



## Jesus the Jew

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**An approach by an historian of the early Christian writings, commonly called the New Testament of the Christian Bible, and of the social, cultural and religious world in which these writings emerged.**

### Jesus the Jew<sup>1</sup>

**By William Loader**

Let me begin by acknowledging a certain hesitation in addressing this topic. I stand in the Christian tradition. What am I doing talking about Jewishness? I contemplated changing the title of my talk to, 'Jesus, not a non-Jew.' Furthermore I am aware that in addressing such a topic within the context of Jewish-Christian dialogue I cannot and must not avoid the broader context and history which surrounds the issue.

In many cultures formal gatherings begin with a Moment of grief and remembrance of the dead. That is appropriate here. For we are addressing a topic which in some hands became the ground for hatred of Jews and found its most horrific manifestation in the holocaust. That pain belongs to the truth, as does the corporate guilt which I share as a member of a tradition which has fostered its cause. Yet that tradition also leads me to repentance and the search for truth.

I approach the topic, 'Jesus, the Jew,' as an historian.<sup>2</sup> In particular I approach it as an historian of the early Christian writings, commonly called the New Testament of the Christian Bible, and of the social, cultural and religious world in which these writings emerged. I have just completed a major study, entitled, 'Jesus' Attitude towards the Law. A Study of the Gospels'<sup>3</sup> and another aimed at a broader reading public, entitled, 'Jesus and the Fundamentalism of his Day.'<sup>4</sup>

Where does one begin? What are our sources for discussing Jesus, the Jew? Our primary sources are the Christian gospels. Those of most historical value for our purpose are the four included in the Christian Bible, the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In addition, the modern historian takes into account the Gospel of Thomas, a second-century gospel containing sayings of Jesus, many of which preserve early tradition. The Christian gospels began to emerge in the fourth decade after Jesus' death. Except for a brief prologue which some have, they preserve collections of anecdotes and sayings strung together within a narrative framework of less than a year, in the case of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and three years in the case of John. Each gospel reflects careful authorship, often adept literary skill, but also ideological perspectives informed by the Christian faith of particular church communities and their concerns.

By observing the way the authors of Matthew and Luke rewrote Mark, we can appreciate both the conservative nature of the process of transmission and the way in which it nevertheless led to changes, sometimes subtle, sometimes radical. What they, writing in the 80s did with Mark, we must assume, Mark in the late 60s or early 70s did with his sources, and they in turn with theirs, back through forty years. This makes it difficult to reconstruct the exact wording of Jesus' saying and, at times, even to know whether what we have before us is historical at all or part of the creative processes of the tradition. The quest for the historical Jesus and the quest for the

historical contemporaries of Jesus, his fellow Jews, are alike fraught with difficulty. Both pictures are coloured by subsequent events. The historian must weigh each unit of material critically and do so in dialogue with others pursuing the same critical endeavour, of which there are not a few! Here, there are no shortcuts, whether inspired by dogmatic assertions of historical worth or by speculative reconstructions based on pesher codes or journalistic endeavour.

Sometimes the creative work of the bearers of the Jesus tradition is relatively plain for all to see. Thus much of John's gospel takes on the character of a stage play in which Jesus as the leading character voices the faith of the community; and his opponents, that of the community's opponents. Yet the same is the case in all the gospels. It is all a matter of degree. And, similarly, in all there is material of doubtless historical worth, including in the Gospel of John.

Our information about Jesus, the Jew, must, therefore, be evaluated in the light of the literary and historical context of the gospels. It must also be evaluated in the light of wider sources about the world of the time, especially the religious, social and cultural world of Palestine in the first century. Here again we face the challenge of evaluating sources. The tannaitic traditions of the *Mishnah* and *Tosefta* and of early *midrashim* face the same rigorous inquiry as the gospels: it is not necessarily to be assumed that attributions preserved from the end of the second century onwards about alleged sayings and rulings of pre-70 Judaism are accurate. Here, too, there are no shortcuts which enable us to leap back over a hundred and thirty years. Yet there is little doubt that many of the traditions are much earlier than the time of the *Mishnah's* compilation and reflect life and values already present before the destruction of the Temple.

Recent decades have uncovered or recovered a rich array of Jewish writings which emanate from the first century of the current era and before. Beside the mighty corpus of Philo and Josephus, and the various testaments, treatises, tales, and apocalyptic works which have long been known, we now have the diverse library of manuscripts found at Qumran on the Dead Sea. Archaeology also plays a significant role, especially when combined with demographic, economic and sociological studies. We now know much more about Galilee and Judea than had been known to previous generations. Some of this depends on new information; some depends on looking at old information in new ways. One need only mention the new appreciation of the impact of Hellenisation in Palestine or the complexity of social and political movements of the time. The rather oversimplified analysis of pre-70 Judaism into three major sects or parties, Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes (and, as a fourth, Zealots), has given way to the realisation that even within these there was considerable diversity and beyond them as well. At the same time there has been a growing appreciation of the social and cultural systems of the Mediterranean world, which goes far beyond a focus on individuals, as if they stood in some sense independently of their world.<sup>5</sup>

This is an appropriate door through which to enter our discussion of Jesus, the Jew. There is no dispute about Jesus' ethnicity, nor about the fact that he grew up in Galilee. He was a northern Jew, probably descended from those Jews settled by the Hasmoneans in the region a century earlier. Unlike many of his contemporaries, such as Philip and Andrew, Jesus bore a Jewish name: Yeshua, short for Yehoshua. Family names indicate a strong commitment to Israel's traditions: brothers Jacob (James), Joseph (Joses), Judas or Jude (Judah), Simon, and father, Joseph, mother, Mary/Miriam.<sup>6</sup>

Even without knowing more than this we may assume that Jesus and his family were observant of Torah, paid tithes, kept the Sabbath, circumcised their males, attended the synagogue, observed relevant purity laws concerning foods, upheld days of purification in relation to childbirth and menstruation, kept the dietary code and one could go on to all the other elements of the Torah which applied to daily life. While the Christian gospels record disputes about Jesus' interpretation of a few of these, and to these we shall return, we are doubtless on safe ground in assuming that Jesus, like his family, was observant. In such close-knit societies disregard would have stood out.

