

How Could You Tell if a Religion is Merely Man-Made?

Select your top 3



It's too local



It's too easy



It resembles other neighboring ideas



It legitimates people in power



Unfulfilled promises



It legitimates wealth



It legitimates men's desire for sex (e.g. via polygamy, etc.)



It has questionable historical evidence



It has places of internal incoherence



Other

Jesus' Resurrection: A Jewish Invention?

Why would Jewish people create a religion like this?

You take the most challenging ethics of Judaism

- The promised land and wealth
- The sacredness of Jewish distinctives (customs, foods, Temple, priests, etc.)
- + Love for the Roman oppressors, other Gentile enemies, the poor
- + Die before you worship the Roman Emperor and worship Jesus instead

= Christianity

An overt desire for self-inflicted punishment	It gave the most meaning to life
A desire for 'community'	The first Jewish disciples all had the same hallucination
Guilty feelings	Jesus was really resurrected and started the movement
A subconscious desire to put a human face to the Jewish YHWH	Other

Jesus' Resurrection: A Jewish Invention?

The period 163 BCE – 135 CE was filled with military, revolutionary movements as Jews struggled against Greek, then Roman oppression. For 300 years, the uniform view was: the Jewish Messiah would be military, oust the Romans, recapture Jerusalem, and rebuild the Temple.

Below is a greatly shortened list of such movements:

163 BCE	40 BCE	3 BCE	6 CE	28 CE	40's CE	66 CE	67 – 70 CE	130 CE
Judas Maccabeus recaptures Jerusalem, cleanses the Temple, and sets a pattern	Hezekiah leads skirmishes and revolts	Judas leads a revolt	Judas the Galilean leads a Jewish independence movement	Pilate puts down a revolt in Jerusalem	Jacob and Simon, sons of Judas, lead a rebellion	Menahem, son or grandson of Judas, seized the Temple and burned the records	John of Gischala leads revolts in the Jewish-Roman War	Bar-Kochba leads the fateful Jewish rebellion at Masada

In fact, when one 'Messianic hero' failed, expectations were transferred to his relative.

Messianic hope was attached to family, at least in the case of:

Hezekiah

40 BCE

Judas ben Hezekiah

(the Galilean)

3 BCE – 6 CE

Jacob & Simon,

sons of Judas

40's CE

Menahem,

son or grandson of Judas

66 CE

Belief in Jesus' resurrection was accompanied by this shift in worldview:

	FROM	TO
The Messiah is	A Jewish military leader	Jesus
The Romans are	The oppressive enemy	Loved by God, welcomed into the community
We want freedom from	Bondage to Rome	Bondage to our own evil & self-centeredness
Do we want the land?	Yes	No
Jewish law and custom are	Inviolable for everyone	Relativized for the sake of non-Jews
The Temple is	The physical building in Jerusalem	The physical body of Jesus
The Temple is cleansed by	Recapturing Jerusalem & purifying it	Jesus purifying his human nature
The Scriptures point to	Israel's liberation from others	Israel's liberation from evil
The Messiah's death means	Defeat, look for another Messiah	God's loving rescue of humanity
The signs of the Messiah's victory are	Triumph over Rome & his renewal of national freedom	Jesus' triumph over death, & his renewal of humanity

Now you evaluate. In an age filled with Jewish ethnocentric, nationalistic fervor and military revolution:

The 'Swoon Theory': Jesus somehow survived crucifixion and escaped the tomb, failed to deliver on any national hopes, **but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.**

The 'Stolen Body' Theory: The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus stole Jesus' dead body, failed to deliver on any national hopes, **but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.**

The 'Mass Hallucination' Theory: The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus all had the same delusion, failed to deliver on any national hopes, **but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.**

The 'Growth of Legend' Theory: The earliest Jewish followers of Jesus invented the idea of the resurrection over time, failed to deliver on any national hopes, **but persuaded many Jews to shift their entire worldview anyway.**

The Christian Theory: Jesus' resurrection **forced** his earliest Jewish followers and others, **against their own prejudices and preconceptions**, to shift their entire worldview and see the Scriptures truly.

Jesus' Resurrection: A Legend That Grew Over Time?

So why did belief in Jesus' resurrection start among Jews?

Why didn't the disciples of Jesus:

1. GO BACK TO FISHING:

'They could simply have gone back to their fishing, glad to have escaped Jerusalem with their lives. They could have switched to a different tack, given up on messianism (as did the post-135 rabbis), and gone in for some form of private religion instead, whether of intensified Torah-observance, private gnosis, or something else. They clearly did not do that. Anything less like a private religion than going around the pagan world saying that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel would be hard to imagine.'



