

THE LIFE OF CHRIST

THIRD EDITION

ADAM FAHLING



CONCORDIA PUBLISHING HOUSE • SAINT LOUIS



This edition © 2017 Concordia Publishing House
3558 S. Jefferson Ave., St. Louis, MO 63118–3968
1-800-325-3040 • cph.org

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The chart “Time Reckoning in the Bible” in the Appendixes has been slightly revised from the chart appearing on p. 1567 in *The Lutheran Study Bible* © 2009 by Concordia Publishing House. All rights reserved.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Fahling, Adam, 1892-1945, author.

Title: The life of Christ / Adam Fahling.

Description: Third edition. | St. Louis, MO : Concordia Publishing House, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017000010 (print) | LCCN 2017000411 (ebook) | ISBN 9780758644497 | ISBN 9780758644503

Subjects: LCSH: Jesus Christ--Biography.

Classification: LCC BT301.3 .F34 2017 (print) | LCC BT301.3 (ebook) | DDC 232.9/01 [B] --dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017000010>

*Dedicated to the Christian pastor,
teacher, and student who seeks but
cannot always quickly find detailed,
authentic, satisfactory, scriptural, and
collateral information on the life of Christ.*

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Commonly Cited Works and Authors

- ABD* Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- AE* Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. American Edition. General editors Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, Christopher Boyd Brown, and Benjamin T. G. Mayes. 82 vols. St. Louis: Concordia, and Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress, 1955–.
- Against Apion* Josephus, Flavius. *Flavius Josephus Against Apion*. In *The Works of Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.
- ALEN* Englebrect, Edward A., gen. ed. *The Apocrypha: The Lutheran Edition with Notes*. St. Louis, Concordia, 2012.
- ANF* Roberts, Alexander, and James Donaldson, eds. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*. 10 vols. Buffalo: The Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1885–96. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001.
- Ant* Josephus, Flavius. *Jewish Antiquities*. In *The Works of Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.
- Concordia* McCain, Paul Timothy, ed. *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*. 2nd ed. St. Louis: Concordia, 2006.
- ISBE* *International Standard Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Chicago: Howard-Severance Co., 1939.
- Life* Josephus, Flavius. *The Life of Flavius Josephus*. In *The Works of Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.
- LSB* Commission on Worship of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lutheran Service Book*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2006.
- LXX* Septuagint. Koine Greek Old Testament.
- NPNF2* Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Series 2. 14 vols. New York: The Christian Literature Series, 1890–99. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1952, 1961.

- SC Luther, Martin. *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*. St. Louis: Concordia, 1986.
- TLSE Engelbrecht, Edward A., gen. ed. *The Lutheran Study Bible*. St. Louis: Concordia, 2009.
- War Josephus, Flavius. *The Jewish War*. In *The Works of Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1987.
- ZPBD *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963.
- ZPEB *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975.

FOREWORD TO THE THIRD EDITION

In 1936, Concordia Publishing House published Adam Fahling's *The Life of Christ*. An updated second edition was published in 1946. It included improvements and revisions that Fahling had suggested before his death in November 1945.

From the time it was first printed, this book has been a great resource for pastors, Sunday School and Bible class teachers, and lay students of the Bible. It gives the reader an inside look into the life of Jesus and the era in which He graced the world by His life, death, and resurrection.

This new edition has updated Fahling's language and included insights from more recent scholarship. We pray this third edition of Adam Fahling's great work will exalt Jesus Christ, our Savior, in your heart and life.

Concordia Publishing House

PREFACE

The subject needs no introduction. It concerns the earthly life of our Lord Jesus Christ, after the date of whose birth practically the whole civilized world numbers its years. He Himself is the Son of God, the Light, the Life, and the Truth; the First and the Last; the One and All; and the Way to life everlasting. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Ac 4:12).

This book is written from the standpoint of a believer. It takes for granted the existence of miracles, the verbal inspiration, and the interpretation of Holy Scriptures according to the intended sense of the holy writers. This is not done in ignorance of the many charges of inaccuracy raised against the statements of the Bible, but rather with the knowledge that these charges cannot be successfully maintained.

The author is indebted to the best biblical scholarship of ancient and modern times. While the general structure and scope of the work is his own, he was guided by the books listed in the bibliography and among these is especially indebted to Farrar, Edersheim, Andrews, Schuerer, Bruce, Dods, Meyer, and others, not only for the subject matter, but also for literary expression.

The encouragement to begin this work grew out of a succession of manuscripts on related subjects, which led to the appointment to write this book. The consideration with which the present manuscript was received in its original, revised, and rewritten form is herewith gratefully acknowledged. Particular thanks for their kindness, advice, and assistance are extended to the Rev. L. Buchheimer of the Synodical Literature Board, Dr. W. Arndt of Concordia Seminary, the Rev. E. Eckhardt, Dr. F. Rupprecht, Dr. Edmund Seuel, and his able assistants at Concordia Publishing House.

The reader is naturally interested in the result of an author's investigation, not the process of that investigation. A tremendous amount of work and study awaits anyone who attempts to write a book on the life and time of Christ. An immense amount of material must be examined. The wide fields of ancient history, archaeology, geography, chronology, the Greek New Testament, the ancient manuscripts, the transmission of the sacred text, the harmony of the Gospels, the synoptic problem, and the like, must be investigated. All this the reader is spared. The author prays that God's blessings will accompany this volume, written to glorify our divine Savior.

A. F.

THE FOURFOLD GOSPEL

The outline harmony of the Gospels, upon which this work is based.

The marks of parentheses indicate that the passage has been taken out of its order.

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
I. GENERAL SCOPE AND PURPOSE OF THE GOSPEL					
1. The Prologue of Luke			1:1-4		See pp. 6-7
2. The Prologue of John				1:1-14	See pp. 7-8
II. THE TWO GENEALOGIES					
3. Apparently Joseph's in Matthew and Mary's in Luke	1:1-17		(3:23-38)		See pp. 475-76
III. EVENTS PRECEDING THE BIRTH OF JESUS					CH. 3
4. The Annunciation of the Birth of John to Zechariah			1:5-25		§§ 1-29
5. The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus to Mary			1:26-38		§§ 35-38
6. Mary's Visit to Elizabeth			1:39-45		§ 39
7. Mary's Song of Praise			1:46-56		§ 40
8. The Birth of John the Baptist			1:57-80		§§ 42-45
9. The Annunciation of the Birth of Jesus to Joseph	1:18-25				§§ 46-49
IV. THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS					CH. 4
10. The Birth of Jesus	2:1		2:1-7		§§ 1-8
11. The Angels and Shepherds			2:8-20		§§ 9-11
12. The Circumcision			2:21		§ 12
13. The Presentation in the Temple			2:22-38		§§ 13-16
14. The Visit of the Wise Men	2:1-12				§§ 17-27
15. The Flight to Egypt	2:13-18				§§ 28-29
16. The Death of Herod and Return to Nazareth	2:19-23		2:39		§§ 30-33
17. Childhood at Nazareth			2:40		§ 34
18. Visit to Jerusalem			2:41-49		§§ 37-40
19. Eighteen Years at Nazareth			2:50-52		§§ 41-42
V. THE PERIOD OF JOHN					CH. 5
20. The Beginning of the Gospel		1:1			
21. The Exact Time	3:1		3:1-2		§ 1