We would have heard about it. Matthew even tells us that Jesus wore tassels as a mark of commitment to Law observance and certainly believed Mark had indicated the same. The notion of a Christian Jesus, who did not live by Torah or only by its ethical values, does not fit historical realities. Jesus was, first and foremost a Jew, an insider; indeed, I suggest, if anything, fairly conservative.

I believe that some anecdotes preserved in the gospel writings corroborate this analysis.<sup>7</sup> Confronted by a Gentile woman, a Syrophenician wanting help for her daughter, Jesus' first response is: "Let the children be fed first! It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (Mark 7:27). Mark is not embarrassed to mention this because he goes on to show that the wily woman persuaded Jesus to drop the barriers and respond to her need. A similarly conservative reaction appears when a leper crashes through the established barriers and pleads at Jesus' feet for healing (1:40-44). One of our earliest manuscripts reports that Jesus was enraged (1:41 D) and all agree he sent the man off gruffly to the priest with the reminder that he make the prescribed offering (1:43). His offence at being touched by the woman with the flow of blood (Mark 5:25-34) probably reflected his sensitivity about her uncleanness in the earlier form of the story. His response to the Gentile centurion wanting help for his son is initially off-putting: "Am I to come and heal him?" (Matt 8:7). That is why the centurion responds immediately by confessing his unworthiness, "I am not worthy for you to come under my roof." He sensed Jesus' hesitation and understood why. Luke has Peter have the same reaction in the days of the early church and it takes heavenly intervention to persuade him otherwise. Jesus responds to the man's pleas, but even so, as with the Syrophenician woman, he does not enter the Gentile house.

These are not typical Jewish responses of the time. They are perhaps typical conservative Jewish responses. It is remarkable that they have been preserved. The same conservatism is reflected to some degree in Jesus' command to his disciples that they not enter Samaritan territory or venture into Gentile areas in their mission (Matt 10:5-6). He saw his own mission and theirs as one 'to the lost sheep of Israel'. When Matthew reworks Mark's story about the Syrophenician woman (Matt 15:21-28; cf. Mark 7:24-30), he explains Jesus' attitude in exactly these words, "I am sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt 15:24). And to reinforce the point, Matthew describes the woman as Canaanite! Luke preserves a similar attitude. The celebrated repentance of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who made fourfold restitution for his misdeeds, receives Jesus' accolade: "Today salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). The words which follow are revealing: "For he also is a son of Abraham."

The fact that Jesus focussed only on his fellow Jews also makes good sense of subsequent history, where the first Christians had to grapple with whether to expand their horizons or not and then on what basis. This became a problem because Jesus had made it clear that his mission was to Israel. What was this task? When we address Jesus' task, we begin to see a pattern or framework of thought, which probably even had a place for Gentiles in time. One might think of Jesus' task as that of a healer. After all, most of the incidents I have mentioned thus far are of that nature. The anecdote which tells us that John the Baptist inquired about Jesus' role has Jesus respond by describing his healing activity. Even allowing for the exaggerations and embroidery which inevitably accompany heroes, there is little doubt that Jesus was acknowledged as a faith healer and exorcist, whether positively or negatively. Faith-healers and exorcists were rare but not unknown in the prophetic and charismatic traditions of Israel as also among other peoples.

Yet Jesus apparently saw such activity within a broader perspective. In an era of unrest and oppression, even if sometimes simply quiet and dull oppression or compromised by the relief of survival, there was a variety of responses to what were seen as forces which were not of God, especially political rulers. Many people longed for Israel's liberation. Luke is probably not far from the mark, when he depicts devout Jews praying in the Temple for a reversal of Israel's fortunes, the casting down of the mighty and the lifting up of the poor (Luke 1-2). Jesus belonged to John the

Baptist's school, at least, his school of thought. John announced that God would bring the world to judgement and call Israel to account. People should realise this, submit themselves to God's judgement, and show they mean it by letting themselves be submerged in the Jordan River. The Jordan was a turning point in more ways than one. Such baptisms marked a new beginning. Jesus had himself baptized. Of this fact there is little doubt. He, too, submitted to God's judgement and promise.

The gospel traditions tell us that this event suddenly turned the thirty-year-old into a spirit-filled prophet proclaiming God's message and performing acts of liberation through healing. This was his mission. In the first three gospels this idealised scene signals the end of John's ministry and the beginning of Jesus' work. John's gospel has them work as contemporaries for a period. Whatever the historical reality, the encounter with John is highly significant for understanding Jesus the Jew. John had confronted the apathy of those who rested on their status as Abraham's children and did not keep the Law. He called for serious change. Jesus was similarly confrontational and similarly demanding. God's Law remained. There was to be no tinkering with even the tiniest stroke of a letter.

Matthew is probably right when he shows Jesus going out of his way to allay suspicions that he in any way sought to undermine the Law (5:17-19). Matthew has him on the attack, like John, against people who watered the Law down. The much-celebrated contrasts which Matthew's Jesus creates (5:21-48) were not contrasts between what the Law taught and what he taught, but between the way people had been hearing the Law and what it really meant. Thus like other great Jewish teachers of his time and later, Jesus railed not only against murder but against anger and hatred; not only against adultery, but against lustful exploitation of women. Like some of the stricter teachers of his day he attacked oaths and divorce. In this he called for an even higher morality than Torah demanded, just as did the writers of the Temple Scroll and the teachers of Qumran. It is as misleading to see these strictures as abrogating Torah on the part of Jesus as it would be to accuse the Qumran radicals of the same.

