

## **PART 4: Jesus, and the Early Church**

### **Chapter 4.01 About Jesus**

The story of early Christianity is at least four stories:

(1) What Jesus really said and did, what really happened in his life, and what he thought about his mission here. We cannot know the majority of this story now, including some that is most important. This part of the book gives as much as I have been able to figure out from reading the latest scholarship.

(2) How the prophet Jesus became the god “Christ”. Whether or not Jesus was really God, we need to know how the idea got across to Christians, how various Christians and non-Christians understood it, and how it developed. We need to know how the idea of Jesus-as-the-god-Christ came to overshadow his message, and how his message was preserved along with the idea of his divinity.

(3) The early Church modified the history of Jesus, the message of Jesus, and relations among followers of Jesus, all to suit its needs. For example, it went from egalitarian and not-very-sexist to stratified and patriarchal. The changes might or might not have been in line with what Jesus wanted. The third story is what happened, in particular (a) how the Church guided the change of Jesus into the god Christ, (b) how early Christians lived ordinary life after they realized that a great world change was not imminent, and (c) how the early Church shaped the New Testament.

(4) What happened between Christians and Jews, in particular why they came to be opponents, how Christians came to denigrate Jews, and how attitudes about Jews shaped the writing of the New Testament.

Each of these tasks requires several books. I focus on the first task while making a few comments on the other topics that are relevant to the first topic.

The real story of Jesus differs from the New Testament. The differences are not huge but they are enough to matter. I repeat that debunking traditional faith is not my intent. My intent is to offer a reasonable version of Jesus’ history to modern people who accept their debt to his moral teachings. I tell the story by selecting from the New Testament and from related literature of early Christianity.

#### **The New Testament.**

The New Testament was written in Greek, not English, Hebrew, Latin, German, or French. The King James (Authorized) Version is not the original version of the Bible. Some parts of the New Testament were derived from lists of the sayings and acts of Jesus; some lists were originally in Aramaic (a language similar to Syrian and related to Hebrew). Jesus spoke mostly Aramaic.

The New Testament is not literally “gospel truth” nor was it originally intended to be literal truth. Jesus died around 30-36 CE (AD). Paul’s letters were probably written in the decade of 50-60 CE. The gospels

were not written until after 65 CE, and none of the writers had known Jesus personally. Other parts of the New Testament were written as late as 120 CE. The gospels and the letters were written at a time when groups of followers were arguing among themselves, and when followers of Jesus were arguing with Jews. Because Jesus spoke Aramaic, none of his words in the New Testament are original to him (unless he actually said some few phrases in Greek). It is not clear how close his words in the New Testament are to what he really said. Jesus did not say all that comes out of his mouth in the gospels. Of what he really did say, it is not clear if the New Testament Greek reflects the original Aramaic well. He said important things that are left out. The gospel writers edited almost everything they used even if the sources originally were Jesus' words. His words were cut short, and other words added. His words were taken out of context. His words were put in new contexts. Jesus is credited with acts that he did not do. Acts that he did do were not reported or not reported accurately. Events were retold to reinforce whatever point the writer wished to make. The order of events was changed to serve the writer so that real events did not happen in the order given in the gospels. The gospels disagree on the order of events and on what happened within events. The writers have Jesus claim things about himself that he never claimed. Rather than reflecting conflicts that Jesus had with Pharisees, Scribes, and other Jews, most episodes of conflict in the gospels have more to do with disputes among followers of Jesus, and disputes between Jews and followers of Jesus. There is not a single clear unambiguous basic text for the New Testament but instead many variant texts that agree in most places but not all places. Many passages are hard to understand in the original Greek and hard to translate with one clear meaning, so that several variant meanings are possible in translations. That is why there can be many English versions. Any reading of the New Testament, in Greek or in translation, is also an interpretation. We have to be careful when citing the New Testament as evidence.

Modern scholars have to assess each phrase. Did Jesus say those words? If he did, what was the original context? If he said approximately those words, can we guess at the real words, real meaning, and real context? If he did not say those words, is the idea still in line with his style, probable intent, mostly-was, or all-about? If he did not say those words, why did the writer put them in his mouth? The same warnings are true about his acts. What point was the writer making about Christianity and Christians?

Some of the words and acts in the New Testament that are not from Jesus still express his intent and/or express good religious insight. I almost cried when I learned that Luke rather than Jesus might have originated the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son; but they are still great examples of what Jesus is all about and still among the best statements of religion ever written. I believe Jesus said something like them. Even if he did not, they express great truths that belong now to Christianity and to the world.

This use of Jesus by New Testament writers was not lying by the standards at the time. It was accepted then to put words in the mouth of a great person, to use his-her words out of context, and to invent contexts and incidents, so as to make a point that the writer considered important. For at least the first hundred years after the gospels were written, at least some readers would have taken them in that light rather than as literal truth. Ancient practice is like using an idealized Curt Kobain to explain the 1990s. Think of "biopics" such as "A Beautiful Mind", "The Doors", or "Ray". We should not judge New Testament writers by our standards but rather take them in their context and work with that.

