

Rethinking the Beginnings of Christianity

New History, New Meanings

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Early Christian History without Christianity

What we imagine when we imagine the historical “beginnings of Christianity,” or at least what we are often told, is that what we have now is a dominant, if declining, global religion that started with the work, death, and resurrection of Jesus. His followers carried on his story and teachings after his death and recruited followers into a movement that, over the course of the first, second, and third centuries, gained efficacy and power until finally, in the fourth century, it was adopted as the official religion of the Roman Empire.

This is the conventional wisdom and predominant thinking about Christian history, and it is the lens through which nearly everyone today reads the New Testament. But this conventional wisdom is a fiction created by the Acts of the Apostles. Fellows of Westar Institute’s Acts Seminar concluded that the story in the Acts of the Apostles is not reliable as history; indeed, it was not meant to *be* history, in the modern sense of a factual report of events. What Acts imagined, or what it hoped for, was the restoration of Israel through Jesus. As Westar Fellow Milton Moreland has emphasized, the agenda of Acts is understandable only in a historical context in which Israel was a colonized and defeated nation. Christianity does not provide the context for Acts; a broken Israel does.

Of course, many scholars already knew that the people represented in the New Testament didn’t consider themselves Christians. Indeed, the term “Christian” is only used three times in the entire New Testament (Acts 11:26; 26:28; 1 Peter 4:16), and it appears to be a relatively insignificant title in all three passages. It is, therefore, something of an historical problem to describe the people behind the New Testament as “Christians” when it seems, more than anything, that they are reflecting on what it means to be part of Israel. By questioning the historical veracity of the very narrative that has settled into peoples’ imaginations, the Acts Seminar paved the way for a wholesale reconsideration of how to put a broken Israel together with what eventually came to be called “Christianity.”

Westar’s Christianity Seminar has picked up where the Acts seminar left off. It gathers together texts and other evi-

dence from the first through fourth centuries in order to examine that history with new eyes, and without presuming Christianity’s inevitable dominance. What if the history of Christianity is full of accidents, complicated relationships, strange turns, and messes? That is, what if the history of Christianity looks more like real life? It would be a history perhaps less amenable to justifying Christian dominance or self-righteousness, but it would be no less meaningful. A more complicated story might even offer more points of entry, more relatable (if less ideal) circumstances and figures to consider.

The Christianity Seminar is working on a number of important themes such as “Gnosticism,” martyrdom, and the Jewish-Roman War, in order to propose significant new perspectives on the first through fourth centuries. As a window into the possibilities offered by the Christianity Seminar, I’d like to offer a few broad suggestions about what it would mean to read “early Christian” literature not as the core beliefs of a religious movement, but as a set of responses to social brokenness. I want to suggest that, rather than static truths about Jesus or God, early Christian texts represent a number of creative and improvised ways of trying to make sense of who one is, where one belongs, and what God means in the face of loss.

Israel under Rome

The late first and early second centuries were a time of profound social tumult, uncertainty, and collective confusion. The people we think of as Christians thought of themselves not as pioneers in a new religion, but primarily as part of Israel. They showed loyalty to Israel’s god, they read and interpreted the scriptures of Israel, some of those who lived in Israel made their way periodically to the Jerusalem temple, and many who did not live in Israel thought of themselves as connected to the land of Israel, either spiritually, or through their family or traditions.

But Israel was in crisis. In the first century BCE, Judea had become a client kingdom of Rome. On and off over the course of about a hundred years, it was able to negotiate some autonomy—sometimes having its own kings, sometimes falling directly under the rule of Rome. But

there was, of course, persistent political tension. And questions about Jews' cultural assimilation were inevitable. "How Jewish are you? Have you given in to Greco-Roman culture?" Questions like that were often asked with anxiety, and arguments about them sometimes hit a fever pitch. Around the Mediterranean, people associated with Israel were trying to live in a world owned by Rome. They were attempting to maintain a sense of belonging to Israel within and despite this.

