

# Roman Influence on the Birth of Christianity

By Barry Benning

Rome's influence on the birth of Christianity is unmistakable, more so than many might realize. Rome's influence is clearly illustrated in two categories; the commonality with Roman culture and cults as it existed prior to Christianity, and the evidence that can be seen in a realistic and historical perspective of the early Christian writings. The discussion to follow proposes a new theory on the origins of Christianity. Was Christianity born of human conflict, the conflict between the imperialism of the Roman Empire and the self-perceived entitlement of the ancient Jewish culture, resulting in Roman attempts at manipulation of religious forces in Judea?

## *Commonality with Pre-existing Roman Culture and Cults*

In Volume II of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*<sup>1</sup> on page 724 in a discussion of the Greek term, *evangelion*, the editors make the following statement regarding the ruler of the Roman Empire:

The ruler is divine by nature.<sup>2</sup> His power extends to men, to animals, to the earth and to the sea. Nature belongs to him; wind and waves are subject to him.<sup>3</sup> He works miracles and heals men.<sup>4</sup> He is the saviour of the world who also redeems individuals from their difficulties. He has appeared on earth as a deity in human form.<sup>5</sup>

This is a powerful and far-reaching statement that encompasses a great deal of classical literature, far more than References 2 through 5 above. For a thorough discussion and listing of appropriate classical references, see a book by Lily Ross Taylor entitled *The Divinity of the Roman Emperor*.<sup>6</sup>

The mythology of divinity began with the founding of Rome (attributed to the date 753 BCE). The Roman historian, Livy (59 BCE – 17 ACE), acknowledges in *The Early History of Rome*, I.3<sup>7</sup> the myth concerning the founders of Rome, the brothers Romulus and Remus, as having been born of a Vestal Virgin, Sylvia, with the god, Mars, as their father. Livy refers to "Romulus, the son of a god and himself divine."<sup>8</sup> The Greek historian, Plutarch, wrote:

For it is said that their [Romulus' and Remus'] mother [Sylvia] conceived by a God. It is reported concerning the begetting of Romulus, that the sun was eclipsed at the time as the immortal God Mars was with the mortal Sylvia. The same is said to have happened about the time of his death... the sun was under an eclipse.<sup>9</sup>

This sets precedence to Christianity in terms of human divinity, virgin birth, and divine conception. These concepts were by no means unique or original to Roman culture (Egypt and Greece come to mind), but Rome was in control of Judea during the birth of Christianity, granting it preference. With regard to the solar eclipse (a relatively rare natural event), the *New Testament* also speaks of an eclipse of the sun upon Christ's death.<sup>10</sup> Livy acknowledges other possible explanations for Sylvia's placement in history, but clearly the mythology existed

concerning the divinity of the founders of Rome, their virgin birth, and a god as their father. Plutarch writes of another virgin birth:

Queen Tanaquil... dressed up the virgin in all her bridal ornaments and attire, and then shut her up in a room together with this apparition. Some attribute this amour to Lar the household God, and others to Vulcan; but which-soever it was, Oeresia was with child, and gave birth to Sevius [the sixth Roman King, 579 – 535 BCE].<sup>11</sup>

After the time of Romulus, the Romans strongly resisted the concept of deity for the Roman ruler for hundreds of years until the time of the Caesars in the middle of the first century BCE. The Romans accepted Romulus as a god due to his distance in ancient history and an attributed myth that he never actually died, but was swept up into heaven by a whirlwind. Livy states "... and at last every man present hailed him as a god and a son of god, and prayed to him."<sup>12</sup> But after the era of the Roman Kings (753 – 510 BCE) the Roman people shunned the title of *rex*, or king, and the idea of god incarnate, until the time of Julius Caesar.

