

THE  
GOSPEL  
OF  
JESUS

*In Search of the  
Original Good News*



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# CONTENTS



INTRODUCTION	The Focus on Jesus' Gospel	v
1	The Lost Gospel of Jesus	1
2	The Sayings Gospel Q	23
3	Jesus Was a Galilean Jew	55
4	What We Do and Do Not Know About Jesus	89
5	Jesus Was Converted by John	111
6	Jesus' Lifestyle Underwritten by God Himself	141
7	Jesus' Trust in God	155
8	Jesus' View of Himself	179
9	The End as the Beginning	203
10	The Gospel of Jesus and the Gospel of Paul	209
EPILOGUE	Where Do We Go from Here?	219
	<i>Notes</i>	229

## INTRODUCTION



# THE FOCUS ON JESUS' GOSPEL

In this Introduction I want to summarize Jesus' gospel, in as clear language as I can, so that no one can miss his point. The rest of the book will spell it all out in more detail; indeed, the Notes contain the scriptural references, so you can look up as much as you like. But I want to put up front the outcome of all that, without any cluttering quotations or digressions, so that you do not lose the point. This book is intended less to provide information about Jesus than it is to let you listen to what he had to say back then, so that you can respond to what he may still have to say today.

The focus of Jesus' gospel was God taking the lead in people's lives, God remaking the world through people who listen to him. Jesus' favorite idiom for God in action was the "kingdom of God." A better translation might be the "reign of God" or "God reigning." This was not a common idiom of his day, to judge by the Jewish texts of his time that have survived, for the idiom is surprisingly rare. Apparently it was Jesus who first made it the central idiom for his message. Since the ideal of God reigning is the main idea Jesus talked about again and again, much of the book focuses on what he meant when he spoke that way.

By using the “kingdom of God,” Jesus put his ideal for society in an antithetical relation both to other political and social systems and to individual self-interest (“looking out for number one”). The human dilemma is, in large part, that we are each other’s fate. We become the tool of evil that ruins another person as we look out for ourselves, having long abandoned any youthful idealism we might once have cherished. But if we each would cease and desist from pushing the other down to keep ourselves up, then the vicious cycle would be broken. Society would become mutually supportive rather than self-destructive. This is what Jesus was up to.

Jesus’ message was simple, for he wanted to cut straight through to the point: trust God to look out for you by providing people who will care for you, and listen to him when he calls on you to provide for them. God is somebody you can trust, so give it a try.

Jesus found his role models for such godly living in the world of nature around him. Ravens and lilies do not seem to focus their attention on satisfying their own needs in order to survive, and yet God sees to it that they prosper. Sparrows are sold a dime a dozen and, one might say, who cares? God cares! Even about the tiniest things—he knows exactly how many hairs are on your head! So God will not give a stone when asked for bread or a snake when asked for fish, but can be counted on to give what you really need. You can trust him to know what you need even before you ask.

This utopian vision of a caring God was the core of what Jesus had to say and what he himself put into practice. It was both good news—reassurance that in your actual experience good would happen to mitigate your plight—and the call upon you to do that same good toward others in actual practice. This radical trust in and responsiveness to God is what makes society function as God’s society. This was, for Jesus, what faith and discipleship

were all about. As a result, nothing else had a right to claim any functional relationship to him.

Put in language derived from his sayings: I am hungry because you hoard food. You are cold because I hoard clothing. Our dilemma is that we all hoard supplies in our backpacks and put our trust in our wallets! Such “security” should be replaced by God reigning, which means both what I trust God to do (to activate you to share food with me) and what I hear God telling me to do (to share clothes with you). We should not carry money while bypassing the poor or wear a backpack with extra clothes and food while ignoring the cold and hungry lying in the gutter. This is why the beggars, the hungry, the depressed are fortunate: God, that is, those in whom God rules, those who hearken to God, will care for them. The needy are called upon to trust that God’s reigning is there for them (“Theirs is the kingdom of God”).

We should not even carry a stick for self-protection but, rather, risk doing good for evil, even toward our enemies. We must turn the other cheek! God is the kind of person who provides sunshine and refreshing showers even to those who oppose him. For this reason, God’s children are those who care even for their enemies.

What followed directly upon and defined “Thy kingdom come” in the oldest form of the Lord’s Prayer used by Jesus was “Give us this day our daily bread.” People should pray for a day’s ration of food, trusting God to provide for today, and then pray tomorrow, trusting God for tomorrow.

God reigning (the “kingdom of God”) was interpreted by Matthew’s community to mean: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This addition to the Lord’s Prayer is, technically speaking, not a call to action, but, like “Thy kingdom come,” which it interprets, an appeal to God to act. After all, when we pray, we trust in God to answer. But God answers by motivating

people to turn the other cheek, to give the shirt off their back, to go the second mile, to lend expecting nothing in return—in sum, to do God’s will on earth. Those who dare to pray to God for help are the same people whom God motivates to help: “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors!”

Part of God reigning in Jesus’ day was helping the sick, the invalids of that day, with whatever medical assistance was available in Galilee at the time. One went from door to door, and if admitted for what we might call “bed and breakfast” (which was God’s answer to the prayer for a day’s bread), one in turn placed God’s blessing on the house by healing as best one could any bedridden who lived there. Just as the sharing of food and clothing, the canceling of debts, and nonretaliation against enemies were not seen as human virtues, but rather as God acting through those who trusted him, just so healings were not attributed to the individual technique or skill of the healer—but to God acting, reigning, through Jesus and others.

