

Jesus and the Christian Gospels

Jesus in History and Interpretation

This is an essay about Jesus, about the significance of who he was and what he said and did. Any interpretation of Jesus' significance is based primarily on the narrative interpretations of his ministry, death and resurrection in the four canonical Gospels in the New Testament. The operative word here is *interpretation*. The Gospels interpret the significance of Jesus' words and actions for his followers in order to shape the practices and beliefs of communities of faith, and hence they presume a faith commitment from the intended audiences. Although the Gospels recount select events in Jesus' life, they do not purport to be objective accounts of what happened. Therefore, reading them as straightforward historical reports of what Jesus did and said not only misconstrues the nature and purpose of the Gospels, it also obscures the fact that history is itself always a matter of interpretation.

That there are four canonical Gospels and several Gospels that are not in the canon indicates that the memory and early traditions about Jesus were interpreted in various ways. A close comparison of the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke, the chronology of Jesus ministry in the Gospels of Mark and John, or the resurrection narratives in all four canonical Gospels demonstrates how key events were interpreted differently. Not everything the Gospels depict Jesus saying and doing happened exactly as reported. Later in this essay we will explore the character and purpose of the Gospels and various approaches to interpreting them in ancient and contemporary contexts. First, however, we investigate how these narrative interpretations of Jesus' significance have been used by modern scholars for historical reconstructions of the figure of Jesus based on critical analysis of the Gospels.

In 1906, Albert Schweitzer wrote a book that evaluated the works about the historical figure of Jesus that had been written in the previous two centuries. The English translation of the title of Schweitzer's book was *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*.¹ The first quest began in the late eighteenth century when a German scholar by the name of H. S. Reimarus, an eighteenth century philosopher who maintained that reason could arrive at a knowledge of God and ethics from a study of nature, questioned the historicity of the Gospel accounts of Jesus' miracles. He was followed by David F. Strauss and others who sought to distinguish what they regarded as purely historical accounts of the life of Jesus from the faith perspective that originally shaped the Gospels. This first quest for the historical Jesus was influenced by Enlightenment-era rationality rejected certain aspects of the Gospel accounts of Jesus as problematic because they contradicted the laws of nature.

What Schweitzer's review of this historical scholarship of Jesus demonstrated was that the lives of Jesus that were produced during this era using historical-critical methods were themselves not objective factual accounts. Rather they reflected the interests and ideals of those who wrote them. In other words, the portraits of Jesus that emerged during the first quest betrayed the worldview and outlook of their authors. Just as the depictions of Jesus in the Gospels were conditioned by the cultural milieu in which they were written and by the faith convictions of their authors, so were the eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of Jesus invariably shaped by the zeitgeist of that period of history. Schweitzer's critique of historical

¹ Schweitzer's book was originally published in 1906 in German as *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung*, literally "History of Life-of-Jesus Research."

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Jesus research marks the close of what is often referred to as the first quest. However, Schweitzer's own contribution to the endeavor would have an enduring effect on historical Jesus studies. His interpretation of the Gospels in the context of early Judaism led him to conclude that Jesus was an apocalyptic figure who, along with his followers, expected the imminent arrival of God's kingdom. Unlike the liberal portraits of Jesus of the previous two centuries, which preserved his ethical message even as they stripped away the elements that weren't consistent with a worldview that discarded the supernatural, Schweitzer's Jesus belonged more to the first century world of apocalyptic Judaism and, therefore, less familiar to Christians at the turn of the twentieth century. Schweitzer concluded that Jesus expected the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God. He threw himself on the wheel of history by challenging the religious authorities in Jerusalem, and in the process was crushed by that wheel.

The first quest for the historical Jesus resulted in a number of important developments that significantly shaped subsequent study of Jesus and the Gospels. Mark was regarded as the earliest Gospel by scholars and hence was used as a primary historical source in historical Jesus scholarship, but in 1901 Wilhelm Wrede's book *The Messianic Secret* contended that the secrecy motif was a literary device created by the author of Mark's Gospel to project the apostolic post-Easter faith in Jesus as messiah back onto the Jesus of history. Although, according to Wrede, Jesus himself had actually made no claim to be messiah, Mark had incorporated this post-resurrection belief into his narrative. Wrede's work highlighted the fact that the early Jesus traditions were creatively adapted to convey particular theological convictions. It also called attention to the literary quality of the Gospel, that is, the artistry of constructing such a narrative. These insights resulted in the development of new approaches to studying the Gospels. Redaction criticism concentrated on how the Gospel writers used and edited source materials, and what this disclosed about the theological perspectives of the respective Gospels. The aim of form criticism, on the other hand, was to ascertain the original form of the oral traditions used to craft the Gospel narratives. It asked questions about the function of the oral traditions in their original contexts and was interested in tracing the development of the Gospel tradition.

Another important consequence of the first quest for the historical Jesus was the distinction made between the "Jesus of history" and the "Christ of faith." One reaction to Schweitzer's historical reconstruction, which made Jesus as apocalyptic prophet less theologically relevant, was for others increasingly to emphasize the Christ of faith. Martin Kähler's book, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historical Biblical Christ*, published in German in 1892, claimed that the true Christ is a Christ of faith detached from the Jesus of history. However, the most important champion of this perspective and one of the most famous New Testament scholars of the twentieth century, was Rudolph Bultmann. For Bultmann, Christianity begins with Easter, and so he downplayed the importance of the Jesus of history for theology. From Bultmann's perspective, it was God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus that was decisive, rather than what Jesus had said and done.²

The "new quest for the historical Jesus" initiated by Bultmann's students was interested in establishing a continuity between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus that Kähler and

² See Theissen, Gerd and Annette Merz. *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide* (Fortress Press, 1998), 6-7.

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Bultmann had so persuasively distinguished. In contrast to the first quest, which sought to strip away the theological elements of the traditions about Jesus used by the Gospels, the new quest was interested in supporting the connection between the Christ of faith and the historical Jesus.³ It was guided by the conviction that the Gospels presuppose the identity of the earthly Jesus and exalted Christ. Bultmann had made the case that presuppositions always influenced the interpretation of New Testament texts. This new quest was intentional in being guided by what they regarded as a foundational presupposition of the tradition, namely, the continuity between the earthly Jesus and the risen Christ. This more explicitly Christological approach put history in the service of theology, and resulted in representations of Jesus that were more Christian and therefore less Jewish.

In the early 1980's, a third quest for the historical Jesus was catalyzed by new approaches to the study of Judaism using a variety of ancient Jewish sources. This produced a revitalized picture of early Judaism as much more diverse and nuanced than the caricature of the Pharisees in the Gospels which had been operative in much previous scholarship. Scholars such as E. P. Sanders, John Dominic Crossan, Geza Vermes, Marcus Borg, and many others in the last three decades have written books about the historical Jesus that depict him as thoroughly embedded and engaged in the Judaism of his day. One of the main insights that has emerged from this third quest, about which the majority of these scholars agree, despite their differences on other matters, is that Jesus was the leader of a renewal movement within Judaism.⁴ The debate has focused on the question of what kind of Jew Jesus was, and the relationship between his particular interpretation and embodiment of Jewish tradition to other forms and expressions of Judaism. This quest has been characterized by greater methodological variety and sophistication, including the use of social science and anthropological models and, in many instances, greater awareness of the Roman Empire as an important part of the context to which Jesus was responding.

Inasmuch as there continues to be a proliferation of scholarly books on Jesus, we are still in the midst of this third quest. Although no consensus about the historical Jesus is forthcoming, a much more richly textured understanding of the Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts of Jesus and the Gospels has advanced the conversation. Nonetheless, what Schweitzer observed about earlier lives of Jesus reflecting the interests and biases of their authors is also true of more recent scholarship. Historical investigation is always guided to some extent by the presuppositions of those interpreting these texts and traditions. The Gospels are not objective historical accounts of what Jesus said and did. Jesus probably spoke Aramaic, lived in an oral culture, and never wrote anything himself. Remembrances of his teaching and activity were profoundly influenced by the belief that God had raised from the dead this Galilean Jew who had been crucified and had made him both Lord and Christ. The task of reconstructing from the Gospels a purely historical account of Jesus, unencumbered by the perspectives and presuppositions of those who composed and preserved the traditions about him, seems unattainable. Nonetheless, there are important reasons not only for historians, but also for those interested in the importance of Jesus for

³ Ibid, 7.

⁴ E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1985).

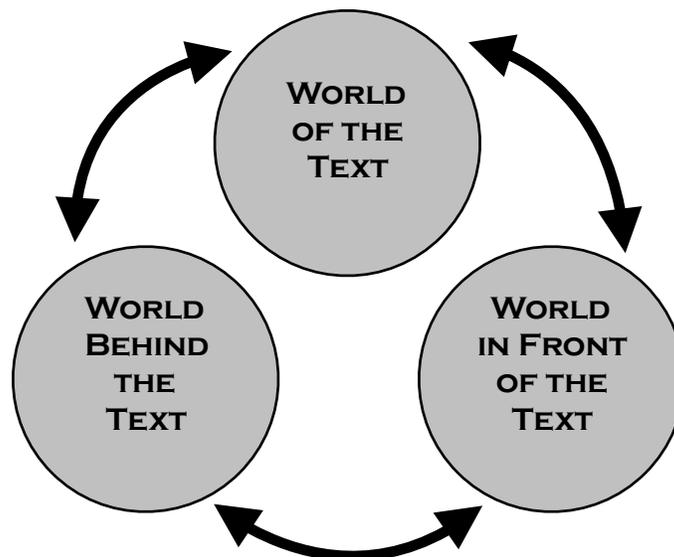
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contemporary life, to preserve the connection between the Christ of faith and what can be known about the significance of what Jesus said and did in his own historical context.

The Hermeneutical Circle

There are four canonical Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke are referred to as the synoptic Gospels because there is a literary relationship between them. The Gospel of John is different in many respects, and is typically not used in historical Jesus research. All four Gospels are a blend of faith and history. That is to say, followers of Jesus recounted the story of his ministry, death and resurrection for the express purpose of fostering faithful disciples. In this essay we want use the methods of historical criticism to investigate how Jesus engaged his own cultural and religious context in a way that makes it possible to explore his significance for our world today. Although it is possible to take a strictly historical approach to an investigation of Jesus and the Gospels, our task calls for a strategy of interpretation that employs historical critical methods but recognizes that any interpretation is shaped by the social location and cultural context of the interpreter. The hermeneutical circle provides a model of what happens in the interpretive process that can be illustrated by the diagram below.

Hermeneutical Circle



To interpret the Gospels is to be drawn into the narrative *world of the text*. The world of the Gospels is a narrative world that has been constructed by the author using existing oral and written traditions to tell the story of Jesus. The *world behind the text* is the historical and cultural context in which the Gospels were originally written and heard as well as the cultural world of the historical Jesus. Although the cultural and religious norms of the world behind the text are reflected in the narrative world of the Gospels, the world of the text takes on a life of its own

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apart from its original historical context once it is disseminated to be read in other times and places. The *world in front of the text* refers to the social world of the person interpreting the text. Every interpretation of the Gospel narratives about Jesus is influenced by a cultural context that is different from the ancient world in which it was produced and read. This is the reason that all reconstructions of the historical Jesus bear some resemblance to those who write them.

The arrows in the diagram illustrate the dynamic character of the interpretive process. The interpreter enters into the narrative world of the Gospels, but to some extent construes the story of Jesus in terms of the norms and conventions of his or her own social world. For example, modern American society values individual rights and tends to be guided by the ideal of the self-made person who creates their own identity and determines their own fate. In the ancient world, however, a person's identity was defined by the group(s) to which he or she belonged and was thought to be vulnerable to numerous external forces, both terrestrial and celestial. So the predominant perception of Jesus as an itinerant charismatic leader in scholarship on the historical Jesus seems to reflect more modern ideas about the individual than the more communitarian ethos that was commonplace in antiquity.

The value of the hermeneutical circle is that keeping the worlds *of*, *in front of*, and *behind* the Gospels ever before the interpreter serves to promote awareness of the distinctive cultural values, conventions, and perspectives involved, and hence magnify the difference between the world from which they come and the contemporary cultural contexts in which they are being interpreted. Interpretations of Jesus and the Gospels that are interested primarily in their significance for life in today's world unwittingly collapse the distance of time and space between the worlds *in front of* and *behind* the text to make Jesus more relevant. But this is precisely how Jesus gets made over in our own image. The tools of historical criticism are used to travel the long winding road from our world to the strange and wonderful world of first century Judea to better understand Jesus and the Gospels in their context.

It is, of course, impossible that we could somehow transcend the social milieu that formed us to fully fathom what it was like to live as a Galilean Jew under Roman rule in the decades leading up to the Jewish revolt. However, due diligence in attempting to understand Jesus in his context can also yield new insights into his significance for today. Just as visiting a foreign country casts one's own country in different light upon return, so efforts to better understand Jesus within the world that he inhabited can facilitate new angles of vision on our own cultural contexts and allow Jesus to speak to them in fresh and creative ways. The three worlds of the hermeneutical circle represent the three interacting contextual realities that are always in play in interpretation. In our attempts to grasp the significance of Jesus we must navigate and negotiate the narrative or literary world of the text to ascertain the substance and force of what Jesus said and did in the world behind the text, and we are circumspect in this endeavor because we are mindful that our own social location colors what we see. Reflection on the significance of Jesus words and actions for contemporary contexts should be predicated on our attempts to understand their force in their original historical and cultural context.

The Historical Figure of Jesus

The hermeneutical circle emphasizes the importance of context in interpreting the Gospel narratives about Jesus, and the primary task in this first portion of the essay is to place Jesus in

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his historical context. Any explanation of the significance of Jesus's teachings and actions should be based on an account of the circumstances and issues to which he was responding. However, before outlining the particulars of the historical and cultural framework for our sketch of Jesus, the content of and criteria for what should be regarded as historical need to be considered. This is a more challenging task than one might imagine because of the paucity of sources about Jesus outside the Gospels that can be used to verify the historicity of the tradition. The two basic aspects that need to be assessed historically are the sayings of Jesus and the actions of Jesus. Establishing the historical probability of what Jesus did is the less disputed of the two tasks, though it is complicated by how to interpret the healings, exorcisms, and other deeds of power attested by the Gospels.

