

Chapter 17 Preaching and Teaching in New Testament Times

The New Testament, like the Old, had sources that existed before its present twenty-seven books were composed. Because the time during which the New Testament was written was much shorter than that involved in developing the Old Testament—the ministry of Jesus closed in about A.D. 30 and all the writings of the New Testament were completed before a century had passed—the sources were not so extensive as they were for the Old. But they were equally complex, and they offer important insights into the inner life of early Christianity. I will describe just two types of sources that lie behind our New Testament: the sources behind the composition of our Gospels, and the accounts that make up the witness to Jesus' resurrection.

I.

One of two chief events of Jesus' ministry was his crucifixion, and the way the account of the event was constructed tells a great deal about the sources that the New Testament writers drew upon to present their faith in Christ.

They began with the crucifixion itself. The act of crucifixion is not described in detail in any of the Gospels but it need not be; people of Judea and Galilee were familiar with it already. It was a means of execution used with only two types of criminals, runaway slaves and persons condemned of treason against the Roman government. It began always with a scourging; a soldier would lay a leather whip time and again upon the naked back of the victim; perhaps the whip would be made up of numerous strands of leather wrapped together, and sometimes bits of nails and glass would be imbedded into the thongs. When the scourging was over, the victim was already a broken hulk of a person. Then he or she (there is evidence that women were also crucified, but this is rare) would be required to carry the crossbeam to the place of execution or, if they were no longer able to do so, any other Jewish national in the area could be impressed into service to carry it. The crossbeam was of rough-hewn wood, most likely a single beam that was placed later into an upright support. Arriving at the place of execution, the victim's hands would be bound to the beam by ropes, or nailed to it with spikes, sometimes both. Then the beam would be dropped into place: a slot on an upright pole set in the ground, or a notch cut into a tree trunk that had been sheared of its upper branches. The time required for the condemned person to die would be regulated by the officer commanding the execution detail; if he wanted the prisoner to die quickly, he merely let him hang on the cross, but if he wanted to prolong the agony, he would pound a stake into the tree just under the prisoner's crotch and let that support him so that he lingered longer in his pain. Death came in one of three ways: either by loss of blood, or the shock to the body, or strangulation and asphyxiation as the muscles in the back of the neck were no longer able to hold up the victim's head but let it

sink lower and lower into his chest cutting off the supply of air. Even Romans were horrified by the act of crucifixion. The orator Cicero was quoted as saying:

“To bind a Roman citizen is an outrage; to scourge him a crime; it almost amounts to parricide to put him to death. How shall I describe crucifixion? No adequate words can be found to represent so execrable an enormity.”

It was the most inhumane method that humankind has ever devised for inflicting the death penalty upon another person, and Christians knew that this terrible means of execution had been extracted upon the man they called Lord and Master.

The early Christians were agitated by the question that still haunts us today: why did Jesus, this precious person in whom the very life of God was found, have to die a death so brutal? As they meditated upon that question, their attention was drawn in particular to two passages from their Scriptures, Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. Each had to do with a righteous man who had suffered unaccountably at the hands of his neighbors.

In Psalm 22 the sufferer was given no name or title: he was simply a person who felt God had deserted him and had cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But God had not abandoned him; rather, God had answered his prayer, hastened to his aid, and had delivered him, as the psalm says, “from the sword and the power of the dog,” so that the man continued to praise God in the midst of the congregation. Not only that; since God had aided this man in his afflictions, “all the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord.” Reflectively, Christians began to apply this insight to Jesus’ crucifixion; he too had appeared abandoned, but God had been with him to deliver him; and from this event people in all the ends of the earth would remember what God had done through him and turn to the Lord; their own experience showed this was already happening. Isaiah 53 told a similar situation to that of the man in Psalm 22. From Isaiah the Christians read of one who was despised and rejected, a man of sorrows but acquainted with grief, whom people had deemed afflicted by God. But it was not so, said the Scripture. This one was rather the servant of God, God’s own representative to the world, who bore the sins of many, made intercession for the transgressors, and through whose stripes we are healed. Once again, apparently meaningless suffering was seen to take on meaning as God used the suffering for God’s own redemptive purposes. These Christian people, deeply nurtured in the religious heritage of the Scriptures, joined these two passages with the event of Jesus’ crucifixion and so came to understand that God had used the sufferings of Jesus for the salvation of humankind.

