

Origins of Christianity (THEO 206)

Lesson 1: The Earliest Christian Writings

Vallée: Introduction, pages 1-8 (Read Terms of Use below)

A) Biblical passages: "Already" View

- Matthew (Mt) 12:28; 11:5-7; 13:44-46; 22:1-14 -
- Luke (Lk) - 4:16-21; 17:20-21
- Mark (Mk) - 4:26-29

B) Biblical passages: "Not Yet" View

- Matthew (Mt) - 6:9-13 (“Our Father,” or “The Lord’s Prayer”); 5:3-12 (The Beatitudes); 8: 11-12

READING NOTES

The Patristic Period

- 1st centuries of the Christian tradition the “Patristic Period”
- It is the period of the founders of the church, of the “fathers” (*patres*) who did pioneering work in turning the Christian movement into a self-assured religious, social, and intellectual force
- Time span covered by the Patristic Period is variously determined
 - Generally agreed that its beginning follows the life and work of Jesus's immediate followers and thus starts with the so-called postapostolic times
 - The end of this period is less agreement → various dates are proposed
 - ◆ Protestant tendency ⇒ believe Patristic Period ended when Middle Ages began (Constantine converting to Christianity)
 - ◆ Catholic historians ⇒ believe Patristic Period ended much later (11th century)
- Christianity’s center of gravity shifts away from Mediterranean to northwestern Europe, making the end of a world; at the same time Eastern Christianity begins
- Periodization is always subjective
- The formative Christian period traditionally called “the age of the fathers”

Christianity

- The formative Christian period can be approached from various angles
- Writers interested in the emergence of a mainstream institution (church) study “church history”
- Those concerned with the gradual construction of normative tenets study “history of dogma”
- Present study of Christianity in its early history is conducted from a perspective that isn’t necessarily that of the church
 - It aims to respond to a 20th century detached interest in the development of Christianity as a social and religious movement
 - ◆ The desire to understand how and why that development took the directions it did
- Early as the second century: Christianity referred to all the concrete way of life of the Christians in opposition to that of the Jews and the Greeks

Patristics as a Field of Research and Study

- Patristics can’t be defined with any satisfactory precision
 - Why? → Patristic studies have always been practiced in connection with other academic disciplines
- As a field of research and study, patristics is essentially interdisciplinary

Sources and Tools

- Ancient sources ⇒ often satisfied with written testimonies, built their reconstructions of the past almost exclusively on textual remains
- Today sources ⇒ Archeology, epigraphy and papyrology
 - Anthropology and sociology have also proved fruitful hypotheses and conceptual tools often yielding fresh understanding of the historical and intellectual processes

Topicality of Patristic Studies

- Blossoming of patristic studies is due to a double cause
 - Cause #1 → The spirit of criticism
 - Cause #2 → The emergence of historical consciousness
- Historical perspective was now essential to an understanding of the present

Trends in Recent Research


- It is a fact that Western religious thought is rooted in both Semitic and Indo-European cultures
- Trend #1
 - Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are both offshoots of the Semitic and Indo-European stream that merge in the writings of the fathers

- ◆ Contemporary study of early Christian literature is conscious of being in touch with quasi-universal movements of thought and practices
- Trend # 2
 - Work is performed in the broader context of the history of religions
 - Jews and Christians of the 4th century marked the definitive split between the two religions traditions
 - ◆ Split was documented in patristic literature (valued for that precise reason)
 - Note → Today the religious context is expanded. Patristic literature is seen to incorporate or reflect more elements coming from indigenous
- Trend # 3
 - Current work is characterized by a direct, resolute, and extensive dealing with sources
 - It is with primary sources that the patristic scholar is working
- Trend # 4
 - Present-day pathologists are generally not inclined to pursue apologetic interests
 - Their work is carried out within secular institutions
 - Their contributions are judged by the value of their scholarship

STUDY NOTES

The Christian Bible

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Christianity is the faith based on Jesus Christ's:

