

# Jesus at home in Judaism

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While Christians would have no hesitation acknowledging that Jesus was a Jew, the full implications of this are not generally understood. It almost goes without saying that Jesus was a Jew. What is more, all the earliest disciples who established Christianity were Jewish, as were the first church leaders. Jesus came from a Jewish family, was raised in the Jewish region of Galilee, had Jewish friends, and was brought up in the religion of Moses. All four gospel writers present Jesus as a pious Jew, who had a deep attachment to the religion of his ancestors, and who was faithful in his observance of the Law of Moses. A genuine understanding of the person and mission of Jesus requires some appreciation of the historical context and the Jewish world in which he lived. The aim of this chapter is to provide some background information and insights that will help the reader gain a clearer picture of Jesus, the pious and idealistic Jew of first-century Palestine.

## Jesus' Early Education

Jesus would have been known from the day of his circumcision as Yeshua bar Yoseph, Jesus son of Joseph. Joseph and Mary were Law-observant Jews and saw to it that their son was raised in a healthy religious family environment. They were village people who had enough to live on and support a family, so they were not on the bottom rung of the economic ladder. The gospel writers tell us that Mary and Joseph were people of prayer who received inspiration and guidance from God (Mt 1:21-25; Lk 1:26-38). They arranged for Jesus' circumcision (Lk 2:21), presented Jesus in the Temple according to Jewish law as part of a purification ceremony<sup>1</sup> (Lk 2:25-28) and, when they could, visited the Temple in Jerusalem to celebrate Passover (Lk 2:41).

As a young lad, Jesus would have received a basic education in general living skills and in the Hebrew Scriptures from his parents. Up to the age of twelve, it was customary for Jewish lads to spend most of their time in the company of their mothers and the women of their village. When he turned thirteen, a boy became officially an adult and was obliged to observe all the commandments. As a young teenager, Jesus no doubt enjoyed spending more time with Joseph and would have learned a lot from him. We can safely assume that Jesus looked up to Joseph and aspired to be like him.

It is worth reflecting on the likelihood that the relationship between Jesus and Joseph was a close and loving one. Later on, Jesus would refer to God as his father, but all his ideas of fatherhood and all the warm and devoted images he had associated with the term "father" would have been nourished by the strong bond he had with Joseph during his formative years. The loving father figures who appear in the teachings and parables of Jesus would almost certainly have been modelled on Joseph.

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<sup>1</sup> The emission of fluids from the body caused uncleanness and a mother became ritually unclean at childbirth. The Law obliged her to undergo a period of purification before she could be clean again (Lev. 12:1-8).

At some point in his late teens, Jesus clearly felt called to do more with his life than remain in Nazareth as a contract worker or artisan. When we meet him in the gospels, he had left home and had embarked on a mission as a wandering charismatic preacher who was having considerable impact on a number of his fellow Palestinian Jews. At this time his knowledge of the Law of Moses and his command of Scripture were exceptional. Mark tells us (Mk 6:1-6) that, when Jesus went back to visit Nazareth, he was invited to read at the synagogue meeting and make some comments on the reading. His words so impressed the villagers of Nazareth that they began to wonder how he had acquired such learning and wisdom. They were also puzzled by his reputation as a healer and the extraordinary gifts he seemed to have possessed.

Modern scholars speculate as to how he would have come by this learning. The gospel evidence does not suggest that he had formal training as a scribe, which would have involved becoming a disciple of a rabbi and receiving an education in the rabbinic scholarship of the day. At the same time Jesus' teachings and disputations with the Scribes and Pharisees betray a degree of learning that was much more than just homespun wisdom. Jesus is called *rabbi*, "my master/teacher", not only by his disciples (Mk 4:38, 9:38) and ordinary folk who heard him speak (Mk 9:17) but also by the learned ones themselves (Mk 12:14, 32). In addition to that, he was recognized as teaching with authority, not like the Scribes who were experts in the law (Mk 1:22). It should be remembered, though, that this title was informal in the days before the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E. and did not imply that the rabbi had a formal training in scribal scholarship. It should also be remembered that Jesus had gained considerable respect and was gathering a following while he was still reasonably young. A Jewish man in Jesus' day might be considered an elder, with acquired wisdom at the age of 40-45. Jesus could not have been much over 30 years old when he began his public life as a wandering teacher-prophet. Here is an indication of the impression he made on his contemporaries through his personality, his behaviour and his teaching. The first-century Jewish historian, Josephus, refers to Jesus as a "wise man" which, some scholars argue, could be tantamount to numbering him among the Jewish Sages.<sup>2</sup> This would make Jesus typical of a number of outstanding Jewish rabbis who had humble origins and who worked with their hands to support themselves while studying. However, this is not conclusive evidence that Jesus had a formal scribal education.

