

Jesus Christ in the New Testament: Part One: The Historical Jesus behind the Gospels

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I. INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHOR OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS sums up his Christian faith with the memorable cry (13:8): "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever!" The "yesterday" and "today" of this cry express well both the strong point and the problem of Christian faith. For Christian faith is nothing if not a historical faith. It is inevitably anchored in the historical life and death of one particular Jew of the first century A.D., and yet the meaning of that life and that death has been reinterpreted countless times down through the centuries. The yesterday and the today of Christian faith must always stand in a certain tension or dialectic.

On the one hand, to change the object of Christian faith into a timeless archetype or a set of philosophical propositions for the sake of relevance is to lose what makes Christianity Christianity, namely, the concrete historical figure called Jesus Christ. The pagan historian Tacitus knew that much when he explained to his Roman audience the origin of the name "Christian" (*Annals* 15.44): "The originator of this name is Christ, who during the reign of Tiberius, had been executed by the procurator Pontius Pilate." Although Tacitus was wrong on one of the details—Pilate was prefect, not procurator of Judea—he was right about the big thing: no Christianity without Christ. Lose that historical mooring and you lose who you are.

On the other hand, the history of Christianity shows that this historical mooring always needs to be brought anew into contact with each gen-

eration of believers if it is to remain relevant. The New Testament itself witnesses to the changing and varied images of Jesus proposed by different Christian leaders later on in the first century. The dialectic expressed by Hebrews 13:8 was there from the beginning. Indeed, even in the first century we can distinguish two types of "yesterdays": the yesterday of the historical Jesus during his public ministry, as far as historians can reconstruct it, and the yesterday of the earliest interpretations of this Jesus, as articulated in the various writings that later came to be collected in the New Testament. These two yesterdays of the first century define the two essays on Jesus Christ that I offer to readers of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*. In this first essay, we will examine the ultimate historical mooring: the historical Jesus.¹ In the second we will move forward to the first interpretations of Jesus by different New Testament authors.

II. DEFINITION OF TERMS

What do we mean by the "historical" Jesus? A common definition of the historical Jesus is the Jesus we can recover and know by means of modern historical research applied to the ancient sources.² This Jesus, therefore, is a modern abstraction and construct. Unfortunately, some authors blithely interchange the adjectives "historical," "real," and "earthly" for this Jesus, but that only creates confusion.³ Jesus of Nazareth lived for some thirty-five or more years in first-century Palestine. Each of those years was no doubt filled with all sorts of experiences, words, and actions on his part. The real Jesus lived all those years and filled them with his reality. Yet of those thirty-five or so years all we can know are some two or three years, mostly toward the end of his life.

We must therefore face the fact that we are dealing with mere fragments of a life, fragments that we put together as best we can. Hence I use the label "historical" in a special sense—to remind us of the limited and hypothetical nature of this Jesus whom historians reconstruct. Such a fragmentary and "if-y" portrait could hardly claim to do justice to the whole reality that was Jesus of Nazareth. Nor can such a fragmentary reconstruction constitute the object of Christian faith today, for immediately we would have to ask: Whose historical Jesus is to serve as the

1. In doing this, I will be summarizing ever so briefly the results of the first two volumes of my trilogy: *A Marginal Jew. Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* and *Volume Two: Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1991, 1994). See also my essay "Dividing Lines in Jesus Research Today," *Interpretation* 50 (1996): 355-72.

2. See, for example, Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus. An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad/Seabury, 1979), 67-68.

3. This is a recurring problem in much of the literature emanating from the Jesus Seminar and its participants.

object of faith? Many of the great biblical scholars of the twentieth century have come up with diametrically opposed portraits of Jesus. By what right or on what grounds would believers choose one of the many competing reconstructions, only to drop it a few decades later for the new, improved model? Whose Jesus are they to choose: Albert Schweitzer's or Eduard Schweizer's? Rudolf Bultmann's or Günther Bornkamm's? John Meier's or John Dominic Crossan's?

To put the whole problem in a different way: many large universities contain both a department of history and a department of theology. Each department has its proper subject matter and its methods for dealing with its subject matter. Each has a right to examine Jesus of Nazareth according to its own methods. Now if the quest for the historical Jesus is to be truly historical, and not theology in disguise, then it must adhere to the methods and criteria of the history department and limit its judgments to what is verifiable according to the rules of empirical historical evidence. Consequently, whole areas of inquiry that are vital to and rightly treated by theology (for example, the divine and human natures of Jesus, the truly miraculous nature of some of his actions) are not the proper subject of empirical academic history. Academic history must stick to affirmations that can be tested and sifted by accepted historical criteria applied to historical sources. The basic problem with the quest for the historical Jesus in the last two centuries is that usually it has been a theological enterprise masquerading as a historical enterprise.