- life
- teachings
- death
- resurrection and ascension into heaven

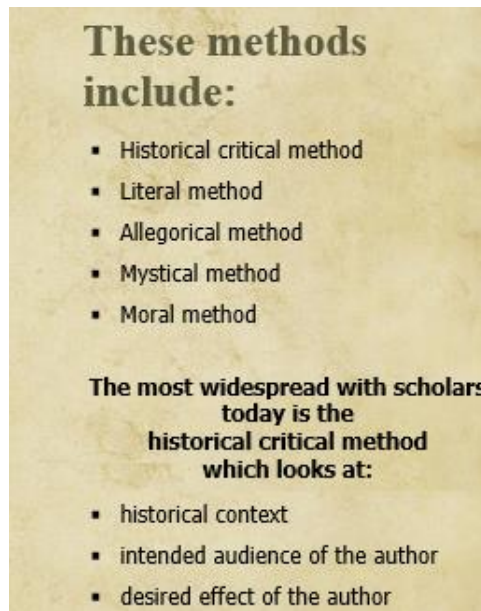
Jesus lived some 2000 years ago.

The Christian Bible contains:

- Old Testament (OT) + apocrypha/deuterocanonical books
- New Testament (NT): 27 books, including 4 Gospels ("good news")
- Gospels were written some 40-50 years after Jesus's death

Left: Folio from Papyrus 46, containing 2 Corinthians 11:33-12:9 in Greek (Source: Wikipedia) (Click on image in enlarge)

METHODS OF BIBLE INTERPRETATION



Taking 3 factors into account:

#1) Historical context

- Looks at how the authors of a particular book, a gospel or a letter have put their writing in the historical context
- How we today (scholars) can understand the historical context in which something was produced
- The writings refers to someone who lived in the past → we don't have all the datas concerning what happened in the past
- It's a hard task to compose and bring together the writings (information of the past)

#2) Intended audience of the author

- Did the author have in mind Jewish that needed to hear about Jesus? A Roman audience? A Greek audience? People who aren't familiar with the writings of the Hebrew Bible, Moses and other important prophets from the Hebrew Bible?

#3) Desired effect of the author

- What exactly did the author have in mind when he wrote a particular book?
- Was it to convert people? To convey a certain message of salvation?
- Was it to just provide a parabola that could be used to teach a lesson that could be applied to moral life

Bible Interpretation (cont'd)

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The Gospels



Image from the Book of Kells, a 1200-year-old book, Folio 27v, with the four evangelist symbols (Source: Trinity College Dublin, London, England, Wikipedia) (Click on image to enlarge)

Synoptics (Greek for "seen together"):

- Matthew (Mt), Mark (Mk), Luke (Lk).
- Matthew and Luke are based on Mark and Q (from the German word "Quelle" = source).

The historical critical method established that:

- Matthew targets a Jewish-Christian audience, because Jesus is presented as the second Moses and Messiah.
- Luke targets a Gentile audience, because it speaks in universal terms.

The Gospel of John (Jn):

- Jesus is the eternal Son and Logos (or Word) of God, the incarnate God on Earth.
- There are also apocryphal (or secret) gospels attributed to Thomas, Peter, Mary Magdalene, Philip, and even Judas – most of them come from Gnostic circles and are later.

The evangelists, along with their symbols in iconography from the *Book of Kells* (image), are:

- Matthew the Evangelist, symbolized by a man, to represent the human nature of Christ.
- Mark the Evangelist, symbolized by a lion, to represent Christ as king.
- Luke the Evangelist, symbolized by a bull or a calf, to represent Christ as sacrifice and as priest.
- John the Evangelist, symbolized by an eagle, to represent the Christ as God.

