

The Birth of Christianity

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Abstract:- Crossan and Casey are examples of those who say that in the first twenty years of the apostolic era Jesus was re-defined as 'Son of God' and 'Lord'. These and other accounts make inquiry into those two decades quite critical. We are able to affirm the broad lines of the narrative of Acts by undisputed information in Paul's earliest letters and by the data in the 'we' passages in Acts. Case studies in Rom 1:1-4 and in the recorded teaching of Philip point to the pervasive influence of the 'teaching of the apostles', Peter's in particular. The pre-history of the underived Gospels of Mark and John, as well as the Synoptic sources Q, L and M are to be sought in this critical two-decade period immediately 'after Jesus'.

The historic Christian faith is no stranger to criticism and attack from outside or from within. Celsus attacked it without and Arius undermined it from within. The butt of attack from without and the point of subversion within are the same – the identity of Jesus.

To illustrate the point let me mention three examples from the modern era.

J.D. Crossan: The Jesus' Movement Hijacked.

Crossan believes Jesus was a social reformer who formed a movement in Galilee that aimed to overturn the existing power structures (Crossan 1988). Jesus' movement emphasised 'life' issues, in particular justice for the marginalised. After Jesus' death in Jerusalem, however, the movement bifurcated and a parallel 'death' movement arose.

Crossan argues that the truest expression of Jesus' 'life' movement survived in 'Q' a document said to underlie the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The 'death' movement intervened in Paul and the Gospel of Mark and all but eclipsed evidence of the 'life' movement. As a result Jesus and his programme are lost to us unless we are able to recapture it by reading 'Q'.

Crossan's work is an erudite but a bizarre interpretation based on conjecture about the bifurcation of the Jesus movement after the first Easter. He bypasses NT evidence in Acts, James and the Pre-Pauline tradition preferring instead the so-called 'Q' document and the Gospel of Thomas, a Gnostic work from the third century. Wright provides a trenchant review of Crossan's 'Birth' (Wright 2000).

So what did happen in Jerusalem in the two decades between Jesus and the appearance of Paul's letters? Is Crossan right? But there are other accounts of what might have happened.

W. Bousset: The Hellenization of Jesus.

W. Bousset was a leader in the 'history-of-religions' school of the nineteenth century. He said post-exilic Judaism had become weak allowing a developing interest in angels and impersonal forces (hypostases) (Bousset 1926). Early Christianity must look for alternative thought forms to express its beliefs about Jesus. It found that alternative expression in pagan Hellenistic religion in Antioch (Bousset 1926).

Bousset saw the Greek-speaking Jews, the 'Hellenists' of Acts 6, who fled to Antioch as the vital link between the original Palestinian Jewish disciples, the 'Hebrews' of Acts 6, and the pagan Greeks of Antioch in Syria. It was in that milieu that Jesus the Jew came to be seen as 'Lord' (kyrios) and '[Son of] God'.

Bousset's explanation has been criticised by M. Hengel as 'a syncretistic paganization of primitive Christianity' (Hengel 1976:18) and by L. Hurtado as 'a clumsy crossbreeding of Jewish monotheism and pagan polytheism' (Hurtado 1988:100).

M. Casey: From Jewish prophet to Gentile God

According to Casey (1991: 42-43) the term 'the Messiah' was not current among the Jews until after Jesus passed from the scene so that he could not have applied it to himself. Passages like Mark 8:29-30 and 14:61-62, therefore, and other titles found in the Gospels ('Son of Man', 'Son of [God]') were created by the early church (Casey 1991:54).

How, then, did Jesus come to be regarded as such in the early church? Casey's solution is that the original disciples with Jesus formed a distinctive and separatist Jewish sect that saw in Jesus after his death 'the embodiment of Jewish identity' (Casey 1991:57-75). That death proved to be the

‘catalyst’ that immediately led to the new interpretation of Jesus in the early church. Here Casey finds existing ready-made vehicles of thought within Judaism for the terms like ‘Lord’, ‘Messiah’ and ‘Son of God’ to be applied to Jesus as an ideal martyr figure. Under Paul, but more particularly John, this Jewish prophet became a Gentile god.

There are several problems with Casey’s reconstruction. First, through intense study of Jewish history we are more conscious now of various other messianic and prophetic figures of the era like Judas the Galilean, Theudas or Simon bar Gioras. Yet none of these men were made ‘Messiahs’ posthumously, despite being more ‘nationalistic’ than Jesus. Secondly, many decades, even centuries, would be needed for a prophet to become regarded as ‘God.’ Yet by the time Paul’s letters appear two decades after Jesus he is being proclaimed as ‘Lord’, the name of God in the OT.

The First Twenty Years – A ‘Blank’ Space?

Clearly, then, the first twenty years are important. By that milestone Paul’s first letter, First Thessalonians, had appeared, proclaiming Jesus as ‘Son of God’, ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’.

