
“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de
Jesu”: Martin Seidel’s *Origo et fundamenta
religionis christianae*, an Overlooked
Milestone in the Critical Study of
Western Religion*

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BEFORE REIMARUS

For a long time, the idea that a naturalistic, critical, and historical approach to Christian origins did not take place before the Enlightenment has prevailed within the scholarly realm. Albert Schweitzer’s now-classic monograph on Jesus research cast a long shadow on the historiographical field, insofar as the much-respected Alsatian polymath and Nobel Prize winner deemed Hermann Samuel Reimarus a thunderbolt out of the blue, writing that “no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus” before him.¹ This idea got much traction among scholars and has been repeated time and again, to the extent that it has become established truth.² Moreover,

* For Arantxa Fuentes Ríos, a most gentle and beloved friend.

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¹ “Vor Reimarus hatte niemand das Leben Jesu historisch zu erfassen versucht.” Albert Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, 9th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1984), 57. Note that all translations within this article are my own.

² Hundreds of works could be cited to support the contention that Schweitzer’s decision to begin the Quest with Reimarus proved massively influential. Of course, there were some dissenting voices; see, e.g., August C. Lundsteen, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus und die Anfänge der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Copenhagen: Olsen, 1939); Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought (1778–1860)* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985); for an overview, see James Carleton Paget, “Quests of

The Journal of Religion

it is a widespread view in the scholarly realm that the circumstances apt to bring about an approach to the sacred Scriptures free from traditional constraints took place for the first time only in the seventeenth century;³ the names of philosophers and skilled authors like Spinoza, Jean Le Clerc, Richard Simon, or Hugo Grotius are brought up as the subversive spirits before whom any critical outlook of the Bible would have been virtually inexistent.

The aforementioned views, although supported by an impressive consensus of historians and exegetes, face several serious problems. To start with, they are, in several respects, deeply counterintuitive. The requisite to call into question the reliability of the sources, particularly the canonical Gospels, is dissatisfaction toward the main story embedded in them. That skepticism comes through the realization of the many contradictions, implausible elements, and flaws they contain. This demands, in turn, the presence of a certain cultural “otherness,” an objectivity or dispassion that allows the observer to espouse an alternative perspective to the prevailing one. But in the Western world, before the Enlightenment, there were several realms where such espousal was possible and was indeed made. I refer, at the very least, to Greco-Roman philosophy, Jewish thought, Deism, and French libertine free thinking. In different ways, all these domains were a favorable environment within which distrust toward the conventional wisdom about Jesus of Nazareth and Christian origins could arise and flourish.

Moreover, when one takes the trouble to read not only the “Anonymous Fragments” published by the German writer, literary critic, and dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, then chief librarian of the ducal library in Wolfenbüttel, in the series *Zur Geschichte und Litteratur: Aus den Schätzen der Herzoglichen Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel*, but also Reimarus’s complete clandestine manuscript, the *Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*,⁴ one notices the Hamburg savant’s reliance on former authors, all of them coming from very different ideological backgrounds. In the main body and the footnotes of this lengthy text, Reimarus refers to scholars who had a bearing on his work and provided forward impulses to the historical study of Jesus and of primitive Christianity.

the Historical Jesus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus*, ed. Markus Bockmuehl (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 138–55, esp. 139. But only recently criticisms of the inherited notion are increasingly heard in the field; for several references, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, “Theses on the Nature of the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung*: A Proposal for a Paradigm Shift in Understanding the Quest,” *Journal for the Study of the Historical Jesus* 17 (2019): 1–34, esp. 12 n. 40.

³ “The seventeenth-century challenges to faith were those that made possible the historical criticism of the Bible.” Gregory W. Dawes, *The Historical Jesus Question: The Challenge of History to Religious Authority* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 33. “The historical investigation of the origins of Christianity began with the English deists.” Luigi Salvatorelli, “From Locke to Reitzenstein: The Historical Investigation of the Origins of Christianity,” *Harvard Theological Review* 22 (1929): 263–369, at 263. Examples could be easily multiplied.

⁴ See Gerhard Alexander, ed., *Hermann Samuel Reimarus: Apologie oder Schutzschrift für die vernünftigen Verehrer Gottes*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Insel, 1972), hereafter cited as *Apologie*.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

The aim of this article is to add an exceedingly important but widely unknown chapter to the story of critical thought by surveying a so far virtually overlooked Latin source, *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae*, a work written by Martin Seidel at the end of the sixteenth century,⁵ an author whose stance has been called “proto-Deist.”⁶ What we know about Seidel’s life is very little and easy to summarize. He was born in the city of Olawa (German Ohlau), in Silesia, at some point in the mid-1540s, an inference drawn from the fact that he registered at the University of Heidelberg in 1564. Two years later, he was appointed Latin teacher at the city’s *paedagogium* or preparatory school. There, he was accused of being “infected with Arianism” and of putting into question the New Testament’s authority. After leaving the city in the spring of 1573, the next and last thing we know about him is his rapprochement efforts with the Unitarian community in Kraków and his epistolary exchange with Faustus Socinus. The date of his death is unknown.

By acknowledging the publication of several fine articles concerning Seidel’s work by German and Spanish scholars, and of a very recent edition of the text,⁷ I do not need to dwell on such matters as the story of the manuscripts or the composition date.⁸ These pieces of scholarship are extremely

⁵ Although the available manuscripts come from the eighteenth century, there are enough traces attributing the text to Martin Seidel and allowing us to date the original work to the end of the sixteenth century.

⁶ Seidel would have been “the earliest deist case.” Martin Mulsow and Richard H. Popkin, “Introduction,” in *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Martin Mulsow and Richard H. Popkin (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 15. See also Winfried Schröder, ed., *Gestalten des Deismus in Europa* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 18–19. One could admittedly put into question this classification of the Silesian author, because of the importance he ascribes to the Hebrew Bible as a kind of divine revelation; nevertheless, according to Seidel such revelation is somehow superfluous, as the Decalogue would be already inscribed within the heart of human beings. In fact, Samuel Clarke defined Deism in the following way: “Deists contend that there was no Want, no Need of a Revelation; that Philosophy and Right Reason was of itself sufficiently able, to instruct and preserve Man in the Practice of their Duty.” Clarke, *A Discourse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God and the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Revelation*, 8th ed. (1705/6; repr., London: W. Botham, 1732), 312.

⁷ Until recently, the sole modern edition was August Gfrörer, “Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae: Eine bisher noch unbekannte deistische, antichristliche Schrift aus dem sechzehnten Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie* 6 (1836): 180–259. This publication has been superseded by Francisco Socas and Pablo Toribio, eds., *Martin Seidel: Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae* (Madrid: CSIC, 2017), which is cited throughout this article as *Origo*.

⁸ Winfried Schröder, “Religionsgeschichte im 16. Jahrhundert? Martin Seidel und seine Schrift ‘Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae,’” in *Spätrenaissance-Philosophie in Deutschland, 1570–1650*, ed. Martin Mulsow (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2009), 161–72; Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus: Untersuchungen zur Metaphysik- und Religionskritik des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts*, 2nd ed. (Stuttgart: Frommann-holzboog Verlag, 2012), 397–403; Schröder, “Proto-illumino dalle fonti dell’ebraismo: L’*Origo et fundamenta religionis Christianae* di Martin Seidel e i ‘Semi-judaizantes’ del tardo Cinquecento,” in *Tradizione e illuminismo in Uriel da Costa: Fonti, temi, questioni dell’ “Exame das tradiçõs phariseas.” Atti del Convegno internazionale, Macerata 29–30 settembre 2015*, ed. Omero Proietti and Giovanni Licata (Macerata: EUM, 2016), 181–99; Francisco Socas, “L’*Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae*: L’auteur, le texte et les thèmes,” in *La philosophie clandestine à l’âge classique*, ed. Antony McKenna and Alain Mothu (Paris: Universitas, 1997),

The Journal of Religion

valuable and informative regarding biographical and other issues, but, excepting a few brief remarks, they fail to highlight Seidel's observations on Jesus and the emergence of Christianity. After presenting a section in which I try to shed some light on Seidel's intellectual context, I will specifically focus on his treatment of the Gospels, Jesus, and Christian origins. A final section will be devoted to the possible relationship between Seidel's and Reimarus's works.

MARTIN SEIDEL'S INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

Evidence suggests that the factors that are usually adduced to explain the emergence of a new approach in the Enlightenment were already at work no later than the sixteenth century (i.e., since the birth of the modern era). Renaissance humanism emphasized the necessity of reading texts in the original languages, thereby creating a new philological sensitivity. This was independent of theological assumption and directed at the problems and nuances of sources long regarded as sacrosanct. Any text, however venerable, could reveal fatal flaws when subjected to the right sort of scrutiny. The Protestant Reformation—which set forth the notion of a “fall” somewhere in the early church—emphasized the discontinuity between medieval theology and Christian origins and implied awareness that the church had changed over time and lost its pristine nature, thus declining into “early Catholicism.” The birth of modern science provided new knowledge that shattered the traditional worldview: long before Kepler and Galileo, the heliocentric cosmology set forth by Copernicus called into question the biblical picture, thereby contributing to the undermining of scriptural authority. The voyages of discovery, which opened up the Americas and the lands of the Pacific to European knowledge, were followed by the increasing awareness of the existence of new religions and a certain detachment toward the inherited view of the main Western beliefs. The wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants, which pervaded and devastated Europe from the early sixteenth century onward, showed in an extremely painful and poignant way that appeals to religious authority were contradictory, insofar as each side claimed divine guidance. These conditions are relevant for our topic, insofar as they all created an atmosphere that, on the one hand, fostered distrust toward the sources, and, on the other, made a new historical reconstruction of Jesus and Christian origins imperative.⁹

213–22; Socas, “En route vers Spinoza: Le *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae* de Martin Seidel,” *La Lettre clandestine* 26 (2018): 99–117; Pablo Toribio, “Los primeros testimonios sobre Martin Seidel, autor de *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae*,” *Anales del Seminario de Historia de la Filosofía* 33 (2016): 59–80.

⁹ “Reimarus was part of a much longer tradition that went back to the humanists and reformers.” Ulrich Groetsch, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus: Classicist, Hebraist, Enlightenment Radical in Disguise* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 19.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

All this meant that the authority of the Bible was increasingly eroded in the conscience of the most perceptive thinkers. For centuries, the Scriptures had been traditionally regarded as a metanarrative embracing—from Genesis to Revelation—the whole of nature and human history, so that any extrabiblical experience or reality had to be incorporated into the one real world made accessible by the biblical story.¹⁰ Now, better knowledge on several levels—of the universe, of human history, and of the texts themselves—did not fit within the biblical framework.¹¹ If the new knowledge of the world could not be incorporated into the biblical story, the latter could no longer provide the wider context of meaning. And this meant, in turn, that the truth of the Scriptures could no longer be taken for granted. In fact, there were good reasons to seriously doubt their authority and legitimacy as divinely inspired documents.

These initial remarks are still kept on a very general level but help explain the rise of a new historical conscience, along with a detached regard toward the inherited wisdom. Exposure of certain documents as forgeries, and of certain deep-rooted beliefs as myths, fostered an *avant la lettre* hermeneutics of suspicion that did not fail to have as its target the sacrosanct Gospel accounts, so that their contents no longer commanded unquestioning belief. A sharp realization of the divergences within Christianity, and awareness that the church had changed over time, led some scholars to glimpse the existence of a wide chasm between the historical Jesus’s preaching and that of his followers. In this way, the very heart of the Christian confession was to be shattered.