Clearly all these are things we cannot do by our own strength and virtue—we are no more up to renouncing self-interest than we are capable of healing disease! Healings took place because God was doing the healing. God was reigning in this new kind of human society Jesus was calling into being—this was in fact the “coming” of the “kingdom of God”: “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then there has come upon you God’s reign.” Jesus was a “faith healer” in the sense that he trusted God to thrust his finger into the human dilemma, to relieve the plight of the physically and mentally ill.

But not everything had been done in the brief time that Jesus had before his death. Not all people lived such trust in God, not all the helpless were helped, not all the disabled healed. In fact, only a few! The disciples trusted God to carry through to completion what was begun in Jesus’ time. Theologians use a pompous term for such hope: “eschatology.” But Jesus’ message

was not intended to replace the grim reality of daily life with a utopian ideal of “pie in the sky by-and-by.” John the Baptist grimly predicted the end of the world, an “apocalypse,” but Jesus did not. Rather, he sought to focus attention on trusting God for today’s ration of life, and on hearing God’s call to give now a better life to neighbors, indeed to enemies.

All this is as far from today’s Christianity as it was from the Judaism of Jesus’ day. Christians all too often simply venerate the “Lord Jesus Christ” as the “Son of God” and let it go at that. But Jesus himself made no claim to lofty titles or even to divinity. Indeed, to him, a devout Jew, claiming to be God would have seemed blasphemous! He claimed “only” that God spoke and acted through him.

He insisted that what acquits in the day of judgment is having listened to what he had to say: trust God to care for you, and hear God calling on you to care for your neighbor! What could in substance have shown more esteem on the part of his disciples than committing their destiny to what Jesus had to say to them? Yet the hardest saying of Jesus both then and now is: “Why do you call me ‘Master, Master,’ and do not do what I say?” Mouthing creeds may be no more than pious dodges to avoid Jesus’ unavoidable condition of discipleship—actually to do what he said to do!

People do not do what he said not simply because of the shift in cultural conditions (“times have changed”), but ultimately because people do not trust God as Jesus did (in spite of claims to having Christian faith). This is what is most unsettling about finding out what Jesus had to say—you discover that you do not really want to “walk in his footsteps”! Jesus’ gospel sounds incredibly naïve. Once Jesus launched himself into this lifestyle, practicing what he preached, he did not last long. Is not a reality check called for?

Yet the bottom line is not necessarily so cynical. In concentration camps, cells of a few selfless people who could really trust

each other, and who were hence willing to give an extra portion of their meager food and other necessities of life to the most needy among them, have turned out to have a better chance of survival than did individuals looking out only for themselves. Selfishness may ultimately turn out to be a luxury we can ill afford. Of course, our plight is not so desperate, and so we do not have to turn to such drastic measures. Think of the rich young ruler, who was just plain too well off, too much like us, to become a disciple of Jesus.

One of Jesus' paradoxical sayings is: "When you save your life you lose it, but when you lose your life you save it." To be sure, the point of this saying is not longevity, but integrity. But what Jesus had to say is all the more worthy of serious consideration.

Jesus' cause in life was not improving fishing conditions on the Sea of Galilee, evading Roman taxation, avoiding gentile pollution, or many other issues he knew about as a Galilean Jew, all of which are not our issues today. Nor did his message consist of the trivia typical of holy men of the day, irrelevant to us today, such as healing techniques that no physician would dare prescribe, magic formulas to cast out nonexistent demons, predictions as to when the world would come to an end, or even how to get rid of the Romans and restore Israel's own kingdom. Rather, he grappled with the basic issues of human existence, which have not changed and with which each generation, each culture, including ours, has to grapple. Jesus was a profound person who found a solution to the human dilemma, which he implemented in his own life and urged anyone who would listen to implement.

It is human nature to need food, clothing, and protection from the elements; to have to cope somehow with infancy, pain, sickness, and senility; to fulfill sexual needs, have a family, and work for its survival; and to search for some sense in it all. These are things we know about firsthand, since we ourselves have to grapple with these same basic ingredients of being human. How oth-



ers have grappled and what solutions they have found is an unavoidable interest we all share. We imitate or react against our parents and other role models. We look up to persons we consider “great,” precisely because of the way they resolved these basic human needs.

The way Jesus reached a basic understanding of the human dilemma and proposed a solution was of course couched in the language and options of his cultural situation, which is not ours. But the dilemma he confronted is still our dilemma, even though we have to recast it in new language and modern alternatives. The problem inherent in understanding the gospel of Jesus is to translate it from his cultural situation into ours, his specifics into ours, his language into ours. This applies both to the forms that the human dilemma took in his situation and takes in ours, and to the solution he offered in his and our translation of that into ours. Only in this way are we able really to listen to him and think through for ourselves what he had to say.

His basic issue, still basic today, is that most people have solved the human dilemma for themselves at the expense of everyone else, putting them down so as to stay afloat themselves. This vicious, antisocial way of coping with the necessities of life only escalates the dilemma for the rest of society. All of us know the result all too well, for we have experienced it ourselves in one form or another: the breakdown of mutually supportive human relations that results in the distinction between the haves and have-nots; the ruling class subjugating serfs, sharecroppers, and blue-collar workers; the battle of the sexes; dictatorships of one kind or the other; exploitation in the workplace; and on and on.

