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A Brief Counter-history of Christianity

Counter-history or counter-narrative when history is lacking. This is not a “godspel” (from god “good” and spel “news”). Nor is it necessarily bad news or a succession of logical steps that lead to a preconceived conclusion. It is simply the result of an inquisitive mind exercising its natural faculties of thought and reflection to the best of its ability as honestly and freely as possible.

It seeks neither to deny nor confirm the biblical narratives. It is a logical explanation of the historical events from which the biblical narratives take their source – a logical explanation founded not in a hypothetical supernatural, but mankind’s universal conception of reality: “that which exists independently of ideas concerning it”. It goes unhindered (as far as humanly possible) by bias, prejudice, and belief, wherever logic and rationality may lead it.

As the Prometheus of Aeschylus observed in 430 BC: “But time itself grows old and teaches all things”¹.

*«LET us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question....
Oh, do not ask, “What is it?”
Let us go and make our visit. »*

(T.S. Eliot, “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”)

There is very little that reputable scholars of antiquity agree upon concerning Jesus. There, nevertheless, appears to be a consensus that he did, in fact, exist. This consensus² reposes exclusively on two historically justifiable events: that Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist (a Jewish prophet and relative of Jesus³ who was also Jewish) and was crucified on the order of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

Presuming, therefore, that there was at least one historical Jesus of Nazareth (there may have been several, as Jesus was a common name at

1 Aeschylus, Prometheus Bound, London: William Pickering, 1832, translation by Thomas Medwin, 57 : <https://archive.org/details/prometheusbound02aescgoog/page/n2/mode/2up?q=%3A+%E2%80%9CBut+time+itself+grows+old%2C+and+teaches+all+things+%E2%80%9D>.

2 James Dunn, Jesus Remembered, writes regarding baptism and crucifixion that these “two facts in the life of Jesus command almost universal assent, ISBN 08028–3931–2, 339.

3 Bible Gateway, Luke 1-36 King James Version (KJV).

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the time⁴), the next question is who were his parents and what were the circumstances of his birth?

There is no consensus among scholars on either of these points.

The authors of the New Testament constructed their narratives on mythological foundations for which there were never any witnesses nor evidence of any sort. The narratives have, therefore, in their quasi-totality, always been impossible to verify⁵. The original manuscripts no longer exist and all we have at our disposal are multigenerational copies that have been recopied, rewritten, partly modified, extended, reduced etc., without the slightest indication or explanation.

The baby Jesus was reputed to have been born out of wedlock to two young adolescents, Mary (15-16 years) and Joseph (17-18 years) who were said to have been engaged to be married at the time. Jesus is thought to have been the couple's first child of a total of seven (four boys and three girls).

What was perfectly evident, even before he was born, was that the illegitimate child, Jesus, would be severely blackballed by society all his life. – which, indeed, he was, according to the New Testament, including by his brothers and sisters⁶. It is, therefore, not difficult to imagine that Mary's story of artificial insemination by the "Holy Ghost" was designed to avoid, if not, at least attenuate the inevitable negative consequences for the innocent baby victim as well as the culpability of the transgressive parents.

This is what an apocryphal document supposedly from Pontius Pilate (or claimed to have been composed based on reports at the praetorium at Jerusalem) reporting events in Judea to Emperor Tiberius, relating the trial of Jesus, has to say on the question of Jesus' birth.

« The elders of the Jews answered and said unto Jesus: What shall we see? Firstly, that thou wast born of fornication; secondly, that thy birth in Bethlehem was the cause of the slaying of children; thirdly, that thy father Joseph and thy mother Mary fled into Egypt because they had no confidence before the people », cf., The gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate⁷.

4 Ed Pilkington in New York and Rory McCarthy in Jerusalem, "Is this really the last resting place of Jesus, Mary Magdalene - and their son?", The Guardian, February 27, 2007, International edition : (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/feb/27/religion.israel>).

5 On The historical reliability of the Gospels : https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Historical_reliability_of_the_Gospels.

