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## In the Beginning

Investigating who Jesus was and how Christianity began is a media phenomenon in itself. It is difficult now to distill the original figure of Jesus from the memories, recollections, accumulations, inventions, myths, and interpretations that have become part of the Christian mediation of him, even in its earliest documents.<sup>1</sup> For some, getting a reasonable historical picture of Jesus is either not possible, not important, or not a question. But there's value in attempting to do so, in order to get at least an approximation of what was there in the beginning, as a basis for understanding how and why it's changed and which factors influenced the changes.

What has commonly been known about the history of Jesus and the beginning of Christianity comes from copies of copies of a relatively small number of written documents reproduced in what is now called the New Testament, comprising four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and a number of letters. But these texts have particular characteristics that need to be considered in building an accurate picture.

One is that they did not begin to be written or compiled until at least twenty years after Jesus had been killed and a post-Jesus movement was underway. Although significant weight is given by many scholars to the dependability of the preservation of the events of Jesus in a Christian oral tradition,<sup>2</sup> much had happened in those intervening decades and there is evidence that some of those later events and the ideas that came out of them were taken up and included in the writing about Jesus as if they were part of Jesus' own story.

A second is that these key documents in the New Testament are just a few of a much larger number of documents also written about the same events. This larger corpus of documents were culled over a period of several hundred years in an ideological process of selection to create an authorized version of the history (a canon) that reflected the interests of those in power at the time. Many of those other documents, which offered alternative

viewpoints, were destroyed in what we would now call a process of media censorship and control.

A further consideration is that these few select documents are nothing like what we would call objective or balanced historical recording. They are partisan, creative, retrospective, interpreted reconstructions of something that happened several decades earlier by a passionate social minority group with a vested interest. Borg identifies them as testimony rather than what we understand as history, and they should be read therefore for their meaning and not primarily for their factuality.<sup>3</sup>

A final consideration is that the texts are a specific medium – writing. Although almost all of the earliest Christians were illiterate, the perspectives we have today on who Jesus was and what he did are the views of an unrepresentative group of literate Christians who made up less than 5% of the Christian community at the time.

There has been a significant scholarly interest from the start of the twentieth century to apply modern historical critical methods to these writings to try to separate out the more historical aspects of Jesus from later inventions and accumulations, in order to locate Jesus more accurately within the social, cultural, and religious milieu of his time. Some of the findings of this research have been controversial and in many cases contradict orthodox Christian beliefs. Many are still being debated.<sup>4</sup> Rather than one conclusion, at best what has been reached are a number of possible options, with Jesus being portrayed variously as a peasant sage, a social revolutionary, a religious mystic, a prophet of the end time, a marginal Jew, or the true Messiah.<sup>5</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this work to try to resolve issues that are unresolved by highly qualified biblical scholars. However, this body of research offers valuable insights that can be useful in getting a clearer picture of what Jesus may have thought and what he was doing. As Borg notes, Jesus ceases to be a credible figure and loses his humanness if attributes properly belonging to his followers after his death are ascribed to him before his death – it is “neither good history nor good theology.”<sup>6</sup> Since the field is still a hotly contested one, what follows is my educated reading of that recent thinking compiled to give us a framework for understanding Jesus’ thought and practice, and for reconsidering the development of thought and practice that followed him and the place of media in those developments.

## **The social and media context**

Jesus was born and spent much of his life in the ancient Roman Middle Eastern region of Galilee. Because of its position on the trade routes between Asia Minor and Egypt, for more than a thousand years, the wider area of Palestine had negotiated its religious and political identity amid constant

imperial occupations and cultural colonization. At the time of Jesus it was part of the Roman Empire, governed by rulers appointed by Rome according to Roman policy.

The Jewish society into which Jesus was born was diverse and highly stratified socially, economically, and religiously. Communication patterns and practices reflected and reinforced these class distinctions. The languages one spoke, the circumstances in which they were spoken, how they were spoken, whether one was literate in a particular language or another, and the extent of one's literacy were all markers of a person's or group's identity and place within the local and imperial cultural hierarchies. Three languages in particular were important in social positioning and stratification. Greek was the dominant language used in urban areas in business, international politics, and secular culture. Hebrew was the language of Jewish scriptures, and it was used primarily in the Temple and Jewish religious literature and practice. Its restricted use and literacy had led to the development of a religious leadership class based primarily on their capacity and resources to read and speak Hebrew. Aramaic, which had a number of dialects, was the common and most widely used language in general discourse and village life.

Levels of literacy were low and generally restricted to the upper classes. While there is a variety of opinions about levels of literacy, the estimation is that from 95 to 97 percent of the population were illiterate,<sup>7</sup> meaning that interactions of social and religious life, particularly in the towns and rural areas, were almost wholly oral in character.

Despite the general low levels of literacy, the religion of Jesus was a blended oral and literate religious culture. For hundreds of years, the Jews in Exile, in Israel, and in the Diaspora had been assembling and reproducing written scriptures and other texts. Protocols had been developed for how these written documents were to be integrated into worship, teaching, and wider oral practices of the religion. Different Jewish religious groups were marked not only by differences in their religious and cultural views, but also by different traditions of the integration of text into oral practice. These included the Sadducees, the hereditary priestly families and landholding aristocrats of Jerusalem; the Pharisees, a religious group marked by their piety born of struggles against secularizing trends a century earlier; the Scribes, a literate group who played a powerful role interpreting the written texts of the religion; and the Essenes, an apocalyptic sect and monastic community of Judaism.

