

Jerusalem Perspective

A Monthly Report on Research into the Words of Jesus

Volume 2, Number 4

January 1989

Sources for the Gospels

Without the Gospels, little would be known of the

way Jesus lived and taught. Although there are a few references to Jesus in the writings of ancient Greek and Latin historians such as Tacitus, Pliny and Josephus, the only sources of consequence for his life and teachings are the letters and tractates of the New Testament.

Jewish Book

Our information about Jesus thus depends upon the writings of the members of a first-century Jewish sect. All the original members of this sect were Jews, as were almost all the writers of the New Testament.

Although its earliest known form is in the Greek language, the New Testament is a thoroughly Jewish book. It is full of ideas, idioms, and thought and language forms which are so completely Semitic that Christians reading from the Old Testament to the New Testament have invariably felt that they were continuing a single story.

by Robert L. Lindsey

Dr. Robert Lindsey, Pastor Emeritus of Jerusalem's Narkis Street Baptist Congregation, has resided in Israel for over forty years. His research is challenging many conclusions of New Testament scholarship from the past 150 years. Lindsey and his colleague, Professor David Flusser of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, have been instrumental in creating a new approach to the study of the synoptic Gospels. In this series of articles, Dr. Lindsey provides an introduction to the field of synoptic studies and the "synoptic problem."

Even the non-Jewish writer Luke, author of the longest account of the life of Jesus in the New Testament and the only apostolic history in this collection (*The Acts of the Apostles*), fills his works with quotations from the highly Semitic sayings of Jesus and the preaching of Jewish apostles. Indeed, it is the Greek Luke who has best preserved the materials about Jesus first written in Hebrew or Aramaic and then translated to Greek.

Paul's Letters

The earliest "books" of the New Testament are not the Gospels, but the letters of Paul and, possibly, the epistle of Jesus' brother

James. These letters do not present even a minimal account of Jesus' life. Rather, they contain appeals to early Greek-speaking Christians, of both Jewish and pagan background, to follow more closely the example of Jesus. The rare references to the historical life of Jesus are introduced only to enforce a

(Continued on page 2)

Forgiveness is one of the main emphases in Jesus' teaching. It is no wonder, then, that forgiveness is part of the short prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.

Man's obligation to be forgiving has perhaps never been more power-

מחל לנו על חובותינו Forgive Us Our Debts

by Bradford Young

fully expressed than in Jesus' parable of the Unforgiving Servant (Matthew 18: 23-35). Although the king's ser-

vant had been forgiven an enormous debt by the king, he was unwilling to forgive a small debt that a fellow servant owed to

him. Would the king show mercy to this unmerciful servant? He most certainly would not.

(Continued on page 4)

Sources for the Gospels (continued from page 1)

point. Nevertheless, these biographical references are brought in so casually as to be considered of great importance by historians, and it would be possible to construct a small *Life of Jesus* from them.

Paul wrote that Jesus was a man "born of woman," a descendant of Abraham and of the family of David, that he lived under the Torah, was persecuted by his own people, ate a last meal at Passover with his disciples to whom he distributed bread and wine, inviting them to repeat that rite in remembering him, was buried but was raised to life by God his Father, and later seen by many of his disciples and once "by over five hundred brethren of whom the majority are still with us."

These references suggest that Paul was well acquainted with the main facts and teachings of Jesus as they are recorded in the Gospels. However, it appears that the Gospels, as they now stand in Greek, cannot have been written prior to about 60 A.D., by which time most if not all of Paul's letters had been circulated among the Greek churches. Yet there is strong evidence that written records of Jesus' life and teachings predate even Paul's earliest letters. It seems that the authors of the canonical Gospels were using Greek written sources

which had themselves descended from a Greek translation of an original Hebrew *Life of Jesus*.

The dates of the Gospels are the subject of much speculation among scholars. Since it seems clear that the writer of the Gospel of John used Matthew, Mark and Luke in writing his own book, it often has been supposed that John was composed as late as the second century A.D. Much recent scholarship would prefer a date as early as 75-80 A.D., which suggests that the three earlier Gospels could have been written before 70 A.D.

