

# SAGE, SHAMAN AND SUBVERSIVE: THE EMERGING PICTURE OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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When I was a youngster over sixty years ago, on Sunday afternoons we would listen to a radio program called—if I recall correctly—*The Greatest Story Ever Told*. On-air performers would enact one of the stories about Jesus, complete with dialogue and sound effects.

Typically a program would begin with two disciples, Philip and Andrew perhaps, talking about some problem they had just encountered—a blind man begging for money beside the road, for example, or a leper cowering nearly out of sight behind a tree.

They would discuss the options open to them and conclude that they did not know exactly what they should do. “Let’s ask the Master,” one of them would suggest. “Yes,” the other would reply, “let’s ask the Master.”

At that point Jesus would appear, and a choir (of angelic voices?) would introduce him by intoning on ascending notes: “Hummm, HUMMM, HUMMM.” Then . . . Jesus . . . would . . . speak—in a majestic stained-glass voice. When he had finished his utterance, the choir would hum in descending tones: “HUMMM, HUMMM, hummm.”

One would imagine that “the Master” must clearly be no ordinary mortal, that he must be divine, that his feet likely floated an inch or two above the dust of the Galilean byways.

All too common is the assumption that the Jesus who walked and talked in Palestine two thousand years ago must have appeared to his contemporaries as the divine Son of God, who was going about his heavenly Father’s business, as he taught and healed the poor and needy.

Closer reflection, however, suggests that this likely was not—indeed, could not have been—the case. Serious reflection, furthermore, will want to study the gospel accounts more carefully in order to gain a clearer picture of the Jesus who stands at the center of the narrative.

This, in fact, is precisely what “the Jesus Question” is all about. Biblical scholars, parish pastors, church members and the unchurched public have been engaged in a decades-long debate about who Jesus really was, what he actually said and did, and how he can best be understood today. “Spirit-person,” “magician,” “teacher,” “revolutionary,” “rabbi,” “Cynic philosopher,” “Galilean peasant,” “apocalyptic pro-

phet”—all have received popular attention and in some cases notoriety. But whether the debate has been truly helpful for the faith and life of real people remains to be seen.

Scholars think of the current discussion as another stage in an ongoing “quest for the historical Jesus.” The assumption here is that the stories about Jesus in the Bible and the traditions that have grown up around him throughout the history of the church are a mixture of fact and fiction.

So for two hundred years they have been trying to separate out the genuinely historical data from the pious legends. The goal is to distinguish between the “Jesus of history” and the “Christ of faith,” as some have put it, or between the “pre-Easter” and the “post-Easter” Jesus, or the “historical Jesus” *versus* the “Jesus of piety,” as others would say.

Most analysts think of the idealistic biographies of Jesus written during the 1800s as the “Old Quest” for the historical Jesus. This period ended with Albert Schweitzer (who concluded that Jesus was not the progenitor of modern liberal ideas, but an apocalyptic prophet who mistakenly thought the world would end within a generation) and with Wilhelm Wrede (who concluded that the gospels were not reliable historical guides, but rather biased theological tracts).

So historical Jesus research remained dormant between the world wars.

It was not until after the time of Rudolf Bultmann (who opined that the actual history of Jesus was not important for authentic genuine faith in Christ) that the so-called “New Quest” began.

This “Second Quest,” associated with names like Ernst Käsemann, Günther Bornkamm and Joachim Jeremias in Germany, and C. K. Barrett and C. H. Dodd in England, concluded that the biblical evidence reveals much about the early church but comparatively little about the historical Jesus.

According to most observers, a “Third Quest” began in the 1970s with the advent of redaction-critical studies, sociological investigations of Jewish and Christian origins, and a more rigorous literary analysis of the biblical narratives.

This “Third Quest” continues today with an ecumenical and international cast of players, including Gerd Theissen and Jürgen Becker in Germany, as well

as N. T. Wright and James Dunn in England.

It includes the work of pace-setting American scholars, some of whom have been associated with the Jesus Seminar headquartered in California, such as Robert Funk, Burton Mack, John Dominic Crossan and Marcus Borg, as well as others such as James Robinson, Raymond Brown, E. P. Sanders, James Charlesworth, Geza Vermes, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, John Meier and Ben Witherington III.

But as fascinating or aggravating as these quests may be, it is not entirely clear whether or how they can enrich the life of Christian people in general or the church's pastors and teachers in particular.

The purpose of this study is to summarize and assimilate the results of current scholarly Jesus research in a way that will enable readers to return to the biblical texts with a fresh perspective. It will offer a picture of Jesus that will resonate in creative ways both with the ancient documents themselves as well as with today's contemporary setting.

The problem is that it is almost impossible *not* to read the gospels without imagining a prior picture of Jesus which will in fact color our reading. If we begin by thinking of him as "gentle Jesus meek and mild" or as a "friend of sinners" or as a "man for others" or as a "semi-divine thaumaturge" or whatever. . . . If we begin with a particular figure in mind we will likely read the narrative through that mental filter.

One value of doing historical Jesus research is that the process inevitably helps us shape a picture which will enable us to read the synoptic stories with greater integrity. The intent is not so much to critique the New Testament accounts themselves, but to critique *our understanding* of the biblical witness.

## THE PRIMARY SOURCES

First, however, we need to be clear about the evidence we will use to sketch this emerging picture of the historical Jesus.

Obviously, the chief candidates are the canonical gospels—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John—except, of course, that John's esoteric picture of Jesus is so unlike the matter-of-fact presentation of the Synoptics that the Fourth Evangelist is no longer considered a reliable source for historical purposes.

Which leaves Matthew, Mark and Luke—except, of course, that according to the "two source theory" Matthew and Luke used Mark as one of their main sources. The result is that Mark's material (redacted around 70 CE, but obviously predating that by decades) is earlier and therefore more likely to be of

historical value.

Furthermore, Matthew and Luke have much material in common which does not appear in Mark, primarily Jesus' shorter sayings and teachings. This material, conventionally known as Q, must also derive from the earliest traditions. If, as some maintain, the Q material originated with the earliest Christian communities in Palestine (perhaps at Capernaum, or maybe Jerusalem, in the 30s, 40s and 50s CE), it obviously has significant historical value.

Other potential sources for recovering the history of Jesus include the Pauline epistles, the sayings *Gospel of Thomas*, the special traditions found only in Matthew or in Luke, the *Secret Gospel of Mark*, the so-called *Signs Gospel* which may have been a source for John, the apocryphal *Gospel of Peter* or its presumed precursor dubbed the *Cross Gospel*, any of the other apocryphal gospels, several of the Apostolic Fathers, and Josephus' *Antiquities of the Judeans* and *Wars of the Judeans*.

While Paul's letters antedate the gospels, they contain such scanty references to Jesus' life—his crucifixion and resurrection, of course, plus the Last Supper tradition—that they can provide little data for evaluating his public ministry.

Although some maintain that *Thomas*, *Secret Mark* and *Gospel of Peter* are early sources, perhaps earlier than the Synoptics, this is not a widely held opinion. The Apostolic Fathers and the later apocryphal gospels may occasionally help to confirm items in the synoptic tradition, but it is doubtful that they can add much of substance to the overall picture of Jesus.

Josephus is valuable not so much for the *Testimonium Flavianum* (*Ant.* 18.3.63-64) which mentions Jesus and "the tribe of Christians [who] are not extinct at this day," as he is for his insights into the social and political milieu of Galilee and Judea in the first century CE.

Consequently our picture of Jesus will privilege Mark and Q as our main sources<sup>1</sup>. These two are the earliest more or less reliable deposits of the traditions which Jesus' earliest followers compiled. Although these traditions were likely shaped and altered in their telling and retelling and later in their editing and redacting, they offer the basis for a reasonably

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<sup>1</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, citations will be from *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; R. J. Miller, ed.; Pleridge Press; San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1992 & 1994). Q material will be referenced as Q<sup>L</sup> if it is from Luke or as Q<sup>M</sup> if from Matthew.

consistent accounting of Jesus' teaching and praxis. They may not recount his exact words and deeds in explicit detail, but they will bring us to his genuine voice and authentic actions.

### THE NECESSARY CRITERIA

So, second, we need to be clear about the criteria we use to sort out the more authentic from the less reliable traditions.

One criterion is *multiple attestation*. Obviously those items which can be found in several sources are more likely to be authentic than those found in only a single source, even if some of the details do not match up.

So, for example, one tradition of Jesus' last supper with his disciples is in Mark (14:22-25) and paralleled in Matthew (26:26-29), a diverging version is in Luke (22:17-20) and with some variations in Paul (1 Cor 11:23-26), and it may be assumed in John (6:52-59, 13:1-3). While these accounts may be liturgically shaped, they are nevertheless reliable evidence that Jesus was remembered as having shared a final meal with his disciples shortly before his death.

A second criterion is *embarrassment*. If the tradition contains something that may have been embarrassing to the post-Easter Christian community, it is probably authentic.

A prime example is Jesus' baptism at the hands of John the Baptist. Although John's ministry was significant in its own right (cf. Acts 19:3-4) Christian tradition largely reduced his role to precursor of the Christ.

Mark (1:9-13) recounts Jesus' baptism by John but immediately leads into a heavenly theophany and satanic testings; Matthew (3:13-15) tries to explain away the need for Jesus to be baptized in the first place; Luke (3:21-22) tells the story without even mentioning the baptizer or the Jordan River; and John (1:19-34) retains the Baptist's witness to Jesus but omits the actual baptizing altogether!

If Jesus' baptism by John was a difficulty for early Christians, the fact that the account of this incident was retained attests to its historical reliability.

A third criterion is *discontinuity*. If we are looking for those teachings or actions which marked Jesus as special or unique, one way is to look for those which have no obvious precedence in Judaism and which at the same time would not have been the invention of the later Christian community.

Jesus' injunction to "love your enemy" (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:27 & 35 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:44) is a prime example. It is clearly not

based on anything in the Jewish scriptures, nor is it repeated in the Christian writings. The fact that it is retained in the gospel records makes it highly probable that it is a genuine command of the historical Jesus.

The problem with discontinuity, however, is that it highlights only those features which would have made Jesus distinctive and which would therefore distance him from his historical environment.

So a fourth criterion is *linguistic and cultural authenticity*. We would expect the things Jesus said and did to find a natural fit within his specific social context. No one doubts that he spoke Aramaic and that his environment was late second temple Pales-tinian Judaism. Therefore, those quotations which appear to derive from the Aramaic language have a higher probability of reflecting Jesus' own voice.

His use of "Amen, I tell you" to introduce many of his sayings, and his way of referring to God as "Abba," clearly reproduce Aramaic usage. Incidents which require a Jewish context, such as debates over kosher food practices (e.g. Mark 2:23-26, 7:1-5; Q<sup>L</sup> 11:39 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23:25) are more likely to be authentic.

On the other hand, sayings which can only have been composed in Greek are unlikely to have originated with Jesus.

A clear example would be his conversation with Nicodemus in John (3:3-4). The Greek term *anōthen* can mean either "from above" or "again." Jesus says, "You must be born *from above*." Nicodemus imagines this would require reentering the womb to be "born *again*." The misunderstanding in this play on words can only be replicated in Greek, not in Aramaic, which eliminates this from consideration as an authentic saying.

A fifth criterion is *coherence*. Many items which do not pass the tests of the first four criteria may nevertheless be historical, particularly if they are compatible with other data which *does* have a high degree of historical probability.

Thus, for example, the parable of the mustard seed appears both in Mark (4:30-32) and in Q (Q<sup>L</sup> 13:18-19 // Q<sup>M</sup> 13:31-32) as well as *Thomas* (20) and clearly fits within Jesus' Palestinian Jewish environment; it is an authentic piece of the Jesus tradition.

The parable of the weeds among the wheat appears only in Matthew (13:24-30) and in a later abbreviated version in *Thomas* (57). Nevertheless, because it is so similar in tone and imagery with the other seed parables in Mark and Q, it too has a higher degree of historical probability.

A sixth criterion is *orality*. Because anecdotes about Jesus and remembrances of his sayings were

passed on for decades by word of mouth before they were reduced to writing, those materials which bear the marks of oral tradition are more likely to reflect the words and deeds of Jesus himself.

For example, the catena of short sayings in Mark (9:42-50), which seem strung together more by catch-words than by logical progression, is typical of the way items are collected and remembered in oral cultures.

A seventh criterion is *rejection*. While the other six criteria might be used to evaluate the evidence for any historical figure, this one is specific to Jesus research.

In contrast to the biographies of other ancient people, the gospels devote an inordinate amount of space to the events leading up to Jesus' death. He suffered a violent death, apparently at the instigation of Judean leaders, but certainly at the hands of Roman officials. Material which helps understand why he was perceived as a threat to them will be valued as a necessary component of the historical Jesus.

For example, his famous retort, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12:17), is embedded in an anecdote which reflects the opposition he provoked from his peers.

These criteria have proven more valuable for identifying which specific *logia* are backed by sufficient historical evidence that they can be counted as authentic sayings of Jesus himself. On this basis "love your enemies," as we said, easily qualifies; "you must be born again" does not. The criteria are less useful for singling out detailed actions that would have occurred at a specific time and place.

Rather, they tend to identify typical actions—the kind of things Jesus probably did repeatedly—without necessarily concluding that any one specific account is historically accurate.

That Jesus was an exorcist who healed demoniacs, for example, is nearly beyond dispute; that all the details about the possessed man at Gerasa are historically accurate may be in some doubt. So with this caveat in place, it is fair to repeat that Mark and Q can yield the historical core of Jesus' teaching and praxis. While they may not always reveal his exact words and deeds in explicit detail, they will allow us to hear his genuine voice and witness his authentic actions.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Now third, in addition to gaining clarity about the sources of our evidence for studying the historical

Jesus and the criteria scholars use for assessing those sources, we also need to explore the cultural context in which Jesus lived. We need to locate him more precisely geographically and historically and socially.

Jesus spent almost all of his life within the territory of lower Galilee, with occasional excursions beyond the borders.

As a result of the Maccabean movement 150 years previously, Galilee had been largely resettled by Jews from the south. In Jesus' day the territory—both the mountainous upper Galilee and the agricultural lower Galilee, as well as portions of the Golan heights—was under the rule of Herod Antipas. It formed a largely homogeneous Jewish cultural island surrounded by non-Jewish lands, with Phoenicia to the north, the Decapolis to the east, and Samaria to the south.

