

EPISODE 15

SOMETIME AROUND THE YEAR ZERO

CHRISTIANITY

Hi there. Welcome to the end of the world. My name is Michael Folz. And this is episode number fifteen of my podcast Dial It Back Or Die. Today we're going to be talking about the origins of Christianity.

Now in doing this podcast I'm trying to keep all references to quote/unquote 'spirituality' out of the discussion. We're trying to keep the focus on history, on science, and on philosophy. But Christianity is so integral to the foundations of Western Civilization that we do have to spend some time examining it.

And, as with Russia, I can't claim to be an expert in the field. On the other hand, though, I am pretty conversant with the subject. I mean, at the age of nine I read the entire Bible front to back. Is that religiously geeky enough for you?

Anyway, as with the two previous episodes, what we're primarily going to try to do here is to disabuse you of some of the misconceptions about early Christianity that you might be in possession of. Which is going to be tricky. First, because, unlike with Greece and Rome, many of these wrong ideas are the result not of popular history, but of popular religion, and thus they have, either positively or negatively, a much higher emotional component. And I will have to be careful when walking through this particular minefield. Because not only are there cherished beliefs, but there are also cherished disbeliefs.

And the second problem in this is that, although there is very good documentation for events that happened in Greece or Rome, outside of the Bible there is virtually no historical record of who Jesus was or what he did. And what supposedly 'contemporaneous' accounts that we do have were written some thirty to fifty years after the fact. Which means that inevitably there is a whole lot of speculation surrounding all aspects of His life, even by experts in the field.

But let's start with something that is not speculation. And which might also really surprise you.

Because our Sunday School understanding of what is called the Holy Land around the time of Jesus' birth is that it was a poor, backward, rural area with shepherds in the fields, people riding on donkeys, and women carrying jugs of water on their heads. And I imagine that the reason that we have this image etched in our brains is because in the Bible the New Testament comes immediately after the end of the Old Testament.

Now virtually all scholars agree that the Old Testament was mostly written in the 6th Century BC. And it was written largely about events which happened even earlier. Well, at that time Judea was indeed a poor, backward, rural area. But remember what I said about Alexander the Great coming through in 330 BC and Hellenizing the entire eastern Mediterranean? Well, Judea was part of that Eastern Mediterranean. Which means that by the time of Jesus that Old Testament world was long, long gone. And in its place was a highly urban, densely populated country of probably at least a million people. Just to the south of it was the Roman Empire's second largest city, Alexandria. And just to the north of it was the third largest, Antioch. In short, as I stressed in the last episode, the Eastern Mediterranean was the most economically dynamic part of the Roman Empire. And Judea was smack dab in the middle of it.

And, yes, there were Pharisees and Sadducees arguing with each other over religious texts. But, just as it is in modern Israel, the majority of the people back then were probably rather secular. Some were completely Hellenized. Others may have still gone to Synagogue, but had adopted many Greek manners and customs in their everyday lives.

And here's another false impression that those Bible stories and Bible movies might have given you. Because it's always presented that Rome had just taken over ruling Judea, implying that before then the Jews had been a proud, independent people. But remember how I said that the Romans always preferred that their provinces had home rule? It turns out that the only reason that the Romans had formally taken over around the time of Jesus was that the sons of the previous Jewish king had proven incompetent. The reality of Judea is that, before Roman dominance, the area had been previously totally ruled by Egypt for several centuries.

What's more, even at that time there were a lot more Jews living outside of Judea than living within it. Virtually every town and city from Spain to Mesopotamia contained a Jewish community within it. In fact, Jews made up about 7% of the Roman Empire's population. (By comparison, today only 2% of the U.S. population is Jewish.)

And Jesus and the people he preached to may well have spoken Aramaic. (After all, at that time

Hebrew had already become pretty much a dead language.) But that's like saying that people in present day Kenya speak Swahili. But just as anyone with any education in Kenya today also speaks some level of English, so, too, did any literate person in Judea also speak at least some Greek. Even the Jewish scriptures were written in Greek. The books of the Bible would be written in Greek. I mean, the name 'Jesus' itself is a Greek one. His disciples, by the way, called him by his Jewish name, Joshua.

Further, although Nazareth, the place where Jesus grew up, was indeed a small Jewish town, it was less than four miles away from a large, thoroughly Hellenized city called Sephoris. That's little more than an hour's walk. So it's rather plausible that, as a bright young student, Jesus would have been exposed to more than just Hebrew thought. And it's almost certain that he wasn't just some rube from the sticks. (For that matter, being a 'carpenter's son' could also mean that his dad was a building contractor.)

