

## **Lecture I**

### **Chapter One Jesus**

The people who came to be known as Israel began with Moses. The people who came to be known as Christians began with Jesus and it is this people which we know as “the Church”. Thus Jesus is known as the founder of the Church.

#### **Early Life of Jesus**

The Gospels record a great deal about what Jesus said and did, however a detailed history of Jesus in the modern sense eludes us. For example, we are not sure when Jesus was born. Estimates range from 6 BC -- 6 AD, with the best guess being somewhere between 6 and 4 BC. The reasons for these guesses are based on the fact that the Gospel of Matthew indicates that Jesus was born in a house (Joseph’s home?) in Bethlehem during the reign of Herod the Great and Herod died in 4 BC. This Gospel also reports that Herod, searching for Jesus, commanded that all infants two years old and younger be killed, therefore at the time of the death of the “Holy Innocents” (assuming that this is a historical event) Jesus may have been two years old, thus the possibility of His birth in 6 BC. After a sojourn in Egypt, Matthew reports that the family of Jesus then settled in Nazareth.

The Gospel of Luke, on the other hand, says that Joseph and Mary traveled from their home town of Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea for the birth of Jesus. According to Luke, the trip to Bethlehem was in response to a Roman census of the whole Roman Empire ordered by Augustus during the time when Quirinius was legate of Syria.

However, Roman records show that Quirinius held that post from 6 to 9 AD. Furthermore, the only census recorded during the time when Quirinius was legate in Syria involved only Judea, not Galilee and was during the years 6-7 AD. There is, however, no record of a single Roman census of the whole Empire during the long reign of Augustus (31 BC - 14 AD).

Therefore, most scholars agree that in the Infancy Narratives of Matthew and Luke (written some eighty years after the event) we are not dealing with history in the modern sense, but with an important theological interpretation of the birth of the historical person, Jesus, aimed at answering the theological question: Who was Jesus?.”

#### **The Public Life of Jesus - The Sources**

Except for the Infancy Narratives, the life of Jesus before His public ministry is not mentioned in the canonical Gospels, with the exception of the visit to the Temple where

the twelve year old Jesus becomes separated for a time from Joseph and Mary. The beginning of His public ministry is usually connected with His baptism by John in the Jordan which occurred sometime after the mid-twenties AD.

While Jesus is mentioned in passing by the Roman historians Tacitus and Pliny the Younger (and perhaps Suetonius) and the Jewish historian Josephus, what is reported from Christian sources of His public ministry, until His death between 27 and 30 AD, is contained in the written Gospel accounts which were based largely on oral traditions and composed by writers who were not themselves eyewitnesses to the life of Jesus.

The first of the four canonical Gospels was written around 70 AD, probably in Rome, and later attributed to someone named Mark. The Gospel itself does not mention an author and scholars think that the later addition “according to Mark” identified an otherwise unknown, Greek-speaking Christian who wished to remain anonymous. Between 75 and 85 AD there appeared two other Gospels. One was an anonymous Gospel (attributed to the apostle Matthew in the middle of the 2nd century) probably written in Antioch (Syria) for a community of Jewish and Gentile Christians. The other Gospel was also attributed to a man named Luke, a physician and a companion of Paul. However, the actual author of Luke was probably a Greek-speaking convert to Judaism before becoming a Christian. He also wrote Acts.

Matthew and Luke used Mark as their main source. Matthew uses about 80% of Mark, however his Gospel is 50% longer than Mark. Luke uses 350 of the 661 verses found in Mark, but often changes their emphasis. Matthew and Luke also seem to have another common unidentified source which scholars refer to as “Q” (*Quelle* - “source” in German). In addition to Mark and Q, Matthew and Luke have materials from sources unique to them designated at “M” and “L”.