"Good News"

These books are called "Gospels" perhaps because the Apostle Paul used the Greek word *εὐαγγέλιον* (*e-van-GE-li-on*, good news) to describe the message he and other evangelists preached to Jews and Greeks throughout the Roman world. He defined this evangel in his first letter to the Corinthians by stating that "the Messiah died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, was buried, was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve..." (I Corinthians 15:3-5).

It is likely that Paul coined the specific sense of the word *e-van-GE-li-on* — good news to men — from the Greek form of Isaiah 61:1 "...the Spirit of the LORD has anointed me to bring good news (*εὐαγγελί-σασθαι*, *e-van-ge-LI-sas-thai*) to the poor..." which was also the quotation with which Jesus announced his ministry in the synagogue of Nazareth (Luke 4:18).

In any case, the word *e-van-GE-li-on* which, due to Anglo-Saxon usage we translate into English as "gospel," was used by the writer of the Gospel of Mark in the first sentence of his book: "The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah." This set the pattern for early Greek believers to label the four canonical accounts of Jesus' life "The Gospel According to Matthew," "The Gospel According to Mark," etc. Eventually, the four col-

lectively were called "the Gospels."

None of the Gospels contains the name of its author, and we are dependent upon second-century Christian tradition for the names of the writers. However, in view of the tendency of Greek Christians of this period to attribute apostolic authorship to early books, it is significant that neither the Gospel of Mark nor the Gospel of Luke bears an apostolic name. This is one of several reasons for believing that Luke was in fact the author of the New Testament works attributed to him, and a good case can be made for the tradition concerning Mark (sometimes called John Mark, cf. Acts 12:25).

Many scholars consider it impossible to prove the second-century tradition that the Apostle Matthew wrote the Gospel which bears his name. The situation is the same regarding John's Gospel. Modern writers usually use the names Matthew, Mark, Luke and John for the books themselves and the traditional authors without necessarily implying that they accept the tradition.

Gospel Order

The order of these Gospels in the earliest manuscripts says something about their popularity in the second and third centuries. Usually the order is Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as in modern usage. However, one also finds the order Matthew, Luke, John and Mark, which may indicate the popularity of Matthew and the unpopularity of Mark's Gospel, which was said by second-century Greek believers to be "out of order."

The order of the Gospels and the identity of their authors is of much less importance than the study of what they actually say. Here the first tools are a knowledge of Koine Greek, the usual Greek of the period, an understanding of textual transmission, an ability to use Old and New Testament Hebrew and Greek concordances and lexicons and, not least of all, a close acquaintance with rabbinic literature in its Hebrew and Aramaic originals. JP

Jerusalem Perspective

Editor
Jeffrey Magnuson

JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE is an independent report published monthly by David Bivin, director of the Jerusalem School for the Study of the Synoptic Gospels. Unsigned articles are attributable to the publisher. Subscription prices (including airmail postage): one year, US\$36; two years, US\$60; three years, US\$75. Gift subscriptions: US\$30 for first, US\$25 for each additional. Back issues are available at US\$3 per issue. Copyright, 1989, by David Bivin. Printed in Israel. ISSN 0792-1357

P.O. Box 31820
Jerusalem, 91317 Israel

Hebrew Nuggets

The word *shalom* appears in the Hebrew Scriptures 226 times, yet we find it nowhere in English translations of the Bible. It is never simply transliterated as *shalom*, but is always translated by English equivalents such as “peace.” Today, however, the use of Hebrew in the modern state of Israel has made *shalom* an international word.

In addition to the many sides of *shalom* we mentioned previously, every visitor to Israel today quickly learns two further uses of the word. In modern Hebrew it has become the way to say both “hello” and “goodbye,” and Israelis bless one another with *shalom* when they meet and when they part.

On שבת (sha-BAT, the Sabbath), the Hebrew greeting is שבת שלום (sha-BAT sha-LOM, Sabbath of peace). The response to this blessing is שבת שלום וברכה (sha-BAT sha-LOM u-me-vo-RAK, Sabbath of peace and blessing).

According to Luke 24:36, when Jesus after his resurrection appeared to his disciples in Jerusalem, he said to them: “Peace to you.” This may reflect the customary Hebrew greeting שלום עליכם (sha-LOM ‘a-le-KEM, peace upon you). This still remains a common greeting in Hebrew, and the response is עליכם שלום (‘a-le-KEM sha-LOM, upon you peace).

