

Language Bias in Early Christianity

by Sven Nilsen, 2023

In this essay I suggest that Early Christianity differs significantly in language bias from later developments and might be seen in historical context as part of a larger social movement operating continuously to improve living conditions among normal people under the Roman empire while shielding itself from persecution.

It is commonly known that certain parts of history tend to be excluded from the selective process that determines what to teach future generations about the past. Frequently, the historic records show wars and conflicts, changing national boundaries and legislative influence. The complexity of governments and bureaucracy are often emphasized, together with descriptions of large and beautiful buildings, complex systems in cities and trade between nations. However, given these large and complex social structures, could there be other social structures of similar size and complexity that have been suppressed and hidden by a selective process?

I believe that there is indirect evidence of this in the period of Early Christianity. First and foremost, I am interested in interpreting Early Christianity in the context of a larger social movement, spanning the Roman empire. This social movement aims at improving living conditions among normal people. The connection to Early Christianity is through aligned values, with something similar to “human rights” we have today, with clear political goals, but encoded as spiritual language to shield itself from legal persecution. This social movement did not likely originate with the teachings of Jesus, but was already in place as a large and complex social structure at his time, spanning multi-national boundaries. The spiritual development in this social movement was diverse, with the teachings of Jesus ending up as the dominating self-identity over time.

Jesus is often viewed as originating the human values of his teachings, as a messenger from God, despite that many things he taught were also shared among similar teachers scattered around the Mediterranean sea and influenced each other over remote distances. It is easy to identify oneself as a Christian today, without studying its origin and the complex history behind the development of Christianity. Thus, it might seem to many people as if Jesus teaches “in a vacuum”, an unprecedented event that simultaneously raises important social questions and give answers to them at the same time. This distorted view of history is due to a huge effort of later governments, largely consisting of men, ignoring the credit of multiple sources and influences across the boundaries of nations.

For example, when viewing apocalyptic preachers at Jesus’ time in the biased light of male dominance, it is very easy to conclude that these preachers believed the entire world was ending. However, when viewing their speech as coded language as part of a larger social movement, one can imagine that the apocalypse is a metaphor for political and religious reform. It is simplistic to assume that these people operated only in a individual and isolated social context, when every other aspect of their society was complex. The Roman empire extended its legislation over huge areas that to the normal person would feel like “basically the entire world”. A such inspiration for organizing social behaviour must not be ignored. It is unlikely that Christianity learned from scratch to operate in a such manner that it caught the attention of the authorities which led to persecution in the short time span described in the New Testament. On the other hand, the evidence points toward a continuous effort of governments to stamp out rebellious activity.

The over-simplified picture of Early Christianity, by some, is like assuming that people were barbaric and hedonistic in their lifestyle until they heard the “message”, upon they immediately saw

the light and completely changed their behaviour to the extent they could participate in a world-spanning complex social structure under the Christian doctrine. What a laughable idea! It is far more likely that such complex social structures already existed prior to the Christian doctrine spreading, fuelled by similar motivations and encouragement to promote human values.

To account for Early Christianity historically, a more likely hypothesis is to assume a background of evolving spiritual views, promoting similar human values, until the Christian doctrine manifested itself as the dominating self-identity. The rapid growth of the Christian beliefs indicates that the demographics of the existing social structure in place, prior to development, was similar to the demographics after these people received the doctrine. One can therefore use what is known about early Christian movements to infer what similarities these movements had with the shared social background. In particular, I wish to highlight the possibility that the shared social background was an active movement spanning the Roman empire, with a diverse set of identities, but united in the effort to promote human well being.

For example, the use of homes as basis for holding secret meetings and spreading the spiritual message, implies that women had an important role in the existing social structure prior to Christianity. Instead of thinking of homes used in a such way as a novel feature of Christianity, one might think of it as a longer tradition of rebellious activity with associated risk of persecution by authorities. With other words, instead of treating these people as ignorant and illiterate in history, I wish to view them in a different light: These people knew what they were doing.