The Fourth Gospel, John, is quite different in style and content from the other three (The Synoptics) and was written between 85 and 110 AD probably in Ephesus (Syria). In the second century this Gospel was attributed to John, son of Zebedee, one of the apostles. However, most scholars now posit more that one author - a writer(s) and a later editor. All authors seem to have written in the tradition of the anonymous “disciple who Jesus loved”, a tradition that circulated within the so-called Johannine community in Syria.

While these Gospels give us accounts of the public life and teachings of Jesus they are not modern historical accounts, but theological in nature based on historical accounts. In other words, they recount certain remembered historical events as seen “in depth” in light of a post-resurrection faith. It is obvious that many people saw and even participated in these same historical events - preaching, miracles, passion and death - of the life of Jesus as did the apostles, but were unable to see these events “in depth”. Thus they did not become followers of Jesus based simply on these historical experiences. The apostles themselves did not begin to understand the “in depth” meaning of these historical events until after the resurrection (as attested especially in Mark).

Thus the Gospels writers did not recount these historical events as history for history's sake, but as instruments for passing on their faith in the risen Jesus based primarily on a post-resurrection, faith-understanding of Jesus. For example, the stories of Jesus raising the dead and announcing the forgiveness of sins are seen in post-resurrection faith-perspective as a sign that the Kingdom of God had begun in Jesus who had divine power and authority. The raising of Lazarus from the dead is not the simple recalling of a quaint marvel, but a "sign" that not only will Jesus conquer death and rise again, but that we too will be able to experience a resurrection from the dead by the power of God.

Each Gospel has a distinctive message. Mark focuses on the Kingdom of God and the humanity of Jesus. Matthew stresses three themes: Jesus as the new Moses (lawgiver), Jesus as Messiah (Christ) and the near approach of the Kingdom of God. In Luke, Jesus personifies the Jewish people and their history and is their fulfillment. Luke also has a strong ethical message, condemning the wealthy and upholding the poor - not just the poor in spirit. John has no infancy narrative and begins with Jesus as the pre-existent, divine Word of God. Where Mark emphasizes the humanity of Jesus, John emphasizes His divinity. He is the Word made flesh, but He is aware of His divinity and is in total charge of His life.

Therefore, the Gospels do not intend to give us history or modern biography, but to answer the questions "Who was Jesus?" and "What was His message?". They are works of faith to give nourishment to the faithful - written by believers for believers. Thus, in this type of writing it is not important that some historical "facts" conflict (the Infancy Narratives or the day Jesus dies) and it is understandable that Jesus and His message are presented from various points of view and each with a different focus e.g., the humanity of Jesus in Mark and divinity of Jesus in John. How could it be otherwise? No one can completely absorb and explain the significance another human being, much less the Son of God made flesh. The Gospel messages are like pieces of a mosaic, which together begin to give us insight into Jesus and His message.

One more example, Jesus is referred to in the NT by many names and titles. These include among others: Messiah, Prophet, Lord, Mediator, Son of David, High Priest, Son of Man, Risen Lord, Suffering Servant, Savior, Word of God, Healer, Good Shepherd, Vine, Logos, Teacher, Lamb of God, Bread of Life, Son of God, and the Way, the Truth and the Life. All these names and titles describe Jesus, but from different points of view. However, none of these nor all of them together begin to express the fullness of who Jesus was.

Given the judgment that the Gospels are not modern history, the question has arisen about whether there is a distinction between the Jesus of history and the Jesus of faith. The various "quests for the historical Jesus" since the 18th century have asked the questions: "Can we find the historical Jesus?" and "Is the Jesus of faith largely a product of the religious imaginations and convictions of His followers?" Most modern scholars have concluded that while we can grant that many of the stories about Jesus are not history in the strict sense and that the Gospel writers may well have put words in the mouth of

Jesus, nevertheless the Gospel accounts are based on a real person with a real history and a definite message which is faithfully contained in the Gospel accounts. The literary forms used - midrash, hymns, liturgical formulae, parables, "speech in character" - may be somewhat foreign to modern writers and audiences, but the message is a message for all time and derived from a historical Jesus whom Christians, in faith, call the Christ.