It is also clear that Jesus espoused an attitude towards Torah which we might describe as affirming a hierarchy of values. He found agreement with a scribe in affirming that the greatest command was to love God and the second to love one's neighbour (Mark 12:28-34). These mattered more than all the sacrifices one might offer. The Psalms and the prophets had already affirmed this. Luke tells a number of stories which underline the same point. The way to life is to keep the commandments and that means learning to be a neighbour to those in need, like the good Samaritan (10:25-37). In an image of heaven and hell, Abraham bemoans the failure of people to heed the call for compassion towards the poor (16:28-31).

Mark preserves an anecdote according to which a rich man approached Jesus on the issue of the way to inherit eternal life (10:17-22). The encounter is instructive and doubtless reflects an historical incident. Addressed as "Good teacher," Jesus immediately refuses the compliment: "Why do you call me good. No one is good except one: God." You can hear echoes of the *Shema*. What is Jesus' answer to the man's quest? "You know the commandments!" Mark tells us that Jesus looked on the man with affection when he declared that since his youth he had kept the commandments. But then Jesus' reply exposes a radical flaw. Challenged to sell his goods and give them to the poor and Join Jesus, the man gives up and goes away sad. It was not that Jesus was adding to the commandments or demanding he convert. Jesus' challenge exposed the man's failure to grasp what underlies the commandments: compassion for the needy. Keeping right practices to the letter means nothing if there is no compassion. Jesus wanted people to follow him on this. But as a teacher, not even as a 'good teacher', because God was the centre of things.

It is interesting to find Jesus sometimes on the warpath like John against malpractice. He attacks hypocrisy (Mark 38-40; Luke 11:37-52). He attacks leaders who put on a show, exploit the poor, the widows. Like John and like the prophets, he warns of impending disaster if people forsake the

ways of God. It will lead to the destruction of the Temple, he warns (Mark 13; Luke 13:34-35). That matters because the Temple is God's house (Mark 11:17; John 2:16). John speaks of Jesus' zeal for the Temple (John 2:17). It will lead to his downfall, as we shall see. Jesus did not attack the Temple in itself or the sacrifices, any more than had the prophets before him.

God's things were to be given to God and that doubtless included tithes (Mark 12:17). But he attacked some people for being preoccupied with tithing minute quantities of herbs, indeed some that the *Mishnah* explicitly exempts, while neglecting justice and the love of God. But it is interesting how that confrontation ends. Referring to such values and to tithing of minutiae he declares: 'These you ought to have kept while not neglecting those' (Matt 23:23; Luke 11:42). That is, he affirms such tithing, nevertheless.

Jesus' demands set him in continuity with John. With John he shares the belief that people must be accountable and will face divine judgement. He even appears to share John's view that such judgement must be near at hand. But it is at this point that we discern also differences. The little we have of John's teaching and preaching focuses on judgement. In Jesus' teaching the climax of history is mostly portrayed in much more promising terms. Jesus employs the biblical visions of hope, especially from Isaiah. 'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the one who proclaims to Zion: Your God reigns' (52:7). The exiles looked to that glorious day. That glorious vision inspired Jesus. Poor Israel is to hear this good news. "Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God; blessed are you who hunger for you shall be filled; blessed are you who weep; you shall laugh!" (Luke 6:20-21).

Images of a great feast, of joy and laughter, of harvest and plenty, abound in Jesus' teaching. He proclaimed the biblical hope: God is going to set up his kingdom. Life will be transformed. Israel's children will flock together from all points of the compass and feast together with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom (Matt 8:11; Luke 13:28-29). Even his choice of twelve disciples reflects the Jewishness of his hope: twelve disciples, twelve tribes. Israel would grow as a tree. Perhaps he also shared the common hope so beautifully portrayed in the Psalms of Solomon that the Gentiles, too, would flock to join Israel in the worship of God (PsSol 17). There they would find a nesting place. Perhaps there is a hint of this in the birds finding shade under the mustard bush (Mark 4:32; cf. Luke 13:19).

When Jesus of Nazareth left John and entered the populated areas of lower Galilee to proclaim his message, he was reflecting this new optimism about the future. The kingdom of God, God's reign was at hand (Mark 1:14-15). Like the *Kaddish* prayer, the prayer he taught his followers included the petition that God's kingdom would soon be established: "Your kingdom come!" (Luke 11:2; Matt 6:10). The Joy of expectation spilled over into the present waiting, so that the present itself became caught up into the reality of the hope. But there was more to it than that. Jesus appears to have identified his own achievements and task as belonging to God's strategy for the introduction of the kingdom. Here is where he placed his miracles and acts of exorcism. Performed in the power of

's spirit, they were indications of the triumph over evil and pain that was to come. "If I by the finger of God cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Matt 12:28; Luke 11:20).

Not only Jesus' healing activity, also his radical exposition of God's law belonged within the context of his vision of the future. In a way this was what one might expect. If you long for what will be God's triumph at the end, then you will surely want to see that triumph already becoming reality in the present. The vision of future peace finds its echo in Jesus' teaching about trust. It

challenged the worrying about food and shelter and pointed to the idyllic life of the lily of the fields and the birds of nature (Luke 12:22-32; Matt 6:25-34). While Jesus appears to have drawn heavily on images from the prophets, Isaiah, in particular, much of his teaching also consisted in appeals to popular understanding of nature and human values. God is like a caring father who refuses to abandon a wayward child (Luke 15:32). These are images of Israel's sages, but they also reflect the piety of the Psalms. Jesus was a storyteller and a user of imagery.

It is interesting that this prophetic vision of Israel's hope functioned as an integrative point of reference for Jesus. Not that it replaced the greatest commandment. Rather, the God who is to be loved is the God who shares the longing for the vision to become reality. It is a way of thinking apically of God. It meant that expositions of God's will tend to come from that starting point rather than from a more formal deposit of authority, such as the scripture or the laws. This puts him in the category of the charismatic teacher rather than the biblical interpreter (cf. Mark 1:22). We see this working itself out in Jesus' attitudes of hospitality and joy. Whether giving hospitality or receiving it, Jesus related to the outcast and the despised in a way which indicated their inclusion (Mark 3:13-22; Luke 7:31-35; Matt 11:16-19). The disqualified were treated like the qualified. He understood such radical inclusion as foreshadowing the radical inclusion of all in the feast of the kingdom. The meal became an important symbol, later stylised after his death to become a major Christian sacrament.

