

CHRISTIANITY AND RABBINIC JUDAISM

A Parallel History of Their
Origins and Early Development

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T W O

The Life of Jesus

E . P . S A N D E R S

WHAT CAME TO BE KNOWN AS CHRISTIANITY, A NEW RELIGION that would spread throughout the world, began in a very modest way, among the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, a Jewish prophet, teacher and healer. Jesus lived from approximately 4 B.C.E. to 30 C.E. He came to be regarded as the Messiah by his followers—the anointed one whom many Jews expected to come and to restore Israel. “Anointed” is *meshiah* in Hebrew and *christos* in Greek, whence the English words “messiah,” “Christ” and “Christianity.” At an early date, within about 15 years of Jesus’ death, some Greek-speaking Christians began to use the title “anointed” as if it were a proper name, and thus Jesus became “Jesus Christ” or “Christ Jesus.” Christians have regarded him as the inaugurator of a new era. By the sixth century after his birth, they had begun to date events either B.C. (Before Christ) or A.D., *Anno Domini* (in the year of our Lord). It is now customary in many circles to use the abbreviations B.C.E. and C.E., “Before the Common Era” and “Common Era,” since these allow non-Christians to employ the dates of the Christian division of time. Thus 4 B.C.E. is the same year as 4 B.C., but put in terms acceptable to all.

That Jesus was born before the beginning of the era that starts with his birth is one of the minor curiosities of history. In the sixth century a Scythian monk who was resident in Rome, Dionysius

Exiguus, introduced a calendar based on the division before Christ and after Christ, but he miscalculated the year of the death of Herod the Great, putting it four years too late. Since Jesus was born near the time of Herod's death, his birth was also miscalculated by four years. When subsequent research established the correct year of Herod's death, the calendar was not revised: year 1 was kept where Dionysius had placed it, and both Herod's death and Jesus' birth were dated to 4 B.C.E.

The story of Jesus is found in the four canonical Gospels in the New Testament. These books were written anonymously, but in the second century Christians began to attribute them to four men: Matthew and John (Jesus' followers) and Mark and Luke (early Christians, but not direct disciples of Jesus).¹ Early Christians wrote many other accounts of Jesus, some of which survive as the apocryphal gospels ("hidden," or "secret," noncanonical gospels). Historians have repeatedly studied these in the hope of finding solid information about Jesus, but without much success. The Gospel of Thomas, which is known from a manuscript found at Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt, has interesting versions of some of the sayings of Jesus that are also in the canonical Gospels, and it is possible that in a few cases its version is earlier than the one in the New Testament. In general, however, our knowledge of Jesus is limited to the information in the New Testament.²

A few non-Christian authors who wrote in the first or second century mention Jesus, but only as the originator of a movement that came to their attention. They add no new information to that given in the Gospels.³

Although the canonical Gospels contain almost the only worthwhile information about Jesus, they are by no means straightforward histories or biographies in the modern sense. The material in them was passed on orally for some years, being modified in the process. Further, the authors of the Gospels were more interested in theological truth than in bare historical accuracy, and their theological concerns sometimes shaped the material.

Even if the Gospels were academic histories, full of well-researched information, we would still be faced with problems in describing the life of Jesus. They do not provide us with a simple, consistent portrait of him. Moreover, there are large gaps—things we would like to know about which the Gospels say little or nothing. They tell us virtually nothing, for example, about Jesus' appearance and upbringing, only the name of his village and the names of his parents.

On the other hand, if we are content with a broad outline, we do know a lot about his life and teaching. Let us begin by considering the kind of man he was.

The Jesus who exercises the greatest hold on the public imagination is the Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). This is the Jesus who blessed the poor in spirit and the meek, who told his followers to "turn the other cheek" and to pray for their persecutors. This portrait of Jesus has served to bolster social and ecclesiastical reform. It supports criticism of those who are preoccupied by worldly concerns, and it helps shape the conscience of countless individuals who are moved by Jesus' example to examine themselves and moderate their behavior.

But we can also find numerous other miniportraits in the Gospels. Around the turn of the present century, Christianity was surprised and shocked by the discovery of the eschatological Jesus, the wild-eyed proclaimer that the end (in Greek, *eschaton*) was near, who predicted that

"The sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds . . ." (Mark 13:24-27 and parallels: Matthew 24:29-31; Luke 21:25-28).

This Jesus also promised that some of his hearers would not die before the kingdom of God arrived (Mark 9:1).

We can also find a portrait of Jesus as a kind of revolutionary: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). Perhaps this is the Jesus who was executed by Rome for claiming to be "king of the Jews" (Matthew 27:11,29,37).

There is, of course, more than one side to anyone's character. We should not be surprised that this is true of Jesus. Nevertheless, competition among these and other portraits does leave the reader wondering: What was the essence of the man? Where was the center?

Scholars have been writing answers to that question for 200 years. Only toward the end of the 18th century did scholars begin to apply the critical method of historical research to the Gospels. Even today, there is some reluctance among many Christian scholars to use this methodology as vigorously when studying the Gospels as they do when studying other material. Most scholars who deal with the Gospels have a *belief about* Jesus that is not subject to historical scrutiny. One of the consequences is that Jesus usually gets a very good press. Put crudely, people tend to project their own ideals—whatever they happen to be—onto him.

In the end, Jesus remains a more shadowy figure than his greatest apostle, Paul. In Paul's case, we have some of his own letters.

There is no mistaking the driving force, the cut and thrust of his mind. We would like to get as close to Jesus as to Paul. It is a disappointment that it cannot be done, since we do not have equally good sources.

The problem of the sources

Naturally, in reconstructing the life of Jesus, in searching for his essence, scholars look for the most reliable material. For several decades they have progressively reduced the range of the literature in which he is sought. The earliest source to be excluded was the Gospel of John. This was done partly because the other three Gospels—Matthew, Mark and Luke—line up against John, and the scholar is frequently forced to choose one or the other. This is especially the case in studying the teaching of Jesus, as we shall see below.

Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the Synoptic Gospels because they can be studied in a synopsis. This does not refer to a précis (although that is the common meaning of the word now), but to a book in which similar accounts can be viewed together (*synoptō* in Greek means “see together”). This is done by arranging Matthew, Mark and Luke in parallel columns.⁴ Here is one example, Jesus’ prediction of his arrest. Although the texts are parallel, there are numerous variations in detail.

Matthew 17:22-23	Mark 9:30-31	Luke 9:43b-44
As they were gathering in Galilee,	They went on from there and passed through Galilee.	But while they were all marveling at everything he did,
Jesus said to them, “The Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of	And he would not have any one know it; for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of man will be delivered into the hands of	he said to his disciples, “Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men.”
men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.”	men, and they will kill him; and when he is killed, after three days he will rise.”	

A study of all the Gospel parallels makes it obvious that these three Gospels, the synoptics, relate very closely to one another. They tell basically the same story, according to the same outline, placing the same events at the same point in the outline, often using identical wording. There are exceptions to these rules, but the most striking single feature of the synoptics is their similarity. They are especially close together when they give the same teaching material. As in the example above, the synoptics vary more in describing the setting of Jesus’ teaching than in giving the teaching itself.

John’s Gospel, on the other hand, cannot be fitted into the synoptic scheme in any way. The outline of events is different, and there is little agreement between John and the synoptics with regard to content.

Moreover, the differences between John and the synoptics are not such that the accounts are complementary; rather, the accounts are contradictory to a very great degree. We may consider some examples: According to the synoptics, during Jesus’ public career he went to Jerusalem for Passover once; according to John, twice. In the synoptics Jesus “cleanses” the Temple at the end of his ministry; in John at the beginning. The synoptic Jesus is an exorcist (for example, Mark 3:22-27); the Johannine Jesus performs no exorcisms.

There are even more striking differences between John and the synoptics. In the synoptics, Jesus declines to say who he is; he even refuses to give “a sign,” and he rebukes those who seek one (Mark 8:11-12 and parallels; cf. Mark 8:29f.). In John, on the other hand, Jesus talks almost exclusively about himself, and he provides several specific signs. (Note the prominence of the “I am” sayings in John, e.g., 6:35-51, 8:12, 10:7. For “signs,” see John 2:11, 4:54, for example.) The Jesus of the synoptics preaches the kingdom of God, while the Johannine Jesus discourses about himself.

Moreover, the style and manner of speech are entirely different. In the synoptics, Jesus speaks in short, pithy sentences, parables, similes and metaphors. In John, Jesus offers long allegorical monologues. For example, we may compare the synoptic parable on sheep (Matthew 18:12-13) with the Johannine allegorical discourse on sheep (John 10:1-18). Matthew’s parable is short, only two verses:

“If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray.”

Thus, in Matthew Jesus uses the story to describe an aspect of God and his kingdom: the inclusion of the lost; a single point is made by telling a short, illustrative story. John, on the other hand, places in Jesus' mouth a long, allegorical monologue; on the surface it is about sheep, but beneath the surface it is about the person and work of Christ, including his death and resurrection (John 10:18). In John's long monologue, we are intended to understand Jesus as being both the shepherd and the door to [God's] fold—which does not make sense, even in the allegorical terms of the parable.

These and other factors resulted in a still-held scholarly consensus: The historical Jesus is to be sought in the synoptics, not in John. The Johannine Jesus is the Christ of faith. That is not to say that John is "fiction"; somewhere behind John's Gospel there are traditions. The author probably knew one or more of the synoptics; he may have had independent access to other information about Jesus. Some parts of John's narrative (as distinct from the discourses) are intrinsically more probable than the synoptic account. Since Jesus was a law-abiding Jew, and since the Bible commands attendance at the pilgrimage festivals (Passover, Shavuoth, Sukkoth), Jesus probably did go to Jerusalem for more than one festival. (In John, Jesus goes four times, twice for Passover [John 2:13, 12:1] and twice for other festivals [John 5:1, 7:10]. In the synoptics, he makes only one pilgrimage [Mark 11:11 and parallels].) John's view of Jesus' trial before two of the chief priests is also intrinsically more probable than the synoptic trial scene (see below). Despite these and similar points in favor of John, the overall portrait of the synoptics must be preferred.

As we shall see, the synoptics' description of Jesus makes sense in context, while it would be impossible to explain early Christian eschatology if the historical Jesus was like the Johannine Christ. John is better read as a series of meditations on the theological significance of Jesus' coming that the author chose to write in the first person, as if Jesus had said them.

Since the middle of the 19th century, John has been mostly ignored in the search for the historical Jesus. But even the Synoptic Gospels pose difficulties for historical research. As we noted above, they are not biographies or histories in the modern sense. The most important point to consider is the nature of the material they contain.

The problems of context

The Synoptic Gospels are composed of independent compositional units with very little context. We probably owe such context as there is to the Evangelists. We may think of each unit as a snapshot, with the individual snapshots arranged and introduced by the Evangelists (or Christian preachers and teachers before them).