More specifically, sixteenth-century Europe knew several ways in which the orthodox framework of the central Christian myth was—however timidly—called into question. Despite the obviously central place that the figure of Jesus plays in Christian communities, his status was for centuries a real battleground. While the most successful interpretations ascribed to him a divine nature, others staunchly resisted such attribution. The bold assertion that made a Galilean preacher a god could not be endorsed by many, for whom Jesus was a simple man,¹² and who could have recourse to those passages of

¹⁰ As it has been suggested, in a sharp contrast of Homer’s *Odyssey* and the Bible narrative: “Er [scil. der biblische Erzählungstext] will uns ja nicht nur für einige Stunden unsere eigene Wirklichkeit vergessen lassen wie Homer, sondern er will sie sich unterwerfen; wir sollen unser eigenes Leben in seine Welt einfügen, uns als Glieder seines weltgeschichtlichen Aufbaus fühlen . . . Alles andere, was noch in der Welt geschieht, kann nur vorgestellt werden als Glied dieses Zusammenhangs.” Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur* (1946; repr., Bern: Francke, 1982), 18.

¹¹ “Rather than beginning with the Bible and fitting everything else into its picture of the world, an increasing number of scholars were beginning with the data of the natural sciences and of history. They were starting to understand the Bible within the framework provided by these secular disciplines.” Dawes, *Historical Jesus Question*, 34.

¹² According to the Ebionites, Jesus was a *nudus homo* (Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 14); “γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸν ὁμοίως ἄνθρωπον εἶναι κοινὸν πάνσι λέγουσιν” (Hippolytus, *Refutatio omnium haeresium* 7.34; Since he also was, they say, a human being like the others).

The Journal of Religion

the Scriptures that describe Jesus as a human being. But, just as in the early Christian era of antiquity when those who had sustained such modest views were rapidly turned into heretics, the same happened in the modern era. After a long period in which the most exalted ideas of Jesus had become solidly established, those challenging such ideas could not fail to appear as terribly unsettling and blasphemous. Admittedly, there are a hundred shades of gray, and alternative standpoints ranged from those granting Jesus a kind of subordinate divinity, on the basis of the authority given to him by God the Father, to those refusing to see him as a divine redeemer figure and arguing that they could not find any scriptural justification for the Trinity. In attacking the central principle of orthodox Christianity, anti-Trinitarians developed some aspects pointing in the direction of the Enlightenment. The traditional theological building had begun to crack, and that had practical consequences: *nonadorantism*, for instance, amounted to the rejection of the veneration and invocation of Jesus.¹³ For all their differences, they all questioned and relativized the traditional creedal formulations and the relationship of the human to the divine in Jesus as described in the orthodox, Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

It does not seem to be irrelevant that virtually all available biographical traces concerning Martin Seidel associate him with heterodox Christian trends, and particularly with those that called Jesus's status into question.¹⁴ His name arises first linked to Heidelberg University in a context of German anti-Trinitarianism, later on in an epistolary exchange with the religious Unitarian leader Faustus Socinus himself, and finally he is cited by Polish Unitarians (the so-called Altdorf crypto-Socinians). This, in turn, connects Seidel with the world of Judaism, whose main scholars since the Middle Ages had adopted a very critical stance toward the prevailing Christian views of Jesus.¹⁵

Despite what has been repeated by several scholars, the rector (the Swiss physician and controversialist Thomas Erastus) did not expel Seidel from Heidelberg's Paedagogium—where he was a Latin teacher—in 1568 but only requested an inquiry about him, which does not seem to have had unfavorable consequences, since Seidel was still there some years after the episode.

¹³ On nonadorantism, see George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation*, 3rd ed. (Kirkville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1992), 1119–33.

¹⁴ "Il a baigné dans un milieu imprégné d'unitarisme et très influencé par les communautés juives." Socas, "L'Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae," 214.

¹⁵ "Already the earliest deist case shows a connection with Judaism. Martin Seidel, in his work 'Origo et fundamenta religionis Christianae,' which . . . circulated among the above-mentioned Judaizing anti-Trinitarians and Sabbatarians, developed his Natural Theology without recourse to any revelation, in the wider context of the discussions of the Heidelberg anti-Trinitarianism." Mulsow and Popkin, "Introduction," 15. On this aspect, see the reflections about Jacob ben Reuben and Profiat Duran in David Berger, "On the Uses of History in Medieval Jewish Polemic against Christianity: The Quest for the Historical Jesus," in *Persecution, Polemic, and Dialogue: Essays in Jewish-Christian Relations* (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2010), 139–57.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

This means that he was in Heidelberg when the fateful anti-Trinitarian episode took place. I refer to the discovery, during the summer of 1570, of several churchmen (i.e., Johann Sylvan, Adam Neuser, and Matthias Vehe-Glirius) within the Palatine Church who denied the divinity of Jesus, their arrest, prosecution, and torture, and the beheading of Sylvan in 1572 as an Arian in the Heidelberg marketplace.¹⁶ It was only in April 1573 that Seidel asked the rector permission to travel to Strasbourg.¹⁷

The next biographical information that can be traced about Seidel is the epistolary exchange he had with Faustus Socinus (1539–1604), his rough contemporary and a tough defender of anti-Trinitarian “orthodoxy.” The Italian religious thinker had traveled from Basel to Transylvania to solve the nonadorantist stance of Ferenc Dávid, who counted on the collaboration of Matthias Vehe-Glirius, one of the Heidelberg anti-Trinitarians. After his failure (and Dávid’s death in prison in 1579), Socinus went to Poland—in the second half of the sixteenth century, a haven of refuge for all who were subjected to religious persecution—where he exerted a growing influence on Kraków’s anti-Trinitarian community, the *ecclesia reformata minor*. At an uncertain date in the last quarter of the sixteenth century,¹⁸ Seidel and Socinus exchanged several letters on the messianic interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

In the first decades of the seventeenth century, Seidel is mentioned by several members (i.e., Johann Vogel, Martin Ruar, and Joachim Peuschel) of the Polish crypto-Socinian circle in Altdorf. Although they disagree with him and occasionally criticize him, at the same time they do not fail to express their admiration for his exegetical skills and insight. For instance, Martin Ruar describes Seidel, referring to his interpretation of Psalm 110, as “a man who is indeed an obvious enemy of our king, and detestable for that reason, but who often not quite wrongly elucidates what is called the literal sense of the Old Testament.”¹⁹ This means that not only did they

¹⁶ On the protagonists of this episode, see Christopher J. Burchill, *The Heidelberg Antitrinitarians: Johann Sylvan, Adam Neuser, Matthias Vehe, Jacob Suter, Johann Hasler* (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1989); Williams, *Radical Reformation*, 1229–36. No source has been identified documenting contacts between Seidel and the Heidelberg anti-Trinitarians, so the possibility that they knew each other and were members of an intellectual network, although highly likely, remains a hypothesis.

¹⁷ Toribio, “Los primeros testimonios sobre Martin Seidel,” 63–64. “El radicalismo crítico de Seidel es, por tanto, estrictamente paralelo en el tiempo y en el espacio al antitrinitarismo clandestino de los ministros Sylvan, Neuser y Vehe” (79).

¹⁸ The *terminus post quem* is 1579, the date when Socinus went to Poland. It has been suggested that the contact took place between 1587 and 1598; see Urban Heberle, “Ueber den Verfasser der antichristlichen Schrift Origo et fundamenta religionis Christianae,” *Zeitschrift für die historische Theologie* 13 (1843): 175–93, esp. 189.

¹⁹ “Homo quidem hostis regis nostri manifestus et ob id detestabilis, sed qui tamen in literali, quem vocant, antiqui foederis sensu enodando non infoeliciter saepe versatus est.” See Gustav G. Zeltner, *Historia crypto-socinismi Altorfinae Quondam Academiae infesti Arcana ex documentis maximam partem Mssis ita adornata* (Lipsiae: J. F. Gleditsch, 1729), 2:464–65. For several examples of aspects in which Ruar shows his agreement with Seidel’s exegesis of some biblical passages, see Heberle, “Ueber den Verfasser der antichristlichen Schrift,” 187.

The Journal of Religion

know about his letter exchange with Socinus, they also probably had read Seidel's work.

Admittedly, despite some convergent points with radical Christian trends, one should not overlook that Seidel's stance is by far more radical than any other found in his contemporary environment. The Silesian writer can by no means be described as a "Polish Socinian."²⁰ He was indeed fully aware of the differences that mediated even between him and the Unitarians, those considered by him as the most advanced among the Christian believers of his age.²¹ In fact, in the first letter to Socinus—and similarly as the title of his work reveals—he describes his task as a "disputare de fundamentis Christianae religionis" ("discussion about the fundamentals of the Christian religion"). He also asserts not having met anyone sharing his views,²² and adds that he knows that his exposition would disturb the Unitarian community. In fact, Seidel blatantly refuses to grant Jesus any special status and treats him as any other historical figure.²³ It is such a radical and disruptive position—which unmistakably put Seidel outside the Christian world—that prevented Socinus from admitting him into his community.²⁴ After all, Seidel's thinking seems to have no particular edifying effect whatsoever. In an eloquent way, the German polymath Gustav Georg Zeltner labeled him "portentosae opinionis homo, et plus quam haereticus" (a man with portentous ideas, and more than heretical).²⁵

There is accordingly an unbridgeable divide between Seidel and the Unitarians regarding key principles of Christianity and the reliability of the New

²⁰ See Wayne Hudson, *The English Deists: Studies in Early Enlightenment* (Oxford: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), 38, who refers to him in these terms.

²¹ He asserts that the Unitarians are "the sect nearer to the truth": "recte ad vos profectus sum, utpote ad eos, qui propius quam aliae sectae ad veritatem accesserunt." *Origo*, 159. Toribio has pointed out the striking coincidences of Seidel's views with the "pagan-Jewish" ideas of the group spearheaded by Daniel Bieliński, whose members denied the messianic character of Jesus and the authority of the New Testament and only accepted the Decalogue as a principle guide (Toribio, "Los primeros testimonios sobre Martin Seidel," 68). At the same time, however, he suggests that the inclusion of Seidel within a group of "semijudaizantes" might entail a polemical construction by Socinus.

²² "Cum neminem sciam meae sententiae, neque quisquam hanc sententiam suscipere velit." *Origo*, 159. Heberle refers to this opinion to argue that there must not have existed immediate followers of Seidel's ideas: "Nirgends finden wir eine zuverlässige Spur, dass er Mitglied oder Stifter einer in sich abgeschlossenen Secte antichristlich-deistischen Characters gewesen sey, sondern wie er unabhängig seine eigenthümlichen Ansichten gewann und ausbildete, so scheint er auch Niemanden gefunden zu haben, der dieselben nach ihrer ganzen Ausdehnung zu den seinigen gemacht hätte." Heberle, "Ueber den Verfasser der antichristlichen Schrift," 193.

²³ Johannes Vogel summarized Seidel's position in this way: "Was wir von dem Jesu von Nazareth sagten oder glaubten (Gott verzeihe es mir, dass ich es erzehle), wäre alles nichtig." In Heberle, "Ueber den Verfasser der antichristlichen Schrift," 181.

²⁴ "Des Buchs Autor ist gewesen Martinus Seidelius, ein Schlesier, welcher weder ein Christ, noch Jud, noch Türck seyn wollen, sondern bloß Theologiam naturalem gehabt." Johannes Vogel, at Gundling; cited by Heberle, "Ueber den Verfasser der antichristlichen Schrift," 181.

²⁵ See Gustav G. Zeltner, *Historia crypto-socinismi*, 1:268.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

Testament. Even the religious extremism of nonadorantism fell short of the Silesian thinker's ideas, since adherents of that trend did not deny that Jesus was the Messiah but only that he should not be worshipped before his second coming. In this sense, Seidel is—as far as we know—a rarity in his world. This fact contributes to explaining the deep sense of alienation that he seems to have felt even among the Unitarian community, as his epistolary exchange with Socinus betrays.