But they had more than this when they recalled Jesus’ death; they also had reports of eye-witnesses about what had occurred on that bitter Friday. Simon of Cyrene, the man known as the father of Alexander and Rufus and who had himself borne Jesus’ cross, had been present at the crucifixion and he, among others, could relate to them what had occurred; the beloved disciple of Jerusalem was also there, and the women who tried to anoint his missing body had looked on from a distance. Any event witnessed by so many people is bound to raise conflicting reports about what actually happened. In such a situation, the Christians did the natural thing;

they let Scripture provide the filter for what they kept from the eye-witness reports. The events which fit in with what Scripture had said about the suffering of the righteous were remembered and recorded and others were discarded. In this process a standard account not only of the event of Jesus' crucifixion but of its meaning was composed early in the life of the church and this account became the common knowledge of Christian people. Beginning with Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem, his cleansing of the Temple and his teaching in the city, it went on to tell of his anointing to be the Christ by the hand of a woman in Bethany, the plot to betray him, the last supper, the prayer in the garden and his arrest, his hearing inside the residence of the high priest, his trial at the praetorium of Pilate, the sentence, his execution, his being taken from the cross and placed in a tomb. Individual Christian communities fleshed out details from their own understanding of the event; but the basic structure stood, and it is a tribute to the wrestling of these early Christians with the question: what do the sufferings of Jesus Christ mean to us and all humankind?

II.

In addition to this regularized account of Jesus's crucifixion, other kinds of literary compositions circulated independently among Christian circles before they were incorporated into the Gospels.

Stories of the "mighty works of Jesus" took this same structured form. Mark's Gospel, for instance, had numerous accounts of Jesus' healings, and instead of being introduced in some ordered chronology of Jesus' ministry, they are listed one after another in the opening chapters of the book: Jesus' healing power is exhibited as he exorcises a demon from a possessed man, relieves the fever of Simon Peter's wife's mother, cleanses a leper, and heals a paralytic let down through the roof of a house by his friends. These are the "mighty works" of Jesus, and the stories were collected in response to a passage such as "Tell John (the Baptizer) what you have seen: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news preached to them." Collections of Jesus' mighty works were compiled by Christians before the Gospels were written in order that the world might know that the power of God was truly working in him.

Mark seemed to have other collections of material he drew upon to construct his Gospel. From 2:16 to 3:6, there are accounts of a series of controversies in which Jesus was engaged: with Pharisees over his eating with tax collectors and sinners, with the Baptist's disciples over fasting, with the Pharisees again over the place of the sabbath in Jewish life. Although important in themselves, these stories also show how Jesus' practices differed from those of other religious movements of the day and hence helped to instruct the emerging Christian communities on how they should respond to the challenges presented to them. Mark included also a block of parables, in chapter 4:1-34, as illustrative of Jesus' teaching, and followed this in 4:35 through the end of chapter 6, with a series of longer stories drawn from his ministry: stilling the storm, healing the Geresane boy possessed by demons and the woman with a flow of blood, raising the little girl from death to life, feeding the five thousand, revealing his true nature to his disciples as he walked upon the water. Mark's practice in composition,

apparently, was to take blocks of stories that had circulated independently and insert them in his Gospel without emendation and with very little editorial comment; we can be grateful to him for that methodology because it gives an indication of the independent life these collections had in the church before the time of the writing of the Gospels.

Collections of Jesus' teachings also circulated independently before the Gospels were written. We have already seen how Paul had access to these sources and how Mark inserted a collection of parables into his Gospel. The longest single block of Jesus' teaching, however, is found in Matthew's Gospel, chapters 5 through 7, which we call the Sermon on the Mount. Beginning with the beatitudes and concluding with the call to hear Jesus' words attentively, the collection also contained Jesus teaching on matters of the law, anger and reconciliation, adultery and divorce, oaths and retaliation, neighbors and enemies; described Jesus' understanding of such practices of piety as fasting, giving alms, and praying; talked of anxiety and God's kingdom, judging and hypocrisy, and set out the Golden Rule.

These collections of teaching were important in themselves, for they provided then and still provide today unmatched insight into the actual words Jesus spoke. More than that, however, they fulfilled a necessary function in the early Christian communities. These communities faced many policy questions: how should they react to charges by the Pharisees, challenges by the followers of the Baptist, and persecutions by the Gentiles? Jesus' teaching took the same place in the life of the Christian communities that the Covenant Code had in the early Israelite villages: it provided that set of precedents which the leaders of the community consulted when they were confronted with questions of acceptable behavior. These collections constituted the New Torah around which the community built its life, and the elders and deacons of the church fulfilled the same combination of judgment and instruction that the elders of Israel had fulfilled centuries before when the confederation of Israel was new. Yet there was this important difference: whereas the Covenant Code was used in worship as well, so the collection in Matthew 5 through 7 took on the form of an early Christian sermon. It was a proclamation of the kind of righteous life that Jesus required, and since no one could live up to its precepts, it was therefore a call to repentance; who could hear it without being convicted of his or her sins and needing to turn to Christ for the forgiveness of God offered through him? From collections such as this Sermon on the Mount, we receive insight not only into the mind of Christ but into the ways the first communities of Christian believers used the insights they had gained from him.