If we want to explain what someone was like—not to give a few random facts about him or her, but to get to the heart of the matter—we aim for *intention, cause and effect* and an *understanding of the circumstances*. "Abraham Lincoln wanted all along to free the slaves; he waited until relatively late in the war because of tactical considerations." Such a statement requires that we know the sequence of events and that we have enough knowledge of what Mr. Lincoln *thought*—in addition to what he *did*—to allow us to weave desire, external action and the force of circumstances into a coherent whole. How can we do this with Jesus, since we have (1) snapshots that (2) have been transmitted for a generation or so in a language other than Jesus' own and in a variety of contexts? (Jesus spoke Aramaic, the Gospels are in Greek.) Unfortunately, we cannot know as much about Jesus as about Paul (or Lincoln or Churchill). On the other hand, we do not remain entirely in the dark, as we shall see.

That what we have are isolated incidents, quite probably rearranged and reset in unoriginal contexts, is easily shown: The settings of individual passages sometimes vary from Gospel to Gospel. We must assume that, during the period of oral transmission, Christian teachers exercised this kind of freedom. That is, the material was used, not embalmed; when used, it had to meet a current issue, and thus the context changed. If this were not so, the material would not have sustained the early Christian communities.

The Evangelists not only arranged the material, they added new introductions and conclusions. We may consider a few examples. Both Matthew and Luke include Jesus' lament over Jerusalem, and they have virtually identical wording in a passage that in Greek is just over 50 words long. Thus they used the same tradition, not a generally remembered Aramaic saying of Jesus that was passed down and translated in various ways. The lament contains this prediction: "You will not see me again until you say, 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.'" Luke places this passage early (Luke 13:34-35), and it is fulfilled in Luke 19:38, when the crowd cries out, as Jesus enters Jerusalem, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." In Matthew, however, the prediction that people will not see Jesus again until they make the appropriate proclamation comes *after* his entry into Jerusalem: the entry into Jerusalem is in Matthew 21:9, the prediction in Matthew 23:37-39. This means that, when the Gospel of Matthew closes, the prediction is still unfulfilled, and the saying, "You will not see me until . . .," points forward to the post-resurrection return of the Lord. Thus we must ask: Did Jesus predict his triumphal entry into Jerusalem (Luke) or his own return after his death (Matthew)?

The setting or immediate context of an individual unit is also frequently different from Gospel to Gospel. An example is the parable of the lost sheep quoted above. A shepherd leaves 99 safe sheep to search for the one that is lost. In Matthew's setting, Jesus tells the parable to the disciples; the meaning is that they should act accordingly (Matthew 18:12-14) and seek the lost. In Luke, the parable is directed against the Pharisees; it defends Jesus' own action in mingling with "tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 15:3-6).

Sometimes scholars reach a consensus in favor of one arrangement or setting, but sometimes there is no consensus. In the two examples I have given, most scholars now would favor Matthew's setting for the saying "You will not see me again." Jesus probably had in mind the future kingdom rather than his next trip to Jerusalem. On the other hand, most scholars accept Luke's setting for the parable of the lost sheep and take it to be a rebuke to the Pharisees for not seeking the lost. Occasionally someone is bold enough to doubt both settings. The correct decision is not self-evident. The answer depends on an overall view of Jesus, and it requires a reconstruction of the larger context of his life and work. Yet since the larger context is provided by other passages that were transmitted by the very same sources, it is difficult to avoid circular argument.

The problem is even more difficult. Not all the material goes back to the historical Jesus. Besides being arranged and set in new contexts, much of it was revised and some was even created. To illustrate how this occurred, we may consider a passage in one of Paul's letters. Paul wrote that he besought the Lord in prayer that his "thorn in the flesh" be removed. The Lord replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:8-9). From Paul's letter, we know that the Lord who spoke this saying was not the historical Jesus, but either the risen Lord or God himself, speaking through the Spirit. If Paul had used the saying in a sermon, however, and it was then quoted and used in different contexts, it would be unlikely that everyone would maintain the nice distinction between the historical Jesus and the Lord who answers prayer.

Christians believed that the Lord still spoke to them, and that sometimes the Holy Spirit spoke through Christian prophets. Paul and other Christians held that they knew the mind of God and that they spoke "in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit" (1 Corinthians 2:9-13). Since "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17), words that were "taught by the Spirit" were often attributed to Jesus (whom the Christians called "Lord") when the Gospels were composed. From the point of view of the first Christians, why not? The same Lord spoke. Yet the result was that

they created sayings that were then placed in the mouth of the historical Jesus.

A second source of newly created material was the Jewish Scriptures, which the Christians accepted as their own. Christians believed that Jesus had fulfilled the biblical prophecies, and this view led them sometimes to draw on those prophecies for information about him. An example is Matthew's statement that, when Jesus entered Jerusalem shortly before his death, he sat on both an ass and a colt. Matthew derived this "information" from the Scripture that he thought Jesus fulfilled:

"Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion!
Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem!
Lo, your king comes to you;
triumphant and victorious is he,
humble and riding on an ass,
on a colt the foal of an ass."

Zechariah 9:9, cited in Matthew 21:5

Hebrew poetry makes extensive use of parallelism, and in this case "a colt the foal of an ass" is a parallel that defines "an ass" in the previous line. Matthew, studying the Scripture, decided that Jesus had fulfilled this prophecy in a very literal way, by riding on both an ass and a colt.

So there are two problems: unknown context and uncertain contents. If we knew enough about the overall thrust of Jesus' life and work—the context of his own life—we could better control the contents, since some things would fit in the context and some would not. Or if we had a completely reliable list of things Jesus said and did, we could search them to try to determine what context they fit best.

Scholars have addressed both problems, context and content. Drawing partly on general knowledge of the period and partly on more particular knowledge of what happened before and after Jesus' life, they have studied the context in which he worked. To a fair degree these efforts have been successful. Recent studies of religious, social and political currents in Palestine have clarified the general context of Jesus' life. Judaism is now much better understood than it was before World War II. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls—which are still being published, ever so slowly—has provided new information. Rabbinic literature—in its present form compiled 200 years or more after Jesus' death—was once considered to represent "first-century Judaism." Jewish society is no longer viewed as having been dominated by the rabbis, and this permits a more realistic assessment of the role of charismatic teachers and healers. Good progress has also been made in the chronological

stratification of rabbinic literature, with the result that we can now confidently assign some of it to the period before 70 C.E.⁵ This material is useful for our purposes.

The criteria of content

The contents of the synoptic material itself remain difficult. A lot of careful academic effort has gone into establishing criteria of authenticity to test the sayings.⁶ Paradoxically, the more the criteria have been refined the less certain we are about which sayings are authentic. In the early days of sifting the sayings, scholars tended to apply the criteria of authenticity mechanically: If saying x is contrary to later Christian opinion, Jesus really said it, since a Christian author would not have invented something with which he disagreed. We do not always know what a later Christian author would or would not have invented, and consequently the criteria themselves are subject to doubt. The result of three decades of study is that we know less than we used to think we knew.

Nevertheless, some things are securely known. No one doubts most of the "framework" of the story of Jesus:⁷

He was born about 4 B.C.E., near the end of Herod's reign.

He grew into manhood in Nazareth, a Galilean village.

He was baptized by John the Baptist.

He called disciples.

He taught in the towns, villages and open areas (apparently not cities) of Galilee.

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 his disciples.

He was arrested and interrogated by Jewish authorities, specifically the high priest.

He was executed on the orders of the Roman procurator, Pontius Pilate.

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

The context of Jesus' career and the framework of his ministry

Jesus' public ministry was bracketed by the preaching of John the Baptist, at its beginning, and the missionary activity of the early Church, after his death and resurrection.

We may be confident that Jesus was baptized by John because of the way the Gospels handle the subject. They all have the Baptist predict that he will be succeeded by one who is greater than he (Matthew 3:11; Mark 1:7; Luke 3:16; John 1:26-27), and Matthew

and John both have him explicitly acknowledge Jesus (Matthew 3:14; John 1:29-31,36). The Baptist was widely regarded as a prophet—probably more widely than Jesus.⁸ The early Christians were no doubt embarrassed that Jesus began his work by accepting John's baptism. The Christian insistence that Jesus' baptism did not imply his subordination to John shows that he was in fact baptized by him. The authors of the Gospels would not have invented a story which they found embarrassing. John's explicit acknowledgement that Jesus was his greater successor is probably a bit of early Christian apologetics. More likely to be authentic is John's question to Jesus from prison, "Are you he who is to come?" (Matthew 11:3).

From this we learn that Jesus began his mission by accepting baptism at the hands of a man who expected God to establish his kingdom in the immediate future.

Paul, whose letters are our best evidence for early Christian preaching, expected the same thing. He had told his Gentile converts in Thessalonica that they would still be alive when the Lord returned. When some of them died, the survivors wondered about the fate of those who were gone. In answer, Paul promised that the dead converts would not lose out. Quoting a "word of the Lord," Paul predicted that when the Lord returned the "dead in Christ" would rise and that both the dead and the living Christians would be caught up "in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air" (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18). Later, when Paul was in prison, he began to think that he might not live to see the day (Philippians 1:22f.), but he still expected the imminent return of the Lord and the establishment of his "commonwealth" (Philippians 3:20f.; Romans 13:11-14). This was not a point of contention between Paul and the Jerusalem apostles: Early Christians in general thought that the day was at hand.

Jesus, too, no doubt had this expectation. Since John the Baptist had it before him and Paul, his apostle, had it after him, it would be very difficult to leapfrog over Jesus' own conviction, especially since sayings very much like 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 are attributed to him: "Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power" (Mark 9:1; see further Matthew 16:27-28, 24:31). Precisely what Jesus thought about the kingdom is less certain. This depends on close exegesis of sayings in the Gospels, which may have been modified or even invented. That Jesus held some sort of expectation about the arrival of "the kingdom" is secure. Nuance and precision, however, can be postulated with less certainty.

This is one of the points that proves that the synoptic Jesus is

closer to the historical Jesus than is the Johannine Christ. The synoptic sayings just cited are very close to what Paul thought that Jesus had said, and there are no comparable sayings in John.

The role of the disciples

The next part of the secure framework of Jesus' life is that he called disciples. Both the Gospels and Paul (quoting an earlier tradition) specify that there were 12 special followers (1 Corinthians 15:5; Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16; John 6:67-71). The synoptics, however, name a total of 13, 11 of them in common (Luke disagrees with Matthew and Mark about the name of the 12th, thus providing a 13th name). John's Gospel names another disciple, Nathanael (John 1:45-51), who is not mentioned in the synoptics. The early Christians seem to have had 12 as a firm number, but they were not certain who should be included. It is probable that Jesus himself spoke of "the twelve," though he was not necessarily followed all the time by precisely 12, nor by precisely the same people. If this is right, the value of the number was symbolic: "the twelve" represented the 12 tribes of Israel. Jesus promised the disciples that "in the new world, when the Son of man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28). This has the effect of "enthroning" Judas, who was one of the 12 on everyone's reckoning, despite the fact that Judas betrayed Jesus. The early Church, knowing of Judas' betrayal, would not have invented a promise from Jesus that would give Judas a place in the new age, and thus we may accept the saying as authentic.