In other words, a believing Christian engaged in the quest for the historical Jesus must prescind for the time being from what he or she holds by faith. Of course, prescind does not mean deny; it does mean, however, that what is claimed to be known by faith cannot be called upon to adjudicate historical disputes. After the historical endeavor is over, there will be more than enough time to ask about correlations between historical findings and faith. But to attempt such correlations from the beginning would be to short-circuit the whole process. Hence, we shall remain militantly within the realm of academic historical inquiry, not theological reasoning. The first thing we must do, therefore, is examine the available sources and the criteria used to sift them for historical information about Jesus.

III. SOURCES

The major sources for reconstructing the historical Jesus are also the major problem, namely, the four Gospels found in the New Testament. While the Gospels do contain historical facts about Jesus, the Gospels are also suffused from start to finish with the Easter faith of the early church. To distinguish an original saying or deed of Jesus from a later Christian

creation can be difficult or at times impossible. By the way, the fact that *all* four Gospels are faith-documents reflecting later theology means that the Gospel of John is not to be rejected automatically in favor of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the so-called Synoptic Gospels. Although the sayings in John's Gospel have undergone massive reworking, some elements in John are more reliable than the parallel material in the Synoptics. Such, for example, is the case with the chronology of events in the final days of Jesus' life. Beyond the Gospels, Paul's letters preserve a historical tidbit here and there, but even these tidbits simply give independent confirmation of what is also found in the Gospels.

What about non-Christian sources outside the New Testament? The first-century Jewish historian Josephus mentions Jesus twice in his vast work, *The Jewish Antiquities* (20.9.1 §200; 18.3.3 §63-64). The longer passage, once stripped of later Christian additions, gives a brief summary of Jesus' ministry.⁴ It states that Jesus appeared during the tenure of Pontius Pilate (26-36 A.D.). Jesus is said to have been a wise man, a miracle worker, and a teacher who attracted many followers. On the accusation of some Jewish leaders, Pilate condemned him to the cross. But those who had been devoted to him continued their adherence, and so Josephus remarks with some bemusement that "the tribe of Christians, named after him, has not died out." This thumb-nail sketch confirms independently the basic picture of the four Gospels without providing any new details.

Scattered references from later rabbinic literature reflect polemics between Jews and Christians in subsequent centuries and contain no independent early tradition about Jesus. As I have already mentioned, Tacitus, writing about 110 A.D., makes brief mention of Jesus' execution. That about exhausts early independent witnesses to Jesus from Jews and pagans, and so we are thrown back upon our main but problematic sources, the four Gospels. To be sure, some scholars, especially those connected with the Jesus Seminar, have claimed that the Coptic *Gospel of Thomas* from the Nag Hammadi library represents an early and independent tradition about Jesus. Personally, I doubt this, since in a number of passages *Thomas* reflects the editorial changes that Luke or Matthew have made on Mark's text; in other words, the author of *Thomas* knew at least some of our written Gospels and used them to create his second-century collection of sayings.⁵

4. See my article "Jesus in Josephus: A Modest Proposal," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990): 76-103.

5. See *A Marginal Jew*, 1:123-41.

IV. CRITERIA

How can we hope to discern which material in the four Christian Gospels goes back to the historical Jew named Jesus? Scholars have devised a number of criteria (rules for making judgments) to identify the sayings and actions that come from the historical Jesus. Five criteria are especially useful:⁶

(1) The criterion of *embarrassment* focuses on actions or sayings of Jesus that would have created difficulty for the early church. Such material tended to be softened or suppressed in later stages of the Gospel tradition: for example, Jesus submitting to John the Baptist's baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, or Jesus' ignorance of the exact time of the last judgment.

(2) The criterion of *discontinuity* or dissimilarity focuses on those words or deeds of Jesus that cannot be derived from Judaism before him or Christianity after him: for example, Jesus' prohibition of fasting or taking oaths. Obviously, one must use this criterion with care. Jesus was a first-century Jew from whom flowed the early Christian movement. A total rupture with history before and after him is *a priori* unlikely. Hence one should be wary of claiming that certain sayings or actions of Jesus are unique and unparalleled in first-century Judaism. It is wiser to speak of what was strikingly characteristic of Jesus: for example, the use of "Abba" ("dear Father") to address God in prayer or the use of the affirmative word "Amen" at the beginning rather than the end of statements.

(3) The criterion of *multiple attestation* of sources and forms focuses on material witnessed by a number of different independent streams of early Christian tradition. The Gospel sources generally acknowledged by scholars are (i) the tradition used by Mark, (ii) a hypothetical collection of Jesus' sayings used by Matthew and Luke (which scholars label the Q document), (iii) special traditions found only in Matthew or Luke, and (iv) the very different sort of tradition used by John. In addition, Paul now and then provides a stray saying. The argument from multiple attestation is all the stronger when the different sources present the material in different literary forms. For example, Jesus' words over the bread and wine at the Last Supper are witnessed both in the passion narrative of Mark (14:22-24) and in liturgical instructions by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians (11:23-25).⁷ Jesus' prohibition of divorce is found in a short saying in the Q document (Luke 16:18), in a longer dispute story in Mark (10:2-12), and again in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (7:10-11).

