

THE FIRST YEARS OF CHRISTIANITY

A PERSONAL INVESTIGATION

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2017

Acknowledgement: my thanks go out to my son Dr. W.J.P. Beenakker
for his great support during the english translation of my book

I often think of my brother Ton who died just before christmas a year ago; we saw each other almost every week, I still miss him

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MAY I INTRODUCE MYSELF

Born into a typical catholic family in a small village in the Dutch province of Zeeland, I moved with my family to Rotterdam 2 years before the start of the war in 1940. After primary school my further education took place at the Catholic Latin School led by the Franciscan friars. Every day during the war I was confronted in the center of the town with the rubble left by the bombardment of May 14, 1940. My school years were spent in one of the few remaining battered buildings, still partly in use to give lessons. I still smell the air of burning houses and remember the big water-filled holes in the ground, where I after the lessons did what every boy at that age would do. After graduating, my education was continued in 1947 with a study at Leiden University in the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics with a major in mathematics. After a Master's degree in 1951, I studied for about four years philosophy and theology but yet preferred a civilian career. I wrote a dissertation and became a lecturer in mathematics. In 1989 I took early retirement under a then existing early retirement scheme. The decision for my early retirement was taken some time earlier and was connected with my plan to give an entirely new direction to my life.

The decision came at a time when the church came under pressure due to major changes that presented themselves. First there was the Second Vatican Council, which was announced on January 25, 1959 and lasted from October 11-1962 until the end of september 1965. Secondly, there was the pastoral council of the Dutch Church Province, wich was opened on november 27, 1966 and lasted until 1970. This council was intended to give shape to the Vatican Council in the Dutch Episcopate.

The Second Vatican Council can be seen as the starting point of the emancipation of the Dutch Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic Church began to reform slowly and, as always, such a process, once it begins, is unstoppable. During this process of change within the Church, the attitude among the community of believers was altered in a very substantial way. The gaze of the believer is no longer pointing up to the sky but horizontally to the world in which one lives. Living on earth has been given a new meaning; it has become a mission, a challenge. This constitutes a revolution in thought and action. Concepts such as integrity of creation, third world development and respect for other cultures and religions became new keywords. No longer convinced of its own right, there is a shift from the Church's teaching to a christian ideal. The unconditional way one so far listened to the "voice of Rome" disappeared. Accepting authority without questions was something of the past, being replaced by a critical attitude, which creates a culture of posing questions that triggered more questions. After the Council believing was not obvious any more but a deliberate choice.

Since my study in exact sciences the love for truth stands always central in my behavior. This made me aware of the problems the Church had with scientific discoveries that could possibly undermine the doctrine of the Church. Reminiscent of the time of Galileo when the first confrontation of the church with science took place. But this is nothing compared to the problems the Church has with the implications of the theory of evolution that seems to undermine the whole edifice of hereditary sin and atonement theology. The Church has so far failed miserably, by evading an honest confrontation between

faith and science by preferring to adopt an attitude of denying and ignoring.

This observation was an indication that the foundation of the church was not as solid and robust as previously assumed. The comforting certainty with which I grew up, had become an uneasy source of doubt. What was true or not and what it meant for a life as a christian became my personal burden, with an uncertain future before me and with a faith that was increasingly challenged. During the council of the Dutch Church Province, I came to the conclusion that I could no longer accept a life in constant doubt. Only a personal investigation could save me from this impasse. Yet I had to wait for another twenty years before the time came that I could really begin.

Now something about my investigations

I gradually got the experience that truth in the exact sciences is not the same as in matters of faith. You will find only a few statements where I clearly give my personal opinion. The Church is a living organism, which has grown over time and changed under varying conditions making it to what it is today. My respect and my love for Christianity is decisive for my judgment. But I've also discovered that for me believing does not mean the same nowadays as it used to do. Read what I have written and do with it as it suits you best. Success!

ON THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN OLD AND NEW

At the boundary between Old and New I stand now to find out exactly what happened when Christianity was about to be born. Looking back to the past, to the time before Jesus, I see a long and rich history in which the jewish religion with many highs and many lows has come to maturity. Looking ahead of me I see, in the distance a small

group of enthusiasts who have preceded me in search of a new future, trusting in Jesus of Nazareth, the proclaimer of God's Kingdom. Any serious researcher, who clings to what at that deciding moment happened in history, is like someone who burns his boats to go towards an unknown future. They did it indeed, and so I did it too. I am, as it were, one of these pioneers; I stood open, for whatever the investigation would yield. This I realized much later when it became very clear to me that I had to make conscious choices to remain credible for myself. How strange is it to start investigations while one is personally involved. It has however from the start been my intent to stay objective and critical. It turned out sometimes that I had to make painful choices when the investigations forced me to do that. I must conclude, looking back, that I've always tried to be honest while drawing conclusions. The moments of doubt got more than enough attention.

At the start of the investigation, I made the conscious choice only to take into account the Jewish background of Jesus of Nazareth, his words and his ideas as we can find those in the Gospels and in the available sources containing original sayings and parables. In the selection of the modern literature that was available, I preferred scientific studies that gave a critical account of what had happened around the birth of the young religion. Religious views, supported by dogmas and papal pronouncements from a slightly later period, I pushed aside as not relevant to my research, well aware of the fact that the development of the Christian religion only at a later stage found its completion. I realized very well that the results of my investigation must be compared with the Church's teaching and practice. Of the last I am pretty well informed since, after my academic study, I

have studied during almost four years, the base of philosophy and theology,

For someone who looks impartially at the first years of the new religion, which hardly deserves the name Christianity and consists of only a very small number of more or less isolated nuclei of several dozen people, it is clear: the future of this religion is uncertain. We know that it went differently than was expected and that the word success story is in place. We also know that at an early stage in Asia Minor a breakthrough took place thanks to the apostle Paul. Although, it is correct to note that when Paul was converted to the new faith, there was already a kind of religion around the worship of the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, as Paul himself had written down in his letters.

MY STUDY OF WHAT HAPPENED AFTER THE DEATH OF JESUS BEGAN IN 1989

My intensive study of what happened after the death of Jesus of Nazareth started in early 1989 when I retired at the age of sixty. I built gradually a fairly extensive library and searched for the most recently published works.

Since the last century, there has been a lot of serious research in this field and publications thereof are available in dutch and, if not, in english. The investigation into the origins of Christianity and the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth has now reached a multidisciplinary level. It is not the Bible alone as subject of study through literary textual criticism. We now know much more about Judaism and the situation in the Middle East at the time of Jesus' life. (Cultural) Anthropology and sociology provide information about cultural and

social aspects in societies of the time. Scientists in the field of religions contribute to a better understanding of the development of Christianity. Important contributions are also provided by historical and archaeological research. Science is important for dating gospels and other writings and for deciphering of previously unreadable handwritings by spectral analysis. Bringing together these diverse qualities increases the level of further investigations. We still have to mention that new sources have become available, such as the discovery of the Gospel of Thomas in the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. In a period of about fifteen years, I have purchased over a hundred publications of active scientists on the different fields. In recent years I was forced to buy this literature online in the United States, since dutch book publishers are not interested anymore. After a period of study of more than a decade, I started, after the turn of the century, with writing down my ideas. I have deliberately opted for the computer as the medium for publication since the use of computers, as a means to obtain information, is presently preferred by most people. A list of literature in english, consulted by me during my research, is to be found at the end of this book.

I want to write a book over a period of more than twenty five years, so I must restrict myself and make choices. It is useless to try to summarize the results of my investigations, during so many years and about so many topics, in a limited number of pages. Important is to give you an impression of how the investigator experiences the results of his study, since he is in a way part of the subject under investigation. Could he at decisive moments stand firm and stay consistent? Sometimes it happened during those years that suddenly

something became very clear for me and that caused spontaneous exclamations; you will find these in my writings. There are a number of issues to be addressed. In doing so, I must limit myself, and you should just settle for what I want to tell you. I want to give a positive yet critical look at the first years of Christianity.

The references to texts from the Bible are taken from the New Jerusalem Bible of 1986 (NJB for short). You can reference to the Bible, and copy text using the website www.Catholic.org/Bible. The quality of this website has its restrictions. When you copy text, it may look good at first sight but when you decide later to print out these text on paper, the results are horrible: text with great open spaces. As a result I felt forced to solve the problems by typing the text of the sayings of Jesus into the computer, hours of work!! Sayings of Jesus in the gospel of Thomas can be found in the Gnostic Society Library (the Nag Hammadi Library). The quality of this website is great and printing later gives no problem.

CHAPTER 1 : THE START OF MY INVESTIGATIONS

For the religious formation of every believer, now and in the past, two people are essential: the evangelist John with his Gospel and the evangelist Luke with his two books: The Gospel and The Acts. Every Christian will agree on this. Supplemented by what was learned at the pulpit, this determines the core of the religious formation of every Christian. And so we feel more than obliged to give the necessary critical attention to what these two people have left us in writings.

THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

The gospel of John is in scientific circles dated around the turn of the century. It gives an entirely different picture of Jesus of Nazareth than the Synoptics: the evangelists Matthew, Mark and Luke. The community that wrote this gospel, clearly has a special vision of the man Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is the word of God, who came down from heaven onto earth. In all sovereignty, he showed himself during his earthly life a master of all situations. He stood above all. Everything was done with his knowledge and consent. He was more divine than human! The meaning of his crucifixion is not so much a sign of reconciliation but more a glorification of him in the eyes of God.

His behaviour is, contrary to what we read in the other gospels, close to what is said in the Church about the risen Lord. In the Gospel of John, Jesus hits hard and constantly onto the Pharisees and all Jews. The way this is done, makes a somewhat artificial impression on me. It is clear from the text that what John says, is absolutely contrary to what a Jew can believe. Take for example John 6, 53:

Jesus replied to them: In all truth I tell you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.

The very idea of drinking blood must have been a horrible thought for a Jew. In Leviticus, it is strictly prohibited. The assertion that it is not about the literal meaning of the word but merely a metaphor, does not change the fact that the wording used was extremely offensive for a Jew. That such a comment had to lead to a rupture, is obvious. A rupture caused by such an essential point of difference makes an abrupt end to all contacts. But why this constant verbal abuse

from John? Why was the author always searching the confrontation with the Jews?

The gospel is built around five miracle stories, which have the same character as the miracle stories in Mark, completed with the wine miracle at the wedding at Cana and the resurrection of Lazarus. These seven miracles are called signs because they refer to Jesus in a special way. With these miracles as a starting point, Jesus speaks about himself and uses mostly the I-form 'I am ...'. He calls himself 'the light of the world ', 'living water 'and 'the bread of life'. The Jews did not understand what Jesus said, which is not surprising when one reads the words! In the discussion that follows, the words testimony and judgment are key notions: Jews who refuse to accept Jesus are subject to the final verdict. The whole makes an artificial impression. What to say if Jesus claims to be a witness for his own statements. Only those who already believe will have no problems.

The church of John seems to have been well informed of the text of the gospel of Mark, given the structure of the passion story surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus, and also of the thoughts in the church of the apostle Paul. The gospel of John is of little importance for the investigation of the historical Jesus. Although this gospel has not received immediately the same appreciation as the Synoptics, it has played an important role in the theological developments during the first centuries.

AGAIN: THE GOSPEL OF JOHN, NOW CRITICALLY READ

What has John to say to us? The whole atmosphere in this gospel is characterized by an ongoing heated debate between Jesus and the Jews. In this gospel John is constantly busy to promote Jesus, to say it

in a modern way. Jesus regularly talks about his special relationship with God, whom he calls his father. He uses words that leave little to the imagination and clearly suggest that it is more than a metaphor. This gospel breathes a spirit of hostility, tending to violence. It's a strange gospel: a theological doctrine of the God-man Jesus in a text that sometimes moves and asks for emotions, but also speaks of condemnation and punishment of those who do not believe in him. If Jesus has brought his good news that way, then it should surprise you that he has arrived in good health at the beginning of the Holy Week.

Where in the texts you can read regularly about Jews picking up stones to kill Jesus, they curiously enough never throw any stone at him. Knowing how strongly Jews reacted in their writings about alleged blasphemy, we should question what John's gospel tells us in detail. While the Synoptics talk of a mild disagreement between Jesus and his opponents, we read in John, however, texts with threats against Jesus that are very clear.