6 The gospels indicate a rift between Jesus and his brothers in the early part of his ministry, and they never appear among his followers (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brothers_of_Jesus#Rejection_of_Jesus). The gospel of John has Jesus's brothers advising him to go to Judea despite being aware that his life would be in danger, and they are absent from his burial : (https://books.google.fr/books?id=zCxpAgAAQBAJ&pg=PA37&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q&f=false).

7 Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Plešić, The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations, Oxford University Press, 2011, ISBN: 9780199732104, The gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate : (<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelnicodemus-roberts.html>), Chapter 2, paragraph 3.

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Mary brought Jesus up in the belief that Joseph was not his father but that he was the son of God. Mary seems to have firmly and solidly inculcated that belief in Jesus and convinced him to lead his life accordingly.

Just what his “foster father”, Joseph, thought of all that is not known. Apparently, he was not privy to the conversation Mary claimed to have had with Archangel Gabrielle. Nor do we know anything of Joseph’s whereabouts or what he happened to be doing while his fiancée was being artificially inseminated by the “Holy Ghost”. One can only imagine that he went along with the story to avoid Mary and himself being branded fornicators by society and the baby being outcast.

It has been suggested that Jesus’ genitor may have been somebody other than Joseph, perhaps even as the result of rape⁸ but, even so, there is little doubt that Joseph assumed the role as his father.

There is no irrefutable historical trace of the rest of Jesus’ life apart from his baptism by John the Baptist and his crucifixion on the order of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate. Exactly how he lived the 30 to 40 years of his life is a matter of conjecture. Even the dates of his birth and crucifixion are not known precisely. He is thought to have been born sometime between 6 BC and 4 BC and crucified sometime between AD 26 and AD 37.

The history of Jesus was destined to end in tragedy. It could not have been otherwise. The pretended extraordinary circumstances of his conception as allegedly proclaimed and upheld by Mary determined the atypical course of Jesus’ life and inevitably led to his tragic death. If so, the complicity of his “foster father”, Joseph, would also necessarily have played an active role in maintaining the myth, though it seems probable that Joseph was already deceased at the time of the tragic death of his eldest son.

From all accounts, Jesus of Nazareth was a good man. He was reputed to be an excellent philosopher⁹ and theologian as well as a highly skilled debater and rhetorician. He faithfully and conscientiously assumed the role assigned to him by his parents which, *in fine*, turned out to be that of a hero of a classical Greek tragedy, a sort of super Prometheus.

His “foster father”, Joseph, is thought to have been a carpenter and Jesus probably followed in his footsteps to gain a living. Though some think he had many talents and was a jack of all trades (but master of none?). Others see him as a political activist¹⁰ which he undoubtedly was.

Jesus lived in Jewish Palestine which was part of the Roman Empire during the first century AD. He was constantly in conflict with the political and religious authorities at the time, the Sadducees and Pharisees, the

8 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, Cambridge University Press, translation by Henry Chadwick, 31 : https://books.google.fr/books?id=wsKLIV3TpOYC&printsec=frontcover&dq=isbn:0521295769&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewj_g632lq3sAhXMzoUKHYbwBScQuwUwAHoECAAQBw#v=onepage&q&f=false.

9 Douglas Groothuis, “Jesus: Philosopher and Apologist”, Christian Research Institute, Article ID: DJ700

Updated: Mar 30, 2023 : <https://www.equip.org/articles/jesus-philosopher-and-apologist/>

10 Gospel Politics.com, “Jesus and Politics” : <https://www.gospelpolitics.com/jesus-and-politics.html>

wealthy Jewish ruling classes of Judea, who retained most of their power during the Roman occupation as long as they paid their taxes.

According to the highly controversial Acts of Pilate narrative, the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate, finally ceded to the insistent demands of the Jewish leaders to have Jesus crucified, but only after having “washed his hands before the sun, saying: I am innocent of the blood of this just man: see ye to it”. To Pilate’s question “Why should he die?” the Jews replied: “because he called himself the Son of God and a king”¹¹.