(4) The criterion of *coherence* or consistency comes into play only after

6. See *ibid.*, 167-95.

7. See my article "The Eucharist at the Last Supper: Did It Happen?" *Theology Digest* 42 (1995): 335-51.

a certain amount of historical material has been isolated by using the previous criteria. Other sayings and deeds of Jesus that fit in well with the preliminary "data base" have a good chance of being historical: for example, sayings reflecting the imminent coming of the kingdom of God.

(5) Finally, the criterion of the *rejection* or execution of Jesus does not tell us directly what material is historical, but it does direct our attention to those words and deeds that would explain why Jesus met a violent end at the hands of the authorities. A bland Jesus, a literary theorist who spun riddles, or a benign moralist who never posed a threat to the powers that be could not be historical. Needless to say, all these criteria must be used in tandem as mutually self-correcting.

Throughout my two volumes of *A Marginal Jew*, and likewise in the third volume when it appears, I apply these criteria in detail to various sayings and actions of Jesus so as to construct ever-so-slowly, as if with the pieces of a mosaic, a fairly probable picture of this first-century Jew—perhaps the best we can hope for. Obviously, I cannot begin to repeat that exhaustive process in this essay. Instead, I will try, in broad strokes, to lay out for the reader the results of my study without rehearsing all the arguments.

V. BIRTH

Information about Jesus' birth is found only in the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke. These must be used with great care, since here in particular literary conventions from both the Old Testament and the pagan world have been used by Christian theology to make theological statements about Jesus. When sifted with care, though, the infancy narratives do supply some reliable information.⁸

We can say with fair probability that Jesus was born near the end of the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C. Most scholars suggest a date around 7 or 6 B.C. for Jesus' birth. Jesus' Hebrew name was *Yēšūʿac* or *Yēšū*, a shortened form of the Hebrew name *Yēhōšūʿac* (Joshua), which means "Yahweh helps." Jesus' mother was named Miriam (Mary); his putative father Joseph. The two infancy narratives place Jesus' birth at Bethlehem, but the rest of the Gospel narratives know only of Nazareth as his place of origin. Whether Bethlehem is simply a symbolic way of affirming that Jesus was descended from David is disputed; I incline toward Nazareth as his birthplace.

Most likely Jesus was thought by his contemporaries to be descended from King David.⁹ Jesus' Davidic descent is attested in different streams

8. See the great study of Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (updated edition; Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1993).

9. The arguments supporting this assertion can be found in *A Marginal Jew*, 1:216-19; see also "Dividing Lines," 363-66.

of New Testament tradition, and neither the title "Messiah" nor the title "King of the Jews" was necessarily tied to Davidic descent at the time. Both Hasmonians and Herodian rulers—neither group being Davidic—had borne the title "King of the Jews" around the turn of the era.

Being of the family of David and therefore of the tribe of Judah, Jesus would have been a layman in the eyes of his fellow Jews. It is only later Christian theology—and in the New Testament only, the Epistle to the Hebrews—that calls Jesus a priest.

VI. FORMATIVE YEARS, FAMILY, AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

Jesus spent over thirty years of his life in Nazareth, an obscure hill town in Lower Galilee. We know next to nothing of this period, despite the attempts of ancient and modern imagination to fill in the gaps with trips to Tibet, India, or Egypt. In the entire New Testament, one slim verse (Mark 6:3) is our only warrant for calling Jesus a carpenter or woodworker (*tektôn*). But since no discernible theological point is being scored by this designation, most scholars accept it as historical. Since Joseph, Jesus' legal father, is never on stage during the public ministry, most critics presume that he had already died. In contrast, Jesus' mother, Mary, is mentioned a number of times, as are four brothers, James (alias Jacob), Josès (alias Joseph), Jude (alias Judah), and Simon (alias Symeon). In keeping with an androcentric culture, sisters are mentioned but not named. While some of the brothers became prominent leaders later on in the Christian church, it appears that they did not believe in Jesus during his public ministry.

From early on theological debates have raged over the exact relation of these brothers to Jesus: true siblings, step-brothers, or cousins? If one prescind from later church teaching, the most likely position from a purely historical view is that they were his siblings. But one must admit that, if the quest for the historical Jesus is difficult, the quest for the historical relatives is nigh impossible.¹⁰

Curiously, an aside in one of Paul's arguments in 1 Corinthians 9:4 mentions that Jesus' brothers were married. In contrast, the New Testament says nothing about Jesus' marital status. One might presume that, like the vast majority of Jewish men of his day, he would have been married. However, from both Jewish and pagan sources we do hear of exceptional cases of religious celibates in Judaism. And, in the face of various references to Jesus' father, mother, brothers, and sisters, the total silence about a wife might be taken as an indication that Jesus remained unmar-

10. See my article "The Brothers and Sisters of Jesus in Ecumenical Perspective," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 54 (1992): 1-28.

ried. His unusual celibate status—and the jibes it occasioned—may be the original setting for his strange statement about men who make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:19). One should remember that the prophet Jeremiah (Jer. 16:1) accepted celibacy as part of his vocation as a prophet sent to announce judgment to Israel in a time of crisis—an interesting parallel to Jesus' prophetic vocation.

