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What Manner of Man? THE PRE-EASTER JESUS

If Jesus of Nazareth was not like the popular image of him, what was he like? Before we turn to specific themes of his message and activity in the rest of this book, I will provide a preliminary sketch of what we may surmise about him as a historical person. In this chapter, I will introduce you to the pre-Easter Jesus.

FROM THE GOSPELS TO JESUS

Before I sketch my own image of the pre-Easter Jesus, it will be helpful to consider what is involved. As I mentioned in chapter 1, the gospels are not straightforward historical documents but are the developing traditions of the early Christian movement put into written form in the last third of the first century. In the forty to seventy years between the ministry of Jesus and the writing of the gospels, the early Christians not only adapted the traditions about Jesus to new circumstances, but also continued to experience Jesus as a living reality after his death. The gospels contain both their memories of Jesus of Nazareth and their ongoing experience of the post-Easter Jesus.

There are thus many kinds of material in the gospels: the pre-Easter Jesus, and some post-Easter Jesus, and some post-Easter Jesus. To put it another way, there are two voices—the voice of the pre-Easter Jesus and the voice of the post-Easter Jesus in the gospels.

The work of a group of scholars has been to illustrate this process twice a year for the sake of the gospels. To me, this seems bizarre, and, to me, it seems to have a simple purpose: to measure how much of this material is on each saying by casting it into a ballot box. The ballot box—represent a decision. A red vote means, "I'm not sure," and a black vote means, "I'm not sure."

To relate the work of the gospels as containing the pre-Easter Jesus, the vote means, "This is a voice of the pre-Easter Jesus." The pre-Easter Jesus of Jesus is still present in the developing voice of the gospels that is even more present in the post-Easter Jesus. The vote means, "This is a voice of the post-Easter Jesus."

If we separate these two voices, how does Jesus emerge? Our work is primarily twofold. First, we look at the early layers of the gospels, also known simply as the "Gospel of Jesus," typical of the early ministry. Our second task is to look at the discovered Gospel of the post-Easter Jesus.

There are thus minimally two layers of tradition or two kinds of material in the gospels. Some material goes back to the pre-Easter Jesus, and some is the product of the early Christian movement. To put it another way, the gospels contain minimally two voices—the voice of the pre-Easter Jesus and the voice of the community in the post-Easter setting. Constructing an image of the pre-Easter Jesus involves separating out these layers, these voices.

The work of a group of scholars known as the Jesus Seminar illustrates this process well. Since we began in 1985, we have met twice a year for the sake of voting on the historical accuracy of the sayings of Jesus. To many people, the idea of voting on Jesus seems bizarre, and, to some, blasphemous. But our voting has a simple purpose: to measure the degree of scholarly consensus on how much of this material goes back to Jesus himself. We vote on each saying by casting one of four differently colored beads into a ballot box. The different colors—red, pink, gray, and black—represent a descending spectrum of historical probability. A red vote means, “I’m pretty sure Jesus said that”; pink, somewhere between “probably” and “more likely yes than no”; gray, somewhere between “more likely no than yes” and “probably not”; and black, “I’m pretty sure Jesus didn’t say that.”

To relate the work of the Seminar to the understanding of the gospels as containing minimally two layers or voices: a red vote means, “This is a part of the gospel that is very close to the voice of the pre-Easter Jesus”; a pink vote means, “Yes, the voice of Jesus is still present, but it is beginning to be affected by the developing voice of the community”; a gray vote points to a saying that is even more the voice of the community; and a black vote means, “This is almost exclusively (and perhaps entirely) the voice of the community.”¹

If we separate these voices out, what image of the pre-Easter Jesus emerges? Our written sources for addressing that question are primarily twofold. The first (and most important) source is the early layers of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (the synoptic gospels, also known simply as the synoptics), which contain sayings of Jesus, typical actions, and a skeletal framework of his adult ministry. Our second source is the early layer of the recently discovered Gospel of Thomas, found in upper Egypt in 1945.

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Thomas consists solely of sayings of Jesus (114 in all), and a strong case can be made that some of these go back to Jesus himself.²

Missing from our list of sources is the gospel of John. As I noted in chapter 1, though it is a powerful and truthful testimony to the community's experience of the post-Easter Jesus, it does not very closely reflect the pre-Easter Jesus. To use the color code of the Jesus Seminar, almost all of John has received only black votes. And so we return to our question: what was the pre-Easter Jesus like?

THE JEWISHNESS OF JESUS

Jesus was deeply Jewish. It is important to emphasize this obvious fact. Not only was he Jewish by birth and socialization, but he remained a Jew all of his life. His Scripture was the Jewish Bible. He did not intend to establish a new religion, but saw himself as having a mission within Judaism. He spoke as a Jew to other Jews. His early followers were Jewish. All of the authors of the New Testament (with the possible exception of the author of Luke-Acts) were Jewish.

Though I find it hard to believe, some Christians are apparently unaware of the Jewishness of Jesus, or, if they are aware, do not give it much weight.³ Moreover, Christians have frequently been guilty of conscious or unconscious anti-Semitism, identifying Jesus with Christianity and his opponents with Judaism, and thereby seeing Jesus and the early Christian movement as anti-Jewish. Parts of the New Testament as well as the popular image of Jesus encourage the notion that "the Jews" rejected Jesus.

But Jesus' opponents did not represent the Jewish people or nation. "The Jews" did not reject Jesus. Rather, the few Jewish persons involved in the events leading to his execution were a small but powerful elite whose power derived from the Romans. Instead of representing the Jews, they might fairly be described as collaborating in the oppression of the Jewish people.

The separation of Jesus from Judaism has had tragic consequences for Jews throughout the centuries. The separation is also historically incorrect, and any faithful image of Jesus must take with utmost seriousness his rootedness in Judaism.