Logically, one of two things happened. Either Jesus was in fact ‘Son of God’, ‘Lord’ and ‘Christ’ or during that period the early Christians decided they would portray him in those terms, despite the fact that he wasn’t really.

Twenty years are, however, too brief a space in which a merely human Jesus would evolve into a divine figure. For that reason alone, explanations like those of Crossan, Bousset and Casey are unsatisfactory.

Yet – and here we face a problem – this twenty-year period is sparsely documented. Our knowledge is limited. Some have called it a ‘blank’ space. Is this true?

No letters from this period have survived. The Letter of James may be early, but there is no way to date it, except that it is earlier than AD 62 when James was killed. The Gospels most likely are later. The Book of Acts clearly post-dates AD 62 when the curtains close on the imprisoned Paul in Rome. In any case, it is argued, the book of Acts is biased and unreliable.

The Problem of Acts.

I don’t subscribe to the current negative view of Acts among so many scholars. Luke’s use of Mark for his own Gospel is open to simple comparison and proves to be prudent and restrained. His book of Acts teems with trivial detail that wins the approval of ancient historians like A.N. Sherwin-White against the jaundiced but often ill informed opinions of theologians.

- It cannot be denied that the author of Luke-Acts ties his narrative into world-history at a number of points.

- Jesus was born when Augustus was emperor;
- John the Baptist began prophesying in the fifteenth year of Tiberius;
- Jesus was executed under Pontius Pilate;
- Apostles are interrogated under the High Priests Annas and Caiaphas;
- Saul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem in the famine under Claudius;
- Jews Priscilla and Aquila were expelled from Rome under Claudius;
- Gallio became governor of Achaia while Paul was in Corinth;
- Paul was mistaken for the Egyptian prophet, was tried under High Priest Ananias and was imprisoned under Felix the governor.

I think Luke-Acts is a fine achievement that locates the author among the great history writers of antiquity. He has an eye for detail and he ties his particular narrative into world history at many points.

Yet there is a problem. He gives us little information about Jewish Christianity in Palestine in the first twenty years. True, Luke tells us about the birth of Christianity at the Feast of Pentecost (in AD 30 or 33), of the difficulties with the authorities in Jerusalem, of the earliest community’s bifurcation as ‘Hebrews’ and ‘Hellenists’, of the death of Stephen, of Saul’s assaults and the scattering of believers throughout the land beyond its borders in Damascus and Antioch.

As we will see, Jewish Christianity developed throughout the Land of Israel – in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria, not just in Jerusalem. It was *within* this Jewish Christianity *within* these twenty years that we must look for the origins of formulated beliefs about Jesus and the origins of the written Gospels. Here we have many questions but Luke gives us some assistance in Luke 1:1-4.

Luke wants us to know how the word of God spread from Jerusalem to Rome, world heartland of the Gentiles. Accordingly he traces the ministry to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch and Peter’s preaching and to the Roman Cornelius. There are hints of indigenous Jewish churches, but little information. It is as if Luke can’t wait to bring Paul and his Rome-wards missions into his narrative.

The Importance of Paul for Acts

Let me return to the question of the usefulness of Acts to the historian of early Jewish Christianity in Israel. Among the scholars the ‘politically correct’ line is that Acts is so

late (80's, it is claimed) and so far removed from the period AD 30-50 to be of little use, historically speaking.

Let us put another viewpoint. It is based on those unusual passages in Acts where the narrative changes from the third person 'he' or 'they' to 'we' or 'us'. The doubters say this is just stylistic, though no one has ever satisfactorily explained how it is therefore 'stylistic'. The most natural explanation is that in other passages the author is depending on other sources for his narratives, oral or written, but that in the 'we' – passages (as they are called) he is depending on his own sources (a diary perhaps). That is, the author of the book of Acts himself chimed into the narrative at certain points. Significantly one of those points was Philippi in Acts 20 in c. 56/57 when he travelled with Paul back to Palestine where he remained while Paul was in prison until with Paul he travelled to Rome c. 60. In short, the last of the 'we' - passages puts Paul and Luke together for five or more years.

Do we see what this means for the usefulness of the book of Acts? Luke had Paul as his oral source for anything he wrote about Paul during that twenty year long so-called 'blank' space. Luke knew from Paul about his early life in Tarsus, his life in Jerusalem under Gamaliel, his involvement in the death of Stephen, his attacks on believers in Jerusalem, his journey to Damascus, his conversion and preaching there, his return to Jerusalem, his sojourn in Damascus and his partnership with Barnabas in Antioch and their subsequent visit to Jerusalem ahead of the first west-wards mission.

But there is more. Paul himself tells us (Gal 1:18) that three years after his conversion he stayed with Peter and met James, the Lord's brother. So, through Paul Luke knew about Peter and James in the early years. Through those Paul met Luke would also have known about other key figures in the early Jewish church. If only he had told us what he knew!

