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Contact Information:

Luke Painter

lukepainter@yahoo.com

www.paintermusic.com/lukepainter/findingtheroots

www.facebook.com/FindingTheRoots

Finding the Roots of Christianity
A Spiritual and Historical Journey

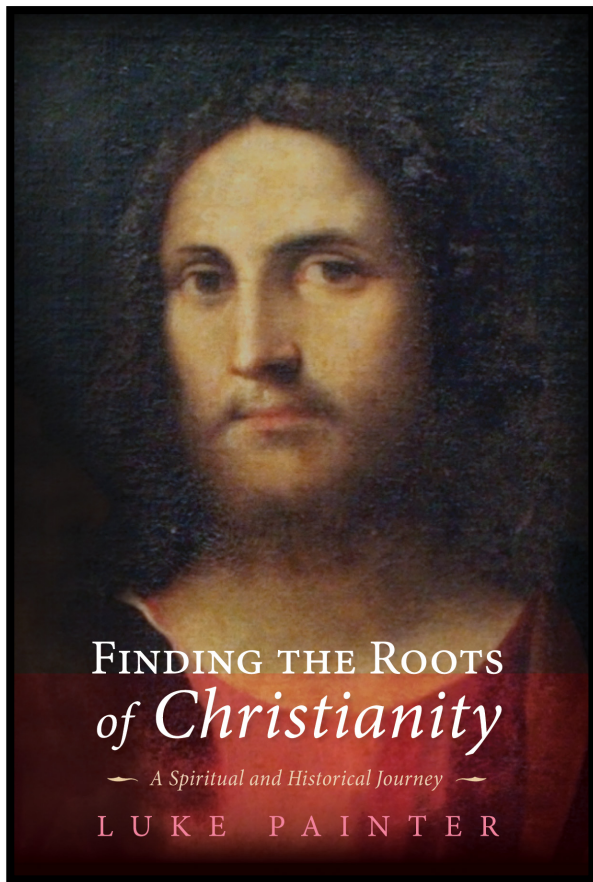
by Luke Painter

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New Title From Luke Painter
Finding the Roots of Christianity
A Spiritual and Historical Journey



Finding the Roots of Christianity is for people who are curious about the historical Jesus, his followers, and the movement they began. Who were they, and how was their message understood by those who heard them? Where did the New Testament of the Bible come from? In a personal, thoughtful style, Luke Painter brings into focus the life and times of the Jewish prophet Jesus of Nazareth, bridging the gap between personal study of the Bible and academic scholarship. Sources outside the Bible, including the ancient historian Josephus and recently discovered “lost scriptures,” reveal the diversity of early Christian beliefs. Roman religious beliefs influenced how the Christian message was understood during the transition from Jewish sect to the official religion of the Roman Empire. Clear and concise, and based on careful historical research, this book guides the reader through what is known about the earliest origins of Christianity as well as recent discoveries and debates. The author’s personal journey of faith and passionate interest in the people behind the New Testament enliven the facts of history, illuminating their meaning for their own time and today.

Luke Painter’s interest in religion began at an early age, as the son of church pastors. A scientist and musician, with degrees in religion, philosophy, and ecology, he teaches ecology and conservation at Oregon State University. The author of numerous scientific articles, *Finding the Roots of Christianity* is his first book on Christian origins, written for the general reader. He has an unusual ability to speak clearly and personally about this controversial and complex subject.

Praise for *Finding the Roots of Christianity*

“Luke Painter’s work is a fine service to thoughtful people. He writes with clarity and honesty on the basis of much careful research.”

—**Elaine H. Pagels, Professor of Religion, Princeton University**

“Luke Painter’s *Finding the Roots of Christianity: A Spiritual and Historical Journey* is a compelling exegesis on the origins of belief. His approach is sensitive to the diversity of interpretations that flow from the text of the Christian Bible. As a college professor who teaches about belief (religious and otherwise), I find his analysis eminently teachable and would be pleased to use it alongside the Old and New Testaments and other foundational texts in my school’s first-year student seminar.”

—**Richard L. Wallace, Professor, Ursinus College**



Interview with Luke Painter

Why would someone want to read your book, given that there are many other books about the historical Jesus and Christian origins?