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
22. The Character and Mission of John	3:2–6	1:2–6	3:3–6		§§ 2–4
23. John Warns the Pharisees and Sadducees	3:7–10		3:7–9		§ 5
24. Individual Directions to Inquirers			3:10–14		§ 5
25. Announcement of the Coming Christ	3:11–12	1:7–8	3:15–18	1:15–18	§ 6
(Announcement of the Imprisonment of John, see no. 50 below)			(3:19–20)		
VI. THE BEGINNING OF CHRIST'S PUBLIC MINISTRY AND CONTEMPORANEOUS MINISTRIES OF JESUS AND JOHN					CH. 6
26. The Baptism of Jesus	3:13–17	1:9–11	3:21–22	(1:32–34)	§ 1
(Luke's Genealogy, see no. 3 above)			(3:23–38)		
27. The Three Temptations of Jesus	4:1–11	1:12–13	4:1–13		§§ 2–7
28. John's Testimony to the Delegation from Jerusalem				1:19–28	§§ 8–13
29. "Behold, the Lamb of God!"				1:29–34	§ 14
30. The First Three Disciples—John, Andrew, and Peter				1:35–42	§§ 15–17
31. Philip and Nathanael				1:43–51	§§ 19–20
32. The First Miracle, at Cana				2:1–11	§§ 21–24
33. A Brief Visit to Capernaum				2:12	§ 25
VII. THE EARLY JUDEAN MINISTRY					CH. 7
34. The First Cleansing of the Temple				2:13–17	§§ 1–3
35. Jesus' First Prediction of His Death and Resurrection (see nos. 116, 123, 205, 245 below)				2:18–22	§ 3
36. Miracles in Jerusalem				2:23–25	§ 4
37. Interview with Nicodemus				3:1–21	§§ 5–10
38. Parallel Ministry of Jesus and John				3:22–24	§ 11
39. John's Loyalty to Jesus				3:25–36	§ 12
40. Jesus' Departure for Galilee				4:1–3	§ 13
41. The Gospel in Samaria				4:4–26	§§ 14–17
42. The Report of the Samaritan Woman to the People of Her Town				4:27–30	§ 18
43. The Discourse of Christ on the Fields White for Harvest				4:31–38	§ 19
44. Reception of Christ by the Samaritans				4:39–42	§ 20

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
45. Return to Galilee				4:43–45	§ 21
46. The Official's Son Lying Sick at Capernaum, Healed at Cana				4:46–54	§§ 22–24
VIII. THE UNNAMED FEAST					CH. 8
47. A Feast of the Jews				5:1	§§ 1–2
48. The Healing at the Pool of Bethesda				5:2–13	§§ 3–6
49. Christ Defends His Action				5:14–47	§§ 7–10
50. Imprisonment of John and Christ's Return to Nazareth	4:12	1:14a	(3:19–20) 4:14a		§ 11
IX. THE BEGINNING OF THE GREAT GALILEAN MINISTRY, OPENING EVENTS					CH. 9
51. The Time is Fulfilled and the Kingdom of God is at Hand	(4:17)	1:14b–15	4:14b–15		§§ 1–2
52. The First Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth (see no. 90 below)			4:16–30		§§ 3–9
53. A New Home at Capernaum	4:13–16		4:31–32		§ 10
54. Jesus Calls Four Fishermen, Miraculous Catch of Fish	4:18–22	1:16–20	(5:1–11)		§ 11–12
55. Christ Teaches in a Synagogue and Heals a Man with an Unclean Spirit		1:21–28	4:33–37		§ 13–19
56. The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law	(8:14–15)	1:29–31	4:38–39		§ 20
57. In the Evening Many Others are Healed	(8:16–17)	1:32–34	4:40–41		§ 21
X. FROM THE FIRST GALILEAN CIRCUIT TO THE CHOICE OF THE TWELVE					CH. 10
58. Christ Retires to a Solitary Place and Is Found by the Disciples and the People		1:35–38	4:42–43		§ 2
59. Jesus Went throughout All Galilee	4:23–25	1:39	4:44		§ 3
(The Miraculous Catch of Fish, see no. 54 above)			(5:1–11)		
60. A Leper Healed and Much Popular Excitement	(8:2–4)	1:40–45a	5:12–15		§§ 4–9
61. Christ Withdraws into the Wilderness		1:45b	5:16		§ 9
62. The Paralytic Healed Who Was Lowered through the Roof	(9:2–8)	2:1–12	5:17–26		§§ 10–14
63. The Call of Matthew	(9:9)	2:13–14	5:27–28		§§ 15–18
64. Matthew's Feast	(9:10–13)	2:15–17	5:29–32		§§ 19–21
65. A Question about Fasting	(9:14–15)	2:18–20	5:33–35		§§ 22–23

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
66. Two Parables: New Cloth and New Wine	(9:16–17)	2:21–22	5:36–39		§§ 24–25
67. The Disciples Plucking Grain on the Sabbath	(12:1–8)	2:23–28	6:1–5		§§ 26–28
68. The Man with a Withered Hand	(12:9–14)	3:1–6	6:6–11		§§ 29–31
69. Jesus Teaches and Heals by the Sea of Galilee	(12:15–21)	3:7–12			§§ 32–33
XI. THE CHOOSING OF THE TWELVE AND THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT					CH. 11
70. A Night of Prayer		3:13a	6:12		§§ 1–2
71. The Choice of the Twelve	(10:2–4)	3:13–19	6:13–16		§§ 3–17
72. The Sermon on the Mount	5:1–48 6:1–34 7:1–29 8:1		6:17–49		§§ 18–26 §§ 27–34 §§ 35–41 § 42
(Here follows in the order of Matthew: A Leper Healed, see no. 60)	(8:2–4)				
73. The Centurion's Servant	8:5–13	3:20a	7:1–10		§ 43
(Here follows in the order of Matthew: The Healing of Peter's Mother-in-Law, see no. 56)	(8:14–15)				
In the Evening Many Others are Healed, see no. 57)	(8:16–17)				
XII. A SECOND PREACHING TOUR, INCLUDING THE PARABLES BY THE SEA					CH. 12
74. The Raising of the Widow's Son at Nain			7:11–17		§ 1
75. John the Baptist Sends Two Disciples to Jesus	(11:2–19)		7:18–35		§§ 2–4
76. Woe to Unrepentant Cities (see no. 146)	(11:20–30)				§§ 5–7
77. Jesus Anointed by a Sinful Woman			7:36–50		§§ 8–10
78. With the Twelve and a Few Women Followers on a Tour through Galilee			8:1–3		§ 11
79. Christ Defends Himself against the Blasphemous Accusation of His Being in League with the Devil (see no. 152)	(12:22–37)	3:20–30			§§ 12–15
80. Scribes and Pharisees Demand a Sign; The Sign of Jonah (see nos. 111, 153)	(12:38–45)				§ 16
81. Jesus Is Called by Mother and Brothers	(12:46–50)	3:31–35	(8:19–21)		§ 17
82. The Parables by the Sea	(13:1–53)	4:1–34	8:4–18		§§ 18–32