Tortured to death on the cross at Calvary on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Jesus is reported to have hurled a quotation of psalm 22:1 (of the Old Testament), of an unknown author, but which is thought to have been written by the Jewish King David some 1,000 years before the birth of Jesus: “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me ?” Nailed to the cross, it is difficult to imagine Jesus quoting, verbatim, a text written by King David a thousand years previously. The only gospel that affirms that he did is that of Matthew (27:45-46) – even though the text had nothing to do with crucifixion which did not exist at the time.

What is more likely is that the excruciating horror of crucifixion had such a devastating effect on Jesus that it opened his eyes to the stark reality that he was not the son of God that Mary and Joseph had led him to believe.

Another cry of anguish attributed to Jesus, as he was being nailed to the cross was: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). This is generally thought to refer to Jesus’ persecutors. Whereas it would far more appropriately and significantly apply to his poor, loving, but tragically misguided parents.

As was the tradition in such cases, Pilate wrote an inscription, “INRI”, and put it on Jesus’ cross. It signified in Latin “Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum” (“Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews”). It was hotly contested by the Jewish leaders but maintained by a disgusted Pilate¹².

Such was the life of a just, brave and holy man, known as Jesus of Nazareth. He had the misfortune to be born out of wedlock. His parents, Joseph and Mary were a modest, God-loving couple who inadvertently sealed his tragic fate by proclaiming that he had been miraculously conceived by God, to spare the family the dishonour of ostracism and retribution by their local community.

Even Aeschylus could never have imagined, in his wildest dreams, the impact that simple story would have on the successive generations of humanity for the next two thousand years, and probably continue to have for many more years to come.

Dreams, of course, are rooted in the realm of abstraction – not in that of reality – just as our sense of the sacred, the transcendent and the spiritual

11 Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Please, *The Apocryphal Gospels, The gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate*, (<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelnicodemus-roberts.html>) Chapter 4, last paragraph.

12 Bart Ehrman and Zlatko Please, *The Apocryphal Gospels, The gospel of Nicodemus, or Acts of Pilate*, (<https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/gospelnicodemus-roberts.html>) Chapter 10, paragraph 2.

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are rooted in the realm of abstraction. Mental constructions often become confused with reality. Distinguishing between the two is not always evident. While the extraordinary natural propensity for abstract thought of particularly brilliant mathematicians has taken us to the moon and back, the same human faculty has prevented the 18th -century "Age of Enlightenment" from attaining its logical conclusion. No less than half of the world population continues to languish in the "Dark Ages". They remain impermeable to the lessons of Enlightenment and continue to perpetuate the belief handed down to us by primeval man, generation after generation, that a God or Supreme Being is not just a conceptual construct but reality.

Primeval man conceptualized gods and the supernatural as a logical explanation of hostile natural phenomena such as hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, volcanos, droughts, bush fires, snowstorms, and the occasional devastating meteorite. They developed a strategy of survival based on that concept, attributing a god to each of nature's hostile manifestations and submissively prostrating themselves, making offerings, sacrifice, and worship to placate and appease the gods. Time has passed and we now have a better understanding of such natural phenomena but for much of humanity the basic concept of deity continues to be considered relevant. Christianity conceives of it as a single, all-powerful, three-dimensional God.

Any defections from the primeval concept of deity due to Enlightenment have been more than compensated by the superior fertility rates of the growing mass of believers in undeveloped and developing countries. Religious beliefs are part and parcel of the culture we inherit at birth and pass on to successive generations. Religious conversion is negligible.

The human brain is one of the most awesome and complex creations of nature in the universe. Its structure is labyrinthine and extremely intricate. We have identified and understood the function of some of the pieces of the mega jigsaw puzzle, but we still have a lot to learn. All the major developed countries have launched large-scale national and international projects dedicated to brain research¹³ and investors are providing billions of dollars in funding, but it will take years to identify all the pieces and put them together comprehensively.

What is clear is that the brain receives and emits information as well as interpreting and creating it. It is the command centre that controls our thoughts and actions. The problem is it sometimes plays tricks on us. It normally provides us with mental constructions that faithfully represent reality, but not always. We have a natural tendency to see that which we know, understand and recognise, and often fail to see that which we ignore. As John Rawls wrote in his magnum opus *A Theory of Justice*, (p 118) citing Kant's ethics, we "observe reality behind a veil of ignorance". Bias, prejudice, belief, psychological factors and disorders affect our vision and lead us to misinterpret the images our brain transmits to us.