The following texts are eligible: John: 5.18; 7.1; 7.19; 7.30; 7.32; 7.44; 8.20; 8.57; 10.31; 10.39; 11.47; 12.1 and the passion story. A list of 13 texts, while we find in the Synoptics only four places in the text (the three prophecies of suffering excluded).

If we read the text and the associated context, we gain insight into the fierce debate between Jesus and his opponents, and we are aware of the direct physical threats. But no stones are flying through the air and no blows are delivered. It seems to me to be rather artificial. It seems like the actual conflicts between John's church and the Jews in the vicinity are re-played in a sort of game. Here are several phrases from the said pericopes:

But that only made the Jews even more intent on killing him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he spoke of God as his own Father and so made himself Gods'equal. (Jn5,18)

After this Jesus travelled round Galilee; he could not travel round Judaea, because the Jews were seeking to kill him. (Jn7,1)

Did not Mozes give you the Law? And yet not one of you keeps the Law! 'Why do you want to kill me'? (Jn7,19)

They wanted to arrest him then, but because his hour had not yet come no one laid a hand on him. (Jn7,30)

Hearing that talk like this about him was spreading among the people, the Pharisees sent the Temple guards to arrest him. (Jn7,32)

Some wanted to arrest him, but no one actually laid a hand on him. The guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees who said to them, 'Why haven't you brought him?' (Jn7,44-45)

He spoke these words in the Treasury, while teaching in the Temple. No one arrested him, because his hour had not yet come. (Jn8,20)

The Jews then said. 'You are not fifty yet and you have seen Abraham!' Jesus replied: In all truth I tell you, before Abraham ever was, I am. At this they picked up stones to throw at him; but Jesus hid himself and left the Temple. (Jn8,57-59)

In the gospel of John the situatioj is completely different than in the gospel of Mark. It goes here not about who is responsible for the death of Jesus, but it goes about the unique place of him in the jewish tradition and the eyes of God. The image that the evangelist gives of Jesus, however, is by no means a realistic description of what could be a jewish man. For Jews the clear start of a deification of Jesus by

John was a step too far. John's Gospel cannot reflect the beliefs of a group of Jewish Christians from the very first years of Christianity. The development in the community of John must have started near the end of the first century or even later. This gospel is the written record of a theological development, and not a description of a historical reality in the life of Jesus. Let it be said clearly: there is no evidence what so ever to be found in the text of the Synoptics to support the content of this gospel.

The young religion has therefore considered this gospel first as a strange gospel and only later came the appreciation when the theology began to play a clear role.

The arguments raised by me to doubt the image of Jesus, described by John, will not disturb the church leaders. For them the historical Jesus is of minor importance compared to the risen Lord Jesus Christ. But my conclusion is clear: the Gospel of John is a theological treatise, based on a figure with little resemblance to the Jesus in the Synoptics, who at that time stood much closer to the historical Jesus than John, especially Mark and Matthew.

ONCE AGAIN: THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

There is such a clear discrepancy between what the Churches tell us on the historical Jesus and the picture that emerges in the texts of the Synoptics that further research into the historical Jesus was unavoidable. In retrospect, I wonder what the point was of my extra effort. It is a fact that in an official response the Roman Catholic Church pronounced that results from such a historical research only have a limited value. Such a decision of the church leadership puts an end to any attempt to give believers a more accurate view of the person

who stood at the base of christian faith. I dare to name the statement of the Church even hypocritical because she simultaneously holds on to a picture of Jesus that has a dubious historical basis. It rejects what was proved by scientifically based research, and it supports an image that arose when the Gospel of John in the second century determined the development of the theology. In the first years after the coming of the Gospel, in the years between 90 and 130, this gospel was not accepted without objections, and it was viewed by many with suspicion and even considered as a false gospel. The contrast with the Synoptics was too obvious to ignore. There was a discussion whether this gospel should be included in the New Testament. But gradually the difference in interpretation of the man Jesus between the Synoptici and John was no longer recognized as such. This had to do with the fact that later certain traditional expressions in jewish texts were explained in a different way than previously was the case. So we read in the Gospel of Luke the story of Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, and we hear a voice from heaven:

'You are my Son; today have I fathered you'. (Lk 3,22)

For Jews the use of the phrase "Son of God" to describe the relationship between the king (the anointed) in Israel and Yahweh was quite normal. He was God's son, chosen by him: "This day I have brought you forth," sings the psalmist when a new king is installed, and still it is sung by the choir on Christmas Eve, when the birth of Jesus Messiah is celebrated. That these words at a later stage in the development of the young religion were no longer understood as a meaningful expression in the jewish tradition, paved the way to understand its meaning in the sense as the evangelist John speaks about Jesus. After the texts of the Synoptics together with the letters of Paul

and the Gospel of John had been published as one volume, the texts of the Synoptics were understood from the perspective of John. From that moment the vision of the evangelist John prevails.¹

For most Christians, the "historical Jesus" is the Jesus figure as described in the Gospel of John: God and human being at the same time. "He is the way, the truth and the life, one with God, his Father". The Credo expresses the belief in this God-man. In this way, everything that is said about the risen Lord, is already present in the man Jesus of Nazareth. The gospel-stories are regarded as truthful stories about this God-man, and so history becomes a living reality. This makes the Gospel the most unique document of Christianity. In the man Jesus the believer recognizes 'God with us'.

But now I have a question that must be answered by the Church leaders: what are the implications for religious belief and religious practice, if Jesus was merely human. When the historic Jesus was just a man, there is no historical basis for John's Gospel. However, Christianity cannot afford this because of the existing religious practice in pastoral care and liturgy, which finds precisely its base in this Gospel. By giving priority to the Gospel of John, Christianity has closed the road to a denial of the divinity of the man Jesus.

This conclusion means for me that the future of Christianity has become a tricky affair and stands or falls with the belief in the divinity of the man Jesus of Nazareth!

¹ Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief*. Random House New York 2003.

LUKE : THE DOUBTFUL APOSTOLIC TRADITION

With tooth and nail the Roman Catholic Church defends the so called apostolic tradition: the belief that everything immediately goes back to Jesus and his apostles. The church sees a continuous line leading from Jesus to the apostles and from there to their successors, the bishops, among them the Pope, the successor of Peter. It is the evangelist Luke who after a gospel also wrote a sequel entitled *The Acts of the Apostles*, abbreviated the Acts. In the Acts Luke describes the beginning of the church in such a way that the apostolic tradition becomes visible in a natural way. He describes the events during the first Pentecost, the foundation day of the Church, and what happened in Jerusalem and the surrounding area. He devoted several chapters to what happened in Palestine, and then he describes the missionary work of Paul in Asia Minor with special attention for the cities Antioch and Rome, the center of the Roman Empire.

There is reason enough to pay particular attention to the person of Luke, because for centuries the faithful have been taught about the origins of Christianity by using the early chapters of the Acts. The picture that Luke presents us, is what the church tells every year again during the readings in the liturgy after Easter. The stories from the Acts show the believers how Christianity took shape in the first years after the resurrection of Jesus. This determines the faith of a Christian and that was apparently the intention of Luke. It makes clear that there is a church from the very beginning, with adequate leaders and already with a certain structure. But how reliable is this description of Luke?

Now the Church speaks so clearly about the importance of Luke, we are obliged to give our full attention to this author. Who was Luke,

was he of jewish descent, where did he live and at what moment he began to write? His personal circumstances will surely have affected his vision and therefore his work as an evangelist.

It is believed that known figures from the early christian period are the authors of the gospels. However, it is also the conviction of the majority of the exegetes, that the names of the real authors are unknown! This is partly caused by the fact that a gospel was not written by one person but came about during a long series of contributions from several persons with continuous improvements and editorial activities. Over time an editor has created the final text, which was published anonymously. The absence of a name was filled by the pious imagination of the faithful who selected names from the early christian period. The name Luke appears in Paul's letters and in the Acts but this information tells us nothing about the real author of this Gospel.

The birth date of the Gospel and the Acts is, according to the conviction of modern exegetes, probably near the year 90/100, and the place of origin somewhere in Asia Minor / Greece. Luke wrote his two books at the end of the first century; a period of about sixty years separates him from the events at the beginning of Christianity. Oddly enough it is only Luke who tells us something about what happened after the Ascension of Jesus. Where could Luke find the information that was the basis for the first chapters of the Acts? The other evangelists wrote nothing about what happened after the resurrection of Jesus, and that must surprise us when we read the story in Luke. That Mark and Matthew mention nothing is remarkable, because both evangelists, and in any case the community of Mark, must have heard of these events.

Realize, that Luke only started with writing his two books when Christianity arose in Asia Minor more than sixty years earlier. Factual knowledge is needed to get a good view of what happened in the first years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The factual knowledge of Luke could only be based on what he could deduce from the letters of Paul and, as we know, Paul was in the beginning an opponent of the new faith and no witness of the beginning. The story in the Acts of the Apostles from Luke about the first Pentecost in Jerusalem and the spread of the new faith, is no trust-worthy source for proper historiography. The fact that Luke probably started writing about 60 years after Jesus' death, undermines the historical accuracy of his work.

We want to get a firsthand testimony from someone who has seen everything from close by from the beginning. Such witness we hope to find in the person of the Apostle Paul, whose letters contain information about what took place in Asia Minor and here and there some information about what happened in Jerusalem, but nothing about the origin of the new religion during Pentecost. The Pentecost story shows how Luke imagines how the beginning of Christianity came about but it lacks a historical basis. In the further course of the Acts, Luke will rely on the information, that he found in the letters of Paul. This information, however limited it was, was enough for Luke, who was an experienced and talented writer with knowledge of how to fill in the gaps in his knowledge by using known patterns of always returning story forms.

LUKE: HIS GOSPEL

Before Luke wrote a story about the first years of Christianity in Asia Minor, he started with writing a gospel. Why? What was his real inte-

rest? It is clear that the development of the christian religion in Asia Minor fascinated him; he felt clearly involved in what happened there. Luke lived somewhere in Asia Minor more than thirty years after Paul's death in Rome. It is obvious that what happened there was for Luke the real Christianity; it was the real center of the new religion. Not Jerusalem, but Antioch and Rome were the places where it happened. The arguments for our conviction about Luke we will derive from what we can read in his gospel and the Acts.

Luke knew very well that everything had started in Palestine, the homeland of the Jews, where Jesus with his quest for the Kingdom of God had put a movement into motion that was unstoppable. Was the movement in Palestine typically jewish of character, in a certain way still connected with the jewish religion, in the Hellenistic cities of Asia Minor the ideas of Jesus were very attractive for the jewish immigrants who felt at home in the Hellenistic culture and also attractive for others who were seeking a new base in their life. What happened there was like a whirlwind that brought everything into motion; in an incredibly short time the christian movement became a religion, what did not happen in the homeland of the Jews where the Jesus movements had not that character.

Luke knew very well that a religion needed a story, a biography of the founder who from birth on would show how special he was. Why did Luke want to write a story about Jesus as he surely knew the Gospel of Mark? Probably the story by Mark was not good enough according to Luke. Mark wanted to solve his own problems, which had to do with his own community. All his attention was focused on finding a new identity for his congregation in which the position of

Jesus as Messiah is essential. This is all past time!! For Luke the present and the future are important.

With what he knew of the Gospel of Mark and with aid of a source of "sayings and parables" of Jesus, the so called *Q*-document (that we discuss later), Luke wrote a story of the life of Jesus, and he did it with flair, such as evidenced by the well-known Christmas stories. This kind of story is called a Life, a conventional form for describing the lives of famous people. Luke took the liberty to give in his gospel his own interpretation of the data that were available, reflecting his vision of the importance of Jesus for the world in his time. That is what we may expect from Luke. From the beginning of his Gospel, he highlighted the importance of Jesus in a broader world than the small Jewish community. He put Jesus central in the Jewish salvation history, but for him Judaism is only the starting point. In chapter four of his Gospel he took away from the Jews the privileged position they traditionally had and gives it to the followers of Jesus in his own (Luke's) time. The evangelist is a representative of a new era; we must realize that for Luke Jesus already is a person of the past. To clarify this, we discuss a passage from his gospel.