The use of 12 as a symbolic number and the explicit reference to the 12 tribes points to a very concrete expectation: that the 12 tribes of Israel would be restored. Centuries earlier the Assyrians had scattered ten of the tribes. Obviously it would take an act of God to get them all back together. Numerous Jewish authors hoped that this would happen. Ben Sira (c. 200 B.C.E.) looked to God to "gather all the tribes of Jacob" and "to give them their inheritance, as at the beginning."⁹ The sect associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls (probably a branch of the Essene party) expected the reassembly of the 12 tribes.¹⁰ This same expectation appears in the pseudepigraphical Psalms of Solomon 11, 17:28-31, 50 and elsewhere. The tradition was continued in early Christianity (Revelation 21:12).

Jesus himself was a Bible-believing Jew, and like many others he thought that God would honor his promises to the patriarchs and restore the 12 tribes in the last days—just as God had previously wrought miracles on behalf of Israel.

Apparently the disciples thought that they would play an important role in the kingdom that God would establish. In the pas-

sage quoted above (Matthew 19:28), Jesus promised to enthrone them in the role of judges. In another passage the disciples debate among themselves about who is greatest. Jesus rebukes them by saying that those who wish to be first should be last (Mark 9:33-35). More significantly, James and John (who, with Peter, were leading disciples) asked if they could sit at Jesus' right and left in his "glory" (Mark 10:35-45). It seems that there was some dispute among disciples about who would have the leading places in the kingdom.

The other concrete expectation we can attribute to Jesus is the hope for a renewed Temple. This is reflected in an act and in two sayings. Jesus went to the Temple, where he overturned the tables of the money changers and the stalls of those who sold pigeons (Mark 11:15). When challenged, he justified his action by saying that the Temple, which should be "a house of prayer for all the nations [Gentiles]" (quoting Isaiah 56:7), had been turned into "a den of robbers" (Mark 11:17; quoting Jeremiah 7:11).

Later, Jesus predicted that "there will not be left here [in the Temple] one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:1-2; Mark 13:1-2; Luke 21:5-6). According to Mark, this prediction was made privately, to one disciple, while according to Matthew the disciples in general heard it.

After Jesus was arrested, witnesses at his trial before the high priest accused him of making a different statement about the fate of the Temple: "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; Matthew 26:61 lacks the phrases "made with hands" and "not made with hands"). The Gospels maintain that this testimony was false (Matthew 26:59-60; Mark 14:56-59). Nevertheless, when Jesus was on the cross, passers-by taunted him by saying "Aha! You who would destroy the Temple and build it in three days, save yourself . . ." (Matthew 27:40; Mark 15:29-30).

Thus we have an action at the Temple accompanied by a saying in favor of Gentiles; a prediction that not one stone would be left on another; and "false testimony" that Jesus threatened to destroy the Temple. It is difficult to see how these traditions fit together—if they do fit together. Why would Jesus both prepare the Temple for Gentile use and predict its destruction? Did he both *threaten* to destroy the Temple and *predict* that it would be destroyed? We begin with the prediction and the threat and consider first the probable early Christian view of them.

By the time the Gospels were written, Christianity had spent several decades making its way in the Roman world. The dominant thrust of the movement was toward acceptance of Roman

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rule. The Christians' kingdom, they said reassuringly, was not of this world (John 18:36); they posed no threat to Rome, civilization and good order (all of which were more-or-less synonymous). In fact, Christianity was potentially revolutionary, both politically and socially. In some parts of Christianity there was fierce hatred for Rome. In the following passage, "Babylon" is a code word for Rome:

"Fallen, fallen is Babylon the Great! It has become a dwelling place of demons, a haunt of every foul spirit" (Revelation 18:2).

Christian leaders and spokesmen spent considerable effort trying to convince the rest of society that they posed no threat. On the whole, they were successful. The author of Luke and Acts (both were written by the same man) was especially concerned with this problem. Acts is filled with stories designed to show that Jews made trouble, but the early Christian apostles were completely law-abiding and were always found to be so when tried by a Roman official (e.g., Acts 18:12-17). Not surprisingly, then, the Gospel of Luke does not contain either of the two passages in which Jesus is accused of threatening the Temple. The accusation was known to the author of Luke from his source, or sources (Mark and Matthew), but he simply deleted it.

One way to test the Gospel material for reliability is to ask whether or not it is "against the grain" of the authors or of early Christianity. If it is, it is probably reliable, since an author would not invent a passage that was "against the grain." With regard to the Temple, all three synoptics want the reader to believe that Jesus *predicted* the destruction of the Temple but did not *threaten* it. We should suspect that in reality it was the other way around: Whatever he did and said with regard to the Temple, it could easily have been taken as a threat of its destruction. We may put this another way: If originally the traditions about Jesus contained a mere prediction of destruction, why would the Christian Church convert the prediction into a threat and then attribute it to false witnesses? The answer is that it would not have done so. The passages in Mark and Matthew about a threat to destroy the Temple are probably there because the accusation was actually made, either at Jesus' trial or when he was on the cross, or both. The Gospels defend him: that was false testimony; Jesus merely predicted, he did not threaten. By the time the Gospels were written, the prediction had been fulfilled: The Temple was destroyed in 70 C.E. A prediction that was fulfilled increased the stature of the prophet.

We can understand why the tradition would have moved from some sort of threatening word or deed to the accusation of making a threat, and then to the Christian reply that the accusers were false witnesses and that Jesus merely predicted. It is difficult, how-

ever, to understand the reverse development: A simple prediction, made privately to one or more of his disciples, that had no public consequences would not have resulted in the presence of the threat theme in the Gospels. The authors would have preferred that the threat disappeared entirely. In Luke it does disappear, while in Matthew and Mark it is called "false testimony." It is probable that Jesus really was accused of threatening to destroy the Temple, and Christianity had to answer the accusation.

We may conclude that the accusation that Jesus threatened the Temple is earlier than the claim that he only predicted its destruction. Two reservations must be lodged. First, we cannot hope to know "what Jesus really said." It is possible that he merely predicted and that his words were taken to constitute a threat.

The second reservation is that Jesus did not think, nor could his accusers have thought, that he and his followers could pull down the stones of the Temple or do any serious damage to it. Herod's Temple was enormous, and the stones were monumental. Many of these stones still stand where Herod's workmen laid them. When the high priest and his council heard that Jesus threatened the Temple, they would not have taken it to be a boast of military and engineering skill. However he worded his threat, he would have meant that God would destroy the Temple. The leaders of Jerusalem were not physically afraid of Jesus and his few followers, nor would they have believed that he knew what God would do. They were probably anxious lest his prediction of coming upheaval and the intervention of God should touch off riots.

We now turn from what he said about the Temple's destruction to what he did: overthrowing the tables of money changers and the seats of dove sellers. Biblical law required that sacrifices be offered for numerous reasons and that they be unblemished. This necessitated an inspection of the animal or bird to be sacrificed, an inspection that was carried out by high-ranking priests. At the time of pilgrimage festivals—Jesus was there at Passover—the Temple was full of people wishing to offer sacrifices, and the problem of inspecting the large number of sacrificial victims on the spot would have been considerable. Most offerings were of birds; the solution to the problem was to inspect a lot of doves or pigeons in advance and offer them for sale. Presumably the Temple and its dealers turned a profit on this, but there is no reason for thinking that it was exorbitant.

The Bible also required that adult males give to the Temple each year the Temple tax of one-half shekel, or two drachmas. The Temple demanded that this tax be paid in a standard and reliable coinage, and so pilgrims would need to change their money. Again,

**Overthrowing
the tables of
the money
changers**

there are no accusations of unreasonable charges. In this case, the evidence is against it. Although the Temple tax could be paid at the Temple, it could also be paid in one's own community. If pilgrims found the fees of the money changers too high, news would spread, money would be changed elsewhere and the Temple money changers would be out of business.

What was Jesus doing when he upset the tables and stalls of these worthy citizens who were helping pilgrims to fulfill their biblical obligations? The action of turning over tables and seats was symbolic. The space in which people exchanged money and bought sacrificial birds was large, and just before Passover it would have been crowded. Jesus' action did not seriously disrupt the Temple's business. What did he intend to symbolize? According to the Gospels, he was "cleansing" the Temple for suitable worship. The quotation from Jeremiah in Mark 11:17 (the Temple had become a "den of robbers") gives the tone to the whole: either the charges were unfair, or the entirety of the trade was wrong and should be removed. A supplementary explanation is based on the quotation from Isaiah, "a house of prayer for all peoples [i.e., Gentiles]." This leads to the view that Jesus wanted to break down the barriers built into Temple practice that separated Jew from Gentile. Jesus' attack on money changers and dove sellers was really an attack on the cult itself, or on the Temple's separation of people into a hierarchy of purity—priests, Levites, laymen, women and Gentiles, in descending order.

Although these views are readily derived from the Gospels, we must look on them with doubt. It is most unlikely that Jesus attacked sacrificial practice or purity distinctions, and very improbable that he sought Gentile equality in the Temple. After his death and resurrection, the disciples worshiped in the Temple. They knew nothing of Gentile equality. Paul's letters indicate that full commonality between Jews and Gentiles developed in Christian circles outside of Palestine (although Acts assigns this dramatic innovation to a series of visions seen by Peter [Acts 10]). In any case, the earliest Church did not attribute to Jesus the idea that there was to be no separation of Jew from Gentile. The quotation from Isaiah in Mark 11:17 probably reflects a desire on the part of second-generation Gentile churches to ground their own practice in a statement by Jesus himself.

What about the authenticity of the phrase from Jeremiah, "den of robbers" (also Mark 11:17)? This does not suggest that Jesus wanted to overturn the cult, only to purify it of dishonesty. Many scholars, however, delete it from the earliest tradition, and I am inclined to do so as well. The phrase could have been lifted from Jeremiah by anyone. Putting it on Jesus' lips allowed the Christians to depict

him as a moral reformer against abuse in high places.

It is probable, then, that we owe both of the quotations in Mark 11:17 (house of prayer for Gentiles; den of robbers) to the later Church. If we delete this verse entirely, Jesus' action in the Temple takes on a different coloration. The symbolic action of overturning seats and tables, in and of itself, points at least as readily to destruction as to cleansing. Had Jesus wished to announce symbolically a coming destruction, there is little else that he could have done. A hammer and a carpenter's chisel could have taken out a small hunk of wall, but turning over some tables would have been more public and obvious. This interpretation has the advantage of making sense of both the action and the saying about the Temple's destruction. It is reasonable to think that what he did and what he said ("not one stone left on another") go together. The most likely explanation of this complex of material is that Jesus expected the kingdom to come in the immediate future, at which time the Temple would be destroyed and then rebuilt or transformed. It remains possible, however, that he thought only that the current Temple practice should be reformed for the new age.

To sum up thus far, we have placed Jesus and his message securely in a context of eschatological expectation. He, no less than John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, looked for the arrival of the kingdom in some decisive or final sense. The evidence that has been examined points not to the end of the world, but to a new world, one with leaders (himself and the 12) and a restored or rebuilt Temple.