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
(Here follows in the order of Luke: Jesus Called by Mother and Brothers)			8:19–21		
XIII. THE GADARENE JOURNEY					CH. 13
83. Christ Commands His Disciples to Cross over to the Other Side of the Sea of Galilee	8:18	4:35	8:22		§ 1
84. Christ Replies to Applicants for Discipleship (see no. 144)	8:19–22		(9:57–62)		§§ 2–4
85. The Stilling of the Storm	8:23–27	4:36–41	8:23–25		§§ 5–6
86. In the Country of the Gadarenes	8:28–9:1	5:1–21	8:26–40		§§ 7–12
(Here follow in the order of Matthew: The Paralytic Healed, see no. 62)	(9:2–8)				
Matthew (Levi) Called (see no. 63)	(9:9–13)				
A Question about Fasting (see no. 65)	(9:14–15)				
Two Parables: New Cloth and New Wine (see no. 66, all in order, but transposed.)	(9:16–17)				
87. Jairus's Daughter and the Woman with the Discharge of Blood	9:18–26	5:22–43	8:41–56		§§ 13–16
88. Two Blind Men Healed	9:27–31				§ 17
89. A Demon Driven Out and a Blas- phemous Accusation	9:32–34				§ 18
XIV. A THIRD PREACHING TOUR, INCLUDING THE MISSION OF THE TWELVE					CH. 14
90. The Last Visit to Nazareth. The Second Rejection (see no. 52)	(13:54–58)	6:1–6a			§§ 1–2
91. Jesus Preaches in the Villages of Galilee	9:35	6:6b			§ 3
92. "Pray Earnestly to the Lord of the Harvest" for Laborers	9:36–38				§ 4
93. The Mission of the Twelve	10:1–42	6:7–12	9:1–5		§§ 5–10
94. Jesus and the Disciples Preaching and Healing	11:1	6:12–13	9:6		§ 11
(Here follow in the order of Matthew: The Message from John the Baptist, see no. 75)	(11:2–19)				
Woes upon Cities of Opportunity (see no. 76)	(11:20–30)				
The Disciples Plucking Grain on the Sabbath (see no. 67)	(12:1–8)				
The Man with a Withered Hand (see no. 68)	(12:9–14)				
Jesus Teaches and Heals by the Sea (see no. 69)	(12:15–21)				

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
Jesus Defends Himself against an Accusation (see no. 79)	(12:22–37)				
Scribes and Pharisees Demand a Sign (see no. 80)	(12:38–45)				
Jesus Called by Mother and Brothers (see no. 81)	(12:46–50)				
The Parables by the Sea (see no. 82)	(13:1–53)				
The Last Visit to Nazareth (see no. 90) This is the end of the transpositions, with the exception of a few details.	(13:54–58)				
XV. THE DEATH OF JOHN THE BAPTIST					CH. 15
95. The Guilty Fears of Herod	14:1–2	6:14–16	9:7–9		§ 1
96. The Story of John the Baptist's Death	14:3–12	6:17–29	(3:19–20)		§§ 2–10
XVI. PERIODS OF RETIREMENT AND SPECIAL TRAINING OF THE TWELVE, THE FIRST RETIREMENT					CH. 16
97. The Return of the Disciples; Report to Jesus	14:13	6:30–33	9:10	6:1–2	§ 1
98. The Feeding of the Five Thousand	14:14–21	6:34–44	9:11–17	6:3–13	§§ 2–3
99. Prevention of the Revolutionary Purpose to Make Jesus King	14:22–23	6:45–46		6:14–15	§ 4
100. Jesus Walking on the Water	14:24–33	6:47–52		6:16–21	§§ 5–6
101. The Reception at Gennesaret	14:34–36	6:53–56			§ 7
102. The Sermon on the Bread of Life				6:22–59	§§ 8–10
103. The Collapse of the Scheme to Make Jesus King				6:60–71	§§ 11–12
104. Jesus Reproached by Pharisees from Jerusalem for Permitting His Disciples to Disregard Ceremonial Traditions	15:1–20	7:1–23	The Great Gap in Luke		§§ 13–17
XVII. THE SECOND AND THIRD RETIREMENTS					CH. 17
105. Jesus Avoiding the Hostility of the Jews				7:1	§ 1
106. Retirement into the Region of Tyre and Sidon	15:21–28	7:24–30			§§ 2–4
107. Retirement into the Decapolis	15:29	7:31			§ 5
108. The Healing of the Deaf Man with a Speech Impediment	15:30–31	7:32–37			§ 6
109. The Feeding of the Four Thousand	15:32–38	8:1–9			§ 7
110. A Short Visit to Magadan	15:39	8:10			§ 8

	MATTHEW	MARK	LUKE	JOHN	CHAPTER/ SECTION
111. A Sharp Attack of the Pharisees and Sadducees; The Sign of Jonah (see nos. 80, 153)	16:1–4a	8:11–12			§ 8
112. Jesus Returns to the Eastern Side of the Sea of Galilee	16:4b	8:13			§ 8
XVIII. THE FOURTH RETIREMENT, INCLUDING THE TRANSFIGURATION					CH. 18
113. The Disciples Who Had Forgotten to Take Bread	16:5–12	8:14–21			§ 1
114. The Blind Man near Bethsaida		8:22–26			§ 2
115. Peter’s Wonderful Confession	16:13–20	8:27–30	9:18–21		§§ 3–5
116. Christ Distinctly Foretells His Death and Resurrection (see nos. 35, 123, 205, 245)	16:21–23	8:31–33	9:22		§ 6
117. Taking Up the Cross with Jesus	16:24–28	8:34–9:1	9:23–27		§ 7
118. The Transfiguration	17:1–8	9:2–8	9:28–36a		§§ 8–9
119. The Question of the Three Disciples	17:9–13	9:9–13	9:36b		§ 10
120. The Demon-Oppressed Boy Whom the Disciples Could Not Heal	17:14–18	9:14–27	9:37–43a		§ 11
121. “Faith Like a Grain of Mustard Seed”	17:19–21	9:28–29			§ 12
XIX. THE CLOSE OF THE GALILEAN MINISTRY					CH. 19
122. Jesus Returns to Galilee	17:22a	9:30			§ 1
123. Third Announcement of His Death and Resurrection (see nos. 35, 116, 123, 205, 245)	17:22b–23	9:31–32	9:43b–45		§ 2
124. Jesus Pays the Temple Tax	17:24–27	9:33a			§§ 3–4
125. “Who is the Greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?”	18:1–5	9:33b–37	9:46–48		§ 5
126. John’s Mistaken Zeal Rebuked by Jesus		9:38–41	9:49–50		§ 6
127. Warning against Causing Others to Sin	18:6–14	9:42–50			§§ 7–9
128. Right Treatment of a Brother Who Has Trespassed against Us	18:15–22				§§ 10–12
129. Parable of the Unforgiving Servant	18:23–35				§ 13
XX. AT THE FEAST OF TABERNACLES IN JERUSALEM					CH. 20
130. The Unbelieving Brothers of Jesus Counsel Him to Show Himself in Jerusalem as a Political Messiah				7:2–9	§§ 1–2

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WHY A HARMONY?