In *The Historical Figure of Jesus* E. P. Sanders offers a list of statements about Jesus that are almost beyond dispute and belong to the framework of Jesus public career.⁵

- Jesus was born c. 4 BCE, near the time of the death of Herod the Great;
- he spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a Galilean village;
- he was baptized by John the Baptist;
- he called disciples;
- he taught in the towns, villages and countryside of Galilee (apparently not in the cities);
- he preached "the kingdom of God";
- about the year 30 he went to Jerusalem for Passover;
- he created a disturbance in the Temple area;
- he had a final meal with the disciples;
- he was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest;
- he was executed on the orders of the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.

He adds another short list of what he regards as equally secure facts about the aftermath of Jesus' life:

- his disciples at first fled;
- they saw him (in what sense is not certain) after his death;
- as a consequence, they believed that he would return to found the kingdom;
- they formed a community to await his return and sought to win others to faith in him as God's Messiah.

With some qualifications, these lists serve as a foundation of most of the recent accounts of the historical Jesus. Although Jesus birth is usually dated somewhere around 4 BCE. The birth narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke are very different and are best seen as theological interpretations rather than historical accounts. The historical starting point for a reconstruction of Jesus' life and ministry is his baptism by John. The other historical bracket is his death by crucifixion. However, the Gospel traditions of both his baptism and death provide examples of historical traditions that have been expanded upon. The Gospel accounts of the baptism highlight the superiority of Jesus to John and the voice from heaven which announces that he is "Son of God." These, again, are theological appraisals that cannot be validated historically. The

⁵ E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 10-11.

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crucifixion, which is also on solid historical ground, is intertwined with chronicles of his trial that indicate that the Jewish authorities are ultimately responsible for his death. As Sanders suggests, it is likely that members of the priestly aristocracy was complicit in the trial and execution of Jesus, but from an historical perspective Jesus was executed for sedition as an enemy of the Roman order. Historical information from other sources shows that Pilate summarily executed thousands of Jews and therefore was probably not as tentative in sending Jesus to his death as he is portrayed in the Gospels.

What the above comments demonstrate is that even the most basic historical information is interpreted in the Gospels in ways that reflect the circumstances and perspectives of faithful followers of Jesus. The four different accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels are further evidence of the interpretive process from the vantage point of such followers. All four Gospels narrate in very different ways the common conviction that God raised Jesus from the dead, but that claim cannot be validated by historical investigation as such. What is clearly historical is the disciples' belief that they saw him after his death. So the resurrection faith of the first followers of Jesus is itself historical in some sense, but it is impossible to get behind the tradition to ascertain exactly what happened. What is historical is their conviction that the risen Jesus was alive and present to them and through them, and this conviction had an impact on the continued expansion and growth of the Jesus movement.

Probably the most challenging aspect of efforts to reconstruct the historical Jesus is deciding what is authentic to Jesus. It is generally acknowledged among scholars that the Gospel of Mark was the first Gospel, and was written around 70 CE shortly after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. So there is approximately a forty-year period between the historical Jesus and the earliest narrative of his ministry, death, and resurrection. During that forty-year period, the memory of Jesus was first preserved and passed on in oral tradition and then written down in collections of Jesus' sayings, deeds of power, suffering and death (his passion), resurrection before being crafted into a narrative of his ministry, death and resurrection by whomever wrote the Gospel Mark. As the memory of what Jesus said and did passed through these various stages it was transformed. The question is, how can what the historical Jesus said and did be ascertained from the narrative accounts in the Gospels, where the memory of him has been shaped by forty years of adapting the tradition to new contexts, and by the perspectives of the Gospel writers themselves?

Significant advances in the study of memory and orality in recent years have contributed to an understanding of the development of the tradition behind the Gospels. On the one hand, oral cultures tend to preserve traditions with more accuracy than literary cultures such as ours. On the other hand, memory is always selective and involves imagination. Since the Gospels and the traditions they used cannot be read uncritically as unvarnished historical records, scholars have developed criteria to determine what in the Gospels should be regarded as historical and what should be regarded as a creative reworking of the tradition. A brief consideration of a couple of these criteria illustrates the difficulty of getting behind the Gospels to establish a historical substratum of the Jesus tradition.

The *criterion of dissimilarity* was at first applied to posit that if a saying of Jesus couldn't be attributed to Judaism or to the early church's theological reflection on Jesus, then it was deemed to be something Jesus probably *said*. The problem with this approach is that it breaks off the

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lines of continuity with both Judaism and the earliest communities of his followers to put forward a minimal collection of genuine sayings of Jesus that depict him as unique. This approach reinforced a portrait of Jesus that is at the very least non-Jewish, and in some instances anti-Jewish. The criterion of multiple attestation maintains that if a saying of or tradition about Jesus is attested in various traditions that are independent, it is likely authentic. Although this is a historically sound approach, there is still much debate about the relationship of the Gospels and their underlying sources. One of the main debates concerns the hypothetical document *Q*. *Q* is from the German word *Quelle* for source, and refers to the sayings of Jesus common to the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. Although *Q* is not an extant document, many scholars regard this hypothetical source as the earliest collection of Jesus' sayings from Galilee. Given the ongoing debate about the status of *Q* in scholarship, the material common to Matthew and Luke will be referred to as the *double tradition* in this essay.

Evaluation of what in the Gospel traditions goes back to the historical Jesus is a complex enterprise that requires a repertoire of tools and approaches. Although there have been gains from the application and refinement of these historical-critical methods to the study of the *historical* Jesus over time, they are typically very focused on a particular aspect of the tradition. One of the most difficult challenges in these historical reconstructions of Jesus is that none of them can account for all the data in the tradition. Every interpreter of the Gospels, expert and non-expert alike, brings to their reading of the text a working portrait of Jesus that privileges certain sayings or deeds and then interprets everything else in the Gospel tradition through that lens. In some instances, what one privileges in the tradition is the basis for bracketing something in the Gospel tradition as being less important or even inauthentic. Historical investigation is by its very nature circular inasmuch as it begins with a minimal amount of historical data and then builds a case informed by underlying assumptions that will inevitably have blind spots. The use of the various historical methods can contribute to this phenomenon because they tend to be used in ways that confirm one's preconceptions about Jesus. In other words, interpreters tend to find the Jesus they are looking for.

In view of this methodological impasse, I would propose that more emphasis should be placed on a holistic reading of the Gospel narratives of Jesus applying the *criterion of historical plausibility*. Theissen and Merz succinctly define the criterion of historical plausibility in this way: "Whatever helps to explain the influence of Jesus and at the same time can only have come into being in a Jewish context is historical in the sources."⁶ The Gospels are realistic narratives that depict Jesus as a Judean conversing and interacting mostly with other Judeans. Given the thicker and more richly textured view of first century Judaism that has emerged in recent years, the primary task is to make sense of what the Gospels depict Jesus doing and saying within his Jewish context. This also pertains to the depiction of his contemporaries. For example, the portrait of the Pharisees in the Gospels is something of a caricature. It more likely betrays a conflict between them and the followers of Jesus after the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, which was then projected back onto the ministry of Jesus.

It is unlikely that there will ever be a definitive reconstruction of the historical Jesus that everyone will agree on. However, a critical reading of the Gospels, paired with a good working

⁶ Theissen & Merz, *The Historical Jesus*, 116.

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understanding of Judaism in its imperial context, provides the most promising path to a historically plausible interpretation of Jesus. Such an interpretation must account for the particularities of the Gospel tradition in relationship to a broader comprehension of what he was trying to accomplish in Galilee and then Jerusalem. The attempt to construct a contextually credible account of Jesus' words and deeds will also benefit from the use of social science models to examine the socioeconomic dynamics of Jesus' Galilean context. An important premise of this discussion of Jesus' significance is that he was addressing concrete circumstances in his own local context and hence his message had practical significance for those who heard and followed him. The force of Jesus' teaching and ministry are more discernible when viewed against the backdrop of the local situation in Galilee, and so are those elements of the tradition that have been shaped by later theological reflection. From the standpoint of the hermeneutical circle, this requires greater awareness of and appreciation for the historical distance and cultural difference between Jesus' world behind the text and the interpreter's world in front of the text. Interpretations of Jesus' significance for contemporary contexts will be more socially relevant and less abstract when he is viewed as a Judean engaging local religious and social issues in Galilee.

The Jesus Movement in Galilee

This concise consideration of the historical Jesus will use the Gospel of Mark and the early sayings source Q to present a historically plausible explanation of the significance of Jesus' words and actions in Galilee in the early 30's of the first century C.E. The task of differentiating what the historical Jesus said and did from secondary interpretations of the tradition after the resurrection is complex. As has been noted, every reconstruction of the historical Jesus privileges certain aspects of the tradition that tend to reinforce one's preconceptions of Jesus. There are tensions in the Gospel tradition that cannot be resolved without positing that certain parts of it are the result of later theological reflection. Instead of beginning by outlining a method to distinguish what is authentic to Jesus from what is the product of later Christological reflection, the priority here is to succinctly reconstruct the Galilean context as a framework for interpreting the earliest layer of the Jesus tradition. Context is the key to interpretation, and even a compact description of Jesus' Galilean environment elucidates the force of his words and deeds.

Jesus was born in the early years of the Roman Empire, which began when Augustus was declared emperor in 27 BCE. Herod the Great was the client king of the Roman Empire. Herod's allegiance to Rome was evident in his grand building projects, which included the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple in Hellenistic-Roman style as well as temples dedicated to the divine Augustus. He also appointed high priests to replace the Hasmoneans, and together with other Herodians they formed a powerful aristocracy that collaborated with Rome. Herod's massive building program may have brought honor to him and his Roman patrons, but it was the cause of considerable economic distress for those living in Roman Palestine. It's not surprising that when Herod died in 4 BCE, there were rebellions in Galilee, Judea, and Perea that had to be suppressed. The Jewish historian Josephus relates the views of a delegation that went to Rome to complain about the repercussions of Herod's rule:

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He had indeed reduced the entire nation to helpless poverty after taking it over in as flourishing condition as few ever know ... In addition to the collecting of the tribute that was imposed on everyone each year, lavish contributions had to be made to him and his household and friends and those of his slaves who were sent out to collect the tribute because there was no immunity at all from outrage unless bribes were paid (Josephus, *Ant.* 17.307-308)

The Roman Empire was an aristocratic empire. The example of Herod illustrates the dynamics in which the majority of resources are controlled by elite families who live off the labor of peasants. Roman Palestine was divided after Herod's death and his son Antipas was given control of Galilee by Augustus. Herod Antipas was client king during Jesus ministry, and the economic hardship that characterized his rule is reflected in the Gospels. The Jesus movement was a Galilean movement, and Galilee was an agrarian peasant society. Galileans were subjected to a triple tax system that consisted of a Temple tax, a Roman tax, and a tax from the Herodian aristocratic administration which placed almost unbearable economic pressure on them. The political facet of this predicament was that this agrarian society was controlled by a ruling aristocracy, mostly from the neighboring cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias, who exploited local peasants through debt-slavery. John's baptism of repentance and Jesus' message and enactment of the kingdom of God should be seen as responding to this social crisis in Galilee. The diagram below is a graphic representation of an agrarian tributary society.⁷

⁷ The model of social stratification developed by Gerhard E. Lenski [from *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), 215–90] as summarized by John Dominic Crossan in *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 45–46.

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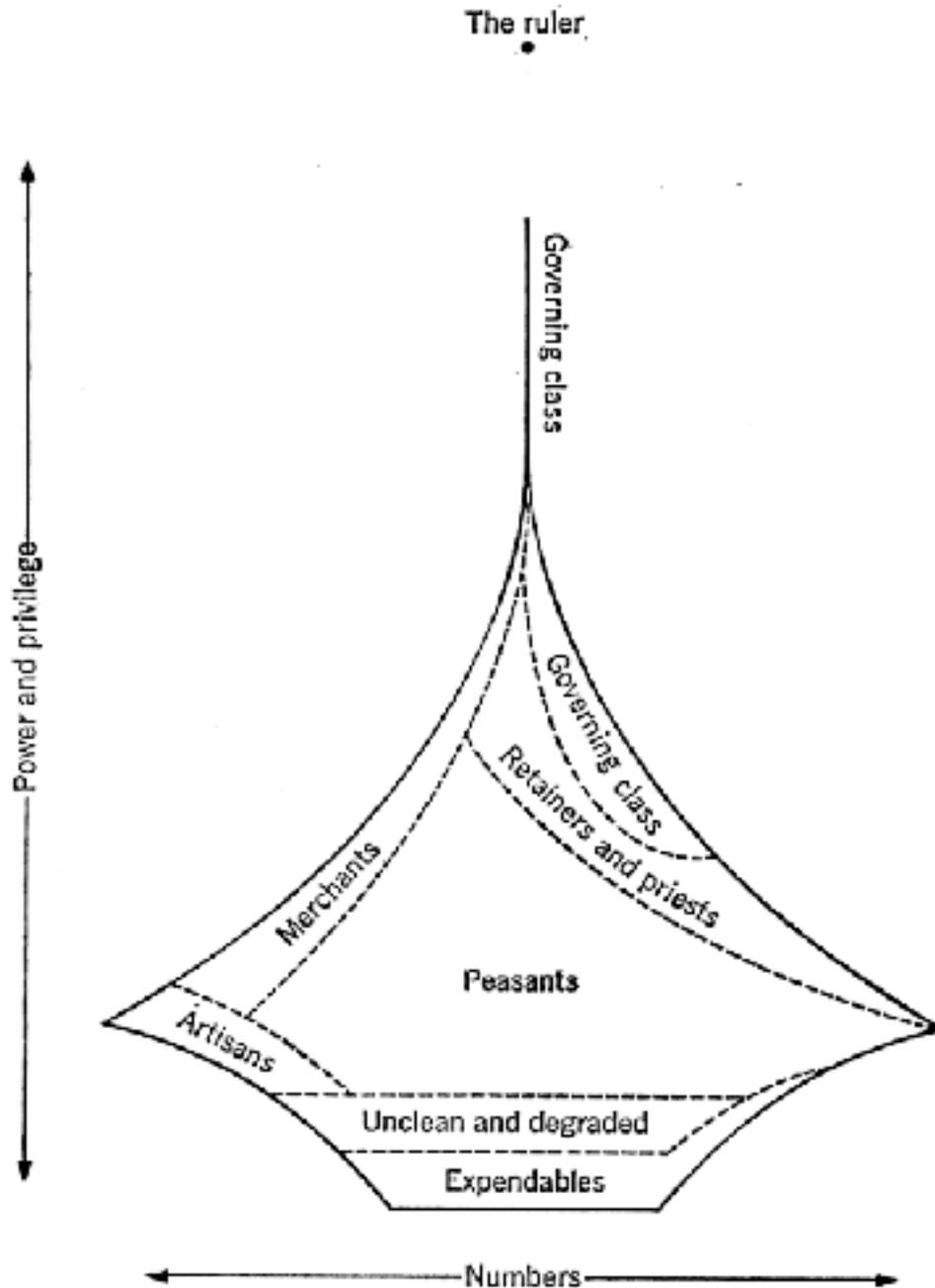


Figure 1 A graphic representation of the relationship among classes in agrarian societies.