Jesus came to grips with the basic intentions of people. He addressed them personally, as to what kind of people they were. He called on them—he did not just teach them ideas. When we take his sayings and distill from them our doctrines, what we have really done is manipulate his sayings for our own purposes, first

of all, for the purpose of avoiding his personal address to us. Without realizing it, we reclassify his sayings as objective teachings to which we can give intellectual assent, rather than letting them strike home as the personal challenge he intended them to be. The issue is not what we think about them, but rather what we do about them.

So the very objectivity of a scholar would really be—a dodge, a way to avoid Jesus' point! So if I, near the end of my scholarly career, am really going to try to talk about what he had to say, I have to try to talk more in the way he talked—I have to retain his note of direct appeal. This tone of encounter, this person-to-person mode, is the only really objective way to speak to you about what Jesus was talking about, for it was that personal talk that he was talking and walking.

Jesus deserves more than being shelved as nothing more than a lofty curiosity in our cultural heritage. He needs to be taken seriously, really to be heard. In the chapters that follow, specifics of his biography, lifestyle, convictions, program, and outcome will be analyzed in just such an effort to take him seriously enough to hear what he had to say then, and still has to say today.

This is not just another book about Jesus; it is a book about the gospel of Jesus.

ONE



# THE LOST GOSPEL OF JESUS

The rash title of this book, *The Gospel of Jesus*, does not have in view the gospel about Jesus that Paul preached, which, following him, the Christian church down through the ages has believed as the one and only gospel (see Chapter 10). Rather, the title refers to the gospel that was Jesus' own message in Galilee during a very brief period, probably no more than a year, before his crucifixion. These two gospels are not the same, and, what is even worse, Jesus' own gospel has been lost from sight, hidden behind the gospel of the church.

This little book certainly does not tell everything you would like to know about Jesus. It does not even tell everything that *can* be known about him. It is not intended to satisfy your curiosity about odds and ends, but to focus on what Jesus was up to. So it does contain the core, what Jesus considered his own gospel.

Whatever might be added that would distract from that focus would not be faithful to Jesus, no matter how factual it might be. You also may not find here your "favorite" material of Jesus', which may well be unconsciously preferred precisely because it has been domesticated, watered down, or even just put on Jesus'

lips, rather than being what was central to him, what he himself had to say. Listening to Jesus is not easy.

The disciples handed down sayings and stories that meant something to them, not just stray information that satisfied their curiosity. They stuck to what they considered basics.

Our real problem with Jesus is not the vast amount of detail we will never know, for most of that we do not need to know. The problem is that we have ascribed to him a different gospel from what he himself envisaged! We have put him on a pedestal and worshiped him, rather than walking in his footsteps. Put somewhat differently: we must work our way back through the church's own familiar gospel and its domestication of the gospel of Jesus. Only then do we strike upon what he really had to say, which was a brittle, upsetting, comforting, challenging gospel—one the present book seeks to lay bare.

This situation calls for some explanation, before we turn to his message itself.

### THE APOSTLES' CREED

The Apostles' Creed, shared among almost all branches of Christianity, poses the problem clearly, even if unintentionally. It presents Jesus as the central figure in the Trinity in heaven, rather than as the individual he was in Galilee. Listen closely to the way the creed presents him. Before reporting that Jesus went to heaven, the creed only tells what was done *for* him:

conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary

and then what was done *against* him:

suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried

But on his life between birth and death, Bethlehem and Golgotha, the creed is completely silent! Missing is what was said and done *by* Jesus, what Jesus himself actually had to say by way of gospel.

The present book seeks to fill in the missing gospel of that Galilean Jesus. It is he, even more than Mary, and surely more than Pontius Pilate, who is the central person in the Apostles' Creed, even if, so to speak, in absentia.

The name "Apostles' Creed" is itself a misnomer, if it is taken to mean that it was composed by the twelve apostles, indeed by any of Jesus' Galilean followers. It actually developed out of the baptismal confession of the gentile church of Rome, documented only from the second century on. How the original disciples themselves would have put it can be inferred only by going back through the Gospels to the oldest traditions they preserve—which is precisely what I propose to do here.

### THE SAYINGS GOSPEL Q

The primary source for knowing Jesus is to be found in the pithy and memorable sayings he used to move his listeners to trust in God enough to go into action. They are what lived on after him, they are what his disciples continued to proclaim—in spite of experiencing his utterly appalling execution (see Chapter 9). You might think the crucifixion would have crushed their faith in all that Jesus had said and silenced even their best intentions. But their experience of Jesus still calling on them to continue his message and lifestyle was the substance of the resurrection experience.

It was his sayings that kept alive stories about what Jesus had done, indeed engendered more and more stories about him. These oral traditions moved from Aramaic into the more literate Greek and came to be written into Gospels, which were ultimately

preserved. They were included in the New Testament, which was established in the next centuries as the “canon,” that is, as the standard for all that is to be considered Christian.