Followers of Jesus Christ believe and confess that the four Gospels of Jesus Christ—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John—were inspired by the Holy Spirit. This means each Gospel is reliable and accurate, even if details differ from one to the next. On this firm basis we are able to combine the events given in the four Gospels to gain a fuller, more complete picture of Jesus and His life among us.

This is especially important since many critics attempt to discredit the accuracy of these accounts by pointing to seeming contradictions between the Gospels. A harmony allows us to explore these difficult questions and provide feasible resolutions.

The first harmony of the Gospels was called the *Diatessaron* (*ANF*9:43–129). It was prepared by a pupil of Justin Martyr named Tatian about AD 160–75 at Rome. Many harmonies have been written in the years since then.

But with any harmony there is a caution. None of the Gospel writers intended to give a complete picture of Jesus or flesh out every detail of His life. Each Gospel was inspired by the Holy Spirit for its own audience with a specific purpose in mind. Blending these Gospels into one account requires the harmonist to honor the specific purposes for which each of the Gospels was originally inspired.

This is something Fahling has done masterfully. His harmony provides us a new view of Jesus Christ, filled with grace, depth, and truth.

INTRODUCTION

Nearly 280,000 books have the word *Christ* in their title, according to WorldCat, the international library catalog. And that result is just for English titles! That number is easily several miles of books on library shelves—all dedicated to one person, one life.

This book is one of that number, and a very special one that takes into account the four great Gospels, the earliest records of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life forever changed the world. Fahling's *The Life of Christ* is a companion to those earliest accounts from eyewitnesses and disciples of Jesus. It is written with respect for those great Gospels, and unlike most books about Christ, it helps the reader easily understand those early accounts together. As you read this life of Christ as a companion to the canonical Gospels, you will grow in your understanding of the history of Jesus. But most important, you will grow in your love for Jesus, who taught:

He who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him. (Jn 14:21)

THE RECORDS

Before exploring the life of Christ, we need to familiarize ourselves with the records of His life and teaching. The principal, and practically the only, reliable sources of our knowledge of the life of Christ are the four canonical Gospels, the first three of which are called the Synoptic Gospels because they present a very similar view and outline of Jesus' life. The few notices of Christ in the writings of non-Christian authors, the references made to Christ in the other books of the New Testament, and those made in later Christian literature all add to the information that the four Gospels already supply. The supposed additional sayings of Jesus and incidents of His life found in the so-called apocryphal gospels are of questionable character. They were written late, and the early Christians regarded them as altogether worthless in authority. Before considering these other later documents, we do well to learn about the Gospels universally received by the early followers of Christ.

THE WRITERS OF THE FOUR CANONICAL GOSPELS

Matthew

We do not know too much about the writer of the Gospel according to St. Matthew. From the beginning of the postapostolic age, Church Fathers universally identified him with the apostle Matthew, and his Gospel was placed first in order among the books of the New Testament. Matthew, also called Levi (Mt 10:3; Lk 5:27), was a disciple and apostle of the Lord. When Jesus left Capernaum, “He saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth, and He said to him, ‘Follow Me.’ And he rose and followed Him” (Mt 9:9). Matthew was a tax collector and, as such, belonged to that class of people whom the Jews mentioned in one breath with sinners. Tradition relates that he preached in Israel for fifteen years and then went to the Ethiopians, Syrians, Persians, Parthians, and Medes. There is also a tradition that says he died a natural death.

The Early Church accepted the apostolic origin and canonicity of the Gospel that bears Matthew’s name. The late-first-century *Letter of Barnabas*, chapter 4, written by an apostolic father, quotes Matthew 22:14 distinctly with the formula “It is written” as though he was quoting the authority of Holy Scripture. Origen (c. 185–c. 254) refers to the Book of Matthew as the first of the four Gospels that the Church of God received without doubt (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:273). Its identity with our Matthew is confirmed by the presence of the Gospel in the first Gospel harmony, the *Diatessaron* (*ANF* 9:43–129) of Tatian (Justin Martyr’s pupil), who prepared his work at Rome about AD 160–75.

The purpose of Matthew’s Gospel is indicated in almost every section of the book. His object was to prove to his fellow countrymen that the entire life as well as the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. The fifteen references to fulfillment are abundant evidence of this.

The date of composition is probably AD 50,¹ but it is unknown where this Gospel was written. Ancient tradition states that Matthew wrote it originally in Hebrew, which may mean the Aramaic spoken by Jewish people in the first century. Papias, bishop of Hierapolis in Phrygia, wrote about AD 140: “Matthew composed the Logia in the Hebrew dialect, and each one interpreted them as he was able” (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:173). But this is debatable. It may be fairly inferred that Papias himself had this Gospel in Greek. And there is no evidence that he had ever seen a copy of Matthew in Aramaic. Barnabas, who wrote before Papias, quotes the Gospel of Matthew in Greek. If Matthew originally wrote in Aramaic, we might assume that he also composed his Gospel in Greek, for it strikes one as altogether an independent composition and not as a mere translation.

From a closer examination of the Gospel itself, as compared with Mark and Luke, it is clear that the material is arranged not strictly chronologically, but by

similarity of material. Matthew tends to gather the sayings of Jesus into five great discourses, or sermons (chs. 5–7; 10; 13; 18; 24–25). This is a problem that has always troubled the harmonists, especially in the arrangement of the material contained in Matthew 8:14–13:58. Some harmonists even suppose a shifting of pages in some ancient manuscripts. However, understanding this portion of the Gospel as a topical arrangement best explains the matter.

The writer of our second and shortest Gospel has from the earliest times till now been identified with John Mark of Jerusalem, the son of a well-to-do woman by the name of Mary, in whose house the disciples used to gather (Ac 12:12–17). He was a companion of Paul and Barnabas on their first mission journey (Ac 13:5). His intimacy with Barnabas is explained by the fact that he was his cousin (Col 4:10). Through Barnabas, he came in contact with the apostle Paul. But at that time, he still lacked fortitude and constancy; at Perga, in Pamphylia, he left the two apostolic missionaries and returned to Jerusalem (Ac 13:5, 13), much to the displeasure of Paul (Ac 15:38). On the next journey, Paul refused to take Mark along, while Barnabas was willing to overlook the temporary weakness. There was a sharp contention over the matter between the two leaders, resulting in Paul and Barnabas parting company. Barnabas took Mark to Cyprus, and Paul chose Silas as his fellow missionary (Ac 15:36–40). But later, we find Mark again as one of the fellow workers of Paul, who said Mark was of great assistance to him (Col 4:10–11; Phm 24; 2Tm 4:11).

However, we also find Mark connected especially with Peter, whom he assisted in his work and whom he accompanied to “Babylon” (1Pt 5:13). The Early Christian Church particularly remembered Mark as Peter’s attendant and assistant. According to the earliest statement in the Church Fathers, “Mark, having become the interpreter of Peter, wrote accurately what he remembered of the things said or done by Christ” (Papias, in Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:172). Mark is said to have lost one finger, and the nickname “stump-fingered” was given him on that account (Zahn, *Introduction to N. T.*, 3:428). He is represented as having been present at the death of Barnabas on Cyprus, after which he went to Alexandria, where he founded the first Church of St. Mark, of which he became the first bishop.

