



The Rise and Fall Of Jesus: A Complete Explanation for the Life of Jesus and the Origin of Christianity by Steuart Campbell, 3rd edition, 2019 (originally published in 1996; twice revised). Marburg, Germany: Tactum Verlag. ISBN-10: 3828843468, ISBN-13: 978-3828843462.

Reviewed by Mark Newbrook

Steuart Campbell, a former Christian, has a long-standing interest in the life of the person known in English as Jesus, and in his role as the key figure in the early development of the Christian religion. Campbell has a background in architecture and an undergraduate degree in mathematics and science. His other books include a skeptical treatment of the matter of the Loch Ness Monster (arriving at the position that there is no such creature) and an explanation of the UFO phenomenon in terms of meteorological and astronomical phenomena. Both books received largely positive online reviews, although some such reviewers (even some who ‘scored’ them highly) found the research methods suspect in places and found some of the explanations simplistic.

I want to stress in this present context that I am not myself a professional Bible scholar. I am a general, historical and skeptical linguist with an undergraduate background in Ancient Greek, ancient history and ancient and modern philosophy, and wide-ranging skeptical interests including the history of religion.

There is, of course, a huge tradition of scholarship concerning the figure of Jesus, which goes back to pre-medieval theology and became more diverse in orientation as Europe and its diaspora emerged from the domination of the churches by way of the C17-19 Enlightenment. For instance, it has now become common for authors to base their accounts of Jesus on historical information and the methods of history rather than on religious texts and theological considerations. Indeed, some authors have argued that there was in fact **no** historical figure who can be

identified with the New Testament (NT) character Jesus. But over the decades this ‘Christ Myth’ view has come to be regarded as a ‘fringe’ position; there are now few well-informed supporters of this stance, most of them humanists and rationalists (although by no means all humanists and rationalists would uphold this extreme view). Campbell agrees with the overwhelming academic majority in rejecting this Christ Myth/‘no-historical-Jesus’ view.

More importantly, there are scholars (mostly non-Christians, naturally) who hold that ‘Jesus’ was a very different person indeed from the interpretation of him which is accepted as true by conventional Christians. And there are other recent thinkers, some of them of a postmodernist persuasion, who argue that the ‘facts’ about Jesus’ life are almost impossible to confirm, are subject to reinterpretation by each group of thinkers and by each generation, and are in any case much less important than the **use** made of the figure of Jesus in the developing early tradition of Christian theology and practice. In addition there are further altogether ‘fringe’ claims about Jesus, such as the view that he died and is buried in Japan. These fringe positions, in particular, are obviously ‘grist to the skeptical mill’.

Paul (formerly Saul) was clearly the most influential figure in the genesis of Christianity and like the Evangelist John he displays ‘gnostic’ tendencies in his writings; but he displays little interest in the person and life of Jesus, focusing upon his death and the significance of his alleged resurrection. This feature of his work (which predates all the extant Gospels) has been variously interpreted; but Campbell

holds that Paul clearly acknowledged Jesus as a man. However, because he rehearses very few specifics about Jesus, Paul cannot be as heavily invoked in the present context as one might imagine.

This present book has a foreword (written in 1993) by the late critical scholar of religion James Thrower. As Thrower and Campbell both point out, discussion of Jesus (despite the post-Enlightenment changes mentioned above) is still dominated by Christian thinkers who regard the orthodox account of his life (allowing for differences between the various Gospels?) as beyond debate. Campbell is obviously free of such bias (although Christians may think that as an ‘apostate’ he now has a **different** bias), and he also goes beyond the criticisms of Christian (meta-)ethics voiced by Friedrich Nietzsche in challenging the ethical ideas reportedly promulgated by Jesus himself. (Various other authors have attacked Christian (meta-)ethics on purely philosophical grounds; to the surprise of many believers, there is no consensus that the Christian god, if real, would count as ‘good’.)

Thrower does urge a **critical** reading of this book on the part of self-identifying followers of Campbell, suggesting that objections to his thought might thereby be sought and possibly found. Unfortunately, there have been no scholarly reviews of the book (any edition) which might have advanced such objections. This may be, in part, because of knee-jerk hostility on the part of many Christian Bible scholars, and/ or because (as Campbell notes) most **non**-Christians are not especially interested in Jesus as a man. And another factor may be the fact that most

professional academics (who typically are already busy enough engaging with transparently mainstream material) are reluctant to devote time and effort to the assessment of material produced by writers without formal qualifications in the relevant domains, suspecting that it will prove not to warrant their attention. (The main exceptions are those scholars who are also active skeptics with a specific interest in such material.) This may sometimes lead to the ignoring of novel ideas which **are** in fact worthy of attention.