In the process, Jesus appears to have engaged openly in what one might call a celebratory lifestyle. He did not fast and subject himself to the disciplines of asceticism as had John. He had come in from the desert. There was nothing un-Jewish about this behaviour, but it was at least unusual and for some disturbing. His response to the criticism that he was a glutton and a drunkard who kept bad company was to counter that wisdom would prove itself in the long run (Luke 7:31-35; Matt 11:16-19).

We are beginning to move towards controversy. So far nothing I have said indicates that Jesus was un-Jewish, let alone anti-Jewish. Nor, do I believe, does any of the material considered thus far indicate that Jesus was abandoning the faith of his people. Quite the contrary, his vision and behaviour depended upon it. He was not the first charismatic, prophetic figure. Not all teachers of Israel were of the scribal mould; not all were interpreters of scripture in the stricter sense. There were sages, prophetic figures, visionaries, revolutionaries, holy men. The rather striking emphasis on God's coming kingdom was not an oddity for the time. If anything, future hope was something of a preoccupation, especially among those articulate enough to see what had gone wrong.

What did go wrong with Jesus, or with his relationship with his people? Even to put the question in this way skews the issue. It was never as simple as that. Let me turn to some of the conflicts in which we know Jesus became embroiled. What did they add up to? One has already been mentioned: Jesus was not like John. Perhaps the real difficulty was between Jesus' followers and John's followers. Why did Jesus not behave like John? Nothing in scripture said one must behave like John. This was not a matter of observance.

Yet the issue was confused by the fact that Jesus appears to have intentionally mixed not just with the needy but with the rich (who were widely recognised as criminal or, at least, immoral), among whom were toll collectors and prostitutes — he was frequently their associate and common at dinner parties. What was a person claiming to be inspired by God's spirit doing courting such company? Alright if this is a missionary strategy, but you seem to be enjoying yourself! Jesus' quip, 'The sick need a doctor, not the well' (Mark 2:17), has something of the mission feel about it, but he was not the Salvation Army and must have behaved in a way that left him open to the accusation that he was personally associating with such types. This behaviour would have been abhorrent to many fellow Jews, not least the writers of the sectarian documents of the Dead Sea Scrolls, but to many others as well. Jesus appears to have seen such association as an expression of inclusiveness. Formally, it broke no law of scripture, but it represented an unusual stance towards holiness. Does compassion for people warrant exposing oneself to moral and ritual

contamination? Doubtless many of these people were lax with regard to the Law in matters of personal purity, observance of proper tithing, avoidance of impurities. After all, these, too, were enjoined by God. You can hardly acclaim the first commandment and ignore what God commands!

Mark tells of an occasion when in healing a paralysed man Jesus declared his sins forgiven (2:1-12). Christians have often read this as a claim by Jesus to forgive sins. Mark reflects the controversy of later days in depicting Jesus' opponents as charging him with blasphemy. Jesus' trial has begun. It became quite common to transpose later controversies back into the ministry of Jesus. In the anecdote Jesus declares that the man's sins are forgiven. By whom? By God of course. It is the passive voice. At some stage this has been underlined by the statement that Jesus, the Son of Man, has authority on earth to forgive sins — like the priests, like other charismatics, like John the Baptist, who did it every day in association with his water rite. Jesus, like John, included declaration of God's forgiveness in his message. The Mosaic Law does not establish a monopoly concerning who may declare God's forgiveness, although it was mostly something linked with the Temple. Assurance of forgiveness forms part of the piety of the Jew who knew the psalms. Nevertheless both John and Jesus, while not acting contrary to the Law, were somewhat maverick. Unorthodox channels of spiritual power are uncomfortable for any religious system. Christians know all about that and doubtless charismatic rabbis raise similar fears. Add to this alleged miraculous powers and it is little wonder that one early recipe was to declare that, yes, Jesus did all this, but by the power of demons. Some tried it on. Jesus replied that it hardly made sense for a demon to prevent the undoing of demonic damage (Mark 3:22-30; Luke 11:15-22).

There were other niggles, mostly from rather extreme perspectives. One was about washing hands before eating (Mark 7:1-21). It assumes a position according to which unclean hands might make food unclean which might make a person unclean. That is a long shot — three removes from the original purity and by all standards would have to be extremist. Jesus' response is a typical quip: 'Not what enters a person makes them unclean, but what comes out of them' (Mark 7:15). The earthy humour of the saying is apparent if we paraphrase it this way: 'What stinks is what comes out, not what goes in.' It should doubtless be understood as a contrast like: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice' (Hos 6:6). In other words, purity of ethical attitude and behaviour matters more than cultic purity. But, like the tithing of tiny herbs, it was not rubbishing either aspect of purity. Only later did Mark and his tradition turn the words into an absolute contrast and have Jesus effectively deny the validity of biblical purity laws. Both Matthew and Luke backed off from such a radical stance, Luke by omitting the episode, Matthew by making it square with biblical Law again, with the result that Jesus is rejecting only an extremist interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

There are a number of occasions when Jesus incurs criticism because of Sabbath behaviour. The best known derives from an occasion when disciples, walking through grain fields on the Sabbath, pluck heads of grain and eat it (Mark 2:23-28). Distance from home is not the issue. Plucking the heads of grain might be a technical infringement, although only on the strictest reading. Jesus' original quip belittles the complaint: 'The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath!' It was not that the disciples were in desperate need. They appear to have been harmlessly plucking the odd head of grain and chewing it. Jesus' response is a theological argument which says: God's chief concern is with people not with rules. It is alright to relax, what is the point to fuss about such minor things. But it is borderline and controversial. Soon other explanations came into the story to justify the approach. So the disciples become hungry, like David and his men who ate the showbread. Jesus has authority to declare the right interpretation (The Son of Man is lord also of the Sabbath). Matthew and Luke both prefer to omit Jesus' radical quip in favour of safer renderings.