To gain admission to the canon, Gospels were attributed to apostles (Matthew and John) or to those dependent on apostles for their information (Mark and Luke). But today, these persons are not thought to have been the actual authors. None of the texts themselves give the author’s name—all four are anonymous. They were composed in the last thirty years of the first century, half a century after the facts. Their actual authors are unknown, but all four Gospels are of course cited here by their traditional names, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.

In modern times, the quest of the historical Jesus has sought to bring to the surface the Galilean Jesus behind the Gospels. This quest began in the nineteenth century with the rise of modern historical scholarship. First of all, it was noted that the narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke contain many of the same stories in much the same sequence, whereas the Gospel of John goes its own way. Indeed, the Gospel of John is the latest of the four, from the last decade of the first century, and reflects more of the church’s gospel about Jesus than it does the gospel of Jesus himself. It is the most important Gospel for the history of theology, but the least important for the quest of the historical Jesus.

As a result, the first three Gospels came to be called the “synoptic” Gospels, since they see Jesus from the same point of view. The “synoptic problem” has traditionally been the attempt to explain this similarity of Matthew, Mark, and Luke to each other over against John. The solution found almost two centuries ago was that the Gospels of Matthew and Luke used most of the Gospel of Mark, which is thus the oldest Gospel. Since it seems to refer to the fall of Jerusalem,<sup>1</sup> it probably was written shortly after 70 C.E., when the Romans destroyed the temple and the city.

This generally accepted solution to the synoptic problem left one issue dangling, however. Many sayings in Matthew and Luke are much the same in wording and order in both Gospels—but these shared sayings cannot be explained as derived from Mark, since they are not to be found there. You can check this out for yourself by looking up the very beginning of Jesus' public ministry: the sayings of John the Baptist,<sup>2</sup> followed by the temptations of Jesus,<sup>3</sup> and then the opening "Sermon"—located "on the Mount" in Matthew<sup>4</sup> and "on the Plain" in Luke<sup>5</sup>—all absent from Mark and yet shared by Matthew and Luke.

How then did Matthew and Luke come by this shared material, mostly sayings, that cannot have come from Mark, since it is not in Mark? The most widely held solution, launched already in 1838, is that Matthew and Luke shared a second source, like Mark written in Greek, consisting almost exclusively of sayings rather than narratives. For lack of a better name, this collection of sayings came to be referred to simply as Matthew and Luke's other "source," in German *Quelle*, from which the initial "Q" was lifted up as the "title." It was really only a nickname, but it has stuck.

Then another Gospel consisting only of sayings, the *Gospel of Thomas*, turned up in a manuscript discovery of 1945, the Nag Hammadi Codices.<sup>6</sup> This discovery was a collection of thirteen books buried near Nag Hammadi in Upper (that is to say, southern) Egypt in the last half of the fourth century. We call them "codices," to distinguish them from scrolls, since they were like modern books with pages that can be turned, rather than rolls that can be unwound. That is to say, each is a "codex."

The Nag Hammadi Codices consist of a collection of almost fifty offbeat Christian texts, called tractates. All were originally composed in Greek at various locations in the eastern Mediterranean world, but the copies that survived in Egypt are all in Coptic translation. Coptic is actually Egypt's ancient pharaonic

language, which in early Christian times was written with Greek letters, since hieroglyphs had long since died out.

After the discovery of the complete text of the *Gospel of Thomas* in Coptic translation, scholars realized that fragments of three copies of the Greek text itself had been discovered half a century earlier at Oxyrhynchus in Upper Egypt.<sup>7</sup> They are more than a century older than the Nag Hammadi Codices, but in most cases are too fragmentary to be of much use.

Clearly, Gospels were not always narratives of Jesus' life; some were just collections of his sayings, such as Q and the *Gospel of Thomas*. Of late, such collections of sayings have come to be called "sayings Gospels," to distinguish them from the "narrative Gospels" with which we have long been familiar from the New Testament. The sayings collection used by Matthew and Luke is no longer known only by its nickname, Q, but has finally been given its own name, the Sayings Gospel Q.

This rediscovered Sayings Gospel Q is not readily available to the public, since it is not as such in the Bible; it has to be reconstructed from the tradition behind the shared sayings in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. For this reason my translation of the Sayings Gospel Q is included for convenience in the present volume (see Chapter 2).

In order to understand why there were originally two, Mark and Q, rather than just one oldest Gospel, we need to recall that from very early on there were two "denominations" in Christianity—each with its own Gospel. The success of the gentile mission of Paul and Barnabas had resulted in the decision at the Jerusalem Council, held around 50 C.E., to admit uncircumcised gentile converts to Christianity. But to avoid mixing Christian Gentiles with Christian Jews, which would make the Christian Jews ceremonially impure in Jewish terms, the Christian Gentiles were to form a separate branch of Christianity. This gentile



church wrote up its traditions about Jesus and thus produced the Gospel of Mark as its Gospel.

One indication that the Gospel of Mark was written for the gentile church is that Mark, rather than postponing the expansion of the Christian mission to include Gentiles until after the resurrection, as Matthew does with the “great commission,” has an equivalent sanctioning of the gentile mission prior to the crucifixion:

And the good news must first be proclaimed to all nations.<sup>8</sup>

That Mark was written for Gentiles is seen most clearly in his explanation of Jewish customs for his gentile readers:

For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they thoroughly wash their hands, thus observing the tradition of the elders; and they do not eat anything from the market unless they wash it; and there are also many other traditions that they observe, the washing of cups, pots, and bronze kettles.<sup>9</sup>

Mark is also writing for a community that is no longer fully bilingual, for he translates Aramaic and Hebrew expressions into Greek for his Greek-only readers:

He took her by the hand and said to her, “*Talitha cum,*” which means, “Little girl, get up!”