The explanation of Seidel's radical stance cannot be straightforward, all the less so because of our wide ignorance of his life circumstances. In fact, his *portentosa opinio* could be the outcome of a long and complex intellectual development. Perhaps, then, the bold and unsettling character of his criticism does not depend on particularly radical influences. After all, Seidel's approach heavily relied on his philological skills (he knew Greek and Hebrew) and his learning in Jewish antiquities—as indicated, for instance, in his use of Josephus—which, insofar as they fostered a close survey of the received wisdom, could easily call a lot of certitudes into question and have tradition-dissolving consequences.²⁶ Instead of a vain search for a “Damascus experience,” the apparently innocuous auxiliary disciplines of philology and antiquarianism, insofar as they created the preconditions for a rational analysis of the biblical narratives and had thereby a subversive potential, could account for the emergence of such disturbing views.²⁷

A SKEPTICAL STANCE ON THE GOSPELS

Skepticism seems also to have had a breeding ground in the convoluted character of apologetic discourses. For centuries, interpretation of the Bible was conditioned not only by the belief that its constituent writings were sacred Scripture but also by the principle that, as such, its exegesis needed special treatment, because of its alleged holy nature and the respectful awe that it commanded. Since a basic assumption of this all-pervasive *hermeneutica sacra* was that the principal author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit, this meant that the Gospel accounts cannot by their nature be contradictory. Rather, those passages that appear to be contradictory are judged as such because of the interpreter's own shortcomings; it must be the reader's fault and ignorance to presume contradictions exist where there can be none.²⁸

²⁶ The earliest printed edition of Josephus is dated 1470 (an old Latin translation). The complete extant works of Josephus in Greek were first published in Basel in 1544; see Alice Whealey, *Josephus on Jesus: The Testimonium Flavianum Controversy from Late Antiquity to Modern Times* (New York: Lang, 2003), 75.

²⁷ A similar point on the reductional power of philology and antiquarianism in Reimarus was made in Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, *Theodizee und Tatsachen: Das philosophische Profil der deutschen Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 79.

²⁸ “Nulla omnino usquam est vera contradictio Scripturarum; sed quae pugnare videntur, nostra culpa ac ignorantia talia esse existimantur; quia vel res, vel sermonem, non intelligimus; vel circumstantias non satis expendimus.” Flacius Illyricus, *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae, seu de sermone*

The Journal of Religion

Another key rule of such *hermeneutica sacra* was the typological interpretation and Christological meaning of the Scriptures: the contents of the Hebrew Bible referred to Jesus as the purpose and personification of the Law.²⁹ For instance, in the promise made by God to Eve in Gen. 3:14–15 or in the account of Abel’s sacrifice, theologians, making use of allegorical interpretations, respectively disclosed the prophecy of a messiah and a reference to Jesus’s allegedly atoning death on the cross.

The belief that the text is, by definition, truthful and cannot be misleading gave rise to all kinds of harmonizing lectures, often verging on the far-fetched. The convoluted nature of many such attempts to reconcile the different accounts, and to see Jesus’s story prefigured in the Hebrew Scriptures, not infrequently entailed odd somersaults and even gave rise to new hermeneutical problems, thereby demanding a high degree of acceptance, to say nothing of outright credulity. The implications of the *hermeneutica sacra* could be accepted and make sense only while the Bible was the interpretative framework, but this fact is precisely what the new historical circumstances and intellectual developments had challenged. For some exegetes, the apologetic discourse became increasingly hard to swallow.

There is every indication that Martin Seidel—not a theologian by training—had, from a very early period, completely rejected the principles of a *hermeneutica sacra*.³⁰ Having taken fully to heart the critical principles, the Silesian thinker, breaching the boundaries between sacred and profane texts, no longer treated the biblical text with the long-maintained reverence as God’s word.³¹ Seidel’s survey of the meaning of the messianic expectations is crucial to understanding his dispassionate regard toward the Christian sources, and particularly the Gospels’ authors. They assume that what Jesus did and suffered had been foretold by the prophets, so that the evangelists’ writings documented the fulfillment of prophecies in Jesus’s life. Nevertheless, Seidel argues, since Jesus did not do what biblical prophecies ascribe to the expected Jewish deliverer—namely, to release the people of Israel from the hands of the foreign rulers—one ought to conclude that a lot of the Gospel accounts do not deserve any credit. According to Seidel, only some things related by the evangelists about Jesus are true,

sacrarum literarum, in duas partes divisae (Basel: Oporinus & Episcopius, 1567; Leipzig: Erythropilus, 1695), pt. 2, 39.

²⁹ “Finis enim legis est Christus. ille solus est illa margarita, aut thesaurus.” Illyricus, *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae*, pt. 2, 8.

³⁰ What has been said about Reimarus—namely, that in his work “a *de facto* convergence of the principles of *philologia sacra* and *philologia profana*” took place (Groetsch, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, 144)—can also be said of Seidel. On these concepts, see Johann A. Steiger, *Philologia Sacra: Zur Exegese der Heiligen Schrift im Protestantismus des 16. bis 18. Jahrhunderts* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2011).

³¹ Referring to the evangelists, he writes that their doctrine about Jesus contradicts not only the Old Testament but also a sane reason: “Praeterea doctrina eorum de Jesu non tantum revelationibus et doctrinae Veteris Testamenti, sed etiam intellectui et rectae rationi repugnat.” *Origo*, 130.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

while many of them are just fiction: “Finally, I do not think that Jesus did all those things written by the evangelists, and I do not think so for this reason: the evangelists themselves write that all what Jesus did and suffered had been foretold regarding the Messiah, and that the writings of the prophets about the Messiah had been fulfilled in Jesus, but that is wrong, as I proved. I certainly think that some things they write about Jesus are true . . . I think that the other things they write about Jesus were concocted by them.”³² In another passage, Seidel sets forth further arguments for skepticism regarding many Gospel passages, and particularly the view—mainly embodied in the Fourth Gospel—that ascribes to Jesus an exalted, even deifying, perception of himself. One argument put forward is what modern scholarship has called “contextual plausibility,” according to which the statements attributed to Jesus must fit the well-known historical, social, and religious context within which he lived. This is why our author writes that Jesus could not have said what the Fourth Gospel put in his mouth: “I do not think that Jesus, whoever he was, was so shameless so as to say about himself the kind of things which that Greek, John, invents, and which do not agree with the other evangelists.”³³ Seidel does not need to dwell on this point, since his readers knew very well the lofty image conveyed by the Gospel of John, even putting it on Jesus’s own lips. For instance, one of the features of the Johannine presentation of Jesus is an all-pervasive form of expression that functions to indicate vividly his alleged transcendent significance—namely, the sentences beginning with “I am” (“I am the light of the world” [John 8:12], “I am the way, the truth, and the life” [John 14:6] are only the best known examples, but notice also “I and the Father are one” [John 10:30]). This kind of expression seems to have a strongly numinous connotation, since it is probably influenced by, and alludes to, Bible passages where God uses the same sort of self-referential language. There is every indication that a pious first-century Jew, as Jesus is thought to be, would not have made these sorts of statements. In this sense, what Seidel wrote has become a well-established point of critical scholarship: in all probability, Jesus did not make such lofty claims as the Johannine Christ does.³⁴

³² “Denique non credo Jesus omnia illa fecisse, quae Evangelistae scribunt, et quidem hanc ob causam non credo, quia iidem Evangelistae scribunt omnia, quae Jesus fecerit et passus sit, ea de Messia praedicta fuisse et scripta prophetarum de Messia in Jesu impleta esse, cum tamen id sit falsum, sicut demonstravi. Credo equidem nonnulla esse vera, quae de Jesu scribunt . . . Reliqua vero, quae de Jesu scribunt, ab iis conficta esse credo.” *Origo*, 60. Elsewhere, Seidel enumerates several reasons that led him to infer that the so-called *Testimonium Flavianum* (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 18, 63–64) is a deceitful addition to Josephus’s original work: “mendacium additum historiae Josephi.” *Origo*, 132–33.

³³ “Ego autem Jesum illum, quicumque fuerit, tam impudentem fuisse non credo, ut talia de se locutus fuerit, qualia Graecus ille Johannes fingit. Neque ista consentiunt cum reliquis Evangelistis.” *Origo*, 63. See also: “Quae autem Johannes scribit Jesum docuisse et fecisse, ea ipsemet sibi confinxit” (62).

³⁴ Of course, some—mainly conservative—authors assume that Jesus made such claims, but this view has not been widely accepted in contemporary critical scholarship.

The Journal of Religion

In the aforementioned passage, to the lack of contextual credibility Seidel adds a further criterion: the things Jesus says in the Johannine Gospel do not match the kind of statements ascribed to him in the other three, the so-called Synoptics (Mark, Matthew, and Luke). The rationale behind this argument is twofold: on the one hand, it means that such (presumably later) statements are not multiply attested; and on the other, the existence of internal contradictions among the Gospels does not encourage us to trust them. In fact, it compels us to dismiss, at least, a part of their contents. The tendency to exalt Jesus beyond the bounds of normal human nature is indeed present in all the Gospels, but the version ascribed to “John” reflects religious developments that radically enhance Jesus’s nature in a way that has no true parallel in the others. Although Seidel does not make the point explicit, he seems to assume that the Fourth Gospel cannot be true, because if its theological contents had parallels grounded in history, the Synoptics would have included them.

The last section of the paragraph includes yet another argument. After citing John 6:51, 53 (“I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever”; “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you”), Seidel adds: “This passage makes plain that in that time there already was a superstition among the Christians, according to which they believed that the common bread—or communion’s bread—that they call ‘sacramental,’ and that they even worship as god, was Jesus’s flesh.”³⁵ Beyond the harsh criticism of the Eucharist, which elsewhere is called “artolatria,”³⁶ the interesting aspect underlying this passage is that it contains another implicit rationale against the reliability of a good part of the Gospel contents. Jesus does not seem to have made this kind of statement, but the fact that Christians, in the age of the redaction of John’s Gospel, believed in the sacramental value and soteriological function of the communion, strongly suggests that the text is projecting Christian beliefs back into Jesus’s mouth. Detection of anachronisms is, accordingly, a further criterion on the basis of which one may reject the trustworthiness of a good part of the sources.

The former quotations make plain to what extent Martin Seidel had ventured outside the strict boundaries of the conventional *hermeneutica sacra*. Long before Reimarus, our author already envisaged the Gospels as human documents that can and should be examined and evaluated just as if one

³⁵ “Ex hoc loco apparet, quod jam eo tempore fuerit superstitio illa apud Christianos, quod crediderunt panem illum commune seu communionis, quem jam appellant sacramentalem, imo pro Deo adorant, fuisse carnem Jesu.” *Origo*, 63.

³⁶ Seidel also uses pregnant expressions to express his disdain toward the Christian beliefs about the Eucharist: “Quam conglutinatam et orbicularem farinam Christiani multis seculis pro Deo suo habuerunt et coluerunt et adhuc maxima pars Christianorum pro Deo habet et adorat” (*Origo*, 64; For many centuries, Christians deemed godly and worshipped this agglutinated and circular flour, and even now most Christians deems it godly and worship it).

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

were reading Aristophanes or Philostratus. As argued in the next section, this bold stance could not fail to have devastating consequences for the key Christian myth.

A NEW VIEW ON JESUS: NATURALISTIC AND HISTORICAL APPROACHES

Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae does not contain a full, lengthy section devoted to the person of Jesus but instead only a few pages and dispersed paragraphs in which its author makes occasional remarks on the Galilean preacher. Nevertheless, the terseness of those passages is, as we will see below, inversely proportional to their intellectual relevance. They are indeed characterized by a naturalistic, critical, contextualizing, and historically plausible approach that turns Jesus, perhaps for the first time, into a fully intelligible figure as a Jew living in a province subject to the Roman Empire.³⁷ Unlike most of his contemporaries, Martin Seidel no longer read Scripture with salvation history in mind, but he exclusively focused on the *sensus historicus sive grammaticus* of the texts he commented on. No longer distinguishing between sacred and profane texts, he rejected any figurative significance or *sensus mysticus* as the guiding principle of exegesis.