All the other Sabbath controversies entail acts of healing on the Sabbath. They are all borderline. Why not wait a day? Why wait? "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath or to do harm?" (Mark 3:4). The quip is almost mischievous, yet it makes its point. Jesus' defence seems to have been an

appeal to what is appropriate observance of the Sabbath, not an attempt to justify non-observance. In other words it is still an inner Jewish discussion. Only later would Christians transform Jesus' authority to interpret into an authority to override and discard. Mark comes near to this and certainly espouses such an understanding in some parts. John has Jesus replace the Law's authority altogether, reducing it to a witness on his own behalf (1:17; 7:39). But neither Matthew nor Luke allows such an approach to stand. Jesus observes Torah rightly and defends its intention.

A further possible ground for criticism was Jesus' attitude towards family, wealth and land. He appears to have challenged the hold these had on people, sometimes in very offensive ways. For instance, he tells a would-be disciple who wants first to bury his father to let the dead bury the dead and to follow immediately (Matt 8:22; Luke 9:60). But we hear no dispute about it and no indication anyone would have seen it as more than Jesus claiming a more urgent need. It was radical to suggest that family systems could stand in the way of God's will, but that was Jesus' way. His own family, Mark tells us, thought he was mad, but Jesus refused to be healed; instead declaring his family to be those who do the will of God (Mark 3:21, 31-35; cf. Luke 4:23). Elsewhere he confronted people about dishonouring parents (Mark 7:10-13), so there was no sense in which he was jettisoning this commandment; he was drawing attention to the fact it must never compete with loyalty to God's will.

Jesus did not call all to wander in his band. But along with those who did, Jesus appears to have been making a statement against society's values. There was a higher priority than wealth and land, even though these were also God's covenant blessings. Jesus was in that sense about as counter-cultural as the teachers of the period whom we place in the broad category of cynics. They too scoffed at pretension, attacked hypocrisy, lived a demonstrably simple life, used earthy images and enjoined simple trust in God. But if Jesus might fall into this category, he does so as a Jew and one also passionate about Israel's future.<sup>9</sup>

Thus far Jesus looks like a charismatic Jew, impassioned by a vision of God's goodness and love and determined to apply it in the present. He is in every generation of Jews, I suspect. He belongs firmly at least within the range of pre-70 Judaism as I understand it. But something went wrong. Oddly enough it appears to have had little or nothing to do with controversies over Law observance. At least nothing in the earliest accounts of Jesus' arrest and trial indicates that Law observance featured as a charge, despite the compositional links which Mark seeks to forge. Both Mark and John would have us believe that the movement against Jesus was Temple-inspired and began building momentum at an early stage. Even so, in the end Law observance is not the issue. This is not to say that matters of controversy would not have contributed to the unease in Jerusalem about Jesus, but we have little to go by. I think it quite possible that Jesus, like many other charismatic figures of the time, was a worry for the authorities. John's gospel probably captures the situation well in showing the high priest concerned to scotch Jesus and his movement lest the Romans see them harbouring unrest and become more oppressive (11:47-53).

Jesus will not have won much sympathy from the religious authorities of the Temple system. His parable of the Good Samaritan is hardly subtle in its slight on priests and Levites who by-pass the needy man on the side of the road. But then mocking religious authorities may well have been a common phenomenon in the resentful north and it is certainly a sport which survives to this day wherever there is centralised authority, political or religious. Here it was both. If John bothered them, so would Jesus for much the same reasons, but, as Mark indicates, John was an enigma for the authorities and so perhaps was Jesus initially (Mark 11:27-33). It is hard not to feel some sympathy with the authorities of this time; there were so many odd bodies emerging in the wake of hope and fervour, some apparently quite mad and others downright dangerous. But then I write in the so-called first world.

Jesus does not appear to have held back in criticism of some of the religious authorities, especially



in cases of exploitation and hypocrisy. He was evidently appalled at commercialisation in the Temple precincts. I think it most likely that he saw the system as corrupt and concluded that the end must be judgement. Other Jews, like the writer of Jubilees and the teachers at Qumran, had been convinced of that for decades, if not for over a century. Jesus was taking John's message to its logical conclusion and echoing the sentiments of Jeremiah against the Temple leadership of his day.

Jesus' action of overturning the tables of the currency exchange and chasing out the animals for sacrifice may symbolise coming judgement or may be a spontaneous act of anger at what they represented. It is probably misleading to seek the cause in the exchange rates they employed or in price manipulation. Whoever placed Jeremiah's words on Jesus' lips, that the Temple had become a den of thieves was doubtless not thinking of these transactions, but of the system as a whole. It was a single sudden act in a small corner of the huge courtyard, not even enough to warrant the watching guards to intervene, but perhaps noted by observers. Perhaps also it was the scene where Jesus made some fateful statement about the Temple's destruction. Fateful because whatever could be construed as an act against the Temple could also be construed as an act against the nation and, what is worse, against the Roman masters. That meant death.<sup>10</sup>

Was there a trial before the Sanhedrin? John's gospel has only an informal hearing with Annas, the former high priest and father-in-law of Caiaphas, high priest at the time. It is scarcely possible to unravel the complexities of the evidence relating to the last days of Jesus in this paper. Let me identify elements which belong at the high end of the scale of probability. Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate by his soldiers. But Jewish authorities of the time were somehow involved. The most likely scenario is that the Temple authorities found Jesus offensive and a threat because of the reaction his movement might provoke from the Romans. At best the issue was preserving stability and relative freedom of worship. Populist movements which could look at all seditious must be eliminated for the sake of the people. These were real dangers. History had shown it and would show it.

