

The Context—Jesus in the Memory of the Church

Lecture 5

One of Acts' deficiencies is that it is clearly selective in its account. Like a good Hellenistic historian, Luke is more interested in cities that he is in rural life, so we learn nothing about the spread of Christianity in the countryside but only in the cities.

The earliest Gospels are compositions that arise out of the life of early Christian communities and bear the marks of that origin. In contrast to some later Gospels that are clearly the work of literary invention, with only a loose connection to living traditions, the writers of the earliest Gospels both rely on and address traditions that arose in actual communities. The social setting of tradition, the process of oral transmission, and the forms in which the memory of Jesus was handed on are, therefore, all pertinent to an intelligent reading of the Gospels.

From the Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letters, it is possible to gain a rough grasp of the Christian movement's first rapid expansion across the Mediterranean world, from Jerusalem to Rome, within the first 30 years of its existence (c. 30–60). Acts is deficient in some ways but provides an essential geographical and chronological framework for the movement of early witnesses and missionaries. Acts is selective in its account and has a clear bias as well but, for the most part, must be considered basically reliable in what it reports. The account in Acts can be corrected and expanded by the use of Paul's letters, which do not detract from but, rather, enhance the remarkable portrayal in Acts.

Together, the sources provide the picture of a movement that expanded with great rapidity and had to accomplish major transitions from the beginning, without strong external or internal controls. The formation of communities in Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, and Italy within 25 years is all the more remarkable because it was accomplished without political means and under duress. Because of rapid movement and instability (persecution), the new religion had to accomplish five transitions at once: geographical, cultural, demographic, linguistic, and sociological. Such transitions had to

be negotiated without strong controls, either institutional (Jerusalem was a poor and weak mother community) or textual (there was as yet no New Testament!). The remarkable historical fact is not the diversity in early Christianity but that there is any discernible unity to the religion.

In the life of local communities (*ekklesia* = church), a number of activities provided the social context for the transmission of the memory of Jesus.

The character of such religious memory (*anamnesis*) is complex and rich, involving less the accurate account of the past than the recollection of the past to inform the present.

Preaching appears in Acts and Paul's letters as a means by which communities were founded, but its exact role in transmitting traditions about Jesus is uncertain. In Acts, we find missionary speeches, but these represent the literary constructions of the author, Luke. Acts also portrays missionary preaching in synagogues, and this may well reflect a short-lived historical period in which Jewish objections to Jesus as

Messiah were voiced and responded to with defenses drawn from scripture. It is possible that preaching related stories of Jesus's wonderworking, and it is likely that preaching, on some occasions, related the story of Jesus's suffering and death, as well as his resurrection.

Worship is always a rich opportunity for the transmission of tradition, especially as associated with ritual actions. Baptism could well have been the occasion for telling of Jesus's baptism by John and relating the links between baptism and Christ's death and resurrection. The Lord's Supper, as we know from 1 Cor. 11, was an occasion for relating the words Jesus spoke to his followers at his last meal. It could also be the setting for the story of other meals—including the feeding of the multitude—in Jesus's life. Christian assemblies (at least in Corinth) also involved forms of ecstatic utterance. Prophecy would be a mode in which "the risen Lord" could continue to speak "in the Spirit." Activities of teaching undoubtedly took place in connection with worship and in other, more quotidian, settings. Probably the greatest numbers of Jesus traditions were transmitted through teaching. The memory of what Jesus had said and done would be evoked by the need to make

decisions that faced believers in their common lives and in conflicts with outsiders, especially fellow Jews. The memory of Jesus would also serve to explain some of their common practices that were distinctive.

The character of such religious memory (*anamnesis*) is complex and rich, involving less the accurate account of the past than the recollection of the past to inform the present. From the perspective of 2,000 years, the first 30 years of Christianity seems a very short period, but in terms of human experience, it is also a long period of time. In the communities of faith in the risen Lord, the memories of Jesus were selected and shaped in response to the continuing experiences and convictions of believers. ■

Essential Reading

L. T. Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament*, pp. 125–141.

Supplementary Reading

C. F. D. Moule, *The Birth of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1982).

Questions to Consider

1. Why is it more remarkable that Christianity has any coherence than that it is diverse in its expressions?
2. In what ways is social memory both more fragile and more powerful than individual memory?