

Introduction

Michael F. Bird: the Christian view on the birth of Christianity

According to Martin Dibelius: ‘In the beginning was the sermon.’¹ What that means is that at the root of Christianity was the proclamation of certain events pertaining to Jesus and the explanation of these events by the followers of Jesus. And so began what we now call Christianity and it began with a bang! Jesus was crucified in Judea some time around 30 CE, and by 49 CE (a mere 19 years later) the Roman emperor Claudius was making imperial policy about Christians in relation to disputes in Rome among the Jewish population concerning a certain ‘Chrestus’ who we may identify with ‘Christ’ (Acts 18.2; Suetonius, *Claud.* 25.4). How do we get from Judea to Rome in so short a time? What happened, when, where, who, how and what does it mean? To look briefly at those questions is the task before us now.

In our study of Christian origins we are dealing with reports and interpretations, facts and faith, history and theology. What sets me apart from James Crossley is that I accept the interpretation of the events by the earliest witnesses, I share their faith, and I expound the theology that they have bequeathed to us. That is why I am an ‘evangelical’ Christian, which I take to mean *someone who identifies with the faith of historic Christianity and believes in the saving and transforming power of the evangel, that is, the good news about Jesus the Christ*. That will obviously influence the way that I approach the historical task. As Frank Thielman writes:

Whereas both the New Testament theologian and the secular historian are interested in the history to which the canonical texts give access, they differ on the importance that they grant to the perspectives of the texts themselves. Historians who stand outside the church employ every means at their disposal to render the perspectives of the canonical texts inoperative in their thinking. The texts then provide the raw data with which the secular historian attempts to reconstruct the story of early Christianity according to another perspective. The New Testament theologians, however, through the basic insight of faith, want to embrace the perspectives of the texts on

¹ Martin Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971), 12–15; in German: *Im Anfang war die Predigt*.

the events that provoked their composition. The perspectives of the texts on the history of early Christianity are not husks to be peeled away so that the historian might see more clearly. They are not merely historical data that provide information about early Christian religion. For New Testament theologians who regard the texts as authoritative, the perspectives of the texts speak of their true significance. They are, in other words, objects of faith.²

I am a reader of the history of early Christianity, the texts and artefacts, the sociology and its relevant contexts, but I read it sympathetically. For me, the Bible is not an assortment of documents about religious ideas from antiquity but it is Scripture and has sacred value in the faith community to which I belong. Does that make me biased then? To be perfectly truthful, it certainly does, and I cannot avoid that. But let me say two things to those who might dismiss my historical labours prematurely as too partisan and lacking in objectivity. First, as a Christian my task is not to peddle my presuppositions and call them evidence. Rather, I hope to carry out the kind of open and critical enquiry that might vindicate those presuppositions.³ Second, I would vouch for myself by saying that, even as a believer, I am genuinely interested in history and truth in its own right. If I were to be persuaded that certain events did not take place (e.g. the resurrection) then I would have to seriously reconsider my current expression of faith and perhaps even abandon it altogether.⁴ Suffice to say, that has not happened to date. On the contrary, my faith has grown and been enriched by my historical study. Over time I have changed my mind on many theological issues as a result of my historical ventures, but I have not yet felt the temptation to chuck it all in as it were.

As I study early Christianity, I see a number of sequential stories: the story of Israel, the story of the Jews under foreign hegemony, the story of Jesus, the story of the early Church, and also the story of God. Thus, what I want to do in this book is provide a commentary on these narratives by looking at the main threads in the various plots and subplots: Jesus, the resurrection, the Gospels, Paul and the early Church, and pay attention to the flash-points along the way. I hope in the end to provide a compelling and entertaining narration of early Christianity that tells us something of Jesus, the first Christians and even of God.

² Frank Thielman, *Theology of the New Testament: A Canonical and Synthetic Approach* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 31–2.