In the 60s of the first century CE, there were Jewish rebellions against Rome. Of particular contention was Rome's control over the Jerusalem temple. Rome responded aggressively. By the end of the Roman-Jewish war in 70 CE, Jerusalem and its temple were totally destroyed, and with them went nearly all of the priestly class, and a chunk of the population. Tens of thousands of people were crucified. *It amounted to an economic and social collapse for ancient Israel, and a total humiliation.* To add insult to injury, the Romans celebrated their defeat of the Jews by parading the temple's sacred objects in a victory procession in Rome, and commemorating the embarrassing defeat in a monument and on their coinage.

Of course, even before Judea was fully incorporated into the Roman Empire, Israel was already a fractured and diffuse people with a long history of imperial domination and cultural trauma. They were a diaspora population, scattered across the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia. But the Roman-Jewish war dissipated any sense of homeland and attenuated any real sense of cohesion for those belonging to Israel.

The destruction of the temple represented a substantial loss. *Israel's God had no place.* But while the temple had been a cultural, economic, and spiritual center for Jews both in and outside of Jerusalem, it wasn't necessarily universally beloved. The temple had in many ways been controlled by the Romans, and there were tensions between the priests, the Jewish upper class, and the rest of the Jewish population. So the temple had become both a significant but troubled spiritual and cultural center. Indeed, because of its compromises with and corruption by the Romans, some might have felt that the temple had already been lost decades before its physical demolition.

For decades after the Roman-Jewish War, especially once it became clear that Jerusalem and the temple would not be restored and that a Roman city would be built in its place, there was a profound sense of grief and confusion. Why did this happen to us? What does it mean to belong to Israel? Are Israel and its traditions dead? What do we do next?

A Grieving Israel in the New Testament

Across ancient religious literature, we see a number of laments and inquiries about what these deep losses meant,

whom to blame, as well as some tentative ideas about what to do. In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John, for instance, Jesus tells the Samaritan woman at the well that God is not tied to place. "A time is coming when it will neither be on this mountain nor in Jerusalem that you will worship the Father" (John 4:21). This is because the Gospel of John knows about and has seen the shakiness and sudden impossibility of tying God to a particular place.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, we hear the pretty straightforward lament: "Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is coming" (Heb 13:14). In the face of the loss of Jerusalem, the author of Hebrews suggests that his audience seek a more permanent city in heaven. Likewise, Hebrews imagines Jesus as the priest and the sacrifice, one that is perfect and eternal (see for instance Heb 9:11–14), and therefore immune to both corruption and destruction (unlike the Jerusalem temple).

Similarly, the Book of Revelation vengefully depicts the destruction of Rome, which it calls Babylon and describes as a whore (Rev 18). And Revelation's ending envisions a triumphal descent of a new Jerusalem: a glittering city, extravagant in its beauty, perfectly pure, and full of light (Rev 21–22).

Aside from Revelation, however, few sources explicitly blamed Rome for the destruction of Jerusalem, even though Rome was the obvious culprit. This is because the Hebrew scriptural tradition has a long history of trying to make sense of the imperial domination and colonization of Israel as the consequence of Israel's own unfaithfulness and corruption. This kind of "blame the victim" mentality still circulated in the first and second centuries.

This is important because we tend to think of such passages as those in Hebrews, the Gospel of John, and Revelation, as statements about Christian theology or doctrine. Most people know and assume that the people we consider to be the earliest Christians thought of themselves as being part of or related to ancient Israel and its traditions. But despite the fact that the texts of the New Testament rely heavily on Israel's history and traditions, we typically hear or imagine that they somehow stand apart in some important way from Jewish traditions. This need to preserve Christianity's difference or uniqueness, in the face of the obvious importance of Israel for the New Testament, often comes in the form of supersessionism—that is, the assumption that Christianity somehow replaced Judaism, or fulfilled it and rendered it obsolete. Supersessionism is evident not just in the outright denials of Judaism's value, but also in the subtle but very popular idea that Christianity was a more inclusive or universal version of Jewish traditions.