2. FIND A NEW MESSIAH:

'Equally, and perhaps even more interestingly, they could have found themselves a new messiah from among Jesus' blood relatives. This is not, I think, normally considered. It deserves to be. We know from various sources that Jesus' relatives were important and well-known within the early church. One of the closest, his brother James, though not part of the movement during Jesus' lifetime, actually appears to have become the anchorman in Jerusalem while Peter and Paul went off around the world (Acts 12:17; 15:13, 21:18; Gal. 1:19, 2:9). James was widely regarded in the early church as the person at the center, geographically and theologically. Yet—and this is the vital clue, like Sherlock Holmes's dog that did not bark in the night—*nobody in early Christianity ever dreamed of saying that James was the Messiah*. Nothing would have been more natural, especially on the analogy of the family of Judas the Galilean. Yet James was simply known as 'the Lord's brother' (Gal. 1:19; cf. Mark 6:3).'



'Their answer...was that **Jesus, following his execution on a charge of being a would-be Messiah, had been raised from the dead.**'¹

¹ N.T. Wright, *Christian Origins and the Resurrection of Jesus: The Resurrection of Jesus as a Historical Problem* (Originally published in *Sewanee Theological Review* 41.2, 1998. Reproduced at http://www.ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Historical_Problem.htm by permission of the author.) Outline form and emphasis mine.

Appendix A: Military Messianic Movements in Israel 163 BCE – 135 CE

- 163 BCE: Judas Maccabeus recaptures Jerusalem and cleanses the Temple, providing the model for a resistance tradition
- 40 BCE: Hezekiah leads revolts and skirmishes. He was put down by Herod the Great. Samaia the Pharisee objects to this.
- 4 BCE: Young men, as Herod lay dying in 4 BCE, pull down Roman eagles from Jerusalem, who were then killed on Herod's orders. They were supported by the teachers Judas ben Sariphaeus and Matthias ben Margalothus (War 1.648-55; Ant. 17.149-66). The young men who were egged on by the teachers Judas and Matthias to pull down Roman eagles from Jerusalem, who were then killed on Herod's orders (War 1.648-55; Ant. 17.149-66).
- 3BCE: Another violent revolt the following Passover, which was renewed at Pentecost (War 2.1-13; 39-50; Ant. 17.206-18; 250-64). Josephus says that it involved 'a countless multitude' from all over Palestine, especially Judea itself. They laid siege to the Romans, fought them, and besieged the commander himself in the palace. At this, anarchy broke out in Palestine (War 2.55; Ant. 17.269, referring to 'continuous and countless new tumults'), including a revolt by Herod's veterans and one by Judas, son of Hezekiah.
- 6 CE: Then there is Judas the Galilean (War 2.118, also probably 'Theudas' mentioned in Acts 5:37), whether or not he is the same person as Judas the son of Hezekiah the bandit leader (see NTPG 180). Judas, together with Zadok, a Pharisee, headed a large number of Zealots and offered strenuous resistance. Judas proclaimed the Jewish state as a republic recognizing God alone as king and ruler and His laws as supreme. The revolt continued to spread, and in some places serious conflicts ensued.
- An individual called the 'Samaritan' led a group of armed followers and ended up in guerilla warfare.
- The unnamed prophets of War 2.258-60/Antiquities 20.167b-8 are subsumed under the general brigandage noted in Antiquities 20.167a.
- The 'Egyptian', according to War 2.262, intended to force entry to Jerusalem, overpower the Roman garrison, and set himself up as a tyrant.
- The unnamed prophet of Antiquities 20.188 appeared in the context of widespread brigandry ('prophets' and their followers entertained dreams of violent revolution).
- Jonathan the Weaver (War 7.437-50) had, according to Life 424f., aroused an uprising in Galilee.
- ~28 CE: The upstart Galileans who Pontius Pilate crushed, mingling their blood with their sacrifices (Lk.13:1)
- 30 CE: There is Barabbas, and the revolt in which he took part (Lk.23.19; in John 18.40 Barabbas is described as a lestes, 'brigand'). Presumably the two lestai crucified alongside Jesus count as well.
- 40's CE: The sons of Judas the Galilean, Jacob/James and Simon (Ant. 20.102), continued their father's insurrection. They were crucified in the late 40s by Roman governor Tiberius Julius Alexander.
- Then there are all the 'common people' who were punished along with Eleazar ben Deinaeus; in War 2.253, Josephus says the number of them was 'incalculable'.
- Jesus ben Ananias enters Jerusalem on the Feast of Sukkot and decries the Temple; the governor interrogates him but later releases him.
- Then there are the further outbreaks of brigandage reported in War 2.264f.; these may be the same ones who are mentioned in 2.271, but in the earlier passage it appears that the revolutionary fervor was far more widespread than a small group.
- 66 CE: Then there are the Sicarii, the 'dagger men,' led by Menahem, another son or grandson of Judas the Galilean (War 4.198, Ant. 20.186f., etc.). The Sicarii forced their way into the Temple and then burned the houses of Ananias, Agrippa, and Bernice, and the Record Office with the records of debt. Menahem broke into the armory at Masada, distributed arms, and returned to Jerusalem as 'king' over the revolutionary forces.
- 66 – 70 CE: Simon bar Giora is captured after the revolt of 66 – 70 and brought to Rome. He is executed in Rome in 71.
- 67 – 70 CE: John of Gischala and his followers (refs. in NTPG 177 n. 54).
- 73 CE: Eleazar ben Yair, possibly the same person as Eleazar ben Simon, leads a Sicarii rebellion at Masada. The size and scope of the group is disputed, as is the manner of their death; possibly it was mass suicide.
- 132 – 135 CE: Finally, there is Bar-Kochba and the Jewish uprising of 135 AD which was crushed at Masada.