Names

We read in II Samuel 3:3 that Absalom was the son of David. His name in Hebrew, אבשלום (‘av-sha-LOM), is a compound of two words: ‘av (father) and sha-LOM. The feminine name שלומית (she-lo-MIT, I Chronicles 3:19) is built from the same root.

Many other personal names are based on this root: שלמה (she-lo-MOH, spelled “Solomon” in English); שלמי (she-lo-MI, mentioned in Numbers 34:27); שלמות (she-lo-MOT, mentioned in I Chronicles 24:22), the plural of sha-LOM.

In Jesus’ day, *shalom* also was used as a personal name. Better known to Christians in its Greek form Salome, it was the second most common feminine name in the period, after מירי (mir-YAM,

In Hebrew, unlike English, syllables almost always begin with consonants. The second of the above two possibilities, *shal-OM*, will not work because then the second syllable would begin with the vowel “o.” To be doubly sure there will be no possibility of confusion for our readers, the transliterations in JERUSALEM PERSPECTIVE mark the breaks between syllables with small dots.

Reading Practice

- עַם (‘am), “people.”
- אִמָּה (‘em), “mother.”
- יוֹם (yom), “day.”
- שִׁשְׁבִּיל (shum), “garlic.”
- שֵׁם (shem), “name.” This was the name of a famous biblical character, Shem, Noah’s first-born (Genesis 5:32). Wouldn’t it seem strange to have a name that meant “name”?
- שָׁם (sham), “there.” One of the most frequent words in the Bible, *sham* appears 689 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.

• הֵם (hem), “them” (masculine).

• יָם (yam), “sea, lake.” Perhaps because of its unique beauty, Jesus spent a great deal of time in the vicinity of a body of water usually referred to in English translations of the Bible as the “Sea of Galilee” or simply, the “Sea.” This “sea,” only 21 kilometers (13 miles) long and 12 kilometers (7.5 miles) wide at its widest point, is actually a freshwater lake.

Matthew, Mark and John always refer to the Sea of Galilee using the Greek word θάλασσα (THA-la-sa, sea). While Luke always refers to this “sea” as λίμνη (LIM-ne, lake), he has only a total of five references to it. Therefore, what has stuck in the minds of Gospel readers is “Sea of Galilee.”

Assuming a Hebrew original might explain why this lake is misnamed “sea.” A Greek translator may have employed the standard

(Continued on page 4)

Lesson Sixteen

שְׁלוֹם — Shalom (part 2)

As we saw in our last article, *shalom* is a very flexible word and can refer to much more than peace. All of the meanings we mentioned — “friendship,” “well-being,” “safety” and “salvation” — are clearly related to peace. And they also are all aspects of “completeness,” the fundamental meaning of the Hebrew root ש-ל-ם (SH-L-M).

Mary). *Shalom* was the name of one of the three women mentioned by name who stood at a distance watching the crucifixion (Mark 15:40) and who later brought spices to Jesus’ tomb to anoint him (Mark 16:1). According to Josephus (*Antiquities* 18:136), it was also the name of that infamous daughter of Herodias who asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter (Matthew 14:8).

Shalom is still used in Israel as a name. Today it is not used for women, but is a common man’s name.

Syllables

When reading Hebrew, how does one know where one syllable ends and the next one begins? For example, in pronouncing the word שְׁלוֹם, how does one know whether he should read sha-LOM or shal-OM?

A very simple rule enables one to properly break words into syllables:

Forgive Us Our Debts
(continued from page 1)

In the Sages

God will not forgive those who refuse to forgive (Matthew 6:14-15). This theme is found in the teachings of sages even before Jesus' time. In approximately 170 B.C., Ben Sira placed forgiveness in the context of prayer:

Forgive your neighbor the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray. Does a man harbor anger against another, and yet seek for healing from the Lord? Does he have no mercy toward a man like himself, and yet pray for his own sins?

(Ben Sira 28:2-4)

One must forgive one's neighbor before requesting forgiveness from God.