STORIES OF JESUS' BIRTH

We know very little about Jefferson's early life and activity. In the opinion of most scholars, little is known of his birth and childhood. The few facts that have come to news to many within the church are that he was born in 1743 and that these stories are seen this way:

Within the New Testament, only in two relatively late books, Luke and Revelation, written by Luke and John, respectively, and Paul, the earliest New Testament writings were written between approximately 60 and 70 A.D. The time between A.D. 62 and 68 was a special way. Neither document was written around the year 70. Nor, at least, this suggests that stories central to the early Christian faith were written during this time.

Moreover, the stories of Luke are very different from the following:

In Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus is traced through the kinship of David, the father of the Jewish monarchy. Jesus goes back to Adam, the first human, and from David to the kings of Israel.

In Matthew, the family of Jesus is born *at home*, and from the flight into Egypt to Nazareth and travels, and so Jesus is born "on" family returns to its home.

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STORIES OF JESUS' BIRTH

We know very little about Jesus before the beginning of his public activity. In the opinion of most mainstream scholars, the stories of his birth and childhood are not historical. Because this is still news to many within the church, it is worthwhile describing why these stories are seen this way.

Within the New Testament, the birth of Jesus is referred to only in two relatively late sources, the gospels of Matthew and Luke, both written in the last twenty years of the first century. Paul, the earliest New Testament author, whose genuine letters were written between approximately A.D. 48 and his death sometime between A.D. 62 and 64, does not mention Jesus being born in a special way. Neither does Mark, the earliest gospel, written around the year 70. Nor does the gospel of John. At the very least, this suggests that stories about the birth of Jesus were not central to the early Christian movement.

Moreover, the stories of his birth as found in Matthew and Luke are very different from each other. The differences include the following:

In Matthew, the genealogy of Jesus goes back to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, and from David onward is traced through the kings of Israel. In Luke, the genealogy of Jesus goes back to Adam, the father of both Jews and Gentiles, and from David onward is traced through the prophets of Israel.

In Matthew, the family of Jesus lives in Bethlehem, where Jesus is born *at home*, and moves to Nazareth after returning from the flight into Egypt. In Luke, the family of Jesus lives in Nazareth and travels to Bethlehem because of the census, and so Jesus is born "on the road" in a stable, after which the family returns to its home in Nazareth.

In Matthew, the people who come to the birth are the wise men following the star. In Luke, there is neither star nor wise men; rather, there are shepherds.

In Matthew, King Herod the Great orders the slaughter of male infants in Bethlehem, which leads Jesus' family to seek

refuge in Egypt. In Luke, there is no such slaughter and no flight into Egypt.

These differences are the basis upon which most scholars conclude that the birth stories are not historical accounts but symbolic narratives created by the early Christian movement. To some extent, they reflect themes important to each evangelist. For example, with his tracing of Jesus' genealogy through the kings of Israel and with his story of the wise men seeking the one who is born "king of the Jews," Matthew emphasizes Jesus' kingship. Luke, with Jesus' genealogy traced back through the prophets, and with shepherds (who were marginalized people) as the ones to whom the news of the birth comes, emphasizes Jesus as a radical social prophet.

The birth stories make use of more primal religious imagery as well. With their stories of Jesus' conception by the Spirit, both Matthew and Luke affirm that what happened in Jesus was not simply "of the flesh," but also "of God"—that is, "of the Spirit." Both powerfully express the ancient theme of light coming into the darkness, Matthew with the star shining as a beacon to the wise men, Luke with the glory of God appearing in the night sky as the angels sing to the shepherds. The decision of the Christian church in the fourth century to celebrate Jesus' birth at the time of the winter solstice expresses this symbolism perfectly (at least in the Northern Hemisphere): he is born at the time of deepest darkness, and his birth is the coming of the light. Or, to put it even more compactly, Jesus is the light in our darkness. To hear the birth stories again in a state of postcritical naiveté is to be able to hear their rich symbolic affirmations without needing to believe them as historical reports.

Of course, these stories also say something indirectly about the historical Jesus, even though it is highly doubtful that they tell us anything about his birth. Namely, they tell us that he was such an extraordinary person that these kinds of stories were told about him. Similar stories were told about others, too. But how did it happen that such stories were told about a marginalized Jew from Galilee? The stories raise the question, What manner of man was this?

JESUS' SOCIALIZATION AND EARLY ADULTHOOD

As we move beyond the canonical Gospels to fill in the missing years of Jesus' life, we find a collection of second-century Infancy Gospels and the *sayings* Gospel of Thomas. These remarkable episodes about Jesus' childhood, for example, he makes a sparrow when criticized for breaking hands and they fly away. At last, he jostles Jesus' shoulder:

Jesus was exasperated and said, "Let your way," and the child in

These fanciful tales assign Jesus the status of the post-baptismal Jesus, the divine status of the post-baptismal Jesus earlier and earlier into the past.

In short, we do not know much about Jesus before about age 30. A few conclusions may be drawn. Jesus was born near the end of the reign of Herod the Great, shortly before 4 B.C.⁷ His parents were Mary and Joseph. He had four brothers and two sisters, all presumably dead before Jesus' birth.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, Galilee, about a hundred miles from Jerusalem. Estimates for Nazareth vary from a few thousand people. Nazareth was a village of Sepphoris, whose population was the largest in Galilee. Sepphoris was a city as they were quelling a rebellion. The Great Temple died in 4 B.C. Rebuilt by Herod the Great, the temple was a metropolitan. The reconstruction of the temple was a major project of Herod the Great.

