

Did Paul “invent” Christianity?

What people who say Paul invented Christianity usually believe is that Jesus never spoke about himself or thought he was anybody special, like the Messiah or the Son of God. Rather, they say, Jesus spoke exclusively about ethical living (doing unto others as you would have them do unto you) and ideas like the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man. Then they say that Paul took an historical Jesus who was no more than a great moral teacher like Socrates or Buddha and elevated him to being a more-than-human Savior.

What such people are forgetting, the “missing ingredient,” is eschatology/apocalypticism, the fact that Jesus and the early Church believed the End of the World was near. Both taught that the Kingdom of God was coming (Judgment Day, when “the Son of Man” would descend from heaven leading an angelic army and serve as Judge for God) and also that the Kingdom could be experienced as a present reality. (All Jesus’ teaching about how to live in the Kingdom of God is not “moral teaching” like that of Greco-Roman philosophers but to be seen in the context of the Jewish idea of the Kingdom of God). So there was no

great difference between what Jesus taught and what the early Church taught after him.

But what about the role of Jesus? Surely that was different in Jesus’ thinking and in the theology of Christianity after him? Yes, but not as different as you might think. I suggest (and I am not alone) that Jesus may very well have seen himself as having a special role to play in the End Time, either thinking he was “the Son of Man” or would be “the Son of Man” when Judgment Day came. Very often in the Gospels, Jesus refers to himself as “the Son of Man” or speaks of “the Son of Man” as if he were someone different from himself. This leaves scholars to wonder if Jesus saw himself as “the Son of Man.” The early church certainly identified Jesus with the mysterious “Son of Man” figure in Daniel 7 who would come with the angels on the Last Day. That was perhaps the very earliest “christology” there was. If Jesus did consider himself “the Son of Man” (possible) and the early church considered him “the Son of Man” (certain), then there was no great difference in what Jesus said about himself and what the

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the figure of the innocent sufferer of Isaiah 53 and the Psalms who suffers for others. The idea that the King would suffer never occurs in earlier Jewish literature; it is a truly original concept, original to early Christianity, one necessitated by the crucifixion, which the disciples had not expected. There is little in the Gospels to suggest that the disciples anticipated the crucifixion (much less the resurrection).

The connecting of Jesus with Divine Wisdom (as in Proverbs 8), seeing him as the incarnation of wisdom which existed always with God (already in Paul), led very quickly and easily to the Gospel of John’s portrayal of Jesus as the incarnation of the

early church said about him.

What was new and original in the theology of early Christianity was the merging together of the figure of the heavenly “Son of Man” with the figure of the kingly Messiah descended from David and with

Divine Logos (Word).

What impresses one is the speed with which early Christianity developed its thinking about Jesus: in the 20 years before Paul writes his first letters, the basic features of Christology already were laid out. As Martin Hengel writes:

“...the ‘apotheosis of the crucified Jesus’ must already have taken place in the 40s, and one is tempted to say that more happened in this period of less than two decades than in the whole of the next seven centuries, up to the time when the doctrine of the early church was completed. Indeed, one might even ask whether the formulation of doctrine in the early church was essentially more than a consistent development and completion of what had already been unfolded in the primal event of the first two decades, but in the language and thought-forms of Greek, which was its necessary setting.” (Martin Hengel, *The Son of God*)

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