A similar idea appears in the Mishnah:

The Day of Atonement atones for

Hebrew Nuggets — Shalom

(Continued from page 3)

translation of *yam*, *THA·la·sa*, long fixed due to the influence of the Septuagint, the second-century B.C. Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Unlike *yam*, however the Greek word *THA·la·sa*, cannot normally also mean "lake." Consequently, when English Bible translators approach the word *THA·la·sa*, they are obligated to translate "sea" if they wish to translate the Greek accurately.

• אולם (ʿu·LAM), "a large room; hall."

• יהורם (ye·ho·RAM), "Jehoram," the king of Israel, son of Ahab (II Kings 1:17).

• יורם (yo·RAM), "Joram," the king of Judah, son of Jehoshaphat (II Kings 8:23).

The king of Israel and the king of Judah are referred to in the Bible by both names. יורם (yo·RAM) is a shortened form of יהורם (ye·ho·RAM), the weak letter ה falling out.

In our next lesson we will begin the study of the Hebrew word for "and" — *vav*.

transgressions of a person against the Omnipresent, but it does not atone for transgressions of a person against his neighbor unless he first appeases his neighbor. (Yoma 8:9)

A man is required to be reconciled with his neighbor before he approaches God.

Such sayings show that, like Jesus, the rabbis realized that a man's relationship to his fellow man affects his relationship to God. One must forgive before requesting forgiveness. The Talmud also highlights this theme in the words of Rabbi Gamaliel Berabbi who taught:

He who shows mercy to others, mercy is shown him by Heaven. But he who does not show mercy to others, mercy is not shown to him by Heaven. (Shabbath 151^b)

Debts & Debtors

An ancient blessing that appears in the Jewish prayer book is reminiscent of the words of Jesus. It is recited after one has recovered from an illness, or after one has survived a precarious journey or some other danger. Like the Lord's Prayer, it employs the word "debtors":

Blessed are you O Lord our God, King of the world, who does good to debtors, for having shown me every goodness.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, this blessing is cited in the context of God's providing rain for his people. His people are sinners — unworthy, undeserving — and are indebted to God. Even so, he is merciful and has blessed them with his goodness. Rabbi Yose bar Jacob said:

We are obliged to praise your name, our King, for each drop that you send to us, for you do good to debtors. (Ṭa'anit 64^b; compare Matthew 5:45)

The Hebrew word תְּבִימָה (*ha·ya·VIM*) stands behind both "obligated" and "debtors" in this text. The same word also can mean "sinners," as is illustrated in one of the Hebrew fragments of the book of Ben Sira:

Do not reproach a person who repents of wrong doing. Remember that we all are *ha·ya·VIM*. (Ben Sira 8:5)

A question is raised when

Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer is compared with Matthew's version. Instead of "forgive us our debts," Luke has "forgive us our sins." The difference can be explained partially in light of the Semitic background of the texts. In Hebrew, the noun חֵב (*hov*, debt; plural, חֵבוֹת, which has the same root as תְּבִימָה (*ha·ya·VIM*), can mean both guilt for which one is held accountable, and a debt to be paid (Ezekiel 18:7; cf. Daniel 1:10, Ben Sira 11:18).

The additional meaning of "sin" for the word *hov* seems to have been adopted into post-biblical Hebrew from Aramaic. It has been claimed by many scholars that "debt" in the sense "sin" is Aramaic but not Hebrew usage, and this has been put forward as evidence that behind the Greek texts of the Gospels was an Aramaic predecessor. However, this sense of the word is also known in the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls (cf. Damascus Covenant 3:10).

Luke's use of the word "sins" seems to be a clarification for his readers of the word "debts." "Debts" is more flexible and includes not only sins but moral obligations connected with personal relationships as well.

Power of Forgiveness

Jesus understood the liberating power of forgiveness. A tremendous release occurs when one is able to forgive.

Jesus exemplified forgiveness in his response to the Roman soldiers who crucified him. The soldiers were callous to the brutality of their actions. In their eyes, this was just another Jew. Jewish messianic hopes had to be suppressed and they had crucified many Jews before.

Yet Jesus prayed, "Father, forgive them for they do not understand what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

This article is condensed from Dr. Young's The Jewish Background to the Lord's Prayer, published by the Center for Judaic-Christian Studies (\$4.95 ppd.), P.O. Box 293040, Dayton, OH 45429, U.S.A.