Antipas' building projects included establishing Hellenistic cities such as Sepphoris in the central valley and Tiberias on the western shore of Lake Gennesaret. Nevertheless, the smaller villages and countryside were apparently not heavily impacted by Greco-Roman customs and cultural values.

Neither Mark nor the other Synoptics mention any major Galilean cities, but they do name Nazareth (just four miles southeast of Sepphoris) as Jesus' hometown, and Capernaum (only ten or eleven miles north of Tiberias on the coast of Lake Gennesaret) as the center of his public activities. This suggests his ministry was in some ways in counter-cultural reaction to the extensive socio-economic changes brought by Antipas' urbanization projects.

Galilee was integrated within the Roman Empire as a client state. Judea to the south, however, was officially a province ruled directly by a governor or procurator, Pontius Pilate. Pilate answered to Vitellius, the Roman legate to Syria, and Vitellius answered directly to Emperor Tiberius.

The capital of the province, with Pilate's headquarters, was located at Caesarea Maritima up the coast on the Mediterranean Sea. This seaport had been constructed by Antipas' father, Herod the Great—with an artificial harbor large enough to contain the entire Roman fleet!—after Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) gave him the town following the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. At the time, he ruled all of Palestine as a puppet of the Romans, who allowed him the title "King of the Jews."

The center of Jewish life, however, was at Jerusalem in the southern central highlands and focused on the temple which Herod the Great began to renovate in grandiose style in 20 BCE (a project which was not completed until 62 CE).

The religious and political life of the Judean state was largely under the control of the family of the high priests, including Annas (6-15 CE) and his son-in-law Joseph Caiaphas (18-36/37 CE), and the aristocratic party of the Sadducees. Because the high priests were appointed and deposed by the Roman legate, their self-interest naturally meant that they collaborated with the imperial occupational forces.

Scholars refer to Jesus' socio-political context with the terms "peasantry," "patriarchal," "patronage" and "purity."

First, the *peasant society* of first-century Palestine, also called a "pre-industrial agrarian society," was marked by major economic disparities between the growing number of urban elites who controlled much of the land and the rural peasants who worked the fields and orchards.

The Jewish territories, in turn, were integrated within the Roman Empire, which was organized around a slave-based tributary mode of production. In both cases, wealth was taken from the peasants and slaves who produced the agricultural income and in some cases manufactured marketable products; their value was then redistributed through taxes and rents to benefit the wealthy elite who controlled the political processes.

Today we tend to diagram modern American social strata in the shape of a diamond, with a small upper class near the top, an equally small lower class at the bottom, and a large and broad middle class with ample opportunity for upward mobility in the center.

In ancient times, however, the diagram would have been in the shape of a triangle. At the top was a small governing class of high officials and aristocrats.

In Galilee these were large landholders and the Herodian court; in Judea, the high priestly families at Jerusalem. Immediately below them was a service class of retainers, which included military and government officials, bureaucrats, scribes, tax collectors, lower clergy in the priestly classes, and merchants.

Together the elite and their retainers accounted for some ten percent of the population. The lower ninety percent—whose prospects included the potential for downward mobility due to indebtedness, but little opportunity for upward movement—included the peasant farmers themselves, artisans (who were often peasants who had lost their land), and the degraded or expendable types (such as bandits, beggars and prostitutes).

Guesstimates of imperial taxes, temple tithes and sharecrop rentals suggest that as much as sixty to seventy percent of all agricultural income produced by

the peasant class was appropriated by the upper-class urban elite.

In this context Jesus would have been a lower-level peasant, one of the *amme ha-aretz*, the "people of the land." His occupation as a *tektōn* according to Mark (6:3), most likely a wood-worker or carpenter who cobbled furniture and small implements, would have marked him as a non-landed artisan who depended on the good will of his neighbors for employment as a day-laborer. He would have known poverty, but was not (yet) destitute.

In this setting his stories about dry-dirt farming (Mk 4:3-9) and antagonism toward absentee landlords (Mk 12:1-9) would have rung true. The blessings he pronounced upon those who are poor, hungry and grieving, as well as his curses on those who are rich, satiated and laughing (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:20-21, 24-25) likewise reflect the lower-class peasant perspective of his auditors.

Second, both first-century Judaism in particular and the Greco-Roman world in general were also *patriarchal societies*, that is, they were male-dominated hierarchical cultures. In a word, the men ruled; a woman's place was defined in terms of her familial relationship as the daughter, sister, wife or mother of some man. The patriarchal family was a microcosm of the entire society, and the man's place within the larger culture was determined largely by his relationship with others as a client or as a patron.

Jesus' decision to leave his home town of Nazareth and make Capernaum his headquarters (where he perhaps had a home? cf. Mk 1:21, 2:1 & 15v1), his seemingly less than cordial relationship with his mother and siblings (Mk 3:20-22), his promises that his followers will gain new family relationships (Mk 3:31-35, 10:28-30), plus his claim that "the son of Adam has nowhere to rest his head" (Q<sup>L</sup> 9:58 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:20) are all counter-cultural in this respect.

In a society which identified males in terms of their home place, Jesus intentionally removed himself from being identified in those terms.

Third, the *patronage system* was the glue that held the political and economic structures together. Theoretically everyone—except perhaps for a few at the very top or the very bottom—functioned within a web of patron-client relationships where they depended upon the goodwill of a benefactor who provided social and economic resources and who expected appropriate responses of gratitude and loyalty.

A provincial governor, for example, as a "client" was expected to send tribute to the "patron" emperor who had appointed him. The governor in turn became

the patron of regional tax officials who collected the tolls on commerce and the taxes on crops. The tax collectors likely had their own network of clients, namely the local merchants and landowners whose prosperity depended upon a stable social order.

A patriarchal society with a network of patron-client relationships has built within it a penchant for oppression, both for women whose worth depends upon androcentric values, as well as for peasants who struggle to exist at the bottom of the patron-client chain.

In this context, the report in Mark (15:41) that women “had regularly followed and assisted [Jesus] when he was in Galilee” is significant, not only because Jesus’ entourage included females, but also because they played the role of patrons with Jesus and his male disciples as clients!

Jesus’ cavalier rejection of his own family relationships (Mk 3:31-35; cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 11:27-28) and requirements that his disciples “hate your own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters” (Q<sup>L</sup> 14:26) must be understood not so much as a rejection of “family values” but more as a reaction to oppressive *patriarchal* family systems.

Fourth, first-century Jewish Palestine was a *purity society*, that is, its core values or taboos were centered on the polarity between what is “clean” *versus* what is “unclean,” between the “holy” and the “profane.”

The purity paradigm was constitutive of social and political values and formed the basis for distinguishing the relative value of Jews *vs.* Gentiles, males *vs.* females, rich *vs.* poor, healthy and whole *vs.* sick or maimed, and the like.

The law of Moses and the temple at Jerusalem were the two foci around which the purity ethic was centered. Thus the Torah spelled out the distinctions between clean and unclean, particularly in regard to kosher dietary restrictions, medical conditions, and ethical taboos.

And at the center of Judean life stood the “holy of holies” in the temple, with concentric circles of lesser and lesser purity radiating outwards: the court of Israel, the court of women, the city of Jerusalem, the land of Judea, the territory of Galilee, and the Gentile nations beyond the borders of “the holy land.”

Jesus’ invective against those Pharisees who “clean the outside of cups and dishes but inside are full of greed and evil” (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:39 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23:25) and Mark’s anecdote (7:1-5) about the disciples eating with unwashed hands must be seen as reactions against the purity ethic. The story of the leper whom Jesus made clean (Mk 1:40-46) is striking in this

regard. On the one hand, it attests his unmediated ability to effect the cleansing; on the other hand, it seems to affirm the need to have the cure approved by the priestly authorities.

To the degree that we understand the cultural contexts of Jesus’ career—as part of the peasant classes, within a patriarchal patronage society, intertwined with purity values—we will be better able to assess the gospel narratives. The values we bring to our reading as modern middle-class North American auditors—with biases toward individual autonomy, a right to privacy, success-oriented achievement, the privatization of religion, respect for education, and the like—make it difficult for us to appreciate the first-century orientation of the biblical story.

In other words, we tend to see in the texts what we are used to seeing in our world. Attention to the geographical and historical and social dimensions of his world are valuable for reading those texts with integrity, and they are necessary for authentic Jesus research.

#### SOME TENTATIVE CONCLUSIONS

One of the results of such research is a catalogue of historical statements about Jesus that most scholars can affirm with a high degree of probability.

The key term is “probability.” Historians shy away from insisting that their conclusions are “certainly true because they are based on unassailable facts.” Rather, they recognize that important issues are rarely that clear cut and that even the best evidence can often be interpreted in more than one way. So they aim for the “most probable” understanding of the data.

Imagine a scale with these degrees:

CERTAIN  
PROBABLE  
POSSIBLE  
UNLIKELY  
IMPOSSIBLE

In the case of Jesus, only normal human and biological statements could be safely labeled “certain”: He was born; he breathed; he ate and drank and slept, etc.; he died.

At the other end, one could list statements that are clearly “impossible”: He did *not* literally and physically walk on top of water; he did *not* magically transform 750 gallons of water into vintage wine, etc.

What follows is a list of statements that the bulk of scholars doing historical Jesus research could affirm as highly probable:

- Jesus was Jewish, a product of rural village life in lower Galilee.
- He was born ca. 6-4 BCE near the end of the reign of Herod the Great (40-4 BCE), during the time Caesar Augustus ruled the Roman Empire (27 BCE-14 CE).
- He was raised in Nazareth by Mary and Joseph, and he had four brothers and at least two sisters.
- Either he or Joseph was a wood-worker, and therefore of the lower strata of the peasant class.
- He probably spoke Aramaic, might possibly have known some Greek, and *maybe* was literate.
- At age 30 or thereabouts he left his family home; he never married.
- He was baptized by John, an ascetic prophet, and was possibly a follower of the Baptist for a time.
- He made his home in Capernaum, on the northern shore of Lake Gennesaret.
- He enlisted a group of follower-disciples who accompanied him on an itinerant ministry through the villages and countryside (apparently not in the cities) of Galilee during the period when Herod Antipas was tetrarch of the region (4 BCE-39 CE).
- He was a teacher whose message centered on the nearness, perhaps even the presence, of the empire of God.
- He did *not* make messianic or semi-divine claims for himself, but he *may* have had a self-understanding as an envoy of God, whom he pictured as a loving father, as *Abba*.
- His teachings included striking aphorisms and parabolic riddles.
- He was (known as) a healer, who dispensed the blessing of health without praying.
- He was also (known as) an exorcist, who expelled demonic spirits without using incantations.
- He attracted a following of socially marginal people, whom he re-socialized into a “family” or “household” of God’s people.
- He encouraged his followers to practice table fellowship without regard for kosher customs of food preparation and sharing.
- His opponents included members of the Pharisaic party, even though he shared some of their beliefs.
- He and his followers traveled to Jerusalem for Passover ca. the year 30 CE.
- He instigated a disturbance in the temple precincts, a symbolic desecration of the site.
- He shared a final meal with his closest disciples.
- He was arrested and interrogated by the temple authorities, including the high priest.
- He was arraigned before Pontius Pilate, the Roman prefect of Judea (26-36 CE), and executed by crucifixion in the spring of 30 CE.

Jesus’ resurrection is conspicuous by its absence from this list. Most scholars, when speaking strictly as critical historians, maintain that there is insufficient evidence to affirm the resurrection as a historical *factum*.

Furthermore, the physical impossibility of such an “event” removes it from the realm of items that can even be assessed as historical. Some maintain the same stance in regard to Jesus’ alleged miracles; hence the parenthetical caveats regarding his healings and exorcisms.

But even if we hold that reports of miraculous events are referring to non-historical or, at best, a-historical phenomena, the evidence is clear nearly to the level of certainty that Jesus’ contemporaries perceived him to be a wonder-worker of some sort.

Furthermore, it is obvious that his earliest followers, including his closest disciples, early on maintained that he had been raised from the dead, and based on that belief they initiated a movement which grew and spread beyond their borders.

The preceding list of historically probable assertions about Jesus gives only a skeletal outline of his career. Fortunately, more evidence is available which can fill in the picture and give a more credible portrait of his personality and praxis.

Some scholars try to fasten on a single angle or focus by which they can appreciate the whole of his life. It is as though they were looking for *the* key to his identity. However, the one thing we learn from the synoptic tradition is that his identity is always something other than what people surmise!

So we may be better off if, instead of looking for a single characterization, we intentionally observe three or four dimensions of Jesus and consider how they interact to form the totality of his life and work.

This will leave open more possibilities for appreciating his impact on human history without closing off any one option. Specifically, Jesus was a teacher, he was a healer, and he was a leader. These three

aspects must lead to a fourth, namely, that he was executed as a terrorist .

### JESUS AS A PROVOCATIVE SAGE

The evidence is clear that Jesus was a teacher. In Mark he is addressed sixteen times as “teacher,” and another dozen times he is described as “teaching.” And by its very nature, of course, the Q document is almost entirely teaching material with a minimum of narrative framing. His teachings fall into three broad, somewhat overlapping categories: aphorisms, parables, and sermons.

**Aphorisms** are short one-line pronouncements such as “the sabbath day was created for Adam and Eve, not Adam and Eve for the sabbath day” (Mk 2:27) or “leave the dead to bury their own dead” (Q<sup>L</sup> 7:60 // Q<sup>M</sup> 9:21).

Often these gnomic fragments are embedded in brief anecdotes known as *chreiai* in the Greco-Roman world. These popular ancient literary forms recount a particularly apt or witty reply on the part of a notable person, a saying which is characteristic of the speaker’s personality.

Sometimes the narrative settings were elaborated into longer stories which conveyed something of the background for the pronouncement. In Mark, Jesus’ remarks on eating with tax assessors (2:15-17) or with unwashed hands (7:1-23), on fasting (2:18-22), on plucking grain on the sabbath (2:23-28) and on paying taxes to Caesar (12:13-17) are all extended *chreiai*.

Likewise, his threat that “this evil generation” will receive no warning “except the sign of Jonah” is contained in a minimally narrated *chreia* (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:16, 29-30 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:38-40).