For a few hundred years after Jesus, influential writings about him included more than is now in the New Testament. The early Church did not distinguish between what we now call the New Testament versus other important writings about Jesus. The early Church did not take any of the writings as literally as do modern standard churches. It did take the writings more literally than I do. Gradually the early Church took the writings about Jesus as almost literal, probably to thwart people who used the writings to launch strange speculation. The Church became committed to treating words as literal that were not meant literally. The Church tried to find the proper balance between allegory and literality but for safety it erred on the side of being literal. The New Testament was assembled out of a mass of existing writings in that climate. The Church selected some writing to serve as the basis for the new religion. It declared those writings, and only those writings, to be the product of the Holy Spirit. We should use our judgment in how literally to take the New Testament and how to interpret it.

Scholars argue a lot over these topics. The suggested readings at the end of this book give you a range of books, many of which assess particular passages so that you can decide for yourself. A few books give lists of what Jesus said, might have said, and did not say, the contexts, his acts, and his possible intent.

I do not argue as a biblical scholar. I do not assess evidence. That is another kind of book. I use passages that I think are from Jesus, reflect his style or intent, or show an important truth even if they came after Jesus. I avoid misleading passages.

Even though the New Testament is not literal truth and was not intended to be literal truth in the modern sense, it might still be true enough and still be the Word of God. It might be what God wanted us to know. It might be the words that God wanted us to have about Jesus. It might be what the Holy Spirit guided into creation. If you want to think of the New Testament as the Word of God in this sense, then you need to understand the history of the New Testament and you need to explain the meaning, consistency, and inconsistency of all passages in the New Testament.

### **John the Baptist.**

John was a prophet who reached his peak at the time Jesus was just starting out, around 25-32 CE (AD). The movement around John was much larger than the movement around Jesus while Jesus was still alive. Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, killed John in about 29-32 CE, a year or more before Jesus died. John's followers continued on after his death. John still has many tens of thousands of followers in the Near East, known as Mandeans.

John was the teacher and predecessor of Jesus. We cannot understand Jesus unless we first understand John. Jesus stayed with John probably for at least several months, perhaps a year, probably not much more. Jesus started his own mission right after he left John. Probably outsiders originally saw Jesus' movement as a breakaway from John's movement. Some modern writers think Jesus and John might have argued but I see little evidence. Jesus' followers might have argued with John's followers over who was the true herald of the Kingdom of God and about the correct behavior of the herald and his followers.

John was sure the Kingdom of God was about to arise, and wished as many Jews as possible to be part

of the new Israel. I do not know exactly what he thought about the Kingdom of God. John probably did not have any well-structured plan for the Kingdom of God. He likely did not think of it in political terms as an alternative to the Jewish aristocracy and the Romans.

John called on Jews to repent their sins, probably both to bring in the Kingdom of God and to allow Jews to participate in the Kingdom when it arrived. To show their repentance and freedom from sin, John ritually washed repentant Jews, sometimes in the Jordan River. Ritual bathing was part of Jewish tradition but had never been used on a large scale as John used it, never to wash away sins with as little preparation as John did, and not to bring in the Kingdom of God. Until John, people thought they needed priests and particular rituals to be absolved of sin and to become ritually pure again. John allowed people to feel clean and pure without need of priests or elaborate rituals. John gave all the people direct access to holiness and to God.

John taught people to be honest and forthright. Officials should only carry out their duties and should not use their office for gain. Tax officials should only collect the right amount of taxes. Soldiers should not bully. If everyone behaved properly, the world would be changed into the Kingdom of God.

John sustained the Law but John did not promote mainstream ideas about Jewish ethnicity and Jewish privilege. The New Testament reports that some Jews challenged John once, saying that Jews did not need John to achieve holiness, purity, or the Kingdom of God because they were Jews, children of God, heirs of the covenant, and guaranteed God's privilege. John retorted that God could make Jews (children of Abraham) even out of the stones if he wished. John did not expect God to make new heirs out of stones. Rather he meant that Jewish identity alone was not enough, and the normal channels to holiness and purity were not enough. People needed to repent in their hearts and to act as God wished. Any Jew who repented and who acted as God wished would be holy enough and pure enough to enter the Kingdom. That person would be a true child of Abraham, true Jew, and true child of God. Thus John stressed intent over ritual action.

People got the mistaken idea they would enter the Kingdom of God if they were baptized but would be denied entry if they were not. I doubt John taught this idea or Jesus taught this idea either. I do not know if Jesus baptized people after he left John but Jesus' followers did baptize much as John had done. Christians later took up the idea that baptism meant entry while not being baptized meant denial but changed the idea to mean that proper baptism meant salvation while not being baptized meant damnation. I believe any mechanical-magical reliance on baptism, and the Christian interpretation of baptism, are both mistakes. I find it hard to understand the mistakes when John and Jesus were so clear about the role of intent and so clear that God would not rely on external ceremonies.