The Gospel that bears his name was most likely written in Rome before the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:115–16). An outstanding characteristic of Mark is his realism, and his pithy style and vivid flashes of portrayal confirm the historicity of his Gospel. All this is a guarantee of a firsthand historical record, a record such as might be expected from so lively a character as Peter, since, as Papias would have it, Mark neither saw the Lord nor followed Him (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:116). Commentators speak of the “Petrine character” of his Gospel.

As to the canonicity and the authenticity of this Gospel, there can be no doubt, for it is supported by the unanimous testimony of the Ancient Church, represented

Mark

by writers from practically every quarter of the Roman world (cf. Eusebius, quoting Origen, *NPNF2* 1:273). There is a theory that would make Mark the first writer of the Synoptic Gospels—the other writers following his lead. We are not concerned with that issue here. However, the more we study the Gospels in Greek, especially when we compare again and again every word of each account, the more we are convinced that the three Synoptists wrote independently of one another.²

Luke

According to the testimony of early writers, Luke was the associate of Paul as Mark was of Peter. Luke does not mention his own name in the Gospel. Yet there is no reason to doubt the tradition transmitted by Eusebius that “the beloved physician” and companion of Paul is the author of the Acts of the Apostles and also of the Gospel that bears his name (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:136–37; 1:222; 1:273; cf. Col 4:14).

Little is known of Luke’s personal history. He had not known Jesus personally, but determines to set forth faithfully “a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the Word have delivered them to us” (Lk 1:1–2).

By birth, he seems to have been a Greek, possibly from Antioch, and by profession a physician. The apostle Paul may have converted him in Antioch, where the disciples were first called Christians. We find him connected with the great apostle in a lifelong, intimate friendship (2Tm 4:11). When Paul set out on his second missionary journey, Luke joined him at Troas and accompanied him to Philippi (Ac 16:10–17; the “we” passages, in which the author of Acts writes as though he was a traveling companion of Paul). On the third missionary journey, he was again with Paul (Ac 20:5–21:17). Afterward, he went with the now captive Paul to Rome (Ac 27:1–28:16); during the apostle’s second captivity he was again with him (2Tm 4:11), for which the apostle was duly thankful.

Beyond these facts, nothing definite is known as to circumstances either of his life or of his death. But from his own writings we may gather that Luke had received a good education since he writes in an easy, flowing, and elegant style, which may be colored at points by the language of his profession (Lk 8:43; Ac 28:8; etc.); he was a historian of the highest order.³

That the Early Church regarded the Book of Acts and the Gospel of Luke as authentic is established by the fact that the Muratorian Canon, a Latin list of New Testament books, c. AD 170, both names Luke the physician as the author and lists his Gospel and Acts as Scripture. His Gospel was also used as one of the four recognized Gospels in the earliest account of the life of Christ, Tatian’s *Diatessaron*.

The date of writing of this Gospel cannot be definitely fixed. But it might be said that Luke surely wrote his Gospel before the year AD 70, since there is no reference to the destruction of Jerusalem, concerning which a complete prophecy is

given in Luke 21. From the last verses in Acts, it is probable that this book was written before the death of St. Paul (AD 68). And Luke's Gospel preceded the Book of Acts (cf. Ac 1:1). Perhaps c. AD 55–60 would fit the circumstances.⁴

In spite of the difficulties that for a long time puzzled historians, we now find that Luke is not only a reliable historian, but that he is *the* historian among the New Testament writers. Not only can Luke be checked against other historical accounts of that era, but in fact other historians ought to be compared with Luke.

The level of detail in the four Gospels presents a dilemma not commonly experienced by historians, who typically have only one or two accounts of an event or of a person's life rather than four detailed accounts. We have no basis to declare that one biblical account is apparently out of harmony with another or to credit one writer at the expense of the other. Nevertheless, qualities in John's Gospel, written by "the beloved apostle," have won first place in the hearts of many Christian readers. Looking at the matter from the point of view of the historian, we have to say that as an eyewitness from the beginning to the end, John was singularly able to tell the truth. In addition, we must consider his remarkably long life and the fact that he who heard the Lord formed the connecting link between the apostolic generation and other remarkable men living well along into the second century. All this confirms the reliability and trustworthiness of his account. For example, there is Irenaeus (bishop of Lyons c. AD 177) who had spent his early childhood in Asia Minor, where he heard the preaching of the aged bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (died c. AD 155). And Polycarp reported that he had heard John, who had heard the Lord (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:238–39; 161).

John

Although the writer of our fourth Gospel does not expressly mention his own name, he describes himself with sufficient clearness, so we know that he is one of the sons of the Galilean fisherman Zebedee (cf. Mt 4:21; Lk 5:10; Jn 21:2) and his wife Salome (cf. Mt 27:56; Mk 15:40–41). He is "the disciple whom Jesus loved" (Jn 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20). A close comparison of a few passages has suggested the inference—although some do not accept it—that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Salome, the wife of Zebedee, were sisters (cf. Mt 27:56; Mk 15:40; Jn 19:25). This would make John a cousin of Jesus, placing him all the nearer to the Lord and commending him to us all the more as a reliable and trustworthy biographer of Christ.

In his earlier days, John had been a disciple of John the Baptist, by whom he was directed to Christ. This was an experience that he never forgot, for he records for us even the hour of the day when he first followed Jesus (Jn 1:39). Together with Peter and his own brother James, he later became one of the most confidential disciples of Christ, and he was with the Lord as an eye- and ear-witness of the Master's labors, journeys, discourses, miracles, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension.

Unlike the fiery character of Peter—although in John’s earlier days he evinced a fiery temper himself (Mk 3:17; Lk 9:49, 54)—he was one of those quiet, modest, unassuming personalities who avoids even the mention of his own name. He had a receptive nature, following every move and listening most intently to every word of the Lord.

It seems that John, writing later than the other three evangelists, was acquainted with the Synoptic Gospels. In fact, it seems that it was his purpose to supply things the other evangelists had omitted in their accounts. Thus we have in John the particulars of the early Judean ministry of Jesus and His various journeys to Jerusalem.

Of John’s later life, history reports that he went to Asia Minor, probably after the death of the apostle Paul. Emperor Domitian, in AD 95, banished John to the island of Patmos, where he wrote the Book of Revelation (cf. Rv 1:9). After regaining his liberty, John returned to Ephesus, where he died about AD 100.

His Gospel was evidently written shortly before the end of the century. It is undeniably present as one of the four interwoven Gospels in Tatian’s *Diatessaron*. This first harmony of the Gospels begins with John’s prologue and ends with the last verse in the appendix of St. John. The Gospel according to St. John is listed in the Muratorian Canon, and Eusebius wrote that all the Christian churches under the sun knew and accepted the Gospel of John (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:154).

Our introduction to the life of Christ would be incomplete without pointing to the introductions prepared by the evangelists themselves. There are two, prepared by Luke and John.

