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# The Historical Jesus

Course Guidebook

Professor Bart D. Ehrman

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



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With a focus on early Christianity in its Greco-Roman environment and a special expertise in textual criticism of the New Testament, Professor Ehrman has published dozens of book reviews and over twenty scholarly articles for academic journals. He has authored or edited eight books, including *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (Oxford University Press, 1999); *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (Oxford, 1997; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1999); *After the New Testament: A Reader in Early Christianity* (Oxford, 1999); *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings: A Reader* (Oxford 1998); *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford, 1993); and *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research* (Eerdmans, 1996). He is currently at work on a new Greek–English edition of the Apostolic Fathers for the Loeb Classical Library (Harvard University Press).

Professor Ehrman is a popular lecturer, giving numerous talks each year for such groups as the Carolina Speakers Bureau, the UNC Program for the Humanities, the Biblical Archaeology Society, various local groups, and select universities across the nation. He has served as the president of the Society of Biblical Literature, SE Region; book review editor of the *Journal of Biblical Literature*; editor of the Scholar's Press Monograph Series *The New Testament in the Greek Fathers*; and co-editor of the E.J. Brill series *New Testament Tools and Studies*. Among his administrative responsibilities, Professor Ehrman has served on the executive committee of the Southeast Council for the Study of Religion and has chaired the New Testament textual criticism section of the Society of Biblical Religion, as well as serving as Director of Graduate Studies at the Department of Religious Studies at UNC.

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# The Historical Jesus

## Scope:

From the late Roman Empire, through the Middle Ages, down to the Reformation, and into our own day, no institution has wielded such economic, political, and cultural power as the Christian church. And behind it all stands Jesus, a man who continues to be worshiped throughout the world, by over a billion people today. Jesus of Nazareth is undoubtedly the most important figure in the history of Western civilization.

Everyone who has even the faintest knowledge of Jesus has an opinion about him, and these opinions vary widely—not only among lay people but even among historical scholars who have given their lives to the task of reconstructing what Jesus was really like, what he really said and did. This course is designed to explain why it has proved so difficult to know about the man behind the myth and to see what kinds of conclusions modern scholars have drawn about him. The course will be taught from a strictly historical perspective; no particular theological beliefs will be either affirmed or denied.

The course will begin with a discussion of the four Gospels of the New Testament, which everyone agrees are our principal sources of knowledge about Jesus. But these books were not written as dispassionate histories for impartial observers. In addition, it appears that their authors were not eyewitnesses to the events they narrate but were writing several decades later, telling stories that they had heard—stories that had been in circulation year after year among the followers of Jesus. The first step, then, will be to determine what kinds of books the Gospels are and to ascertain how reliable their information about Jesus is. Apart from their worth as religious documents of faith, we will examine how the Gospels are useful to historians who want to know what really happened.

As we will see, the Gospels create challenges for scholars who want to know about the words and deeds of Jesus. After explicating some of these difficulties, we will consider other sources that are available, including other Gospels that did not make it into the New Testament but that nonetheless purport to narrate the life and teachings of Jesus. In addition, we will examine all the references to Jesus in every other ancient Jewish and Roman source.

After reviewing the available sources, we will examine the criteria that scholars have devised for getting behind the stories told about Jesus to ascertain what he was really like. Once we have a handle on how to approach our sources of information, we will consider the historical context of Jesus' life; our assumption is that if we fail to situate Jesus in his context, we will take him out of context and, therefore, misunderstand him. After discussing the political, social, and cultural history of first-century Palestine, we will proceed to the second major part of the course, a scholarly reconstruction of Jesus' actual words and deeds.

There we will see that the earliest sources at our disposal, including the Gospel of Mark and the lost Gospel of Q (one of the sources used by both Matthew and Luke), are probably correct in portraying Jesus as a Jewish apocalypticist, one who anticipated that God was soon going to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his kingdom here on earth. Specifically, Jesus proclaimed that a cosmic judge from heaven, called the Son of Man, was soon to appear, and that people needed to repent, turn to God, and adhere to his own teachings in preparation. Those who did so would be rewarded with God's kingdom; those who did not would be destroyed.

The remaining lectures in the course will show how this apocalyptic message of Jesus affected his ethical teaching, his own activities, and his final days. We will see that this proclamation caused a furor in Jerusalem when Jesus went there to celebrate the Passover feast at the end of his life. Fearing that his preaching might excite the mobs, the authorities in Jerusalem had him arrested and taken out of the way, handing him over to the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who had him executed as a troublemaker.

The course will end, then, by considering how Jesus' followers began to modify his message after they came to believe that he had been raised by God from the dead, as they transformed the religion of Jesus (i.e., the one he preached) into the religion about Jesus.

# Lecture One

## The Many Faces of Jesus

**Scope:** Jesus of Nazareth is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the history of Western civilization, whose influence moves far beyond the lives of his followers into many areas of modern life, but despite his far-ranging impact, Jesus appears to be scarcely known. Opinions of lay people and scholars about him are so much at odds with one another that they simply cannot all be right.

In this course, we will explore why this lack of information exists, with an eye toward trying to determine what Jesus actually said and did. The course will neither presuppose nor disallow any particular forms of belief (or disbelief) in Jesus; it will approach the task from a strictly historical perspective of inquiring into our surviving evidence. Questions we will ask, and attempt to answer, include the following: What ancient sources of knowledge do we have about Jesus (both literary and archaeological)? How historically reliable are these sources? Can the Gospels of the New Testament be trusted to provide a historically accurate picture of Jesus' words and deeds? What methods have scholars devised for examining such ancient sources? Once these methods are applied, what can we say with relative certainty about the things that Jesus actually said and did?

### Outline

- I. Jesus of Nazareth is almost certainly the most important figure in the history of Western civilization, a man whose impact on the course of history is completely unparalleled.
  - A. His effect on secular history was not immediate. He was first known as an obscure Jewish teacher who was crucified for sedition.
    1. Within a century of his death, communities of followers had been established in all the major urban areas of the Mediterranean.
    2. Two centuries after that, he was known, and even worshiped, by some members of the aristocratic elite in the Roman

Empire; The Emperor himself, Constantine, became a follower in the early fourth century A.D.

3. A century after that, the entire Empire was officially Christian. Christianity then became the central religion for virtually all of what became Europe and on into the New World.
4. Throughout this period, from the early Middle Ages to today, the Christian church has exercised enormous political, economic, social, and cultural power—unlike any institution in the history of the West. At the beginning of it all is the man Jesus himself.

**B.** The most obvious arena of Jesus' influence, of course, is in the religious lives of his followers.

1. The latest demographic figures put the numbers of Christians, of all kinds, at well over a billion.
2. Millions of people devote their lives to Jesus, to following his teachings and to emulating his example. Millions believe that both their present well being and their lives for all eternity are determined by what he did.

**C.** Even those who do not believe in him cannot escape Jesus' influence; his name, his life, and his teachings fill our culture, and nonbelievers think of him as one of the great moral teachers of the ages.

**II.** You would think that a person who is this important would be well known. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

**A.** Almost everyone has an opinion about Jesus, but the opinions are so much at odds with one another that they can't all be right.

**B.** Remarkably, the situation does not improve much when you move from the popular media to the world of scholarship. Books and articles of recent vintage on Jesus number 2,045, representing radically different conclusions. They can't all be right.

**C.** Why are there so many different opinions about this, the most important figure in the history of our form of civilization? Which view is most historically plausible? How can we possibly know?

1. These are some of the basic questions that we will address in this course on the historical Jesus.
2. In the rest of this introductory lecture, I'd like to indicate what our approach will be, outline the major components of our study, and provide a bit of important background information.

- III.** In this course, we will take a strictly historical approach to the question of the historical Jesus.
- A.** We could strive to understand Jesus from the perspective of faith.
    - 1. That is how most people do understand Jesus, because they want to know what to believe about him and they want to understand his significance for their lives and their relationships with God.
    - 2. Approaching our study from this religious prospective can present hidden difficulties. If we decide to approach the study of Jesus from the perspective of faith, then whose faith should it be?
    - 3. Also, if we approach the study of the historical Jesus strictly from the perspective of faith, then we will almost certainly end up where we started, because people almost always find what they expect to find if they allow their expectations to guide the search.
  - B.** For these reasons, it might be better to take a different approach to our task, one that requires us to suspend our beliefs or disbeliefs about Jesus to see what he was actually like, to see what he really said and did.
    - 1. This *historical*, as opposed to *religious*, approach to the study does not claim to be better than a religious approach.
    - 2. This approach does not require that we disbelieve, only that we do not allow our beliefs to determine our historical conclusions.
    - 3. A historical approach is interested in examining historical evidence. It does not mean that historians cannot be believers.
- IV.** The course will be roughly divided into two parts. The first part deals with what our sources of information about the historical Jesus are; the second part deals with what these sources can reveal to us when we examine them following solid historical criteria.
- A.** First, we will consider all the surviving sources from antiquity that can help reconstruct what Jesus said and did.
    - 1. The principal sources of information about Jesus are the Gospels of the New Testament. We will begin our investigation by determining how reliable these accounts are for reconstructing Jesus' life by asking—and answering—a number of questions.

2. We will then consider other sources from outside the New Testament, for example, a couple of dozen other Gospels that record words and deeds of Jesus. We will also look at what other ancient people—non-Christian Jews and pagans—had to say about Jesus to see if they can assist us in rounding out the picture.
  3. We will then discuss the task of using these sources for historical purposes, considering the kinds of methods that scholars have developed.
- B.** Second, we will apply the methods we have discussed to the sources that have survived to see what they can reveal to us about Jesus.
1. My thesis will not sound at all peculiar to those who are familiar with twentieth-century scholarship on the historical Jesus.
  2. Since the early part of the century, when the great humanitarian and medical missionary Albert Schweitzer wrote *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, scholars have widely considered Jesus to be a kind of Jewish apocalyptic prophet. He anticipated that God was soon going to intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and bring in his good kingdom on earth.
  3. I will try to show why this point of view has been so popular among so many scholars for so long and then will discuss what Jesus actually taught and recount the most important events of Jesus' life, those surrounding his crucifixion.
  4. I will conclude the course by discussing how the apocalyptic words and deeds of Jesus have affected his followers down through the ages, until today.
- V.** Throughout our investigation, you will see that I consider evidence to be an important consideration in trying to reconstruct a person from the past.
- A.** Some other scholars of the historical Jesus don't share my view of evidence. They discuss their views at great lengths in their books but never indicate how they know what they claim to know.
  - B.** Establishing what happened in the past isn't a matter of guessing—it's a matter of evidence. If you are reading the results

of a rigorous examination of evidence, you have a right to see what that evidence is.

- C. In this course, I'll not simply regale you with my views of who Jesus was but will go to some length to explain what the evidence is. If you disagree with my conclusions, you'll be able to examine the evidence for yourself and decide where I've gone wrong in interpreting it.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 1.

Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus*, chap. 5.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Some people maintain that it is impossible to study Jesus without believing in him. Do you think this is true? Is it true for other areas of academic study? Is it possible, for example, to study Buddhism without being a Buddhist? Or the Dialogues of Socrates without being a Platonist? Or communism without being a Marxist?
2. It would be useful at the outset of this course for you to be clear in your own mind what you already think about Jesus' life and teachings. You might want to jot down a couple of notes along these lines, to compare with what you've come to think by the time the course is completed.

## Lecture Two

### One Remarkable Life

**Scope:** It is difficult to know where to begin the study of the historical Jesus—with the first Gospel of the New Testament, the first book of the New Testament to be written, the first Gospel to be written, or somewhere else? In some ways it makes best sense to begin not with the New Testament at all, but with the world in which the Christian religion was born, a world largely populated by “pagans.”

One of the leading questions to deal with at the outset of a study of Jesus is whether the Christian view that Jesus was both divine and human derives from the circumstance that stories were told about him in the pagan environment. Is it possible that former pagans who converted to belief in Jesus portrayed him in terms that they were already familiar with, as one who was more than mortal? If so, how can we get behind the developing doctrine about Jesus as a kind of “divine man” to see what he was really like in history? That will be one of the objectives of this course of study.

### Outline

- I. In investigating the historical Jesus, we must first ask where to start.
  - A. The Gospels are a logical starting point.
    1. We could start with the first Gospel of the New Testament, Matthew. Even though Matthew is the first book to occur in the New Testament, however, it was not the first written.
    2. The first books written were actually by the apostle Paul, to whom are ascribed thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament, and who wrote ten or fifteen years before the Gospels.
    3. As we will see later in the course, Paul does not record a good deal of information about the words and deeds of Jesus.
  - B. Maybe we should begin with the earliest Gospel to be written, which most scholars agree was the Gospel of Mark. But Mark was written several decades after Jesus lived; most scholars date it to A.D. 65–70 (Jesus probably died around A.D. 30).

- II.** I've decided that the best place to begin our study is by summarizing for you the life of a remarkable man who lived nearly 2,000 years ago.
- A.** The accounts of his life may sound familiar to you.
1. Before he was born, his mother knew he would not be a normal child. An angelic visitor told her that her son would be divine.
  2. His birth was accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders and as a child, he was religiously precocious.
  3. As an adult, he left home to engage in an itinerant preaching ministry, teaching his good news that people should live for what is spiritual, not the material things of this world.
  4. He gathered disciples and did miracles to confirm them in their faith.
  5. He raised the ire of many of those in power, who had him brought up on charges before the Roman authorities.
  6. Even after he left this world, though, his followers claimed that he had ascended to heaven and that they had seen him alive afterwards. They wrote books about his life, and some of these writings still survive today.
  7. I doubt if any of you has ever read them, and I doubt if many of you have even heard the name of the man I've been describing: Apollonius of Tyana. He was a famous neo-Pythagorean philosopher of the first century A.D., a worshiper of pagan gods, whose life and teachings are recorded for us in the writings of his later follower Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*.
- B.** Apollonius lived at about the same time as Jesus, although they never knew each other. Their followers, though, knew each other and had heated debates about who was superior.
- C.** These were not the only two men believed to be divine. Jesus may be the only miracle-working Son of God that we know about in our world, but he was not at all the only one talked about in his world.
- III.** It is important to begin our study of Jesus with some sense of the context in which the early Christians told stories about him.
- A.** As we'll see later, the Gospel writers seem to have inherited their stories about Jesus from a rich oral tradition about him.

1. The Gospels are anonymous, even though there are traditional names for the purported authors.
  2. Scholars are fairly unanimous that they were written some decades after Jesus' death: Mark, A.D. 65–70; Matthew and Luke, A.D. 80–85; and John, A.D. 90–95.
  3. These books, as with all the books of the New Testament, were written in Greek, even though Jesus, as a Palestinian Jew, would have spoken Aramaic.
  4. Because most Christians, even in the first century, were probably non-Jews— i.e., they were converted from being “pagans”—it would be worth learning about typical pagan beliefs to understand how the stories about Jesus might have been modified by Christians who told them. Note that “pagan” is not a derogatory term for historians; it simply means someone who is neither Jewish nor Christian.
- B.** Even though pagan religions were highly diversified, we can say the following about all of them: they were polytheistic and used sacrifices to placate the gods; they had no particular creed or system of ethics that had to be believed as a matter of religion; and they were not scriptural religions, nor were they exclusive as to which god or gods one could or should worship.
- C.** For the most part, pagans did not see their gods as jealous or in competition with one another. They understood the realm of the gods as a kind of pyramid of power and authority with some kind of supreme deity at the top and the great gods below him followed by local deities, then family and personal deities.
1. Below them were other kinds of local deities, who still were unbelievably powerful from the human perspective, followed by family and personal deities and then lesser beings (daimonia).
  2. Finally, were demi-gods, that is, humans who were half mortal and half divine.
- IV.** We should be aware that pagan beliefs about partially divine humans may have influenced early pagan converts to Christianity.
- A.** In the next lecture, we will consider this question further. At this point, to stimulate your thinking, I'd like to note a couple of interesting points from our surviving Gospels.

- B.** As I've indicated, Mark was the first Gospel to be written. As we'll see, compelling reasons exist to believe that Luke used Mark as one of his sources for writing his account some 10–15 years later.
1. For the purposes of our brief comparison here, I'd like to point out how these Gospels begin and end. Mark (the shortest of the Gospels) begins with references to the Jewish prophets, includes the account of Jesus' baptism as an adult by John the Baptist, and ends with his women followers going to his tomb to learn that he has been raised from the dead.
  2. The emphasis in Mark is on the "Son of God," a term used to describe an individual or group of people who mediate God's will on earth. The Son of God is not a divine being.
  3. Luke, by comparison, begins with accounts of Jesus' miraculous birth to a mother who is a virgin and ends with a description of Jesus' ascending into heaven.
  4. Is it an accident that the later account—written after the stories about Jesus had been in circulation for a longer time among former pagans—is the one that portrays Jesus more in line with what pagans typically thought about divine men?
- C.** John's Gospel was written even later and also makes for an interesting comparison with Mark.
1. Scholars do not think that John used Mark (or Luke) as one of his sources. Like Mark, John does not narrate a virgin birth or ascension.
  2. The difference in the way Jesus is portrayed between John and Mark, though, is striking.
  3. In Mark, Jesus is clearly God's favored one, his son, whom God empowers to do miracles and who dies for the sins of the world. But he is portrayed as completely human in every way. He never talks about himself as divine, and no one identifies him as being God—not even Mark himself.
  4. Contrast that with Jesus' portrayal in John, which begins by identifying Jesus as the Word of God, who was responsible for the creation of the universe, who is called God both by the author and by others in the Gospel (e.g., 21:25), and who says himself that he is completely equal with God (10:30).
  5. Again, is it an accident that the earliest of our Gospels portrays Jesus as human and the latest portrays him as God?

- D. It has commonly been noted that as time goes on, Christians begin to portray Jesus in increasingly exalted terms.
1. In Mark, he is a human who is called God's son, probably much like other humans (e.g., the ancient kings of Israel, like Solomon [2 Sam 7:14], were called God's sons when they were used by God to mediate his will to earth).
  2. In Luke, Jesus appears to be a kind of divine human, whose father is not a mortal but God himself (1:35). In Mark, the assumption seems to be that Joseph is Jesus' father; there is no account of his virgin birth.
  3. In John, as we have seen, Jesus is equal with God. But that's not the same as saying that he was identical with God. Later Christians made this claim, leading, in the fourth century, to such formulations as the Nicene Creed, in which Jesus is affirmed as being fully divine and fully human at one and the same time.
  4. Is it possible that this is a later formulation, one that had its roots after Jesus' life and the early development of which can already be seen in the Gospels?

### **Essential Reading:**

Cartlidge and Dungan, *Documents for the Study of the Gospels*, parts 2 and 3 (the third part contains extracts from Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*).

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Ferguson, *Religions of the Roman Empire*.

Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, Part I (on pagans).

Shelton, *As the Romans Did*.

Turcan, *Cults of the Roman Empire*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Based on what we have already seen, how does it seem to you that the date of a source for the life of Jesus should affect its value for reconstructing what he was really like?

2. Why is it that no one today seems to know the stories about “divine-men” such as Apollonius of Tyana? Are these stories irrelevant for understanding the stories about Jesus? If not, why are they not discussed at all?

## Lecture Three

### Scholars Look at the Gospels

**Scope:** Scholars investigating the Gospels of the New Testament have understood them in a number of different ways over the years. Before the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, almost all scholars took the Gospels to be historically accurate accounts of supernatural events. With the Enlightenment and its emphasis on natural law and the power of human reason and its distrust of traditional authority and the notion of divine intervention, the Gospels came to be seen as records of natural events that were wrongly perceived to be miraculous by the early followers of Jesus.

Both ways of looking at the Gospels came under attack with the monumental work of David Friedrich Strauss. Strauss argued that the Gospels are not historical in either the supernatural or natural sense, but rather contain myths—history-like stories that intend to convey a truth but never happened. Even though few scholars today would subscribe to Strauss’s precise notion of “myth,” most believe that the Gospel accounts do contain stories about Jesus that are historically inaccurate—in that they cannot have happened as described—but that nonetheless are designed to reveal the “truth” about him.

### Outline

- I. Did Christians in later times, including the authors of the Gospels, begin to see Jesus as divine in some sense, whereas in earlier periods—including during Jesus’ own life—he was not seen that way?
  - A. Let me stress again that I am not talking about the importance of the Gospels for issues of faith, but only about their importance for knowing what Jesus was really like.
  - B. We must start with a fuller understanding of our earliest sources for knowing about Jesus, the Gospels of the New Testament. We’ll look at these books in general terms and ask what kind of documents they are.

- C. First, I'll give a brief history of scholarship on the question, discussing three different ways of thinking about the Gospels. The discussion will be chronological, but I emphasize that all three ways of understanding the Gospels are still represented by some readers today.
- II.** Before the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, virtually everyone understood the Gospels to be *supernatural histories*, records of things that actually happened, but that were mostly supernatural. Here are three examples.
- A. All four Gospels have an account of the miraculous feeding of the multitudes (Matt. 14:13–21; Mark 6:30–44; Luke 9:10–17; John 6:1–13).
  - B. A second example is Jesus' "walking on the water," a miracle that included, according to Matthew (14:24–33), Simon Peter walking on the water as well.
  - C. Finally, consider the biggest miracle of all: After dying and being buried, Jesus is raised from the dead and appears to his disciples as the Lord of Life.
- III.** Starting with the Enlightenment, some scholars started seeing the Gospels not as supernatural histories but as *natural histories*.
- A. The Enlightenment that swept through Europe in the eighteenth century involved a new way of thinking and looking at the world.
    - 1. Intellectuals of the Enlightenment came to distrust traditional sources of authority and started to insist on the power of human reason to understand the world and the human's place in it.
    - 2. This was an age of science and development of modern technology. Scholars began to assert the "logic" and importance of cause–effect relationships. They developed scientific notions of "natural law," i.e., highly predictable ways that nature worked, along with the concomitant view that these "laws" could not be broken by any outside agency (for example, a divine being).
    - 3. These intellectuals modified the grounds of human knowledge—away, for example, from the traditional teachings and dogmas of the church to such "objective" processes as rational observation, empirical verification, and logical inference.

4. In terms of religious belief, scholars of the Enlightenment recognized that in earlier times, people had naively appealed to divine agency to explain natural phenomena that seemed mysterious.
- B.** A number of biblical scholars were heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and took a rationalistic view of the Gospels.
1. According to these scholars, the miracles of the Bible obviously didn't happen.
  2. For such scholars, the Gospels do not contain historical accounts of actual supernatural events, but rather historical events that were completely natural but were misperceived to be miraculous.
- C.** One of the famous rationalist interpreters of the Bible was a German theologian named Heinrich Paulus, author of a famous study called *Das Leben Jesu* (*Life of Jesus*, 1827).
1. In the so-called “feeding of the multitudes,” Paulus wrote that everyone saw Jesus break bread and immediately brought out their own picnic baskets. Only later did someone look back on the event and consider it to be a miracle.
  2. In the account of Jesus walking on water, Paulus notes that the event allegedly took place at night during a storm and maintains that the disciples rowing against the wind had never gotten their boat far from land. When Jesus appeared to be walking out to them, he was just wading along the shore, much to the amazement of his disciples who thought they were in the middle of the lake.
  3. As for the resurrection of Jesus, Paulus notes that the ancient Jewish historian Josephus mentions two of his own companions who survived crucifixion. Paulus believes this is also what happened to Jesus.
- D.** Paulus's explanations for the miracles of the Gospels may seem fairly outlandish to us today, but for many people of the Enlightenment, they made a lot of sense.
- IV.** A major shift in the way of looking at the Gospels came in the years 1835–36 with the publication of a two-volume book by the famous German theologian David Friedrich Strauss called (in its English translation by George Eliot) *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*.

- A. This erudite and compelling book had nearly 1,500 pages of detailed and meticulous argument involving every story in the Gospels. In it, Strauss disagreed with both of the prevailing ways of understanding the Gospels in his time.
1. On the one hand, he agreed with the rationalists who said that miracles don't happen and that, as a consequence, the Gospels can't be literally true in their depictions.
  2. On the other hand, he found the "enlightened" natural explanations of the Gospel narratives ludicrous and thought that rationalists like Paulus were completely off base.
  3. For Strauss, the Gospels contain neither supernatural histories nor natural histories. Instead, they contain myths.
- B. Strauss did not mean "myth" in the way most of us think of the term.
1. Today, most people understand a "myth" to be something that isn't true. For Strauss it was just the opposite. A myth *was* "true," but it didn't happen.
  2. More precisely, for Strauss, a myth is a history-like (yet fictional) story that is meant to convey a religious truth. For Strauss, the Gospels are full of this kind of story.
- C. The best way to understand how Strauss's view works is to take an example: Jesus' walking on water.
1. The supernaturalist view cannot explain how the event could have happened without denying that Jesus had a real human body, because human bodies have more "specific gravity" (as Strauss calls it) than water and, therefore, will sink. But if Jesus didn't have a real body, then he wasn't a real human—and that, Strauss points out, is one of the earliest heresies of early Christianity, known as *docetism*.
  2. The naturalist view of Paulus is scarcely any better, because it ignores what the text actually says. For example, the Gospels say that the boat was in the middle of the lake, not that the disciples thought it was. Paulus has to change the text to explain it, and that doesn't seem to be a very safe approach to interpretation.
  3. The supernatural interpretation can't explain the text, and the natural explanation ignores the text. According to Strauss, both modes of interpretation err, because both of them see the story as a historical account. In fact, Jesus' walking on the

water is not an actual historical event but a myth—a history-like story that is trying to convey a truth.

4. Early Christians, Strauss noted, likened the trials and tribulations of this life to a stormy sea that threatens life and limb. Only Jesus can rise above these forces. Thus, for Strauss, the story of walking on the water was a myth, meant to reveal the truth that Jesus can help his followers overcome the obstacles of their lives.

V. A lot has happened in biblical scholarship since Strauss published his *Life of Jesus* in 1836, but one thing has remained constant. Many scholars—for most of this century, the vast majority of critical scholars—think that Strauss was right, not in all or even most of the specific things he said, but in the general view he propounded. The Gospels contain stories that did not happen historically as narrated but are meant to convey truths.

- A. Few scholars today would follow Strauss in calling these stories “myths.” The term is too loaded even still, and for most readers, it conveys precisely the wrong connotations.
- B. The notion that the Gospel accounts are not completely accurate but still important for the religious truths they try to convey is widely shared in the scholarly world, even though it’s not so widely known or believed outside of it.
- C. In the next lecture, I’ll begin to present the evidence that scholars have found to be convincing of this view. Before doing so, though, I want to answer the more basic question of whether a story *can* be “true” if it didn’t happen.
  1. People don’t usually talk this way, e.g., when we ask if a movie is a “true story.”
  2. We do tell stories that didn’t happen to convey a “truth.”
  3. Consider the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, which we know is not a historical account. We tell our children this story to emphasize something about our country (e.g., that it is—or at least should be—rooted in honesty) and about personal morality (you shouldn’t lie even if it means getting in trouble).
  4. Do the Gospels contain that kind of story? That will be the subject of our next lecture.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Apocalyptic Jesus*, chap. 2.

Tatum, *Quest of Jesus*, chap. 5.

**Suggested Reading:**

Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

Strauss, *Life of Jesus*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Discuss the relationship between “stories” and “truth.” In what way does a story need to be historically accurate to be true? What other kinds of truth can there be besides historical truth? How would it affect your own understanding of the New Testament if you became convinced that some of its stories didn’t really happen?
2. Do you think “myth” is a good term to use of Gospel accounts that try to convey a truth but are not historically accurate (if such accounts exist)? Why or why not?

## Lecture Four

### Fact and Fiction in the Gospels

**Scope:** Scholars have come to believe that some of the stories of Jesus' life in the New Testament Gospels are historically inaccurate, not out of a desire to call into question the validity of the Christian religion (many of these scholars are committed Christians), but because compelling evidence exists to do so. The evidence is of two kinds: (1) some of the accounts are told in more than one Gospel and, when these are compared with one another, clear discrepancies emerge and (2) some of the accounts are implausible when looked at with a careful eye to what we otherwise know about history.

In neither case can the evidence be considered in the abstract but only by examining particular narratives in close detail. This lecture will consider the divergent accounts of Jesus' death in Mark and John and of his birth in Matthew and Luke. In each instance, we will try to locate places where the authors agree and disagree and to see, then, if any of these differences are irreconcilable; moreover, we will ask if there are any completely implausible aspects of their accounts. In the end, we will see that the Gospels seem to contain stories that cannot have happened as narrated but are nonetheless meant to reveal some kind of Christian "truth" about Jesus.

### Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we saw that for most of two centuries, scholars have maintained that the Gospels contain stories that are trying to convey "truths" about Jesus but are not historically accurate.
  - A. This consensus among scholars doesn't necessarily make it true; we need to look at the surviving evidence, in this case, from the Gospels themselves. As we will see, compelling reasons exist for thinking that the Gospels contain stories that cannot be historically accurate—at least, historically accurate as they are narrated.
  - B. In this lecture, we will look at two of the major kinds of this evidence.

1. Some stories are told by more than one Gospel and, often, these accounts contain discrepancies; these discrepancies indicate that the stories were changed at some point and that they both cannot be accurate.
  2. Some of the stories are implausible in light of what we already know about the ancient world. Here, I'm not referring to "miracles", but to other events that are narrated but do not appear to be historically plausible.
- C. The only way to evaluate this kind of evidence is to conduct a detailed analysis of specific accounts, viz., two examples drawn from the stories of Jesus' birth and death.
- II.** The accounts of Jesus' death in our earliest (Mark) and latest (John) Gospels are difficult to reconcile.
- A. As you can see by reading the accounts (Mark chapters 14–15; John chapters 18–19), the basic story line is the same in both Gospels. Both have the same cast of characters and basic narrative of events, ending in Jesus' crucifixion.
  - B. The accounts also contain striking differences, which may or may not be historical discrepancies. Let's examine further.
    1. For example, in Mark's account (chapter 15), Jesus, Pilate, the Jewish leaders, and the crowds are all in one place. The trial is very short, and Jesus speaks only two words (translated into English as "you say so," when asked if he is the king of the Jews).
    2. In John's account (chapter 16), the Jewish leaders refuse to enter Pilate's residence, because they do not want to become ceremonially defiled (we're not told why they would be) and so prevented from eating the Passover meal that evening. As a result, Pilate moves back and forth between Jesus, who is inside, and his accusers, who are outside. Jesus, rather than being silent for most of the proceeding, delivers several speeches to his judge.
    3. In theory, one could argue that both accounts are accurate insofar as they go. Mark simply didn't indicate that Jesus' judge and accusers were in different locations and that Jesus gave several longer replies to Pilate's questions.
  - C. Other differences, though, are hard to reconcile. In particular, there is a discrepancy over when the event takes place. The timing of the

event may seem like a small detail, but we must think of historical evidence as if it were evidence at an accident or a crime scene where we're trying to figure out what happened.