THE START OF THE PUBLIC LIFE OF JESUS ACCORDING TO LUKE

The gospel of Luke is based on what he found in the text of Mark. But Mark stood closer to the time of Jesus than Luke. For him his Jewish background was very important and the interests of his own community came on the first place. He was the leader of a group of followers of Jesus who were looking for a new identity when the relationship with the Jewish community came under pressure. We see this in the way Mark describes the figure of Jesus. Mark pulls out all the stops to show that Jesus was the expected Messiah, in order to

provide his community with an excellent basis. For Luke this was obvious. For him Jesus is the Messiah, but a Messiah with a meaning that went far beyond the limits of the Jewish religion. The difference in vision between Mark and Luke can be explained partly by the different circumstances of time and place. But the characters from both gospelwriters played also a role. Luke was the thinker, a man looking behind the events to discover a deeper lying truth; an artist who contrary to what historically seen is correct, creates a new image of the same event, that fits better into his personal vision. Let's see how Luke introduces Jesus to us in the beginning of his public life.

The first appearance of Jesus

After the introductory chapters in which Luke has told the birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, he continues in chapter 3 with the description of the events leading up to the public life of Jesus. John the Baptist is presented to us as "a voice of one crying in the desert: prepare the way for the next Messiah". He baptized in the Jordan River, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Even Jesus was baptized by John and we read that the heavens opened and the Holy Spirit in the shape of a dove descended upon him, and a voice came from heaven: 'You are my Son; today have I fathered you' (Lk3,22). Then Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where he stayed for forty days and was put to the test by Satan.

Then Luke starts the public life of Jesus in the synagogue of Nazareth, while Mark placed the first public appearance of Jesus in the synagogue in Capernaum. Luke has changed both incidents. First he tells what happened in Nazareth and then he speaks about Capernaum. What was the reason for this change? Luke begins his description of

what happens in the synagogue of Nazareth, unlike Mark, with a text from the book of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 61,1-2) which reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me. He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to prisoners to announce their release, and to blind that they see, to let free the oppressed, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord. (Lk4,18-19)

Then Jesus observes: "This text is being fulfilled today even while you are listening". Jesus makes a statement and the people in the synagogue are surprised about the wisdom of Jesus and ask in amazement: "is this not the son of Joseph? "

This short phrase recalls the more detailed description by Mark (Mk 6.2 et seq) of the family background of Jesus. Apparently it evokes displeasure and disbelief from the visitors of the synagogue in Capernaum. One cannot match the simple background of Jesus with what he pretends to be. Luke has no need to follow this line of thought. He just looks for an opening that gives him the opportunity to express his views on the changing new position of the Jews. According to him, there has come an end to the privileged position of the Jews by the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. He says it with these words:

But he replied, 'No doubt you will quote me the saying, 'Physician heal yourself.' And tell me. "We have heard all that happened in Capernaum. Do the same here in your own country." And he went on, 'In truth I tell you, no prophet is ever accepted in his own country'. (Lk4,23-24)

"There were many widows in Israel, I can assure you, in Elijah's day. When heaven remained shut for three years and six months and a great famine raged throughout the land, but Elijah was not sent to any one of

these: he was sent to a widow at Zarephath, a town in Sidonia. And in the prophet Elisha's time there were many suffering from virulent skindiseases in Israel, but none of these was cured, only Naaman the Syrian'. (Lk 4,25-27)

Jesus (actually Luke) quotes apparently these passages from the Old Testament to show that even then already was foreseen that other nations in the long run would take over the privileged position of the Jews. These two stories are from the books 1 and 2 Kings, namely 1Kn 17.1-16 and 2Kn 5.1-14.

Note that it is Luke who lets Jesus speak these words. The story by Luke causes a strange impression on me. It's a strange story using a text from Mark to begin a tirade, against Jews, that has nothing to do with the text of Isaiah that just had been read by Jesus; two events from the time of the prophets Elijah and Elisa are the excuse for Luke to do so. An outsider reading this story for the first time, will understand nothing about it.

Then Luke continues:

When they heard this everyone in the synagogue was enraged. They sprang to his feet and hustled him out of the town; and took him up to the brow of the hill their town was built on, intending to throw him off the cliff, but he passed straight through the crowd and walked away. (Lk4,28-30)

Luke was clearly not well acquainted with the local situation on spot. Nazareth was not a city, it was hardly a village and earlier still a small hamlet of a few hundred inhabitants in the lower hills of southern Galilee. The village was not built on a steep mountainside but

lies in the plains as evidenced by excavations on site.² We now know what we can expect from Luke. From the beginning of his book he stresses the importance of Jesus in a larger world than the small Jewish community.

He puts Jesus centrally in the Jewish history of salvation, but for him Judaism is only the starting point. In chapter 4, he takes away from the Jews the privileged position they have traditionally and assigns it to the (heathen) followers of Jesus in his own (Luke's) time. So the evangelist is presented to us as a representative of a new era; we must always keep this in mind.

LUKE: THE NATIVITY STORY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

The Gospel of Luke tells us the story of the miraculous events surrounding the birth of Jesus and his precursor John the Baptist. As Luke tells it, it is clear for the reader that by the birth of Jesus of Nazareth Israel's salvation history will also have significance for the whole world. Luke uses two chapters and part of the third to show the reader the connection between what happened in the past, and what takes place around the birth of Jesus.

The Old Testament speaks of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, in 1 Samuel chapter 1, to make clear that what is impossible for man, is not for God. Hannah was childless in her marriage and had reached an age that motherhood for her would forever remain an unfulfilled wish. But with God all things are possible and so we read in 1 Samuel 2.1 to 10 the text of the hymn that Hannah sang when

²John Dominic Crossan & Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus. Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts*, HarperCollins Publishers 2001.

her son Samuel was born. This hymn was later converted by Maria in her paeon during her visit to her niece Elizabeth. Elderly among us know this paeon as a religious Latin song called Magnificat.

Also Elizabeth and her husband Zacharias were old and had given up the courage to have children. Zacharias was a priest and when he did service in the Temple to burn incense before the Lord, the angel Gabriel appeared to him. The sight confussed Zacharias and he was overcome with fear. But the angel said to him:

Zechariah, do not be afraid, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth is to bear you a son and you shall name him John. (Lk1,11-13)

But Zacharias did not respond in a way the angel expected, because he asked how this was possible given the age of his wife, and therefore he was punished by the loss of his voice. Zacharias went home and a short time later Elizabeth became pregnant and gave thanks to Yahweh who wanted to take away her disgrace.

Then Luke continues his gospel with the famous story about the visit of the angel Gabriel to Mary in Lk1,26. When Mary heard that she would become the mother of the Redeemer, whom she had to call Jesus, she asked how this was possible since she had no husband. But where Zacharias could not afford such a remark, Mary was not blamed for it. The angel said also to her that her niece Elizabeth was pregnant. Mary hastened to visit Elizabeth. During the meeting between the two women, Mary pronounced the words of the hymn called Magnificat, in previous years a regular Latin song in the Roman Catholic worship. It is a permanent reminder of the encounter of these two gifted women. We were so used to listen to the voice of Mary when we heard that song, that we never realized that it must have

been Luke who composed this hymn based on the praises of Hanna. Luke, the evangelist who more than others realized what the meaning was of the birth of Jesus for the salvation of mankind. What has taken place hidden in the intimacy of the family almost a century earlier, he has revived a century later and recorded in pictures and words.

The Messiah was to be born from the house of King David. That was the general view in Israel. Luke knew that Bethlehem was the place where King David was born. This meant for him that Jesus had to be born there. Coincidentally in the same time the Romans wanted to keep a census within their empire. Everyone had to travel to the place of origin of the family to be counted there. Imagine: a chaotic, and barely controllable movement of itinerant people who probably did not know well where to go. To the birthplace of their grandparents or maybe even further back in time, perhaps to a place where a famous ancestor was born? Where to go was the problem. For a direct descendant of David it was obvious, but for almost everyone else it remained a big question. But why so complicated? If you want to be counted, you better stay home. The whole story of Luke is so unlikely that it is laughable.

A census can also not have been important for the Roman administration, where one was only interested in retrieving as many taxpayers' money as possible. It was therefore important to identify anyone who had possessions.

Luke begins his story in chapter 2 by saying that Augustus was emperor and Quirinius was governor of Syria. So he wants to prove to be a serious historian who knew what he wrote. Joseph, who was engaged to Mary, who was pregnant with her first child, departed

from Nazareth in Galilee and headed to Bethlehem in Judea. Let's be honest with Luke. He knew very well that the reason he gave for the journey to Bethlehem was a fiction. But Luke was obviously not satisfied with Nazareth as the birthplace of Jesus.

In the story that follows, Luke was guided by his creative mind and his knowledge of what was common among the Jews at the birth of the first child of the male sex. The factual verifiable basis for what Luke says, is missing and the oral tradition does not contain any indication of the correctness of what he claimed. The story shows how the author himself imagined how the beginning was of a new phase in the history of salvation from God for mankind. The story of Luke was adopted in the church as literal truth and was given an important theological significance.

These Christmas stories move every year again the churchgoers while they experience God as a God-with-us. Among the evangelists Luke is the poet, the artist who needs no more than a few brushstrokes to put events to life.

In Sec. 3 in the same Gospel we read Joseph's genealogy to prove that the birth of Jesus goes back to King David. The strange duality of Joseph's genealogy and the virgin birth of Jesus must surprise the attentive reader but it seems no problem at all for the flexible mind of Luke. The poetic description of Luke points to God who has decided to intervene in the history of people for salvation and blessing of all. In such a description fits poetic license and that shows also in the genealogy of Jesus, which also can not be taken literally. With his description Luke follows in the footsteps of birth-stories of the classical antiquity where gods take young virgins for brides, giving birth to divine sons. Such stories are to be found everywhere in antiquity.

They are signs of a deep human longing for something that transcends the earthly, for something that connects heaven to earth. In this way Luke shows to be a child of his time, but he places the church leadership in a position of stubbornly holding on to the belief: "What is true, must also be literally true." The tenacity with which the church leadership continues to fight by fire and sword every alleged attack on the dogma of the virgin birth, shows the almost panic fear that the position of Jesus could be affected. Fact is that many a theologian who has made only a comment in that direction has experienced the consequences.

The stories told by Luke gave him the opportunity to bring forward his views about the meaning of the birth of Jesus for all mankind. He does this by referring to what took place as the parents were taking the child Jesus to the Temple according to the requirements of the Jewish Law. Luke tells us that the old man Simeon had gotten the promise of the Holy Spirit not to die before he would have seen the coming Messiah with his own eyes. Simeon took the child in his arms and said:

Now, Master, you are letting your servant go in peace as you promised; for my eyes have seen the salvation which you have made ready in the sight of the nations: a light of revelation for the gentiles and glory for your people Israel. (Lk2,29-32)

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH GETS STUCK IN HER VISION OF THE PAST, IN THOSE STRANGE OLD TIMES

Paradise, original sin and redemption through the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, these three concepts are inextricably linked to each other. "One can not remove the revelation of original sin without un-

dermining the mystery of Christ," we read on pg. 93 of the Dutch Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church. By disobedience to the commandment of God by our original ancestors, the sin came into the world and the sin of the first people puts an end to the paradisiacal state. Originally man was immortal, but now he suffers the same fate as all living beings around him. The sin of the first man is passed on to his offspring, who, although there is not a personal offense, became responsible for the consequences of this sin. The Church sees this as the explanation for the existence of sin in the world. In the Roman letter Paul says:

Just as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience are many to be made upright. (Rom.5,19)

Without salvation through the crucifixion of Jesus and baptism in his name one remains in sin. From the time of Augustine the doctrine of the original sin is essential for Christianity.

After two thousand years of Christianity, nothing has changed in the way the Church speaks to the believers about the content of faith. The fact that the Church's doctrinal pronouncements have emerged at a time with a fundamentally different worldview has not affected the way in which the believer will be addressed in our time. The same words, the same images are still in use in liturgy and sermons. The original sin and the virgin birth of Jesus remain cornerstones of faith. Holding on to the original sin, in the old and still existing formulation, frustrates the intellect. How can I understand that the Church's teaching is still at odds with reason, the rational mind of man? How can I give the teaching of the Church a place in our worldview that differs so substantially from that of the past?