But the point is, based on the 'we' – passages and his lengthy companionship with Paul this author had oral access to Paul's early years and the people and events of the early years. So we must reject the line that because Acts is said to be late (which is unproven) it is unreliable (which is unlikely) those early years are blank. The truth is they are not altogether blank, as we will now indicate.

Windows into the First Twenty years.

Churches in Judaea (Galatians 1:22; 1Thessalonians 2:14-15)

Then I went into the regions of Syrian and Cilicia.

And I was still not known by sight to the churches of Christ in Judaea; they only were hearing it said, 'He who persecuted us once is now proclaiming the faith he once attempted to destroy'.

For you, brothers became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus in Judaea, because they same things as you from their own countrymen even as they did from the Jews who killed both the Lord Jesus and drove us out...

From these texts we learn the following important information. Within three years of Paul's conversion, that is, only about four years on from Jesus, there were churches – Jewish churches - in Judaea. Those who belonged to these churches had been persecuted by Paul who had attempted to destroy 'the faith' they held to be true. When Paul returned to Judaea the Jews drove Paul out (back to Tarsus). These Jewish churches continued to suffer at Jewish hands.

Peter was 'apostle' to the Jews (Galatians 2:1, 7-8)

Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem...

When [James, Cephas and John] saw that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been entrusted with the gospel to the circumcised for he who worked through Peter for the apostolate to the circumcised worked through me also for the Gentiles....

For the past fourteen years, that is, almost right back to Jesus himself there had been two 'apostatates' or 'missions' – one to Gentiles led by Paul, the other to Jews by Peter. God had worked through both men as they preached the gospel to their respective ethnic constituencies. In Peter's case, this was to Jews in the land of Israel.

The Spread of Christianity in Judaea, Galilee and Samaria (Acts 9:31-32)

So the church throughout the whole of Judaea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and being built up and walking in the fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Spirit was multiplied.

Now it happened as Peter was travelling through them all he came to Lydda...Joppa...Caesarea...

Following Saul's conversion near Damascus there was 'peace' so that the members of the church of Jerusalem who had been 'scattered' and taken root as churches throughout Judaea, Galilee and Samaria were 'built up and multiplied'.

This confirms Paul's references noted above to 'churches in Judaea', adding the detail about churches in Galilee and Samaria. Luke tells us that these churches were multiplied and grew up from the seeds of those scattered by persecution from Jerusalem. It is likely that these churches were both 'Hebrew', Aramaic-speaking, as well as 'Hellenist', Greek-speaking, in character, reflecting the respective religious cultures of both.

Easily missed is the comment that Peter 'went to and fro among them all'. The verb *dierchomai* is semi-technical

for ‘going on a preaching tour’. Who are the ‘all’ among whom Peter travelled as an itinerant preacher? Clearly, they are the churches of Judaea, Galilee and Samaria that had sprung up as a sea of green wheat spouts from the seed scattered by Saul’s attack in Jerusalem.

This is Luke’s version of Galatians 2:7-9 where Paul speaks of Peter’s God-given apostolate among the Jews.

John 21 may obliquely refer also to this. Peter was to ‘feed’ and ‘shepherd Christ’s sheep’, that is, Jewish believers in Israel in the first instance.

It is clear from the passages following Acts 9:31-32 that these churches were by then well established. The members of the churches in Lydda and Joppa knew one another. Dorcas belonged to an ‘order’ of widows in Lydda as in Jerusalem, among both the ‘Hebrews’ and the ‘Hellenists’. Although Peter was leader among the ‘Hebrew’ believers in Jerusalem it is likely that he encountered Greek speakers on the Hellenized coastal plain in Lydda, Joppa and Caesarea.

The Creation of Written Texts (Luke 1:1-4).

Seeing that many have taken it in hand to compile a narrative concerning the matters that have been fulfilled among us even as they handed them over to us, that is, by those who from the beginning had become eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, I decided also – who had followed all things closely from the beginning – to write to you an orderly account, O Excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things in which you have been instructed.

This is an extraordinarily important statement, whose significance is easily missed on account of its rather formal nature. We know that rabbis instructed their disciples by means of oral transmission, that is, by rote teaching and learning. It is equally clear that the apostles taught and responding believers learned, in ways not dissimilar from the rabbis’ methods. For example, Paul ‘handed over’ to the Corinthians various teachings that they ‘received’, for example in regard to the Lord’s Supper (ch 11) and the outline of the gospel (ch 15). This ‘orality’, however, was not the endless telling and retelling of stories by village raconteurs. Rather, it was structured ‘top down’ teaching from a teacher to pupils.

The book of Acts refers to ‘the apostles’ teaching’ (e.g. 2: 42) and most likely this took the form of such oral instruction. Doubtless this became part of the intellectual and spiritual formation among Jewish believers in the churches of Judaea.