We should pause to clarify the important term "eschatology." Many people today think that when ancient Jews thought about the end-time (*eschaton* in Greek) they had in mind the last moment before the physical dissolution of the universe. Jewish eschatology, however, usually looked forward to a new world in the sense of a new order. Peace and justice will prevail, the lion will lie down with the lamb, life will be easy and food abundant. Jesus and his followers probably shared this general view. Paul thought that Christ, when he returned, would reign for a while before turning the kingdom over to God (1 Corinthians 15:23-28).

The best evidence for Jesus' expectation consists of (1) the saying that the disciples will judge the 12 tribes, (2) the disciples' debates about who will be greatest, (3) Jesus' promise to drink wine with his followers in the kingdom (Mark 14:25) and (4) the material that shows that he expected a renewed or new Temple. All this material is at least basically authentic, and it converges on the same point: the future establishment of the kingdom of God as a new order on earth. "Eschatological expectation" in some sense or other is certain; "new order" is less certain but still highly probable.

Sayings about the kingdom

The word “kingdom” has a diversity of meaning in the Gospels, a diversity that probably goes back to Jesus himself. We may distinguish five sometimes overlapping meanings.

1. The kingdom is a transcendent reality that people enter one by one. Here the kingdom is a sovereignty, or reign, that individuals may accept; acceptance guarantees admission:

“Unless you turn and become as children, you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Mark 10:15).

“It is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mark 10:23).

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter into the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my father in heaven” (Matthew 7:21).

2. The kingdom is a future reality that will come, but how it will come and what it will be like are not specified:

“Thy kingdom come!” (Matthew 6:10, in the Lord’s prayer).

3. The kingdom will be established by God’s angels, or by the Son of Man, and its arrival will be accompanied by cosmic signs.

Many of the passages that reflect this view do not actually contain the word “kingdom,” but the establishment of God’s rule is the subject. How the end-time figure came to be called the Son of Man is not clear. Even murkier is Jesus’ own view of the relationship between himself and the Son of Man—assuming that he actually predicted the coming of the Son of Man. These are two of the principal passages:

“Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, also the Son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels . . . There are some standing here who will not taste death before they see that the kingdom of God has come with power” (Mark 8:38-9:1 and parallels).

“But in those days, after that tribulation, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken. And then they will see the Son of man coming in clouds with great power and glory. And 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 13:24-27 and parallels).

4. The kingdom will be a new order on earth.

Several passages already discussed belong in this category: Mat-

thew 19:28 (the disciples judge the tribes of Israel); Mark 9:33-35 (who is greatest?); Mark 10:35-45 (who will sit at Jesus’ right hand?). There is one further passage that is difficult to assess. According to Matthew 16:18-19, Jesus told Peter that he was “Rock,” and that on this rock he would build his Church. The saying continues, promising that what Peter binds or looses on earth is bound or loosed in heaven, a promise that is made to the disciples in general in Matthew 18:18.

All scholars agree that Jesus did not foresee an institutional Church with a professional priesthood that would have authority to absolve sins. If that is what the saying means, it is so anachronistic that it cannot be authentic. On the other hand, the nickname “Rock” shows that something authentic lies behind the passage. The name of the disciple whom we call Peter was actually Simon son of Jonas (Matthew 16:17). Paul, however, called him not Simon, but either Cephas (1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:22, 9:5, 15:5; Galatians 1:18, 2:9, 11, 14) or Peter (Galatians 2:7-8). “Cephas” is the Aramaic word for “rock,” while “Peter” is the corresponding Greek word. In other words, Simon son of Jonas went by the nickname “Rock” in both languages. The Gospels were written in Greek for readers of Greek in the second and third generations after Jesus. The synoptic authors felt no need to refer to Simon’s Aramaic nickname: he was “Simon” (Mark 1:16 and elsewhere), “Simon called Peter” (Matthew 4:18, 10:2) or simply “Peter” (Mark 5:37 and elsewhere). Paul, however, had met the man in Jerusalem and knew by what name he actually went: Cephas, which Paul turned into Greek (Peter) in only one passage.

The importance of this is that the meaning of Simon’s Aramaic nickname was preserved in Greek. It is as if the popular Munich beer were called “Lion’s Brew” in the English-speaking world, except by people who had been to Munich and who knew some German, who called it “Löwenbräu.” If the brewer wanted to emphasize the “lion-ness” of the beer, he would change its name from country to country: in English it would be “Lion’s Brew,” in French “Bière de lion,” in Hebrew “birah shel ‘ari” and so forth. In fact, this is not what the brewer has done. What matters to the brewer and the advertising agencies is that it be identified as *German*: its lion-ness is not important. The case of Simon’s name, however, fits the hypothetical situation in which Löwenbräu becomes “Lion’s Brew.” What mattered was the *meaning* of Simon’s nickname, “Rock.”

From this we should infer that Jesus really did give Simon the name “Rock” or “Rocky” and that the meaning of the nickname was significant. Presumably it did not refer to craggy features, and probably not to strong nerves and emotional stability. Jesus made use of symbols, as we saw in discussing “the twelve.” It is a reason-

able hypothesis that “rock” was symbolic. If so, “foundation stone,” or “cornerstone,” as suggested by Matthew 16:18, is a reasonable translation.¹¹

Foundation or cornerstone of what? Matthew proposes “Church,” certainly meaning thereby the Christian Church that he knew (cf. Matthew 18:17). This is the anachronistic part of the saying, which we cannot attribute to Jesus. Jesus could well have thought of Peter as the symbolic cornerstone of the eschatological people of God, including both the reassembled 12 tribes and the Gentiles (for Gentiles, see Matthew 8:11).

I have spent this many lines on a difficult passage for a reason. This is one of the numerous sayings in the synoptics that will never yield secure results. We first establish the Aramaic word that Jesus said, and this can be done with certainty. But what did it mean? Did Jesus actually name Simon “Rock” after a messianic confession (so the setting in Matthew)? Was the name symbolic? If so, of what? We may infer here, suggest there, sometimes guess.

Although certainty eludes us, I suspect that the name “Rock” fits some way or other into Jesus’ expectation that there would be a new order in which he and his disciples would have the major roles. Beyond this we cannot reasonably go.

5. The kingdom is present in Jesus’ words and deeds.

“Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, he answered them, ‘The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, “Lo, here it is!” or “There!” for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you’” (Luke 17:20-21).

“Now when John [the Baptist] heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to him [Jesus], ‘Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?’ And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offense at me’” (Matthew 11:2-6).

Some said that Jesus “casts out demons by Beelzebul, the prince of demons.” In his reply Jesus said, among other things,

“if I cast out demons by Beelzebul, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Luke 11:15-20 || Matthew 12:24-28).

These passages have convinced a majority of New Testament

scholars during the past few decades that Jesus taught that the kingdom was “somehow” present in his teaching and healing. Although this view is passionately held by many, the evidence for it is not very good. The first passage, “the kingdom . . . is in the midst of you” (Luke 17:21), may also be translated “the kingdom . . . is within you.” Apart from the question of authenticity, the passage does not attribute the presence of the kingdom to Jesus’ words and deeds. It is, rather, a denial that the kingdom will be seen in any one place, so that one can point to it. In other words, the kingdom is omnipresent, not a penumbra around Jesus.

Nor does the second passage (Matthew 11:2-6) claim that “the kingdom” is present in Jesus’ words and deeds. It is an answer to the question, “Are you the one who is to come?” not “Is the kingdom present wherever you are?” Jesus certainly thought that he was “the one”: if his disciples would be the judges of Israel, he presumably would have a higher rank. He may very well have offered his healings and teaching as “signs” to John the Baptist (though to others he said that he would give no signs [Mark 8:11-12]). We noted above that the question of the Baptist is more likely to be authentic than his explicit acknowledgement of Jesus (p. 51-52). It does not, however, show that Jesus thought that the kingdom was present, but rather that in his own view *something* crucial was happening in his ministry.

The third passage (Luke 11:20 || Matthew 12:28) states that the kingdom has come upon “you” if Jesus’ claim is true, namely that he casts out demons by the power of God, rather than by black magic. Luke does not identify “you,” but according to Matthew Jesus’ saying is addressed to Pharisees; in any case, it is directed to people who doubted that he acted by the power of God. What does it mean that the kingdom has “come upon” his opponents? Perhaps that they have run into its power and condemned themselves by not accepting Jesus? In this case, the saying would recall Mark 8:38: “For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man also be ashamed, when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.” This saying makes crucial one’s response to Jesus in the present, but puts the kingdom (the glory of his Father) in the future.

The proponents of the view that these passages show that Jesus thought that the kingdom was present are pushed into saying “present in some sense.” But in what sense? It was not present in the sense that God’s enemies were defeated. Tiberius, Pilate, Antipas and Caiaphas still ruled. God’s will was not yet done “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

Admittedly, there is nothing inherently impossible about Jesus’

having thought that the kingdom was in some way present, while in another way future. Paul could say that the kingdom of God is found where there is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17). The Lord, however, did not yet reign as king; his enemies were not yet defeated. Only after he defeated them would he hand over the kingdom to God the Father (1 Corinthians 15:24-28). By analogy, Jesus could have said that the kingdom of God exists wherever people accept it and live accordingly, but that it would fully come only in the future. He could have thought that the kingdom of God was proleptically (that is, anticipating a future state as though it already existed) and selectively present whenever people encountered him, or that it was omnipresent but unseen. The problem is that the passages about the kingdom do not prove that he thought this. We may accept that he thought that his own work was crucial, and that response to him would determine what happened to the individual when the kingdom arrived; yet it appears that he did not use "kingdom" to refer to the present situation of confrontation and acceptance or rejection. This remains only an intriguing possibility.

What conclusions may we draw about the meaning of the "kingdom of God" as Jesus understood it? The material we have examined neither excludes nor proves any particular meaning beyond doubt. They are all harmonizable: Jesus could have thought that in his own work the kingdom was present by anticipation; that it would come in the future; that it would be marked with cosmic signs and the appearance of the Son of Man with angels; that he and his disciples would have the most prominent places in it; that individual commitment would determine who would enter it when it arrived; *and* that people could enter it in the present time, in the sense of accepting God's reign in their lives and living in accord with his Spirit.

If, however, we ask what is certain, we must answer only that he believed that the moment of decisive change was near and that God was about to establish a new order on earth. This view of the kingdom has sayings in its favor, as do other views. What moves the expectation of a new order from being a mere possibility to a higher status, a meaning that we may confidently attribute to Jesus, is that this is what John the Baptist thought and this is what Jesus' followers thought after his death. Jesus must fit his context; his followers could not have misunderstood him entirely.

Jesus' distinct teaching about the kingdom

This is not to say, however, that Jesus thought only what is common to John the Baptist and Paul. One can make distinctions. The descriptions of John the Baptist, both in the Gospels and in Josephus,¹² indicate that he called all Israel to repent and to live

righteously. By contrast, Jesus seems not to have been primarily a preacher of repentance, and the Gospels do not attribute to him a call for *national* repentance. John issued a general appeal for repentance, but Jesus conducted a more personal ministry. John sounds like Billy Graham, but Jesus does not. Many of Jesus' most striking sayings are directed not to crowds, but to a few interlocutors or followers.