For those living outside Jerusalem or without access to the Temple, the center of religious community was the local synagogue, a primarily lay-oriented community that stressed reading or recitation of the Hebrew scriptures, exposition of the scriptures when there was a person present who could do it, singing of hymns, and offering of prayers. Although illiterate, most heard the scriptures spoken sufficiently frequently to be able to

recite significant portions of them from memory. Since most village people spoke Aramaic, a practice developed of providing oral Aramaic interpretations and applications of the Hebrew scripture readings, known as *targums*. When the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the synagogue form of worship with its combination of reading or reciting scriptures with oral commentary and debate became the common form of worship in reformed Rabbinic Judaism. In its early development, Christian communities drew significantly on this media model in the development of Christian worship practice.

A major issue in people's daily lives was making enough not only to provide the basic necessities of life but also to meet the financial burden of taxation. The Romans imposed heavy taxes, tolls, and tributes on occupied populations to support their imperial activities, the military, and the ruling elite. Depending on occupation and location, these imperial tax obligations could range from 12% to 50%.<sup>8</sup> Collection of taxes was leased out by the Romans to the local upper stratum, including religious leaders, who added to the imperial tax obligation their own costs and profits. These were ruthlessly collected, with military support provided to local tax collectors if needed. Jews were also obligated to pay religious tithes and taxes, specified in the Torah as part of the Covenant, for the support of the temple, its priests, and the poor. For farmers, the combined Jewish and Roman taxes were around 35 percent.<sup>9</sup>

For those living already at a marginal or subsistence level, meeting these obligatory taxes was crippling. In an empire that was dominantly agricultural, income and wealth were tied significantly to ownership of land. Those whose traditional or inherited land was not large or fruitful enough to support their family and meet their tax obligations eventually were driven into debt, were forced to sell their land to the upper classes, and became either a worker for others or even a slave in what Stegemann and Stegemann describe as "a regular process of pauperization."<sup>10</sup> Increasingly, the ownership of land and therefore wealth became concentrated and restricted to the upper classes.

Many coped by paying the Roman taxes, which were ruthlessly enforced, but not the religious ones, which lacked the same power of enforcement. In this situation, the only sanction the religious leaders could impose in the face of this loss of their income was to declare those who did not pay their religious dues to be ritually unclean and therefore excluded from religious participation until the taxes were paid.

This economic impact was felt particularly in the subsistence economy of the rural towns and small villages, and it led to a significant underclass – "a growing number of landless laborers, widespread emigration, and a social class of robbers and beggars."<sup>11</sup> The social disruption it caused produced numerous apocalyptic figures and movements – prophets, preachers,

and messiahs – who traversed first-century Palestine proclaiming the day of God’s judgment and the end of the world.<sup>12</sup>

This was the world Jesus grew up in.

## Jesus in his media context

According to the Christian written tradition, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, a village in Galilee less than four miles away from a large urban center, Sepphoris. Prior to his religious ministry, he is identified as a carpenter (*tektōn*) and son of a carpenter.

These rural roots and manual occupation are indicators of Jesus’ cultural and economic position. Geographically, coming from Nazareth associated him with an inconsequential part of the country. When it was recommended to the cultured and Greek-speaking Nathanael that he meet Jesus, Nathanael’s response was “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”<sup>13</sup>

Jesus’ spoken language was a Galilean dialect of Aramaic, an identifiable accent and manner of speech that likewise were disdained by the religious elite and urban dwellers.<sup>14</sup> As a carpenter servicing different customers, including possibly in the nearby city of Sepphoris, Jesus may have had some knowledge also of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew words.

His identified occupation as a carpenter also locates Jesus socially. Although some modern interpretations romanticize him as a skilled specialist tradesman, the term was an occupational designation of a construction worker who could be a “mason, carpenter, cartwright, and joiner all in one.”<sup>15</sup> The term “carpenter” was also a derogatory cultural signifier for the illiterate lower classes.

His birthplace and occupation therefore locate Jesus within the lowest, most vulnerable stratum of society, associated with small farmers, tenants, traders, day laborers, fishermen, shepherds, widows, orphans, prostitutes, beggars, and bandits. His people and family were people who were relatively poor if not absolutely poor, living at a subsistence level and constantly struggling for the basic necessities needed for survival.<sup>16</sup> This class stigmatization explains the reported response from people when Jesus began speaking publicly in his hometown: “‘Where did this man get this wisdom and these deeds of power? Is not this the carpenter’s son?’ ... And they took offense at him.”<sup>17</sup>

Based on this background, it is also likely that, like others of his class, Jesus was illiterate. This likelihood goes against the largely unquestioned traditional Christian view that Jesus was naturally able to read and write. Unpacking this contradiction is important from a media perspective.