Proverbs are similar to aphorisms in that they, too, are short, one-line sayings. The Markan tradition contains a half-dozen examples of such maxims: about how sick, not healthy people need a physician (2:17); how one does not store new wine in old skins (2:22); how a house burglar must first tie up its owner (3:27); how one does not place a lamp under a basket or bed (4:21, cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 11:33 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:15); how a prophet is honored everywhere except in his home town (6:4); and how those who are not for you are against you (9:40).

The sayings tradition also includes proverbs: about how the blind cannot lead the blind (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:39 // Q<sup>M</sup> 15:14); how students are not better than their teacher (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:40 // Q<sup>M</sup> 10:24); how good trees do not produce rotten fruit (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:43 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:17); how people are worth more than birds (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:24 // Q<sup>M</sup> 6:26); how

“what you treasure is your heart’s true measure” (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:34 // Q<sup>M</sup> 6:21).

The bulk of Jesus’ one-liners, however, are more like aphorisms than like proverbs, and the distinction is important for understanding his teaching role.

Proverbs express the kind of collective wisdom which is based on ancestral authority, while aphorisms convey personal insights which are based on one’s individual authority. Proverbs summarize the rules and expectations of conventional wisdom. Aphorisms, on the other hand, use paradox and hyperbole, contradiction and exaggeration. Their forceful and imaginative language challenges our normal perspective; they force us to reevaluate our assumptions and to make decisions.

Aphoristic speech challenges us to reassess Jesus’ *character* more than it leads us to focus on the *content* of his speech.

A representative catalogue of Jesus’ more provocative aphorisms in Mark would include the following: “By trying to save your own life, you’re going to lose it,” and *vice versa* (8:35); “If your hand gets you into trouble, cut it off,” (9:43); “Salt is good—if salt becomes bland, with what will you renew it?” (9:50, cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 14:34 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:13); “Whoever blasphemes against the holy spirit is never forgiven,” (3:28, cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 12:10 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:32); “It’s easier for a camel to squeeze through a needle’s eye than for a wealthy person to get into God’s domain,” (10:25); and “Pay the emperor what belongs to the emperor, and God what belongs to God” (12:17).

The sayings gospel includes items like these: “Don’t pass judgment, and you won’t be judged,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:37 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:1); “The mouth gives voice to what the heart is full of,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:45 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:34); “Among those born of women none is greater than John; yet the least in God’s domain is greater than he,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 7:28 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:11); “Which of you fathers would hand his son a snake when it’s fish he’s asking for?” (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:11 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:10); “Don’t get the idea that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace but a sword,” (Q<sup>M</sup> 10:34 // Q<sup>L</sup> 12:51); “There’ll be weeping and grinding teeth out there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in God’s domain and yourselves thrown out,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 13:28 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:12); and “To everyone who has, more will be given; and from those who don’t have, even what they do have will be taken away,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 19:26 // Q<sup>M</sup> 25:29).

In sum, Jesus’ aphorisms have an edge to them; they continue to affect us in much the same way they must have challenged and provoked his original auditors. The same is true for his parables.



*Parables* are the most characteristic feature of Jesus' teaching. While others, both in the Jewish world and in the Hellenistic environment, used *meshalim*, comparisons, fables, illustrative anecdotes and the like to embellish their teaching, none of these exactly match Jesus' use of parables. Some maintain that studying his parables is the quickest entree into contact with the historical Jesus himself.

The old Sunday School definition of a parable as "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" is clearly inadequate, of course. However one may view Jesus' parables, they are not mere homey anecdotes told to illustrate deeper theological truths.

Rather, they are striking metaphors which tease their auditors' imaginations and force them to make a decision. In large measure they may account for the impact of his personality, which some obviously admired and which others apparently detested.

The effect of the parables is due in large part to the way Jesus tells them. He starts his story innocently enough, with an ordinary, even innocuous introduction: "A farmer went out to sow his seed," "A man had two sons," "If you had a hundred sheep and lost one," etc. But before he finishes, he introduces an anomaly (he "ups the ante") and gives the story a twist (he throws in a "zinger") and forces us to think about what has happened and to decide on (we have to "vote" for or against) what we have heard.

Consider one of the best attested examples, the parable of the mustard seed, which appears in three traditions, Mark, Q and *Thomas*.

How should we compare the empire of God? Or in what parable can we put it? It is like a grain of mustard. When sown upon the ground it is smallest of all the seeds upon the ground. But after it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the other shrubs. And it puts out such large branches that the birds of the sky are able to nest in its shade! (Mk 4:30-32, my translation; cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 13:18-19 // Q<sup>M</sup> 13:31-32, *Thomas* 20)

The anecdote begins with a disarmingly simple detail: a small seed planted in a garden. Technically, there are some seeds smaller than mustard, and mustard bushes normally grow at the edge of a garden where they can reach heights of six to twelve feet. They are fast-growing self-seeding annuals, with hollow reedy stems not suited for nesting.

So when Jesus employed a bit of hyperbole to suggest that God's domain is like an over-sized mustard bush which can provide a shady spot for a bird's

nest, he must have unsettled his hearers and provoked them into rethinking their presuppositions.

This is no "little acorns into mighty oaks" story; God's empire is not being compared to one of the cedars of Lebanon. This is the kind of story that resonates best with a lower-class peasant population, for whom an empire of more humble dimensions might be more inviting.

At the risk of forsaking the historical for the homiletical, we can try to imagine how this sort of anecdote would translate into contemporary terms. Try this:

How does God work today? It is like a Geo Metro, an OK little car in December when it rolled off the assembly line in Detroit. It drove around as well as could be expected during the winter. But by the end of February it had placed third in the Daytona 500!

The parable is preposterous, of course. If your vehicle of choice is one of those over-priced gas-guzzling Suburban Assault Vehicles, you would find it ludicrous. And you would reject it out of hand.

But if all you can afford is a rusty ten-year-old Chevy Impala, it might be attractive. Life isn't like that, of course, but don't you wish it could be? The idea would intrigue you, and you would embrace it. And you would welcome both the story and the storyteller. In all likelihood, that is the kind of attention Jesus attracted by telling stories such as the mustard bush.

Mark only includes three more such parables: the sower and soils (4:3-8), the automatic growth of the seed (4:26-29), and the vintners who killed the owner's son (12:1-11). In addition to the mustard seed, the Sayings Gospel contains the wise and foolish builders (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:448-49 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:24-27), the rich farmer (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:16-21), the leaven (Q<sup>L</sup> 13:20-21 // Q<sup>M</sup> 13:33), the great feast (Q<sup>L</sup> 14:16-24 // Q<sup>M</sup> 22:1-10), the lost sheep (Q<sup>L</sup> 15:4-7 // Q<sup>M</sup> 18:12-13), the lost coin (Q<sup>L</sup> 15:8-10), and the money entrusted to slaves (Q<sup>L</sup> 19:12-26 // Q<sup>M</sup> 25:14-30).

Many of Jesus' most familiar and characteristic parables are found in one of the other gospels. Only Luke, for example, has the good Samaritan (10:5-27), the prodigal son (15:11-32), the unjust manager (16:1-8), the rich man and Lazarus (16:19-31), and the unjust judge (18:2-8).

Only Matthew contains the dragnet (13:47-50), the unforgiving slave (18:23-35), the workers in the vineyard (20:1-16), the ten maidens (25:1-13), and the sheep and goats (25:31-46).

Each of these stories contain characteristic features of Jesus' parables: an innocuous beginning, a twist in the plot, and an implied call to decision. This is in keeping with the unconventional and provocative style of his teaching.

**Sermons** in the synoptic and Q sources are not so much rhetorically structured addresses as they are collections of aphorisms, parables and other pronouncements. In Mark they include the parable discourse (4:1-34) and the so-called Little Apocalypse (13:3-37).

In Luke, Q material is gathered in the inaugural sermon at Nazareth (4:14/21-30), the Sermon on the Plain (6:17/20-46), the teachings on the journey (12:1-59) and the temple discourse (21:5-36). In Matthew, Q materials make up much of the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-7:27), the missionary instructions (10:5-42), the parables chapter (13:1-52), the community ordinances (18:1-35), and the apocalyptic collection (23:1-25:46).

These collections or sermons contain a mixture of wisdom sayings focused on the present plus apocalyptic sayings focused on the future. One of the controversial issues bedeviling current research revolves around which is more original, which is more authentic to Jesus.

According to some, the wisdom material is more basic. In this case—as the aphorisms sampled above suggest—Jesus stands in the tradition of those Jewish sages who propounded an alternative to the conventional wisdom of the scribal schools. He would have had more in common with the books of Job and Ecclesiastes than with Proverbs, Ben Sirach and Wisdom of Solomon.

According to others, the judgmental and apocalyptic materials are more basic, in which case Jesus stands in the tradition of the Hebrew prophets, such as Amos, Hosea, Jeremiah and Joel.

Samples from Mark include: “The time is up! God’s imperial rule is closing in. Change your ways, and put your trust in the good news,” (1:14); “The day will come when the groom is taken away from them, and then they will fast, on that day,” (2:20); and “If any of you are ashamed of me and my message in this adulterous and sinful generation, of you the son of Adam will likewise be ashamed when he comes in his Father’s glory accompanied by holy angels,” (8:38).

Also: “Many of the first will be last, and of the last many will be first,” (10:31, cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 13:30 // Q<sup>M</sup> 20:16); “Those who hold out to the end will be saved,” (13:13); and “Then they will see the son of Adam coming on the clouds with great power and splendor,” (13:26, cf. 14:62).

The sayings source also includes a number of

items of prophetic judgment, often nuanced with apocalyptic images: “Damn you rich! You already have your consolation,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:24); “The standard you apply will be the standard applied to you,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:38 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:2); “On [judgment] day Sodom will be better off than that town,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 10:12 // Q<sup>M</sup> 10:15); and “Don’t fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; instead, you ought to fear the one who can destroy both the soul and the body in Gehenna,” (Q<sup>M</sup> 10:28 // Q<sup>L</sup> 12:4-5).

Also: “Struggle to get in through the narrow door; many will try to get in, but won’t be able,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 13:24 // Q<sup>M</sup> 7:13); “On that night there will be two on one couch: one will be taken and the other left,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 17:34 // Q<sup>M</sup> 24:40); and “To everyone who has, more will be given; and from those who don’t have, even what they do have will be taken away,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 19:26 // Q<sup>M</sup> 25:29).

In either case, whether we view him against a wisdom or a prophetic-apocalyptic background, we will find Jesus is a provocative and challenging teacher, not at all lackluster or conventional. Can we be more specific?

Some who emphasize wisdom antecedents argue that he was a **rabbi**. Rabbi, of course, places him squarely within his Jewish milieu.

On several occasions, in fact, Mark refers to Jesus as “rabbi” (9:5, 10:51, 11:21, 14:45). In this gospel he displays a rabbi’s familiarity with the Jewish scriptures and can easily reference several stories: David and Abiathar (1 Sam 21:1-7, in 2:25-26), Adam and Eve (Gen 1:27 & 2:24, in 10:608), the Ten Commandments (Ex 20:12-16, in 10:19), and Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:6, in 12:26).

Furthermore, in the give and take with his disciples and with his opponents he freely quotes specific biblical passages: Isaiah’s warnings about not seeing (Is 6:9-10, in 4:12), about empty worship (Is 29:13, in 7:6-7), and about the temple (Is 56:7, in 11:17), the Psalm verses about a rejected stone (Ps 118:22-23, in 12:10-11) and the Messiah of David (Ps 110:1, in 12:36), the Great Shema and the command to love one’s neighbor (Dt 6:4-5 & Lev 19:18, in 12:29-31), and a prophecy about a stricken shepherd (Zech 13:7, in 14:27).

Only twice does the Q document report direct quotations from the scriptures: Jesus’ rejoinders to satanic testings (Dt 8:3 & 6:16, in Q<sup>L</sup> 4:4-12 // Q<sup>M</sup> 4:4-10) and his reference to John the Baptizer (Mal 3:1, in Q<sup>L</sup> 7:27 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:10). In addition he refers to stories about Jonah (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:29 & 32 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:39-41), Solomon (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:31 & 12:27 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:42 & 6:29), Abel and Zechariah (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:51 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:35), Noah (Q<sup>L</sup> 17:26-27

// Q<sup>M</sup> 24:37-39), and Lot (Q<sup>L</sup> 17:28-29).

But if Jesus was a rabbi, some aspects of his style seem out of character. The common practice was for aspiring students to seek out a teacher and petition to join his school. Jesus, according to Mark, did just the opposite; he summoned students to follow him (1:16-20).

Whereas rabbis customarily were located in one place, likely their home or synagogue, Jesus was an itinerant and his disciples literally followed him around the countryside.

Furthermore, according to evidence in the later Talmud, rabbis were adept at preserving, extending and applying Jewish tradition. Often their teachings began in this fashion: “Rabbi So-and-So said this, but Rabbi Such-and-Such said that. . . .”

Jesus, however, never engaged in that sort of dialogue. He apparently preferred a straightforward “Amen, I tell you,” which may in part account for the editorial note that the people “were astonished at his teaching, since he would teach them on his own authority, unlike the scholars,” (Mk 1:22).

Jesus’ transient style of ministry coupled with his aphoristic style of teaching have led others to argue that he was a *Cynic* philosopher.

The Cynic movement originated with Diogenes of Sinope in the fourth century BCE, but enjoyed a revival during the first century CE. Popular accounts pictured Cynics as lower-class vagabonds whose costumes featured a simple cloak, wallet and staff and whose life-style eschewed the comforts and conventions of polite society.

Cynics preached a message which encouraged others to live freely, unencumbered by care and ambition.

According to both Mark (6:7-11) and Q (Q<sup>L</sup> 10:3-11 // Q<sup>M</sup> 10:9-14) Jesus instructed his disciples to travel lightly: no knapsack, food, sandals or extra shirt. Like beggars, they were to depend on the gifts of others to sustain them, and to shake off the dust from any village that would not welcome them.

Jesus’ one-liners are similar to the Cynic variety which featured clever verbal escapes from embarrassing or potentially compromising situations. His humorous exaggeration about a camel going through a needle’s eye (Mk 10:25), the clever way he stumped his interlocutors in connection with Caesar’s coin (Mk 12:17), and his abrupt dismissal of a potential follower who wanted to bury his father (Q<sup>L</sup> 9:59-60 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:21-22) are examples of his Cynic-like retorts.

