

BEHIND THE MYTHS: THE FOUNDATIONS OF JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

John Pickard

Lecture to Conway Hall Ethical Society, 16 June 2013

It is not possible to do justice to a book of 500 pages in a short lecture or essay, but I can give some idea of the origins of the book and a flavour of two of its main themes. The book is inspired by Karl Kautsky's *Foundations of Christianity*, published in 1908. I read it as a young socialist in the early 1970s at a time when, like a lot of my comrades, I had a thirst for political theory and for an explanation for such things as the origins of religion. Kautsky filled a gap in that respect and I had the ambition in later years to write an update of his book, to take into account modern archaeological finds and scholarship.

In writing the book, I am indebted to the scholarship of many academics, archaeologists and researchers for their work on ancient manuscripts. I have used their interpretations of texts in ancient cuneiform, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek and Arabic very extensively, although not necessarily drawing the same conclusions as they did. I believe I have brought to a more general readership very important ideas and evidence that would otherwise have circulated in more limited academic circles and publications.

Spiritual Events Not Credited

In trying to find out "what really happened" in history, I approached the historicity of Moses, Jesus and Mohammed with a completely open mind. Kautsky thought there "probably" *was* a character known as Jesus, albeit a *revolutionary* and not the prophet of the New Testament. I was genuinely open to discovering who these individuals were and to know their place in history. The only *a priori* condition I applied when researching was that I gave no credence to any spiritual events, whether through gods, angels, visions or miracles. In preparing this book, I looked for the real drivers of historical change: the social, political and above all the economic forces at work.

The two themes I deal with are the issues of evidence and an examination of social movements behind the three religions. Historians are fond of using the expression, "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence". That statement is formally correct but in the absence of evidence we are entitled to make a judgement about the *probability* of an event's being historical, depending on the scale of the suggestion being made. It is one thing to make a claim that is relatively insignificant, but another altogether about huge empires, massive migrations of large populations, huge social movements of thousands of people or even large-scale military campaigns. Absence of evidence in *these* cases where any reasonable person would expect historical evidence to exist is another thing entirely.

Historians have an abundance of real historical evidence remaining to this day, in the form of tens of thousands of inscriptions, monuments, tombstones, tablets, papyri and parchments. These have been left for us by the great empires of the Near East: the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans. In addition to these, modern methods of archaeology and archaeological finds have given wonderful insights into life in ancient times.

Common Myths

Looking at the historical narrative in the Hebrew Bible, it is well established that myths like the Creation and Flood in Genesis are copies of common myths circulating in the Near East [Eastern Mediterranean, Middle East] for a long time. Parts of the Babylonian book of Gilgamesh have been recycled almost word for word. What is less commonly known is that most of the subsequent historical narrative in the Old Testament is also mythical. The “deliverance” from Egypt, led by Moses, is a theme that runs right through Jewish religious tradition and finds an echo in political themes in Israel today. Yet it is myth. There is not a shred of evidence, despite the almost perfect preservation conditions, of the movement of hundreds of thousands of Hebrews across Sinai. In fact, as the archaeological evidence shows, at the time when Joshua was supposed to have been conquering Canaan, including the famous episode of the destruction of the walls of Jericho, this part of the world was an Egyptian-controlled province and remained so for some considerable time afterwards.

Likewise, Solomon is described in the Bible as the “greatest of all kings”, ruling a huge empire. He is attributed with building a great temple in Jerusalem. Yet none of the surviving artefacts or inscriptions in any of the great empires surrounding Israel so much as mentions Solomon and despite centuries of searching, not a trace of the great temple has been found in Jerusalem.

When we turn to Christianity, the “absence of evidence” is equally profound. Nowhere in the writings of Pliny, Philo or Josephus is there any mention of a great prophet able to speak to thousands of listeners (let alone feed them with a few loaves and fishes) and there is no record of Pilate supervising a trial and crucifixion. What is equally significant is that none of the earliest writings of the Christian sects included any biographical material about Jesus. Paul is the most staggering case of call [*sic*: all]: we are expected to believe that this person met and conversed with the leaders of the Christians in Jerusalem, more than once, and even debated with them; and yet Paul makes no reference to any biographical reference to Jesus.

The problem with Mohammed is much the same. Here also we are expected to believe that his followers, despite the presence of many scribes, waited hundreds of years before they deigned to write down his biography. Indeed, his followers waited sixty years after death before they even began to put his name on monuments or in inscriptions. As one authority pointed out, for the first period of the Arab Empire, “*The Prophet had no publicly acknowledged role.*”

In the case of both Jesus and Mohammed, there is a resounding silence when it comes to contemporary evidence, and reasonable people will come to the conclusion that, against the extravagant claims that are made, such “absence of evidence” really *does* amount to “evidence of absence”.

