

## Theories of the Origins of Christianity

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### 1. Why study this topic?

This is the first in a projected series of papers on the origins of Christianity. What's the point of studying this topic? I can see possible personal, social, and intellectual reasons for examining it:

- **Personal reasons:** Many people define themselves in relation to the Christian tradition, some identifying with it or seeing it as a source of spiritual insight, others identifying themselves as outside of it, opposed to it, or oppressed by it. Exploring the origins of the tradition could help people on either side who want to justify or reassess their position in relation to the tradition.
- **Social reasons:** The Christian tradition influences the behavior of millions of people, with both good and bad effects. Increasing people's understanding of the origins of the tradition may help reduce the bad effects.
- **Intellectual reasons:** There is an ongoing explosion of new scholarship on the topic, as the field has gradually freed itself from ecclesiastical control and generated new methods, ideas, and evidence from archaeological findings and rediscovered texts. An educated understanding of history requires some acquaintance with this material.

While I believe that studying the topic in a fair-minded way should bring people to agreement on particular points, I don't anticipate agreement on the "big" picture simply because interpretations necessarily draw not only on facts and reasoning, but on people's varying experiences in life and beliefs about what is possible. The aim is not to find a definitive answer to every question, but to increase familiarity with the evidence, theories, and arguments addressing those questions, that is, to provide a better-informed understanding of the topic.

### 2. The range of theories

As a starting point, one thing that seems well-established is that the tradition we call Christianity began spreading in the mid-first century C.E.<sup>1</sup> The fact that people were joining groups sharing ideas, stories and sayings related to the figure of Jesus Christ is attested in both Christian and non-Christian writings of contemporaries, specifically Paul's letters (probably written in the decade of the 50s), the *Antiquities* of the Jewish historian Josephus<sup>2</sup> (written late in

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<sup>1</sup> C.E. means "common era," modern scholars' more neutral term for the time period Christians designated "A.D."

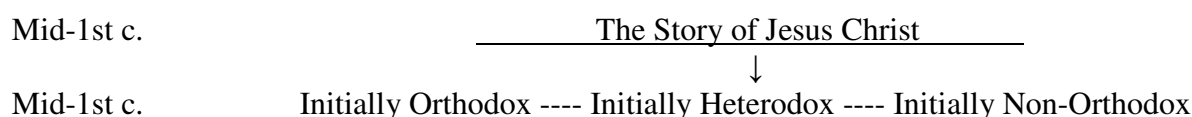
<sup>2</sup> I am not here citing Josephus on the historicity of Jesus, but as evidence of his awareness of early Christianity. The authenticity of the passage on Jesus in the *Antiquities* has been much debated; the majority opinion of historians has been that Josephus wrote most of it but that it was later amended by a Christian editor. More recently, Gary



invention, a combination of elements from disparate sources such as pagan myths, stories about different philosophers and religious teachers, and collections of wisdom sayings.

Theories of what initiated the Story of Jesus Christ can be placed somewhere along this spectrum. Probably most practicing Christians hold views near the left end of the spectrum and most historians hold views near the middle of the spectrum, while views toward the right end of the spectrum have a following but are less common.

The second set of theories attempts to answer the question of which interpretation of the tradition, if any, was the original version of Christianity. These theories can be arranged along a spectrum from what I call “Initially Orthodox,” through “Initially Heterodox,” to “Initially Non-Orthodox.” To illustrate:



Initially Orthodox<sup>4</sup> refers to theories claiming that the original interpretation of the Story of Jesus Christ was substantially similar to the dominant form of Christianity since the fourth century, with features such as: a trinitarian God who created the universe, the human incarnation of the second person of the Triune God in Jesus, the atonement of humanity’s sins through the sacrificial death of Jesus, and so forth. Initially Heterodox refers to theories claiming that there were significantly different interpretations of the Story of Jesus Christ from the outset of the tradition, not only the “orthodox” interpretation but gnostic, more traditionally Jewish, or other interpretations. Initially Non-Orthodox refers to theories that the original interpretation of the Story of Jesus was one of these other interpretations, and not the “orthodox” interpretation.

Catholic, Orthodox, and the vast majority of Protestant churches support the Initially Orthodox position. Until fairly recently most historians would have accepted this position as well, but a growing number have adopted the Initially Heterodox and Initially Non-Orthodox positions.

### 3. Conclusion

In this paper I have given reasons for studying the origins of Christianity and conceptually mapped out the theoretical positions attempting to answer the two key questions about these origins. The next step will be to begin assessing important evidence and whether that evidence supports or challenges the different theories. I propose to start with what are generally held to be the earliest Christian writings we still have copies of, the letters of Paul.

*Email comments or suggestions for revisions of the paper to [alan@heartawake.com](mailto:alan@heartawake.com)*

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<sup>4</sup> By labeling this position Initially Orthodox I do not mean to associate it primarily with the Eastern Orthodox churches; rather, an “orthodox” interpretation of the Christian tradition here is the interpretation corresponding to the interpretation adopted by the Council of Nicea in the early fourth century.