The picture above is an exemplification of the previous slide containing the methods

- **First 3 Gospel** are known as the **Synoptic gospels** (came from a Greek word that means "taken together" or "seen together")
- They're the **gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke**
- Using the *historical critical method*, scholars have been able to pinpoint a number of things concerning this gospels
 - First of all, they look very similar in content
 - Scholars have ask themselves **WHY?**
 - ◆ For instance they have established that the **gospel of Matthew** and **gospel of Luke** are based on an earlier gospel, the gospel of Mark; and a particular source that they refer to as *cue* which comes from the German word for "*source*" and thus, Matthew & Luke have really used the earlier version of the gospel that was written by Mark.
 - ◆ This particular source that nobody has seen yet (interesting source) but scholars think that this source did really exist, maybe there was some notebooks that the apostle were using when travelling (we haven't come

across them yet) some scholars still hope to find them (one possible source of inspiration of the gospel)

- Historical critical method was also able to establish that **gospel of Matthew targets a Jewish-Christian audience**, because in it Jesus is presented as the second Moses and Messiah. Though the fact that the author had in mind an audience that was familiar with who Moses was & familiar with the notion of the Messiah (or saviour) pinpoints to, particular audience.
- **Gospel of Luke is targeting a non-Jewish audience** (also referred to as **Gentil audience**) because it speaks in a more universal terms. Luke has to explain who really Moses was, because people weren't really familiar, they didn't come from a Jewish milieu
- **4th gospel** → was established using the historical critical method. It is different from the first 3. The 4th gospel is talking about Jesus as the internal son of God and the logos of God. The word *logos* here signified "reason"
 - ◆ The term was philosophical concept brought in by John to talk about Jesus and therefore, he is quite difference from the other 3 writers of gospels
 - ◆ NOTE → There exists other gospels

The Life and Teachings of Jesus

Biblical Prophecies

- Jesus was born in the year 0 of the Common Era (CE) (this is the secular alternative to AD (Anno Domini)).
- There are Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem.
- Jesus's parents: Mary and Joseph.
- The gospels tell us about Jesus's birth, then an episode at age 12, and his life around the age of 30

John the Baptist

An important character, was Jesus's forerunner and he baptized people for the forgiveness of their sins.

Jesus's baptism by John has been seen as:

- Consecration to God as the Messiah.
- John publicly announcing that the Messiah has arrived.
- Jesus identifies himself with sinful humanity.

After the baptism:

- Jesus undergoes a 40-day retreat in the desert before starting his ministry.
- Jesus then begins to gather his first disciples: Simon, Peter, Andrew, James and John.
- The emphasis of Jesus's ministry is on a spiritual life.

JESUS'S MINISTRY

Miracles are seen as signs of the presence of the Kingdom of God

- turning water into wine
- healing the sick
- restoring life to the dead
- casting devils out of the possessed
- multiplication of bread

The kingdom is "**already**" here,
but "**not yet**" fully realized.

- Many stories of miracles concerning Jesus in the bible
- It's especially important in today's world
 - People say they don't see many miracles around them so how come the bible talks about miracles?
 - Why are miracles so important?
 - How are they understood?
- We have a general understanding of miracles → as some sort of suspension of the natural laws
- How does the bible see it? (Understood it?)
 - Try to enter the mindset of the authors of the bible
 - ◆ Jesus performed miracles and scholars who look at the texts, the intention of authors
 - ❖ Scholars try to understand the miracles and came with this understanding that is quite reflective of how Jesus understood them
 - ◆ Miracles are seen as signs of the presence of the kingdom of God. It's this new reality that Jesus introduces
 - ◆ Jesus talks about it. Something that gives us a glimpse to a better world, where there is less suffering, people are being healed, justice is being done
 - ◆ WHY? → Because in every days world, see a lot of suffering, injustice
- There's a mention in the bible that miracles such as: turning water into wine, healing of the sick, restoring life to the dead, casting devils out of the possessed, multiplication of bread
- Jesus talks about these miracles as referring to the presence of the kingdom of God, a new reality
 - Using modern terminology: **kingdom of God** (language used in bible) is a new reality. A reality in which there's less suffering, no suffering at all, complete justice, equality (ideals that humanity holds, what they strive for)