The first task is to situate Jesus in his Galilean context in the 30's. All the Gospels agree that Jesus' ministry begins with his baptism by John in the Jordan River. John was an apocalyptic prophet announcing God's imminent judgment unless Israel repented. In the Gospel tradition John's role is described as forerunner to Jesus. However, the Israelites who submitted to his baptism probably understood it as a reenactment of the Exodus, as Crossan and Reed suggest, "taking penitents from the desert, through the Jordan, into the Promised Land, to possess it in

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holiness once again.”⁸ John’s baptism, then, ritualized a hope for liberation from the political and economic oppression that characterized life in Galilee at this time. Jesus began his ministry under the auspices of John the Baptist, and whatever message and ministry he had was, initially at least, aligned with John’s.

One of the main challenges in appreciating the significance of John and Jesus in their Galilean setting is the tendency to regard them simply as religious figures. However, in the ancient world religion, politics, and economics are inextricably bound together. For Israelites, fidelity to God’s covenant encompassed every dimension of life. The fact that Herod Antipas killed John indicates that he viewed John as a political threat. A passage from the Jewish historian Josephus elucidates both what John was doing and why Herod was concerned.

For Herod had put him to death, though he was a good man and had exhorted the Jews to lead righteous lives, to practice justice towards their fellows and piety towards God, and so doing to join in baptism. When others too joined the crowds about him, because they were aroused to the highest degree by his sermons, Herod became alarmed. Eloquence that had so great an effect on mankind might lead to some form of sedition.... (*Ant* 18.117-118)

The Gospels report that Herod expressed the same concern about Jesus when he heard that Jesus had cast out demons and healed the sick:

King Herod heard of it, for Jesus’ name had become known. Some were saying, “John the baptizer has been raised from the dead; and for this reason these powers are at work in him.” But others said, “It is Elijah.” And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old.” But when Herod heard of it, he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” (Mark 6:14-16)

Later when Jesus was in Jerusalem, Luke says that some Pharisees warned Jesus,

“Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you. He said to them, “Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.”” (Luke 13:31)

The activity of John the Baptist and Jesus occurs in Galilee and surrounding villages where taxation and subsistence agriculture served Herod Antipas’ project of urbanization.⁹ Richard Horsley has made the connection between the exploitation of the populace in these agrarian villages and the numerous incidents of resistance and rebellion that occurred around the time of Jesus. A related observation is that during second-temple times most inhabitants of Galilee were

⁸ John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones and Behind the Texts* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2001), 117-118.

⁹ See Douglas Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 45-78. Oakman has a good description of Galilee in terms of aristocratic politics. The chart on pages 50-52 illustrating the rule of Herod Antipas as an example of the politics of aristocratic empires is especially helpful.

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descendants of the northern Israelite peasantry, and stood in the northern prophetic tradition calling for the revitalization of Israelite village communities and a return to covenantal principles as a means of redressing social, political, and economic injustices.¹⁰ Both John the Baptist and Jesus were shaped by this prophetic tradition and were committed to the renewal of village life in the face of these harsh circumstances. However, while Jesus was initially identified through baptism with John's more apocalyptic hope of God coming in judgment to rectify matters, he is depicted throughout the Gospel tradition as having a different strategy of grappling with the distress and discontent that was experienced by Galileans.

Jesus and John the Baptist

In a passage common to Luke and Matthew, Jesus compares his reputation to that of John: "For John the Baptist has come eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, 'He has a demon'; the Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Luke 7:33-34//Matt. 11:18-19). Moreover, in this same passage Jesus draws another sharp distinction between him and John: "I tell you, among those born of women no one is greater than John; yet the least in the kingdom of God is greater than he" (Luke 7:28//Matt. 11:11). The contrast between Jesus and John in this passage provides an important clue to understanding the distinctive character of Jesus' ministry, the focus of which was the kingdom of God. How do we account for Jesus' transition from participant in John the Baptist's ascetic movement, with its standard covenantal emphasis on repentance and cleansing from sins, to being stigmatized for keeping company with those in need of reform?

John's imprisonment and execution undoubtedly had a traumatic effect on Jesus, but another passage common to Luke and Matthew suggests that Jesus' views were developing in a different direction even before that. When John sends his disciples to ask Jesus, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus replies:

"Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." (Luke 7:22-23//Matt. 11:4-6).

Paul Hollenbach proposed that this shift was caused by Jesus' experience of God's power being mediated through him to exorcise and heal, which he interpreted as the kingdom of God being present in some sense.¹¹ The Gospels do consistently portray Jesus as having a distinct authority to enact the kingdom, in word and deed, that is markedly different from John's apocalyptic vision of awaiting God's approaching judgment.

In attempting to situate Jesus in the Galilean context of his ministry, one question that needs to be asked is: How did Jesus' message and embodiment of the kingdom of God deal with the hardship of that village populace? This is a difficult question for at least two reasons. First, as

¹⁰ Richard Horsely, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 35-54. list the rebellions?

¹¹ Paul Hollenbach, "The Conversion of Jesus: From Jesus the Baptizer to Jesus the Healer," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. H. Temporini and A. Hasse (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1982), II. 25. 1:196-219.

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Bultmann famously said, already in the earliest strata of the tradition the proclaimer has become the proclaimed. That is to say, the kingdom of God is the primary focus of Jesus activity but in the Gospels Jesus himself, his identity and significance, is the center of attention. The second complication follows from the first. Once Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God became a set of beliefs about him, the metaphor of the kingdom of God became more abstract and spiritualized. A Galilean or Judean audience in the first century would have heard the phrase *kingdom of God* as a political metaphor and would have grasped the implicit contrast with the client kingdoms that were an extension of imperial rule, such as that of Herod Antipas. To examine Jesus' message and enactment of the kingdom of God in relation to the sociopolitical landscape of Galilee is to explore the politics of the kingdom, that is, how Jesus was organizing and mobilizing his followers to embody divine power in their local context.

Jesus and the Renewal of Local Community

In an article entitled "Jesus and the Renewal of Local Community in Galilee," Jonathan Draper challenges the dominant scholarly perspective that Jesus was an itinerant charismatic leader and argues that more attention should be given to group formation in the Jesus movement as a response to the economic and social disintegration and threatened landlessness in Galilee.¹² He contends Jesus was attempting to "renew local community in villages and towns, to strengthen and renew family and community relations and reverse the downward spiral of violence."¹³ Except for a few passages that describe specific instances in which disciples are sent out, the Jesus tradition presupposes the existence and support of settled local communities. Geographically Jesus moves within a limited radius of a few villages until he goes to Jerusalem. Hence the emphasis on Jesus' itineracy may be more a consequence of superimposing post-Enlightenment individualism on the Gospel tradition so that a focus on Jesus as a unique religious figure eclipses his "concrete program of action for social transformation."¹⁴

A brief consideration of meals and some of Jesus' teachings as practical expressions of the kingdom of God will illustrate Jesus' strategy for the renewal of community life in Galilee. A place to start is the passage above that describes Jesus as "a friend of tax collectors and sinners." This phrase occurs with reference to Jesus in all three of the Synoptic Gospels where it is leveled by scribes and Pharisees as a criticism of Jesus (Mark 2:15; Matt. 9:10; Luke 5:30; 7:34). This complaint about Jesus reflects his opponents' perception of him, and may come from an early stratum of the tradition rather than from Jesus himself. Nonetheless, the criticism preserves a reminiscence of Jesus as a social deviant that probably has some basis in history. In the world in front of the text, "sinner" has a moral connotation, but in the context of Judaism, a sinner is one who is not compliant with Torah. What sinners and tax collectors have in common is that while they represent opposite ends of the socio-economic spectrum, both were dishonored and

¹² Jonathan Draper, "Jesus and the Renewal of Local Community in Galilee," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 87 (June 1994) 29-42. url: http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/ricsa/jtsa/j87/j87_drap.htm
Reference Horsley

¹³ *Ibid*, 40.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 38.

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therefore socially marginalized. Douglas Oakman has made the interesting suggestion that the word for sin in Aramaic word, which was the language Jesus spoke, was *hōvayin*, the word for “debtors.” He points out that these debtors could have been farmers or fishers in heavy debt, women enslaved in prostitution, or members of trades endangered by taxes. According to Oakman, “In this understanding, Jesus dines with just these people in order to broker relief.”¹⁵

Meals were an integral part of Jesus’ enactment of the kingdom of God, and they play a prominent role in the Gospel tradition. In addition to their obvious material significance in satisfying the hunger of a preponderance of people who worked to eke out a subsistence living, they also had symbolic import on a number of levels. Crossan has interpreted the significance of Jesus’ meals as a central aspect of what he calls a “brokerless kingdom” marked by “the just sharing of food as the material basis of life, of life that belongs to God.”¹⁶ He sees this sharing of meals (commensality) as part of Jesus’ program to restore, from the bottom up, a society fractured by urbanization and commercialization, and on a symbolic level, as a confrontation between the divine realm of God’s kingdom and the temporal realm of Herod Antipas within the wider realm of the Roman Empire. The feeding stories in the so-called miracle tradition also operate at both material and symbolic levels. On the one hand, the appetites of five thousand and four thousand people respectively are satisfied by the multiplication of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:30-44; 8:1-10). On the other hand, they also serve to declare God’s abundant provision in the midst of ostensible scarcity.

Another important aspect of the kingdom of God signified by Jesus’ meals is the manner in which social norms, boundaries, and social relations are reconfigured. According to Dennis Smith, there are four categories of meals in the Gospels: 1) meals with Pharisees, 2) miraculous feedings, 3) meals with “tax collectors and sinners,” and 4) meals with *disciples*.¹⁷ Smith maintains that only meals with “tax collectors and sinners” and with disciples offer a high degree of historical probability. “Sinner” and “tax collector” are both terms of slander that refer to two groups on the fringes of Jewish society, albeit at opposite ends economically. The scandal in Jesus eating with them was his inclusion of two groups who were normally excluded by their social location and questions about morality. In eating with sinners and tax collectors Jesus exemplified the kingdom of God as encompassing those on the margins of society.

Meals are a prominent theme in the Gospel of Luke, but what is striking about many of Luke’s meal scenes is that they are depicted in the style of a Greco-Roman symposium which provides the occasion for Jesus to teach. (see Luke 7:36-50; 11:37-44; 14:1-24; 22:7-30). Formal meals in Greek or Roman setting were a microcosm of society and meal etiquette served to reinforce the rigidly stratified Greco-Roman social order. In Luke’s meal scenes Jesus often challenges this hierarchical social ranking and teaches the “biblical” virtue of humility. For

¹⁵ Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus*, 98.

¹⁶ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: HarperOne, 1993), 346ff.

¹⁷ Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist: The Banquet in the Early Christian World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 223.

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example, Jesus tells a parable that is only in Luke in which he gives this advice about the seating arrangement at a marriage feast:

“But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:10-11)

While the disregard for social honor and stratification evident in this passage is consistent with what is known about the historical Jesus, the challenge to social convention has been re-contextualized for Luke’s Greco-Roman audience. The historical Jesus’ meals with “sinners and tax collectors” and Luke’s meal scenes both subvert social convention and act out an inclusive vision of the kingdom of God. However, the original cultural context of Jesus’ meals is Jewish while Luke has set them in a Greco-Roman context where they challenge conventions of status and honor.

The meals scenes in the Gospels illustrate just how difficult it is to separate history from tradition, to differentiate what Jesus said and did from their symbolic interpretations by his first followers. The prominence of meals in the Gospel tradition indicates that table fellowship was an important aspect of Jesus’ ministry and that it had symbolic significance. However what table fellowship with Jesus meant in the Jewish context of rural Galilee is somewhat different from the symbolic function of the meal tradition in the Gospels, which reflect a more Greco-Roman setting. In the agrarian context of Galilee under Antipas’ rule, eating with sinners and tax collectors, and even the feeding stories can be seen as dealing with the crisis of poverty and dispossession materially and socially through both a concrete and symbolic representation of the kingdom of God. Whatever meaning was originally ascribed to the meals Jesus had with Galileans, once they became a part of memory and tradition about him, their significance was largely symbolic. Jesus was eating with Galilean peasants who may not have kept all of Torah, or at least the traditions of the elders (oral Torah), as the debate about his disciples eating with defiled hands indicates (Mark 7:1-23). In the Gospel tradition, “sinners” and “tax collectors” become terms of slander used by Jesus’ opponents who accuse him of transgressing social and religious boundaries. The audiences of the Gospels were communities that included Gentiles, who were de facto “sinners,” and others who would not have been considered part of the covenant community. These communities were on the margins of Judaism and Greco-Roman society, so a key role of the meal tradition was to legitimate the inclusion of those on the fringe and to depict Jesus’ inclusive vision of the kingdom of God as a reordering of social relationships.