JESUS' SOCIALIZATION AND EARLY ADULthood

As we move beyond the canonical birth stories to stories that seek to fill in the missing years of Jesus, the same verdict—nonhistorical—applies. A collection of such stories is found in the late second-century *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* (not to be confused with the *sayings Gospel of Thomas*), which reports some quite remarkable episodes about Jesus as a boy. At around age five, for example, he makes sparrows out of clay on the sabbath and, when criticized for breaking the sabbath by “working,” claps his hands and they fly away. At around age six, a playmate accidentally jostles Jesus’ shoulder:

Jesus was exasperated and said to him: “You shall not go further on your way,” and the child immediately fell down and died.⁴

These fanciful tales assigning extraordinary powers to the child Jesus are the products of early Christian imagination, in which the divine status of the post-Easter Jesus is uncritically projected back earlier and earlier into his life.⁵

In short, we do not have any historically reliable stories about Jesus before about age thirty.⁶ However, from the gospels a few conclusions may be derived. He was probably born very near the end of the reign of Herod the Great, and therefore shortly before 4 B.C.⁷ His parents were Jewish, and their names were Mary and Joseph. He may have been the firstborn, though this is not certain. He had four brothers and an unknown number of sisters, all presumably children of Joseph and Mary. Joseph probably died before Jesus’ public activity began.⁸

Jesus grew up in Nazareth, in the hill country of southern Galilee, about a hundred miles north of Jerusalem. Population estimates for Nazareth vary widely, from two hundred to two thousand people. Nazareth was less than four miles from the city of Sepphoris, whose population of forty thousand made it the largest in Galilee. Sepphoris had been destroyed by the Romans as they were quelling a rebellion that arose when Herod the Great died in 4 B.C. Rebuilt during Jesus’ youth, it was quite cosmopolitan. The reconstruction included a Roman-style theater

built sometime in the first century in which Greek and Roman plays were performed, though it is not clear that it can be dated as early as Jesus' lifetime. But it is rather intriguing to imagine Jesus going to the theater as a young man.

Indeed, Jesus' environment was considerably more cosmopolitan than we have typically imagined. The debate about the degree of Hellenization in Galilee continues among scholars, but it is clear that Galilee was not a bucolic rural backwater. In addition to Sepphoris, there were four other cities within about fifteen miles of Nazareth. Trade with other parts of the Mediterranean world was extensive, and foreign goods such as beer imported from Egypt were available. The area contained a considerable number of Gentiles, and the Greek language was widely used. It is possible that many or most Jews were bilingual, speaking both Aramaic and Greek. And, of course, the whole of Palestine was under Gentile control. Since 63 B.C., it had been part of the Roman Empire, ruled by "client kings" appointed by Rome.

From a few hints in the gospels and from what we might imagine about the socialization of a Jewish boy in first-century Galilee, we can surmise a few things about Jesus' youth. It is quite likely that he went to school in the synagogue in Nazareth, where the emphasis would have been on reading and writing, with the Torah as the primary text.⁹ He probably became a woodworker (in Greek, *tektōn*).¹⁰ The word *tektōn* has been translated as, but had a meaning different from, our word *carpenter*—that is, one who works on wooden buildings. For the most part, buildings were not made of wood in Palestine. Rather, a *tektōn* made wood products: doors, door frames, roof beams, furniture, cabinets, boxes, even yokes and plows. In terms of social standing, a *tektōn* was at the lower end of the peasant class, more marginalized than a peasant who still owned a small piece of land. We should not think of a *tektōn* as being a step up from a subsistence farmer; rather, a *tektōn* belonged to a family that had lost its land.

If his family was at least somewhat devout—a common assumption among Bible scholars—Jesus would have participated in the practices of "common Judaism."¹¹ He would have learned the stories, hymns, and prayers of the Jewish tradition. He would have observed and celebrated the great Jewish holi-

days, three of which were pilgrimages in Jerusalem. Passover, in the Egyptian desert. Pentecost (or "the Feast of Weeks" or "the Feast of Harvest") was an agricultural festival celebrating the grain harvest and thanking God for it. Sukkot (or "the Feast of Booths") was an eight-day festival marked by much music, feasting, and prayer. Jesus, who spent forty years spent in the wilderness, was to live in temporary dwellings. It is not hard to think that Jesus at least once visited Jerusalem to observe these feasts. Jesus, who knew much about daily and weekly life, it is probable that he, like the Pharisees, prayed twice daily, upon rising and upon going to bed, and served the sabbath, which included Torah study and prayer.

At some point in his life, Jesus was a seeker and embarked upon a journey. An obvious explanation of one aspect of his life about him: in his late twenties he left Nazareth and became a follower of John the Baptist. We do not know whether this was a gradual maturing or the product of a profound religious experience. But so much of his life behind and go out into the world of John the Baptist.

We may further surmise that what William James calls a "conversion" experience, of course, was not from unbelief to belief or from Jewish to Christian. Rather, as James described, it was a changing from one religious life to another; it was a sudden or gradual, where the religious life became central to one's life. Jesus experienced such an experience, and he undertook the ministry of Jesus. He had something to do with Jesus.

Clearly, Jesus' relationships with the people he met in all the gospels begin the

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days, three of which were pilgrimage festivals, ideally to be spent in Jerusalem. Passover, in the spring, recalled the exodus from Egypt. Pentecost (or "the Feast of Weeks"), some fifty days later, was an agricultural festival celebrating God's ownership of the land and thanking God for its fruitfulness. Tabernacles (or "the Feast of Booths") was an eight-day harvest celebration in the fall, marked by much music, feasting, and dancing; it recalled the forty years spent in the wilderness. During this festival everybody was to live in temporary dwellings or "booths."¹² It is reasonable to think that Jesus at least occasionally went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem to observe these festivals. Though we do not know much about daily and weekly religious practices at the time of Jesus, it is probable that he, like most Jews, prayed the Shema twice daily, upon rising and going to bed.¹³ He no doubt observed the sabbath, which included attending the synagogue for Torah study and prayer.

At some point in his life, Jesus must have become a religious seeker and embarked upon a religious quest. This is the most obvious explanation of one of the most certain facts we know about him: in his late twenties or around the age of thirty, he left Nazareth and became a follower of a wilderness prophet named John. We do not know whether this decision was the result of a gradual maturing or the product of a more sudden and dramatic religious experience. But something led him to leave conventional life behind and go out to the wilderness to become a follower of John the Baptizer.

We may further surmise that Jesus probably underwent what William James calls a "conversion experience." The conversion, of course, was not from paganism to Judaism, for he grew up Jewish. Rather, as James defines it, *conversion* need not refer to changing from one religion to another, or from being nonreligious to being religious; it may also refer to a process, whether sudden or gradual, whereby religious impulses and energies become central to one's life.¹⁴ It is reasonable to suppose that Jesus experienced such an internal transformation, which led him to undertake the ministry that he did, and that this probably had something to do with John the Baptizer.

