

# The Gospel of Luke 2. The Cultural Context of Luke. The Early Christian Experience

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## Topics

(These topics and the main source of the material for these notes is **The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation**. Luke T. Johnson. Fortress, 1986)

### 1. Claims of the First Christians

- 1.1. Introductory Matters
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## 1. Claims of the First Christians

### 1.1. Introductory Matters

1.1.1. Christian success due to experience of power, not to purer ethics, profundity, or ancient beginnings

1.1.2. Christian insiders see themselves as liberationist; outsiders view them as terrorists

### 1.2. Christianity from the Outside

1.2.1. Largely ignored by contemporaneous writers due to its insignificance

1.2.2. Few references to Jesus in Talmud understandable due to New Testament writings

1.2.3. Roman references sometimes appear not to distinguish between Christians and Jews

"Since the Jews constantly made disturbances at the instigation of **Chrestus**, he expelled them from Rome." *Life of Claudius* by **Suetonius**

1.2.4. Tacitus knows Christians are a distinct group

"**Nero** fastened the guilt and afflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called **Christians** by the populace. **Christus**, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of **Tiberius** at the hands of one of our procurators, **Pontius Pilate**, and a deadly superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out, not only in **Judaea**, the first source of the evil, but also in the city, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world meet and become popular." *Annals*

1.2.5. Pliny the Younger, a pagan governor of Bithynia was concerned with the rapid growth of Christianity

After imprisoning some Christians, Pliny wrote to Trajan: "They maintained, moreover, that the amount of their fault or error had been this, that it was their habit on a fixed day to assemble before daylight and recite by turns a form of words to Christ as to a god; and that they bound themselves with an oath, not for any crime, but not to commit theft or robbery or adultery, not to break their word, and not to deny a deposit when demanded. After this was done, it was their custom to depart, and to meet again to take food, but ordinary and harmless food . . . I discovered nothing else than a perverse and extravagant superstition." *Letter to Trajan*

### **1.2.6. Hellenistic satirist Lucian of Samosata considers Christians to be very credulous; in the following quote Peregrinus is a Cynic philosopher who dupes a group of Christians**

"It was then he learned the wondrous lore of the Christians by associating with their priests and scribes in Palestine. And-how else could it be-in a trice he made them all look like children; for he was prophet, cult leader, head of the synagogue, and everything, all by himself. He interpreted and explained some of their books, and even composed many, and they revered him as a god, made use of him as a lawgiver, and set him down as a protector, next after that other, to be sure, whom they still worship, the man who was crucified in Palestine because he introduced this new cult into the world.

"Then at length Peregrinus was apprehended for this and thrown into prison, which itself gave him no little reputation as an asset in his future career and the charlatanism and notoriety-seeking that he was enamoured of. Well, when he had been imprisoned, the Christians, regarding the incident as a calamity, left nothing undone in the effort to rescue him. Then, as this was impossible, every other form of attention was shown him, not in any casual way, but with assiduity;...people even came from the cities of Asia, sent by the Christians at their common expense, to succor and defend and encourage the hero. They show incredible speed whenever any such public action is undertaken; for in no time at all, they lavish their all. So it was, then, in the case of Peregrinus; much money came to him from them by reason of his imprisonment, and he procured not a little revenue from it. The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live for all time, in consequence of which they despise death, and even willingly give themselves into custody, most of them. Furthermore their first lawgiver persuaded them that they are all brothers of one another after they transgressed once for all by denying the Greek gods and by worshipping the crucified sophist himself and living under his laws. Therefore they despise all things indiscriminately and consider them common property, receiving such doctrines traditionally and without any definite evidence. So if any charlatan and trickster able to profit by occasions comes among them, he quickly acquires sudden wealth by

imposing on simple folk." *Passing of Peregrinus*

### **1.2.7. Even after most of the NT writings were in circulation, most outsiders viewed Christians with contempt**

## **1.3. Claims of the Christians**

### **1.3.1. Christians did make some astounding claims (1 Cor. 3:22, 6:2-3, Eph. 3:9-10, 1 John 5:4-5, Rev. 11:15)**

### **1.3.2. These claims were made prior to outside notice of the Christian sect**

### **1.3.3. Christian claims were based on their experience**

- With "powers and principalities" (1 Cor. 2:6-10, 1 Pet. 3:21-22)
- With respect to salvation (Rom. 1:16, 1 Cor. 1:18)
- Of liberation (Gal. 5:1, 2 Cor.3:17)
- Of peace (Rom. 5:1, Col. 3:15)
- Of joy (Acts 13:52, 1 Pet. 4:13)

