



■ All the evidence . . . Prof Robert Eisenman makes his claims in a 1,074-page book

Picture by Dave Fleming

Fighting for a new faith-figure

Despite leaving very little for Christians to pin their faith upon, Professor Robert Eisenman considers that he has done Christianity a favour by revealing the family background to Jesus Christ – and pushing the apostle Paul into the background.

"I want to present all the data and, if a reader does not agree with my analysis, that is fine – but the information is there to reflect on," he told me.

There is, however, very little left to reflect on when one has finished the massive 1,074-page *James the Brother of Jesus*.

He claims that the major writers of the New Testament were anti-semitic, presented Rome in a bright light, and rejected the influence of Jesus' family background.

He discounts the virginity of Mary – it was, he asserts, James who was the virgin and it was attributed to Mary – and brushes aside much of the historical background of the New Testament as irrelevant or simply make-believe.

Most of it, he insists, is the result of the writers of the day trying to rub Jewish noses in the dust and bring credit to Roman and Greek influences.

Asked what was actually left for Christians after his surgery, he replied: "Very exciting stuff. We have a whole new character – James – whom we didn't know about before and who is perfectly righteous and doesn't have the shades of doubt involved in his being. He doesn't change his doctrine according to his situation and he doesn't take the easy or advantageous position, as did Paul. Instead James is uncompromising and unbending and tries to embody all righteousness."

His argument is presented in full – he refused to end the book at page 600 as the publishers requested. "I wanted the family and brothers of Jesus to be left in because that is where the final proof occurs. The reader will have an impossible time denying it," he insisted.

Maintaining dogmatically that the New Testament was written from documents which were "defective and overwritten" he concludes that it was written in that form so that "the

David Hall meets an author who insists the New Testament was doctored to hide the real founder of Christianity

picture of Jesus we have is based on religious canonical documents that, to a large extent, have been rewritten so that the family and those close to Jesus have been written out and a huge amount of anti-semitism written in."

As evidence he points out that in the New Testament Jesus "is made to appear as if he doesn't like his own people. He says things like, 'A prophet is never accepted in his own house', 'who are my mother and brothers?'. These are polemics – the Greco idea to put your own ideas into the mouth of an important person to give them credibility."

Jesus is made to like Roman Centurians – and to praise them – and the centurians are presented as not wanting to execute Jesus, which is, in Prof Eisenman's words, unrealistic and a complete invention.

"Real Jewish sympathisers would never write those sort of things," he claims.

His views started to develop when he was in Oxford in 1986-87 as a visiting senior member of Lincoln College and while he was at the Oxford Centre for Post Graduate Hebrew Studies at Yarnnton.

His wife was born in Leicestershire and the family has a soft spot for England – and Oxford in particular.

"My children have British citizenship after their mother – something Margaret Thatcher did to alter the law. Probably the only good thing she did."

He also began to be interested in the Dead Sea Scrolls and has been an ardent fighter to have them given public access and to speed the

publishing of research already accomplished.

"I personally led the campaign to break the monopoly on the scrolls and to end the log-jam in holding back manuscripts," he points out.

He did his doctorate in Islamic and Judaean subjects and knew nothing of Christianity until he began teaching. At California State University, Long Beach, he discovered students wanted to pose questions and he was forced to research the subject more and more. "It keeps you on your toes with a large class of students wanting to be fed."

It was an interest which took off when he suddenly had his own Damascus-road experience – discovering the brief biblical mentions of James, the brother of Jesus.

"He is mentioned briefly in Acts and Galatians but it is never developed. As an outsider, I read it and was knocked over – I couldn't believe what I was reading. He was the most important person of them all – the leader of the early church and both Peter and Paul had to defer to him. This was nothing like the picture of early Christianity which had been given previously."

In other literature he found that James was a central figure – associated with righteousness. Many of his characteristics have been hijacked and taken over by Paul and others in the New Testament, the writer claims.

Prof Eisenman wants to restore the balance after 2,000 years. "The public don't have a prior position staked out. They want to be stimulated.

"This is not for the faint-hearted or those under doctrinal authority but for people with a free mind who want excitement.

"There are few people left who really take the faith seriously. Those people will obviously remain the same but the residue of those who have gone off to existentialism, Buddhism, following Madonna or the Beatles, those made of sterner stuff, will be able to use their mind."

For a man who admits to having no faith, he has written an exhaustive volume which could well undermine that of those who do.

James the Brother of Jesus by Robert Eisenman is published by Faber at £25.