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Robert L. Bloom
Gettysburg College

Basil L. Crapster
Gettysburg College

Harold A. Dunkelberger
Gettysburg College

See next page for additional authors

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3. Jerusalem: Jesus Christ and St. Paul

Abstract

What we know of the actual life of Jesus comes almost exclusively from the four gospels, primarily from the first three. The earliest of these, believed to be Mark, was written about thirty years after the death of Jesus. Neither Mark nor the other gospels was compiled with a strictly biographical purpose in mind. Each writer selected from written and oral sources what he thought was necessary to provide the Church with an inspiring account of the sayings and acts of its founder, an account which could be used for edifying the faithful and for spreading the gospel. In all probability there is in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John a record of no more than 50 or 60 separate days in the life of Jesus. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, gospels, Jesus, New Testament

Disciplines

Classics | History of Christianity | Religion

Comments

This is a part of [Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold A. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

3. Jesus Christ and St. Paul

What we know of the actual life of Jesus comes almost exclusively from the four gospels, primarily from the first three. The earliest of these, believed to be Mark, was written about thirty years after the death of Jesus. Neither Mark nor the other gospels was compiled with a strictly biographical purpose in mind. Each writer selected from written and oral sources what he thought was necessary to provide the Church with an inspiring account of the sayings and acts of its founder, an account which could be used for edifying the faithful and for spreading the gospel. [In all probability there is in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John a record of no more than 50 or 60 separate days in the life of Jesus.]

For hundreds of years the accuracy of the New Testament account of the life of Jesus was scarcely questioned. Then, in the nineteenth century, scholars began to scrutinize the New Testament as they did the Old. Some concluded that it was next to impossible to learn anything about the historic Jesus, the man who had actually lived. Others held the evidence indicated that the general picture of his life as it is found in the gospel account was substantially correct. The consensus of opinion in more recent years has tended to shift to the latter position.

Historians are generally agreed on the acceptance of a minimum body of facts from the gospels concerning Jesus: that he was born in Judea, during the reign of Caesar Augustus; that he grew to manhood in Nazareth, where he was a carpenter by trade; that his active ministry of teaching and preaching extended over a period of about three years, or perhaps even less; that he was a Jew who preached primarily to Jews; that in many ways, as for example in his stress on the importance of the spirit over the letter of the law, he resembled the Hebrew prophets; that he spoke frequently of the kingdom of God (exactly what he meant by this term has been much debated); that he emphasized the necessity of doing the will of God; that his chief opposition came from fellow Jews, some of whom felt that he was making false claims and jeopardizing their preferred position with the Romans; that he was tried by Jews, who were in charge of the administration of justice in Palestine; that the sentence of death was confirmed by the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate; and that he was crucified.

The personality of Jesus Christ with its capacity to inspire men is unique in history. It has been held that the supreme miracle of Christianity is, in reality, the faith which for two thousand years Christ has commanded in the lives of millions of men and women. Within a few days of His crucifixion, this extraordinary capacity was felt by some of His dispirited followers. They were convinced that He had risen from the dead and that they had seen Him. The Resurrection was enough to

convince them that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. The Gospel of Luke records some parting words of Jesus to His followers. They were to preach repentance and remission of sins, in His name, "among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." Also, they were to wait in Jerusalem until they would receive "power from on high." The Acts of the Apostles tells of a deeply spiritual experience which came to a number of those followers on the Jewish festival of Pentecost. This event is taken by the Christian Church to mark the occasion on which the Holy Spirit, which had been promised by Jesus, was first felt to be present in the experience of His adherents.