It is also likely that this network of social activity knew how to communicate knowledge about how to form and organize larger social structures, e.g. by voting. How to code messages and distort texts in order to avoid persecution by authorities. How to use metaphors, stories and a rich shared language of ideas to rapidly make people in the in-group recognize a message.

With other words, Jesus teachings might have been drawn on a body of knowledge that was communicated across national boundaries. This explains how Jesus could have provided such interesting ideas about spirituality from a scientific point of view, without having physical divine insight. When comparing Jesus' ideas to other teachers at the time, they do have similarities. To view Jesus in isolation and separate from the historical background, would be extremely naive.

When considering the complexity of the Roman empire, it seems strange to treat everybody that are slightly outside the orbit of the armies and politicians as ignorant people unable to orchestrate complex social groups and desire to create sophisticated communication channels. Just take for example; how complex these systems are described in social studies of modern prisons with similar levels of illiteracy to historical levels of Early Christianity. The slaves of the Roman empire did not have any less sophisticated systems to spread news and knowledge. To deny this fact, would be simply to deprive slaves in history of their natural human behaviour and assign them as an artificial historical and social category as non-humans.

The spiritual language of Early Christianity can not have been developed as an isolated event associated with the spread of the Christian doctrine. There is simply not enough time to account for a such high level of social complexity. If there was no such spiritual language, then one would expect similar spreading pace to areas like the tribes which have no previous contact with civilization. One could argue that Greek culture helped the spread of Christianity through sharing similar ideas. However, I believe that there is a social structure needed in place, not just similar ideas. Also, there are numerous records of sophisticated techniques to distract and hide coded language, or activities, suspected by authorities, among slaves in other times and periods. This suggests that early Christians did not deliberately avoided hiding their activities from persecution. On the other hand, the rituals seems to enable spreading these beliefs in secrecy from the start.

A typical approach to the stories in the New Testament is that “those are some fascinating stories” and thus attributing them some special meaning based on the wide spread within a surrounding culture. This lazy attitude lacks the context of Early Christianity that, at any moment, one could risk a death penalty. In this stressing environment, it is not likely that people were superficial in their decision making about how to spread their beliefs and influence others with their ideas. There is no reason to believe that people in Early Christianity would have the same requirements as mainstream accepted religion. On the contrary, in times when Christians are persecuted, they find comfort in their faith. This indicates that the language used by Early Christianity is shaped by persecution. However, it would have been very strange if this language just coincidentally suited the situation from the start, as if it arrived finished for the task at hand. New religions are often correlated with political goals. Ignoring the possible political goals today does not mean that early Christians were that naive.

What is the social context of Early Christianity? This period is known as the start of the fall of the Roman empire. However, the Roman empire persisted in some form yet, for a long time to come. One could argue that it never fell completely, but transformed and survived in bits and pieces. When interpreting the historical context of this period, it is important to not just look at the destruction going on, but also on the persistence and ability to transform ideas in society from one form to another. The murder of Caesar, followed by the death of Cleopatra, might inspired the motivation to think of authorities in general as somewhat illegitimate. This explains why there was so much rebellious activity in Israel at Jesus’ time. However, this activity might not just focused on getting rid of Roman influence. A more pragmatic approach could be to aim for transforming and reforming the Roman influence into better living conditions for normal people. A large and complex social movement with a such political goal might be likely, considering that facing the army of the empire was often not an alternative.

If you are a Roman general with an army division, then one can seek power through cunning and strategy. However, if you are a slave or a peasant, then such long term plans are difficult to carry out without high stakes. This does not mean that slaves and peasants were socially inept or incapable of carrying out sophisticated reforms in both religious and political settings. To understand what this world was like, one must have in mind that there was no uniformly established information network. A false rumour, designed specifically to attack someone, could have the impact of a large army. This is why the governments at the time put large efforts into formal communication.

In order to make a slave rebellion successful, there is more required than just the desire to be free. An information network is required to both enable people to wait for certain signals or rumours and to coordinate their efforts. The authority was more than well equipped enough to beat down any single group who did not obey. Therefore, through these sophisticated information channels, people had to make themselves more vulnerable toward change of beliefs. This is required to reach the proper consensus needed, which costs individual consistency on the behalf of social adaptivity.

