Introduction

Historians know very little about the personal life of an average peasant in Roman Palestine in the first half of the first century of the Common Era. Archaeology reveals physical aspects of the setting in which they lived out their lives; the surviving archaeological artifacts of the period that are uncovered in excavations become the cryptic residue of their lives. Archaeologists must use artifacts and imagination to sketch out in very broad outline aspects of peasant life, but the peasant as a real flesh and blood human being remains elusive.[1] All that remains are places and things to be pondered. No narrative descriptions of day-to-day activities of peasant life and those of the still lower classes in the Roman province of Palestine exist. Such sources do not even exist for peasant life in the whole of the Roman Empire, where a great deal can be known about the private lives of people of means.[2]

According to the earliest sources, Jesus was a first-century man from the region of Galilee, which was a part of the broader geographical area known in the Greco-Roman world as Judea. The people who populated the area were generally known by outsiders as Judeans.[3]

Jesus was the heir of the ancient Israelite religion, which in his day was associated primarily with the "land of [Judea], Jerusalem and the temple, and the cult and law as practiced there."[4] He belonged to the elusive impoverished classes of the greater Palestine area, and except for the early Christian gospels would have suffered the fate of oblivion, as did others of the impoverished classes of that period. We do not know for certain when he was born, his course of life, what he looked like, or where he was buried. We have no personal information about him in contemporary documents originating in the period in which we think he lived. The earliest information we

1. Note for example, the missing peasant in Rousseau and Arav, *Jesus and His World.*

2. See Veyne, *Private Life*, 134: "Of this hard-working crowd of peasants, fisherman, and shepherds, some slaves, others free we know very little."

3. Elliott, "Jesus the Israelite," 119–54.

4. Ibid., 149.

have as to his personal history is inadvertently provided by a first-century man who described himself as the apostle of Jesus.[5] Only six personal features from the life of Jesus are mentioned by Paul, the apostle. Jesus was "born of a woman, born under the law" (Gal 4:4)—meaning that he was a human being who was born into a social context under the authority of the Torah of the Israelite people. The names of his parents are not mentioned, which suggests they were likely unknown. Paul's description of his birth does not use incarnation language such as is found in Matthew, Luke, and John. Paul further indicates that Jesus is a descendant of the legendary Israelite King David (Rom 1:3), but the descent is clearly suspect as an unprovable ascription of faith—Paul is using confessional language in Rom 1:2–5. Paul also knew an apostle named James, whom he described as "the brother of the Lord" (Gal 1:19). In the undisputed Pauline letters the word "brother" (ἀδελφός) always refers to a religious connection (i.e., a "spiritual brother"), but here Paul has likely resorted to a familial relationship to distinguish this James from another James (viz. James, Cephas, and John, Gal 2:9).

Paul mentions only three incidents from the life of Jesus. His failure to mention others suggests that he does not know anything like a sketch of the life course or even a career of Jesus. According to Paul, Jesus ate a meal "on the night he was delivered over" (1 Cor 11:23–25). The clearly liturgical language he uses in describing the bread and the cup makes it doubtful that he knows this event independently of church practice. He further knows that Jesus was both crucified (Gal 3:1) and buried (1 Cor 15:4). The lack of detail does not instill any confidence that Paul has any independent information apart from what has come to him through the *kerygma* of the early church.

Four narratives emerge in the latter half of the first century (70–90) purporting to describe the public career of Jesus and with these texts began the attempts to explain the origins of the church's message. Mark, the earliest of the four writing about a generation after the death of Jesus, begins the narrative this way: "Beginning of the gospel about Jesus, the Anointed" (Mark 1:1).[6] What follows in Mark's narrative is a brief abridgement of the public career of Jesus, containing examples of things Jesus said and did, things said about him, and things done to him. The same is true for the other three gospels. Basically all four gospels are aiming to explain who this mysterious figure is that is preserved in the gospel message preached by the church (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–9; Acts 2:22–24). Only one author of the four gave a reason for writing a narrative about Jesus; Luke's reason for writing a gospel

5. Paul claimed that he was called to proclaim Jesus among the gentiles (Gal 1:11–16).

6. See Hedrick, "Parable and Kingdom," 180–82.

was so that his patron would "know the truth about the things of which you have been informed" (Luke 1:4). All four accounts describe the content of that "truth" differently, however.[7] They had no primary historical sources uninfluenced by religious faith on which to draw. Scholars theorize that the basic sources used by all four are derived from a generation of oral tradition about Jesus passed along by word of mouth; this oral tradition depicts him through the eyes of faith as bigger than life.[8] As a result, the gospels themselves belong more to the category of "evangelistic tract" or propaganda literature than they do to disinterested historical narrative.[9] The church's canonical gospels are not the ultimate authoritative historical descriptions of Jesus; rather they should be conceived as among the very first attempts at fleshing out the *kerygma* about Jesus of Nazareth[10] on whom the church based its message, aiming, as it were, at clarifying the origins of the church.