Clearly, Jesus' relationship to John was important. Not only do all the gospels begin the story of Jesus' adult activity with his

association with John, but about him Jesus is reported to have said, "There is no one born of woman greater than John."¹⁵ That is high praise. Moreover, Mark dates the beginning of Jesus' ministry to John's arrest, which suggests minimally that, with his mentor in prison, Jesus stepped in to carry on. Beyond the minimal, we may wonder if the arrest and execution of the Baptizer were even more significant for Jesus.¹⁶ In any case, it is in connection with John that Jesus' personal story became public history.

THE ADULT JESUS: A SKETCH

So what was the adult Jesus like? What did this person, born to Mary and Joseph, socialized in Nazareth, and discipled to John the Baptizer, become?

Answering this question involves us in the task of historical reconstruction, which may be understood as generating an image or gestalt that draws together into a cohesive whole the various elements of the tradition judged to be historical. The process is very much like a particular stage of detective work: after the evidence has been gathered, analyzed, and weighed, it has to be integrated into an overall hypothesis.

Doing this with the traditions about Jesus produces a sketch, or construal or gestalt or image, of Jesus. I prefer these terms to *picture* or *portrait*, both of which suggest too much fullness of detail. A *sketch*, on the other hand, suggests broad strokes—a clear outline without much precision of detail.

Scholars have been attempting this for over two hundred years in what Albert Schweitzer called "the quest for the historical Jesus." Throughout much of this century, as I indicated earlier, the scholarly effort to discern what the pre-Easter Jesus was like has been in eclipse, disparaged as historically impossible and theologically irrelevant; this period is referred to by historians of the discipline as the time of "no quest."

In the 1980s, however, in what has been called "a third quest for the historical Jesus," "a new era in Jesus research," and "a renaissance in Jesus scholarship," this has changed.¹⁷ Now scholars are more confident that we can, with a reasonable degree of probability, know something about the historical

Jesus.¹⁸ In the judgment of many, the "quest" of the pre-Easter Jesus is possible.

Two Negative Claims

Before I turn to my sketch, it is important to make five statements. The first, which concerns the popular image of Jesus, is that the dominant image of the pre-Easter Jesus were in the past. This I mean simply that we have not had a Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah in some special sense. According to the developing gospel tradition, he was not about believing in him. He consistently pointed away from himself and toward the Father, theocentric, not christocentric—centered on the messianic proclamation about him.

The second negative statement concerns the spread scholarly image of Jesus, the Easter Jesus was *non-eschatological* formulation in order not to be denied is the notion that Jesus expected the Kingdom of God as a new generation.²⁰ This growing scholarly development. Over the last ten years, the eschatological prophet, which was the middle third of this century, has become a minority position.²¹

Four Positive Strokes

My own sketch of the pre-Easter Jesus is based upon a typical research and evaluation of the best evidence that Jesus had characteristics of several personalities, and each stroke in the sketch is of these types. Because I have dealt with this detail elsewhere, I will present it

Jesus.¹⁸ In the judgment of many, "a softly focused characterization" of the pre-Easter Jesus is possible.¹⁹

Two Negative Claims

Before I turn to my sketch, it is important that I make two negative statements. The first, which counters a central element in the popular image of Jesus, is that the self-understanding and message of the pre-Easter Jesus were in all likelihood *nonmessianic*. By this I mean simply that we have no way of knowing whether Jesus thought of himself as the Messiah or as the Son of God in some special sense. According to the earliest layers of the developing gospel tradition, he said nothing about having such thoughts. They were not part of his own teaching. His message was not about believing in him. Rather, the pre-Easter Jesus consistently pointed away from himself to God. His message was *theocentric*, not *christocentric*—centered in God, not centered in a messianic proclamation about himself.

The second negative statement, which counters a widespread scholarly image of Jesus, is that in all likelihood the pre-Easter Jesus was *noneschatological*. That statement needs precise formulation in order not to be misunderstood: what is being denied is the notion that Jesus expected the supernatural coming of the Kingdom of God as a world-ending event in his own generation.²⁰ This growing scholarly consensus is a recent development. Over the last ten years, the image of Jesus as an eschatological prophet, which dominated scholarship through the middle third of this century, has become very much a minority position.²¹

Four Positive Strokes

My own sketch of the pre-Easter Jesus consists of four broad strokes. It is based upon a typology of religious figures. My research and evaluation of the best Jesus scholarship convince me that Jesus had characteristics of several different types of religious personalities, and each stroke in my sketch identifies him with one of these types. Because I have developed this idea in considerable detail elsewhere, I will present it here very compactly.²²

1. The historical Jesus was a *spirit person*, one of those figures in human history with an experiential awareness of the reality of God. I will say more about this later in this chapter.
2. Jesus was a *teacher of wisdom* who regularly used the classic forms of wisdom speech (parables, and memorable short sayings known as aphorisms) to teach a subversive and alternative wisdom. About this I will say more in chapter 4.
3. Jesus was a *social prophet*, similar to the classical prophets of ancient Israel. As such, he criticized the elites (economic, political, and religious) of his time, was an advocate of an alternative social vision, and was often in conflict with authorities. About this point I will say more in chapter 3.
4. Jesus was a *movement founder* who brought into being a Jewish renewal or revitalization movement that challenged and shattered the social boundaries of his day, a movement that eventually became the early Christian church. I will say more about this in chapter 3.

These four strokes, taken in combination with the two negative statements made earlier, provide a sketch or profile of what the pre-Easter Jesus was like.²³ Together, they enable us to constellate the traditions about him into a coherent whole. The outline is very skeletal, of course, and I wish to flesh it out. Without seeking to be comprehensive or developing them in detail, I want to describe some impressions of Jesus that have struck me over the years.