Campbell himself holds that his lack of relevant qualifications/ employment-history is the obvious reason why his book has not been reviewed by any academic commentator. He suggests, in fact, that it is his position as an ‘outsider’ which has enabled him to ‘see what appears to be the real Jesus’ (personal communication). There are certainly cases in the literature (in all disciplines) where a well-informed amateur has arrived at a novel position which has proved to be insightful and at least arguable. But skeptics will recognise Campbell’s stance as a position adopted too readily by very many non-mainstream, sometimes inadequately informed thinkers convinced of the great worth of their own ideas. Most such authors have much less ground (evidence, reasoning) for their iconoclastic claims than they suggest, and some have obvious ‘axes to grind’. An author’s own statements on this front cannot be **assumed** to be valid. Being an ‘outsider’ is obviously **not** an unadulterated advantage.

Another possible factor here involves Campbell’s own often dogmatic descriptions of his work, including his depiction of his book on the Loch Ness Monster as having a uniquely well-grounded status, the unmodified use of the ‘factive’ term *solved* in the title of his UFO book, and, in his ‘blurb’ for this present work, the bombastic-sounding claim that it ‘explains otherwise inexplicable accounts’. While intending academic critics of writers of this kind should probably ignore such usage and concentrate on the actual content, this

wording is of a kind which is not usual in academia and might make beginning or prospective scholarly readers or critics wonder if they are dealing with a genuinely scholarly treatment – and thus deter them.

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To be more specific: Campbell mostly argues closely for his conclusions regarding contentious points (for example as to what languages Jesus spoke), but sometimes one might consider that a conclusion or claim is overstated, inadequately argued or indeed rather speculative. Even where writers are themselves sufficiently well-informed to be confident about such matters, it is helpful to readers to be as restrained and as thorough in respect of the expression and justification of positions as the overall length of the work will permit.

In a broadly similar vein, Campbell refers to the NT text mainly by way of English translations and paraphrases, and in places refers to translations as sources or cites earlier scholars as referring to the Greek. Whatever his own proficiency in Greek, or in the Hebrew of the Old Testament (OT) (the source of the prophecies cited in the NT), this practice creates an issue in respect of his authority as a commentator, especially for readers who are themselves not versed in the languages. This is especially important at key points where the various Gospel narratives appear to contradict each other and even more important where well-known translations differ; such cases should be handled with authoritative reference to the original. More generally, it is (rightly) standard practice for works proclaiming novel theories to refer to the original (with translations in notes where a work is aimed partly at those who require

same). It would be of interest to see what specialist NT Greek scholars and OT Hebraicists might have to say about Campbell’s ideas.

Having said all this, Campbell’s book is certainly worthy of attention. As noted, much of his argumentation is close, with attention to detail. He cites many scholars and specific works, and he has researched the varied versions of Jesus’ life given in the orthodox Gospels and piecemeal in the rest of the NT (there are also various ‘apocryphal’ gospels, rendered ‘non-canonical’ as Christianity came to power in the Roman Empire after 300 CE). He also refers to various non-Christian accounts of the matter, which include the work of the important Jewish historian Josephus (whose account of Jesus is brief and textually contentious) and non-Jewish references (notably Roman). Campbell has also examined, in considerable detail, critical works by later scholars.

On the basis of all this diligent scholarship, Campbell has come to the view that Jesus has been misunderstood by Christians and that their Jesus-based religion is in fact irrelevant to modern life. Obviously serious atheists and indeed most skeptics would endorse this view in general terms. But there remains, of course, the question of how far Campbell’s **specific** case holds up.

The gist of Campbell’s exegesis of the Gospels is that Jesus **wanted** to be crucified and by his actions ensured that he would suffer this fate, because he regarded himself as the Jewish Messiah, the saviour (not only in a military sense) of the Jewish people who had suffered under foreign control, both in exile and in the ‘Holy Land’, for hundreds of years since the destruction of Solomon’s Temple in 6 BCE. The arrival of the Messiah was anticipated in Jesus’ time, and despite the undeniable role of this concept in Jewish thought the threat of its immediate (alleged) fulfilment was unpalatable to the Jewish establishment and to the occupying Roman authorities. Jesus was aware of his consequential likely fate (Campbell devotes space to the question of the roles in this outcome of Pontius Pilate as Roman governor on the one hand and

of the Jewish leadership on the other) and was unwilling to attempt to forestall it (which he perhaps might have achieved if he had abandoned his claims early enough), because he would then have **failed** to fulfil the relevant OT prophecies and the expectations of those who believed in them.