One of the grounds for the assumption that Jesus was able to read and write is a number of places in the Gospels where Jesus is referred to as

reading and writing.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars argue that a Jewish boy of Jesus' time would have learned to read and write as part of his religious participation,<sup>19</sup> or that Jesus could not have expressed many of the sayings he did without a detailed knowledge of the texts of "The Law and the Prophets."<sup>20</sup> Later theological construction of Jesus as the Son of God also cast him as capable of superior human qualities and therefore at least equal to the abilities of the social elite.

However, Crossan argues a strong case that in a situation where 95 to 97 percent of the Jewish state was illiterate and where Jesus was a member of the lowest class in the society, it must be presumed that Jesus was illiterate.<sup>21</sup> Dunn likewise contends, "We have to assume, therefore, that the great majority of Jesus' first disciples would have been functionally illiterate. That Jesus himself was literate cannot simply be assumed."<sup>22</sup> The reason why Jesus' lower-class illiteracy was downplayed or changed in later writings about him has media relevance. Crossan suggests that Jesus' illiteracy posed a problem to later educated and literate Gentile Christians who wanted to commend the Christian faith to the cultured members of their own class, and they did so by writing it out in the writing of their stories. The later written accounts of Jesus as a young man debating the learned teachers in the temple and personally reading and interpreting a passage from Isaiah in the Nazareth synagogue both come from Luke's Gospel, the author of which was an educated physician living in Rome. Crossan sees them as later textual reworkings of Jesus to make him more culturally acceptable to the media culture of a different class. Accounts of Jesus reading and writing, he advocates, are "Lukan propaganda rephrasing Jesus' oral challenge and charisma in terms of scribal literacy and exegesis."<sup>23</sup>

Recognizing Jesus as illiterate does not contradict his frequent quoting of Jewish sayings and excerpts from scripture in his teachings, but locates them rather within the oral cultural practice of his time. It was a common and a significant skill of illiterate people to be able to recite significant passages of scripture from memory as a result of hearing them read frequently or being taught them. Through these oral practices, Jesus and most of his Jewish contemporaries would have known the foundational narratives, basic stories, and general expectations of his tradition and be able to use and quote them in communication and argument. How this was done, however, was distinctly oral in character and quite different from "the exact texts, precise citations, or intricate arguments of its scribal elites."<sup>24</sup>

While not a critical issue, considering the likelihood that Jesus was probably illiterate is important for a number of reasons. It recovers significant class and political dimensions in his religious message that were subsequently written out. It embeds his highly skilled oral charisma in his lower-class background rather than as a developed skill of a cultural elite. It also gives an insight into one of the early transformations of Jesus by followers who

inhabited a differently mediated culture and wanted to make Jesus relevant to that culture. In this process, however, the distinctive claim of the lower classes for Jesus to have been one of them was taken away by a minority group of Christian writers. This concern would reemerge later in challenges to Christian writing. Because of the permanence of writing and the censorship of alternative views, however, the Lukan view that Jesus was literate would become unquestionably embedded in the Christian tradition.

As an adult, Jesus became a follower of the itinerant prophet, John the Baptist, before becoming a charismatic teacher himself. He gathered around him an inner band of disciples and other men and women who joined him in his travels and supported and helped him in his healing and miracle work. It was to this group primarily that Jesus passed on verbally his religious and social vision and teachings. It is noteworthy that the people he chose as his inner band were primarily members of his own class and subject to the same bitter poverty to which Jesus' religious message was addressed. Understanding this class reality gives a more realist insight into a number of incidents reported in the New Testament Gospels that are frequently spiritualized or allegorized. Jesus' many references to the poor and hungry and promises that in the coming Kingdom of God they will be fed are frequently interpreted as spiritual hunger, rather than seen for what they literally are: a political manifesto to the poor and starving that, in the coming Kingdom of God, they will have food to eat.

The activities of Jesus as they are recorded reflect two identifiable religious communication genres from within the Jewish tradition that carried cultural meaning for his audiences. His effectiveness as a communicator lies in his skill in activating and challenging the nuances of these cultural literacies.

One was that of the oral prophet, a recognized figure combining oral traditions of speech as charismatic, dramatic, and demonstrative performance. The identification of Jesus with this cultural genre is indicated in questions asked of Jesus' disciples on occasion if he was one of the revered Jewish prophets come back. Jewish prophets were largely rural-based critics that forthrightly addressed current public issues of political, social, and religious importance, particularly the oppressive effects of the urban religious government on the rural poor. Within the prophet's message was an emphasis on God's defense and vindication of the oppressed, a critique of the dominant systems of power and the power-holders causing the oppression, and the vision of a new age to come in which the present system of injustice is overcome, all of which can be seen in Jesus' message.<sup>25</sup>

The other communication genre reflected in Jesus' communication was that of the sage or wise teacher within the rabbinic tradition. Like most rabbis, Jesus gathered around him a group of identified disciples who travelled with him and assisted him in his work, and to whom he directed and entrusted his teaching.<sup>26</sup> On one occasion, Jesus sent out his disciples in pairs to proclaim more widely the good news he was bringing, something

that Thiessen sees as an innovation among rabbis, and a means of mass communication of his message in an oral society, comparable to the coins and inscriptions of rulers.<sup>27</sup> This sending out of his disciples became an important signifier in later Christianity and was an important element in concepts of Christian mission.