Unlike many anachronistic approaches, heavily conditioned by Western views of a neat distinction between the “secular” and the “sacred,” Seidel grasped the inextricable relationship of the “religious” and “political” dimensions of the Jewish hopes in the Roman period. The first pages of *Origo* argue that the biblical prophets had not promised a heavenly realm but rather a worldly kingdom, with the figure of an earthly king who would release Israel’s people from the captivity of foreign empires. Through the quotations of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others, which refer to concrete geographical, terrestrial, and political realities, Seidel draws the conclusion that the Jewish expectations were of a material and earthly nature.³⁸ Incidentally, this is also the notion held by Leon Modena (1571–1648), a thoughtful Jewish author who wrote several decades later: according to this learned Venetian rabbi, Jewish contemporaries of Jesus were expecting a powerful king, one capable of liberating them from Roman domination.³⁹

³⁷ In fact, Seidel remarks in several passages the imperial context of Jesus’s life. See, e.g., “Judaei tunc temporis sub Romano imperio fuerint et Judaea per praesides Romanos administrata et gubernata fuerit” (*Origo*, 131–32; In that time, Jews were subjected to Roman rule, and Judaea was administered and ruled by Roman governors).

³⁸ “Manifestum est itaque prophetas non coeleste regnum neque coelestem regem seu Deum, sed restitutionem regni Israelitici seu Davidis, quod per captivitatem Babylonicam considerat, et regem mundanum seu terrenum qualis nimirum erat David vel Salomon, ex promissione illa facta Davidi, promississe” (*Origo*, 20; It is made thus plain that the prophets did not promise, out of that promise made to David, a heavenly kingdom or a heavenly king or God, but the restitution of Israel’s or David’s kingdom, which had fallen through the Babylonian captivity, and a worldly or earthly king, like David or Solomon).

³⁹ “They were looking for a king who would be extremely successful, who would magnify the kingdom of Israel all over the world.” Shlomo Simonsohn, *Clipeus et gladius. Leonis Mutinensis*

The Journal of Religion

And it is worth noting that contemporary scholars, having at their disposal a wider array of sources, and fully aware of the plurality of Jewish messianic expectations during Jesus's lifetime, also maintain that the concept of the Davidic messiah as a warrior king who would destroy the enemies of Israel and institute an era of peace "constitutes the common core of Jewish messianism around the turn of the era."⁴⁰ Although there was no standard concept of the Messiah, it is possible nonetheless to speak of "a common Jewish hope for a royal messiah from the Davidic line."⁴¹

A brief historical overview of Israel's rule during the Persian and Hellenistic periods allows Seidel to infer that it is the age under Roman rule when the messianic longings were exacerbated. While in the previous centuries the Jews enjoyed some degree of freedom, the arrival of the Romans made the situation worse, and, at the turn of the first century, under the new world empire, the hopes and dreams of the Jewish people in deliverance were rekindled. Seidel was indeed aware of the pro-Roman character of the Herodian dynasty, of Idumean origin; this fact, along with the presence of Roman prefects in Judaea, created a situation of subjugation under a foreign and pagan rule, so that the longing for freedom flourished.⁴²

It is in this context of messianic fervor that the emergence of Jesus is placed. But sensitivity to the political and nationalistic dimension of Jewish religious expectations and feelings is just one of the features that characterize Seidel's overview. Another remarkable trait is the fact that Jesus is not envisaged as an isolated and unparalleled individual but is introduced within a very precise context where other similar figures had already appeared: "Since Jews longed for that king promised by the prophets, there arose some people who passed themselves off as that promised king and who tried to release the Jews from the Romans' rule, like Judas of Galilee, Theudas, and others, about whom you can read Josephus the historian. Around the same time there also arose a certain Jew, named Joshua, who later was called by the Greeks Ἰησοῦν, by the Romans—from the Greek—Jesus, who was also a Galilean."⁴³ The interesting aspect of this paragraph,

tractatus antichristianus. Magen wa-herov. Hibbur neged ha-natzrut (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1960), 69. And, just as in Seidel, this contention implies that Jesus was not the Messiah expected by the Jews: "From all this it is seen, that from the point of view of the times as well one cannot say that the *Notzri* was appropriate to be the Messiah who was hoped for and was promised by the prophets" (70).

⁴⁰ See John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature*, 2nd ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 78.

⁴¹ Collins, *Scepter and the Star*, 73.

⁴² *Origo*, 24–25.

⁴³ "Cum autem Judaei tantopere desiderarent regem illum per prophetas promissum, prodierunt aliqui, qui se plebi Judaicae pro rege illo promisso venditarunt quique Judaeos ex potestate Romanorum eximere conati sunt, ut Judas Galilaeus, Theudas et alii, de qui vide Josephum historicum. Circa idem tempus prodit etiam quidam Judaeus nomine Josua, quem postea Graeci appellarunt Ἰησοῦν, Latini vero ex Graeco Jesum, qui etiam fuit Galilaeus." *Origo*, 25.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

in which Jesus surfaces in Seidel’s discourse for the first time, is that it goes beyond the usual portrayals of the Galilean preacher in several respects. The author does not treat Jesus by assuming in him a special nature, or the sheer uniqueness the Christian dogma proclaims. Far from it, Seidel brazenly places Jesus as one more link within a chain of other prophetic and messianic claimants cited by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus under the Roman prefects and procurators. Admittedly, the comparison of Theudas, Judas, and Jesus is also implicitly made in Acts 5:36–37 (in Gamaliel’s speech), but in that passage those referred to are the followers of these men, while Seidel makes explicit a comparison among Jesus and the leaders recurring in Josephus’s work, to the extent that he also hints at the Galilean provenance of both Judas and Jesus. In this way, to start with, Seidel nullifies any attempt to deem Jesus a matchless human, a being ultimately alien to his world. The Christian object of worship is thereby fully and unmistakably historicized.

Jesus’s understandable character as a historical figure is underpinned in the next statement, where Seidel presents him as a messianic-royal claimant—namely, as another example of those men aspiring to become kings, who surfaced repeatedly under Roman rule: “This one also said that he was that promised king. He said indeed he was the Christ, Χριστόν, what means ‘anointed.’ Since ‘Messiah’ in Hebrew, ‘Christ’ in Greek, ‘Anointed’ in Latin, means ‘king’ in the Hebrew language . . . That Jesus had said he was the Messiah, the Christ, namely, the king of the Jews, is made plain in those writings, which were composed by his disciples.”⁴⁴ Unlike many exegetes, Seidel clearly asserts that Jesus himself declared he was the Messiah. In the remainder of that paragraph, he implicitly makes use of a criterion that some modern scholars have called “recurrent patterns”; namely, the fact that the same motif—in this case, a royal claim—recurs, again and again, throughout the sources.⁴⁵ Revealingly, Seidel cites the different elements in the Passion accounts that point in the same direction: the fact that Pilate’s interrogation contains the question-accusation “Are you the king of the Jews?”; the fact that Jesus’s answer does not deny the charge; and, finally, the mocking of Jesus by the soldiers in the employ of Rome, involving a burlesque parody of kingly epiphany (which includes dressing him in a purple cloak, placing on him a crown of thorns, and kneeling down in mock homage to him). Above all that is the presence of the *titulus crucis* “king of the Jews” as *causa poenae*. In this way, Seidel uses all the convergent evidence to draw the conclusion that “Jesus was crucified because he posed as king

⁴⁴ “Is etiam dixit se esse regem illum promissum. Dixit enim se esse Christum, Χριστόν, id quod ‘unctum’ significat. ‘Messiah’ enim Hebraice, ‘Christus’ Graece, ‘unctus’ Latine, in Hebraea lingua significat ‘regem’ . . . Quod autem Jesus dixerit se esse Messiam, Christum, id est, regem Judaeorum, id apparet ex illis scriptis, quae discipuli ejus conscripserunt.” *Origo*, 25–26.

⁴⁵ See, e.g., Dale C. Allison, *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 1–30.

of the Jews.”⁴⁶ It is worth emphasizing that Seidel does not simply state that Jesus was crucified because he was misunderstood as a kingly claimant but precisely because he indeed claimed to be a king. Long before Reimarus, such a clear statement reveals a full awareness of the political dimension in Jesus’s self-conscious and in his message of the impending kingdom of God.⁴⁷ This view has been set forth since the Enlightenment by a good number of scholars with similar arguments to those offered by Seidel.⁴⁸

The historical plausibility of this naturalistic approach is also made plain by the treatment of Jesus’s first followers. Confessional exegesis tends to hold a hagiographical standpoint of the disciples as protosaints moved by the highest ideals when following their master. Seidel, however, posited their interest in political power. Surely basing his judgment not only on his knowledge of human nature but also on several Gospel passages that make the disciples’ ambition evident,⁴⁹ the Silesian thinker asserts that they expected to become rulers in Jesus’s imminent earthly realm: “They deemed him that promised king, hoping and thinking that they were going to be princes and satraps in his kingdom.”⁵⁰ This also means that Seidel does not establish a (counterintuitive) chasm between Jesus and his first disciples: in his view, all of them were part of a Jewish messianic movement that envisaged a radical turnabout in the existing order of things, in which they would all be granted this-worldly rewards.

Seidel’s naturalistic approach to Jesus and his followers is surprisingly detached. Of course, true detachment (conveyed by the Tacitean *sine ira et studio*) remains just an asymptotic ideal. But detachment was then conspicuous by its absence. Along the centuries, treatments of Jesus have usually been (and still are) heavily conditioned by apologetic or polemic goals. The former kind of bias is all-pervasive in confessional exegesis, while the latter is frequent in authors hostile to Christianity, as the examples of some contemporaries of Seidel—such as Giordano Bruno—prove.⁵¹ Far from it, Seidel’s

⁴⁶ “Jesus crucifixus fuerit, quod se venditarit pro rege Judaeorum.” *Origo*, 26.

⁴⁷ “Sein Versuch, den christlichen Messianismus im Lichte des jüdischen zu verstehen, hat zum Ergebnis, daß Jesus ganz der politisch—innerweltlichen Variante des alttestamentlichen Messianismus verhaftet war, welcher einen rex terrenus und von diesem die Wiederherstellung des Reiches der Juden erwartete. Eben diese Erwartung verbanden auch die Apostel mit Jesus, der freilich nicht der ‘Messias promissus’ war.” Schröder, “Religionsgeschichte im 16. Jahrhundert?,” 166.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., George H. Buchanan, *Jesus: The King and His Kingdom* (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1984); Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 233–47 and 290–93. “What he claimed for himself was *tantamount* to claiming kingship.” Ed Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985), 322. For a recent treatment of this topic, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, *La invención de Jesús de Nazaret: Historia, ficción, historiografía*, 3rd ed. (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2019), 188–94.

⁴⁹ Mark 10:28–30, 35–41; Luke 22:24, 30; see also Mark 9:33.

⁵⁰ “Eum pro rege illo promisso habuerint, sperantes et credentes se futuros principes et satrapas in regno ipsius.” *Origo*, 27.

⁵¹ See Elisabetta Scapparone, “Efficacissimus Dei Filius’: Sul Cristo Mago di Bruno,” in *La magia nell’Europa moderna: Tra antica sapienza e filosofia naturale*, ed. Fabrizio Meroi (Florence: Olschki, 2007), 417–44.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

pages are entirely void both of unctio and invective. On the one hand, he approaches Jesus as he would any other figure, without vested interests. On the other, he takes a stance that, even without making concessions to any devout subservience, is not devoid of some sympathetic statements. For instance, he asserts that if Jesus taught what Matthew ascribes to him, his doctrine “was not bad.”⁵² And, distinguishing between Jesus’s beliefs and Christian teaching, he says that, by preaching that the core and goal of the Jewish law is love of God and one’s neighbor, Jesus was right.⁵³

Such an unprejudiced stance can also be seen in the fact that Seidel does not simplify the figure of Jesus nor offer a caricature-like portrait. He does not reduce the Galilean to just a political rebel but adopts a holistic approach by taking into account the genuine religiosity that the sources ascribe to him. At the same time, when tackling this aspect he does not endorse the unrealistic and biased portrayal of a de-Judaized Jesus, typical of the Christian tradition. On the contrary, Seidel assumes that Jesus was a pious Jew, whose disagreements with his contemporaries remained within the parameters of normative Judaism. In fact, he does not need to emphasize this basic aspect: he rather takes it for granted. Preferring the Gospel of Matthew to that of John,⁵⁴ Seidel states that Jesus did not want to abolish the law but to fulfill it, although the Galilean emphasized the importance of its moral dimension.⁵⁵ Furthermore, he did not endorse the widespread view (then and now), according to which Jesus opposed the Pharisees in matters of doctrine, but asserted that he did it only regarding practical issues.⁵⁶

Besides, Seidel does not shy away from tackling the thorny issue of miracles. On the one hand, he relativizes the astonishing feats attributed to Jesus by adopting a comparatist approach and referring to the large number of witnesses of supernatural occurrences ascribed to the pagan gods. For instance, exorcism is characterized as “an art which was well known in that age by many, as witnessed by Josephus, and which some people still know today.”⁵⁷ On the other hand, he blatantly asserts that the main miracles

⁵² “Si Jesus illa docuit, quae Matthaeus eum docuisse scribit, videtur ejus doctrina non fuisse mala.” *Origo*, 61.