Some Impressions of Jesus

Jesus' verbal gifts were remarkable. His language was most often metaphorical, poetic, and imaginative, filled with memorable short sayings and compelling short stories. He was clearly exceptionally intelligent. Not only were his insights pointed and illuminating, but he was very clever in debate, often turning a question back on his interrogators so that they could not respond without discrediting themselves. In contemporary terms, he was gifted as both a right-brain and left-brain thinker.

He used dramatic public actions. He ate meals with untouchables, which not only generated criticism but also symbol-

ized his alternative vision of human life. In Jerusalem at the head of a provocative parade, parodying prevailing ideas of kings of ancient Israel, he performed symbolic actions. He provocatively staged a demonstration by overturning the tables of the money changers and the sacrificial animals.

There was a radical social awareness and activity. He challenged the social order of the elites who dominated it. He humbly but playfully or sarcastically indicted the powerful. He has been remarkably courageous, doing even when it was clear that he would be killed. The fate of his mentor John the Baptist was a reminder to him of what happened to others. He attracted a significant following in the land of first-century Palestine.

He was a remarkable healer. There is more about him than about anybody else. He attracted a following, including women and children, and any sketch of his life must account for this. His credibility must account for this. His life was something quite compelling and mysterious, especially among the rich.

And finally, he was young. His public activity was brief. He lived only a short time. His public activity lasted perhaps as long as the synoptic gospels (or as much as John). The founders of the world religions lived long lives and were active for many years. That so much came forth from him has been a remarkable person. No one has exclaimed, "What manner

JESUS AS SPIRIT PERSON AND MEDIATOR OF THE S.

The first stroke in my four-stroke sketch of Jesus was. The most

ized his alternative vision of human community. He entered Jerusalem at the head of a procession on a donkey—a virtual parody of prevailing ideas of kingship. Like the classical prophets of ancient Israel, he performed symbolic actions: on one occasion he provocatively staged a demonstration in the temple, overturning the tables of the money changers and driving out the sellers of sacrificial animals.

There was a radical social and political edge to his message and activity. He challenged the social order of his day and indicted the elites who dominated it. He had a clever tongue, which could playfully or sarcastically indict the powerful and proper. He must have been remarkably courageous, willing to continue what he was doing even when it was clear that it was putting him in lethal danger. The fate of his mentor John the Baptizer must have been a vivid reminder to him of what happened to unauthorized leaders who attracted a significant following in the tense political atmosphere of first-century Palestine.

He was a remarkable healer: more healing stories are told about him than about anybody else in the Jewish tradition. He attracted a following, including people who left their previous lives behind, and any sketch of Jesus with a claim to historical credibility must account for this fact.²⁴ There must have been something quite compelling about him. He also attracted enemies, especially among the rich and powerful.

And finally, he was young, his life was short, and his public activity was brief. He lived only into his early thirties, and his public activity lasted perhaps as little as a year (according to the synoptic gospels) or as much as three or four years (according to John). The founders of the world's other major religious traditions lived long lives and were active for decades. It is exceptional that so much came forth from such a brief life. He must have been a remarkable person. No wonder his followers are said to have exclaimed, "What manner of man is this?"

JESUS AS SPIRIT PERSON AND MEDIATOR OF THE SACRED

The first stroke in my four-stroke sketch is foundational to everything else Jesus was.²⁵ The most crucial fact about Jesus was that

he was a "spirit person," a "mediator of the sacred," one of those persons in human history to whom the Spirit was an experiential reality.²⁶

It took me a long time to see this. The process began with the realization that there really are such phenomena as experiences of Spirit and spirit persons. The realization came to me initially not from the study of the Bible or the Christian tradition, but from the study of non-Western religions and cultural anthropology. This illuminating category helps us see much about Jesus that we otherwise might miss.

We begin with what a spirit person is. The older, semitechnical term is *holy man*, but *spirit person* seems better. The change to *person* reflects the fact that such figures come in both genders, which makes a gender-inclusive term desirable. The change to *spirit* (*spirit person* rather than *holy person*) seeks to avoid the connotations of *holy*, which there is a natural tendency to understand as an adjective denoting a moral quality, such as *righteous* or *pious* or *revered* or *saintly* or even *sanctimonious*. Such a reading would profoundly obscure what the phrase is meant to convey: a person to whom the sacred is an experiential reality.²⁷

Spirit persons are known cross-culturally. They are people who have vivid and frequent subjective experiences of another level or dimension of reality. These experiences involve momentary entry into nonordinary states of consciousness and take a number of different forms. Sometimes there is a vivid sense of momentarily seeing into another layer of reality; these are visionary experiences. Sometimes there is the experience of journeying into that other dimension of reality; this is the classic experience of the shaman. Sometimes there is a strong sense of another reality coming upon one, as in the ancient expression "The Spirit fell upon me." Sometimes the experience is of nature or an object within nature momentarily transfigured by "the sacred" shining through it. Bushes burn without being consumed; the whole earth is seen as filled with the glory of God (where *glory* means "radiant presence"). The world is perceived in such a way that previous perceptions seem nothing more than blindness.

What all persons who have these experiences share is a strong sense of there being more to reality than the tangible

world of our ordinary experience. They speak of having experienced something "real." They know something they didn't know before; it is noetic, involving not simply a *feeling* of the sacred. What such persons know is *the sacred*. Spirit persons who experience the sacred frequently are

It is experiences such as these that historians of the world to speak of "the sacred" (the *numinous*) refers to the other reality encountered. Most often, of course, the religious language of the sacred abstractly; rather, they name it: *man*, *Atman*, *Allah*, the *Tao*, *Great Spirit*. We suppose that all these names (and the others) mean the same thing.²⁹ But it is an impulse to name something as sacred from the experience of the sacred. Because the most common name of the sacred in the Jewish-Christian tradition is *God*, I often use *God* or *(the) Spirit* when referring to the sacred.

Spirit persons share a second feature: they are mediators of the sacred. They mediate the sacred. Sometimes they speak the word or will of God; sometimes they mediate the power of God in the form of sacraments. Sometimes they function as game hunters and gatherers and early agriculturists; sometimes they become charismatic warriors. What they all have in common is that they become mediators for the power or wisdom of God to the world. Anthropologically speaking, they are another layer of reality, mediators who mediate the sacred to the Spirit.