Now, one can understand why people were willing to change their spiritual beliefs so rapidly. In order to coordinate, they had to align their beliefs with others who might have a different culture or background. To know that one group had higher chance at being successful compared to another group, was significant for people in this social movement. Early Christianity evolved in this space of language dynamics, where belief systems were up for debate. A successful belief system in a such historical context required both the ability to hide coded messages, when desired, and to convincingly make people change their positions.

Just look at the historical records of all the effort required by the Roman empire to defeat rebellious groups in Israel at the time. There is no reason to believe that these people could provide a such resistance without already having a complex social movement to assist in their organization.

From a naive perspective of history, one might view these rebellions as individualistic and isolated events performed by strong tribal cultures. However, this is a biased interpretation, often viewed through a lens of history that has gone through a long process of censorship. These people have lived under Roman empire for centuries. Why should they not integrate higher social structures into their own culture? Could they do complex tasks such as paying taxes or take up loans, without also being able to empowering themselves through unofficial channels of communication?

Historical evidence through archeological findings implies that the cultural influence of symbols and rituals across nation borders were present. For example, female tombs in Jerusalem from Jesus' time used a shape, for head support, similar to the symbol used for the Egyptian goddess Hathor. In Israel, Hathor might have been associated with the goddess Asherah. Despite Asherah worship being forbidden by the power elite, there was at least such activities up to the second century before Jesus. In the period between, there could have been cults of mostly women that sought new ways to practice their spiritual traditions. This could also explain some of the esoteric practices in Christianity such as speaking in tongues or making prophecies.

Cleopatra's death happened closer in time to Jesus than the first kept writings of his teachings. What if: Cleopatra had influence on the motivation to reform society to create better living conditions for women in Israel? Could this explain why Jesus' teachings are such in favour of women, compared to laws at the time?

In any case, whether secret Asherah worship, or Cleopatra, or some other source of motivation was present, it is a good idea to view Jesus' teachings in a social and historical context, not just as a divine revelation from God. The teachings are so similar to other sources that it would be hard to not think of some influence between various views of spirituality. The idea that Jesus, as a man, invented all these ideas in isolation, surrounded by many potential groups of women organizing to improve their living conditions, is absurd. In the setting that these people have lived for a long time under the Roman empire, it is also likely they sought reform and taking cultural ownership in the present power structure. Women wanted more power, just like men.

It can be difficult to interpret history in a realistic way, when our beliefs are biased by centuries of intellectual and philosophical progression. The problem is not just gathering data about the past, but how to reconstruct and understand the minds that were living at the time. When there is a religious in-group who view their beliefs as the "correct answer", it is easy to be biased against people in the out-group. Therefore, when Christianity spread its doctrine, it might seem as if people became enlightened after conversion. However, there is no historical evidence that people suddenly become more moral or wise on average by changing their mythological beliefs. Obviously, there is a difference, when at times, hateful messages are spread which increases violence. Yet, when looking at history at large time scales, the changes in religious beliefs do not correlate a lot with violence. The wars and social abuse continued no matter how peace-encouraging the messages.

The reason people viewed Christianity in the Western world as historical revolutionary, is because it as a religion has a strong self-identity. Today we emphasize stuff like monotheism vs polytheism, precisely because these spiritual technicalities were differences between Christianity and other religions. One can imagine that, given another religion ended up as dominant, the differences between this particular dominant religion and others would be emphasized by historians.

I argue that it is not monotheism that is the most important characteristic of Early Christianity. Monotheism contributed to the spread of the Christian doctrine, by outcompeting polytheism. However, there are more general properties of a such self-identity. For example, when a religion becomes dominant, there is often higher social utility in converting to the dominant religion. Monotheism might as well make it easier for authorities to persecute polytheistic religions, which

were less united in their diversity. This is consistent with Christianity's strong self-identity. Once the authorities are pushing for monotheism, the utility of converting to polytheism goes down. However, it is not certain that monotheism was the most important characteristic property that initially enabled spreading the Christian doctrine. Again, I am suspicious, because this makes it look as if people were believing arbitrary things for no political or social reason.