⁵³ “Recte etiam docuit quae sit summa et scopus legis Mosis et prophetarum, non Messias promissus, sicut Christiani docent.” *Origo*, 61.

⁵⁴ “Quamvis autem etiam Evangelium Matthaei aliquibus in locis depravatum esse credam, tamen mihi videntur veriora esse, quae Matthaeus de Jesu scribit, quam quae Johannes scribit” (*Origo*, 61; Although I think that the Gospel of Matthew is also corrupted in some places, it seems to me that what Matthew writes about Jesus is truer than that written by John).

⁵⁵ “Docet . . . quomodo lex debeat impleri non tantum externis factis, sed etiam interne, in corde et cogitationibus” (*Origo*, 61; He teaches how the law must be carried out not so much through external facts but also internally, in the heart and thoughts).

⁵⁶ “Neque reprehendit Pharisaeos in doctrina, sed tantum in moribus et vita.” *Origo*, 62.

⁵⁷ “Quam artem tunc temporis plures sciverunt, teste Josepho, et adhuc aliqui sciunt.” *Origo*, 60–61. It is also noteworthy that, in order to shed light on the resurrection accounts, Seidel refers to the story about Romulus contained in Livy (*Ab urbe condita* 1.16) and adds: “Huic simile de Jesu narratur.” *Origo*, 143–44. This parallel is still adduced by contemporary

The Journal of Religion

narrated by the evangelists are nothing but fables, with the argument that there are no independent sources witnessing the alleged wonderful acts.⁵⁸ This last argument will also be used by the seventeenth-century anonymous author of *Symbolum Sapientiae* with regard to Jesus's resurrection, in order to emphasize the biased character of the account: "Admittedly, there remains a not minor doubt in the fact that nobody saw the risen Christ except Christians, who are partisan witnesses."⁵⁹

Seidel also dismisses one major notion conveyed by the Gospel accounts and widespread in modern Christian exegesis—namely, that the Jewish authorities sought Jesus's death at any cost, prompted by some kind of *odium theologicum*. Far from it, he offers an explanation (presumably inspired by both his finely attuned historical sense and the reading of John 11:47–50) according to which the Jewish authorities proceeded against Jesus only because of prudent, political reasons.⁶⁰ In fact he asserts that, given that Jesus had attracted a substantial following, many of whom deemed him a king, the Jewish authorities feared a tumult and (in practical response) delivered him to the Roman governor: "And also the Pharisees and the princes of the Jewish people in that time would have willingly had that king promised by the prophets, a king who might release them from the Roman rule. But they knew that Jesus was not of Davidic lineage; moreover, they saw that Jesus had not power enough to release them from the Romans. That is why they did not want to acknowledge him as a king."⁶¹

Although Seidel accepts the Gospel version—called into question by several modern scholars—according to which those responsible for Jesus's arrest were the Jews, he critically tackles the main "explanations" (envy, hatred, fear) offered by the Gospels and the Christian tradition. Instead of a

scholars; see, e.g., David M. Litwa, *Jesus Deu: The Early Christian Depiction of Jesus as a Mediterranean God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 163–74.

⁵⁸ "Quod vero praecipua miracula, quae narrantur ab Evangelistis, sint fabula et mendacia officiosa . . . id vel hinc patet, quod nemo de istis scripserit nisi soli Christiani, cum tamen multi fuerint, qui, quae eo tempore memoratu digna contigerunt, conscripserunt, quique eodem tempore aut paulo post vixerunt, cum praedicta miracula non potuerint fieri in angulo, ut a solis Christianis conspicerentur." *Origo*, 130.

⁵⁹ "Certe dubium manet non levidense quod Christus resurgentem nemo viderit nisi Christianus, testis in causa propria." Francisco Socas, ed., *Symbolum Sapientiae: La clave de la sabiduría (Un tratado clandestino del siglo XVII)* (Huelva: Universidad de Huelva, 2011), 102.

⁶⁰ The intriguingly realistic overtones of John 11:47–50 not only come closer than any other Gospel passage to identifying accurately a motivation for the Jewish authorities to get Jesus out of the way but run against the Johannine perspective itself (i.e., it being difficult to imagine how John simply created the scene). See Samuel G. F. Brandon, *Jesus and the Zealots: A Study of the Political Factor in Primitive Christianity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 17, 127; Dwight Moody Smith, *John among the Gospels* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012), 219–22.

⁶¹ "Etenim etiam Pharisei et principes populi Judaici eo tempore libenter habuissent regem illum per prophetas promissum, qui ipsos ex potestate Romanorum eriperet. Sed sciebant Jesum non fuisse ex posteritate Davidis; deinde videbant Jesum non fuisse sufficientem, ut ipsos a Romanis eripere possit: ideo eum pro rege agnoscere noluerunt." *Origo*, 62.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

religious catalyst (which does not plausibly account for the narrated facts), he offers a realistic and explanatory reason for the fact that Jesus was neutralized. If, as Seidel states, he made a royal claim and obtained a following, it would have entailed an objective threat to public order (“disciplina publica”). This fact alarmed Jewish authorities, who were worried about probable reactions from the Romans, and so they tried to intervene beforehand: “And since that fact was going to arouse a tumult and insurrection in the midst of the people, the princes of the people, to prevent tumult and insurrection, arrested Jesus and delivered him to the Roman governor for punishment. I think this is the true story of Jesus.”⁶² It is not unfathomable hatred but understandable exercise in political responsibility that led to the arrest and death of Jesus. In this way, Seidel pulls the rug from under the feet of the widespread notion regarding the evilness of the Jewish authorities, thereby making an essential constituent of the Christian myth collapse. Put otherwise, the “true story” (*historia vera*) of Jesus is not the mysterious tale of a god or an immaculate being persecuted by malevolent and devilish humans but the understandable, politically based story of a royal claimant and visionary who had to be stopped because of a need to maintain public order. In this way, his fate becomes comprehensible.

The recovery of a figure of Jesus that, although created with just a few brushstrokes, sees him as an intelligible historical actor is one of the most outstanding achievements of *Origo*. Not less interestingly, a noteworthy by-product of his work is the suggestion that the worshippers’ approach not only dehistoricizes the figure of the Galilean preacher but even turns him, paradoxically, into a morally dubious being, insofar as some statements attributed to him are only understandable as a display of conceit and shamelessness.⁶³ As has been argued above, Seidel does not deem such statements historical but mere concoctions.⁶⁴ This bold phrasing means that the Christian construction of Jesus is ultimately self-defeating from a moral perspective. In turn, this entails the, at first sight, unexpected corollary that only a skilled and honest historian—not the devout believer or the theologian—can offer a truly credible and plausible view of the Galilean preacher.

⁶² “Cumque ista res tumultum et seditionem in populo paritura essent, ideo principes populi, ut tumultum et seditionem praecaverent, Jesum ceperunt et Romano praesidi ad supplicium tradiderunt. Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu.” *Origo*, 62.

⁶³ A similar point has been made explicit by some modern scholars who have argued that, if—as mainstream scholarship repeats—Jesus was not a nationalistically minded preacher aiming to throw the Romans out, he would have deceived his followers, insofar as they deemed him the person destined to redeem Israel. See Hyam Maccoby, *Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance* (London: Ocean Books, 1973), 165, 174; Buchanan, *Jesus: The King and His Kingdom*, 38–39.

⁶⁴ “Ego autem Jesum illum . . . tam impudentem fuisse non credo.” *Origo*, 63.

The Journal of Religion

THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY: BEYOND THE SUPERNATURAL

Ecclesiastical historiography has traditionally portrayed the emergence of the Christian religion through a triumphalistic lens, according to which it was nothing less than a miraculous and ultimately inexplicable phenomenon: the success of the new religion has been panegyrically described as the inexorable progression from a tiny and brutally persecuted group to becoming an established religion.⁶⁵ Far from this apologetic persuasion, Seidel's approach is characterized by a naturalism that uses rational causes and avoids any resort to supernatural factors. The continuity of the movement immediately after the crucifixion is explained in an understandable way. He refers to a "spectre" (spectrum) that would have appeared to Jesus's first disciples,⁶⁶ but a close scrutiny of the text shows that the term "spectrum" designates just a mental image and is meant to describe nothing but a subjective and deceitful experience. Moreover, he asserts that Jesus's followers added "as a useful lie" (*officioso mendacio*) that they had taken a meal with the spectre and had touched him, "so that it was not considered a spectre" (*ne putaretur spectrum*).⁶⁷ Nevertheless, beyond the notion of religious imposture as fraud or deceit—so widespread in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—he expatiates on the exegetical enterprises carried out by Jesus's followers and aimed at turning the disturbing and disappointing experience of his crucifixion into a meaningful one:⁶⁸ the belief that Jesus's fate was prefigured in the Scriptures allowed the disciples to overcome the psychological discomfort caused by the crucifixion and the nonarrival of the kingdom of God, which Jesus had announced as an imminent event.

Such an interpretative work was carefully surveyed by Seidel, who, making use of philological and contextual arguments, criticized it as unsound and fanciful. Among the cases he analyzes, the following examples are particularly worth mentioning. On the one hand, he dismantles the story (narrated in the so-called infancy narratives) of Jesus's virginal birth, by showing that the original Hebrew word (*'alma*) for the so-called "virgin" does not mean the same as the Greek word *παρθένος*—found in the Septuagint—but just "girl" or "maiden."⁶⁹ On the other, he argues that the "Song of Yahweh's servant" contained in Isaiah 52–53 cannot be legitimately applied to Jesus, as Christians do;⁷⁰ Christians claim that the servant is Jesus and that he is referred to, but the connection is strained and ultimately untenable. In

⁶⁵ Even some contemporary scholars nowadays go on using terminology turning the spread of Christianity into a puzzling and wonderful event and referring to "den staunenswerten Aufstieg des Christentums und sein ebenso verwunderliches Überleben." Christoph Markschies, *Warum hat das Christentum in der Antike überlebt?*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 43.

⁶⁶ *Origo*, 26–27.

⁶⁷ *Origo*, 27.

⁶⁸ *Origo*, 28.

⁶⁹ *Origo*, 28–34.

⁷⁰ *Origo*, 34–38.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

addition, a similar point is made about the Psalms, and particularly Psalm 110, which was extensively used for the reinterpretation of Jesus’s death, to the extent that modern scholarship has drawn the conclusion that Christians seem to have partially constructed the story of the crucifixion out of biblical passages.⁷¹ In this way, Seidel manages to deconstruct Jesus’s legendary biography by paying attention to the two extremities of the mythical account—namely, the beginning and the end.

Another interesting aspect is that our author seems to have glimpsed the extreme usefulness of the spiritualizing process carried out by Christians regarding Jesus’s original eschatological hopes. The disciples asserted that, while Jesus did not get his kingdom on earth, he has it now in heaven.⁷² This interpretation of the kingdom matches the kind of processes that take place in failed millenarian and messianic movements: the prophecy is reinterpreted in such a way that what was supposed to have been a visible and verifiable occurrence is reinterpreted as an invisible event; in this way it is possible to state that the event occurred as predicted, only on a spiritual level.