The gospels do not present a picture of Jesus reaching his maturity in Nazareth. On the contrary, he appears to follow the call to leave Nazareth and embark on a broader mission in life.<sup>3</sup> His search for something more takes him southward out of Galilee to the company of an outstanding holy man, John the Baptizer, who was becoming known as a prophet and who had attracted a considerable following. Jesus was drawn by John's call for repentance and a renewal of Torah spirituality, in preparation for the approaching reign of God, and he became a disciple of John. John and his disciples would have been a spiritual family for Jesus, who would have found a satisfying sense of purpose and spiritual direction in this company.<sup>4</sup> Jesus' own outlook on life and on religion as a way to God would have been shaped, to some extent, by this experience. It is after John's arrest that Jesus begins his independent mission and gathers other disciples around him. At this point he focuses his teaching on the reign of God, accompanied by an interpretation of the Law of Moses that bears his own distinctive stamp.

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<sup>2</sup> David Flusser, *Jesus* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 30.

<sup>3</sup> Luke interprets this as a call for Jesus to be about his "father's business" (Lk 2:45).

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus. An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 49.

## Jesus the Law-Observant Jew

Not only does the upbringing of Jesus mark him as undeniably Jewish, but his behaviour, his attitudes and his teachings prove that he was a pious Palestinian Jew, who was not only devoted to the observance of the Torah of Moses but who sought to impart to others a Torah spirituality that would strengthen people's relationship with God. The gospels show us that Jesus very quickly gained the reputation of being a prophet. He referred to himself as a prophet when he experienced rejection in his home village of Nazareth (Mk 6:1-6) and his activity as a wandering charismatic preacher fits the general pattern of many of the classical prophets (cf. Lk 24:19). Like the prophets of former times, Jesus saw a need to work toward correcting error and he set out to show his contemporaries an authentic way to spiritual fulfilment and quality life in the sight of God.

One of the most notable characteristics of the Hebrew prophets was that they practised what they preached. They were all pious people who were faithful to the Law of Moses. Jesus was no exception. He observed the Sabbath and was a familiar visitor to synagogues, particularly those in Capernaum (Mk 1:21) and Nazareth (Mk 6:2). The fact that he was asked to read and preach in synagogues is an indication of how people respected him as a Law-observant Jew (Mk 1:39, Mt 12:9). The evangelists point out that Jesus observed Passover. He made the pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem and in fact became quite irate at the behaviour of the merchants in the outer court (Mk 11:15-17). Matthew says that Jesus was actually teaching in the Temple precincts (Mt 21:23) without being molested or ordered out of the area. Jesus also observed Passover by eating the customary ritual meal with his friends (Mk 14:12-16).

Matthew (9:20) relates the story of the woman who was cured of her haemorrhage after she touched the tassels (*tsitsiyot*) on Jesus' cloak. Mark also tells how people flocked to Jesus, hoping to be cured of illnesses just by touching the tassels of his cloak (6:56). The fact that Jesus wore tassels is an indication of his dedication to the observance of Torah. People who came into contact with Jesus would have quickly been suspicious of his teaching if his wearing of tassels was not matched by his adherence to the Mosaic Law.