In addition to an itinerant life-style and pithy rejoinders, we could list other parallels between Jesus

and the Cynics. Both professed a sense of being called by God; were unencumbered by spouse or children; were intent on “saving” others from life’s afflictions; lived at the margins of society; were opposed by the cultural elites, etc.

But beyond such general similarities, there is nothing that compels us to conclude that the historical Jesus was in fact a Jewish Cynic. Although Hellenism was rapidly encroaching upon the Galilean social scene in his day, there is little or no evidence that Cynics were present anywhere in that cultural milieu.

It is possible that the author of Mark, writing in Greek, chose to picture Jesus with Cynic-like traits in order to appeal to a cultural pattern familiar to his original Greek-speaking audience. In any event, we would be hard pressed to prove that a Jewish Jesus can best be understood on the basis of a Greco-Roman model like the Cynics.

Some contend that Jesus can better be understood as a Jewish *prophet*. Not all are agreed on whether the description can be narrowed more specifically. Was he an “ethical prophet”? A “social prophet”? A “millenarian prophet”? An “apocalyptic prophet”?

Common to all of the classical prophets in the Hebrew scriptures was a pattern of judgment and salvation. The ancient *nebiim* regularly berated their compatriots and their leaders for mistreating each other and forsaking their proper worship of Yahweh.

They insisted if they did not repent the Lord God would punish them, whether by foreign armies or by natural disasters or by supernatural catastrophes. And they promised that in the end a remnant would be saved and restored to the land.

Many of Jesus’ teachings fit easily within the mold of prophetic denunciation, especially his invective against the temple. In the closing chapters of Mark, his symbolic desecration of the temple (11:15-18), his antagonistic attitude toward the temple authorities (11:27-33), his thinly veiled parable of the vintners (12:1-11), his controversies with the various temple factions (12:13-40) and his prediction of the temple’s destruction (13:2, cf. 14:58) clearly coincide with a classic prophetic role.

The Q document, which is set entirely in Galilee, does not contain anti-temple material, but its indictment of Jerusalem—“You murder the prophets and stone those sent to you!” (Q<sup>L</sup> 13:34 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23: 37)—shares the same anti-establishment attitude.

Prophetic judgment also characterizes the tone of many of Jesus’ other pronouncements. Mark’s gospel includes: “I did not come to enlist religious folks but sinners,” (2:17); “On the sabbath day is it permitted to

do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?” (3:4); “You have set aside God’s commandment and hold fast to human tradition,” (7:8); “You still haven’t got the point, have you? Are you just dense?” (8:17); “You distrustful lot, how long must I associate with you?” (9:19); and “[Moses] gave you this injunction [permitting divorce] because you are obstinate,” (10:5).

The sayings tradition also contains its share of judgmental role-reversals: “Damn you legal experts too!” (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:46); “You know the lay of the land and can read the face of the sky, so why don’t you know how to interpret the present time?” (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:56 // Q<sup>M</sup> 16:3); “Those who promote themselves will be demoted, and those who demote themselves will be promoted,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 14:11 & 18:14 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23:12); “It’s inevitable that snares will be set; nevertheless, damn the one who sets them,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 17:1 // Q<sup>M</sup> 18:7); and “[You will] be seated on thrones and sit in judgment on the twelve tribes of Israel,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 22:30 // Q<sup>M</sup> 19:28).

Did Jesus anticipate a catastrophic, end time disruption of the cosmos? If so, he would fit naturally as the link between the Baptist’s gloom-and-doom preaching and Paul’s the-end-is-near expectations. Some of Jesus’ apocalyptic imagery would support such a conclusion.

Mark’s so-called “Little Apocalypse” with its images of wars, earthquakes, famines, celestial portents and the like (13:5-37) fits the pattern, as do intimations that the son of Adam will depart (or arrive?) “in his Father’s glory accompanied by holy angels,” (8:38, cf. 14:62).

Q, too, refers to the final judgment and the resurrection. Jesus insists that the villages of Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum will fare less well “at the judgment” than the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon and even Sodom: “You don’t think you’ll be exalted to heaven, do you? No, you’ll go to Hell,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 10:13-15 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:21-24).

Again: “at judgment time” the queen of Sheba and the citizens of Nineveh “will be brought back to life along with the members of this generation” in order to condemn them, (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:31-32 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:41-42). Thus Jesus (like the Pharisees) affirms the resurrection of the dead and an end-time judgment, both features of an apocalyptic scenario.

On balance, the preponderance of the material that pictures Jesus as a prophet places him at the here-and-now pole on the time line, rather than at the then-and-there end.

In other words, his ethical and social pronouncements for the present time are more central to his total

message than are his eschatological and apocalyptic predictions for the future.

Unlike most prophets of whatever stripe, however, Jesus never used the standard oracular formula, “Thus says the Lord.” Instead, as indicated earlier, his preferred formula was “Amen, I tell you.”

Furthermore, neither Mark nor Q specifically identify Jesus as a prophet. Neither the proverbial lack of honor for a hometown prophet (Mk 6:4) nor other people’s erroneous speculation (Mk 6:15, 8:28) make the equation.

Prophets *are* important in the sayings tradition, but there they refer to Jesus’ followers (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:23 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:12; Q<sup>L</sup> 11:47-51 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23:29-32, 34-36; Q<sup>L</sup> 13:34-35 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23:37). They are destined to suffer the same fate as the biblical prophets, namely, persecution and death.

We get the impression that the Q people thought of themselves as persecuted prophets and would likely have interpreted Jesus’ death in the same terms. But this is not quite the same as identifying the historical Jesus as a bonafide prophet.

Ultimately it is all but impossible to decide which of the two Jewish models—rabbi or prophet—is the best descriptor of the historical Jesus. Scholarly consensus is lacking here; in fact, the issue will continue to be hotly debated for the foreseeable future.

In either case, however, Jesus’ teachings were clearly not conventional; they were personally challenging and upsetting of the *status quo*.

We can adopt a broader category—namely, “sage”—to encompass his role as a teacher and purveyor of wisdom, without necessarily implying that Jesus was seen as the incarnation of divine wisdom (cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 7:35 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:19; Q<sup>L</sup> 11:49) or that he was self-consciously “Sophia’s Child.” Rather, we will need to remember that his was an alternative wisdom. Thus we can properly describe him as a *provocative sage*.

#### JESUS AS A COMPASSIONATE SHAMAN

In addition to being a teacher, Jesus was also a healer. Mark contains eighteen miracle stories. Nine are healings: Simon’s feverish mother-in-law (1:29-31); a leper (1:40-45); a paraplegic (2:1-12); a man with a crippled hand (3:1-6); a synagogue president’s daughter (5:21-43); a hemorrhaging woman (5:24-32); a deaf-mute (7:31-37); and two blind men (8:22-26, 10:46-52).

Four are exorcisms: a demoniac in a synagogue at Capernaum (1:21-27); a demoniac in a cemetery at Gerasa (5:1-20); a Syrophenician woman’s daughter

(7:24-30); and a man 's "epileptic" son (9:14-29).

Five are so-called nature miracles: the quieting of a storm on the lake (4:35-41); Jesus' walking across the lake (6:45-52); two extraordinary meals for thousands (6:33-44, 8:1-10); and the shriveling of a fig tree (11:12-14, 20-21).

In addition, Jesus' miracles are mentioned in three summary passages (1:32-34, 39; 3:7-11; 6:53-56) and his disciples' miracles in one (6:7 & 13).

The Sayings Gospel by its very nature includes only two or three narrative passages. One is the healing of the officer's slave (Q<sup>L</sup> 7:1-10 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:5-10, 13). Three other verses (Q<sup>L</sup> 7:22 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:5; Q<sup>L</sup> 10:13 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:21; Q<sup>L</sup> 11:14 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:22) also mention Jesus' miracles, exorcisms, and healings (specifically of blind, lame, leprous, deaf, and dead people).

Stories of miraculous phenomena are notoriously difficult for modern scholars to deal with from a historical perspective. Given what we know about the "immutable laws of nature," how can we deal with these reports?

Are we to maintain that God actually interfered in the world of matter and energy to produce results that would not, could not, otherwise have occurred? If so, could such events even be evaluated according to historical criteria?

Alternatively, are we to imagine that a historical or natural or coincidental event lies behind what was later elaborated into a miracle story?

Although dealing with the actual historicity of Jesus' miraculous healings can be problematical, there can be little doubt that he had a *reputation* as a healer. In other words, the stories of his healings are reliable historical evidence that from early on his followers witnessed healings which they interpreted as miraculous cures. Several other factors may be helpful here:

One is a possible distinction between "disease" *versus* "illness" and between "cure" *versus* "healing." The first in each pair are medical matters. Disease implies the kind of physical disorder that could be diagnosed by a competent physician and then potentially treated and cured through medical science.

Illness here suggests more of an emotional or spiritual malady which could be healed in a way which left a person with a sense of wholeness. (For example, a person with an incurable cancer could nevertheless reach a state of wholeness and well-being.)

Along these lines, we could suppose Jesus was the sort of caring healer who relieved others of their illnesses, without implying that he actually effected miraculous cures of medical diseases.

A second factor to consider is that many of the diseases Jesus' reputedly healed were similar to the kind that can result from what modern psychiatrists would call a case of hysterical blindness or paralysis or an acute mental disorder.

Some sociological studies suggest that such disorders are more prevalent in economically distressed environments and in times of war or military occupation. Along these lines, we could suppose Jesus actually healed disorders of this type without suggesting that they were miraculous cures.

A third factor is that the ancients believed the universe was controlled by an extensive network of demonic forces; rescue from their grip required divine intervention. Jesus' exorcisms, whatever their actual cause and effect, would have been seen as the defeat of demonic powers.

The one passage in Mark (3:20-27) which offers an extended commentary on his miracles insists that he was able to expel demons not because he was allied with them but because he was opposed to them. If the exorcisms provide the symbolic framework for understanding all the miracle stories, then both the cures of sickness and the nature miracles also imply the defeat of inimical forces.

A fourth factor is that stories of miraculous healings were not uncommon in the ancient world. Asclepius, the Greco-Roman god of healing whose popular shrines were scattered throughout the empire, was revered by devotees who believed they had been relieved of such distresses as obstetrical difficulties, internal parasites and diseases, wounds, facial marks, paralysis, blindness, sores, muteness, headaches and even death.

In a similar fashion, Mark's Jesus gave relief from paralysis, blindness, leprosy, muteness, fever, demons, hemorrhaging, hunger and also death.

Apollonius of Tyana (ca. 3 BCE - 98 CE), an itinerant Pythagorean philosopher who traveled with his disciples throughout the ancient world, also was said to effect miraculous cures, especially exorcisms, from time to time.

Two Jewish holy men, Honi the Circle Drawer (ca. 50 BCE) and Hanina ben Dosa (ca. 50 CE), were also reputed to work miracles. The former was adept at bringing rain in times of drought; the latter was a Galilean healer.

When all these considerations are factored in, we are justified in concluding that the historical Jesus was indeed a healer. Whether any of his healings were bonafide miraculous cures may be more difficult—some would say, impossible—to affirm.

But within the cultural expectations of his day it is clear that others regarded him as an agent of divine (or demonic?) healing. Can we be more specific?

Those who maintain that *prophet* is the best descriptor of Jesus observe that he was merely following in the pattern of Elijah and Elisha. The tales of these two ancient prophets in the Jewish scriptures (1 Kings 17 through 2 Kings 8) include miraculous provisions of food and water, a healing of a leper, restoration of dead children and an “apoca-lyptic” departure into heaven, among others.

Those who focus on his ability to cure demoniacs maintain that historically Jesus was an *exorcist*.

Exorcists were familiar figures in the ancient world. Babylonian and Egyptian texts, magical papyri, Tobit, *Jubilees*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Josephus, rabbinic literature, Lucian, Philostratus, the *Genesis Apocryphon*—all contain accounts of the kinds of exorcisms that would have been familiar to Jesus’ contemporaries.

Many of his reported techniques—healing from a distance, face-to-face confrontation with the demons, eviction to an alternative habitat (e.g. pigs, in Mk 5:11-13), violent eviction, etc.—were used by other exorcists. Furthermore, many villages had a “resident exorcist,” a local healer who might also be a teacher or scribe whose role was to keep the community healthy and whole.

As strange as “exorcist” might be for moderns, we dare not ignore the possibility that it was part and parcel of Jesus’ historical role.

On the other hand, we need to note the ways in which reports of Jesus’ exorcisms do not conform to traditional practice.

Specifically, he did not use prayers to effect his exorcisms; he did not invoke any outside authority or another powerful name; he did not recite incantations. He simply expelled the demons on his own authority.

Furthermore, his saying that “if by God’s finger I drive out demons, then for you God’s imperial rule has arrived” (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:20 // Q<sup>M</sup> 12:28) suggests that he may have considered his exorcisms as the first stage in the ultimate defeat of Satan and the advent of the empire of God.

One step beyond exorcist is the notion that Jesus was a *magician*.

Some would like to distinguish between “miracle” and “magic” on the basis of motivation. According to them, a miracle would be a divine act which benefits God’s people often performed through a specially chosen person.

Magic, on the other hand, would be a case of

someone who has esoteric knowledge manipulating a god, perhaps for monetary reward and often for the magician’s own benefit.

However, the ancient world did not necessarily make such neat distinctions. Whether the term is “sign” (*sēmeion*), “wonder” (*teras*), “power” (*dynamis*), or even “marvel” (*paradoxos*), there is no clear difference between Christian and non-Christian use. It’s more a case of biased interpretation: “In my group clearly it is a divine miracle; in your group obviously it is demonic magic.”

The evidence in Mark for calling Jesus a magician includes these features: He forced an evil spirit to reveal its name and then commanded it to keep silent (1:21-25; 1:34; 5:6-10); this not uncommon magical technique was based on the belief that to know the name of a power was to have control over that power.

He used spittle (7:33, 8:22), a boring finger (7:33), deep sighs (7:34), and strange-sounding foreign words, (*talitha kum*, 5:41; *ephphatha*, 7:34); these, too, were distinctive features of magic spells.

Add to that the fact that he was reported to have cast a spell on a fruitless tree (6:1-6; 8:11-12) plus the fact that his own name was used by others to effect exorcisms (9:38; cf. Acts 19:13), and it becomes more probable that Jesus was indeed a magician.

On the other hand, such a characterization with its largely negative connotation is at odds with Jesus’ role in the rest of the Markan narrative.