It was during the reign of Julius Caesar (60 – 44 BCE) and Augustus Caesar (44 BCE – 14 ACE) that the concept of god incarnate gained prominence. The idea of the ruler's divinity was especially promoted in the eastern provinces. An inscription in Ephesus honored Julius Caesar as "a revealed god, offspring of Mars and Venus, and universal saviour of the human race."<sup>13</sup> In 45 BCE in Rome in the temple of Quirinus a statue of Caesar was erected with the inscription, "To the unconquered god."<sup>14</sup> The Roman senate decreed Julius Caesar to be a god and commanded the erection of a temple to him and his *Clementia*.<sup>15</sup> In 45 BCE Caesar's portrait appears for the first time on coins from the Roman mint, which had usually contained images of the gods, and had never before shown a representation of a living man.<sup>16</sup>

Julius Caesar's adopted son and heir, Octavian, continued the practice of having his portrait on minted coins when he became Emperor Augustus Caesar. Inscriptions on the coins included *divi filius*, son of a god. Augustus Caesar was also considered by popular mythology to be the son of the god Apollo. Augustus' mother, Atia, spent the night in the temple of Apollo and was impregnated by the god in the form of a serpent (the Roman representation of fertility).<sup>17</sup> In Book 6 of *Aeneid* written by the Roman poet Vergil around 19 BCE, Vergil refers to Augustus as "descended from God." Contemporary rivals to Augustus Caesar, Mark Antony and Sextus Pompey, also claimed rights to divinity. Mark Antony masqueraded as Dionysus, and Sextus claimed to be the son of Neptune, *Neptune dux*, as the Roman author, Horace, referred to him.<sup>18</sup> Sextus claimed dominion over the seas and the favor of Neptune when his opponent's fleet was destroyed by storm.<sup>19</sup> Julius Caesar was also said to have dominion over the waves. In reference to a boat pilot fearful of putting to sea due to violent waves, Plutarch quotes Caesar as saying, "Put on, brave fellow, and fear nothing, but commit the sails to [the goddess] Fortune, and expose all boldly to the winds; for thou carriest Caesar and Caesar's fortune."<sup>20</sup> Plutarch goes on to write that the goddess Fortune favored Caesar and "it was her province to give calmness to the sea." Compare this to Matthew 8:26-27:

And he [Jesus] said to them, "Why are you afraid, O men of little faith?" Then he rose and rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. And the men marveled, saying, "What sort of man is this, that even the winds and the sea obey him?"

The concept of god incarnate and being the son of a god was not unique to the Roman and Greek presence in Judea. In Judaism, King David was considered to be the first-born son of God.<sup>21</sup> In the *New Testament* Jesus disputes this,<sup>22</sup> presumably in promoting his own rights to this claim.

In the *New Testament* Jesus had twelve disciples.<sup>23</sup> In *The Early History of Rome*, I.7, in reference to the first king of Rome, Livy writes, "...of which the most important was the creation of the twelve lictors to attend his person. Some have fancied that he made the lictors twelve in number because the vultures, in the augury, had been twelve." In *The Divine Augustus*, section 70, in reference to a gala Augustus Caesar would throw, Suetonius writes, "A private entertainment which he gave, commonly called the *Supper of the Twelve Gods*, and at which the guests were dressed in the habit of gods and goddesses..." Does Livy's emphasis of the number twelve somehow carry over to the number of disciples in Christian literature? However, the number twelve also has strong importance in Jewish culture with the twelve tribes of Israel coming from the twelve sons of Jacob.<sup>24</sup>

Religious scholars are not certain of the origins of Christian baptism (from the Greek word *baptismos*, which means the act of bathing or washing). Many note that the Jewish rite of initiation for gentiles called *proselyte ablution* also originated around this time. But a precedent also existed in Roman culture. In *The Early History of Rome*, I.45, Livy writes:

Surely you do not mean to sacrifice to Diana without first performing the act of purification? You must bathe yourself, before the ceremony, in a living stream. Down there in the valley the Tiber [river] flows.

Roman culture placed a strong emphasis on bathing for cleanliness, and according to the above passage, in preparation for religious ceremony. If the original purpose of baptism in river waters relates to a type of cleansing or bathing (i.e., the meaning of *baptismos*), then the ritual has strong similarity to the practice described by Livy. There were also Jewish sects of the time that practiced ritualistic cleansing, but not necessarily in a river.

