



INTRODUCTION

HISTORY DOES NOT RECORD THE DAY or the hour in which what would become one of the most pivotal moments in human history took place. Some time in the latter part of the second decade of the first century of our era, a man of no particular renown, himself perhaps not much older than the century in which he grew to adulthood, traveled on foot from his village in the land of Galilee to a spot along the Jordan River in Judea to the south. It was a journey not at all uncommon in those days, but a deliberate one. He came as one seeking the will of God, but he would leave as one revealing the will of God to others. In one brief moment, his fate, and the fate of millions in generations to come, would change forever.

What brought him to that place? And why, of all the hundreds, possibly thousands, of others who had made similar journeys to the same tree-lined patch by the river's edge was he so profoundly affected by what transpired there? Fundamentally, there are two possible answers to those questions. One is well known, documented by the Evangelists, and has for centuries been embraced by millions of faithful

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Christians all over the world.¹ The other is cloaked in obscurity — at best uncertain and most likely, as a matter of history or biography, unknowable.² Yet, it is the aim of this study to hazard a conjecture — one of many, as we will see — as to a possible historical answer, in the hope of shedding some additional light on this most remarkable occurrence.

Nearly all studies of the historical Jesus (as opposed to the religious figure of Christ Jesus) thematically begin at the end and work backward. They seek to understand within the context of historical evidence the figure of Jesus that has come down to us primarily through the four canonized Gospels (Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John) and the Christian religion. More specifically, most are preoccupied with two elusive and challenging questions. One is the question of Jesus' divine nature. The other is the question of the meaning of Jesus' death. The two questions are interrelated, of course, but, in regards to evidence and interpretation, separable. Because they are so important in both historical and faith-based accounts of the life of Jesus, let us take a moment to review the issues involved in each.

The first question — or more accurately, set of questions — has to do with whether and in what sense Jesus was in essence, or partook of, a divine being. This question has many facets. First, there are the nativity narratives in the Gospels. Because they do not agree with one another, they have raised questions about Jesus' parentage, his place of birth, his blood relation to the House of David (from which the Jewish Messiah was prophesied to come), and his blood relation to John the Baptist.³ In addition, there is the question, as yet unsettled, as to whether the Jews viewed the Messiah as some sort of divine or semi-divine being or merely as an extraordinary warrior or hero. Then there is the issue of the Gospels themselves — when they were written and by whom and for what purpose. The answers matter because they can shed light on how the figure of Christ Jesus (the resurrected Son of God) is presented in each Gospel and how that representation may color what we might learn about the historical Jesus from those faith documents. Over time, the figure and meaning of Jesus the Christ evolved

within the early church and faith-based communities.⁴ Differences are apparent already within the New Testament itself. Furthermore, there are the issues of Jesus' authority (from whence does it come), the varying accounts of what occurred at his baptism, and the stories of his miraculous healing powers and resurrection. Are they meant to be evidence of his divinity or of his prophetic stature only?⁵ And finally, there are the enigmatic references by Jesus himself to the Son of Man and the issue of Jesus' relationship to the Messiah. Did Jesus himself believe he was the (or, a) "son of God" and, if so, what did that mean to him and how did he speak of that to his disciples? Did he believe he was the Messiah promised to the people of Israel? Did he believe he was the last of the prophets? How were those ideas connected and when did they come to be connected together?

The second set of questions involves the very nature of Jesus' mission and what he hoped to accomplish by it. The series of events leading up to Jesus' death and to what is usually referred to now as "the Easter experience" (Jesus' resurrection and appearance to the apostles following his crucifixion) are, on the one hand, "well documented" by three of the four Gospel writers and, on the other hand, from a historian's perspective, sketchy and incomplete. Like the Nativity stories, the accounts of Jesus' trial and death are so deeply ingrained in Christian culture through art, song and literature that in the popular mind they are all woven together into one Passion narrative. But the individual accounts are not so cohesive, especially in the order and progress of certain events and the presence or absence of certain persons. Thus, sorting biography from history from literature from theology is no easy task. As scholars have shown, each Passion narrative is shaped according to how the author and/or the community the author was writing for understood the meaning of those events. Trying to unravel the actual sequence of events, much less signs of intent or motivation, is nearly impossible. Nonetheless, several interpretations of those events have come to dominate the study of the historical Jesus.

