

Humanities 2

Lecture 6

The Origins of Christianity and the Earliest Gospels

Important to understand the origins of Christianity in a broad set of cultural, intellectual, literary, and political perspectives

Also important to understand the origins of Christianity relative to Jewish and Roman religious practice

Judaism: emerged as a series of practices, grounded in an emerging canon of sacred texts that became the “Old Testament” (i.e., the first five books of Moses, the “Torah,” followed by a series of historical narratives, poetic and philosophical texts, and prophetic utterances).

Ancient Judaism does not define itself as a religion in relationship to heretical practices or beliefs. There is no formal “orthodoxy” but rather an emergent group of sects defined geographically and socially.

It does define itself as a monotheistic religion set against the polytheistic practices of the ancient Near East.

Central to early Judaism is a fundamental connection between relationships among people and relationships between people and God.

“A highly characteristic feature of the entire Torah [is that] civil law, the dealings between man and his fellow, are not merely a matter of agreements freely entered between people or an arbitrary social contract satisfying most members of the community. The Torah makes no essential distinction between ‘matters between a man and his Creator’ and those ‘between man and his fellow man,’ because the structure of relationships between human beings is intimately connected to the relationship between man and his Creator.”

The Talmud, ed A. Steinsaltz

Thus, embedded in the Old Testament, esp. the first five books, is a sense of human relationships defined in terms of human/divine relationships. The purpose of much of the Torah is to delineate, codify, and discuss the details behind those relationships.

At the heart of Old Testament Judaism is the codification of law, ritual, and behavior. The proper practice of human relations is therefore essential to the proper practice of worship.

Early Christianity needs to be understood in the context of these highly-developed practices and beliefs.

Hellenistic religion: “Hellenistic” means the adaptation of Greek modes of culture by the Romans in the late Republic and early Imperial periods.

Roman culture transmitted Greek philosophy, mythology, and cultic practice and this transmission affected Judaism and early Christianity.

Central to this impact, broadly speaking, is a conception of the soul resonant with Platonic epistemology – the idea that there IS a soul and that it antedates and postdates the life of the body.

Central, too, is the development of certain PROSE literary forms for stories of heroic and divine acts.

The narratives of the life of Jesus resonant with Hellenistic prose narrative of deities or heroes; the rhetorical practices of forensic argument transferred to the oratorical practices of preaching.

Christianity as a rhetorical practice. The early texts of Christianity are defined as narratives and epistles. They are thus presented as forms of performance for specific audiences. They have a rhetorical technique designed to move, to compel, to convince.

Rhetoric (public speaking, legal argument, political leadership, literary form) was the centerpiece of the Classical education.

Being a **public figure** was inseparable from the idea of being a **public speaker**

THUS: early Christianity in the Roman Imperial world responds to and adapts many of the ideals and practices of public speaking.

KEY POINT:

The early texts of Christianity are defined as narratives and epistles.

They are thus presented as forms of performance for specific audiences.

They have a rhetorical technique designed to move, to compel, to convince.

NOW: The Old Testament is, of course, a deeply rhetorical work; it contains speeches, poems, stories, proverbs, and the like.

BUT:

“By Hellenistic times Jewish worship included reading from the law and the prophets and preaching by a rabbi, who interpreted the sacred texts and applied their message to the life of the congregation. In the New Testament, both Jesus and Paul are described as preaching in synagogues. This is the origin of the Christian homily. In Greek, homilia originally meant ‘conversation,’ but it became the term for a simple sermon based on interpretation of Scripture.” (G. Kennedy, A New History of Classical Rhetoric)

Christianity emerged, therefore, as an INTERPRETIVE PRACTICE.

The New Testament came to be understood as the allegorical or figurative fulfillment of the Old Testament.

Thus, OT stories were read for their figural meaning: e.g., Abraham and Isaac; a man climbs a mountain with his son; his son has a pile of wood on his back; he is about to sacrifice his son

Classical literature came to be read for its potential Christian allegorical prefigurations.

Thus certain myths (e.g., Orpheus and Eurydice, Hercules, stories of Odysseus) came to be interpreted as having an allegorical meaning keyed to ethical or moral virtue: the relationship of reason and sensuality, the idea of heroism as keyed to recognizing one's true home in the heavens, the recognition that this life in the body is a kind of imprisonment.

Questions of doctrine: in the first century of Christianity, a series of fundamental doctrines emerged which were not in themselves definable as “Christian” as much as they were definable in response to Roman and Jewish practice. These include:

The conception of religion as a basic set of beliefs or convictions (creeds), rather than as an aggregation of practices. Thus, the definition of being a “good” member of the religious group on the basis of what you believe rather than how you perform or behave.