The accounts of Jesus' mighty works had their own utility as well. They were used as an evangelistic device to convince the skeptic that the power of God was truly in Jesus. This power healed the sick, raised the dead, won its victories over the unseen worlds of demons and other forms of possession, and controlled the powers of nature. "With power such as this," they asked, "is not Jesus what the Christian says he is, the Christ?" Employing this question, the Christian evangelists kept confronting the unbelieving world, and they pointed to these stories as proof that in him the power of God was acting in a unique and unexpected manner. Both collections had been gathered to fulfill precise functions in the life of the early Christian church. Christian missionaries went into the world armed with the accounts of his work and

proclaimed: “The power of God is in this man; see what God is doing through him to bring his power into human life.” The collections of teachings were used to instruct converts in the proposer ways for the new Christian to behave. Each of these compositions corresponded with a particular need the church had—to evangelize and to instruct—and they show us the inner workings of the Christian life in the period between the death of Jesus and the writing of the first Gospel.

III.

More difficult to characterize, however, is that set of stories most important to the Christian faith, the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection. Whereas the outline of the narrative of his crucifixion took on a settled form at an early time, and although there is considerable agreement among the Gospels about what he taught and what he did, no such agreed-upon form is apparent in the accounts of Jesus’ resurrection.

Paul gave us the earliest listing of these, when he inserted into Corinthians the credal statement that says that James, Cephas, the twelve, five hundred brethren, all the apostles, and he himself were the recipients of appearances by the risen Lord. None of the appearances was described in any detail, and of some of them there is no other record at all.

Mark’s Gospel, curiously enough, contained no resurrection appearance. It merely told of some women who went to the tomb on the first day of the week and found there a young man seated on the right and dressed in a white robe. He told them that Jesus had risen and that they should tell his disciples to go to Galilee where they would see him. In fear and astonishment the women ran from the tomb and told no one what they had seen. There the Gospel ended. Later editors tried to remedy the deficiency by supplying a longer ending to the Gospel which included accounts of Jesus’ resurrection, but the best manuscripts of the Gospel do not include them. Like Paul, Mark felt under no compulsion to give details of Christ’s resurrection: all that was needed for faith was the announcement that it had occurred.

Matthew had the story of the women coming to the tomb, but his details are different. In his account an angel delivered a message similar to the one given in Mark by the young man: Go to Galilee. We are then told what happened in Galilee. Jesus met the disciples on a mountain and commissioned them to go into all the world, making disciples of all nations, baptizing and teaching; and he promised his presence with them until the end of the age. This Gospel emphasized the presence and power of the resurrected Christ with his disciples as they went about his business.

Luke’s account was more complicated. This time the women came to the tomb and found two men, who delivered the same message to return to Galilee. In the meantime, two disciples made their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. As they journeyed, a third person joined them; when they invited him into the house for supper, they recognized him as he broke the bread for their meal. Returning to Jerusalem to the other disciples, the two learned that the Lord had risen and had appeared to Peter. Jesus himself joined the group to talk and eat with them. He

opened the Scriptures to them: that is, he pointed out from Scripture how all the things they had witnessed were consistent with God's action in redemption and he commissioned them to be his witnesses before the world. He led them in procession to Bethany and departed from them there, while they returned to the Temple in Jerusalem and were there continually praising God.

John's account was even more intricate, centering around a scene in a garden in which, instead of a young man or angels making the announcement of Jesus' resurrection to the women, Jesus himself came to only one of them, Mary Magdalene. Mary reported her experience to the disciples. They hid themselves in a locked upper room fearful of what might happen to them at the hands of the Jewish people; while they were there, Jesus stood in their midst and brought with him his word of peace. He sent them into the world with the words, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," and he transmitted his holy spirit to them, granting them the power to remit or retain the sins of any. The disciple Thomas was not with the group when Jesus came, and when he was told what had happened, he expressed his doubt to all of them. On the eighth day afterward, the group was again assembled in the house, presumably in some form of Christian worship, and Jesus came again, expressing Thomas' words of doubt and offering to let him place his fingers on the wounds and his hand in his side. That was enough for Thomas and he issued his exclamation of faith: "My Lord and my God!"