Jesus insisted that the requirements of the Law be respected when he told the lepers he cured to go and show themselves to the priests (Lk 17:14). This was in keeping with the law that required a priest to verify such a cure (Lev 13:2-8, 14:2-3). Matthew 17:24-27 records the occasion in Capernaum when Peter was asked if Jesus paid the half-shekel tax that contributed to the maintenance of the Temple. Peter said he did, thereby testifying to Jesus' respect for law. One could even go further and say that Jesus was in many respects a conservative in his attitude to Torah. His attitude toward Gentiles is typical of a conservative Jew of his day. When the Syrophenician woman approached him asking him to cure her daughter Jesus responded with a rather harsh remark: "Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (Mk 7:27). This remark came from his conviction that his mission was only to the people of Israel and not to Gentiles: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 15:21). However, in this particular case the intellectual jousting implicit in the woman's reply struck a positive chord in Jesus and he was lured beyond the boundary of his original purpose when he cured the woman's daughter.

Jesus' attitude to Gentiles is typical of conventional Palestinian Jews of his day. On another occasion a Roman centurion in Capernaum asked Jesus to cure his slave who was near death. In some early manuscripts, Jesus asks, "Am I to come and cure him?" (Mt 8:7). There is a note of hesitation, here indicating Jesus' unwillingness to incur ritual uncleanness by going into the house of a Gentile. The nice touch in this story is that the centurion is sensitive to Jesus' feelings and insists that he need not come into his house, but that he could simply say the word and the servant would be healed. While not wishing to be ungracious, Jesus would have felt uncomfortable at the prospect of entering a Gentile house. In both these accounts, Jesus avoids laying himself open to uncleanness.

The gospels say virtually nothing about visits Jesus might have made to such cosmopolitan centres as Sepphoris,<sup>5</sup> Tiberias,<sup>6</sup> and the Hellenistic cities of the Decapolis<sup>7</sup>. The probability is that Jesus avoided ritual uncleanness by staying out of these places and confined himself to Jewish towns and villages. Further evidence that Jesus kept away from Gentiles and focused his attention on his fellow Jews is revealed when he sends the Twelve out on their mission. He limits their activity to the people of Israel: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:5)<sup>8</sup>. This also indicates that Jesus' sole missionary concern was to bring the message of how to enter the reign of God to his fellow Jews.

## The Teachings of Jesus

Mark tells us that Jesus "went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons" (Mk 1:39; Mt 4:23). Matthew also adds that when Jesus left Galilee he "went to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. Large crowds followed him and he cured them there" (19:1f.). Even allowing for some enthusiastic exaggeration on the part of the evangelists, it is obvious that Jesus was offering an approach to Jewish life and religion that was attractive to many people. Little expressions in the gospels like "everyone is searching for you" (Mk 1:36); "the crowds were astounded at his teaching" (Mt 7:28); "such great crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat there" (Mt 13:2); "when the crowds were increasing he began to say" (Lk 11:29) show that the teachings of Jesus not only made sense to those who listened but were filling a great need in the lives of ordinary Jewish people. We also know that Jesus taught in open outdoor spaces (Mt 5:1; Lk 6:17; Mk 2:13, 6:34-36; Lk 5:3), which was not unusual in Jewish rabbinic tradition.

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<sup>5</sup> Sepphoris was a large Greco-Roman city that had been destroyed by the Romans and was being rebuilt by Herod Antipas as Jesus was growing up. It is about an hour's walk (6 km) from Nazareth and functioned as the administrative capital of Galilee.

<sup>6</sup> Tiberias was built by Herod Antipas who established it as his capital in the years 18-20 CE. It is situated on the on the south-western shore of the Sea of Galilee and Herod named it after the Roman Emperor Tiberius Caesar. The population was largely Gentile although some wealthy Jews would have been attracted by the government offices and the "high society" there. Pious Jews would have avoided Tiberias because it was built on the site of an ancient cemetery and was therefore unclean.

<sup>7</sup> The Decapolis (Greek: "ten cities") was the region situated in the Roman province of Syria, east of the Jordan extending from Damascus to Philadelphia. In this region there was a league of ten Hellenistic cities that had been set up for strategic reasons after the Roman occupation in 63 BCE.

<sup>8</sup> The instruction to preach to all nations (Mt 28:19) clearly derives from the growing experience of the Matthean community, which came to realise that the teachings of Jesus had universal application. The community spread its mission into Gentile areas and won many Gentile converts. This led to a growing awareness that the Spirit was guiding the early Jewish followers of Jesus beyond the house of Israel to the world at large. Matthew 28:19 is a good example of where the writer is inspired by the Holy Spirit rather than by the actual words of Jesus.