One of the enduring characteristics of Jesus from a media or communication perspective is his outstanding skill and reputation as an oral communicator and charismatic performer. As Crossan describes him, he was “an illiterate peasant, but with an oral brilliance that few of those trained in literate and scribal disciplines can ever attain.”<sup>28</sup> The oral characteristics of his communication had political significance for his audiences. They affirmed the dispossessed, disenfranchised, and illiterate rural and peasant classes and the value of their religious experience and culture in ways they could readily identify with, feel enfranchised by, and respond to. The popular appeal of Jesus can be understood within this context: his identification with his audience, his audience’s identification of his shared cultural rootedness, and his outstanding skill in performing his message within the recognizable genres, relationships, responses, codes, tropes, and expectations of the highly developed oral culture from which he came and to which he spoke. Two genres of oral proclamation are particularly notable and have become emblematic of Jesus’ teaching style: his short sayings or aphorisms, and his parabolic stories.

Numerous examples can be given of the terseness, parallelism, and rhythm of his teaching sayings, characteristics that facilitate memory and oral repetition even to the present time:

Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own.  
Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.  
Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you.<sup>29</sup>

The skillfully constructed, memorable, cryptic, and often subversive character of Jesus’ parabolic stories similarly explains their durability and generative power. Well-known parables such as The Lost Sheep, The Good Samaritan, and The Prodigal Son have a strong realism, are concise and economic in their narrative, have memorable and at times subversive characters, are dramatic in their reversals, and frequently have either a twist in the tail that upends audience expectations or a lack of closure that requires hearers to construct their own meaning. Bailey notes that they reflect characteristics still found in “Oriental storytelling”:

I discovered that the Oriental storyteller has a ‘grand piano’ on which he plays. The piano is built of the attitudes, relationships, responses and value judgments that are known and stylized in Middle Eastern peasant society. Everybody knows how everybody is expected to act in any given situation.

The storyteller interrupts the established pattern of behavior to introduce his irony, his surprises, his humor, and his climaxes. If we are not attuned to those same attitudes, relationships, responses, and value judgments, we do not hear the music of the piano.<sup>30</sup>

These multiple layers, nuances, resonances, sharp provocations, and controversial advocacy that mark Jesus' parables are largely lost to the modern audience, but would have engaged the minds and emotions of his audiences and stimulated discussion among hearers for days.<sup>31</sup> Christian leaders, theologians, and preachers frequently try to shut down this polysemy of the parables by giving "definitive" interpretations of their meaning within their own constructed theological systems. Freed from that constraining orthodoxy, however, the parables of Jesus remain even today as questions inviting an answer, and as an encouragement to audiences to participate by generating their own new meaning in the story.

The ordered nature of the documentary records of Jesus' teachings and stories does not give the full picture of how they were produced or received. Each of the Gospels tells the sayings and parables only once. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, groups together a large number of sayings in what is now a well-known section commonly called The Sermon on the Mount,<sup>32</sup> as if all were given on the one occasion. Other Gospels reproduce the sayings in different narrative settings. Dunn suggests that this ordering may reflect the practices of the early Christian oral tradition of preserving the tradition in blocks and series to facilitate memory.<sup>33</sup> In practice, though, as with other itinerant teachers, the sayings and stories would have been part of a repertoire of themes and topics that Jesus creatively retold in different settings in response to specific situations or questions.

In addition to his spoken words, he also performed his key messages. He gained some notoriety by assembling a questionable group of people into a new "kingdom community" that travelled with him. Against convention, he mixed with and shared hospitality with women and others designated as social outcasts, and included social nobodies and outcasts as protagonists and exemplars in his teachings and parabolic stories.

In a social context that saw the world of the spirit as a reality that continually intervened and influenced events in the material world, Jesus also communicated through actions that embodied prophetic meaning: casting out demons, healing the sick, and miraculously producing food to feed the hungry – performing the new reality he was speaking about. His chosen followers were given authority to do the same.

Although Jesus was rooted in the Jewish tradition of the teacher and the prophet, the biblical scholar Birger Gerhardsson notes that he does not fit into any Jewish category. He was not a common traditionist, a link in a chain of tradition presenting wisdom from others, but had original features – a

Jewish teacher with prophetic and messianic traits who impressed his hearers with the authority with which he spoke.<sup>34</sup>

In difference from most subsequent Christian theology, Jesus' theology was expressed in concrete, practical, and accessible terms. God was spoken of not as an abstract concept, but as a concrete presence interested in the practicalities of people's everyday lives and able to act on human needs. This religious language and theology relocated God away from the preserve of religious institutions into the everyday world of the home and marketplace. His teachings on the nature of God were commonly in narrative stories about everyday activities: a shepherd losing a sheep, a woman losing a coin, a farmer sowing a field. In place of his audience's religious positioning as unclean and excluded from official religious access to God, Jesus spoke of a direct and personal human relationship to a God who was gracious, compassionate, and forgiving.