Then looking up to heaven, he sighed and said to him, “*Ephphatha,*” that is, “Be opened.”

“*Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani?*” which means, “O my God, o my God, why have you abandoned me?”<sup>10</sup>

In addition, Mark does not seem to know Palestinian geography very well, which may suggest he is not from that region:

Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis."<sup>11</sup>

Tyre and Sidon are both on the Mediterranean northwest of the Sea of Galilee, but Tyre is much to the south of Sidon. One would not go through Sidon when going south from Tyre. And the Decapolis is well inland, southeast of the Sea of Galilee; one would not pass through it on the way from the Mediterranean to the Sea of Galilee. So this itinerary reads as if Mark did not have a much clearer picture of the geography of the region than do most of us.

On the other hand, the Jewish church was made up of the immediate disciples of Jesus, all of whom were Jews, who after Jesus' death resumed preaching his sayings. The result was that small collections of his sayings were brought together for preaching purposes and in the process translated from Aramaic into Greek. These small collections were over a period of time supplemented with new material, and the whole was edited around the year 70, at about the time of the Jewish war, thus finally producing the Sayings Gospel Q.

Just as there are indications in the Gospel of Mark that it was written for a gentile Christian audience, there are indications in the Sayings Gospel Q that it was written for a Jewish Christian audience. It includes derogatory statements about Gentiles like those that were no doubt common in the Aramaic-speaking Jewish villages:

And if you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what reward do you have? Do not even the Gentiles do the same?

So why be anxious, saying: “What are we to eat?” Or: “What are we to drink?” Or: “What are we to wear?” For all these the Gentiles seek; for your Father knows that you need them all.<sup>12</sup>

The Jewish Christian church finally merged with the gentile Christian church. No doubt as an ecumenical gesture, it blended the Gospels of each branch of Christianity, Q and Mark, to produce the Gospel of Matthew. Similarly the gentile Christian church blended the same two original Gospels into its Gospel of Luke. But its Evangelist included a second volume, the Acts of the Apostles, narrating the success of the gentile mission. This is why we know so much more about the gentile church than about the Jewish church in this early period. When in the second and subsequent centuries the gentile Christian church collected its authoritative writings into what became the New Testament, it included its oldest Gospel, Mark, but did not include the oldest Gospel of the Jewish Christian denomination, the Sayings Gospel Q.

It is because Q and Mark are one stage behind Matthew and Luke, one stage nearer to Jesus, that they, rather than Matthew and Luke, are usually quoted in what follows. Only when something distinctive of Matthew or Luke is relevant are they cited. Since the reconstructed Sayings Gospel Q is the best source that exists today to get back to what Jesus actually had to say, it is also the best source for understanding what he thought he was doing, what he was up to in what he did.

The narrative Gospels do not seem to have been composed in a community of persons who actually heard Jesus speak. But of course they do have information not found elsewhere, information that is important and should not be lost from sight. But the sayings of the Sayings Gospel Q—of course not all of them, but the oldest layer—do go back to the community of those who had heard and

remembered what Jesus had said. Indeed, they preserved them not just as nostalgic memories of a past leader, but rather as the true message that they continued to announce in Jesus' name. Many of them are pithy sayings, like one-liners that are not easily forgotten. They made their point when Jesus said them, and when his disciples repeated them in his name. And they can make that same point when we hear them today. The Sayings Gospel Q is thus the primary source for the gospel of Jesus.

### WHAT JESUS DID ACCORDING TO Q

Of course you are interested in knowing about what Jesus did, not just what he said. But the Sayings Gospel Q presents him as a person who does precisely the kinds of things the narrative Gospels report (as will be explained in more detail in the rest of the present book; see especially Chapters 6 and 7).

The Sayings Gospel Q makes Jesus' role as faith healer clear in the narration of the healing of the centurion's boy<sup>13</sup> and his role as exorcist clear in the exorcism initiating the Beelzebul controversy.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the Sayings Gospel Q launched the proof that Jesus was the "one to come" that John had predicted by calling on John's disciples to see and hear what Jesus was *doing*. The Sayings Gospel Q even provided the list of things that Jesus had done that proved it,<sup>15</sup> a list so extensive that Matthew had difficulty documenting it (see Chapter 5).

It is odd that a sayings Gospel would list, as its evidence of who Jesus was, first his healings, before mentioning what he said. Furthermore, the Sayings Gospel Q reports that "mighty works" were performed in Chorazin and Bethsaida.<sup>16</sup> The "mission instructions" in the Sayings Gospel Q also call on the disciples to heal the sick,<sup>17</sup> making clear that Jesus' healing power was carried over to them. Thus Jesus' role as faith healer and exorcist is as clear in the Sayings Gospel Q as it is in the narrative Gospels,

even though almost all the healing stories are reserved for the narrative Gospels.

Even more important, it is the Jesus of the Sayings Gospel Q who gave his explanation for the faith healings and exorcisms. So if you wonder what Jesus was really up to in his healings, read the Sayings Gospel Q—it is God reigning!