Anyway, this brings us to that word 'syncretic' again. The process whereby religions in the ancient world evolved by freely sharing ideas and beliefs with each other. Because Romans may not have been all that deep or religious. But people in the Eastern Mediterranean were. And there was everything from mainstream Pagan worship of the traditional gods to more refined Pagan thought and Greek philosophy to Greek mystery cults to Egyptian mystery cults to Buddhism to you name it. And Judaism at the time was in many ways more open and progressive than are the Ultra Orthodox today. For one thing, Judaism in general was very open to converts, even to proselytizing. And, for instance, Philo, an Egyptian Jewish scholar who lived at the same time as Jesus, even went so far as to treat the entire Old Testament as mere allegory.

Now I'm not saying that Jesus was therefore this cosmopolitan religious scholar, seamlessly weaving together disparate ideas from all of the world's religions. As I said, hard facts about the life of Jesus are pretty much nonexistent. But even in the Bible, they don't just have Jesus preaching to the poor and downtrodden. They also have him also turning water into wine at a fancy wedding, discoursing with the wealthy Nicodemus, and winning arguments against learned rabbis. Again, he is not painted as a simple man from a simple village. If he embraced poverty, he no doubt did it voluntarily, and not out of necessity.

My point in saying all this is that we have all been so indoctrinated with the idea of the so-called 'Judaean-Christian' tradition that we think that the teachings of Jesus are somehow directly connected to Old Testament Hebrew beliefs and predictions. But Old Testament Jews hadn't even been truly monotheistic. They conceded that other gods existed; they just claimed that their God Jehoavah

was the biggest and best. Jehovah was also a jealous god who behaved in ways little better than any of the Greek gods did. Beyond that, the Old Testament theology had no conception of a soul, and no conception of what happened after you die. Therefore no heaven or hell. It was, all in all, a pretty primitive conception of the Divine.

By the time of Jesus, however, all kinds of much more sophisticated ideas about life and its meaning had developed. As I've already mentioned, from Persia and Zoroastrianism came the ideas of an eternal battle between Good and Evil, an afterlife of either fire or divine light, and a person's final judgment. Followers of Plato, who I will call Neoplatonists because we're talking about 400 years after Plato, believed in an immortal soul which was distinct from the mind and body. They also believed that the soul had descended from the Godhead by means of a mystical force which they called Logos, and that said soul was now miserably trapped within the material world. And it's hard to know what exactly the various Mystery Cults taught, since it was secret. But we can guess from studying the esoterica which was written down that it was somewhat along these lines.

Like I said, though, even though there's no doubt that some Jewish sects were pretty much Old Testament fundamentalists, others had absorbed these new ideas. And one large Jewish sect, which very well may have had a profound effect on Jesus and His teachings, were the Essenes. Now the Essenes were really into purity. They wore white robes when they congregated. They had a ritual bath at least once a day. They had extremely strict entrance requirements. They practiced chastity, forgiveness, and renunciation of all anger. And they held all things in common. Although they still believed in Hebrew scriptures, they also held the more advanced Neoplatonist ideas about the soul, the kingdom of light, and the afterlife. But their core belief was that they were purifying themselves so as to prepare for a Messiah who would rid the world around them of the degraded materialism that had come about because of the wealth generated by Hellenization, etc. (And, by the way, you can have more than one Messiah, since the word just means 'anointed one'.)

Now some people see Jesus as being an Essene; that is, a holy man and preacher who was teaching those radical Essene doctrines, and who perhaps also saw himself as that purified being who would set the Jewish world right. Others, including virtually all present day Christians, obviously don't see it that way. But there's that problem: There weren't any tape recorders back then to record His ministry. And the earliest Gospel which was written was written at least thirty years after His death. And today scholars pretty much agree that it is only His various parables and pithy sayings which have an extremely high certainty of truth to them.

Now this doesn't mean that all of the rest is necessarily fiction. It's just that we don't know which part is and which part isn't. What was unconsciously slanted. Or what was put in there to support one particular person's take on the subject. After all, the Gospels go out of their way to show how imperfect His disciples were. So it's entirely possible that the Gospel writers—and we really don't know who they actually were, either—were substituting what they wanted Jesus to be, as opposed to what He had actually seen Himself as.