The resurrection stories in John were further complicated when a second set of them was added in what appears to be a second ending written for this Gospel. This related how the disciples were in Galilee fishing when Jesus appeared on the shore, and under his instructions the disciples had a marvelous catch of fish. When they brought the boat to land, they found a charcoal fire, like the one beside which Peter had stood to deny his Lord. By the fire Jesus three times commissioned Peter to feed his flock; and the account closed by trying to clear up a matter concerning the death of the man called "the disciple whom Jesus loved," not all of the implications of which are apparent to us today.

It is clear that, unlike the accounts of Jesus' crucifixion, the accounts of his resurrection vary widely in scope. We need to try to make some sense of this.

It is possible that because the experience of the resurrection was so personal, it could not reduce itself to one single account as was the case with the crucifixion. Each major mission of the church, built as it was around the revelation to one particular Christian leader, kept and cherished the account that was most precious to it. There was an attempt to bring these together, as was seen in the passage in Corinthians, but it remained more important to the whole Christian church to have these many accounts, for this indicated to one and all the widespread nature of the appearances of the resurrected Christ.

One person however was acclaimed in all the accounts as the original witness to Jesus' resurrection and this was Simon Peter. He alone is mentioned by name in Mark's narratives; when the two men who had seen Christ in Emmaus returned to Jerusalem, they were told that Christ had arisen and had appeared to Peter; and in John's Gospel, Peter is the first person to

enter the tomb of Jesus, though he does not understand what he saw. Peter was the central figure in the resurrection narratives, and the conviction that Christ had risen from the dead strengthened the other followers of Jesus to set out again upon the paths of discipleship that they had abandoned at the moment of the crucifixion.

On the other hand, the account of the women at the tomb emerged rather late in Christian history. Luke tells us as much; he noted that the women had said nothing about their experience until they later learned that the Lord appeared to Peter. This need not strike us as strange; witness by women was inadmissible in Jewish courts and could not be used as a primary resource to convince Jewish men that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead. More than that, there was an additional sufficient legal reason for the women's testimony to be withheld for many years: since even to touch the dead body of a crucified criminal was itself a treasonable act under Roman law, these women by going to the tomb were actually committing treason, and only when a statute of limitations had expired would it be safe for them to tell their story openly. The way their report was changed shows the kind of embellishment that occurred as stories were reworked to fit later needs. At first it was reported that a young man had announced Jesus's resurrection to the women; then it was an angel, then it was two young men; finally, it was Jesus himself who came to Mary Magdalene after an angel had made an announcement to the women. To say that the story was embellished, however, by no means invalidates the original event; and I believe that Mark's report of an announcement by a young man to the women that Christ has risen and calls the disciples to Galilee is an authentic account of the way the resurrection was made known to Jesus' first followers.

What is most remarkable about the varied accounts of Jesus' resurrection is the manner in which each appearance was tailored to the particular needs of the person to whom Jesus appeared. To Peter, Jesus offered forgiveness and, since Peter had denied him, he needed this restoration if he were to continue his relationship with the living Lord. To Thomas, he brought confirmation that answered his doubts. To the two men on the way to Emmaus, he brought his continued presence in the supper of the Lord. To Paul, he supplied a way for the young man to use his talents and ambitions in the service of the greatest master of all. To all the disciples, he brought a renewed sense of what it meant to be part of his resurrected body. The event of the resurrection was not presented as an argument to be proved or disputed but was a witness to what had happened in the lives of Jesus' followers. That the witness came in so many ways should embarrass us; it simply points out that the resurrected Christ continues to meet the particular needs of particular people as he did in the days of his ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem.

IV.

These are not all the sources that went into the makeup of the New Testament. The Book of Acts, for one, contains quotations and speeches whose secrets even the most able scholars cannot yet penetrate, and John's Gospel points to material lost to us when he says in 20:30 that "Jesus did other signs not written in this book" and in 21:25 that "there are many other things

which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.” Paul himself quotes agreements from apostolic conferences, hymns of worship, early creeds and baptismal confessions, and Old Testament passages in his letters. But even the sources we do have open fascinating insights into the life and faith of the Christian church in the days between Jesus’ death and the beginning of the writing of the Gospels. The sources show Christian people at work on ecclesiastical, liturgical, theological, ethical, educational, and evangelistic questions that needed to be resolved if the Christian message was to make an impact with the empire of Rome; and they reveal the individual faith of the individual Christian disciple as he or she struggled to come to grips with the meaning of Christ’s ministry, death, and resurrection. We wish we had access to even more of the sources developed then and to the precise revelations into the Christian life that we might receive from them. Recognizing how deep is the shadow that falls across our knowledge, however, we can still be grateful for what we do have, and we can accept our New Testament not as telling us all we want to know about Jesus and the life and times of his followers but as telling us all we need to know about Christ for our own salvation.