When Jesus' disciples receive hospitality in a home, he told them:

Cure the sick there, and say to them: "God's reign has reached unto you."<sup>18</sup>

The exorcisms are similarly explained:

But if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then there has come upon you God's reign.<sup>19</sup>

The disciples had that same faith that God is reigning; indeed, they were still proclaiming Jesus' message even after his death. So they told the miraculous healing stories with which we are familiar from the narrative Gospels. Indeed, they sometimes used incredibly miraculous language.

For modern people, who have trouble understanding the point of such excessive miracle stories, it is not enough to say that you do not have to take them literally, for then how do you take them? A responsible answer would be: take them the way Jesus in the Sayings Gospel Q says to take them! It is the Sayings Gospel Q that provides the interpretation for such things in the narrative Gospels as faith healings and exorcisms as God's reign taking place (see Chapters 6 and 7). Hence the relevance of the Sayings Gospel Q for understanding Jesus' Galilean ministry as portrayed in the narrative Gospels, and indeed for understanding how and why it actually took place during Jesus' lifetime, can hardly be overestimated.

Not only are stories presenting Jesus as faith healer and as exorcist prominent in the narrative Gospels; so are dramatic scenes presenting him as providing food for hungry masses. Yet it is especially in the Sayings Gospel Q that the actual point of such feeding stories is made clear. The Sayings Gospel Q reports that Jesus explicitly says again and again that you are to count on God to feed the hungry. In the Lord's Prayer, the petition "Let your reign come" is followed directly by what that means in the here and now: "Our day's bread give us today."<sup>20</sup> Jesus promises people that they can trust God for food,<sup>21</sup> for just as God feeds the ravens, just so he feeds humans.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, the worker is assured of receiving food in the mission instructions.<sup>23</sup> Thus, according to the Jesus of the Sayings Gospel Q, food, just like healings, is again and again what happens when God reigns.

Jesus does not exemplify an ascetic way of life, admired though that was in antiquity and exemplified as it was by his mentor, John the Baptist. Rather, he is a person who both eats and shares food with others.<sup>24</sup> This open table fellowship could lead people to imagine him—or, as he would put it, God—feeding people by the thousands.<sup>25</sup>

Of course there is no final proof that even the oldest layer of sayings attributed to Jesus does in fact go back to him. His disciples, in continuing his message after his death, inevitably repeated them in such a way as to avoid misunderstandings that may have arisen and to make clear what they were sure was Jesus' intent by clarifying his wording. But it has become possible to a very large extent to detect such "improvements" and hence to get behind them to the earlier formulation. This oldest layer can be trusted to give an accurate image of what Jesus was up to, what his gospel really was.

Jesus must have spoken Aramaic, his mother tongue (see Chapter 3), whereas we have what he said only in Greek translation, on which our English translations are based. So it is not a matter of

verbatim quotations, but of ancient Greek and modern English translations. But they can convey accurately what he had to say.

Readers of the narrative Gospels, and even of the Sayings Gospel Q, must avoid both extremes—being too credulous or too skeptical—in assessing the reliability of the sayings ascribed to Jesus. Later reformulations or even new sayings put on Jesus' tongue should not be ascribed to him, even though they may well be our favorite sayings (see Chapter 8). But the oldest layer of sayings ascribed to him should not be considered unreliable; it should in fact be what we use to talk about Jesus. Otherwise Jesus quite unnecessarily disappears from the pages of history, or “Jesus” becomes an empty category into which wild fantasies can be poured.

#### FROM THE JESUS OF THE SAYINGS GOSPEL Q TO US

If the Sayings Gospel Q gives us insight into the thinking and doing of Jesus, how does that connect to us? The Sayings Gospel Q as a document ceased to exist after the first century, when the enlarged and improved editions of Matthew and Luke replaced it for reading in the church. And, since no Christian manuscripts dating back to the first century have survived, no copies of Q survived. The Sayings Gospel Q has been lost for a very long time!

Is not its Jesus, the real Jesus, also gone? Simply detecting, a century and a half ago, a collection of his sayings embedded in Matthew and Luke does not necessarily mean that we have any connection with the real Jesus whose sayings it contains.

The real Jesus was not only in his way otherworldly—he was worlds apart from us! We may still want to understand ourselves as his disciples and his church, to consider him as our Lord—but that is far from obvious. We, the gentile church, are the result of Paul's gentile mission, not of the Sayings Gospel Q's Jewish mission. Paul did not see or hear Jesus during his public ministry in

Galilee, but first encountered Jesus after the crucifixion as a blinding light that spoke to him on the road to Damascus—and who literally and figuratively so outshone the Galilean Jesus as to leave that Jesus out of sight.

What we know about the people behind Q is very limited and must be largely inferred from Q itself, since it has not been recorded elsewhere. What we know about the first generation of Christianity comes either from Paul's Letters or the book of Acts. But Acts is the second volume of the two-volume work Luke-Acts, which presents the foundations of the gentile Christian church. Of course the Gospel of Luke does present Jesus' public ministry in Galilee and then the first chapters of Acts do describe the Jerusalem church, but just in order to have them validate Paul's gentile church.<sup>26</sup> The rest of Acts is the success story of Paul's gentile mission.