How Did the Religions Start?

Dismissing the intervention of God, angels or miracles, the second theme in my book is an examination of the social, political and economic conditions of the day, and how these were the basis of the movements that led to what we now know as Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Clearly, in each case there must have been a special chain of events that gave rise to political and social movements of huge numbers of people, otherwise new religions would be popping

up all over the place all the time. What was special about the circumstances at those points in history?

Taking first of all the Israelites as a people, there is clear archaeological evidence that in the middle of the fourteenth century BCE there was a huge revolutionary wave spreading across the whole of what was then an Egyptian province in Canaan. The Bronze-age cities were in decline, but, more significantly, they were beset by uprisings of peasants, dispossessed peoples, bandits and other dissidents who were labelled by the writers of the day as the *Apiru*. Many of the settlements of these revolutionary *Apiru* in the uplands of Palestine, well away from the cities from which they revolted, have been excavated and show the existence of a tribally-based, egalitarian society based on terrace-farming. This new culture, growing out of the old Canaanite society, was welded together by its common revolutionary tradition and mode of production. Yahwism, the worship of the god who would later feature as the God of the Jews, was the ideological expression of the *Apiru* culture and the “tribal” traditions in the Old Testament are no more than an echo of that historical period, carried for the most part as oral tradition and folklore for hundreds of years.

There were similar social upheavals in the period of the formation of Christianity. We know from the writings of Josephus that the first part of the first century CE was one of enormous social upheaval in the whole of Palestine. Josephus testifies to the large number of peasant revolutions, upheavals and uprisings throughout this whole period, perhaps the most disturbed in the whole of Palestinian history up to that point. The Dead Sea Scrolls of the Essenes and other literature testify to the enormous dissent and the undercurrents of political opposition of the day. This opposition expressed itself in apocalyptic and messianic movements, most of which are described in Josephus. These movements may have had their roots in Palestine, but would have had a resonance throughout the whole of the Jewish Diaspora, already representing ten per cent of the total population of the Roman Empire.

Joshua Sects

This revolutionary atmosphere was the background to the rise of *Joshua* sects or “salvation” sects within the Jewish community in Palestine and elsewhere. Echoes of these sects remain in the New Testament, for example in Acts, where it is said the followers of Jesus “*had all things common*”. Josephus mentions the name Joshua (which was later Latinised to Jesus) fourteen times, including two revolutionary leaders, two high priests and numerous others. It was one branch of the Joshua sects around Paul, against the bitter opposition of the movements in Jerusalem, which elevated Joshua from a generic figure to a human sacrificial agent, albeit one without a biography at that early stage. From that he evolved later into a god.

Christianity thrived beyond that point, not because of its intellectual or theological appeal, but because its communities offered a haven of welfare, mutual support and inclusivity which was absent anywhere else in the unstable and crisis-ridden Roman world.

The Origins of Islam

The origins of Islam lie in a similarly disturbed period in the area of what is modern-day Palestine, Syria and Iraq. In the first two decades of the seventh century there was a long and bitter war between the Persian and Byzantine Empire and the armies of both empires were

made up overwhelmingly of Christian Arabs. After initially succeeding, the Persian military machine collapsed and with it the whole of the empire. It was in this political vacuum that for the first time an independent *Arab* state came into being, albeit one beset by many tribal, clan and family divisions. It was the inauguration of this incipient Arab empire in 622 CE that originated what was at first called the “Arab era” and which was only later called the Islamic era.

As the state was consolidated, it was a quasi-Christian state, with a strong infusion of Judaic influence, but another important influence was a puritanical form of Arab monotheism based around Arab translations of what were originally Syriac Christian liturgical documents. These writings were later redacted to form the Koran and it became central to a new state religion, offered as an alternative to Byzantine Christianity. As the Arab empire consolidated, its capital was Damascus. Jerusalem was its religious centre and the site of its first great cathedral of worship (the Dome of the Rock) built on the site of the old Jewish Temple. It was towards Jerusalem that the Arab monotheists prayed and to that city that pilgrims made their pious journeys.

The development of what is recognisable as “modern” Islam began only in the early eighth century, nearly a hundred years after the supposed life of the Prophet and, as was the case with Jesus, an entire biography was manufactured and elaborated over many years later. The first biography of the prophet was written down no earlier than the middle of the eighth century, and it was only from that point onwards that modern Islam took shape. In the case of all three faiths, the drivers of historical change were the wars, revolutions and social upheavals of the day. The new “theologies” were not the motive force of great change, but were the secondary reflection in the political language of the day of mass movements and the aspiration for change of tens of thousands of people.

Find the book on Amazon, or at: <http://www.authorhouse.co.uk/>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/John-Pickard/485057228227225>

ISBN: 978-1-4817-8362-0 (paperback); 978-1-4817-8363-7 (e-book)