The theory of evolution, which gives a rational explanation for the origin of the different species in nature, where also man is a product of a long evolutionary development, has caused a shock in the Churches. There was never a paradise with immortal human beings and denial of the fall from paradise means no original sin and no need for salvation by the death of Jesus. This issue has not yet been discussed in the Churches. Ultimately a new content should be given to the concepts of original sin and salvation. The theory of evolution makes clear that the hereditary sin must be seen in conjunction with our primitive origin, characterized by a constant struggle for life, where further adaptation through evolution should allow the survival and the safeguard of the species. So far, the Roman Catholic Church has not yet the courage to acknowledge this reality. The silence at a time when the theory of evolution can count on general support in scientific circles, is remarkable. However, it is undeniable, that the doctrine of original sin and redemption is a fundamental issue. The church leadership realizes, I think, very well what it means for the Church where original sin and reconciliation are essential issues. If these disappear then, in a chain reaction, the entire doctrine and the set of dogmas formulated in the course of centuries comes into discussion. It is painfully obvious that Roman Catholicism is a dogmatic religion, but not in line with the Jewish religion.

The church leadership continues to focus its full attention on the preservation of the building that originated in ancient times. Even the council in the sixties of the last century could not cause a fundamental change in the attitude of the Church.

Apart from the question whether or not there is such a thing as an original sin as a personal burden for each of us, it surprises me mo-

re and more how one unquestioningly continues to describe the relation between sin and redemption in blood-soaked words and images, which remembers us of a time when people were trying to appease the gods through bloody sacrifices. Is it really necessary to make a forgiving God into a hateful God by pulling him down to our own level? Is it him not permitted to forgive out of love. Must he demand the blood of his own son, Jesus, as compensation for something like a genetic burden of the human race? The answer of the Church is only too well known: 'It shows the mystery of God's goodness, that he did not spare his own son to save us'. I can not understand the logic of this answer. Apparently the Church remains stabbing in her vision of the past, where a bloody sacrificial system regulated the relation between human beings and gods.

CHAPTER 2 : THE BIBLE

When we search for traces of the historical Jesus and the first christian communities, we expect to find these in the four known Gospels, in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. They have long been the only sources of information for us. For centuries reading and understanding was based on the literal meaning of the Scriptures. This was as well for the books of the Old Testament as for the books of the New Testament. It was an absurd thought to doubt what was told in the Gospels about Jesus. And it remained so, centuries long, because the worldview only changed slowly. That belief lasted for a long time and matched seamlessly with what was told in the Bible about ghosts and miracle stories.

The Gospel stories were supplemented with the birth story of the Church by Luke in the Acts: a true representation of the historical events in the first phase of the development of Christianity. At a later

stage this story was complemented by the Church in accordance with the dogmatic developments.

THE TURNING POINT

The situation began to change gradually when in the sixteenth century Europe became the scene of fierce religious conflicts. The Reformation and the bloody religious wars then drastically changed the religious landscape. The dominant position of the church in Rome was undermined and traditional creeds and dogmas were no longer taken for granted. The Reformation took the Scripture as the only source of knowledge about the faith, where a prominent place was awarded to the conscience of the believers.

The Reformation has given the Scriptures into the hands of believers, who did not belong to the ranks of the clergy, a situation hitherto unthinkable in the traditional church.

The seventeenth century was the time of the origin of the modern sciences, which focus on the predictability and the regularity of processes in nature.

Science opens views on fascinating new discoveries where intelligibility takes the place of mystery. For many, especially the intellectuals, the worldview changed. The worldview, based on the physics of Aristotle, is outdated. Physics, mathematics, astronomy and medical sciences are now in the center of attention. This new culture is deterministic. When it becomes clear that regularity is the determining factor of what happens in nature, one begins to doubt whether here on earth things happen by direct intervention from above. The magical world loses its glamor, belief in ghosts and miracle stories staggers. The period since 1750 is sometimes called the Enlightenment.

This term is used to express that the time of the Dark Ages is over and the enlightened man has arrived with open eyes in a new time. The Enlightenment is the start of a continuing confrontation between faith and reason. The time is right for a critical approach of the Scriptures. This does not mean that those, who were leading in the Church, were involved in the confrontation between faith and reason. On the contrary, even today it is the policy of the Roman Catholic Church to ignore results of critical historical research if these results could possibly bring these religious beliefs in disrepute.

The historical research was the work of a small group of intellectuals with different backgrounds. Because the Bible in the New Testament is built around the figure of Jesus, the beginning of the critical study of the Bible is also the start of the search for the historical Jesus. Jesus investigation therefore knows a long history, more than two hundred years, and the end is nowhere in sight. Members of the Reformed Churches have been leaders in this field. The lack of catholic scientists is mainly caused by the fact that they are usually holders of a ministry. Due to strict censorship from Rome, abnormal behavior may be reason for an abrupt end to a career. However, the situation has nowadays changed slightly for catholic scientists. Clergy, who conduct research, have now more likely than before the possibility to conduct independent research in secular institutes and universities.

With the Enlightenment came the questions about the historical reliability of the texts. If one begins to read biblical texts with a critical attitude, then differences stand out between texts, which were before not seen as such. Contradictions and improbabilities are now recognized and ask for an explanation. The unlikely tale by the evangelist Matthew in the passion story about the attitude of the jewish

people is one of the examples I would like to mention. Jesus' death was the result of a political trial by the Roman government, supported by Jewish magistrates who, by the large influx of pilgrims in Jerusalem during the Passover, were concerned about the integrity of the temple and safety in the city. The horrible words: 'Let his blood be on us and on our children!' (Mt27,25), with which the Jewish people took the blame for the death of Jesus, is contrary to the truth, extremely offensive to the Jewish people and the start of centuries of persecution and oppression of Jews in Europe. Also greatly exaggerated is how the Pharisees in Chapter 23 are attacked by Matthew. This punishment speech is not according to the fact that the Pharisees in Jesus' time were considered as the teachers of the Jewish people on matters of religion. It is inconceivable that Jesus had different views. His remarks about the Pharisees are definitely harsh but fit into the general criticism among the Jews on the overconfidence and arrogance of this group. Personal motives of the author are responsible for such exaggerated statements. Contradictions in the text can also be found when we compare the birth stories in Luke and Matthew. Even more significant is the difference between the suffering stories of John and the other three gospelwriters.

Critical historical research reveals that the final editors have put their personal mark on the form and content of the texts. The idea that the writers literally wrote down their texts inspired by the Holy Spirit, is no longer accepted in scientific circles. They wrote about things that were important for their community and what they wrote down or omitted, was a deliberate choice motivated by personal motives.

SCIENCE DOES NOT STAND STILL

It is not easy to read the Bible and to understand what you read. For it requires knowledge of what happens, knowledge about the conditions of that time, knowledge of political, social and cultural backgrounds. One must know the motives of the writer and for whom the texts were intended. At the start of critical historical research, there was not a lot of adequate knowledge. The people engaged in this activity were not trained for it. It took years before solid science took shape, leading to acceptable results. Only since the last century, there have been many serious research publications. Numerous scientists are involved in searching for small particles of knowledge, which together, after years of research, have made a whole building. The investigation of the origins of Christianity and the historical figure of Jesus of Nazareth has now made great progress. It has received a multidisciplinary character. It's not the Bible alone as the subject of study through literary textual criticism. We now know much more about Judaism and the situation in the Middle East at the time of Jesus' life. Cultural anthropology and sociology provide information about cultural and social aspects in societies of the time: a contribution to a better understanding of the development of Christianity. Contributions are also provided by historical and archaeological research. Physical science is important for dating and for deciphering previously unreadable hand-writings by spectral analysis. Bringing together these diverse disciplines helps to advance the investigation. New sources were discovered and investigated, such as the Gospel of Thomas in the Nag Hammadi library in Egypt and the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE CREATION OF THE BIBLE

There is a problem connected to the reading and understanding of Bible texts. It has to do with the creation of the text of the Bible. When reading the texts we are confronted with the fact that the texts have not been written at one time by the same person,

The books of the Old Testament were adapted frequently during a long process of many centuries. Gradually the image of Yahweh changes from a god who has led his people in conquering a new country, into a god who wanted to stay in their midst but expected that they would treat him as the only god in their lives, and would obey his laws. The periods with the cruel wars of conquest were replaced by short periods of calm and peace in the new homeland, and by longer periods of oppression by foreign nations. Influenced by the turbulent history and especially by the dramatic period of the Babylonian captivity, the religion of the Jewish people got depth. Not until the time of the prophet Daniel, came the realization that death did not mean the end of life. During the long history of Israel, episodes from the past have been re-interpreted and, as a result, certain episodes are re-written much later in their final form. This makes reading texts not a simple task. Reading is interpreting, reading a text means assigning a meaning to it. Pure objectivity here is wishful thinking! The more space a text leaves for own interpretation, the greater the opportunities to get clearly divergent opinions.

The books of the New Testament, as well as those of the Old Testament, can be found in the *New Jerusalem Bible*, in use in Roman Catholic countries in Europe. The most well known books are the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul. But when we read the beginning of the Gospel of Luke, we are puzzled. He begins

his text as follows: "Already many have tried to recover the events that have taken place among us on the basis of data, which were passed on by people who were eyewitnesses from the beginning and active in the service of the word". As far as we know Luke knew the texts of Mark and maybe of Matthew, but John wrote his Gospel later. Where are these other books and why none of them are recorded in the Bible? Apparently more happened during the early development of the young religion than we can learn from the known scriptures.

THE NEW TESTAMENT

The Bible-books in the first period of the new religion were created in a community that itself was constantly changing and developing. So during the first stage of the new religion the texts were repeatedly adjusted. The first time this happened while copying texts by individuals for their own use or for use in the local community. Changes to the text were made by omitting text or adding lines, if the copyist found it necessary to change the text according to his own -correct-theological views.

It may be surprising that they took the freedom to change these holy texts. But make no mistake. This sacred character was only granted at a later stage to the biblical texts. This process of adaption lasted a few centuries. The results of these continuous adaptations we can see when we study the texts of the earliest complete Bible Manuscripts dating back to the fourth century. The two most important complete manuscripts are the Codex Vaticanus, preserved in the Vatican, and the Codex Sinaiticus, preserved in the British Museum. If we compare the texts of both manuscripts with each other, we can experience what the results are of continuous adjustments. In the sections in which the Gospel texts are documented, there are more

than three-thousand differences, aside from obvious errors. Some differences are unimportant, but others are striking. There are also large differences in comparison with other surviving text-fragments. I give some examples:

In the most ancient manuscripts of the gospel of Mark the story of the appearance of the Risen Lord to his disciples in Galilee is missing. Mark speaks in Chapter 16 only about the empty tomb. This was never a problem because the Gospel of Matthew was considered to be the oldest and Mark's gospel as a shortened reproduction thereof. It became a problem when research proved that the Gospel of Mark was the oldest one. In later texts therefore an appearance story is added in Mk 16.9-20 according to Mt 28,16 et seq and this addition is again repeated in other translations.

Other changes have to do with power and authority in the church. The position of Peter as the central figure in the church is made clear among others in John 21, where the command is given to Peter to lead the Church. Critical text research has shown that the entire chapter 21 was added later. If one reads the text, it is at once clear that the last sentence of chapter 20, verses 30 and 31, closes the gospel in a natural way, so that the subsequent addition only causes astonishment. Convince yourself and read Joh. 20,30-31.

But there's still more! Of the letters attributed to the apostle Paul only seven are written by him, while the rest is deliberately attributed to him in order to put forward own ideas with the authority of the apostle. The result is that Paul shows different faces in his letters and evokes so much misunderstanding. I have to assume that these facts are not unknown to the ecclesiastical authorities, but during the

church services the clergy says nothing and the relating problems stay unsolved.³

About the origin of the books of the New Testament and the creation of the canon, which belongs to the New Testament, see the book by Burton L. Mack.⁴

GOSPEL: NOT A BIOGRAPHY OF JESUS OF NAZARETH

The Gospel of Mark appeared after the destruction of Jeruzalem in the year seventy, so forty years or more after the death of Jesus. It was not the intention of Mark to write a biography of Jesus, but he used a narrative form with Jesus as the central figure to make clear how important Jesus was for the community, where Mark was the leader: how they thought about him and how they wanted to imitate him. Mark wanted to teach the members of his congregation what the status of their own church was inside the tradition of Israel. He did it in such a way that he succeeded to give his community a solid foundation for a successful future. Mark's Gospel gives also insight into the history of a community of followers of Jesus.

The three evangelists Mark, Matthew and Luke are called the Synoptici. If we give an overview of their texts, synopsis in Greek, by placing them in columns next to each other, then we can compare them well and look for agreements and differences. While in the Bible

³Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The first Paul, reclaiming the radical visionary behind the Church's conservative icon*, Harper One 2009.

