

Jesus the Jew and the Christian cover-up

ALLAN LEVINE, Martin Levin, March 22, 2008. The Globe & Mail

Book Review of

HOW JESUS BECAME CHRISTIAN

By Barrie A. Wilson. Random House Canada.

Forget about Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and fictional conspiratorial machinations about whether Jesus and Mary Magdalene had children, Barrie Wilson has produced a significant and sensational work of scholarship. And it is truly religious dynamite.

Acknowledging Jesus's Jewish background is nothing new, but arguing, as Wilson does, that Christianity is largely the result of a deliberate and deceptive manipulation is more intriguing and contentious. "Jesus never converted to another religion," Wilson claims. "Nor did he start one. If he were to return, he'd probably be amazed – perhaps bewildered or possibly even angry – at what has been created in his name." Adding for good measure that, "of all the Jewish males who ever lived, Jesus was by far the most influential."

A professor of humanities and religious studies at York University in Toronto, Wilson has drawn on decades of his own research into the history of early Christianity and, like the superb teacher he must be, invites readers to accompany him on a wondrous journey back in time to understand Jesus's life, the ordeal of being a Jew in a world ruled by Romans, the construction of the New Testament, and the powerful forces that have transformed Western civilization.

Admittedly this is no easy task, but he pulls it off brilliantly. He is an academic who can write for a non-specialist audience and does so exceptionally well – guiding, explaining Scripture, and even creatively integrating imaginary newspaper columns and blogs into his prose. All of which brings Jesus and his epoch alive.

Using an array of biblical sources, both Jewish and Christian, he builds his case step by step, searching for clues in the Gospels, offering concise summaries, and posing difficult questions – many of which, he concedes, cannot be answered. We do not know, for example, the precise details of Jesus's day-to-day life – his emotional state or the real reasons he opposed Roman rule – and probably never will. But it is possible to offer reasonable and intelligent speculations based on solid research. That is what Wilson does very well, and by the last page he has convincingly made his case.

The short version of Wilson's thesis, which he calls the "Jesus Cover-Up Thesis," is this: The spiritual figure that billions of Christians worship worldwide as the Son of God was, in fact, a Jew, a rabbi, and a revered teacher of the early first century who obeyed and championed the Torah. Jesus (or more accurately in Hebrew, Yehoshua or Yeshu) prayed in synagogue and urged his followers to adhere strictly to Jewish law. Only in this way, he promised, would the Kingdom of God become a reality. Wilson probes the Jewish roots of the Lord's Prayer, the Sermon on the Mount and the Last Supper (which is more commonly recognized as a Passover seder, although there were likely many

more people in attendance than the 12 disciples portrayed in Leonardo da Vinci's celebrated painting). In Wilson's view, Jesus wanted to improve Jewish life, not abolish it. He did not proclaim himself to be a "Christ" figure or a "Son of God." That came later.

Living as second-class citizens in their own country and dominated by a foreign power in Rome, Jews needed hope and Jesus provided it. His growing number of followers began to think of him as a "potential Messiah." Led by Jesus's brother, James – whose writings until recently have been largely ignored – these Jews established the "Jesus Movement." After Jesus was killed by the Romans, in about 30 AD, they waited for him to return to create the promised Kingdom of God.

With James's death in the early 60s, the Jesus Movement suffered a leadership crisis, and in Wilson's words, was eventually "upstaged" and "hijacked" by the Christ Movement launched by Paul of Tarsus, a Hellenized Jew living in the Jewish Diaspora. The two movements should have remained separate and parallel religious sects, but subsequent events changed this. Paul did not know Jesus, yet nevertheless linked him to the Christ Movement. In the process, he tore Jesus from his Jewish roots.

Wilson shows that the most significant development in this synthesis occurred 60 years after both James and Paul died and was accomplished by the unknown author of the Book of Acts (part of the Gospel of Luke). This new "take" on Jesus was so credible that, as Wilson puts it, "we tend to think of Paul's Movement as just another form of early Christianity. It wasn't. It was a brand-new religion entirely." It was thus what Wilson terms "Paulinity" – "a Hellenized religion about a Gentile Christ [and] a cosmic redeemer" – rather than the Jewish-inspired religion of Jesus, which was embraced by the Gentiles of the Roman world in the period from the second to the fourth centuries.

The New Testament is not a neutral document. The Gospels and other writings are arranged in a particular order to give weight to Paul's interpretation of the link between the Jesus and the Christ Movements. Moreover, it was not sufficient for authors of several Gospels to distance Christianity from Judaism, they had to vilify it: Jews became equated with Satan. According to Wilson, this made the cover-up complete. The devastating result was religious anti-Semitism and the perpetuation of the accusation that the Jews killed Christ.

In fact, it was only one Jewish sect, the Sadducees, who turned against Jesus. They wanted to maintain the status quo with the Romans and feared that Jesus's preaching about a Kingdom of God and altering the world was dangerous. Once the Romans accepted Christianity, it was not possible to blame them for Jesus's death, so the Jews were identified in the Gospels and later Church decrees as the true evil murderers of the Son of God. Centuries of persecution followed.

One major reason, Wilson notes, for the hostile reaction to The Da Vinci Code was "its suggestion that Jesus was human." And that criticism was levelled at a novel. Wilson's firm belief that Christianity must refocus on the human and Jewish Jesus and accept the truth of the cover-up is sure to generate an even greater controversy.

Winnipeg historian and writer Allan Levine is the author of, among other books, *The Devil in Babylon: Fear of Progress and the Birth of Modern Life*. His next book, *Evil of the Age*, beginning a new historical mystery series, will be published in May.