It is important to note that the experiential presupposes an understanding of reality. The dominant image of reality in the modern world, derived from the Enlightenment, is in material terms, as constituted by energy within the space-time continuum. The experience of spirit persons suggests that there is more to reality than that there is, in addition to the tangible

world of our ordinary experience. They share a compelling sense of having experienced something "real." They feel strongly that they know something they didn't know before. Their experiences are noetic, involving not simply a *feeling* of ecstasy, but a *knowing*. What such persons know is *the sacred*. Spirit persons are people who experience the sacred frequently and vividly.²⁸

It is experiences such as these that have led the religious traditions of the world to speak of "the sacred." *The sacred* (or *the numinous*) refers to the other reality encountered in these experiences. Most often, of course, the religious traditions do not speak of the sacred abstractly; rather, they *name* it—as Yahweh, Brahman, Atman, Allah, the Tao, Great Spirit, God. This is not to suppose that all these names (and the concepts associated with them) mean the same thing.²⁹ But it is to suppose that the impulse to name something as sacred flows out of the experience of the sacred. Because the most common name for the sacred in the Jewish-Christian tradition is *God*, I shall from now on most often use *God* or *(the) Spirit* when referring to the sacred.

Spirit persons share a second feature as well: they become mediators of the sacred. They mediate the Spirit in various ways. Sometimes they speak the word or will of God. Sometimes they mediate the power of God in the form of healings and/or exorcisms. Sometimes they function as game finders or rainmakers in hunting-and-gathering and early agricultural societies. Sometimes they become charismatic warriors or military leaders. What they all have in common is that they become funnels or conduits for the power or wisdom of God to enter into this world. Anthropologically speaking, they are delegates of the tribe to another layer of reality, mediators who connect their communities to the Spirit.

It is important to note that the experience of spirit persons presupposes an understanding of reality very different from the dominant image of reality in the modern Western world. The modern worldview, derived from the Enlightenment, sees reality in material terms, as constituted by the world of matter and energy within the space-time continuum. The experience of spirit persons suggests that there is more to reality than this—that there is, in addition to the tangible world of our ordinary

experience, a nonmaterial level of reality, actual even though nonmaterial, and charged with energy and power. The modern worldview is one-dimensional; the worldview of spirit persons is multidimensional.

Moreover, this other reality, it is important to emphasize, is not "somewhere else." Rather, it is all around us, and we are in it. In William James's words, we are separated from it only by filmy screens of consciousness.³⁰ When those screens of consciousness momentarily drop away, the experience of Spirit occurs. A spirit person is one in whom those screens of consciousness are unusually permeable—compared with most of us, who seem to have hardened rinds of consciousness instead.

Judaism had its stream of spirit persons. Indeed, they are the central figures in the biblical tradition, going back to the beginnings of Israel. Abraham and Jacob had visions of God and other paranormal experiences. Moses was a spirit person par excellence. He ascended Mount Sinai—the sacred mountain that symbolically is the navel of the earth, the *axis mundi* connecting this world to the other world—and there was in intimate communion with God. According to the book of Exodus, when he came down from the mountain his face even glowed with the divine presence. I have no idea if things such as that happen or not, but the point of the tradition is clear: Moses is presented as one of these mediators. He "knew God face to face," as his brief obituary at the end of the book of Deuteronomy puts it.³¹

Beyond Moses there is Elijah, a social prophet who was experientially in touch with the Spirit of God. He even, according to the stories about him, "journeyed in the Spirit," much as the Sioux spirit person Black Elk is reported to have done. Then there are the prophets of ancient Israel. For most of them the story of their "call" is told, typically involving a visionary experience of another reality. Classic among these is the story of Ezekiel, whose book begins with words that almost make the hairs on the back of one's neck stand up: "In the thirtieth year, in the fourth month of the year, on the fifth day of the month, by the river Chebar, the heavens were opened and I saw visions of God."

Closer to the time of Jesus there were a number of Jewish holy men or spirit persons. Best known are Honi the Circle-

Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, both of whom their contemplative prayer and their ability as ers."³² If we move beyond Jesus for just a moment, Saul became the apostle Paul through his ex-Spirit. According to the book of Acts, he had Damascus Road that involved both a *photism* (a light) and an *audition* (a voice).³³ According to I had a vivid experience of journeying into "the there experiencing things that are unutterable be put into words because they transcend the language."³⁴

It seems to me that, given that there really are and that the Jewish tradition included many such was clearly a spirit person. The stories of his life make this very clear. He had visions, including baptism in which, like Ezekiel, he "saw the heaven the Spirit descending upon him like a dove."³⁵ followed by a series of visions in the wilderness i call the temptation narrative, but which a apologist would recognize immediately as a wild vision quest, characteristic of spirit persons.³⁶

Jesus used spiritual practices, including contemplative prayer. We are told that he prayed for hours at a time all night long, and presumably not because his gotten exceptionally long. Rather, it seems more practiced a form of contemplation or meditation as Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle-Drawer. A said in the Jewish tradition that they would stand before God before they would heal. The practice of meditation is not simply an Eastern tradition, but Jewish-Christian tradition as well.