THE PROLOGUE OF LUKE

Following the literary style of Luke’s day, he composes a classical prologue to his Gospel, in which he declares the motive, plan, and purpose of his work. As a late contemporary, he sets himself upon the task of writing a history of the recent past. Others had been doing this—gathering testimony, taking notes, and writing accounts in their attempt to preserve in writing the evangelical memorabilia—which moved Luke to do the same. “Many have undertaken to compile” an account of those things that now lie before us as a complete whole (Lk 1:1). The facts were gathered from those who had been eyewitnesses of Jesus and ministers of the Word. But Luke does not tell us who these writers were, nor does he say anything about the nature of their writings. He merely asserts the existence of certain written accounts, records, narratives, or sayings, which moved him, after due investigation, to write an independent and full account of his own. Luke made no explicit reference to the other Gospels. Matthew’s and Mark’s Gospels were probably written about the same time and, like Luke’s Gospel, were independent productions.⁵ Luke was well qualified to do this writing because, in his inquiries, he had followed all things from

Luke 1:1–4

An Authentic
Account of the
Historic Christ

the beginning. (The fact that he made these investigations does not at all conflict with the doctrine of inspiration.) And in carrying out this difficult task, he plans to write “in order.” This refers not to a detailed, mechanical sequence, but rather to a well-planned and well-arranged, reliable history. “That you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Lk 1:4). Of the “most excellent Theophilus,” to whom Luke dedicated the Gospel, we know nothing. It has been suggested that he was a moneyed layman of Antioch who paid for the research and production expense. At any rate, he had already received “catechetical” instruction (Gr *katecheo*; Lk 1:4), and Luke was now supplying him with a reliable textbook for continued study.

THE PROLOGUE OF JOHN

In a beautiful prologue, the evangelist John identifies the person of Jesus Christ, who is to be the subject of his narrative. Jesus is the Logos, or the eternal and pre-existing Word, the Son of God—God Himself. John uses a term already familiar in Greek philosophy to denote the principle that maintains order in the world⁶ but is here given a meaning all its own. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (Jn 1:1). In tracing the antecedents of Jesus, John steps into prehistory (but not unhistory) and proclaims Jesus as the fountain of life and light, adding the sad note, however, that “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (v. 5).

Not that the appearance of this Light came unheralded into a blinded world. For there was John the Baptist, the apostle John’s former teacher. Although John the Baptist was not that Light, God sent him “to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him” (v. 7). But the personified Light and Word, the way for whose coming John the Baptist prepared, “came to His own, and His own people did not receive Him” (v. 11). Still, the gracious operation of the Spirit through the Gospel overcame some who naturally opposed what was first preached to them, and they received “the right to become children of God.” They “believed in His name” (v. 12). And thus they “were born”—reborn—“not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man” (v. 13). They were born not through anything that man can do, not in a natural way, “but of God,” by the power of the almighty and gracious One.

The Son of God is eternal. But like the Father and the Holy Spirit, He was invisible to sinful man (1Tm 6:16) until “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14). Then all among whom He sojourned could see Him in the flesh. “We have seen His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (v. 14). John the Baptist bore witness to the Lord’s preexistence when he said: “He who comes after me ranks before me, because He was before me” (v. 15). And from John the evangelist’s own

John 1:1–18

Exhibiting the
Historic Christ as
the Eternal Son of
God Incarnate for
Our Redemption

experience, he joyfully states: “From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (v. 16). This statement can be made because “the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (v. 17). Thus, John the evangelist formally identified “the Word” with Jesus Christ. The Law alone did not convey this fullness of God’s grace. God revealed it in this wonderful incarnation. “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, He has made Him known” (v. 18).

NON-CHRISTIAN WITNESSES TO THE LIFE OF CHRIST

Lest anyone conclude that Christians were the only ones writing about Jesus in those early years, we include comments from authors who were not Christians but who referred to Christ. They include the following:

Josephus (AD 37–c. 100). In *Ant* 18:63–64, he wrote:

Now there was about this time Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man; for he was a doer of wonderful works, a teacher of such men as receive the truth with pleasure. He drew over to him both many of the Jews and many of the Gentiles. He was [the] Christ. And when Pilate, at the suggestion of the principal men amongst us, had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him; for he appeared to them alive again the third day; as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him. And the tribe of Christians, so named from him, are not extinct at this day.

It is very likely that Josephus made some reference to Jesus, but most scholars agree that Christians revised this passage, if it is not entirely spurious. (The present writer is inclined to accept its authenticity; but this is not the place to enter into the argument.)

Pliny the Younger (AD 61–c. 113). Pliny, writing from Bithynia to Trajan, referred to Christians meeting on certain days and singing hymns “to Christ as to a god” (*Letters* 10.96).

Tacitus (c. AD 56–c. 117). The well-known Roman historian, in a passage relating to the persecution of Nero, wrote how the Christians, already a great multitude, derived their name “from one Christ, who was executed in the reign of Tiberius by the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate” (*Annals* 15.44).

Suetonius (c. AD 69–after 122). In his *Lives of the Caesars* (*Claudius* 25.4), Suetonius spoke of the Jews as expelled from Rome for the raising of tumults at the instigation of one “Chrestus,” a mistaken name for “Christus.” Suetonius was also mistaken about the cause of the disturbance, but the incident is likely that referred to in Acts 18:2.

APOLOGISTS FOR CHRISTIANITY

Of the ancient Christian apologists, mention may be made of the following:

Quadratus (died AD 129). This missionary of apostolic times wrote an apology for the Christian faith and presented it to Emperor Hadrian. The work has been lost; only a fragment has been preserved. Here is an interesting passage, which is found in the *Church History* of Eusebius:

But the works of our Savior were always present, for they were genuine. Those that were healed and those that were raised from the dead, who were seen not only when they were healed and when they were raised, but were also always present—and not merely while the Savior was on earth, but also after His death—they were alive for quite a while, so that some of them lived even to our day. (Eusebius, *NPNF2* 1:175)

Aristides (writing c. AD 125). In his *Apology*, likewise addressed to Emperor Hadrian, Aristides included the following beautiful reference to Jesus:

Now, the Christians trace their origin from the Lord Jesus Christ. And He is acknowledged by the Holy Spirit to be the Son of the Most High, who came down from heaven for the salvation of men. And being born of a pure virgin, unbegotten and immaculate, He assumed flesh and revealed Himself among men that He might recall them Himself from their wandering after many gods. And having accomplished this wonderful dispensation, by a voluntary choice He tasted death on the cross, fulfilling an august dispensation. And after three days He came to life again and ascended into heaven. (*ANF* 9:276)

Justin Martyr (c. AD 100–65). His *Apology*, addressed to Emperor Antoninus Pius, contains the following references to the time, birth, and life of Christ:

Christ was born one hundred and fifty years ago under Cyrenius and subsequently, in the time of Pontius Pilate, taught what He said He taught. (*First Apology* 46)

Our teacher of these things is Jesus Christ, who also was born for this purpose and was crucified under Pontius Pilate, proconsul of Judea, in the time of Tiberius Caesar. (*First Apology* 13)

Now, there is a village in the land of the Jews [Bethlehem, mentioned before], thirty-five stadia from Jerusalem, in which Jesus was born, as you can ascertain also from the register of the taxing made under Cyrenius, your first procurator in Judea. (*First Apology* 34)

And after He was crucified, they cast lots upon His vesture, and they that crucified Him parted it among them. And that these things did happen you can ascertain from the *Acts of Pontius Pilate*. (*First Apology* 35)