John was austere. He fasted often, ate simple food, and wore simple clothes made from coarse local material, rather like Gandhi or like an Indian "ryshi". He called people away from everyday life, at least for a while. In contrast, Jesus did not think that austerity alone was enough or even necessary. Jesus ate reasonably well; drank wine; laughed; consorted with rich people, prostitutes, and other sinners; and went to parties. Jesus wanted to find holiness and ritual purity in the middle of everyday life. If people could not find holiness in everyday life, then there was little hope for the Kingdom. I do not know if this difference with John caused Jesus to leave John. I do not know if Jesus became discouraged with John's idea of the Kingdom because John had had his chance in his way and his way had not worked, so Jesus

wanted to try another way.

Jesus was like Siddhartha the Buddha when Siddhartha denied the need for strict asceticism and instead took the Middle Path. In seeking to find holiness in the middle of everyday life, Jesus is like a Taoist adept or some Mahayana Buddhists. I do not stress any of this similarity here.

John probably did not think he would be the one to usher in the Kingdom of God or to control the Kingdom. John did not think of himself as the prophesied messiah. He did not see himself as a political messiah. John likely expected someone to come after him who would usher in the Kingdom and would administer the Kingdom as an agent of God. It is not clear if he thought his actions prepared the way for the coming person(s) or how his actions might prepare the way other than by the repentance of the Jews. It is not clear if John thought of the coming person as a messiah, as the Davidic messiah, or in terms of any messianic ideas. It is not clear what role the "Son of Man" might have played in John's ideas but I have seen no evidence the "Son of Man" played any role. John's followers might have thought John was the coming person or the messiah. During the time that Jesus was with John, Jesus might have gotten the idea that he, Jesus, was the coming person but I see no clear evidence. Jesus' understanding of the situation might have been part of any argument between John's followers and Jesus' followers even after both of them were dead.

The Jewish aristocracy killed John from fear of his popularity. They did not kill John because John offered the people direct access to God and so bypassed the clergy, putting the clergy out of work; the clergy never thought John's movement would erode the devotion of the people to the Temple and them. John was not a threat to organized religion. John was a possible threat to the normal socio-political calm necessary for power relations. John was a peaceful man who had no interest in hurting the Jewish or Roman governments. But John was not under control. So although John was peaceful, his popularity might have led to public disturbance, might have led Rome to suppress the disturbance and his movement, and so might have led Rome indirectly to hurt the Jewish aristocracy. If Rome acted against John, the people would blame the Jewish aristocracy for not defending John. If John's movement caused a disturbance, Rome would blame the aristocracy for allowing John to flourish; then Rome would kill John and punish the aristocracy, and the people would still blame the aristocracy anyway. The aristocracy figured it was better to kill John before he became a problem. Probably the same thing happened to Jesus.

### **The Story of Jesus.**

Jesus was born between 8 BCE and 3 BCE in the last days of King Herod the First.

Jesus died between 30 CE and 38 CE in Jerusalem. He was crucified.

Jesus was born in Galilee. Jesus was not born in Bethlehem. Joseph and Mary did not go to Bethlehem to take part in a census. Herod did not send soldiers to kill the children of the village in the hope of killing the future king. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus did not flee to Egypt and return. Mary was not related to Elizabeth, the fictive mother of John the Baptist. Jesus and John the Baptist probably were not related.

Jesus was the first child of Mary. Mary and Joseph were not married when Jesus was born. Joseph likely was not the father of Jesus. We do not know the human father of Jesus. If Jesus' biological father was God, we face other problems that I talked about in previous chapters. God was not Jesus' biological father. Thus it makes no sense to talk of Mary as a virgin except as a virgin when she first had sex with the human father of Jesus. All the birth legends in the New Testament were made up based on motifs of semi-divine heroes; we find the same motifs in stories about Moses, the Buddha, and Lao Tze.

Jesus had four brothers and some sisters. The siblings were real "blood" younger siblings of Jesus through his mother Mary, and were not cousins of Jesus. So Mary did not remain chaste after Jesus was born. If Joseph was Jesus' father and the father of Mary's other children, then the siblings were full siblings to Jesus; otherwise they were half siblings through Mary.

Jesus spent his childhood and early adult years in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. Jesus spoke Aramaic as his first language. Jesus might have known some Hebrew to read the scriptures and might have known a little Greek to carry out business. I think he could read Hebrew well but the question is not clear.

