

The Life of Jesus

A Brief Assessment

GERD LÜDEMANN

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Since the images people use in their speech reflect their surroundings, it is clear that Jesus came from a small agricultural village. The world of his parables is a rural one. Jesus is familiar with the sower in the field (1 Mark 4:3–8); the shepherd with his herd (Luke 15:4–6); the birds of the sky (Matt.: 6:26); and the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:28). Even the mustard plant, commonly considered a weed in the garden, becomes for this peripatetic provincial an image of the in-breaking kingdom of God (Mark 4:30–32).

Jesus grew up in a family of five brothers and at least two sisters in the Galilean village of Nazareth. He was probably the oldest child. His mother tongue was Aramaic, but he likely gained some proficiency in colloquial Greek. He learned the woodworker's craft from his father. Like most of his contemporaries, Jesus could not read or write, but he was able to obtain a considerable religious education in the local synagogue. At Sabbath services and on other occasions, he acquired by word of mouth parts of the Torah, prophetic teachings and predictions, and exciting stories that surely included the narratives about Elijah and Elisha—the prophets whose miraculous deeds inspired a good deal of contemporary popular piety.

The limitations imposed by Jesus' environment become apparent when we contrast his situation with that of his close contemporary, the apostle Paul. That Paul came not from a village but a city is likewise indicated by his habitual images. His letters portray city life—with the stalls of traders (2 Cor. 2:17); a tutor holding the hands of his little charges on the way to school (Gal. 3:24–25); and a solemn triumphal procession moving through the streets (cf. 2 Cor. 2:14). Paul often takes his imagery from warfare (2 Cor. 10:3–5), and even soldiers' trumpets provide him with a comparison (1 Cor. 14:8). Similarly, his arguments employ parallels from the legal sphere (Gal. 3:17), the theater (1

Cor. 4:9), and athletic competitions (1 Cor. 9:24). Jesus probably never visited a theater or an arena, although he may have found work in the city of Sepphoris, a center of Greek culture only about three miles from Nazareth.

Unlike Jesus, Paul was highly literate, having received both a Jewish and a Greek education. And though his mother tongue was Greek, he had a good command of Aramaic. Roman citizenship endowed him with numerous privileges. By origin and education, Paul was as thoroughly cosmopolitan as Jesus was provincial. Had they ever met, social barriers would have discouraged communication, and at any rate, they might well have had little to share. Paul would proba-

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bly have chuckled at the country bumpkin from Galilee, or he might simply have shrugged his shoulders. Jesus' reaction to Paul would probably not have been any warmer. In any case, he would hardly have understood Paul's pedantic theological demonstrations, for scholarly exegesis of commandments, prophets, and scriptures, with all its nice distinctions, was not to his taste.

And yet, the two shared important assumptions and goals. Jesus and Paul were committed Jews, proud and eager to serve the one God who had created heaven and earth and chosen Israel. Both acted in the certainty that their God had destined Jerusalem to be the center of the earth. Here, the “Savior” would come at the end of days; and here, divinely ordained sacrifices were offered and great festivals like Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles established the consecrated unity of the cycles of seasons and years. It should also be noted that both Jesus and Paul displayed the gift of exorcism and that both considered themselves to have struggled successfully against Satan.

Every life is affected by special features that range from inborn traits to culturally acquired beliefs and values to the workings of sheer chance. In Paul's case, for example, an illness that tormented him to the end of his life evidently made him particularly susceptible to ecstatic experiences. He hints at this when he speaks about the thorn in the flesh or the angel of Satan which—of course, at God's bidding—keeps pummeling him (2 Cor. 12:7). Jesus suffered from an even harsher affliction, a blot on his reputation that originated with his mother: apparently he, her first-born child, had been fathered in dubious circumstances. In our earliest written source, he is contemptuously labeled “son of Mary” (Mark 6:3), and Matthew's story of Jesus' birth recognizes

GERD LÜDEMANN is a professor of theology at the University of Göttingen, Germany, and a Fellow of CSER. His most recent book is *Intolerance and the Gospel*.

the lack of a father and immediately introduces the Holy Spirit as a begetter (cf. Matt. 1:18–25). Not only that, but in his genealogy of the Messiah, Matthew mitigates the charge of immoral behavior by including four female ancestors with questionable or immoral associations (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah—Matt. 1:3–6)—women whose notoriety had clearly not deterred God from his plan to raise up Jesus, the son of Mary, to be the Messiah and Son of God.