³ Bruce D. Chilton, 'An Evangelical and Critical Approach to the Sayings of Jesus', *Themelios* 3 (1978), 74–85 (85).

⁴ I think here of Gerd Lüdemann and Bart Ehrman in particular, as examples of scholars who have abandoned faith owing to their scholarly endeavours.

James G. Crossley: the secular view on the birth of Christianity

Whatever route either of us would take in this competing book on Christian origins, the passages/evidence and narrative outline could only be selective. That much is obvious but it begs the questions: Why choose certain passages/pieces of evidence? And why choose a certain narrative? What I will do is use the preselected areas (Jesus, resurrection, Paul, Gospels and Christianity in the Roman Empire) to explain some of the key reasons why Christianity became a major religion in its own right, often constructing its identity over against the Roman and Jewish worlds while at the same time being embedded in both. Three key areas, among numerous others, set Christianity apart from its Jewish heritage: Law observance (or lack of), Gentiles and the full deification of a human being, Jesus. Judaism, in contrast, was known, partly, for its observance of the Law, its stress on Jewish ethnicity, and its god who certainly did not become a human being. At the same time, Christianity's Jewish and scriptural heritage of hostility to other cults or views of the divine, among other things, provided one mechanism for a distinctive identity to be constructed over against the Roman world. Of course, identity is much messier and much more complex than this simple outline, but in general terms, and in terms of orthodox Christianity, the above factors became known as some of the distinctive features. The question now is how Christianity got to these distinctive features.

The approach I will take will be what may generally be called 'secular', if by secular we mean the kind of approach that might typically be used in humanities departments outside theology and biblical studies. Here, I will provide some fairly conventional approaches developed by historians outside theology and biblical studies and sometimes fruitfully applied to the historical study of Christian origins. This will involve looking at broader social and economic trends, combined with individual decisions, that led to the emergence of Christianity as a distinctive religion. In this respect, the famous pre-inclusive language statement of Karl Marx is worth recalling:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.⁵

⁵ K. Marx, 'Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', in K. Marx and F. Engels, *Collected Works: Volume 11 1851–1853* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1979), 99–197.

But not unlike Christianity as described above, I too have a heritage that I cannot (and will not) totally shake off, namely, the various approaches advanced in biblical studies and even – heaven forbid – theological approaches. Indeed, the very thematic structure of this book is one of classical studies of Christian origins grounded in theological approaches to the ancient texts. This is hardly a surprise, as theology is deeply embedded in its historical context, and theology too, as we will see, plays its part in the emergence of Christianity, even if this has been massively overstated in scholarship. But, on this level too, my choice of areas to study sharply focus the secular–evangelical/Christian debate on the full divinity of Jesus and the non-observance of at least key parts of the Law (not to mention the resurrection!), which have been massive identity markers for Christian tradition.

Contrary to what has been written about me in various reviews and elsewhere, I do not deplore theological approaches, theology, history of ideas, Christianity or religion, etc. I have stressed this elsewhere and stress it again (and again) and consequently I can now only hope people do not add words and sentiments that are not present (cf. Rev. 22.18–20). What I want to do is provide an explanation for the emergence of Christianity that is not heavily grounded in theology, the supernatural, and/or ideas but one that is heavily grounded in socio-historical explanation. I do not wish to demolish anyone's worldview or religious beliefs but, at the same time, I have no desire to endorse them for the sake of historical research that comes up smelling of Christian roses. But then why have a book between a believer and non-believer if there are no points of argument?

To anticipate a certain type of reaction, I am not arguing that my secular perspective is 'more objective' or somehow inherently superior to an evangelical or indeed any other approach, though, obviously, I do think my explanation is, to the best of my knowledge, a better account of the evidence, just as, presumably, Michael Bird thinks his account is better than mine. If neither of us were arrogant enough to think like this then there would be little point in being involved in doing a book like this. And this really hits at the heart of this book: Who has got the better account of Christian origins?