We know nothing of Jesus' formal education, if there was any. Theoretically, it is possible that Jesus was illiterate and acquired his knowledge of scripture simply through oral repetition. However, his acceptance by some Jews as a teacher (a "rabbi" in the loose, nontechnical sense of the word), a teacher who could expound and apply the scriptures to Jewish lives, plus his ability to argue with experts in the Law, incline me to think that he had received enough education at a local level to read the sacred texts in Hebrew. Ordinarily, Jesus would have spoken Aramaic since that was the common language of Galilean peasants. Greek would have been used at times by some Jewish peasants for commercial purposes, and Jesus may have known enough to "get by." That he regularly used it in his teaching is unlikely. All in all, there was nothing in his early life or educational background that prepared his fellow townspeople for the startling career he was soon to undertake: hence the shock that greeted him when he returned home after a preaching tour (Mark 6:1-6).

VII. BEGINNINGS OF THE MINISTRY

Sometime around the year 28 or 29 A.D., during the reign of the emperor Tiberius (14-37), the tenure as prefect of Pontius Pilate (26-36), and the high priesthood of Joseph Caiaphas (18-36), Jesus emerged from obscurity to respond to the preaching of an ascetic prophet who baptized people in the Jordan River. This prophet, called John the Baptist by Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* 18.5.2 §116-19) as well as by the New Testament, imitated the great prophets of old by summoning a sinful Israel to repentance. What made him different was that he used a once-and-for-all cleansing ritual (baptism) to symbolize the purification necessary to protect one from God's final fiery judgment, which was about to break in upon Israel. Hence John's message was, in the terminology of scholars, "eschatological." That is to say, Israel was living in the last days of the present order of things; soon God would come to judge his people once and for all and begin a new, permanent era of salvation.¹¹

The very fact that Jesus submitted to John's baptism shows that Jesus accepted the Baptist's mission and message. Jesus may have stayed for a while in the circle of the Baptist's disciples, and some of Jesus' first and

11. See *A Marginal Jew*, 2:19-233.

closest disciples (Peter, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael) may have been drawn from that circle. When Jesus left John's circle, he took over from his mentor both his eschatological message and his practice of baptizing. These borrowings may have occasioned some rivalry and hard feelings. In any event, the origin of Jesus' message and ministry in those of John the Baptist should make one suspicious of present-day attempts, especially by the Jesus Seminar, to eliminate the element of future eschatology in Jesus' preaching.¹² On one side of Jesus stands the fiery eschatology of John the Baptist, on the other side the fiery eschatology of Jesus' closest disciples in the earliest days of the church. A totally non-eschatological Jesus standing in between his mentor and his followers strains credulity.

VIII. JESUS' MESSAGE OF THE KINGDOM

While Jesus continued the eschatological preaching of the Baptist, there was a notable shift away from an emphasis on dire judgment and punishment and toward the joyful news of God coming to regather and save Israel in the end time. Against the tendency of Christian piety to stress Jesus' relation to the individual, we must remember that Jesus was a Jewish prophet seeking to address above all the whole people Israel. It was to Israel at the climax of its history and not to individuals in the privacy of their hearts that Jesus directed his message of the coming of the kingdom of God. Since "kingdom of God" was not a set term in Israelite prophecy before Jesus, and since the phrase was not a favorite theme of Christian preaching outside the Gospels, it seems that Jesus himself purposely chose this phrase to sum up what was special about his message.

What did Jesus mean by the kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is better described than defined. It is an allusive, multi-layered symbol that points not to a static, spatial kingdom but to a dynamic action, to the whole story of God coming in power as king in the last days.¹³ Jesus proclaimed that God was coming soon to regather the scattered tribes of Israel and to establish his kingly rule over them once and for all. But in the typical clash of metaphors that Jesus enjoyed to exploit in his parables, the God who comes to Israel reveals himself surprisingly not as a remote king and fearsome judge but as a loving, merciful father embracing his prodigal son, as a shepherd seeking his lost sheep.

Jesus hammered home his message of the kingdom with many forms of speech taken from the wisdom and prophetic tradition of Israel, in-

12. See, for example, John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 227-302; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 1-21.

13. See, for example, the essays in Bruce Chilton, ed., *The Kingdom of God* (Issues in Religion and Theology 5; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Wendell Willis, ed., *The Kingdom of God in 20th-Century Interpretation* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987).

cluding beatitudes, woes, and oracles. Most striking was his use of parables (in Hebrew, *mēšālīm*).¹⁴ In the Old Testament the parable, as used by the prophets, was an extremely elastic form of speech that covered short proverbs, metaphors, taunts, reproaches, oracles, and short stories—usually involving some kind of comparison. In some of the prophets, especially Ezekiel, the parable became an enigmatic allegory arising out of a historical crisis and pointing to a future act of God. Continuing this tradition, Jesus used parables in their many forms to call Israel to decision in the final, critical period of its history. He employed these mysterious sayings and stories to tease the minds of his audience into active thought, to knock his cocky hearers off balance, to destroy their false sense of security, and to open their eyes to the crisis they faced.