It was very much "with the grain" of the Christian movement for Jesus to preach repentance. Both Matthew and Mark summarize Jesus' message as being similar to John's: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15; cf. Matthew 4:17), but they give no particular occasion on which he called on "the crowds" to repent. The absence of particular events is especially striking in view of the preference of both authors. Presumably they would have included more passages about repentance if they had them. Luke has several passages on repentance, but the majority of these are best viewed as Luke's own creations. In none of the Gospels do we hear anything of a mass response in which people renounced their sins (as in the case of John the Baptist), craved God's forgiveness and turned over a new leaf. I am not arguing that Jesus was opposed to general repentance, but rather that his particular message was not that of the mass revivalist.

The thrust of Jesus' ministry—its distinctive character—was that the kingdom would include even sinners if they accepted *him*—not if they reformed. Accepting him may have implied reform, but his message was more the promise of inclusion, especially of sinners, than the requirement of general repentance.

The Gospels several times mention Jesus' association with "toll collectors and sinners" (e.g., Matthew 11:19). We may consider the meaning of each term. In Galilee, toll collectors worked for Herod's son, Antipas. He paid tribute to Rome, but his toll collectors did not directly serve a foreign power. Nevertheless, people assumed that, as a class, the collectors abused their positions by overcharging. In Jesus' view, even they were to be included in the kingdom.

"Sinners" was not a term for ordinary people who, in the normal course of life, sometimes transgressed. The word, rather, represents the Aramaic or Hebrew word that would better be translated as "the wicked"—those who were generally regarded as being beyond God's mercy. People who transgressed and made atonement were not wicked. In the Psalms and subsequent Jewish literature the term is reserved for those who did not attempt to live in accord with God's law. It is these with whom Jesus associated and whom he included in the coming kingdom of God.

Jesus' critics, rather than Jesus himself, used the term "wicked"

of some of his followers. Jesus called them by more revealing terms, such as “the lost” (Matthew 10:6, 15:24) and “the poor” (Matthew 11:5 || Luke 4:18).¹³ It is intrinsically likely that Jesus’ followers were on the whole from the lower socioeconomic orders. Those who were well placed in the present kingdom were less likely to look for another than were the poor. In the ancient world large numbers of people had little stake in the social order, and it was they who could be mobilized by charismatic leaders. The crowds who followed Jesus, hoping for healings, probably consisted largely of such people.

On the other hand, some of the leading disciples seem to have been fishermen who owned their own boats (Mark 1:16-20) and toll collectors, who were not financially impoverished. Luke indicates that some of Jesus’ supporters were women of means (Luke 8:2-3).

Thus “poor,” and probably other terms such as “meek” (Matthew 5:5) and “lowly of heart” (Matthew 11:29), may be partially accurate and partially misleading if taken as a socioeconomic description of those whom Jesus especially sought. On the one hand, he did not seek out the prosperous burghers and the aristocratic priests. The major cities of the Galilee (Tiberias, Sepphoris and Scythopolis) are not mentioned in the Gospels, and Jesus may never have gone to one of them. In the towns and villages where he did go he would not have met the elite. The crowds he attracted consisted mostly of the economically poor. Yet on the other hand at least some of his followers were economically above the level of day laborers, and the one group of “sinners” that is identified, the toll collectors, was not financially poor.

Perhaps it is a mistake to try to identify too closely the people to whom he directed his message. We certainly cannot correlate his offer of the kingdom to the sinners with a socioeconomic group. The overwhelming impression of the teaching attributed to him is that it was *inclusive*. He proclaimed the kingdom, and he included even sinners in it. We can now say that he did not go to the cities; this may not have been policy on his part, a rejection of urbanism. Perhaps he simply spoke to those who were at hand, the villagers of his native Galilee.*

The inclusive character of his teaching comes out best in the parables that describe the kingdom as standing the expected order

* The Gospels attribute a few miracles to Jesus while he is en route to or near Gentile cities (Mark 5:1, 7:24,31), but they depict no activities in these cities. The authors of the Gospels all believed fervently in a mission to Gentiles, and they work in references to Gentile territory, but they cannot actually describe Jesus as working within Gentile cities. More likely to be authentic is Jesus’ limitation of his mission, and that of his disciples during his lifetime, to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:6-7, 15:24).

of things on its head. Laborers who work a short period of time are rewarded as much as those who work all day (Matthew 20:1-16); the lost sheep that is found causes *more* rejoicing than the ninety-nine that did not stray (Matthew 18:12-13 || Luke 15:4-7); the prodigal who returns is feasted, not the obedient and faithful son (Luke 15:25-32). In a word, “many that are first will be last, and the last first” (Mark 10:31, cf. 9:35; Luke 22:26).

What did Jesus expect his followers to do? The usual problems of authenticity are especially severe in the area of ethics, but there are two even greater difficulties. One is the audience: Did he give ethical admonitions to the populace in general (that is, to all those who would listen), or only to the relatively few who actually followed him? The second problem is the relationship of ethical instruction to his expectation that the kingdom would soon come: Did he envisage a very short period during which exceptional moral standards should be maintained?

We turn first to the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), the most famous collection of teachings attributed to Jesus. The admonitions of this sermon have three characteristics: they are pacifist, they are perfectionist and they are interiorized. “Interiorization” is seen most clearly in two of the so-called antitheses: murder and adultery can be committed in the heart (Matthew 5:22,27-30).

Perfection is a main theme. The disciples are to observe every commandment in the Law and Prophets and to leave none out (Matthew 5:17-19); to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 5:20); to be perfect as God is perfect, loving enemies as well as friends (Matthew 5:44,48). Perfection is implied in many of the individual commands, such as not to take oaths (the perfectly upright do not need to back up their statements); to fast without appearing to do so (avoiding calling attention to oneself); not to pile up wealth (Matthew 5:34-37, 6:16-18, 6:19-21).

Pacifism is one of the hallmarks of the perfect: they pray for their persecutors and are blessed when they are persecuted (Matthew 5:11,44); they “turn the other cheek,” give to their legal adversaries more than their suit demands and, if coerced into labor, do more than is required (Matthew 5:39-42).

The admonitions of the Sermon on the Mount are hothouse ethics: They require a special environment and do not do well in the everyday world. The hothouse could be a small sect that partially withdraws from the world, to which members make long-term commitments. They are to grit their teeth, take any manner of abuse and do without all but the bare necessities, knowing that at the end of this life they will gain the eternal kingdom. Or the sect could be eschatological, made up of people living from hand

**Behavior
of Jesus’
followers**

to mouth while they wait for the end of the age. This requires less organization and discipline than the previous possibility and is inherently less stable.

Albert Schweitzer proposed that Jesus taught "interim ethics," that is, ethics valid only for the short period before the arrival of the kingdom, which Jesus expected (according to Schweitzer) within a very few months.¹⁴ Schweitzer's view has generally been rejected, usually because it seems to make Jesus' teaching irrelevant to the ongoing world. There is another objection. Apart from the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10), there is not a whiff of eschatology in the Sermon on the Mount. There is a threat of individual destruction at the end (Matthew 7:24-27), but nothing about the arrival of the kingdom or about a looming decisive change.

The perfection required by the Sermon on the Mount is not short-term, buoyed by the expectation of the end, nor is it pneumatological, based on participation in the Spirit of God. Pharisaic daily practice is the model (Matthew 5:20). The differences between Pharisaism and the sermon are interiorization and perfection. One grinds it out, hoping for reward from God (Matthew 6:4,6,18).

Is this the teaching of Jesus? Certain details suggest that it is not. The legal perfection required in Matthew 5:17-20 is counter to the theme that Jesus was not overly strict with regard to the Law, as we shall see below. The sermon's requirement to fast is curious in view of the complaint against Jesus that his disciples did not fast (Mark 2:18-22). The ascetic tone is quite different from Jesus' reputation as one who ate and drank, and who associated with toll gatherers and sinners (Matthew 11:19). Toll gatherers, heroes of other passages, are outsiders according to the sermon (Matthew 5:46).

The conflict of individual passages does not, however, constitute irreconcilable contradiction. We must remember the occasional character of Jesus' teaching and also the fact that we can never know whether or not we have the original context—even if we do not doubt the saying itself. He could have said one thing on one occasion but another in different circumstances.

The problem of the Sermon on the Mount

There is a more fundamental problem with the Sermon on the Mount. Considered as a unit, it does not seem to catch the spirit of Jesus' teaching. He expected the kingdom to come in a climactic sense in the near future. If this is correct, the Sermon on the Mount must be seen as striking the wrong note. Expectation of the end of the present order is such a strong factor that it would color everything. Jesus probably taught a perfectionist ethic, but we should view it in the context of eschatological expectation rather than

strict intracommunity discipline and practice.

The best evidence for perfectionism is the prohibition of divorce or remarriage. Paul attributes a saying on divorce to Jesus (1 Corinthians 7:10f.), as do four passages in the Gospels. A short form of the prohibition appears in Matthew 5:31-32 (|| Luke 16:18) and a long form in Mark 10:2-12 (|| Matthew 19:3-9). Paul's version and the short form in the synoptics basically prohibit remarriage after divorce, though Matthew's version assumes that divorce makes the woman commit adultery because she will have no means of support unless she remarries. Thus Matthew's short form is tantamount to a prohibition of divorce. The long form, on the other hand, forbids divorce on the basis of biblical interpretation: God originally "made them male and female"; and the Bible states that, when he marries, a man leaves father and mother and becomes "one flesh" with his wife. "So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mark 10:6-9 || Matthew 19:6).

This, the best attested of all Jesus' teachings, perfectly illustrates how uncertain we are of precisely what he said. Was it "no remarriage after divorce" (Luke and Paul)? "no divorce because it requires remarriage, which is adultery" (Matthew's short form)? or "no divorce because it is contrary to God's intention when he created humans" (the long form)? All the versions are stricter than biblical and common Jewish law, which allowed a man to divorce his wife and permitted both parties to remarry. While we cannot know which of these strict views was Jesus' own, we should nevertheless point out that the long form is probably eschatological. Many people who expected a new order thought that it would be a reestablishment of the original order of creation. The two biblical passages quoted in the long form, "male and female he created them" and "the two become one flesh," are from Genesis (1:27, 2:24), and thus they were read as referring to the paradisaic state. The long form of the passage on divorce, by referring back to the time of creation, implicitly points forward to the new age and requires Jesus' followers to start living as if the new age has arrived.

Once we accept one perfectionist teaching, shall we accept them all? Or should we doubt that the "winebibber and glutton, the friend of toll collectors and sinners" required a superhuman perfection of his followers? What counts against the perfectionism of the Sermon on the Mount is its hothouse and noneschatological character. The impression of a small group, striving heroically to be more righteous than the Pharisees, is too communitarian to correspond to the historical circumstances of Jesus and his movement. Perfectionism requires either intense eschatological expectation or a small, disciplined community, or both (as in the sect

associated with the Dead Sea Scrolls). The Sermon on the Mount offers us instead the perfectionism of a disciplined community without eschatology. It is unlikely that this kind of perfectionism corresponds to Jesus' movement during his own lifetime, which had the reverse characteristics: eschatology, not a stable, closed society.

**Authenticity
of individual
sayings**

This judgment does not decide which individual sayings within the sermon are authentic. These have to be studied one by one. We shall consider a few examples.