The charismatic way in which Jesus was able to engage directly with people, and the enthusiasm with which common people responded to his presence, his speech, and his actions, is recorded in a number of places in the Gospel records, with large crowds not only coming to hear him but also following him from place to place. Memory and impact of this charismatic presence were significant factors in the response to the disciples preaching about him after his death.

There was also a political dimension to his religious message, a challenge to the religious authorities whose religious policies and interpretations were oppressing the poor and disenfranchised. Crossan identifies the political character of Jesus' message as different from that of the many other movements or acts of resistance that were active at the time, such as unarmed protestors, armed bandits, apocalyptic or millennial prophets, and royal or messianic claimants. He sees what Jesus was doing as "on the borderline between the covert and the overt arts of resistance ... (not) as open as the acts of protestors, prophets, bandits or messiahs ... (but) more open than playing dumb, imagining revenge, or simply recalling Mosaic or Davidic ideals."<sup>35</sup> Many of his stories invoked the oral strategies used by subordinated groups to resist or subvert the imposition of authority in situations where to resist more overtly would be fatal. The subversive use of double meanings, cultural codes and nuances, and exaggerations or particular attributes given to characters in many of Jesus' stories are largely lost to us today but would have been understood and talked about by his hearers. The parable of The Good Samaritan is a good example, where respected Jewish religious leaders pass callously by a person in need without helping, but the one who stopped to help was a Samaritan, a race that was culturally and religiously despised. The cutting nature of his challenge, however, was perceived by those in positions of power, making his arrest and crucifixion political as much as religious in motivation.

One of the significant issues or consequences of Jesus' oral communicative style is that he never, at least that we are aware of, gave a systematic summary or key points of his theological thinking that could be referred to as a yardstick for later interpretations of his key messages. He appears to have presumed the religious structure of Judaism, and in places in the recorded accounts of his message he explicitly states that he was not interested in developing an alternative to Jewish religious law and criticizes those who did not respect it.<sup>36</sup> His desire was not to destroy or replace Judaism, but to rekindle its heart. His focus as an oral communicator was not in developing a better philosophical or religious system to be taught to people, but in interactively engaging with people about rethinking the nature of faith and their ethical behavior in relation to issues they were concerned about. The intent of his proverbs, parables, lessons from nature, and prophetic performances was to kindle people's imaginations to be born afresh and see and live differently. His concerns were local not universal, concrete not abstract, provocative not systematized. The foundation for his work was not a philosophy, but a vision of God as an ever-present, gracious, and compassionate father whose nearby (in both space and time) spiritual kingdom opened new possibilities and challenged the values and false security of earthly powers and concerns.

This lack of closure and system in Jesus' sayings, stories, and actions has made them a fecund source of inspiration, renewal, interpretation, and provocation for people seeking to understand their meaning and relevance for new concrete situations. But their lack of system and definition has also made them problematic for reproducing them out of their oral context into different media of communication, or for making them the basis for religious organizations where order and predictability of meaning are essential for maintaining stability and power.

This difference in media systems – the oral charismatic and the written, philosophical, and organizational – underlies the immense amount of effort that has been put throughout Christian history into trying to build and connect the fixed structures of the new religion of Christianity on the fluid teachings and stories of Jesus. Jesus' intention appears to have been that his stories and teachings be engaged with and lived – not systematized into abstract philosophical doctrines and creeds.

This difference of media systems is also a consideration in the titles that have been ascribed to Jesus. A number of reputable scholars today are of the opinion that Jesus didn't see himself as the founder of a new religion, nor that he claimed for himself many of the exalted claims made about him in the later Christian tradition.<sup>37</sup> It is helpful to be reminded that Jesus wasn't Christian, but was Jewish – he was born a Jew, lived as a Jew, and died a Jew. The purpose of his mission in its context was distinctly Jewish: the renewal of Israel's relationship to God and calling Israel back to its divine calling to

be an inclusive people of God in the face of practices of exploitation and sacrifice that belied that high destiny.

The most common title Jesus used of himself was the term “the son of man” or “a son of man.” This was a Hebrew or Aramaic term from the Jewish tradition that was used to describe all of humanity or one’s participation in humanity – similar to our English use of the term “humankind” or “I am one of you.” The title “Son of Man” that is ascribed to Jesus in the later Greek-language Gospels is subtly different. It is a developed Greek translation of the Hebrew term, but refers to a transcendental apocalyptic figure that is the agent of God’s judgment. From his textual research, Crossan considers it very unlikely that Jesus used the title “The Son of Man” to describe himself, but did use the term “son of man” in its generic native Hebrew and Aramaic sense to identify himself with those he was addressing. His use of it was “to emphasize that he shared with them a common destiny as *we* poor or destitute human beings.”<sup>38</sup>

There are a number of references in the writings of Paul and the Gospels that give Jesus the title “the Son of God,” and there is a similar significant debate among scholars about whether Jesus referred to himself individually in this way, and what exactly was meant when the term was used.<sup>39</sup> Certainly Jesus spoke of God in very intimate familial ways, such as in his use of the Aramaic term *Abba*, a term used on occasion by adults in referring to their natural fathers or an honored teacher.<sup>40</sup> Jesus’ use of the term was part of his message to all: to see God as a close parent rather than a distant ruler. It does not necessarily indicate that Jesus saw himself as having a unique relationship with God that was unlike any other person’s.