The charge against Jesus on the cross and his mockery as 'King of the Jews', his execution between two brigands, the tradition about swapping Jesus for the brigand, Barabbas, the appearance of the royal messianic motifs — these all suggest that Pilate faced a man charged with sedition in general terms. Yet the failure to round up Jesus' followers for execution indicates that his was not seen as a militant movement. He, himself, had to be removed. It is one of the oddities of the gospel material that messiahship features in these last days, whereas it is largely absent from the rest of the early tradition. Only on one occasion does it come to the fore, when Jesus is reported as accepting the acclamation, 'Messiah', but straightaway Peter who voiced it is exposed as misunderstanding what it was about (Mark 8:27-33). It seems unlikely that Christians acclaimed Jesus Messiah after his death solely on the grounds that this was a false accusation levelled against Jesus. We can only speculate that Jesus may have been willing to have such an appellation applied to himself in the last days of his life. But it is not reported as his concern prior to that. Even then the charge was false at one level. He was not wanting to be what many hoped for in a Davidic Messiah.

With regard to a possible Jewish trial or hearing, it is very likely that later charges against Christian belief have given shape to the accusations. This is very likely to be the case on the matter of blasphemy. Claiming a kind of messiahship was not uncommon and noidthen as blasphemous. That charge became relevant only when Christians developed their high assessment of Jesus' character and origin, but even in John's gospel the charge is vigorously defended. The issue of some kind of messiahship did most likely play a role and fed the charge to Pilate.

The first charge mentioned, the claim to be going to destroy the Temple, is presented as false, but thinly veils what was a valid concern. Like Jeremiah, Jesus had attacked Temple authorities and

warned of its destruction. Of this there is little doubt. As already mentioned, such a charge lent weight to the view that Jesus was seditious. It may well have been linked in some minds with messianic aspirations, namely, the rebuilding of a glorious Temple, like Solomon's, that first son of David.

Would Jesus' execution have made the front page of the newspaper? Possibly, possibly not. Viewed from a Christian perspective with a naive reading of the gospels, we might imagine the world stood still and all of Israel held its breath. This is unlikely. Executions were common. Human life was cheap. Times were desperate or could be if unrest was not snuffed out. Political realities had to take precedence over individual aspirations. The authorities must have believed they were acting in the nation's best interests. Jesus would not be the first innocent to fall victim to such necessity. These were the days when totalitarian regimes were the norm. Jesus died a Jew with a vision and a deep sense of fulfilling God's will. Romans killed him. The religious authorities of his people were part of the act. This is very, very different from the wild and dangerous claims that 'The Jews killed Jesus.' It is also a long way from the overreaction against the horrors of antisemitism which deletes any involvement of Jewish authorities and speculates that they were working for his release. They were caught up in the system.

Jesus was not crucified because he denied his Jewishness, abandoned the Scriptures, or disowned his people. He died as a result of a combination of factors which had conspired also against others of his people who had captured a vision and launched prophetic challenges. But he remained a Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, the Jew from Galilee. Why could it not stay that way? Why the later split between Jesus' movement and most of his compatriots? To answer this question demands another paper, but let me indicate two major aspects which, I believe, led to this parting of the ways, which is a rather innocuous way of speaking about what for some was a very painful and traumatic family and community event.

First there was the issue of inclusiveness. The movement seems to have kept up the egalitarian tendencies of Jesus and also continued to associate regularly with sinners and outcasts. In itself that was not necessarily a problem. It was just dangerous. It became a more acute problem when, whether ousted or just actively itinerant, members of the Jesus movement found themselves in synagogues or in other public places where Gentiles were attracted to their message. They very soon affirmed that the spirit of Jesus sanctioned such a widening of the appeal. The assumption is that Israel's God is the God of the universe, so this had to entail proclaiming God's goodness to all peoples. Israel must not keep God to itself. What then should happen with non-Jews? Should they be allowed in? Provisions about becoming a Jew are relatively unambiguous. There was biblical precedent and there were biblical commands. That might have been the end of it.

But this charismatic movement, like its charismatic leader, Jesus, seems not to have attended first to such requirements, but de facto received such people into its movement and then, later, faced the issues. Some were all for following the normal procedures fully, including circumcising the converts. But they had already been received and were participating in the spirit of the movement, sharing in common meals and worship. So others believed at least circumcision should be waived. The range of opinions spread further. Some believed that all biblical laws which functioned as identity markers or barriers should fall. Some, like Paul, argued that the new movement had its own sufficient basis for goodness which would more than meet what was the spirit and intention of the Law. Some saw themselves as needing to abandon Jewish heritage altogether.

The range reflects also;ep division and pain, for these were Jews talking to Jews within the movement. Jesus had not faced this situation. He left no concrete indication of what might have been his response. The Christian Jews were on their own. Yet they did stand under the influence of Jesus and to some extent you can see that he had an orientation which had the potential to lead in some of these directions. He affirmed ritual and ceremonial law, but gave higher priority to ethical commands of love. He affirmed love for God, but appears to have seen this primarily in

personalistic terms of trust and prayer, rather than in cultic terms. When faced with a choice between preserving, what he sensed as barriers he should uphold, and responding to human need, he could drop the barriers. But it is one thing to say, some things matter more than others, an inclusive contrast. It is quite another thing to start saying that one can abandon some things, an exclusive contrast.

Many Christian Jews, faced with the new situation of Gentiles argued that inclusion would have to mean removal of barriers. Gentiles did not have to become Jews. They did not have to become culturally Jewish. This, of course, begs the question in the view of those for whom scripture is Scripture. God's Law is unchangeable. We see here the interesting phenomenon of cross-cultural encounter in which people of one culture are forced to decide what is absolute and of abiding value and what belongs to the particulars of their culture which need not be preserved. We all know this experience. You just need to look at Christianity to see the same issues played out over and over again. God has instituted our way of doing things — of course!

The Hellenistic world of the Roman empire and before had brought considerable cross-cultural encounter. Jews dispersed throughout the region had long exposure to the issues and mostly took a conservative line, even though there are many examples of spiritualisation of cultic particulars such as sacrifice, food and purity laws and the like. Already scripture, itself, had affirmed that circumcision of the heart was the priority, a contrite heart worth more than many sacrifices. It was not a huge step from inclusive contrasts to exclusive contrasts. By and large the Christian movement opted for some forms of exclusive contrast. Now no longer: circumcision of the heart more than circumcision of the flesh; but circumcision of the heart instead of circumcision of the flesh.