As to the spread of Christianity, Seidel’s naturalistic stance is perceived in the fact that he takes into account many concurrent factors of very different character. For the sake of brevity I will provide just an enumeration of those factors, which give an idea of the scope and explanatory ability of the Silesian author’s approach. Dismissal of circumcision (abhorred by many non-Jews) in the Pauline branch of the new movement and its replacement through baptism made easier the entry into the new sect for many people.⁷³ The destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple, insofar as it involved the sudden disappearance of the original (and conservative) Jewish-Christian community, made possible the emergence of other local churches and the spread of Paul’s view of the new movement as a religion of universal validity, therefore open to Gentiles. The success of the new movement can be better accounted for when one realizes that its diffusion was not carried out by illiterate Palestinian fishermen but by educated people (Paul and the “Greeks” who composed the Gospels are mentioned).⁷⁴ Some contents—both doctrinal and practical—of the new religion are also envisaged as causes of its appeal, like monotheism and cultivation of virtue among Christians.

⁷¹ *Origo*, 39–41. See, e.g., John D. Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus? Exposing the Roots of Anti-Semitism in the Gospel Story of the Death of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995).

⁷² “Utque hanc suam opinionem etiam aliis persuaderent addiderunt hoc: quod viderint ipsum ascendentem in coelum eumque in coelo habere regnum, quandoquidem in terra regnum obtinere non potuerit.” *Origo*, 27.

⁷³ *Origo*, 66.

⁷⁴ “Quod autem Christiani pro miraculo habent, piscatores illos idiotas Christianam religionem per totum mundum disseminasse, in eo etiam valde errant. Nam quamvis piscatores illi primi fuerint, imo mulierculae quaedam, quae Jesum a morte resurrexisse affirmarunt, non tamen ipsi hanc sectam ad alias gentes detulerunt, sed alii, utpote Marcus, Lucas, Johannes, qui fuerunt Graeci, et quidem literati. Praecipuus autem auctor et disseminator hujus sectae fuit Paulus, qui non erat idiota, sed literatus et in lege Mosaica institutus.” *Origo*, 65.

The Journal of Religion

Imperial-sponsored dominance is adduced as a crucial factor; particularly, the wide support given by the emperor Constantine and other rulers to the Christian Church in late antiquity and the Middle Ages was decisive. In fact, Seidel repeatedly emphasizes the violence (*vi et bello, vi et armis*) through which the new religion was imposed.⁷⁵ Last but not least, Seidel mentions the socializing process through which the beliefs and practices of the Christian ancestors were internalized by their children and perpetuated along the generations.⁷⁶

The aforementioned set of factors indicates Seidel's refusal to assume the traditional narrative according to which the new religion would have been the puzzling outcome of miraculous and ultimately supernatural forces. Moreover, throughout his overall analysis, Seidel makes use of an evolutionistic approach. According to theological orthodoxy, the beliefs of modern Christians are basically the same as the first apostles' faith, in turn basically the same as Jesus's own doctrine. That this idea is an apologetic device is nowadays a widespread contention in scholarly circles, but in the sixteenth century it was still a bold claim: "Contemporary Christians . . . boast that their faith and doctrine has arrived until the present in a continuous tradition and succession since the apostles' time, although contemporary Christians have a faith and a doctrine which are different to those which Christians held before the Council of Nicaea."⁷⁷ This statement summarizes the survey the Silesian thinker carries out in preceding pages, in which he sets forth several examples. While the first Christians adhered to Judaism and therefore circumcised converts from paganism, this practice was altered by Paul. Nevertheless, even if Paul introduced several novelties to Christian beliefs, he did not favor some concepts later accepted by other coreligionists. A case in point is that of Christological beliefs: Seidel correctly asserts that, however exalted Paul's thoughts about Jesus were, he did not affirm that Jesus was equal to God, even less placed him above God.⁷⁸ The fact that Seidel lived in an anti-Trinitarian context is reflected in the fact that he devotes several pages to argue that

⁷⁵ *Origo*, 73–75. "Qui autem recusarunt baptismum recipere, auxilio imperatoris vi adacti, aut occisi aut pulsi fuerunt, quod in omnibus regionibus initio Christianismi factum est" (75). This emphasis implies a devastating criticism: the religion that presents itself in its foundational Scriptures as the doctrine of meekness and love has been spread through the most violent means.

⁷⁶ See *Origo*, 28, 76: "Postea liberi et posterii eorum, sicut etiam in aliis religionibus fieri solet, secuti sunt vestigia parentum et antecessorum suorum." This emphasis implies the obvious but disturbing fact that throughout history people have usually not joined Christianity because of a genuine search for truth or through conviction based on arguments but just according to the customs and traditions.

⁷⁷ "Hodierni Christiani . . . gloriantur suam fidem et doctrinam a tempore apostolorum continua traditione et successione usque ad haec tempora devenisse, cum tamen hodierni Christiani aliam fidem et doctrinam habeant quam habuerunt Christiani ante concilium Nicensem." *Origo*, 71.

⁷⁸ "Ut Jesus non tantum aequalem Deo affirmant, sed eum etiam supra Deum collocent et honorent." *Origo*, 67.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

the doctrine of the Trinity is a later fabrication;⁷⁹ by setting forth the criticisms addressed to former Christian thinkers by later ones,⁸⁰ Seidel makes plain the existence of important theological developments and changes in the history of the church. A further example is that of chiliastic hopes, held by several Christian authors (e.g., Tertullian), which were later dismissed as infected with heresy.⁸¹ In all these ways, Seidel deconstructs the theological claim of an immutable doctrine.

Seidel's distinctiveness in relation to his contemporary context can be seen, for instance, when a comparison is made with a work which constituted a Catholic reference point for centuries; namely, the twelve-volume *Annales Ecclesiastici*—conceived as an answer to the *Magdeburg Centuries*—by the Italian Oratorian priest (later cardinal) and ecclesiastical historian Caesar Baronius (1538–1607).⁸² Since the authors of the *Magdeburg Centuries*, the major historical manifesto of the Lutherans, had backed up their version of the events with a large number of ancient documents, the necessity was felt that an effective response would be conducted on the basis of scholarship. Nevertheless, even if the Italian savant, an almost strict contemporary of Seidel, has often been praised as a consummate historian, the simple fact is that his work leaves much to be desired. For instance, his “life of Jesus” is mainly a paraphrase of the Gospels that assumes its reliability, is embellished by texts coming from Philo and Josephus, and is supported by the works of polemicists from the first Christian centuries.⁸³ Just to mention a couple of examples, Baronius accepts both the description made in the Passion accounts of Pilate's reluctance to condemn and execute Jesus and

⁷⁹ Referring to Paul's time, he asserts: “ex quo apparet Trinitatem tunc temporis nondum fabricatam fuisse.” *Origo*, 68.

⁸⁰ “Quod autem Trinitas Christianorum primum post concilium Nicenum inventa fuerit et per Hieronymum et Augustinum maxime confirmata . . . id vel ex eo patet, quod Hieronymus et Augustinus (quos hodierni doctores Christianorum maxime sequuntur) priores doctores Christianorum, qui ante Concilium Nicenum apud Christianos claruerunt” (*Origo*, 68–69; That the Trinity of Christians was invented for the first time after the Nicaean Council and mainly confirmed by Jerome and Augustine . . . is made plain by the fact that Jerome and Augustine, who are mostly followed by contemporary Christian authors, condemn the former Christian authors who excelled among the Christians before the Nicaean Council).

⁸¹ *Origo*, 71. For a thorough study of this eschatological belief, see Charles E. Hill, *Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁸² The first volume seems to have been written already in 1579, although it was not printed by the Tipografia Vaticana until 1588; see Franco Motta, “A Tale of History, Dogma, and Tradition. Jesus in Caesar Baronius' *Annales Ecclesiastici*,” in *Texts, Practices, and Groups: Multidisciplinary Approaches to the History of Jesus' Followers in the First Two Centuries; First Annual Meeting of Bertinoro (2–5 October 2014)*, ed. Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 829–53, esp. 842.

⁸³ “Every conceivable document, numismatic and epigraphical as well as written, of pagan as well as of Christian provenance, was brought to bear on every successive moment in the Gospel narratives.” Erich Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 460.

The Journal of Religion

Matthew's episode of the earthquake and the opened tombs.⁸⁴ In fact, Baronius's first forays into ecclesiastical history were inspired by his spiritual mentor, Filippo Neri, who envisaged the *Annales* as a polemical and orthodox response to Protestants. Besides, the institutional context in which the work was researched, written, and published was the Roman Curia in the wake of the Council of Trent.⁸⁵ Although Campanella praised Baronius's history of the church as a model of true history,⁸⁶ by no means can such kind of blatantly apologetic and biased literature—a milestone of the Counter-Reformation's "sacred history"—based on a view conceived in providential terms, be deemed a historical approach in a critical sense. Unlike Seidel's evolutionistic approach, Baronius firmly asserted that the Roman Catholic Church had been "always the same" (*semper eadem*) since its apostolic origins.⁸⁷

To sum up, a sharp historical sensitivity—which seems to have been matchless in contemporary standard works on Christian origins—is fundamental in Seidel's approach.⁸⁸ Placing the emergence of such a sense within the Renaissance, Peter Burke defined it to include at least three factors. One is a sense of anachronism—namely, the realization that the world inhabited by our forebears was different in quality from the present; two, a new attention to evidence (i.e., an awareness that not all sources are equally reliable from a historical standpoint), along with the evaluation of historical sources for accuracy; and three, an interest in causation (i.e., the move toward the usage of middle-range explanations) concerning the norms and the trends that are bigger than individuals but at the same time susceptible to analysis and calculation. Even a cursory survey of Seidel's work shows that he had developed an accurate sense of history, within which all three factors are recognizable. If the birth of a new historical sense "can be seen most

⁸⁴ "Ipse Pilatus . . . palam professus est, neque se, neque Herodem causam ullam mortis dignam in eo invenisse." Augustine Theiner, ed., *Caesaris Baronii Annales ecclesiastici Tomus primus* (Paris: Ludovicus Guérin, 1864), 132; "Tunc etiam et magnus factus est terraemotus, adeo et ut ea concussionem scissae sint petrae" (143).

⁸⁵ See, e.g., Giuseppe A. Guazzelli, "Cesare Baronio and the Roman Catholic Vision of the Early Church," in *Sacred History: Uses of the Christian Past in the Renaissance World*, ed. Katherine van Liere, Simon Ditchfield, and Howard Louthan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 52–71.

⁸⁶ See Anthony Grafton, *What Was History? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29.

⁸⁷ See Guazzelli, "Cesare Baronio and the Roman Catholic Vision of the Early Church," 58 and 61. "Baronius' aim is not any historical contextualization of the development of the body of doctrines and apostolic traditions, since for him—as for his contemporaries—the Christian doctrine springs not from any kind of evolution, but rather from revelation." Motta, "Tale of History, Dogma, and Tradition," 829. On the lack of impartiality and the religious approach of Baronius's (and others') scholarship, see Jean-Louis Quantin, "Document, histoire, critique dans l'érudition ecclésiastique des temps modernes," *Recherches de science religieuse* 92 (2004): 597–635, esp. 607–14.

⁸⁸ For a recent and more extended treatment of this topic, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "A New Historical Sensitivity in the Sixteenth Century: Martin Seidel on Christian Origins," *Bruniana & Campanelliana* 25 (2019): 33–49.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

spectacularly in the criticism of documents and the criticism of myths,⁸⁹ the skeptical approach of Seidel to the Gospels, the figure of Jesus, and Christian origins deserves closest attention as a landmark of critical thought.

FROM SEIDEL TO REIMARUS?