Many if not most of the references to meals in the Gospels indicate a symbolic interpretation that connects them with communal meals shared by communities of Jesus’ followers. The Lord’s Supper tradition is the most obvious example (Mark 14:22-25// Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20), but the feeding stories and other meals scenes also have eucharistic overtones. The “breaking of the bread” signifies the presence of the Lord at community meals, and this is also tied to an eschatological interpretation. Jesus expresses the eschatological significance of the last meal he eats with his disciples when he says: “Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God” (Mark 14:25 // Matt

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26:29; Luke 22:18). The meal anticipates a banquet at the end of time, which is described by Isaiah:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.
And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;
he will swallow up death forever.
Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken. (Isa 25:6-8)

These images were associated with a future messianic banquet: victory over primordial enemies (e.g. death), eternal joyous celebration, abundance of food, the presence of the Messiah, and the pilgrimage of the nations.¹⁸ All of these are important themes in the Gospels, but because the meal tradition is so entangled with communal meal practices that celebrate the presence of the risen Jesus and look forward to his return as Messiah it is difficult to ascertain what exactly in these meal stories goes back to Jesus himself.

Jesus as Prophet

Jesus is depicted in the Gospel tradition as announcing the approach of God's kingdom, which is proleptically expressed through deeds of power such as exorcisms and healings, as well as gathering followers around particular covenantal practices. Although he is referred to as Son of God and Messiah in the Gospel narratives, these are honorific titles attributed to him by others that he does not explicitly use of himself. The designation that may best represent what Jesus was doing and saying in Galilee, and then in Jerusalem, is that of prophet. The Gospel of Mark indicates that Jesus regarded himself as a prophet. He tells those who took offense at him in his hometown synagogue at Nazareth, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house" (Mark 6:4). It is unlikely that the epithet prophet would have originated with the early church. A passage common to Luke and Matthew says that Jesus regarded John as a prophet, and so he was also linked to this role by virtue of his identification with him:

"When John's messengers had gone, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John:

'What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who put on fine clothing and live in luxury are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.'" (Luke 7:24-26)

Jesus here associates John's prophetic activity with "wilderness," and contrasts it with powerful elites such as Antipas. A number of passages in the Gospels suggest that people surmise that

¹⁸ Dennis Smith, *From Symposium to Eucharist*, 169.

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Jesus is a prophet: “But others said, ‘It is Elijah.’ And others said, “It is a prophet, like one of the prophets of old” (Mark 6:15).

There were different kinds of prophets in early Judaism, but Jesus and John the Baptist fit the profile of popular prophets who led movements of resistance and renewal, which were not uncommon in the first century.¹⁹ As Herzog observes, this type of prophetic leader emerges because they embody the values of the group they represented. As a peasant artisan in the village of Galilee Jesus would have been steeped in the prophetic traditions of Israel.²⁰ In contrast to the scribal subculture of Judaism with its texts and interpretations, Jesus inhabited an oral cultural that related the foundational biblical stories and figures to their own local context. These popular messianic movements, as Horsley calls them, often began in the wilderness as reenactments of the foundational acts of God’s deliverance in the exodus and the formation of the covenant community.²¹ Moses was regarded as the prototypical prophetic leader (Deut. 18:15), and Elijah and Elisha were especially revered figures in the Galilean milieu of Jesus. They were prophets who responded to a crisis in the northern kingdom by challenging political authority. The prophetic renewal movement led by Elijah and “the children of the prophets” has left an indelible mark on the Gospel tradition and may even have provided inspiration for Jesus himself.²²

It would be difficult to overstate the significance of the exodus as the defining event in Israel’s history, especially in the popular imagination of Judeans lived under imperial rule since the Babylonian exile. John the Baptist’s call to prepare the “way of the Lord” evokes Isaiah’s theme of a new exodus signaling that God was acting anew through Jesus to effect the liberation of God’s people (Mark 1:2-6// Matthew 3:1-6; Luke 3:1-7). While the new exodus is a scriptural motif used by the Gospel writers to characterize the movements initiated by John and Jesus respectively, it also symbolizes the phenomenon of power associated with the focus of Jesus’ message and activity, namely the kingdom of God. The phrase “kingdom of God” is a political metaphor that has its roots in the biblical notion of God as King. However, it is also a spatial metaphor which highlights a tension between the principal conviction of Judaism that God is the sovereign creator who rules the universe and the reality of the Roman control of Palestine. Since Jesus was proclaiming God’s reign in a Galilee that was under Roman rule, he was in some sense exemplifying an order or an experience of power very different from and incompatible with the machinations of imperial power.

¹⁹ See Richard Horsley and John Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements at the Time of Jesus* (New York: Winston Press, 1985), 135-189. Horsley most recent attempt to depict Jesus as a prophet is found in Richard Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012).

²⁰ William Herzog II, *Prophet and Teacher: An Introduction to the Historical Jesus* (Louisville: WJK Press, 2005), 23.

²¹ Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*, 93.

²² See Thomas Brodie, *The Crucible Bridge: The Elijah-Elisha Narrative as an Interpretive Synthesis of Genesis-Kings and a Literary Model for the Gospels* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000), 79-97. Brodie makes a persuasive case for how the Elijah-Elisha narrative serves as a literary model for the Gospel of Mark, and especially the Gospel of Luke.

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Given the anachronistic connotations of kingdom language in contemporary contexts, a constructive alternative translation that conveys the phenomenon expressed is “Power.” Oakman maintains that “when Jesus spoke of ‘Kingdom of God,’ his reference was to the presence and reality of the Power, the Power’s ultimacy.”²³ So, for example, when Jesus says to a group of Pharisees, “The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, ‘Look, here it is!’ or ‘There it is!’ For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:20-21), he was speaking of the Power “among you” or “in your midst.” The language of power pervades the Jesus tradition and is used in a variety of ways. Jesus’ healings are referred to as “deeds of power,” and he is described as teaching with “authority.”²⁴ This is the same Power that the Israelites identified with the one who delivered them from bondage in Egypt in the exodus.²⁵ It is also the Power that formed the Israelites into a people, and the template for how that Power was to operate among the people was set out in the Mosaic covenant. Principles of political-economic cooperation and justice distinguish it as a Power shared in community (Exodus 20; Joshua 24; Deuteronomy 5:27-28).²⁶ Jesus uses the metaphor of “father” to speak of this Power in personal terms as beneficent and merciful, as well as caring and providing for all creatures (see Luke 6:35-36; 11:2-4; 12:22-34).

The Gospel of Mark introduces the ministry of Jesus by announcing, “Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news’” (Mark 1:14-15). Matthew and Luke follow Mark in making Jesus’ assertion of the immanence of this “Power” the central focus of the narrative by describing its effects. Although the plot of these narratives is a construction of the authors using a variety of traditions about Jesus, the major facets of what the Gospels describe Jesus doing and saying is historically consistent with the portrait of him as a popular prophet leading a local renewal movement that dealt with the severe social and economic conditions of Galilean life. “Kingdom of God” is a biblical catchphrase encompassing the various representations of power featured in the narratives.

If these portrayals of kingdom power in the Gospels are set within the exigent circumstances of Jesus’ Galilean context, the shape of Jesus’ prophetic program of renewal and the various responses to it become more intelligible as a historical phenomenon. Of primary importance is Jesus’ efforts to gather the people of God. The gathering of the scattered people of God is a major theme in Israel’s scriptures, especially among the prophets (see Deuteronomy 30:1-5; Isaiah 11:12-13; 58:6). As Lohfink observes, “gathering” Israel is often parallel to “liberating,”

²³ Oakman, *The Political Aims of Jesus*, 76.

²⁴ The Greek word that is translated “deeds of power”, and erroneously in some translations as “miracle”, is *dunamis*. See for example Mark 5:20; 6:2, 5, 14; 9:1, 39; 12:24; 13:25-26; 14:62. The Greek term that is translated “authority” is *exousia*. See for example Mark 1:22, 27; 2:10; 3:15.

²⁵ As Horsley points out, in the exodus story the first step is for the prophet and the people to hear the voice that comes from beyond the imperial system. Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers*, 45.

²⁶ Richard Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers: Conflict, Covenant and the Hope of the Poor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 43.

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“saving,” “healing,” and “redeeming,” Israel.²⁷ The twelve disciples Jesus chooses represent the twelve tribes of Israel that were scattered, more importantly it underscores the point that a primary purpose of the Power is the formation of a community. In other words, “the reign of God must have a people.”²⁸ At the conclusion of an episode common to Luke and Matthew in which Jesus is accused of casting out a demon by Beelzebul, the prince of demons, he asserts: “Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters” (Luke 11:23). In a characteristically prophetic mode he holds people accountable to the Power operative through him to gather, restore, and heal.

The passage in which this saying about participation in God’s Power at work in and among the people Jesus was gathering is one of many exorcisms in the Gospel, which can themselves be understood as a struggle for power. In commenting on the accusation in Luke 11:15 that Jesus “casts out demons by Beelzebul the prince of demons,” Moxnes emphasizes that his response reveals assumptions about space and boundaries underlying the challenge: “Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls on house. If Satan also is divided against himself, how will his kingdom stand?” (Luke 11:17-18). He sees the challenge that identified Jesus with Beelzebul as an attempt by opponents to put him outside the boundaries of “civilized” society, outside Israel. The household was the center of social and economic life, and it was at the intersections of household and kingdom that the people around Jesus lived their lives and experienced the power that “the strong man” could exercise control (11:21-22).²⁹ Anthropological studies of exorcism in other societies suggests that there is a connection between spirit possession and forms of imperial domination, but such experiences of being occupied by an alien power were interpreted cosmologically rather than politically.³⁰ These exorcisms stories allude to experiences of release from the effects of the oppressive and hegemonic powers that controlled people’s lives as a consequence of Jesus imparting a restorative divine Power.

Interpreting the exorcism and healing stories in the Gospels as a demonstration and experience of Power that challenges existing structures of power not only demystifies the confrontation with cosmic forces but also sheds light on the conflict with the religious authorities. From a literary perspective conflict drives the plot of the Gospel narratives just as it does any good story. Differentiating between conflict on the literary level of the narrative and in Jesus’ Galilean context is complicated by the fact that Gospels are written after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. So the depiction of the conflict between scribes and Pharisees in the Gospels reflects post 70 C.E. disputes between Jesus’ followers and Jewish leaders because the portrait of scribes and Pharisees is something of a caricature that doesn’t completely fit with Jesus’ Galilean context. However, if Jesus was mediating a Power from outside the socio-

²⁷ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth: What He Wanted, Who He Was* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 60.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 48.

²⁹ Halvor Moxnes, “Ethnography and Historical Imagination in Reading Jesus as Exorcist”, *Neotestamentica* 44.2 (2010), 338.

³⁰ See Horsley, *Jesus and the Powers*, 113-117.

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religious system, then it follows that as its brokers scribes and Pharisees would likely have regarded him as a disturbance and a threat.

In Mark's narrative the conflict between Jesus' authority and scribal authority is introduced at the outset of his ministry where in the context of teaching in a synagogue he delivers a man with an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21-28). While it is the narrator who contrasts Jesus' authority to teach with that of the scribes, this passage points to the crux of the conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities both in Jesus' Galilean ministry and in the Gospels, namely the interpretation of Torah. First, it is important to note the setting of many of these conflicts is the local synagogue which was a center for community life organized around the Torah. In a village context such as Galilee scribes acted as administrators who related Torah to legal matters and the affairs of peoples' everyday lives. As prophetic leader of a renewal movement in Galilee Jesus embodied the values of the people who followed him, and those values were rooted and grounded in Torah. Despite a longstanding view that Jesus transgressed or abrogated Torah, he is depicted in the earliest layers of the tradition as upholding the Decalogue in its entirety (Mark 12:28-31), espousing many of its individual demands (Mark 7:9-13; 21-23; 10:17-19), observing Levitical rule (Mark 1:44), confirming that the whole of Torah is binding (Luke 16:17) and refuting criticism that his behavior is lawless (Mark 2:23-28; 3:1-6).³¹ What distinguished his interpretation of Torah from the more traditional interpretations of scribes and Pharisees was the conviction that God was speaking and acting through him. This prompted a prophetic approach to Torah that drew on its traditions of justice and judgment and was responsive to the socioeconomic stresses in Galilee.

The two nodal issues at the center of the dispute between Jesus and the scribes about how to interpret Torah were Sabbath observance and purity regulations. In Mark 2:23-3:6 there are two consecutive Sabbath controversy accounts. In the first, Pharisees complain that Jesus' disciples are violating Sabbath by plucking grain, and in the second Jesus responds to those who are watching to see if he will heal on the Sabbath. Anticipating their criticism he asks, "Is it lawful to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" (Mark 3:4). Both episodes have likely been embellished in the context of Mark's narrative, but even so they disclose the underlying issues in Jesus' historical context and a key interpretative principle for him. The matter in question in both incidents is the priority he gives to human distress; hunger and physical affliction respectively. The purpose of Torah for Jesus was to support the health and well-being of human beings, and this is consistent with how Torah has been interpreted within historic Judaism. Similarly, in the conflict focused on Jewish purity regulations he does not disregard purity so much as reinterpret it as a matter of interpersonal ethics rather than ritual practice (Mark 7:1-23).

Jesus' habit of fraternizing with "sinners and tax collectors" was also a matter of concern for scribes and Pharisees who saw themselves as guarding the boundaries of the Mosaic covenant (Mark 2:15-17; Luke 5:30-32; 7:34, 39; 15:1, 7, 10; 18:13; 19:7). "Sinners" were by definition people who behaved contrary to the covenant, or, as Crossley remarks, someone's definition of

³¹ Dale Allison, p.165 but don't know what source - must be constructing Jesus - index

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law and covenant.³² The most historically accurate aspect of the portrait of the Pharisees in the Gospels is their emphasis on purity or holiness. Some of the people who come to Jesus are depicted as transgressing purity regulations, and it's plausible that Jesus and his followers may have been somewhat lax in their observance of purity regulations, but impurity is not regarded as a "sin" per se in early Judaism. Nonetheless, people who were ritually impure could be marginalized socially. The Gospel tradition does not elaborate on the specific reasons some around Jesus were deemed "sinners." Given that a majority of the people in Galilee would have lived around subsistence level, lack of time and resources may have impeded many from observing Torah according to the standards of local religious authorities. Those who were designated "sinners" give the impression of being on the margins of society for economic or social reasons, and Jesus was reintegrating them into the covenant community.