Best known is the Christian interpretation, that Jesus, who was the Son of God, intentionally arranged to be arrested and tried in order

that he might sacrifice himself for the sins of mankind and fulfill the Jewish prophecies and re-establish the covenant between God and his people. Jesus historians usually differ on the details and nuances of interpretation, but the prevailing view is that Jesus intentionally called the attention of the authorities to himself by going to Jerusalem during the festival of Passover and preaching “unorthodox” views on the steps of the Temple, forcing a confrontation with the Jewish authorities. By doing so, he hoped to bring about the establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven. A third, and now often rejected, hypothesis is that after some period of preaching and performing miracles, Jesus became frustrated and despondent because the people of Israel had not embraced his message, so he decided to make a “last stand” in Jerusalem by following in the footsteps of other prophets and risking his life by challenging the authorities. In most cases, the quest to uncover the historical Jesus as best we can is driven by a desire to understand Jesus’ motives and purpose, ultimately expressed in the nature of his death. Which of these narratives one embraces will, of course, color how one understands or interprets Jesus’ words and actions in the period before he makes his final, fateful trip to Jerusalem.

It is not my intent to rework the ground covering those two central issues yet again.⁶ Instead, I want to set aside those questions and their related issues, and begin at the beginning. The question that prompted me to pursue the course that led to this book is not what are we to make of Jesus’ life and teachings — that question must be and will be decided by each individual who makes the effort to study them— but rather, how did Jesus come to be the Jesus that has had such a profound impact on human history? What transformed an “ordinary” Jewish peasant from a small village in Galilee into a charismatic religious leader?

Unlike many other major religious figures, we have no account of how Jesus developed his unprecedented religious views. Moses, we are told, spoke with God directly. Siddhārtha Gautama had first a life-altering experience and later a reality-shattering experience before reaching enlightenment and earning the title of the Buddha.

Mohammed had the *Quran* dictated to him by the angel Gabriel, and Joseph Smith received the *Book of Mormon* by the angel Moroni. But with Jesus, the closest we come is the account of his baptism, which is mainly told from the perspective of the narrator, not of Jesus himself, and is represented as the public affirmation of his divine nature and mission. Of course, many religious figures have come from humble or secular roots, without any special religious training or aspiration towards a religious life, only to experience a revelatory or conversion experience that completely, and almost instantly, transformed their lives. One thinks of St. Paul, St. Theresa of Avila, St. Francis of Assisi, St. Augustine, and many other lesser known saints and mystics. If we delve below the surface, the Gospel accounts suggest that such may have been the case with Jesus, as we will examine further on. Nonetheless, Jesus' teachings are firmly grounded in Judaism as it was practiced and espoused in his day. If we are to understand what may have sparked Jesus' conversion and what is different about his message from that of his contemporaries, we must consider the tradition he is coming out of and responding to. Just as important, we need to understand the world Jesus lived in, the daily lives of the people he came in contact with, and their sense of how events were unfolding around them. The record there, too, is sketchy, but we can draw on the work of historians, archaeologists, and scholars of religion and religious texts to fill in some of the gaps.

Within Jesus scholarship, much emphasis has been placed in recent years on the economic changes that were taking place in Palestine around the end of the first century BCE and the beginning of the first century CE, on the impact of Roman occupation on the Jews in Judea and Galilee, and the subsequent and likely reactive rise of apocalyptic expectations and figures around the time of Jesus. These are indeed important developments, but I think there are others of perhaps equal importance for an understanding of Jesus that have received less attention. There is a need to rebalance the scales a bit.

It hardly need be said that the undertaking I am proposing is fraught with peril and no doubt will raise alarm and suspicion in some

readers — and for good reason. Very little — some authors have asserted, almost nothing — about Jesus' life or teachings is certain, well documented or without ambiguity. And for the faithful, the case is already closed. Acknowledging those possible objections, I offer this excursion in the spirit of an essay or thought experiment, not as an academic study or popular history, for the purpose of stimulating thought and dialogue. I have approached this undertaking not as a work of historical fiction but, rather, a work of historical imagination, drawing on a variety of sources and disciplines to piece together a plausible scenario of how Jesus seemingly out of nowhere emerged as a prophet proclaiming the imminent approach of the Kingdom of God.

Admittedly, the exploration I am going to embark upon covers ground already over-mined and by others much more qualified than me.⁷ My reasons for doing so are not to question the work of other scholars, historians or theologians, nor is it my intention to present a critique of Christianity or Jesus himself. I am interested in exploring a somewhat puzzling and unique religious conundrum: Where did Jesus the religious leader come from, and why did he burst on the scene as he did when he did? The answer, I believe, will help us better understand what he hoped to accomplish and why he chose the path he did.