An interesting feature of these narratives is their portrayal of situations in which the contemporaries of Jesus were perplexed as to how to regard him. For example, in the synoptic gospels there are several pronouncement stories, which I designate as anecdotes of identity.[11] These brief *chreia*[12] are comprised of a brief setting, confusion over the identity of Jesus, and conclude with a pronouncement saying. The evangelists also include other brief descriptions of reactions to Jesus in longer narrative units where people are perplexed as to his identity.[13] Certainly these latter descriptions are novelistic intended to heighten the mystery surrounding Jesus. But they have the added effect of introducing uncertainty into the narratives as to how Jesus should be understood. The numerous appellations applied to Jesus throughout the four canonical gospels suggest that mystery had always surrounded him.

7. Hedrick, *When History and Faith Collide*, 30–47.

8. And Matthew, Luke, and John are thought to have used written sources as well.

9. Hedrick, *When History and Faith Collide*, 110–25.

10. For the first renewed attempt in modern times, see Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

11. Mark 6:2–5 = Matt 13:54–57; Mark 6:14–16 = Matt 14:1–2 = Luke 9:7–9; Mark 8:27–30 = Matt 16:13–20 = Luke 9:18–21; Mark 15:2–5 = Matt 27:11–14 = Luke 23:2–3. There is one in Q Matt 11:2–6 = Luke 7:18–23, and another incorporated into a longer narrative: Mark 14:60–62 = Matt 26:62–64 = Luke 22:67–70.

12. The terms anecdote, *chreia*, pronouncement story, and apophthegm are used to describe "a short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or curious incident often biographical and generally characterized by human interest," *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, s.v. "anecdote." For a discussion see Robbins, *Ancient Quotes and Anecdotes*, xi–xii.

13. Mark 4:41 = Matt 8:27 = Luke 8:25; Matt 12:22–23; Luke 7:48–49; John 4:28–29; 6:41–42; 7:25–27; 8:23–25; 10:19–21; 10:22–25; 19:7–9.

In Mark's gospel, for example, the appellations are not consistent or clear. Some are uncomplimentary (crazy, possessed, 3:21–22), and common or mundane (carpenter, son of Mary, 6:3) and regional (Nazerene, 14:67;[14] Jesus of Nazareth, 1:24). Some are titles of community respect (teacher, 9:17; rabbi, 9:5; prophet, 6:4; lord/sir, 7:28, 11:3; son of David, 10:43–48[15]), and political titles (king of the Judeans, 15:2; king of Israel, 15:32) or enigmatic (son of man, 9:9). The religious appellations, including those suggesting that Jesus has some special relationship to God, are not explained or clarified further in Mark (son of God, 3:11; holy one of God, 1:24; son of the most high God, 5:7; the Anointed, 8:29; the Anointed, son of the Blessed, 14:61; a son of God, 15:39). Of these Jesus is portrayed as applying only the title "son of man" to himself, but as accepting the appellation of the Anointed, son of the blessed.

The result over all is a confusing portrait of the protagonist of Mark's gospel. How should a reader of Mark's gospel describe Jesus? Is he an unschooled peasant with enough native ability to be regarded as a teacher or rabbi? Should he be included among the prophets of Israel? Did he have political aspirations? How should a reader regard the religious appellations used in Mark in the light of the other designations that seem to cast Jesus as a common man with unusual gifts (cf. Mark 2:7)?

Matthew and Luke have appellations much the same as Mark, which might prompt a similar confusion as to the identity of Jesus were it not for their birth narratives (Matt 1:18–2:23; Luke 1:5—2:52) that influence readers to see Jesus as a divine emissary, although they never clarify how humanity and divinity are united in the man from Galilee. Matthew goes so far as to identify him with Lady Wisdom herself (Matt 11:16–19). On the other hand, the status of Jesus in the Gospel of John is heightened to the point of portraying him as a divine agent in human guise (John 1:1–18; 20:28; cf. Phil 2:5–11).

Using these admittedly confessional narratives, as well as noncanonical sources, modern historians have been engaged for over 200 years aiming to develop a historical understanding of Jesus of Nazareth with mixed results. They have been quite successful in understanding and describing the nature of the sources, but have not been as successful in developing a historical description of Jesus that commands the general agreement of New Testament scholarship. In this regard little progress has been made since Albert Schweitzer's definitive statement of the problems surrounding

14. But see the complexities surrounding the designation Nazarene: Goranson, "Nazarenes."

15. See the discussion in Lane, *Mark*, 387–88.

the study of Jesus of Nazareth in his seminal study *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Schweitzer surveyed the critical lives of Jesus from Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1778) through Wilhelm Wrede (1901), and concluded with his own view, which he described as "Thoroughgoing Eschatology" in response to Wrede, whose view he regarded as thoroughgoing skepticism.[16] Schweitzer's conclusion is that the historical man Jesus conceived of himself as an eschatological figure, who by forcing his death, would begin the final eschatological drama of history.