1. In this instance, the clue has to do with a simple question: When did Jesus die?
  2. To answer the question, I need to provide some historical background, then look carefully at each account.
- D. Both Mark and John indicate that Jesus died during the Feast of the Passover, the annual festival celebrated by Jews in Jerusalem to commemorate the deliverance of God's people Israel from slavery in Egypt, as recorded in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible.
  1. In Jesus' day, the festival was a major event. Jews came from around the world to celebrate the feast in Jerusalem.
  2. They would arrive a week in advance to undergo a ritual of purification that would allow them to eat the meal. Then, the afternoon before the meal, they would bring a lamb—which was to be eaten as part of the celebration—to the Temple (or else the lamb would be purchased there) to be sacrificed by the priests.
  3. The rest of the day was spent in preparing the meal and was called the "Day of Preparation for the Passover." Remember that in Jewish reckoning, a new day begins, not at midnight, as for us, but when it gets dark. (Even today, Jewish Sabbath begins on Friday evening at dark and continues through Saturday, until it gets dark again.)
  4. After the lambs were sacrificed and their blood was drained, they were given back to the Jewish worshippers, who took them home to cook. The meal was eaten after it got dark, that is, on the day of Passover itself. The meal consisted of several symbolic foods to recall Israel's slavery in Egypt and the deliverance by God.
- E. We are now ready to compare our two accounts in detail; both accounts give us a precise description of when, in relationship to the Passover meal, Jesus was crucified. We begin with the earlier account, Mark's.
  1. The day before his arrest, Jesus' disciples ask him where they are to prepare the Passover meal (Mark 14:12) and he gives

them instructions. This then is the Day of Preparation for the Passover.

2. That night, they have the meal, in which Jesus takes the symbolic foods and instills them with new significance.
  3. Afterwards, Jesus goes out to pray, is betrayed by Judas Iscariot, is handed over to the Jewish authorities, and spends the night in jail.
  4. The next morning—i.e., the morning of Passover, the day after the lambs were slain and the Passover meal had been eaten—he appears before the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, who finds him guilty of criminal charges and orders him executed.
  5. Jesus is taken off and crucified at 9:00 a.m. (Mark 15:25).
- F. This dating of the event stands in stark contrast with what we find in John (chapters 18–19).
1. Here, too, Jesus has a last meal with his disciples, but there’s no word of it being a Passover meal. In this Gospel, the disciples never ask where they are to prepare Passover, and Jesus does not speak about the symbolic foods in a new way.
  2. After supper, Jesus goes out to pray, is betrayed by Judas, is arrested, and spends the night in jail. The next day he appears before Pilate.
  3. As we have seen, we’re told that the Jewish leaders who were his accusers refuse to enter Pilate’s residence, because they do not want to become ritually defiled and so prevented from eating the Passover meal that evening (18:28). Eat the Passover meal? Hadn’t they already done that the night before?
  4. The problem is clarified at the end of Jesus’ trial, when we’re told exactly when he was condemned and led off to be executed: John 19:14—“And this was on the Day of Preparation for the Passover, at 12:00 noon.”
  5. How could it be the Day of Preparation for the Passover? According to Mark, Jesus lived through that day, had the Passover meal with his disciples that night, and was put on the cross the next morning, on the day of Passover itself. In John’s Gospel, though, Jesus was executed before the meal even began.

- G.** It is probably impossible to reconcile this discrepancy between John and the Synoptic Gospel account. We can, however, explain why the discrepancy came about.
- 1.** The Gospel of John is the only Gospel of the New Testament that explicitly identifies Jesus himself as “the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29, 36). This is also the only Gospel in which Jesus is said to die on the afternoon of the day before the Passover, precisely when the lambs were being slaughtered.
  - 2.** To most scholars, it appears that John has changed a historical fact to make a theological point: that Jesus really was the Lamb of God.
  - 3.** This is one kind of evidence to suggest that the Gospels contain some accounts that cannot be historically accurate, at least in all their details.

**III.** The stories of Jesus’ birth in our two other Gospels, Matthew and Luke, are also historically problematic.

- A.** Again, the two accounts have broad similarities. In both, Jesus is born to the Virgin Mary in Bethlehem.
- B.** Again the two accounts also have numerous differences. In this case, the differences number more than the similarities; although, again, a number of the differences are not actual discrepancies.
- 1.** Luke alone indicates that Joseph and Mary had come to Bethlehem to register for a census because—during the days of the Syrian governor Quirinius—Caesar Augustus had decreed that “the whole world” (presumably, the Roman Empire) should be taxed. Everyone, therefore, needed to register at their ancestral homes (for Joseph, Bethlehem). Jesus just happened to be born while they were there. Matthew says nothing about any of this.
  - 2.** Luke alone mentions the shepherds who come to worship the infant Jesus; Matthew alone mentions the wise men who followed the star that stood over the house where he lay.
  - 3.** Matthew alone mentions the wrath of King Herod, who learns of the child and sets out to destroy it by slaughtering every child who is two years old and under in Bethlehem. Matthew alone indicates that Joseph and Mary escaped in time by fleeing to Egypt, where they stayed until Herod died, then

returned—only to relocate in Nazareth to avoid the wrath of Herod’s son, who was now ruling.

4. These differences may be puzzling—virtually all the stories in Luke are found only in Luke and all the stories in Matthew are found only in Matthew—but they are not necessarily contradictory.
- C. Some of the differences, though, do appear to represent actual discrepancies.
1. Where, for example, was Joseph and Mary’s hometown originally? Was it Nazareth, as in Luke, or Bethlehem, as in Matthew? Notice that the wise men find Jesus in a house in Matthew—no word of a temporary residence outside the inn. When Joseph and Mary return from Egypt, where do they initially plan to go? Bethlehem, of course.
  2. Were Joseph and Mary in Bethlehem just for a temporary visit (as in Luke), or was that their home (Matthew)? Notice that, according to Matthew, Herod has every male child under the age of two murdered; presumably, then, the wise men had been on the road for a long time and Jesus was no longer an infant.
  3. If Joseph and Mary really fled to Egypt (as in Matthew), how is it that they returned immediately to Nazareth just thirty days after Jesus was born (as in Luke, that is, after the thirty-day period of purification)?
- D. In addition, certain aspects of these accounts strike historians as completely implausible. Consider just Luke’s account.
1. We have relatively good documentation for the reign of Caesar Augustus, but no mention in any source of a worldwide census.
  2. Moreover, how *could* such a census be taken, in which everyone registered at the homes of their distant ancestors? How would they know where to go? Imagine the mass migrations. How is it that no source from the time even bothered to mention it?
  3. Finally, we know from other sources—the Jewish historian Josephus, the Roman historian Tacitus, and some inscriptions—that despite Luke’s account, Quirinius was not governor of Syria during the reign of King Herod in Palestine but ten years later.

- E. It appears, then, that these accounts could not have happened as narrated. Ultimately, these stories are probably not to be read as objective accounts of history but as trying to make a point.
  - 1. Both want to emphasize that even though Jesus came from Nazareth, he was born in Bethlehem. Why? No doubt because the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, said that the future ruler of Israel would come from there (Micah, 5:2).
  - 2. Both want to emphasize that Jesus was an extraordinary person from the beginning. Evidence? For both authors, his mother was a virgin.
  - 3. These stories, in other words, are trying to convey ideas about Jesus. But when looked at as historical sources for what really happened, they appear to be inaccurate in places.

#### IV. The Gospels are full of that kind of story.

- A. We could look at many examples of discrepancies in the Gospels, but such an exercise would be neither fruitful nor interesting.
- B. Instead, it is better simply to accept the Gospels for what they are: documents that are trying to tell the “truth” about Jesus, even if that truth is not always based on events that actually happened.
- C. Let me be clear, though, that I’m not saying that every story in the Gospels is completely inaccurate.
  - 1. The Gospels no doubt do contain historically reliable material that will be of considerable use to us as we try to establish what Jesus really said and did.
  - 2. They also contain historically inaccurate material; part of our task will be deciding which is which.
  - 3. Before pursuing that task, though, we must learn more about these books, for instance, who their authors were and where they got their stories.

#### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 3.

John 18–19.

Luke 1–2.

Mark 14–16.

Matthew 1–2.

Stanton, *Jesus and the Gospels*.

**Suggested Reading:**

Kysar, *John the Maverick Gospel*.

Nickle, *The Synoptic Gospels*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why do you suppose Matthew and Luke have such different stories about Jesus' birth? That is, why didn't one or both of them simply tell the *whole* story as we have it in the Christmas story told every year?
2. In anticipation of what we'll be doing later, how do you think we might get behind the contradictions of our sources to figure out what really happened in the life of Jesus? In other words, assuming that two sources are contradictory, how could we decide which, if either, is right?

## Lecture Five

### The Birth of the Gospels

**Scope:** The Gospels of the New Testament, although written anonymously, have been traditionally ascribed to two of Jesus' disciples, Matthew and John, and two companions of other apostles, Mark and Luke. These books were probably not written by eyewitnesses—they certainly don't claim to be. Even if they were based on eyewitness testimony, they would not necessarily be historically accurate.

The books seem to have been written thirty-five to sixty-five years after the events they narrate by highly educated, Greek-speaking Christians (unlike the lower-class, Aramaic-speaking disciples of Jesus). As two of the authors admit, they inherited the stories from the oral tradition.

Jesus' words and actions were principally passed on by word of mouth by people who were not eyewitnesses to the events and who had never laid eyes on any of the eyewitnesses. The stories about Jesus were changed to fit the new circumstances in which they were told. The Gospel writers also adapted these stories. One of the tasks of the historian is to move behind the accounts as they have been changed to see what they reveal about what Jesus himself actually said and did.

### Outline

- I. We have seen that the Gospels contain stories that didn't happen or, at least, that didn't happen as they are told.
  - A. Sometimes the surviving accounts contain clear discrepancies, such as discussed in Lecture Four, or are so highly implausible that historians agree that they cannot have happened as narrated (i.e., Luke's census).
  - B. We now need to move to the next step of trying to understand *why* the Gospels are this way.
- II. The titles of the Gospels name their authors as two of the disciples, Matthew (the tax collector) and John (the son of Zebedee), and two

friends of the apostles, Mark (the secretary of Peter) and Luke (the traveling companion of Paul).

- A.** Scholars have reasons to doubt these traditional ascriptions.
  - 1. If Matthew actually wrote a book about Jesus' words and deeds, he most likely would have called it something like "The Gospel of Jesus Christ" or "The Life and Death of Our Savior." Whoever labels this text the "Gospel according to Matthew" is trying to explain whose version of Jesus' story this one is.
  - 2. Moreover, we know that the original manuscripts of the Gospels did not have their authors' names attached to them.
- B.** Even more significantly, none of the Gospels claims to be written by an eyewitness.
  - 1. For example, even though someone named Matthew is mentioned in Matt. 9:9, nothing in that verse indicates that he's the person writing the account. Furthermore, nowhere in the Gospel does the author indicate that he was personally involved in the events that are described.
  - 2. Even verse (21:24), indicates that the author was not the eyewitness, but based his account on the report of an eyewitness.
  - 3. In sum, the New Testament Gospels were written anonymously.
- C.** The earliest readers of the Gospels found their authors' names to be unimportant.
- D.** The first time an ascription can be found comes from about A.D. 120–30 in the writings of an obscure author named Papias.
  - 1. Papias claimed that the apostle Peter would speak about Jesus' words and deeds as the occasion demanded, and that Mark, his secretary, later wrote the stories down but "not in order." Papias said he received this information from an elderly Christian.
  - 2. Papias also claimed that the Matthew wrote the sayings of Jesus in Hebrew and that "everyone interpreted them as they could." He says nothing about Luke or John.
- E.** This tradition from Papias must be considered seriously, even though there is no way to know for sure, because Papias doesn't quote the Gospel of Mark.

1. Still, Papias emphasizes that the author of the Gospel was not an eyewitness.
2. The earliest we can trace this Mark tradition is to A.D. 110–120 (Papias’s elderly informant)—that is, almost a half-century after Mark was written. There is no other supporting evidence.
3. Papias tells us that Matthew’s book comprised only “sayings” of Jesus (our Matthew contains a lot more than that) and it was written in Hebrew (not Greek, as our version came down to us). Papias does not appear, therefore, to be referring to this book.

F. Apart from this tradition in Papias, we don’t hear anything about the identity of the writers until near the end of the second century A.D.

**III.** Scarcely any other solid information is available about the Gospel writers, but we can deduce several pieces of useful intelligence.

A. As mentioned earlier, the books appear to have been produced sometime between A.D. 65–95. On this, almost all historians agree.

B. All four Gospels are written in Greek by authors who were obviously literate and reasonably well educated.

1. A recent study by William Harris places the literacy rate in the Roman world at fifteen percent at most. In contrast, all four of these authors seem to be highly educated.
2. We know from the New Testament that Jesus’ followers were mainly lower-class peasants, who spoke Aramaic, not Greek. Two of the leaders among Jesus’ followers, Peter and John, are said to be “illiterate” (Acts 4:13).
3. It seems unlikely that these disciples of Jesus played decisive roles in the literary compositions that are ascribed to them.
4. Because the books were written in Greek, not Aramaic, they appear to have been written outside of Palestine, although some scholars would locate Mark, and even Matthew, in Galilee, where Greek was spoken. Scholars continue to call these books Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John purely as a matter of convenience.

**IV.** The next step in figuring out why the Gospels are the way they are— with a mixture of historically accurate and historically inaccurate

materials—is to ask where these anonymous Greek-speaking authors got their information.

- A. Three of the sources we've already considered—Luke, John, and Papias—indicate that the Gospels were based on reports handed down, either orally or in writing, from earlier Christians and that ultimately these reports went back to eyewitnesses (see Luke 1:1–4).
- B. Before considering the oral transmission of these stories, we should think about the implications of the idea that the accounts go back to eyewitnesses.

- 1. Consider any two eyewitness accounts of a particular event: Are they *ever* exactly the same?
- 2. Suppose eyewitnesses did not bother to write down their accounts immediately, but waited twenty or thirty years. Even worse, suppose the stories were not written by the eyewitnesses themselves but by people to whom they told their stories.
- 3. The point is that even stories based on eyewitness accounts are not necessarily reliable, and the same is true a hundred-fold for accounts that have been in oral circulation long after the fact, even if ultimately stemming to reports of eyewitnesses.

- V. Now we should consider the implications of the fact that, as three of our earliest accounts attest, the stories in the Gospels were handed down by word of mouth and not written down until thirty-five to sixty-five years after Jesus' death.

- A. To understand the New Testament, we must realize that the most important events during those years involved the spread of the Christian church.
  - 1. Christianity started, immediately after Jesus' death, with a handful of his followers, perhaps twenty or thirty people located in Jerusalem, if we go by the Acts of the Apostles.
  - 2. Within forty or fifty years, this tiny band of disciples had multiplied many times over in major urban areas throughout the Mediterranean. Still, individual Christian communities were generally small.

3. In this age before mass media, Christians propagated the religion by word of mouth. They were trying to convert pagans by talking about Jesus' life and teachings.
  4. Given that the stories were told in different languages in different places over a huge geographical area, we are completely safe in saying that the stories were not told only by the original followers.
- B.** I think we can assume that the stories got changed as they were told and retold by word of mouth, year after year.
1. Sometimes the changes would have been accidental as the stories were told for fifty years, in different countries, using different languages, among thousands of people.
  2. Sometimes people telling the stories may have wanted to change them to make a point, to promote faith in Jesus.
- C.** Some standard objections are raised to the idea that the stories about Jesus were changed as they circulated by word of mouth throughout the Empire. Many people—somewhat unreflectively—assume that stories couldn't have been changed in such a relatively short amount of time, especially when eyewitnesses were around to verify the accounts.
1. Stories can change overnight, as anyone who has ever been in the news industry can readily attest.
  2. Eyewitnesses often disagree among themselves about crucial points (cf., our own courts of law).
  3. Almost no one who was telling these stories could have checked with eyewitnesses, even if they had wanted to, given the limited communications in the ancient world.
  4. The idea that the stories were changed is not a bit of scholarly speculation; we have hard evidence for it.
- D.** The most common objection to the notion that stories about Jesus were changed in the process of transmission is that people living in oral cultures had better memories than most of us.
1. Anthropological studies of the past twenty years have shown convincingly that this isn't the case at all. In fact, the concern for verbal accuracy is found exclusively in written cultures, where accounts can be checked to see if they are consistent.
  2. In oral cultures the natural assumption is that stories *are* to be changed, depending on the audience and the situation.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 3.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 3.

**Suggested Reading:**

Davies and Sanders, *Studying the Synoptic Gospels*, chap. 1.

Dibelius, *From Tradition to Gospel*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Think of some examples from your own life when someone who was an eyewitness to a significant event got it completely wrong when they tried to describe it. How does your own experience with eyewitness accounts affect your view of the possibilities of being able to reconstruct the past with accuracy?
2. If the Gospels were written anonymously, why do you suppose later Christians attributed them to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John?

## Lecture Six

### Some of the Other Gospels

**Scope:** Having considered some of the problems involved in using the Gospels of the New Testament as completely reliable guides for establishing what Jesus said and did, we can now turn to a consideration of other sources that have come down to us from antiquity. Numerous other Gospels from outside the New Testament allegedly report Jesus' words and deeds. In this lecture and the next one, we will consider several of these other Gospels.

On the whole, the non-canonical Gospels are late (second through eighth centuries A.D.) and legendary. Most of them were forged in the names of companions of Jesus. Many of them used the canonical Gospels as sources for their own accounts. Some of the earliest ones may, in theory, provide us with additional information about what happened during Jesus' life. In this lecture, we will examine the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, probably the earliest surviving account of Jesus' life as a young boy, and the Gospel of Peter, a fragmentary narrative of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection. These accounts are fascinating as pieces of early Christian literature, but their legendary character is evident even to a casual reader. They will not, therefore, be of much use when we later try to establish what Jesus said and did.

### Outline

- I. At this point, we will consider whether any other sources are available that might help us in our quest to discover what Jesus said and did.
  - A. We have a couple of dozen other Gospels not found in the New Testament, books written by Christians about the life and teachings of Jesus.
  - B. As a group, these Gospels have the following important features:
    1. As a rule, they are much later than the canonical Gospels; most of them date from the second to the eighth centuries.
    2. The only one that can make any claim to being contemporaneous with the New Testament Gospels is the

newly discovered Gospel of Thomas, which we will consider in Lecture Seven.

3. Unlike the anonymous Gospels of the New Testament, many of these Gospels are actually pseudonymous, claiming to be written by the apostles, or disciples, or Jesus' brother James, or his female companion, Mary Magdalene. All these books appear to be forged.
- C. These non-canonical texts seem to have used the canonical Gospels, as well as oral traditions about Jesus.
1. The authors of the earliest of these surviving books, though, may not have known about Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
  2. This fact can potentially make a book like the Gospel of Thomas particularly important for reconstructing Jesus' actual teachings, although most of the accounts are highly legendary.
- D. It is possible to categorize these Gospels as infancy Gospels, narrative Gospels, or sayings Gospels.
1. Infancy Gospels tell stories about Jesus' birth and childhood; many of them draw on the stories of Matthew and Luke.
  2. Narrative Gospels are like the Gospels of the New Testament in that they contain narrative accounts of the life and (sometimes) death of Jesus.
  3. Sayings Gospels principally contain collections of Jesus' teachings, often without any narrative context.

**II.** The so-called "Infancy Gospel of Thomas" is one of the earliest non-canonical Gospels and almost certainly the earliest of the Infancy Gospels.

- A. Scholars debate when the book was written (there are very few internal clues), but some date it as early as the first half of the second century.
1. The book is attributed to a person named "Thomas," a word that means "twin."
  2. In some parts of early Christianity, it was believed that Jesus had a twin brother, Judas Thomas (fathered, possibly, by Joseph rather than God).
- B. If Jesus was a miracle-working son of God as an adult, what was he like as a child? It turns out that that the boy was a bit mischievous, according to this non-canonical account.

1. The Gospel begins with Jesus as a five-year-old, making clay sparrows by a stream on the Sabbath. When found to be violating the Law not to work on the Sabbath, Jesus miraculously destroys all evidence of malfeasance. He claps his hands and commands the sparrows to fly off; they immediately come to life and do so.
2. Jesus is portrayed in his early years as more than a bit temperamental. When another child disturbs him at play or runs into him on the street, he curses him and withers him on the spot
3. When his teacher at school becomes exasperated with the boy and cuffs him on the head, Jesus speaks a word and strikes him dead.
4. As time goes on, Jesus begins to use his powers for good.
5. The account concludes with Jesus as a twelve-year-old in the Temple, surrounded by scribes and Pharisees who hear him teach and who bless Mary for the wonderful child she has brought into the world (a story borrowed from Luke 2).

C. Clearly, as entertaining as it may be, the book will not be of much use to anyone who wants to know the historical facts of Jesus' life.

**III.** A much more serious account of Jesus is found in the Gospel of Peter, a fragmentary account of Jesus' trial, death, and resurrection, allegedly written by his disciple Simon Peter, one of the earliest examples of a non-canonical narrative Gospel.

A. The text was discovered in 1886 in the tomb of a Christian monk in Egypt.

B. The existence of the book had been known before its discovery from the writings of Eusebius, the fourth-century author who is known as the "Father of Church History." His ten-volume book, *Ecclesiastical History*, provides us with a good deal of our information about Christianity in the first three centuries.

1. According to Eusebius, the Gospel of Peter was read by one of the churches ruled over by the second-century bishop of Antioch, Serapion.
2. When Serapion received a tip that the book presented a heretical view of Christ, he examined it and forbade its further use.

3. We presume that what we have now in hand is this long-lost Gospel. Unfortunately, it is impossible to tell from our sources.
  4. Moreover, what was discovered in 1886 was only a fragment of the original that starts and stops in the middle of a sentence.
- C.** The part of this Gospel that survives is in many ways similar to the passion accounts of the New Testament.
- D.** There are also striking differences from the New Testament accounts.
1. Here “the Jews” are held to be even more liable for Jesus’ death than in the New Testament Gospels. The Jewish instigators of the plot against Jesus know full well that they have sinned against God in condemning him.
  2. Jesus does not appear to suffer in this account (v. 10: “he was silent as if he felt no pain”). This description may have led to Serapion’s condemnation of the book as espousing the ancient heresy of docetism, which claimed that Jesus did not have a real human body but only appeared to.
  3. Unlike the canonical Gospels, this Gospel contains an actual description of Jesus’ resurrection. Two angels go into the tomb and come forth, with their heads reaching up to the sky, supporting Jesus between them, with his head stretching up above the sky. Behind them emerges the cross. A voice comes from heaven, asking if the gospel has been taken to those who are dead. The cross replies, “Yes.”
- E.** These distinctive features point to a date for the writing of the Gospel of Peter in the second century.
1. Christians had begun to hold the Jews completely accountable for Jesus’ death at that time.
  2. Docetic Christians at the time maintained that Jesus, as fully divine, could not have really suffered.
  3. The legendary details surrounding the resurrection appear to be later additions to the stories about Jesus.
- F.** Whether this account had full access to the earlier Gospels of the New Testament and used those accounts remains an open question that different scholars answer differently.
1. This account has numerous similarities to the accounts found in the New Testament, especially Matthew.

2. On the other hand, very few verbal similarities exist between the Gospel of Peter and the earlier accounts, which would be difficult to explain if Peter had used one or more of them as a source.
  3. In either event, it appears that the account is relatively early, again, like the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, written perhaps during the first half of the second century.
- G. Despite its early dates, the accounts in Peter (like those in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas) appear to be highly legendary and of little use for us if we want to know the historical Jesus.

### **Essential Reading:**

“The Infancy Gospel of Thomas” and the “Gospel of Peter,” in Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 124–30.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 12.

Elliott, *The Apocryphal Jesus*.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Hennecke-Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*.

Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, parts 1 and 2.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Read the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Peter and evaluate whether *any* of the traditions found there might be considered to be historically accurate. What kind of criteria would you use to make that judgment?
2. Does it seem strange to you that Christians would continue to fabricate stories about Jesus well into the second, third, and later centuries, making up accounts that obviously never happened? Why or why not? Does it seem strange that Christians would forge Gospels in the names of the apostles—i.e., write documents claiming to be the work of one of Jesus’ closest earthly disciples or family members, knowing full well that they were not?

## Lecture Seven

### The Coptic Gospel of Thomas

**Scope:** One of the most significant archaeological discoveries of the twentieth century is the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, discovered in Egypt. The documents represent books that were deemed “heretical” by the early church fathers; specifically, they present a *Gnostic* view of the world. Gnostics maintained that the material world was the evil creation of an inferior deity; the goal of religion was to escape the entrapment of this world by acquiring the necessary knowledge (Greek: *gnosis*) for salvation. This knowledge was conveyed by a heavenly being who came from the divine realm into the transitory material world to provide redemption for the sparks of the divine imprisoned here.

The Gospel of Thomas, 114 randomly ordered sayings of Jesus, contains no narratives from Jesus’ life and nothing about his death and resurrection. These sayings are best understood in light of the Gnostic myth of the world, which we will cover in this lecture. Scholars debate the date of this document and its relationship to the New Testament.

### Outline

- I. We will focus on a source that was produced in the early history of Christianity and possibly, independently of the New Testament Gospels.
  - A. This is the now-famous Coptic Gospel of Thomas, without question, the most significant book from early Christianity uncovered in modern times.
  - B. The serendipitous discovery of this Gospel is a fascinating story.
    1. An Egyptian Bedouin, named Mohammed Ali, near the village of Nag Hammadi, found an earthenware jar containing thirteen leather-bound books.
    2. Because he was under suspicion for a violent murder and was afraid that his house would be searched and the books, confiscated, Mohammed Ali gave them to a priest for safekeeping.

3. Word got out, antiquities dealers bought the volumes and scholars eventually gathered them all to read, edit, translate, and publish them as “The Nag Hammadi Library.”
- C. The “library” consists of thirteen leather-bound books, with fifty-two separate writings (i.e., they are anthologies of texts), written on papyrus
1. The bound books have been reliably dated to the mid-fourth century A.D., but the dates of some of the writings are much earlier, possibly as early as the first or second century A.D.; some are mentioned by Church Fathers who opposed them.
  2. The books are all in Coptic, an ancient Egyptian language. They appear to be Coptic translations of Greek originals.
  3. The most famous of the books is the Gospel of Thomas; some scholars date its text to as early as the first century, possibly predating the writing of the Gospels of the New Testament. Most scholars prefer to date it to the first half of the second century.
- D. Different kinds of texts are represented in this library.
1. Some are Gospels, with very peculiar understandings of Jesus and his teachings—understandings rooted in an ancient form of “Gnosticism.” Other texts represent mythological reflections on how this material world came into being, sometimes in the forms of “revelations.”
  2. Others appear to be mystical poems celebrating the true nature of the spiritual world.
- E. Most scholars think that a fourth-century monk removed the books from the monastery library near the site where they were found. He may have considered the books heretical and wanted to be rid of them (but why didn’t he burn them then?), or safeguard them until they were again “permitted” to be read by authorities.
1. Around the time the books were produced, the powerful bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius, made an official statement about which books could and could not be read in the churches (A.D. 367).
  2. Possibly the books were buried in anticipation that the tide of theological opinion would shift. When that never happened, they remained in the ground until 1945.
  3. This assumption would mean that whoever buried the books considered them to be sacred—possibly even sacred Scripture.

This is particularly striking because the books are clearly Gnostic—a form of Christianity widely condemned as heretical.

- II.** Before describing the nature of the Gnostic religion, I should give a basic description of the Gospel of Thomas itself.
- A.** Unlike the fragmentary Gospel of Peter, discovered sixty years earlier, this particular Gospel is completely preserved. It has no narrative at all, no stories about anything that Jesus did, no references to his death and resurrection. The Gospel of Thomas is a collection of 114 sayings of Jesus.
- B.** The sayings are not arranged in any recognizable order. Nor are they set in any context, except in a few instances in which Jesus is said to reply to a direct question of his disciples. Most of the sayings begin simply with the words, “Jesus said.”
- 1.** In terms of genre, the book looks less like the New Testament Gospels and more like the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew Bible.
  - 2.** In fact, the opening statement indicates that the correct understanding of these sayings will provide more than wisdom; it will bring eternal life: “These are the secret words which the living Jesus spoke, and Didymus Judas Thomas wrote them down. And he said, ‘The one who finds the meaning of these words will not taste death’” (Gosp. Thom., 1).
- C.** The author of the book explicitly claims to be Didymus Judas Thomas.
- 1.** Both “Didymus” and “Thomas” are words that mean “twin” (the first is Greek, the second Semitic); Judas is his proper name.
  - 2.** According to the ancient Syrian writing called the Acts of Thomas, he was a blood relation of Jesus, also mentioned in the New Testament (Mark 6:3). In other words, Didymus Judas Thomas was Jesus’ twin brother.
- D.** One way to think about this collection of sayings is to compare them to sayings we already know from the canonical Gospels.
- 1.** Many of the sayings in Thomas sound completely familiar, e.g., “Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the poor, for yours is the Kingdom of Heaven’” (Gosp. Thom., 54).

2. Other sayings sound vaguely familiar, yet somewhat peculiar: “Jesus said, ‘Let the one who seeks not cease seeking until he finds, and when he finds, he will be troubled, and when he is troubled, he will marvel, and he will rule over the All’” (Gosp. Thom., 2).
3. Other sayings in the Gospel of Thomas sound quite unlike anything known from the New Testament: “Jesus said ‘...On the day when you were one, you became two. But when you have become two, what will you do?’” (Gosp. Thom., 11)
4. The meanings of these sayings are in no way obvious, but can perhaps be understood in light of “Gnostics” beliefs.

**III.** Gnosticism is a blanket term describing a wide range of religions that emerged in Mediterranean at about the same time as Christianity.

- A. Before the discovery of the Nag Hammadi library, we had to rely on what the Gnostics’ opponents said about them to know their beliefs.
- B. A careful reading of some of their own texts, along with the comments of their enemies, can give us a basic idea of their views.
  1. Gnostics believed that Matter was inherently evil; spirit was good.
  2. Some people in the world were pure matter and destined to die. Other people (i.e., the Gnostics) had a spark of the divine within them, but were entrapped in matter by the nefarious creator of this world, who was not the true God but an ignorant and far less powerful being, intent on bringing harm to the divine realm.
  3. The goal of the Gnostic religion was to free these sparks from this world, to allow them to return to their original spiritual home.
  4. Escape could come only by acquiring the knowledge (Greek: gnosis = knowledge) necessary for salvation. This knowledge came only from a divine emissary; to the Gnostics, Christ, was that divine being.

**IV.** Scholars debate whether the Thomas is best seen as a Gnostic Gospel.

- A. On the one hand, the book does not spell out the Gnostic myth of creation and redemption. Then again, neither do a number other Gnostic texts.

- B. A large number of the sayings that may strike a first-time reader as altogether puzzling *do* make good sense when read in light of the basic Gnostic myth that I've just laid out.
- C. Strikingly, this Gospel does not contain a word about Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, but only his "secret: teachings.
- D. Even though Thomas has some sayings that sound remarkably like those found in the New Testament Gospels, it does not appear that he used them as sources.
  - 1. Virtually no extensive parallels can be found in the actual wordings of the sayings and many of the sayings of the Synoptics, are left out of Thomas.
  - 2. Most scholars have concluded that this pseudonymous author knew a number of the sayings of Jesus and that he understood these sayings in a particular Gnostic way.
  - 3. He had heard these sayings, much as the other Gospel writers had, through the oral traditions that were circulating about Jesus.
  - 4. Because of the strong Gnostic leanings of some of these sayings, it seems likely that this work was written in the early second century. Because he appears to have written independently of the other Gospels, his account of Jesus' words—especially those that are not heavily influenced by the later Gnostic myth—can be of some use for us in deciding what Jesus said.

### **Essential Reading:**

"The Gospel of Thomas" in Ehrman, *The New Testament and Other Early Christian Writings*, pp. 116–23.

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 11.

Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Koester, *Ancient Christian Gospels*, part 2.

Robinson, *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*.

Rudolph, *Gnosis*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In what ways does Gnosticism, as I've described it in this lecture, seem to you to be like and unlike Christianity as it is more traditionally taught?
2. Read through the Gospel of Thomas and choose several sayings that strike you as especially peculiar. Now try to interpret them in light of the major tenets of Gnosticism laid out in this lecture.