Jesus addressed God personally as a member of a monotheistic religious community. The term “Son of God” occurs in a number of places in Jewish scriptures, but where it does it refers to the nation of Israel as God’s chosen son or as an honorific title given to the king of Israel. As a monotheistic Jew, the idea of seeing himself or any other human being as a preexistent divine “Son of God” would have been anathema to Jesus. It is instructive that most of Jesus’ chosen disciples, after his death, retained a strongly monotheistic Christian theology, in which they recognized and affirmed Jesus as the Messiah sent by God, but never saw him in this role as divine or as the pre-existent Son of God. It is noteworthy that because they refused to recognize Jesus as God or the Son of God, they were later branded as heretical and excommunicated by Gentile Christians.

On the other hand, the concept of a “Son of God” was a quite familiar one in Hellenistic culture, which was more polytheistic in its outlook and quite accepting of the existence of such intermediate spiritual beings. As we will explore further in the following chapter, the identification of Jesus as the “Son of God” appears not to have been part of Jesus’ self-understanding or original message, but an innovation in Hellenistic Christianity made to

facilitate Christianity's transition from its original Jewish context into the wider Greco-Roman world, where the main competitor for religious loyalty was Roman imperial theology, which declared that the great emperor, Caesar Augustus, was divine and was referred to variously as "Son of God," "Lord," "savior of the world," "bringer of peace," and divinely conceived.<sup>41</sup>

## Remaking Jesus in speech and performance

The small inner circle of followers chosen by Jesus expected that he was inaugurating an imminent new kingdom of God on earth and that they would be part of it. That hope and expectation came to a sudden halt when he was arrested and quickly executed in Jerusalem by the Roman authorities. His death shocked and traumatized them, compounded by the fear that they could easily be identified, arrested, and suffer the same fate themselves. In the period following his death, they shared memories, discussed what had happened, and drew on their cultural media of written or memorized texts of scriptures for comfort and to gain an understanding of the meaning of what had happened.

Although there are different opinions about the particulars, sometime after his death<sup>42</sup> Jesus' followers appeared in public again, declaring Jesus as God's Messiah as promised in Jewish scriptures, and declaring that the last days were at hand and that Jesus would be returning imminently to establish God's Kingdom on earth. People were urged to put their faith in Jesus and prepare themselves for the coming end of the world.

There is a diversity of views within Christianity about what caused this transformation. Many Christians accept literally the narrative accounts in the Gospels and the Book of Acts, written 40–70 years after the events: that, after being dead and placed in a tomb for forty or more hours, the processes of natural decay in Jesus' body and brain were reversed, although the wounds of his crucifixion remained, and his heartbeat and breathing recommenced. He walked out of the tomb; interacted with and gave new instructions to his followers – a group of 500 on one occasion;<sup>43</sup> and then, in his body, he rose up through the clouds and disappeared, with two men in white robes saying that his body would return down through the clouds again one day. Some Christians see this narrative as a mythological construction, grounding what was primarily an experience of new insight and spiritual regeneration and redirection of the group. The Dutch Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, describes it in terms that "the new orientation of living which this Jesus has brought about in their lives has not been rendered meaningless by his death – quite the opposite."<sup>44</sup> Some Christians see it in allegorical terms, with the impact of Jesus pointing to the unquenchable transformative power of God within life. There are

numerous others – some psychological in nature, some theological, some mystical, some fantastic. Some of the media issues in these narratives will be explored in the following two chapters.

However it happened, following his death there was a significant transformation in the immediate followers of Jesus that in its transmission has had remarkable durability and motivating power. Conceptualizing Jesus as the promised Messiah, and themselves as participants in a divine action predicted in their holy scriptures, transformed the charisma of the person of Jesus into a charisma of his ongoing presence embodied in the people he had chosen to be his followers.

Inherent in this first experience for these first followers was a passion to communicate this new reality in a way that gripped others the way they themselves had been gripped by it, a task made more urgent because it involved a perception that these events were a precursor to the end of the world. From the very beginning, the character of the communication of Christianity hasn't been just a descriptive recital of information about facts or events. Much of Christianity through the centuries has been characterized by this rhetorical drive to communicate to and convince audiences of the crucial importance and urgency of what was being spoken about, and to win them over to their cause. In a way that would be followed by subsequent generations, the first followers utilized a full range of mediational actions of interpretation, rhetoric, and persuasion.

They looked back to their tradition, taking passages and verses from the Jewish scriptures, at times out of context, to remake Jesus into a historical prediction and thus give historical credibility to what they were saying. They borrowed concepts and practices from their Jewish culture and made those concepts also part of the message. With the push of new conviction and the pull of the urgency of the expected imminent end of the world, accuracy was less important than relevance and persuasion.

What becomes apparent from these beginnings is that while Jesus was the founding impulse, the dynamism and shaping of Christianity have come from this continually creative process of people making and remaking Jesus to be relevant to new circumstances and to win people over. Christianity spread and grew not just because it contained a message of spiritual power. It spread and grew because its adherents felt energized and at liberty to continually adapt and reinvent its meaning and practices to be relevant to the demands, opportunities, and communication systems of new contexts.