This, however, is not what Luke means by saying that ‘many...a narrative’ had been ‘handed over’ to him. Luke is pointing to *written texts*. Luke is saying that before he came to write Luke-Acts ‘many’ had also but (previously) *written* a ‘narrative’ or account of the ‘matters’ now

‘fulfilled’ among them. By this he means ‘matters’ relating to Jesus and the early church.

These *written* documents have been ‘handed over’ to Luke by those who from the beginning (i.e., from the time of John the Baptist) had been ‘eye-witnesses-then-catechists of the word.’ In other words, the original disciples of Jesus who post-resurrection became preachers and teachers were the guarantors of the texts that they and others had written.

When did these eyewitnesses and teachers ‘hand over’ the texts to Luke? Most likely it was when Luke was in Palestine, c. 57-60, as in the final ‘we’ – passage in the book of Acts.

Do we see what this means? It shows that by (say) A.D. 60 written texts had been created. By means of a little detective work it has been possible to ascertain the texts that were ‘handed over’ to Luke and which he combined in his own ‘orderly account’ written for the catechumen Theophilus. These texts included (1) the Gospel of Mark, (2) Infancy Stories, (3) Resurrection stories, (4) a collection of parables and other teachings, and (5) a mainly teaching collection (also employed by Matthew).

In other words, at some point between Jesus’ resurrection in AD 30 and the ‘handing over’ of these texts in AD 60 (?) ‘many’ persons had put in hand the compiling of various accounts relating to the ministry of Jesus. Most likely these texts were chiefly used for reading in the Jewish churches and there is no reason why they might not have been written soon after the birth of Christianity in AD 30 (or 33).

The Letter to the Hebrews and the Letter from James.

Are there any other windows through which we can look at Jewish Christianity in these early decades?

Possibly the Letter to the Hebrews is one such window. Reference to ‘Timothy’ locates it perhaps to the fifties and from either Corinth or Ephesus, cities where Timothy was active. The readers are Jews, Greek-speaking Jews and most likely Greek-speaking Jews in Israel, struggling to hang in with Jesus as the Christ. Perhaps they were ‘Hellenists’ (Greek-speaking Jewish Christians) who did not flee from Israel, but remained. The writer is one who was taught by the original disciples of Jesus (2:3). Barnabas is one possible candidate.

The Letter of James is another, though written from Israel to Jewish believers in the Diaspora. Most likely, too, it is early, earlier than AD 62 when James bar Yosef was killed. Arguably James’ letter pre-dated Paul’s first letters, making it the oldest surviving document of Christianity. Regrettably neither Hebrews nor James give us any way of fixing their dates so as to secure their usefulness for our purposes.

The Witness of Peter.

Let us now turn to reflect on three passages that point to the earliness of the tradition about Jesus. In each case we may trace the presenting teaching back to Peter and to the earliest times in early Christianity.

I. *Romans 1:1-4*

By way of background we note Paul's affirmation of the faith of the Roman believers. In a context of mission baptism in chapter 6 he thanks God that they had been 'obedient from the heart to the pattern of *teaching* to which they were handed over' (v17). In chapter 16 he refers once more to 'the *teaching* you learned' (v17). I think it likely that the teaching in question approximated to that Paul rehearses at the head of the letter. That would make good sense, pointing to a fundamental teaching that he and they shared. Paul writes about:

- ...the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures concerning his Son
- who came from the seed of David according to the flesh
- who was set apart as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness
- through his resurrection of the dead Jesus Christ our Lord...

It is understandable that many have seen in Rom 1:1-4 a creed or confession, for example, the two balancing yet contrastive statements:

concerning his Son

who came from the seed of David according to the flesh

who was set apart as Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness

through his resurrection of the dead

This text has the marks of a pre-formed teaching that Paul received at an earlier time and which he made his own.

It may also have been a teaching known to the believers in Rome. It is not unreasonable to conjecture that Roman Jews in Jerusalem at the Feast of Pentecost received this teaching at the time of their baptism. This would have been a quarter of a century earlier.

Upon further thought we see connections between this text and the Acts summary of Peter's preaching on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2). Both affirm Scriptural fulfilment:

- Jesus' descent from David
- Jesus' special relationship with God (in Acts is 'the Christ'; in Romans he is 'his [God's] Son')
- the resurrection

- that Jesus is Lord
- the coming of the Spirit

The connections between Rom 1:1-4 and Acts 2 are strong, especially when we remember that baptism was likely common to both. As well, we note that the Acts refers many times to 'the teaching of the apostles'. It is reasonable to assume a close connection between Peter's Pentecost sermon and this teaching to baptisands and that such teaching was cast in summary form similar to that reproduced by Paul in the opening lines of Romans. Furthermore, there are linkages between Paul's synagogue preaching in Damascus, Pisidian Antioch and Thessalonica - centred as it was Jesus as the Christ, son of David, Son of God - and Rom 1:1-4.