So who is the person who comes to us through the Gospels? Most importantly, the Gospels present Jesus as the Son of God. In the magnificent Prologue of John, Jesus is the eternal, divine, Word (Logos). Through Him all things are created and have life. He comes to give life to all who receive Him. He makes known to us the Father. He and the Father are one. Mark begins his Gospel with the declaration that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, while the rest of his Gospel goes on to focus on the humanity of Jesus.

Interestingly, for Mark the first person in his Gospel to recognize Jesus as "Son of God" is a Gentile, the Roman centurion present at the crucifixion. Matthew and Luke begin their Gospels with the Infancy Narratives which proclaim Jesus as born of a virgin by the power of God. Here angels, Jews (shepherds) and Gentiles (Magi) adore the newborn Son of God.

### **The Public Life of Jesus - The Message**

The Gospels convey the message of Jesus in remembering what He said - His teachings - and how He lived - His approach to people. There was more to remember of Jesus than could be or was recorded. John's Gospel ends with this admission: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (Jn 21:25).

So why were certain rememberings written and others not? Part of the answer is that those things written down were judged to contain the core of the Christian faith based on the experience of the historical and risen Jesus. The other important reason is that certain events and sayings were recorded by Gospel writers to address current issues or events in their various communities, just as Paul's letters addressed the special current needs of his communities. For example, many scholars think that Mark stresses the denial of Jesus by Peter to comfort those in Rome who had denied their faith during the time of Nero's persecution. If Peter denied Jesus, but was forgiven and became an exemplar Christian, they too could be forgiven and renew their Christian lives. Someone once said that the Good News is good news for someone - someone in a unique time, place and circumstance.

Scholars also think that John's Gospel omits the bread and wine ritual of the Last Supper and substitutes the "washing of the feet" to emphasize to the Johannine community that simply celebrating the Lords Supper in memory of Jesus means nothing if their lives are not transformed into lives of service to one another in imitation of Jesus. The Christian life is not confined to ritual, but to a life of service to others, especially the poor.

What Jesus taught - Of course, Jesus taught many things and in many ways. However, His central message, His “good news”, was that of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is established on earth when all people accept the reign of God over their hearts and minds, thus attaining their full humanity - their salvation from all that diminishes them as human beings (sin). The Kingdom is possible only by an act of God, but must be accepted by people. The Kingdom is sometimes seen as both present and future. It grows like a mustard seed and will come to full maturity in the future by the hand of God. Some sayings of Jesus seem to indicate that the Kingdom would be established within the lives of his disciples, later Christian thought saw the fullness of the Kingdom coming sometime later at the Second Coming of Jesus.

The Kingdom is prepared for in the lives of people when they open themselves up to power of God and strive to love God and love neighbor. People must change their minds and their lives to accept and enter the Kingdom. No religious rituals make one automatically a member of the Kingdom, only a life of love and service in the imitation of Jesus. Jesus comes to give His life to all, a life at one with God. Jesus is the Bread of Life. He comes that we might have life, life in abundance. All of this is a free gift to those who accept it. Those who are made aware of Jesus and His message of the Kingdom are challenged to accept Him and his message in faith. However, many who are unaware of Jesus and His message can enter the Kingdom now and forever when their lives are dedicated to the service of others, especially those in need - “when I was hungry you gave me to eat, thirsty and you gave me drink, etc.”- a life of service to friend and enemy alike. “Love one another as I have loved you.” (Jn. 13:34)

When Jesus raised people from the dead or healed them or forgave their sins this was a sign that their faith in Him gave them life. His parables revealed a Father who never condemned, but always offered life. The Prodigal Son’s return to his father was greeted with a banquet, a welcome home, not a condemnation. The life of the Kingdom is there for those who repent and “come home” to their Father’s house. The Kingdom of God is like a banquet open to all who have given their lives over to the reign of God i.e., those who have opened themselves up to love God and neighbor with all their heart.