In contrast to the Pharisees who stressed purity and boundaries, Jesus' teaching was more oriented to economic and social relations, and focused specifically on issues of poverty and debt. Followers were exhorted to give to everyone who begs without expectation of return (Luke 6:30-35). Several passages, including the prayer Jesus teaches his disciples, feature the problem of debt and emphasize the importance of release from indebtedness (Matthew 6:12//Luke 11:4; Luke 7:41; 16:5, 7; Matthew 18:28, 30, 34). Jesus also instructs his followers regarding their relationship to possessions. He urged them not be anxious about material needs and to trust God's care for them. He enjoined them to "Sell your possessions, and give alms. Make purses for yourselves that do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys" (Luke 12:33; 14:33). Jesus also had a lot to say about the deleterious effects of wealth, and in several passages challenges the rich. In addition to aphoristic sayings such as "woe to you that are rich" (Luke 6:24) and "you cannot serve God and mammon" (Luke 16:13), the parables of rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), the story of the rich man (Mark 10:17-22//Matthew 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23), the parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-24), the parable of the dishonest steward (Luke 16:1-8), the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the story of Zachaeus (Luke 19:1-9), and the parable of the pounds (Luke 19:11-27) all challenge the prosperous in a manner that implies their fiscal habits were a cause of economic distress and oppression for others and so he required them to repent and amend their ways.

Since Jesus lived in oral culture he did not regularly cite or refer to biblical texts, but his teaching is grounded in Israel's scriptures. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man implores Abraham to warn his family so they can repent, but Abraham replies, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (Luke 16:31). In a passage common to all three synoptic Gospels a scribe asks Jesus "which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18:

"The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

³² James Crossley, *Why Christianity Happened: A Sociohistorical Account of Christian Origins (26-50 CE)* (Louisville: Westminster John Know Press, 2006), 87.

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This double command, as it is sometimes called, is the central precept in Jesus' interpretation and appropriation of Torah in the economically distressed milieu of Galilee. The parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25-37 is an example of how Jesus illustrates the practical implications of these commandments in ways that promote inclusivity, beneficence, and accountability to others, especially those in need.

Jesus refers to the Torah and the prophets mostly in the context of debating with scribes and Pharisees. His disputes with them were predicated on some shared convictions, such as the authority of Torah and the importance of the Mosaic covenant. What differentiated Jesus from these other teachers and precipitated most of their disagreements, however, was his concern to connect the power of God's kingdom to the struggles of a peasant underclass who for various reasons found themselves on the periphery. Parables were his preferred medium for imparting the message of the kingdom. A parable is a short narrative fiction that draws on the concrete particulars of nature and everyday life to subvert the status quo and re-imagine the world.³³ Jesus' parables employed poetic metaphors to engage hearers' imagination by painting a vivid picture of kingdom Power that was often set in contrast to grandiose images of power. A good example is the parable of the mustard seed:

He (Jesus) also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade." (Mark 4:30-32 // Luke 13:18-19; Matthew 13:31-32)

As the parable indicates, the mustard plant is more like a "shrub," which the ancient writer Pliny says, "grows entirely wild" and once it has been sown "is scarcely possible to get the place free of it" (*Natural History*, 29.54.170). This is a strange and provocative image for the kingdom of God, but Jesus was likely invoking a comparison with the mighty cedar of Lebanon which was a common image for empire in Israel's scriptures (see Ezekiel 17:22-23; Daniel 4:10-12). The mustard shrub is a metaphor for an emergent phenomenon that was organic, recalcitrant, and disruptive. Moreover, it was the very antithesis of imperial power as control and order.

While it is not possible to comment on or categorize all of Jesus' parables, they are all part of a strategy to evoke the possibility of another reality, the world as it should be over against the world as it was. Some critique greed, patronage, preoccupation with status and other Greco-Roman values (e.g. Luke 7:41-43; 12:16-20; 14:15-24; 16:19-31; 19:12-27), and others suggest countercultural dispositions and practices such as hospitality, generosity, mercy, forgiveness, vigilance, etc. (Luke 10:30-35; 15:11-32; Mark 13:34-36; Matt 18:10-14, 21-35). All the parables, along with Jesus' other teachings, were inextricably tied to his effort to gather people into a cooperative form of life that would enable them to stand firm in the face of severe political and economic stress. The immanent Power he mediated was the basis for a popular sovereignty

³³ Brandon Scott, *Re-Imagine the World: An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Santa Rose: Poleridge Press, 2001), 13-15. The understanding of the parables presented here is indebted to Scott's work, which includes his major commentary on the parables, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989).

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and as the movement organized around it galvanized and gained momentum tensions with established authorities also intensified.

Journey to Jerusalem

The turning point in the synoptic Gospel narratives and in the prophetic ministry of the historical Jesus was his journey to Jerusalem where he caused a disturbance in the Temple that eventually led to his trial and execution. Most scholars acknowledge the historicity of the Temple incident and the subsequent trial and execution, but the interpretation of these incidents has been heavily shaped by later reflection on them from the perspective of Jesus' post-resurrection appearances and in the light of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 C.E. Therefore the task is to distinguish a historically plausible account of what happened when Jesus went to Jerusalem from later interpretation of them. This is a challenge because event and interpretation are inextricably woven together from the very early in the history of the tradition. The key, however, is establishing the continuity of Jesus' prophetic ministry in Galilee with what he said and did in Jerusalem, and explaining the reaction of the authorities that resulted in his crucifixion. Then it will be possible to elucidate the development of the Gospel traditions about Jesus passion and resurrection into their current canonical form.

From a historical point of view Jesus went to Jerusalem as a prophet leading a renewal movement. In a passage from the double tradition common to Luke and Matthew Jesus laments over Jerusalem. The narrative context in which the saying occurs is different in Luke and Matthew. In Luke's version some Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him.

He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Luke 13:32-34)

This passage is significant both because it contains a saying of Jesus that links the portrayal of his prophetic ministry in Galilee with his presence in Jerusalem, and because it shows how the tradition has been appropriated in the narrative strategies of the Gospel writers. For the purpose of our historical reconstruction, it is noteworthy that Jesus depicts himself as a prophet who is attempting to gather the covenant community. In Luke's account Jesus is still en route to Jerusalem, so this is not the proper setting for his lament. It also questionable that Herod is seeking to kill Jesus before he even arrives. Where history and interpretation converge in this passage is Jesus' reference to himself as a prophet belonging to a longstanding tradition of Israelite prophets who confronted the authorities and suffered a similar fate in Jerusalem as well as outside Jerusalem.³⁴

³⁴ Fitzmyer observes that behind this statement lies a traditional belief about the fate of various prophetic figures in the city of Jerusalem. He suggests that killing of the prophet Uriah in Jerusalem by King Jehoiakim might be envisaged (Jer 26:20-23); or the attempt on Jeremiah's life in Jerusalem (Jer 38:4-6). However, there are many other examples of prophets who meet a similar fate. Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke X-XXIV* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 1032.

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Jesus enters Jerusalem in Mark as he approaches the city from the Mount of Olives. Although this event, like many of the incidents in the passion narratives, is recollected as a performance of Israel's scriptures, especially the prophets and psalms, Mark's account preserves the historical kernel of a symbolic action typical of prophets. The crowd construes his arrival as the coming kingdom of David and shouts:

“Hosanna!

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!

Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David!

Hosanna in the highest heaven!” (Mark 11:9-10)

However, in this passage as well as the story of blind Bartimaeus (Mark 10:46-52) the view of Jesus as Davidic messiah is rejected. Rather Jesus' action in Mark and in its original historical context is best understood a parody of royal processions common in antiquity. In contrast to political or military rulers who entered a conquered city in a war chariot or on a ceremonial steed, the symbols of violent power, Jesus entered on a donkey.³⁵ The fact that this satirical public action was performed during Passover when Israel celebrated liberation from its oppressors made it even more provocative, and in itself could have been enough to result in crucifixion.³⁶

Upon arrival in Jerusalem this symbolic act was followed by another disruptive action in the temple itself. According to Mark, Jesus “entered the temple and began to drive out those who were selling and those who were buying in the temple” (Mark 11:15). In the synoptic Gospels this is the incident that leads to Jesus' arrest, trial and execution. Although Jesus' action in the temple is recognized by most scholars as having some basis in history, the significance of this event is a matter of some debate. The episode is often referred to as the “cleansing of the temple,” but that is a misnomer because it doesn't accurately indicate the focus of Jesus' critique. Jesus is portrayed here as teaching, and the words he used to convey the reason for his indignation are from Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11: “Is it not written, ‘My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations’? But you have made it a den of robbers” (Mark 11:17). Although it's improbable that Jesus quoted scripture verbatim on this occasion, the Jeremiah text in particular associates Jesus' outburst with Jeremiah's temple sermon and is used to interpret the underlying issue in a manner consistent with the focal point of his prophetic praxis in Galilee, namely economic hardship.

The verse from Jeremiah is taken from the prophet's oracle against the temple and its priests for presuming that sacrificial worship in the temple could be the basis of the covenantal relationship with God without upholding its standards of justice and moral obligations to the most vulnerable:

“For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, “Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you.” (Jeremiah 7:22-23)

³⁵ See John Dominic Crossan & Jonathan Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 220.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 220.

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As in Jeremiah, in condemning the temple Jesus was denouncing a priestly aristocracy who presided over it by accusing them of acting like “thieves” who have turned the temple into “den” where they hide out. Their administration of the temple system disclosed their own elite interests at the expense of the people. As Herzog puts it, the wealth of the temple, which was also a treasury, was an inevitable corollary of the poverty of the peasantry.³⁷ The temple extracted tribute from people through the temple tax, tithes and sacrifices. It was an economic institution with the priestly aristocracy bearing responsibility for collecting tribute to Rome, so in opposing the ruling class of Jerusalem Jesus was by implication opposing Roman rule.³⁸

The Gospel of Mark, followed by Luke, suggests that Jesus’ prophetic action in the temple was the cause of his subsequent arrest and execution. Within the narrative, after Jesus expresses his dissatisfaction with the temple using the words of Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11 the narrator observes: “And when the chief priests and the scribes heard it, they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound by his teaching” (Mark 11:18; Luke 19:47). While this is the narrator’s interpretive perspective, it is also the most plausible historical explanation. Not only did Jesus’ pronouncement against the temple challenge the authority of the priestly aristocracy, it also roused the multitude of pilgrims in Jerusalem for Passover. In Luke, the narrator’s description of the chief priests and the crowd’s response to Pilate acclamation of Jesus’ innocence echoes a similar sentiment, “He stirs up the people by teaching throughout all Judea, from Galilee where he began even to this place” (Luke 23:5). Therefore, even though passages are constructions of the Gospel writers, they underline the fact that Jesus was leading a movement that may have gained momentum in Jerusalem as the Jewish people were celebrating liberation from slavery in Egypt. If so, then Roman authorities would likely have regarded his behavior as seditious and therefore as deserving of execution.

The Gospel accounts of the arrest, trial, and role of the different Jewish groups are at variance with one another. This indicates that details of what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem are highly interpreted and cannot be taken at face value historically. The traditions about Jesus’ trial and crucifixion have been comprehended through the lens of Israel’s scriptures and shaped both by the experiences of his followers and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE. The development of the passion narratives in the Gospels will be discussed in the next section. What can be established beyond reasonable doubt is that Jesus was arrested and taken before Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea, who authorized his crucifixion. Temple authorities may have played a role in handing him over, but the trial before the Sanhedrin is historically questionable. There is no historical precedent for such a trial, and the high priest’s question, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” (Mark 14:61) reflects later Christological reflection and debate. Moreover, the charge of blasphemy brought against Jesus by the high priest was not an offense punishable by death (Mark 14:64).

One aspect of the trial before the Jerusalem council that may be historically accurate is the accusation that Jesus said he would destroy the temple (Mark 14:58). Jesus is also reported to have spoken against the temple earlier in the long discourse set on the Mount of Olives in Mark

³⁷ Herzog, *Prophet and Teacher*, 167.

³⁸ Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*, 144.

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13. He tells his disciples who marvel at the grandeur of the temple, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down” (Mark 13:2). Jesus then goes on to predict the tribulation that will occur before the Son of Man returns. Mark 13 is a dense and complicated passage that has been heavily redacted by Matthew and Luke (Matt 24:1-44; Luke 21:5-38), and it is difficult to disentangle what might be authentic in these sayings of Jesus from material that was retrojected on the text after the destruction of the temple and in anticipation of Jesus’ return. There are, however, two elements in the passage that are important to our historical reconstruction and can serve as points of transition to a discussion of the development of the Gospel tradition. Jesus’ prophesy that the temple would be destroyed may have been ascribed to him after the fact. However, given that the ruling class of Judea presided over a longstanding situation of economic distress that eventually resulted in the Jewish wars and the destruction of Jerusalem, it is conceivable that a prophet like Jesus could have foreseen the eventual downfall of the city.³⁹

Jesus’ prophetic warning about the impending destruction of the temple in Mark 13 is associated in this section with his sayings about the return of the son of man. This raises what is probably the most disputed aspect of historical Jesus studies, the eschatological or apocalyptic dimension of Jesus’ proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of God. There are essentially two basic views. One view regards Jesus as more of a sage or teacher who propounded a subversive practical wisdom, and attributes the eschatological material to a later layer of the tradition that has its origins in the early church. On this view, what Jesus says about judgment, tribulation, and the imminence of God’s kingdom is best explained as Jesus’ earliest followers interpreting his memory and tradition in the light of the resurrection, itself viewed as an apocalyptic event. This perspective is shaped more by social analysis of the Gospel tradition which understands Jesus’ sayings to be responding to the concrete realities of the local Galilean milieu, and therefore regards sayings more oriented to the future as inauthentic.