The monotheistic property of Christianity should not be taken as an isolated property that enabled spread of the Christian doctrine. On the other hand, Jesus' teachings are mostly not focused on monotheism. I believe that the initial spread of the Christian doctrine, must be understood in a social context where a network of unofficial communication channels made people cooperate across national boundaries. This social structure was open for transforming into a stronger self-identity. The combination of monotheism with Jesus' teachings of human values that aligned with the social structure's political and social goals, were the initial cause of the spread of the Christian doctrine.

Try imagine a world where polytheism is the dominant cultural background, at which all political and social activities take place. To people in this world, the idea of monotheism might seem so stupid that they never entertained the idea, except as a concept of higher order spirituality. If we could talk to them directly, then I expect they would have many good arguments for why monotheism would not be successful. Part of the success of monotheism, is because the idea was so radical that it forced certain social changes. However, this change did not happen in isolation from the cultural background of the world. To understand the success of monotheism, one must also consider the political and social goals that were strongly desired at the time, to a such extent that people were willing to convert to monotheism in order to achieve their goals.

Conversion to monotheism in itself does not explain why people kept this belief in the face of persecution. Monotheism, being provocative for polytheists, was not just the only thing that attracted people to these beliefs and held them there for the rest of their life. Evidence points to all religions modifying their message to attract followers over time. If Jesus said something that would put off new followers, then it is more likely to have been forgotten. The things we read Jesus said today are most likely those things that helped spreading the Christian doctrine. Similarly, the people who lived during Early Christianity were no less naive about their religions. To treat this period as special event in history when people were naive and hundred percent honest about their own beliefs, without having political or social goals, is to me intellectual dishonesty. The human brain and human behaviour has not changed that much in the past.

The mechanism that explains the spread of the Christian doctrine during Early Christianity, is in my opinion a complex social property. I believe that there was already an existing social structure in place, but with a diverse set of self-identities. The Christian doctrine enabled this social structure to gain a strong self-identity over time. Therefore, Early Christianity should not be understood as a "magical" or an isolated special event that have exceptions from normal social behaviour. It is true that Christianity in many ways shaped the future of the Western civilization. However, the credit for this change did not happen as an isolated and unique property of the Christian doctrine. The gospels in the New Testament might very well reflect beliefs that aligned with the values of the existing social structure in which the Christian doctrine was spreading.

It would be incredible from a scientific viewpoint if Jesus' teachings by coincidence happened to align with the values reflected in an existing multi-national social structure, that was ready to receive the message from God. A much more likely explanation is that Jesus teachings happened in a historical context that was part of the existing social structure. There are many things about his teachings that point toward treating women as more equal to men, compared to the current laws. Several possible sources of motivation for this reform can be found. Thus, the Christian doctrine might have evolved from the beginning to more strongly reflect the values of the social structure.

Once the social structure evolved a successful and strong self-identity, this self-identity outcompeted the other set of self-identities over time. This process took place outside the influence sphere of the political and economical elite of the Roman empire. The reason this process happened partly in secrecy, might be that the social structure was continuously working toward improving living conditions of normal people. The idea that this process could have happened without any prior existing networks of communication, is historically implausible. This leads to the question of what kind of social structure this was, spanning national borders, continuously operating over a possibly long period of time.

A motivation for developing a such social structure could be that the dominating group of the power elite during this period was unstable. With continuous internal power struggles inside the Roman empire and several slave rebellions, people might find it difficult to trust authorities. Loyalty to one group might quickly end up at the wrong side of history. Also, with the public opinion of men as taking the primary role of authority, the suspicion automatically was directed toward the male gender. The natural mechanism in a such time is to form social structures through local authoritative women. This provided some social stability that kept normal people a little more protected against the continuous disasters produced by the empire.

Only 30 years before Jesus, Cleopatra ruled the Egyptian Ptolemeic dynasty. Given that Egypt had thousands of years long tradition of strong female participation in politics, economics and legislation, it would be very strange if nothing of this sort influenced Israel. Just because a woman at the top dies, does not imply that the overall social structure, that enabled a such level of power, vanished overnight. It could have been a strong motivation for authorities at the time to suspect all forms of female participation in the bid for power in the Roman empire. This motivation is due to the recent changes of the dominating group in the power elite. However, to say that previous groups of the power elite did not have any influence in the following years, would be a too simplistic and naive interpretation of historical events.