Galilee lies well north of Jerusalem, around what would now be the "Golan (Galilean) Heights" of Syria and Lebanon. Galilee was generally prosperous and had a diverse economy. Like Samaria, Galilee was once part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel as opposed to the Southern Kingdom of Judea with its capital at Jerusalem. Galilee had been separated from Judea for at least 500 years. Judeans looked down on Galileans and Samaritans as not fully Israelite, as rude bumpkins, and as not fully understanding the religion of God. Galileans looked down on Judeans as snobs, rather like northern Californians and Oregonians think of southern Californians. Galilee did not have many Pharisees and did not show much interest in that approach to Judaism. After the time of Jesus, when the Romans ended the Kingdom of Judea and eliminated Samaria and Galilee as Hebrew districts, some Galileans took on a Syrian or Lebanese identity; but most of them probably joined the movement that led to what is now dominant rabbinic Pharisaic Judaism, what most Americans think of as Judaism.

In Greek, Jesus' occupation was "tekton", which means "craftsperson" (from the same root as English "technician"). Jesus might have been skilled, semi-skilled, or unskilled. All carpenters are tektons, but not all tektons are carpenters, so Jesus might have been a carpenter. His family probably did not have much land. They might have been poor or prosperous; we do not know.

Jesus did not marry and did not have children. A son then should, especially a first-born son, so his non-marriage might have made Jesus seem odd, and probably annoyed his family. We do not know if Jesus had sex outside of marriage but probably not. I see no evidence that Jesus was homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, asexual, or anything else. If "stereotypical heterosexual but chaste outside of marriage" is the default then we should probably assume that.

Jesus was in his late twenties or early thirties when he left his family to follow John the Baptist. Jesus was subordinate to John. It is not clear how long Jesus stayed with John but likely about a year. John baptized Jesus.

Jesus and John agreed on most points but disagreed on some points, for which see above on John. Jesus set out on his own mission.

I gave the content of Jesus' message in earlier chapters. I will illustrate some points of the content in later chapters with selections from the New Testament.

Preaching the Kingdom of God, and bringing about the Kingdom of God, was the chief goal of Jesus' mission. At first, his movement was a movement entirely within Judaism, aimed at Jews. It was something like the revival movements we see among Christians, as for example in the early 1800s in the United States.

Jesus said the Kingdom of God was both already here and also coming. He announced the Kingdom in two ways, as an external Kingdom to be ruled by God and as a kind of community made up of people who "get it" and act according to the message. He felt the two implied each other.

When the Kingdom of God came fully, all the world, all the persons, and all the nations, would change in accord with Israelite expectations. But the world and everything in it would not end entirely. Jesus was an eschatological prophet of the end of the normal world and the coming of the Kingdom of God in this world instead, but he was a limited eschatological prophet. Jesus did not proclaim any secret knowledge, despite some New Testaments passages to that effect; he proclaimed the Kingdom openly and fully; so he was not an apocalyptic prophet. He thought that everybody should be able to see, understand, and participate in the Kingdom if they only wished to do so.

Jesus thought he was the person appointed by God to bring in the Kingdom of God. He might have thought he was also appointed by God to administer the Kingdom for at least a while until God solidified the new arrangements of the Kingdom, maybe something like an acting general manager or acting CEO. He might have expected to cooperate with the Temple priests, as something like a prophet-consultant.

Jesus differed in two ways from other people who tried to bring in the Kingdom of God. First, Jesus was not only a harbinger or a doorman, he was the instrument by which the Kingdom would come and he had a large role to play in it. Second, his idea of the Kingdom was not primarily military or political. He did think there would be political and military changes in that Israel would return to its former glory and would have an even bigger world role than ever before. But probably he did not think it was up to people to bring military or political changes. God would do that. People would go along. What people were to do in the meantime, and the nature of the Kingdom, are both topics for later chapters.

The traditional kings of Israel came from the House of David. It is not clear if Jesus expected a Davidic King shortly, eventually, or at all. He did not think he was the next king of Israel in the sense of a Davidic king or any other kind of king. It is not clear what he thought of relations between the Kingdom of God, his role, the messiah, and the next Davidic king. He might have thought of himself as a non-military or non-Davidic messiah in the sense of an active prophet. There were many such in the Tanakh who were not kings. He might have labeled himself as a (non-Davidic) "messiah" either directly in words or indirectly by using symbols from the Tanakh such as riding into Jerusalem on a donkey.

Jesus definitely called himself the “Son of Man” but he did not mean anything more than “me”.

The Kingdom of God was not an alternative political kingdom to that of the Jews or Romans. Jesus was not a secret militant freedom fighter. Jesus was probably non-violent, perhaps nearly a pacifist.

In standard Judaism at the time of Jesus, there was only one God, God had no rivals, and no human being could participate in divinity at all. To think of a human as divine was blasphemous. Whatever Jesus thought of his status as a human being or as God is not evident, even from the New Testament, but very likely he went along with Jewish thinking. I doubt Jesus thought of himself as God or god-like at all. He would have considered such ideas blasphemous. During Jesus’ life, there was no idea of the Trinity and of the second person of the Trinity. If somebody had asked him, “Are you the second person of the Trinity?” he would not have known what the person was talking about. If Jesus thought of himself as a son of God, it was in the same sense that all Israelites (Galileans, Samaritans, and Judeans) were Children of God, or as any person adopted by God was a Child of God, such as Abraham. He did not think of himself as the only begotten Son of God. He did not even think of himself as a son of (a) god in the way that the Greeks understood heroes such Heracles (Hercules) or Achilles to be sons of divinities; even that little was blasphemous to a Jew.

