

# A New Paradigm for the Study of Christian Origins: Replacing the Dendritic Model

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**Abstract:** *This article argues that the dendritic (tree-like) or traditional model of Christian origins must be replaced with a plectic (braid-like) model. The dendritic model assumes that Christianity began at a specific point in both time and space—in the person of “Jesus of Nazareth”—and then branched out to form the various ancient sects of Christianity. This article asks: What if the numerous forms of “Christianity” did not all derive from a single historical figure? What if these earliest “Christianities” arose in the same way that the different forms and varieties of Egyptian, Indic, and Greco-Roman religions evolved? A new paradigm is proposed where the various forms of Christianity can be envisioned as forming by the coalescence of various threads (or trajectories) of religious tradition. Some of the threads may trace back into the mists of prehistory, others may trace to the turn of the current era, and still others may have begun in the second or third centuries CE. Not all early forms of Christianity contained the same threads. Not all threads stayed in the braid for long, and still others continued into the present. After entering the braid, threads of tradition evolved, bifurcated, branched off, or were absorbed into other traditions. Clearly, this is what we see happening today as multitudinous sects, cults, and denominations continue to arise and go extinct. As in historical geology, so too in religious history: The present is the key to the past.*

**Keywords:** Historical Jesus, Paradigm shift, Christian origins, History of religions, Historical models

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## Introduction

In the present paper, an attempt is made to create a new research model that will allow social-scientific investigations of the origins of Christianity. What follows is a complex hypothesis that incorporates many simpler hypotheses. As in all science, hypotheses are proposed for the purpose of explaining observed facts. Not all such hypotheses will be equally supported

by evidence, and a few may actually depend upon logical inference rather than observation. This new paradigmatic model will have to be subjected to rigorous testing, and it will have to be modified when necessary to accord with newly discovered evidence.

Because Historical Jesus studies have always been fundamental in discussions of Christian origins, it is worth remembering the conclusions drawn by Albert Schweitzer in the second edition (1913) of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*: “There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus,” he noted—perhaps sadly. “The Jesus of Nazareth who came forward publicly as the Messiah, who preached the ethic of the kingdom of God, who founded the kingdom of heaven upon earth, and died to give his work its final consecration, never existed. He is a figure designed by rationalism, endowed with life by liberalism, and clothed by modern theology in a historical garb.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, the “Historical Jesus” has only existed in the imagination of scholars. A man who actually lived has not been found.

Schweitzer summed up his survey of with what sounded like an admission of defeat:

The study of the Life of Jesus has had a curious history. It set out in quest of the historical Jesus, believing that when it had found him it could bring him straight into our time as a teacher and savior. It loosed the bands by which for centuries he had been riveted to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine....But he did not stay; he passed by our time and returned to his own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep him in our time, but had to let him go. He returned to his own time by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.<sup>2</sup>

In other words: Historical Jesus research has gone nowhere.

### **The Traditional Paradigm**

Traditionally, research into Christian origins has employed what can be called a *dendritic* model. That is to say, the traditional paradigm assumes that the beginning, growth, and evolutionary history of Christianity mimics

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<sup>1</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 478.

<sup>2</sup> Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 478–9.

## Conclusion

The new paradigm and model for the study of Christian origins presented here is, without a doubt, an oversimplification. The hypothesized braiding together of a mystery Christ-cult thread with a Palestinian messianic Jesus cult being the foundational fusion from which all early Christian groups developed does not take notice of the fact that both of the “threads” were themselves complex braids that must be unwoven before a clear picture emerges even of that inaugural conjunction. It is probable that besides the four threads discussed in this article, at least twenty more such trajectories would need to be elucidated before it becomes possible to outline the time sequence in which the features of the early Christian cults emerged and to discern the evolutionary relationship between these disparate groups.

Historical Jesus research hitherto has had to be carried out within the confines of a Procrustean-bed model—a model requiring Christianity to have begun at a single point in time and space. Only by freeing ourselves from that methodological box can a truly social-scientific investigation begin to deal with the problem of Christian origins. I conclude that Christian origins must be studied in the same way the origins of Greco-Roman, Egyptian, and Indic religions have been studied. The “Christian exceptionalism” constraining Historical Jesus research must yield to a more secular, scientific methodology.

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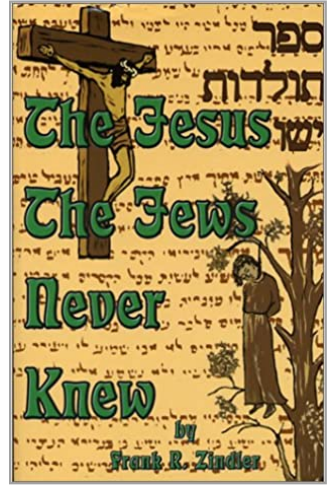
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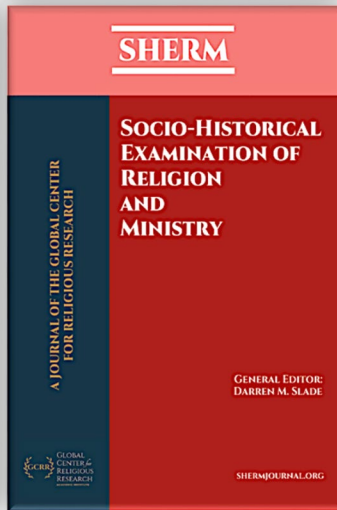
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