Scholars continue to debate which parables come from Jesus himself and which from the early church. While most parables lack multiple attestation of sources, we can speak of a multiple attestation of certain basic themes that keep recurring through different parables in different sources. To summarize: with a tone of urgency, the parables warn that delay is dangerous, for any moment may be too late. Jesus' audience must risk all on a decision to accept and act on his message. No sacrifice is too great, for soon the present conditions of this sinful world will be reversed—a theme also heard in the beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-23). The sorrowful will be made happy, the hungry will be fed to the full, namely, by God on the last day.

Far from pleasant Sunday-school stories, Jesus' parables were at times violent verbal attacks on the whole religious world presumed by his audience. These parables promised a radical reversal of values, a revolution wrought by God, not humans. In fact, the parables did not simply speak about this new world of the kingdom that was coming; they already communicated something of the kingdom to those who allowed themselves to be drawn into Jesus' metaphorical world, who allowed their lives to be turned around or converted. In this sense the parables themselves made real in the present something of the future salvation of the kingdom that Jesus proclaimed.

IX. JESUS' DEEDS OF THE KINGDOM

The experience of the future kingdom in the present moment was not just something Jesus proclaimed in words. He also acted out his message

14. For an introduction into the vast area of parables research, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New Testament Library; London: SCM, 1963); Charles E. Carlston, *The Parables of the Triple Tradition* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988); Bernard Brandon Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

in two striking ways:

(1) Jesus dramatized his message of God welcoming sinners home into the Israel of the last days by choosing to associate and eat with the social and religious "low life" of his day, the toll collectors and sinners. No doubt this offended those who identified the renewal of Israel with stringent observance of the laws of ritual purity. Jesus instead emphasized the joyful message that the eschatological banquet was at hand, a banquet anticipated in the meals he shared with the religiously marginalized. In keeping with this festive mood, he ordered his disciples not to practice voluntary fasting. His nonascetic ways not only distinguished him from the Baptist but also exposed him to ridicule from the more conventionally devout. To them he was a *bon vivant*, "an eater and wine-drinker, a friend of toll collectors and sinners" (Matt. 11:19).

(2) The coming kingdom was also made present by Jesus' startling deeds of power that we label "miracles."¹⁵ I must stress here that I am not claiming that Jesus actually performed miracles. That is a judgment proper to faith and theology. What the historian can say is that, during his own lifetime, and not simply later on in the church's preaching, Jesus and his followers—and at times even his opponents—believed that he worked miracles. This miracle tradition is widely attested in all the strata of the Gospel traditions and is confirmed independently by Josephus. The significance of these supposed miracles for Jesus' mission is twofold. (a) First, the miracles of healing and exorcism were not just kind deeds performed for poor individuals. Like Jesus' table fellowship with sinners, they were concrete manifestations of God coming in power to Israel in the end time. Jesus defended his exorcisms with the claim: "If by the finger of God I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20). The healing and liberation of a sick and imprisoned Israel that the prophets had promised for the last days was now a reality. (b) But even more important is the implicit claim that Jesus makes by presenting himself as an eschatological prophet who was also a miracle worker. In the Old Testament only Moses, Elijah, and Elisha perform a whole series of miracles. Only Elijah and Elisha are said to have raised the dead, and only Elijah the prophet was expected to return in the last days to regather a scattered Israel. By his eschatological message bound together with his miracles, Jesus the prophet in effect was taking on himself the mantle of Elijah. He was identifying himself as the Elijah-like prophet that God was to send to gather Israel in the last days. Once again Jesus was indicating that the future kingdom was in some way already present in his ministry.

15. See my treatment in *A Marginal Jew*, 2:509-1038.

X. VARIOUS TYPES OF FOLLOWERS AND COMPETING GROUPS

Jesus' call to Israel met with different reactions resulting in different types of followers. Using the rough image of three concentric circles, we may distinguish three kinds of followers around Jesus. An outer circle was made up of the nondescript crowds, all those who followed Jesus physically at least for a while. They were large enough to make the authorities nervous enough to do away with Jesus. The middle circle was made up of disciples, a special group called directly by Jesus to follow him literally, physically, and long term, at the cost of leaving home and family and of exposing oneself to hardship and hostility. Most striking in this regard are the women followers whom Jesus allowed into his traveling entourage, a departure from custom that many pious people probably found shocking. Allied with these disciples was a group of sedentary supporters who offered Jesus hospitality during his travels. From the middle circle of disciples Jesus chose an inner circle called the Twelve, a symbolic embodiment of Jesus' eschatological message. As Israel arose in the beginning from twelve patriarchs who begot twelve tribes, so in this end time Jesus chose twelve Israelites to symbolize and begin the regathering of the twelve tribes of Israel. It was for this purpose that Jesus sent the Twelve out on a brief mission to Israel during his public ministry. Jesus was not interested in founding a new movement or sect within Israel; he wished to begin the regathering of all Israel in view of the coming kingdom. Hence Jesus had little direct contact with individual gentiles during his ministry; they were not his major concern. God would take care of the gentiles when he came in his kingdom.