Jesus limited his activity to Israel, mostly Galilee. He went to Jerusalem several times, primarily to participate in religious festivals, and not primarily to preach or to carry out his mission. He did not seek non-Hebrews (non-Jews) and at first he did not welcome them. As time went by, and some non-Jews showed interest, he probably tolerated them. It is not clear that he treated them equally with Jews but I hope he did.

Jesus taught in rural areas and small settlements of Galilee but not in cities. Part of the mission was healing. At that time a person could not be fully healed without also being forgiven of any accumulated sins, so Jesus served as the conduit by which God forgave accumulated sins. To forgive sins in this way, as a conduit of God, for the purpose of healing, was not wrong or blasphemous. Other Jews did it. Jesus’ healings were considered miracles caused through God’s intervention using Jesus, and were not the cause of controversies.

Jesus believed in demons and Satan, as did most Jews then. It is not clear if Jesus thought that all evil originated with Satan, but he did think Satan and demons caused a large share of evil, and he used Satan and demons to represent all evil. Jesus intended to defeat evil. He thought he had already defeated evil to a large extent through his own realizations and his own actions, and he thought that all evil would be defeated during his mission. The biggest evil was social injustice. To defeat evil meant to end social injustice. To end social injustice meant that evil had been defeated. If social injustice persisted, then evil had not been defeated.

Jesus exorcised demons. Exorcism was probably not central to the mission in the same way that teaching good behavior was or healing was. But defeating evil was central to Jesus’ mission, and exorcising demons was part of defeating evil. If Jesus and his followers could not exorcise demons then they could not defeat evil. Some people thought Jesus healed and exorcised demons because he used black magic or had some direct connection to demons. He did not.

Jesus called followers. It is not clear how many he called or how many followed him at any one time. Jesus had some constant followers that followed him around most of the time, and likely relied on the mission for support. Jesus had some people that followed him around sometimes but probably did not follow him everywhere he went, and did not rely on Jesus' mission for support. Jesus had some people that supported him and his followers whenever he was in their vicinity, and who might have given them support to travel on as well. His mission had a support network.

Jesus extended ideas of personal integrity and equal respect to women. Jesus treated women as full human beings. Jesus listened to them. Jesus acknowledged that they had the authority to make decisions and to confer respect. He acknowledged when they showed respect to him, as when a woman poured oil on him in a symbolic anointing of him as an important person. To anoint a person means to label that person a "messiah" but not necessarily a Davidic king messiah.

Women were prominent among the supporters and followers. Some individual women were widely known as important in the movement. They were administrators, leaders, and teachers. Their particular identities are largely lost now. Mary Magdalene ("from Magdala") was one. Public action by women was unusual, especially among Hebrews but even among non-Hebrews. For women to openly follow Jesus, go around with him, go out publicly, and teach publicly, even with proper men as companions, even if they kept all proprieties, was a serious scandal. The fact that women did so openly shows their commitment to Jesus and their importance in the movement. Some women were called "apostles" and had status equivalent to the highest ranking male followers such as Peter and Paul. The facts that their identities are lost, they are not called apostles now, and women's activities were downgraded in scope and importance after Jesus died, do not show that women did not have status originally but show a change from what Jesus originally did and taught. These facts show that the position of women changed back to what it had been before Jesus, and that the record was edited to conform. Jesus was not a feminist in the modern sense but respected all persons regardless of sex (gender) or status.

Any of the followers or supporters might be called "disciples" or might not. At the time, the word meant "follower" or "serious student" of a person.

Probably within a short time of starting his mission, Jesus began to attract large groups of people to hear him speak, to benefit from his healings, and to watch him heal. This aspect of the mission bothered the authorities, as it had with John.

Jesus liked to socialize. Especially he liked to eat with people and to go to social events such as weddings.

Jesus ate with just about anybody, including disreputable people such as tax collectors, prostitutes, rich people, poor people, and soldiers. Eating with people showed that you accepted them into your society, so Jesus accepted into his society people that strict Jews then would not accept and he accepted people that many upright Christians now would not accept. Eating together probably both symbolized the Kingdom and was an instance of the Kingdom. By accepting all kinds of people with him, Jesus accepted them into the Kingdom of God.

Jesus supported the Jewish Law, and condemned deliberate breaches of the Law; but he was not much

concerned with fine points. He probably did not get into disputes about following the Law or interpreting it as we see in the New Testament; he probably did not care enough about those technical matters to dispute them. He stressed the intent and spirit of the Law over the letter. In this, he was similar to other Jewish religious leaders of his time, including some Pharisees.