These texts are fully entrenched in Jewish traditions. Their writers clearly understand themselves as belonging to Israel. Revelation, Hebrews, and the Gospel of John do not use the word "Christian." They were all likely written

before the term was even coined. These texts respond to the loss of some tentative center around which a collective sense of Jewish identity may have been organizing. A heavenly Jerusalem staunches the loss of a real Jerusalem. A God without place arises when God's place is in conflict or gone.

The Book of Acts, too, reads differently when we assume its focus to be not Christianity but rather an Israel that is broken and seeking restoration. Take, for instance, the scene of Pentecost:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem, and at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" (Acts 2:1-8)

In the liturgical calendar, Pentecost is celebrated as the birth of the church and the commissioning of the first followers of Jesus to evangelize the world with the message about him. Especially in modern history, Christians have read the Pentecost narrative as a missionizing text as well as a text that seems to sponsor an institutional Christianity.

Under closer examination, however, we notice some other concerns cropping up in this narrative. For one, there is the day on which this event takes place: Pentecost, or the Festival of Weeks, celebrates the harvest fifty days after Passover. So the story takes place during a traditional Israelite festival. Notice also that the narrative reverses the order of the story about the tower of Babel. There people were at first unified, but then scattered and divided by God so they cannot speak to each other. In the Pentecost story, Jews from every nation are gathered together in Jerusalem, yet are able to understand the apostles each in their own language. Here in Jerusalem is a hodgepodge unity of Jews, made possible by the holy spirit.

Indeed, what is usually understood, in Acts, as the mission to the "gentiles," seems to represent not a mission to "non-Jews," but rather a mission to those people who are associated with Israel but live in other parts of the Mediterranean world. In fact, the Greek word often translated as "gentile," *ethnos*, simply means "nation." Jews of every nation are brought together. Thus at Pentecost a scattered Israel is held together, if only temporarily.

Jesus' Death in the Context of Roman Violence

The people associated with Israel were not the only ones on the losing end of Roman imperial domination. The Romans were paranoid and watchful, regularly worrying about insurrection, and sometimes exacting revenge even over minor subversions. They used extensive, sometimes random violence throughout the empire in an attempt to control their wide swath of the Mediterranean world. And, of course, violence also represented sport and entertainment for the Romans. Within their Colosseum and amphitheaters, enraptured audiences of thousands enjoyed the spectacle of human executions or reenactments of mythical and historical battles, featuring human and animal casualties in the hundreds or even thousands. The Pax Romana, or the Roman peace, was an eerie peace, haunted by the threat of violence.

In this haunted, paranoid atmosphere, against a backdrop of daily violence and a backstory of a fractured and nearly defunct Israel, what would the death of Jesus have meant? What did the idea of the violent death of a son of God, a savior for Israel, *do* for people in the first and second centuries?

For one, Jesus' death would not have been seen as a singular event, though that is often the way we imagine it today. It was just one violent, unjust, and heartbreaking death amidst a whole landscape of others. That is true not only for his death, but for other dimensions of Jesus' story as well: Jesus is betrayed by friends, shifted between various authorities, subject to the whims of an imperial system and the ruling classes of his own people. All that suggests that Jesus' death was not meaningful because it was special or different from the experience of others, but rather *because* it was so frighteningly similar. Jesus embodied the fears, longings, and wishes of those who told stories about him.

Indeed, the evangelists invite their readers to identify with Jesus in this way. Jesus' mantra "follow me" in the Gospel of Mark—"pick up your cross and follow me" in Mark 8:34—seems like an explicit invitation to Mark's readers to identify with Jesus' pain, to find in Jesus a figure through whom they might contemplate their own pain and vulnerability. In the Gospel of John, Jesus similarly tells his followers that he is in them as they are in him (John 14:20).

