

THE DEATH
OF
CHRIST

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*The Cross in New Testament History
and Faith*

John Knox

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TO

Lois, Jack, and Tonie

Foreword

ALTHOUGH THIS BOOK GIVES SOME ATTENTION TO THE THREE facets of its august theme—namely, the external circumstances of Jesus' death, its meaning for him, and its meaning in and for the early Church—the reader will see at once that this attention is by no means equally divided. The short opening chapter, concerned with the external historical conditions, does not presume to be more than an introductory sketch; and the last three chapters on the meaning of the Cross for the early Church also comprise a relatively small section of the book. By far the largest attention is given to the problem of the central chapters, the problem of Jesus' own understanding of his death—which is, of course, a part of the broader problem of his understanding of himself and his mission.

The reasons for this fuller discussion of this aspect of our theme I shall speak of in a moment. Just now I want only to say that, from my point of view, the third section of this book, although relatively short, is the most important. In both of the first two sections we are dealing with questions which must be answered on the basis of the criticism of documents—which means that they cannot be very surely answered and also that the answers cannot, in the nature of the case, be of ultimate or decisive importance. It is not until we reach the

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third section that we come to the ultimately significant element in our theme—the meaning of the death of Christ in early Christian memory, life, and thought. For, as will be said again later, by the Cross we mean neither the execution of a Roman political prisoner nor the tragic end of a uniquely noble and dedicated life, but rather the central moment in a divine event which only the Church remembers and the continuing meaning of which only the Church can know. It is only when we turn to a consideration of that meaning that the context in which earlier discussions have any great importance clearly appears. I feel, therefore, more than the author's usual interest that those who begin this book will find it possible to read on to the end.

The reasons why I have felt justified in giving largest attention to the subject of the middle section, "Jesus and His Cross," are chiefly, I suppose, its controversial nature and the fact that the problem of the "messianic consciousness" of Jesus, a perennial problem, is now again a matter of lively interest in many theological circles. But I have also a more practical purpose. I believe it is a real service to the memory of Jesus to question some of the thoughts about himself which are commonly attributed to him. Ordinarily it is true, I fear—and perhaps especially just now in the current phase of theological discussion—that one who argues, as I shall do, that Jesus probably did not make the kind of claims for himself which the Gospels make for him is thought of as in some way depreciating Jesus or detracting from his greatness. I believe that exactly the reverse is true. In making my argument, I hope I am moved principally by an interest in the truth, but I am certainly moved also by the conviction that some of the traditional conceptions of Jesus' self-consciousness reflect seriously (of course without intending to or knowing that they do) either upon his sanity or goodness as a human being or upon

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the authenticity of his humanity itself. I think it important to show if possible that the Gospels, critically examined, do not provide a basis for disparagements or doubts on any of these scores.

Although what is presented in these pages was planned from the beginning as a single book and was written with readers, rather than hearers, especially in mind, my work on it was begun in preparation for the Shaffer Lectures, which were delivered at the Divinity School of Yale University in February of 1956. Four of the chapters are substantially identical with these lectures. The book also contains material from the Carew Lectures at the Hartford Theological Seminary in March, 1957, and from convocation lectures at the Eden Theological Seminary in the following April. I am deeply grateful for the honor conferred on me by each of these institutions, for the hospitality shown me, and for the kindness with which my words were received.

While I must, of course, take entire responsibility for this book, I want to express my warm thanks to my friend and colleague Professor Frederick C. Grant, who read the whole of my manuscript, and to other friends, Professor Paul Schubert of Yale University, Professor Wilhelm Pauck of Union Theological Seminary, and Dr. William R. Farmer of Drew University, who read sections of it. Each of these friends made valuable criticisms.

JOHN KNOX

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I. INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER ONE

"Under Pontius Pilate"

NO ONE COULD BE SO BOLD AS TO TAKE UP THE THEME OF THIS book without misgiving. The death of Christ is the central moment in the whole event to which Christian faith and devotion look back. From the beginning it has seemed supremely to represent all the values and meanings realized within the Christian community, providing universal Christianity with its most characteristic symbol. And it has always been remembered as a moment of strange and awful pregnancy, significant beyond our understanding, pointing us toward heights incalculably beyond our reach and making us aware of depths in our existence which we know we shall never sound or probe. No wonder the sun was hidden "from the sixth hour . . . until the ninth." It is significant that, according to the Gospels, both the death of Christ and the Resurrection took place in darkness—events too sacred to be gazed on, too full of portent to be plainly seen.

And yet the recognition of this ineffable character has not kept the Church from making the Cross the center of theological interest and attention throughout its whole history, and it must not be deemed rash or presumptuous for one to seek what light one can find and to understand as fully as one can. There can be no genuine awareness of mystery except as a

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by-product of the search for understanding. At the end point of our questioning stands One who does not answer our questions but receives and absorbs them in the vaster mystery of his own being. But this happens only at the end point of our questioning. Only he who resolves all the mysteries he can is in position to recognize the one ultimate and all pervasive mystery which cannot be resolved. Only he who has sought earnestly to master can know when he is really mastered. Only one who has challenged all the gods can know the one true God. It is only at the very end of the New Testament's longest, most sustained, and most serious effort to understand and formulate the meaning of life and history that we read: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" It is only after we have tried with the utmost seriousness and with every energy of our minds to understand that we have the right to make such a confession; it is only then that we are really able to make it. . . . So much by way of apologia for my proposal of a general theme so momentous and so sacred.