When a dominating group of the power elite is associated with religious beliefs, it is possible for the group to convert to another religion by need, to preserve some of their own political power over time. However, when a dominating group of the power elite is associated with gender, it is not possible for the group to convert to another gender! Yet, a previously such dominating group can not just vanish overnight. It would naturally find other ways to preserve some of its political power. This could be the reason that the social structure existed below the influence sphere of the power elite at the time of Jesus' teachings and in following years during which the Christian doctrine spread. It can also explain why the Roman empire so quickly decided to persecute Christians.

While a social structure spanning national borders could be rooted in previous periods of changing dominating groups of the power elite, it does not mean that the social structure itself had a single leader or a single council. On the contrary, being a possible source of rebellious activity, it was most likely denied, through force and persecution, a public self-identity in the form of a single leader or a single council. This meant that the social structure was open for changing its self-identity. At the time of Jesus' teachings, the self-identity of the social structure was not established uniformly. When the Christian doctrine started to spread, the social structure might have continuously operated for many years, but under a diverse set of self-identities to shield itself from persecution. People living with these traditions were changing within the historical context of their lives. Old people died and new people was born into the same traditions, or converted from the outside. This is a different way of viewing Early Christianity, as a functioning society and not just a group of outsiders that were naive and ignorant about their time and place in history. Every other aspect of these people's lives were complex, so why not attribute this process some amount of complexity?

The acceptance of Christianity under the rule of Constantine, is often interpreted by people through the lens of a new religion gaining grounds. However, one should not underestimate the influence of Helen, Constantine's mother. When we see gender playing a role in politics, we should think of possible influences over longer periods of time, such as, Helen possibly be inspired by Cleopatra or other strong female role models. The reason is that, like today, people living during this period were information-hungry. In all likelihood, they drew inspiration from their own view of history (not ours). This history was long and complex and offered plenty of motivation to attempt improving living conditions when one gender oppressed the other. This is something historians should do and not fall into the trap of viewing political changes as isolated religious motivations. Any successful religion happened in history in a complex interactive process with social needs and ideas.

When there is a single ruler over a nation or empire, history tends to view what happens through a personal narrative. However, these rulers could not process all the causal information that took place at the time. Their worlds were too complex to be narrated by a personal perspective. What most of history is lacking, is commentary on what kind of social movements existed outside a single coherent personal narrative. In our modern world, we can find many examples of such social movements. Every time we take a closer look at the evidence, we find that the personal narrative of rulers often corrupts or excludes perspectives of historical periods from larger and more diverse social perspectives. As long we have written records back in time of such studies, there was a very vibrant and influential activity by such social movements. Since the human brain has not changed a lot over the past thousand years, it is expected that similar social movements existed but was forgotten. The thumb rule is that such social structures existed in one way or another. The problem is to find out in what particular form, what influence it had and how wide spread it was.

When it comes to Early Christianity, one should not treat it as an exceptional period in history. The tendency to take Jesus as a very influential and important figure, can undermine or overlook the context of his teachings. Jesus was not the only influential figure at the time and the human values communicated in his message must be understood also from a perspective where people are already open to such beliefs. It is easy to interpret the New Testament, which did not exist in that form, through the lens of a battle between different religions, when religions in a historical context were used by people to provide stability for communities, to gain political power and to achieve goals through social reforms. In other words, people tend to forget that religion and politics mixed and was sometimes a question of life and death.