### **1.3.4. Primary Christian experience is one of power expressed with a variety of terms**

- Authority or **exousia** (John 1:12, 2 Cor. 10:8)
- Energy or **energeia** (Eph. 3:20-21, Col. 1:29)
- Power or **dynamis** (Rom. 15:13, 1 Cor. 6:14)

### **1.3.5. Power was visible in "signs and wonders" (Acts 4:30), proclamation of "good news" (1 Cor. 2:4-5), spiritual transformation (Rom. 12:2)**

### **1.3.6. Source of power is God (Jas. 4:12)**

### **1.3.7. Experience of power so new that it was viewed as radical new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)**

### **1.3.8. Christian wisdom was a gift of revelation, not the result of strenuous study (Eph. 1:8)**

**1.3.9. Christians claimed hopes for an eschatological event controlled by God, tempered by experience in the present of righteousness (Rom. 3:21), freedom from law (Rom. 7:6) and sin (Rom. 8:1), revelation (Rom. 16:26), salvation (2 Cor. 6:2)**

## **2. The Resurrection Faith**

### **2.1. Fundamental conviction of early Christian faith**

**2.1.1. The fundamental conviction of early Christian faith was "Jesus is raised" (1 Thess. 1:9-10, 4:14, 1 Cor. 15:3-8)**

### **2.2. The Resurrection Experience**

**2.2.1. "Christianity is a religion of personal encounter with the Other...in the risen Jesus."**

**2.2.2. Paul speaks of appearances or visions of a resurrected Jesus (Gal 1:15-16, 2 Cor. 12:1-5)**

- Encounters with a "transcendent, commanding presence"
- Jesus experienced as present in the Christian community (Acts 9:5)

**2.2.3. Two types resurrection accounts**

- Empty-tomb stories (Mark 16:1-8, Luke 24:1-11)
  - Response to charges of hoax
- Appearance stories (Mark 9:9-20, Luke 24:13-49)
  - Emphasize bodily appearance (Luke 24:39-43)
  - Stress lack of control by disciples as evidenced by their fear

**2.2.4. Older scholarship views of resurrection**

- A psychological struggle (by Mary Magdalene) that led not to belief but to mission
- "Jesus did not rise on Easter, but faith did" A. Loisy

**2.2.5. Problems with these views**

- Don't know Mary Magdalene psychological status
- Disciples do not demonstrate a strong faith upon Jesus' death, but to the contrary run away in fear

**2.2.6. "The resurrection experience that gave birth to the Christian movement was the experience of the continuing presence of a personal, transcendent, and transforming power within the community." (John 20:20-23)**

**2.2.7. "The possession of the Holy Spirit is the experiential correlative to the confession that Jesus is Lord." (Acts 2:32-36)**

**2.2.8. Jesus presence experienced through the Holy Spirit (Gal. 4:6) Who raised Jesus (Rom. 8:11)**

**2.2.9. Resurrection faith characterized by conviction that Jesus lived, could be experienced as present in power, and deserved the title Lord**

**2.2.10. Jewish Christians had to deal with the dissonance that Jesus died the death of a sinner and was under a curse from God (Deut. 21:23, Gal. 3:13)**

## **3. Jesus in the Memory of the Church**

### **3.1. Anamnesis**

**3.1.1. = ("a recollection of the past that enlivens and empowers the present")**

**3.1.2. Best example of this found in the celebration of communion (Luke 22:19, 1 Cor. 11:24-25)**

**3.1.3. Memory of the church colored by the resurrection experience**

## 3.2. Social Contexts of Tradition

3.2.1. Author of Luke/Acts sees orderly spread of Christianity from Jerusalem outward, beginning with proclamation in the synagogues, then, after rejection to the Gentiles (Acts 1:8, 13:46-47)

3.2.2. Luke does not enlighten us about the Christian community of Galilee, Egypt or Syria, but concentrates on cities of the Mediterranean Roman Empire

3.2.3. Luke portrays Christianity spreading

- Through establishment of churches
- Rapid expansion over a large geographic area

3.2.4. Quick spread of Christianity means it had to endure differing circumstances as well as linguistic issues since many of Jesus words appear to have Aramaic origins

3.2.5. Other NT evidence suggests that the Christian community did not have such peaceful origins and had some growing pains to endure due to changing circumstances and rapid spread

- Addressed by preaching, worship and teaching

## 3.3. Preaching

3.3.1. Evidence of early Christian preaching found in the letters (Gal. 4:13, Col. 1:3-7, 1 Thess. 1:5, Heb. 2:1-4, Jas. 1:21, 1 Pet. 1:22-25)