Furthermore, the case for finding magic in Mark is slim. Only one pericope, the healing of a deaf-mute (7:31-37), accounts for the majority of the examples of magical techniques, e.g.. the spittle, finger-boring, deep sigh, and a foreign incantation. In fact, in both cases where Jesus utters foreign phrases, Mark takes pains to translate them and eliminate their mystery.

Indeed, when compared with Hellenistic formulas and spells, it is obvious that Jesus does not mumble the elaborate incantations or carry out the kind of magical rituals prescribed in the Greek papyri.

In short, while it is possible that Jesus was thought of as a magician, the evidence does not make this the most probable interpretation of the historical data.

Instead of focusing on Jesus’ own miraculous performance, we may find it helpful to consider the people who benefitted from his healings.

From this perspective, with the exception of the cursing of the fig tree, the Markan miracle stories all involve people who are rescued from desperate situations. Only one case of fever is included, an affliction which might otherwise cure itself over the course of time, unless, of course, this is a symptom of life-

threatening malaria. Otherwise the list of beneficiaries includes those suffering from demon possession, leprosy, paralysis, storms, *in extremis*, prolonged haemorrhagia, hunger, deafness, and blindness.

Furthermore, most of the people Jesus assisted were marginal characters located near the fringes of society: victims of skin disease, physical handicaps, incurable conditions, malnutrition, deafness and blindness, and those whose outward behavior marked them as emotionally unstable.

In other words, none of Jesus' healings directly improved the lot of an important and influential person—it was a synagogue president's *daughter*, a Roman officer's *slave*—which suggests that his healings were more about compassion for others than about self-aggrandizing miraculous power.

The term “shaman” usually refers to the “medicine man” in a more primitive society, but in this case it is an appropriate term for Jesus. It is broad enough to include the several aspects of his healing ministry, and it can accommodate the conclusion that the stories of his miraculous cures are expressions of divine mercy.

Thus we can properly describe him as a *compassionate shaman*.

#### JESUS AS AN EGALITARIAN SUBVERSIVE

In addition to being a teacher and healer, Jesus was also a leader. Which, by definition, means that he had followers. And which, by implication, suggests that he was the founder of a movement.

The questions, then, are: Who were his followers? How were they organized? What kind of movement did he found? And how conscious or intentional was he about being that kind of leader with that kind of organized movement?

The existence of a core group of twelve disciple-followers (Mk 3:13-19) is so deeply embedded in the tradition that it must be a historical recollection. The fact that the lists of their names do not agree in all their details (cf. Mt 10:1-4, Lk 6:12-16, Acts 1:13) suggests that “the Twelve” (Mk 4:10; 6:7; 9:35; 10:32; 11:11; 14:10, 17, 20, 43; cf. 1 Cor 15:5) was not a later theological invention but a piece of historical data.

At their center was Simon Peter, together with James and John, and perhaps Andrew. In addition to the twelve males named as disciples, Jesus' followers included a wider group of indeterminate number (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:17), a few of whom are named (e.g. Levi, Mk 2:14; bar Timaeus, Mk 10:46).

Significantly, the larger group also included

women, some of whom are also named (e.g. Mary Magdalene, one or two other Mary's, Salome, Mk 15:40-41, 46; 16:1).

We can surmise from a few clues that Jesus' entourage was an eclectic and inclusive group. Two of the fishermen were noticeably higher on the socio-economic scale than Jesus, assuming that their family fishing business was profitable enough for them to own their boats.

Levi was a tax agent in the Herodian patronage system, and therefore allied with the imperial occupation forces. On the other hand, Simon the Canaanite and perhaps Judas ben Iscariot may have been sympathetic to what later became the Zealot cause, and therefore opposed to Roman hegemony.

The Magdalene's name was obviously intended to distinguish her from the other Mary's, but it identifies her as coming from Magdala (a.k.a. Magadan, Migdal), a fishing village midway between Capernaum and Tiberius. Magdala's reputation as a prosperous but depraved locale may suggest something of the less-than-savory reputation of Jesus' followers.

In any event, Jesus' was the leader of an inclusive group of followers. He practiced what some would call a “politics of compassion,” as opposed to a “politics of holiness.”

The official Jewish piety promoted by the ruling elite promoted the scriptural value of holiness: e.g. “You shall be holy for I, Yahweh your God, am holy,” (Lev. 19:45). At the root of the holiness ideal is a separation from all that is profane.

It promotes an exclusive ethic with clear boundaries between those within and those without the norm. It encourages proper performance and conformance to accepted codes.

Jesus, on the other hand, promoted an equally valuable Jewish scriptural virtue, namely mercy or compassion: e.g. “Be as compassionate as your Father is,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:36 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:48; cf. *chesed*, Exod 34:6-7; *racham*, Deut 4:31).

At the heart of the compassion ideal is an inclusive attitude which embraces especially those who otherwise would not qualify to be part of the favored group. Its emphasis on grace conflicts with the prevailing emphasis on conformance.

The presence of women in Jesus' entourage, both as benefactors and as disciples, indicates that Jesus' movement was counter-cultural. That is, it did not conform to the expectations of the patriarchal society in which it was embedded.

Also, Jesus' healings and exorcisms, in which divine benefactions were bestowed directly on margi-

nal individuals without reacquiring them to go through normal priestly regimens, was also counter-cultural. That is, it undermined the purity codes in place at that time.

Furthermore, Jesus' teachings—direct, confrontational pronouncements and parabolic riddles which promoted the presence of the empire of God apart from temple and tradition—were also counter-cultural. That is, they broke with the patterns of traditional lore propounded by village scribes and elders.

Is this counter-cultural bias evident in other aspects of Jesus' praxis? And if so, how might it have impacted the lives of his lower-class audiences?

For starters, consider one of the most obvious pieces of historical data, namely, that Jesus left his ancestral home in Nazareth around age 30 at an age when he should have been a well-established citizen and family man.

It is not clear whether Jesus was and remained an itinerant, or whether he eventually relocated and made Capernaum his home. His assertion that “foxes have dens, and birds of the sky have nests; but the son of Adam has nowhere to rest his head” (Q<sup>L</sup> 9:58; cf. Mk 1:38-39; 6:6, 56) and Peter's later insistence “Look at us; we left everything to follow you” (Mk 10:28) support the idea that he was always on the move.

The Markan summaries of his wanderings (1:38-38; 6:6, 56; 7:23-4, 31; 8:27; 9:30; 10:1) coupled with several trips by boat back and forth across Lake Gennesaret (4:35; 5:1, 21; 6:32, 45, 53; 8:10) also give the impression that Jesus was remembered as an itinerant. On the other hand, Mark also indicates that Capernaum was his base of operations and his new home (1:21; 2:1; 3:20; 6:1; 9:33).

In either case, Jesus did not stay in the place and station where he would have been expected to remain, namely, located in Nazareth in the role of the elder son of the family.

In fact, the evident friction between Jesus and his family of origin is one of the embarrassing details in the record. Sayings which predict intra-family conflict (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:52-53 // Q<sup>M</sup> 10:35) and which encourage his followers to “hate your own father and mother and wife and children” (Q<sup>L</sup> 14:26 // Q<sup>M</sup> 10:37) reflect his repudiation of expected familial affiliations.

Likewise, the picture of his mother and brothers left to cool their heels outside his home (Mk 2:31-35) more than hints at his disdain for customary patriarchal family traditions. In short, Jesus' praxis violated the norms of the society in which he worked.

In keeping with his willingness to abrogate traditional patriarchal norms is Jesus' desire to affirm the

worth of women and children.

Mark's narrative provides ample examples: his concern for supporting aged parents (7:10-12; 10:19); his willingness to embrace and restore children (5:35-42; 9:14-27; cf. Q<sup>L</sup> 7:1-10 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:5-13; 9:36-37; 10:13-16); and his care for women (5:24-34; 7:24-30), especially widows (12:40-41-44). Jesus' teachings on divorce (Mk 10:1-9, 10-12; Q<sup>L</sup> 16:18 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:32) are calculated to protect the rights of a wife against the cavalier, arbitrary treatment of a promiscuous husband.

Several statements support the conclusion that Jesus' strategy was not so much to summon his followers out of their accustomed situations as it was to reconstitute them into new families and communities.

So, for example, in place of his natural family he claims that “whoever does God's will, that's my brother and sister and mother,” (Mk 3:35). Furthermore, there is no one who has left home to follow him “who won't receive a hundred times as much now, in the present time, houses, and brothers, and sisters, and mother, and children, and farms,” etc. (Mk 10:30).

Notice how in these lists Jesus does *not* mention a *paterfamilias*! If his followers were shunned by their families of origin, well then, “congratulations to you when people hate you, and when they ostracize you and denounce you,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:22 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:11).

The Q document helps us appreciate the values which were practiced by Jesus' followers. We can understand this best if we imagine how these values would have impacted the lives of marginal peasants.

According to popular notions, peasant populations enjoy a bucolic camaraderie and are content to enjoy the simple pleasures of rustic life. The truth, however, is that they live in a constant state of poverty, not quite destitute but never comfortable, always in debt, if not financially at least socially indebted to their benefactors and overlords.

Peasants learn to be suspicious of each other, to keep meticulous account of who owes how much to whom. They are vulnerable to coercion, and to suffering insults from those a rung or two higher on the social ladder.

In such an environment Jesus' ethical demands take on a special poignancy. The series in Q<sup>L</sup> 6:27-42 (// Q<sup>M</sup> 5:44-48, 7:1-5, 12) is typical: “Love your enemies” is a program for acting in an unconventional way with one's fellow-peasants and for dealing with the petty conflicts of village life.

“When someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn



the other as well” (in the Q<sup>M</sup> 5:30 version) gives permission for a man who has been insulted with a backhanded slap to stand up and challenge his opponent to “hit me like a man” on the left side of his jaw.

If a creditor sues to seize your outer garment, give him your underwear as well. As you stand in court stark naked, your oppressor and the judge will both be shamed!

If a soldier invokes corvee and forces you to carry his baggage from one mile post to the next, keep on for an additional mile and let him run the risk of being punished for overstepping his authority. Make loans—even to your enemies!—without extracting interest or even repayment. Break the cycle of mutual judgment and recrimination (cf. also Q<sup>L</sup> 12:57-59 // Q<sup>M</sup> 5:25-26). In short, “treat people the way you would have them treat you.”

Such a pattern of communal behavior, if adopted across the board, would completely transform the mores of peasant society. They would turn from fractious, mutually suspicious people into a mutually supportive community. And this, in turn, would make it more difficult for their overlords to control them and keep them wary of each other.

The so-called “Lord’s Prayer” (Q<sup>L</sup> 11:2-4 // Q<sup>M</sup> 6:9-13) must be understood along similar lines. The petition for the heavenly Abba to “impose your imperial rule” could only come to fulfillment at the expense of the current political empire.

“Provide us with the bread we need” on a daily basis reflects the reality of peasants who often must live hand-to-mouth, wondering whether they will be able to obtain enough food for the next day.

“Forgive our debts to the extent that we have forgiven those in debt to us” is not about “sins” (i.e. moral transgressions), but about finances. “God, you forgive me the temple tax I haven’t paid for three years, and I’ll forgive the chicken and the cup of olive oil my neighbor owes me.”

In other words, by commending such a prayer to his followers, Jesus lures them into becoming committed to a style of living which would undermine the systemic values of debt and recompense that continue to keep them in their place.

Other directives follow the pattern: “There is more to living than food or clothing,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:23 // Q<sup>M</sup> 6:25); “sell your belongings and donate to charity,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 12:33; cf. Mk 10:21); “those who promote themselves will be demoted” and *vice versa* (Q<sup>L</sup> 14:11, 18:14 // Q<sup>M</sup> 23:12); “you can’t be enslaved to both God and a bank account,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 16:13 // Q<sup>M</sup> 6:24); and “if some companion goes wrong, scold that person; if there is a

change of heart, forgive the person,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 17:3 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:15; cf., Mk 11:25).

All these support values which build a mutually supportive and inclusive community. Such values also, *mutatis mutandis*, undermine important values in the prevailing patriarchal society and its culture of purity.

One of Jesus’ most distinctive traits was his practice of hosting communal meals. He apparently had a penchant for enjoying food and drink with his companions, a practice he presumably encouraged them to continue in his absence.

In this regard he departed from the customary asceticism of his mentor. “John the Baptist appeared on the scene, eating no bread and drinking no wine, and you say, ‘He is demented’; the son of Adam appeared on the scene both eating and drinking, and you say, ‘There’s a glutton and a drunk, a crony of toll collectors and sinners,’” (Q<sup>L</sup> 7:33-34 // Q<sup>M</sup> 11:18-19; cf. Mk 2:16).

The theme of bread and food and meals is an often overlooked motif in Mark. While the complex of ideas related to eating and drinking may serve a literary purpose within the gospel’s narrative, it is surely a reflection of Jesus’ typical behavior.

Meals are characteristic of Jesus’ praxis. (English translations have difficulty signaling its pervasive presence because the same term, *artos*, must be rendered by “bread” or “loaf” when singular and by “loaves” or the more abstract “food” when plural.)

The broader bread-food-eating theme first appears with the note about John’s diet (Mk 1:6), and then continues sporadically through subsequent chapters: Peter’s mother-in-law served supper (1:31); Jesus dined with sinners (2:15); his disciples refused to fast (2:18); they plucked grain on the Sabbath (2:23); King David ate the priest’s bread (2:26); Jesus lacked time to eat (3:20; 6:31); he told three seed stories (4:3, 26, 30); he gave orders to feed Jairus’ daughter (5:43); and Herod hosted a birthday banquet (6:21).

The motif is densest in the central chapters: twice Jesus’ miraculously fed crowds of thousands (6:35-43; 8:1-9); his disciples ate with unwashed hands (7:2); Jesus argued that food cannot make one unclean (7:18-19); and he berated his men for not grasping the true significance of bread (8:14-21).

The theme resurfaces in the closing chapters: Jesus was disappointed when he could not find figs to eat (11:11:12-13); he dined at the home of Simon the leper (14:3); and he ate a Passover Seder with his followers (14:17-25).

The sayings gospel also includes items which respect Jesus’ reputation as one who made food and

meals a central concern: “Congratulations, you hungry; you will have a feast,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 6:21); “Stay at one house, eating and drinking whatever they provide,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 10:7); “People will come from east and west . . . and dine in God’s domain,” (Q<sup>L</sup> 13:29 // Q<sup>M</sup> 8:11); and “You may eat and drink at my table in my domain,” (Q L 22:30).