Jesus used the medium of parable to convey many of his ideas. Although these short stories put forward one or more points that the listeners were meant to apply to their own lives, they also give us insights into Jesus' own ideas about reign or kingdom of God and human attitudes and behaviour. For instance, in the Parable of the Mustard Seed (Mk 4:30-32), the reign of God begins small and grows to a great size. Likewise the silent and imperceptibly growing seed moves inexorably toward maturity and fruition (Mk 4:26).

Jesus never actually gives a detailed explanation of what he understands by the reign of God. It is a mystical concept and can only be reached by those whose lives are conformed to the will of God. Consequently, rather than defining the nature of the reign of God, Jesus is more intent on showing his contemporaries how they can live as true children of God in harmony with the divine will. In biblical times, the kingdom of God would come to fulfilment when Israel and eventually the whole world came to acknowledge Yahweh as supreme King and people would live according to the will of God.<sup>9</sup> Jews believed that the restoration of Israel to its former political independence was one aspect of the kingdom of God (Zeph 3:14ff.; Zech 9:9f.; Mic 4:6f.). The inter-testamental Pseudepigrapha and the Dead Sea Scrolls in particular give us insights into eschatological<sup>10</sup> and apocalyptic ideas about the kingdom that influenced Jewish thinking in the years leading up to the time of Jesus. With all its mystical elements, Jewish eschatology was never entirely otherworldly but always had both an historical and a transcendental dimension. In other words, the reign of God was going to be a universal phenomenon that would take place in history while its ultimate completion would occur in the time of the new creation beyond the messianic era.

In Jesus' day, there was no single idea among Jews of the reign of God, but it was commonly thought that the forces of good would one day overcome the forces of evil and the whole world would undergo a change.<sup>11</sup> All of humanity would be governed by goodness in this future golden era. It was also believed that the new age would be brought in by God's specially anointed human agent, the Messiah, who would win a great victory over the forces of evil.<sup>12</sup> Josephus tells us that, during the period of Roman occupation, there was an added political dimension to the theology of the reign of God. Many Jews believed that Rome had to be overcome by military force as a first step in the establishment of the reign of God.<sup>13</sup> However, there is no political agenda in the teachings of Jesus about the reign of God, and he certainly does not set out to rally large numbers of people around him in an attempt to bring about social or political change in Palestine. His parables contain religious and ethical messages designed to encourage

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<sup>9</sup> The kingdom of God in the Hebrew Bible refers to God's sovereignty over Israel (Judg 8:23; Is 43:15; 1 Chron 17:14) and over the whole world (Ps 22:28; 47:2, 7-8; 93; Amos 1:3-2:3; Dan 4:17; Tob 13:1). This latter concept can only be brought to reality when all the nations acknowledge Yahweh as the one true God and submit to the will of Yahweh. See Is 2:2-4; 19:19-25; Zech 14:9.

<sup>10</sup> The *eschaton* (Greek: "end") in Jewish thinking was the time at "the end of days" (*aharit ha yamim*) when the present era would undergo change, goodness would triumph, the Messiah would reign and the original paradise would be re-established on earth as a new creation (Is 65:17; 66:22).

<sup>11</sup> These ideas are spelt out in various ways in Jer 3:17f.; the Jewish Sibylline Oracles 3.716f.; the War Scroll 1QM; Psalms of Solomon 17:3.

<sup>12</sup> Ps Sol 17:21ff.; 18:6-9; 1QSa II.11ff.

<sup>13</sup> Flavius Josephus, the first-century Jewish historian, describes the philosophy of two significant rebels, Judas the Galilean and the leader of the rebels at Masada, Eleazar ben Jair, who believed that God could not be Israel's only authentic king until the Romans had been defeated and driven out of Palestine (*The Jewish War* ii.118; vii.323).

the listener to adopt attitudes and behaviour that would nourish relationships with God and neighbour. This becomes his “how” for entering the reign of God.

