

# Scholar discovers 'real' Christian history

By CHRISTOPHER ZINN

For nearly 2,000 years, Christianity has been based primarily on the authority of the New Testament, a group of Christian writings that, early in the Church's history, were declared canon. So compelling is this selection of writings that most people, not only Christians, regard the Gospels and the accompanying Book of Acts as a kind of photograph, in words, of Jesus himself.

In an immense, enthralling new study of early Christianity, "James the Brother of Jesus: The Key to Unlocking the Secrets of Early Christianity and the Dead Sea Scrolls," Robert Eisenman proposes that the Gospel version of Jesus distorts the actual history of Jesus and the people who followed and worked with him. Eisenman, a scholar and editor of an edition of the Dead Sea Scrolls, is not the first to say this. But his book pinpoints the early Christian traditions concerning James, the brother of Jesus, as the key to, as he puts it, "unlocking a whole series of obfuscations in the history of the early Church" and provide as well "the missing link between the Judaism of his day . . . and Christianity."

Most modern scholars agree that the Gospels are the work of writers from the second half of the first century who never themselves witnessed the events they describe. With the momentous discovery in 1947 at Qumran of a collection of Hebrew and Aramaic manuscripts — now known as the Dead Sea Scrolls — our understanding of Jewish communities in Palestine at the dawn of Christianity has been forever altered.

For one thing, the Scrolls point to the existence of militant, fiercely apocalyptic religious sects with recognizable connections to the Christian movement. Set in the context of other writings from the period, the Gospels no longer appear simply as the unvarnished truth of Jesus' life and teachings, but rather as a purposeful re-creation of facts and episodes concerning a series of Messianic figures in first-century Palestine. Above all, their very survival reflects the political and theological views of those who eventually triumphed in the conflicts that beset these Jewish and early Christian communities.

Working from the evidence of the Scrolls and other Jewish and Classical writings, Eisenman patches together a historical picture of early Christian Palestine that contrasts



## JAMES THE BROTHER OF JESUS

Robert Eisenman  
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### BOTTOM LINE

In a massive display of provocative scholarship, "James the Brother of Jesus" offers a stunning reinterpretation of early "Jamesian" Christianity as the very opposite of the version of Christianity that has come down to us. Long and often difficult, Eisenman's book nonetheless places us at the center of these controversies, with often surprising results.

starkly with the Gospel's version. Whereas the Gospels depict "a peaceful, Hellenized countryside, where Galilean fishermen cast their nets or mend their boats," Eisenman believes that the true center of the Christian movement was an insurgent Jewish population in Jerusalem that continually agitated against the ever-increasing encroachment of Rome on their own religious and national identity.

Accommodation to Roman rule was epitomized by the regime of the Herodians, Jewish leaders who acted as colonial governors on behalf of the Roman state. Eisenman thinks that significant masses of Jews both resented and sought to resist "Romanization" by instead supporting Jesus and his successors as the true leaders of their community. By insisting on a strict application of religious law and by teaching that virtue belonged to the poor masses rather than the wealthy elite, Jesus, James and their successors sought

to bar the influence of these foreigners and preserve the solidarity of Jewish culture in Palestine and throughout the eastern Mediterranean.

That they failed to do so is reported in part by the Jewish historian Josephus, who describes the Emperor Vespasian's triumph over the Jews of Jerusalem in A.D. 73. (Ironically, the manuscripts at Qumran were probably preserved because all the sect's adherents were wiped out in the war against the Romans.) But the true extent of that failure is even more amply demonstrated by the evidence of the Gospels themselves, though it takes a scholar with Eisenman's manic amplitude to explain why.

Simply put, those canonical writings reflect the victory of a counter-movement in early Christianity itself, best embodied in the figure of Paul, the "apostle to the Gentiles." Based not so much in Jerusalem as in the "overseas" church, Paul's Christianity was cosmopolitan rather than nationalistic, antinomian instead of law-abiding, inward-looking rather than outward-acting, and inclusive of all — circumcised and uncircumcised alike. Far better suited to surviving in a Hellenized Roman world, Paul's Christianity eventually mutated into its official culture.

In a sense, Eisenman's huge book simply insists that we recognize that what we now call Christianity was "the mirror reversal of what actually took place in Palestine under James," and that the Gospel writings reflect the victory of Paul in the struggle with James, the victory of an expanding empire over an indigenous culture. It's for this reason that James and the history of his leadership was written out of the official record, and that Jesus — as the embodiment of Paul's ascendant theology — was subsequently denatured and deified.

At nearly a thousand pages, "James the Brother of Jesus" is not a quick study. Massive in its learning and relentless in its argument, Eisenman's book sports no gracious outline to ease the reader's work. Even so, "James the Brother of Jesus" is something of a revelation, and not just for its specific conclusion about the "real" history of early Christianity. It delivers us into an unfamiliar, entrancing scriptural world of punning word-play, trenchant allusion and ruthless polemic, where nothing, including the person of Jesus, is quite what it seems.

As regards the "historical Jesus," Eisenman simply answers that

"who and whatever James was, so was Jesus." In helping us return to Christianity's origins, in deepening our understanding of both the destructiveness and the creativity of Pauline Christianity, Eisenman has done a service to believer and skeptic alike.

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