Luke-Acts seems quite consciously to be playing down the Jewish Christian Q movement. Once Luke completes his copying out of the Sayings Gospel Q into his narrative Gospel,<sup>27</sup> he rather explicitly says that the idyllic, unreal world of Jesus has been put behind us. That idyllic world had begun with Jesus' successful resistance to the temptations:

When the devil had finished every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.<sup>28</sup>

But the devil returns with a vengeance just in time for the passion narrative:

Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was one of the twelve.

Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat.<sup>29</sup>



Luke, having reached the conclusion of the Sayings Gospel Q, turned to the Gospel of Mark for the rest of Jesus' public ministry. Thus Luke has in effect turned from the unreal world free from the grip of the devil back to the real world around him:

And he said to them, "When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals, did you lack anything?" They said, "Nothing." He said to them, "But now, let him who has a purse take it, and likewise a bag. And let him who has no sword sell his mantle and buy one. For I tell you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, 'And he was reckoned with transgressors'; for what is written about me has its fulfillment." And they said, "Look, Lord, here are two swords." And he said to them, "It is enough."<sup>30</sup>

The disciples must now come to grips with reality, even buy a sword, which meant replacing the kind of mission Jesus had advocated and practiced with one more like the missionary journeys of Paul.

The need for a sword appears at this juncture because Luke is turning to Mark's narration of Jesus' arrest in the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus is confronted by "a crowd with swords and clubs."<sup>31</sup> A disciple feels called upon to come to his defense:

But one of those who stood near drew his sword and struck the slave of the high priest, cutting off his ear.<sup>32</sup>

Thus was born the church militant. But Jesus' instructions to the Q community had been not even to carry a stick in self-defense!<sup>33</sup>

The continuation of Jesus' ministry by the Q community is not visible in Acts, which focuses instead on the gentile mission led by Paul:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.<sup>34</sup>

And Galilee? There is only one single passing reference in all of Acts to there being a church also in Galilee:

Meanwhile the church throughout Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and was built up.<sup>35</sup>

The author of Luke-Acts of course knew all the sayings of Jesus found in Q and Mark, since he had written with their help the Gospel of Luke. But in reading the book of Acts, one would never imagine that there were still Christians whose religious experience consisted largely in listening to what Jesus had had to say back then.

At the Jerusalem Council, a practical working arrangement of two separate missions had been agreed on:

... agreeing that we should go to the Gentiles while they went to the Jews.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, Luke in the book of Acts is interested in the kind of religious experience characteristic of the gentile mission, which obviously did not build to any great extent on the sayings of Jesus. So the course of the Q community has to be postulated largely on the basis of Q itself. This is far from ideal, but for the moment it is all we have to go on.

The most obvious thing that can be said about the Q community after it resumed Jesus' message is that it did not meet with much success. Listen to passages in Q that talk of rejection, passages that probably would not have been retained if things had developed quite positively:

To what am I to compare this generation and what is it like? It is like children seated in the marketplaces, who, addressing the others, say: “We fluted for you, but you would not dance; we wailed, but you would not cry.” For John came, neither eating nor drinking, and you say: “He has a demon!” The son of man came, eating and drinking, and you say: “Look! A person who is a glutton and drunkard, a chum of tax collectors and sinners!”

But into whatever town you enter and they do not take you in, on going out from that town, shake off the dust from your feet. I tell you: For Sodom it shall be more bearable on that day than for that town. Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the wonders performed in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, in sackcloth and ashes. Yet for Tyre and Sidon it shall be more bearable at the judgment than for you. And for you, Capernaum, up to heaven will you be exalted? Into Hades shall you come down!

This generation is an evil generation; it demands a sign, but a sign will not be given to it—except the sign of Jonah! For as Jonah became to the Ninevites a sign, so also will the son of humanity be to this generation.<sup>37</sup>

The Jewish mission seems to have continued to have little success in the generation after Jesus’ own ministry, so that “this generation” was apparently meant rather literally, for the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70 was taken to be God’s punishment for the rejection of the Jewish mission:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children

together, as a hen gathers her nestlings under her wings, and you were not willing! Look, your House is forsaken! I tell you: You will not see me until the time comes when you say: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!"<sup>38</sup>

After the Roman armies had marched through Galilee and Judea and destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, Judaism was of course in terrible disarray. The very question of its survival was at stake. The Q community, as a part of the Judaism of the day, was caught up in this dilemma.

It had always been obvious that those whose temple was the temple in Jerusalem were Jews, the others Gentiles. To this extent, it was quite clear who was a Jew. This made it possible for the Jews to have among them various parties that all too readily rejected each other on other issues, such as the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the Essenes, the Zealots, the Therapeutae of Alexandria, the Sethians, and then the Christian Jews. But when the temple that they all claimed was destroyed, where was the Jewish identity? The plurality of parties was simply a luxury they could no longer afford. Whatever was left of Judaism had to stand together! The Jewish leaders came together and merged all these parties into a unified Judaism, which soon became the rabbinic Judaism out of which modern Judaism emerged. As a result, these individual groups disappeared from history, among them the Christian Jews who had composed the Sayings Gospel Q.