A close examination of the teachings of Jesus reveals that they were all based on the Scriptures and Jewish tradition. Even though his spiritual insights and interpretations of the Law were to some extent original, Jesus did not set out to invent a new religious system. Unlike his followers, Jesus did not preach himself but rather the reign of God. It was the post-resurrection generation of disciples who preached a Christology that recognised Jesus as the Christ, the unique Son of God.<sup>14</sup> When he prayed and taught his disciples to pray, Jesus drew on the Jewish tradition in which he was steeped. The expressions in the Our Father, for example, show great affinity with Jewish prayers in the Scriptures and rabbinic prayers. The *kaddish*<sup>15</sup> contains the prayer: “may thy name be hallowed and may thy kingdom come. Exalted and sanctified be his great name in the world which he created according to his will, and may he bring about his kingdom.”

## Jesus and Torah

In his teaching Jesus proves himself to be a fervent supporter of the Law of Moses. He declares in the Sermon on the Mount that he has not come to destroy or even make any changes to the Law. Rather, with an obviously formal pronouncement, he says that he has come not to destroy but to fulfil the Law. “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished” (Matt. 5:17-18).

Jesus always directed his teaching to his fellow Jews and, in this context, he endorsed the Mosaic Torah as an authentic way to a sound relationship with God and neighbour. It would seem logical, therefore, to conclude that his intention was not to set up a new religion that would break away from his beloved Judaism, but rather to bring his contemporaries back to the original spirit of Torah. This comes through very strongly when he comments on the commandments relating to murder and adultery (Mt 5:21-30). He argues that it is not enough to refrain from murder but that, in the spirit of the Law, one should not even give in to anger, which might lead to assault and finally murder. Using a typically rabbinic principle, Jesus builds a fence around the Law (*seyag le-torah*)<sup>16</sup> and protects it by censuring anger. Similarly, if a man avoided looking upon women as sex objects, he might not go further and entertain lustful thoughts and this, in turn, would check the final step of unlawful sexual behaviour. In both these cases, Jesus is teaching his listeners how to safeguard the spirit of Torah, through a spirituality that goes deeper than external behaviour as it stresses the importance of right attitudes.

In his Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records a rule of thumb that Jesus used to sum up the spirit of the Law and the prophets: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Mt 7:12). This logic is not

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<sup>14</sup> Mt 1:16, 18; 8:29; 14:32; Mk 1:11; Lk 1:35; 4:41; Jn 11:27; Acts 2:36, 5:42; 1 Jn 2:22.

<sup>15</sup> The *kaddish* is a doxology or prayer of praise recited after the main sections of the synagogue liturgy. Its origins go back to the period of the *tannaim*, which is the century of Jesus and the following century.

<sup>16</sup> The “fence” consisted of an injunction developed in the Oral Law designed to pre-empt any action that would lead to the breach of a specific commandment of the Torah. In this way the actual commandment was safeguarded. See Mishnah, *Avot* 1.i.

original to Jesus, as he is virtually quoting the outstanding and influential Rabbi Hillel<sup>17</sup> who presented a similar rule of thumb: “Do not unto others that which you would not have them do unto you” (*Shabbat* 31a). It is important to note that the “golden rule” as cited by Hillel and Jesus was not meant to be a profound theological or ethical principle, but rather a guiding maxim for human behaviour.

When asked by a lawyer (Mt 22:36-40) to nominate the greatest of the commandments (*mitzvot*), Jesus quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 and added a quotation from Leviticus 19:18. The second of these injunctions, “you shall love your neighbour as yourself” appears to be original to Jesus, but in fact there is a Jewish tradition that goes back at least to Rabbi Hillel, who taught that the love of one’s fellow human beings is the essence of the Law of Moses (*Shabbat* 30-31). Jesus follows in the footsteps of Hillel with his focus on the centrality of the love commandment as a guiding principle in maintaining fidelity to the Law. In essence, Jesus is urging his contemporaries to return to the spirit of Deuteronomy, which stresses love as the foundation for relationship with God and neighbour.<sup>18</sup>

The evidence of the gospels indicates that Jesus was not happy with the way certain religious leaders of his day were interpreting parts of the Law of Moses. It clearly disturbed him that their priorities were distorted and that they were unable to discern the true spirit of the Law. For instance, when some Pharisees and Scribes accused the followers of Jesus of eating with unwashed hands (Mk 7:1-13) and thereby breaking a ritual custom of cleanliness, Jesus openly called them hypocrites (Mk 7:6) and showed them that their values were upside down. He pointed out that, when they dedicated money to the Temple instead of using the funds to provide for their elderly parents, they were actually placing a custom above one of the commandments of Moses. Jesus was illustrating how behaviour like this missed the point of Mosaic spirituality, because it attached more importance to external practices than to the search for genuine relationship with God. Jesus quoted Isaiah 29:13 to call attention to the emptiness of people who worship God with their lips and external ritual, while their hearts are not involved. In their religious behaviour, these Scribes and Pharisees had lost sight of the spirit of the Law.