In the first century BCE, the Greek historian Nicolaus of Damascus (teacher to Herod the Great and ambassador to Augustus Casesar) writes in the *Life of Augustus*:

Octavius, at the age of about nine years [twelve<sup>25</sup>], was an object of no little admiration to the Romans, exhibiting as he did great excellence of nature, young though he was; for he gave an oration before a large crowd and received much applause from grown men.

Compare this to Luke 2:42-47:

And when he [Jesus] was twelve years old... they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.

Both passages refer to child prodigies prior to their entrances as profound leaders in adulthood.

After the death of Julius Caesar, Suetonius writes in *The Divine Augustus*, Section 96, that a Thessalian claimed the "Divine Julius Caesar" appeared to him while he was travelling on

a bye-road. This story has similarities to the appearance of Jesus after his crucifixion to Simon while traveling on the road in Luke 24.

The term *gospel* is an old-English form of “good news,” which stems from the Greek word *evangelion*. Prior to the Middle Ages and the English translations, the term *gospel* didn’t exist. The Greek term *evangelion* is of importance here (root term for the modern-day “evangelical”). Prior to Christianity, the term *evangelion* had as much or more meaning and emotion in Roman culture as *gospel* has in Christianity today. Reference 1 explains in detail the use of this term in Greek and Roman culture along with associated references. In brief, the Greeks first used the term to mean “reward for good news.” The Greeks eventually modified the term to mean “news of victory in battle” brought by a messenger. The Romans also adapted this term to announce a new Caesar or a birth of a divine heir to the throne.<sup>26</sup> The following decree in the Roman province of Asia in 9 BCE marks the birthday of Augustus (September 23<sup>rd</sup>) as the beginning of the civil year:<sup>27</sup>

Providence... has ordained the most perfect consummation for human life by giving to it Augustus, by filling him with virtue for doing the work of a benefactor among men, and by sending in him, as it were, a saviour for us and those who come after us, to make war to cease, to create order everywhere... and whereas the birthday of the God [Augustus] was the beginning for the world of the *Evangel* that have come to men through him... the reckoning of time for the course of human life should begin with his birth.

The earliest Christian writings (the first three Gospels in their original translations) used the term in nearly identical fashion to the Roman use. *Evangelion* appears fifteen times in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Mark 1:1 states, “The beginning of the *evangel* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” In Luke 1:19 an angel proclaims *evangel* announcing the birth of John the Baptist to his father. In Luke 2:10 an angel proclaims *evangel* announcing the birth of Jesus to shepherds.

Later, as Christianity developed, the apostle Paul enthusiastically adapted this term in his letters of the *New Testament* – using it over 60 times. It is interesting to note that *evangelion* appears almost 80 times in *New Testament* writings, but it never appears in the prior Jewish religious writings of the *Old Testament*.

Some may think the commonalties mentioned above are coincidence. But all of these were pre-existing human concepts associated with a society in control of Judea – concepts which gained fervor in Rome in the few decades preceding Christianity. The commonalties mentioned in this paper are not exhaustive.

### *Historical Perspective of Early Christian Writings*

Several independent sources suggest that Christianity began in the first century ACE in the Roman province of Judea during the reign of Pontius Pilate as governor. The Roman historian Publius Cornelius Tacitus (56 – 117 ACE) wrote in *The Annals of Imperial Rome*, XV.42:

To suppress this rumour [suspicions on the burning of Rome in 64 ACE], Nero fabricated scapegoats – and punished with every refinement the notoriously

depraved Christians (as they were popularly called). Their originator, Christ, had been executed in Tiberius' reign by the governor of Judaea, Pontius Pilatus. But in spite of this temporary setback the deadly superstition had broken out afresh, not only in Judaea (where the mischief had started) but even in Rome.

This is an historical, independent reference to the origins of Christianity. The *New Testament* writings are not considered in the classical sense "historical." There is disagreement even on which century they were written. Since the writings are filled with stories of miracles and fantastical events, many consider these folklore that take time to develop in human culture. However, some scholars believe the first three Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke) were written much earlier, soon after the time of Jesus. If the Gospels were written from people of that time and period, then they can be used to hypothesize real human events and attitudes representative of the movement.