⁴Burton L. Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, The Making of the Christian Myth, Harper San Francisco 1995.

these three writers are listed in the order Matthew, Mark and Luke, we use, in derogation thereof, a rank-order of their names in accordance with the order in which the texts originated. The oldest gospel in which is spoken about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus bears the name of Mark and was published some time after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Matthew and Luke wrote their Gospels with the text of Mark before them. But there are texts in the gospels of Matthew and Luke that can not be found in Mark. These texts come from a different source consisting of a *Collection of Sayings*. This collection of sayings we shall meet in the next chapter under the letter *Q* (the first letter of the german word *Quelle* what means source in english). Instead of *Q* we also use the names *The Lost Gospel* or *Hidden Gospel*.

In this connection we talk about the two sources theory: with the Gospel of Mark and the collection sayings *Q* as the sources for Matthew and Luke. There is no original written tekst of *Q* available but the text was reconstructed from the Gospels of Luke and Matthew. In addition, the text of *Q* gives insight into the history of a, in many ways, very interesting community that stood at the base of this gospel. Later we will give our full attention to this sayings gospel.

The community in the first century in Palestine and Asia Minor was a society where people neither could read nor write with the exception of a very small elite, who was literate and was employed by the government and the religious leaders to provide for written documents and important issues such as commercial contracts. The spoken word was virtually the only form of communication between people. The memory along with the spoken word took the place of written texts. From mouth to mouth information was given to each other. We

ourselves, with all other options available to us, are no longer able to store many different things in our minds in such a way that we can recollect them easily. Early man were trained in it because they had to. There were many tricks to remember a lot of interrelated data, e.g. by using keywords or by well chosen words that connect one story (or statement) with another. Will a statement or a story, during a long process of oral transmission, survive in a reasonable way, it must have a certain quality: it must be especially short and concise, and keep the attention of people in the process of oral transmission. A clear example is the following statement: Love your enemies. Such a statement is shocking, perverse, an impossibility: an enemy, who is now loved by you, is no real enemy any more! This statement has survived the process of oral transmission, and arrived unchanged after years at a generation that has not known Jesus personally. It are precisely the striking words of Jesus and the short appealing stories that have survived the wear of time. No big speeches, as we read in the Gospel of John. These can only be made by the author himself. Even if a writer draws from his memory because he has personally witnessed the event, it is impossible after all those years to write something down that's more than the essence of a story.

A definite conclusion can be drawn: what is eligible to remember, are short striking sayings and stories of Jesus, always repeated by him and later repeated and passed on by his followers. Always repeating, again and again, plays an important role in an oral process. Stories about Jesus are therefore told-stories until they were eventually recorded in writing. The period, between the death of Jesus and the appearance of the first written information about him, is called the

oral period. What was told from mouth to mouth shortly after Jesus' death has great value for research into the origin and content of the classical gospels and to understand what happened in the first years after the death of Jesus. Only after many steps the first written records appear; the quality of the results depends on the length of time elapsed before the story was recorded in writing.

The first two known written records are dated to about the year fifty, twenty years after the death of Jesus. The texts are in no way similar to the known four Gospels and you will find no miracle stories, nor events of Jesus' life, nothing about the apostles, nothing about the crucifixion and even nothing about the resurrection, only sayings and short stories, usually in the form of parables. These two written sources are the oldest christian testimonials next to Paul's letters, which contain little information about Jesus, because he did not know him personally.

Christianity knew during centuries only the classic texts of the four gospels. Only in the last century one has discovered the existence of these two written sources. Now we know them, the way we look at the classic gospels has changed. The two written sources were created at least twenty years before the first Gospel, the Gospel of Mark.

One of these written sources is designated by the letter *Q*, the first letter of the word *Quelle*: the german word for source in english. *Q*, as a written document, however, no longer exists in the original redaction. It has been found hidden in the texts of Matthew and Luke, it is therefore also called The Hidden or Lost gospel. In Galilee, the area where Jesus grew up and later traveled around with his students, this gospel was a written report of a group of followers of Jesus. It only consists of a large number of sayings, hence the name Sayings

Gospel, and it contains some short stories, mainly parables, attributed to Jesus. This Gospel resembles in no way to our familiar four Gospels that read like a novel, which describe life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The original text of *Q* has been lost but later reconstructed by scientists from the texts of the evangelists Matthew and Luke, who apparently knew the original text of *Q*. The history of this early christian group could be traced and covered a period of about fifty years until after the destruction of Jerusalem in the year 70. This christian community can give us a lot of information about Jesus.

The other source is the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. This gospel was hidden in the ground in Egypt until, during excavations in the last century at Nag Hamaddi, jars were found with texts from the early christian times, including this Gospel. This gospel, like *Q*, contains no record of the life and death of Jesus but consists merely of sayings, and short stories.

That the two sources, in the first (oldest) edition, were written about twenty years after the death of Jesus must not make us overconfident, because both sources have a history, with a strong development, that lasted longer than twenty years; traces thereof can be found in those gospels. The core we are interested in, comes from about the year fifty, so twenty years after Jesus' death. However, later much has been added to it, because the christian communities in which these texts were written have introduced their own history in the text by adding sayings under the name of Jesus. Sometimes this happened in such a way that the view on the original core was obscured. What is and what is not from Jesus, has been investigated by specialized scientists. For our knowledge of the historical Jesus, the core of *Q* and Thomas is very important, with the Gospel of Thomas

as a monitoring instrument by comparing texts in Thomas with texts in the *Q*-document and the four canonical gospels.

Among the sayings and stories of Jesus there are some that have reached us in more than one way and were documented, independently of each other.

The sayings Q-Gospel, the Gospel of Thomas and the Gospel of Mark are considered to be independent sources.

In this context it is useful to note, that stories that are considered to be independent of each other usually are formulated in different ways. Independency of sources does not mean that this concerns all that is mentioned in the sources. While in one case there will be clear evidence of independency, it is not so in another case. Take for example sayings that can be found everywhere.

Because the hidden gospel *Q* contains the core of the message of Jesus, we will give it our full attention. Since the Gospel of Thomas is an independent source and has also many similarities to the Lost Gospel, we should also pay due attention to this apocryphal gospel.

Jesus was not a teacher who gave instructions at a fixed location where he met with his disciples and other listeners. He had left home and family and traveled around through Galilee, preaching the Kingdom of God. He led a nomadic life, though he apparently had the habit of regularly returning to Capernaum. Quite a change from a life in Nazareth in the family circle to a life without certainty. This way of living has been extremely important in many ways. Not only for himself but also for his followers. It has left a mark on his teaching and has given direction to how the *Q*-community has continued his work after his death. During his wanderings, he came into contact with the

sad and poor circumstances under which many people lived without a fixed income and often without a place to stay during the night. His experience echoes in his parables and pithy statements.

By his conscious choice, he shares now the life of those who live on the edge of society, and he became one of them. They travel together, share the food that people give them, and collectively look for a place to sleep during the night. After Jesus' death, his disciples in Galilee tried to put into practice what he learned them about the Kingdom of God and they went in this respect very far. Over time, they made a code of conduct for members of the group and they let Jesus say how they must behave, how they should treat each other and how their attitude should be when dealing with others from outside the group. It gets really interesting when at a later stage one encounters resistance and even problems within their own circle. The sayings of Jesus become sometimes threatening for those who are the cause of the problems, but also full of encouragement for those who do not give up.

The additions to the text are as layers folded around the original text, without changing it, sometimes after an already existing text, and sometimes prior to an already existing text. Researchers managed to isolate the different layers so as to unravel the various stages in the history of the community. The oldest layer of *Q* shows no tendency to understand the words of Jesus with a christian agenda in mind. Here you are most likely very close to Jesus. The text of the *Q*-Gospel are to be found in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, but in the New Jerusalem Bible it is not specified where these contributions can be found. There are no indications in the margins where texts from Luke (Matthew), which do not come from Mark, also can be found in Matthew

(Luke); if so, then most likely it is a text from *Q*. In the book *The Five Gospels*, the references to the source are allways mentioned in the margin.⁵ In Mack, you will be given an overview of the sections in the gospel of Luke coming from *Q*, with a format that refers to the different stages in the history of the community.⁶ The book *The Lost Gospel* gives us a complete text but no insight into the original structure of the text and the different stages in the history of the group.⁷ The book of John S. Kloppenborg includes the research report from a principal investigator in this field.⁸

We should not forget that the texts from *Q* are sometimes adapted by Luke and Matthew to fit into the concept they had in mind. Because the texts are included and amended in accordance with the ideas of the author, one gets just a fragmented picture from *Q* and the interesting history of the corresponding community and its developments.

The picture that Luke paints is clear. An enthusiastic group followers of Jesus tries to bring into practise, the ideas of Jesus of Nazareth

⁵The Five Gospels. The search for the authentic words of Jesus. New translation and commentary by Robert W.Funk, Roy W.Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, A Polebridge Press Book 1993.

⁶Burton L. Mack, Who Wrote the New Testamnt?, The Making of the Christian Myth.

⁷Marcus Borg, The lost Gospel *Q*:The Original Sayings of Jesus, Ulysses Press Berkeley California 1996.

⁸John S. Kloppenborg, The Earliest Gospel, An introduction to the original stories and sayings of Jesus, Westminster John Knox Press Louisville 2008

about the Kingdom of God. They invest a lot of time and energy to think about what that means for them. The first followers of Jesus were principally Jews. They gave direction to the development. They understood what Jesus meant, because they stood in the same tradition. They were part of the Jewish community to which they belonged, and they visited, as was customary, the synagogue on the Sabbath. They traveled from village to village to enthruse people for Jesus. Among them were non-Jews as well. But gradually problems emerged. They did not always have success. In some villages they were no longer welcome. Moreover, tensions arose in families due to different preferences of family members. When more and more non-Jews became part of the movement, troubles arose with the Jews from outside the group. The non-Jewish members were accepted as part of the group. This caused troubles because intimate interactions between Jews and non-Jews, such as the joint use of the meal, was forbidden according to the strict purity rules of the Pharisees. Jewish Christians ran the risk that they were no longer welcome in the synagogue. Tensions in families, and the threat of expulsion from the synagogue, forced many people to choose between continuing or abandoning the movement. The survival of the church was at stake. Had the work of all those years, for the sake of the Kingdom of God been in vain? And what if you were placed outside the Jewish community? Was the Jewish descent and the Jewish tradition something without value and meaning in your life? This was unthinkable! The loss would indeed mean exclusion from the community in which you were born, a true tragedy. At that moment we see myths appear, as in the history of every religion. This process as described by Mack supports the search for an identity of the community. By a revaluation of the place of Jesus in the Jewish tradition, the band with the tra-

dition was not broken, but got a new content. In this way they keep what is valuable and lay a foundation for the survival and further development of the community. The traces of this process we find in the later expansion of the *Q*-Gospel. The oldest layer in *Q* has been adapted in the course of the turbulent history of the group to cope with the problems. The idea of the Kingdom of God is not forgotten but the final establishment of the Kingdom of God, which was originally expected in the near future, is shifted to the distant future. The definite arrival of the Kingdom was expected now at the end of time as the final judgement will take place. Jesus becomes now an apocalyptic prophet who at the end of time will vindicate the movement. The sayings of Jesus from the earlier period of the movement, have so been supplemented accordingly. Besides wisdom teacher, Jesus becomes an apocalyptic prophet who knows and predicts what will happen in the future.

The sayings gospel *Q* is a unique document because it shows us how myths are important for the movement to understand its place in the history of Israel. Without encountering any further problems, the position of Jesus is upgraded, and the base of the movement becomes firmly rooted in the Jewish tradition.

This Jesus movement is not only the oldest group of followers of Jesus, whose history can be traced so well, but it is the community that lived and worked in the same area as Jesus previously. How strange it is that the *Q*-people say nothing about the apostles. None from the list of twelve, even not Peter, is mentioned by name, while the apostles are important in the traditional Gospels! Why were they not interested in the people who talked with Jesus everyday? Even more striking is that this Gospel does not mention Jesus' death and not

even his resurrection. Of course not, you may say. It's all about a collection of sayings and so the lack of personal data is irrelevant. Sure, the core of *Q* is indeed a collection of sayings of Jesus, with no mention of special events with the exception of the baptism in the Jordan by John. When the problems came, however, the text got the nature of historiography, although in the form of statements and assertions. One might expect that at such times special events in the life of Jesus would be told to encourage the congregation. On the contrary, it seems as if one has never heard of the resurrection; it seems as if the *Q*-community did not need the resurrection to be motivated.