The portrayal of Jesus that is set forth in Seidel's work strongly recalls that of the Hamburg savant who is deemed to be at the forefront of the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung*. It is not surprising, therefore, that Winfried Schröder has perceptively posed the question of whether Seidel could have had a bearing on Reimarus's intellectual development.⁹⁰ The German scholar, however, does not tarry on that point. It is accordingly worth reflecting on this possible relationship between two critical thinkers who combined a deistic stance with an unsparing biblical criticism.

Any reader acquainted with Reimarus's work will easily perceive many strong similarities between Seidel's *Origo* and the Enlightenment radical's *Apologie*. Leaving aside their common championship of a natural religion, a host of features are common to both: refusal to grant the Bible any privileged status and its ensuing treatment as any other human artifact; distrust toward the Gospels as containing a lot of fictitious and unreliable material; attention paid to the historical and political context of Jesus's preaching; and emphasis on the worldly nature of the kingdom announced by the prophets and expected by Jews. Among other common themes are their view of the anticipated figure not as an eschatological savior or spiritual leader but as a powerful king from the Davidic line, who would restore kingship in Israel;⁹¹ the assertion of crucial differences between Jesus's teachings and Christian doctrine (in the sense of a spiritualizing *Noth-System*);⁹² the adoption of a detached stance toward the figure of the Galilean preacher—devoid, at the same time, of polemic and apologetic goals; the portrayal of Jesus as a messianic-royal claimant;⁹³ the realistic view of the disciples' aims as characterized by worldly ambition;⁹⁴ the simultaneous realization of the religious and political dimensions in Jesus's preaching and activities; the political interpretation of the Jewish authorities' intervention in his fate;⁹⁵

⁸⁹ Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Arnold, 1969), 76.

⁹⁰ “Nicht ausgeschlossen, daß dieser Autor der Spätrenaissance einen Anteil an der Entwicklung des Reimarus hatte.” Schröder, “Religionsgeschichte im 16. Jahrhundert?,” 171.

⁹¹ *Apologie*, 1:721; 2:41, 122–23. Seidel's emphasis on the worldly nature (“mundanum regem” [*Origo*, 12, 20, 157], “mundanum regnum” [19, 21], “mundanum seu terrestre regnum” [177]) of the kingdom promised to David in the Hebrew Bible is an aspect that is contained both in the *Origo* and in his epistolary exchange with Socinus. This emphasis on an earthly realm clearly reminds us of the importance granted to that very same feature by Reimarus.

⁹² *Apologie*, 2:22, 180–81.

⁹³ *Apologie*, 2:60.

⁹⁴ *Apologie*, 2:136–37.

⁹⁵ *Apologie*, 2:153.

The Journal of Religion

and the naturalistic approach to the birth of Christianity.⁹⁶ All of them are notable features common to both authors.

The existence of these striking convergences makes the question of whether Seidel's work could have had a bearing on that of Reimarus imperative. Is it possible to trace a lineal or sequential relationship between the two critical thinkers—put otherwise: Did the former pave the way for the latter—or did they independently arrive at similar conclusions by virtue of a combination of philological skills, Jewish antiquarianism, and the same hermeneutics of rational suspicion?

The unpromising starting point is the realization that there seems to be no explicit mention of Seidel in Reimarus's works. As I have recalled above, Reimarus recorded many of his intellectual debts in the *Apologie*, where he refers to ancient Greek philosophers like Celsus and Porphyry,⁹⁷ to Renaissance Jewish writers like Isaac ben Abraham of Troki,⁹⁸ and to the work of Deists and other authors who relentlessly read the Bible as a profane piece of writing.⁹⁹ He even cites some clandestine literature and could have known the *Traité des trois imposteurs*.¹⁰⁰ Accordingly, Reimarus does not seem to have had qualms about citing his sources. The name of Seidel, however, does not surface anywhere.

The former negative remark, however, does not exhaust the question: absence of evidence need not necessarily mean evidence of absence. There are no reasons to think that Reimarus must have recorded all authors who had a bearing on his views. If this is a judicious contention, other paths could and should be explored. A first trace of a possible relationship is the role that Hamburg played in both cases. Reimarus was born and died in the Hanseatic city and was professor of Oriental languages in his hometown, at the prestigious *Gymnasium illustre*, for almost three decades. Although several manuscripts of Martin Seidel's *Origo* are known, the most

⁹⁶ A close comparison of Seidel and Reimarus in this respect would be rewarding but falls beyond the scope of this article.

⁹⁷ Explicit references to them are found in *Apologie*, 1:61, 68, 157, 328, 802, 905; 2:268–69. On Reimarus's use of pagan philosophers, see Winfried Schröder, *Athen und Jerusalem: Die philosophische Kritik am Christentum in Antike und Neuzeit* (Stuttgart: Frommann-holzboog Verlag, 2011), 17–18.

⁹⁸ "Der R. Isaac in seinem Chissuk Emunah, wirfft ihnen nicht allein überhaupt vor, daß sie die Sprüche der Propheten, wieder den wahren Verstand, im N. T. mißhandelten, indem man aus dem Vorhergehenden und Nachfolgenden leicht sehen konnte, daß jene gar nicht an das gedacht hätten, was die Evangelisten und Apostel daraus beweisen wollten; sondern er wiederlegt auch im zweyten Theil seines Werks alle Deutungen der besonderen Stellen A. T. die man im Neuen angeführt findet, als falsch und verkehrt; und soferne ist dieser Jude der gründlichste und stärkste Widersacher des Christenthums." *Apologie*, 2:268.

⁹⁹ For Reimarus's references to Toland, see *Apologie*, 1:434; 2:658, 660; to Collins, see *Apologie*, 1:728, 742; 2:271.

¹⁰⁰ For the spread of this work, see Miguel Benítez, "La diffusion du 'Traité des trois imposteurs' au XVIII^e siècle," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine* 40 (1993): 137–51; Wolfgang Gericke, "Hermann Samuel Reimarus und die Grundleitungen seiner Zeit," *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 18 (1992): 118–31.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

extensive, complete, and best-ordered version comes precisely from Hamburg, in whose main library it is preserved.¹⁰¹ This is also the only copy that provides the name of the work’s author.

Even more intriguing and potentially sobering is the fact that the Hamburg manuscript seems to have been copied by the Hebraist Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739), who had the copy in his own library.¹⁰² The thought-provoking aspect is that this contemporary of Reimarus was, at the same time, his close friend and confidant, and also one of his mentors and correspondents. Wolf gathered one of the most splendid private libraries in Hamburg, which totaled about 24,000 volumes, and was also in close contact with Peter Friedrich Arpe, a well-known collector of forbidden books.¹⁰³ In fact, it has been asserted that, aside from having instructed Reimarus to look at various manuscripts in Dutch libraries, Wolf—who had made his own *peregrinatio academica* to Holland and England in 1708–9—might have suggested to Reimarus that a visit be paid to Jean Le Clerc.¹⁰⁴

There is still another hint that Reimarus might have been attracted to Seidel’s work—namely, the fact that the former knew the work of Johann Fabricius (1644–1729), professor of theology at the University of Helmstedt.¹⁰⁵ This author published, between 1717 and 1724, a collection of six volumes, titled *Historia bibliothecae Fabricianae*, that Reimarus knew, to the extent that he alludes to the first volume in the comments to Conrad Iken’s textbook *Antiquitates Hebraicae*.¹⁰⁶ The interesting point is that, in the second volume, the theologian Fabricius, under the heading “Fratres Poloni seu Unitarii,” devotes an entry to Martin(us) Seidel(ius), which reads as follows:

Martin Seidel, from Ohlau in Silesia, neither a Christian nor a Jew nor a Mohammedan, wrote *Fundamenta religionis christianae*, in which he examines statements of the Old Testament adduced in the New, and tries to show that they do not literally match those matters to which the writers of the New Testament applied. There are other things in this book which are contrary to Christian religion. Moreover, he was

¹⁰¹ Staats—und Universitätsbibliothek, cod. theol. 1851. On the manuscripts, see the introduction of Socas and Toribio, *Origo*, xxxvi–xlvi. “Nuestra hipótesis es que la copia de Hamburgo representa el estado de los escritos de Seidel más pleno y la disposición preferible entre todas.” *Origo*, li.

¹⁰² “Schreiber ist J. Christoph Wolf. aus seinem Besitz.” Nilüfer Krüger, *Die theologischen Handschriften der Staats—und Universitätsbibliothek: Katalog der Handschriften der Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg* (Stuttgart: Hauswedell, 1993), 2:33.

¹⁰³ See Martin Mulsow, “Johann Christoph Wolf (1683–1739) und die verbotenen Bücher in Hamburg,” in *500 Jahre Theologie in Hamburg*, ed. Johann A. Steiger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 81–111, esp. 94 and 102–5. This scholar mentions the fact that one of Fabricius’s friends, the doctor Christian Joachim Lossau, was the owner of the most complete collection of clandestine literature in Hamburg, and perhaps in Germany (106–7).

¹⁰⁴ Groetsch, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, 116.

¹⁰⁵ Not to be confused with Reimarus’s teacher, mentor, and father-in-law Johann Albert Fabricius (1668–1736).

¹⁰⁶ Reimarus, *Scholia ad Conradi Ikenii Antiquitates Hebraicas*, 3 (for the text, see Groetsch, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus*, 87–88).

The Journal of Religion

fond of natural theology, thinking that it suffices to live according to the precepts of the Decalogue, not because they were given by God to the Jews, but because they fit the natural light of his conscience. He also denied that the Christ or Messiah had already appeared, since it had not been promised to the Jews but in a conditioned way, obviously if they were to be obedient to God, which they did not fulfil. Therefore, this impious man deemed whatever we say and believe about Jesus the Nazorean nothing but fables.¹⁰⁷

If Reimarus read this passage, he could not have failed, from its inception, to feel amazed and intrigued by such a description, which portrayed a thinker who was at the same time a committed champion of natural religion and a radical critic of Christianity, to the extent that what pious believers thought of Jesus he considered as nothing but a bundle of fables. Since circa 1735 onward—the period when Reimarus may have started to waver from his own orthodox upbringing—such a portrayal could have been that of the erudite himself.¹⁰⁸ We cannot be sure that Reimarus knew the aforementioned passage, but at least we know that, according to the auction catalog of his library, he owned the complete set of Fabricius's *Historia bibliothecae Fabricianae*, which he used.¹⁰⁹

The probability that Reimarus had heard or read about Seidel increases when one realizes that references to the Silesian writer are found in other significant works to which the Hamburg savant had access. A good case in point is Gottfried Arnold's lengthy and famous *Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-historie* (1699–1700), the remarkable two-volume work in which this Pietist Lutheran author carried out a major revision of ecclesiastical history by evincing more sympathy toward heresy than toward any established church. Arnold writes: "One also finds news about a Silesian by the name of Martin Seidel, who, because of his wish to refute Socinus, adopted an extreme position, and explicitly denied that the Messiah has already come."¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ "Mart. Seidelius, olaviensis silesius, nec Christianus, nec Iudaeus, nec Mahumetanus, scripsit Fundamenta religionis christianae, in quibus examinata dicta V. Tū in novo allegata, atque ostendere conatur, ea non agere in sensu literali de illis rebus, ad quos scriptores novi foederi transtulerint: aliaque in libro isto extant, religioni christianae adversa. Ceterum theologiae naturali tantum erat deditus, credens, sufficere, si viveret ad normam preceptorum decalogi, non quatenus a Deo erant data Iudaeis, sed quia convenient cum lumine naturae conscientiae suae indito: negabat etiam, Christum seu Messiam fuisse iam exhibitum, propterea quod non nisi conditionate promissus fuerit Iudaeis, si videlicet futuri essent Deo obedientes, quod tamen non praestiterint: quidquid igitur dicimus credimusque de Iesu nazareno, id nefarius ille habebat pro fabulis." Johann Fabricius, *Historia bibliothecae Fabricianae*, pars 2 (Wolfenbüttel: Johann Christian Meisner, 1718), 77–78.

¹⁰⁸ It has been argued that Reimarus's rejection of Christianity must have occurred during the mid-1730s. See Peter Stemmer, *Weissagung und Kritik: Eine Studie zur Hermeneutik bei Hermann Samuel Reimarus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983), 92–93.