A note of caution needs to be sounded here, lest the reader of the gospels get the impression that Jesus had a hostile relationship with the Scribes and Pharisees. Scholars generally agree that the strong tone of the invective of Matthew 23 comes not from Jesus, but from the Matthean community.<sup>19</sup> Jesus was certainly critical of those Pharisees who put the minutiae of legal requirements above genuine righteousness. But in no sense was this a repudiation of his own Jewish heritage, or a rejection of the Mosaic Law, or even a rejection of Pharisaism. There is nothing in the gospels to indicate that Jesus had any problems with the Law of Moses as such. On the contrary,

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<sup>17</sup> R. Hillel (c.60 B.C.E. to c.20 C.E.) was a Babylonian Jew who studied in Jerusalem and became the recognised head of the highest academy there. He was a man of remarkable virtue and was one of the most influential teachers in the history of Judaism.

<sup>18</sup> See the references in Deuteronomy to God’s love for Israel and the call for a reciprocation of love: 5:10; 6:5; 7:9, 13; 10:12, 15; 11:1. See also the call for love and kindness toward fellow human beings: Deut 10:19. Also Prov 10:12; 15:17; Hos 12:6; Mic 6:8; Zech 7:8.

<sup>19</sup> E.P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, 276. James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism*. New York: Doubleday, 1988, 46. Scholarly consensus is that the tone of Matthew 23 reflects the opposition between the Matthean community and post-70 C.E. Pharisaism. Matt. 23 tells us more about the relationship between the Pharisees and Matthew’s church than between the Pharisees and Jesus.

he respected Torah as an incomparable and time-honoured way to God. In fact, he was a loyal son of Torah, an authentic bar-mitzvah, and he did everything in his power to protect the integrity of the true Jewish tradition. It is equally important to see that, in overturning the tables of the money changers in the outer court of the Temple, Jesus was not criticising the priesthood or Temple sacrifice and worship. Neither was he performing the function of a religious reformer advocating an end to cultic abuses. Rather, he was acting as an eschatological prophet symbolising the end of the present era and the advent of a new age, a new Jerusalem, a new Temple and a new form of religious worship<sup>20</sup>.

All four gospels show that, in his own set of priorities, Jesus placed relationships with God and other people above rules and hallowed customs. When the Pharisees (Mt 12:1-8) drew an extremely long bow and accused his disciples of preparing food on the sabbath when they plucked grain from a wheat field, which was forbidden by the rabbis, Jesus responded in fine rabbinic style with scripture references to two cases (a) to David and his followers who ate the sacred bread offerings because they had no other food (1 Sam. 21:2-7), and (b) to the activities of the priests in the Temple who work on the Sabbath but who are not guilty because of the holy nature of their work. Jesus also brought home to the Pharisees that helping another person was a greater good than strict observance of the sabbath (Mk 3:1-6). In these cases Jesus points out that the laws are designed to help people's relationship with God. They are not ends in themselves, but serve the human journey toward God.

Again, when asked by a sincere and Law-observant man what he must do to have eternal life, Jesus answered by emphasising the extra dimension that raises the human person above the level of conformity to the Law to new heights of generous self-giving. In this instance, although the man was faithful to the commandments, he was held back by his attachment to his wealth and could not bring himself to exercise the kind of compassion toward the poor and disadvantaged that would lift him on to a new relational level with God and his fellow human beings (Mt 19:16-23). The episode also tells us that it is just this kind of selfless attitude that should characterise a disciple of Jesus.