Concentrating on the Galilean context tends to highlight the social and pragmatic force of Jesus’ words and deeds, but this perspective also tends to downplay Judaism as the framework of his teaching and activity. On the other hand, those who emphasize the apocalyptic or eschatological aspects of the Jesus tradition tend to regard Jesus primarily as a religious figure and make sense of his sayings and activity in relation to other voices and groups in Judaism. Both perspectives have merit and use different approaches to call attention to important but divergent facets of the Jesus tradition that should be held together, even if there is an ostensible tension. As noted in the outset of this essay, the distinction between social, religious, political and economic dimensions of life is anachronistic and artificial when projected onto the Jesus tradition because they were correlative facets of Jewish life. The portrait of Jesus as leading a renewal movement in Galilee needs to be combined with the view that regards as an eschatological prophet within Judaism. As Allison points out, if Jesus did prophesy the temple’s

³⁹ For an explanation of the role of the Jerusalem aristocracy in the Jewish first revolt see Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judaea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt against Rome A.D. 66-70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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demise and replacement, then he was operating within the framework of restoration eschatology.⁴⁰

The role of prophet in Judaism encompasses the message and praxis of Jesus' Galilean ministry as well as his prophetic pronouncements and actions in Jerusalem. It's impossible to do justice to the complexity of the issues surrounding the debate about whether Jesus had an apocalyptic outlook, but what much of what has been construed as apocalyptic in the tradition can also be explained as part of Israel's prophetic tradition. The term "apocalyptic" comes from the Greek word *apokalypsis* which means "revelation," and "eschatology" comes from the Greek word *eschatos* which means "last" or "coming at the end or after all others." Both words denote an orientation to the future. Crossan represents the common understanding of "apocalyptic eschatology" when he says that it refers to "the darkening scenario of the end of the world" with an expectation of divine intervention.⁴¹ Along with a majority of scholars he sees John the Baptist as a harbinger of an imminent apocalyptic intervention by God who will enact eschatological judgement on those who don't repent. Those who downplay the eschatological aspects of Jesus' message want to dissociate Jesus from John's apocalypticism. But as Horsley contends, the message that on "the day of the Lord" God would be coming in judgment to either deliver or punish was typical of the prophets.⁴²

Both John and Jesus were prophets who called people to repent as part of summons to covenant renewal, and this involved holding people accountable, especially those in power, through pronouncements of judgment. Themes of reversal, final judgment, resurrection of the dead, restoration of Israel, and the great tribulation are stock prophetic themes that run throughout the sayings of Jesus (e.g. Mark 10:31; Luke 14:11; 17:33).⁴³ A good example of a saying that includes themes of tribulation, covenant, eschatological banquet, judgment and the restoration of Israel is a passage in Luke:

"You are those who have stood by me in my trials; and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:28-30; see Matthew 19:28).⁴⁴

Jesus speaks as an eschatological prophet mostly in the context of Jerusalem where he must face his own imminent end, but this was consonant with his prophetic activity in Galilee. As Allison suggests, eschatology is, among other things, an expression of dissatisfaction with the present.⁴⁵ Jesus went to Jerusalem as prophet addressing issues of poverty and exploitation in Galilee, and

⁴⁰ Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 100.

⁴¹ John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992), 238.

⁴² Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*, 18.

⁴³ Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 170.

⁴⁴ The Greek of the phrase that is translated "my Father has conferred on me a kingdom" literally says "And I make a covenant with you just as my Father has made a covenant with me, a kingdom."

⁴⁵ Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 110.

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there his focus shifted from a strategy of renewal in the present to future judgment. What is not a part of his prophetic warnings, however, was an emphasis on the end of the world. This is a misunderstanding of the message of Jesus and Jewish apocalyptic.

Mark 13 is sometimes referred to as the “little apocalypse” because it is regarded as the most explicitly apocalyptic passage in the Gospels, with parallels in Matthew and Luke. Jesus speaks to his disciples about tribulations that include wars, earthquakes, famines, trials, betrayal, false prophets and messiahs, and then exhorts them to stay vigilant. Since many of the particulars in this passage could allude to the Jewish wars that began in 66 CE, ascertaining what parts of the discourse can be traced back to Jesus is difficult. Although many interpreters read the passage with an accent on the end time scenario, Jesus emphasizes that “the end is not yet ... this is but the beginning of the birthpangs” (Mark 13:7-8). After he warns his disciples of these impending disasters, he then assures them that after the ordeal “they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in clouds’ with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven” (Mark 13:26-27). These words of Jesus are from Daniel 7:13. Daniel is an apocalyptic book in the sense that it contains “revelation” that assures Jewish people during the reign of Antiochus Epiphanes that “one like a son of man” will mediate divine sovereignty by judging the empires of the world and gathering the elect. However, Daniel 7 is not about a judgment that signals the end of the world, but rather, as Horsely puts it, a judgment that “leads to the renewal of the world as the place where the restored people can finally live in justice.”⁴⁶

The synoptic Gospels tell the story of Jesus in two parts. In the first part Jesus is a popular prophet leading a renewal movement in the exploited environs of Galilee, and in the second part he goes as a prophet to the capital city of Jerusalem to confront those in charge of the temple. Jesus’ engagement with the authorities in Jerusalem continued to be on behalf of the Jewish populace. By invoking the apocalyptic vision of Daniel 7 he reiterated and reinforced the connection between the reign of God and the people of God that characterized his Galilean ministry. In the vision a heavenly court is assembled to judge all the world empires, especially the beasts. The symbols of lion, bear, leopard, beast and finally “son of man” represent successive societies. Lohfink’s comments about the political force of this vision are worth quoting at length:

The fifth society is, of course, very carefully dissociated from those that precede it. It is no longer brutal, no longer bestial but finally a human society. Therefore it is symbolized not by beasts but by a human being ... the fifth society does not arise out of the sea of chaos but comes from heaven. It comes “with the clouds of heaven” (Dan 7:13). Thus the new, eschatological society comes from above. It cannot be made by human beings. It is God’s gift to the world, It is the end of violent rule.⁴⁷

Jewish and Roman authorities recognized that Jesus’ pronouncements against and demonstration in the temple were, like his proclamation of God’s kingdom, patently political. The Gospel

⁴⁶ Horsley, *The Prophet Jesus and the Renewal of Israel*, 49.

⁴⁷ Lohfink, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 43. Along with a number of scholars Lohfink understands “son of man” as a symbol for the ultimate and final royal rule of God, but at the same time a figure for the true Israel or eschatological Israel that serves God along.

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accounts of the trial(s) that led to his execution may vary, but what is beyond dispute is that the historical reason for the Roman prefect Pilate sentencing to him death by crucifixion was sedition.

Crucifixion was a form of execution reserved primarily for slaves and criminals that was meant to make an example of those who would dare to subvert the imperial order, the *Pax Romana*. This is precisely what was indicated by the inscription on the cross, “The King of the Jews” (Mark 15:26). Although obviously intended to mock Jesus as falsely claiming to be ruler of the Judean people even while they lived under Roman rule, it nonetheless betrayed Pilate’s grasp of the seditious potential of Jesus and the community forming around him. The portrayal of Pilate as a principled official reluctant to allow the crucifixion but ultimately succumbing to the pressure of the crowd is in tension with what is known about him from other sources. Philo and Josephus, ancient Jewish writers from the first century, describe incidents that took place during Pilate’s tenure that caused near-insurrections among the Jews because of his insensitivity to Jewish customs. Philo describes him as “a man of a very inflexible disposition, and very merciless as well as very obstinate.”⁴⁸ He was removed from office two to three years after the death of Jesus for being accused of murdering innocent Samaritans.⁴⁹ Despite the fact that Pilate authorized Jesus’ execution, all of the Gospels shift responsibility for the death of Jesus to the Jewish authorities and to some extent the Jewish crowd assembled at his trial. Therefore it is with the stark and bleak reality of the crucifixion ordered by Pilate that the historical account of Jesus comes to a close and the transition to a focus on the interpretive process begins.

Throughout this account of Jesus in his historical context it has been evident that the details of events are so tightly interwoven with their interpretation that it is difficult to disentangle them. The most effective approach to ascertaining the historical contours of Jesus’ public ministry is setting out a plausible account of the synoptic Gospels’ narrative of Jesus in the cultural-historical milieu of Galilee and Jerusalem. The next step is to show how the memory of what Jesus said and did was preserved and shaped by the first followers of Jesus. After the death of Jesus his followers continued the movement he initiated and developed the tradition into what became the four literary productions known as the Gospels.

Followers of Jesus and the Development of the Gospel Tradition

The memory of what Jesus said and did, of his trial, and his crucifixion was preserved by his followers. Also inscribed into each of the four canonical Gospels is the conviction that God raised him from the dead. The Gospel accounts of Jesus’ postmortem appearances of Jesus to his disciples were not included in the discussion of the historical Jesus because resurrection intimates an experience of transcendence that cannot be verified by historical method. What can be explored historically are the effects that belief had on his followers, and on the formation of the Gospels. In the Gospel of Mark the risen Jesus does not appear to his disciples. Rather a young man tells the women who go to the tomb, “He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to

⁴⁸ Philo, *On The Embassy of Gaius* Book XXXVIII 299–305.

⁴⁹ Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 18.4.1-2.

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Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:6-7). The Gospels of Matthew, Luke, and John all have different appearance stories, which betokens not only multiple encounters with the risen Jesus but also that the narration of the event is itself an interpretation of its significance (see Matthew 28:1-20; Luke 24:1-53; John 20:1-29; 21:1-23). The earliest reference to the resurrection of Jesus is the tradition Paul cites in 1 Corinthians which says that the risen Jesus “appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died” (1 Cor 15:5-6). Paul goes on to mention Jesus’ appearance to James and to himself, and then asserts that in raising him from the dead God had inaugurated the general resurrection of the dead (1 Cor 15:12-13).

An important element of the resurrection accounts in all four Gospels that is absent from Paul’s discussion is the empty tomb tradition. The empty tomb tradition belongs to the earliest conceptualization of Jesus’ resurrection. In all four Gospels it features women who go to the tomb where Jesus was buried to anoint his body only to discover that it’s not there. The initial message from the young man in the tomb in Mark’s account, who becomes an angel in Matthew and Luke, is that Jesus is not here because he has been raised. The interpretation of the empty tomb is not self-evident, and indeed raises the question of how an ancient audience would have understood this tradition. Daniel Smith contends that a first-century person (Jewish or Greek) would have interpreted an inexplicably disappearing body or an unaccountably empty tomb as evidence not of “resurrection” but of “assumption.”⁵⁰ The significance ancient audiences would have inferred from the empty tomb tradition in the Gospels is that God had vindicated Jesus. In other words, since Jesus was executed as an enemy of the Roman order for sedition, the view that he had been raised from the dead was regarded as a divine response that validated his prophetic message and activity.

The various accounts of Jesus’ postmortem appearances have a different function from the empty tomb tradition within the Gospel narratives. The phrase “he appeared” in 1 Corinthians 15 likely denotes a visionary experience of the risen Jesus, but in the Gospels Jesus’ appearances to his disciples are depicted as more than an apparition or a resuscitation. In Matthew, Luke and John the risen Jesus walks, talks, and in Luke and John he even eats with his disciples, thus providing narrative accounts of what Paul describes as a resurrection body: “It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). One concern addressed by the appearance stories, especially in Luke and John, may have been docetic views of Jesus as a spirit or phantom. The primary purpose of the appearance stories in all the Gospels, however, was to show Jesus commissioning his disciples to carry on with his mission. Those who had seen the risen Jesus could claim distinctive authority for leadership in the movement. In the shorter ending of Mark’s Gospel, which does not include an appearance account, the young man instructs the women to “go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you” (Mark 16:7). Galilee here is not just a geographical location but also symbolic of any place where the ministry of Jesus was

⁵⁰ Daniel Smith, *Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Early History of Easter* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 4. He notes this is an idea found in almost every ancient culture that in certain special cases God (or some divine being or beings) could take a person immediately and bodily into the divine realm.

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continued by his followers. Therefore, within the narrative strategy of the Gospels appearances of the risen Jesus serve to validate his message and mission vis-a-vis the imperial system that executed him, and to inspire his followers to continue the movement he initiated in Galilee.

The empty tomb and the appearance traditions first circulated orally among Jesus' followers. They were related and handed down in the context of instruction or proclamation. These traditions were shaped by the conviction that Jesus was risen from the dead and then woven together with other traditions about Jesus to form the narrative accounts that are the canonical Gospels. The memory of Jesus was from the very beginning shaped by followers who reflected on the significance of his message and actions for their own lives in diverse contexts. The earliest traditions about him were transformed as they were appropriated by communities of his followers throughout the Roman Empire. Form usually follows function, and this is no less true of the Jesus tradition as followers made use of them to define their identity and develop practices of communal pattern of life.

Jesus was crucified some time around 30 CE, and there is general agreement that Mark was written shortly after the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. In this forty year period between the time of Jesus and the time of the Gospels stories and sayings circulated as oral tradition in what was an oral culture. In contrast to Western societies predominated by written media, the fundamental dynamic of communication in the ancient world was between speaker and hearer. The literacy rate was low, somewhere between 5%-10%, and most written texts were scripts to be performed in public. Performative storytelling was the ordinary medium of literary production in the Greco-Roman world. As Michael White puts it, written texts served as scripts *of and for* oral presentations.⁵¹ Stories about and sayings of Jesus disseminated in an oral culture were not static or fixed in the same way written texts are. Oral tradition is conservative in seeking to preserve authentic memories, but it is also malleable in that it changes with each new performance. As the Jesus tradition was transmitted in new contexts it reflected the interests, values, and ideals of the community in which it was performed.⁵² In this respect, the constructed memories of oral tradition do not simply relate the facts of what happened. They are also scripts for communal practice and belief.