How Jesus Lived - Jesus lived His public life as one of open fellowship with all sorts people. He did not confine Himself to an exclusive band of followers. He dined with the rich and the poor, with his followers and strangers. He sought out in a special way the company of the despised, helpless and the rejected. He communed with children, tax collectors and harlots. To the poor, the sick, the suffering and the outcast He gave friendship and hope.

He confronted hypocrites among the religious leaders and gave stern warning to those who let wealth, family and selfish concerns keep them from a life of service in the Kingdom. He confronted evil, but without violence. He defined authentic authority among His followers and within society as one of service, not of power to control or repress. They were to serve, not be served. This life of service was not to be abandoned even if it meant loss of wealth, family, friends or even led to suffering and death.

Nothing was more valuable than one's commitment to the Kingdom - for only this life was true life and would bring one to eternal life with the Father. Ultimately, there was nothing to fear, for the Kingdom was all that mattered.

### **The Public Life of Jesus - The Events**

In a brief outline, the Gospels sketch out the life of Jesus highlighting certain important events that are designed to help us understand who Jesus was. These include birth, the baptism by John, the temptations of Satan, the Transfiguration, preaching in Galilee, the journey to Jerusalem, a brief ministry in Jerusalem, the passion and death, and the resurrection/ascension.

Before entering His passion, the Synoptic Gospels record Jesus gathering his disciples for a final meal, probably on the day of Passover. At that meal He announced a new covenant, one sealed in His life (blood) and revealing a new deliverance from sin and death. As the Passover meal made the ancient saving event a present reality to those who celebrated it, Jesus would use this new covenant meal as a way to become present to His followers until the Kingdom comes in its fullness.

The Gospels were written near the end of the first century at a time when Christians had been expelled from the synagogues and from Jerusalem. Christians could no longer see themselves as Jews. They were also confronting the Roman government and trying not to antagonize it. Thus, the Gospel accounts of the passion and death of Jesus seem to place the most of the blame for these events at the feet of the Jewish authorities and Jewish people. Pilate, as a representative of Rome, is seen as judging Jesus not to be guilty and finally giving in to pressure from Jewish authorities to have Him crucified. In some Eastern Christian Churches Pilate was even venerated as a saint. However, this picture of Pilate as a fair judge and one easily intimidated by Jewish authorities does not quite square with the picture of Pilate as a ruthless, violent, Jew hater as painted by contemporary Roman writers like Pliny and Josephus.

The truth of the matter is probably more complicated. Certainly Jesus would not have been crucified without full consent of Pilate. In truth, Jesus was probably judged more of a threat to Roman peace and order than to Jewish sensibilities. Indeed, both Roman and Jewish authorities had reason to fear and thus punish Jesus. Unfortunately, these anti-Jewish sentiments in the Gospels have been used as an excuse for ill treatment of the Jews throughout Christian history.

John's Gospel seems especially hostile to "the Jews" and one explanation for this curiosity is offered by Raymond Brown. He suggests that perhaps many of the converts of the Johannine community were former Samaritans, who since the time of Solomon had little use for their spiritual "cousins" in Judah. Perhaps this historical animosity, plus the events of the passion and death of Jesus created phenomenon in John's Gospel. Whatever the case, anti-Jewish sentiment has scarred Christian history from the first century to our own.

## **Chapter 2**

### **The Church Spreads Across the Empire**

The Early Jerusalem Community -- As Christians look back on their beginnings, they cite the Book of Acts to indicate that the Church began on the feast of Pentecost. This was the ancient Jewish harvest festival (Feast of Weeks) celebrated fifty days after the Sabbath that followed Passover (Lv. 23:15ff). In Acts, Pentecost was fifty days after the resurrection and was the day that the disciples, including Mary, received the gift of the Holy Spirit and were confirmed in their faith that Jesus had risen from the dead and would return soon to establish the Kingdom of God in its fullness.