Even many of the titles for Jesus, titles that we imagine evoke only his specialness, suggest a subtext of "everyperson." The term "son of God," while sometimes signaling a special figure, was also used to refer to anyone associated with Israel. The titles "Son of Adam" and/or "Son of Man" also, importantly and literally, signal the mortal condition of all of humanity.*

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* The Scholars Version, in fact, translates this term "The Human One." See Robert J. Miller, ed., *The Complete Gospels*, 4th ed. (Polebridge Press, 2010), 208.

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It was not just Jesus' pain or death that may have resonated with his followers. And it is not just the more generalized meanings of some of the titles bestowed upon him that may have spoken to people in the first and second centuries. As a crucified Lord, a cosmically significant Christ, or an anointed one, someone whose importance the world debates or doesn't recognize might easily be seen as a reflection of one's own insignificance in the imperial politics of life and death. It might have been a kind of hyperbolic imagining of one's self in the face of one's felt insignificance. Of course, Israel had historically and consistently understood itself as God's chosen people, so this mix of exalted titles with humiliating, painful experience may very well express how deeply Israel felt its catastrophic defeat to be at odds with its specialness.

And, in fact, the deep cosmic darkness of Jesus' death may not simply dramatize one's own precariousness. The wondrous event of his being raised from the dead might additionally be understood to dramatize one's own sense of possibility, as offering hope that life is full of wondrous potential. Death and destruction happen, but Jesus' resurrection signals life's strange, haunting persistence in the face of death and destruction.

It seems that Jesus may have inspired a sense of collective belonging, but not as the founder or inspiration for Christianity. Rather, he figured in stories that represented and collected the kinds of brokenness experienced by a people. He dramatized their fears and hopes for what could be achieved in a precarious world ruled by the Roman politics of death.

We do not do history because we know what happened. We do history because history is, in some sense, lost to us. It cannot be fully recovered. Doing the work of history repeatedly tests the limits of our knowing. We bump up against blank spots, missing links, and disjunctures at every turn. But writing a history that reflects life's chaotic circumstances and unexpected meanderings, is a matter of ethics. Particularly in a world so marked by violence and uncertainty, no other history would make sense. **4R**



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Seven Sonnets Encircling Wisdom *Continued from page 2*

5. Wisdom's Partisans

Sometimes there is nothing left for us but words,
bread crumbs dropped, despite destiny and death,
insouciantly along the boulevards.
Who but the mad pick them up, test their worth?
The likes of Tolstoy, Gandhi, M.L.K.
experiment with human dynamite,
to see if our dreams do more than decay,
to learn if hope is still within our sight.
The aphorisms of an artisan
have leaked out on a planetary scale,
speak to lives of constant desperation,
unsettling experts with a twice-told tale.
What happens to this maddened world if we
unmask our fears and love the enemy?

6. A Blaze of Solidarity

Some say Wisdom flares like a burning nun,
enigmatic to the corporate gaze,
sitting, an incandescent Buddhist sun
that calls in question all our nights and days.
She topples over, ever silently;
soldiers rush in to occupy the spot

replacing any ash of memory
with mindless discipline that serves to blot
the inconvenience of her smoking bones.
Again they're too late to put the fire out.
Those searing images heat up the phones.
From a nameless street comes a primal shout:
empires try to pick you off one by one,
by snuffing out the hope we're not alone.

7. The Play of Wisdom

We all are caught in a midsummer's dream.
Our cosmic nightmare takes a comic twist:
Is there no bottom to the primal scream?
Do we keep falling for the story's gist?
Or can we see beyond the bottom line,
by taking seriously our child's play?
Is this where Wisdom wants us all to dine
with all our fears and foibles on display?
There is no certainty in all of this,
no guarantee we ever get it right;
nor is there any everlasting bliss
as we disintegrate from day to night.
Still Wisdom teases, daring us to dance,
to come alive, at least to take the chance.