

## **It's Easter, time to rev up the revisionism; New scholarship suggests Jesus might never have intended to found a new religion**

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Jesus needs saving, once again, from his followers. This time, however, it is not from those he preached to or from one of his most loyal supporters who, the Bible says, betrayed him.

It's the Christians who came later.

That's the shared thesis of at least two recently released books about the man crucified almost 2,000 years ago. How Jesus Became Christian by Barrie Wilson and The Jesus Sayings by Rex Weyler both try to take the reader back to Biblical times to uncover Jesus's lost message.

"It seems like Jesus was rejecting power and handing it over to the people," Vancouver-based Weyler says in a telephone interview. "But that didn't sit well with authorities - religious or secular."

Easter always brings a fresh wave of books and TV shows about Jesus as publishers and broadcasters capitalize on the heightened awareness of the man from Nazareth at this time of year, says University of Toronto Christianity professor Mark McGowan.

"For a Jesus book, August wouldn't be that great," he adds.

Easter remains a much more theologically based holiday than Christmas, McGowan says, and savvy publishers know they can release more thoughtful books than they would during the hurly-burly of the Yule season. The Weyler and Wilson books certainly fit that description.

Wilson, a religious studies professor at York University, says the discovery last century of lost gospels in the Gnostic Writings as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which scholars are only now beginning to understand, have led to a flourish of books on the origins of Christianity.

"We now know more about early Christianity than we did even 15 years ago," Wilson says in an interview.

Wilson takes readers to the first centuries BC and AD to help them understand the context in which Jesus lived and preached. It was a time of great religious upheaval, with new ideas challenging old beliefs and Roman domination threatening the future of Judaism.

Among Jews, Wilson says, there was a great deal of debate about how to preserve the faith in the face of Roman influence and authority.

A close reading of the story of Jesus - some drawing on lost gospels not included in modern Bibles - reveals that he was not trying to establish a new religion in his name, Wilson says, but to show his followers how to resist Roman domination and remain Jewish. That, Jesus taught, could only be done through strict adherence to the Torah, known to most Christians as the Old Testament, according to Wilson.

But such teachings contrast sharply with the message of Paul, who never met Jesus but claimed to have been visited by him in a mystical experience on the road to Damascus after Jesus's crucifixion.

Wilson says Paul told followers not to follow the Torah. He argued that salvation could only be achieved by accepting Jesus as the son of God.

"Paul had a different focus, and that I always found strange from the first time I stepped into a New Testament class," says Wilson.

What Paul was advancing, Wilson says, was a completely different religion that had nothing to do with Jesus, whose original followers were still trying to build their movement in Jerusalem after the crucifixion while Paul spread his message to gentiles throughout the Roman Empire.

In fact, Paul's religion had nothing to do with Jesus or his teachings, says Wilson, pointing out that Paul never talks about the living Jesus in any of his writings.

"There's no parables, no Sermon on the Mount," says Wilson. "Those are strange omissions."

The popular history of Christianity is that it evolved out of the Jesus Movement that began before Jesus's crucifixion and was led by his brothers and closest followers afterward. The Bible's Book of Acts has been the basis of such an understanding.

Wilson, however, rejects such theories, calling the Book of Acts "pure fiction."

Instead, he says, Paul and his followers simply appropriated the Jesus story to give their own movement a historic credence that would make it more appealing to Roman gentiles.

"Paul was a religious genius," Wilson says. "He saw a way to take a Jewish figure (Jesus) and turn him into a universal saviour."

Paul's Christ movement did catch on, spreading fast among non-Jews and within a few centuries it was the official religion of the empire.

Much of its attraction, Wilson says, was that it didn't require the same strict Torah observance that Jesus wanted, including adult circumcision for converts, and requiring only that Christ be accepted as a personal saviour.

"It was much easier," says Wilson.

But along the way, the message of Jesus was not only lost but deliberately suppressed in an effort to beat out the rival Jesus Movement in the fight for followers, says Wilson.

Paul's writings on the subject, Wilson says, became the basis for centuries of anti-Semitism in the Christian world as Jews came to be blamed for the crucifixion of Jesus the saviour.

For Wilson, the far more disheartening death was the lost story of Jesus the man.

"Really," says Wilson, "it was the Christians who killed Jesus, metaphorically.