Jesus and other Jews who were developing inclusive contrasts (and probably annoying Temple authorities by doing so — like saying, 'You don't really have to come to church regularly to be a Christian') were the forerunners for the more radical break. For some Jews such abandonment meant abandonment of God's people, Israel, and the Jewish way of life. Debates about quality of observance and nonobservance were not new and continue. The radical wings of the Christian movement took a liberal stance towards inclusion which meant they had to redefine their relationship to their Jewish heritage. Reading Paul's writings you can see how much that continuity mattered. But many Jews remain unpersuaded that in Paul sufficient continuity remains.

It was not that Christian piety lost what the Law represents, either ethically or culturally. The tragedy of Jesus' innocent execution, like moments of terrible tragedy at other times, generated extraordinary spiritual energy, so that writers like Paul made it central to their life's meaning and helped bequeath to Christian tradition a profound sense of death leading to life, pain leading to liberation. Poured out, innocent love became the ultimate sacrifice beyond all others, so that Christians came to affirm: 'Christ died for all!' All need to live by the power of this vulnerable, self-giving love. It was still the love of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Christian Jews saw Jesus as representing, symbolising, the suffering of Israel. They are betrayed whenever such profound sensitivity has been skewed against their people and the cross not laid beside their suffering but used to inflict it.

The other major area, usually seen as the main area of conflict, is the way Christians came to speak about Jesus. I think there is insufficient evidence to justify the claim that Jesus saw himself as something other than a human being. When he spoke of himself as God's child and of God as his father, he was drawing on Jewish models, not making a DNA claim. Undoubtedly he claimed a special place for himself, as had special figures before him. He acts with charismatic authority. Charismatic authorities are always a bother to established authorities, as we have seen, but they appear from time to time. Like John, Jesus acted with authority, claiming God's authority. Only at a functional level could one say, representing God. But then such distinctions blur when we contemplate that it is not as though God was somewhere else. Paul said, 'God was in Christ.'

God was also in Moses. Christians want to say that God was uniquely in Christ. I am not sure that this would have made a lot of sense to the historical Jesus. What does unique mean?

There is no question that Jesus exercised authority, in healing, in teaching, in preaching. It was not authority over against Torah, but authority in declaring God's will, and that, focused especially on the future and its impact already now in the present rather than exegetically in exposition of scriptural law. The enigmatic phrase, 'Son of Man', appears on Jesus' lips in the gospel material. It is hard to know how much it preserves historical memory. I still think it derives from apocalyptic speculation and alludes primarily to the human one who will act as God's agent at the climax of history. Did Jesus see himself acting in this role? Perhaps. And perhaps he assumed that also his band would assume leadership in a renewed Israel of the restored tribes (cf. Matt 19:28; Luke 22:30).

When the disciples claimed they had seen Jesus alive after his death, it meant for them that God had vindicated Jesus over against his accusers. Belief in resurrection was not uncommon. Here, however, it entailed a claim that the time of resurrections, the time of the end, was at hand. It proved to them that Jesus was right in what he said and claimed. This explains the continuity: the Jesus movement continued to proclaim God's coming reign and to behave in community and inclusiveness as had Jesus. Naturally Jesus moves into the centre of their thought in a new way. He also becomes part of their hopes. Just what had happened to Jesus? In affirming that Jesus was the Messiah, the movement was transforming a category which had once remained grounded in political aspirations. God had enthroned Jesus in heaven. One day Jesus would reign on earth as Messiah, as Israel's king, a strongly persistent tradition of Jewish Christians.

But the focus on Jesus' heavenly location moved Jewish thought about Jesus into the realm of mystery. Some Jewish groups had a strong interest in heavenly realities. Heaven was not only the place for angels, but also for exalted human beings, like Moses or Elijah or Enoch. Spiritualising the royal messianic tradition lay behind these Jews' claim that Jesus had been enthroned in heaven. It was not just a matter of reward, but of authorisation. God lent his sacred name the name that is above every name, to this Jesus. That entailed empowerment. The idea was not entirely novel. Some had speculated about a similar enthronement of Moses and of Enoch and of angels, sometimes with such naming. Empowered with the divine name, what kind of being is this? Rabbinic traditions reflect concern with speculation about two powers in heaven.<sup>11</sup> Possibly Christian Jewish speculation about Jesus is in mind. Certainly Christians acclaimed Jesus, 'Lord'. The combination of titles led to 'Lord Jesus Christ.'

Christian Jews also began to link Jesus in this exalted status with roles attributed to divine wisdom. From Proverbs 8 through to Sirach, the Wisdom of Solomon and Philo and elsewhere, God's wisdom appears personified as God's companion, God's agent in creation, God's Law in person. It was no great step to identify Jesus in these terms. In some sense heavenly realities know no time. What was true of Jesus now must have been true of him then. Out of this developed Christian Jewish beliefs that Jesus had been with God and borne God's name, shared in God's reality, from before creation and that Jesus was the manifestation of his reality. Subsequent history shows that no one intended to surrender Jewish tenets in the process. Neither the oneness of God nor the humanity of Jesus was to be compromised. What a development! And beside these were other explanations, typical of the time, to explain why Jesus was the way he was: divine seed in a human Mary, but, at first, focused primarily on miraculous conception.