## Lecture Eight

### Other Sources

**Scope:** Having considered all the Gospels from early Christianity that can plausibly be used to reconstruct the words and deeds of Jesus, we can now turn our attention to other sources that may provide useful information. Unfortunately, none of the other documents that still survives from antiquity offers extensive discussions of Jesus. Among all the pagan sources that come down to us from the century following Jesus' death, he is mentioned only twice—once by Pliny the Younger and once by Tacitus—and only in passing. The first-century Palestinian historian Flavius Josephus gives us a bit more information but, again, only enough to support the claims of the New Testament; that is, that Jesus was known as a teacher and doer of great deeds who acquired a faithful following but was crucified at the instigation of Jewish leaders under Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was emperor.

Nor is there much additional information to be gleaned from the twenty-three other books of the New Testament outside of the Gospels, including the writings of Paul. We can consider one other canonical source—or rather, a hypothetical source—the lost document called “Q,” which was probably used by both Matthew and Luke as a source for many of their sayings of Jesus. Most scholars are reasonably confident that Q once existed, even though it is now no longer available; it is usually dated to a period somewhat before Mark, possibly in the 50s or 60s A.D. Apart from these meager remains, no other sources exist that can assist us significantly in trying to reconstruct the words and deeds of Jesus.

### Outline

- I. We have concluded our survey of the surviving Gospel sources for reconstructing the life of the historical Jesus.
  - A. With the partial exception of the Coptic Gospel of Thomas, the non-canonical Gospels do not provide us with much additional information to what is already found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

- B.** Even these canonical Gospels are problematic as historical sources (whatever their merits as inspirational documents of faith).
    - 1.** They were written decades after the events they narrate by authors who were not eyewitnesses.
    - 2.** The authors inherited their stories from the oral tradition, in which tales of Jesus' words and deeds had been in circulation for years and were altered in the process.
  - C.** We will consider the three kinds of other sources that we have: pagan (i.e., non-Jewish and non-Christian), Jewish, and canonical sources outside of the Gospels and restrict our search to sources written within a hundred years of Jesus' death (that is, up to A.D. 130).
- II.** It is striking to note that scarcely any pagan sources are available that can help us reconstruct the life and teachings of Jesus.
- A.** From the first century A.D., we have hundreds of documents written by pagan authors for all kinds of reasons, as well as numerous public inscriptions and a considerable archive of private letters.
  - B.** In none of this extensive literary record is Jesus ever mentioned at all. As enormous an impact as Jesus has made on Western culture over the past 2,000 years, in his own day, his impact appears to have been practically nil.
  - C.** Our earliest recorded references to Jesus in pagan sources come from the early second century, and only two certain references come from within our prescribed time limits (A.D. 30–130). The first is from the Roman governor of the province of Bithynia-Pontus (in modern-day Turkey), Pliny the Younger.
    - 1.** The reference occurs in a letter written by Pliny to his emperor, Trajan (A.D. 112), reporting administrative problems with groups who were meeting illegally; in that context he mentions a group of Christians who are followers of “Christ, whom they worship as a God” (“Letter 10 to the Emperor Trajan”).
    - 2.** His major concern is how to stamp out this group. His remark about Jesus is made only in passing, but it shows that he had heard of Jesus.
  - D.** The second, and more substantial, reference comes in the writings of a friend of Pliny, the famous Roman historian Tacitus.

1. In his history of Rome, *The Annals* (A.D. 115), Tacitus discusses an incident that had happened fifty years earlier, when the Emperor Nero torched the city of Rome to enable him to develop his own architectural plans for the city (A.D. 64).
  2. Tacitus indicates that when Nero became suspected for perpetrating the arson, he sought, and easily found, a ready scapegoat in the band of Christians in the city, who were generally despised by the populace. Nero had the Christians rounded up, charged with the arson, and executed in various heinous ways.
  3. In that context, Tacitus mentions something that they were followers of “Christ” whom, he notes, was crucified under the procurator of Judea, Pontius Pilate, when Tiberius was the emperor.
  4. Again, it is useful to know that Tacitus knows this much about Jesus. The reference does not, though, provide us with much information—and none that we didn’t already have.
- E. No other certain references to Jesus exist in any pagan author within a century of his death.

### III. The surviving Jewish sources are also of little use in reconstructing the life of Jesus.

- A. Not nearly as many Jewish sources survive from the period.
- B. The main source for the history of Palestine at the time is Flavius Josephus, a Jewish aristocrat who was a general in the northern part of Israel (Galilee) during the Jewish uprising against Rome in A.D. 66–70.
  1. When he and his troops were surrounded by the Roman legions, they made a suicide pact. Lots were drawn to determine who would kill whom, until the final two soldiers would take their own lives. Josephus managed to draw one of the final two lots, then persuaded his remaining companion to surrender.
  2. When he was brought before the conquering general Vespasian, Josephus used a good bit of political savvy by predicting that Vespasian himself would become the Roman emperor. As it turns out, he was right. Nero committed suicide

and, after a rapid succession of three emperors in the course of a year, Vespasian was declared emperor by his troops.

3. Vespasian rewarded Josephus for his prophecy by giving him an annual stipend and a residence in Rome. Josephus wrote a number of significant literary works that provide us with our best information about the life and history of Palestine: a lengthy account of the Jewish Wars, and a twenty-volume work on the history of the Jews from Adam and Eve to his own time, called the *Jewish Antiquities*.

C. Jesus is never mentioned in the *Jewish Wars*, but he makes two tantalizingly brief appearances in the *Antiquities*.

1. The briefer of the two references indicates that he was called by some the messiah and that he had a brother named James.
2. The longer reference gives more detail, indicating that Jesus was known to be a wise man, who did spectacular deeds and had a following among both Jews and Gentiles. He was brought up on charges by the Jewish leaders, appeared before Pontius Pilate, and was crucified. His followers formed a community that continued to thrive, first in Judea, then elsewhere, even in Rome.
3. Some scholars debate the authenticity of some of what Josephus wrote about Jesus.
4. It is useful to know that the premier historian of first-century Judaism knew this much about Jesus, especially given that what Josephus says coincides with what we already knew from the Gospels. Unfortunately, Josephus gives us nothing more, and his work can scarcely be used to help reconstruct the life of Jesus.

D. No other references to Jesus exist in any other Jewish source written within a century of his death. However, Jesus is mentioned in the Talmud, A.D. fifth-century commentaries on A.D. second-century collections of oral traditions called the *Mishnah*.

IV. The other books of the New Testament, outside of the four Gospels, tell us very little about Jesus.

- A. The most prolific of the other authors is Paul, in whose name appear thirteen of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. But Paul gives us little information about Jesus. The following list is meant to be exhaustive:

1. He was born of a woman (Gal. 4:4).
  2. He was a Jew (Gal. 4:4).
  3. He had brothers, one of whom was named James (1 Cor. 9:5; Gal. 1:19).
  4. He had twelve disciples (1 Cor. 15:5).
  5. He ministered to Jews (Rom. 15:8).
  6. He taught his followers that they should not get divorced and that they should pay their ministers (1 Cor. 7:11; 9:14).
  7. He had a last supper with his disciples (1 Cor. 11:23–26).
  8. He was betrayed (1 Cor. 11:23).
  9. He was crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).
- B.** One other source from the New Testament must be mentioned. Technically speaking, this source is not a Gospel, but it probably provided the Gospels with some of their material. This is the much discussed, but hypothetical, document called “Q.”
1. The term “Q” stands for the German word *Quelle*, “source.” German scholars developed the idea that there was once a Gospel that was used by Matthew and Luke and simply called this source, “source.”
  2. Three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, have so many stories in common that scholars call them the “Synoptic” Gospels (from the Greek for “seen together”: the stories can be set side by side and compared easily); they most likely all depended on some of the same sources for their information.
  3. The consensus since the nineteenth century is that Mark was the first Gospel written, and that Matthew and Luke got a number of their stories (which they usually changed) from Mark.
  4. How does one explain *other* stories found in Matthew and Luke, sometimes word-for-word the same, that are not found in Mark? (Mark has scarcely anything not also found in the other two.)
  5. According to the widely held view, Matthew and Luke acquired these stories from another source that they had at their disposal but that we do not have at ours: Q.
  6. Almost all of these other non-Markan traditions that are found in both Matthew and Luke are sayings of Jesus—including some of his best known sayings, such as the Lord’s Prayer and

- the Beatitudes. Only two narratives are told in this material: the stories of the three temptations in the wilderness and Jesus' healing of the Capernaum official's son.
7. Both Matthew and Luke must have also had other sources—written possibly, but certainly oral—for their material, because each Gospel has stories about Jesus found in it alone. Scholars usually simplify the matter by calling Matthew's special source(s) "M" and Luke's "L."
  8. We surmise, then, that Q was a written document that contained mostly sayings of Jesus—much like Thomas, which was written at least a half century later. As we saw, Thomas does not contain an account of Jesus' death and resurrection; most scholars think that Q did not either, although it is almost impossible to say. (The only way we know what was in Q is if Matthew and Luke have a story in common that is not also found in Mark. It's possible that in places only Matthew or only Luke or neither of them took over a story from Q—including stories of Jesus' passion.)
  9. Most scholars think Q was written at least by the time of Mark but probably somewhat earlier (say, during the 50s or 60s A.D.). If they are right, in one sense, then, Q would represent our earliest source for the life of Jesus—even though we don't actually have it.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 5.

———, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 13.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Furnish, *Jesus According to Paul*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Why do you imagine Jesus is scarcely mentioned in Jewish and pagan sources for the first century after his life? Try to think up a couple of plausible explanations and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Then do the same exercise for the apostle Paul.

2. If Q is a hypothetical source, how much do you think we can rely on it for reconstructing the life of Jesus?

## **Lecture Nine**

### **Historical Criteria—Getting Back to Jesus**

**Scope:** Now that we have considered all the available sources for the historical Jesus, we can consider how to use them to reconstruct his actual words and deeds. In an ideal world, our sources for any figure of the past would be numerous; close in time to the events they narrate; and written by eyewitnesses who worked independently of one another, who were not overly biased toward their subject matter, and who basically agreed on their major points. The sources available for the historical Jesus are unusually valuable in some ways; for example, several of them are independent of one another. They also pose some challenges. They were not written by eyewitnesses near the time of the events they describe, but by authors who lived later, in different parts of the world; who were biased toward their subject; who are not completely consistent with one another; and who inherited their stories from an oral tradition in which they had undergone serious alteration.

With a clear view of our sources, we can develop criteria to help us approach the sources to recover the words and deeds of Jesus. In general terms, we are best served to give particular weight to the earliest sources and to sources that appear to provide a portrayal of Jesus that is not overly developed theologically; moreover, the particular biases and emphases of all our sources must be considered.

Scholars have devised three criteria for establishing historically reliable material. The first is the criterion of independent attestation, which states that any tradition about Jesus that is independently attested in multiple sources is more likely to be historically authentic than a tradition found, ultimately, in only one source.

### **Outline**

- I. To this point in the course, we have spent most our effort in examining the four available basic sources for reconstructing the life of Jesus: the canonical Gospels; other writings of the New Testament; Gospels that

did not make it into the New Testament; and pagan and Jewish sources from within the first century of Jesus' death.

- A. I should stress that the sources we've examined are the *only* sources available. If someone says something about Jesus that's not based in any of these sources, he or she is making it up.
  - B. We need to move beyond a discussion of the surviving sources to the question of methodology. Given the nature of our sources, how can we use them to determine what actually happened during the life of Jesus?
- II.** We should begin in the broadest terms by asking what a historian of antiquity might hope for in a set of sources, then reflect on how what we have available stacks up against this historian's wish list.
- A. Historians can, of course, imagine an ideal set of sources for reconstructing a past event.
    - 1. The sources would be numerous (the more the better), so that they can be compared to one another.
    - 2. They would derive from a time near the event itself, which would mean they were less likely to be based on hearsay or legend.
    - 3. They would have been produced independently of one another, so that their authors were not in collusion.
    - 4. They would not contradict one another, so that one or more of them is not necessarily in error.
    - 5. They would be internally consistent, so that they show a basic concern for reliability.
    - 6. They would not be biased toward the subject matter, so that they have not skewed their accounts to serve their own purposes.
  - B. To some extent, we are quite fortunate to have the kinds of sources we do for the historical Jesus.
    - 1. Jesus' life is presented in multiple ancient sources (e.g., Mark, Q, M, L, Paul, Thomas, Josephus, and so on).
    - 2. Many of these accounts of his words and deeds are independent of one another—that is, the author of Mark didn't know Q; John probably hadn't read the Synoptics; Paul, who was writing before any of the Gospels had been written, obviously didn't know what they were going to say; the

Gospel writers show no evidence of having been influenced by Paul; and so on.

- C. On the other hand, these sources have obvious historical problems when compared with our historians' wish list.
  - 1. The sources are not disinterested accounts written by impartial observers near the time of the events they narrate.
  - 2. None of these authors was an eyewitness. They spoke a different language from the eyewitnesses, lived in different countries from the eyewitnesses, and addressed different audiences with different needs and concerns. Their own beliefs would have affected their accounts.
  - 3. Each of these authors, as two of them (Luke and John) actually tell us, inherited his stories from earlier written sources. Each of these sources has its own perspective, as well.
  - 4. Before anyone bothered to write stories about Jesus, the stories had circulated by word of mouth for years and were changed to suit the purposes at hand. They were modified further when they were written down in such lost documents as Q and further still when rewritten by the authors of the Gospels.
  - 5. This view is not based simply on scholarly imagination. We have evidence for it from the Gospels, as noted in earlier lectures.
- D. How then can "faith documents" such as the Gospels— writings produced by believers for believers to promote belief—be used as historical sources?

**III.** We should first consider a few basic methodological principles that most historians would agree should be applied to our sources.

- A. Historical sources closest to an event have a greater likelihood of being accurate than those at a further remove.
  - 1. This isn't a hard and fast rule, of course; sometimes, later sources can recount events more accurately than earlier ones.
  - 2. The rule of thumb, particularly with the ancient world (where authors didn't have our data retrieval systems), is that "earlier is better."
  - 3. The logic of the principle, especially when dealing with ancient sources, is that as an event is discussed and reports

about it circulate, the opportunities for it to be changed become greater and greater—until just about everyone gets the story wrong.

4. In terms of our study, this means that the earliest sources should be especially valued. John, written about sixty or seventy years after the events it narrates is less likely to be accurate than Mark, written some thirty years earlier. Recall what John did with the date and time of Jesus' death.
  5. So, too, the Gospels of Peter and Thomas may be less accurate; although they rely on earlier materials, they were evidently produced in the early second century.
  6. Following this principle, our best source of all would be Paul (who regrettably doesn't tell us very much), then Q (that is, the common source shared by Matthew and Luke for stories not found in Mark) and Mark, followed by M (Matthew's special source[s]) and L (Luke's), and so on.
- B.** We should be alert to later developments (e.g., theological views) in the tradition that have affected our.
1. For example, the Gospel of John, the last of the canonical Gospels, has a far more exalted view of Jesus as God than can be found in the earlier sources.
  2. Our question as historians is *not* whether the things Jesus says of himself in John are true, but whether they are things that the historical Jesus actually said.
  3. The logic behind the need to be alert to later theological developments is pretty straightforward: A greater passage of time allows greater sustained theological reflection.
- C.** We should beware of the bias found in each author.
1. We've seen already in some of the sources how just about every story drives home, either subtly or obviously, the same point (e.g., the vendetta against the Jewish people in the Gospel of Peter).
  2. Whenever we can determine an author's biases, we can and must take them into account when considering his or her report.
  3. An example is the report in the Gospel of Peter that it was the Jewish King Herod and his court that had Jesus crucified. In all other early sources, the Roman governor Pilate is said to be

responsible. Peter's established bias against the Jews should give one pause when evaluating his version of the event.

4. Consider, too, the change in the time of Jesus' death in John, in which Jesus dies on the same day at the same hour as the Passover lambs in the Temple. For John, Jesus *is* the Passover lamb; we must be wary of his dating in view of his theological agenda.

**IV.** We can apply three specific criteria, developed over the past half-century by scholars, to the traditions about Jesus to learn what historically reliable information they contain.

- A.** Other scholars number these criteria differently or propose alternative ones, but almost always, the alternatives can be logically subsumed under one of these three, which can be applied to any tradition about Jesus found in any source.
- B.** My own reconstruction of what Jesus actually said and did will be rooted in these criteria.
- C.** If you do not like these criteria, you will need to come up with others of your own. Given the wide-ranging problems posed by our sources, we can't simply take them uncritically as being historically accurate.
- D.** In this lecture, we will consider one of the criteria; in the next lecture, the other two. For each, I will try to explain the requisite logic and illustrate the use of the criterion by citing a number of examples.

**V.** One of the most widely used criteria is called the "criterion of independent attestation."

- A.** One helpful way to think about the criterion of independent attestation is to compare the work of the historian to that of a prosecuting attorney, who tries to establish what actually happened in the past.
  1. It is better to have a number of witnesses who can provide consistent testimony than to have only one, especially if the witnesses can be shown not to have conferred with one another to get their stories straight.
  2. So, too, with history. An event mentioned in several independent documents is more likely to be historically accurate than an event mentioned in only one.

3. This is not to deny that individual documents can provide reliable historical information. Without corroborating evidence, however, it is often impossible to know whether an individual author has made up an account or, perhaps, provided a skewed version of it.
  4. As we've seen, we do have a number of independent sources for the life of Jesus: Mark, Paul, Q, M, L, and John all wrote independently of one another. Moreover, the Gospel of Thomas, possibly the Gospel of Peter, and certainly Josephus were all produced independently of our other surviving accounts.
  5. If tradition about Jesus is preserved in more than one of these documents, no one of them could have made it up, because the others knew of it as well, independently.
  6. If a tradition is found in several of these sources, then the likelihood of its going back to the very beginning of the tradition from which they all ultimately derive, that is, back to the historical Jesus himself, is significantly improved.
- B.** This criterion does not work for sources that are not independent.
1. For example, the story of Jesus and the so-called "Rich Young Ruler" is found in three of the Gospels (Matt. 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; and Luke 18:18–23). Because Matthew and Luke took the story from Mark, however, it is not independently attested.
  2. For this reason, the criterion of independent attestation does not work for stories found among all three Synoptic Gospels, because the source for such stories is Mark, or among any two of them, because these are either from Mark or Q.
- C.** Let's examine some examples to help clarify the circumstances in which the criterion can be applied.
1. Stories in which John the Baptist encounters Jesus at the beginning of his ministry can be found in Mark, in Q (where John's preaching is expounded), and in John. Why did all three sources, independently of one another, begin Jesus' ministry with his association with John the Baptist? Possibly because it really did start this way.
  2. Jesus is said to have been crucified by all four of the Gospels (and in Peter), along with Paul, Josephus, and Tacitus; in all these accounts except Paul's the execution is dated to the

governorship of Pontius Pilate. Pilate is known to have been governor from A.D. 26–36, and Jesus must have been crucified by him sometime during that period.

3. Jesus is said to have brothers in Mark (6:3), John (7:3), and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (9:5); moreover, Mark, Paul (Gal. 1:19), and Josephus all identify one of his brothers as James. Conclusion: Jesus probably did have brothers and one of them was probably named James.
4. A number of sources attest that Jesus caused a disturbance in the Temple that angered the Jewish leaders and that he predicted the Temple would be destroyed (see Mark 11:15; John 2:15; Mark 13:2; John 2:19; Gospel of Thomas 71). Conclusion: It appears that the cleansing of the Temple and the prediction of its destruction go back to the historical Jesus.
5. Jesus tells parables in which he likens the Kingdom of God to seeds in Mark, Q, and the Gospel of Thomas.

D. This criterion has some obvious limitations.

1. First, it is important to emphasize that merely because a tradition is found in only one source, it is not automatically discounted as historically inaccurate. For example, the parables of the Prodigal Son and of the Good Samaritan occur only in Luke—but that in itself does not necessarily mean that Jesus did not tell them.
2. The criterion shows which traditions are more likely to be authentic but does not show which ones are necessarily inauthentic, a critical difference.
3. At the same time, multiply attested traditions are not necessarily authentic either. Instead, they are more likely to be authentic. If a tradition is attested independently by two or more sources, then it must be older than all the sources that record it. This is not the same as saying that it must go all the way back to Jesus.
4. For this reason, our first criterion must be supplemented with others. We will consider two other such criteria in our next lecture.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 6.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

**Suggested Reading:**

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*.

Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teaching of Jesus*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Pick two events that occurred last month—one that you think you could demonstrate happened beyond the shadow of a doubt and one that you think you would have real difficulty demonstrating. What is the difference in the nature of the evidence between the two?
2. Under what circumstances would it be possible to argue that an independently attested tradition was *not* historical? If the tradition was not historical, how do you imagine that it came to be independently attested?

## Lecture Ten

### More Historical Criteria

**Scope:** In addition to the criterion of independent attestation, scholars have devised two other criteria to determine the historical reliability of any tradition about Jesus preserved in the surviving sources. The first is the “criterion of dissimilarity,” which maintains that any tradition about Jesus that does not coincide with, or that works against, the vested interests of the Christians who preserved it is likely to be historically reliable. The logic is that if Christians altered the traditions about Jesus and on occasion even made them up, then any tradition that would not advance their purposes in doing so must actually go back to Jesus himself. The best way to understand this criterion is to see it applied; some of the most significant events of Jesus’ life do pass it, including his baptism by John and his crucifixion.

The third criterion is called “contextual credibility.” It maintains that any tradition about Jesus that cannot be plausibly situated in his first-century Jewish Palestinian context cannot be accepted as historically reliable. Unlike the other two criteria, which are *positive* (i.e., they are used to argue which traditions *are* reliable), this one is principally *negative* (arguing which traditions are not). Again, the criterion is best understood by considering examples, including some drawn from the later Gospels of John and Thomas, which portray Jesus in ways that make better sense in their own later contexts than in his own.

### Outline

- I. The second and most controversial criterion that historians use, and often misuse, to establish authentic tradition from the life of Jesus is sometimes called the “criterion of dissimilarity.”
  - A. The criterion can be explained by analogy to a legal case.
    1. Any witness in court will naturally tell things the way he or she sees them. The perspective of the witness must be taken into account when trying to evaluate the merits of a case. Sometimes a witness has a vested interest in the outcome of the trial.

2. If the witness testifies counter to his or her vested interests, that testimony is more likely to be true.
  3. The analogy does not completely fit ancient literary sources.
- B.** This is particularly the case when dealing with sources that describe events from the life of Jesus.
1. We know that early Christians modified and invented stories about Jesus (cf., the stories in the Gospels of Thomas and Peter).
  2. We must determine what the early Christians were trying to say about Jesus and to ascertain whether the traditions told about in his sayings and deeds clearly support these Christian views.
  3. What if a saying or deed attributed to Jesus does not obviously support a Christian cause, or even works against it? A Christian would not generally make up a tradition of this kind. Why would it be preserved? Perhaps because it really did happen that way.
  4. The criterion of dissimilarity, then, maintains that any tradition about Jesus that does not support a clear Christian agenda, or that appears to work against the vested interests of the Christians telling the story, is more likely to be historical.
- C.** This criterion has limitations.
1. Just because a saying or deed of Jesus happens to conform to what Christians were saying about him does not mean that it cannot be accurate.
  2. Thus, the criterion may do no more than cast a shadow of doubt on certain traditions (cf., the Infancy Gospel of Thomas and some of the sayings of Jesus in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas).
  3. But the criterion of dissimilarity is best used not in the negative way of establishing what Jesus did not say or do, but in the positive way of showing what he likely did.
- D.** The best way to clarify how the criterion works is by showing it in action using several examples:
1. Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist—it was widely assumed in early Christianity that a person who was baptized was spiritually inferior to the one who was doing the baptizing (cf., the dialogue between Jesus and John found only in Matt 3:15–16).

2. Jesus' crucifixion—the idea that the Messiah would be crucified was scandalous for most Jews, who thought that the Messiah would be a figure of grandeur and power who would overthrow the forces of evil to bring in God's kingdom (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:23).
  3. Jesus' betrayal by Judas, one of his own followers, (multiply attested)—this might make it appear that Jesus was lacking in authority or power, even over those closest to him.
  4. Sometimes the criterion can be applied to specific sayings. For example, in Mark 8:38, it is not at all clear that the cosmic judge (the "Son of Man") who is coming from heaven to wreak havoc on the earth is Jesus himself—even though Christians were completely and unambiguously convinced that it was.
  5. The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25 is similar. The notion of salvation on the basis of doing good things is contrary to the early Christian belief that salvation came from believing in the death and resurrection of Jesus.
- E.** Other sayings and deeds of Jesus obviously do not pass this criterion.
1. For example, in Mark's Gospel, Jesus three times predicts that he must go to Jerusalem to be rejected and executed. This is precisely what the early Christian preachers were saying about Jesus' fate, that he didn't die because of an accidental miscarriage of justice but because of the plan of God.
  2. In John's Gospel, Jesus claims to be equal with God, a claim that coincides with what some Christians were saying about him near the end of the first century, when John's Gospel was written.
  3. Such traditions may strike us as suspect in view of the criterion; they cannot be established as certainly going back to Jesus when viewed in its light.
- F.** Historians must evaluate all the traditions about Jesus to determine whether they coincide with the beliefs and practices of the early Christians to make a judgment about their historical reliability.
1. One problem in the criterion, as you might guess, is that we do not know as much about the early Christians as we would like, and what we do know indicates a variety of beliefs and practices.

2. It is easier to make a judgment concerning a particular tradition when it passes both of the criteria we have discussed (independent attestation and dissimilarity).
- II.** A final methodological principle, called the “criterion of contextual credibility,” is rooted in the necessity of understanding Jesus’ context for determining which traditions can be reliably attributed to him.
- A.** The logic of the principle can again be explained in terms of a judicial proceeding.
1. In a court of law, the testimony of a witness will not hold up under cross-examination if it does not coincide with the facts of the case.
  2. The same applies to historical documents. If a newly “discovered” text has “250 B.C.” written on it, we know there is a problem.
  3. For ancient documents, reliable traditions must conform to the historical and social contexts to which they relate. For the traditions of the Gospels, this means that the sayings, deeds, and experiences of Jesus must be plausibly situated in the historical context of first-century Palestine to be trusted as reliable.
- B.** Because this principle seems fairly obvious, I will illustrate it simply with a couple of examples.
1. Some sayings in the Coptic Gospel of Thomas are much easier to situate in the context of the second century, when the Gnostic myth that makes sense of the sayings was influential, than in the days of Jesus (e.g., saying 37).
  2. The tradition found in the Gospel of Peter that it was the Jewish King Herod who had Jesus executed rather than the Roman governor Pilate does not conform with what we know about the administration of Judea in the days of Jesus.
  3. The conversation of Jesus with Nicodemus in John 3, in which he says, “you must be born again,” depends on a play on words in Greek. The Greek word for “again” also means “above”; Nicodemus thinks Jesus means the first, but he really means the second. This word play cannot be replicated in Aramaic, the language that Jesus would have been speaking. The conversation could not then have occurred in this way.

- C. Unlike the other two criteria, the criterion of contextual credibility serves a strictly negative function. The others are used to argue *for* a tradition, while the third is used to argue *against* a tradition.
- III.** Given the nature of our sources, we need to apply a set of rigorous criteria to determine what actually happened in Jesus' life.
- A. Traditions that we can most rely on as historically accurate are those that are independently attested in a number of sources, that do not appear to have been created to fulfill a need in the early Christian community, and that make sense in a first-century Palestinian context.
- B. With respect to Jesus, or indeed, with respect to any historical person, the historian can do no more than establish probabilities. In no case can we reconstruct the past with absolute certainty. All we can do is take the evidence that happens to survive and determine to the best of our abilities what probably happened.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 6.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1.

**Suggested Reading:**

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Perrin, *Rediscovering the Teachings of Jesus*.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chaps. 6–7.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. At first sight, many people think that the criterion of dissimilarity sounds backwards: Shouldn't traditions that *conform* with Christian views be the ones that are most likely to be authentic? Explain why this point of view is logically problematic (i.e., explain the logic that makes the criterion of dissimilarity necessary).
2. How might criteria such as the three we've discussed be applied to any other historical figure that you know about (e.g., an American president, a famous saint, an ancient military leader)?

# Lecture Eleven

## The Early Life of Jesus

**Scope:** This lecture will illustrate the various criteria for establishing historically reliable tradition by examining what our sources have to say about Jesus' birth and early life. After a brief review of the sources for this period of Jesus' life—Matthew and Luke among the Gospels, with scattered references elsewhere—we will discuss which of the surviving traditions can be trusted as authentic and which cannot.

A rigorous application of our criteria shows that we cannot really know if numerous favorite traditions are historically grounded. We can know, however, that other important information in the Gospels is.

### Outline

- I. The past two lectures have covered criteria that historians can apply to the surviving sources to discover what Jesus said, did, and experienced.
  - A. We've seen that the oldest sources, as a rule, are to be preferred, as are sources that are not as theologically advanced and obviously biased in their presentation.
  - B. We've also seen that the most reliable traditions will pass all three of our criteria: independent attestation, dissimilarity, and contextual credibility.
  - C. In this lecture, I'd like to apply these criteria to the surviving accounts of Jesus' birth and early life both to illustrate how the criteria work in practice and to set the stage for the rest of the course and its consideration of the words and deeds of the historical Jesus.
- II. To begin, we will review the sources that describe this period of Jesus' life.
  - A. Neither our earliest surviving Gospel, Mark, nor the last of the canonical Gospels, John, provides a birth or infancy narrative. Both Gospels do make allusions to matters relevant to this period of Jesus' life. Both, for example, indicate that Jesus came from

Nazareth (Mark 1:9; John 1:45) and that he had brothers (John 7:3; Mark 3:32), but only Matthew and Luke have stories about Jesus' birth and early life.

- B.** The accounts in Matthew and Luke are at odds with one another on a number of points.
  - 1. We have seen some of these differences in a previous lecture. Were Joseph and Mary originally from Nazareth, as in Luke, or from Bethlehem, as in Matthew? Did they return to Nazareth just a month after Jesus was born, as in Luke, or flee to Egypt, as in Matthew?
  - 2. these differences show beyond much doubt that Matthew and Luke were not dependent on one another for their stories and so constitute independent sources of information.
- C.** Some of the information found in Matthew and Luke can be corroborated by non-Gospel accounts that are independent of them. For example, the apostle Paul indicates that Jesus had brothers (1 Cor. 9:5), one of whom was named James (Gal. 1:19).
- D.** The non-canonical infancy Gospels also cover this territory, but are not to be relied on as preserving historically accurate information.
  - 1. The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, as we have seen, is highly legendary and draws on Luke. It is not an independent witness.
  - 2. Other infancy Gospels provide us with all sorts of legendary accounts.
- E.** Using, for the most part, sources still preserved in the New Testament canon and applying to them the criteria we have discussed, what can we say about the birth and early life of Jesus?

**III.** Some of the best known traditions of Jesus' birth cannot be accepted as historically reliable when gauged by our criteria.

- A.** We have no way of knowing if Jesus' mother was really a virgin.
  - 1. The tradition is independently attested in both Matthew and Luke.
  - 2. Oddly, the tradition isn't attested anywhere else in the earliest sources, even among writers who would have had a real interest in publicizing the fact that God was actually Jesus' father. Both Mark and Paul (writing earlier than Matthew and Luke), for example, consider Jesus to be God's son and refer

to his mother (Mark 3:31; Gal 4:4) but say nothing about her being a virgin (in Mark, in fact, she doesn't seem to understand who Jesus really is; 3:21; 31–34). The Gospel of John mentions Joseph and calls him Jesus' father (John 1:45), seeming to assume that Jesus was born in a normal way.