The numerous admonitions not to be self-seeking fit well into Jesus' own lifetime. The long passage in Matthew (6:25-34) on not being anxious about material possessions is a case in point. For example:

"Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin If God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith?" (Matthew 6:26-30).

Jesus and his closest followers did leave their homes, families and possessions, at least for a short period (according to 1 Corinthians 9:5, Peter traveled with his wife), and these verses fit that context. But Jesus was not a 1960s hippie, he was a first-century proclaimer of the kingdom of God. What fueled this passage (assuming that it is his) and the action based on it was eschatological expectation, not childish irresponsibility.

In early Christian literature we can see the Church struggling with this aspect of Jesus' eschatological ethic. Paul urged his converts to "deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it"; the basis for this was the belief that it was "passing away" (1 Corinthians 7:31). Yet this did not mean that they should quit their jobs and beg on the street. Paul had to admonish the Thessalonian Christians to live quietly, mind their own affairs and work with their hands, so that they would be "dependent on nobody" (1 Thessalonians 4:11-12). According to Acts, the members of the early Christian community in Jerusalem sold their possessions and lived in common (Acts 4:32-37). Using capital for daily expenses had the result that we should expect: the funds were soon exhausted. Paul spent a considerable portion of his career taking up a collection for Jerusalem from his hard-working Gentile converts. (On the collection, see Galatians 2:10; 2 Corinthians 8-9; Romans 15:25-27.)

From these difficulties over money and work in the early Church, we may infer that the admonition to give up one's possessions and

family does go back to Jesus' own teaching, especially his call to follow him (see Mark 8:34-37, 10:29-30; Matthew 10:37-39). It is probable that Jesus did not expect, or even want, many to "follow" him in this way. He proclaimed the good news of the coming kingdom to more people than he directly called into discipleship.¹⁵ He almost certainly thought of surrender of home, property and family as being for a short period only, until the kingdom arrived. In the Sermon on the Mount the admonition to "give to the one who begs from you" (Matthew 5:42) and the implied admonition to live like the lilies of the field are probably authentic sayings, but they have been separated from their original eschatological context. We do not see, on the basis of these chapters, how the Christian community could give practical effect to these sayings. From Acts and Paul we learn more: Share until the money and food run out, then appeal for aid.

Thus in the Sermon on the Mount we have sayings which, individually judged, may be deemed authentic (as well as some that are unauthentic), but which have been transferred from their original context. Originally, they probably applied to a small number of followers for what Jesus thought would be a short period of time.

If we generalize on the basis of this analysis, we shall conclude that Jesus probably did expect "perfection" of his immediate followers: They gave up everything for his sake and the sake of the kingdom. It is, however, doubtful that this was his message to the crowds. Even Matthew 5:1 depicts the Sermon on the Mount as being directed to the disciples, not the multitude. In Luke's parallel (the Sermon on the Plain), Jesus heals many in the crowd, but he delivers the sermon to his disciples (Luke 6:19f.). We further note that in many of the other crowd scenes there is little or no teaching, and no perfectionist teaching at all (Mark 2:4, 3:9, 20, 4:1-9 et al.).

In short, Jesus proclaimed the kingdom to all who would hear; he called only a few to a special life of discipleship. To oversimplify only slightly: Parables of the kingdom were directed to the crowds, perfectionist ethics to the disciples.

Jesus told the crowds that God loves the lost and that they would be in the kingdom. What did he expect *them* to do? Presumably to act accordingly. If God treated them with mercy and tolerance, they should treat others in the same way. If Jesus gave them detailed instructions, we do not have them. He seems to have worked on the basis of a principle that was formulated some decades later:

"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us

Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 John 4:10-11).

"Love" is the central word in the "two greatest" commandments that Jesus selected from the Hebrew Bible: Love God, love your neighbor (Mark 12:28-34, quoting Deuteronomy 6:4f.; Leviticus 19:18). He could summarize the entire Scripture using only the second of these commandments:

"So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them; for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

This is not, however, ethical instruction, since it is not sufficiently detailed to determine individual decisions, especially when there are competing claims on one's love. But the main element of Jesus' teaching was the all-encompassing love of God that motivates and inspires those who receive it. We may, after all, find the heart of his ethical teaching in the Sermon on the Mount: "Love your enemies . . . , so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:44-45). Human perfection is based on God's love of all, both the good and the evil.

The Law Several stories in the Gospels concern Jesus' relationship to the Jewish Law.¹⁶ These passages create the impression that Jesus was lax about observance of the Law, but on closer examination we shall see that there are no clear instances of actual transgression. Most of the legal debates concern the Sabbath. In some cases, he was questioned for healing on the Sabbath (Mark 3:1-6; Luke 13:10-17, 14:1-6). According to one passage, he defended his disciples for plucking grain on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-28). He is depicted as debating handwashing and vows of gifts to the Temple (Mark 7:1-13). One saying seems to be directed against the food laws: "There is nothing outside a person which by going in can defile; but the things that come out are what defile" (Mark 7:14-19). He discussed which are the greatest commandments (Mark 12:28-34). In a section of the Sermon on the Mount called the antitheses, he appears to set his own teaching over against the Law (Matthew 5:21-47). We shall begin with the last section.

The format of the antitheses is this: an opening statement, "you have heard that it was said . . ." (or "it was said"); a biblical quotation; the response "but I say to you . . ." Many scholars have understood "but I say to you" as antithetical to the biblical passage and thus as showing that Jesus opposed the Mosaic Law. We saw above that one of these passages, the saying on divorce, is doubtless authentic, at least with regard to general contents:

"It was also said [in the law], 'Whoever divorces his wife, let

him give her a certificate of divorce.' But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife . . . makes her an adulteress . . ." (Matthew 5:31-32).

Many scholars think that here Jesus sets his own authority directly against the Law. This is, however, incorrect. The antitheses are not actually antithetical to the Law;¹⁷ they are rather interpretations of the law, as the terminology indicates. In traditional Jewish legal debate, the verb "say" means "interpret." "Concerning this we say" in the Dead Sea Scrolls means "this is our interpretation." In rabbinic literature, "Rabbi X says" is used in the same way. The terminology in the antitheses does not imply that Jesus directly opposed the Law of Moses.

In the prohibition of divorce, Jesus' view is stricter than that of the Law, but it is not against the Law. If one never divorces, one will not transgress the Mosaic stipulations (Deuteronomy 24:1-4).

A second example is the saying on murder and anger:

"You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'You shall not kill' But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment . . ." (Matthew 5:21f.).

Here "You shall not be angry" is "the revelation of a fuller meaning [of the commandment] for a new age. The second statement unfolds rather than sweeps away the first."¹⁸ Jesus is the interpreter of the Law, not its opponent. This was certainly the understanding of the earliest known student of these sayings, the person who put together the Sermon on the Mount, where the antitheses are not against the law, but rather exemplify the preceding passage: "I have not come to abolish [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill them" (Matthew 5:17)—fulfill them by going beyond them in some instances.

Going beyond the law may imply a kind of criticism of it: it is not rigorous enough, or it is not adequate for the new age. We have already noted this point in discussing the pericope on divorce, and it may be accepted as true of Jesus' teaching to his close followers.

Did he at any point actually oppose the Law? The only passage that says this is Mark 7:19, "He declared all foods clean." This is Mark's interpretation of the saying that it is not what goes in that defiles, but what comes out. The Mosaic Law explicitly forbids the consumption of some foods (Leviticus 11; Deuteronomy 14). If Jesus said, and literally meant, "what goes in does not defile," he opposed the Law. It is, however, more likely that this is an example of hyperbolic antithesis, a well-known device for making a rhetorical point, frequently used in the Bible and subsequent Jew-

ish literature. Hyperbolic antithesis uses “not . . . but” in an exaggerated way to mean “less . . . more.” When Moses told the Israelites that their murmurings were *not* against Aaron and himself *but* against the Lord, they had just been complaining to *him* (Exodus 16:2-8). The sentence means, “Your murmurings directed against us are in reality, and more importantly, against the Lord, since we do his will.” When the author of the Letter of Aristeas wrote that Jews “honor God” “*not* with gifts or sacrifices *but* with purity of heart and of devout disposition,”¹⁹ he did not mean that sacrifices were not brought, nor that he was against them (he approved of sacrifices²⁰), but rather that what matters most is what they symbolize. Similarly Mark 9:37, “Whoever receives me, receives *not* me *but* the one who sent me,” means “receiving me is tantamount to receiving God.”²¹ “Not what goes in *but* what comes out” in Mark 7:15, then, could well mean, “What comes out—the wickedness of a person’s heart—is what really matters,” leaving the food laws as such untouched. If this interpretation is correct, there is no conflict with the law.

There is a very good reason for doubting that Mark’s comment (“he declared all foods clean”) correctly describes Jesus’ view. The first generation of Christians did not know that Jesus had “canceled” the food laws. According to Acts 10, Peter was first told in a repeated vision that all foods are clean. He found this so hard to accept that, after seeing the vision three times, he was still “inwardly perplexed” (Acts 10:17). In view of this ignorance, we must conclude that Jesus did not command his disciples to ignore the food laws. The saying is either unauthentic or hyperbolic. In either case, Mark’s interpretation does not give Jesus’ own view.

The other passages on the Law do not even represent Jesus as opposing it. In Mark 2:23-28 he justifies a minor transgression on the part of his disciples by arguing that the Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath; therefore, since they had no food, they were justified in plucking grain. In Luke 13:10-17 he justifies healing a woman on the Sabbath by laying his hands on her, again arguing that human need overrides the Sabbath law. Most Jews agreed with this principle, though there were disagreements about when to apply it, some holding that life must be at risk. In any case, the justification of minor transgressions by means of legal argument shows basic respect for the Law. A person who defends minor transgression does not oppose the Law itself.

The controversies over handwashing and the use of the word *korban* (given to God) in vowing goods to the Temple do not touch the written Law, but are (as Mark 7:3 correctly notes) only against the traditions of the scribes and Pharisees.

We must also note that the settings of many of these passages

are contrived and appear unreal. Pharisees did not really post themselves around Galilean cornfields on the Sabbath hoping to catch a transgressor (Mark 2:23-24), nor did scribes and Pharisees make special trips from Jerusalem to Galilee to check on the state of people’s hands when they ate (Mark 7:1). Further, in both cases it is the *disciples* who were criticized, not Jesus himself; he only springs to the defence. The likeliest explanation of these passages, as Rudolf Bultmann proposed long ago, is that the settings derive from the post-resurrection Christian Church, sections of which had stopped observing the Sabbath and food laws.²² They utilized sayings in new contexts to defend their own departure from the Law. Jesus may have said “the Sabbath is made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath,” but only the Marcan context makes it a justification for transgressing the Law.