In addition, his stories about the big (wedding) dinner (Q<sup>L</sup> 14:21-23 // Q<sup>M</sup> 22:9-10) and about those who found a lost sheep or coin and summoned their neighbors to “celebrate with me” (Q<sup>L</sup> 15:5 & 9) continue the theme.

The point is not just that Jesus had a reputation for enjoying celebrative meals of food and wine, but more importantly that he shared those meals with undesirables.

His table companions characteristically included other lower-class peasants who were not scrupulous about observing the conventional kosher dietary regulations. The charge that Jesus was “a glutton and a drunk, a crony of toll collectors and sinners” explicitly links both aspects of his table practice: celebrative meals, plus undesirable companions.

His meal practice, therefore, could not be understood as anything but counter-cultural. Which is undoubtedly why representatives of the cultural elite—in the role of scribes and Pharisees in the gospel narrative—challenged him. But this is also one of the key factors that likely made him popular with the lower-class peasants.

People caught at the bottom of oppressive social systems have few options. On the one hand, they can simply knuckle under and acquiesce to the powers that be. No doubt this was the posture of the majority of the peasant population.

On the other hand, they can revolt against the system and actively opt out or rebel. This was the fate of some beggars and the choice of notorious brigands.

Jesus’ agenda offered a third possibility. Without advocating overt opposition to the elite rulers and their retainers, he challenged his followers to redefine their mutual relationships among themselves and then to restructure their patterns of living in ways that undermined the “normal” codes of value and accepted conduct.

The result was a surprising experience of “the empire of God” which had room for even the meanest types of “sinners,” including tax agents and prostitutes.

One noteworthy aspect of Jesus’ strategy is that he clearly envisioned a non-violent *modus operandi*. His “love your enemy” ethic stands in stark contrast to the

armed resistance movement which led to the destruction of the Judean state a generation later.

On the other hand, phrases like “peaceful coexistence” or “loyal opposition” do not fairly describe his stance *vis-a-vis* the entrenched authorities either.

Obviously Jesus’ positioned himself and his followers in opposition to and subversive of the established power structures. But Mark and Q do not record any memory which can be construed as advocating armed or violent resistance.

At its core Jesus’ ethic was a non-violent style of living. It may have been confrontational and even aggressive at times, as his conflicts with the authorities and his action in the temple demonstrate, but in every case it was neither violent nor armed.

Some have described the genius of Jesus’ praxis as an experience of inclusive, “unbrokered” access to the benefits of God’s empire.

The combination of a patriarchal society with purity values meant that for peasants access to God’s benefits had to be obtained or “brokered” through a hierarchical system centered on the temple. The priests profited from the fact that they owned the temple’s sacrificial system and therefore helped ensure the oppression of the lower classes.

Jesus’ strategy was to subvert that value system by substituting another, namely, a gift-*versus*-debt value, by which outsiders became part of an inclusive community which enjoyed direct, unbrokered access to God’s goodnesses.

Clashes between Jesus’ gift-*versus*-debt system and the prevailing clean-*versus*-unclean system run throughout Mark’s narrative. The majority of the healings and exorcisms were cases in which uncleanness was countered by the gift of a cure: Jesus expelled unclean demons (1:26, 5:8, 9:22); he touched fevered and menstruating women (1:31, 5:28); he touched and raised a corpse (5:41). Jesus specifically contrasted his healing of a leper with the priestly requirements for cleansing (1:13), and gratuitously forgave a paralyzed man (2:5).

He repeatedly subverted such traditional customs associated with cleanliness as fasting (2:18), the sabbath observances (2:23, 3:4), kosher foods (7:2, 5, 19), and even the temple itself (11:15, 13:2). He freely accepted people who are outside the bounds of Jewish purity: Levi and other tax collectors (2:14-15), a Syrophenician woman (7:26), and a foreign deaf-mute (7:35).

In place of clean-*versus*-unclean Jesus established a gift-*versus*-debt system: his seed parables affirmed spontaneous growth (4:8, 27, 32); he repeatedly gave

food (6:37, 8:6, 14:22-23); he affirmed such charitable acts as giving water (9:41), giving to the poor (10:21), the widow's mite (12:44), and perfuming his own body (14:7).

His pithy sayings about forgiveness of sins (3:28), giving more to the one who has much (4:25), and gaining or losing one's life (8:35) were all expressions of his gift-*versus*-debt praxis.

This subversion of the prevailing system obviously accounts for his opponents' determination to destroy him; in addition, because his practice had economic implications, it also empowered the oppressed and encouraged them to support each other.

In sum, our sources picture Jesus as the leader of a lower-class peasant movement, in which his followers were resocialized into an inclusive, non-violent community, where they shared celebrative meals as experiences of the unbrokered blessings of the empire of God.

The values of his movement obviously subverted the patriarchal, purity-based system enforced by the ruling elite and their retainers. Can we be more specific?

Some identify Jesus as a Galilean *chasid*, a charismatic "holy man." The Hassidim movement originated during the days of the Hasmonean rulers (142-63 BCE) among those who opposed the introduction of Hellenistic customs into traditional Jewish culture.

Some of the individual "holy men" (such as Honi the Circle Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, mentioned earlier) attracted devoted followings, and their devotees were seen as a threat by those leaders who accommodated themselves to foreign practices.

If Jesus was seen as a *chasid*, as one who had more direct access to the world of the spirit and who could mediate the divine presence to his followers, that would explain both why he was popular with the crowds and threatening to the established authorities.

Others maintain that *social reformer* or "social prophet" is a more apt descriptor. Jesus' provocative teachings and powerful exorcisms coupled with his lower-class, anti-establishment following depict him as the founder of a movement intent on revitalizing the mores of Palestinian Judaism.

The prevailing politics of holiness led to attitudes of exclusivity and antagonism. Within late Second Temple Judaism that inevitably led to antagonism and violence against the Roman Empire. Which in turn ultimately led to the destruction of the Judean state in the revolts of 70 and 135 CE.

According to those who see Jesus as a social reformer, if he had succeeded his non-violent agenda

could have avoided that outcome by transforming Jewish culture into a more inclusive, less oppressive political-religious-economic society.

Conjectures along these lines, however, probably outstrip the evidence. In fact, "social reformer" is more a modern category rather than an ancient title. So while such scenarios may be historically possible, they do not rise to the level of probability.

Still others take the next step and claim that Jesus was a genuine *revolutionary*. Clearly he was executed by the Roman authorities on charges related to sedition. All the gospels record that the sarcastic *titulus* over his head charged him with claiming to be "King of the Jews." Whether he actually made that claim, or whether others made it for him is much in doubt.

Nevertheless, a number of factors point in the direction of seeing Jesus as a revolutionary: he came from Galilee, a veritable "hot bed" of anti-Roman insurrection; he proclaimed the arrival of "the Empire of God" as an alternative to the Empire of Rome; his followers made messianic claims on his behalf, undermining the Herodian right to the title "King of the Jews"; he was accused of authorizing non-payment of the imperial taxes; his "temple incident" was the kind of terrorist activity that could incite a riot and sabotage the peace of the province.

On the other hand, although Galilee was the scene of anti-Roman uprisings in the decades before and after Jesus' time, during his tenure the territory was relatively free of such movements.

The Gospel of Mark is careful to repudiate overt political messianic claims for Jesus (Mk 8:27-34; cf. Mt 16:13-20). In fact, the canonical gospels all take pains to suggest that Jesus was innocent of political charges; they paint him as a martyr whose execution was a miscarriage of Roman justice, instigated and perpetrated under pressure from the Judean religious authorities.

The gospels, of course, were composed decades after the event when the Jewish and Christian communities were parting ways and the Jesus movement was beginning to flourish in the Hellenistic environment of the Roman Empire, when it was prudent for followers of Jesus to downplay involvement by the Roman authorities in the death of their founder.

So on the whole, it is not clear that Jesus was a bonafide revolutionary; again, what is historically possible is not necessarily historically probable.

But it is more than probable that the movement Jesus led subverted the patriarchal, client-benefactor, purity based values of the culture in which he and his followers lived. His alternative social agenda was

egalitarian in nature: he invited suspect outsiders— a.k.a. “sinners”—to join his fellowship and to enjoy celebrative meals shared in common. By any accounting Jesus was a “subversive” in the broadest sense, if not in a narrower political sense of the term.

In short, he was an *egalitarian subversive*, a designation which gives us a third angle—together with provocative sage and compassionate shaman—for assessing his historical impact.

### JESUS AS A POLITICAL MARTYR

Equally necessary for assessing Jesus’ historical impact is understanding the significance of his death. He was executed as an enemy of the state; the method of execution, namely crucifixion, was a calculated strategy on the part of the Roman occupation forces to terrorize the native Jewish populace.

Only rarely do either Mark or Q picture Jesus in direct contact with, much less opposition to, the imperial authorities. His career is thoroughly Jewish in its content and context. We can understand how his teachings and actions must have aggravated many of his compatriots. So the question is: What made him such a threat to the Roman authorities that they had to kill him?

One possible answer is that Pontius Pilate was so cajoled or intimidated by the Judean religious leaders that he condemned Jesus against his better judgment. This solution can be supported by a superficial reading of the gospel narrative, but is clearly inadequate on several grounds:

For one thing, this scenario ignores the actual historical relationship between the occupying power and the subservient populace; in other words, the procurator intimidated the priests, not *vice versa*. Power flowed from the governor to the governed, not the other way around.

In fact, Josephus recounts at least four instances between 4 BCE and 70 CE in which the Romans crucified thousands of rebellious Jews (*Wars* 2.75, 2.241, 2.305-308, 5.446-451), which suggests that this was a calculated strategy for demeaning and terrorizing an otherwise proud and independent people.

Furthermore, as indicated earlier, the gospels were written over a generation after the event, at a time when the Jesus movement was largely disassociated from Judaism and had taken root in the Roman world. Thus the narratives downplay the culpability of the Roman authorities and exaggerate the liability of the Judean leaders.

The best clues to the reasons for Jesus’ execution

can be found in a more nuanced reading of the narrative of the events leading up to his death. As noted earlier, in comparison with ancient biographies, the canonical gospels devote an inordinately large amount of space to the last week of his life.

Apparently Mark was the first to tell the story in precisely this way, although some of the pieces were already in place. Paul, for example, positioned the Last Supper in close proximity to the crucifixion (1 Cor. 11:23-26).

Whether Jesus’ trip to Jerusalem where he died was his only journey there, as suggested by Mark, or whether he may have visited the city several times, as indicated by John, is difficult to decide. Most scholars hold that the latter is more probable, even if they do not adopt the details of John’s chronology.

Those who hold that Mark is based on a pre-existing account of Jesus’ last week are more inclined to accept the details as historical than are those who maintain that the author of Mark largely fabricated the narrative from random traditions.

In any event, the answer to the question of why Jesus was executed cannot ignore the evidence in Mark. However, the Markan story is such a carefully crafted narrative that it is not always easy to determine which elements yield valuable *historical* evidence. On the following page is a summary of the shape of the story.<sup>2</sup>

Its outline shows how carefully the author of Mark has shaped the story so that it moves almost seamlessly. According to the logic of the narrative, Jesus was executed by the Roman governor at the instigation of the Judean authorities (Mk 14-15) because he desecrated the temple and antagonized its leaders (Mk 11-13).

Most scholars would agree that this is likely the most probable historical truth. But that does not yet explain why behavior offensive to *Judean* authorities would result in *Roman* penalties.

Complicating the discussion is the fact that most of the material in the Markan account is simply not historically verifiable.

Either (a) it is obviously shaped by Mark’s narrative agenda (e.g. the so-called “apocalyptic discourse,” which deals with End Time predictions, not with the

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<sup>2</sup>What follows is a modification of my own narrative analysis: M. I. Wegener, *Cruciformed: The Literary Impact of Mark’s Story of Jesus and His Disciples* (New York: University Press of America, 1995) 159-199.

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## THE RUINATION OF THE TEMPLE (Mark 11:1-13:37)

- **A Movement toward Desecrating the Temple**
  - Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, inspects the temple, and leaves (11:1-11)
  - As he returns the next day he curses a fig tree, and expels the temple traders (11:12-19)
  - The third day he talks about prayer, parries with the authorities, and tells the parable of the Wicked Vintners against them (12:1-12)
- **A Movement toward Confounding the Leaders**
  - Jesus thwarts the Pharisees and Herodians on the subject of paying taxes (12:13-17)
  - He refutes the Sadducees' denial of the resurrection (12:18-37)
  - He commends a scribe as they agree on the two greatest commandments (12:38-34)
  - He challenges the scribes' doctrine that the Christ is David's descendant (12:35-37)
  - He denounces the scribes' avarice, and commends a widow's offering (12:38-40, 41-44)
  - He predicts the destruction of the temple (13:1-2)
- **An Apocalyptic Movement toward the Future**
  - With his closest companions, Jesus elaborates on his prediction of destruction: (13:3-4)
  - "Watch! for imposters, wars, earthquakes and famines, but don't be alarmed" (13:5-8)
  - "Watch! for arrests, interrogations and betrayals, but don't be worried" (13:9-13)
  - "Beware of the 'wasting horror,' and be ready to flee" (13:14-22)
  - "Watch! for astrological disasters heralding the arrival of the Son of Man" (13:23-32)
  - "Watch! just as a door keeper stays alert for the householder's return" (13:33-37)

## THE RUINATION OF THE SON OF MAN (Mark 14:1-15:41)

- **A Movement toward Betrayal**
    - The priests and scribes plot to kill Jesus (14:1-2)
    - A woman anoints Jesus during supper at the home of Simon the Leper (14:3-9)
    - Judas agrees to deliver Jesus to the priests (14:10-11)
    - Jesus' disciples make preparations to observe Passover (14:12-16)
    - He eats a final meal with the twelve, and shares his "body and blood" (14:17-21, 22-26)
  - **A Movement toward Desertion**
    - Jesus predicts all his disciples, including Peter, will desert him (14:27-31)
    - He prays for release in the garden of Gethsemane, while his disciples sleep (14:32-42)
    - Judas and a crowd from the authorities arrest him, as his disciples flee (14:43-52)
  - **A Movement toward Rejection**
    - Peter follows as Jesus is taken to the high priest (14:53-54)
    - The priests' council condemns him to death for blasphemy (14:55-65)
    - Peter disowns Jesus three times (14:66-72)
  - **A Movement toward Crucifixion**
    - Jesus is silent as Pilate interrogates him (15:1-5)
    - Pilate releases Barabbas to the crowds and sentences Jesus to crucifixion (15:6-15)
    - The soldiers sarcastically mock Jesus as "King of the Jews" (15:16-20a)
  - **A Movement toward Death**
    - Jesus is crucified on Golgotha (15:20b-24)
    - A sign on his cross, passers-by, and priests mock him as "King of the Jews" (15:24-32)
    - Jesus dies, abandoned by God (15:33-39)
    - Some women observe his death from a distance (15:40-41)
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question of the temple's destruction), or (b) it is intrinsically incapable of verification (e.g. the treatment of a prisoner within the soldiers' barracks), or (c) it is historically improbable (e.g. the "custom" of releasing a prisoner during Passover), or (d) it is not based on multiple sources (just about everything else in the account!).