- Scholars looking at Jesus said have come to understand the message of Jesus about miracles and kingdom of God as a very interesting creative tension. There's tension between the "already here" & "not yet realised"
 - **"Already here"** → it means that the kingdom of God is already here, present in what Jesus is doing (healings) [BUT] people will obviously die at some point or become sick again. There are miracles where justice of Jesus is being shown but you still see injustice
 - ◆ Tension between the fact that we have a foretaste of this reality but we don't have the full taste (don't have it fully realised here)
 - ❖ Message of Jesus is that the fully realisation of the kingdom of God is not going to come right now. There's still time to go
 - ❖ NOTE → Very creative tension that helps us understand miracles as different from just a mere suspension of natural laws and it gives us a glimpse into this interesting message that Jesus brings about a new reality. Because that's why people are so fascinated by this reality which happens to be the most widely spread religion on earth today
 - ✚ They continue to have hope for justice, hope for the disappearance of suffering, for a lot of things that we don't see today

Exemplification of kingdom of heaven

- Texts of "not yet realised"

*Our Father, Who art in heaven
Hallowed be Thy Name;
Thy kingdom come,*

- "thy kingdom come" is an example of a "not yet realised" because when Jesus teaches his followers to pray "thy kingdom come" means that the kingdom is not yet there
- The "already here" is present in come text.
 - Example → Jesus's encounter with Jean the Baptist disciples who are coming to Jesus and they say "We are expecting this important savior and this Messiah. Are you really that person we're expecting?" Jesus doesn't say yes or no, he says "look at my miracles and look at what is happening when I do my miracles"

⇒ Regular reality is somewhat suspended and new reality is being present with Jesus heals people, forgive people, justice is provided for people

- Conclusion → Message of Jesus is about the presence of the kingdom of God, the connection between miracles and the kingdom of God

The Kingdom of Heaven

Texts supporting the "Already" view

Matthew (Mt)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 12.28▪ 11.5-7▪ 13.44-46▪ 22.1-14
Luke (Lk)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 4.16-21▪ 17.20-21
Mark (Mk)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 4.26-29

Note: PDF of texts can be found on the reading page of this lesson.

- New testament was written in Greek (original language in Greek)

Texts supporting the "Not Yet" view

Matthew (Mt)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ 6.9-13 ("Our Father" or "The Lord's Prayer")▪ 5.3-12 (The Beatitudes)▪ 8. 11-12
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Source: The Bible Gateway
<http://www.biblegateway.com/>

Jesus's Radical Ethics

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An important question: Is Jesus the Messiah?



Jesus reluctantly applies this title to himself because of misunderstandings.

At the Transfiguration (witnessed by three disciples) Moses and Elijah appear to seal the fact that Jesus is the Messiah.

Jesus's Ethics and Teachings

- touched lepers and a bleeding woman to heal them
- welcomed women as disciples
- extended the command against adultery to adultery in one's heart
- preached "turn the other cheek" (as opposed to "an eye for an eye")
- taught love your enemies
- proposed love is for God and for one's neighbor
- offered forgiveness to those who repented
- challenged the interpretation of the Mosaic law (generally NOT the law itself)
- challenged the Jewish authorities

Jesus's Crucifixion, Death and Resurrection

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Sequence of events

1. Jesus returns to Jerusalem. Has Last Supper with his disciples
2. Judas betrays Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, Jesus is arrested
3. At the trial Caiaphas, the high priest, asks Jesus if he is Christ (or the Messiah) and Jesus answers: "You have said so", thus answering in the affirmative
4. Caiaphas and the other priests see this declaration as blasphemy against God
5. Roman authorities are asked to crucify Jesus
6. The crucifixion occurs some time between 27-33 CE (apparent end of the story)
7. Resurrection: women visit the tomb; Jesus's appearances; women's presence witnesses to the historical truth in claims of Jesus's resurrection



The Early Church

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After Jesus's Death and Resurrection

- Acts of the Apostles (author Luke), Paul's Letters, the other letters of the New Testament
- Jesus's ascension to heaven is followed by the descent of the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost (Acts 2)
- Paul's attempts to convert both Jews and Gentiles to Christianity
- Anti-Christian feelings among Jews which led to anti-Jewish feelings among the early Christians
- The new message Christianity proposes: salvation is by faith (not by circumcision, says Paul)

Left: The Resurrection painted by Johann Heinrich Tischbein the Elder, 1778 (Source: Wikipedia)