As a result, we do not always see the world exactly as it is. Each of us lives in a world of his construction¹⁴. The vision of each individual is not

13 Neil Savage, "The search for secrets of the human brain", Nature, 8 November 2019 (<https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-019-03065-7>)

14 David Eagleman, "Biological Limits of Human Perception". Eagleman video

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the same as that of any other individual. In some key areas such as politics and religion where it is not unusual for the brains of many individuals to be immutably hard-wired under the influence of their parents and cultural and social environments, conflicting worldviews are usually irreconcilable.

Given the circumstances of his birth and upbringing, this must surely have been the case of Jesus.

The New Testament narratives do not depict the revolt of Jesus as being directed against the system or Judaism per se but against the Jewish leaders in personam whom he considered to be incompetent, corrupt and illegitimate. Jesus remained a devout Jew all his life. He did not create Christianity.

Christianity began as a small Jewish sect of which the principal promoter seems to have been Saul of Tarsus, later known as Saint Paul, who founded several Christian communities in Asia Minor and Europe between the mid-30s and 50s AD. Saul's assistant, Luke, accompanied him on some of his trips. Saul and Luke were the principal authors of the New Testament. They wrote about 40% of the texts.

According to the New Testament, Saul's initiatives were not well received by Simon Peter (Saint Peter) and James (Jesus' brother) who considered that only Jews could become members of the sect. To placate them, Saul returned to Jerusalem and negotiated an agreement that Simon Peter would be the leader of the sect in Jerusalem and Saul would be the leader of the Gentiles (non-Jews)¹⁵.

For many years after the death of Jesus, the sect consisted of numerous small, disparate communities. It did not acquire the status of religion until 325 AD under the impulse of the Roman Emperor, Constantine, who brought the leaders of the small communities together for the first time at the ecumenical Council of Nicaea¹⁶ and fostered their adoption of orthodoxy, common doctrines and dogma. Fifty-five years later, in 380 AD, Theodosius I made Christianity the official state religion of the Roman Empire.

Christianity has since become the largest religion in the world with over two billion declared adherents. However, Islam is expected to overtake it before the end of the century¹⁷ due to the persistently higher fer-

shows the biological limits of human perception and some technologies that expand possibilities of experience : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1X1mry35ykQ&ab_channel=FORA.tv.

¹⁵ Wayne A. Meeks and L. Michael White, "Paul's Mission and Letters", Frontline, section titled "Tension over Dining Fellowship": <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/first/missions.html>.

¹⁶ Wu Mingren, "The Council of Nicaea: Pagan Emperor Constantine Used Christianity to Unify Church and State", Ancient Origins, 2018 : <https://www.ancient-origins.net/history-important-events/council-nicaea-0010969>.

¹⁷ Michael Lipka, "Muslims and Islam: Key findings in the U.S. and around the world", Pew Research Center, 2017, section titled "How many Muslims are there? Where do they live?", first paragraph : <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/>.

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tility rate of the Muslim population. Present-day religion is essentially a cultural phenomenon, and, for many adherents, it is also an inspirational means of expression of the spiritual (abstract) dimension of their human nature.

Both Christianity and Islam are, of course, offspring of Judaism. Both have developed into universal religions while Judaism continues to remain the essentially ethnic religion that was created by the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob about four thousand years ago.

From both a historical and theological point of view, it is interesting to note that the Christian Bible is an anthology of texts of both the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible) and the New Testament (the writings of early Christian authors) which attests to the organic roots of Christianity in Judaism.

« The real advantage which truth has, consists in this, that when an opinion is true, it may be extinguished once, twice, or many times, but in the course of ages there will generally be found persons to rediscover it, until some one of its reappearances falls on a time when from favourable circumstances it escapes persecution until it has made such head as to withstand all subsequent attempts to suppress it » (John Stuart Mill, On Liberty, 1859).