According to Acts, following this Pentecost experience Peter preached the first sermon and worked the first miracle. It is often called the “birthday” of the Church, because those who heard the preaching of Peter and others were now called not only to repentance, but also to baptism and reception of the Holy Spirit as signs of faith and admittance to the community of the followers of Jesus. The converts on Pentecost were reported as coming from many distant lands representing the entire Roman world, indicating that the new faith in Jesus was to have universal implications. However, all of these early converts were Jews. Gentiles were not yet part of the picture.

Acts 2:41-47 paints an idyllic picture of the early Christian community centered in Jerusalem, growing in numbers, breaking bread together, while its members continued to visit the Temple and live their ordinary Jewish lives. While they had early confrontations with Jewish leaders, they still considered themselves practicing Jews who saw Jesus as the promised Messiah sent to restore Israel and establish the reign of God, as John the Baptist and others had prophesized. Other Jews probably regarded them as just another Jewish sect, like the Essenes. Any idea or realization of a separate “Christian Church” was still on the far horizon.

Early Movements of Christianity Beyond Jerusalem -- Eventually the message about Jesus was carried to other Jewish communities outside of Jerusalem. Like Jesus, early Christian missionaries focused their efforts on the “lost sheep of the house of Israel”. Probably the first to broaden the missionary effort were members of the Hellenists led by Stephen. The Hellenists were Greek-speaking Jews who visited or resided in Jerusalem. They spoke Greek, used the Greek translation of the Old Testament scriptures (the Septuagint) and held unorthodox views concerning the Temple.

In a dispute over the treatment of Hellenists widows, the leaders of the Jerusalem community appointed seven Hellenist deacons to see to the proper distribution of food to their widows. The Seven were also filled with the Holy Spirit and preached to other Hellenists and later to Gentiles. After condemnation by Jewish authorities, Stephen was stoned to death. His Hellenist followers were then persecuted and driven out of Jerusalem.

Concerning the travels and mission of those followers of Stephen who were driven out of

Jerusalem, Acts 11:19-21 recounts that their primary mission was to the Jews, but that they also took the fateful step of preaching to the “Greeks” or Gentiles:

Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word to none except Jews. But there were some of them, men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who on coming to Antioch spoke to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number that believed turned to the Lord.

Acts also notes that it was in Antioch that “the disciples were for the first time called Christians”. However, these Gentile Christian converts were of a different sort. They were admitted to the Christian community without becoming Jews -- without circumcision and without commitment to the observances of the Law.

Paul would later adopt the same practice with his Gentile converts and thus precipitate the first serious controversy in the early Christian community -- must Gentile converts become Jews before becoming Christians?. The resolution of this conflict in favor of Paul’s view would pave the way for the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the Empire.

Paul the missionary -- Paul’s personal experience of the risen Jesus convinced him that Jesus would make no sense if the Jewish Law was sufficient for salvation. Thus, the Law had been superseded by Jesus. Neither circumcision nor adherence to the details of the Law were necessary for those who put their faith in Jesus. Therefore, for Paul the Gentiles who accepted Jesus were not required to become Jews.

This “liberal” view contrasted sharply with the “conservative” view of many in the Jerusalem community and other Jewish converts outside Jerusalem. To settle this important issue a council was called in Jerusalem probably in the year 49. Peter who was somewhat ambivalent about the issue, finally conceded that salvation came through faith in Jesus and James, speaking for the conservative Jerusalem community, finally declared that circumcision would not be required of Gentile converts, but recommended that for the sake of communal peace, certain Jewish customs should be retained - the blood taboo, avoidance of food offered to idols, etc.

Thus, Paul not only facilitated the shedding of an outward, cultural Jewish cast to Christianity, but he also preached his message in theological terms that would be understood and accepted by Gentiles formed by a Hellenistic culture devoid of a Jewish historical base. On the other hand, Paul continued to make concessions to Jewish/Christian sensibilities when necessary, as in his Epistle to the Romans and his conduct when in Jerusalem, however his main effort was to make the Christian message understandable to the Gentiles.