New Testament Historian and Theologian, N.T. Wright notes:

‘There were, to be sure, several variations on Jewish messianic belief in this period. None of them envisaged a Messiah who would die at the hands of the pagans. On the contrary, where Jewish expectations of a Messiah did exist, they regularly possessed a dual focus. In a line of tradition stretching from David to Bar-Kochba, including the Maccabees [who cleansed the Temple after Antiochus Epiphanes desecrated it] and Herod [who tried to legitimize his dynasty by expanding and refurbishing the Temple], we find that the king would have to defeat the pagans, and that he would have to rebuild (or at least to cleanse) the Temple. The two actions would, of course, go together: as long as the pagans remained undefeated, YHWH had not returned to Zion, presumably because his house was not ready. If a messiah was killed by the pagans, especially if he had not rebuilt the Temple or liberated Israel, that was the surest sign that he was another in the long line of false messiahs.

It is clear what follows. If the messiah you had been following was killed by the pagans, you were faced with a choice between two courses of action. You could give up on the whole idea of revolution and abandon the dream of liberation. Some went that route, such as the rabbinic movement as a whole after 135 AD. Or you could find yourself a new messiah, if possible from the same family as the late lamented one. Some went that route: witness the continuing movement that ran from Judas the Galilean in 6 AD to his sons or grandsons in the 50s; to another descendant, Menahem, during the war of 66 – 70; and to another descendant, Eleazor, who was the leader of the ill-fated Sicarii on Masada in 73.

If, after the death of Simon bar-Giora in Titus’s triumph in Rome, or if, after the death of Simeon ben-Kosiba in 135, you had claimed that Simon, or Simeon, really was the Messiah, you would invite a fairly sharp response from the average first-century Jew. If, by way of explanation, you said that you had had a strong sense of Simon, or Simeon, as still being with you, still supporting and leading you, the kindest response you might expect would be that their angel or spirit was still communicating with you, but not that he had been raised from the dead. So far as we know, the followers of the first-century messianic or quasi-messianic movements were fanatically committed to the cause. They, if anybody, might be expected to suffer from cognitive dissonance after the death of their great leader. In no other case, however, right across the century before Jesus and the century after him, do we hear of any Jewish group saying that their executed leader had been raised again from the dead.

So—and here is the third step in the second stage of my argument—granted that Jesus of Nazareth was certainly crucified as a rebel king, it is extremely strange that the early Christians not only insisted that he was actually the Messiah, but they reordered their worldview, their praxis, their stories, symbols, and theology around this belief.

They had, after all, the two normal options open to them. They could simply have gone back to their fishing, glad to have escaped Jerusalem with their lives. They could have switched to a different tack, given up on messianism (as did the post-135 rabbis), and gone in for some form of private religion instead, whether of intensified Torah-observance, private gnosis, or something else. They clearly did not do that. Anything less like a private religion than going around the pagan world saying that Jesus was the Messiah of Israel would be hard to imagine.

Equally, and perhaps even more interestingly, they could have found themselves a new messiah from among Jesus’ blood relatives. This is not, I think, normally considered. It deserves to be. We know from various sources that Jesus’ relatives were important and well-known within the early church. One of the closest, his brother James, though not part of the movement during Jesus’ lifetime, actually appears to have become the anchorman in Jerusalem while Peter and Paul went off around the world (Acts 12:17; 15:13, 21:18; Gal. 1:19, 2:9). James was widely regarded in the early church as the person at the center, geographically and theologically. Yet—and this is the vital clue, like Sherlock Holmes’s dog that did not bark in the night—*nobody in early Christianity ever dreamed of saying that James was the Messiah*. Nothing would have been more natural, especially on the analogy of the family of Judas the Galilean. Yet James was simply known as “the Lord’s brother” (Gal. 1:19; cf. Mark 6:3).

We must, then, ask once again: Why did Christianity even begin, let alone continue, as a messianic movement, when its Messiah so obviously not only did not do what a Messiah was supposed to do but suffered a fate which ought to have showed conclusively that he could not possibly have been Israel’s anointed? Why did this group of first-century Jews, who had cherished messianic hopes and focused them on Jesus of Nazareth, not only continue to believe that he was the Messiah despite his execution, but actively announce him as such in the pagan as well as the Jewish world, cheerfully redrawing the picture of messiahship around him but refusing to abandon it? Their answer, consistently throughout the evidence we possess, was that Jesus, following his execution on a charge of being a would-be Messiah, had been raised from the dead.’

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