But that is a carefully constructed theological interpretation; the often harsh facts of life are not always so pretty, and Jesus came to feel this to an increasing extent. From the very first, no doubt, people in his hometown of Nazareth

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either shunned or attacked him as a bastard without a proper father. Hence the taunt, “son of Mary.” His later adoption by Joseph—long before he rose to public notice—did not remove the stigma of being regarded as the son of a prostitute. It is hardly unreasonable to suppose that his later acceptance of those who were despised as sinners and outcasts reflects his own bitter experience of blameless rejection. Such a sense of alienation may also account for his difficult relationship with his own biological family. Following the evidently early death of his adoptive father, he would normally have been expected, as the oldest son, to assume responsibility for the family, especially for his mother. But the sources tell another story. For Jesus, the fourth commandment appears to have had little attraction; he chose the way of radical separation.

However, insults and inclinations are not in themselves enough to give rise to a movement. There must be other motivations from other people. In Jesus’ case, the key stimulus was the figure of John the Baptist.

John was one of a long line of Jewish prophets who called for repentance in the face of the imminent day of God’s judgment. Yet like other prophets, he mitigated the threat with the promise of forgiveness for all those who repented and accepted his baptism. This guarantee of escaping God’s wrath gave his message great appeal and led numerous Jews to come to him beside the Jordan. Among them was Jesus the Galilean, who, burdened with a nagging sense of unfulfillment, had come south and found at least temporary relief in the circle around John the Baptist. Here was a new kind of family—one very different from his biological fami-

ly and more spiritually nurturing. Now, he belonged to a group of ascetics whose only obedience was to God and whose gratitude for this one final opportunity for repentance was palpable and genuine.

Clearly, this eccentric prophet in the Jordan wilderness and his followers worried and indeed challenged the members of the priestly aristocracy in Jerusalem. What was this nondescript agitator trying to do with his obvious parody of the Twelve Tribes crossing the river under Joshua and the establishment of the pure desert religion of the Tabernacle in the land? Had not the supervision, administration, and execution of the sacrifices that brought about atonement long since been entrusted to them alone by God? But as long as the Temple was not in immediate danger, they tried to ignore the exotic Baptist sect by the Jordan. Anyway, Roman oppression had produced an abundance of “inspired” prophets with all sorts of messages—messianic and otherwise. But they could not forever overlook the fact that John was dangerous. As people began to understand—and perhaps even concur on—his implied charge of Temple corruption, things would heat up for the authorities. Worse yet, his preaching had unsettling political implications, since their jurisdiction depended on collaboration with Rome; and John was preaching the rule of God, not Caesar. Indeed, Herod Antipas, the ruler of the area in which Jesus lived, soon recognized the underlying political radicalism and had John summarily executed as a messianic pretender.

It is not clear how long Jesus remained in the Baptist’s company, but the rivalry between the disciples of Jesus and those of John shows that Jesus must have already gone his own way before the Baptist’s death. That defection must not be seen as a break with Jewish tradition; rather, it resulted from Jesus’ refocusing of John’s preaching. This new dispensation evolved from three sources. First, Jesus was uncomfortable with John’s fundamentally ascetic attitude. Second, this aversion stemmed in considerable measure from his powerful experience of the Kingdom of God that was realized in meals at which all were welcome. Third, Jesus had discovered a gift for healing and found in it an overwhelming experience—one he also associated with the presence of God.

We can no longer claim to be completely clear about the substantive or chronological connection between these three points, but it is important to note that none is ever attributed to John. Clearly, they mark a turning point in Jesus’ spiritual development. However, some similarities between them seem rooted in the Baptist’s religious convictions. First, Jesus shared with John an unshakable commitment to following and expounding on the will of God. Second, like John he remained unmarried, as did the apostle Paul. This point is all the more worth noting, since it was considered the religious obligation of every male Jew to father descendants. Third, Jesus may have shared with John the expectation of an imminent final judgment, though this point depends more on interpretation than on solid evidence.

No doubt, Jesus’ gift for healing soon became widely known in Galilee. His cures of psychological and psychosomatic illnesses are the best attested of the New Testament “miracles.” At that time, such afflictions were attributed to demonic possession, and since Satan was regarded as the

chief of these evil spirits, these cures lent reality to the notion that Jesus was waging a successful battle against him. The report that he had seen Satan fall like lightning from heaven implies that he had become stronger than Satan himself, and thus represents an anticipation of the advent of God's kingdom. That he could snatch people from the rule of the devil by providing healing and the forgiveness of sins shows that, for him, sickness and sin were inseparably joined. Here again, Jesus resembles Paul, who could attribute an epidemic of debility, sickness, and even death in the Corinthian community in Corinth to the sinful misuse of the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11:29–30).

