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Father and sons

MUDDIED by competing loyalties and undisclosed shifts of perspective, the story of early Christianity is one which offers a paradigm for historical understanding. At its centre is the self-defining, and on the face of it, perfectly logical assumption that Jesus was the 'founder' of 'Christianity'. The story isn't so much seen "through a glass darkly" as refracted by cultural and political obliquities and masked by gaps and absences.

The demythologisation of Jesus continues apace. It has become quite respectable to portray him as someone closer to Che Guevara than to the Son of God. Some see him as a charismatic nationalist, posthumously manipulated into deity. Barbara Thiering's *pesher* reading of *Revelation* has him surviving the Cross, fronting a radical Jewish movement out in the desert and eventually dying in Rome, at the heart of the Evil Empire; and she suggests that the church, or rather the Vatican, is currently attempting to marginalise Jesus, perhaps even to make him disappear altogether.

By any reasonable historiographical standard, he disappears as the 'founder' of 'Christianity', first because we know strikingly little about him, and second, because he made no attempt to found any such

James the Brother of Jesus – Volume 1: The Cup of the Lord

Robert Eisenman:
Faber, £25

Paul: The Mind of the Apostle

AN Wilson:
Sinclair-Stevenson, £17.99

By Brian Morton

movement, any more than Karl Marx had a personal stake in something called 'Marxism'. The brevity of AN Wilson's study of Paul, compared to Robert Eisenman's monumental study (which alarmingly is only a first volume) suggests correctly that there may already be a consensus about his finding, if not its exact contours. It has long been understood that much of the doctrinal apparatus of Christianity – celibacy, rigorous heterosexual, the centrality of the Crucifixion and Resurrection – comes not from Christ but from Paul. What is interesting about Wilson's account is that he attempts to go a step further and suggest that, regardless of what happened on the

road to Damascus, Paul did not try to found a 'new' religion either, but simply used the life and death of Jesus as the central trope of a visionary consciousness of what it meant to be Jewish, and Jewish during the reign of Nero.

So who was Paul? As Saul, we learn of him as a Christian-hating Jew from eastern Turkey who experiences the quintessential 'conversion'. But since it is a conversion to something – 'Christianity' – which does not yet exist, that is implausible. Wilson reconstructs a man whose profound motivation is conditioned by the political circumstances of empire and occupation. A rebuilt and newly-Hellenised Jerusalem was only the most potent symbol of a vast polity and economic superstructure that was on the verge of imploding apocalyptically.

Paul thought the world was coming to an end. To give himself a revolutionary focus, he mythologised the Crucifixion. "The most hideous form of torture became the cause of sublime, blood-curdling boasting, the one who died on the Cross was alive. Jesus lived. In the mind of the Romanised Jew, the tormented Pharisee, the temple guard and tent-maker for the legions, it was Paul himself who was

nailed to that instrument of torture. Paul who died, Paul who suffered, Paul who rose."

That Paul had a Pharisaic training is likely but unclear; that he was 'Romanised' is certain. For Robert Eisenman, one of the great figures of biblical scholarship, this compromises him deeply. His work on the Dead Sea Scrolls and on hitherto neglected early Christian texts points him in a very different direction. It was not Paul, or even Peter, who gave the early decades of Christianity their impetus, but a figure who fails to figure even in believers' picture of the Gospel story. That Jesus had a brother is much more significant than the possibility he may – and probably did – have a son. For it was James who seems to have taken charge of the revolutionary cadres round Jerusalem in the years after 40CE and until his own death in 62, an event which directly triggered the insurgency against Rome.

James was executed by stoning, a punishment apparently reserved for blasphemers; compare the fate of his brother, who shared the fate of thieves. Perhaps we have to think in terms of James being the real focus of a movement to which history has applied a carefully falsified teleology. Eisenman's course through

the evidence is so logical and his narrative so compelling that one emerges after almost 1,000 pages wondering how this defragmented, internally consistent understanding of early Christianity could have been kept out of sight for so long? Partly, of course, by the inaccessibility of the evidence; partly by the determination of the church fathers; and partly through the simple expediency of allowing Paul's almost solipsistic Judaism to become the working model of 'Christianity'.

Eisenman is too careful a historian, and too passionate a believer to attempt merely to debunk 2,000 years of history. His is not an effort to replace Jesus with James, but to rescue the younger brother from the oblivion to which the blatantly fictionalised Book of Acts consigned him. Once that textual and historiographical problem is hurdled, "it will also no longer be possible to avoid, through endless scholarly debate and other evasion syndromes, the obvious solution to the problem of the historical Jesus ... the answer to which is simple. Who and whatever James was, so was Jesus". For the moment we see as "through a glass darkly", but in time, face to face. This may be as close as that encounter can ever be.