

Wilson, Barrie. *How Jesus Became Christian*. Toronto: Random House Canada, 2008. Hardcover ISBN: 978-0-679-31493-6. 317 pages. \$32.95 CAN. Reviewed by Alan Lai, Ed.D.

The title of the book is intriguing. I read it because I knew Wilson has had some impact on some of my friends; and I would like to know how to respond.

A serious scholar of religious studies, this is Wilson's first book intended for general readers. In this highly readable book, Wilson introduces the fascinating social and political world of the first century. These are his questions: What's a Messiah supposed to do? What's a "Christ"? How did Paul become so influential, displacing the movement led by Jesus' brother, James? How did the early Christian movement separate from Judaism, while trying to claim its heritage for its own?

Answering these questions, Wilson uncovers a "Jesus Cover-Up" Thesis: Jesus lived, died, and resurrected as a faithful Jew. After his resurrection, Peter and James continued Jesus' ministry Wilson calls it: Jesus movement. This Jesus movement was thoroughly Jewish in character by means of observing the Torah, Sabbath keeping and circumcision. Unlike Paul, Peter and James knew Jesus personally, knew what Jesus taught, and what Jesus represented. But years later, an outsider called Paul, who had never met Jesus personally, only claimed to have been chosen by Jesus in his "vision," taught a religion to Gentiles based on the name of Jesus but basically, not a religion of Jesus. Acts 15 catches a glimpse of the tension of the two movements.

Instead of a Jewish movement, Paul created a Hellenized religion Wilson calls it Christ movement for the Roman world. What we called Christianity today is in fact a Paulinity. Paul's universalized concept of Christ was a product of Hellenization where Paul articulated a "revisionist" theology based on three points: Abraham as an exemplar of faith, a unique theology of history where the validity of the Torah was only for awhile, all who follow the law were "under a curse." Wilson says if Paul wanted to dispel the accusation that said he was not teaching what Jesus taught, a legitimate appeal for authority would be to quote Jesus or cite examples or parables for support. But Paul never cited Jesus' sayings or parables in his letters. The earthly Jesus was not authoritative to Paul. It is evident to Wilson that Paul has never met and known the historical Jesus. Paul could not say Jesus agreed with him because according to Wilson, Paul knew Jesus would not. To Wilson, Paul's religion was not a continuation or reinterpretation of the religion of Jesus. Paul to Wilson was a Jewish dropout.

Was Paul's "Christ" Jewish? Wilson says in reading Paul we have no sense that Christ was really Jewish. Paul's view of Christ removed the Jewish concept of Messiah from its matrix and plunked it into a Gentile one. Paul's Christ is about a Gentile Christ, a cosmic redeemer, and a human sacrifice for sin. But the question is whose sins was Paul address – Gentiles' and/or Jewish peoples'? Wilson says Judaism rejected human sacrifice in any context. A human sacrifice for sin makes no sense in a Jewish context. Is Paul's universal Christ valid for Gentiles only? A "yes" seems to be an oxymoron. Is Paul's mission and theology directed to Gentiles only? Paul's notion of the law has never really departed from the Jewish notions of the Torah. That is why Jews in Paul's times got an impression that Paul was giving a blanket statement condemning all human beings in general and Jewish people in particular. If Paul was also addressing Jews, does that mean God at one point enacted a covenant with the Jewish

people now no longer apply? This raises a concern about the nature of God. It implies: If God could change one contract, why not another?

But Paul's Christ alone couldn't have "made" Jesus Christian. Wilson sees Luke as a mediator who pieced the two contradictory movements together in the Book of Acts where Luke grafted Paul's movement onto the Jesus movement, making it a seamless single movement – a way to gain legitimacy. As history shows, Paul's Hellenized version of Christ won Constantine's favor. Jesus' original Jewish renewal movement died out not because they were inauthentic, but it was unfavorable politically and culturally given the context of the time.

Wilson gives us a "Paul-against-Jesus" model that worth considering. Even people who are uncomfortable with Wilson's "Jesus Cover Up" thesis need to wrestle with the "historical facts" he presents. The disappointment of this book is the lack of direction concerning how I should treat Paul and his teachings today. Wilson's real contribution is he opens up the Pandora box where questions intertwining faith, politics, and culture must be addressed. Second, I question whether placing Paul outside or at the fringe at best of the Jewish traditions sufficiently explains why Paul said what he said. There is a long line up of scholars who are equally critical of Paul but they do not strip Paul's Jewishness. Third, Hellenization was a struggle facing all people at that time in the region. By the time Jesus started his ministry, Judea and Galilee were under Roman occupation a couple hundred of years. It was not if, but a matter of degree as far as Hellenization was concerned. Paul might be a radical, but unlikely a Jewish dropout. Fourth, like our ancestors during the Reformation era, we tend to read Paul's words against his Jewish background. But increasingly, we must ask: Is this the only background? What about the Imperial Rome?

It is unnecessary to think anti-Semitism of the early church was a *direct* consequence of Paul's Hellenized Christ Movement, although I agree the failure of the church to read the Jewish roots of their faith and socio-political context of the time was severe. The New Testament writings are not intrinsically anti-Semitic; they become so when non-Jews read the writings as outsiders of the Jewish community with the political interest to defame Judaism. I am sure that if Paul were alive and knew what his successors had done to Jews and Judaism, he would wrote a whole brunch of letters to condemn the church twice as fervent as we have seen in 1 Corinthians.

REFLECTIONS FOR MINISTRY. Wilson helps us see the messiness of the first century where Christianity emerged was no less controversial, complex, and mind-bothering than our contemporary obsession with debate on human sexuality. Christianity, despite having the same ancient Jewish roots as contemporary Judaism, is not a version of Judaism. Instead of picturing Christianity supersede Judaism, we should see them as siblings. That is why the church must stop teaching supersessionism.

The church needs capable teachers to teach an understanding of Christianity that is in no way nullifying Judaism. Caricaturing Pharisees and Judaism have no place in the pulpits. I agree with Wilson when he says the church need to recover the Jewish Jesus and to fight anti-Semitism. But Christianity has not only been Hellenized, but also Italianized, Germanized, and Anglo-Saxonized. The kind of Christianity the world knows best, including its doctrines and liturgies, is deeply Europeanized. The task of Christian education must include freeing the church from European captivity.

How should we deal with Paul? Imagine there was no great Jewish War and no destruction of the Temple, it is possible that Paul's Gentile movement would have gone no further. The destruction of the Temple cracked open the Jewish identity hole and created a void that made Paul's theology an absurdity no longer. Paul suddenly "fits" a changing political climate. But the story shouldn't stop there. This historical debate concerning the tension between "Athens" and "Jerusalem" also reveals the contextual nature of Christian theology. If Paul was not afraid of accommodating faith with the socio-political context of the day, why should we?

Despite the version of Christianity the church knows best have strong Hellenized elements, sermons on Sunday mornings have been heavily focused on the canonical gospels where preachers constantly trying to appropriate Jesus' sayings for our daily lives. Paul might not have concerned too much what Jesus said and possessed no written record of his sayings, but we do. That is, preachers are constantly trying to "reconcile" Paul's radical theology for Gentiles with Jesus' Jewish-embedded sayings. The church is not ready to give up its Jewish root despite having developed into something else. But by what means do we bridge them? Theology matters.

Lutheran self-identity is rooted in a 16th century reading of Galatians and the Letter to the Romans as championed by Martin Luther. The challenge Wilson posted for us is the need to go back even further. It is customary to use the Reformation lens to read Paul. But it is crucial to critique a 16th century Paul through the 21st century understanding of the first century political landscape.