

PROCRUSTEAN CRITICISM

Secular scholars attempting to construct a coherent and compelling theory of the origins of Christianity have never succeeded fully in this effort due to a number of Procrustean requirements imposed upon them by religious tradition. They have not been free to follow trails of evidence because of roadblocks set by tradition that bar exploration of forbidden paths. Free inquiry into Christian origins has been hampered by at least five constraints imposed by Orthodox tradition.

First of all, secular critics have had to force their theories to fit a framework in which Christianity had a single place and time of beginning. All theories have had to be grounded in an historical Jesus of Nazareth who lived in Palestine at the turn of the current era. Christian history has been forced into the shape of a tree springing from a single taproot. It has not been free to take the form of a braid of religious trajectories such as works so well when trying to visualize the origins of Egyptian, Mesopotamian, or Greco-Roman religions.

Secondly, theorists have been required to explain how all their Greek-language primary sources could have been derived from Aramaic-language documents or traditions. How can it be, if Jesus taught his earth-shaking precepts in Aramaic, that the earliest documentary evidence pertaining to him is in Greek? Moreover, how could documents containing Greek puns and quotations from Homer and Aesop be derived from Aramaic oral or written traditions?

Thirdly, theorists have had to explain the nature and origins of oral traditions that somehow gave rise to the written documents that we find upon the stage when the curtain goes up to begin the Christian drama. What if there was no oral tradition? What if there was an oral tradition but it was of the sort that underlay the mystery cults of Mithra, Isis, Osiris, or

Dionysius? Would the discovery of a Mithraic oral tradition prove the historical existence of Mithra?

Fourthly, secular critics have had to assume that Christianity originated as a sect within Judaism—a Judaism that seems however to become less “Jewish” with every advance in our knowledge of the era being investigated. Despite growing evidence that “Judaism” at the turn of the era was not in any way monolithic, and despite the fact that there were many Judaisms and that some of them must have blended imperceptibly into Hellenistic paganism, it is difficult to dispel the vision of a Pharisee evolving into a Roman Catholic.

Fifth and finally, theorists have had to accept the “fact” that a man who was so obscure that he and his chief lieutenants escaped the notice of all contemporary writers and historians, but nevertheless he was able to change the course of world history by means of his charismatic and compelling effects on apostles who themselves remain unknown to history! The absence of evidence supporting the historicity of the apostles amplifies the *argumentum e silentio* relating to Jesus of Nazareth into the wail of a warning siren.

Secular scholars must now at last cease to limit the paths they might pursue, following only those that never stray from the Procrustean bed of tradition. Instead of shaping and trimming facts to fit the pits and lumps in the Orthodox mattress, they must discard that old and musty mattress altogether. They must try to determine as best they can the actual shape of the evidence. Then they must see what kind of mattress can best accommodate it. They must follow paths of inquiry whithersoever their pursuit of truth may lead them.