And here's another problem with the Gospels. Because Matthew, Mark, and Luke all basically tell the same story of the life of Jesus, with the same sayings and the same timeline. The Book of John, however, tells a completely different story, with a different timeline and with completely different places and events. What's more, its first few verses—In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God, etc.—were directly lifted from a Greek Neoplatonic hymn. And what has been translated into English as 'Word' is really that Greek mystical word Logos. So it is quite plausible to see the entire book, with its frequent references to the Divine Light, with the turning water into wine, or Jesus' claim to be the living water, or Jesus calling himself the Son of God (which He doesn't do in the other Gospels), all as allegory and metaphor and hints of deeper meaning. As the story of the Hebrew preacher being retold with the esoteric symbolism of both Platonists and Mystery Cult enthusiasts. And what makes this interpretation even more interesting is that the Book of John has the greatest claim to having been written by an actual disciple of Jesus.

Of course, again, this isn't the mainstream view. Even though Jesus Himself taught almost exclusively in allegory and metaphor. But an even bigger problem with figuring out what the real message of Jesus was, and a problem which is acknowledged by the mainstream, is that what Jesus taught in the Gospels is in many ways radically different from what Paul taught after the death of Jesus.

In case you don't remember, Paul wasn't a disciple of Jesus. He never even met Him. Instead he was a thoroughly Hellenized Jew from present day Turkey who claimed to have had a vision from God while on the road to Damascus. The real disciples of Jesus were initially pretty leery of him. Especially because Jesus had specifically specified to his disciples that He had come only for the reawakening of the Jews. Whereas Paul had this idea that this was no longer just going to be a Jewish sect, but that now Jesus was the Savior of the entire world. What's more, Jesus had preached that salvation came only through baptism, moral cleansing, forgiveness of others, a righteous life, and good and charitable deeds. Paul preached that all you had to do was believe that Jesus had died for your sins. And, yes, you should also try to be righteous, etc. But, really, what it came down to is that all that

you really needed to do was believe. And then Divine Grace would take care of everything else.

But whatever problems fully believing Christians have in reconciling these two completely different approaches, there is another thing which is hardly mentioned nowadays, but which was more than central to early Christianity. In fact, it was the entire reason for early Christianity. And this was the expectation of an imminent Second Coming. After all, in the Gospels Jesus quite clearly states that some of those listening to Him then would still be alive when He returned. And Paul also mentions this belief repeatedly in his various letters.

But, unfortunately for those believers, it didn't happen. Although that doesn't mean that Christianity therefore died. No, instead it ever so slowly became the world religion that we know today. Although you may want to ask yourself why, after its main prediction failed to materialize, this was so.

Well, to my way of thinking this has to do with the fact that Paul had taken the undeniably Jewish story of Jesus and placed it out in the wider, non-Jewish world of the Greek and the Roman. And, whether or not you accept my musings on the Essenes or on the metaphysical and metaphorical nature of the Book of John, by mainstreaming Jesus, as it were, Paul—who, by the way, was not only a Hellenized Jew but also a fully fledged Roman citizen—inevitably added Neoplatonic thought to the mix. So that once Christianity had gotten large enough to attract the Romans' attention, it was no longer just another obscure Hebrew sect, but was now this radical pacifistic religion which also had this outrageous belief that a mortal man had actually been God Itself.

Not a god, mind you, since some emperors had been egotistical enough to try to pass themselves off as small g godlike. But God the absolute. Because, remember, any educated Pagan knew that there was an absolute, eternal, infinite God which superseded the old, mythical gods and was qualitatively different from them. So for Christians to worship a man as God meant to the Romans that these Christians must therefore be bizarre, retrograde, superstitious primitivists. In other words, to the educated Pagan point of view, Christians were outright atheists.

Nor were Romans much into pacifism. After all, they were manly men who sought Virtue through battle. And to them all of the primary Christian virtues—forgiveness, modesty, humility—were exactly what Rome saw as totally feminine traits. So it seemed obvious to them that Christianity was some weird perversion which was trying to turn men into women.

Then there was the matter of the sacrifices to the gods. Now as I mentioned in the last episode, the Romans didn't care whether or not you believed in their gods. Rather they saw the annual sacrifices

required of all Roman citizens in the same way that we regard pledging allegiance or saluting the flag. Even before Jesus, however, the Jews in the Empire had refused to do this, since according to their tribal religion they were only allowed to sacrifice to their god Jehovah. Now keep in mind that originally the Jews were not really monotheistic. They just thought that Jehovah was better than all the other gods and that therefore that they were better than all the other tribes. You know, a chosen people.