According to Jesus, however, the Kingdom of God meant not only liberation from sickness and other evils, but it involved the establishment of God's rule under the jurisdiction of Jesus and the twelve apostles. Underlying the latter notion was the ancient but delusory hope that, when God at last instituted his kingdom, he would also restore the ten tribes that had been annihilated by the Assyrians seven hundred years previously. At the time of Jesus, only the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained, but, at the end of history, according to a promise attributed to Jesus, his twelve disciples would judge these Twelve Tribes. What higher prerogative than to sit beside Jesus among God's elect in the Court of Heaven? Indeed, the apostle Paul expressed a similar hope. He called on the members of the Corinthian community not to go to the law against one another, since they themselves would one day judge angels (1 Cor. 6:3).

Here, we see directly into the hearts of a number of early Christians, no doubt including some members of the community gathered by Jesus. Their faith sprang not from reason or reflection but from the prospect of sharing in God's rule. And this rule extended not only to human beings but also to an entire cosmos that must be restored to the rightful order willed by God. Of course, all this reflected a Jewish perspective, since it involved only the Jewish people and focused on the New Jerusalem. Other peoples amounted to no more than neighbors or supernumeraries. Jesus' exalted status reflected the ardent hope that God would soon keep his promise. And the successes of his ministry subsequent to his departure from John the Baptist may well have convinced him that he must play the leading role in this final drama. Again the parallel with Paul is striking and perhaps illuminating: it was only a few years later that Paul became persuaded that he had been ordained to effect the incorporation of the Gentiles into the future kingdom of God (cf. Rom. 11:13–36).

The decisive actions of Jesus' career were molded by the unshakeable faith that it was his mission to authoritatively interpret God's law in God's name. In general, his interpretation can be perceived as based on an accentuation of the divine will. Thus, he forbade divorce with an appeal to the goodness of God's creation, in accordance with which, the marriage of man and woman creates an indissoluble unity (Mark 10:9,11). He defined the commandment to love by the extreme demand to love one's enemy (Matt. 5:44a). He forbade judging (Matt. 7:1) and swearing (Matt 5:34a). Occasionally, he proclaimed a sweeping retraction of the law—as, for instance, when he in effect declared the food laws irrelevant (Mark 7:15) and when he adduced human welfare as the purpose of the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

But anything that in the modern view would appear to be autonomy was grounded in heteronomy, in God enforcing his rule. Jesus could ordain this free yet radically conservative interpretation of the law only because he had received the authority to do so from the deity he lovingly addressed (as Paul did later—Gal. 4:6) as *Abba* (Luke 11:2)—a term connoting both intimacy and affection. Under such circumstances, Jesus and his heavenly Father were practically one and the same, a notion that must have been highly offensive to his Jewish hearers.

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And although he drove out demons and expounded the law, Jesus was also a poet and a wisdom teacher. He told intriguing tales of common scamps and deep-dyed villains, and from their realistic estimations of the world, drew morals for himself and his disciples. Indeed, his own life often resembled that of a picaresque hero, especially because of his itinerant mode of living; for having no income, he accepted the support of sympathizers and trusted in God. Embedded in some of his stories, we find the kind of shrewd maxims one would expect from a philosopher. In other parables, he vividly showed how God would bring into being his kingdom: gently and yet, at the same time, irrevocably.

Still other stories strikingly portray God's attempts to reclaim the lost. Jesus provided living commentary for this lesson: he was often the guest of tax collectors and prostitutes. Some of the parables attributed to him contain a threatening tone: there will be judgment in the end, and God will destroy his enemies. Yet as the Beatitudes powerfully testify, he will also make good the fate of the poor, the hungry, and those who weep.

One may reasonably wonder how the timeless nature of Jesus' wisdom comports with those passages that indicate the expectation of an imminent end. Some scholars cut the knot and declare the first authentic and the other a later creation. That at least produces a Jesus whom we find easier to understand today. But that is probably too modern a solution. What we cannot reconcile, the first-century mind might have harmonized with little difficulty. Paul offers a contemporary example of the accommodation of the wisdom teaching and the anticipation of an imminent end. Paul fully expected to experience the coming of the Lord on the clouds of heaven and was obsessed with spreading the

gospel throughout the Roman Empire before Jesus' return. Yet we find in his writings such timeless observations as the foolishness of human wisdom before God (1 Cor. 1–2), and the magnificent hymn we find in 1 Corinthians 13 is a paean to a timeless love that precludes the calculation of an imminent end. This love is greater than hope (for the end) and greater also than faith (in Christ who first made possible the expectation of an imminent end). Surely then, Jesus could also have combined apocalyptic preaching, wisdom teaching, and divinely sanctioned ethical demands, however contrary to modern logic that may seem. A consideration of the final days of his life suggests that the image of the approaching end may have by then become predominant.