Two dominant forces present in Judea during the birth of Christianity included Roman authority and the established Jewish religious order. Both of these forces were very strong and influential, and often times in conflict. Even though the established Jewish religious order was not as organized and well-defined as Roman authority, it formed the basis for very bitter, fervent, and sometimes violent resistance of the Jewish people to the Roman occupation. The province of Judea presented numerous problems to the Roman Empire in terms of collecting taxes, enlisting men to serve in their fielded armies, and enforcing control and order in a disobedient population.

It was not unheard of for Roman authority to meddle in the religious affairs of the Jewish people. The Roman governor prior to Pontius Pilate, Valerius Gratus, appointed and fired a succession of five high priests to the Jewish council. In many of Rome's provinces (and especially the eastern provinces) the cult of the Roman Emperor was promoted as an effective means of government.<sup>28</sup> But showing great flexibility in their governing model, Rome also permitted the practice of local religious customs in order to pacify the masses. However, the intensity of Jewish religious beliefs was the primary source of their resistance to Roman authority. The mere presence of the Roman occupation was a defilement to the Holy Land of the Jewish people and their covenant with God. Did Christianity begin as a result of Roman manipulation to soften the resistance of the Jewish people to Roman rule?

According to written documentation from that time period, Jesus offered teachings very different from Judaism. He was consistently critical of the Jewish religious order, while offering startling, public praise of a Roman centurion. He encouraged submissive behavior towards oppression and obedience to taxes. Jesus' criticism of the Jewish religious order (the keepers of the Mosaic Law,<sup>29</sup> the scribes,<sup>30</sup> the chief priests,<sup>31</sup> the Pharisees,<sup>32</sup> Saducees,<sup>33</sup> etc.) would have been consistent with Roman goals of breaking down competition to their authority. The Jewish religious order was strongly resistant to any outside influence to the Jewish faith. Disruption of this core precept by Rome would have assisted in instilling obedience and servitude in the common people. In contrast Jesus publicly referred to a Roman centurion as having the greatest faith in all of Israel.<sup>34</sup> In turn Roman centurions referred to Jesus as "Lord"<sup>35</sup> and in another case as "[a or the] Son of God."<sup>36</sup> It is interesting that the only documented spoken reference to Jesus as the Son of God comes from a Roman, from the very culture where this concept had prominence in the preceding decades.

A notable theme in the *New Testament* writings are the numerous positive, obedient, and acceptant references towards paying taxes.<sup>37</sup> Jesus was referred to as a "friend of tax

collectors.”<sup>38</sup> When Jesus was asked if it was lawful to pay taxes to Rome, Jesus responded, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.”<sup>39</sup> In another written story regarding the payment of the half-shekel tax,<sup>40</sup> Jesus instructs Peter to pay for both of them, taking special care not to offend the collector. One of the twelve disciples was highlighted as being a tax collector (Matthew/Levi).<sup>41</sup> While staying the night in Jericho, Jesus stayed with the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus.<sup>42</sup> The Jewish people detested paying taxes to Rome, many even considering the profession of tax collector as sinful. Jesus’ teachings and actions were well in line with Roman goals to change this attitude.

Another dominant theme of Jesus’ teachings promoted submissive behavior towards oppression. “But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.”<sup>43</sup> “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”<sup>44</sup> “Blessed are the meek, the poor, the peacemakers.”<sup>45</sup> This is in direct contrast to the proud, priestly nature of the Jewish people. The Jewish people felt they were the chosen people of God, bound by a Holy Covenant that, by definition, would last forever.<sup>46</sup> The Hebrew God of the *Old Testament* demanded merciless treatment of enemies with no room for forgiveness.<sup>47</sup> In 1 Samuel 15:25-30, the Jewish King Saul repented and asked for forgiveness, twice, for not having killed every living thing of the enemy (men, women, children, babies, and animals), but was rejected by God – fatally. In obvious contrast, the passive, submissive tendencies of Jesus’ teachings offer clear advantages to Roman control.