In short, the critical 'teaching' at the very head of Romans bears close connection between the preaching outlines first of Peter and then Paul in the Acts of the Apostles. The linkages are too close to be coincidental and point to christological formulations in the first weeks and months after Jesus' historical life span.

II. *Philip the 'Evangelist'*

The book of Acts calls the Greek-speaking Jew Philip, the 'Evangelist.' Scattered from Jerusalem as a fugitive from Paul's attacks we see Philip first in Samaria, second, on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza speaking to the Ethiopian and third, preaching to all the towns on the coastal strip from Azotus to Caesarea.

We hear echoes of his preaching. To the Samaritans he said that Jesus was 'the Christ' (8:4) and in response to the Ethiopian reading Isaiah 53 he preached to him Jesus.

It is surely no coincidence that Philip's preaching echoed the teaching of Peter in Jerusalem. In the summaries of sermons in Acts we hear Peter say many times that Jesus is 'the Christ' (2:31, 38; 3:18, 20); that Jesus is of the 'seed of David' (2:30), the Lord's 'anointed' (4:26). We can see why Philip preached Jesus as 'the Christ.'

Furthermore, we know why he identified the Servant of Isaiah 53 with Jesus. The Greek text of Isaiah 53 uses the word *pais* ('servant') the very word Peter uses for Jesus - God's 'holy servant - *pais* (4:27, 30). In Isaiah 53:13 God says 'my servant (*pais*) will be glorified'; Peter says 'God glorified his *pais*' Jesus (3:13). In other words, Peter understands that Jesus is the Lord's vicariously suffering *pais*. Since the 'apostles teaching' led by Peter impacted on a disciple like Philip it is no surprise that he immediately identified the *pais* the Ethiopian read about in Isaiah 53 with Jesus.

This suggests that the early apostles based on their involvement with Jesus and his death and resurrection and their Spirit-led reflection of OT texts.

Paul's Tradition about Christ (1Cor 15:3-5/Acts 10:40-41,43)

One of the major examples of oral tradition pre-dating Paul, that was 'handed over' to him and that he in turn 'handed over' is the teaching about the death and resurrection of Christ.

I remind you...the gospel that I preached to you that you also received...

For I handed over to you that which I also received, namely that Christ died for our sins

according to the scriptures that he was buried

that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures

that he appeared to Cephas then to the twelve

then to more than 500 brothers, etc.

Of the various occasions Paul may have 'received' this critical tradition the most likely is at his baptism in Damascus soon after the Lord's confrontation with Paul on the road there.

Most likely this carefully crafted statement of belief was formulated in Jerusalem beforehand by the first apostles. This seems likely based on similarities with Peter's message to Cornelius, the Roman God-fearer.

Luke records a summary of Peter's sermon in his house including these extracts:

To [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

God raised him on the third day

God gave him to be manifest...to us...as witnesses.

If we were listening carefully we would have heard echoes from Paul's words in 1Cor 15:3-5.

Peter's words:

To [Jesus] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name

are echoed in Paul's words to the Corinthians:

Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

Peter's words:

God raised him from the dead on the third day

are echoed almost exactly in Paul's words:

He was raised from the dead on the third day.

Peter's words:

God gave him to be manifest...to us...witnesses

are echoed in Paul's:

He appeared to Cephas ... the Twelve etc.

In other words, Peter's formulated message to Cornelius has critical elements, even exact words, as in the pre-formulated summary Paul handed over to the Corinthians, which he in turn had received many years earlier, most likely at his baptism in Damascus. Most likely, therefore, Paul is depending upon a tradition of Peter's teaching about Christ.

So we have briefly touched on Rom 1:14, Acts 8-9 and 1Cor 15:1-5. In each case we are able to trace back critical Christological elements to the 'apostles' teaching' originating in Jerusalem and led by Peter in the narrow corridor of time after the resurrection of Jesus.

This means that Christology was 'high' from the beginning, that this 'high' Christology launched Christianity. The notion that a 'low' view of Jesus existed at the beginning, that incrementally increased by a series of evolution-like mutations cannot be sustained.

The Gospels: Pre-History

It is important to state the obvious. It is not known when or where the Gospels were written. Clearly they arose after Jesus and before the end of the century when they begin to be quoted in the early church writings.

Because they are written in Greek it is assumed that they did not arise in Israel, where Aramaic was the common language. Because, as it now appears, they are sophisticated literary works it is assumed that they could not have been written by 'mere fishermen'. Both these assumptions – that they could not have arisen in Israel nor be the works of Jesus' original circle – must be questioned. This we will do shortly.

The following observations about the Gospels can be made:

First, each of the finished Gospels had a pre-history that (a) went back through the prior years into the ministry of Jesus himself, and (b) occurred in Israel among Jewish Christians.

Second, Paul's citation of various 'traditions' that had been 'handed over' to him suggests that he had been subjected to oral instruction, most likely at the time of his conversion/baptism (1Cor 11:23; 15:3). In this case, the oral formulation must have been early in the history of earliest Christianity.