But Jesus wanted only to **seem** to die on the Cross and later to re-appear as the risen Messiah. He either genuinely expected that he would be resurrected, or else was complicit in a plot to survive his crucifixion and then to present himself as the risen Messiah. (Campbell discusses the vexed question of whether he was given a drug which caused him to appear to have died sooner than expected.) This plot failed; Jesus recovered sufficiently to manifest himself to his followers, who believed that he had indeed been resurrected, but was wounded beyond the possibility of prolonged survival and died shortly afterwards (probably in a private building). (Maybe Jesus himself realised, after reviving, that he had survived by natural rather than divine means and would not live much longer.)

The core of this analysis (as opposed to the question of the veracity or otherwise of beliefs in Jesus' actual resurrection) is not itself as strikingly different from the orthodox interpretations of the life of Jesus with which Campbell takes issue as one might expect from his 'blurb', preface etc. The most salient novel point is Campbell's interpretation of the 'multiple Messiah' doctrine as expressed in Jewish scriptures as involving specifically **two**, in principle distinct Messiahs, who might be seen as rivals and/ or as manifesting themselves at different times and/ or in different circumstances. According to Campbell, Jesus came to see himself as a **synthesis** of these two figures, thereby conferring especial Messianic significance upon himself (which was, of course, accepted by the new religion, Christianity), and as having been accidentally or

deliberately chosen for this role by the key supporting figure of John the Baptist (taken by some to be the very Messiah, which he himself reportedly denied).

Modern Christians and other non-Jewish interpreters of the texts might be forgiven for regarding this as a matter of specifically Jewish theology which does not bear heavily on the status of their own beliefs. However, the 'two-Messiah' interpretation, which was apparently espoused by the Pharisees, does locate the story of Jesus in a more specifically Jewish theological framework, in a way which Christians might find opposed to their own ecumenical ideas. And for many later thinkers of various kinds such questions, however important to Jesus himself, might appear of rather limited interest. Believing Jews who did/ do not accept Jesus (or any of the other 'false Messiahs' who appeared in the period in question or later) as the Messiah were/ are still awaiting the Messiah. These people might have varied opinions about the 'two-Messiahs' doctrine but such differences do not call their basic stance into question, and the figure of Jesus (regarded by such people as purely human) is not involved. 'Secular' Jews who have abandoned Jewish religious beliefs are Jews only in respect of ethnicity, and matters of Jewish doctrine are irrelevant to them. For believing Christians, Jesus **was** the Messiah (the Son of God, and for non-unitarians part of the Holy Trinity) and **was** resurrected; but if Campbell is right about the specifics this story is **much** less likely to be true than his own account (as indeed atheists will argue in any case.) Jesus was a mortal man on a misguided mission of a specifically Jewish nature, and his life is of no real significance to **any** of these groups of people. Specifically, Christianity, as a religion, should be abandoned.

Campbell discusses many other more specific topics and issues involved in the life of Jesus: the precise dates of

his birth and death (hardly of **doctrinal** significance to Christians but of great interest), the location of his birth, his place in the C1-CE Jewish politico-religious world (see below), his relationships (if any) with the Nazarene sect and the Essenes of Qumran, the chronology of the early development of Christianity, Jesus' self-referring use of the term 'Son of Man' (taken from the apocryphal *Book of Enoch*, which is of great interest by way of background to the thought of Jesus' day but is itself implicated in various controversies), the miracles which he reportedly performed, his theological philosophy as described in the Gospels, the shape of his trial before Pilate, etc., etc. In respect of Jesus' philosophical location within the Jewish world, Campbell argues (with the eschatologist Albert Schweitzer) that Jesus was essentially a Pharisee or pro-Pharisee (surprising as this might appear for many recent/current Christians) and rationalised Pharisee doctrine about the Messiah (although Campbell's discussion of this complex area in Chapter 3 strikes this reviewer as one of his weaker sections).

The book ends with two Appendices, one of them dealing with the 'search for Jesus' over the centuries and the other with Schweitzer's view of Jesus.

Campbell's book is dense with information and arguments, and those without either a commitment to Christianity or a focused rejection of the religion might find it too heavy-going for what it is worth to them personally. Specifically, Christian believers might not want to read it for fear of having their core ideas disturbed, or might read it in a spirit of determination to reject its main thesis. But anyone with any kind of scholarly interest in these events long ago which spawned what is still the world's most-followed religion should find it worth the effort – whether or not they end up by accepting Campbell's conclusions.