I also want to go even further and suggest that most of what Jesus taught to other people, were things that existed already as teachings in some form or another at that time. It was common for people to believe that a human being could be granted divinity and immortality by glory. Over time, when people committed to the Christian doctrine, they made Jesus gradually into Son of God. However, this development should not just be reversed for historical accuracy. The most valuable ideas we can take from history is not only about discovering lies, but also discovering truths. The truth of the context in which Jesus taught other people, might be that there was wide spread activity, supported by women, that had clear goals for both political and religious reforms, consistent with previous periods when women had a stronger public role in society. The goals might have varied from place to place, but they could have aligned very well overall with the human values reflected in Jesus' teachings. In that sense, when people converted to Christianity initially, they might have thought of this as a change of beliefs to conform with people around them that had similar goals but who differed slightly by self-identities. By uniting the different self-identities under one strong self-identity, there was a deliberate fight to gain more power and autonomy. This fight, or struggle, could have started many years earlier than the birth of Jesus.

This brings me to the point of arguing in favour of a particular development that might have contributed to the social structure. In ancient Greek and later Roman culture, women were in charge

of households and also masters of slaves. Even though men might own slaves on paper, the slaves were more frequently communicating with women than with men. Combined with the Jewish synagogues which treated people's illnesses, the slaves could look to Jewish people as examples of success. Remember that Jews saw themselves historically as coming from slaves of Egypt. If there was anything the Roman empire was afraid of, then it was organized slavery rebellion. As the communities surrounding the synagogues developed, women might admire the charity of the Jewish people. Since they commanded slaves, the surplus time and ability to perform work could be oriented toward charity. Specially, in times when the government failed at its duties. Therefore, over time when the Roman empire went through unstable periods, the communities led by women grew stronger and more resourceful.

Now, the terrified Roman empire started to see women as potential agents of chaos. They started vilification of female goddesses in paganistic religions to increase suspicion toward women, leading to women being, metaphorically speaking, pressed back in a corner. As the social pressure increased, they started to look for alternative beliefs. It might have been the intention of the authorities to make women surrender, but as in most of history, people are more resourceful than you would think at first sight. In Israel, the vilification of female goddesses started earlier, and for other reasons (Babylonian captivity) than in the rest of the empire. This explains why the first ideas of how to break through the censorship happened in Israel. It was a Jewish teacher, named Jesus, who had close communications with women and understood their social problems.

In just 10 years after the death of Jesus, the Christian doctrine had spread to multiple cities. From Jerusalem to Antioch, Edessa, Ephesus, Corinth, Thessalonica, Cyprus, Crete, Alexandria and Rome. Even by today's standards of excellent communication channels and information networks, a such development would be astonishing. However, it was not God's mysterious work that caused this by performing miracles. It was a combination of an eager apostle, Paul, and the receptive audience of women who felt oppression. The Christian doctrine was already designed for these groups and quickly changed to adapt to the needs. Another source of inspiration was Mythraism, a religion popular among Roman soldiers. This both provided community relation to Jewish synagogues and some protection against violent oppression.

The Roman empire intensified persecution of these communities. However, it was too late. The Christian doctrine had spread too quickly for the Roman army to engage. An army who could defeat any opposing enemies through violence, except an army of women in charge of systematic charity. Christianity grew in followers, despite the threats of death penalty. It was easy for people to pick sides due to lack of moral high ground of authorities, as the empire already tried to discriminate women through lowering their personal deities from divinity. It did not matter how powerful the authority seemed, when it could not treat people with respect and dignity. People envisioned a reformed empire, exercising soft power, united behind the new Christian doctrine, that provided a strong self-identity. The monotheistic property of the doctrine served as a making any criticism of the new religion a double-edged sword: If you complained about worshipping only one god, then why discredit goddesses? The critique against monotheism also reflected back, like holding up a mirror of the self-image that one hates. The empire exploded in aggression against Christianity.

Persecution of Christians destroyed the Roman empire. It was realized by many that the authority essentially attacked its own citizens, killing people who were role models of good deeds. In doing so, the Roman empire alienated itself. The turning point came when Constantine used Christianity to win a battle by shocking the enemy (who were also Romans), using symbols on their shields. The enemy collapsed, lacking the morals to fight. The way was now paved for mainstream Christianity. As the mainstream adopted the Christian doctrine, its interpretation changed gradually and the past was buried by a male dominant power elite. Jesus turned in people's mind from a teacher to a Son of God, which spread his message as if it came into the world as an isolated event, by a miracle.