3. The two sources that mention the virgin birth both have a vested interest in the doctrine. For Matthew, the virgin birth fulfills prophecy (Matt. 1:23) and for Luke, it shows that Jesus really was God's son (Luke 1:35). That is to say, the story does not at all pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
  4. For all these reasons, historians have long doubted whether Jesus was actually born of a virgin. In the end, we have no way to know.
- B.** It is impossible to know if Jesus was really born in Bethlehem.
1. All four of the Gospels assume that Jesus came from Nazareth. But two of them—Matthew and Luke again—independently claim that he was born in Bethlehem.
  2. These two are inconsistent with one another at key points (if Matthew's account is right, it's hard to see how Luke's can be also and vice versa). Both also present serious historical problems when taken on their own terms (for example, the worldwide census under Caesar Augustus in Luke).
  3. Both Matthew and Luke also had a clear reason for wanting to affirm that Jesus came from Bethlehem, because a Hebrew prophet had predicted that a ruler would come from there (Micah 5:2; quoted in Matt. 2:6).
  4. Again, it seems odd that if it were widely known that Jesus came from Bethlehem, the tradition was not mentioned in our other sources (e.g., Mark, John, and Paul).
  5. As a result, most critical historians consider the tradition of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem to be highly problematic.
- C.** Closely related, of course, is the story that Joseph and Mary had to travel to Bethlehem to register for a census.
1. This story is found only in Luke and as we saw earlier, the story seems to be contradicted by Matthew.
  2. It's not at all contextually credible. As discussed earlier, we know a good deal about the reign of Caesar Augustus but hear from no other source about some kind of empire-wide tax that

compelled everyone needed to register return to their ancestral homes.

- D.** The story of the wise men, found only in Matthew, is historically problematic.
1. It is historically implausible, both because no one else living at the time mentioned any such astral phenomenon, which must have attracted considerable attention had it occurred and because it's nearly impossible to understand logistically (how exactly does a star stop over a house?).
  2. Moreover, the story is used to show that heaven itself proclaimed this child's birth to all who had eyes to see, (in fulfillment, probably, of Num. 24:17). In other words, it does not pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
  3. The story also shows that the Jewish leaders rejected Jesus (they didn't join the wise men in worshiping the child who would be king, even though they knew where he was to be born) and that they—with Herod as their ultimate leader—actually sought the boy's life. These themes anticipate the end of Matthew's Gospel story, in which Jewish animosity leads to Jesus' execution. In other words, these are all theologically-driven traditions.
- E.** Similar points could be made of the even more problematic accounts we've already discussed of Luke that are not multiply attested; e.g., from Luke, Jesus' birth when Quirinius was governor of Syria (which doesn't pass contextual credibility) or the adoration in the Temple by Simeon and Anna (which doesn't pass dissimilarity) and the rest.
- F.** It is nearly impossible to say whether the one New Testament story about Jesus as a boy (in Luke) is something that actually happened, since it is not independently attested nor does it pass dissimilarity, because it serves a clear theological agenda of portraying Jesus as a *wunderkind* (Luke 2:41–52) who was completely dedicated to God and superior to the leaders of the Jews at the age of twelve.
- IV.** We do have traditions that clearly pass our criteria, and these need to stand at the foundation of what we think about Jesus' birth and early life. I take these to be rock-solid traditions.

- A.** Jesus was born and raised a Jew. This is stated explicitly by Paul (Gal. 4:4) and is overwhelmingly attested in all our Gospel sources at every level, i.e., it passes independent attestation in every imaginable way. Virtually nothing is more certain.
- B.** Jesus came from the small village of Nazareth in Galilee.
1. This tradition passes the criterion of independent attestation quite easily. It is attested in all four Gospels (Matt. 4:13; Mark 1:9; Luke 4:16; John 1:45), and Jesus is sometimes called “Jesus of Nazareth” in other ancient sources (for example, Acts 3:6).
  2. Moreover, as we’ve just seen, Matthew and Luke had to go out of their way to explain how it was that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, because everyone knew he came from Nazareth. To this extent, the tradition passes the criterion of dissimilarity (that is, neither Matthew nor Luke was comfortable with it).
  3. Even more significantly, with respect to dissimilarity, it is difficult to imagine why Christians would have wanted to make up the tradition. Nazareth was, at that time, a small, unknown, and completely insignificant village in Galilee (northern part of modern-day Israel). Nothing would be gained for Jesus’ followers to make up a tradition that he came not from Bethlehem (the home of David) or from Jerusalem (the center of power), but from a little one-horse town out in the sticks (cf., John 1:45).
- C.** We can say a few things for certain about Jesus’ parents.
1. They are assumed to have been Jews who lived in Nazareth and are consistently named Joseph and Mary in our sources (for example, independently, Matt. 1:16–18; Mark 6:3; Luke 2:5, 16; 3:23; John 1:45; even later rabbinic sources call his mother “Miriam”).
  2. None of our traditions have stories about Joseph after Jesus begins his public ministry. It is usually assumed that he had died by then.
  3. The idea that Joseph was already an old man when he became betrothed to Mary, however, is not found until the second century, when it is sometimes used to explain why they never had sex. This idea has absolutely no basis in the earliest Gospel accounts.

4. About the only thing said about Joseph in the Gospels, outside the birth narratives, is that he was a common laborer (Matt. 13:55; also found, possibly independently of Matthew, in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas, 13).
  5. The Greek word used to describe his profession is *tekton*, usually translated as “carpenter.” The word could also refer to a number of occupations that involved working with the hands—stone mason or metal worker, for example. In any event, a *tekton* was a lower class, blue-collar worker, comparable, in modern terms, to a construction worker. It is hard to imagine why Christians would have wanted to make up this tradition (hence, dissimilarity).
  6. Mary is reported in several of our earliest sources to have outlived her son (e.g., in John’s Gospel she watches his crucifixion).
  7. We don’t have any reliable information concerning what Mary actually thought of Jesus, because the traditions that she knew that he was the Son of God even before he was born are not multiply attested (they occur only in Luke) and obviously don’t pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
- D.** Jesus evidently had siblings of both sexes.
1. His brothers are mentioned in Mark, John, Josephus, and Paul. His sisters show up in Mark (3:32, 6:3).
  2. It has sometimes been maintained that these were not his actual brothers and sisters. The famous translator of the Latin Vulgate, Jerome, for example, claimed that they were his cousins—even though there is a Greek word for “cousin” that is not used of these people in our sources. Others have claimed that they were his half-siblings from Joseph’s previous marriage.
  3. These claims relate to the Roman Catholic doctrine that Mary was a virgin both when Jesus was born and for the rest of her life, after which she ascended to heaven, because she was not tainted by sin.
  4. The Gospels do not mention this, however, so the natural assumption is that Joseph and Mary engaged in sexual relations and had a large family. Jesus was presumably the oldest child.
- E.** We have only scattered hints about Jesus’ education.

1. It is clear that he spoke Aramaic (a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew). The tradition is multiply attested (see Mark 5:41; 7:34; John 1:42). The tradition also makes sense contextually, because Aramaic was the normal spoken language of Jews in Palestine in the first century. Moreover, there would be no reason for anyone to make up the tradition. Thus, it passes all three of our criteria.
  2. The Gospels also indicate that Jesus could read the Scriptures in Hebrew (for example, Luke 4:16–20; see also Mark 12:10, 26) and that he eventually became known as an interpreter of them. He is, sometimes, for example, called “rabbi,” that is, “teacher” (see Mark 9:5; John 3:2).
  3. At the same time, we have independently attested traditions that those who knew about Jesus’ background were surprised by his learning (Mark 6:2; John 7:15). This idea is not only multiply attested, but it also appears to pass the criterion of dissimilarity, because none of the Christians telling stories about Jesus would want anyone to think that he was a slow learner as a child.
  4. These data suggest that he did learn to read as a child but that he was not considered an intellectual superstar.
  5. No traditions specifically indicate that Jesus spoke Greek, although some historians have surmised that living in Galilee, where Greek was widely known, he may have learned some. Some have also suspected that he communicated with Pontius Pilate in Greek at his trial, although we will see later that it is very difficult to know exactly what happened then.
  6. At best we can say that it is possible that Jesus was trilingual; that is, that he normally spoke Aramaic, could at least read the Hebrew Scriptures, and may have been able to communicate in Greek.
- F. We are almost completely in the dark about Jesus’ early life otherwise. We might assume that he had a normal childhood, but unfortunately we aren’t even sure what a “normal” childhood would have been like in rural Galilee. He probably would have been apprenticed to his father’s line of work, as a carpenter making yokes and gates or something along a similar line. He is called a *tehton* in Mark 6:3, and it’s hard to imagine a Christian’s desire to make that up.

**Essential Reading:**

Luke 1–2.

Matthew 1–2.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, chaps. 8–10.

**Suggested Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 7.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Choose one of the traditions of Jesus' birth or early life that appears to pass one criterion but not another. Using reason, argue how you might decide whether the tradition is historically reliable or not.
2. Why do you suppose the Gospels provide so little information about the period of Jesus' life before his baptism by John? Why do we hear almost nothing of his life as a teenager or a young man?

## Lecture Twelve

### Jesus in His Context

**Scope:** It is important to situate the words and Jesus in their own historical context. Not to do so is to take them out of context, which necessarily means to misunderstand them. The history of Palestine for the eight centuries leading up to Jesus was a story of war and foreign domination. Israel was controlled first by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Egyptians, then the Syrians, and then the Romans. Only for about a century in this entire period did Israel have a sovereign state in the land, under the Jewish ruling family known as the Maccabees, who came into power in the mid-second century B.C. but were overthrown by the Romans in 63 B.C. Jesus was born under Roman rule.

More than a century before his birth, different forms of Judaism had emerged in Palestine. The variety of Jewish belief and practice can be seen in some of the prominent sects of the time: the Pharisees, who stressed scrupulous observance of God's law in all its detail; the Sadducees, who focused on worshipping God in the temple through practices of sacrifice; the Essenes, who strove to maintain their own ritual purity in separatist communities set up in anticipation of the coming judgment of God; and the so-called "fourth philosophy," which comprised a variety of groups that stressed their God-given right and need to drive out foreign oppressors and reclaim the land, by force if necessary.

These sects do not include all the religious options open to Jews in Jesus' day; the vast majority of Jews belonged to none of them. They do, however, reveal some of the varieties in Judaism. Jesus was aligned with none of these groups and had deeply rooted differences with each of them.

### Outline

- I. It is absolutely critical that we situate Jesus in his own historical context.

- A. The criterion of contextual credibility insists that for a tradition about Jesus to be plausible, it must make sense in the world of first-century Palestine Judaism.
  - B. If we try to look at the words and deeds of Jesus outside of that context, we will misunderstand them. This is true of every word and action that every one of us ever experiences.
- II.** The history of Palestine was long and complex; here we need deal only with the fraction of it that bore directly on the context of Jesus' adult life.
- A. In a nutshell, the political history of the land had involved some 800 years of periodic wars and virtually permanent foreign domination.
    - 1. The northern part of the land, the Kingdom of "Israel," was overthrown by the Assyrians in 721 B.C.
    - 2. Then, about a century and a half later, in 587–86 B.C., the southern Kingdom of "Judah" was conquered by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. Jerusalem was leveled, the Temple was destroyed, and the leaders of the people were taken into exile.
    - 3. Some fifty years later, the Babylonian Empire was overrun by the Persians under Cyrus, who brought an end to the forced exile and allowed the Judean leaders to return home.
    - 4. The Temple was rebuilt, and the priest in charge of the Temple, the "high priest," was given jurisdiction as a local ruler of the people. This was a man from an ancient family that traced its line back hundreds of years to a priest named "Zadok."
    - 5. Ultimately, of course, the Persian king was the final authority over the land and its people.
  - B. This state of affairs continued for nearly two centuries, until the conquests of Alexander the Great, ruler of Macedonia, who overthrew the Persian Empire, conquering most of the lands around the eastern Mediterranean as far as modern-day India in 336–323 B.C.
    - 1. Alexander brought Greek culture into the various regions he conquered, building Greek cities and schools and *gymnasias* (centers of culture), encouraging the acceptance of Greek

- culture and religion, and promoting the use of the Greek language.
2. When Alexander died, still a young man (in 323 B.C.), his generals divided up his realm, and Palestine fell under the rule of Ptolemy, the general in charge of Egypt.
  3. During time, the Jewish high priest remained the local ruler of the land of Judea; that did not change when the ruler of Syria took control of Palestine from the Ptolemaeans in 198 B.C.
- C. The Syrian monarchs, especially under Antiochus IV, otherwise known as Antiochus Epiphanes exacerbated tensions with foreign domination when he decided to bring greater cultural unity to his empire by requiring his subjects to adopt aspects of Greek civilization.
1. Some of the Jews living in Palestine welcomed these innovations, while others, however, found this process of “Hellenization,” (i.e., the imposition of Greek, or Hellenistic, culture) absolutely offensive to their religion.
  2. In response to their protests, made it illegal for Jews to circumcise their baby boys and to maintain their Jewish identity, converting the Jewish Temple into a pagan sanctuary, and requiring Jews to sacrifice to the pagan gods.
- D. A revolt broke out, started by a family of Jewish priests known to history both as the “Maccabeans,” based on the name given to one of its powerful leaders, Judas “Maccabeus” (that is, Judas “the Hammerer”), and also as the “Hasmoneans,” based on the name of a distant ancestor.
1. The Maccabean revolt began in 167 B.C. as a small guerrilla skirmish and ended with much of the country in armed rebellion against its Syrian overlords.
  2. In less than twenty-five years, the Maccabeans had successfully driven the Syrian army out of the land and assumed full and total control of its governance, creating the first sovereign Jewish state for over four centuries.
  3. They rededicated the Temple—one of their first acts, in 164 B.C. (commemorated still by Hanukkah)—and appointed a high priest as supreme ruler of the land.
  4. To the dismay of many Jews in Palestine, however, the high priest was not from the traditional and ancient line of Zadok

but from the common stock of priests of the Hasmonean family.

5. The Hasmoneans ruled the land as an autonomous state for eighty years, until 63 B.C., when the Roman general Pompey came in conquest.
- E. The Romans allowed the high priest to remain in office, using him as an administrative liaison with the local Jewish leadership. But there was no doubt who controlled the land. Eventually, in 40 B.C., Rome appointed a king to rule the Jews of Palestine: Herod the Great.
1. Herod was widely known both for his ruthless exercise of power and for his magnificent building projects.
  2. Many Jews, however, castigated Herod as an opportunistic collaborator with the Romans, a traitorous half-Jew at best. This charge was based on his lineage. His parents were from the neighboring country of Idumea and had been forced to convert to Judaism before his birth.
  3. During the days of Jesus, after Herod's death, Galilee, the northern region of the land, was ruled by Herod's son, Antipas, and starting when Jesus was a boy, Judea, the southern region, was governed by Roman administrators known as prefects. Pontius Pilate was prefect during the whole of Jesus' ministry and for some years after his death. His headquarters were in Caesarea, but he came to Jerusalem, with troops, whenever the need arose.
- F. The historical events leading up to Jesus' time are significant for understanding his life because of their social and intellectual consequences, which affected the lives of all Palestinian Jews.
1. The Jewish "sects" of Jesus' day (for example, the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes) were formed in response to the social, political, and religious crises of the Maccabean period.
  2. The Roman occupation led to numerous nonviolent and violent uprisings during Jesus' time, uprisings of Jews for whom any foreign domination of the "Promised Land" was both politically and religiously unacceptable.

III. Various Jewish sects emerged during the rule of the Hasmoneans, largely in reaction to that rule. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions four of these groups; the New Testament refers explicitly to three. All

of these groups play a significant role in our understanding of the life of the historical Jesus.

- A. Most Jews did not belong to any of them. Josephus indicates that the largest sect, the Pharisees, claimed 6,000 members and the Essenes claimed 4,000. The Sadducees probably had far fewer. The overall Jewish population in the world at the time was probably between three and four million.
  - 1. Still, these small groups were powerful in their own ways—especially in the social and political scene in Palestine.
  - 2. All members of these groups subscribed to the basic theological views characteristic of Jews just about everywhere. They all believed, for example, in the one true God, the creator of all things, who was revealed in the Scriptures, who had chosen his people Israel, and had promised to protect and defend them in exchange for their devotion to him through following his laws.
- B. The groups differed in significant ways, however, on the issues of what practices were required in obeying God’s laws and how to react both to the rule of a foreign power and to the presence of a high priest from a line other than Zadok’s.

**IV.** The best known group was the Pharisees, who, contrary to the modern misperception, were not professional hypocrites.

- A. They were a highly committed group of Jews who believed in following God’s law, as revealed in the Torah (Hebrew word for “law”—a reference to the Law of Moses found in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible), absolutely as far as possible.
- B. At places, though, the Law of Moses was ambiguous.
  - 1. It was clear, for example, that Jews were supposed to keep the Sabbath day “holy.” This was taken to mean that one should not engage in work on the Sabbath the way one did on other days. But the law never defined what “work” was.
  - 2. The Pharisees came up with rulings to indicate what one could or could not do on the Sabbath to keep the commandment.
  - 3. This kind of ruling was circulated and came to be seen as a set of “oral” laws (as opposed to the written law of Moses), which if kept would assure the faithful Jew of keeping God’s “written” law.

4. These oral laws were eventually written down by later rabbis, or Jewish teachers, about 200 years after Jesus, in the book called the *Mishnah*, the heart of the very large collection of Jewish lore and learning called the Talmud.
    - C. It is a mistake to see Pharisees as hypocrites. Quite the opposite, most of them appear to have been sincere and highly devout. Their emphasis was on keeping the Law of God in all its detail. Jesus, however, had a different opinion about what really mattered to God.
  - V. We are less well informed about the Sadducees, because none of them left us any writings.
    - A. It appears that the Sadducees were from the upper-class aristocracy of the Jews. Many of them were priests in the Jewish Temple.
    - B. The Sadducees are known to have disputed with the Pharisees over the statutes of the oral law. For them, what really mattered was what God had written through Moses in the Torah—especially as it related to the worship of God in the Temple.
    - C. Contrary to popular opinion, it was the Sadducees (not the Pharisees) who were the real power players in first-century Israel. The chief priests came from their ranks, and they were the ones who represented the local concerns of the Jews to the Roman governor.
    - D. The overarching concerns of the Sadducees were centered on the sacrificial cult in the Temple. The Sadducees seem to have been open to Roman rule, as long as they were allowed to perform the sacrifices prescribed by God in the Torah. Again, Jesus had a different understanding of what really mattered to God.
  - VI. The Essenes were a group of highly religious Jews who believed that the rest of the people of Israel had fallen away from God and become impure.
    - A. As it turns out, we probably know more about the Essenes than any of the other groups, even though they are never explicitly mentioned in the New Testament. In addition to references in Josephus and several other ancient writers, we now have a collection of writings that appear to have been produced by Essenes: the famous Dead Sea Scrolls.

1. As was the case with the Gnostic documents uncovered near Nag Hammadi, Egypt, the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was completely serendipitous.
  2. In 1947, a shepherd boy searching for a lost goat in the barren wilderness near a place called Qumran, by the northwest shore of the Dead Sea, happened to toss a stone into a cave and heard it strike something. Going in, he discovered an ancient earthenware jar that contained a number of old scrolls.
  3. The books were recovered by Bedouin shepherds, news of the discovery reached antiquities dealers, biblical scholars learned of the find, and a search was conducted to find more scrolls in the caves and to retrieve those that had already been found by the Bedouin, who had cut some of them up to sell one piece at a time.
  4. Some of the caves in the region yielded entire scrolls; others contained thousands of tiny scraps that are virtually impossible to piece back together.
  5. Most of the scrolls are written in Hebrew; others, in Aramaic; a few, in Greek.
  6. Different kinds of literature are represented here, including at least partial copies of every book of the Jewish Bible, with the exception of the book of Esther; commentaries on some of the biblical books; books of psalms and hymns; prophecies that indicate the future course of events that were believed to be about to transpire in the authors' day; and rules for the members of the community to follow in their lives together.
- B.** Sifting through all these books, scholars have been able to reconstruct the life and beliefs of the Essenes in considerable detail.
1. Believing that the Jews of Jerusalem had gone astray, this group of Essenes chose to start their own community, in which they could keep the Mosaic law rigorously and maintain their own ritual purity in the wilderness.
  2. They did so fully expecting the apocalypse of the end of time to be imminent. When it came, a final battle would take place between the forces of good and evil, the children of light and the children of darkness. The battle would climax with the triumph of God and the entry of his children into the blessed kingdom.

3. Some of the scrolls indicate that this kingdom would be ruled by two messiahs, one a king and the other a priest. The priestly messiah would lead the faithful in their worship of God in a purified Temple, where sacrifices could again be made in accordance with God's will.
4. In the meantime, the true people of God needed to be removed from the impurities of this world, including those prevalent in the Jewish Temple and among the rest of the Jewish people.
5. The Essenes, therefore, started their own monastic-like community with strict rules for admission and membership.
6. It appears that when the Jewish War of A.D. 66–73 began, the Essenes at Qumran hid some of their sacred writings before joining in the struggle. They may well have seen this as the final battle, preliminary to the end of time when God would establish his kingdom and send its messiahs.

C. In short, the Essenes stressed their own ritual purity as the most important aspect of their relationship with God. Again, Jesus took another view.

**VII.** The final group of Jews mentioned by Josephus is called, simply, the Fourth Philosophy.

- A. This term comprises a number of groups of Jews who believed that God had given them the land of Israel and that it should be taken back by force from those who currently ruled it.
- B. This group (or rather, groups) believed in violent resistance to any foreign power in the land, especially the Romans. They eventually had their way. In the year A.D. 66, just a generation after Jesus' death, a revolt against the Romans broke out, leading to a three-and-a-half-year war that ended in the destruction of Jerusalem and the burning of the Temple.
- C. The religious outlook of the Fourth Philosophy centered on the Jewish homeland as the place given by God to his people, which should not be ruled by any foreign power. Again, Jesus had a different point of view.

### **Essential Reading:**

Cohen, *From the Maccabees to the Mishnah*.

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 7.

Sanders, *Judaism Practice and Belief*.

**Suggested Reading:**

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*.

Fitzmyer, *101 Questions*.

Sandmel, *Judaism and Christian Beginnings*.

Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Try to imagine, and then to articulate, a variety of views that might be embodied among a people who have long been subject to the rule of a foreign power. Can you imagine, for example, groups of people who would favor that kind of situation? Who? Why? Who would oppose it?
2. What appear to be the common denominators among the various groups of Jews (the “sects”) that we’ve discussed in this lecture?

## Lecture Thirteen

### Jesus and Roman Rule

**Scope:** Rome ruled Palestine much as it did the other provinces of the Empire. Roman or local aristocrats were appointed to run normal operations of government; their ultimate responsibilities were to raise revenue for Rome and to keep the peace. In some ways, Rome granted favored treatment to the Jews of Palestine, but Roman rule was nonetheless felt by many to be an unbearable burden.

Jews responded to Roman rule in a variety of ways: at Passover in Jerusalem, there was a type of silent protest against foreign domination and a not-so-veiled expression of hope that God would intervene once again on behalf of his people; nonviolent resistance to Roman policies; occasionally, they engaged in acts of armed rebellion, including the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70 that left Jerusalem ruins. Throughout the period, prophets arose to speak out against Rome as God’s enemies and were often killed as troublemakers.

One form of resistance ideology became prominent in the period. Called “apocalypticism” by modern scholars, this ideology claimed that the forces of evil that were currently in charge of this world and responsible for its suffering would be overthrown by God in a mighty act of judgment. This imminent event was thought to be the prelude to the appearance of God’s kingdom in a utopian age preserved for God’s people. We have compelling reasons for thinking that Jesus himself proclaimed some such apocalyptic views.

### Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we saw the importance of situating Jesus in his own historical context.
  - A. Jesus was a first-century Palestinian Jew. To understand him, we need to know something about the historical and social context of Judaism in Palestine in the first-century.

- B.** One consequences of foreign subjugation of Palestine included the formation of Jewish sects, which exercised some power and offered religious options for Jews living at the time.
  - 1. The Pharisees emphasized keeping the law of God to the fullest degree possible and developed a set of oral laws to ensure this.
  - 2. The Sadducees emphasized worshiping God in the Temple in strict accordance with the Torah, the Law of Moses.
  - 3. The Essenes emphasized maintaining their own purity in light of the imminent apocalypse in which God would judge the world and his own people.
  - 4. The Fourth Philosophy emphasized the Jewish homeland and their divinely appointed right and duty to reestablish Israel as a sovereign state, by force if necessary.

**II.** The Roman imperial authorities treated the Jews of Palestine much as they treated those in other conquered territories they ruled as provinces. Rome formed conquered lands into provinces ruled either by Roman aristocrats appointed as governors or by local aristocrats designated as client kings.

- A.** When Jesus was born, all of Palestine was ruled by a client king, Herod; when Jesus died, the northern part of Israel, Galilee, was ruled by one of Herod's sons, but Judea in the south was ruled by a Roman governor, Pontius Pilate.
- B.** Roman governors and client kings had two principal obligations to the Empire: to raise revenues and to keep the peace. Local administrators were left to do what needed to be done in view of local circumstances.
  - 1. The Romans did not have troops all throughout the conquered territories. Most Jews in Palestine probably never saw a Roman soldier. Soldiers were stationed on the frontiers to protect against invasion.
  - 2. In Palestine a force of soldiers was kept by the Roman governor at his residence in Caesarea on the coast, for use in case of any local disturbance. At Passover, the governor took his troops to Jerusalem to quell any potential trouble.
- C.** The principal burden that Jews in Palestine bore was the requirement to pay taxes to the Empire, in the form of crops and monies.

1. In monetary terms, the Roman tax burden on Jews appears to have been average, about twelve or thirteen percent of income to support the Roman presence in the land.
  2. These taxes were on top of taxes to support the Temple and local Jewish administration, perhaps an additional twenty percent.
  3. This may not appear exorbitant by the standards of today's highly industrialized nations; we must recall, however, that in ancient agrarian societies, most farmers did well to eke out an existence in the best of circumstances.
- D.** Since the days of Julius Caesar, Jews were not required to supply Rome with soldiers, nor were they required to provide direct support for Roman legions stationed nearby or marching through to the frontiers.
- E.** In another respect, the Jewish situation could be seen as far worse than average. Many Jews considered it blasphemous to pay taxes to support Roman administration of the land that God had given them.
- III.** Throughout the first century, Jews of Palestine resisted Roman rule on a number of occasions and in a number of different ways.
- A.** Many Jews engaged in simple silent protests against foreign rule as, for example, during the Passover festival described earlier.
1. The festival was explicitly a commemoration of God's deliverance of Israel from an oppressive foreign power in earlier times (from Egypt under Moses).
  2. Many Jews celebrated the feast because they anticipated that God would do it again (free them from Rome under...the messiah?).
  3. Romans understood full well the political implications of the feast, which is why they brought in troops for the occasion
  4. On occasion, the Roman presence had the opposite of its desired effect. For example, in the 50s, during the reign of the procurator Cumanus, a soldier made an indecent gesture to the crowds. They picked up stones, the soldiers moved in, and—according to Josephus (who may have exaggerated the numbers)—20,000 Jews were killed in the mayhem.
- B.** On some occasions, a Roman administrator would offend the Jews in Palestine, and they would respond through nonviolent protest.

During Jesus' lifetime, when Pilate assumed the prefectorship of Judea (A.D. 26), he set up Roman standards with the image of Caesar throughout Jerusalem. Josephus says that Jews in the city erupted in protest and staged a kind of sit-in; after five days and several failed threats of killing the lot of them, Pilate backed down.

- C. A very few violent insurrections also occurred in Palestine during the first century.
1. The most significant and disastrous one came thirty-five to forty years after Jesus' death, when Roman atrocities (e.g., the plundering of the Temple treasury) led to widespread revolt.
  2. The Romans sent in the legions from the north and quickly subjugated Galilee (Josephus, recall, was the commander of the Jewish troops). A group of Galilean Jews fled to Jerusalem and provoked a bloody civil war against the priestly aristocracy who had been in charge of the Temple and the rest of the city. Once they acquired control, these "Zealots" pressed the fight against the Romans to the end.
  3. This led to a horrifying three-year siege of Jerusalem, with massive starvation within the walls. The war ended in a bloodbath in which tens of thousands of Jews were slaughtered or enslaved, rebel leaders were crucified, much of the city was leveled, and the Temple was burned to the ground in A.D. 70.
- D. A fourth form of protest involved a more obviously "religious" response. Throughout this period, we know of self-styled prophets who predicted that God would soon intervene on behalf of his people to overthrow the forces of evil that ruled them.
1. As mentioned in Josephus and briefly in Acts, less than fifteen years after Jesus' crucifixion, a prophet named Theudas publicly proclaimed that he would part the Jordan River, allowing the people to cross into Israel on dry land, an obvious reference to the traditions of Israel's exodus from Egypt. The Roman governor sent forth his troops, slaughtered Theudas and his followers, and displayed the prophet's head in Jerusalem.
  2. About a decade later, another prophet arose (also mentioned in Acts), called "the Egyptian." He led a huge following (30,000 people, according to Josephus) outside of Jerusalem and predicted that he would make the "walls come tumbling

down”—a clear allusion to Joshua and the Battle of Jericho. The Roman troops again were sent forth, and a huge slaughter occurred.

3. John the Baptist should probably be seen as a prophet of this sort, predicting that God would soon intervene on behalf of his people and wreak massive destruction and judgment: “Who warned you to flee from the wrath that is coming? Behold, the axe is lying at the root of the tree; every tree that does not bear fruit will be cut down and cast into the fire” (Luke 3:7, 9). He, too, was executed.
4. Other Jewish prophets arose and experienced similar fates. Roman administrators of Judea had no qualms about destroying anyone whose predictions about God’s intervention gained them a large, and potentially riotous, following, especially in Jerusalem.

**IV.** An even more widespread response to Roman rule involved a kind of religious ideology that became popular during the period, what modern scholars call “apocalypticism.” This ideology originated, probably, during the time of the Maccabean revolt, but became enormously popular among the Jews of Palestine under Roman rule.

- A. This ideology may have undergirded some of the self-styled prophets I mentioned (almost certainly John the Baptist), and it was widely held among large numbers of Jews.
- B. The name comes from the Greek term *apocalypsis*, which means an “unveiling” or a “revealing.” Jews who subscribed to this world view maintained that God had revealed to them the future course of events, in which he was soon to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his good kingdom on earth.
- C. We know about Jewish apocalyptic thought from a number of ancient sources: the Book of Daniel in the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and numerous “apocalypses” written at the time—i.e., books that describe the course of future events as “revealed” to their authors.
- D. Jewish apocalypticists subscribed to four major tenets:
  1. They maintained a view of cosmic dualism, in which there were two forces in the world—good and evil—and everyone and everything sided with one of the two forces. The present

age was ruled by the forces of evil and the age to come would be ruled by the forces of good.

2. They were completely pessimistic about the possibilities of life in the present evil age.
3. Apocalypticists believed, though, that God would intervene in the course of history, overthrow the forces of evil, and bring in his good kingdom with a judgement of the entire world, both the living and the dead.
4. Moreover, apocalypticists insisted that this future judgment of God against the forces of evil and the appearance of his good kingdom on earth was imminent. In the words of one famous Jewish apocalypticist: “Truly I tell you, some of you standing here will not taste death before they see the Kingdom of God come in power.” These are the words of Jesus (Mark 9:1). “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away before all these things take place” (Mark 13:30).