Third, Paul's letters also refer to 'word[s] of the Lord' (1Thess 4:15; cf. 1Cor 7:10, 12) and there are numerous echoes of Jesus' teaching (e.g., Rom 13:7; 14:14). Since Paul was mostly away from Israel apart from his early

years as a believer and had been not recently subject to local catechetical teaching it seems likely that these teachings of the Lord existed in written form.

This is confirmed in Luke's preface. It indicates that at the stage preceding his own writing various written texts were in circulation, among them the Gospel of Mark, the Infancy and Resurrection stories, and the teaching sources 'Q' and 'L'.

Fourth, to the five or so sources evident in Luke we must add the source called 'M' that Matthew employed, along with Mark and 'Q.'

In total then, there are no less than six texts that were extant for Luke and Matthew to amalgamate in their Gospels. These we must assume were written in Israel regardless of the destination Matthew and Luke may have had in their minds.

To summarise, in the years following Jesus there was among his followers in Israel intense scholarly activity (a) in establishing catechetical formulations, (b) in committing the teachings of the Lord to writing (though when this happened we cannot be sure), and (c) the assembling of OT texts now seen have been fulfilled in Jesus.

The Underived Gospels: Mark and John

The Gospels of Mark and John differ from Matthew and Luke. It is not possible to establish sources underlying Mark and John. Source criticism has been applied to John, notably by Bultmann and Fortna. Many if not most, however, remain unconvinced that separate strands have been woven together to form the Fourth Gospel.

Likewise many, though perhaps not most, find no evidence that John has depended on the text of Matthew, Mark or Luke. My own conviction is that the Gospels of Mark and John are the end-products of their own separate traditions that have run parallel with one another.

Leaving aside the question where and for whom Mark and John were finally published I argue that the pre-history of each occurred in mission work among Jews and in Jewish mission churches in Israel and that this pre-history stretched back to the earliest preaching after the first Easter.

The Gospel of Mark bears a close relationship with the outline of Peter's preaching to Cornelius summarised in Acts 10. The correspondence between the two is striking. Peter characterises his sermon as 'the word [God] sent to Israel.' Like the Gospel of Mark the sermon begins with John's baptism and the Spirit's 'anointing' of Jesus for his preaching of 'good news' accompanied by 'doing good' in healing all oppressed by the devil. Again, like the written Gospel, the sermon asserts that Jesus did these things both 'in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem'. The sermon, like the Gospel of Mark, states that in Jerusalem they put him to death but God raised him the third day and manifested him to chosen witnesses. Both sermon

and written material begin and end at the same point and follow the same country-city sequence, with an uneven emphasis on Jerusalem.

Clearly, there is a connection between the two. The most likely explanation is that Peter established a format for preaching and that Mark followed that format as the skeletal framework for his written text. To that outline Mark has attached the numerous shortish episodes that narrate the teachings, healings and encounters Jesus had.

For its part, the Gospel of John does not have so clear a narrative outline as the Gospel of Mark. Unlike Mark the Fourth Gospel is predominantly set in Judaea/Jerusalem with occasional periods in Galilee. Both, however, reach their climax in the Holy City, Jerusalem. The Gospel of Mark, like Peter's sermon, is an entity in itself, an evangelistic presentation from start to finish.

We do not read the Gospel of John that way. Rather, in John, the critical elements are (1) the various 'signs' plus accompanying discourses, and (2) the geographical movements between Galilee and Samaria where respectively he is welcomed and acclaimed and Judaea/Jerusalem where he is rejected and finally killed.

To whom are these Gospels directed? In my opinion, the Gospel of Mark is directed towards readers who were impressed with Rome and Roman rule, who needed to understand that Jesus was the true 'Son of God.' The Gospel of John, on the other hand, appears to me to be directed towards Jewish readers who needed to understand that Jesus is the Christ who has superseded and eclipsed Judaism.

Again - in my view - there is no reason to doubt that both Gospels were written in Palestine in the milieu of Jewish Christianity by AD 60, quite possibly during the fifties. I propose that Peter and John had parallel, non-competing missions among Jews, and that each issued in written texts primarily for reading in the churches. Peter's Gospel was committed to writing by his amanuensis Mark.

The Gospel of John was written by John Zebedee, second mentioned apostle in the book of Acts, companion of Peter's and the third 'pillar' of the church in Jerusalem. I accept the tradition that John moved to Roman Asia (c. AD 60?). I feel strongly, though, that the Gospel of John was in principal written in Palestine. The tone of this Gospel is Jewish and Palestinian.

Interestingly it seems that material from the Gospel or from the Johannine tradition has found its way into Luke's text. There are examples of information in Luke that is also in John but not in Matthew and Mark, for example, (1) the woman's anointing of Jesus' feet with costly perfume and her wiping his feet with her hair, (2) Pilate's declaration 'I find no crime in this man', and (3) the post-resurrection appearances that emphasise his wounds and his eating with the disciples. It has been demonstrated that Luke

has depended on John and not vice-versa (Anderson 1996:275-6).