Christians regard Pentecost as the real beginning of the Church, but for a long time thereafter it bore little resemblance to the powerful institution that it was eventually to become. The early followers believed in the imminent return of Christ -- the second coming -- to judge all men and in due time bring the episode of human history to an end. This belief put the early Christian communities on the spot. Taken at face value, it could render the organization of a Church and the refinement of beliefs superfluous. However, it did not prevent them from resolutely carrying their message to a wider circle of listeners or from making converts. What may well have been the kernel of this earliest Christian preaching is contained in the following sermon of Peter recorded in the Acts:

And Peter opened his mouth and said: Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the word which he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.*

Next to Jesus himself, the most important figure in first century Christianity was Paul (c. 1 - c. 64). He was born in Tarsus, an important Hellenistic center in Asia Minor. Of a strict Jewish family, he was sent to Jerusalem to receive

* Acts 10:34-43. Revised Standard Version of the Holy Bible.

training as a scribe. His first reaction to Christianity was one of strong hostility and he threw his active support to those who were persecuting its adherents. There followed his dramatic conversion (c. 34) and subsequent acceptance as a coworker by the naturally somewhat reluctant Christian leaders in Jerusalem. To the end of his life Paul never wavered in the commitment he had made. He preached and founded churches among Jews and non-Jews. Paul was the first great Christian missionary. His labors extended from Asia Minor to Rome and from Macedonia to Malta. His letters provide us with a fuller look at him than it is possible to gain from almost any of his contemporaries. It seems probable that he suffered martyrdom at Rome.

The earliest members of the Christian communities were Jews. It took them some time to decide that theirs was not simply a reform movement within Judaism. At first reluctant to abandon entirely the ancient faith, they continued to meet its requirements. Furthermore, they insisted that all Gentile converts submit to circumcision and similarly obey the Jewish law. Among the first to argue the unwisdom of this policy was Paul, at whose urging it was modified. This proved to be the first step to its eventual abandonment.

Paul believed that there had been a time when the Jewish law was necessary for men, but that the need for it had now passed. The person of Christ had been substituted in its stead. Jesus, God become man, had borne on the cross the weight of sin for all mankind. His resurrection was both a sign of his divinity and of the validity of his promise of eternal life to the faithful. Salvation comes to those who have faith in the power of Christ to accomplish this mighty work. Faith is the key, a faith that transforms into righteousness the daily life of the believer. Wherever he went, Paul preached this doctrine of "Jesus and the resurrection," first to the Jews and then, since they usually rejected him, to the Gentiles. We can see that, in his mind, Jesus the Jewish Messiah became Christ crucified and resurrected, the Saviour of all men, both Jews and Gentiles. For him, this represented a clean break with Judaism and it presaged a clean break for the other Christians as well. But it was by no means a rejection of the whole Hebrew legacy. Paul's God was still the sovereign creator God of the Hebrews, but He was considered by Paul to have revealed Himself anew and finally in Jesus Christ, whose life, death, and resurrection became the central facts of history.

For a time Christianity appeared to outsiders to be just another sect of Judaism; it is doubtful whether the Roman government was able to distinguish between the two before the year 100. The Jewish leadership was as vigorous in its rejection of Christianity as it had been in condemning Jesus. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death by Jews. There were several reasons for this hostility. No firm opinion had crystallized of exactly what the Messiah would be like. To accept a false Messiah was certainly a sin. The Jews had rejected pretenders before and they would have to be prepared to continue

rejecting them. Moreover, as long as Christianity was regarded as a Jewish sect by the Romans, it threatened the favored political position which the Jews enjoyed in the empire. Finally, some Jews were hostile because the Christians often tried to proselyte among them and especially among their recent converts.

During the Pax Romana Roman roads, the law and order maintained on land and sea, and the fact that there were only two languages necessary to communicate with this vast empire facilitated the spread of Christianity. Until about the year 70, when the Romans responded to a Jewish revolt by destroying the city, Jerusalem was the chief center of the new faith. No one city arose immediately to take its place, although Antioch was important during the second century and Alexandria during the third. By the year 200 there were Christians in all parts of the empire, although most of them were to be found in the eastern provinces. They were both men and women; freemen and slaves; rich and poor; with influence and without; and, although paganism remained strongly entrenched in the countryside, they were both urban and rural.

As it was preached in the Roman world, the Christian message of salvation bore resemblances to the mystery religions. But more significant than the similarities were the definite advantages which Christianity had over the mystery religions: an historic figure from the recent past as a founder; unequivocal monotheism (which attracted many more persons than it repelled); a stronger missionary spirit; a greater optimism; high ethical standards; and, after a time, a much superior organization, which created a fellowship that was truly empire-wide. The general consensus of opinion is that the mystery religions never threatened seriously the existence of Christianity. In any event, they disappeared.