¹⁰⁹ Gerhard Alexander, ed., *Auktionskatalog der Bibliothek von Hermann Samuel Reimarus: Redigiert von Johann Andreas Gottfried Schetelig, Hamburg, 1769 und 1770: alphabetisches Register* (Hamburg: Joachim Jungius Gesellschaft, 1978–80), 2:2268–70.

¹¹⁰ "Man findet auch nachricht von einem Schlesier Martin Seidel genandt, der über den eiffer wider Socinum, welchen er widerlegen wollen, endlich auff das extremum gefallen und ausdrücklich soll gelegnet haben daß MeBias schon kommen sey." Gottfried Arnold,

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

If Reimarus had read this piece of information about Seidel, again he would have probably felt intrigued by such a radical thinker. Arnold, who adds several lines on Seidel's ideas and explicitly refers to the refutation carried out by the Wittenbergan theologian Jacob Martini,¹¹¹ is not explicitly cited by Reimarus. Nevertheless, in the main text of the *Apologie*, when he writes about the vagueness of the initial ideas of Jesus's disciples after his death, which led to endless discussions (“zu . . . ewigen Streitigkeiten”), Reimarus asserts that such a situation can be easily seen in an *Anleitung einer dogmatischen Kirchen- und Ketzler-Historie*, which is an unmistakable reference to Arnold's volume.¹¹²

There are, accordingly, several ways through which the Enlightenment radical could come to know Seidel's name and basic insights. We have envisaged three of them: Wolf's copy, along with the references to Seidel in Johann Fabricius's and Arnold's works. Admittedly, the evidence produced for Reimarus knowing the Silesian thinker is in the main circumstantial. And, since Reimarus was an inveterate quoter of his sources, there seems to be no clear reason for the fact that he did not mention the *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae* (or its author) in his clandestine manuscript, if he had read this work. Therefore, whether Reimarus knew Seidel is a question that should be left open, at least for the time being.

Regardless of whether Reimarus was reliant on Seidel, the former discussion might prove fruitful in another way. Unlike what has been repeatedly claimed, progress in the study of Jesus takes place only in a very relative and inconsistent way, in the sense that there are ideas on him that recur, time and again, through the centuries, and also in the sense that there is not a linear evolution in subsequent phases. A comparison of Seidel and Reimarus confirms both aspects. On the one hand, as we have seen, they set forth many similar notions (which they might have reached in an independent way). On the other, it is not clear that Reimarus constitutes a step forward in all respects, despite having written one century and a half after Seidel. For instance, Reimarus occasionally yielded to the temptation of using Jesus as a foil for theologians and a supporter and forerunner of Deism *avant la lettre*, insofar as, in some passages of the *Apologie*, he asserts that the Galilean preached only the practical principles of a rational faith, a natural

Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzler-historie vom Anfang des Neuen Testaments bis auf das Jahr Christi 1688 (Frankfurt am Mayn: Thomas Fritsch, 1700), 472 (2. Theil, Cap. VI, § 49). For other references to works mentioning Seidel, see Heberle, “Ueber den Verfasser der antichristlichen Schrift,” 190.

¹¹¹ On this episode, see Toribio, “Los primeros testimonios sobre Martin Seidel,” 72–74; *Origo*, xix–xx. Extensive passages of Seidel's work were printed in Jacob Martini's *Liber tertius de tribus Elohim oppositus Judaeis & Semijudaizantibus* (1619), and have been reproduced in *Origo*, 185–240; see also Schröder, *Ursprünge des Atheismus*, 401 n. 18.

¹¹² *Apologie*, 2:431. See Dietrich Klein, *Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1694–1768): Das theologische Werk* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 152–53.

The Journal of Religion

religion,¹¹³ while nothing of the like is found in Seidel's work. This means that, despite many convergent points, one should be cautious to posit unbroken continuity between Seidel and Reimarus and to avoid the temptation to believe in the existence of a linear progress in the study of the past, and particularly in the *Leben-Jesu-Forschung*. Seidel did not limit himself to adumbrate things to come: the enduring value of his work stands on its own.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER REMARKS

The great importance of Reimarus in the research on Jesus and Christian origins has been acknowledged in the scholarly realm since Lessing decided to publish some excerpts of his work. Since then, philosophers and historians of religion, such as David Friedrich Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Albert Schweitzer, Wilhelm Dilthey, Robert Eisler, and Samuel G. F. Brandon, have paid tribute to the Enlightenment radical's contribution. None of them, alas, seems to have been aware of the existence of Martin Seidel's work. Nevertheless, even a perfunctory glance through *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae* will force any reader to infer that it is no longer possible to deem Reimarus an early pioneer. The history of the critical study of Christian origins should be severely qualified and nuanced in the light of Seidel's work.

A comparison of Seidel and Reimarus further confirms that the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of a work does not always depend on the intrinsic value of its contents. In the case of the savant from Hamburg, without wishing in the least to detract from his undeniable achievements, one must avow that several factors came together to bring about the wide impact of his ideas and to make his "Fragments" a turning point: the fact that his work was not couched in a serpentine Latin but was written in the vernacular; the relevance of this author in the Republic of Letters; and, more importantly, the fact that Lessing published it in a prestigious series, making it accessible to the European learned world.¹¹⁴ On the contrary, Seidel's work enjoyed a very limited

¹¹³ "Christus nichts anders als seine vernünftige praktische Religion gelehret." *Apologie*, 1:64. This statement is often repeated: 1:99, 113–14, 126, 165, 171. In other passages, Reimarus asserted that Jesus's unique goal was betterment of mankind (2:415), and he ascribes to the Galilean a universalistic message, by using Matt 28:19 and Mark 16:15 (2:97–98). It is too obvious that these contentions do not fit much of the outline Reimarus elsewhere made of Jesus. It has been rightly asserted that, by positing the presence in Jesus of blatantly contradictory claims, Reimarus was experiencing a deep tension between his sharp historical conscience and his philosophical leanings. In this way, the Hamburg savant could not consistently understand Jesus as a Jew all the way through: Reimarus was "struggling against his method of Jesus-as-Jew, the textual evidence, and his commitments to the *Aufklärung* virtue of tolerance." Michael J. Thate, *Remembrance of Things Past? Albert Schweitzer, the Anxiety of Influence, and the Untidy Jesus of Markan Memory* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), 59–60.

¹¹⁴ For a thorough and recent survey of these factors, see Fernando Bermejo-Rubio, "Was *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger* an Innovative Contribution? On Reimarus' Significance in the History of Jesus Research," in *From Jesus to Christian Origins, Second Annual Meeting of Bertinoro (1–4 October, 2015)*, ed. Francesco Berno, Adriana Destro, and Mauro Pesce (Turnhout: Brepols, 2019), 261–83.

“Hanc credo esse historiam veram de Jesu”

reception, circumscribed within closed anti-Trinitarian circles.¹¹⁵ This is all the more paradoxical, because, while Seidel aimed to spread his views among the people,¹¹⁶ Reimarus seems almost to have been horrified by such an idea, and his *Apologie* was initially not intended for publication.

A study of Seidel (and Reimarus) proves that it is not necessary to adopt an atheistic stance to call radically into question the Christian mythical discourse. According to both authors, reason is God-given and distinguishes human beings from animals.¹¹⁷ But the claim that it is a divinely instilled gift implies that revelation itself needs to withstand the test of reason.¹¹⁸ Put otherwise, the wisdom that offers itself as divine revelation cannot ultimately contain anything that contradicts it. Since contradictions and incongruences are easily demonstrable features of the Gospels, their character as revelation is debunked.

Be that as it may, from this brief survey it should be clear that the long-overlooked proto-Deist Martin Seidel deserves a place of honor within the avant-garde of the critical study of Western religion. The voice of modernity resounds through his pages. His groundbreaking, well-argued, and eye-opening work, despite its limited reception, offers the model of a rigorous approach that provides a realistic historical reconstruction. While a lot of implausible notions have been repeated throughout the ages—Jesus somehow overcame Judaism, set forth a brand-new wisdom, had nothing to do with the dirty political matters of his time, and was thereby a matchless being—the humble but iconoclastic Silesian thinker accurately realized the

¹¹⁵ At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Gustav Georg Zeltner wrote that Seidel was hardly known to one of every one hundred theologians: “vix centesimo cuique notus” (*Historia crypto-socinismi*, 1:268). Three centuries later, the situation has not substantially changed.

¹¹⁶ As Seidel declared in the first letter addressed to Socinus, he carried out proselytizing activities, insofar as he had been trying to convert his fellow Germans from idolatry: “de Germanis meis desperarim, quos hactenus per aliquot annis scriptis meis ab idololatria avocare conatus sum.” *Origo*, 159. On February 1575, in the course of an inquest against Thomas Erastus, the Swiss physician and controversialist admitted to having received a heretical manuscript from Martin Seidel; see Charles D. Gunnoe, *Thomas Erastus and the Palatinate: A Renaissance Physician in the Second Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 246.

¹¹⁷ See *Origo*, 129–39.

¹¹⁸ “Etiam in rebus divinis seu de Deo debemus uti ratione et intellectu, qua remota oporteret nos omnibus religionibus et erroribus credere, cum nulla ratio esset cur potius huic religioni et opinioni crederemus quam alii, et sic non amplius essemus homines, sed animalia irrationalia, velut equus aut mulus, cum sola ratio nos ab irrationalibus animalibus discernat” (*Origo*, 129; Thus, we must also use reason and intellect in matters concerning God; if we renounce reason, we would have to believe every religion and error, since there would be no reason to believe a certain religion and opinion more than others, and in this way we would no longer be human beings, but irrational animals like horses or mules, because only reason distinguishes us from irrational animals). “Ohne Vernunft und deren Gebrauch wären wir, wie das Vieh, gantz und gar keiner Religion fähig.” *Apologie*, 1:54. “Es bleibt uns also nichts übrig, als die väterliche Religion, weil sie nach dem Zufall eben so wohl falsch seyn konnte, mit Vernunft und ohne Vorurtheil zu untersuchen. . . . Denn eine göttliche Religion, die des Menschen Verstand erleuchten und den Willen heiligen soll, fordert von ihm eine überlegte Einsicht und Überführung von ihrer Wahrheit” (1:73).

The Journal of Religion

close similarity of Jesus to many other coeval Jews and offered a plausible portrayal of him that shrewdly grasped his situatedness. At the same time, he made the emergence of Christianity an intelligible phenomenon, which dismantled its supernatural aura. In this sense, the study of Seidel is not a sterile exercise of scholarly antiquarianism, and the fact that his work has been neglected for so long does not mean that it is negligible from the standpoint of responsible historians. While approaches to Jesus and the early church had so far been subservient to the *idola fori* of European civilization, Seidel set forth nothing less than a critical and unprejudiced study of the common wisdom. Christianity was already under siege, and, long before the Enlightenment, an intellectually devastating assault on its most sacred fortress, trying to deal it a fatal blow, was being made.

The former survey is also helpful in order to better appreciate the overall project of *Origo et fundamenta religionis christianae*. In the main part of his work, Seidel carries out a defense of natural religion that posits that God does not interact directly with the created world, thereby involving a radical attack on those religions allegedly originated with a divine revelation. In fact, Seidel's work constitutes one of the first attempts to explicitly advance a Deist stance. The argument that basic Christian assertions (the reliability of the New Testament as divinely inspired, and the view of Jesus as the fulfillment of the biblical prophecies) are unfounded is, accordingly, essential in order to debunk the traditional outlook: Seidel argued that, while the main messianic hope embedded in the Hebrew Bible is that of an earthly salvation, according to the New Testament writings Jesus's messianic idea amounts to a heavenly kingdom, and drew the conclusion that those writings are in the main fabrications and that Jesus did not fulfill any prophecy. In this light, the deconstruction of the Christian claims, characterized by its historical and naturalistic approach, not only perfectly fits into the overall argument of *Origo* but could be deemed the cornerstone of its theoretical building.