

Origins of Luke's Gospel -- E. J. Campfield

When we consider the history and literature of earliest Christianity, it's important to keep a few things in mind.

First off, Jesus was not a Christian -- he was a Jew.

And John the Baptist was certainly not a Baptist -- he was a Jew.

Virtually all the earliest Christians understood themselves religiously to be Jews.

John and Jesus both pre-date Christianity. And it was not the intention of either John or Jesus to start a brand new religion -- but rather to reform, or we might more accurately say in this instance, *to repair and restore* a very ancient one.

As a religion, Christianity is derivative of Judaism -- that's where it came from. And as such, how accurate a picture we have of what earliest Christianity might have looked like in practice is in direct proportion to our clear understanding of what Judaism of this time looked like in practice. Because that *shape* is what Christianity branched out from.

Now we could spend half a semester in a graduate level course, unpacking just the concepts I've laid out for you so far. So understand, we're flying low and fast today, clipping just the tops of the trees. But below that canopy, exists a thick, thriving jungle of remote history and recent scholarship that I hope you find as fascinating as I do.

My topic today is Luke's Gospel. In deference to the holiday season, examples we look at today will come from Luke's familiar annunciation and nativity stories of chapters 1 & 2 -- what we think of as the Christmas Story.

Questions that should be on our minds when we investigate any piece of literature, especially a very old piece of literature like Luke, are: Who

wrote it? When, where and why did they write it? For what purpose was it intended? Whom was it written for? By what means did the recipients receive it? How did they experience and use it? And what was their reaction to it?

Now we know that much literature from this era developed through a process initially of oral transmission, recited or essentially performed from memory, with adjustments made per the occasion as a good speaker will, and then eventually found its way into formal handwritten papyrus, or occasionally parchment, manuscripts.

The question I want to focus on today is : *For what purpose was the Gospel According to Luke first composed **in written form**, and how did early -- second generation Christians -- **first use and experience that document**.*

We're going to look at a fairly recent theory that Luke's Gospel was composed specifically as an *ancillary text* to accompany the weekly sabbath readings of Torah in synagogue -- as what we might very loosely call a "targum." We'll explore that Hebrew term in a moment.

Now you're looking at me a little oddly, thinking: "A *gospel* read in *synagogue*?" Keep in mind that much of Christianity for its first couple generations might more accurately be called Christianic-Judaism. Judaism was still the core noun, modified somewhat by a Christianic adjective.

As such it continued to operate more or less within the world of mainstream Jewish synagogue and even temple worship as did other sectarian Jewish splinter groups, more or less. And there were many such sects and splinter groups at this time, tolerated within the mainstream of Jewish worship, and even given tolerant audience -- if not fully acceptant audience -- for expression of their beliefs.

So to answer the question, "What did earliest Christian worship look like?" Much of it looked a lot like mainstream Jewish synagogue worship of the time -- because that's where it developed from.

Though it waned over time, this continued to be the case until maybe a decade or so after 70 C.E. and destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, when the rabbis introduced the *Birkat HaMinim*. Devout Jews and many devout Christianic-Jews prayed three times a day, facing east. What they recited in prayer was called the *Amidah* -- the 18 Benedictions.

The rabbis introduced a not so subtle change in the 12th Benediction called the *Birkat HaMinim*, or cursing of the *minim*, the minorities, meaning all the sectarian heretics. This was apparently aimed largely at the Christians.

If you can imagine what the effect would have been on you as a Christianic-Jew, being expected to recite this benediction, beseeching God to "destroy those in heretical sects, who slander Jews and who act as informers against Jews," and what it would have done to your personal relationships with more mainstream Jews who were reciting this, not just occasionally, but three times a day. In a short period of years, Christians were out of the synagogues, and we had a pronounced Judeo-Christian split.

But back to the Luke theory. It revolves around a very oddly placed genealogy of Jesus that appears in Luke. His Jesus narrative has been flowing along very smoothly, building momentum even, for three chapters. And then suddenly we're dropped into a genealogy that stops the story dead in its tracks ... *who was the son of so and so, who was the son of so and so, who was the son of so and so* -- on and on and on for more than 75 generations. Then goes right back to the narrative, top of chapter four, like nothing happened. *Just plain weird...*

Why that genealogy in Luke is there *at that particular juncture of the text* has perplexed theologians and biblical scholars for literally hundreds and hundreds of years.

Yet, it somehow feels very purposely put in placed exactly where it is.

Let's go to PowerPoint.