Finally, while in some few instances Jesus is represented as a kind of legal expert—most notably in the antitheses—this was by no means his primary role. Jesus was a charismatic teacher and healer, not a legal teacher.²³ The contrast between a charismatic, individualistic and populist teacher and a legal expert should be emphasized. Jesus is sometimes called “rabbi” in the Gospels (Mark 9:5, 14:45) or “teacher” (Matthew 8:19, 12:38), and often he is said to “teach” (Mark 1:21, 2:13). Consequently modern scholars sometimes write about Jesus the Rabbi. In such books he is thought of as sitting down with his listeners, opening the Bible (or recalling a passage from memory), laying out competing interpretations and offering his own. Jewish “parties” or “schools” disagreed about interpretation of the Law, and Jesus is often seen in this context: he studied the Law, adopted distinctive legal positions and schooled disciples.

Following this model, one would expect the primary topic of his teaching to be the Law. But the whole model is, I think, wrong. If Jesus’ teaching had been of this sort, we should have more material like the antitheses, where he is depicted as taking up a biblical passage and offering his interpretation of it.

The great bulk of his teaching, however, is about the kingdom, and the characteristic style is the parable or brief saying. The focus is on what God is like (he includes the lost and is surprisingly merciful) and on what the kingdom *will be* like (values will be reversed; those who are last will be first). Outside the antitheses, there is virtually no *legal exegesis*.

We misconceive Jesus if we think of him primarily as a teacher of the law—a rabbi in that sense. Rather, he preached the kingdom and God’s love of the lost; he expected the end to come soon; he urged some to give up everything and follow him; he taught love of the neighbor. His message did not have primarily to do with how the law should be obeyed.

Miracles We can better understand the kind of man Jesus was, and how he attracted crowds and followers, if we focus on his miracles. People flocked to him seeking to be healed (see, for example, the summary in Mark 1:32-34).

Neither he nor others thought that his miracles showed that he was a supernatural being. They were evidence, rather, that he had the Spirit of God. Some doubted even that. His opponents charged that he cast out demons with the help of the Prince of Demons (Mark 3:22). He replied, in effect, that it was the Spirit of God that empowered him (Matthew 12:28).

The miracles attributed to Jesus are not significantly different from those attributed to pagan deities, especially the Greek god Asclepius, and to other miracle workers. We glimpse this even within the Gospels. When the Pharisees accused him of casting out demons by the Prince of Demons, Jesus asked, "By whom do your sons cast them out?" (Matthew 12:27), thus acknowledging that the "sons" of the Pharisees—that is, members of the Pharisaic party—could also exorcise. In another instance, someone who was not a follower of Jesus was nevertheless casting out demons in his name (Mark 9:38-41). This probably shows the consciousness of the early Christians that they had competition.

Jesus and his followers, like most other ancients, believed in spiritual powers, some demonic, and they attributed many illnesses, as well as antisocial behavior, to them (see, for example, Mark 5:1-13, where Jesus sent the evil spirits that inhabited a demoniac into 2,000 swine, which rushed into the Sea of Galilee and drowned). They also believed that God sent sickness and death as punishment for sins; this is reflected in the story of Jesus healing a man by telling him that his sins were forgiven (Mark 2:1-12 || Matthew 9:1-8).

Jesus' followers, and possibly Jesus himself, besides seeing the miracles as proof that he had the Spirit of God, saw in them the fulfillment of prophecy. When John the Baptist sent a message to Jesus, asking, "Are you he who is to come?" Jesus appealed to the miracles:

"Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matthew 11:4-5).

This answer draws on both Isaiah 35:5f. and 61:1. There is a very good possibility that this reply is authentic. We noted above that the later Christian Church, which held that from the outset John had recognized Jesus as "the one who is to come," would

probably not have invented a question by John on that point. If the question is authentic, the answer may well be also. Jesus responds that his miracles fulfill prophecy and show that he is "the one who is to come." The precise definition of "the one," however, is left open.

During his ministry, at least according to the account in the synoptics, Jesus made only one trip from Galilee to Jerusalem; within a week of entering the city he was dead. The trip moved him not only from one geographical region to another, but also from one political sphere to another. Galilee was ruled by Antipas, one of Herod's sons. Although he reigned at Rome's pleasure, he was Jewish. He had his own troops and his own system of justice. When Jesus entered Judea, he moved into a Roman province, in which a Roman held full military and legal authority.

In Jesus' day the Roman prefect was Pontius Pilate. Pilate, like other Roman administrators, used local leaders to handle day-to-day affairs. In Jerusalem, the high priest, surrounded by a council of other aristocrats, governed.²⁴ He had at his disposal a very large armed police force. The high priest was the man in the middle. If he failed to control the local population and Roman troops had to be used, more blood would be shed than if he maintained order. The Roman troops hardly loved the Jewish population, and we may be sure that the Jews were not fond of them. It was the high priest and his guards who kept the two sides apart, by maintaining order and suppressing unrest.

Jesus came to Jerusalem at Passover time—one of the three pilgrimage festivals of the Jewish year, and the most popular. Jews came from far and near to worship and to eat the Paschal lamb in or near the holy city. Tents were set up in a substantial area outside the city walls;²⁵ inside the streets were packed. Passover commemorated the Exodus from Egypt, the time of Israel's liberation from bondage. Thus it was charged with political significance, and many doubtless felt anger and resentment at the Romans, whom they saw as the current equivalent of pharaoh. The bondage of Israel was light, as bondage goes, but still it was not freedom. Since trouble was likelier to break out at a pilgrimage festival than at any other time,²⁶ it was the custom of the prefect to come to Jerusalem from Caesarea, bringing extra troops.²⁷

The scene changes in another sense. The scribes and Pharisees, so prominent in the story until now, almost vanish. In Mark, after Jesus enters Jerusalem, Pharisees are mentioned only in 12:13 (|| Matthew 22:15-22), where they join with others to question Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar. In Luke, they are numbered among the multitude watching Jesus enter, and they offer him advice (Luke

Conflict and death

19:39). Pharisees also appear in Matthew 22:34,41, but not in a strongly hostile sense. They are denounced in Matthew 23, and they go with the chief priests to see Pilate in Matthew 27:62, to ask that Jesus' tomb be guarded. Even in Matthew, however, they are not the main adversaries. That role is played by the chief priests.

Jesus' last week

There are five major events in the story of Jesus' last week.

1. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey; people welcomed him by shouting:

"Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the kingdom of our father David that is coming" (Mark 11:9-10).

According to Matthew and Luke, they explicitly called him "king" or "son of David" (Matthew 21:9; Luke 19:38).

2. He went to the Temple, where he turned over the tables of money changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons (Mark 11:15-19).

3. He shared a last supper with his disciples, saying that he would not drink wine again "until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God" (Mark 14:22-25).

4. The high priest's guards arrested him and took him before the high priest and his council. Witnesses accused him of having threatened to destroy the Temple, but he was not convicted. He admitted to the high priest, however, that he was both "Christ" (in Hebrew, "meshiah") and "son of God," and he was convicted of blasphemy (Mark 14:43-64).

5. His captors sent him to Pilate, who interrogated him and then ordered that he be crucified for claiming to be "king of the Jews" (Mark 15:1-5,15,18,26).

There are two principal questions: "Why was he arrested?" and "On what charge was he executed?" The second question, which leads to the discussion of Christology (the Christian doctrine of who Jesus was), has drawn a great deal of attention. The first, however, the motive for his arrest, is historically more illuminating. The formal charge against him could have been trumped up, but there must have been some explanation for his arrest.

Some light is shed on the topic by the account of his arrest. Jesus and his disciples shared what would be their last supper, apparently on Passover evening (Matthew 26:17-29; Mark 14:12-25; Luke 22:7-20). After the meal, probably around midnight, he went to Gethsemane (usually placed on the Mount of Olives, a hill east of the Temple) to pray. After some time, but still well before dawn, he was arrested. Matthew gives what is doubtless the right explanation of the time of the arrest: The high priest ordered that

it not be "during the feast, lest there be a tumult among the people" (Matthew 26:5). The secret arrest indicates that Jesus had become a public figure during Passover week, and that action against him might lead to upheaval.

Two previous events posed this threat: Jesus' entry to the city and his attack on money changers and bird sellers in the Temple. If the entry to Jerusalem, with people shouting about the kingdom of David, really took place and really involved a lot of people, it is surprising that Jesus was not arrested earlier. There are two possible explanations: (1) the demonstration was extremely small, was limited to the outskirts of Jerusalem and attracted little attention; (2) the high priest's security forces did not know where to find Jesus. It is likely that both of these are true. A large demonstration almost certainly would have attracted armed intervention. Even a small following, inspired by enthusiasm for the coming kingdom, would have alarmed the high priest. But he may not have known where to find the troublemaker and how to arrest him quietly. Later, one of Jesus' disciples, Judas, betrayed him (Mark 14:10f., 14:43-46), but earlier in the week Jesus was probably lost in the crowds.

The second incriminating action was Jesus' turning over seats and tables in the Temple area. This too was probably a small demonstration. The story does not mention the disciples, who may not even have been present. Had Jesus run rampant, upsetting tables and chairs over the whole area, the Temple guards would have intervened.

That both these incidents figured in the authorities' concern is evident from later events. When Jesus was taken before the high priest and his council, the first charge against him was that he had threatened the Temple. Pilate executed him on the charge of claiming to be "king of the Jews," which reflects his entry into Jerusalem. These charges may have been exaggerated; possibly he did not say "I will destroy the Temple" and "I am the king of the Jews." But, when one considers his teaching about the "kingdom," his view that accepting him was important for future membership in it and the shouts of his followers when he entered Jerusalem, the charge that he claimed to be king is perfectly understandable. Similarly, his statement about the coming destruction of the Temple, coupled with his act of physical violence, could be construed as a threat to destroy it.

Caiaphas and Pilate knew that Jesus did not have an army that could defeat the Temple guards and the Roman troops, much less the larger forces available in Syria. Had the high priest and the prefect suspected a real *Putsch*, Jesus' disciples would have been rounded up as well. What they feared was an uprising—the fear of

all colonial powers. Especially in Jerusalem at Passover, talk about David's kingdom and a new or renewed Temple could inspire the populace to think that redemption was at hand. They might rise to strike a blow to hasten it, as they in fact did some 30 years later.

Jesus' arrest reveals that he was regarded as potentially dangerous. Why was he not merely flogged as a warning and released? Josephus tells of another Jesus, the son of Ananias, about 30 years later. At the Feast of Tabernacles (Sukkoth), in a period that was otherwise peaceful, Jesus son of Ananias went to the Temple, where he cried,

"A voice from the east, a voice from the west, a voice from the four winds; a voice against Jerusalem and the sanctuary, a voice against the bridegroom and the bride, a voice against all the people."²⁸

This prediction of destruction—that it was such is clear from the reference to the bridegroom and the bride, taken from Jeremiah 7:34—led to his being interrogated and flogged, first by the Jewish authorities, then by the Romans. He answered questions by "unceasingly reiterat[ing] his dirge over the city," and was finally released as a maniac. He kept up his cries for seven years, especially at the festivals, but otherwise not addressing the populace. Finally, a stone from a Roman catapult killed him.²⁹

Our Jesus' offense was worse than that of Jesus son of Ananias. Jesus of Nazareth had a following, perhaps not very large, but nevertheless a following. He had taught about "the kingdom" for some time. He had taken physical action in the Temple. He was not a madman. Thus he was potentially dangerous. Conceivably he could have talked his way out of execution had he promised to take his disciples, return to Galilee and keep his mouth shut. He seems not to have tried.

