

Preface

In the mid-second century CE the Christian convert, Justin Martyr, wrote: 'For . . . they declare our madness to be manifest saying that we give the second place after the unchangeable and eternal God and begetter of all to a crucified man'; and again: 'For by what reason should we believe that a crucified man is the first-begotten of the unbegotten God and that he himself will pass judgement on the whole human race?'

He asks, in other words, how Christians could hope to persuade anyone else of the wisdom of following – and, indeed, worshipping – Jesus, a mere human being and one who had been so humiliatingly crucified.

Justin, and other Christian writers of the second century, devoted time and energy to addressing questions of this kind. Understanding the arguments they used to justify, and to promote, belief in the new religion of Christianity and how they used the ancient Jewish scriptures for that purpose is the subject of this book.

By 150 CE it was over a century since the life and death of Jesus in the mid-first century and those who had known him were long dead. The conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine to Christianity in the early fourth century, which gave the new religion a central role in the Empire, was far in the future. Christianity was still only a small-scale movement; but it was a missionary one and its reach, through proselytising efforts, had extended well beyond its Palestinian Jewish origins, so that adherents were now to be found in numerous communities around the Mediterranean.

This spread of Christianity brought its followers into close contact with the long-established Graeco-Roman culture that dominated all aspects of life in the Roman Empire. Indeed, those who espoused Christianity had in many cases been brought up and educated in Graeco-Roman ways before being converted to the new faith. The authors whose works are considered in the chapters that follow were converts in this mould.

This book is about the arguments these authors put forward in their writings. The texts they wrote were addressed (in form at least) to non-Christian audiences whose beliefs and practices they had formerly shared. They sought to present arguments in favour of Christianity in ways that would appeal to those audiences and in doing so they had to ask themselves whether acceptance of the new faith was compatible with continued adherence to all – or even any – aspects of the Graeco-Roman cultural tradition.

Christianity inherited from its Jewish origins the ancient scriptures of the Jewish people. Christians reinterpreted these texts in the light of their new faith and the Jewish scriptures became the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. The Jewish scriptures were unlike anything in the Graeco-Roman literary tradition; but they became a central feature of Christianity and some Christian writers, converted from Graeco-Roman backgrounds, used them to support the arguments they made in promoting their new faith. How and why this was the case is explored in the following pages.