There were two primary ways people in a conquered province could be productive subjects to the Roman Empire; (1) pay taxes to Rome and (2) serve in the fielded Roman armies. Rome employed a unique and highly successful policy of enlisting men from the conquered provinces to serve in their fielded armies. However, this was very expensive, as were many other aspects of maintaining the Empire. In the early stages of the Christian movement, John the Baptist is documented as having baptized men from only two professions; tax collectors and soldiers. These were public exhibitions, which may have provided an acceptant light towards the named professions. John professes that the proper behavior for a tax collector is to collect no more than the appointed amount.<sup>48</sup> This implies that the appointed amount is legitimate and proper. As for soldiers, John professes, “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”<sup>49</sup> Having soldiers be content with their wages has obvious advantages to Rome. In these public baptisms, when a tax collector and a soldier asked what was needed for righteousness, John did not tell them to stop practicing their professions, which is probably what the Jewish people wanted to hear. Instead, he instructed them in ways conducive to Roman rule.

Public miracles were a noted aspect of Jesus’ ministries. The Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus, writes in *The Antiquities of the Jews*, “...he performed admirable and amazing works.” Assuming for the moment that this reference and the numerous references in the *New Testament* have some basis in human events, it is fair to say that few consortiums in the region had the means and ability to orchestrate the documented miracles. And there was probably only one that had the means and ability to feed four and five thousand people in remote areas.<sup>50</sup> Rome was well versed at feeding legions in the field. It is, quite frankly, the most logical conclusion that Rome was behind such exhibitions. It is even documented in written accounts that a centurion initiated and was directly involved in the performance of a miracle.<sup>51</sup>

Ironically, a point of contention that many people may have towards this theory actually turns out to be a very strong point of support. The crucifixion of Jesus was carried out by the Romans, albeit through the demands of the Jewish people. But if one studies closely what is written about this event, versus what has been passed down by word of mouth in Christian

Tradition, a very different story emerges. None of the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion mention Jesus having been nailed to the cross. Why would such an unusual and exceedingly cruel aspect of crucifixion be missing from written accounts? The most obvious and simplest answer to this question is that Jesus wasn't nailed to the cross. He was probably supported in the more common fashion with ropes. This is not the only answer to the posed question, but it is a viable and reasonable answer.

Jesus spent relatively little time on the cross, approximately six hours according to written accounts. There are three primary points suggesting Jesus did appear live after his crucifixion:

1. The event is documented in two independent sources: the *New Testament* and *Antiquities* by Josephus. Josephus wrote, "And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men among us [the Jewish elders and chief priests], had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day."
2. The event is very likely the primary reason why Christianity persisted. If Jesus had died upon crucifixion, the movement probably would have died with him.
3. The documented story of Jesus' post-appearance after the crucifixion in Luke 24:36-43 is realistic, granting it credibility:

As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." And while they still disbelieved for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate before them.

If one reads this account without the common preconception that Jesus was nailed to the cross, the story takes on a different meaning. Why is there no mention of nail wounds in this written account? Jesus asks his disciples to "see" exposed parts of his body (i.e., parts not covered by clothing, like his hands and feet) and to physically handle other parts of his body to prove he is flesh and blood, and not spirit. Jesus is doing this to calm their fears by proving he is not a ghost.

As shocking as this next statement may appear, it is a relatively simple statement with complete viability. It is a statement well in line with the motivation of Roman authority to protect its interest in light of violent demands from a Jewish mob. The next statement is not only simple, but also exceedingly logical if one tries to throw off the intense cultural emotion placed upon it. If Jesus appeared live after the crucifixion (as suggested by the arguments above), then this necessarily means he did not die on the cross. This strongly hints that Rome was involved in allowing Jesus to live. Rome carried out the crucifixion and a Roman centurion pronounced his supposed death.<sup>52</sup>

The strong possibility that nails were not used in Jesus' crucifixion and his relatively short time on the cross, fits well with a Roman design to protect Jesus from a death demanded by a Jewish mob. And Jesus' documented post appearance to his followers suggest a continuation, if not enhancement, of this design in a viable sequence of human events in no need of supernatural explanation.

