

# What is the Question and Why is it Important?

The history of the world is a story of power struggles – between tribes, nations, empires, and ideologies. Today is no different from the past: there are military conflicts, political and economic rivalries, and ideological wars between the religions and other belief systems. These include Marxism and communism (at present on the wane), other forms of atheism and materialism (not at all on the wane), religious fundamentalism (of various sorts), postmodernism, and paganism. The great religions of the world are still competing strongly: Islam is obviously in the ascendant. Hinduism arguably has a modern reincarnation in postmodernism, and Christianity, though declining in the West, is growing in other parts of the world.

Military and political struggles feature all the time on our television screens, and it is easy to see how important and dangerous they are, not just to those living in war zones, but to the whole world. The ideological wars are not always so visible or so easily portrayed in the media, though they are often bound up with politics (as in the Middle East). But they are also very important. Richard Dawkins and the “new atheists” may be wrong about many things, but in

this respect they are right: they recognize that the struggles going on in our modern world for the hearts and minds of human beings matter; the outcomes will be of huge importance for the future of human society and indeed of our planet.

In today's ideological battles certain issues regularly come to the fore, and this book is looking at one of the key points where Christianity has often been under attack in recent years. It concerns St Paul (as Christians call him) and his relationship to Jesus.

## **Who were Jesus and Paul?**

Jesus was a Jew who lived in Palestine in the first part of the first century AD. A healer, a teacher, and the founder of a popular movement, he became by any reckoning a hugely important figure. His followers, who were initially all Jews, came to see him as their “messiah” whom their Scriptures, the so-called Old Testament, told them about. The word “messiah” means “anointed one”, and the Old Testament spoke of God sending an anointed king who would save the Jewish people from their enemies and bring peace and prosperity. Jesus' followers saw him as that saviour.

Jesus was opposed by people in power, both the Jewish authorities and the Romans, who ruled Palestine, and he was finally crucified. But his movement did not die with him. His followers claimed that he rose from the dead two days after his crucifixion and that his death was a sacrifice, bringing the forgiveness of people's sins. They started to proclaim him as “Lord” and “Son of God” around the

Mediterranean world. Christians have gone on making these claims ever since.

If this is the Christian story of Jesus, who was Paul? He was one of the most important figures in the Jesus movement in its earliest days. He helped shape the church as it evolved; he was at the forefront of its missionary outreach; and a large part of the Christian New Testament was written by him or about him. He should probably be considered as second only to Jesus (with apologies to Peter) among people who influenced the development of Christianity.

### **The accusation against Paul and his inventive imagination**

But this is precisely the issue that this book is intending to address, because Paul is frequently accused of not being a faithful interpreter of Jesus, but distorting Jesus' message almost out of all recognition. It is alleged that Paul and others turned Jesus, who was no more than a popular Jewish teacher and healer from Palestine, into a divine cult figure who came down from heaven to save humankind, died as a blood sacrifice for the sins of the world, was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven, and who will one day return to judge the world.

Paul turns out to be the author of key Christian doctrines, so the argument goes, and the founder of Christianity as we know it. But the religion that he created was not that of Jesus. It was something constructed out of the story of Jesus through Paul's own imagination: he was influenced

by the pagan religions of the Greek world (for example the mystery religions with their ideas of gods dying and rising) and most of all by his own experience of conversion to Christianity on the road to Damascus, when he claimed to have seen, heard, and been called by Jesus. His imagined view of Jesus dominated the early church, and the real Jesus, it is claimed, lost out.

### **Does it matter?**

If this view of Paul is true, then the case for Christianity in the market-place of ideas is greatly weakened. It is unlikely that many people would want to go on believing in a Jesus produced by Paul's imagination. It is also unlikely that a relatively ordinary Palestinian prophet and teacher from the first century, if this is what Jesus really was, would command much of a following today.

So the view in question is a very serious attack on Christianity. It is also a subtle attack, since at first sight it does not look like an attack on what is most sacred to Christians – Jesus himself. It looks like an attack on something – or someone – of much less importance.

And this attack on Paul is appealing to all sorts of people, including those who find him problematic for other reasons:

- Jews have seen Paul as a traitor because of his conversion.
- Muslims revere Jesus, but do not like Paul's insistence that Jesus was the Son of God.
- Modern people often see Paul as misogynistic and homophobic.

- Modern people are also sceptical of the Christian church as an institution, and find conspiracy theories about it and its origins very attractive.

Some Christians find Paul difficult for these and other reasons, and separating Paul from Jesus may feel like a relief rather than a threat to their faith. It can be seen as positively advantageous in the modern multi-faith world not to have to defend the divinity and uniqueness of Jesus.

### Is the attack on Paul justified?

But, if this attack on Paul is serious and appealing, is it justified? There have been many popular proponents of the idea, such as the novelist Philip Pullman. But there have also been scholars who have supported it. Over a hundred years ago the German William Wrede put forward something like this view in his book *Paul*.<sup>1</sup> In more recent years the Jewish scholar Hyam Maccoby wrote a book with the self-explanatory title *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*.<sup>2</sup>

It would be easy to suppose that if any scholars, and especially Christian scholars, held such a view they must have had a good reason for doing so. But it would be unwise to conclude that too quickly. There are scholars who deny the Holocaust, or deny climate change, or believe that the earth is just a few thousand years old. Intelligent people used to believe that the earth was flat. Scholars can be found who deny almost anything, including most aspects of traditional Christian belief. But

the question is: are they right? What are the arguments?

This short book is an attempt, by someone who has been interested in the question for a long time, to show that Paul did not invent Christianity or change the religion of Jesus, but that he got Jesus right.<sup>3</sup>

### **Where are we going? An outline of the contents of this book**

Although this book is a short one, the journey it takes is quite long, looking at the various questions and issues that scholars and others have raised.

- Chapter 2 looks at the important preliminary question of whether the New Testament is usable at all as historical evidence.
- Chapter 3 considers Paul's conversion and the possibility that this could be the source of his ideas about Jesus, for example his view of Jesus as divine.
- Chapters 4 to 6 address the question of why Paul seems to refer to Jesus' life and teaching so little. Was Paul not interested in the real Jesus, but only in his own mystical experience? These three chapters assemble some of the most important evidence for Paul's knowledge of Jesus.
- Chapter 7 looks specifically at where Paul got his views about Jesus' divinity and Jesus' death.
- Chapter 8 asks if Paul and Jesus were really in agreement, or whether their religions were quite different.
- Chapter 9 considers Paul's influence on the rest of the

New Testament, and how far the New Testament is his version of Christianity.

- Chapter 10 reviews the main arguments, and comes back to the big question: did Paul get Jesus right?