Other indicators that Jesus was a spirit person intimate way in which he addressed God. In part God *Abba*, which is the Aramaic word that a babbling edge of speech uses to address his or like the English *papa*. So Jesus called God "Papa" shall see in subsequent chapters, referred to God imagery). Why would a first-century Jewish person

Drawer and Hanina ben Dosa, both of whom were famed for their contemplative prayer and their ability as "miracle workers."³² If we move beyond Jesus for just a moment, the Pharisee Saul became the apostle Paul through his experience of the Spirit. According to the book of Acts, he had a vision on the Damascus Road that involved both a *photism* (an experience of light) and an *audition* (a voice).³³ According to Paul himself, he had a vivid experience of journeying into "the third heaven" and there experiencing things that are unutterable, that may not be put into words because they transcend the categories of language.³⁴

It seems to me that, given that there really are spirit persons and that the Jewish tradition included many such figures, Jesus was clearly a spirit person. The stories of his life in the gospels make this very clear. He had visions, including a vision at his baptism in which, like Ezekiel, he "saw the heavens opened" and the Spirit descending upon him like a dove.³⁵ That vision was followed by a series of visions in the wilderness in what we typically call the temptation narrative, but which a cultural anthropologist would recognize immediately as a wilderness ordeal or vision quest, characteristic of spirit persons.³⁶

Jesus used spiritual practices, including both fasting and prayer. We are told that he prayed for hours at a time, sometimes all night long, and presumably not because his prayer list had gotten exceptionally long. Rather, it seems more likely that he practiced a form of contemplation or meditation similar to that of Hanina ben Dosa and Honi the Circle-Drawer. About them it is said in the Jewish tradition that they would still their hearts before God before they would heal. The practice of wordless meditation is not simply an Eastern tradition, but is central to the Jewish-Christian tradition as well.

Other indicators that Jesus was a spirit person include the intimate way in which he addressed God. In particular, he called God *Abba*, which is the Aramaic word that a toddler on the babbling edge of speech uses to address his or her father. It is like the English *papa*. So Jesus called God "Papa" (he also, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, referred to God with female imagery). Why would a first-century Jewish person address God

as "Papa" when his tradition typically used much more formal terms of address for God? It is a bit shocking, and Jesus may have used this word for that reason, of course. That would be quite in character. But it also seems likely that this intimate term of address for God expressed the intimacy of Jesus' own experience of God.

Jesus spoke with "authority," which is best understood as flowing out of his own spiritual experience. It was not the authority of "Thus says the Lord," but rather an authority that took the form of "You have heard it said of old, but I say unto you. . . ." Sometimes his sayings began with the word *amen* rather than ending with it. This initial *amen* is unusual within Judaism. Such authoritative forms of speaking suggest that he perceived himself as speaking "from the mouth of the Spirit," and not simply as reciting tradition.³⁷

According to some of the stories in the gospels, his followers experienced a presence around him that was palpable and contagious. This seems similar to the spiritual presence or zone of liberation that other famous religious figures such as the Buddha and Saint Francis of Assisi are reported to have generated. Of course, Jesus was both a healer and an exorcist. Modern scholars generally accept that there is a historical core to the healing and exorcism stories, even though we may not be confident that any particular story is a detailed report of a specific incident. But historically speaking, we can say that Jesus was perceived by his contemporaries and himself as an exorcist who cast demons out of people and as a healer of diseases, and that this was attributed to the power of the Spirit working through him.

All of this makes it plausible to locate Jesus' own spirituality within what we know of Jewish mysticism in his day. Our picture of early Jewish mysticism has been growing, especially in the last several years.³⁸ The more we realize that there was a form of Jewish mysticism in first-century Palestine, the more likely it seems that Jesus stood in that experiential tradition.³⁹

Jesus' experience of the Spirit is expressed with dramatic simplicity in the "inaugural address" in Luke with which he begins his ministry: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.*"⁴⁰ At the center of Jesus' life was a profound and continuous relationship to the Spirit of God.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LIFE OF THE

This understanding of Jesus as a spirit person has important implications for the life of the church today. It challenges our understanding of Jesus, God, and the Christian life.

The image of the pre-Easter Jesus as a spirit person is quite different from common understandings of God. It is very different from my childhood image of God, an understanding that is still I think common in the church and that surfaces in the question "Who or what was God?" The image of Jesus sketched in this chapter suggests that the answer is "No, the pre-Easter Jesus is also quite different from the image of God that I have believed strongly (and perhaps wrongly) in God. It is a different thought of Jesus in my early adulthood. The spirit person suggests that Jesus was not so much a person believed strongly in God, but one who knew God.

The sketch affects how we see Jesus in the world. Imaging Jesus as a particular instance of a spirit person's personality known cross-culturally undermines the traditional Christian belief that Jesus is unique, which most often rests on the notion that Christianity is exclusively "the only way."⁴² The image I have sketched here suggests that Jesus is not the exclusive revelation of many mediators of the sacred. Yet even a different image of Jesus from the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian life in my judgment adds to the credibility of his life.

To speak personally, when the truth of Jesus' life was tied to the claim that the revelation of God was only in this tradition (and in the antecedents of this tradition) there came a time when its truth became for me a question: What are the chances that God would speak through this particular group of people (who just happened to be a group of people)? Indeed, I can put it more strongly: it is impossible for me to believe this. However, the image of Jesus as a spirit person is highly credible. The image of Jesus like this—and Jesus was one of them. The image of Jesus as a spirit person, of the numinous, of God, of the sacred, for whom God was an experiential reality.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

This understanding of Jesus as a spirit person has significant implications for the life of the church today. It affects how we see Jesus, God, and the Christian life.

The image of the pre-Easter Jesus as one who experienced God is quite different from common understandings of Jesus. It is very different from my childhood image of Jesus as one who was God, an understanding that is still held by some in the church and that surfaces in the question "Do you believe Jesus was God?" The image of Jesus sketched in this chapter suggests that the answer is "No, the pre-Easter Jesus was not God."⁴¹ It is also quite different from the image of Jesus as one who believed strongly (and perhaps wrongly) in God, which was how I thought of Jesus in my early adulthood. The sketch of Jesus as a spirit person suggests that Jesus was not simply a person who believed strongly in God, but one who knew God.

The sketch affects how we see Jesus in another way as well. Imaging Jesus as a particular instance of a type of religious personality known cross-culturally undermines a widespread Christian belief that Jesus is unique, which most commonly is linked to the notion that Christianity is exclusively true and that Jesus is "the only way."⁴² The image I have sketched views Jesus differently: rather than being the exclusive revelation of God, he is one of many mediators of the sacred. Yet even as this view subtracts from the uniqueness of Jesus and the Christian tradition, it also in my judgment adds to the credibility of both.