Jesus probably was little concerned with purity. He did acknowledge some of the strong major pure or impure conditions, such as when a person died; but otherwise probably did not worry much. Except for major purity situations, he did not worry about whether the purity conditions of people would prohibit them from contact. He did not try to keep himself ritually pure all the time. In this, he was like most regular Jewish people, even most educated or rich regular Jewish people, and like a Galilean peasant. He differed from strict Pharisees, who were concerned with purity and did try to keep pure at all times; but he did not differ so much as to cause serious dispute.

In eating with all people, not worrying about purity, exorcising demons, healing, and acting as an instrument for God to forgive sins, Jesus did bypass the regular priestly system including the Temple. Jesus offered the people direct access to God and to a feeling of power not mediated by the regular power brokerage system of "who you know and do favors for". I am not sure what the Pharisees offered Jews in the time of Jesus, so I am not sure if he also bypassed the Pharisees, but I doubt it. Jesus was like John. Like John, offering direct access would have made Jesus popular and contributed to the external show of his movement, just as it does with charismatic preachers today. Also as with John, somebody offering direct but temporary access to God did not worry the priests and Temple authorities very much and was not the basis for conflict.

In the gospels, Jesus speaks of twelve apostles. Jesus had an inner circle, which might have consisted of about twelve men. If there were exactly twelve, then they represented the twelve tribes of Israel - that is how the later Church portrayed them. The rosters of the twelve apostles vary a bit in the New Testament but on the whole the lists are pretty consistent, and the followers of Jesus likely knew these special individuals well. There might really have been twelve, at least sometimes. The New Testament calls them "the twelve" for short.

Jesus had a special mission for the twelve. He sent them to Israel to give his message and to get people to act accordingly so as to begin the Kingdom of God. Sending them in that way was both a symbol of the reunification and restoration of Israel, and the first concrete step in the reunification and restoration. He did not send them to non-Jews. Although they had some success, on the whole they did poorly. Jesus was disappointed at the failure. The mission lasted at least a few weeks, probably a few months. It likely did not last several years. The twelve probably did not go forth alone but went in pairs or in small groups. It is not clear if one apostle was paired with another apostle or if each apostle had his own companion or companions.

No women were among the twelve. It is not clear if some women went on the special mission of the apostles.

Jesus ate many meals with his close followers, including the twelve but not limited to the twelve. As with some Jewish meals and some pagan meals, Jesus' meals with his close followers probably had some ritualistic aspects such as breaking and blessing bread and blessing wine.

Jesus went to Jerusalem with some of his followers several times, maybe as many as five times. Jesus' ministry lasted at least one year and maybe as many as four years. The Gospel of John indicates about three years.

At some time, Jesus had an altercation at the main temple in Jerusalem. He severely interfered with the vendors on one of the major porches. It is not clear if this altercation happened several years before he died, one year before, or a few days before. Mark, Matthew, and Luke report it as a few days before he died. John reports it as at least one year before he died.

Pharisees tended to live around Jerusalem, so Galilee had very few Pharisees. Jesus probably did not encounter many scribes and Pharisees, so he probably did not argue often with them. The stories of arguments with scribes and Pharisees reflect conflicts that the early Church had rather than conflicts that Jesus had. Pharisees might have looked down on him and dismissed his religious importance but more likely they just did not pay much attention to him.

Sometime in the decade 30-39 CE, Jesus went to Jerusalem for Passover for the last time. Maybe around that last visit, Jesus caused the general disturbance at the temple.

Jesus had a final meal with the disciples. It is not clear that this meal was distinctive or was in any way different than other meals with his close followers. The words about his body and blood might have been from this meal or from any meals before this time but were reported as having been stressed at this particular meal.

Jewish authorities arrested and questioned him. It is not clear if the Jewish or Roman authorities instigated the arrest but probably the Jewish authorities did. The Jewish authorities would not have spent much time on Jesus, especially because they were busy with Passover. It is not likely that the high priest would have spent any time with Jesus because of his duties elsewhere at the time but he might have spent some time with Jesus.

The Romans were aware of Jesus' group and unhappy about it. With the consent of Jewish authorities, the Romans executed Jesus by crucifixion, outside Jerusalem. Both Roman and Jewish authorities wished to eliminate Jesus to prevent any possible public disorder. It was like swatting a fly to stop the buzz, even before any biting. The Jewish authorities did not have the power to execute anybody; only the Romans could execute anybody. The decision to kill Jesus was a mutual decision by the powerful people of two ethnic groups and two religions. It is not clear if Romans or Jews made the decision first; probably they made it together in a joint effort to preserve beneficial public order.