The development of the figure of Jesus as a unique embodiment of phenomena previously granted to other individuals or groups. E.g.: Jesus is the only heroic figure, the only one who can descend to hell and return, the only one capable of performing miracles (at least in the New Testament).

Jesus is also the only male who is permitted to be symbolically marked. In Judaism, the marking of the male body signifies the membership in the community of faith. In early Christianity, the only marked male body can be Jesus’.

Jesus is presented as the son of God, at least in part, in response to the Roman deification of the Emperors – there can be only one. Finally, one of the centerpieces of early Christian narrative and characterizations of Jesus is the idea of the miracle. What is a miracle? How does it differ from magic?

The Early Gospels as designed to address, codify, and explain many of these issues.

Dates: Mark 60s'; Paul 50s; Luke 70s' and 80s

Writings at the time of Roman imperial consolidation, Jewish conflict, and the emerging Jewish Diaspora. The Temple at Jerusalem is destroyed by the Romans in 70. These are writings designed to consolidate in literate and literary form oral narratives and public memory.

THE GOSPEL OF MARK

Stylistically simple

Written in Greek; very limited vocabulary; does not aspire to literary eloquence

PARATAXIS: simple sentences that follow the same structure and usually begin with a conjunction (“and”).

The feel of Mark is of simple, orally transmitted stories in which the narrator is not trying to call attention to himself

Mark does, however, use quotes and language from the Old Testament to affirm and authorize his prophetic voice (e.g., Mark 1:3 from Isaiah)

Mark's Goals:

Consolidate stories about Jesus

Create a canon of events: stories that happened and are important

Present Jesus himself as a messianic holy man, who speaks rather than writes,
in ways that are enigmatic and parabolic

Define Jesus as miracle worker, not magician

Make the RESURRECTION (not the birth or genealogy) the most important thing

Mark's imagery

Voice: 1:3, the voice crying in the wilderness

Jesus speaks, others listen

Stuff happens on the road

The wilderness: Jesus seems to come out of nowhere; John the Baptist
at the opening working in the countryside; Christianity as a rural rather than
a city religion (at least here in Mark)

Dream: people appear out of the wilderness; miracles happen; causality is strange

Water: the medium through which people are cleansed, healed, and made whole
baptism, sailing, sea of Galilee, River of Jordan

images of ship travel; the journey over water

"I will make you fishers of men" (1:16)

An example of Mark-narrative: **Mark 3, the man with the withered hand**; Jesus says
things and they happen; speech > event; compare God, let there be light

Miracles vs. Magic

Magic must be learned; takes time; requires a level of literacy and practice

Aeneid: divination requires very elaborate methods and skills

Magic: How did you do that?

Miracles can't be learned; you have it or you don't.

Magic = participation in a culture with a textbook

Mark: not a text book of magic but an account of miracles: Mark 4:38-39,
Jesus calms a storm: "rebuked the wind . . . Peace be still . . .
what manner of man is this?"

COMPARE THE AENEID AND THE STORM IMAGERY

Aeneas is a hero because he survives the storm; to control the winds, you
need to establish an elaborate relationship with the god of the winds

Jesus is a miracle worker because he calms the storm with words

Don't ask how he does it; ask who he is that he can do it

He doesn't have a back story: he just speaks and things happen

FOR TUESDAY

GOSPEL OF LUKE

FOR THURSDAY: PAUL, 1 CORINTHIANS, EPISTLE TO THE ROMANS

ISSUES:

LUKE AS A LITERARY WRITER; LITERATE SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS

THE OPENING SENTENCE OF LUKE; MORE COMPLEX; SUBORDINATE
CLAUSES; FUSION OF ORAL AND WRITTEN TRADITION

MORE GENEALOGY; MORE PARBLES AND MIRACLES; MORE INTEREST
IN WOMEN

THE REPRESENTATION OF THE LAST SUPPER: What is the Last Supper?

Passover Seder and redefinition of symbolic foods; allegory of the past; allegory of the future

Compare his handling of the material that Mark handles: e.g., the withered hand, the leper, the man with the unclean spirit, etc.

Another is to look at what is unique in Luke: e.g., the visit to Martha and Mary (10:38-42), the prodigal son (15:11-32), the Good Samaritan (10:25-37).

What makes these stories different from those in Mark? Do they paint a different kind of portrait of Jesus than Mark does?

Look, too, at Luke's version of the Last Supper – indeed, look at the entirety of Luke 22. What are the aspects of this version that make it dramatic, emotional, literary, etc?