It is easy to conceptualize how the religious fervor of early Christians may have sensationalized the crucifixion with the introduction of nails. Or rumors may have been introduced by the Romans to explain Jesus' supposed quick death on the cross. The first written account suggesting this method may have been used does not appear until many decades later when the Gospel of John is written in a modified version of the post-appearance story called the "doubting Thomas."<sup>53</sup> Most biblical scholars agree that the Gospel of John was written long after the other three. If one carefully maps out the chronology of major events in the Gospels, the first three have fair agreement. The Gospel of John, however, varies significantly from the other three. The Gospel of John re-tells the post-appearance story in a slightly modified version from Luke. The account in John first introduces the concept of nail wounds in Jesus' hands. This modified account has the flavor of a story that has been told and re-told over the decades, intermixing with rumors of Jesus having been nailed to the cross. The basis for this conclusion is the nature of the much earlier version in Luke, which makes no mention of nail wounds.

There are several other very important differences in the Gospel of John compared to the other three Gospels that I will mention briefly:

1. John is the only Gospel that mentions any type of physical violation to Jesus while he was on the cross (i.e., the stabbing of Jesus in the side with a spear after he was supposedly dead).<sup>54</sup> The stabbing results from Jewish demands that the legs of the prisoners be broken and Rome's reaction with breaking the other two, but not Jesus'. The medically-improbable account regarding fluid expulsion from a corpse (from the testimony of a Roman, Pontius Pilate, after probing from Jewish elders), suggests fabricated witness. Also, why is this story never mentioned in the earlier accounts?
2. In the first three Gospels, the Romans direct Simon of Cyrene to carry Jesus' cross. John is the only Gospel that states Jesus carried his own cross.
3. John is the only Gospel to mention that women and his acquaintances were near the cross,<sup>55</sup> which contradicts all of the other three, which state they watched from a distance.<sup>56</sup>
4. The Gospel of John never uses the Greek term, *evangelion* (see the earlier discussion of the term *gospel*). Many theologians surmise that the author of John was sensitive to the use of this term and that it may have come from Jesus' lips. I contend the author's sensitivity was associated with the timing of the writing of that Gospel and the spread of Christianity to Rome (discussed in more detail later).
5. The first three Gospels quote Jesus as promising his disciples his glorious "Second-Coming" would occur within their lifetimes.<sup>57</sup> This quote is completely missing from the Gospel of John, probably when it became all too apparent in later years this was not going to happen.

Before the crucifixion, when a Jewish crowd<sup>58</sup> brought Jesus before Roman authority, Pontius Pilate argued profusely against crucifying Jesus.<sup>59</sup> Pilate carried Jesus' defense to the point that a riot was forming.<sup>60</sup> Why would a Roman Prefect defend a Jewish peasant, whom he supposedly had never known, in front of a Jewish crowd vehemently calling for his execution? In addition, there are several points regarding the crucifixion which suggest Rome was involved in concealing a staged execution. Roman soldiers (including a centurion) stood guard over the crucifixion site.<sup>61</sup> A heretofore, unexplained person in the *New Testament*, Joseph of Arimathea, took possession of Jesus' body (not a member of his family, which was the traditional practice).<sup>62</sup> And according to scholarly opinion (historians/theologians Albert Roper, Mgr. E. Le Camus, A. T. Robertson, Professor T. J. Thorburn, A. B. Bruce, Arndt, Gingrich, Professor



Harold Smith, Lewis and Short noted in *Evidence* by Josh McDowell) and my own conclusion from the *New Testament* writings,<sup>63</sup> Roman soldiers stood guard over Jesus' tomb. Pontius Pilate was directly involved in directing the guards for Jesus' tomb. Why did the Romans take such a strong interest in what was otherwise the corpse of a Jewish peasant? It is absurd to think of Roman soldiers expending man-hours to guard the gravesite of an executed Jewish criminal. It is reasonable to consider that the Jewish court would have been highly motivated to dispense Jewish guards to the grave site without involving, or needing, Pilate's approval. But this is not what's documented in written accounts.