Well, the Romans hadn't taken kindly to this sort of attitude. From their viewpoint, the Jews, who were spread throughout the Empire, were benefiting from all the peace and prosperity of the Empire. But at the same time they were stubbornly refusing to perform the simplest of civic duties so as to show their appreciation. After all, if the Roman gods were really fake, then where was the harm in making a fake sacrifice? Nonetheless, after much toing and froing, the Romans had finally granted the Jews an exemption.

And now the Christians had come along and were making the same demand.

All of which might make you really believe all of those Bible movies and Sunday School stories about the prosecution of early Christians. Most scholars agree, however, that whatever little prosecution there was was localized and sporadic. In general, as with all other religious paths and doctrines, Rome pretty much left everyone to their own beliefs.

Scholars also believe that the number of Christians grew pretty slowly. But you don't need all that great an annual percentage increase when you're compounding over three centuries. And over the span of those three centuries two characteristics stand out. First—and this might really surprise you, what with those stories of shepherds in their fields—is that Christianity was almost exclusively an urban religion. After all, Rome was a highly urban society, missionaries came from the literate classes, and no one of any religious persuasion thought that illiterate peasants in the boondocks were worthy of conversion.

The second point is that as Christianity spread to the outer world—from southern India to Armenia to Ethiopia—it invariably split into different strains with different teachings and different ideas as to what aspects of Jesus' teaching were most important. And one of the most interesting strains to us in the modern world is Gnosticism. (Yes, I know that the 'g' is supposed to be silent. But if they're going to insist on putting it there, then I'm going to pronounce it.)

Anyway, Gnosticism is almost more Neoplatonism and Mystery Cult esotericism than it is Christian. As with the Essenes and the mystical interpretation of the Book of John that I went over earlier, it held that we are all souls from the spiritual world who somehow got entrapped here in this

material world. And it held that the teachings of Jesus—all those sayings and parables—all had hidden meanings which spoke to this deeper truth.

Needless to say, however, at least in the Western Roman Empire, Gnosticism, along with all other unorthodox strains, were all pretty much ruthlessly stamped out by the early Church Fathers. Because, you see, as opposed to, say Islam, Christianity did not have a single book to follow or worship. It did have various scriptures of varying authority, but they were often incomplete or contradictory. So that in the end it was up to a centralized church to come up with an official interpretation of Christian doctrine, and then to make sure that everyone followed it.

So that when the emperor Constantine made the completely surprise move in the early 300s to make Christianity the official state religion there was already in existence a centralized Church to work hand in glove with the state. And I say that this was a surprise move, first, because Constantine wasn't even a Christian himself. Second, because as I've been saying, Rome had always been open to all manner of religious thought. Whereas Christians, taking the one thing from Judaism which they shouldn't have, most definitely didn't. And, third, because at the time Christians weren't anywhere near to being a majority in the Empire.

Now there are two more misconceptions about Christianity at around this time that need to be cleared up. The first misconception is the idea that once Christianity became the state religion all the Roman gods and other Pagan beliefs were immediately discarded. Well, that didn't really happen for at least another century. In the meantime Pagans continued on as before, incense was lit, and the sacrifices were made. In fact, one Roman Emperor, Julian, briefly reversed course and for a few years made the old Roman gods, etc., the official state religion again.

The other misconception dates back to the 18th Century and Edward Gibbon's book, 'The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire'. In line with what we shall see was 18th Century thought, his thesis was that said decline and fall was a direct result of the Empire's formal adoption of Christianity. Although admittedly an intriguing idea, nowadays virtually no historian agrees with this hypothesis.

But, speaking of the decline and fall, it does provide a great irony. Because as much as we in the present day might be offended by those Church Fathers squashing all alternative ideas as to what Jesus had actually been teaching, and much as it is therefore entirely possible that these Church Fathers actually got it wrong themselves, the plain fact is that, when the authority of the Western Roman Empire suddenly evaporated after the year 400, the centralized, un-theologically contested Church in Rome was still there. And for the next five hundred years or so this monolithic presence, though

relatively shaken by the chaos surrounding it, was still by far the steadiest cultural force in all of Western Europe.