E. Jesus, as presented our earliest and most historically accurate sources, seems to have adopted an apocalyptic point of view and believed that the judgment would happen in his own generation.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction*, chap. 16.

Horsley, *Jesus and the Spiral of Violence*, chaps. 1–4.

Sanders, *Judaism Practice and Belief*, chaps. 1–4.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Collins, *Apocalyptic Imagination*.

Crossan, *The Historical Jesus*, chaps. 1–4.

Rowland, *Open Heaven*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. In view of the brief description of Roman domination of the provinces given above, how does that situation (say, for Jews in Palestine) seem to be like and unlike the situation of developing countries who are under the sway of the economies and policies of major world powers today?

2. Discuss how an apocalyptic worldview might provide comfort for someone experiencing oppression and personal suffering.

## Lecture Fourteen

# Jesus the Apocalyptic Prophet

**Scope:** Now that we have examined our sources for the historical Jesus, discussed the historical criteria, and set the context for Jesus' life in first-century Palestine, we can establish what Jesus was actually like and what he said and did. The first step is to set forth the general character of Jesus' message. It appears that Jesus proclaimed an apocalyptic message, that God would soon intervene in the course of history to overthrow the forces of evil and establish his kingdom earth.

We will examine this by looking at the earliest sources at our disposal (Mark, Q, M, and L), even though it later came to be muted (Luke), altered (John), and even spurned (Thomas) and determine if the apocalyptic view of Jesus passes all three of our historical criteria.

Finally, the idea that Jesus was essentially an apocalypticist can explain *both* the beginning and the aftermath of his ministry, which clearly began with Jesus' association with an apocalyptic prophet, John the Baptist, and resulted in the establishment of apocalyptic communities of Christians throughout the Mediterranean. Jesus' ministry links the apocalyptic John and the apocalyptic Christian church.

### Outline

- I. The only way to know what Jesus actually taught is through the sources that survive from antiquity. Principally, these sources are the Gospels.
  - A. These books must be examined critically using the various historical criteria that we have already discussed. It is not good enough to object to any reconstruction of the historical Jesus simply by citing proof texts—i.e., verses that seem to say something else. Every verse in all our sources must be examined carefully, not just to see what it says and to determine what it means, but also to establish whether it actually goes back to the life of Jesus himself.

- B. A careful examination of all the surviving evidence suggests that Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist.
- II. The view that Jesus was an apocalypticist has been dominant among scholars for most of this century.
- A. The view was first popularized by the classic *Quest of the Historical Jesus* written by Albert Schweitzer, the humanitarian and medical missionary who began his career as a philosopher, theologian, and New Testament scholar.
    1. Schweitzer's book discussed in detail all the attempts to write a life of Jesus down to his own day (1906), showing how scholars had portrayed Jesus incorrectly, because they failed to recognize that he was an apocalypticist.
    2. Schweitzer's own reconstruction of Jesus' life and teachings has, probably with justification, been called into question over the course of the past century, but his overriding points—that Jesus must be situated in his own first-century Palestinian context and that his message was apocalyptic—came to dominate scholarship.
  - B. Even this broader point of view has come into question in recent times.
- III. When applied to our sources for the historical Jesus, the basic rules of thumb indicate that he probably held an apocalyptic view.
- A. We know that historians prefer sources that are closest to the time of the events they narrate and that are, insofar as possible, not tendentious.
  - B. In the case of Jesus, we see a clear and consistent trend when it comes to the apocalyptic materials. The earliest sources at our disposal—Q, Mark, M, and L, for example—all portray Jesus apocalyptically. Later sources, for example, John and Thomas, do *not*. This scarcely appears to be an accident.
  - C. The basic point is this: throughout the earliest accounts of Jesus' words are found numerous apocalyptic predictions: a kingdom of God is soon to appear on earth, in which God will rule; the forces of evil will be overthrown, and only those who repent and follow Jesus' teachings will be allowed to enter the kingdom; judgment on all others will be brought by the Son of Man, a cosmic figure who may arrive from heaven at any time.

- D.** Jesus is said to have proclaimed this message in Q, Mark, M, and L—our earliest surviving sources. Consider the following examples: Mark 13:24–27, 30; Luke 17:24; 26–27, 30 (this is Q material; cf. Matt. 24:27, 37–39); Luke 12:39 (also Q; cf. Matt. 24:44); Matt. 13:40–43 (M); and Luke 21:34–36 (L).
- E.** Some of the most clearly apocalyptic traditions are toned down as we move further away from Jesus’ life to the later Gospels.
1. Mark was our earliest Gospel and was a source for Luke (along with Q and L). We can easily see how the earlier traditions of Mark fared later in the hands of Luke. Interestingly, some of the earlier apocalyptic emphases begin to be muted.
  2. Contrast Mark 9:1 with Luke 9:27, then consider Luke 17:21 (found only in Luke). In this later Gospel, Jesus no longer says that his disciples will see the kingdom come in power, but only that the kingdom will arrive in the ministry of Jesus himself.
  3. In Luke 17:21, Luke has Jesus say that the kingdom is “in your midst.” This differs from Mark’s earlier “coming with power.”
  4. So, too, the high priest is no longer told that he himself will see the Son of Man arrive in judgment (Mark 14:62), but simply that the Son of Man would henceforth be in heaven (Luke 22:69).
  5. Luke does not seem to think that the coming of a real kingdom would occur in the lifetime of Jesus’ companions. Evidently, because he was writing after they had died, and he knew that the end had not come. To deal with the “delay of the end,” he made appropriate changes in Jesus’ predictions.
- F.** In still later sources, the apocalyptic materials are eliminated.
1. Thus, in the Gospel of John, the last of the canonical accounts to be written, the kingdom is not described as soon to come, but as already present to those who believe in Jesus (John 3:3, 36).
  2. In fact, the older view—that a day of judgment is coming and the dead will be resurrected at the end of the age—is debunked in view of the newer view, that in Jesus a person can already be raised into eternal life (John 11:23–26).

- G. This “de-apocalypticizing” of Jesus’ message continues into the second century. The Gospel of Thomas, for example, written somewhat later than John, contains a clear attack on anyone who believes in a future kingdom here on earth (sayings 3, 18, 118).
- H. If we were to tally up these data to this point, we’d have a fairly compelling subtotal. Early traditions record apocalyptic teachings on the lips of Jesus. Later traditions generally mute this emphasis; still later sources explicitly argue against it.
  - 1. It appears that, when the end did not arrive, Christians realized that Jesus said it would and changed his message accordingly.
  - 2. If scholars are to prefer the accounts of our earliest sources, then it’s clear that the early Jesus is portrayed as an apocalypticist.

IV. The same results accrue if we consider the apocalyptic traditions associated with Jesus in light of the specific criteria that we’ve discussed: contextual credibility, dissimilarity, and independent attestation.

- A. We have absolutely no trouble seeing Jesus as an apocalypticist in terms of contextual credibility.
  - 1. First-century Palestine had numbers of apocalyptic Jews who left writings, e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls.
  - 2. Other apocalyptic Jews were written about, e.g., John the Baptist (in the New Testament accounts) and various other prophets (e.g., Theudas and the Egyptian) who were mentioned by Josephus.
- B. Some of the most striking apocalyptic traditions also pass the criterion of dissimilarity. I have already discussed a couple of them.
  - 1. Mark (8:38) talks about a cosmic judge of the earth, the Son of Man, without giving any hint that the reference is to Jesus—even though that’s what the earliest Christians who transmitted the saying believed. It seems that they didn’t formulate this saying, but it goes back to Jesus himself.
  - 2. The parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 indicates that, at this apocalyptic judgment, the Son of Man will judge the nations based on how they lived. Because this does not coincide with the view of Jesus’ later followers—that salvation comes only on the basis of faith in Jesus, not on the

basis of good works—the story was probably not formulated by Christians, but by Jesus himself.

3. Some of Jesus' key apocalyptic sayings, therefore, pass both the criteria of contextual credibility and dissimilarity.
- C. Some of these sayings also pass the criterion of independent attestation.
1. Jesus is portrayed as an apocalypticist in Mark, Q, M, and L.
  2. The later Gospel of Thomas argues against this portrayal. Why argue against something unless someone else subscribes to it?
  3. All these sources were independent of one another and all of them, to a greater or lesser extent, especially the earlier sources, portray Jesus apocalyptically.
- V. A consideration of the way Jesus' ministry began and how it ended is the key to everything that lies between.
- A. There is little doubt that Jesus began his ministry by associating with, and even being baptized by, John the Baptist. The traditions are independently attested and dissimilar to what Christians would have wanted to say about Jesus.
- B. John was an apocalyptic prophet in the wilderness. Jesus could have joined forces with the Pharisees, Essenes or the Fourth Philosophy, but intentionally went to John, presumably because he stood in agreement with John's apocalyptic message of the coming judgment.
- C. There is also little doubt about the aftermath of Jesus' ministry. After his death, Christian communities were established throughout the Mediterranean.
1. We know about these communities because of the writings of their earliest leaders, such as the apostle Paul, whose writings clearly indicate that he believed he was living at the end of the age and that Jesus was soon to return from heaven in judgment against the earth (1 Thess. 4:13–5:10).
  2. The first communities of Christians were, in other words, thoroughly apocalyptic.
- D. How can we explain that the beginning and the aftermath of Jesus' ministry were both thoroughly apocalyptic?
1. If only the beginning were apocalyptic, we could claim that Jesus associated with John but then changed his mind about

- his apocalyptic views. That wouldn't explain why Jesus' own followers, after his death, were hard-core apocalypticists.
2. If Jesus' later followers were apocalypticists but Jesus did not begin as one, we could say that after Jesus' death, followers changed his teachings to make them coincide with their beliefs.
  3. The fact that both the beginning and the end are so clearly apocalyptic is compelling evidence that the middle—Jesus' life, which provides the continuity between John the Baptist and the early Christian communities—was also apocalyptic.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 8.

Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, chaps. 1–4.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. What strikes you as the strongest evidence that Jesus was an apocalypticist? Where does the evidence seem to you to be the weakest?
2. How would you counter an argument that said that Jesus was not an apocalypticist because he is not portrayed that way in the Gospel of John?

## Lecture Fifteen

# The Apocalyptic Teachings of Jesus

**Scope:** Jesus proclaimed that God's kingdom was coming to earth imminently. This would be a real kingdom with real rulers (the twelve disciples), a kingdom that would welcome some people but exclude others. Before the kingdom arrived, a scene of judgment would take place, in which the Son of Man, a cosmic figure from heaven, would appear to destroy God's enemies. This coming judgment would involve a massive reversal of fortunes; those who had prospered in this world through siding with evil would be taken down, but those who had suffered would be exalted. The judgment would come not to individuals, and also to institutions and governments. In particular, the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, the heart of all Jewish worship, would be destroyed.

### Outline

- I. In the last lecture, we saw that, in the most general terms, Jesus can be labeled a first-century Jewish apocalypticist who taught that a kingdom of God was coming to earth.
  - A. I take the summary of his preaching in Mark 1:15 (the first words he is recorded to have said in that Gospel) to be reasonably accurate and thoroughly apocalyptic: the present age is nearly up; repent now.
  - B. Throughout his authentic teachings, when Jesus refers to the coming kingdom, he seems to mean an actual earthly kingdom, ruled by God. Consider the things Jesus says in early traditions found in Q:

“Truly I say to you, in the renewed world, when the Son of Man is sitting on the throne of his glory, you [disciples] also will be seated on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” (Matt. 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30)

“And there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom, but you are cast out; and people will come from east and west and from north and south and recline at table in the kingdom of God.” (Q: Luke 13:23–29; cf. Matt. 8:11–12)

**II.** While the arrival of the kingdom was “good news” for Jesus’ followers, it was not good news for everyone. In a mighty act of judgment, evil rulers will be toppled and punished, and the oppressed will be raised up.

**A.** This judgment will be universal in scope. Compare the saying in our earliest Gospel:

“And in those days, after that affliction, the sun will grow dark and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the sky will be shaken; and then they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds with great power and glory. And then he will send forth his angels and he will gather his elect from the four winds, from the end of earth to the end of heaven.” (Mark 13:24–27)

**B.** This coming judgement is the subject of a number of Jesus’ parables. Consider this one that is multiply attested in Matthew and Thomas:

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, they hauled it ashore, and sitting down chose the good fish and put them into containers, but the bad fish they threw away. That’s how it will be at the completion of the age. The angels will come and separate the evil from the midst of the righteous, and cast them into the fiery furnace. There people will weep and gnash their teeth.” (Matt. 13:47–50)

**C.** As seen in these references, Jesus calls this coming agent of judgment, who is regularly accompanied by angels, the “Son of Man,” a title deriving from a passage from the Hebrew Bible, Dan. 7:13–14.

- 1.** In some of the sayings about the future coming of the Son of Man, Jesus does not appear to be speaking about himself. These sayings, pass the criterion of dissimilarity, because Christians would be unlikely to make up sayings in which it was unclear that Jesus himself was the future judge.
- 2.** These sayings also pass the criterion of contextual credibility—cf. Enoch, ch. 69, a contemporaneous Jewish apocalyptic prophecy referring to the “son of man” as an agent of God’s judgment.

3. In other sayings, though, Jesus clearly does speak about himself using the term “son of man.” These obviously do not pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
  4. As a result, we can be reasonably sure that Jesus said that a future judge of the earth, whom he called the Son of Man, was soon to be sent from heaven as a prelude to God’s kingdom.
- D. Similar teachings can be found in other apocalyptic writings from the same time period (e.g., 1 Enoch 69:4; Ezra 13:1–11).

**III.** This coming judgment would involve a serious reversal: Those who are in power would be removed; those who are oppressed would be exalted.

A. This kind of reversal of fortune makes sense in an apocalyptic context.

“And so the one who exalts himself shall be humbled and the one who humbles himself shall be exalted; for the first shall be last and the last shall be first” (Mark 10:31; Luke 13:30).

B. This is the theme of some of Jesus’ best known but least understood teachings, the Beatitudes.

1. In these teachings, notice the verb tenses, in view of Jesus’ apocalyptic emphases: “Blessed are the meek, for they *shall* inherit the earth, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they *shall* be satisfied, blessed are the pure in heart, for they *shall* see God.” When? In the future kingdom.

2. And so, “blessed are those who are persecuted for doing what is right, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” God’s kingdom will come to those who are beaten down, poor, hungry, and persecuted.

**IV.** The coming judgment of God would involve not just individuals, but governments and institutions.

A. In particular, Jesus is reported in independent sources to have predicted that the grand and glorious Temple in Jerusalem, the center of all Jewish religion, would be destroyed at the appearance of the Son of Man (Mark 13:1).

1. As we will see more fully in a later lecture, even though the Temple was ordered to be built by God and was run according to his dictates in Scripture by the leaders of his own people,

Jesus taught that the institution had become corrupt and was going to be overthrown by God when the Son of Man arrived.

2. That a Jew would say such a thing about the Temple is completely credible. The prophet Jeremiah in the Hebrew Bible made a similar prediction six centuries earlier (Jeremiah 7), as did other self-styled prophets in Jesus' day, as we know from Josephus.
- B.** As we will see in a later lecture, this teaching in particular got Jesus into trouble with the ruling authorities.
- V.** Jesus maintained that the Son of Man's arrival was not some far off event to be worried about at some remote time in the future. It was imminent. It would come in his own generation (Mark 8:38–9:1; 13:30).
- A.** In the next lecture, we'll consider some of the ethical corollaries of Jesus' proclamation of the coming kingdom. His moral teaching was situated clearly in his apocalyptic context.
1. Jesus did not teach his ethics to show people how to live in peace for the long haul. For him, there wasn't going to be a long haul.
  2. His ethical teachings are meant to show people what they need to do now to escape judgment when the Son of Man arrives and to be brought into the kingdom of God. Believers needed to be humble (Mark 9:35; 10:42–44); be like "little children" (Mark 10:14); give away all their possessions and all their attachments to earthly things, (Mark 10:25).
- B.** Similarly—and possibly even more strikingly—Jesus taught that it would not be the upright and religious people who are brought into the kingdom, but sinners (Matt 21:31–32; Luke 18:9–14).
1. Probably none of Jesus' teachings caused such an uproar as these. Tax collectors and prostitutes and sinners will come into the kingdom before the righteous leaders of the Jews (Matt 21:31).
  2. It is hard to know what he meant by this, but given the number of places in which Jesus urges people to repent and return to doing what God really wants, it appears that those who were exalted leaders of his people were not right before God, whereas those who humbly repented of their wicked ways were.

- C. Jesus taught that people needed to repent and live in ways God wanted them to in light of the coming kingdom. In the next lecture, we'll consider more fully what that might have entailed.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 9.

Mark 10, 13.

Matthew 5–7, 24–26.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chaps. 11–13.

**Suggested Reading:**

Chilton and Evans, *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.

Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why have Christian readers been so reluctant to take literally Jesus' teachings about the coming Son of Man, the cosmic destruction he'll bring, and the need to give away possessions and live like slaves?
2. Read over some of the more familiar teachings of Jesus, such as the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6, and the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25, and reflect on what they would mean in an apocalyptic context.

## **Lecture Sixteen**

### **Other Teachings of Jesus in their Apocalyptic Context**

**Scope:** Jesus did more, of course, than talk about the coming apocalypse. He is widely regarded as one of the greatest ethical teachers of all time. We must realize, however, that even his teachings about ethics were situated in an apocalyptic context that radically affects their meanings. Jesus did not deliver timeless truths to guide individuals in leading long and productive lives. His teachings were meant to show people how to live to enter the kingdom of God that was soon to appear.

These teachings are based on the Law of Moses, as found in the Jewish Bible. In particular, Jesus stressed the two laws to love God above all else (Deut. 6:4) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18).

### **Outline**

- I.** Many people today consider Jesus to be one of the greatest ethical teachers of all time, with his stress on the law to “love your neighbor as yourself” and his formulation of the “Golden Rule” that tells us “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
  - A.** Jesus’ ethical teachings may have meant something quite different in his context than they do in ours.
  - B.** Jesus’ ethical teachings, in other words, were ethics of the coming kingdom. They reflected what life would be like in the kingdom and qualified a person to enter it once it arrived.
- II.** It would be a mistake to think of Jesus’ ethical teachings without considering their relation to the Jewish law. As we have seen, Jesus was fully Jewish in every way; he embraced the Jewish law and saw himself as a principal proponent and interpreter of that law.
  - A.** Recall the three major ideas of Judaism:
    - 1.** It was monotheistic, with one Creator-God.
    - 2.** God made a covenant with the people of Israel (Abraham, Moses).

3. The law told the Jews how to worship their God and how to live in a community of believers.
- B.** To be Jewish meant, in part, to embrace the law that God was believed to have given Moses, as embodied in the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah. Jesus regularly turns to the law as its interpreter throughout independently attested traditions; e.g., Mark 10:17–22; Luke 16:16 (Q = Matt. 5:18); Matt. 5:17, 19–20 (M); John 10:34–35.
- C.** Throughout the Gospels, Jesus constantly quotes the law and places his interpretation against the interpretations of other teachers of his day, e.g., Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes.
1. In contrast to Pharisees (as we'll see in a later lecture), Jesus did not think that God was concerned about scrupulous observance of every single detail of every law.
  2. In contrast to Sadducees, Jesus did not think that carefully adhering to the laws of how to sacrifice in the Temple would bring a person into a right standing before God.
  3. In contrast to Essenes, Jesus did not think that maintaining one's own ritual purity by separating oneself from the sinfulness of the rest of the world was ultimately what God wanted.
  4. In all these disagreements, the issue was never over whether God's law, as found in the Hebrew Bible, should be kept. The question was how it should be kept and what it meant to keep it.
- D.** For Jesus, as for other Jewish teachers of his day, what God wanted was for his people to keep the commandments that formed the heart of his law, the commandments to love God above all else (Deut. 6:4) and to love one's neighbor as oneself (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:28–34).
- E.** Even though the commandment to love is simple, it is also all encompassing. Giving oneself over to the command is necessary to enter God's kingdom, which is the ultimate goal of all existence.
1. The kingdom is to be sought after as one's most prized possession (cf. the parable of the pearl of great price; Matt. 13:45–46).
  2. Nothing else in human existence should be of any ultimate concern—not even food and clothing (Matt. 5:39–42; 6:33).

3. Trying to live for things of this world while committing oneself totally to God would be like a slave trying to serve two masters—it can't be done (Luke 16:13).
4. Thus, one should give up everything—all possessions and everything that binds one to this world—in light of the coming kingdom (Mark 10:17–21). Those who give up their lives in this world will gain much in the kingdom that will soon appear (Mark 10:29–31).

**F.** This emphasis on giving up everything for the kingdom means that Jesus was not a major proponent of what we now call “family values.”

1. In fact, he was quite unambiguous that parents, siblings, spouses, and even children were to have no importance in comparison with the kingdom (Luke 14:26).
2. Jesus appears to have realized how divisive this teaching could be, but he claimed that he would split families up rather than keep them together (Luke 12:51–53).
3. As with other hard saying of Jesus, these should not be explained away so that they no longer mean what they say. Instead, they should be placed in their own apocalyptic context.

**G.** Jesus' teachings on marriage considered in this context are different than some modern interpretations.

1. In his society, it was unusual for a man to be unmarried (as he was). Some were ascetics, as the evidence indicates Jesus was.
2. Jesus never taught against marriage.
3. In Mark 12, Jesus argues with the Pharisees over bodily resurrection, showing his belief in bodily resurrection into a state of no marriage.
4. Thus, Jesus may be saying, “don't get married” (in view of the coming judgment).

**H.** Jesus did not advocate a strong structure to promote a healthy society, because he thought society was diseased and soon to be destroyed.

**III.** Jesus “maximized” the commandment to love and “minimized” everything else in comparison.

**A.** This can be seen in the so-called “antitheses” preserved now in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 5:21–48).

1. The law says not to murder; if you really love your neighbor, though, you won't even get angry with him.
  2. The law says not to take your neighbor's wife; if you really love your neighbor, though, you won't even desire to take her.
  3. The law says to make the punishment of someone who has offended you commensurate with the offense ("an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"); if you really love your neighbor, though, you will not demand a punishment at all or even take offense when he harms you ("turn the other cheek").
- B.** This love of others should extend to everyone, even in the most extreme situations.
1. Rather than seek restitution for what has been taken from you or destroyed by another (as set forth in the law), you should forgive what others owe you—so that God will forgive what you owe him (Mark 11:25; Luke 11:4).
  2. You should not condemn even the genuine shortcomings of others—lest God judge the genuine shortcomings that are yours: "judge not so that you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37).
  3. You are to love even those who are your sworn enemies, who are out to hurt and kill you (Luke 6:27; Matt. 5:43–44).
- C.** In particular, Jesus was concerned that his followers love those who were underprivileged and oppressed—the impoverished, the mentally diseased, the terminally ill, the outcast, the imprisoned. These people would inherit the kingdom when it arrived.
- D.** This command to love one's neighbor had its corollary in the command to love God above all else.
1. The reason people could put the kingdom of God above all else—including food and clothing—is because God would provide all these things (Matt. 6:25–33).
  2. People can trust God as a parent to give his children what they need. All a person must do is ask (Matt. 7:7–11; Luke 11:9–11).
  3. To those who trust God (that is, have "faith") all things are possible (Mark 9:23, 11:23; Matt. 17:20), because God cares for his children and will give them whatever they ask—especially his kingdom, which is soon to come.

- IV.** In conclusion, the more clearly ethical teachings of Jesus—some of the greatest ethical instructions ever heard in the history of our form of civilization—are not to be removed from their apocalyptic context.
- A.** Jesus gave these teachings as interpretations of the Jewish law, especially Deut. 6:4 and Lev. 19:18.
1. Jesus, in other words, did not see himself as inventing a new system of ethics, but as explaining the Law of Moses in view of his own apocalyptic context.
  2. Those who committed themselves completely to God and their fellow humans in love would survive the coming onslaught.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 10.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chaps. 11–13.

**Suggested Reading:**

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Chilton and Evans, *Authenticating the Words of Jesus*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. If Jesus was so Jewish in his basic orientation and his teaching, why do you suppose the religion that later developed in his name became so emphatically anti-Jewish?
2. Discuss how the apocalyptic character of Jesus' proclamation can change one's understanding of his teachings about loving one's neighbor as oneself. Does it seem appropriate to you to reinterpret Jesus' teachings that a person should give up everything for the kingdom so that they no longer require a person to give up a single thing?

## Lecture Seventeen

### The Deeds of Jesus in their Apocalyptic Context

**Scope:** The previous lectures discussed some of the evidence that has led many scholars to think that Jesus was a Jewish apocalypticist. Other scholars have begun to question this view. In this lecture, I will evaluate two of the ways that such scholars have tried to explain away the early evidence for an apocalyptic understanding of Jesus. I will then discuss how the activities of Jesus that can be established as historically probable also fit well into an apocalyptic framework.

#### Outline

- I. Jesus' apocalyptic focus also allows us to better understand the kinds of things that he is known to have done. His deeds are established by considering the reports in the Gospels in light of the historical criteria we have established.
  - A. Before getting into this discussion of Jesus' deeds, I want to stress that simply citing some verses and drawing conclusions are not adequate measures to justify a different way of understanding Jesus.
    1. We have seen substantial evidence that Jesus' ministry was rooted in his apocalyptic views of the coming of a kingdom on earth.
    2. Anyone who poses an alternative view must also work it out on the basis of evidence.
    3. Some scholars have tried to do just that, to argue that Jesus was not an apocalypticist, even though our earliest sources independently indicate that he was.
  - B. One way to get around the problem of our early sources is by arguing that these sources—for example, Mark, Q, M, and L—are not the earliest ones. This is the view, for example, espoused by John Dominic Crossan, a member of the so-called "Jesus Seminar," whose books on the historical Jesus are among the most popular in the market.

1. Crossan thinks that Jesus was not a Jewish apocalypticist but obviously has to contend with the problem of the sources, which he does with wit and verve—and ingenuity.
  2. Crossan claims that other lesser-known sources not found in the New Testament—including such documents as the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of the Hebrews—preserve traditions that are much older than those found in the canonical sources. Because none of these other sources portrays Jesus as an apocalypticist, for Crossan, he evidently was not one.
  3. The problem is that the documents Crossan refers to date from much later times. The Gospel of the Hebrews, for example, is not even mentioned or alluded to until the end of the second century. To say that it preserves traditions that are older than those found in a Gospel produced a full century or more earlier (Mark) is certainly possible, but it stretches one’s credulity.
  4. When the sources that virtually everyone agrees were produced first preserve traditions that portray Jesus apocalyptically and sources that virtually everyone agrees were produced later preserve traditions in which he is not portrayed apocalyptically, a trend is suggested.
- C. Another way around the problem is to claim that these earliest sources do not portray Jesus as an apocalypticist.
1. This, too, is a bit problematic, because apocalyptic materials are found, for example, throughout Mark and Q.
  2. Some scholars are convinced that Q is not only much earlier than Mark but also is not apocalyptic. Many members of the “Jesus Seminar” take this position.
  3. That, too, is hard to maintain, because Q does contain apocalyptic traditions on the lips of Jesus (e.g., Luke 12:39 = Matt. 24:44; Luke 17:24, 26–27, 30 = Matt. 24:27, 37–39).
  4. Proponents of a non-apocalyptic Jesus claim that even though our version of Q is apocalyptic, an earlier version of the document was non-apocalyptic—and that later an editor inserted apocalyptic traditions into the text. This later corrupted version of Q was then used by Matthew and Luke.
  5. Remember that we don’t even have Q. It’s hard enough to claim that an ancient document in our possession went through multiple editions and to determine what it looked like

at every stage; to do so for a document that we *don't* have is really far more than is possible with such limited data.

- D. In short, it is very difficult to get around the problem that our earliest sources independently show Jesus to be an apocalypticist. Moreover, both his words and deeds make sense in an apocalyptic context.
- II.** Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, which demonstrates that he began his ministry by adopting an apocalyptic perspective.
- A. We have already seen that this is one of the most securely rooted traditions in the early sources; it passes all three criteria with flying colors.
  - B. John proclaimed an apocalyptic message, as seen, for example, in Q (Luke 3:9). It is hard to imagine why Jesus would have chosen to associate himself with the Baptist if he didn't agree with John's message, because he could have easily associated with someone else (e.g., with a Pharisee or with the Essenes).
  - C. The baptism of Jesus shows that he essentially agreed with John in his apocalyptic message, although some scholars argue that Jesus later changed his mind. The evidence we have doesn't support this argument.
  - D. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Jesus' decision to call twelve disciples, one of the most well attested traditions in our sources.
    1. All the Synoptics agree that there were twelve insiders among Jesus' followers, but they don't agree on the names of who these twelve were (cf. Mark 3:14–19 and Luke 6:12–16). This evidence shows that it was known that there were twelve of them.
    2. Moreover, the tradition is supported by Paul, John, and Acts (1 Cor. 15:5; John 6:67; Acts 6:2).
    3. In addition, some of the sayings about the twelve appear to pass the criterion of dissimilarity. This is especially true of the Q saying of Jesus to his disciples that they would sit on twelve thrones to judge the twelve tribes of Israel in the coming kingdom (Matt. 19:28). No one would have made this saying up later, knowing full well that one of the twelve (Judas) betrayed Jesus.

- E.** This saying of Jesus (Matt 19:28; cf. Luke 22:30) may provide a key to the significance of the number twelve. It was a symbolic number in light of the ancient tradition that Israel had originally been formed by twelve tribes.
- 1.** The twelve disciples, therefore, represented true Israel and it was they—the ones who adhered to Jesus’ teachings—who were the true people of God.
  - 2.** Notice that in the Q saying, the focus is on their future role as rulers in the kingdom of God.
  - 3.** This aspect of Jesus’ teaching may have been responsible for another well-documented tradition in our sources—that the disciples had allowed their future prominence to go to their heads. Jesus constantly had to remind them that the first shall be last and that only those who humbled themselves like children and slaves would be allowed to enter into the kingdom (cf. Mark 9:33–37, 10:35–44 with Matt. 19–39).

**III.** Among Jesus’ other activities, his associations with the wicked and the outcast are particularly prominent.

- A.** His companionship with prostitutes, tax collectors (who were generally regarded as corrupt and collaborators with the Romans), and sinners (i.e., those who had no concern to keep the law) is attested throughout the early traditions of Mark, Q, M, and L (e.g., Mark 2:15–167; Matt. 11:19, 21, 31–32; Luke 15:1).
- B.** Moreover, this is not the kind of tradition that Jesus’ later followers, concerned about his reputation, would have likely invented.
- C.** Jesus’ choice to associate with sinners and outcasts make sense in light of his apocalyptic message. The kingdom would come to these people, not to the rich, eminent, powerful, and religious (cf. Mark 21:31 and Matt. 21:31 and its reversal of fortunes with the coming of the kingdom).
- D.** Jesus also clearly associated with women in public.
- 1.** This is multiply attested in our traditions (e.g., Mark 15:40–451; Gospel of Thomas 114; Luke 8:1–3; John 4; and so on).
  - 2.** These associations are significant, because women were widely regarded as inferior to men and, at least in Palestine, were restricted in their abilities to engage in public activities.