Nevertheless, we can identify a handful of details which are not only possible but which, because they agree in principle with other factors in Jesus' praxis, we can therefore consider historically probable.

First is the fact that Jesus was executed by crucifixion. The curious detail that the soldiers conscripted Simon of Cyrene, "the father of Alexander and Rufus," to carry Jesus' cross adds a realistic note to the account. This note makes no sense if Mark's audience did not in fact actually know these two otherwise unknown men.

Jesus' life ended on a Roman gibbet. Cicero referred to this form of death by torture as "a most cruel and disgusting punishment" and "the extreme and ultimate punishment of slavery" (*In Verrem* 2.5.165, 169). Jesus' death by crucifixion confirms his position at the very bottom of the social hierarchy, in the company of slaves, brigands, murderers and rebels.

Second is the repeated assertion that he was accused of being "King of the Judeans." Whether or not this was a fair accusation, it could not have been heard by Roman authorities as anything but a counterclaim to imperial rule and as an invitation to revolt.

In other words, Jesus was crucified for the crime of sedition and insurrection. If Jesus had a well-known reputation for announcing the impending arrival of the dominion or kingdom of God, it would have been a small step to surmise that he was positioning himself to claim the role of king.

In Galilee Jesus would have provoked the opposition of the Herodian party (who supported Antipas' claim to the title "King of Jews"), and in Judea he would have been a challenge to the legitimacy of the uneasy alliance between the temple authorities and Pilate's procuratorship.

Third is the incident in the temple. What is commonly but inaccurately called "the cleansing of the temple" was actually a desecration of the temple precincts. Technically he was not in the temple itself, the *naos* or inner sanctuary, but had interrupted the currency exchange and sale of sacrificial animals in the outer courtyards. Whether his followers or other pilgrims supported his action and effectively halted the rituals is a matter of speculation.

In any event, Jesus' symbolic action is congruent

with his earlier strategy of rejecting priestly sanctioned purity values (which limit participation in God's realm on the basis of cleanliness) in favor of debt-*versus*-gift values (which would open God's realm and make the temple "a house of prayer for all peoples"). In Mark's narrative this incident provides the motive for the decision of the priests and their retainers to eliminate him.

In the Greco-Roman world the desecration of a temple was a capital offense. And, conversely, surviving inscriptions demonstrate that benefactors who restored temple sites or endowed their upkeep were accorded public honor. Thus Jesus' anti-temple action alone could have warranted imperial punishment.

However, it is more likely that Pilate would have viewed Jesus' action as the sort of provocation which, in the context of a national celebration of freedom like Passover, could easily degenerate into a riot.

The procurator's residence while staying in Jerusalem was at the Fortress of Antonio, a citadel strategically located overlooking the temple courtyards. In any case, if his staff had observed what they thought was a riot brewing, the governor would have required little more incentive to quickly eliminate the instigator and so squelch any potential insurrection. This would account for why only Jesus and not any of his followers were arrested and prosecuted.

Fourth, the details—perhaps even the likelihood—of the interrogation before the priestly council and the trial before Pontius Pilate are historically questionable. The actual content of the testimony in those two venues obviously cannot be corroborated; there were no court reporters.

Later evidence from the Jewish Mishnah and Talmud does not allow for a clandestine night-time meeting of the Sanhedrin, but whether such a prohibition was in effect during the presidency of Annas and Caiaphas is not clear. Nor is it clear why any of the charges brought against Jesus would qualify as blasphemy. Apparently neither threats to destroy of the temple, nor claims to be a messiah, nor predictions of the exaltation of the son of Adam (Mk 14:58, 61-62) were capital offenses under Jewish law.

Our best guess is that Jesus' obvious anti-temple posture was sufficiently incriminating as evidence to make charges of insurrection credible to the authorities. In short, Pilate believed the priests' accusations that Jesus was a threat to public safety and quickly ordered his execution.

Fifth is the remembrance of how shamefully Peter disowned Jesus. The details of exactly when and to whom Peter swore his oaths of denial cannot be

harmonized between the Synoptics (Mk 14:66-72, Mt 26:67-75, Lk 22:55-62) and John (18:15-18, 25-27). And apparently each version accommodates those details to Jesus' prediction (Mk 14:30, Mt 26:35, Lk 22:34, Jn 14:38; does the rooster crow once or twice? and when?).

But based on the criterion of embarrassment, the event itself is highly probable. It resonates well with the recollection that Jesus' followers, except for a handful of women, deserted him when the authorities arrested him. Unlike Socrates' disciples, for example, who surrounded their mentor after his conviction by the Athenians and were present when he drank the hemlock, Jesus' companions completely deserted and disowned him.

Sixth is the Last Supper. Obviously if Jesus customarily shared meals with his companions, one of those meals must have been remembered as their last dinner before his death.

The fact that the Pauline, Markan and Lukan versions differ in significant details suggest that they represent multiple sources of the tradition, which in turn raises the likelihood that the Last Supper is historical. Whether it was a bonafide Seder may remain in doubt, but not that the meal took place in the context of the Passover festivities.

The church's later Eucharistic theology has obviously shaped the wording of this narrative, but the criteria of dissimilarity and embarrassment combine to authenticate the core of the tradition.

For Jews in particular, the cannibalistic overtones of the bread-equals-body and wine-equals-blood equations would have been reprehensible. Ergo, they must reflect Jesus' table conversation.

Paul's version (1 Cor 11:23-26) is the earliest, dating from the mid-50s CE, and is based on a finely honed tradition he received, presumably from the Jerusalem church over a decade previously. Which indicates that references to Christ's body and blood were part of the account from the first. We can only guess in what sense the earliest followers would have understood phrases like "given and shed *for you*."

Mark (14:22-24, 25) links the bread and cup sayings with Jesus' prophecy that he will not drink wine again "until that day when I drink it for the first time in God's domain." The fact that Mark retained this unfulfilled prophecy attests to its genuineness (cf. Mk 9:1).

This, in turn, suggests that the Last Supper tradition was linked with Jesus' anticipation of the arrival of the empire of God. Thus the meal was a clandestine, subversive political-social event. For Jesus and

his companions sharing such a supper during a "freedom festival" like Passover was another way of undermining the priestly-sanctioned temple cultus and the Roman-imposed imperial suppression.

Seventh is Jesus' agonizing prayer in Gethsemane. Obviously if his companions were either dispersed or asleep no one could have recorded the content of his petitions. Nevertheless, this incident conveys an attitude on Jesus' part that may—again on the criterion of embarrassment—be historical, because it betrays weakness and lack of resolve.

The series of so-called "passion predictions" which form the outline of the chapters leading up to Mark's passion narrative (8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34), coupled with other reported premonitions of death (8:34, 10:38, 12:7, 14:8, 27), leads us to think that Jesus envisioned—perhaps even welcomed—his fate. Consequently his prayer "that he might avoid the crisis" (14:35) suggests, conversely, that he did indeed anticipate his work would lead to suffering and death.

But attempts to determine someone's inner motives are notoriously risky. One way of phrasing the question is to ask whether Jesus thought of himself as God's special envoy, and if so whether he understood this in traditional terms.

In short, did Jesus think of himself as a messiah or as the Christ (literally, "anointed")? "Messiah," of course, is a royal title. Anyone who made messianic claims would perforce be declaring to stand in the line of King David as ruler of the Jewish state.

If Jesus did claim to be the Christ, that would help explain why he was executed as an insurrectionist. It would be consistent with the taunts that he was "King of the Judeans." And it would explain why the title became virtually a second name within decades.

On the other hand, there is no evidence anywhere in Jewish tradition that the messiah would suffer or be put to death. Everywhere, whether in political or more spiritual terms, the messiah was expected to be victorious. Paul's later reference to "Christ crucified" (cf. 1 Cor 1:23) is an oxymoron, along the lines of "defeated victor."

In Hellenistic circles, however, the notion of a noble death held an honored place in political discourse. "Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's fatherland," sang Horace (*Odes* 3.2.13). While the thought that a wise or righteous man might suffer death unjustly was a commonplace in Jewish lore, the idea that a king should suffer for the benefit of his people derives from Greco-Roman sources.

Consequently the idea that Jesus would have thought of himself as a messianic king destined to

suffer death does not ring true historically to Jesus' Jewish environment.

It might resonate well within the Hellenistic environment of Mark's original auditors, except for one fact: given the opportunity to assign the title "Messiah" or "Christ" to Jesus, Mark twice avoids making the equation. Instead, Mark substitutes "the son of Adam."

In a pivotal scene near Caesarea Philippi (8:27-33) Peter affirms that Jesus is "the Anointed." But Jesus immediately silences him and predicts that "the son of Adam was destined to suffer," etc. So Peter scolds Jesus for saying this openly, but Jesus in turn scolds Peter and tells him to "get out of my sight, you Satan."

Near the end of the narrative, in the trial scene (14:61-64), the high priest demands to know if Jesus is "the Anointed, the son of the Blessed One?" "I am!" Jesus replies, "and you will see the son of Adam sitting at the right hand of Power," etc. Neither of these scenes should be construed as historical, but they are evidence that Mark prefers the title "the son of Adam" rather than "the Anointed."

Which raises another issue: Was this title—literally an inelegant Greek phrase: "the son of the man"—actually Jesus' preferred self-reference? Presumably the phrase *ho huios tou anthropou* reproduces an Aramaic idiom, *bar enash/a*, meaning "a man" or "someone" or "I myself," but it is not clear that this idiom was ever a common self-designation in Jewish circles.

Scholars debate whether the Greek phrase in the gospels refers to a mortal human (as in Ezekiel, where the phrase describes the prophet over 90 times) or to a heavenly figure (as in Dan 7:13, where one like a son of man arrives with the clouds of heaven, cf. Mk 13:26, 14:62, and as in 1 Enoch 37-71).

Sometimes the phrase refers to activity in the present time of Jesus' ministry (Mk 2:10, 28); sometimes it refers to his suffering and resurrection (8:31; 9:9, 12, 31; 10:33-34, 45; 14:21, 41); sometimes it points to a future exaltation in power and glory (8:38; 13:26; 14:62).

Contrary to a commonly held opinion, the phrase does not *always* occur in sayings of Jesus; in at least three instances (2:10, 28; 10:45) it may be an editorial comment. But by the same token it is noteworthy that Jesus never refers to himself by his own name; his only self-references are *via* "the son of the man."

In any event, it is likely that the phrase goes back to Jesus himself. It does not occur in the earliest sources, the Pauline correspondence and the Q document, and we cannot imagine any good reason why the early

church would invent such a phrase. This, according to the criterion of dissimilarity, suggests that "the son of the man" is historically authentic.

If so, what does this self-designation tell us about Jesus' self-understanding? Obviously it is not merely a circumlocution for "I" or even "I myself." If the phrase did not include the articles—"son of man," *huios anthropou*, *bar enash*—it would underscore Jesus' basic humanity.

But the addition of the articles—"the son of the man"—increases the intensity of the image. It implies that the one so designated is a *genuine* human being, a person who is intent on living within the inherent limitations of humanity, one who is not avoiding one's essential mortality.

Once again: we wonder whether Jesus anticipated that his work would lead to a violent end. The evidence in Mark<sup>3</sup> is that he did not embrace the militaristic conquering connotation of "Messiah" or "Christ." Instead he chose the enigmatic phrase "the son of the man" (or "the son of Adam," as the SV renders it), which stresses the fundamental mortality of his own humanity.

This does not quite suggest that he looked forward to dying, as though that were the goal of his life, but it does indicate that he did not shrink from dying. Jesus' teachings and practices were subversive of the political and social realities of Roman-dominated Galilee and Judea, and he apparently did anticipate that as a consequence he would suffer a violent death.

To summarize: Jesus' teachings and healings promoted the worth and well being of the peasant villagers who lived at the lower margins of society in rural Galilee. He encouraged them to live and act in ways which undermined the dominant social and political values of the urban elite—the political power brokers, the land-owning aristocrats, and the priestly hierarchy.

His efforts to create less-distrustful and less-fractured communities among the lower-class peoples were especially threatening to the classes of retainers who prospered at their expense. His open antipathy to the Jerusalem temple likely triggered the charges which convinced the Roman governor that Jesus was a threat to the well-being of the state. And as a result he was summarily executed. In short, Jesus suffered the fate of a *political martyr*.

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<sup>3</sup>Note that the terms "son of man," "messiah/christ," "lord," and "son of god" are conspicuous by their absence from Q; nor does Q refer to the event or the significance of Jesus' death by crucifixion.



## POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Perhaps it is inevitable that contemporary examinations of Jesus each tend to focus the historical evidence into a single descriptor which can account for the bulk of his words and deeds. Peasant, itinerant, rabbi, prophet, cynic, exorcist, magician, holy man, reformer, revolutionary, victim—all are apt descriptions of the various facets of his public performance.

However, in this study we have tried to approach the subject from three angles by observing that Jesus was a teacher, a healer, and a leader. We can view any single pronouncement or action—or any combination or pattern of them, for that matter—from all three perspectives, and thereby we can hope to gain a deeper, multidimensional picture of the man.

By defining him more generally as a “sage” and a “shaman” and a “subversive” we can avoid getting hung up on the details of narrow technical definitions, and we can accommodate more subtle nuances within the broader patterns of his ministry.

