

# After Jesus Before Christianity Reading Guide

Christianity has endured for more than two millennia and is practiced by billions worldwide today in various forms and denominations. Yet that longevity has created difficulties for scholars tracing the religion's roots, distorting much of the historical investigation into the first two centuries of the Jesus movement. Most of what we have come to know through "religious education" about the first two centuries was created in the fourth, fifth and later medieval periods of re-writing history to fit into the narrative of the present day of the time.

Now as you read this book ask yourself what if Christianity died in the fourth or fifth centuries after it began based on what I know from reading this book? Why is that?

How would that change how historians see and understand its first two hundred years?

Why do you think as you read this book there were multiple Jesus movements, not a singular one, before the fourth century?

Can we explain why there was nothing called Christianity until the third century?

How do we go about understanding why there was much more flexibility and diversity within Jesus's movement before it became centralized in Rome, not only regarding the Bible and religious doctrine, but also understandings of gender, sexuality and morality?

Now as you begin the book keep in mind there are six major discoveries of the first two centuries CE and as such portray the six most significant happenings in the wide variety of *wisdom schools, Anointed communities, supper clubs, Jesus groups, and political movements* before Christianity came into existence and after Jesus was crucified:

- They resisted the Roman Empire;
- They practiced gender bending;
- They lived in chosen families;
- They claimed belonging to Israel;
- They had diverse organizational structures;
- They had persisting oral traditions.

As you read each section/chapter keep in mind these eight questions and see how the questions apply to the summary of sections provided after the eight questions

1. What is the main point in the section, chapters, or pages we are addressing in the readings? What in those sections struck you and why? What do you think is missing?
2. What new light do you find in what you have read? Is there a story there that you can relate to? An

experience? Etc.

3. In the readings, What do you find the author's experience(s)? Is that experience true to you?
4. What are the implications of the passages you have read for today? Implications for us and the world we live in today? Family? or Friends?
5. What problems do you have with the passages, text, experiences being expressed?
6. What is different about the experiences of the author(s) in the situation of time being discussed? How does that compare to our experiences today? Think historical, social, society, political, etc.
7. What is the difference the author(s) are making for us, and why is that difference?
8. Do we have a sense of consensus about the difference between what we have read for us in our lives moving forward?

Now look for ***The Violence of Rome, the Resistance, and Creativity of Communities*** as you read these chapters: 3 and 4 provide most of the material for this topic area, but some material comes from chapters 6, 17, and 18.

How Does Forming ***New Identities through Gender*** play out in the reading of the book? Look in Chapters 7 and 8 are at the heart of this topic and findings, but chapters 10, 11, 12, and chapter 18 also add to the complexity of new identities through gender. Why and what do you think is happening here? Why was Gender important? What did Gender Bending accomplish?

We all grew up for the most part believing that everyone in the first two centuries thought of themselves as Christians. Why is it that ***we find No Christians in the First Two Centuries***? What did this mean for their identity? What role did politics play in the identification? As you read look for the answers in this chapter: Chapter 2 is the primary concern of this question but almost every other chapter ends up helping get beyond the words “Christian” and “Christianity” into the wild and diverse experiences of the many different communities and movements. What does the difference in communities mean for identity?

The ***Centrality of Israel for the Jesus Movements*** of the First Two Centuries is really important for us to consider and why we see the central identity of the people of Israel for early Jesus movements. It shows how the practice and meaning of the people of Israel lay at the heart of the many different Anointed groups, Wisdom circles, and Christ communities rising from the Jesus movements. Think of

what life was like in the Mediterranean regions, what was Roman Rule like? Try to relate to this in our times, think of the United States under a foreign occupation. Soldiers and tanks on every corner of the streets, we can move around freely but we know what happens when we “get out of line”. Does this help us understand why maybe the people of the time took more of a “*spiritual pilgrimage*” with Jesus toward the people of Israel in the first two centuries. Chapter 9 guides this us through the depth of the meaning the people of Israel held for all these different groups and movements, but beyond chapter nine, the whole book shows how the people of Israel provide the major traditions and creativity for the first two hundred years of Jesus movements.

Now think about what we all take for granted the New Testament. Before the ***New Testament*** what was there? Chapter 19 leads the way from the myth of the Bibles back into portraits of lively communities and oral practice. Stating clearly that there was no such thing as a ***New Testament*** as we know it in the first two hundred years of Jesus movements, this chapter helps us reclaim the understanding of how these many groups were imbedded in oral culture. And keep in mind as you read it oral culture gets its own flavor in each culture that it is addressing. The key here in this chapter and even as you read the entire book is to focus on getting beyond the idea of books back then and back into oral culture is central when understanding the lives and the struggles of the peoples of early Jesus movements.

