

**MODERN RELIGIOUS  
PROBLEMS; THE  
EARLIEST SOURCES  
FOR THE LIFE OF JESUS**

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Modern Religious Problems; The Earliest Sources for the Life of Jesus by F. Crawford Burkitt

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# **Modern Religious Problems**

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**AMBROSE WHITE VERNON**

**THE EARLIEST SOURCES  
FOR THE  
LIFE OF JESUS**

BY

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## CONTENTS

I. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS	1-29
Marks of Genuineness:	
Jewish Topography	14
Jewish Language	18
Jewish Thought	26
II. THE SYNOPTIC PROBLEM	30-46
The Priority of Mark	31
The Identification of Q	37
III. THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK	47-80
The Kingdom of God and the " Son of Man "	57
Influence of the Book of Enoch	66
Outline of the Story as given by Mark	72
IV. POSSIBLE " SOURCES " OF THE GOSPEL OF	
MARK	81-99
John Mark	84
Inaccuracies:	
Abiathar	89
Jewish Ablutions	91
Date of the Last Supper	92
Simon Peter	94

## CONTENTS

V. THE COMPOSITION OF MATTHEW AND	
LUKE	100-128
Matthew and Luke contrasted	101
Narrative of the non-Marcian Parts of Luke	103
Did Q contain a Passion Story?	109
The "Persean Source" of Luke	113
General Faithfulness of Matthew and Luke	116
Matthew's Treatment of Mark	117
Luke's Treatment of Mark	119
NOTE ON RECENT RECONSTRUCTIONS OF "Q"	124
BIBLIOGRAPHY	129-131



# THE EARLIEST SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF JESUS

## I

### PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

“THE originator of that name,” — Tacitus is speaking of those whom the common people in Rome, as he says, called “Christians” as a term of reproach, — “the originator of that name, one Christus, had been executed in the reign of Tiberius by order of the Administrator, Pontius Pilate.” The contemptuous sentence of the Roman historian<sup>1</sup> is the only information about the life and career of Jesus of Nazareth that has come down to us independently of Christian tradition. So far as it goes, however, it agrees with what we read in the Gospels: Pontius Pilate occupies in the statement

<sup>1</sup> *Annals*, xv. 44.

## SOURCES FOR THE LIFE OF JESUS

of Tacitus the same place that he occupies in the Church's Creed. He stands there to mark the date of the Crucifixion.

The Christian Church grew up in obscurity under conditions that were by no means favourable to the preservation of accurate historical reminiscences of its earliest beginnings. By the time the Christians began to preserve in writing the record of the origin of their religion, deep and ever-widening gulfs had intervened between them and the events. Jesus was born a Jew, and he lived and died among his own countrymen in Palestine; his religion took root in the great cities on the eastern half of the Mediterranean. The first disciples, the men who had really known the Master according to the flesh, were Aramaic-speaking Semites; in a couple of generations the great majority of Christians were Greek-speaking townfolk, mixed perhaps in blood, but educated wholly in Greek ways of

## PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

thought. In the interval the Jewish State had been annihilated by the forces of the Roman Empire, and what remained of the earliest community of disciples had been broken up.

But the cause that most of all tended to make the Christians careless of preserving the memory of the past was that their minds were set upon the future, the future which they believed was immediately in store for them and for all the world. They, the first Christian converts, had obeyed the call to save themselves from the crooked generation of their contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> They had turned from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, even Jesus, their deliverer from the wrath to come.<sup>2</sup> That generation, some of them at least, would not taste of death till they saw the Kingdom of God come.<sup>3</sup> Jesus their Lord

<sup>1</sup> Acts ii. 40.   <sup>2</sup> I Thess. i. 9.   <sup>3</sup> Mark ix. 1, and parallels.