Nagging Questions

Several nagging questions, however, conceivably inspire doubt about this reconstruction.

One is the 'Roman' character of Mark's Gospel. This Gospel is noted for its several 'Latinisms' (e.g., *spekoulator*/executioner; *kenson*/tribute) and also for its 'imperial' sounding beginning, 'The Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God.' The latter is matched by the Roman captain's assertion that Jesus was 'truly Son of God.' 'Gospel' and 'Son of God' were deeply embedded in Roman vocabulary for the Emperor found on coinage and in inscriptions.

Is this really a problem? Palestine was significantly 'Romanised' as we recognise in (1) place names like Caesarea, Tiberias, Sebastos = Augustus, Bethsaida Julia, (2) prominent buildings like the Antonia or Caesareum and (3) Roman names like Agrippa given to the son and grandson of Herod. Roman engineers designed and built the Jerusalem Temple and the great harbour at Caesarea. Roman coins were in everyday use. Roman legionary troops were regularly seen. It is now established that Latin inscriptions and papyri were by no means unknown.

That Mark was written out of and against Roman imperialism is entirely imaginable in a setting in Palestine. It is not necessary to posit an Italian provenance.

Another question relates to both Gospels, that is, they are written in Greek. Half a century ago it was widely believed that the Land of Israel was a Pharisaic enclave and that Hebrew was the language of the scribes and its cousin Aramaic the language of the common man. This almost demanded that these Greek gospels were written outside Palestine. That 'Hebraic' view of Palestine may have been true in the years prior to Alexander's dazzling campaigns in Anatolia, the Levant, Egypt and Mesopotamia. In the years following under the kingdoms of Alexander's 'Successors' those regions were penetrated and in some cases permeated by Hellenistic culture, borne on the wings of Koine Greek. This is true of Israel, as we now know.

The principalities in which Jesus chiefly moved – Galilee and Judaea – were ringed by Greek centres. These included the independent city states on the coast (Gaza, Agrippias, Ascalon, Dora, Tyre and Sidon) and their inland counterparts (Hippos, Gadara, Scythopolis, Gerasa and Philadelphia). Though governed by a Herodian, the tetrarchy of Philip to the north west of Lake Galilee was predominantly Greek in character including the principal cities Bethsaida Julia and Caesarea Philippi.

As well, cities within Judaea and Galilee were hellenised, including Jerusalem itself as well as Azotus, Jamnia, Joppa, Sebaste, Caesarea, Tiberias and Sepphoris. The upper echelons of society - landowners, courtiers, senior military officers, bureaucrats – were linked with those who

held power in the cities, whether a Herod, a High Priest or leader in the Regional Council. These persons would be capable of writing and reading Greek, a factor that tended to cascade the value of Greek learning downwards towards the upwardly mobile, the 'wannabes' of those times.

Furthermore, many belonging to the lower orders would have been able to converse in Greek, especially those buying and selling from the streams of travellers and merchants streaming along the Via Maris or crossing over from the thirty or so Greek city states into Judaea and Galilee to buy and sell.

From the book of Acts we learn of Greek-speaking Jews – the Hellenists – some of whom became disciples, led by Stephen and Philip. The same book points to at least seven Greek-speaking synagogues in Jerusalem; there may have been many more. One of the most prized archaeological finds in Jerusalem is the Theodotus Inscription written in Greek, pointing to a synagogue and guest-house for Diaspora Jews. Needless to say numerous other Greek remains have been found – whether funerary inscriptions in Jerusalem or texts on papyrus in Qumran, Masada and Muraba'at.

In short, the world of Jesus and the missionaries in Israel was a bi-lingual world in which Greek was highly significant. It appears that many of the OT texts quoted by Jesus were from the Septuagint, the Greek OT. Evidently Jesus was familiar with the Greek OT. The incident with the Syro-Phoenician woman in Tyre and Sidon implies a conversation in Greek. Likewise, Pilate's interrogation of Jesus implies a Greek conversation.

It is striking, though not altogether surprising in view of the above, that these Gospels and indeed sources used in Matthew and Luke should be in Greek. True, Mark has Jesus speaking in Aramaic on several occasions (Talitha Koumi, Ephthatha, Abba, Eloi Eloi Sabacthani) and John mentions some places by their Aramaic names (e.g., Bethzatha, Gabbatha, Golgotha) and uses the Aramaic words Messiah and Rabbouni. Mostly these are translated into Greek, implying that the readers are not Aramaic speakers.

So did Jesus always speak Aramaic, in which case the first missionaries fairly soon translated his words into Greek? Alternatively, did he speak Greek or Aramaic dependent on the situation? Or did he chiefly teach in Greek and only occasionally revert to Aramaic? This would explain why the Gospel tradition is uniformly Greek, perhaps in this language from the beginning? If the Aramaic and Hebrew culture proved hostile and resistant it might further explain the Greek direction taken by the early missions to Israel.