Having freed the Christian message from its conservative Jewish moorings, Paul was now

free to concentrate his remarkable energies on spreading this message throughout the Roman empire. From the information available, no single person was more instrumental than Paul in the spread of Christianity within the Roman world.

Peter also set out from Jerusalem to preach the “good news”, but we have little information about his accomplishments. Tradition attests that he was finally martyred in Rome under Nero. Except for later legends, we do not know if or how others apostles spread the Christian message. Christian communities did sprang up in Egypt, Spain, India and many other areas of the Roman world, but how and by whom they were established remains a historical mystery and the stuff of legends.

The dominance of the Jerusalem Church ended with the death of James, the brother of the Lord, and fall of Jerusalem the Romans in 70 AD. Near the end of the “Jewish War” of 66-70 AD, the Romans marched on Jerusalem. Some 80,000 Roman soldiers finally took Jerusalem and its 600,000 inhabitants and pilgrims. Well over 100,000 Jews died of starvation or were killed, some 97,000 were taken prisoner, the rest sold into slavery. The Romans then leveled the city and, contrary to the orders of their commander Titus, destroyed the Temple never to be rebuilt.

These events and the subsequent expulsion of Jewish Christians from the synagogues and their condemnation as heretics by a council of Pharisees, destroyed forever the possibility of Christianity existing as a Jewish sect and set Christianity irrevocably on its present course -- out of Palestine and existing as a free standing Church of the Gentiles.

By the beginning of the fourth century, Christianity had evolved from a tiny Jewish sect, to a distinct religion with adherents throughout the Roman empire. Even granting the heroic efforts of Paul, Peter and other missionaries, how did this unique religious phenomenon become a reality? Historians, sociologists and other have offered many reasons. These include several unique political, social and cultural conditions of the first century:

- 1) Rome had consolidated an empire that encircled the Mediterranean Sea. Not only did it provide a political unity, it had also adopted and spread a fairly common Hellenistic culture which included the Greek language, philosophy, literature, political thought, art and a general educational outlook that considered this entire cultural to be of universal appeal and application to all peoples. Thus, it is no accident that the New Testament was written in Greek or that John’s Gospel could refer to Jesus as the Divine “Logos”. This universal culture was rich soil for the introduction of a universal religion.
- 2) The Roman empire was at peace. Augustus had brought the “peace of Rome” (*pax Romana*) to his empire. This peaceful condition, coupled with the many fine roads and transportation systems available throughout the empire to facilitate trade, greatly enabled and facilitated the missionary travels of Paul and others as they spread the faith.
- 3) Paganism in the first century was quite vibrant, but there was some spiritual unrest and

spiritual hunger. The ancient Roman/Greek religion was still accepted and practiced, but many of the old Roman cults were mainly ritualistic, without any creeds, theologies or ethical demands. Into this atmosphere, many eastern religious cults, especially the mystery cults, had begun to be adopted by many within the empire. The mystery cults were so called because only cult members were initiated into the sacred rites which imparted divine knowledge that would guarantee the protection of the god and the assurance of eternal salvation.

The mystery cults like that of Cybele and especially Mithra also looked for a redeemer that would free the human spirit from the flesh and grant eternal life. Therefore, the culture was ripe for Christianity offering a redeemer with a universal message of the meaning of life, strong ethical demands crystallized into the command to love self and others, even one's enemies, and the promise of eternal life to those who believed and lived in the imitation of the redeemer.

For all the reasons above, Christianity was attractive to many throughout the Roman empire and its adoption by Constantine in the early 4th century would give it legal legitimacy and facilitate its rapid growth throughout the Empire (see Ch. 4). But the greatest reason for its success and staying power was that in Jesus and His teachings the universal questions about human life were effectively addressed: Who is God? What is the meaning of human life? How should I live? What is the meaning of death? Why is there evil? How can I be saved from my sins? Am I loved?