During the forty or so years between Jesus and the Gospel of Mark the memory of Jesus circulated orally. However, Mark and the other Gospels used sources, some of which were written down. There were likely collections of stories about Jesus' deeds of power, aphoristic sayings and parables, accounts of his suffering, death, and resurrection, and eventually nativity stories. As noted earlier in the essay, the sayings of Jesus common to Matthew and Luke are regarded by many scholars as example of such a sayings collection referred to as Q. The sayings are not identical in the two Gospels because they were edited by the Gospel writers, but the sayings in Luke are generally regarded as closer to the original than Matthew.⁵³ Q contains some of the most memorable sayings of Jesus and is important because it is purported to be an

⁵¹ L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 92.

⁵² *Ibid*, 101-103.

⁵³ For a brief introduction and the edition of the The Sayings Gospel Q of the International Q Project published by Fortress Press see <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~kloppen/iqqet.htm>

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example of an early source for the Gospels with the best guess for a date somewhere between 50 - 70 CE. But because there is no manuscript evidence for Q or any references to it in any ancient Christian texts, it is at best a working theory that has been questioned by a growing number of scholars.⁵⁴

What is interesting about scholarship on the Q sayings source is that it provides a window, albeit one based on conjecture, onto the period of oral tradition between Jesus and the Gospels. While there are no extant copies of Q, the Gospel of Thomas is an analogous example of a collection of Jesus' sayings that has no narrative structure. The Gospel of Thomas is one of the most famous of the cache texts found in 1945 in the Egyptian town of Nag Hammadi. It is an extant sayings collection that contains 114 logia of Jesus. Half of the sayings have parallels in the Gospels and half were formerly unknown. So whether there was an actual Q document or not, the Gospel of Thomas is an example of a collection of Jesus sayings that makes no allusion to the passion or resurrection. This would suggest that the individuals and communities for whom this document was of value probably tried to live in accordance with these particular sayings of Jesus. Similarly, scholars who work on Q maintain that it describes a particular way of life of Jewish disciples of Jesus who regarded themselves as itinerant prophets who moved from town to town announcing, "The kingdom of God has come close to you." Many of the sayings in Q also imply that these followers of Jesus called for repentance and experienced persecution.

There are a number of observations to be made from this brief treatment of collections of sayings during the period between Jesus and the Gospels before discussing the canonical Gospels. Although there is no evidence for the existence of the Q sayings source as a document, it's probable that this collection or ones like it existed as oral tradition. In other words, whether there is a Q source or not, the Gospel of Thomas confirms that collections of Jesus' sayings did circulate and were a source for the narratives of Jesus constructed by the Gospel writers. Perhaps even more significant for understanding the development of these Jesus traditions into the Gospels is how the tradition was simultaneously preserved and modified as Jesus' followers sought to embody his teachings. For some communities in the Jesus movement the sayings functioned as practical wisdom to live by. Not only was the Jesus tradition being performed for followers, followers were themselves performing the tradition with their lives. The Jesus movement was for the first decades a messianic movement within Judaism that, if Paul's letters are any indication, was including an increasing number of Gentiles so that by the end of the first century they were a majority. Jews and Gentiles alike were drawn into the movement by the communal pattern of life predicated on Jesus' teaching and prophetic praxis as well as the conviction that, though he had been executed for sedition, God had raised him from the dead and hence had inaugurated the new age.

The Genre and Relationships of the Gospels

As works of ancient literature, the canonical Gospels do not fit neatly into any particular genre. Some have stressed their Jewish character, especially their continuity with the narrative traditions and themes of Israel's scriptures, while others look for analogies in Greco-Roman

⁵⁴ See Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002).

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literature. Although the oral qualities of the Gospels have been underlined so far, when the story of Jesus was committed to writing in the second half of the first century C.E. the authors made use of literary forms available in the culture. Before the Gospel of Mark the memory of Jesus was preserved and recounted orally in story and ritual. The Gospel of Mark is the first known attempt to render into a cohesive narrative the oral legacy of Jesus. In this respect the Gospel of Mark signals an important transition in which a more fluid oral tradition was transformed into a more fixed literary tradition that became the standard and primary source for subsequent narrative interpretations of Jesus. Since the Gospels emerged from a Jewish messianic movement, Israel's scriptures provided a lens for interpreting the Jesus tradition, and also served as a literary template. At the same time, to communicate the message of and about Jesus to a growing number of followers and would be followers it was essential to find some common cultural ground. So there are points of connection with both Jewish and Greco-Roman literary forms.

The structure of the Gospels is broadly biographical, tracing Jesus' public ministry in chronological sequence. However, the disproportionate amount of narrative space devoted to the last week of Jesus' life distinguishes it from the typical Greco-Roman biography. Some elements from the ancient biography genre such as anecdotes and sayings of a particular teachers known as *chreiai* bear some resemblance to Justin Martyr's description of the Gospels as "the memoirs of the apostles," but, as Loveday Alexander points out, "the precise literary form adopted by Mark's performance of the Jesus story is hard to match in the Greek biographical tradition."⁵⁵ She suggests that the Gospel narratives have more in common with the folktale which blends some characteristics from biographical tradition with oral traditional literature. The folktale is more a mode of composition and performance than a genre.⁵⁶ Like folktales, the Gospels are focused to a remarkable degree on the action of the hero.⁵⁷ This is especially true of the Gospel of Mark. Alexander cautions against drawing too firm a distinction between action and teaching in the Gospels because many of the action episodes are didactic. Nonetheless, the narratives as a whole give prominence to Jesus' public activity, and this is different from Hellenistic biographies of the philosopher or poet whose life exemplified virtues that were to be emulated. The Gospels provide virtually no information about Jesus' private existence nor insight into his interior life. A counterpart to the Greco-Roman biography in Jewish literature is the "biography of the prophets," which was concerned with office and function, Helmut Koester has suggested that the Gospel of Mark in particular follows the framework of the "biography of the prophets" because the primary concern in the story of Jesus' suffering and death is the legitimation of his office.⁵⁸

A strong case can be made for the literature of the Hebrew Bible having the greatest influence on the literary form of the Gospels. Much of the narrative of the Hebrew Bible is composed of

⁵⁵ Loveday Alexander, "What is a gospel?" in Stephen Barton, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Gospels* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 27.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

⁵⁸ Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels: Their History and Development* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 27-28.

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biographical “story cycles” that feature the exploits and achievements of key protagonists such as Abraham, Moses, or Elijah.⁵⁹ The paradigmatic significance of the Moses and Elijah traditions in the depiction of Jesus as a prophet has already been discussed, but another critical aspect of the Hebrew Bible narratives is that the tales of these heroic figures were, in Alexander’s words, “subordinated to the overall narrative style and goals of a purposeful religious, ethical, and national work.”⁶⁰ Like the biblical narratives on which they are patterned, the Gospels tell the story of Jesus as a continuation of the story of Israel after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. They are organized around key themes from the Hebrew Bible such as covenant, kingdom, exodus, prophecy, suffering servant, messiah, son of God, son of man, etc., which were pressed into service to cast Jesus as the divinely appointed leader of the covenant community.

Among the various reasons the Gospels were written, the destruction of the temple in 70 CE was a watershed event that profoundly influenced the composition of all four canonical Gospels. There is general agreement that the Gospel of Mark was written shortly after Jerusalem was conquered. The rebellion against Rome that began with the wars that broke out in 66 CE culminated with the burning of the temple in Jerusalem. There is general agreement that the Gospel of Mark was written around this time, either just before or after 70 CE, the date that marks the end of second temple Judaism. For more than five hundred years the temple stood not only as the main religious institution of Judaism but also the axis around which its view of reality revolved. Jews regarded it as the *axis mundi*, the center of the cosmos, and believed that when the temple liturgy was performed properly it perpetuated a symmetry between heaven and earth. So the end of the temple not only raised theological questions about faithfulness, both God’s and the covenant people’s, it also ignited a debate about the future of Israel.

Mark’s story of Jesus engaged this debate by presenting Jesus as the leader of the covenant people and therefore as the key to Israel’s future after the destruction of the temple. At the beginning of the narrative, at his baptism by John in the Jordan, Jesus is described as being anointed by the Spirit and hearing a divine voice from heaven that declared, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased” (Mark 1:11). These words are a conflation of Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Psalm 2 is an enthronement Psalm acclaiming the newly anointed king as God’s son. So before Jesus even began his renewal movement in Galilee and surrounding villages, hearers are informed that he has already been designated as the one through whom God will lead the people. The “son of God” title ascribed to Jesus defines his role as God’s representative who mediates divine power and sovereignty, and should not be confused with later creedal formulations that interpret this to mean that he has a divine nature. Mark’s story operates on two levels. On one hand, historical sources are used to recount Jesus’ activity in Galilee and Jerusalem. But the story is told from a post-70 CE perspective after Jesus, having been executed by that same imperial power that destroyed the temple, is believed to have been vindicated and appointed by God to lead Israel and the nations in the “way of the Lord” (Mark 1:3). The phrase “way of the Lord” comes from Isaiah and is allusion to the hope and promise of a new exodus.

⁵⁹ Alexander, “What is a gospel?”, 27.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 27.

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But in Mark the “way,” as in Jesus and the disciples were “on the way,” is also a metaphor for the pattern of life taught and modeled by Jesus (e.g. Mark 4:4, 15; 8:27; 9:33; 10:32).

The word which is translated “Christ” (*Christos*) simply means “anointed one.” It has the connotation of “messiah,” and occurs in the opening line of Mark with the other term for political leader of Israel, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus *Christ*, the *Son of God*” (Mark 1:1). The use of the designation “Christ” or “messiah” is contested in Mark because it was typically associated with a national model of leadership. The turning point in Mark’s narrative is when Jesus begins his journey to the capital city of Jerusalem. At Caesarea Philippi he redefines the role of messiah for his followers by associating it with his impending suffering and death. Three times in Mark 8-10 Jesus explains that it is necessary for the “son of humanity,” his preferred self-designation, to be delivered to the authorities and condemned only to rise after three days (Mark 8:31-33; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). However, the main thrust of these predictions of his passion and resurrection is to teach his disciples that his path of rejection, suffering, death and resurrection is the new paradigm of faithfulness for the covenant community in a post-70 imperial world.

Jerusalem is the setting for Mark 11-16 and the predominance of the temple theme in this section takes on new significance in light of the audience’s knowledge that the temple has recently been destroyed. Jesus criticizes the temple establishment and forecasts the ruin of a temple that for the audience no longer exists. After Jesus is arrested, he is taken before the chief priests and the council who, according to the narrator, bear false witness against him saying, “We heard him say, ‘I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands’” (Mark 14:58). Although the testimony is false in the sense that within the narrative Jesus never said that he would destroy the Jerusalem temple and replace it with a temple “not made with hands,” the audience understands that this new temple that will replace the one that has been destroyed is the covenant community. It seems likely that the word “temple” here echoes Paul’s metaphor of the “body of Christ,” which could also be translated “body of the messiah.” The inscription on the cross that sarcastically acclaims Jesus as “The King of the Judeans” also has ironic force because for the audience Jesus has been divinely appointed to lead the lead the people of God into a new future and way of life at variance with the imperial power and social order. Finally, as Jesus breaths his last, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom,” and a centurion exclaims, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:38-39). Having a Roman centurion, someone implicated in Jesus’s execution, acknowledge that Jesus is God’s anointed leader portends that gentiles will also be included in the movement as it spreads throughout the empire.

Matthew and Luke as Interpreters of Mark

In the transition from oral tradition to written narratives about Jesus the Gospel of Mark established the basic plot of the story followed by Mathew and Luke. Together these three Gospels are referred to as the synoptic Gospels. The term “synoptic” comes from two Greek words “with” (*syn*) and “seeing” (*optic*) and denotes the literary relationship between them. There is an ongoing debate about whether the Gospel of John also used Mark as a source or is an independent Gospel tradition. All four Gospels were likely written in last third of the first century, though some scholars would date Luke and John early in the second century. The

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earliest traditions about the four canonical Gospels stem from the second century and are reflected in the titles prefaced to the Gospels. Matthew and John were attributed to apostles, and Mark and Luke were attributed to companions of the apostles. The oldest witness is bishop Papias of Hierapolis who is quoted by Eusebius.⁶¹ Helmut Koester makes three important observations about the Papias tradition. First, Papias does not use the term “gospel” but says that Matthew composed “the sayings.” Second, in their written form these traditions about Jesus do not carry any greater authority than that which was transmitted orally. In other words, these texts are not regarded as scripture. Third, Papias shows that these written documents came with the names of apostolic authors or of men who had followed the apostles, which guaranteed the trustworthiness first of the oral tradition and then the written documents.⁶²

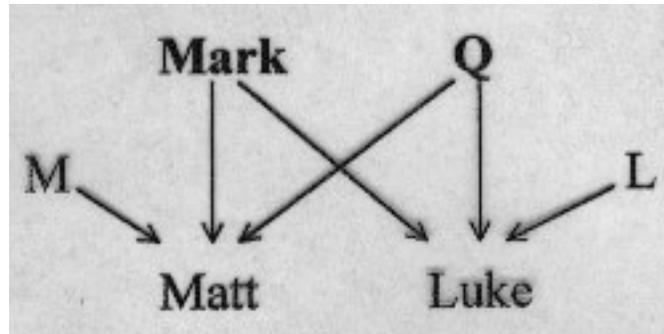
A close reading of the synoptic Gospels side by side in a Gospels parallels shows that while they have a great deal in common, there are also a number of inconsistencies and contradictions in details. The birth narratives of Matthew and Luke, for example, are completely different, as are the resurrection narratives. The tendency throughout church history was to harmonize the differences, which had the consequence of minimizing the distinctiveness of each Gospel. In the second century an early Christian apologist by the name of Tatian combined the four Gospels into a single narrative called the *Diatesseron*. But as scholars began to compare the four Gospels and study them critically, it became evident that the authors were not eye witnesses. New theories about the interrelationship of the Gospels emerged.