By adding the modifiers “provocative” and “compassionate” and “egalitarian” we can name those qualities which brought his program into such great tension with the agenda of the established authorities.

In spite of its inherent redundancy, the phrase “political martyr” names the inevitable result of Jesus’ praxis, and it reminds us that his was not merely a “personal” or “spiritual” or “religious” project. Rather, he lived and died as an active participant in the struggles of a people dominated by an oppressive system in an occupied territory.

What is the benefit of outlining such an emerging picture of Jesus? Some may feel this sort of historical investigation discredits the scriptural accounts, or undermines their faith, or jeopardizes the mission of the church.

Others may feel just the opposite: that historical Jesus research makes the biblical narratives more real, or strengthens their faith, or gives greater credibility to the ministry of the church. Here are five ways Jesus research can enrich our work today:

First, it helps us read the *synoptic gospels* with greater accuracy and integrity.

It is too easy to begin our reading with preconceived notions about what we will find. If we begin with the idea that Jesus was a mild-mannered friend of sinners, or a dispenser of spiritual advice, or an all-powerful wonder-worker, for example, that is likely what we will find.

Historical study, however, gives us a clearer picture of how things really were in Palestine 2000 years

ago and therefore helps us form a more authentic picture of Jesus which can then color our reading of the gospels. We are then better able to enjoy the stories of Jesus in the Bible because we will see them as true-to-life experiences.

As mentioned previously, one goal of historical research is not so much to critique the ancient narratives as much as it is to critique the self-understanding and the biases of contemporary readers.

As we said, our intent is not to judge the New Testament accounts themselves, but to judge our own understanding of the biblical witness. In short, we need to do Jesus research in order to keep ourselves honest.

Second, historical Jesus research provides the proper starting point for doing *systematic theology*.

Classic Christologies which define Jesus as the incarnate Son of God, as the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, and as the one who embodies both a divine nature and a human nature are all couched in descriptive language. However, they actually function doxologically, not descriptively.

That is, they are expressions of Christian commitment and devotion; they are not descriptions of Jesus the man. By holding our historical reconstructions of the human Jesus in tension with our doctrinal constructions of the divine Christ, we can keep our dogmatic theology from becoming docetic.

More importantly, careful study of Jesus’ impact on his first followers, in the historical context in which they lived, can help us understand why those early believers soon pinned exalted titles on him.

We have seen how Mark preserves the title “the son of the man.” Why did others, Matthew’s gospel in particular, feel it was important to identify him as “Messiah” or “Christ”? Why do the Pauline correspondence and Luke-Acts emphasize the title “Lord” or “Kyrios”? And how did the title “Son of God” become so important for the Johannine literature and the Epistle to the Hebrews?

While answers to these questions lie beyond the scope of this study, historical investigation of Christian origins cannot but help clarify theological issues such as these.

Third, the results of our Jesus research will help us clarify the shape of *the church’s ministry*.

Our usual practice is to identify the personal benefits of our relationship with Jesus. Soteriology emphasizes the present gift of forgiveness of sins and the future hope of eternal life.

Traditional metaphors of the atonement—whether the classical *Christus Victor* model, or Anselm’s

vicarious satisfaction theory, or Abelard's moral influence concept—all focus on the individual believer's personal standing before God and stress how each single person can be saved.

Thus the church stresses personal piety and individual discipleship. Programs of community outreach and social action then grow out of the individuals' group consensus. Political involvement becomes an extension of personal morality.

However, once we realize that Jesus led a socio-political movement—"political" not in the sense of modern partisan politics, but in the root sense of "life in the *polis*, the city"—our starting point will become our sense of *social* ethics, rather than our *personal* standards. We will learn to be suspicious of the so-called "separation of church and state" dogma, and reclaim the church's rightful public voice.

Then we will come to measure our personal ethics in light of our public morality. Our concern for individual forgiveness and eternal salvation will become an outgrowth or extension of how much we value interpersonal reconciliation and community wholeness.

Fourth, historical Jesus research is an appropriate way to interact with the lives of *secular humanists*.

It may be true that the more conservative, so-called "evangelical" or "fundamentalist" churches are the ones that seem to be growing most rapidly today. But on the other end of the religious spectrum, many of the Unitarian Universalist congregations are also enjoying greater than expected growth.

A significant portion of the educated population of North America and Europe seems to be indifferent, if not antithetical, to what is seen as the unscientific or irrational teachings of traditional Christianity.

Careful study which begins by treating the biblical record in much the same way as any other anthology of ancient documents, and which is not afraid to address "the Jesus question" with the same clear-eyed rational discourse, may be the church's best avenue for engaging post-modern secularists. Such an approach would recognize that faith in Jesus is the *result* of engaging the gospels, not the *prerequisite* for studying the texts.

Fifth, in a similar fashion this may be the best approach for Christianity's engagement with the other *major world religions*, not only with Judaism and Islam with which we share common roots, but also with Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Shinto traditions as well. The day in which Christians could make exclusive claims that precluded respect for other faiths deserves to be relegated to the past.

By choosing to focus on what we sometimes call "the scandal of particularity"—namely, that our faith is centered in a particular person who lived in a specific place at an exact time in history—rather than in a philosophical system or an ethical practice. . . . By focusing on the person of Jesus himself we may find common ground in our conversation with Jewish and Muslim theologians, who rightly count Jesus as "one of their own."

By considering the provocative aphorisms of Jesus, we may detect similarities with the teachings of the compassionate Buddha and the adages of Confucius and the paradoxes in the *Tao Ten Ching*. By emphasizing the goals of Jesus' ministry we may relate to Hindu and Shinto desires to be at one with the universe and with nature.

Whether historical Jesus research ultimately proves helpful in addressing these five issues remains to be seen, of course.

#### THE EMERGING PICTURE

A month before my fourteenth birthday I participated in the Rite of Holy Confirmation. To celebrate that coming-of-age event, my parents gave me my first wrist watch, my godmother sent me a leather-bound Bible, and my grandparents offered a hymnal with my name inscribed in gold.

An older cousin gave me a little devotional booklet entitled *What Jesus Means to Me*. I don't know whether I ever actually read that book, but I do know that the title has stuck with me. All historians have to consider—at least implicitly, if not explicitly—what their subject means to them. Obviously when we are studying Jesus sooner or later we have to ask what this means, what *he* means for us.

Our imagination must come into play here. Historians have long since abandoned the fiction that they can construct purely objective accounts. While the social sciences are scientific in the sense that they base their conclusions on as much primary evidence as is available, they do not pretend to be as exacting and unbiased as physics or chemistry.

Which means that the historian's subjective experience is not only an admitted factor but a *necessary* factor in the project. Historians are required to use their imaginations to reconstruct the significance of the events and people they are studying.

In the case of Jesus research, the warning stands that any picture of him which is completely congenial for us is most likely inaccurate. If you are entirely satisfied with the Jesus you see, you are probably

wrong!

With that caveat in place, we can proceed. As a provocative sage, Jesus' teachings and parables challenged the people who gathered around him, mostly other marginal peasants from the villages and farming hamlets of lower Galilee, to rethink their subordinate lot in life. He surprised them into imagining that life in God's empire, unlike life in Antipas' territory and the Roman empire, is rewarding and positive.

As a compassionate shaman, Jesus' healings and exorcisms enabled his companions to experience the kind of health and wholeness which signaled the defeat of oppressive demonic powers.

As an egalitarian subversive, Jesus led his followers into mutually supportive patterns of living, centered around festive meals they shared in common. In short, people were attracted to him not just because of the kind of person he was but also because of the kind of people they became when they were around him.

Perhaps you have had the experience of meeting someone for the first time and gaining the distinct impression this person was going to be "bad news," the sort of person you would want to avoid at all costs in the future.

Similarly, you may also have had the exact opposite experience. You met someone and right away you knew you were going to like this person. There was something about that person—some inflection of voice, some twinkle in the eye, some gesture of hospitality—which immediately attracted you and struck you as "good news."

And if the feeling was mutual, you felt confident your friendship would be a lasting and beneficial relationship. Today I think we are most likely to experience this if we are fortunate enough to fall in love with the person who eventually becomes our life partner.

Something like that, we imagine, is what must have happened when those Galilean peasants met Jesus. He, too, was one of them. But there was something about the way he acted—he didn't swagger, but neither did he cower—and he went about with a kind of self-assurance that was reassuring.

And there was something about the way he spoke—he didn't brag, but neither did he apologize—and the things he said were never demeaning, rather they were forgiving and affirming.

Also there was something about the way he shared—he wasn't stingy, but neither was he wasteful—and people found themselves being generous and celebrating with each other. For marginal peasants this must have been an attractive and engaging vision of life.

The trouble is, the things Jesus said and did ran counter to the way things were supposed to go in a patriarchal society built on a purity ethic.

His announcement of the arrival of the empire of God was an implicit challenge to the legitimacy of the Roman imperial system. While this was scarcely a threat to the emperor himself, it must have made retainers in the patronage system nervous—tax farmers, land owners, mercenaries in the military, clients living in the urban centers. His habit of building an inclusive fellowship where people could experience divine benefactions directly was an explicit challenge to the value of the sacrificial system centered in Jerusalem.

While his action in the temple precincts was scarcely a threat to the shrine itself, it must have made the priestly hierarchy sufficiently nervous to denounce him to the governor. He was clearly a threat to the good order of the territories of Galilee and Judea. So in the end he was executed as an enemy of the state.

As a political martyr, Jesus' movement to reform the religious-social-cultural-political world of late Second Temple Judaism was a failure.

His experiment in fostering inclusive communities of people who affirm their mutual self-worth and who share their resources with each other in a non-coercive, non-violent, non-hierarchical style did not succeed.

In fact, it may have been doomed to fail from the start, because it came at a time in history when the Jewish community was compelled to become more exclusive, or run the risk of being assimilated into the dominant Greco-Roman culture.

But although Jesus' movement was a failure in its immediate context, he did not fail in a larger sense. For simply to label him a "political martyr" is to imply that his death and the things he stood for in life have on-going significance. Not every criminal who is executed is a "martyr," only those whom others continue to value as important.

In Jesus' case, the movement which began in Galilee and ended in Jerusalem *did* take hold and expand beyond the borders when it spread into the Hellenistic world. What started in those rural villages carried on in the urban centers of the empire.

Only one factor can adequately account for this extraordinary leap. It is the announcement of ***Jesus' resurrection***.

As indicated before, the restoration of life to a dead man is not the kind of "event" which can even be addressed historically. Jesus' resurrection is not subject to verification; it can neither be proved nor disproved.

The documents which report the story of his rising from the realm of the dead are self-contradictory in important details, and they do not agree on whether we are dealing with a revived corpse, or a recognizable albeit immaterial “body,” or a visionary experience, or whatever. Could his resurrection have been recorded by a video camera? Responses range from “Well, of course” to “Obviously not.”

However, although the resurrection itself cannot be labeled “historical” in the strict sense of the term, there is no doubt historically that Jesus’ first followers were convinced not only that he had been vindicated by God and exalted to the heavens, but also that he had been raised in some hard-to-define bodily sense and restored alive to this earth.

Furthermore, they knew then as we do today that the revivification of a dead person was and is an impossibility that defies all credulity; nevertheless, they elected to make it a center piece of their message.

The Pauline correspondence repeatedly reflects this conviction, and in Paul’s most extended discussion of the subject in 1 Cor 15 he insists that this tradition goes back to the earliest apostles.<sup>4</sup> Which means that Christians were publicly proclaiming Jesus’ resurrection within a decade of his death.

Clearly for them Jesus was more than merely a “martyr”; he had become for them their “living Lord,” the “Savior of the world,” the promised “Christ.”

The historical impact he made on his companions was so intense and powerful, so positive and enduring that they had no recourse but to resort to the most extraordinary language available to them when they wanted to put a name to his lasting influence on their lives.

If death by crucifixion was the worst possible denigration, then resurrection from the dead must be its opposite, the best possible affirmation.

“Resurrection,” therefore, is the only word historically that can account for the fact that Jesus’ companions experienced his ongoing presence in their communities.

Which means that twenty centuries later those who claim to be his followers can still affirm—without crossing their fingers!—that Jesus is risen.

Today we tend to pose the issue by asking, “Do you believe in Jesus?” We anticipate that people will

respond by naming the things they believe *about* him, i.e. *that* he was a prophet, *that* he is the Son of God, *that* he went about doing good, *that* he suffered for our sins, etc.

A prior question we should be asking is: “Do you believe Jesus?” That is, do you agree with what he said and did? Are you willing to affirm his approach to life and death? Do you buy into his agenda for challenging the *status quo*, for promoting the well being of socially marginal people, for relying on the gifts of God? Does his story ring true for you?

To get at this from a different angle, consider how our English-language Bibles translate a key New Testament concept with two completely different words. *Pisteuō* is a verb and is regularly translated with the term “believe.” (E.g. “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you will be saved,” Acts 16:31 NRSV.)

*Pistis* is a noun, but although it represents the same root concept it is normally rendered as “faith.” (e.g. “By grace you have been saved through *faith*,” Eph 2:8 NRSV.) So for all practical purposes the concepts of “belief” and “faith” are identical as far as our biblical documents are concerned.

But what is the core meaning of *pistis/pisteuō* faith/belief?

At the heart of their meaning is the concept of “trust.” So on this basis faith or belief in Jesus is not so much what you are willing to say *about* him as much as whether you are willing to put your trust *in* him.

The older dogmaticians used to distinguish between the *fides quae* (that is, the content of the faith which we believe) and the *fides qua* (that is, the trusting faith by which we believe).

That, too, is the issue today. Historical Jesus research helps us gain clarity around what we maintain was true about him and his career. How we respond to that historical picture is another matter.

If trajectories like provocative sage and compassionate shaman and egalitarian subversive help us understand Jesus’ praxis and the reason he died as a political martyr, well and good. And if we are then compelled to take that leap of faith which affirms his resurrection and his on-going presence in our midst, so much the better.

As a result we will be empowered to regain a sense of what it means to nurture each other within inclusive, celebrative communities of faith. Then we may also dare to reclaim our public voice so we can work for the common good and enhance the welfare of the marginal members of our larger societies.

But only if we believe Jesus.

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<sup>4</sup>For a fuller discussion of this chapter, see my article: M. I. Wegener, “The Rhetorical Strategy of 1 Corinthians 15,” *Currents in Theology and Mission* (2004) 438-455.