Naturally, as with the Old Testament prophets, not all reactions to Jesus were positive. Probably many Israelites remained indifferent to yet another movement among the many that had sprung up in Palestine around the turn of the era. Most Palestinian Jews, poor peasants and artisans, were devoted to the basic tenets and practices of their religion, but had no time for or interest in the special movements such as the Essenes, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees. While these groups are highlighted by Josephus, none of them was the single dominant force in Israel in Jesus' day. Let us look quickly at each of these groups.

Faced with the endless speculation fired by the discoveries at Qumran, we must remember that the New Testament never mentions the Essenes or Qumran. Intriguing parallels have been drawn between Essene beliefs and Jesus' teachings, but they are best explained as natural similarities between two eschatological movements in Palestinian Judaism at the turn of the era. Jesus' lack of concern with the minute details of legal observance was the direct opposite of Qumran's extremely stringent observance of the Law. And Jesus' outreach to all Israel, including toll collectors and sinners, was diametrically opposed to Qumran's sectarian

withdrawal into a separate community of the pure. This physical separation may be one reason why the Qumranites never appear on stage in the Gospels; most probably they never interacted with Jesus.

In contrast, the Gospels present the Pharisees as regularly interacting with Jesus, usually in disputes. Unfortunately, determining who the Pharisees were in the early first century is rife with problems since we have no literature directly from them, as we do from Qumran.¹⁶ The Gospels, Josephus, and especially the rabbinic material all portray the Pharisees from the viewpoint of a later date and later agendas. One should not presuppose that the Pharisees were identical with or were the direct forebears of the later rabbis.

At a minimum we can say that the Pharisees were a voluntary religious movement within Palestinian Judaism that sought reform through careful, detailed interpretation of the Mosaic Law. A predominately lay group, they stressed stringent observance of laws concerning ritual purity, the Sabbath, and tithing. They favored the relatively new Jewish belief in a future life and the resurrection of the body. Their presence in many different layers of Gospel tradition indicates that they did engage in disputes with Jesus and his alternate eschatological vision for Israel. But some of the stories about the Pharisees in the Gospels reflect the conflict between them and the early church and probably do not go back to the historical Jesus. This subsequent conflict has left behind in the Gospels a highly polemical view of the Pharisees that should not be taken as sober historical reporting. Moreover, it should be stressed that the earliest layers of the passion narratives in the Gospels do not associate the Pharisees as a group with Jesus' execution.

We know still less about the Sadducees, and what we know comes only from their enemies. Another voluntary group within Judaism, the Sadducees disagreed with their competitors, the Pharisees, over questions of ritual purity; they also rejected the idea of resurrection and a future life. A relatively small group, they possessed some wealth and political influence, and seem to be represented among the lay and priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem. However, not all aristocrats or priests—including the high priests—were necessarily Sadducees. In the Gospels the Sadducees are mentioned rarely. The only time Jesus engaged in direct debate with them was when he defended belief in the resurrection against their skepticism (Mark 12:18-27). Here, at least, Jesus found himself on the side of the Pharisees.

16. On the Pharisees and other competing groups, see Anthony J. Saldarini, *Pharisees, Scribes and Sadducees in Palestinian Society* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1988); Anthony J. Saldarini, "Pharisees," *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:289-303.

XI. JESUS' RELATION TO THE MOSAIC LAW

Vis-à-vis these religious movements and Palestinian Jews in general, Jesus would have stood out because of his teaching about the two defining institutions of Judaism: the Mosaic Law and the Jerusalem temple. As for the Mosaic Law, one must stress against any talk about abrogation of the Law that for Jesus, as for any religious Jew, the Mosaic Law was the given—quite literally, given by God. The total abrogation of the Mosaic Law would simply be unthinkable for a religiously-minded Palestinian Jew. Various Jewish groups debated their individual interpretations of the Law, but the existence of the Law itself was not open to question. Hence, nowhere in the earliest Gospel traditions do we find Jesus saying anything about abolishing the Law as a whole.

What we do find is Jesus' own approach to interpreting the Law, one that understandably created conflict with competing religious movements. To be sure, some aspects of Jesus' characteristic emphases would not have caused great opposition. For example, Jesus emphasized unrestricted love of God and neighbor, indeed, even love of enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). This emphasis flowed from Jesus' eschatological message: the radical love and forgiveness that God was showing his people in the end time must be imitated by all those who wanted to share in the coming kingdom. Once again something of the future kingdom was to be made real even now—not only in miracles or parables but also in the moral lives of Jesus' followers.