*THE SOCIAL SITUATION IN PALESTINE IN THE FIRST CENTURY*⁹

You may assume that there is no significant difference in the living conditions of the population in Palestine with those of the other peoples around the Mediterranean. However, there is a huge difference between the world of yesterday and that of today. In the book of J.D.Crossan one can find a brief description, taken from a cultural anthropological work of Gerhard Lenski, in which Roman society is characterized as an agricultural society whose population lived partly in towns, the upper class, and partly on land, the peasant population.¹⁰ It was a society with only two social classes and with a huge divide between the ruling class and everything below. The land was

⁹Scot Korb, *Life in Year One. What the World was Like in First Century Palestine*, Riverhead Books 2010.

¹⁰John Dominic Crossan, *A Revolutionary Biography* 1994

Gerhard Lenski, *Power and Privilege: A Theory of Social Stratification*, New York MkGraw-Hill 1966.

owned by a very small group. In such a pre-industrial society, the income came from the proceeds of the country, earned by the peasantry, which represented about 90% of the population. The farmers had to pay each year a large portion of their crop as rent to the landowners, while they also had to pay taxes on their products. It came down to only about 30% of the proceeds remaining for the residents of the countryside. The farmers could therefore only barely support their families. If they were struck by illness or crop failure, they were expelled from their land.

Farm workers had to carry out their work for a pittance. A portion of the population consisted of craftsmen who were mostly recruited from the impoverished peasants. There were very many people who had no permanent sources of livelihood and were dependent on begging. Lenski used for this lowest category the heartrending description: useless. That expression indicates clearly that these people really were not needed for anything; they had no means of livelihood and had to see how they could stay alive. Banditry therefore was sometimes the only way to survive.

In such a society oppression and exploitation of the people by a small elite was quite normal.

Palestine stood under Roman rule since 63 BC and was officially a part of the Roman Empire after the death of King Herod in 4 BC. In Palestine, the conditions were not much different. The agrarian society was exploited and oppressed by a very small upper class who owned nearly all sources of wealth. Only a small part of the products that were harvested annually by the peasantry, benefited the local population. In Galilee, the power resided with Herod Antipas together with his court and the great landowners. In Judea, which was

directly under Roman administration, the aristocratic elite and the families of the high priests with their relatives and servants controlled the city. They resided in Jerusalem, the center of political domination by the occupier and the center of the co-operating Jewish leaders, but also the religious center of Israel. The general poverty of the inhabitants contrasted here fiercely with the welfare of the Jewish aristocracy and the priestly class. The people who controlled the city and oppressed and exploited the peasantry, were also the ones who were responsible for the sacrifices in the Temple. These two aspects made Jerusalem with its temple and its priesthood also the symbol of oppression and exploitation of the Jewish population.

In addition there are a few factors that should be mentioned separately. Palestine was an occupied country and as always domination was accompanied by oppression and exploitation. The tax rate was high because representatives of the occupier and those who leased the collection of taxes from the government, took the opportunity to earn a lot of money in a short time. In the Gospels, one can read that the tax collector was held in low regard. In addition, tax must also be paid for the maintenance of the temple.

In the center of Galilee lies the city of Sepphoris. Destroyed during the uprising of the people after the death of Herod the Great, the city was rebuilt by his son Herod Antipas, according to the ideas of his father during the construction of Caesarea Maritima on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Built in Greco-Roman style, the population of the new town grew in a short time of one thousand to between eight and twelve thousand inhabitants. The farmers from the area around Sepphoris had to pay for the cost of building the city and they had to provide for the necessary food and the luxury of the inhabitants.

Everything in the periphery was focused on the importance of Sepphoris. Under the reign of Antipas the population grew in Galilee, and the cities of Sepphoris and Tiberias, located on the Sea of Galilee, were increasingly prosperous. This new wealth was paid for by the residents of the surrounding land. Who was poor became even poorer while the rich were getting richer.

What were the further consequences? Antipas paid his taxes to Rome in precious metals, meaning that the people in the region had to pay their taxes to him in these values. This implies a cash economy. As a result of the growing needs of the cities, the available agricultural land was also greatly expanded. The pressure on the population increased more and more and many farmers, who still owned their land, sold it in the hope of subsequent survival as a tenant. What happened under Herod Antipas was a revolution at the expense of the rural population.

This is a brief description of the time when Jesus of Nazareth was born, grew up and became aware of the injustice done to his countrymen.

THE GREAT IMPORTANCE OF THE GOSPEL OF THOMAS

We know that the books of the New Testament are just the tip of the iceberg. Only a small part of what is written in the first centuries, has also been preserved. Citations that we found in the books of christian writers of the period, were long the only indication that there were originally many more gospels than the known four.

By a happy coincidence, in 1945 in Egypt near the city Nag Hamaddi, a jar was discovered hidden in the ground. This jar contained about forty writings, all breathing the same spirit. They are called gnostic

writings. The greek word gnosis means knowledge, or perhaps better translated: insight. The accidental discovery at Nag Hamaddi is due to monks from a nearby monastery who had writings in their possession that were not consistent with the orthodox doctrine. For fear of discovery they no longer dared to keep them in the cloister and buried them outside. Among the texts found they discovered a Coptic manuscript that was originally written in Greek. It is known as the Gospel of Thomas. A full text of Thomas can be found in the book *The Five Gospels*. Besides the Gospel of Thomas, the Nag Hammadi library contains also many other fragments of books whose existence was hitherto unknown. These works breathe the same spirit. The development in communities that have produced these writings, had an entirely different character than in the communities that we have come to know through the canonical Gospels, the Acts and Paul. By studying the texts, it turned out that they were known by the Fathers, given the different quotes taken over by them.

Scholars date the oldest part of the text of Thomas to the fifties so the importance of the text is obvious for understanding the first phase of Christianity. Like *Q*, the Gospel of Thomas is a "sayings gospel" consisting of 114 sayings or *Logia*, in which nothing is mentioned about life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although the Gospel of Thomas is no part of the canonical writings of the New Testament, it is considered of great importance in scientific circles because of its impact on the exegesis of the classical Gospels. Of the 114 statements about half has parallels in the four gospels.

While quite a few statements or parts of them exhibit little difference from what we find in the Synoptics, other texts are totally incomprehensible for the uninitiated in the Gnostic beliefs. The community of

Thomas apparently started in the same way as the other Jesus movements but had later chosen for a different road. It appears to be difficult to discover the oldest layer in the text. However, the text gives enough insight into the core of this document to support statements of other writers as an independent source. About 20% of the sayings from Thomas also occur in the oldest layer of *Q*. Also in the gospel of Mark such sayings of Thomas can be found. So the gospel of Thomas can be used as an independent source for additional arguments to support a particular conviction.

THE JESUS SEMINAR

Special attention deserves the large-scale project of the so-called Jesus Seminar. It is a large group of mostly American scholars with different backgrounds, who have made a common scientific research on the sayings and deeds of Jesus. It is a broad-based study over a total period of more than ten years. The studied texts are the four Gospels together with the text of the Gospel of Thomas. The project started with a completely new translation from Greek into contemporary English (American). This translation was the joined effort of a large group of experts. It became the basis for detailed study and discussion in the group. During the first phase of the study, texts were investigated and evaluated with respect to the sayings that could be traced back to Jesus. Detailed arguments for a particular opinion were discussed, and finally the members of the seminar gave their opinion about a certain topic by vote. To assess the degree of similarity, whether a particular text came from Jesus, the members used colored beads with a color code ranging from red, via pink, to gray and black, in a decreasing probability, where each color had a numerical value with the lowest value for black. The result of the vote was

the weighted average of the individual scores. The lower limit for red was 0.75 and the upper limit for black 0.25, with gray and pink in between. A result of the weighted average of eg. 0.75 --visible by the red color of the tekst-- means that the probability that the saying comes from Jesus, is 75 percent or differently formulated that most of the members supported that vision.

In the text of The Five Gospels we see thus the conclusions of the Jesus Seminar made visible in colored sections. The results of the study have been published and include a very comprehensive review that gives an insight into the opinion of the different members of the seminar. The notes suggest that the religious background of members may have played a greater role in the choice of the color code than would be expected from a choice based purely on historical facts (blood is thicker than water?). The total of the colored text can be useful in sketching a realistic picture of Jesus. ¹¹

It seems strange to discuss in such a way religious texts that play a central role in a religion. But when using scientific methods in historical research that concerns a large group of people involved, one should use methods that are appropriate and understandable in such a situation. Comments like: you can not do that and it is absurd, are totally misplaced. It is clear that results could be different in another composition of the research team or with a different weighting system.

¹¹ Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar. The Gospel of Jesus, according to the Jesus Seminar, Polebridge Press 1999.

The importance of the work of the Jesus Seminar is, according to my personal opinion, not so much the contribution of this seminar to a reliable picture of Jesus, but more an important contribution to a scientific approach of biblical texts. While reading a gospel text in the translation by The Seminar, you find in the margin all kinds of information concerning dependency of texts, indications for other places of related texts and more matters of interest. There is a certain code, used to interpret what can be seen in the margin. I always read a gospel pericope with the gospel text of the Jesus Seminar before me.

CHAPTER 3 : THE HIDDEN GOSPEL *Q*

Without exaggeration, we dare say: The sayings set *Q* contains the core of the teachings of Jesus.

The main topics, sayings and parables of Jesus, can be found in Matthew and Luke. If present, indications to corresponding texts in the Gospel of Thomas are mentioned.

The Kindom of God, already detected by Jesus but not seen by others

Asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was to come, he gave them this answer. "The coming of the kingdom of God does not admit of observation and there will be no one to say, "Look, it is here! Look, it is there!" For look, the kingdom of God is among you". (Lk17,20-21)

His disciples said to him, "When will the kingdom come?". It will not come by watching for it. It will not be said, 'Look, here!' or 'Look. there!' Rather the Father's kingdom is apread out upon the earth and people don't see it". (Th113)

The itinerant life of Jesus and his followers

One of the scribes then came up and said to him, 'Master, I will follow you wherever you go.' Jesus said. 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head'. (Mt8,19-20)

One assumes that with the word: Son, Jesus refers to himself. With this interpretation, the emphasis is on the roving nature of Jesus' life where he and his followers often had to stay in the open air during the night. Jesus apparently took life as it came and he tried to learn his students this attitude. His trust in providence is evident from a number of sayings such as those found in Lk 12,22 , also in Mt 6.25 et seq, coming from *Q*, and in Th 36. We quote:

Then he said to his disciples, That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and how you are to clothe it. (Lk12,22)

"That is why I am telling you not to worry about your life and what you are to eat, nor about your body and what you are to wear. Surely, life is more than food, and the body more than clothing!". (Mt6,25)

Jesus said, "Do not fret, from morning to evening and from evening to morning. [about your food—what you're going to eat, or about your clothing--] what you are going to wear. [You're much better than the lilies, which neither card nor spint]. (Th36,1)¹²

So you should pray like this: Our Father in heaven, may your name be held holy, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we have

¹² Text between [...] means that the content of a part of a tekst in the gospel of Thomas is uncertain, not readable or caused by other problems.

forgiven those who are in debt to us. And do not put us to the test, but save us from the Evil One. (Mt6,9-13)

He said to them, 'When you pray, this is what to say: Father, may your name be held holy, your kingdom come; give us each day our daily bread, and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive each one who is in debt to us. And do not put us to the test. (Lk11,2-4)

So I say to you: Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened. (Lk11,9-10)

'Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened to you. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who searches finds; everyone who knocks will have the door opened.' (Mt 7,7-8)

Jesus said, "Seek and you will find". (Th92)

Jesus [said], "One who seeks will find, and for [one who knocks] it will be opened". (Th94)

Rules of the road in the proclamation of God's Kingdom

Take no purse with you, no haversack, no sandals. Salute no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, let your first words be: "Peace to this house!". And if a man of peace lives there, your peace will go and rest on him; if not it will come back to you. Stay in the same house, taking what food and drink they have to offer, for the labourer deserves his wages; do not move from house to house. Whenever you go into a town where they make you welcome, eat what is put before you. (Lk10,4-8)

With no haversack for the journey or spare tunic or footwear or a staff, for the labourer deserves his keep. 'Whatever town or village you go into, seek out someone worthy and stay with him until you leave. As you enter his house, salute it, and if the house deserves it, may your peace come upon it; if it does not, may your peace come back to you. And if anyone does not welcome you or listen to what you have to say, as you walk out of the house or town shake the dust from your feet. (Mt10,10-14)

When you go into any region and walk about in the countryside when people take you in, eat what they serve you and heal the sick among them. (Th14,4)

The Kingdom of God must grow as evidenced by the parable found in Lk13.20-21, coming from Q and also in Th96.1-2

Again he said, 'What shall I compare the kingdom of God with? It is like the yeast a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour till it was leavened all through.' (Lk13,20-21)

Jesus [said], "The Father's kingdom is like [a] woman. She took a little leaven. [hid] it in dough, and made it into large loaves of bread. Anyone here with two ears had better listen!". (Th96)

Exaggeration we read in the parable of the mustard seed in three independent sources, Mk4.31-32; respectively Lk13.18-19 and Mt 13.31-32 both from Q; and in Th20. The text in Mark reads:

It is like a mustard seed which, at the time of its sowing, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth. Yet once it is sown it grows into the biggest shrub of them all and puts out big branches so that the birds of the air can shelter in its shade.' (Mk4,31-32)

He went on to say, 'What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it with? It is like a mustard seed which a man took and threw into his garden: it grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air sheltered in its branches.' (Lk13,18-19)

The disciples said to Jesus, "Tell us what Heaven's kingdom is like. He said to them. " It's like a mustard seed, the smallest of all seeds, but when it falls on prepared soil, it produces a large plant and becomes a shelter for birds of the sky." (Th20)

The Kingdom of God demands the commitment of the whole person.