At first, with the expectation that time was short, and with the memory of Jesus sending them out in pairs specifically to Jews,<sup>45</sup> the primary focus of activity was on spreading the message to Jews living in Jerusalem and the near districts. This evangelizing activity was carried out by the disciples or itinerant prophets, who “continued Jesus’ Galilean practice of travelling among the villages, casting out demons, working cures, maintaining an open

table fellowship in thanksgiving, and speaking ‘in Jesus name’.<sup>46</sup> Renouncing home, family, and belongings, they were supported in this by the hospitality of home gatherings of new followers, who provided the itinerant preachers with room, board, a supportive community for their missionary work, and often funding for the next stage of their journey.

People joined the group by confessing Jesus as the predicted Jewish Messiah, repenting of their sins, and, after the model of John the Baptist, being baptized in the name of Jesus. As the group grew, it functioned as an apocalyptic revitalization sect within the Jewish religion, one of many such sects.<sup>47</sup> They continued to see themselves as faithful Jews and followed the requirements of the Torah as followers of the Rabbi Jesus: “They observed the Sabbath, kosher laws, the great festivals of Judaism; they practised circumcision and kept all the other commandments required of faithful Jews everywhere.”<sup>48</sup> In a way similar to that of Pharisaic home fellowships and study groups, they also met separately on a regular basis as groups in people’s homes, where their identity as followers of Jesus was reinforced and expressed by confessing and praising Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, singing hymns, reading and reinterpreting their Jewish scriptures, recounting things that Jesus had said and done, baptizing new believers, and sharing in a communal meal that re-enacted the last meal Jesus had with his disciples. These Jewish Jesus communities were associated with synagogues across the region, including as far as Rome.

Coordination of the movement fell significantly to the inner circle who had been with Jesus throughout his ministry, particularly James (the brother of Jesus), Peter, John, and possibly Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Jesus and James.<sup>49</sup> The major leadership role was taken by James, who was known as James the Righteous or James the Just, an ascription given only to those who followed the Torah strictly, and in recognition of his personal poverty and compassionate concern and work for the poor. This focus on service to the poor continued the emphasis of Jesus and would remain a strong emphasis of the Jewish Jesus Movement.<sup>50</sup>

Of particular focus in this early retelling of the Jesus story were his stories and sayings, accounts of his miracles and exorcisms, the telling of his death and resurrection, and his radical ethic, “an ethic of homelessness, detachment from the family, criticism of possessions and nonviolence.”<sup>51</sup> In Thiessen’s analysis, Jesus’ death was regarded not “as a saving death which frees people from sins” but rather “as one of the prophets who died a martyr’s death for their cause.”<sup>52</sup> There was immediacy in this oral prophetic speech that blurred boundaries between what had happened in the past and what was happening now. Jesus was spoken of not as a past figure who was dead and gone but as a continuing presence alive in those who were now speaking and performing.

The nuance of this fluid boundary and movement between past and present realities that is possible and natural in oral performance is easily lost when

the same experience is fixed in time via writing. The factual and theological problems that arose later when the resurrection of Jesus was written down as a separate, physical event that happened in the past did not arise in the same way in these early stages of oral proclamation. As Sawicki notes,

The prophets proclaimed resurrection as a real-time experience. That is they were able to evoke the presence, power and life of the once-crucified Jesus, and to validate this experience, by wonderworks done through the mention of Jesus' name. In the heyday of the Christian prophets, there was as yet no story of resurrection as an event in someone else's past. Teachers later would narratize resurrection, but the prophetic way was simply to proclaim that one now lives and works among the people who is Jesus, who died.<sup>53</sup>

In this enthusiastic rhetorical telling and proclamation, there was significant adaptation of the sayings and events of Jesus' life in the process of bringing them to life for the audience. While greater constraints were followed in the oral transmission of a fixed tradition, in the process of retelling the apocalyptically charged message, the message gained new material and new meaning as the original Jesus was imaginatively recreated in the process of telling in new settings. The rabbinic and prophetic traditions within Judaism provided models for this process of change through adaptation and application of a master's sayings to different contexts and circumstances.

The events, stories, and meanings of Jesus' life in the earliest stages, then, were preserved through oral repetition and rehearsal and formed into a number of oral traditions, perhaps connected to specific Christian prophets or regions and preserved by rehearsal in activities of recruitment, instruction, and worship.<sup>54</sup> While there were common themes and practices across these different traditions, there was also diversity.