In these books, then, of the prophets we found Jesus, our Christ, foretold as coming, born of a virgin, growing up to man's estate, and healing every disease and every sickness, and raising the dead, and being hated, and unrecognized,

and crucified, and dying, and rising again, and ascending into heaven, and being called the Son of God. (*First Apology* 31)

THE FALSELY SIGNED AND GNOSTIC GOSPELS

Lastly, one cannot write about the Gospels today without also mentioning the falsely signed gospels (the Pseudepigrapha, or apocryphal gospels) and the Gnostic gospels. This is because manuscript discoveries in the twentieth century brought many of these works back to light. We write “back to light” because the early Christians knew and commented on these writings, rejecting them as unfaithful accounts. Although it remains possible that here and there these accounts preserve some credible sayings or stories from Jesus (cf. the independent saying from Jesus in Ac 20:35), there is no reliable way to confirm which sayings or stories these might be. Unlike the canonical Gospels that Christians universally received and regarded as faithful testimony, none of the falsely signed gospels or Gnostic gospels attained such status. Gnostics, for example, valued some of them and so preserved them, but Christians generally saw no reason to preserve them and in many cases warned against them. Most of these documents exist in one or a limited number of copies, in contrast with the canonical Gospels, which were preserved in many thousands of copies.

The earliest among these falsely signed or Gnostic gospels may be the *Gospel of Thomas*, which is a collection of sayings attributed to Jesus. Many of the sayings are like those in the canonical Gospels and may have been drawn from them or from the sayings passed down orally. The *Gospel of Thomas* likely dates to the early years of Gnosticism, sometime in the second century, though obviously much later than the time of the apostles and the canonical Gospels.

The value of these gospels today is that they tell us much about some fairly early and diverse beliefs and practices that sprang up among or alongside early and medieval Christian communities. They also illustrate the mixing of religions (syncretism) that can take place in a diverse culture.

1

THE STATE OF THE WORLD

The time was ripe for the coming of Christ. In all the world's history there never was such a combination of favorable circumstances for the birth of Christ and the introduction of Christianity—political, social, economic, intellectual, linguistic, religious, and moral. Divine providence itself had foreseen and provided for “the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4). Daniel's prophetic vision of a mighty kingdom of iron (Dn 2:40) was now reaching the height of its power. In ever-widening circles, the legions of Rome were extending her boundaries. From Rome to all of Italy, to the neighboring isles, to Carthage, to the right, to the left, they marched until finally they crushed all the countries of the Mediterranean basin under their iron heels, or the nations had voluntarily accepted the Roman peace (*pax Romana*). The whole world was at rest. From the wooded swamps of Britain to the sands of Egypt, from the Pillars of Hercules to far-off Mesopotamia, the famous *pax Romana* prevailed. And it was to prevail for centuries to come when the message of Jesus Christ would travel.

There had been mighty empires in the ancient world. History relates, and archeology reveals, the glories of the early Babylonian, the Egyptian, the Assyrian, the Chaldean, the Persian, and the Macedonian past. And even Israel had its brief spell of political glory. But in general, these older empires owed their rise to the success and ability of some adventurous conqueror. When the master-hand was withdrawn, they fell asunder or were swept away to make room for some new kingdom or dynasty that sprang up with the same rapidity and in its turn experienced the same fate.¹ This refers in particular to a number of ancient Asiatic kingdoms. But it is also true of Alexander's Greek monarchy that issued from Europe, was broken up at his death into several conflicting kingdoms, and yet survived in its influence and passed on to its heirs an heirloom of far-reaching importance.

With the coming of the Romans, a new era began. The Romans founded their monarchy on principles yet unknown. After ruthlessly conquering a nation, the Romans did not continue to oppress them but governed them so that conscious

1
The Roman Empire

2
Asiatic Monarchies

3
Roman Principle of Moderation

strength was tempered with consideration for local customs and ensured military protection, public safety, and domestic peace.² This refers, of course, to the general policy, not to local tyranny that an individual provincial governor might practice. By this general policy, the edifice of Roman power was gradually built up, and the wisdom of the ages preserved it. Here was the first Western empire that endured for a long period of time and whose yoke was rather endurable. In view of its size, its character, its composition, its lasting structure, and its success, one can justly call the *pax Romana* the grandest political achievement ever accomplished by Western culture.³ With it, the monarchies of Alexander, of Charlemagne, and of Napoleon cannot be compared. Greeks, Romans, Gauls, Britons, Jews, Syrians, Egyptians were all peacefully and seemingly permanently united in one common fatherland (*communis omnium patria*). The general principle of government was wise and yet simple as well as beneficent. The various nationalities, though differing among themselves, felt as one. Their obedience to the central government, upon the whole, was voluntary, uniform, and permanent. The vanquished nations, blended into one great people, resigned the hope, nay, even the wish of resuming their independence and scarcely considered their own existence as distinct from the existence of Rome.⁴

4
Voluntary
Submission

Never before had so many nations been so bloodily conquered and so peacefully ruled. The established authority of the Caesars was exercised with the same facility on the Thames, the Orontes, and the Nile as on the banks of the Tiber.⁵ The Thracians were kept in subjection by two thousand Roman guards; the Dalmatians lived in peace under a single Roman legion. The tribes of Gaul had fought for independence for nearly eighty years, and when defeated, they submitted to the orders of twelve hundred men. A single legion sufficed to govern Spain. But one legion was quartered in Northern Africa, and a few legions curbed far-reaching Egypt and the proud nobility of Greece. Although it was still necessary to keep the German peace with eight Roman legions and to pacify the Britons with four, generally speaking, the conquered nations bowed respectfully to the proud Roman mistress and believed their own best interests to coincide with the common interests of Rome.

5
The Stewardship of
Empire

Thus, Rome blended the nations and prepared them for the preaching of the Gospel among them. With the exception of a few inconsequential barbarian tribes beyond well-patrolled frontiers and outside the interest of the Roman horizon, now for the first time we may speak of “the world” (Lk 2:1) as embracing broad humanity or the *genus humanum*. For practical purposes, it was the whole Western world, united and largely at rest. Rome’s enemies were conquered, peace was everywhere established, and her program of expansion concluded with Europe, Asia, and Africa firmly united. When her own civil wars ended, Rome finally settled down on January 16, 27 BC, to put the principle of the empire formally into operation. This was the day when Gaius Octavius became *Imperator* Caesar Augustus and was

invested with absolute power under republican titles. For after the Battle of Actium, Augustus found himself at the head of nearly forty veteran Roman legions and the Roman world at his feet.