In the oldest layer of *Q* is a brief altercation between Jesus and someone of his listeners:

Another to whom he said, 'Follow me', replied, 'Let me go and bury my father first'. But he answered, 'Leave the dead to bury their dead; your duty is to go and spread the news of the kingdom of God.' (Lk9,59-60)

Such an advice from Jesus is, especially in the patriarchal time, contrary to the social duty of a son for his parents. But it underlines the importance Jesus attaches to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and at the same time it is typical for Jesus to clarify this in such a shocking way. Frankly, I believe that Jesus would have reacted with surprise if his advice was taken literally.

In Lk 14,26 and Mt 10,37, coming from *Q*, is a text that is typical for the attitude of the members of the *Q*-community:

Anyone who comes to me without hating father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, yes and his own life too, cannot be my disciple. (Lk 14,26)

'No one who prefers father or mother to me is worthy of me. No one who prefers son or daughter to me is worthy of me. (Mt10,37).

Jesus said, "Whoever does not hate father and mother cannot be my disciple." (Th55,1)

It is understandable that one always has tried to weaken the meaning of this text. So absurd as it sounds, so much resistance as it evokes, it seems to me almost certain that, at least in the core, Jesus himself is responsible. The exaggerated manner of Jesus is reinforced by the tendency of the Q-community to react in an exaggerated manner to statements by him. The agreement with the previously quoted statement "let the dead bury their dead" is remarkable. Jesus clearly has problems with the way in which the family band in his time exerts pressure on the individual members of a family. Jesus saw the family band as a barrier for a free choice of the family members. Moreover, the wording stresses again the unconditional effort which Jesus asks of his followers.

The Kingdom of God is precious and worth to give it all you have

In Mt 13,44 and Th 109.1 to 3 the kingdom of God is compared to a treasure hidden in the field. The text of Matthew reads as follows:

The kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field which someone has found; he hides it again, goes off in his joy, sells everything he owns and buys the field. (Mt13,44)

Jesus said, "The (Father's) kingdom is like a person who had a treasure hidden in his field but did not know it. And [when] he died he left it to his [son]. The son [did] not know about it either. He took over the field and sold it. The buyer went plowing, [discovered] the treasure, and began to lend money at interest to whomever he wished." (Th109)

When someone finds a treasure in the ground and then hides it again with the intention to buy the field, he will apparently keep it hidden for the owner of the field. I can't believe that such a honest scribe as Matthew does such a thing. It is typical for Jesus to emphasize the importance of God's Kingdom in such a provocative way

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

Sayings in Matthew 5 and Luke 6 as far as they can be found in The Lost Gospel.

The Beatitudes: notice the difference between Matthew and Luke.

Every time I wonder how people will have reacted to the words of Jesus: blessed are the poor, blessed are the people who are hungry, the people who are sad. I really wonder!

Then fixing his eyes on his disciples he said: How blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours. Blessed are you who are hungry now: you shall have your fill. Blessed are you who are weeping now: you shall laugh. (Lk6,20-21)

Jesus said, "Congratulations to the poor, for to you belongs Heaven's kingdom. (Th54)

Congratulations to those who go hungry, so the stomach of the one in want may be filled." (Th69,2)

How blessed are the poor in spirit: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs. Blessed are the gentle: they shall have the earth as inheritance. Blessed are those who mourn: they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for uprightness: they shall have their fill. (Mt5,3-6)

Statements that characterize Jesus as someone who turns the society on its head.

'But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who treat you badly.' (Lk6,27-28)

If you love those who love you, what right you have to thank for? Even sinners love those who love them. (Lk 6, 32)

Give to anyone who asks you, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away 'You have heard how it was said. You will love your neighbour and hate your enemy. But I say this to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you: so that you may be children of your Father in heaven, for he causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike. For if you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Do not even the tax collectors do as much? And if you save your greetings for your brothers, are you doing anything exceptional? Do not even the gentiles do as much? You must therefore be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect.' (Mt5,42-48)

'Be compassionate just as your Father is compassionate.' (Lk6,36)

A saying of Jesus that evokes much misunderstanding !!!

To anyone who slaps you on one cheek, present the other cheek as well; to anyone who takes your cloak from you, do not refuse your tunic. (Lk 6,29)

But I say this to you: offer no resistance to the wicked. On the contrary, if anyone hits you on the right cheek, offer him the other cheek as well; if someone wishes to go to law with you to get your tunic, let him have your

cloak as well. And if anyone requires you to go one mile, go two miles with him. (Mt5,39-41)

How such advice is understood by his audience depends on the way it is said. In any case, Matthew brings it as a serious expansion of Jewish Law. His listeners will surely have looked at him, full of disbelief, when he asked them to offer the other cheek as well to the opponent. He cannot really have said something like that, they thought. Beaten, without doing anything back and even ask for more. Who could accept something like that? A slap on the right cheek was usually done with the back of the right hand and was therefore considered as a grave insult. Accepting this was unthinkable. But large must have been the hilarity - and relief? - of the audience, when Jesus gave the advice to give up both garment and robe before the court. I see myself standing there before the judge in court, not in my shirt but completely naked. Ordinary people had simply no more clothes on their body. This remark of Jesus has taken away the pressure and relieved his listeners. And then Jesus asks casually his audience to serve as pack animals for the occupier, not just for one mile but even for two miles. Residents in occupied territory had namely the obligation by order of the Romans to help carry a burden over a distance of one mile. His audience will have enjoyed this short humorous sketch. But what was the purpose of Jesus? Frankly, I believe that literal compliance with Jesus' advice to also offer the other cheek may not be a suitable method to calm the aggression of an adversary. On the contrary, it is a challenge and leads to more violence. It definitely is not nonviolent resistance as some would argue. I believe Jesus is mocking the retribution rule practiced in daily life. He wanted to denounce mutual aggression and did this in his characteristic man-

ner, full of humor and ridicule. He contrasts the rule of retaliation with another just as unrealistic rule, that we have to accept everything and even ask for more. This rule of retaliation leads literally to nothing and can really only provoke laughter. By appealing to the sense of humor of his listeners, Jesus wants to stress the absurdity of the rule to repay evil with evil.

The personal views and convictions of writers may have influence on the formulations and maybe even on the actual content of what you can read in a source. We take a special saying by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount about ownership of people, something inviolable for all men: *what's mine is not yours, so stay away of what is mine!* But there is a statement in which Jesus says that you have to accept that somebody takes away something that is not his. This saying points to the bitter poverty of people who live at the brink of collapse.

Give to everyone who asks you, and do not ask for your property back from someone who takes it. (Lk6,30)

[Jesus said], "If you have money, don't lend it at interest. Rather give [it] to someone from whom you won't get it back. (Th95)

Give to anyone who asks you, and if anyone wants to borrow, do not turn away. (Mt 5,42)

The formulations are not literally, word by word, the same. The wording in Matthew is neutral: give to people who beg or want to borrow. Thomas changes the text in Matthew by speaking about lending to people who anyway never could repay it. But Luke, who also uses the *Q*-source, adds: if anyone takes away what belongs to you, do not require it back. Through this latest addition the saying by Luke gets

emphasized. Jesus gets here maybe a criticism that is not justified. Pay attention! It is it likely that Jesus would give and lend without demanding anything in return but that is something else then saying it. I think it has been the itinerant preachers of the Q-community, who visited the farmers with such radical statements while preaching in the name of Jesus. Exegetes always pay attention to differences in the wording of texts attributed to Jesus.

Wealth without compassion excludes a relationship with God:

'No one can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or be attached to the first and despise the second. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money.' (Mt6,24)

'No servant can be the slave of two masters: he will either hate the first and love the second, or be attached to the first and despise the second. You cannot be the slave both of God and of money.' (Lk16,13)

Jesus said. "A person cannot mount two horses or bend two bows. And a slave cannot serve two masters, otherwise that slave will honor the one and offend the other. (Th47)

Jesus critical about the rules of Jewish Law

He called the people to him again and said, 'Listen to me, all of you, and understand. Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the thing that comes out of someone that makes that person unclean. (Mk7,14-15)

After all, what goes into your mouth will not defile you: rather, it's what comes out of your mouth that will defile you." (Th14,5)

Jesus said, "Why do you wash the outside of the cup? Don't you understand that the one who made the inside is also the one who made the outside?"(Th89)

'Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of cup and dish and leave the inside full of extortion and intemperance. Blind Pharisee! Clean the inside of cup and dish first so that it and the outside are both clean. (Mt23,25-26)

But the Lord said to him. 'You Pharisees! You clean the outside of cup and plate, while inside yourselves you are filled with extortion and wickedness. Fools! Did not he who made the outside made the inside too? Instead, give alms from what you have and, look, everything will be clean for you. (Lk11,39-41)

Sayings of Jesus against the Pharisees (of moderate tone!).

Everything they do is done to attract attention, like wearing broader headbands and longer tassels, like wanting to take the place of honour at banquets and the front seats in the synagogues, being greeted respectfully in the market squares and having people call them Rabbi. (Mt23,5-7) (derived from Q)

In his teaching he said, 'Beware of the scribes who like to walk about in long robes, to be greeted respectfully in the market squares, to take the front seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets. (Mk 12,38-39)

CHAPTER 4 PARABLES OF JESUS

We discuss three parables, which are factually five parables since two are changed by the writers from a Jesus story into a christian

story. It is a happy circumstance that these two parables have an original version in the Gospel of Thomas.

We first discuss two parables that paint a distressing picture of the two sides of society in those days. On one side the poor peasantry and on the other hand the clan of the landowners and the rich who, without concern for the less fortunate, are busy with their own activities and do not forget to maintain good relations with the view on their own interests. Two separate worlds, except on the day the rent is collected. At such a moment the extremes meet in a business atmosphere of 'giving and taking'.

THE PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS ACCORDING TO MARK

We start with the parable which in the Jerusalem Bible is called *The parable of the wicked tenants*. The evangelist Mark has adapted the text spoken by Jesus to teach the members of his community about the cause of the destruction of the temple. You can find this parable in Mk 12,1-8 and the unchanged version in Th 65,1-7.

The destruction of the temple and the city of Jerusalem had caused the end of the temple state. Jahweh had abandoned his people and had punished them for their wicked behavior. That is how the Jews experienced this catastrophe. One had to save what can be salvaged from the ruins of lost heritage and frustrated expectations. It seemed unthinkable to build a future without Jerusalem, the place where Jahweh in the temple had chosen his presence on earth among his people. The Jesus people had the same feeling of despair and incomprehension. In the community of Mark a very audacious interpretation was given of those dramatic events. Jewish members in the community of Mark, versed in the books of the Old Testament, have

sought for texts that could explain the death of Jesus. They interpreted certain passages in the prophets and in the psalms as prophecies, written with the purpose of fulfillment in the person of Jesus. They saw a link between the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple and the death of Jesus. God punished traditional Judaism for the murder of Jesus and for not accepting him as the Messiah. With that idea in mind Mark (re)writes in chapter 12 of his Gospel, the famous parable of the criminal winegrowers (wicked tenants) who kill the heir of the vineyard to come into its possession.