One can understand that Jews who did not share the stance of Jesus and his followers found this all a bit 'over the top.' How could you make a human being a deity in such a short time. A blasphemous outrage! And so it must have seemed from outside and even to some inside. Like the divisions over the scripture, the divisions over what to think about Jesus were many. The most developed in such speculation is John's gospel. It presents Jesus as offering life and truth and

bread and light and water. It presents him as speaking of his descent from his Father into human life as the Father's ambassador and then planning to return. John's gospel tells us that many Christian Jewish believers found all this too much and left the movement, or, at least, the Johannine version of it. Yet the author is at pains to point out, as we have seen, that the charges that Jesus claims equality with God or tries to make himself God are false. In the framework of John's thought they are false. His Jesus is the subordinate envoy, a cipher for God's reality, always only glorifying God, not himself.<sup>12</sup>

Had there not been the disputes over the Law, the Jewish Christian movement would probably have been more sensitive to its heritage in developing its thought about Jesus though without surrendering its unique claims for him. But in the context of the tensions which the Law issues produced, claims for Jesus also escalated beyond a point where much dialogue was possible. The sad pain of division exacerbated the tensions and the process gave impetus to hatred instead of love. Bedevilling one's opponents appears both in the relation between Christian Jews and other Jews and within the Christian movement itself, the one well illustrated in the Gospel of John (esp. John 8), the other in the First Epistle of John (esp. 2:18-22; 4:4-6).

Christians still want to affirm that God was in Christ and uniquely so. What does unique mean?. I sense that there is a spectrum of ways of affirming that God was addressing us in Jesus. There is already such a spectrum in the New Testament. Some of the early Christian ways of saying this, could probably remain within acceptable Jewish possibilities; others are far beyond. For some, this is the main ground for the parting of the ways and continues the major sticking point.

I also sense that there is a spectrum of ways of dealing with Torah in scripture. Here Christian and Jewish attitudes to scripture show a similar diversity, I suspect, and that includes the importance of continuing oral and later codified written tradition. But there is an end to the spectrum where few Jews would dare, at least, theoretically. It is where people relativise cultic and purity law, so-called externals, as cultural particularities and abandon them. In practice it is not uncommon. Even Philo, for all his spiritualising, railed against this option (MigrAbr 89-93). For many, I suspect, even before christology was the sticking point, this was the impetus for parting. It continues to be a major difference, although ironically Christianity is brim full of cultural particularities made absolute.

On both of these spectra the historical Jesus sits comfortably within the areas of overlap, in his view of his own role and person, and in his attitude towards the Law. In that sense one could perhaps claim that Jesus was comfortably Christian and certainly comfortably Jewish and would not have sensed the conflict as other than intramural, within his own faith community. Yet what he generated challenged people into the unknown and, like the prophets of old, called them to radical compassion and evoked other responses as well, not least, a tradition of adulation.

Ultimately, in my view, the abiding claim of Jesus lies not in what divided but in what unites. Such a radical life as that of Jesus the Jew, lived under the vision of the kingdom, may well have us all wanting to edge him out. For the gods of this world, self interest, individually, culturally and nationally, who surround us with their altars and burn the world's poor in their groves, have their way of snuffing out the light of truth and telling us there is peace where there is no peace. They discarded him, like generations later would callously and cruelly discard his people, even in his name.

From his pain and from their pain a great cry for compassion and justice has gone forth into the world. Jesus the Jew would have wept for his people and for us.

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## Footnotes

1. This paper was first presented to the Western Australian Council of Christians and Jews, 14 October, 1996, at Murdoch University.
2. For significant recent discussion see the collections contained in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.) *Jesus' Jewishness. Exploring the Place of Jesus within Early Judaism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991); I. Broer, (ed.), *Jesus und das jüdische Gesetz* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer,

- 1992); K. Kertelge (ed.), *Das Gesetz im Neuen Testament* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986). See also G. Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); note also his earlier *Jesus The Jew* (London: Collins, 1973); E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985); *Jewish Law from Jesus to the Mishnah* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990); *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE – 66 CE* (London: SCM; Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992); among the many works of J. Neusner, note *Judaism in the Beginning of Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1984) and *Judaic Law from Jesus to the Mishnah. A Systematic Reply to Professor E. P. Sanders*. South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 84 (Atlanta: Scholars.1993); M. Hengel, and R. Deines, 'E. P. Sanders "Common Judaism", Jesus, and the Pharisees' *JTS NS*, 46 (1995) 1-70; and J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways. Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London: SCM, 1991).
3. *Jesus' Attitude towards the Law. A Study of the Gospels* - in the WUNT series (Tübingen: JCB Mohr).
  4. Forthcoming, to be published by the Joint Board of Christian Education, Melbourne.
  5. J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus. The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), has a very useful coverage of these issues.
  6. On this see also J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus. Volume One: The Roots of the Problem and the Person* (New York: Doubleday, 1991) pp. 205-208.
  7. For discussion of the following anecdotes from Mark see my 'Challenged at the Boundaries: A Conservative Jesus in Mark's Tradition' *JSNT* 63 (1996) 45-61.
  8. On the way the gospel writers portray Jesus' attitude towards the Law, apart from the works referred to in footnote 2 and 3 see also my 'Interpreters of the Tradition' *Trinity Occasional Papers XVI,1* (June, 1996) 31-49.
  9. For discussion of the Cynic analogy see Downing, F. G. *Christ and the Cynics: Jesus and other radical preachers in first ceat sy tradition* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988); Crossan, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 72-88, 421-422; B. L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: the Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1993). For critique of the analogy see H. D. Betz, 'Jesus and the Cynics: Survey and Analysis of a Hypothesis' *Journ Relig* 74 (1994) 453-475.
  10. See the enlightening paper by K. Müller, 'Möglichkeit und Vollzug jüdischer Kapitalgerichtsbarkeit im Prozess gegen Jesus von Nazaret' in: K. Kertelge (ed.), *Der Prozess gegen Jesus. Historische Rückfrage und theologische Deutung QD 112* (Freiburg: Herder, 1988), pp. 84-110.
  11. See the work of A. F. Segal, *Two Powers in Heaven. Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism* *SJLA* 25 (Leiden: Brill, 1977).
  12. See my discussion in *The Christology of the Fourth Gospel. Structure and Issues* *BET* 23 (Frankfurt: P. Lang, 2nd edn., 1992) pp. 154-172.

Source: Gesher.

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