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Jesus had experienced great success in Galilee, but the same call to which the crowds had responded now drew him to Jerusalem, where he proclaimed to the Jewish people and their leaders the need for repentance. Marching into the city, surrounded by both male and female followers, he went to the Temple and dramatized both his criticism of the existing cult and his hope for the coming of a new Temple by the act of overturning the tables of some of the money-changers and traders. The Jewish priesthood and aristocracy could not forgive him that, and the subsequent events bore little resemblance to the occasional clashes between Pharisees and Jesus in Galilee. There, Jesus had received no more than insults; here, in a city swarming with Passover celebrants, the authorities were in deadly earnest. Jesus was falsely labeled as a would-be king of the Jews, and Pilate gave him short shrift. Evidently, his disciples were quite unprepared for this, for they all fled. The crucified Jesus was the victim of a criminal conspiracy: he suffered for deeds he had never committed and aspirations he would never have countenanced.

Although this unforeseen outcome seemed to repudiate all that Jesus had told his disciples and the Jewish people, he probably did not perceive it that way. Once again, a look at Paul helps: when some members of his community began to die and Jesus failed to return as soon as the apostle had promised, Paul did not give up his faith but proclaimed it all the more strongly. He announced that whether he lived or died, he belonged to the “Lord.” In all likelihood, that is how Jesus thought and felt on the cross, surrendering himself to his Father. True faith can never be refuted by reality, let alone by arguments.

Of course, the story of Jesus' life must include the accounts of post-mortem events, since, except for these extraordinary reports, all knowledge about him would no doubt have ceased long ago. In their eagerness to exalt his memory, his disciples began by making Jesus the Jew into an enigma of the first order. Soon after his death, they claimed that Jesus had been raised from the dead and would come again on the clouds of heaven as the Son of God, as Savior, as Christ, as the Son of Man. Even more important, a number of his followers drove out demons in his name and performed miracles similar to his. Some even claimed to speak on behalf of the risen Jesus and, ostensibly filled with the Holy Spirit, asserted the authority to deal with problems in their communities. The apostle Paul, the erstwhile persecutor of Jesus' followers whose reported encounter with the risen Christ resulted in his conversion, provided the relentless will that energized the mission to the Gentiles. With a genius for organization and an indomitable dedication to his calling, he became the prime example of this phenomenon.

After the Jewish rebellion of 66–70 C.E. and the resulting destruction of Jerusalem, there followed a period of unparalleled confusion, out of which emerged a church consisting almost exclusively of Gentiles, who, without delay, branded their risen Lord's fellow Jews as murderers of God. The flood of bizarre interpretations that began with the reported resurrection of Jesus was unstoppable. Everywhere, the constraints of reason that had reined in religious pretensions to infallibility began to give way. According to evangelists and preachers alike, the Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament) provided numerous cases in which God had alluded to Christ and announced his coming. Indeed Christ had been at God's side when the world was created. As if the assassination of Jesus the authoritative exorcist, the expounder of the law, the prophet, the poet, and the wisdom teacher at the hands of a political cabal were not tragedy enough, the long history of misinterpretation and misuse of his memory and message to benefit individual and sectarian interests is a greater and even more shameful one.

Nevertheless, a vital question remains: once the ecclesiastical trappings and distortions are recognized as a shameless charade, what can Jesus mean in today's world? For me, Jesus is a sympathetic, original figure, a man of humor and wit at whom I sometimes chuckle.

Yet, one cannot doubt the earnest dedication that characterized his mission to those on the periphery of the Jewish society of his day. Jesus is the paradigm of one who will not be deterred from following a chosen path to the end; but his interpretation of the law, which both relaxed and intensified the essence of the Torah, makes him too serious for me. Nor can I revere an enthusiasm that repudiates reason or esteem the proclaimed Kingdom of God that has failed to materialize.

Finally, in his confident dialogue with God, Jesus seems almost delusional; like so many religious people, he errs in seeing himself at the center of the world.

Therefore the unity of Jesus' message and his integrity as a person remain problematical, and we cannot expect to build upon the sand of uncertainty solid answers to the haunting challenges of our world. ♦