Some of the Q community may, like those in the other Jewish parties, have simply merged into the more unified Judaism, what came to be called "normative Judaism." Thus they would have ceased to be identified as Christian. But some apparently persisted in their Christian identity while continuing their Jewish way of life. These, in turn, came to be rejected by mainline (gentile) Christianity and ended up in lists of heretics.

One such group of “heretics” were the Ebionites, an Aramaic word that means “the poor.” Their “heresy” was that they insisted on continuing their Jewish lifestyle. Actually, “the poor” was a very early name for Jesus’ followers. There is a real irony in the fact that this “heretical” group bears the same name that was used for the original Christians of Jerusalem,<sup>39</sup> indeed was used by the Q community of itself. It is no coincidence that the first and most important collection of Jesus’ sayings in Q, which grew to become the Sermon on the Mount, begins with a blessing on “the poor”<sup>40</sup> and a flashback in Q to this earliest collection refers to Jesus “evangelizing the poor.”<sup>41</sup>

At the very earliest time the term “Christian” had not yet been coined. It was first used of Barnabas and Paul’s gentile church in Antioch<sup>42</sup> and may never have been used of Jewish Christian groups. As a matter of fact, it may be something of a misnomer when, for simplicity’s sake, I refer to the Q community as “Christian.”

Another such “heretical” group was called the Nazarenes. This term had also been, from early on, a designation for Jesus himself<sup>43</sup> and even for Paul.<sup>44</sup> But this group maintained the Jewish way of life and so came to be rejected by gentile Christianity.

Once a Jewish Christian group had been rejected by gentile Christianity as heretical, it faded from the pages of history. Fortunately, the Jewish Christian Sayings Gospel Q did not fade from history along with the community whose Gospel it was. Rather, it survived in the gentile church’s Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

The Matthean community had originally been confined to Jewish territory, since it maintained prohibitions against using gentile roads and visiting Samaritan towns:

Do not go away on a road of the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the son of man comes.<sup>45</sup>

It is not clear whether these texts were in the Sayings Gospel Q itself, since they are not in Luke; but then Luke would have had every reason to leave them out, for he played up the Samaritan mission in Acts<sup>46</sup> and of course Paul went to the Gentiles. In any case, at some stage in the evolution of the Q community into the Matthean community, this geographical limitation was in effect. But later it would seem to have been suspended, perhaps as a result of the chaos left in the wake of the Roman army's destruction of much of Galilee on its triumphal march toward Jerusalem. The "great commission" with which the Gospel of Matthew concludes explicitly instructs the mission to go to the Gentiles—while emphasizing, not unintentionally, that it is the message of the Sayings Gospel Q that is to be carried on that mission:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe everything that I have commanded you [!]. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.<sup>47</sup>

Within the Greek text of the Sayings Gospel Q can be seen smaller and larger clusters of individual sayings, which were then finally united into the Sayings Gospel Q as we know it from Matthew and Luke. The most prominent such cluster is what is called the Sermon, though that is really a misnomer, since it is not assumed to be a speech Jesus made on a given occasion. Rather, it is an early collection of Jesus' sayings into what was no doubt considered to be the core of his message. This "sermon" was put

at the beginning of Jesus' message in the Sayings Gospel Q. As Matthew and Luke borrowed from Mark, they each fitted the Sermon into Mark at a slightly different geographical location. The result is that in Matthew it is called the Sermon on the Mount<sup>48</sup> and in Luke the Sermon on the Plain.<sup>49</sup>

Matthew enlarged the Sermon by including in it the most important other old clusters, such as the Lord's Prayer,<sup>50</sup> followed by the certainty of the answer of prayer,<sup>51</sup> and the role model of the ravens and lilies.<sup>52</sup> Thus down through the centuries, when the Sayings Gospel Q was completely lost, indeed its very existence unknown, it is the Sermon on the Mount that functioned indirectly to keep its message—the gospel of Jesus—alive.

In the early church, it was thanks to the Gospel of Matthew that the Sayings Gospel Q continued to play a role, if only indirectly. Matthew was by far the most widely used early Christian book, to judge by the number of copies that have surfaced in the dry sands of Egypt, by the number of quotations in early Christian writers, and by the number of textual corruptions introduced from Matthew into other Gospels by scribal copyists obviously more familiar with Matthew.

Paul's Letters were of course the most popular among theologians, but it is not they who converted the Roman Empire. Rather, it was the masses, from whom the foot soldiers in Constantine's army came. They knew firsthand of the underprivileged and oppressed who had been rescued by the soup kitchens (which served more than wafers), the adoption of orphans, the absorption of widows, and the many other forms of humaneness that derive ultimately from Jesus, mediated through the Sayings Gospel Q and then through the Sermon on the Mount. So it was his foot soldiers that the emperor told of having seen the cross in the sky with the message "In this sign conquer!" The troops, heavily Christian and hence pacifistic, fell into line and marched into battle, on to victory.

It seems to have been Francis of Assisi who then rediscovered the Sermon on the Mount. The Franciscan order that emerged from his leadership has been the bearer down through the centuries of much of the message of Jesus found in the Sayings Gospel Q. Then Leo Tolstoy took up the torch in his *War and Peace*, followed by Mahatma Gandhi with his “passive resistance” and Martin Luther King Jr. with his “dream” of an integrated America. Now that the Sayings Gospel Q is readily available for study, we can see how Jesus’ message has indeed continued to be heard, though in quite unusual ways, down through the centuries.