I

The particular question with which we begin, however, is furthest removed from the center of greatest significance in our theme; and our apologia, perhaps unnecessary in any case, will seem not to apply. We begin by asking what we can know about the external circumstances and the historical causes of Jesus' death. But though this is a straightforward historical query, involving remotely if at all the question of theological meaning, it is in its own way as difficult to answer as the other—not because the issues are so deep but because the evidence is so meager and, even where it exists, so ambiguous. There can be no doubt whatever, of course, that Jesus was put to death

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by crucifixion—on this all our sources, including Paul, agree—and this datum may almost be said to belong essentially to the Church’s memory of Jesus himself. One can be almost equally sure that the Crucifixion took place in or near Jerusalem, in a Passover time, during the procuratorship of Pilate and by the hand of the Romans. But one cannot go beyond these formal facts with anything like the same assurance. Granted that the final responsibility for Jesus’ death must rest with the Roman authorities, what part if any did the Jewish leaders have in bringing it about? How was Jesus tried? How many hearings were held and before whom? What were the charges against him? Of precisely what crime was he convicted? Such questions are still not answerable with complete assurance and perhaps will never be. Although the Passion narratives of the four Gospels are relatively full, they are not always consistent with one another; and even where they agree, what we know about the nature and purpose of the Gospels and about the growth of the tradition which they embody requires that we be critical. There are, moreover, significant silences. In a word, the Gospels do not provide us with a clear, consistent picture of the external historical facts of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Fortunately, the purpose of this book does not require that we obtain such a picture. We are concerned primarily, not with the external circumstances of Jesus’ death, but rather with the meaning the death had for Jesus himself and for the early Church. Therefore, I shall make no attempt to deal with the subject of this chapter in any thoroughgoing way. I shall not try to compare systematically the several Passion narratives or to discuss the problem of their sources or of interdependence among them. I shall not attempt to describe in detail the political situation in Palestine in the early first century or to place the career of Jesus realistically within that

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setting. Nor shall I undertake at the end any exact reconstruction of what happened. Indeed, I shall do little more than call to mind three general tendencies operative in the Gospel tradition as a whole which must be supposed to have exercised an effect upon the way the original facts of Jesus' crucifixion were remembered and reported, and shall raise, but not try to settle, the question of the extent to which each should be taken into account in our estimation of the Gospel evidence. I have in mind, first, the tendency to draw out, to elaborate, to make "important," the incident of Jesus' crucifixion; second, the tendency to play down the Roman part in it and to emphasize correspondingly the part taken by Jews; and third, the tendency to discount the political significance of the incident. There can be no doubt that such tendencies operated; the only question is how extensive were their effects.

First, then, we must recognize the existence in the Gospel tradition of a tendency to elaborate, to "play up," the bare facts of Jesus' crucifixion. Let us imagine, quite hypothetically, that nothing was really known to have happened except that officers of a Roman military force, responsible for helping to maintain peace in Jerusalem at the time of the Passover feast in A.D. 29 or 30, observing that Jesus was the object of considerable public interest and hearing talk about the "kingdom of God," quietly arrested him one night while he was outside the city with a few friends and, after a brief hearing before the procurator, put him to death as a possible troublemaker along with others of the same kind. Can we not be sure that even if the incident as first known had been thus simple and straightforward, it would not have remained so in the Church's tradition? The crucifixion of Jesus was almost at once to become the focus of attention in both faith and worship, the center of meaning in the whole Christian gospel. It would have been

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inconceivable that an event of such supreme significance should have happened quickly, casually, inconspicuously. Luke reports a disciple's question to a supposed stranger: "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days?" (24:18). It had to be so. As the same writer says later (Acts 26:26), events so important could not have occurred "in a corner."

One must take into account also the exigencies of the Christian preaching. Paul tells us that in his preaching to the Galatians, Jesus Christ was "publicly portrayed" as crucified before their very eyes (Gal. 3:1). The Crucifixion had to be *pictured*. Men must see and feel it, imaginatively entering into the sufferings of Christ and sensing the awful significance of what happened on Calvary. The story of the Passion must be told in such fashion that the stark reality of it be felt and the full redemptive meaning of it be realized. The early preachers would have dealt with the Crucifixion, or for that matter with any other incident in the life of Jesus, not in the manner of historians, but in the manner of dramatists. We can be sure of this, if for no other reason, because preachers still deal so with the Gospel materials; and if the four Gospels had not crystallized the tradition around the end of the first century, who would venture to guess how long and elaborate the story of Jesus' crucifixion would now be? In a word, if suitable and adequate materials for the preaching were not available in the Gospel-making period, they were created. If a modern preacher finds such a statement shocking, let him watch what he himself does the next time he takes a Gospel incident for his text. Almost inevitably he will fill out the Gospel story with details and concrete touches designed to make it more graphic or moving and to bring out what he feels to be the real meaning or intention of the story. Such dramatic handling of a text is in