3. This also makes sense in an apocalyptic context. Remember the kingdom would have complete equality, and those who were oppressed would be exalted. Women were drawn to this message.
- IV. Jesus' activities during his public ministry largely consisted of traveling through Galilee, proclaiming his gospel, and gathering followers.
- A. We do not know how long this ministry lasted.
    1. In Mark's Gospel it appears to last only a matter of months, from the early summer when grain had begun to ripen (Mark 2:23) until the Passover feast the following spring (14:12).
    2. John's later account, though, speaks of three Passover feasts (2:13, 6:4, 11:55), so the ministry must be assumed to have lasted at least a bit over two years.
  - B. Jesus' ministry was probably restricted to rural areas.
    1. Jesus is never said to have visited the major city of Sepphoris, even though it was just a few miles from Nazareth, or any of the other major cities of Galilee.
    2. He is always in the small towns and villages and in the fields outside (e.g., Mark 1:45, 3:7, 4:1, and so on).
    3. He appears to have used Capernaum, on the Sea of Galilee, as his base of operation. This tradition is multiply attested (Mark 1:21, 2:1; Matt. 4:13; John 2:12, 6:59), and it's hard to see why Christians would have made it up.
  - C. His ministry was almost exclusively to fellow Jews, whom he tried to convince, through his proclamations and interpretations of Scripture, that they needed to repent and turn to God in view of the coming destruction.
- V. In light of the foregoing discussion, we can say that the most well attested deeds of Jesus all support the notion that Jesus was an apocalypticist, concerned to bring his message of the imminent arrival of the kingdom of God to the people of Israel before it was too late.

### Essential Reading:

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 11.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chaps. 11–13.

———, *Jesus and Judaism*, chap. 3.

**Suggested Reading:**

Allison, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Chilton and Evans, *Authenticating the Deeds of Jesus*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. In this lecture, we have considered a number of Jesus' most well documented activities and associations from an apocalyptic perspective, but by no means all of them. Just to pick one other—how might Jesus' well-documented fondness for children fit into his overall apocalyptic message?
2. Discuss Jesus' decision to associate with outcasts and sinners. Is it really plausible that he thought wicked people would come into God's kingdom before those who tried to be righteous? If so, what light might that cast on people today—even Christian people—who are bent on being highly moral instead of sinful?

## Lecture Eighteen

### Still Other Words and Deeds of Jesus

**Scope:** The most commonly reported activities of Jesus are his miracles, especially his abilities to cast out demons and heal the sick. The reports of Jesus' miracles create special problems for historians, not because they must take the philosophical view of the Enlightenment that miracles cannot happen, but because even if one concedes that miracles can happen, historians cannot demonstrate them. Historians are restricted to marshaling evidence from the public record, available to all people of every religious conviction, concerning what probably happened in the past. Because historians work with probabilities (never absolute certainties) and because miracles by their very nature are the most improbable of events, historians can never show that they probably happened. The historian can, though, discuss the reports of miracles and that is what we will do in this lecture. We will also address the issue of the relationship of the present to the future in Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom. Was it, as some scholars assert, present and perhaps complete in Jesus' earthly ministry, or was it a Kingdom yet to come, brought by the Son of Man in judgement.

### Outline

- I. The ubiquitous Gospel reports of Jesus' miracles create special problems for historians, who are committed to establishing what probably happened in the past.
  - A. These miracle traditions create a special problem for historians. Some people since the Enlightenment have insisted that miracles cannot happen. For such people, because miracles don't happen, Jesus did not do miracles. This view can be called the "philosophical" problem of miracle. I want to state emphatically that this is not the issue I want to address in this lecture.
  - B. For the sake of the argument, I'm willing to concede that miracles can and do happen. Even if miracles are possible, however, the historian still has no way to show that they have ever happened. I'll call this the "historical" problem of miracle.

- II.** We must begin by comparing the ways in which historians engage in their craft to the ways in which natural scientists engage in theirs.
- A.** The natural sciences operate through repeated experimentation, seeking to establish predictive probabilities based on past occurrences. One might call “presumptive probability.” A “miracle” would involve a violation of this known working of nature.
- B.** The historical disciplines are not like the natural sciences, in part because they are concerned with establishing what *has happened* in the past, as opposed to predicting what *will happen* in the future, and in part because they cannot operate through repeated experimentation.
- 1.** An occurrence is a one-time proposition; once it has happened, it is over and done with.
  - 2.** Because historians cannot repeat the past to establish what has probably happened, there will always be less certainty about past events. The farther back you go in history, the harder it is to mount a convincing case for a miracle.
- C.** This is what makes alleged miracles so problematic.
- 1.** Most things that happen are not so unlikely as to defy the imagination, because they happen more or less all the time.
  - 2.** What about events that do not happen all the time? As events that defy all probabilities, miracles create an inescapable dilemma for the historian.
- D.** For historians, a miracle can never be the most probable occurrence. That means that historians can never show—by the very nature of the case, given the constraints imposed on them by historical methods—that miracles probably happened.
- 1.** This is a problem for all historians of every religious or even non-religious stripe.
  - 2.** Even if otherwise good sources exist for a miraculous event, the very nature of the historical discipline prevents the historian from arguing for its probability. By their very nature, miracles are the least probable occurrence in any given instance.
- E.** A related issue is that the only kind of evidence that historians can look at is what is available in the public record.

1. The historian has no access to “supernatural forces,” only to events that can be observed and interpreted by any reasonable person, of whatever religious persuasion.
  2. If a miracle requires belief in the supernatural realm, but historians—when they are acting as historians—have access only to the natural realm, then they can never even discuss the probabilities of a miracle.
- F.** I should emphasize that historians do not have to deny the possibility of miracles or deny that miracles have actually happened in the past.
1. Many historians, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims, believe that miracles have happened.
  2. When they think or say this, however, they do so not as historians but as believers.
  3. In this discussion, I am not taking the position of the believer; I am taking the position of the historian.
  4. When reconstructing Jesus’ activities, I will not affirm or deny the miracles that he is reported to have done. These events—even if they did happen—are beyond the purview of the historian. As a historian, however, I can talk about the reports of his miracles, because these are a matter of public record.

### **III.** Jesus clearly had the reputation of being an exorcist.

- A.** The accounts of his exorcisms are multiply attested; they are found throughout Mark, M, and L. But how about the other criteria?
1. The accounts cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity, because followers who believed that Jesus was could overcome the forces of evil may well have made up stories to show that he did.
  2. The accounts pass contextual credibility only to the extent that other miracles workers, such as the pagan Apollonius of Tyana and some other Jewish holy men, were also thought to have power over.
  3. The historian cannot say that demons—real live supernatural spirits that invade human bodies—were actually cast out of people. To do so would be to transcend the boundaries of the historical method

4. We certainly can say that Jesus was widely recognized by people of his own time—who did believe that demons existed and could be exorcised—to have the powers to cast them out.

**B.** What is especially interesting for the historian is how these alleged miracles were interpreted by Jesus' earliest followers.

1. When Jesus is charged with casting out demons by the power of Satan, he responds by saying, "If I cast demons out by Beelzeboul, by whom do your sons cast them out? But if I cast demons out by the spirit of God, behold the Kingdom of God is come upon you" (Matt. 12:27–30; cf. Luke 11:19–23).
2. Notice that everyone—Jesus and his opponents—admits that both Jesus and other Jewish exorcists can cast out demons. Even more important, Jesus' exorcisms are interpreted apocalyptically. They show that the kingdom of God was at hand.
3. It is striking that this apocalyptic view is the earliest understanding of the widespread tradition that Jesus could cast out demons.

**IV.** Similar results accrue to a historical understanding of Jesus' miracles of healing.

**A.** The reports of his abilities to heal the sick and raise the dead are multiply attested, but they cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity.

**B.** Even more significant is the interpretation commonly given to his ability to heal.

1. His healing miracles were not taken to be signs that Jesus was God. They were the sorts of things that Jewish prophets did. Jesus simply did them better than anyone else. The earliest traditions assign apocalyptic meaning to these acts.
2. Recall that in the kingdom, disease and death would no longer exist. Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead. In a small way, then, the kingdom was already becoming manifest.
3. According to an account in Q, when John the Baptist wanted to know whether Jesus was the final prophet before the end or whether another one could be expected, Jesus reportedly replied:

Tell John the things you have seen and heard: the blind are regaining their sight, the lame are starting to walk, the lepers

are being cleansed, the deaf are starting to hear, the dead are being raised, and the poor are hearing the good news! (Luke 7:22; Q; 4)

4. Again, Jesus' miracles are interpreted apocalyptically to show that the end had arrived and a final climax was soon to come.
- V. This leads us to a final point: To what extent did Jesus proclaim that the end had already begun to make itself manifest? Scholars have long debated the extent to which Jesus thought that the kingdom had already arrived.
- A. Some have gone to the extreme of claiming that, for Jesus, the kingdom was already completely present and nothing more was going to occur—no cataclysmic break in history brought by God, other than the appearance of Jesus himself (this view is termed “realized eschatology”).
    1. This view is largely based on such verses as Luke 17:20–21: “the Kingdom of God is in your midst.”
    2. Unfortunately, the verse is not multiply attested, and we have seen many examples of clear apocalyptic proclamations scattered throughout the earliest sources.
    3. In some sense, though, it seems as if Jesus thought that the end had already become manifest in the present.
  - B. Most scholars would say that Jesus understood that the kingdom had already begun to appear, but a cataclysmic ending was still to come with the arrival of the Son of Man.
  - C. We have already seen a sense of the coming of the kingdom in both Jesus' teachings of ethics and the reports of his miracles.
    1. People who follow Jesus are to implement the ideals of the kingdom in the present. Because war will not exist, people should not commit any acts of violence now; because hatred will not exist, people should engage only in love now; because oppression will not exist, people should work for justice now.
    2. The reports of Jesus' miracles also show the beginning of the kingdom in the present. Because the forces of evil will not exist, Jesus casts out demons now; because illness will not exist, Jesus heals the sick now; because death will not exist, Jesus raises the dead now.
  - D. Many of Jesus' parables present this view: that the kingdom has started to appear in the ministry of Jesus and the lives of his

disciples, but that what they were experiencing was merely a foretaste of the glories that were to come when the kingdom of God arrived in power.

- E. The parable of the mustard seed (in both Mark and Thomas) stresses that the small and inauspicious beginnings in the present would erupt into enormous consequences in the end.
- F. The parable of the leavened dough (Q) emphasizes that what is small and hidden now will affect the whole world later.

VI. For Jesus and his earliest followers, the apocalyptic message of the coming destruction had serious implications for the present.

- A. Those who implemented the ideals would be qualified to enter the kingdom when it arrived with the powerful appearance of the Son of Man. They had also begun to realize what life would be like in that kingdom, which would be ruled by peace, harmony, justice, and love.
- B. Those who saw in Jesus a great worker of miracles saw still further manifestations of the kingdom.
  - 1. Historians cannot affirm that Jesus did (or did not) perform supernatural feats that violated what we might call natural laws—that kind of judgment lies beyond the purview of what we can know historically.
  - 2. Historians can say that Jesus was commonly *believed* to have done such things, and that this belief was typically understood apocalyptically. By casting out demons, healing the sick, and raising the dead, Jesus was embodying what life would be like when the kingdom of God arrived.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 11.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 2.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chap. 10.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles*.

Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World*.

### Questions to Consider:

1. Explain why a miracle that was reportedly done by a modern faith-healer—even if attested to by eyewitnesses and discussed in the newspapers—cannot be established as historically probable. (If it seems to you that it *would* be probable if reported by eyewitnesses, listen or read through this lecture again and think about the logic behind the claim that historians cannot establish that a miracle, by its very nature, probably happened in the past.) Does the fact that it can't be established as probable mean that it cannot be accepted as true?
2. For the sake of argument, I presupposed in this lecture that miracles can and do happen (even though they cannot be established as probably happening). Now for the sake of a different argument, presuppose something quite different—that Jesus did *not* do any miracles at all. Assuming such a view, how might you account for the abundance of miracles attributed to him throughout the tradition?

## **Lecture Nineteen**

### **The Controversies of Jesus**

**Scope:** In this lecture, we will explore the traditions of Jesus' widespread rejection and some of his controversies with the Pharisees, especially over the meaning of the commandment of Scripture to keep the Sabbath day holy and the Pharisaic rules concerning tithing. We will then consider whether Jesus' radical emphasis on the command to love led him to violate the Scriptural demands for ritual purity, especially with regard to kosher food laws.

### **Outline**

- I.** The past lectures clarify why Jesus would acquire a following.
  - A.** To people who were suffering, he brought a message of hope, that God would soon intervene in the world to relieve their suffering and reward their faithfulness.
    - 1.** The Romans and other evil forces would be removed from power.
    - 2.** The poor, oppressed, and outcast would be brought into God's kingdom and pain, injustice, poverty, disease, and death would no longer exist.
  - B.** His followers had already begun to form a tightly knit community organized around the principles of love, as taught by God in the Jewish Scriptures.
  - C.** Jesus was thought to have done great miracles that showed that the kingdom had already begun to appear.
  - D.** Many, perhaps most, people today assume Jesus had thousands of avid followers and only a few powerful enemies. This was not the case.
- II.** Traditions of Jesus' rejection cover most of those with whom he came in contact: his own family, his townspeople, people living in surrounding towns and villages, the Jewish religious leaders, the aristocracy in Jerusalem, and of course, the Roman overlords.
  - A.** The tradition that Jesus' own family rejected him is firmly rooted. This may seem hard to accept for those who know about the annunciation story in the Gospel of Luke (where the angel Gabriel

informs Mary who her son will be). This story, of course, cannot pass the criteria of independent attestation or dissimilarity.

1. The theme of Jesus' rejection by his family is attested in multiple and independent traditions and is not the sort of thing later Christians would be likely to make up. It passes our criteria.
  2. Early in his ministry, according to our first account, Jesus' family tried to seize him from the public eye because they thought he had gone mad (Mark 3:21); he in turn spurned them when they came to see him (Mark 3:31–35).
  3. His brothers are said in a later source not to have believed in him (John 7:5), and he had no relatives among his closest followers. Paul implies that Jesus' brother James became a believer only after Jesus' resurrection (1 Cor. 15:7).
  4. Only the latest Gospel, John, tells us what Mary thought of him. It says that she was with him till the end, although the Book of Acts indicates that she was one of the early believers immediately after the resurrection (John 19:25–27; Acts 1:14).
- B.** Jesus was clearly rejected in his own hometown in Nazareth.
1. This is shown by the rejection scene recorded in our earliest narrative, Mark 6:1–6 (cf. Matt. 13:53–58), and amplified by independent traditions in Luke 4:16–30.
  2. This rejection is supported even more firmly by Jesus' widely attested saying “a prophet is not without honor except in his own country” (Mark 6:4; John 4:44; “in his own village,” G. Thom. 31). In the earliest form of the saying, Jesus indicates that the prophet is also dishonored “among his own relatives and in his own house,” suggesting that Jesus was not well received at home.
- C.** Other towns and villages of Galilee also seem to have rejected Jesus.
1. This is best seen in Q materials, which are early and appear to pass the criterion of dissimilarity:  
Woe to you Chorazin, woe to you Bethsaida. For if the great deeds that have been done among you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago and sat in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. And you Capernaum, you will not be exalted up to heaven will you?

No, you will descend into hell. (Luke 10:13–15;  
Matt. 11:20–24)

2. Note that Jesus' response to his own rejection is couched here in apocalyptic terms of judgment, condemnation, and destruction.

**D.** The widespread rejection of Jesus and his message would make sense of several other early traditions associated with Jesus.

1. In Q, he laments that even though foxes and birds have places to stay, he has nowhere (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58).
2. In Mark and Thomas, he intimates that the reason the kingdom has such a small and inauspicious beginning is that most of his proclamation is falling on deaf ears (for example, the parable of the sower: Mark 4:1–9; G. Thom. 9).
3. He claims, in a completely independent source, that he is “hated by the world” (John 15:18).

**E.** Above all, Jesus was rejected by the religious leaders of his people.

1. At the end of his life, as we'll see, his rejection by the aristocracy that ran the Temple—the Sadducees and the chief priests—ultimately led to his execution by the Romans.
2. During his preaching ministry in Galilee, though, Jesus had no confrontations with the powerful Jews of Jerusalem's Temple, but only with local teachers who belonged to the Pharisees.

**III.** During his public preaching ministry, Jesus was harshly opposed by Pharisees and experts in the Jewish law (known as scribes), who thought that his teachings were wrong, that he misunderstood what God wanted, that he and his followers profaned the law, and that as a result, his powerful deeds could not come from God but were from the devil.

**A.** The controversies Jesus had with these other Jewish teachers were not over whether the law of God should be followed, but rather over the proper interpretation of the law. These were internal Jewish debates, no more harsh or vitriolic than those going on between other Jewish groups, for example, between the Essenes and the Pharisees.

- B. Some of Jesus' disagreements with Pharisees involved moral decisions that were made difficult by the fact that the Law of Moses was incomplete and ambiguous.
  - 1. An example is the law concerning divorce. Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife (cf. Deut. 24:1–4), but what should be the permissible legal grounds?
  - 2. Like some Pharisees, but unlike others, Jesus himself took a fairly radical stand, that the legal grounds provided by Moses were simply a makeshift measure and that God preferred people never to divorce (Mark 10:2–9).
- C. Other disputes involved ethical and religious matters not directly dealt with by the law.
  - 1. As an example: Should one support a corrupt civil government (i.e., Rome) by paying taxes? The Law of Moses doesn't say, and different Jewish scholars had different opinions.
  - 2. For Jesus, given that the end of the present order was imminent, taxes were a matter of indifference: "Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar" (that is, the money Caesar minted that bore his own impression; Mark 12:13–17; G. Thom. 100).

IV. Far more vitriolic were the disputes Jesus had with Pharisees over the proper interpretation of laws that both sides agreed were given by God and were to be followed. An illustrative example involves the law to keep the Sabbath day holy—one of the Ten Commandments.

- A. It would be a mistake to accept what Jesus' opponents said and think that he both broke the Sabbath and encouraged others to do likewise.
  - 1. In fact, it's difficult to find any place in the Gospel traditions where Jesus actually does anything in violation of the Sabbath laws found in the Hebrew Scriptures.
  - 2. Instead, in nearly every instance, Jesus has broken the Pharisees' interpretation of the Sabbath laws—for example, by healing on the Sabbath or allowing his disciples to pluck some grain to eat on the Sabbath.
  - 3. Healing on the Sabbath is nowhere forbidden in the Law of Moses, and Jesus is not said to have plucked grain on the Sabbath.

- B.** For Jesus, an overarching principle determines what is appropriate to do on the Sabbath: “Sabbath was made for humans, not humans for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27).
1. This shows that Jesus affirmed the goodness of the Sabbath, but maintained that part of its goodness involved not imposing it as an inordinate burden on anyone. God meant the Sabbath as a way to help people, not hurt them. As a result, it is always right to do what helps others, not what hurts, on the Sabbath (Mark 3:4).
  2. To some extent, the Pharisees agreed with this judgment. We know, for example, that the Pharisees judged that if a farmer had an animal that fell into a pit on the Sabbath, it was all right to pull it out. (In contrast, the Essenes claimed that this ruling was far too lax, as we now know from the Dead Sea Scrolls.)
  3. Jesus alludes to the Pharisaic view in both Q (Luke 14:5; Matt. 12:11) and L (Luke 13:15), but takes it a step further: Humans are worth more to God than animals, so it’s perfectly acceptable to do something that might benefit someone on the Sabbath.
  4. Moreover, it is multiply attested that Jesus cited biblical precedent for such views, pointing out that even in the Hebrew Bible, God extends his approbation of certain activities on the Sabbath (Mark 2:25–26; John 7:22–23).
  5. Any interpretation of the law that did not have as its principal aim the love of others above all else was, for Jesus, completely misguided.
  6. Thus, what put the Pharisees at odd with Jesus was how the law—in this case, the law to keep the Sabbath day holy—was to be interpreted, not whether it should be kept.
- C.** Jesus occasionally found the Pharisaic oral laws to be far too restrictive and counterproductive. An example is the Pharisaic law of tithing.
1. Moses commanded that ten percent of all crops grown should be given to the priests in the temple (called a “tithe”).
  2. Pharisees were concerned, though, over what to do when they purchased vegetables in the market, when they didn’t know whether or not the tithe had been paid. To guarantee that the

law had been followed, Pharisees opted to tithe what they purchased, as well as what they produced.

3. Jesus didn't consider such interpretations, distinctive to the Pharisees, to be ultimately of any significance, in comparison to the need to love one's neighbor above all else.
4. For Jesus, anyone who insisted that what really mattered to God was the amount of mint and cumin his priests had received was completely missing the point. What God wanted was a people committed to loving him above all else and loving their neighbors as themselves (Q: Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42).

V. At times, Jesus pushed his emphasis on love to such an extreme that it seemed to others that he discounted the law, e.g., with respect to the laws of purity that are so central to the Hebrew Bible.

- A. At one point, for example, he denies the necessity of the Pharisaic practice of washing one's hands before a meal, washing done not to get rid of germs—these people didn't know about germs—but to become “ritually clean” before God.
- B. In our earliest tradition about the matter, Jesus says, “There is nothing outside a person that can bring defilement by entering into him; but it is the things that are outside of a person that bring defilement” (Mark 7:16). In context, Jesus is not abrogating the Mosaic food laws, but denying the Pharisaic ruling that a person should wash before eating.
- C. Jesus taught that what matters to God is not the oral laws of the Pharisees about how to keep Sabbath, what to tithe, and how to eat.
  1. Anyone who keeps the Sabbath, tithes, and washes his or her hands, but then commits murder or adultery, or deceives or slanders another, or exalts oneself over or oppresses others, has completely missed out on what God wants.
  2. The Pharisees, in other words, emphasized the wrong things. In Jesus' words from Matthew, they “strain out the gnat but swallow the camel” (Matt. 23:24).

VI. It is clear that Jesus face widespread rejection among the Jewish people to whom he preached and had numerous controversies with other Jewish teachers of his day.

- A. It was not these legal disputes with the Pharisees that ultimately led to Jesus' execution. The Pharisees were not the power players in Jesus' day; they had no political clout, civil authority, or legislative jurisdiction. They were a group of highly respected and seriously religious Jews, but they were not influential, at that time, in political affairs. Their disputes with Jesus could not have led to his crucifixion.
- B. The religious authorities responsible for Jesus' arrest and trial were the Sadducees and high priests in the Temple of Jerusalem.
  - 1. When Jesus left the familiar rural environs of his childhood and took his apocalyptic message of the coming judgment of God to the capital city of Jerusalem, he aroused the opposition of those who were powerful enough to silence him.
  - 2. Once he offended them by proclaiming that they too would face God's coming wrath, his own days became numbered.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 11.

Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. II.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chap. 14.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, chaps. 9–10.

### **Questions to Consider:**

- 1. How do you think we can explain the persistent report that Jesus was widely rejected by those who knew him, including his own family? How could they not realize who he was?
- 2. Think of the most heated arguments that you've gotten into. Are they with people who are close with you or with people you scarcely know? In light of your experience, what do you make of Jesus' heated disagreements with the Pharisees? Is it possible that they were at such odds precisely because they knew each other well and agreed on some of the most basic issues?

## Lecture Twenty

### The Last Days of Jesus

**Scope:** We have better documentation for Jesus' final week than for any other period of his life. He left Galilee for the capital of Jerusalem, Judea, to celebrate the Passover feast. It appears that he did not go to the festival as a pilgrim, but as an apocalyptic prophet to deliver his message of imminent destruction and salvation to the heart of Israel, the Temple of Jerusalem, to urge people to repent before it was too late. This lecture will discuss what happened when Jesus entered the Temple and caused a disturbance, an action probably meant as a parable, demonstrating in a small way the kind of destruction that would occur when the Son of Man arrived—the Temple itself would be destroyed. We will observe Jesus preaching his message and acquiring greater numbers of listeners frightening the local authorities, who feared riots among the crowds. They arranged to have Jesus removed quietly from the public eye. Before he was arrested, Jesus realized that his time was up and had a last meal with his disciples in which he may have informed them that his enemies were about to make their move against him.

### Outline

- I. We must draw a connection between the content of Jesus' apocalyptic message and the reason for his death.
  - A. Some hypotheses of what Jesus ultimately stood for run aground on this connection. They sound completely plausible in reconstructing what Jesus said and did, but they can't make sense of his execution by the Romans.
    1. If Jesus is to be understood as a Jewish rabbi who taught that everyone should love God and be good to one another, then why did the Romans crucify him?
    2. If Jesus was mainly interested in opposing the materialistic world that he found himself in, urging his followers to give up their possessions and live simple, natural lives, apart from the trappings of society, why would he have been sentenced to death?

- B.** Let me explain how I understand the connection between Jesus' life and death. In this lecture and the next, I'll go into some of the details.
1. At the end of his life, Jesus brought his apocalyptic message of the coming judgment to Jerusalem. This judgment would be inflicted by the Son of Man, who would destroy all those opposed to God before establishing his kingdom.
  2. Those who refused to accept this message would be condemned—even if they, like the Pharisees, followed the Torah of God exactly, or maintained the purity regulations of the Essenes, or remained faithful to the sacrificial cult of the Temple as the Sadducees did.
  3. Religious leaders among these various groups, and the institutions they represented, would be destroyed by the Son of Man. So, too, would the Temple be destroyed.
- C.** Jesus acted out this message when he arrived in Jerusalem. He entered the Temple and engaged in symbolic destruction as a warning of what was to come, overturning tables and causing a mild ruckus.
1. This public display and its accompanying message angered some of the chief priests, who recognized how explosive the situation could be during the Passover.
  2. Fearing an uprising, the priests conferred, had Jesus arrested, and questioned him about his words against the Temple.
  3. Realizing that it would be dangerous to let Jesus run loose, the priests decided to have him taken out of the way. They could not handle the matter themselves, however, because the Romans did not allow Jewish authorities to execute criminals.
  4. They delivered Jesus to the governor, Pontius Pilate, who had no qualms at all about disposing of yet one more troublemaker who might cause a major disturbance. Jesus was then executed by the Romans on political charges.
- II.** We are better informed about Jesus' last days than about any other period of his life. For the Gospel writers, his life was mostly preparation for his death.
- A.** Thus, the focus of the earliest surviving accounts is on Jesus' last days. Mark devotes five of his sixteen chapters to the final week of Jesus' life, and John devotes ten out of twenty-one.

- B. It is no stretch to say that the Gospels are principally concerned about Jesus' passion, that is, the accounts of his suffering and death. Some scholars have said that the Gospels are passion narratives with long introductions.
- C. There can be no doubt, historically, that for the last week of his life, Jesus left the place of his public ministry, rural Galilee, and went with his disciples to the capital city of Judea, Jerusalem. Why he did so may not seem quite as obvious.
  - 1. A theologian, of course, might say that Jesus traveled to Judea to die for the sins of the world. This view is based on Gospel sayings (such as Jesus' predictions of his own passion in Mark 8:31, 9:31, and 10:33–34) that cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity, in that they portray Jesus as knowing the details of his own fate.
  - 2. From a strictly historical perspective, that is, restricting ourselves to what we can show on historical grounds, we should recall that Passover was an enormously popular festival. Maybe, then, Jesus went to Jerusalem simply to celebrate the Passover.
  - 3. On the other hand, Jesus' actions in Jerusalem appear to have been well thought out. When he arrived, he entered the Temple and caused a disturbance. He then spent several days, in the Temple, teaching his message of the coming kingdom.
- D. Given Jesus' understanding that this kingdom was imminent, perhaps it is best to conclude that he went to Jerusalem as part of his mission, precisely to proclaim his apocalyptic message in the heart of Israel itself—the Temple on Passover.

### III. The account of Jesus' "triumphal entry" is hard to accept historically.

- A. Even though the account is multiply attested (see Mark 11:1–10; John 12:12–19), it cannot pass the criterion of dissimilarity, because it is explicitly said to have fulfilled a prophecy of Hebrew Scripture about the coming messiah (see Isa. 62:11; Zech. 9:9, cited in Matt. 21:5).
- B. What we know of the political situation makes it even more difficult to accept the account as historical.
  - 1. The week before Passover was a tense and potentially dangerous time in the view of the Roman authorities.

2. This was the one time of year that the Roman governor, who usually stayed in Caesarea on the coast, would come to the capital with troops in tow to quell any possible uprisings.
3. If Jesus actually entered the city with such fanfare, with crowds shouting their support for him as their new ruler, the king who fulfills the prophecies (who would, therefore, overthrow the current ruler and his armies), it is nearly impossible to understand why he wasn't arrested and taken out of the way immediately.
4. Probably the most we can say is that Jesus did enter Jerusalem, that he was one of the pilgrims coming for the feast, and that he (like others) may well have come on a donkey.
5. It is also possible that some of the crowds in Jerusalem had already heard about Jesus' teachings and remarkable deeds and, when he came to the city, wondered if this could be the messiah.
6. Such speculation would not have been extraordinary. We know of other Jews both before Jesus' day and afterwards who were thought by some to be the future ruler of Israel. Typically, such potential threats to the Roman authorities were executed.

**IV.** One of the most solidly established traditions about Jesus is that when he arrived in Jerusalem, he caused a disturbance in the Temple, driving out those who sold animals and overturning tables of the money changers.

- A.** The account is multiply attested in both Mark (chap. 11) and John (chap. 2).
- B.** To understand the event, we must have some background information.
  1. The Temple compound was an enormous place. The walls around it were ten stories high, and they enclosed enough space to hold twenty-five American football fields.
  2. The Temple was the one place where Jews from around the world could sacrifice animals to God, as prescribed by the Torah.
  3. Jews obviously couldn't bring animals with them from afar; the animals had to be purchased on the spot. It wouldn't make

sense to use imperial money, with an image of Caesar on it, to purchase animals in the Temple of the one God who forbade the use of images. A currency exchange was set up to allow the purchase of animals with Temple money.

4. It's hard to see how the Temple could function without some system like this. Our early accounts, though, indicate that Jesus entered the Temple, drove out those who were selling sacrificial animals, and overturned the tables of the moneychangers.
- C. It is difficult to know, historically, what Jesus actually did when he entered the Temple and what he meant by it. Most scholars recognize that some aspects of the accounts appear to be exaggerated. This is particularly true of Mark's claim that Jesus completely shut down the operation of the Temple.
1. Again, the Temple complex was immense, and armed guards would have been present to prevent any major disturbances.
  2. Moreover, if Jesus had created a problem in the Temple, it's nearly impossible to explain why he wasn't arrested on the spot and taken out of the way before he could stir up the crowds.
  3. For these reasons, it looks as if Mark's account represents an exaggeration of Jesus' actions. Exaggerations aside, we're almost certain that Jesus did something that caused a disturbance in the Temple. The event is multiply attested in independent sources and the event coincides with Jesus' predictions that the Temple would soon be destroyed.
- D. For this reason, a good number of scholars—beginning in the 1970s with E. P. Sanders—have begun to recognize that Jesus' actions in the Temple were meant as a symbolic expression of his proclamation.
1. Jesus sometimes engaged in symbolic acts that illustrated his apocalyptic message (for example, by associating with tax collectors and sinners to illustrate his message that the kingdom was for the outcast and lowly).
  2. In view of Jesus' message of the coming destruction of the Son of Man, perhaps it is best to see his action in the Temple as a kind of prophetic gesture, an enacted parable, in which he demonstrated on a small scale what was soon to happen in a

big way on the Day of Judgment. The Temple was going to be destroyed.