The only documented conflict to Roman support of the Jesus movement are written accounts that Jesus was mocked, spat upon, and struck with a reed while under Roman custody.<sup>64</sup> The incident occurred in the Roman praetorium and, as such, probably would have been based strictly on Roman witness, the very ones who would have been involved in promoting deception. John 18:28 records that the Jews did not enter the praetorium on that day. The reference of being struck in the head with a reed is hardly the beating commonly portrayed in Christian folklore. And such a beating conflicts significantly with Pilate's public defense of Jesus in front of the Jewish mob. Luke makes no reference to these interactions with Roman soldiers, but instead records a similar incident in Herod's court without anyone striking Jesus.<sup>65</sup> A much more violent and angry encounter occurs in the court of the Jewish high priest and is recorded in all four Gospels.<sup>66</sup>

The traditional word-of-mouth version of the "crown of thorns" in Christian folklore describes long, menacing thorns tearing into Jesus' scalp causing great pain with blood streaming down his face. These are strictly word-of-mouth images since written documentation say nothing about thorns piercing his skin, the blood they may have caused, or the pain they may have inflicted. The Gospels refer to Roman soldiers "plaiting a crown of thorns."<sup>67</sup> The word *plait* means to braid, as in hair or straw, which suggests a softer weave of some flexible stalk. Given that there are no written accounts of long thorns, piercing skin, and blood, then where did these accounts come from? One could investigate Christian art history to get a feel for when the word-of-mouth versions originated.

Despite common perceptions held by modern-day Christians, Jesus is never documented as supporting the overthrow of Roman authority. And Roman authority is never documented as pursuing Christ's crucifixion. Modern-day theologians and religious historians may conjecture how they think it should have been, hypothesizing that Pilate had no qualms crucifying Jesus, or even sought Jesus' crucifixion in order to keep the peace. But such conjecture is pointless when it goes against the only written knowledge we have of these events. Any number of human events are possible for any number of underlying reasons. At best, we can seek out the underlying reasons that tie a body of evidence together, not reinvent evidence to fit our underlying reasons.

Finally, there is one other point of contention that many people might have towards this theory that is actually a strong point of support. Early Christians in Rome were persecuted by the ruling authority. But a very important question is: Why did Christianity spread so quickly to Rome – within a few decades? Without modern-day communications it is easy to see how the true nature of Christianity's beginning may have been lost, particularly if the beginning was concealed in local secrecy in Judea. This would not be the first example in history where something is started for one reason, but develops into something else entirely, with unforeseen consequences. What were the forces behind the seemingly paradoxical shift of an offshoot of Judaism from Judea to Rome? From the land of the "chosen people of God" to the land of their

oppressors – oppressors who continued world domination under the eventual banner of Christianity itself. Could it be that Christianity gravitated towards Rome due to the Western leanings of its teachings and philosophies? The Christian philosophy was embraced wholeheartedly by the common people of Rome, but shunned, gradually losing favor in Judea. As with anything new, the early Christian movement in Rome was looked upon with caution and disdain by the ruling authority. But they, too, gradually embraced Christianity, making it the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine over two hundred years later.

### *Addendum*

In order for Rome's manipulation of religious forces in Judea to succeed, very few of Jesus' immediate followers or disciples would have been aware of the Roman connection. There are numerous references in the *New Testament* of Jesus going off by himself, away from the disciples for days at a time or overnight.<sup>68</sup> If the Gospel writers went to the trouble of noting these occurrences, then these sojourns were probably prevalent or frequent events. A few of the less-important disciples may have been involved in the Roman connection – “less important” for two main reasons. First, they would have maintained a low profile in order to conceal their involvement. Second, in a paradoxical contrast, the very reason the more prominent or famous disciples are famous (Peter, James, John, etc.) is because they would have been the ones who were so completely duped and unaware of the Roman connection. They were the ones who carried on the movement, especially after having witnessed the “miraculous” appearance of Jesus after his crucifixion. Joseph of Arimathea would have been instrumental in the Roman connection since he was the person who is documented as having taken Jesus' body from the cross.