The trial of Jesus

In Matthew and Mark there are two hearings before Jewish authorities, but only one in Luke (Matthew 26:57-75, 27:1-2; Mark 14:53-72, 15:1; Luke 22:54-71). It is very likely that the long trial scene of Matthew and Mark is simply an expansion of the short one. In this case, the original report was simply that the chief priests and others consulted about Jesus, bound him and turned him over to Pilate.

It is the longer scene, however, that has always attracted attention. According to Mark's version, witnesses testified that Jesus had threatened the Temple, but they did not agree (presumably on details), and so the charge failed. The high priest then asked Jesus, "Are you the Christ, the son of the Blessed?" Jesus admitted that he was, but immediately predicted that the Son of Man would

come on clouds of glory. The high priest cried, "Blasphemy," and the council condemned Jesus (Mark 14:53-72).*

In a Jewish context, it is difficult to construe either "son of the Blessed [that is, God]" or "Christ" as blasphemy. Neither denigrates God. On the other hand, "Christ" and "son of God" became the two favorite Christian titles for Jesus, and some Christians understood them in a way that Jews might have regarded as blasphemous. That is, the combination "Christ," "son of God" and "blasphemy" fits the post-resurrection Church better than the lifetime of Jesus. The "false" charge that he threatened the Temple, on the other hand, is very close to what the Gospels tell us he did. If the trial scene is in any way accurate, it is more likely that the charge about the Temple was the telling one. Jesus was taunted with that accusation while on the cross (Mark 15:29f.), not with claiming to be the son of God. The authors of the Gospels, in a period when the Church was making its way in the Roman empire, did not want Jesus to appear as a rabble-rouser or as someone who threatened peace and good order. They toned down the threat to the Temple to a mere prediction (Mark 13:2 and parallels) and said that the accusation that he threatened it was false. His physical act against it they interpreted as "cleansing," as if the Temple personnel were corrupt ("a den of robbers," Mark 11:17). They preferred that he die for professing the Christology of the Church.

As we saw above, it is probable that we should reverse their preference: He was executed because he posed a threat to public order, not because he applied to himself the titles "Christ" and "son of God."

Our understanding of how it was that Jesus came to die does not, however, depend on a reconstruction of Mark 14:55-65. It is more instructive to focus on the main movement of events: Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, his demonstration against the Temple, his stealthy arrest by the high priest's guards, his crucifixion and the taunts about the Temple. One can understand the sequence of events without entering into the details of the trial scene.

The attack on the Temple seems to have been crucial in persuading Caiaphas and Pilate that Jesus should die. It confirmed his potential to make trouble, and it showed that he might use physical violence, even if of a very minor kind.

Since Jesus' action in the Temple had such drastic consequences, we need to return to the question of why he did it. We have seen

* Matthew has an interesting variant: After the high priest asks, "Are you the Christ, the son of God," Jesus replies, "You have said so, but I tell you that you will see the Son of Man . . ." (Matthew 26:63-64). It is not certain whether "you have said so" means yes or no.

that it was a symbolic gesture, as were some of his other deeds. If we consider them as a group, we may be able to better understand Jesus' intention.

As did many prophets before him, Jesus communicated by symbolic acts as well as by words. He called 12 disciples, apparently to represent the coming restoration of the 12 tribes of Israel. He ate with sinners, in order to indicate that they would be included in the kingdom. He entered Jerusalem on a donkey, perhaps to remind his followers of Zechariah 9:9 (cited at Matthew 21:5: "your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on an ass"). When he overturned tables and stalls in the Temple area, he was probably also acting symbolically, perhaps indicating that the Temple would be renewed. His last meal with the disciples seems also to have been a symbol, one that pointed toward the coming kingdom, which would be like a banquet. (On the kingdom as banquet, see also the parables in Matthew 22:1-14 and Luke 14:15-24.)

Since the other symbolic acts reflect Jesus' expectation of a coming kingdom, it is probable that his demonstration in the Temple was intended in the same way. By both word and deed he proclaimed that the kingdom would come, that Israel would be restored, that the Temple would be rebuilt (or renewed), that he and his disciples would be leading figures in the kingdom and that people previously regarded as "last" (sinners and toll gatherers) would become the "first."

These expectations, however, were not fulfilled, at least not in any obvious way. What did happen was a surprise.

When Jesus was executed, his disciples, reasonably thinking that they would be next, hid. Some of his women followers—who were safer than the men and possibly braver—cared for his body. When they returned to the tomb a day and a half later (he died and was buried on Friday; they returned Sunday morning), they found that the tomb was empty. Jesus appeared to them and then later to the disciples in Galilee. The result of this was that they gathered in Jerusalem to wait for his return, which they expected soon. That is, they did not give up his idea that the kingdom would come; they now expected him to return from heaven to establish it. The movement grew and spread geographically. Twenty-five or more years later Paul—a convert, not an original disciple—still expected Jesus to return within his own lifetime. But the Lord tarried.

The "delay" led to creative and stimulating theological reflection, seen for example in the Gospel of John. Meanwhile, the man behind it all became remote. The synoptic material was by no means immune from this same kind of development. The consequence is that it takes patient spadework to dig through the layers

of Christian devotion and to recover the historical core. Historical reconstruction is never absolutely certain, and in the case of Jesus it is often highly uncertain. Despite this, we have a good idea of the main lines of his ministry and his message.

A discussion of the resurrection is not, strictly speaking, part of the story of "the historical Jesus," but part of the aftermath of his life. A few words about the different resurrection accounts may nevertheless be useful. According to Matthew and Mark, the disciples went to Galilee and saw Jesus there; according to Luke they did not leave the environs of Jerusalem. The story of Jesus' ascension into heaven is slightly different in Luke 24:50-53 and Acts 1:6-11, though written by the same author. Equally striking are the differences between the stories of Jesus' appearances. In Matthew he appears only twice, once to Mary Magdalene and the other Mary (Matthew 28:1-10), once to the surviving 11 disciples (Matthew 28:16-20)—11 because Judas had committed suicide. In Luke, however, he does not appear to the women (see Luke 24:8-11), but comes first to two unnamed disciples (Luke 24:13-35) and then to all the disciples, before whom he ate (Luke 24:36-49). According to Acts, he was with the disciples for 40 days, appearing off and on (Acts 1:3f.).

The earliest evidence, however, is not in the Gospels, but in one of Paul's letters. He offers, as part of what had been "handed down" to him, a list of appearances of the risen Lord: He appeared first to Cephas (Peter), then to the 12 (not the 11!), then to more than 500, then to James (Jesus' brother), then to "all the apostles" (apparently not just the 12), then to Paul himself (1 Corinthians 15:3-8).

Before commenting on the problems raised by these divergent accounts, let us first consider what the risen Jesus was like. According to Luke, he was not immediately recognizable; the first two disciples to whom he appeared walked and talked with him for some time without knowing who he was; he was made known "in the breaking of the bread," when they ate together (Luke 24:35). Although he could appear and disappear, he was not a ghost. Luke is very insistent about that. The risen Lord could be touched, and he could eat (Luke 24:39-43).

When Paul was engaged in a debate with his Corinthian converts about whether or not dead Christians will be raised, body and all, he tried to describe what the coming resurrection will be like. His answer is presumably based on his own firsthand experience when he saw the risen Lord ("Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" [1 Corinthians 9:1]; God "reveal[ed] his Son to me" [Galatians 1:16]). In the resurrection, Paul explained, each individual will have a body, but it will be transformed: not a physical

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body, but a spiritual body. One fact is clear: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; in the resurrection, there will be no flesh and blood. This is directly applied to Jesus: "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven" (1 Corinthians 15:42-50). Paul repeated: Everyone will be changed; when they are like the "man of heaven," they will no longer have their perishable bodies, but rather imperishable ones (1 Corinthians 15:51-54).

In the first century people knew about two experiences similar to resurrection. Luke and Paul both intend to exclude the possibility that the risen Jesus was either a resuscitated corpse or a ghost. A ghost then was what a ghost is now, or what a ghost was to Shakespeare:³⁰ a phantasm, especially one that appears late at night.³¹ Sophisticated ancients, like their modern counterparts, dismissed ghosts as creatures of dreams, figments of the imagination. The less sophisticated, naturally, were credulous. Both Paul and Luke opposed the idea that the risen Lord was a ghost, Luke explicitly ("a ghost has not flesh and bones as you see that I have," Luke 24:39), Paul by implication: what is raised is a *body*. Yet they equally oppose the idea that Jesus was a resuscitated corpse. These were more common then than now, because embalming is now so widespread. It is, however, possible for a person to be dead to all appearances, and later to "regain" life. There are several such stories in ancient literature, some in the Bible and some elsewhere.³² Paul and Luke, however, deny that the risen Lord was simply resuscitated. In Paul's view, he had been transformed, changed from a "physical" or "natural" body to a "spiritual body." Luke thought that he had flesh and could eat, but also that he had been changed. He was not obviously recognizable to people who saw him, and he could appear and disappear.

Both authors were trying to describe—Paul at firsthand, Luke at second or third hand—an experience that does not fit a known category. What they deny is much clearer than what they affirm.

Faced with accounts of this nature—sharply diverging stories of where and to whom Jesus appeared, lack of agreement and clarity on what he was like (except agreement on negatives)—we cannot reconstruct what really happened. We can, however, make some very general comments.

One is that the authors of the Gospels wanted to give *narrative stories* about the resurrection. They were probably not too worried about agreement or consistency. This may readily and convincingly be illustrated. In Acts there are three accounts of the Lord's appearance to Paul and the immediate aftermath, which differ at various points (Acts 9:1-30, 22:3-21, 26:12-20). For example, in one story (Acts 22:17-21), after the Lord first appeared to Paul,

Paul went first to Damascus and then to Jerusalem, where Jesus again appeared to him. It was at this second appearance that the Lord commissioned Paul to be apostle to the Gentiles. In Acts 9, however, the statement that the Lord appointed Paul to go to the Gentiles comes in Damascus (Acts 9:15). The author of Luke-Acts was not stupid; he doubtless knew that his stories varied. He could have told the same story in the same way, but that would not have been as interesting a narrative. Like many other authors, both ancient and modern, he disliked repetition; like other ancient authors, he would change events in order to avoid it.

Luke, like the other Gospel writers, wanted to tell stories in narrative form. They did not care about "accuracy"³³ in the way that we do. This makes it difficult to peer behind their accounts and describe what really happened.

Much about the historical Jesus will remain a mystery. Nothing is more mysterious than the stories of his resurrection, which attempt to portray an experience that the authors could not themselves comprehend. But we should remember that we know a lot, if we are content with a broad outline. We know that Jesus started under John the Baptist, that he had disciples, that he expected the kingdom, that he went from Galilee to Jerusalem, that he did something hostile against the Temple, that he was tried and crucified. Finally we know that after his death his followers experienced what they described as the "resurrection": the appearance of a living person who had actually died. They believed this, and within a few decades many of them would have given their lives for their belief.