In the eighteenth century scholars realized that the parallels in the Gospels are so similar in wording that one of the three synoptic Gospels must have been the basis for the others. Since Luke states in the preface to his Gospel that he made use of other narrative accounts (Luke 1:1-4), this Gospel must have been dependent on either Matthew or Mark. From the time of Augustine in the fourth century the canonical order of the Gospels was regarded as the order of dependence, so Matthew was thought to have been written first. According to Papias the Greek version of Matthew was a translation of an earlier Hebrew edition. So for centuries the common view was that Mark abbreviated Matthew. Toward the end of the eighteenth century J. J. Griesbach proposed a theory based on the early view that Matthew was the first Gospel and claimed that Mark used both Matthew and Luke for his abbreviated version. The main problem with the Griesbach hypothesis is that it is difficult to account for why Mark would omit material in the double tradition common to Matthew and Luke. Therefore, the theory which is most widely accepted by scholars is the two-source theory which posits that Matthew and Luke depended on Mark and wrote independently of each other. The other main source used by both Matthew and Luke was Q. The distinctive material in Matthew and Luke designated “M” and “L” respectively. The two-source can be illustrated with the following diagram:

⁶¹ Papias’ writings are dated between 100 and 150 C.E. The fragments from his writing are found in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 3.39.3-4.

⁶² Helmut Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, 33.

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There is no one solution that solves all the difficulties, but since eighty percent of Mark is reproduced in Matthew and sixty five percent in Luke, Markan priority is seldom questioned. The existence of Q, however, continues to be debated with the majority of scholars who question the existence of Q maintaining that Luke used Mark and Matthew.

One of the main benefits of the study of the relationship between the Gospels is that it led to a deeper appreciation for the distinctive narrative vision of each Gospel. Although the study of the use of sources in the Gospels involves a certain amount of conjecture, it has also put more emphasis on how the evangelists redacted and shaped the Jesus tradition to address particular contextual and theological issues. In using Mark as a source, Matthew and Luke can be read as the first interpreters of Mark, or better, as performances of Mark. A close analysis of how Matthew and Luke modify Mark's narrative provides some insight into their respective narrative strategies. This along with an examination of the material unique to Matthew and Luke, and the distinct themes and uses of Israel's scriptures suggests how Matthew and Luke adapted Mark's story of Jesus to shape the convictions and practices of audiences negotiating particular concerns and circumstances. While there is no external information outside the Gospels themselves that would make it possible to situate them geographically, the overarching perspective and key emphases of each Gospel can be inferred from the narrative itself.

Matthew and Luke both follow the basic framework of Mark's Gospel, and both also add infancy narratives to set the stage and introduce the story. Since it is only possible to touch on the broad contours of their narratives in this essay, the main point to be inferred from the divergent accounts of Jesus' birth, including irreconcilable genealogies, is that in different ways they are at the outset connecting their respective stories of Jesus to the history of Israel. Matthew establishes that Joseph belongs to the house of David so as depict Jesus as Davidic messiah. Throughout the Gospel Matthew makes a point to show that Jesus' ministry, death and resurrections were a fulfillment of Israel's scripture. Luke's genealogy goes back to Adam to underline the universal scope of Jesus' mission. The main themes of Luke's Gospel are set out in the canticles of Mary (Luke 1:46-56) and Simeon (Luke 2:25-35), and the prophecy of Zechariah (Luke 1:67-80). The focus in all three passages is on the redemption of Israel, in particular the restoration of Israel that includes the nations. This central theme of the restoration of Israel is woven throughout the narrative and picked up expressly highlighted in the final scene as the disciples, walking on the road to Emmaus with the risen Jesus whom they do not yet recognize, say, "we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel" (Luke 24:21). This theme is then carried

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over into Acts, the only sequel to a Gospel in which the mission of Jesus is continued by his followers.

In each Gospel there are key passages vital for understanding the narrative as a whole, and which also provide a window on the communal context of the Gospel. Matthew's Gospel is organized around five major discourses that include the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the discourse on mission (Matthew 10), parables of the kingdom (Matthew 13), discourse on community life (Matthew 18) and an eschatological discourse (Matthew 24-25). The Sermon on the Mount contains material that is also in Luke, but Matthew's Jesus is portrayed as the authoritative interpreter of Torah who teaches and models a righteousness characterized by "meekness" (Matthew 5:5; 11:29; 21:5) and "mercy" (Matthew 5:7; 9:13; 12:7; 23:23). Since Jesus tell his followers "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill... For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:17, 20), a number of scholars have inferred that the setting for this Gospel was a Torah observant community of Jesus' followers that was involved in a dispute with scribes and Pharisees who likely represent the religious authorities in Matthew's context. The vitriolic diatribe against scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 acknowledges their authority but criticizes them because they "do not practice what they teach" (Matthew 23:3). Matthew story of Jesus can be read as a narrative portrayal of a righteousness, a central theme in Torah, that can be practiced by all. Hence the final authoritative command of the risen Jesus to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... *teaching* them to obey everything that I have commanded you"(see Matthew 28:19-20).

Luke's story of Jesus tells of God fulfilling promises of salvation for Israel and the nations. Only Luke's account of John the Baptist includes the phrase from Isaiah 40 "and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (3:6). This vision of salvation is given more specific definition in Jesus' programmatic first speech at his hometown synagogue in Nazareth where he reads from the Isaiah scroll:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor. (Isaiah 61:1
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free, (Isaiah 58:6)
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." (Luke 4:18-19)

This passage signals to the audience that Jesus' ministry will engage various forms of oppression and injustice. There is more material on economic relations in Luke than any other Gospel, so issues of poverty and marginalization were specific contextual issues addressed by this Gospel (e.g. Luke 6:20-21, 27-36; 12:13-21, 32-34; 14:15-33; 16:1-13, 19-31). The hope of salvation in Luke is defined as deliverance from social ills, and so Jesus is cast in the role of prophet on the model of Elijah, who was engaged in renewing society. However, the offer of salvation requires a human response of "repentance" that entails participation in Jesus' mission. Luke's story of Jesus offers an alternative vision of life and practice that promises God's deliverance from the

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dehumanizing effects of imperial society for the covenant community that hears Jesus' words and does them (see Luke 6:46-49).

The Gospel of John

The Gospel of John has not been discussed because it is a very different narrative about Jesus that is probably independent of the synoptic tradition, or at least radically departs from it. The literary relationship between Matthew, Mark, and Luke indicates that they share a similar form, structure, and content. All three Synoptic Gospels are using many of the same sources and traditions to tell the story of Jesus. They edited the material in ways that reflected the concerns and interests native to the communities and contexts in which they were writing, but Matthew and Luke are essentially following and adapting Mark's story of Jesus. The Gospel of John, on the other hand, is so different from the Synoptic Gospels that we must begin with what is distinctive so that John's story of Jesus can be interpreted on its own terms.

On a basic level the chronology and geography of the Gospel of John are at variance with the Synoptic Gospels. In the Synoptic Gospels the Temple incident is the turning point in the plot of the story inasmuch as it leads to his trial before the Jewish Council and ultimately to his death. In the Gospel of John the incident in the Temple occurs at the beginning of the Gospel in chapter 2. Jesus moves back and forth between Galilee and Jerusalem throughout the Gospel. John and the Synoptic Gospels are obviously referring to the same incident even though they place it at different points in the chronology. They also interpret its significance in different ways. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus' prophetic challenge to the Temple administration belongs to a longer section that deals with Temple themes and sees his trial and execution as the direct consequence of what he said and did in the Temple. In John the plot to kill Jesus is hatched after Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead (11:45-53).

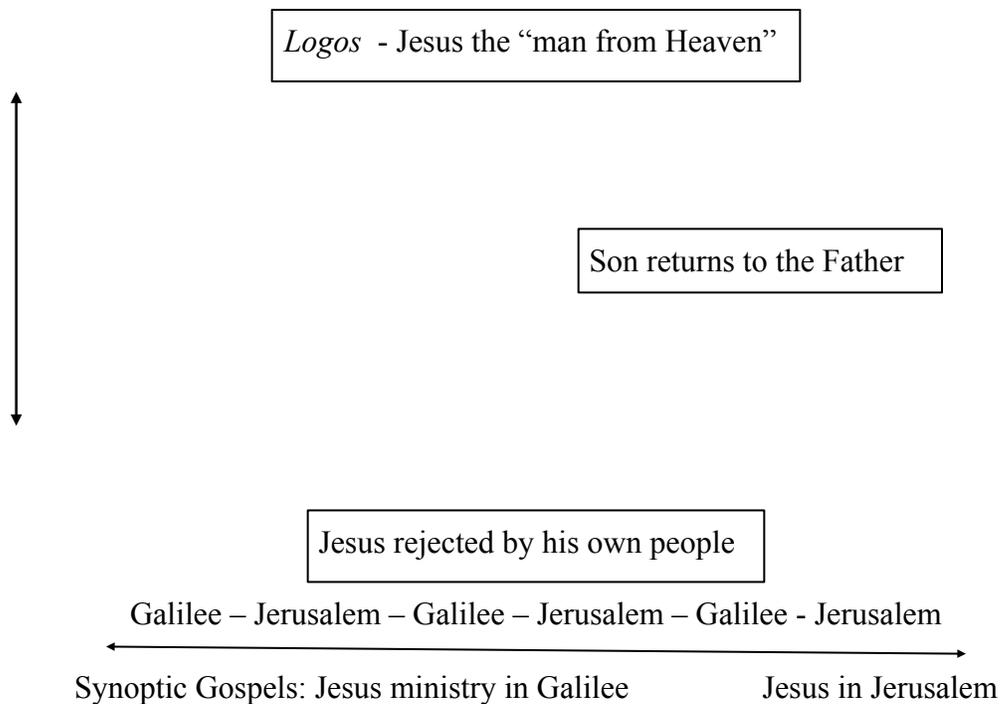
Among some of the other important differences between John and the Synoptic Gospels is the fact that in John Jesus' ministry spans three years while in the Synoptic chronology it lasts only a year. There are no exorcisms or parables in John. There are fewer healings and other deeds of power in John and they are called "signs." In the Synoptic Gospels the exorcisms, healings and other deeds of power are evidence of the presence of the "kingdom of God." But the "kingdom of God" is not the focus of the Gospel of John. Rather, the "signs" serve to reveal the true identity of the one who performs them. Perhaps the most striking difference between John and the Synoptic Gospels is the manner in which Jesus speaks. Instead of short pithy sayings, or parables, Jesus speaks in long extended discourses. The metaphors and symbols of John are also different from those in the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus' metaphorical way of speaking is self-referential and does not point to the "kingdom of God", the root symbol of the synoptic tradition. This is because John depicts Jesus preeminently as the "Revealer". He comes from God and he reveals God. That is his primary role in John's Gospel. Even the healings are occasions for long monologues in which Jesus "reveals" the deeper significance of his identity and the nature of his work.

The Gospel of John begins with a hymn that succinctly tells the story of Jesus in poetic form. John's prologue sets out many of the main themes and the essential plot of the Gospel. At the outset the hymn evokes the creation and introduces the "Word" as the central character who "was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one

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thing came into being” (John 1:2-3). In Stoic philosophy *Logos*, translated “Word” here, referred to the cosmic reason holding the universe together. The counterpart to this idea in Judaism was the important concept of Wisdom as a pre-existent Divine being. This personification of Wisdom found in Proverbs 8 and other Jewish literature is probably the frame of reference for this poetic description of the descent of the Word into the world. Wisdom was perceived to be a female figure present with God at creation who comes to dwell on earth. In Jewish tradition she is identified with Torah, but in John Jesus is the expression of this Divine Wisdom.

In the Gospel of John Jesus is the incarnation of this preexistent Divine Wisdom. He came to “take up residence” in the cosmos in order to lead people to life (John 1:14). But as the prologue and the Gospel both attest, this story takes a tragic turn when those who inhabit the cosmos reject this particular embodiment of the Divine presence. Another feature that makes this Gospel so different from the Synoptic Gospels is that it is plotted along a vertical axis whereas they are plotted along a more historical horizontal axis. John’s Jesus is the “man from heaven” who “tabernacles” among the people of God only to return to the Father. Although the Synoptic Gospels affirm the divine presence and power in and through Jesus, they do not go so far as to suggest that he was with God from the beginning. John tells the story of Jesus as a cosmic tale while in the Synoptic Gospels the story unfolds on the vertical plane of history.



So while Jesus moves back and forth between Galilee to Jerusalem and interacts with various characters, the main narrative arc is from heaven to earth and then back again. What Jesus says and does, the conflicts he is embroiled in and even his death and resurrection are presented from the point of view of the cosmological tale set out in the opening hymn. John essentially replaces the Synoptic Gospels’ proclamation of the kingdom of God with a present experience of “life”

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that is “eternal” (see John 3:15-16; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2).⁶³

The clearest window onto the world behind the text of this Gospel is the skillfully narrated healing of the man born blind in John 9. This healing story operates on at least two levels in the sense that the story of the blind man who receives his sight is also discloses something about the story of the Johannine community. After Jesus heals the blind man he is brought before the Pharisees to be interrogated. Since the Jewish authorities did not believe he had been blind, they called the man’s parents to explain how he now sees. They reply:

“We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.’ His parents said this because they were afraid of the Judeans; for the Judeans had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue.” (John 9:20-22)

There are other references in the Gospel to being put out of the synagogue (12:42; 16:2). We should, however, be careful about taking such statements at face value as indicating believers were actually expelled from the synagogue. This Gospel was written 15-25 years after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple during a time when Jewish leaders were shoring up boundaries as they attempted to redefine what it meant to be Jewish in a world without a temple. As a result there developed some kind of strife between the Johannine community, which had existed within the ambit of Judaism and in relation to the local Jewish community. The language of enmity against “the Judeans” in this Gospel was born of intense emotional pain and social bereavement due to strained relationships with and perhaps separation from their Jewish compatriots. The Gospel itself suggests that the main issue may have been the community’s claims regarding Jesus’ unique relationship to God. There was a perception among Jewish rabbis early in the second century that Christians believed that there were “two powers in heaven”. This was thought to compromise the foundational monotheistic confession in Judaism that there is one God. There are passages in John that suggest this may have been a point of contention between the Johannine community and the synagogue.

⁶³ “Life” virtually replaces the proclamation of the kingdom as the object of the gospel promise. The phrase “eternal life” (*zoē aiōnion*) in John denotes a quality of life peculiar to the new age that is experienced in the present.

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