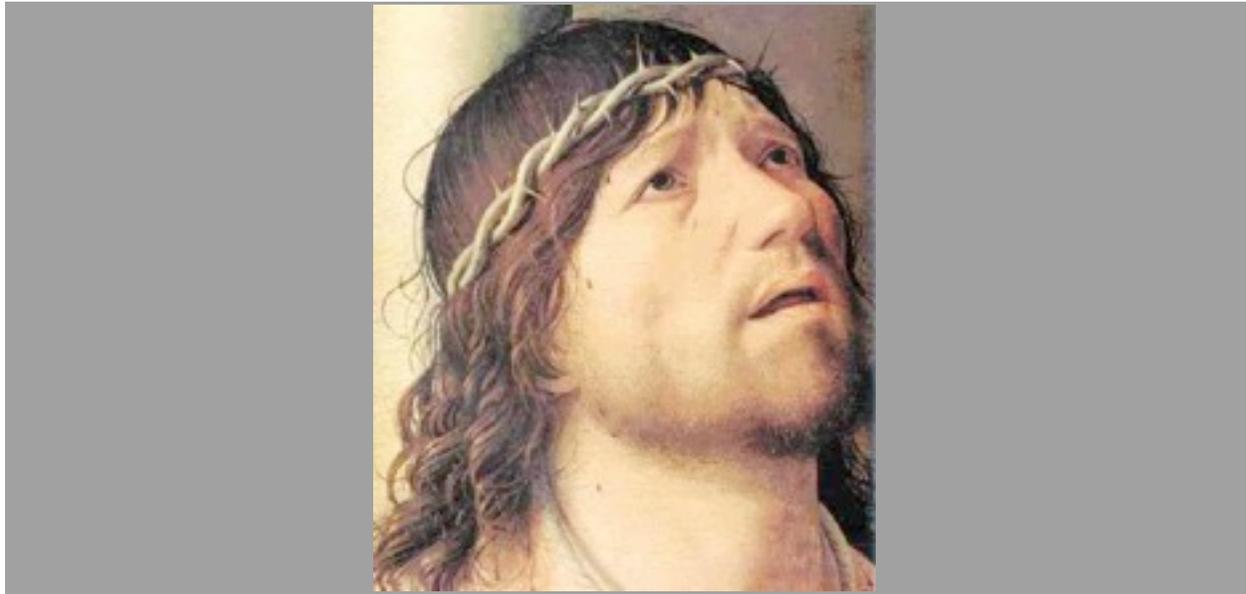


Jesus started out Jewish -- others made him Christian



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REVIEWED BY BERNARD BASKIN

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More than 2,000 years after his birth, Jesus remains a puzzling and enigmatic personality.

Questions abound: Did he intend to start a new religion? Did he consider himself the long-awaited Messiah? Was his essential message distorted by those who came after him?

It is difficult, if not impossible, to answer these and similar questions because the "real Jesus" is hidden behind four different accounts of him in the Christian Bible. Aside from these Gospel versions, there are virtually no other sources from which to gain any authentic knowledge of his life or teachings.

The Gospels -- written between 40 and 90 years after his death -- are filled with gaps and contradictions, encrusted with legendary accretions, influenced by the theological preconceptions of their authors and concerned with influencing or placating the Roman authorities at the time.

It is helpful to make a distinction between the terms "Jesus" and "Christ" and what they imply.

Jesus is a proper name for the Hebrew Joshua; it denotes a Palestinian of 19 centuries ago around whom the Gospels weave a radiant biography. They indicate that his concern was an ethical and redemptive message to a strife-torn and restive society, addressed especially to the poor and outcast.

Christ, on the other hand, derives from the Greek word for saviour, closely akin to the Hebrew moshiah (messiah or anointed). Christ represents the concept of a man-God, not a mortal creature, who came voluntarily into the world to atone for the sins of men and women by self-immolation.

The life lived and the ideas taught by Jesus were, in essence, a product of his Jewish birth and background. When he was asked about the essentials of his religion, he replied, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One" and "Love your neighbour as yourself." Both are quotations from the Hebrew Bible, and the very foundation of Judaism's faith.

This book, *How Jesus Became a Christian*, is a seminal work by a professor of humanities and religious studies at Toronto's York University. It is the product of 20 years of teaching and research.

His major thesis is that the teachings and true personality of Jesus -- loyal to his people and faith -- were altered by Paul and early Christian leaders to create a radically new religion.

The author asserts: "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. This was the very group that endorsed the 'coverup.'"

James, Jesus's brother, led a group in Jerusalem that tried to win followers to a new but basically Jewish way of life. After his death, the movement was eventually "hijacked" (the author's word) by an alternative theology launched by Paul of Tarsus, a Hellenized Jew who contended the laws of Moses could not bring a person to righteousness and could be ignored or nullified.

Wilson writes: "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."

Wilson says bluntly, "Paul took a popular, charismatic Jewish teacher and transformed him into a universal Saviour."

In any case, it is clear Judaism and Christianity did not go their separate ways until the fourth century, when Emperor Constantine signed the Edict of Milan, which established official tolerance of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire.

Wilson's basic contention is not new but rarely so plausibly argued and so impressively documented. His style is engaging and meant for a popular audience.

This theological detective story deserves wide readership and discussion.

Bernard Baskin is Rabbi Emeritus of Temple Anshe Sholom and a regular contributor to The Spectator's books and opinions pages.

How Jesus Became Christian, by Barrie Wilson

(Random House, \$32.95)