3.3.2. Christian belief was initiated through preaching (Acts 2:37, Gal. 3:2-5)

3.3.3. Central features of early Christian preaching (Acts 2:16-36, 3:12-26, 10:34-43, 13:16-41, 17:22-31)

- Prophecy fulfilled in Jesus
- Jesus, son of David, died, was raised by God
- God had validated Jesus' life through the Holy Spirit
- Jesus would return
- Call for repentance

3.3.4. Although Luke records these sermons for his own purposes, the similarities may also indicate a common tradition

3.3.5. Preaching occurred in synagogues (Acts 13:13-16, 14:1)

3.3.6. Proclamation of a crucified messiah would require early Christians to answer certain questions

## 3.4. Worship

3.4.1. Jesus' ministry had ties to the temple in Jerusalem (Mark 11:15-18, 27) and his followers continued to worship in the temple after his death and resurrection (Acts 2:46)

3.4.2. Jewish Christians continued to worship in the synagogues (Mark 13:9, Acts 18:7-17) as shown by the necessity to throw the Christians out

3.4.3. Synagogue worship ceased in 85 CE with the institution of the *birkat ha minim*

3.4.4. Household the predominant place for early Christian worship (Acts 16:32)

3.4.5. House as setting for worship probably led to Christian identification as the "household of God" (1 Tim. 3:15)

3.4.6. Primary rituals of early church were baptism and observance of the Lord's Supper

**3.4.7. Baptism allowed for reinterpretation of the Hebrew bible (1 Cor. 10:1-5, 1 Pet. 3:20-21)**

**3.4.8. Celebration of communal meals important in early worship (Acts 2:46)**

**3.4.9. Lord's Supper recalls and makes Jesus present to the observers as the Passover meal meant that all Jews were slaves whom God had liberated from Egypt**

**3.4.10. Traditional Jewish prayer form modified from "Blessed by the Lord" to "Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:6)**

**3.4.11. Aramaic origins of some prayer forms preserved in the use of**

■ **Maranatha** or Our Lord, come (1 Cor. 16:22)

■ **Abba** or daddy (Gal. 4:6)

**3.4.12. Use of Hebrew *amen* in prayers**

**3.4.13. Texts of some early Christian hymns preserved in NT (Col. 1:15-20, 1 Tim. 3:16, 1 Pet. 1:22-25, 3:18, 22, Phil. 2:6-11)**

**3.4.14. Reading of scripture assumed due to prevalence in synagogue worship (1 Tim. 4:13)**

### **3.5. Teaching for the Common Life**

**3.5.1. Areas of concern for early Christians included**

■ True vs. false prophets (1 Cor. 14:29)

■ Manifestations of the Spirit (Gal. 5:13-26)

**3.5.2. Midrash and diatribe are suggested in NT writings**

**3.5.3. Women were teaching since Paul writes against the practice (1 Cor. 14:34-36)**

**3.5.4. Paul, at least, distinguishes between his own teaching and that inspired by God (1 Cor. 7:8,10)**

### **3.6. Forms of Memory**

**3.6.1. Oral tradition**

■ Specifics of time and place are lost

■ Punch line remembered more clearly than setting

■ Stories become shorter, more formulaic, more focused

**3.6.2. Controversy stories**

■ Jesus or disciples do something

■ Opponents challenge them

■ Jesus makes a profound statement

**3.6.3. Healings**

■ Sickness is noticed

■ Jesus acts

■ Result

■ Bystanders react

**3.6.4. Exorcisms**

■ Possession is noticed

■ Jesus engages spirits in conversation

■ Jesus commands the spirit(s) to depart

■ Departure of spirit signified by physical sign

■ Exorcised person restored

■ Bystanders react

### **3.7. Memory of Jesus' Death**

**3.7.1. That Jesus' death required interpretation is evidenced by**

■ Passion accounts in all 4 gospels

■ Jesus' suffering carefully prepared for before the crucifixion

**3.7.2. Kerygmatic tradition (1 Cor.15:3-8)**

**3.7.3. 1 Cor. 1:23 demonstrates the unexpected and controversial nature of the crucifixion**

**3.7.4. Scriptures that proved helpful to early Christians include: Ps. 110:1, Zech. 9:9, Ps. 118:22, Ps. 69 & 22**

**3.7.5. Jesus' suffering viewed as ordained by God (Luke 9:22)**

**3.7.6. Jesus' last words derived from Torah**

- Mark 15:23 = Ps. 69:21
- Mark 15:24 = Ps. 22:18
- Mark 15:29 = Pss. 22:7, 209:25
- Mark 15:31 = Ps. 22:8
- Mark 15:34 = Ps. 22:1
- Mark 15:36 = Ps. 69:21