the religion of Jesus will be uncovered. We don't normally see that and that's because we're not supposed to see the differences between Paul and Jesus. This is part of one of the most effective cover-ups of all times. It is much more significant than the current popular hypothesis that Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and that they had children together whose offspring survive to the present day. For *that* cover-up there is little evidence even of marriage, let alone children. The meager support for that hypothesis are just generalities—that rabbis of that era typically married, that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb to claim his body (and so acted as wife), and that she was highly regarded by a faction within early Christianity, the Gnostics. While Mary Magdalene was evidently an important person within early Christianity, the evidence for the Jesus-as-family-man hypothesis is slim, and that's not our story here.

But there was an important cover-up. By examining the evidence—writings from New Testament times—we will reveal how the real deception actually happened. It was a huge switch—the Christ for Jesus, Paul's religion for Jesus', and the Christ Movement for the Jesus Movement. Unraveling this shift clarifies some of the most powerful mysteries of early Christianity and explains how Jesus became Christian. Much of the confusion of Paul's religion with that of Jesus, for example, is traceable to the fictitious history invented by the Book of Acts, around A.D. 100 . . . But that's getting ahead of our story.

The new Christ Movement came on the scene angry. As it evolved its own institutions in the late first and early second centuries, it turned on Judaism with a vengeance. That anti-Jewish hostility represents a curious feature of early Christianity. It was not, for instance, content to ignore Judaism. Instead it ransacked and hijacked from Judaism what it thought useful while simultaneously

demonizing Jewish leaders and the Jewish people. If we were to take these writers at their word, there was no point in Judaism—or the Jewish people for that matter—continuing to exist. That’s a powerful message that has had dreadful repercussions throughout subsequent history. This will enable us to discover the real reason for Christian anti-Semitism, buried for so long in the hidden history of early Christianity. The cover-up had much to do with these destructive attitudes.

The Jesus Cover-Up Thesis suggests that Christians need to put into perspective the dynamics that shaped the early years of this religion. These still have a tremendous influence today. Most Christians look at the New Testament through the eyes of Paul. In my judgment, this is not helpful. Paul’s image of the Christ obscures much of the real Jesus of history. Simply put, Jesus got upstaged by Paul. In recovering more of its Jewish roots, the message of the human Jesus of history will become more prominent. This means moving Paul off center stage.

So step back with me into the world of Jesus, James, Mary Magdalene, and Paul. The first century A.D. was an exceptionally confusing time. Jewish people found themselves to be a small, colonized minority within a vast empire controlled first by Greece and then by Rome. The challenge every Jew faced then was how to retain Jewish identity in the face of constant and overwhelming pressures to assimilate into the larger, more cosmopolitan culture.