A further tantalising possibility is worth mentioning. It is that one or more of Jesus' disciples may have written down his acts and words. We now know of the existence of palm sized writing tablets of wood and wax in use at that time, including in Israel. If, for example, a Levi kept records of

passers by it is not impossible to conceive of such a person noting the teachings of their rabbi.

At this stage certainty is not attainable. But it is possible, quite possible in fact, that some of Jesus' teaching was in Greek and that it was written down at the time. This would explain the universal use of Greek in the Gospels of Mark and John and in various 'narratives' used by Luke and sources underlying Matthew.

Yet a third question sits at the back of the mind. Surely the original disciples of Jesus were too backward to produce documents like John and Mark that are increasingly seen as quite sophisticated literary forms? That they were 'only fishermen' and spurned by the chief priests as *agrammatoi kai idiotai* is the frequently unspoken assumption of the sometimes 'spiffy' modern day 'chief priests' of the theological academies. 'How could such men write such works? They must have been written late, by much cleverer, though unknown people.'

It is not recognised, as it should be, that the further one moves on from Jesus toward the end of the first and into the second century, the richness of understanding and articulation diminishes. Do we really stack the Didache, the Letters of Clement, Barnabas, Ignatius and Polycarp next to the Gospels and the Letters of our canon? These are long-winded, boring texts when set alongside the succinct treasures of the canonical writings from generations closer to Jesus.

Furthermore, it is worth remembering that not infrequently God raises up people from obscurity. This is true of Jesus in particular, whose home was a tiny and remote mountain village that suffered from a local proverb that said no good thing could come from it. The scholars in Jerusalem mocked him. 'How is it that this fellow has *letters* having never studied?' – that is 'with us'! Yet the existence of the Gospels and the rise and spread of Christianity is testament to his unique genius.

John Zebedee had been a disciple of this 'rabbi' as he had (most likely) been of 'rabbi' John the Baptist beforehand. In any case, originally from hellenised Bethsaida he was part owner in a fishing co-op in Capernaum shared with his brother James and Simon and Andrew bar Jonah. Intelligence and relative affluence with it is implied, and some level of education. His mother kept company with leading women like Joanna, wife of the tetrarch's estate manager. Some connection with the High Priest is also implied. The impression of a 'mere fisherman' begins to diminish.

John Mark has two names, one Jewish the other Greek or Roman, implying a family that spanned several cultures. The mother's house – most likely where the 'upper room' was located – ran to a servant and was sufficiently large to accommodate the group praying for Peter's release. This man accompanied Barnabas (his cousin) and Paul in the mission to Cyprus and Pamphylia. He was called *hyperetes*,

'catechist.' Peter calls him 'my son' and he is connected with Peter as his 'interpreter' by Papias, an early authority connected by only one remove from the apostles. Is there any good reason this John Mark might not have written the Gospel that bears his name?

Jesus and the Rise of Christianity.

Regrettably, Luke is so passionately concerned to tell Theophilus how the good news came from Israel to Rome it did not occur to him that people like us would love to know more about the first missionaries in Israel itself. For in that mission to the Jews of Israel lies the long-lost secret of the formation of the Gospel, both as to its skeletal outline and its numerous component stories.

Questions like: Was that tradition mainly oral or in writing? Was it initially in Aramaic? Or did Jesus teach substantially in Greek anyway? Did the tradition arise solely orally or did scribes record Jesus' utterances?

Answers are not yet certainly forthcoming, though the more we know about Palestine in that era the closer we may be getting to knowing. It would come as no surprise to me to discover that Jesus mainly taught in Greek and that his words were recorded. That at least sits well with the emergence of collections of teachings and indeed entire Gospels within two or three decades of Jesus.

So much, then, for these windows into early Christianity. Not all the details are necessarily as I have sketched them. But they are close enough. But do we see what this means?

Earliest Christianity has a high Christology and is historically back-to-back with Jesus. Earliest Christology is the Christology of the first Christians. Logically the Christology of the first Christians articulated the Christology of Jesus himself, authenticated by the powerful realities of the resurrection and the coming of the Spirit.

The attempts of re-definition offered by Crossan and Casey, for example, and before them of Bousset have at least one thing in common, whatever their differences. They refuse to face the facts - the historical facts – about Jesus, that he was in fact the Son of God, the Lord and the Christ. To go down one or other of those tracks is to embark on a journey into fantasy, not a journey into historical reality. Those journeys seem attractive to the post-modern mind as it twists and turns to escape personal commitment. On the other hand, the documents of the New Testament bring us face to face with the historical Jesus who is now the risen and living Christ, with the summons to bow the knee and the heart to him as Lord of all, as Peter told Cornelius.

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