Now none of this would in itself have created difficulties for other religious Jews. However, Jesus' focus on the centrality of love, compassion, and forgiveness was matched by a relative lack of concern about the details of ritual purity or Sabbath observance over which the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes debated. Jesus' interpretation of the Law was radical in the sense that it both reached back to appeal to God's original intent in giving the Law and reached down into the depths of human hearts to emphasize purity of intention. Sometimes this radicalization simply deepened or broadened the thrust of the Law. For instance, Jesus equated angry words with murder and impure thoughts with adultery (Matt. 5:21-30). While this might sound extreme or unrealistic, such teaching would not alienate large numbers of his fellow Jews. But at times Jesus' radical interpretation reached the point of apparently rescinding individual obligations and institutions imposed or permitted by the Law. For example, Jesus forbade divorce and the taking of an oath (Matt. 5:31-37), and he bade one of his followers to ignore the sacred obligation to bury his father in order to follow Jesus without delay (Matt. 8:21-22). Some scholars even think that Jesus rejected the distinction between clean and unclean foods (Mark 7:14-23), though this is disputed. Other scholars see this rejection as a creation of the early church as it pur-

sued its mission to the gentiles.

One sees, then, the problem: within a basic context of accepting and affirming the Law as God's Word to Israel, Jesus took it upon himself to decide that certain individual precepts or institutions in the Law were to be rejected. Worse still, Jesus made no attempt to defend his teaching by appealing to the tradition of revered sages before him or by claiming, like the Old Testament prophets, that "the word of the Lord came to me, saying ..." Rather, Jesus, as a true charismatic, claimed to know directly, intuitively, God's will for Israel in the end time. His claim is well summed up in his characteristic introductory phrase, "Amen, I say to you." Such an extraordinary claim would have disturbed not just Pharisees or Sadducees but many ordinary Jews devoted to the Law.

At this point one sees the futility of trying to classify Jesus neatly within one of the parties or factions of first-century Judaism. He shared various points with various movements, but the overall configuration of his views was unique.

XII. THE TEMPLE AND JESUS' LAST DAYS IN JERUSALEM

As with the Law, so with the Jerusalem temple, Jesus' attitude was complex. On the one hand, Jesus regularly went up to Jerusalem for the great feasts and used the temple as the best place to preach to the crowds. (In this the picture of Jesus' journeys in John's Gospel seems more accurate than that of the Synoptics.) On the other hand, during his last visit to Jerusalem, Jesus performed a prophetic action in the temple which helped to seal his fate. But for this we must turn to the question of Jesus' last days.

In the spring of 30 A.D. (or possibly 33), Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem for his final Passover. As he entered the ancient capital of King David, he apparently chose to make a symbolic claim to messianic status by riding in on a donkey amid the acclamation of his followers (multiple attestation of Mark 11:1-10 and John 12:12-19), thus evoking the memory of a prophecy by Zechariah (9:9) about a righteous, victorious, yet peaceful king entering Jerusalem on a donkey. Jesus followed up this symbolic entry with a symbolic action in the temple, disrupting the selling and buying of sacrificial animals (multiple attestation of Mark 11:15-17 and John 2:13-17). While this so-called cleansing of the temple has often been interpreted as a call for reform of the temple and a purer worship, in the context of Jesus' eschatological message it more likely symbolized the end of the old order, including the temple. These two symbolic actions of Jesus may have been the reason why the priestly aristocracy chose to arrest Jesus during this particular visit to Jerusalem, as opposed to his earlier stays. Jesus himself chose to press the issue, forcing the authorities to

make a decision for or against him.

Various sayings in the Gospels that probably go back to Jesus show that he reckoned with the possibility of a violent death (Matt. 23:37-39; Luke 13:31-33; Mark 10:35-40; 8:32-33; 12:1-12). Actually, granted his own provocative actions, Jesus would have had to have been a simpleton not to have foreseen the possibility of an untimely end. More to the point, Jesus saw himself as the eschatological prophet, and Jewish piety had increasingly come to view the Old Testament prophets as rejected figures and often as martyrs. The martyrdom of the Baptist, Jesus' mentor, turned this theology into an uncomfortably close reality.

That Jesus did reckon with the possibility of imminent death is confirmed by the final solemn meal—what we call the Last Supper—which he held with his intimate disciples. Sensing that he might not live to celebrate the regular Passover meal, Jesus held this farewell meal on Thursday evening, as the 14th of Nisan (the Day of Preparation) began. (Here John's chronology, as opposed to that of the Synoptics, is probably correct.) At the beginning and end of the meal respectively, Jesus used bread and wine to represent his body and his blood, that is to say, his whole life given and poured out in death for the sake of his people (multiple attestation of Mark 14:22-24 and 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Thus did Jesus symbolize his acceptance of this strange *dénouement* as a part of God's mysterious will for bringing the kingdom to Israel and restoring the covenant made at Sinai. Even to his death, Jesus saw his mission as the regathering and saving of all Israel, his blood "poured out for the many." In a profound sense, this supper was indeed the *last*—the last and climactic supper in a whole series of meals Jesus had shared with his disciples and sinners alike, meals that had been channels of God's forgiveness and salvation to Israel. This last meal served as a pledge that, despite the apparent failure of his mission, God would vindicate Jesus beyond death and bring him and his followers to the eschatological banquet. Hence Jesus insisted that the disciples all perform the unusual act of drinking from *his* cup, not their own cups. He was calling them to hold fast to their fellowship with him even in death, so that they might share his victory when the kingdom fully came.

