

INTRODUCTION

THE DA VINCI CODE FACTOR?

One of the most enjoyable parts of my work is running a course for ‘sceptics’ and ‘enquirers’ on the history and practice of Christianity. It is a low key affair with wine, nibbles and plenty of time for Q&A. Usually, the first of the five evening sessions is a quiet affair with most guests testing the waters, trying to gauge whether they know less about the topic than everyone else in the room. So, typically, I just keep on talking, happy to wait until later weeks to hear people’s burning questions.

Not so, in my most recent course. I had just explained to a group of about twenty workers, students, mums and dads that Christianity revolves around the person of Christ as described in the documents of the New Testament, the Christian counterpart to the Old Testament or what Jews call the Tanakh. Immediately, two or three in the group started to fire their questions, barely allowing a few sentences of reply before shooting off more:

“But who wrote the New Testament?”

“How soon after Christ was it written?”

“How do you know the story hasn’t changed over the years?”

“Who decided which bits got into the New Testament and which bits didn’t?”

“Did anyone else in Jesus’ day write about him?”

“Why didn’t he write the message down himself?”

I’m sure you get the picture.

I have been running courses like this for over ten years and never have I had so many history-style questions on one night, let alone in the very first session. I wondered to myself whether I was experiencing a ‘*Da Vinci Code* factor’, a renewed interest in and scepticism toward the historical basis of Christianity generated, in part, by Dan Brown’s phenomenally successful novel.

On reflection, I suspect *The Da Vinci Code* itself is part of a wider fascination with historical roots. Ten years ago we hardly ever saw TV shows exploring the ‘real story’ of, say, the ancient Israelites, Alexander the Great, the life of Christ, the Roman emperors, the rise of Christianity, the Crusades, and so on. In the last few years, it seems the ABC and SBS have aired documentary exposés on these themes virtually on a monthly basis. Scepticism and intrigue concerning the past are alive and well, certainly they are among my current group of enquirers.

Interestingly, Christianity has always invited the kinds of doubts mentioned above. There’s a simple reason for this: Christianity claims to be based on history. Unlike the Hindu Upanishads which focus on the believer’s merger with the life force Brahman, or the Buddhist Tripitaka which emphasises the extinguishment of self and suffering, or the Islamic Quran which centres on the nature and practice of submission to God, the New Testament revolves around a series of *events* said to have occurred in Palestine between 5 BC and AD 30. This makes Christianity particularly open—some would say *vulnerable*—to the kinds of questions just listed. The logic is simple: if you claim that something spectacular took place in

history, intelligent people are going to ask you historical questions. On the whole, Christianity has welcomed this. It is as if the Christian faith places its head on the chopping block of public scrutiny and invites us all to take a swing.

In saying that Christianity is ‘historical’ I do not mean provable. It is certainly not my intention in this small book to convince readers that Jesus actually healed the sick, rose from the dead and so on. My aim is simpler. I want to underline for readers what is already a *given* in the academic study of the subject: Christianity is based on claims that can be examined historically.

The subtitle of this book says it all. I want to explore with readers *how* historians know what they know about the man we know as Jesus Christ, whose contemporaries knew him as Yeshua ben Yosef (Jesus son of Joseph). The emphasis here is not so much on *what* historians think they know about Jesus—though, there will be a bit of that throughout. I want to explain *how* historians arrive at their conclusions: What sources do they use? What methods do they employ? What levels of reliability do they assign to the various data in front of them?

One thing should become clear—and I will be happy if readers come away with this only. Professional historians, regardless of their religious persuasion, treat the New Testament and its portrait of Christ far more seriously than the general public realises. There are literally thousands of scholars around the world who devote their time to analysing early Christianity. Some of them hold chairs in the most prestigious universities in the world. And they constantly publish their findings in the more than 100 academic journals dedicated to this subject.

One reason for the size of this scholarly enterprise—apart from the fact that Christianity has been around for a while—is

that the data at the historian's disposal is greater than most of us realise. Christianity arrived on the scene at a time of great literary activity. Philosophers were writing weighty tomes on the meaning of life. Poets and playwrights were composing material to make people laugh and cry. Emperors were crafting royal propaganda to ensure they were well remembered. And historians were recording for posterity all that they could discover about the startling events surrounding the rise of the Roman Empire. The non-biblical writings from this period (100 BC–AD 200) fill many shelves in your local university library.

One lucky outcome of this flurry of literary output is that a small town Jewish teacher, named Yeshua, Anglicised as Jesus, happened to rate a mention in several of the writings of the period. This is not as predictable as you might imagine. Although today we recognise Jesus as the founder of the world's largest religion,¹ back in the first century he was hardly known outside the tiny strip of Roman ruled land called Palestine. It is a happy accident of history that Jesus rated a mention outside the texts of the New Testament.

The New Testament itself was part of this ancient literary boon. At one level, the second part of the Christian Bible is little more than a set of biographies about a Jewish teacher and a collection of personal correspondence penned by those who followed him. In hindsight, however, the 27 texts that make up the New Testament have quite a lot to answer for. Their influence on Western literature and philosophy, law and politics,

¹ The United Nations World Population Profile gives the number of Christians in the world as 2,069,883,000, almost double the figure for the next largest religion, Islam (*Britannica Book of the Year*, 2004, Encyclopedia Britannica Corporation, page 280).

not to mention the personal religious experience of millions, is significant to say the least. We are going to assess these documents in the following pages, not so much to discover their religious meaning but to work out their usefulness as historical sources for the life of Christ.

The modern study of Christ does not stop with the New Testament and the handful of non-Christian references to him. Historians sift through a vast range of additional ancient material, which, while not mentioning Jesus, tells them quite a bit about the culture he lived in and, therefore, about him.

Probably the best known of these ‘background’ sources is the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, a collection of Jewish writings from the period just before Jesus. What they tell us about Christ’s near contemporaries—ancient Jews living in Palestine—sheds some light (and some heat) on a few of the things he taught. Many, many other texts (and some archaeological findings) likewise expand our understanding of Jesus and early Christianity. We will be exploring some of these in the following pages.

But first, a brief word about the intriguing game of ‘Jesus scholarship’, the historical analysis of Christ’s life.