The Romans officially executed Jesus as a political prisoner, specifically as a pretender to the throne of Israel. It is not clear why the Romans thought Jesus was a political threat or pretender to the throne of Israel other than that Jesus led a public movement and that some followers likely hailed him as messiah. The charge against Jesus might have been founded on a distortion of his idea of his role in the Kingdom of God, and might have been merely a pretext.

Jesus was not killed because of his ethnicity, religion, or religious innovations, because he preached the

Kingdom of God, called for repentance, healed, offered interpretations of the Law, broke the Law in minor ways, forgave sins, ignored purity, allowed people direct access to God, bypassed the official priesthood, claimed to be God, opposed the Pharisees, opposed the Sadducees, partied with disreputable people, or was a secret freedom fighter. If Jesus had only preached the Kingdom of God without also heading an obvious public movement, likely he would have been hailed as a saintly ineffectual minor prophet. He was killed to prevent any public disturbance, almost regardless of what he taught, even though his movement was obviously non-violent and often socially useful.

The apostles, disciples, and other followers fled when Jesus was arrested. They did not witness his trial and so did not know what really happened. Some women followers probably stayed in Jerusalem and might have seen his crucifixion and burial, perhaps because the authorities did not consider women dangerous. The authorities did not pursue the followers that fled. After Jesus died, the authorities no longer considered the movement or anybody in it as much of a threat.

Jesus' body probably was not recovered after he was crucified, especially since his followers fled. Jesus' body probably was not put in a tomb, and therefore it was not resurrected out of a tomb. We do not know what happened to his body.

### **Right After Jesus.**

The stories by the women witnesses became the major source of stories of his death. After he died, some followers saw Jesus. The people who saw Jesus incorporated the stories of the women witnesses into what they said they saw, and elaborated the stories to include his burial, tomb, empty tomb, and resurrection. It is not clear exactly what they saw; they did not always see a physical body or a physical body with normal traits. Some followers really did see something; and many of their reports were sincere. People that claimed to see him gained little except attention or status from a minor stigmatized group, and they might have put themselves at risk from authorities. Still, I found no strong evidence that Jesus really did rise from the dead. Some stories are contradictory, and several stories can be explained as allegories that were not originally intended as literal reports but were later taken as literal reports. If you wish to think of Jesus as resurrected in some spiritual way but not in the obvious physical way, and wish to use the stories as proof, you can do so.

The idea of the tomb, the variant stories of the empty tomb, what happened while Jesus was dead, variant details of the men at the empty tomb, and some appearance stories, are all later ideas of the early Church told to bolster dogmatic points or factional claims. As a result of some people seeing Jesus, and of other people believing the people who said they saw Jesus, some of his followers came to believe Jesus would return to restore Israel, found the Kingdom, and begin a general resurrection. His resurrection was the first in the general resurrection.

Not all of Jesus' followers believed in his resurrection. I think, at first, that most followers did not believe in the resurrection but I do not have much evidence. The followers that did not believe in his resurrection eventually died out, and the followers that did believe came to dominate.

Many followers continued the movement on the basis of what they had learned and what they had done while with Jesus. Both followers that did not believe in his resurrection and followers that did

believe continued his movement until the ones that did not believe in his resurrection dwindled away.

All followers believed in both the message of Jesus and the coming Kingdom of God. Members of the movement awaited the restoration of Israel, reunification of Israel, rise to dominance of Israel, and the Kingdom of God. They used baptism and the Last Supper as an initiation ritual. Many followers also awaited Jesus' imminent return and the resurrection of the dead. Many of these beliefs are in line with strict orthodoxy but differ from what most Christians believe now.

Some followers did not believe that Jesus was a son of God or a god in any way. Some followers, probably a majority, believed Jesus was divine in some way. The followers that believed in his resurrection also tended to believe he was divine. The two ideas go together. After stories of his resurrection became current, it was hard to believe in one without believing in the other.

People that believed in his divinity also stressed the magical efficacy of his birth, death, and resurrection. They believe that somehow the mere facts of his birth, death, and resurrection changed the world and continue to change the world. Somehow they bring about the Kingdom of God. This subgroup came to dominate the Jesus movement, so that the people who did not believe in some divinity for Jesus disappeared. Jesus the prophet had become a god Christ.

Within the subgroup of followers that believed in Jesus' divinity, a sub-subgroup believed he was divine in a lesser way rather than in a high way like God the Father. Within the subgroup of followers that believed in Jesus' divinity, another sub-subgroup believed he was divine in a high way, either very much like God the Father or exactly like God the Father. Eventually the sub-subgroup that believed in high divinity for Jesus dominated the Jesus movement. Jesus the prophet had become the God Christ. The movement had become the Church.