- E. It is hard to know, though, what exactly Jesus found to be offensive about the Temple, i.e., whether he found the priests operating it to be corrupt or had some other problem with it.
  - 1. The words quoted in the accounts may not go back to Jesus himself, because the charges of corruption in the Temple may represent later Christianization of the tradition.
  - 2. On the other hand, we do have accounts of other Jews both before Jesus (e.g., Jeremiah 7) and in his own day (e.g., the Essenes) who believed that the Temple system had become corrupt.
  - 3. As a country fellow from rural Galilee, who preached against wealth and power, the sheer opulence of the place may have made Jesus' blood boil on principle.
- F. There are two ways we can understand the significance of Jesus' prediction that the Temple would be destroyed in the context of his broader apocalyptic message.
  - 1. Jesus may have believed that the coming kingdom would have a new Temple, one totally sanctified for the worship of God. This was the view of the apocalyptically minded Essenes of the Dead Sea Scroll community, who were his contemporaries.
  - 2. Alternatively, Jesus may have believed that the Temple would not be needed in the coming kingdom, because evil and sin would no longer exist; therefore, the cultic sacrifice of animals to bring atonement would not be needed either. This view was later embraced by some of Jesus' apocalyptic followers, such as the author of the Book of Revelation (see Rev. 21:22).
  - 3. In either case, the implication of Jesus' actions was clear: For Jesus, the Temple cult and the officials in charge of it were a temporary measure at best and a corruption of God's plan at worst. They would be eliminated when the kingdom arrived.
- V. Jesus' dire predictions against the Temple did not escape the notice of those in charge, the chief priests who also happened to have jurisdiction over the local affairs of the people in Jerusalem.

- A. These priests were mostly Sadducees, who acted as chief liaisons with Roman officials, in particular with the Roman prefect, Pontius Pilate.
- B. At this point in our earliest account, Mark, Jesus begins to have serious arguments with the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem, sometimes engaging in public debates with them and sometimes speaking ill of them to anyone who would gather around to listen (see, for example, Mark 11:27–33, 12:1–12, 18–27, 14:1).
- C. Jesus spent the week teaching and engaging his foes in the Temple.
  - 1. His most explicitly apocalyptic message, in fact, is said to have been delivered there, according to all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 24–25; Mark 13; Luke 21).
  - 2. As the crowds began to swell, Jesus evidently started to attract more attention. The Jewish authorities in the Temple became concerned about an uprising. It had happened before and was to become a constant threat in the years to follow.
- D. For their part, the Roman authorities were armed and ready to act. It was decided to have Jesus taken out of the public eye by stealth to avoid any problems.
- E. Before his arrest, Jesus had a last meal (possibly a Passover meal, possibly not) with his disciples, during which he warned them of the danger he was in. He infused the foods with new symbolism.
  - 1. The “Last Supper” is multiply attested by Mark (14:22–25; 1 Cor. 11:23–26; see also Matt. 26:26–29; Luke 22:15–20).
  - 2. Some of what Jesus says may pass the criterion of dissimilarity; e.g., that he would not drink wine again until he drank it in the kingdom, which assumes that the kingdom would come right away—even though the Gospel writers knew it hadn’t come decades later.
  - 3. Jesus’ realization of his impending arrest is not implausible.
  - 4. It is difficult to know exactly how Jesus phrased his words at the Last Supper, because the passion predictions in the Gospels are so similar to early Christian preaching about Jesus that the words may have been put on his lips.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 12.

Luke 19–23.

Mark 11–15.

Matthew 21–27.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chap. 11.

**Suggested Reading:**

Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, chap. 16.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Is it possible to think that Jesus was opposed to the Temple of God in Jerusalem (which God himself had ordered to be built and maintained) without thinking that he was opposed to Judaism itself? That is to say, how could he oppose the central institution of the Jewish religion without being anti-Jewish?
2. Explain the significance of the timing of Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem for an understanding of his arrest. Why does it matter, in particular, that he arrived in time for the Passover festival?

## Lecture Twenty-One

### The Last Hours of Jesus

**Scope:** Jesus was almost certainly betrayed by one of his own followers, Judas Iscariot. What is not clear, though, is what it was that Judas betrayed or why he acted as he did. It seems unlikely that he was hired simply to inform the authorities of Jesus' whereabouts, because they could have obtained that information without paying for it. The surviving traditions contain hints that Judas may have divulged insider information that was available to him as one of the twelve disciples and that was used against Jesus at his trial. We do not have good sources for what happened at the trial of Jesus, as we shall see in this lecture. But it is clear that the high priest and his council, the Sanhedrin, considered Jesus a threat and therefore turned him over to Pilate.

#### Outline

- I. In this lecture, we will pick up at the point where the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem decided that Jesus had to be removed.
  - A. Jesus was almost certainly betrayed by one of his disciples, Judas Iscariot.
    1. The event is multiply attested (Mark 14:10–11, 43–45; John 18:2–3; Acts 1:16; possibly 1 Cor. 11:23) and is not the sort of thing that a later Christian would probably make up.
    2. Some question exists about the meaning of the Greek word for “betray.” One interpretation is that God is “giving him over” to his suffering.
  - B. What is not clear is what it was that Judas betrayed.
    1. The common notion that Judas simply told the authorities where they could locate Jesus apart from the crowds may be right, but why would they need an insider for that kind of information?
    2. Judas may have divulged something else, some information that the authorities could use to bring Jesus up on charges.

3. It is striking that in the reports of Jesus' trials, he is charged with calling himself such things as the Messiah, the Son of God, and the King of the Jews (Mark 14:61, 15:2; John 18:33, 19:19).
4. In the public teachings of Jesus that we have established as historically reliable, Jesus never calls himself such things. In our earliest source, when someone does call him the messiah, he hushes it up (Mark 8:30). Where did the authorities get the idea that he called himself such things?
5. This may have been what Judas betrayed. We know that Jesus taught his disciples privately things that he didn't say in public.
6. Did Judas betray insider information? If so, we might have a clue about what Jesus told his disciples about himself.

**II.** We have several hints about what Jesus taught the disciples about himself that Judas may have divulged to the authorities.

- A.** The hints come by way of several curious pieces of information that look to be historically reliable.
  1. Almost certainly, the charge leveled against Jesus by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate was that he considered himself to be the King of the Jews (Mark 15:2; John 18:33, 19:19).
  2. Jesus never calls himself this in any of the Gospels. Why would he be executed for a claim he never made?
  3. In addition, during his hearing before the Jewish authorities, who held a kind of preliminary investigation before turning him over for prosecution, Jesus was evidently charged with calling himself the Messiah (Mark 14:62)—a figure of grandeur and power, widely thought to be the future ruler of the people Israel.
- B.** Jesus spurned the title "Messiah" in reference to himself in public, but it is possible that in one sense he did think that he was the messiah?
  1. Jesus taught that after the Son of Man executed judgment on the earth, the kingdom would arrive.
  2. Kingdoms, by their nature, have kings. Who would be the king?

3. Ultimately, of course, it would be God—hence, Jesus’ common reference to the “Kingdom of God.” But he probably didn’t think that God would physically sit on the throne in Jerusalem. Who then would?
  4. The earliest traditions also indicate that Jesus thought that he himself would be enthroned. For one thing, only those who accepted his message would be accepted into the kingdom.
  5. Jesus also told his disciples that they would be seated on twelve thrones to rule the twelve tribes of Israel. Who would be over them? It was Jesus who called them to be the Twelve. Moreover, his disciples asked him for permission to sit at his right hand and his left in the coming kingdom (see, for example, Mark 10:37). They evidently understood that he would be the ruler in the kingdom, just as he was their “ruler” now.
- C. Finally, at least some people during his life almost certainly believed that Jesus would be the future ruler of Israel. If they didn’t, we can’t explain why these followers thought he was the messiah after he died.
1. Jesus’ followers would not have started to believe this on the basis of their later conviction that he had been raised from the dead.
  2. Before Christianity, as far as we know, Jews did not expect that the messiah would be raised from the dead. In no surviving Jewish text—whether in the Hebrew Bible or later, up to Christianity—is the messiah said to be one who would die and be raised up.
  3. If Jesus’ followers called him messiah later, after his death, they must have thought of him as messiah earlier, while he was alive.
  4. Yet in our earliest accounts, Jesus doesn’t teach that he’s the messiah and discourages his disciples from noising it about.
- D. The best way to explain all these data is to say that Jesus’ teachings about himself were intimately related to his apocalyptic proclamations.
1. Those who heeded his words would enter that kingdom.
  2. This would be God’s kingdom, ruled by his chosen ones—the twelve disciples on twelve thrones.

3. Jesus would rule over the disciples. He, in effect, would be the king of God's coming kingdom.
  4. In that apocalyptic sense (and I would say, only in that sense) did Jesus think of himself as the messiah. He wasn't a cosmic judge, an authoritative priest, or a military leader. He was the one sent from God to proclaim the good news of the coming kingdom, who would be the ultimate ruler when the end arrived.
- E.** Judas, then, betrayed this private teaching of Jesus to the authorities.
1. That's why they could level the charges against Jesus that he called himself the Messiah, the King of the Jews.
  2. He meant it, of course, in the apocalyptic sense. They meant it in a this-worldly sense. But he couldn't deny the charge when asked about it ("are you the King of the Jews?"), because that was how he understood himself, and the twelve disciples all knew it.

**III.** It is also difficult to know why Judas decided to betray this information.

- A.** Some people have thought that he did it for the money (see Matt. 26:14–15; John 12:4–6).
1. This is possible, but the "thirty pieces of silver" is a reference to a fulfillment of prophecy in the Hebrew Bible (Zech. 11:12); that is, the tradition doesn't pass the criterion of dissimilarity.
  2. Some argue that Judas grew disillusioned when he realized that Jesus had no intention of becoming a political–military messiah.
  3. Others have reasoned that he wanted to force Jesus' hand, thinking that if he were arrested he would call out for support and start an uprising that would overthrow the Romans.
- B.** Each of these explanations has merit, but in the end, we'll never know.
1. Judas cast the money back at the Jewish leaders. Because priests were not allowed to use "blood money," they bought a potter's field with the silver.
  2. Judas died, either by suicide or some other cause.

- IV.** The early sources all agree that after a last meal with his disciples, Jesus was arrested by Jewish authorities (multiply attested in Mark 14:43 and John 18:3) who conducted a preliminary investigation against him.
- A.** As local aristocrats, the Jewish high priests were allowed by the Romans to conduct and control their own internal affairs.
1. The head of the group would have been the high priest, who during this time (A.D. 26–36), was a man named Caiaphas.
  2. There is nothing implausible in a local offender being brought before local authorities. In Jesus' case, the authorities were Caiaphas and his ruling "council," called the Sanhedrin (this also explains why Jewish police arrested Jesus, rather than Roman).
- B.** Unfortunately, we have no reliable way of knowing what happened when Jesus appeared before Caiaphas.
1. In part, we are hampered by our sources. According to the accounts, the only persons present were Jesus and the Jewish rulers. Apparently, none of Jesus' disciples was present.
  2. The real problem, though, is that it is difficult to understand the trial proceeding, if it actually happened as narrated, because the charge of "blasphemy" leveled against Jesus cannot be rooted in anything he is actually claimed to have said (Mark 14:61–62).
  3. It wasn't blasphemous to call oneself the messiah (as Jesus allegedly did)—this simply meant that you understood yourself to be the deliverer/ruler of your people. Nor was it blasphemous to say that the Son of Man was soon to arrive—this was simply to acknowledge that the Book of Daniel had predicted something that would happen in your own day.
  4. Yet the high priest accused Jesus of blasphemy. Because no blasphemy was committed, it seems unlikely that the trial proceeded the way that it's described in Mark, our earliest source. (One could conceive of his statement as blasphemous only by assuming, with Mark, that Jesus was the Son of Man, because then Jesus would be saying that he had a standing equal with God. The high priest would have had no reasons to think that Jesus was referring to himself when he mentioned the Son of Man.)

- V. We can say a good deal about Jesus' final hours before his appearance before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate.
- A. He was almost certainly betrayed by one of his followers, Judas Iscariot, who may have divulged to the authorities some of Jesus' secret teachings that he had given to the inner circle of twelve.
  - B. These teachings concerned his own identity—something he was loathe to discuss publicly. Jesus seems to have thought that he himself would be appointed the ruler of the coming kingdom by God.
  - C. Once the local Jewish authorities learned this, they had all the grounds they needed to make a quick arrest to get Jesus out of the public eye.
  - D. Working stealthily, the authorities had Jesus arrested at night and brought him into an informal interrogation. We don't know exactly what happened there, but it clearly was enough to make the authorities to hand him over to the Roman governor for trial.

**Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 12.

John 18–19.

Luke 22–23.

Mark 14–16.

Matthew 26–27.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chap. 16.

**Suggested Reading:**

Brown, *Death of the Messiah*.

Crossan, *Who Killed Jesus?*

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Consider the various options for why Judas decided to betray Jesus. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of each option?
2. Why might some scholars doubt the historicity of the following stories found in the Gospel accounts of Jesus' last hours? What historical arguments can be mounted in their favor? Where do you stand on the issue? (a) The institution of the Last Supper (Mark 14:22–25; Matt

26:26–29; Luke 22:15–20; 1 Cor. 11:23–26), (b) Jesus' washing of the disciples feet (John 13:1–20), and (c) Jesus' prayer in the Garden before his arrest (Mark 14:32–42; Matt 26:36–46; Luke 22:39–46).

## Lecture Twenty-Two

### The Death and Resurrection of Jesus

**Scope:** One of the most certain facts of history is that Jesus was crucified on orders of the Roman prefect of Judea, Pontius Pilate. As a provincial governor, Pilate had free rein to handle difficult situations; trial by jury or due process were not required. We don't know why the Jewish authorities handed Jesus over to Pilate; they may have done so out of deference to Pilate, or because they did not want the responsibility, or because they wanted Jesus permanently taken out of the way and were not allowed under Roman law to perform capital punishment. In this lecture, we will try to determine what we can from the historical record about the trial and death of Jesus. We will also discuss the contradictory reports of Jesus' resurrection.

### Outline

- I. We are not well informed about what happened at Jesus' trial before Pilate.
  - A. In an earlier lecture, I discussed Pilate's position—and power—as governor of the Roman province of Judea.
  - B. It is not completely clear why the Jewish authorities didn't handle the problem posed by Jesus themselves.
    1. They may have wanted to show deference to the Pilate, who was in town to take care of such problems during the Passover.
    2. The authorities may have been concerned about the large following Jesus was acquiring (if, in fact, he was acquiring a large following; it's hard to know). If so, they may not have wanted to incur any animosity among the masses.
    3. They may also have wanted Jesus taken out of the way—that is, they wanted him executed. Most historians believe that although the Romans allowed the local aristocracies to run their own affairs, they reserved the right of capital punishment for themselves.
  - C. It is difficult to know what actually transpired when Jesus appeared before Pilate.

1. His followers who later told stories about it were not there, and the principal participants, Pilate and the chief priests, would not have been likely to release details to inquiring Christians later.
  2. The Gospel accounts of the crowds at the trial do not pass the criterion of contextual credibility. We know from Josephus that Pilate was a brutal ruler who did not cater to the whim of the populace.
  3. The idea of the crowds calling for Jesus' blood does not pass the criterion of dissimilarity; later Christians telling the story may have wanted to emphasize the culpability of the Jewish people.
  4. We can trace this tendency through the Gospels in chronological order (Mark, Luke, Matthew, John, and the non-canonical Peter). This trend was carried out in church traditions in the second century, including accounts of Pilate's conversion. In other words, Pilate and the Romans became more innocent, and the Jews became more guilty as time passed. This overlooks the important fact that the Jewish leaders, not the Jewish people, instigated the arrest of Jesus.
- D.** What is virtually certain is that the point at issue in Jesus' trial was, again, his own claims about himself.
1. Pilate would not have cared one bit about whether Jesus kept the Sabbath, or told people to love one another, or urged his followers to give away their wealth.
  2. He would have cared about things that related to his rule as a representative of Rome. Independent sources attest that the ground for execution was that Jesus called himself the King of the Jews (Mark 15:26; John 19:19).
  3. This tradition also passes the criterion of dissimilarity. "King of the Jews" is not a title that Christians themselves used of Jesus, insofar as we can tell from our surviving sources.
  4. Mark's account is not an eyewitness report, but it may not be far off in the essentials. Pilate, having heard from the Jewish chief priests that Jesus was known to speak of himself as the messiah (= "king" in this context), queried him about it. Jesus either admitted the charge or did little or nothing to defend himself against it.

5. Pilate needed to hear no more. Jesus was a potential troublemaker who was stirring up the crowds and who thought of himself as a political usurper of the prerogatives of Rome. Without further ado, Pilate ordered him executed as an enemy of the state.
  - E. The trial was probably short. It may not have lasted more than a couple of minutes and was probably one of several items on a crowded morning agenda. Two others were charged with sedition the same morning. All three were taken outside the city gates to be crucified.
- II.** Crucifixion was a horribly slow and torturous death reserved by the Romans for the lowest of criminals.
- A. Romans did not think that death sentences should be carried out in a humane and private manner.
    1. They used public torture as a deterrent, a way to show to that the power of the Empire could be brutally brought to bear against the body of anyone who dared to defy it.
    2. Jesus was not the only person crucified in the ancient world. This mode of execution was common for slaves, common criminals, rabble-rousers, people accused of sedition. When the Roman general Titus overthrew Jerusalem after a two-year siege in A.D. 70, he crucified so many people that he ran out of lumber.
  - B. According to the Gospel traditions, before being led off to his execution, Jesus was flogged (Mark 15:15; John 19:1).
    1. Flogging, too, was a horrific punishment; the Romans used leather thongs with little pieces of glass or bone tied to the ends to rip off the skin and the inner muscle.
    2. The account of Jesus' flogging may be a Christian addition to show how much he suffered, or it may be historically true.
    3. Given that public torture of criminals from the lower classes was the rule of the day, the accounts are completely plausible.
  - C. Jesus and the others would have been taken by soldiers outside the city gates, carrying their crossbeams to the upright stakes kept at the site of execution. We don't know the actual site.
    1. The uprights were reused, maybe every day. There the condemned would have been nailed to the crossbeams, or to

the uprights themselves, through the wrists and possibly the ankles.

2. A small ledge may have been attached to the upright on which the condemned could sit to rest.

**D.** We know a bit more about crucifixion now than we used to, largely because of an archaeological discovery made some thirty years ago.

1. The discovery was the partial remains of a crucified man, named Yehochanan, his ankle bone still attached to a piece of olive wood through which a stake had been driven. The nail had been driven into a knot in the wood and couldn't be removed.
2. Yehochanan appears to have been tied to the cross by the arms; more commonly, a person was nailed through the wrists.

**E.** Death by crucifixion was slow and painful.

1. It came not by loss of blood, but by suffocation, as the lung cavity distended and the person could no longer breathe.
2. Death came only when the victim lacked the strength to pull up on his arms to relieve the pressure on his chest; sometimes it took days.
3. In Jesus' case, death came quickly, within several hours—possibly because he had been so badly abused already.
4. Jesus' disciples were not there with him, though some of the women who had accompanied him from Galilee reportedly looked on from a distance (Mark 15:40). None was close enough, though, to hear what, if anything, he said at the end.
5. By mid-afternoon, on the day before Sabbath, he was dead.

**III.** In several independent accounts, we are told that Jesus' body was buried by an influential but secret follower, Joseph of Arimathea (Mark 15:42; John 19:38; G. Pet. 23).

**A.** Some scholars have called this tradition into question on the grounds of contextual credibility.

1. Crucified criminals were usually not allowed decent burials, but were left on their crosses to rot and be devoured by scavengers or tossed into a common grave as part of their humiliation.

2. At least one recent scholar, John Dominic Crossan, has argued that Jesus' body was eaten by dogs—which is admittedly possible, but there is really no way, historically, to know.
  3. It does seem improbable that Jesus' corpse was left hanging on the cross. If it had been, his followers would presumably have seen it there later and been somewhat less inclined to maintain that it had been raised from the dead on the third day following.
- B.** We can say, then, that Jesus' body was probably buried somewhere by someone, either by the soldiers in a common tomb or, as the tradition says, by someone other than his family and closest followers.
- C.** The important thing, of course, is what his followers claimed happened next.

**IV.** Christianity is rooted in the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead.

- A.** Historians cannot claim that the resurrection of Jesus “probably” happened.
1. Even if it did happen, historians would have no way of demonstrating it, given the limitations of what can be appealed to as historical evidence. Because historians can establish only what probably happened, and a miracle of this nature is highly improbable, the historian cannot say it probably occurred.
  2. Moreover, the sources are hopelessly contradictory, as we can see by doing a detailed comparison of the accounts in the Gospels. Who went to the tomb? How many people went? What were their names? What did they see when they got there? Whom did they meet? What were they told? What did they do as a result?
  3. Answers to each of these questions are not only different among the Gospels but also completely divergent.
- B.** As a result of these limitations, there are some things that we really cannot affirm as historians.
1. We cannot affirm that Jesus really was raised (though we aren't required to deny this either).
  2. We cannot say even that he was buried in a private tomb.
  3. We cannot say that three days later that tomb was empty.

4. Nor can we say that three days later the disciples *claimed* it was empty and that he had appeared to them (we only know that later they claimed it was empty and that he had appeared to them).
  5. Nor do we know that all of the remaining disciples (Judas having killed himself) actually became believers.
- C. What we do know, though, is also important.
1. We know that some (all? most? a few?) of his disciples who knew Jesus had been killed claimed at a later time (three days? three months? three years?) that his tomb was visited by some of his women followers three days later and was found to be empty.
  2. They also claimed to have seen him alive afterwards.
  3. They came to believe that he had been raised from the dead.
  4. This claim completely changed their lives and the history of our world ever since.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chaps. 12–13.

John 19–20.

Luke 23–24.

Mark 15–16.

Matthew 27–28.

Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus*, chap. 16.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*.

Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*.

———, *Who Killed Jesus?*

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Throughout the Gospels, words are attributed to Jesus from the cross. Explain why historians would have difficulty establishing these words as historically authentic.

2. Try to formulate what you see as the responsibility of the Jewish authorities and the responsibility of the Roman authorities in Jesus' death. Throughout the ages, Christians have charged Jews with the responsibility for Jesus' death; in more recent times, this charge is seen as an instance of anti-Semitism. Do you think it is? Why or why not?

## Lecture Twenty-Three

### The Afterlife of Jesus

**Scope:** The religion of Christianity is probably best understood as having begun not with Jesus' ministry, his death, or his resurrection, but with the belief in his resurrection among some of his followers. These first Christians were themselves Jewish apocalypticists, who believed that God would raise the dead at the end of time. Once they came to think that Jesus had been raised, they drew the logical conclusion: With Jesus' resurrection, the end had already begun. Moreover, because Jesus was the first to be raised, he was obviously a significant figure in God's plan to destroy the forces of evil. Christians who held such views had difficulty convincing non-Christian Jews who were expecting a person of grandeur, not a weak, crucified criminal. Jews and Christians engaged in heated debates over these passages. Even then, not every Christian understood Jesus in the same way. In most instances, the beliefs about Jesus that emerged were far removed from what the man himself was really like.

### Outline

- I. We can't really say that Christianity began with Jesus' preaching, because Christianity is rooted in a belief in Jesus' death for the sins of the world and his resurrection from the dead.
  - A. Whereas Jesus preached about the Son of Man, who was soon to come in judgment against the earth, the early Christians preached about Jesus, who had died and been raised from the dead. Or, to use an old formula, the early Christians appear to have taken the religion *of* Jesus and made it into a religion *about* Jesus.
  - B. Nor can we say that the new religion began with Jesus' death, because without a resurrection, Jesus' death is just another tragic death among thousands, even millions, of tragic deaths throughout history.
  - C. Nor can we say, at least as historians, that the new religion began with Jesus' resurrection, both because historians are unable to affirm on historical grounds that the resurrection happened (i.e., it's a matter of faith, not historical demonstration) and because if

Jesus had been raised and no one believed it, Christianity still wouldn't have started.

- D.** Christianity, then, began with the belief in Jesus' resurrection. How did belief in the resurrection affect how Jesus' followers understood who he was and what he taught?

**II.** It is important to remember who Jesus' followers were. We know some of them by name: Simon Peter, James, John, and some other disciples, along with several women, such as Mary Magdalene.

- A.** We can assume that they were followers of Jesus precisely because they agreed with or were persuaded by his message. This means, then, that even before Jesus died, his closest followers—the ones who later came to believe that he had been raised from the dead—were Jewish apocalypticists.

**B.** Now comes the key question: What would a Jewish apocalypticist think about the resurrection of a great man of God?

1. Recall: Apocalypticists believed that the dead would be resurrected when God came in judgment. Such a person who came to believe that Jesus was raised from the dead would draw an obvious conclusion: The end of the age has begun (cf. 1Cor. 15–20).
2. It is also significant that Jesus was the first raised: He is the one who has inaugurated the beginning of the end.
3. The early disciples concluded that the end had started and that God had chosen Jesus to defeat the cosmic forces of evil aligned against him. Jesus had been exalted to heaven, but he was soon to return in judgment on the earth.

**C.** Thus, belief in Jesus began to affect how people understood who he was in relation to God, the world, and the salvation of the human race.

1. During Jesus' life, he had talked about God as father and likened him to a kindly parent. His followers came to think that Jesus was the one and only Son of God.
2. During Jesus' life, he had talked about the coming Son of Man who would arrive on the clouds of heaven in a mighty act of judgment against God's enemies. His followers came to think that he himself had been raised up into heaven and began to speak of him as the coming judge of earth, the Son of Man.

3. During Jesus' life, he talked about the kingdom of God that was soon to arrive and evidently maintained that he would have a place of prominence in it. His followers came to think that that was precisely what would happen; Jesus would reign as the future ruler, the King of the Jews, the Messiah.
4. During Jesus' life, he talked about implementing the ethics of the kingdom. His followers came to think that the kingdom had already begun and that he was already its ruler. In fact, he was ruler of all things in heaven and earth—the Lord of all.

**D.** In a relatively brief time, the disciples shifted their attention away from the imminent arrival of the Son of Man and the kingdom of God onto Jesus himself, whose resurrection revealed that he was the Son of God, the Son of Man, the Messiah, and the Lord.

**III.** Jesus' early followers, though, had considerable difficulty trying to convince other Jews of their claims. We have seen that Jews at the time had a range of expectations of what the future messiah would be like.

- A.** Some saw him as a great warrior figure like King David, one who would take up arms against the foreign oppressor, drive him out of the land, and reestablish Israel as a sovereign state.
- B.** Others saw the messiah as: a cosmic figure of power who would come from heaven to destroy God's enemies or a mighty priest who was authorized by God to deliver divinely inspired interpretations of God's law. In every case, the messiah was a figure of power and grandeur.
- C.** Jesus, of course, was none of these things, but an itinerant preacher from rural Galilee who was crucified as a common criminal. Jesus' death showed most Jews that he was *not* the messiah. Most considered the idea that he was the messiah to be blasphemous.
  1. Christians today tend to think that Jesus was crucified, because that was what the messiah was supposed to do.
  2. Before Christianity, we have no indication that any Jew anywhere thought that the messiah would suffer and die, even for the sins of the world. Not a single reference exists to any such idea in any Jewish text—including the Hebrew Bible—before Christianity.
  3. Why then do Christians assume that that is what the Jewish messiah *was* supposed to do? Because that's what the early

Christians concluded based on what they already knew about Jesus.

- D. Early Christians began searching their Scriptures to see how these things could be.
  - 1. The Hebrew Bible did not discuss the messiah's suffering. Some passages refer to the suffering of a righteous man (cf. Isaiah 53), who feels abandoned by God, but whose suffering is accepted as a sacrifice for others.
  - 2. Some passages, such as the Psalms of Lament (e.g., Pss. 22, 35, 69) and the songs of the Suffering Servant of the Lord in the book of Isaiah (Isaiah 53), were taken to refer not just to *any* person who was suffering, or even to Israel as a whole (cf. Isaiah 49:3), but to the future messiah of Israel.
  - 3. Jews and Christians began to debate the meanings of these texts, and the debates continue to this day.
- E. The point is that early Christians began to interpret Jesus differently once they came to believe that he had been raised from the dead, and they soon began to make exalted claims about him that they then went to their Scriptures to try to support.

- IV. Different Christian communities developed different understandings of who Jesus was. For the early Jewish followers of Jesus, it made perfect sense to call Jesus the Son of Man.
  - A. That meant that he was the cosmic judge coming from heaven referred to in Dan. 7:13–14.
  - B. But what would the term mean to later communities of Christians made up of converted pagans who didn't know Dan. 7:13–14? It would probably mean not that Jesus was some kind of divine figure, but that he was a human—the Son of Man.
  - C. The early Jewish followers of Jesus would have had a clear view of what it meant to call Jesus the Son of God.
    - 1. In the Hebrew Bible, the Son of God refers to any human being who was specially chosen by God to mediate his will on earth—like King Solomon of old (2 Sam. 7:14).
    - 2. To Christians who were converted pagans, it would probably mean not that Jesus was a human who was in close standing with God, but that he was actually divine—the Son of God!

- D. Eventually, Christians proclaimed both things about Jesus—that he was the Son of Man and the Son of God, both human and divine.
1. By the end of the first century, with the Gospel of John, we know of Christians who called Jesus “God.”
  2. This was obviously far removed from what Jesus himself said. Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet of the coming kingdom; the Christians came to think of him as the creator of the universe. It’s an astounding difference.
- E. The various notions of who Jesus was affected the way each Christian community told its stories about Jesus. This seems to be a certain fact of history; otherwise, one could never explain why the stories were changed so frequently and in such different ways.
1. Christians who continued to be convinced that Jesus was a righteous man, but nothing more than a man, would obviously remember his sayings far differently from Christians who believed that Jesus was God himself.
  2. The Gospels we have inherited reflect these differences. They do not really all say the same thing.
  3. As historians, we cannot take any one of these accounts at face value as preserving a portrait of Jesus as he really was. Instead, we need to sift through each of these portraits carefully and cautiously, seeking to determine the words and deeds of the man who stands behind them all.

### **Essential Reading:**

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chap. 13.

Frederiksen, *From Jesus to Christ*.

Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*.

### **Suggested Reading:**

Brown, *Death of the Messiah*.

Dunn, *Christology in the Making*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Take a passage such as Psalm 22 or Isaiah 52:13–53:12 and try to explain how an early Christian might interpret it to support the view that the messiah had to suffer and be raised from the dead. Then try to

explain how an early Jew might interpret it in a completely different way.

2. Imagine an early debate between a non-Jewish Christian and a non-Christian Jew over whether Jesus was the messiah. What would be the strongest arguments on both sides?

For further background on the development of early Christian thought on Jesus, as reflected in Scripture, non-canonical writings, and other sources, we recommend the course *The New Testament*, also by Professor Ehrman.

## Lecture Twenty-Four

### The Prophet of the New Millennium

**Scope:** Ever since Jesus' day, some of his followers have continued to insist that his proclamation of the imminent end of the age is literally true, and some have set dates for when it will happen. One such case is Edgar Whisenant, whose book, *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Occur in 1988*, made an impact on parts of American Christendom. Another is one of the best-selling authors of all time, Hal Lindsey, whose descriptions of the end times have been read by millions. This phenomenon is not recent; nearly every generation from the beginning of Christianity until today has had its doomsday prophets, who have declared that their own generations would be the last. Two things can be said about every single one of these predictors of doom: every single one of them has been incontrovertibly wrong, and they all have been able to base their predictions, in part, on the words of Jesus. In this lecture, we will investigate such prophecies and argue that Jesus' message must be understood in its context to be fully understood. It cannot be moved to our context to predict the end times.

### Outline

- I. We have now completed our study of the historical Jesus. We have covered all the available sources for reconstructing his life and have discussed historical criteria that can be used to get behind the later portrayals of his life in the Gospels to see what the man himself was really like.
  - A. We have used these criteria to try to paint a coherent picture of what he said, what he did, and why he died.
    1. My thesis for the second half of the course has been that Jesus was an apocalypticist who expected the imminent end of the age with the coming of a cosmic figure of judgment from heaven.
    2. I've tried to show that all the sayings and deeds of Jesus that can be accepted as historically reliable fit well into this apocalyptic framework.