At what point did Christianity take on a life of its own and potentially lose the true nature of its beginnings (whatever form that may have been)? Pontius Pilate reigned as governor for only a few years after the time of Jesus. Documentation suggests that Pilate either died in 36 ACE during his trip back to Rome, or he continued a life in exile in Gaul. There are some sects of Christianity that even speculate that Pilate and his wife, Claudia Procula, converted to Christianity. Is there an interesting connection between a sketchy perception of conversion to Christianity and Pilate's involvement in its formation? There are historical references that suggest Joseph of Arimathea (the man mentioned in the previous paragraph as having been instrumental in Christianity's formation) ended up in Gaul, just as Pontius Pilate might have. And one of the “lessor” disciples (Simon Zelotes) came to Gaul per Joseph's request. Eventually he went on to Britain where he was executed by a Roman commander in 61 ACE. The puzzle gets very complicated and it is difficult to decipher Christian folklore, the true knowledge of its beginnings and perceived plots in related or unrelated power struggles.

Did the true nature of Christianity's beginning disappear after Pilate's departure from Judea? One intriguing event suggests otherwise. Herod Agrippa, a Jewish king appointed by Rome, ruled Judea during the period of 37 to 44 ACE. Early on, Agrippa was looked upon with disdain and mistrust by the Jewish people, causing problems for him in gaining power. However, towards the end of his rule, Agrippa gained great popularity amongst the populace by taking on a policy of persecuting the early Christians in Judea. He carried it to the point of having one of the original disciples, James, executed, and Peter jailed. Many historians suspect that Herod Agrippa was poisoned soon after this by the Romans. But historians are perplexed as to why Rome would have done such a thing in light of Agrippa's increasing popularity.

Christian folklore suggests God caused Agrippa's death due to his persecution of the Christians. A combination of the historical and Christian-folklore versions may be the true circumstances, with Rome playing the role of God. If local Roman authority still had an interest in nurturing what was still a local Christian subversion to Judaism, therein lays the potential motive of Rome to eliminate the persecution of the Christians. And perhaps it was Rome's involvement that subsequently freed Peter from a Jewish prison, which could have easily been staged to appear as a miracle. Is it possible that Peter detected positive interactions from Roman encounters, compared to the rejections and persecution he received from the Jews? Could this be the reason Peter eventually carried his ministries to Rome, not realizing that doing so would lose the protection of the local Roman authority back in Judea? Or could it be that by the time Peter was executed in Rome (64 ACE), the true nature of Christianity's beginnings had been lost?

### *Conclusion*

The first three statements below are most assuredly fact. The first statement warrants volumes of obvious arguments that will not be addressed here. Statement (2) follows naturally from the first. Statement (3) is obvious, even with a cursory examination of the two religions, which should be of concern for the faithful when both religions accept the same God that supposedly doesn't change.<sup>69</sup> Questions (4) through (6) are speculative and assume there was a man in history filling the role of Jesus. This speculation is supported by independent references from Tacitus and Josephus mentioned earlier in this paper.

1. The supernatural explanation of Christianity's birth is myth.
2. Christianity started as a result of human endeavors.
3. Christian culture and its theological basis differ significantly from Judaism.
4. If Christianity's birth was highlighted by numerous marvelous works/miracles (as documented by Flavius Josephus and the *New Testament*), these exhibitions would have been orchestrated. Did a single Judean peasant have the means or even the motivation to pull off such feats?
5. Would a single Judean peasant promote and pursue drastic changes to Jewish culture knowing how sensitive (i.e., life threatening) his actions would have been to the general population?
6. Could a single Judean peasant do all of this and somehow survive a Roman execution to ensure the continuation of his movement?

The answers to questions (4) through (6) are most assuredly no. It is more likely such an individual had the organized backing of a capable organization – and evidence points squarely to Rome.

This paper illustrates a reasonable alternative to history that is infinitely more likely than the traditional, religious view. The author hopes that if people see reasonable alternatives to religious folklore engrained since childhood, they will think and reason for themselves rather than blindly continue to build upon mythology.

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