To speak personally, when the truth of the Christian tradition was tied to the claim that the revelation of God was found only in this tradition (and in the antecedent Jewish tradition), there came a time when its truth became for me highly unlikely. What are the chances that God would speak only to and through this particular group of people (who just happened to be *our* group of people)? Indeed, I can put it more strongly: it became impossible for me to believe this. However, I find the image of Jesus as a spirit person highly credible. There really are people like this—and Jesus was one of them. There really are experiences of the sacred, of the numinous, of God—and Jesus was one for whom God was an experiential reality.

This leads to a second set of implications, which concern how we think of God. Candor compels me to acknowledge that experiences of the sacred do not prove the reality of God (though I find them far more interesting and convincing than any of the “proofs” for the existence of God). But if one does take these experiences as epiphanies of the way things are, as disclosures of the sacred—as I do myself—they have implications for how we think of God.

They challenge our most common ways of thinking about God and invite us into a much different way of imaging God. The most common modern understandings of God in the church (as well as in our culture) are deist or supernaturalist. Speaking broadly, the deist way conceives of God as a supernatural being “out there” who created the world a long time ago, who established natural laws as a way of ordering it, and who no longer has much to do with it. The supernaturalist way of imaging God also sees God as a being “out there,” and differs from deism only by affirming that God from time to time supernaturally intervenes in this world (especially in the events reported in the Old and New Testaments). Different as the two views are, they have some things in common. Both are products of the Enlightenment, which removed God from this world.⁴³ Both are instances of “the god of theism,” which images God as a being separate from the world—that is, as a primarily transcendent reality. And both typically stress belief as the basis for affirming the existence of a God who is essentially not around.

The image of God that goes with the understanding of Jesus as a spirit person is very different. Rather than being an article of belief, God becomes an experiential reality. The Jewish tradition in which Jesus stood speaks of persons who “know” God, and the Hebrew word for *know* is the same word used for sexual intercourse. God can be *known* in that direct and intimate way, not merely believed in. The experience of spirit persons in general and of Jesus in particular suggests that God is not to be thought of as a remote and transcendent creator far removed from this world, but imaged as all around us—as “the one in whom we live and move and have our being,” as the book of Acts puts it in words attributed to Saint Paul.⁴⁴ Within this framework, the pre-Easter Jesus becomes a powerful testimony to the reality and knowability of God.

Finally, the image of Jesus as a spirit person has implications for how we think of the Christian life. It challenges the Christian life from believing in Jesus or being in relationship to the same Spirit that Jesus had. This is the theme that I emphasized at the end of chapter 1 and will return to again in this book: that the Christian life is not about being in God to being in relationship to God.

NOTES

1. The first stage of the Jesus Seminar’s work was a book about to be published in a color-coded edition, which sayings of Jesus will be printed in the color that correspond to the Seminar’s voting: *The Five Gospels: The Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, 1994); the fifth gospel is Thomas. The second stage of the Seminar’s work, now under way, focuses on the Gospel of Thomas.
2. See Helmut Koester and Stephen J. Paterson, “The Gospel of Thomas: Does It Contain Authentic Sayings of Jesus?” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, April 1990, pp. 26–39. See also Stevan Davies, *Christian Wisdom* (New York: Seabury, 1994); and John P. Meier et al., *Q Thomas Reader* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1992).
3. See, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Jesus: A Feminist Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 105–6, where she discusses a friend who had to work very hard to get into a catechism class in her parish that Jesus was Jewish. She responds, “But the Blessed Mother for us.”
4. Translation from E. Hennecke and W. Schneiders, *The Apocryphal Gospels* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), p. 393. In the episode immediately preceding the episode about another child, “You insolent godless daughter, you wither like a tree and shall bear neither fruit nor leaf, and the child ‘immediately withered up.’” See the Gospel of Thomas (as well as all other early Christian texts now most easily accessible in *The Complete Gospels*, ed. by Miller (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1992).
5. Luke’s account of Jesus amazing the teachers in the temple probably represents an early stage of the Jesus Seminar’s work.

Finally, the image of Jesus as a spirit person has implications for how we think of the Christian life. It shifts the focus of the Christian life from believing in Jesus or believing in God to being in relationship to the same Spirit that Jesus knew. It is the claim that I emphasized at the end of chapter 1 and that will emerge yet again in this book: that the Christian life moves beyond believing in God to being in relationship to God.

NOTES

1. The first stage of the Jesus Seminar's work (on the *sayings* of Jesus) is about to be published in a color-coded edition of the gospels, in which sayings of Jesus will be printed in the four colors that correspond to the Seminar's voting: *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York: Macmillan, scheduled for publication in early 1994; the fifth gospel is Thomas). The second stage of the Seminar's work, now under way, focuses on the *deeds* of Jesus.
2. See Helmut Koester and Stephen J. Patterson, "The Gospel of Thomas: Does It Contain Authentic Sayings of Jesus?" *Bible Review*, April 1990, pp. 26-39. See also Stevan Davies, *The Gospel of Thomas and Christian Wisdom* (New York: Seabury, 1983); John S. Kloppenborg et al., *Q Thomas Reader* (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1990); and Marvin Meyer, *The Gospel of Thomas* (San Francisco, HarperSanFrancisco: 1992).
3. See, for example, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her* (New York: Crossroad, 1985), pp. 105-6, where the author tells about a friend who had to work very hard to convince an adult education class in her parish that Jesus was Jewish, only to have somebody respond, "But the Blessed Mother for sure is not."
4. Translation from E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963, 1965), vol. 1, p. 393. In the episode immediately preceding this one, Jesus says to another child, "You insolent godless dunderhead, . . . you shall wither like a tree and shall bear neither leaves nor root nor fruit," and the child "immediately withered up completely." The Infancy Gospel of Thomas (as well as all other early Christian gospels) is now most easily accessible in *The Complete Gospels*, ed. Robert J. Miller (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1992).
5. Luke's account of Jesus amazing the teachers in the temple at age twelve probably represents an early stage of this process.