Küng names this early stage of communication and community formation of the Jesus Movement as the Jewish Apocalyptic Paradigm, which he associates with a number of distinctive characteristics.<sup>55</sup> It was apocalyptic and eschatological. The followers expected that Jesus would be returning very soon, and the focus of their proclamation and action was on preparing for an end that was about to come. It was strongly Jewish in character and Aramaic in its language, culture, and social location. It was deeply connected with the historical person of Jesus: his charismatic presence, his stories and teachings, his miracles and activities, his interactions with people, and his passion and death. It was subversive in its gender structures. Women, some of whom had travelled with Jesus during his itinerant ministry, were actively involved in it from the beginning, including as leaders. It was diverse and fluid in its communication forms. In addition to practical discourses of communication, prophecies, testaments, dreams, and visions were accepted as legitimate means of knowledge about the mysteries of the divine. It was practical in its orientation. It showed little concern for metaphysical

abstractions or speculation. Its core beliefs centered on the historical person of Jesus and the practical and ethical implications of their new perspectives on faith: what did one need to do to live in accordance with the divine plan God had revealed to them and in anticipation of God's coming kingdom? In its earliest stages, it was a lower-class movement.

It was not on the history of an upper class that historiography was usually oriented, but on the history of the lower classes: fishermen, peasants, craftsmen, little people who normally have no chronicler. The first generation of Christians did not have the least political power and did not strive for positions in the religious and political establishments. They formed a small, weak, marginal group of the society of their time, under attack and discredited.<sup>56</sup>

The transformation of this distinctive, lower-class, Aramaic Jesus Movement into the religion of Christianity is the focus of the following chapters.

## NOTES

- 1 See, for example, Allison, 2010, particularly Chapter 6, "How much history?"
- 2 See, for example, J. D. G. Dunn, 2003.
- 3 Borg, 2012, loc. 387.
- 4 For good summaries of the major stages and approaches of this research, see Levine, 2006; Powell, 1998.
- 5 Powell, 1998.
- 6 Borg, 1994.
- 7 See, for example, Crossan, 1994, p. 25; J. D. G. Dunn, 2003, p. 148.
- 8 Stegemann & Stegemann, 1995, p. 119.
- 9 Borg, 1987, p. 85.
- 10 Stegemann & Stegemann, 1995, pp. 110–123.
- 11 Borg, 1987, p. 85.
- 12 Aslan, 2013, loc. 139.
- 13 John 1:46.
- 14 While standing in a crowd in Jerusalem after Jesus was arrested, the disciple Peter was identified by a bystander as a Galilean and therefore likely associated with Jesus (Mark 14:70). It is not explained whether he was recognizable by his distinctive speech or dress or by some other factor.
- 15 Stegemann & Stegemann, 1995, p. 199.
- 16 Stegemann & Stegemann, 1995, p. 199.
- 17 Matthew 13:54–57.
- 18 Jesus is reported as astonishing the learned teachers in the temple (Luke 2:41–53), reading the scriptures in the synagogue in Nazareth (Luke 4:17), and writing on the ground (John 8:6).
- 19 See, for example, Borg, 1987.
- 20 See, for example, Gerhardsson, 2005.
- 21 Crossan, 1994, pp. 25–26.

- 22 J. D. G. Dunn, 2003, p. 148.
- 23 Crossan, 1994, p. 26.
- 24 Crossan, 1994, pp. 25–26.
- 25 Reuther, 1993, p. 24.
- 26 Byrskog, 1994.
- 27 Theissen, 2012, p. 74.
- 28 Crossan, 1994, p. 58.
- 29 Matthew 6:34, 7:12, 7:7–8.
- 30 Bailey, 1976, p. 35.
- 31 Linnemann, 1966, pp. 20–21.
- 32 Matthew 5:1–7:29.
- 33 J. D. G. Dunn, 2003.
- 34 Gerhardsson, 2005.
- 35 Crossan, 1994, p. 105, citing Scott, 1990.
- 36 For example, Matthew 5; Luke 10:25–28.
- 37 See, for example, Borg, 1987, pp. 10–11.
- 38 Crossan, 1994, p. 51.
- 39 For those arguing that Jesus didn't refer to himself as "Son of God," see Aslan, 2013; Borg, 1987; Crossan, 1994; Wilson, 2008. For a nuanced discussion between this and the orthodox position, see Borg & Wright, 1999.
- 40 D'Angelo, 2006, p. 64.
- 41 Borg, 2012, loc. 293.
- 42 The four New Testament Gospel narratives say this happened in three literal days. Some scholars suggest the three days were figurative to link retrospectively to references in the Jewish scriptures, and it could have been weeks, months, or perhaps years.
- 43 Paul, in I Corinthians 15:1–11.
- 44 Schillebeeckx, 1989, p. 333.
- 45 Three of the Gospels describe Jesus as sending out his disciples to spread his message. For example, "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5).
- 46 Sawicki, 1994, p. 53.
- 47 White, 2004, pp. 128–132.
- 48 Wilson, 2008, p. 96.
- 49 Moltmann-Wendel, 1982.
- 50 Aslan, 2013, loc. 3128. The term "Jesus Movement" is used to describe this early stage of the movement that emerged following Jesus' death; it was largely Jewish in character. It is used also to distinguish it from the movement that was later called "Christian," which, although connected, had significant differences, as will be explained.
- 51 Theissen, 2003, p. 37.
- 52 Theissen, 2003, p. 38.
- 53 Sawicki, 1994, pp. 85–86.
- 54 Borg, 2012, loc. 347.
- 55 Küng, 1994, pp. 65–70.
- 56 Küng, 1994, p. 66.