3. I have begun to show, in the last lecture, how Jesus' own religion was transformed by his followers as soon as they came to believe that he had been raised from the dead.
- B.** In this lecture, I want to talk about a different kind of transformation of Jesus' teaching, one whose impact is still with us today.
1. This transformation involves adhering literally to some of his teachings when the situation has drastically changed.
  2. Since Jesus' time, some people have continued to believe that the world will end soon. Most of them have based their beliefs on the teachings of Jesus. Even though every single one of these prophets of doom, from the second century to the twentieth century, has been incontrovertibly wrong about their predictions, the business of predicting the end of the age continues to be alive and well.
  3. I would like to mention a couple of the more interesting figures, starting closer to our own time.
- II.** The year 1988 was supposed to be the year the world ended. Proof was given in a widely distributed and remarkably influential booklet entitled *88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Occur in 1988* by Edgar Whisenant, a former NASA rocket engineer.
- A.** True to its title, the book enumerated biblical and logical reasons why 1988 would be the year that history would begin to end, and how.
1. Sometime during the Jewish festival of Rosh Hashanah, Sept. 11–13, 1988, Jesus Christ would return from heaven to remove his followers from earth (the “rapture”), before a seven-year period of cataclysmic disaster on earth (the “tribulation”).
  2. The tribulation would begin at “sunset 3 October 1988,” when the Soviet Union invaded Israel and began World War III. The crises that ensued would lead to the rise of an agent of Satan who would lead millions away from God and declare himself to be divine.
  3. He would then try to take over the world's governments, leading to a thermonuclear war on Oct. 4, 1995, which would devastate the United States (“you can walk from Little Rock to Dallas over ashes only”). The world would be thrown into

nuclear winter (temperatures would never rise above  $-150^{\circ}$  F), and the food and water supply would be eliminated.

**B.** Even though the book may sound like a quaint bit of Christian science fiction, it was read as Gospel truth by a surprising number of sincere and devout Christians. Within months, over 2 million copies were sold.

1. Many Christians pointed out that such precision is unbiblical, because Jesus is recorded as saying, “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only” (Matt. 24:36).
2. Whisenant was unfazed. After all, he had not predicted “the day and hour” of the end, just the week.

**C.** To buttress his “88 Reasons,” Whisenant used biblical quotations that co-literalists had a hard time refuting, e.g.:

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see all these things, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I say to you, this generation will not pass away until all these things take place. (Matt. 24:32–34)

1. Whisenant pointed out that in the Bible, the “fig tree” is often used of the nation of Israel. The fig tree “putting forth its leaves” is a reference to Israel’s coming back to life after a long hiatus.
2. Because the modern state of Israel was established in 1948 and because a generation in the Bible is forty years—*voilà!*—1988 must be the year of the end time.

**D.** Whisenant claimed that many other biblical predictions, most of them highly complex, pointed to exactly the same time. One of the simpler examples was in Leviticus 26:28. God tells the people of Israel that if they are disobedient, they will be punished “sevenfold” for their sins.

1. Whisenant takes this to mean a punishment lasting seven “years,” and he notes that in the Jewish lunar calendar, a year consists of 360 days. Moreover, in a number of biblical texts (for example, Numbers 14:34), God reckons one day as a year. This means that the punishment was to last  $7 \times 360$  years, or 2,520 years in all.

2. According to the book of Daniel, Israel's punishment was to begin with the seventy-year oppression of Israel by the Babylonians, which started, according to Whisenant, with the reign of the monarch Nebuchadnezzar in 602 B.C. and ended in 532 B.C.
  3. If the time of Israel's punishment is to last an additional 2,520 years, that happens to bring us up to ... surprise!—1988.
- E. When 1988 came and went, Whisenant did not retract his views, but simply argued that he had made a slight miscalculation. In a second book published soon after his predictions had failed, he urged that 1989 would be the year!

**III.** The end never did come, of course. But the constant and inevitable failure of such projects to materialize has never seemed to have the slightest effect on their popularity. A clear case in point comes from one of the best-selling authors of the modern period, an evangelical Christian named Hal Lindsay.

- A. Lindsay may well be the most read author of the twentieth century. His most famous book, *The Late Great Planet Earth*, was the best-selling work of nonfiction of the 1970s, with over 28 million copies in print.
- B. Lindsay was a savvy observer of the times with a knack for relating to, even mesmerizing, the average mildly interested reader—especially college students.
1. His book reads like a detective novel and is packed with anecdotes, plausible historical scenarios, and predictions of mass destruction.
  2. Writing in 1970, Lindsay saw the world as the stage of God's historical activities and the Bible as the blueprint.
  3. Lindsay calculated that a world war would break out in the Middle East in 1989, leading to an invasion of the oil-thirsty Soviet Union, a nuclear counterattack of a ten-nation European commonwealth, and the invasion of an army of 200 million Chinese.
  4. At the end of it all, only the European commonwealth would be left, headed by a charismatic leader who was none other than the anti-Christ. The commonwealth would unleash its nuclear arsenals, destroying the major cities of earth.

5. When there appeared to be no hope, God would intervene once and for all. Christ would appear from heaven to overthrow the forces of evil and set up his kingdom on earth.
- C. Lindsey insisted that his portrayal of future events is rooted completely in the Scriptures, which accurately portrayed the future of our planet.
1. The problem, of course, is that this claim has been made by every Christian doomsday prophet from the beginning. As always happens, when the predictions do not occur, the prophets must go back to the drawing board.
  2. What is most intriguing is that the evangelistic fervor never dies down with each successive edition.
  3. When it appeared to Lindsay that it wasn't going to happen as predicted, he wrote another book, *1980s: Countdown to Armageddon*, arguing that everything was going according to plan. The book was on *The New York Times* bestseller list for 21 weeks.
- D. Evidently, Lindsey's reputation has not been tarnished a whit by his failed interpretations or his more recent claims that UFOs are deceptive ruses by demons, who will soon stage a massive UFO landing to mislead earthlings into believing in life on other planets. His books and videos continue to be enormously popular.
- IV. If we had more time, we could detail other failed prophecies that have been made throughout the course of Christian history. It is worth noting, at least, that they seem to recur in almost every generation. I'll mention a couple of striking examples, not even dealing with the massive concerns among some believers over the approach of the year 2000.
- A. Possibly the most well known American failed prophecy was experienced by the followers of William Miller. Miller was a New York farmer who predicted, on the basis of a careful study of his Bible, that the world would end in a cosmic blaze of glory in 1843. Some among his thousands of followers gave away everything they owned in expectation of the day; some went to court to get everything back later.
- B. Even more significant historically were the predictions of the Italian monk, Joachim of Fiore, who demonstrated that the anti-Christ would soon appear and the end of the age would arrive by

the year 1260. These predictions played a major role in theological reflections during the later Middle Ages.

- C. A thousand years earlier, we find an important group of Christians living in Asia Minor adhering to the teachings of a second-century prophet named Montanus, who claimed that the world was going to end in his own generation. One of the greatest theologians of early Christianity, Tertullian, belonged to this group.
- D. Just over a century before that, we find the writings of the apostle Paul, which later came to form part of the New Testament—the earliest Christian writings of any kind that we have. Paul tells his followers that Christ will return from heaven in a mighty act of judgment and remove his followers from the world, both those who had previously died and, in Paul’s words, “we who are still alive.”
- E. These are just a few of the many, many prophets that we know about.
  - 1. Most of those who have predicted the imminent end of all things are lost in the shrouds of history.
  - 2. All these predictors of the end have two things in common: Every one of them was completely wrong, and every one of them could cite the words of Jesus in support of his or her views.

V. Let me conclude by telling you my point in making this brief survey.

- A. My point is not to stress the fact that Jesus got it wrong.
- B. Instead, I think that his earliest followers got something right.
  - 1. I have to admit to being a bit hesitant to make this point, given the fact that these lectures have been completely based on a historical study of Jesus rather than on any theological set of beliefs—mine, yours, or someone else’s.
  - 2. To paraphrase the Hebrew prophet Amos, I myself am neither a theologian nor the son of a theologian. My concerns in these lectures are not theological. If someone were interested in theology, however, he or she might want to take heed of how the early Christians handled their traditions about Jesus.
- C. One of the frustrations of the historian of ancient Christianity is that the early Christians did not preserve their traditions about

Jesus intact, but modified them for new situations in which they found themselves.

1. As we have seen, Christians had no qualms about making Jesus relevant for new situations, instead of trying to pretend that what was suitable in one context was suitable for another.
  2. Their willingness, even eagerness, to do so creates problems for historians who want to know what Jesus actually said and did.
- D.** But what causes such problems for historians may create great possibilities for theologians—or even believers—who are interested in something more than the plain facts of history.
1. Those who refuse to recognize that every new situation is a new context and that new contexts require a rethinking of old traditions are committing the same error as those who refuse to recognize that Jesus must be understood in his own context.
  2. We can't pretend that Jesus lived in our context and interpret his words in light of what they might mean today.
  3. We also can't pretend that we live in Jesus' context and that his words are immediately relevant to a different situation.
  4. That has always been the downfall of the doomsday predictors: They have taken the words of a first-century Jewish apocalypticist and pretended that they were directed to the context that the predictors themselves were living in. These words may have provided hope for a better day to their original hearers. When they are removed from their original context and used without remainder in new contexts, they simply become shallow and false.
- E.** Anyone who is interested in understanding what the words of Jesus might mean in our world cannot apply them directly to the modern situation without seeing how that situation is different from his own.
1. Applying the teachings of an ancient rabbi to a modern context is not the business of a historian, but of a theologian.
  2. The historian can recognize the dangers in assuming that the context of a person's words and deeds are unimportant either to their meaning or their relevance.

**Essential Reading:**

Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*.

Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*.

Ehrman, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet*, chaps. 1, 14.

**Suggested Reading:**

Lindsey, *Late Great Planet Earth*.

Weber, *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming*.

Wojcik, *The End of the World*.

**Questions to Consider:**

1. Why do you think so many people are interested in knowing the details of the end? Do the reasons for this modern concern seem to be the same or different from the reasons to be found in an ancient apocalyptic context?
2. For those who do not believe that the end is imminent and who think that Jesus was mistaken to think that it was, is there any relevance to his proclamation of the coming Son of Man? (I do not mean for this question to have an obvious answer.)

## Timeline

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| 1800 B.C.?      | Abraham.                                     |
| 1400 B.C.?      | Moses.                                       |
| 753 B.C.        | Traditional date for founding of Rome.       |
| 750–500 B.C.?   | Prophets of Hebrew Bible.                    |
| 750 B.C.?       | Homer.                                       |
| 587 B.C.        | Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem.            |
| 510 B.C.        | Beginning of Roman Republic.                 |
| c. 400 B.C.     | Plato.                                       |
| 333–323 B.C.    | Conquests of Alexander the Great.            |
| 300–198 B.C.    | Palestine under Egyptian rule.               |
| 198–142 B.C.    | Palestine under Syrian rule.                 |
| 167–142 B.C.    | Maccabean revolt.                            |
| 145 B.C.        | Book of Daniel (final book of Hebrew Bible). |
| 140 B.C.        | Rise of Jewish sects.                        |
| 142–37 B.C.     | Maccabean rule.                              |
| 63 B.C.         | Conquest of Palestine by Romans.             |
| 44 B.C.         | Assassination of Julius Caesar.              |
| 40–4 B.C.       | Herod King of the Jews.                      |
| 4 B.C.–A.D. 39  | Herod Antipas, ruler of Galilee.             |
| 27 B.C.–A.D. 14 | Octavian Caesar Augustus as emperor.         |
| 4 B.C.?         | Jesus' birth.                                |
| A.D. 14–37      | Emperor Tiberius.                            |
| A.D. 18–36      | Caiaphas, high priest in Jerusalem.          |
| A.D. 26–36      | Pilate as Governor of Judea.                 |

- A.D. 30?..... Jesus' death.
- A.D. 33?..... Conversion of Paul.
- A.D. 37–100 ..... Josephus (Jewish historian).
- A.D. 37–41 ..... Emperor Caligula.
- A.D. 41–54 ..... Emperor Claudius.
- A.D. 54–68 ..... Emperor Nero.
- A.D. 50–60?..... Pauline epistles.
- A.D. 50–60?..... “Q” Source.
- A.D. 56–117?..... Tacitus.
- A.D. 50–70?..... “M” and “L” Sources.
- A.D. 61–113 ..... Pliny the Younger.
- A.D. 65?..... Gospel of Mark.
- A.D. 69–79 ..... Emperor Vespasian.
- A.D. 66–70 ..... Jewish Revolt and destruction of Temple.
- A.D. 79–81 ..... Emperor Titus.
- A.D. 80–85?..... Gospels of Matthew and Luke.
- A.D. 81–96 ..... Emperor Domitian.
- A.D. 90–95?..... Gospel of John.
- A.D. 56–120 ..... Tacitus.
- A.D. 62–113 ..... Pliny the Younger.
- A.D. 98–117 ..... Emperor Trajan.
- A.D. 110–130?..... Gospels of Peter, Thomas, and Infancy Thomas.

## Glossary

**Alexander the Great:** The great military leader of Macedonia (356–323 B.C.) whose armies conquered much of the lands around the Mediterranean, including Egypt, Palestine, and Persia, and who was responsible for the spread of Greek culture (Hellenism) throughout the lands he conquered.

**Antiochus IV** (= Antiochus Epiphanes): Syrian monarch who compelled the Jews of Palestine to adopt Greek culture, leading to the Maccabean revolt in 167 B.C.E.

**antitheses:** Literally, “contrary statements”; used to designate six sayings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:21–48), in which he states a Jewish Law (“You have heard it said...”), then sets his own interpretation against it (“But I say to you...”).

**apocalypticism:** A worldview held by many ancient Jews and Christians that maintained that the present age is controlled by forces of evil that God will destroy at the end of time when he intervenes in history to bring in his kingdom, an event thought to be imminent.

**apocrypha:** Literally, “hidden things”; used to describe a group of books on the fringe of the Jewish or Christian canons of Scripture. The Jewish Apocrypha contains such books as 1 and 2 Maccabees and 4 Ezra.

**Apollonius:** A pagan philosopher and holy man of the first century A.D. who could allegedly perform miracles and deliver divinely inspired teachings; a man believed by some of his followers to be a son of God.

**apostle:** Literally, one who is “sent”; used of one who is commissioned to perform a task. In early Christianity, the term designated missionaries who were specially appointed by Christ. See **disciple**.

**Beatitudes:** Literally, “blessings”; used as a technical term to refer to sayings of Jesus that begin the Sermon on the Mount (e.g., “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” Matt 5:3–12).

**canon:** From a Greek word that means “ruler” or “straight edge.” The term is used to designate a recognized collection of texts; the canon of the New Testament is thus the collection of books that Christians accept as authoritative.

**Christ:** See **Messiah**.

**Christology:** Any teaching or doctrine about the nature of Christ.

**contextual credibility, criterion of:** A criterion used by scholars to establish historically reliable material. With respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that any tradition about Jesus that cannot be credibly fit into his own first-century Palestinian context cannot be regarded as authentic.

**cosmos:** Greek term for “world.”

**covenant:** An agreement or treaty between two social or political parties; used by ancient Jews to refer to the pact that God made to protect and preserve them in exchange for their devotion and adherence to his law.

**cynics:** Group of Greco-Roman philosophers known as street preachers who harangued their audiences and urged them to find freedom by becoming liberated from all social conventions. Because they chose to live “according to nature,” with none of the niceties of life, their opponents called them “dogs” (Greek = *cynes*).

**Daimonia:** Category of divine beings in Greco-Roman paganism. *Daimonia* were thought to be less powerful than the gods but far more powerful than humans and capable of influencing human lives.

**Dead Sea Scrolls:** Ancient Jewish writings discovered in caves to the northwest of the Dead Sea; believed to have been produced by a group of apocalyptically minded Essenes who lived in a monastic community from Maccabean times through the Jewish War of A.D. 66–70. See **Essenes**, **Qumran**.

**disciple:** A follower; literally, one who is “taught” (as opposed to an “apostle” = an emissary, one who is “sent”).

**dissimilarity, criterion of:** Criterion used by scholars to establish historically reliable material; the criterion maintains that any tradition about Jesus that does not coincide with (or that works against) the vested interests of the early Christians is likely to be authentic.

**docetism:** From the Greek word *dokeo*, “to seem” or “to appear.” Used to describe the view that Jesus was not a human being but only “appeared” to be.

**Egyptian, the:** A Jewish apocalyptic prophet of the first century A.D., mentioned by Josephus, who predicted the destruction of the walls of Jerusalem.

**Equestrian:** The second-highest socioeconomic class of ancient Rome (below “Senator”), which was comprised of wealthy aristocrats.

**Essenes:** A sect of Jews that started during the Maccabean period who stressed maintaining their own ritual purity in the face of the coming apocalypse; its members are generally thought to have produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

**Fourth Philosophy:** A group of Jews mentioned by Josephus who insisted on violent opposition to the foreign domination of the Promised Land.

**Four-source hypothesis:** A solution to the “Synoptic Problem” that maintains that four sources lie behind the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke: (1) Mark was the source for many of the stories found in Matthew and Luke, (2) Q was the source for the material (mainly sayings) found in Matthew and Luke but not in Mark, (3) M provided material found only in Matthew, and (4) L provided material found only in Luke.

**Gentile:** A non-Jew.

**Gnosticism:** A group of ancient religions, some of them closely related to Christianity, that maintained that elements of the divine had become entrapped in this evil world of matter. These divine elements could be released only by acquiring the secret *gnosis* (Greek for “knowledge”) of who they were and of how they could escape. This gnosis was generally thought to have been brought by an emissary of the divine realm.

**Greco-Roman world:** The lands (and culture) around the Mediterranean from the time of Alexander the Great to the Emperor Constantine, roughly 300 B.C. to A.D. 300.

**Hasmoneans:** An alternative name for the Maccabees, the family of Jewish priests that began the revolt against Syria in 167 B.C. and ruled Israel before the Roman conquest of 63 B.C.

**Hellenization:** The spread of Greek language and culture throughout the Mediterranean that began with the conquests of Alexander the Great.

**High Priest:** Before A.D. 70, the highest ranking official in Judaism when there was no Jewish king, in charge of the operation of the Jerusalem Temple and its priests. See **Sadducees** and **Sanhedrin**.

**Holy of Holies:** The inner part of the Jewish Temple in which God's presence on earth was believed to dwell. No one could enter this room except the High Priest on the Day of Atonement to make a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

**Independent attestation, criterion of:** Criterion used by scholars to establish historically reliable material. With respect to the historical Jesus, the criterion maintains that any tradition that is attested independently by more than one source is more likely to be authentic.

**Josephus:** First-century Jewish court historian, appointed by the Roman emperor Vespasian. His works, *The Jewish War* and *The Antiquities of the Jews*, are principal sources for information about life in first-century Palestine.

**Judas Maccabeus:** Jewish patriot who led the Maccabean revolt in its earliest phases. See **Hasmoneans**.

**L:** A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives but is believed to have provided Luke with traditions not found in Matthew or Mark. See **four-source hypothesis**.

**M:** A document (or documents, written or oral) that no longer survives but is believed to have provided Matthew with traditions not found in Mark or Luke. See **four-source hypothesis**.

**Maccabean revolt:** The Jewish uprising against the Syrians starting in 167 B.C.; protested the forced imposition of Hellenistic religion and culture and the proscription of Jewish practices, such as circumcision, by the Syrian monarch Antiochus Epiphanes. See **Hasmoneans**.

**manuscript:** A hand-written copy of a text.

**Markan priority:** The view that Mark, the first of the Synoptic Gospels written, was one of the sources used by Matthew and Luke.

**Messiah:** From a Hebrew word that literally means "anointed one," translated into Greek as "Christos," from which derives our English word "Christ." The first century saw a wide range of expectations of whom this

future deliverer might be: a great warrior king, a cosmic judge of the earth, or a mighty priest inspired to interpret God's law.

**Mishnah:** A collection of oral traditions passed on by Jewish rabbis who saw themselves as the descendants of the Pharisees, put into writing around A.D. 200. See **Talmud**.

**Nag Hammadi:** Village in upper (south) Egypt, near the place where a Bedouin named Mohammed Ali discovered a collection of Gnostic writings, including the Gospel of Thomas, in 1945.

**paganism:** An umbrella term used for ancient polytheistic religions (i.e., other than Judaism and Christianity).

**Passion:** From the Greek word for "suffering"; refers to the traditions of Jesus' last days, up to and including his crucifixion (hence the "Passion narrative").

**Passover:** The most important and widely celebrated annual festival of Jews in Roman times, which commemorated the exodus from Egypt.

**Pentateuch:** Literally, the "five scrolls"; designates the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), also known as the Torah or the Law of Moses.

**Pentecost:** From the Greek word for fifty (= *pentakosia*); designates the Jewish agricultural festival that was celebrated fifty days after the feast of the Passover.

**Pharisees:** A Jewish sect that may have originated during the Maccabean period, which emphasized strict adherence to the purity laws of the Torah and developed special oral laws to help them to do so. See **Mishnah**.

**pseudepigrapha:** Literally, "false writings"; ancient non-canonical Jewish and Christian literary texts, many of which were written under pseudonyms.

**pseudonymity:** The practice of writing under a "false name," evident in a large number of pagan, Jewish, and Christian writings from antiquity.

**Q Source:** The source used by both Matthew and Luke for the stories they have in common that are not found in Mark (these are mainly sayings); from the German word *Quelle*, "source." The document no longer exists but is reconstructed on the basis of Matthew and Luke.

**Qumran:** Place near the northwest shore of the Dead Sea where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in 1945; in the first century, home to a group of Essenes who used the Scrolls as part of their library.

**Roman Empire:** All the lands conquered by Rome and ruled, ultimately, by the Roman emperor, starting with Caesar Augustus in 27 B.C.; before Augustus, Rome was a republic, ruled by the Senate.

**Sadducees:** A Jewish party closely connected with the Temple cult and the Jewish priests who ran it; comprised mainly of the Jewish aristocracy in Judea, whose leader, the high priest, served as the highest ranking local official and chief liaison with the Roman governor.

**Samaritans:** Inhabitants of Samaria, located between Galilee and Judea, who were considered by some Jews to be apostates and half-breeds, because their lineage could be traced to intermarriages between Jews and pagans several centuries before the New Testament period.

**Sermon on the Mount:** The sermon found in Matthew 5–7 that preserves some of the best known sayings of Jesus (including Matthew’s form of the Beatitudes, the antitheses, and the Lord’s Prayer).

**Sanhedrin:** A council of Jewish leaders that played an advisory role to the high priest in matters of religious and civil policy.

**Scribes, Jewish:** Highly educated experts in Jewish law (and possibly its copyists) during the Greco-Roman period.

**Senators:** The highest ranking members of the Roman aristocracy, comprised of the wealthiest men of Rome, who were responsible for governing the vast Roman bureaucracy during the Republic and were still active and highly visible under the Empire.

**Son of God:** In most Greco-Roman circles, a term used to designate a person born to the union of a God and a mortal, who was thought to be able to perform miraculous deeds or convey superhuman teachings. In Jewish circles, the term was used to designate a person chosen to stand in a special relationship with the God of Israel, including the ancient Jewish kings.

**Son of Man:** A much disputed term that is used in some ancient apocalyptic texts to refer to a cosmic judge sent from heaven at the end of time, based, probably, on Daniel 7:13–14.

**synagogue:** An ancient place of Jewish worship, prayer, and reading of the Torah, from a Greek word that literally means “being brought together.”

**Synoptic Gospels:** The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, which narrate so many of the same stories that they can be placed next to each other and “be seen together” (the literal meaning of “synoptic”).

**Talmud:** The great collection of ancient Jewish traditions containing both the Mishnah and the later commentaries on the Mishnah called the Gemarah. There are two collections of the Talmud, one made in Palestine during the early fifth century A.D. and the other, in Babylon perhaps a century later. The Babylonian Talmud is usually considered the more authoritative.

**Theudas:** A first-century Jewish apocalyptic prophet mentioned by Josephus who predicted the parting of the Jordan River and, evidently, the reconquest of the Promised Land by the Jewish people.

**Torah:** A Hebrew word meaning “guidance” or “direction”; usually translated as “Law.” As a technical term, it designates either the Law of God given to Moses or the first five books of the Jewish Bible that Moses was thought to have written, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

**tradition:** Any doctrine, idea, practice, or custom that is handed down from one person to another.

**Zealots:** A group of Galilean Jews who fled to Jerusalem during the early stages of the Jewish War against Rome in A.D. 66–70, overthrew the reigning aristocracy in the city, and urged violent resistance to the bitter end. See **Fourth Philosophy**.

## Biographical Notes

**Alexander the Great:** Alexander of Macedonia, otherwise known as Alexander the Great, was one of the most influential people in the history of Western civilization. Born in 356 B.C. to King Philip of Macedonia, he succeeded to the throne at the age of twenty-two when his father was assassinated. Driven by his desire for conquest and using his military genius and a ruthless military policy, Alexander quickly conquered Greece before moving his armies eastward to overcome Asia Minor, Palestine, and Egypt. His major conquest came over Darius, ruler of the Persian Empire, which extended his territories well into modern-day India. Alexander's historical significance stems from his use of military conquest to spread a previously unheard of cultural unity, termed Hellenism, to the lands around the Mediterranean. It played an enormous role in the history of Western civilization and, of course, for the New Testament, which was rooted in Hellenistic culture and written in Greek.

**Caesar Augustus (Octavian):** Octavian was the first of the Roman emperors, who transformed Rome from a Republic (ruled by a Senate) to an Empire (ruled, ultimately, by the emperor). He was born in 63 B.C. to the niece of Julius Caesar and was later adopted as the son of his great-uncle. When Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C., Octavian left Greece (where he was being educated) to avenge the death. In Rome, he joined forces with two other prominent aristocrats, Lepidus and Mark Antony, to form a so-called "triumvirate" of power. There were differences among the three, however, and when Octavian deprived Lepidus of his power and defeated Antony (and Cleopatra) in battle, he emerged as the sole ruler of Rome. The Roman Senate continued to exist, of course, and to exercise real authority. Octavian was bestowed honorific titles—including "Augustus" (= most revered one)—and power as Rome's "first citizen" and, eventually, the "father of the country." Octavian's rule lasted over 40 years (27 B.C.–A.D. 14) and is often referred to as the period of *Pax Romana*, a relatively peaceful time.

**Josephus:** Josephus was born to an aristocratic Jewish priestly family in A.D. 37 in Palestine. He was highly educated and became an important figure in Judean politics. When the Jewish war against Rome broke out in A.D. 66 (a war that would lead to the catastrophic fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70), Josephus was given charge of the Jewish forces in Galilee in the north. His troops were no match for the

Roman legions, however, who marched through the region with ease. Josephus later reported that when surrounded at the town of Jopata, his troops made a suicide pact to prevent the Romans from taking any prisoners. When the killing was nearly complete, Josephus and the one other remaining soldier agreed to surrender.

When brought before the conquering Roman general, Vespasian, Josephus revealed a prophecy from God that Vespasian would become emperor. Soon thereafter, when Nero committed suicide in A.D. 68, the imperial government was thrown into serious turmoil, with three different emperors appearing on the stage in less than a year (dispatched through assassinations and suicides). Eventually Vespasian's troops proclaimed him emperor. He marched to Rome, restored order, and settled in for a ten-year reign. As a reward for prophetic insight, Vespasian granted Josephus an annual stipend and appointed him to work as a court historian.

Josephus's literary projects over the course of his stay in Rome are important to posterity. He first produced a detailed account, in seven volumes, of the Jewish Wars. Then, some twenty years later, in the early 90s, he published his twenty-volume history of the Jewish people from the very beginning (Adam and Eve!) up to his own time, called *The Antiquities of the Jews*. Josephus wrote several other books that still survive, including a defense of Judaism against its cultured despisers and an autobiography. These books by a learned Jew from Palestine, produced with a full range of resources at his disposal, provide our fullest and best (and sometimes only) source of information for the history of the Jewish people (especially in Palestine) during the first century.

**Heinrich E. G. Paulus:** Heinrich Paulus was one of the major figures in German theological circles in the early part of the nineteenth century. Born in 1761, he developed a keen interest in Semitic languages at a young age. While still in his twenties, he was appointed a professor of "oriental" (i.e., Semitic) languages at the University of Jena; soon thereafter, he became a professor of biblical interpretation and theology. Most of his career was spent at the University of Heidelberg (1811–1844), where he held a chair in exegesis (= interpretation) and church history.

Paulus is best known for his two major studies of Jesus and the Gospels, which have never been translated into English: *Leben Jesu als Grundlage einer reinen Geschichte des Urchristenthums* (= *The Life of Jesus as the Foundation of a Pure History of Early Christianity*, 2 vols.) and

*Exegetisches Handbuch über die drei ersten Evangelien (= Handbook for the Interpretation of the First Three Gospels, 3 vols).*

In the first of these works, Paulus develops an “enlightened” understanding of the Gospel traditions about Jesus. He maintains that the miracle stories can best be explained by assuming that the disciples of Jesus misconstrued natural events that occurred during Jesus’ ministry, thinking that they involved supernatural events. In Paulus’s judgment, in no case did miracles actually occur; the disciples mistakenly thought they did.

**Albert Schweitzer:** Widely regarded as the greatest humanitarian of the twentieth century and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953, Albert Schweitzer is perhaps best remembered today as a medical missionary in French Equatorial Africa. Even before beginning his medical studies, though, Schweitzer was already renowned both as a prominent theologian and as a concert organist. Born in 1875 in Alsace, he studied at Strassburg, Berlin, and Paris. His area of theological expertise was the New Testament, and he wrote important books on Jesus’ preaching of the kingdom (1901) and on the apostle Paul (1911). By far his most important work was *Quest of the Historical Jesus* (German title: *Von Reimarus zu Wrede*; 1906), which discussed, with wit and penetrating insight, all previous attempts to write a life of Jesus. The book also criticized scholars from the beginning of the modern period (the end of the eighteenth century) to his own day for failing to recognize the importance of certain critical perspectives (e.g., that the Synoptics are better sources than John) and for overlooking the heavily apocalyptic component of Jesus’ message and mission. This was the most important early attempt to push for the view that Jesus was an apocalypticist who must be situated in his own first-century Jewish context. In rough outline, this view has dominated scholarly discussion ever since.

**David Friedrich Strauss:** David Friedrich Strauss was one of the pioneers of modern New Testament studies. Born in 1808, he studied theology and philosophy, first in Blaubeuren, then in Tübingen and Berlin. He was particularly trained in, and enamored by, the philosophical views of G. W. F. Hegel. At the remarkably young age of twenty-seven, Strauss wrote his revolutionary and massively influential study *Das Leben Jesu, kritisch bearbeitet* (= *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined*) in two volumes. In this detailed and erudite work, Strauss argued that earlier interpreters of the Gospels, whether traditionalists who subscribed to the supernatural or rationalists who did not, had all misperceived the true nature of the early accounts of Jesus’ life by thinking that they provided historical

documentation for what had really happened. For Strauss, the Gospels do not contain historical narratives but “myths,” i.e., history-like stories that evolved in early Christianity to relate the “truth” about who Jesus really was. These stories didn’t actually happen but nonetheless proclaim the Christian message.

The book created a storm of protest in the theological and academic communities. As a result of his views, Strauss was relieved of his duties as a professor at Tübingen and from then on, had difficulty landing a regular teaching post. In subsequent editions of the book, Strauss retracted some of his more radical views about Jesus but later returned to them. Embittered by the controversies over his work, he continued to write in philosophy, theology, and early Christianity (as well as politics and biography) until his death in 1874.

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