## The Mission of Jesus

What motivated Jesus to wander around the countryside, first in Galilee and then elsewhere in Palestine, preaching to people? Like John the Baptist, Jesus was convinced that the time was near for the coming of God's reign upon the earth. For people steeped in the Jewish tradition, this meant that God was about to bring to an end the present sinful and imperfect world order and establish a new world order in which the values of goodness would dominate all human behaviour and people would live in kindness and peace with one another, with God, and with the natural world around them. Later Jewish tradition maintained that the Messiah, the specially anointed agent of God, would inaugurate this new age by overcoming the forces of evil, and would lead Israel and the rest of humanity into a future where everyone would live according to God's will. The community of the Dead Sea Scrolls were convinced that this cosmic victory over evil would be brought about by two messianic figures. One would be a royal Davidic warrior and the other a spiritual, priestly figure.<sup>21</sup> This tells us that, at the time of John and Jesus, there was no single concept in Judaism about the person and

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<sup>20</sup> Meyer, *Aims*, 170; Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 89-90.

<sup>21</sup> See the Rule of War 4Q285; the Messianic Rule 1QS<sub>a</sub> (=1Q28a).



function of the Messiah (or Messiahs). It follows that Jesus might well have been seen by some to be the Messiah, with a spiritual role even though he did not fit the description of the royal warrior kind of Messiah.

John the Baptist did not see himself as the Messiah, but he believed he was a prophet called to announce the arrival of the Anointed One by urging people to repent and turn to God (Mk 1:4-8). The followers of Jesus were convinced that Jesus himself was the Messiah (Mk 8:29), chiefly because he was offering people a formula for changing their lives so that they would be committed to doing God's will. As more and more of his fellow citizens were won over by the message of Jesus, it was becoming clear that he was performing a messianic function in combating evil and bringing people back to God (Jn 10:24ff.).

So what was Jesus trying to achieve? Despite some differences of opinion on matters of detail, modern scholars generally agree that Jesus was inspired by the spirituality of Second-Isaiah and others to hope and work for the restoration of Israel.<sup>22</sup> This, as we have seen, would be an integral first step in the establishment of the universal reign of God. According to the Hebrew Scriptures and pseudepigrapha, the restoration of Israel would take place when those faithful to Yahweh would be united in Israel. This would include the scattered Jews in foreign lands and those in Israel itself. This would all take place in a new Jerusalem, with a new Temple in which people would serve God in faithfulness and God would reign over the new Israel with love and mercy.<sup>23</sup> The gospels indicate that Jesus saw himself playing a key messianic role in this restoration of Israel and the establishment of the reign of God. His entry into Jerusalem, and being acclaimed by a small band of followers, would seem to indicate that Jesus saw himself fulfilling prophecy (Mt 21:1-10 cf., Zech 9:9). During his last days in Jerusalem, he would have come to realise that his death was inevitable and, no doubt, he began to see this as part of his God-sent mission. Casting himself as the son in the Parable of the Wicked Tenants (Mk 12:1-12) not only reveals Jesus' understanding of his relationship with God, but further suggests that he regarded his death as integral to his messianic task. He was not setting up a new religious system, nor did he see himself as merely a prophet announcing the coming of the kingdom. He was responding to a divine call to actually inaugurate a new messianic age.

## Further Reading

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<sup>22</sup> Ben Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus*. London: SCM, 1979; E.P Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism*, 77-119, 335-40; Marcus Borg, *Jesus a New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1987, 125-49; M. de Jonge, *Jesus the Servant-Messiah*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Pr., 1991, 55-75.

<sup>23</sup> Is. 49:4f., 56:1-8; 60:3-7; 60:10-14, 16; 61:6; Ezek. 34, 27; Tob 13:5, 11, 16-18; 2 Macc. 2:7; Jub. 1:15-17; Pss. Sol. 17.

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Vermes, Geza *The Religion of Jesus the Jew*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993

## Web-Sites

Faith Futures Foundation's Historical Jesus Studies web site contains a number of links to issues relating to the Historical Jesus

<http://www.faithfutures.org/HJstudies.html>

Mark Goodacre's *New Testament Gateway* contains further excellent links on the Historical Jesus

<http://www.ntgateway.com/Jesus/>

Margot Hodson's *Olive Roots* site explores the Jewish origins of Christianity.

<http://www.hodsons.org/Oliveroots/id2.htm>