I intended this book to be easy to read, but also scholarly, and that's the feedback I am getting from readers, regardless of their familiarity with the subject. It is concise but thorough, appropriate for those who are simply curious to know what history can tell us, and also for serious students, with references provided for further study. It is the kind of book I wish I had found when I was 19 years old and trying to understand these things.

Do you bring a unique perspective to the subject of Christian beginnings? How is this book different?

One thing that sets this book apart is the way I combined a historical study of Christian roots with my personal journey of faith. I did this to make the history relevant and alive. This is not entirely unique, but I found that most books about Christianity and the New Testament fell into one of three categories: academic and impersonal; pious and unquestioning; or sensationalistic and misleading. This left a hole to be filled, to relate history and belief through a clear assessment of the available evidence.

Did the process of analyzing what you believe, and why, lead you to reconsider or modify any of your beliefs or opinions?

When I first began this research as a teenager and college student, I found it very challenging to my Christian beliefs. Some of these beliefs held up under scrutiny, but others did not. At first I found this disorienting, but then liberating and illuminating, and that is something I wanted to share in this book.

Can you give an example of a belief that held up to examination?

There really was a Jewish prophet, healer, and teacher of righteousness named Jesus of Nazareth, crucified under Pontius Pilate near Jerusalem 2000 years ago! We have more information about him than for most people from ancient times, especially for a poor person. His earliest followers believed he rose from the dead, and proclaimed him to be "the Christ" or Messiah. This began the movement we call Christianity.

How about a belief that did not withstand scrutiny?

One doctrine that is clearly false is the notion that the Bible as a whole is the perfect, infallible, word of an omniscient God. This is an impossible standard, and most people don't expect any other book to be perfect, though it may be authoritative. Nevertheless, for most evangelical Christians, Biblical infallibility is a foundational doctrine that is rarely questioned openly, because to do so is to automatically expel yourself from this community. When I confronted this question as a teenager, my identity in this Christian community was very important to me, so it was traumatic to realize I could no longer be a part of it. One of the motivations for writing this book was to help others who are struggling with this question, and to show them they are not alone.

You have been studying this subject for many years, so why did you write this book now?

After researching and thinking about these things for most of my life, the time came when I felt I had something worth saying, and that might be helpful and interesting. I also wanted to organize and present the information I had found, for myself and anyone who might benefit. The resulting book has been fun to write, and the impetus for some great conversations about a subject that has fascinated me since I was a child.

An Excerpt from *Finding the Roots of Christianity*

Having discovered that John disagrees with the other Gospels about whether or not the Last Supper was the Passover, what does this mean? As with the other examples, it demonstrates that some of the details of the Gospel accounts are not entirely consistent. This makes sense if the Bible was written and compiled after a time of passing these stories around. Different accounts would come from different people, and they might not get all the facts straight. Also, some details may change as the story is retold over and over by different people. Looking deeper, a clue may be in John 1:29 where Jesus is described as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” Jesus was literally sacrificed as the Lamb of God at the same time the lambs were sacrificed for the Passover! The symbolism of Jesus as the sacrifice lamb emphasizes the message of the Gospel of John, but may have biased the way the story was told, changing the timing of events.

Alternatively, there are good reasons to think John’s timeline might be the correct one. For one thing, it seems very unlikely that the priests involved in the arrest and trial would have been willing to do these things on the high and holy Passover day. All such work was forbidden, especially for priests. It is easy to imagine early Jewish Christians combining the new memorial ritual about Jesus with the traditional Passover, and losing the detail that the Last Supper was actually the day before. Either way, by recognizing this inconsistency I am better able to understand what the scriptures literally say in their own words.

Even with these differences the basic message of the Gospels is much the same: Jesus is the Christ, the Jewish Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior who brings the Kingdom of Heaven. It is also clear that even knowing the facts of the Bible, I still do not have a clear view of Jesus. Some of the details in the Bible stories are contradictory and have been embellished through retelling, so it is difficult or impossible to tell what actually happened in detail. Therefore, the entire picture must remain a little fuzzy. If anyone doubts that the New Testament has internal contradictions, I suggest they read the four Gospel accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, and jot down a basic timeline of events for each—who went where and did what, and what they saw and heard. Then try to find a believable way to reconcile these details. When I first tried this exercise as a teenager, I fully expected everything to fit together like a puzzle, but found the pieces were not compatible. This made sense when I realized that the New Testament was written by people who, like me, were fallible, people who believed they had something important to communicate. Who were these people and what was their message?