XIII. ARREST, TRIAL, AND DEATH

After the supper Jesus led his disciples to a small plot of land on or at the foot of the Mount of Olives called Gethsemane ("olive press" or "oil vat").¹⁷ There he was arrested by an armed band assisted by Judas, one of

17. For a full treatment of the passion narratives, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Death of the Messiah*, 2 vols. (Anchor Bible Reference Library; New York: Doubleday, 1994).

the Twelve. The arresting group was probably under the control of the high priest Joseph Caiaphas, though Caiaphas most likely would have kept Pilate informed on what was being planned for the Galilean troublemaker. Faced with arrest, Jesus rejected armed resistance, and his disciples fled in ignominious disarray.

What happened next is difficult to say, since the Gospels disagree among themselves. In my view, the Gospel of John plus Josephus give us the most likely scenario. During Thursday night an informal hearing was held by Caiaphas and some of his advisers, at the end of which Jesus was handed over to Pilate. During the high priest's hearing, Peter, who had followed the arrested Jesus at a distance, was confronted by some servants and in a panic denied knowing Jesus.

Early on Friday morning, the 14th of Nisan, Pilate held a speedy and informal trial and condemned Jesus to crucifixion, the Roman execution used for slaves, bandits, and revolutionaries. The charge was claiming to be the King of the Jews. Whatever the religious disputes between Jesus and the priests, Pilate would have been concerned only with political repercussions. In light of Jesus' Davidic lineage, his constant talk about a coming kingdom, his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, and his symbolic action in the temple, the Nazarene's words and deeds could easily have been interpreted by Pilate as indicators of another upstart Jew trying to seize power in Judea.

It must be stressed that the Roman prefect was the person directly responsible for Jesus' crucifixion. Cooperating with him was Caiaphas and the councilors around him, for Rome often preferred to govern subject populations through the local aristocracy. Needless to say, the local aristocrats maintained in power by Rome were not a representative, still less a democratic, regime. One would like to think that in our day it is unnecessary to emphasize that responsibility for cooperating with Pilate must fall on this small group of aristocrats in Jerusalem and not on the whole of the Jewish people of the time, to say nothing of subsequent generations. Sadly, such a disclaimer is still necessary and sometimes still not heeded.

After the usual scourging (a cruel mercy meant to hasten death), a crossbeam was laid on Jesus' shoulders, but so weakened was Jesus that one Simon from Cyrene had to be pressed into service to help carry the beam. The crucifixion took place outside the city walls at Golgotha (Skull Place), possibly an abandoned quarry. Whether Jesus was tied or nailed to the cross is not specified, although nails are mentioned in some of the Gospels' resurrection appearances. Various sayings of Jesus from the cross are recorded in different Gospels, but all of them, including the famous cry of abandonment (Mark 15:34; see Ps. 22:2), may come from later Christian interpretation. Besides Simon of Cyrene, the only sympathetic

witnesses on Golgotha were some female followers from Galilee. The placing of Jesus' mother and the beloved disciple at the cross (John 19:25-27) is probably a symbolic addition by John's Gospel.

Although crucified criminals sometimes lingered for days, Jesus' death occurred relatively quickly. A hasty burial was necessary especially because at sundown (the beginning of Saturday, the 15th of Nisan), Pass-over would coincide that year with the Sabbath. In the absence of close relatives, Jesus' corpse might have been disposed of unceremoniously in a common grave. But Joseph of Arimathea, an influential Jewish official, interceded with Pilate and obtained the body for (temporary?) burial in a tomb nearby. Some of the women at the cross witnessed the preparations for burial, though the only constant name at both cross and tomb is Mary Magdalene. The account of setting a guard at the sealed tomb must be judged a later creation of Jewish-Christian debates.

XIV. CONCLUSION

With the burial, the quest for the historical Jesus comes to an end. Since the historical Jesus, a modern construct, is by definition the Jesus who is open to empirical investigation by any and all observers, the risen Jesus lies outside the scope of the quest. This is not to say that the resurrection of Jesus is not real. It is simply to recognize the limitations of modern historical research. In its essence the resurrection of Jesus is an event that transcends time and space; it is something that happens between Jesus and God, not Jesus and this world.

There is a positive point to our ending abruptly with Jesus' death and thus creating a sense of incompleteness. It reminds us that the story of Jesus does continue, but in a different way, with Jesus no longer the proclaimer but the one proclaimed in the preaching of his followers. The various interpretations of Jesus' person and work by these followers, that is to say, the different christologies found in the New Testament, will be the subject of my second essay, which will follow in a subsequent issue of *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought*.