At first, followers of Jesus were largely Jewish and they aimed their work only at Jews; but gradually more non-Jews joined, and eventually non-Jews dominated. Non-Jews came to dominate the part of the movement that believed in a high divinity for Jesus and in the magical power of his birth, death, and resurrection. That does not necessarily mean those ideas were weird to all Jews, imposed on Jews, or non-Jewish. It does not mean those ideas are wrong. Divinity for a human is blasphemous in standard Judaism now; and was blasphemous among priests or well-educated Jews in the time of Jesus; but it might have been more tolerated among common Jews then. Some Jews could have believed in his divinity and the magical efficacy of his birth, death, and resurrection. The picture is not clear. Non-Jews did strengthen the ideas of divinity and magic.

"Non-Jews" means not just Greeks but also Syrians, Babylonians, Iranians, Romans, and other ethnic groups. The followers of Jesus that stressed his divinity as the God Christ were first called "Christians" in Antioch in Syria, where they formed a big group. The Christians at Antioch exerted much influence over all the early Church.

Groups of Jesus' followers argued among themselves about all the issues, probably in particular his divinity and the degree of his divinity. Groups of his followers were mostly still Jews, and hoped to recruit Jews. As a result, groups of Jesus' followers argued with Jews about these issues too. Even after non-Jews dominated the movement, they still argued about these issues. The New Testament was

written while all these people were still arguing, mostly around 70-90 CE. The controversies in the gospels have less to do with conflicts that Jesus had with Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and other Jews than with conflicts that followers of Jesus later had with them. The New Testament reported about Jesus but did so in ways to support the point of view of the writers.

Some non-Christian Jews harassed followers of Jesus. It is not clear if non-Christian Jews harassed all followers of Jesus or harassed only followers of Jesus who stressed his divinity. Jews tolerated fairly well some followers of Jesus in Jerusalem who did not believe in the divinity of Jesus, the party around James the Just, the brother of Jesus. It is not clear in what ways Jews harassed Christians that believed in the divinity of Jesus or how severely. Probably harassment was quite mild until after the Romans destroyed the Temple and most of Jerusalem from 70 CE onwards. After then, Jews needed to be strong in their ethnic identity, and the split between Jews and Christians became intense and irrevocable. Later, Romans also persecuted some Christians. The Roman persecution also was usually mild except for some isolated atrocities.

When Christians later gained the upper hand, Christians persecuted Jews, more severely than Jews had persecuted Christians. When Christians persecuted Jews, many Christians did so.

After Jesus died, his followers feared the Romans and sought peace with the Empire. After non-Jews dominated the movement, and after the movement split from most Jews, followers stopped thinking of the Kingdom in terms of Israel. Followers of Jesus stopped seeing the Kingdom in terms of any political state and started seeing it in terms of peaceful non-Jewish communities. After Jesus did not return for several decades, and nobody else was resurrected, followers stopped thinking in terms of a resurrection and began thinking of alternatives. Church dogma to this day still focuses on a resurrection but most common Christians came to think of the Kingdom as going to heaven to be with Jesus after they die. The Church replaced Israel as the institution of the Kingdom. Membership in the Church replaced Jewish identity as a criterion for membership in the Kingdom. Carrying out the ideas of the Church, and especially the message of Jesus, became what people do as Christians just as Jews had the Law. Good standing with the Church replaced a good relation with the Jewish God.

Within a hundred years after Jesus died, the Church was less egalitarian and more hierarchical, with regular offices. Men dominated the offices, and women were relegated to traditional roles in the home, to minor roles, or to subgroups for women with limited power. Christians interpreted the ideas of Jesus so as to validate the Church and their normal lives in the Roman Empire. People used the identity of Jesus as the god Christ to validate the changes and their normal lives.

Some Christians still felt the call of Jesus' message, often urgently, but they usually acted on it within the framework of the Church, the Empire, and Tradition. Jesus also had acted within the framework of Jewish Church, Jewish tradition, and the Roman Empire. You have to decide for yourself if you think there is a difference.

### **My Take: The Message Again.**

I think Jesus' original message, that focused on a Jewish Kingdom of God, was changed slightly into the better message that I described in the first part of the book: a relation with God as Jews had in the

Tanakh, the Christmas Spirit, the Golden Rule, love your neighbor, include everyone, forgive, value your soul-spirit-self, value the soul-self-spirit of everybody, love nature, and try hard to build a better world. We put all this in the context of realistic human nature and practical self-government. I cannot be sure Jesus would approve but I think so. The early Church can take much credit for this beneficial shift in Jesus' message.

**Reminder: Paraphrases.**

Most of the Biblical citations in this part of the book are from the New Testament. The citations are not direct quotes from a widely-accepted version of the Bible but are paraphrases that I made up mostly from the King James (Authorized) Version, which is public domain. I did this to avoid problems with copyright. I encourage you to check against your favorite translation; somebody who believes in the inerrant literal word of God has to check. Each paraphrase begins and ends with an asterisk (\*). Double quotation marks (“”) indicate speech within a paraphrase, usually Jesus speaking. Single quotation marks (‘’) indicate a quote within a speech, often Jesus speaking the words of a character in a parable. My comments and additions are in square brackets []. I apologize for typographical errors.