What's more, after the 3rd Century or so the Church *had* decided to minister to all of the rural unwashed illiterate masses. Even more important, missionaries and martyrs started to go forth among all of the heathen, by this point in time actually uncouth barbarian, tribes of Germany and Scandinavia. And although today it is fashionable to equate Christianity with belief and myth instead of clarity and reason, back then it was the Christians who upheld the Greek and Roman traditions of truth and logic.

So that in this instance, at least, the common historical narrative, that it was primarily the Church which kept the spark of Civilization alive during the long period of Western Europe's Dark Ages, is actually true.

Now so far I've been going out of my way to stress that the adoption of Christianity in the world at large, and in Western Europe in particular, was in many ways a colossal historical fluke. After all, we can't be sure as to what Jesus actually taught or actually intended His mission to be. We can't be sure that the strain of Christianity which the Church Fathers settled upon was the correct one. And we don't know exactly why Constantine made it the official state religion.

But now I'm going to say something which will probably be the most surprising statement of this entire episode. And it is this: That it doesn't matter whether the proper message is the Gospel version that Jesus was merely calling his fellow Jews to repentance or whether it is the Pauline version that Jesus died for our sins. It doesn't matter that many of the Church Fathers were probably more interested in personal power than in getting the theology right. It doesn't even matter whether the Christianity that we ended up with was primarily Hebrew or primarily Neoplatonist. And, finally, it really doesn't matter about the truth or falseness of the various magical elements of the Christian story, such as a virgin birth or a physical resurrection after death.

What matters, I would suggest, are the behavioral elements inherent in the Christianity which developed. And those behavioral elements were indeed radical.

For one thing, Jesus' teachings on marriage, and on lust in general, were much stricter than what had come before. In short, a level of purity and sexual discipline which previously had been reserved only for solitary philosophers or ascetics, or for a temple's Vestal Virgins, was now being asked of everyone.

For another thing, His admonition that you not only turn the other cheek, but that you forgive

your enemy seven times seventy times, took forgiveness to a whole other level. And His parable of the Good Samaritan showed that a good Christian didn't just help their kin or their neighbor or their fellow citizen, but that they also had to be altruistic towards every single person in the world.

But the overarching trait which defined the Christian mindset was that of *agape*, or Divine and/or unconditional love. Sometimes translated as 'charity', the love that *agape* referenced was as far away from lust, or sexual attraction, as was possible. Plato and other Greek philosophers had hinted at something like this with their discussions of Platonic Ideals and Platonic Love. But, although ethereal, *agape* also seemed to contain within it what we would call a proactive emotional component. Nor did it require that the love expressed had any need to be reciprocated. Kind of like a rarified, universal version of the love that a mother feels for her child.

So that in that sense the Romans had been right. Christians *were* trying to turn men into women.

Finally, there was almost necessarily an implication that ultimately Christian existence would become a communal one. For instance, right after the death and believed resurrection of Jesus, His disciples, anticipating the Kingdom of Heaven, immediately decided to hold all things in common. And the monasteries which would later develop would also be communistic.

In essence, then, Christian beliefs were not only radical. They were actually downright utopian.

Of course, as these beliefs spread they inevitably ran up against the practical concerns of the real world. Because up until that time there had been very good reasons not to be guileless and openhearted towards strangers and enemies. I mean, as with lions and tigers and bears, strangers could very easily kill you. So one can perhaps be sympathetic to those Church Fathers who tried to rein in those ultra-idealistic impulses and adapt them to a real world.

Further, whereas one could make the argument that one could and should exhibit these new Christian virtues when living in a long standing, peaceful empire of seventy million people, which Rome was, how was this a good idea, or even feasible, when there were honest to goodness barbarians at the gate? Worse, how was this framework supposed to hold up when civilization itself collapsed?

Well, everyone was about to find out. Because the Goths, for instance, may have been relatively civilized. But the peoples pushing on them from the outside, like the Franks and the Huns and, later, the Vikings, didn't have much of a moral compass beyond 'kill or be killed'. And now for the next five hundred years the Church would be the only institution which stood between structure and chaos.

So now we've briefly laid out the three pillars that Western Civilization has rested upon. The three streams which flowed together, as it were. And now we're somewhere around the year 500, and about to head north, or south, or whatever direction it was that got us to here.

And in our popular history the next thousand years is kind of a blurry blur of darkness and ignorance. But, as I keep pointing out, most times our popular history turns out to be at least somewhat wrong. So please stay with us, because next time I hope to enlighten you as to the true story of the Middle Ages.

In the meantime, though, thank you, once again, so much for so far having listened.