Happily for the tranquility of mankind and for the coming of the Prince of Peace, whose advent Caesar Augustus was unwittingly to usher in, Augustus was himself a prince of peace. His imperial policy was not aggression, but firm, yet peaceful, administration.⁶ He was satisfied to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth and to preserve those dominions that Rome won in the first seven centuries of its history. He concluded his last will and testament, written in his own hand, with the counsel to his successors never to aim at an extension of the empire.⁷ And on the whole, the Julian-Claudian line adhered to this policy in the period with which we are now concerned, that is, during the life of Christ and in the first days of the Christian Church. The doors of the temple of Janus Quirinus, which were kept open only in time of war, were closed three times during the reign of Augustus.⁸

Ever since the dawn of history, there had been a gradual intermingling of peoples around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Early Phoenician settlers formed colonies in Northern Africa and Spain, but in the course of time, many of them were made citizens of Rome. The Romans conferred the same honors upon Greek settlers of Italy, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and Southern Gaul. As a result of the many wars, deportations, captivities, and colonizations, the Middle Eastern peoples had already become thoroughly acquainted with one another. After the Macedonian conquests, the whole East was covered with Greek colonies and cities. Greeks settled everywhere as professors, merchants, physicians, artists, actors, and acrobats. And now, with the coming of Rome, the East was to become thoroughly and permanently acquainted with the West. The members of each nationality discovered how much they really had in common with one another. Although the Greeks brought civilization and culture, the Romans brought law, order, and peace; and the entire nation was to enjoy the blessings of both groups of gifts. This peaceful and ordered state of affairs in the empire contributed largely to the spread of the cosmopolitanism already in progress. In an empire that was international in character, it was natural that national barriers were largely removed. The great cities of the empire—Rome, Alexandria, Jerusalem, Antioch, and others—became meeting places of all races and languages. The polyglot character of the legions recruited from every quarter of the empire was in itself a contributing factor in the breaking up of national barriers. On the front, soldiers of various nationalities fought their battles, became companions in arms, and then returned to their distant homes as brothers. Previously, it had been no strange experience for Jews and Egyptians, Germans and Gauls, to meet one another in Rome. Now, one could frequently see blond hair and blue eyes in the marts and camps even of the East. After the death of Cleopatra, the services of her splendid bodyguard of

6
Caesar Augustus

7
Cosmopolitanism

four hundred Gauls were no longer needed in Alexandria, so Augustus generously sent them over to Herod.⁹ There were Germans in Jerusalem at the time of the birth of Christ. When Herod the Great died, a Thracian-German-Gallic guard escorted his body to its resting place.¹⁰ During Christ's sojourn on earth and until the last Jewish war, the stalwart and burly figures of soldiers from northwest Europe were familiar sights in the streets of Jerusalem.¹¹

8
Domination of
Greek Culture

Originally, the Romans were little more than conquering barbarians who had small regard for civilization and culture. Already, they had wiped out two ancient and, in some respects, superior civilizations—those of Etruria and Carthage—so that hardly a trace of them remained. The ancient languages and dialects of Italy, for instance, the Sabine, the Etruscan, and the Venetian, sank into oblivion. The language of the conqueror, though with some inevitable mixture, was adopted in Italy, Africa, Spain, and Gaul. Only in the mountains or among the peasants were preserved faint traces of the Punic, Celtic, or other idioms. However, the children of Mars left a cold civilization to the conquered nations. And it is hard to conceive what a scourge Rome would have proved to the world had she merely continued in her victorious course without the tempering influence of civilization and culture. The shades of night would have descended upon the Roman world. But with the conquest of Greece, untutored Mars came under the spell of cultured Pallas Athene.¹² The arts of Greece intellectually subdued victorious Rome. The immortal writers of classical Greece—Homer, Sophocles, Herodotus, Aristotle, and others—were soon made the favorite objects of Roman study and imitation. Of course, these elegant pastimes were not suffered to interfere with the more serious business of the Roman peace (*pax Romana*) and the policies of imperial rule. Nevertheless, the contact was of the greatest importance. It marked the end of a pure, independent Latin civilization—if there ever had been any—and the beginning of a culture known as the Greco-Roman civilization. Latin poets and historians might complain that captured Hellas (Greece) led captive her captor,¹³ but it was a good thing that it happened. For thus Christ was ushered into a civilized and Greek-speaking world.¹⁴

9
A Limited
Preparation for the
Gospel (*Praeparatio
Evangelica*)

Although it must be admitted that Roman protection and the adoption of Greek culture were important, it must be pointed out that this factor has been wrongly represented as a *praeparatio evangelica*. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, the eclecticism of Greek thought, and Stoic philosophy cannot be called schoolmasters leading men to Christ. For, after all, Greek civilization, in spite of some beautiful aspects, was pagan, degenerate, and corrupt. Its true character was quickly recognized, even in Rome. Oriental extravagance, luxury, and vice tended to replace the simplicity, frugality, and morality of an earlier day. Along with the many helpful elements of culture that the Romans had received from the East, they also received the germs of moral and social disease. “To learn Greek is to learn knavery” became a proverb in Rome.¹⁵

In its far-reaching consequences, however, one of the results of the Greco-Roman civilization was to be of the greatest importance. For example, the worldwide spread and dominating influence of the Greek language was a most valuable aid to the cause of Christ's kingdom. As a result of the Macedonian conquests, Greek thought and culture not only pervaded the entire East, but the people from Asia Minor to India also generally spoke the Greek language. Many Greek colonies of the Mediterranean basin had previously known and spoken the Greek language, along with Latin, except where forcibly and successfully suppressed. But now Greek had entered and permanently established itself in even the strangest surroundings. Who would have dreamed of finding flourishing Greek cities in the land of Israel¹⁶ and among the extraordinarily home-loving Palestinian Jews? Thus, our Savior was intimately brought into contact with Greek and occasionally may have spoken it. Some Jews even officially recognized Greek as a proper language for religious services. They translated their sacred writings, the Old Testament, into Greek.¹⁷ Some of their books, not part of the canon, did not have to be translated because they were originally written in Greek.¹⁸ The inscription on the wall of the outer temple court in Jerusalem forbidding Gentiles to enter under pain of death was posted in Greek.¹⁹

And when the Romans came upon the scene, they found the Greek language so widely known and so deeply rooted that they could not hope to suppress it. Indeed, they did not even try to do so. Merely asserting the dignity of the Latin tongue and employing it in the administration of civil and military affairs in their Eastern dominions, the Romans gladly accepted the Greek language as a common means of communication. And so it came about, at first in the East, but gradually throughout the whole empire, that the language of Alexander became both the language of the Gospels and the *lingua franca* of the Greco-Roman world. People in the Roman Empire used it to a much greater extent than Latin.²⁰ It was almost impossible in any province to find a Roman subject of liberal education ignorant of Greek.²¹ No businessman of consequence could afford to be a stranger to Greek. Due to an overestimate of Greek literature, the only books read, studied, and imitated as to style—except Law, and that for good reasons—were Greek. So it was in Alexandria, in Jerusalem, in Antioch, in Rome, yes, even in Cadiz and Lyons. Alexander's ambitions of a world conquest had, in a way, been fulfilled. His language was spoken from the many Alexandrias that had been founded—in Babylonia, in Africa, etc.—to the statue of Alexander before which Julius Caesar sighed in Spain.²² It is true, Alexander's kingdom was shattered since Rome largely swallowed it up, but his language remained. His successors, the masters of Rome, themselves studied Greek and were able to use it. Julius Caesar did not say, "*Et tu, Brute?*" as usually reported, but his dying words were Greek.²³ Some of the famous sayings of Augustus were originally uttered in Greek.²⁴ Tiberius understood Greek.²⁵ Caligula

10
The Greek Language
Aids the Spread of
the Gospel

11
The Romans
Adopted Greek as a
World Language