> In the knowledge that He is the coming Son of Man [Jesus] lays hold of the wheel of the world to set it moving on that last revolution which is to bring all ordinary history to a close. It refuses to turn, and He throws himself upon it. Then it does turn; and crushes Him. Instead of bringing in the eschatological conditions, He has destroyed them. The wheel rolls onward, and the mangled body of the one immeasurably great Man who was strong enough to think of Himself as the spiritual ruler of mankind and to bend history to His purpose is hanging upon it still. That is His victory and His reign.[17]

Wrede had argued that Mark's portrayal of Jesus attempting to silence those who recognized him as the Israelite messiah (the Anointed) was not a historical feature in the life of the historical man; it was a traditional motif that proceeded from the post-resurrection idea that Jesus had become the Anointed of the Lord at his resurrection and the so-called "messianic secret" emerged from attempts to introduce this idea back into the lifetime of Jesus. How Mark chose to employ the traditional motif, however, was all the work of Mark.[18] Schweitzer regarded Mark's characterization of Jesus as basically historical. Critical scholarship, however, tended to follow Wrede's view over Schweitzer's, and the result was that not a single critical "life" of Jesus appeared again for over fifty years (1956). The author of that book, Günther Bornkamm began his study with the surprising sentence: "No one is any longer in the position to write a life of Jesus."[19] That is to say, the gospels are unreliable; they do not reproduce "the course of his career in all its happenings and stages" as "a more or less assured whole."[20] Hence, Bornkamm argued, we should not continue attempting to produce "a detailed description

16. Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 330–50.
17. Ibid., 370–71.
18. Wrede, *Messianic Secret*, 225–30.
19. Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 13.
20. Ibid., 24–25.

of the course of his life biographically and psychologically."[21] This observation made almost sixty years ago has nevertheless not discouraged the spate of lives of Jesus, even in the camps of critical scholarship.

Views about Jesus of Nazareth at the end of the twentieth century have become numerous and quite different from one another, particularly in critical scholarship. Marcus Borg has summarized at least six distinct ways of viewing Jesus as human being that have appeared in major studies.[22] What follows are the brief descriptions as Borg sees them—Borg elaborates further in his book.[23] According to E. P. Sanders, "Jesus was an eschatological prophet standing in the tradition of Jewish restoration theology."[24] The characterization of Jesus that emerges from the Gospel of Mark according to Burton Mack "is an image of Jesus as a 'Cynic sage' or 'Cynic teacher,' more Hellenistic than Jewish, in a thoroughly Hellenized Galilee."[25] Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza regards "Jesus as a wisdom prophet and founder of a Jewish renewal movement with a socially radical vision and praxis."[26] Borg's own view is that Jesus "was a charismatic healer or 'holy person,' a subversive sage who undermined conventional wisdom and taught an alternative wisdom, a social prophet, and initiator of a movement the purpose of which was the revitalization of Israel."[27] John Dominic Crossan argues that "Jesus was a Jewish Cynic peasant with an alternative social vision."[28] Bart Ehrman describes Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who expected the end of the old world and the establishment of a new world order on earth.[29] It appears that the enduring legacy of Schweitzer's book still applies: given the nature of the sources with which scholars must work almost any view of Jesus is possible.

Drawing on the critical eight-year sifting of the sayings of Jesus by the Jesus Seminar,[30] this present study aims at describing Jesus simply on the basis of those sayings that have the highest claim to have originated with him. A description of Jesus based on his sayings alone will naturally

21. Ibid., 24.
22. Borg, *Jesus*, 18–43
23. See the discussion in chapter nine below.
24. Borg, *Jesus*, 19.
25. Ibid., 21.
26. Ibid., 24.
27. Ibid., 26.
28. Ibid., 34.
29. See the discussion of Ehrman in chapter 9 below.
30. The report is published in Funk and Hoover, *Five Gospels*. The study finds that only 18% of sayings attributed to Jesus in written texts of the first two centuries Common Era can be claimed to have originated with the historical man Jesus of Nazareth (the red and pink sayings).

vary depending on the sayings identified as having the highest claim to have originated with him. Nevertheless, the most reasonable place to begin a study of Jesus' ideas and character based on his own words is with the sharpest critical sifting of the sayings tradition. This study identifies a range of historical valuations of the entire data base of sayings attributed to Jesus. The "voiceprint" that emerges from such a study casts him in a rather different light from the majority of lives of Jesus published at the end of the twentieth century.