You will find the parable in Mk 12.1-9, and also in Mt 21.33-39 and Lk 20.9-15, both dependent on Mark. The text that you read in Mark, is certainly not told that way by Jesus. Mark has used a story of Jesus and adapted it with the intention to assign to it a different meaning. By making some small changes, it becomes an indictment of the Jews because they reject Jesus as the Messiah. The original version of this parable can be found in the Gospel of Thomas.

Now back to Mark and let's see what he's made of the story. He begins in chapter 12 verse 1:

A man planted a vineyard; get fenced it, dug out a trough for the winepress and built a tower; then he leased it to tenants and went abroad.

This refers to the song of the vineyard of the prophet Isaiah, verses from 5.1-7, which read:

Let me sing my beloved the song of my friend for his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it, cleared it of stones, and planted it with red grapes. In the middle he built a tower, he hewed a press there too. He expected it to yield fine grapes: wild grapes were all it yielded. And now, citizens of Jerusalem and people of Judah, I ask you to

judge between me and my vineyard. What more could I have done for my vineyard that I have not done? Why, when I expected it to yield fine grapes, has it yielded wild ones? Very well, I shall tell you what I am going to do to my vineyard: I shall take away its hedge, for it to be grazed on, and knock down its wall, for it to be trampled on, I shall let it go to waste, unpruned, undug, overgrown by brambles and thorn bushes, and I shall command the clouds to rain no rain on it. Now, the vineyard of Yahweh Sabaoth is the House of Israel, and the people of Judah the plant he cherished. He expected fair judgement, but found injustice, uprightness but found cries of distress.

Mark has his choice of words at the beginning of the parable adapted to this text and interprets the text in Isaiah with Jesus in mind. The text in Mark continues as follows in verses 2-8:

When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard. But they seized the man, trashed him and sent him away empty handed. Next he sent another servant to them; him they beat about the head and treated shamefully. And he sent another and him they killed; then a number of others, and they trashed some and killed the rest. He had still someone left: his beloved son. He sent him to them last of all, thinking, "They will respect my son." But those tenants said to each other. "This is the heir. Come on, let us kill him, and the inheritance will be ours. So they seized him and killed him and threw him out of the vineyard.

The servants who were mistreated are the prophets who were sent by Jahweh to Israel, and with the heir of the vineyard Mark refers to Jesus who was put to death by the Jews. And what the owner of the vineyard will do next you can read in the conclusion:

Now what will the owner of the vineyard do? He will come and make an end of the tenants and give the vineyard to others. Have you not read this text of scripture: The stone which the builders rejected has become the cornerstone.(Mk 12,9-11)

Now everything is clear to the church of Mark: God has punished the Jews for Jesus' death by destroying Jerusalem along with the temple and giving the vineyard (the covenant) to others (the Gentiles). So Mark has, without explicitly indicating, upgraded the new movement to the new Israel. In the version of Matthew and Luke the content is in line with that in Mark. That the audience, according to Mark, understood this, is clear from the response of the priests and Pharisees. They understood the parable of Jesus as an attack on themselves:

And they would have liked to arrest him, because they realised that the parable was aimed at them, but they were afraid of the crowds. So they left him alone and went away. (Mk12,12)

This story of Mark is a typical example of the emergence of a christian myth. If we read again the text in Mark this should be clear. It is Jesus who tells the story of Mark during his life in Galilee. Certainly, as Jesus told the story, his listeners will have understood the allusion to the "Song of the vineyard" of Isaiah. But the connection with the controversy between him and the Pharisees and the priests must have escaped them. Jesus apparently suggests that the Jews will not accept him as the Messiah and accuses them of his imminent death. It seems extremely unlikely that his listeners would have reached this conclusion. Jesus was still alive and well in their midst and his trial had not yet taken place. But in the story and the conclusion this is suggested. It is therefore clear: Jesus will certainly not have told the story in this way and have caused these strange reactions. It is not a

story of Jesus but a story of Mark and its audience does not comprise of the hearers of Jesus but the parishioners of Mark. They know what happened to Jesus. But not only that. The story is in such a way created by Mark, that they hear in it the voice of their master, Jesus. The interpretation of Mark has become a reality for them; this creates the myth that the Jewish people are guilty of the death of Jesus.¹³

It may surprise you that it never comes to your mind when hearing this parable during the liturgy on a Sunday morning, that something is wrong here. The only explanation must be that we were told from the pulpit that Jesus knew from the beginning what would happen to him in the future. He also knew that he would be killed by his opponents. With this knowledge in mind he accused his opponents in advance; an argument like that was common in the spirit of the time.

PARABLE OF THE WICKED TENANTS ACCORDING TO THOMAS

You can read the original text spoken by Jesus in Th 65,1-7

He said, "A [...] person owned a vineyard and rented it to some farmers, so they could work it and he could collect its crop from them. He sent his slave so the farmers would give him the vineyard's crop. They grabbed him, beat him, and almost killed him, and the slave returned and told his master. His master said, 'Perhaps he didn't know them.' He sent another slave, and the farmers beat that one as well. Then the master sent his son and said, 'Perhaps they'll show my son some respect.' Because the farmers knew that he was the heir to the vineyard, they grabbed him and killed him. Anyone here with two ears had better listen!" (Th 65)

¹³John Dominic Crossan, *Who killed Jesus?* Harper Collins San Francisco 1995.

The Gospel of Thomas lacks a context and a conclusion. Without a context, it is often difficult to determine what Jesus meant with a parable. The best way is to behave yourself as a member of the audience that listened to him. The story was originally intended for that audience, not for the church of the evangelist and not for us. We can assume that everyone among Jesus' hearers knew, perhaps from personal experience, what it meant to rent the land and then giving the almost entire annual harvest to the owner of the land. With the little bit that remained the tenant has to pay the taxes and must try to get through the rest of the year. But what no one expected, happened: the parable gets a surprising end, it ends in murder. Out of desperation the tenant resorts to violence to try to escape under the oppressive yoke of exploitation.

It is a sad story about the desperate poverty from which there is no escape. Jesus' listeners will probably have listened breathlessly. The end of the story is in itself not important. Jesus is not afraid to tell a shocking story with an open end. The conclusion however you should draw yourself. This story does not preach revolution but is pointing a finger at the obvious exploitation of the peasantry and it will be understood as such.

PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST ACCORDING TO MATTHEW

In the Jerusalem Bible we find in the oldest layer of *Q* in Lk 14,16-24 and Mt 22,1-14, but also in Th 64,1-12 the parable of the wedding feast. This parable is ideal for a transformation in christian style. Matthew re-worked the parable into an allegory and turned a Jesus story into a christian story. He turned a regular meal into a wedding feast which a king, here clearly God, gives to his son, Jesus. The gospel of Thomas gives the original version spoken by Jesus.

We give the text from verse 2:

The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to a king who gave a feast for his son's wedding. He sent his servants to call those who had been invited, but they would not come. Next he sent some more servants with the words. "Tell those who have been invited: Look, my banquet is all prepared, my oxen and fattened cattle have been slaughtered, everything is ready. Come to the wedding. But they were not interested: one went off to his farm, another to his business, and the rest seized his servants, maltreated them and killed them. The king was furious. He dispatched his troops, destroyed those murderers and burnt their town. Then he said to his servants. "The wedding is ready; but as those who were invited proved to be unworthy, go to the main crossroads and invite everyone you can find to come to the wedding." So these servants went out onto the roads and collected together everyone they could find, bad and good alike; and the wedding hall was filled with guests. When the king came in to look at the guests he noticed one man who was not wearing a wedding garment and said to him. "How did you get in here, my friend, without a wedding garment?" And the man was silent. Then the king said to the attendants. "Bind him hand and foot and throw him into the darkness outside, where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth". For many are invited but not all are chosen.' (Mt22,1-14)

From verse 11 the theme changes from a parable (allegory) into a description of the last judgment. The phrase "there will be weeping and grinding of teeth" fits typically into verse 13. With his choice of words Matthew makes it very easy to understand to the reader or hearer that it concerns a condemnation of those who reject Jesus as the Messiah. The context, which precedes this parable, is the known parable of the criminal winegrowers (the wicked tenants).

THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING FEAST ACCORDING TO THOMAS

If we compare the text of Matthew with the description given by Thomas we see that in the version of Thomas everything sounds much more neutrally.

So we let Thomas tell us the story:

Jesus said, "A person was receiving guests. When he had prepared the dinner, he sent his slave to invite the guests. The slave went to the first and said to that one, 'My master invites you.' That one said, 'Some merchants owe me money; they are coming to me tonight. I have to go and give them instructions. Please excuse me from dinner.' The slave went to another and said to that one, 'My master has invited you.' That one said to the slave, 'I have bought a house, and I have been called away for a day. I shall have no time.' The slave went to another and said to that one, 'My master invites you.' That one said to the slave, 'My friend is to be married, and I am to arrange the banquet. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me from dinner.' The slave went to another and said to that one, 'My master invites you.' That one said to the slave, 'I have bought an estate, and I am going to collect the rent. I shall not be able to come. Please excuse me.' The slave returned and said to his master, 'Those whom you invited to dinner have asked to be excused.' The master said to his slave, 'Go out on the streets and bring back whomever you find to have dinner.' Buyers and merchants [will] not enter the places of my Father." (Th64)

Jesus appears to be very well informed about how things go in the circles of the rich. They are constantly busy to get more possessions, they buy, sell and celebrate feasts with their affluent colleagues in their own circle. They invite each other, and if they can not come, their excuses are quite understandable for their hosts. But in this

story it is a bit too much of a good thing. Everyone seems to have a good excuse. That seems strange because such a meal was usually planned long in advance and the preparation took quite some time. Probably the invitees were invited long in advance and had ample opportunity to make time for the banquet. The present text of course does not do justice to how Jesus will have told the story in reality. His story will undoubtedly have been accompanied by a profusion of images and descriptions that match the eastern exuberance that will always remain foreign to us westerners. His audience sees it clearly: all these wonderful and delicious things and then, incomprehensibly, nobody wants to come. But the parable takes an unexpected turn. The host behaves completely different than expected. He has got a human face. Listen to what the host says: not the rich will sit down for the meal but the ordinary man in the street. It's the world upside down. He gives the parable a new content and gives his listeners from the familiar world of oppression and exploitation a glance into a world where things are going differently. His audience will probably have sensed the humor in the story. Jesus mocks the rich and wants to make it clear to his audience that it is they who will be invited into the Kingdom of God for a feast.

THE PARABLE OF THE LABOURERS IN THE VINEYARD

The Parable of the labourers in the vineyard only occurs in the gospel of Matthew, Mt 20,1-15. The parable starts with the words:

'Now the kingdom of Heaven is like a landowner going out at daybreak to hire workers for his vineyard. He made an agreement with the workers for one denarius a day and sent them to his vineyard. Going out at about the third hour he saw others standing idle in the market place and said to them. "You go to my vineyard too and I will give you a fair wage." So they

went. At about the sixth hour and again at about the ninth hour, he went out and did the same. Then about the eleventh hour he went out and found more man standing around, and he said to them. "Why have you been standing here idle all day?" "Because no one has hired us," they answered. He said to them. "You go into my vineyard too. In the evening, the owner of the vinyard said to his bailiff, "Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with the last arrivals and ending with the first. "So those who were hired at about the eleventh hour came forward and received one denarius each. When the first came, they expected to get more, but they too received one denarius each. (Mt 20,1-10)

In this parable, Jesus is a master in exaggeration. Every few hours he let the owner go to the market to see if there is someone who wants to work for him. He promises to pay what is reasonable. He had agreed with the first workers for one denarius. Eventually, he will pay at the end of the day the same amount of one denarius, regardless of the number of hours worked. When the last one, who has worked only one hour, gets one denarius, the workers of the first hour expect more, and we would agree, but they get also one denarius. And then we read:

They took it, but grumbled at the landowner saying: "The men who came last have worked only one hour, and you have treated them the same as you did us, though we have done a heavy day's work in all that heat.." He answered one of them and said. "My friend, I am not being unjust against you; did not we agree on one denarius? Take your earnings and go. I choose to pay the lastcomer as much as I payed you. Have I no right to do what I like with my own? Why should you be envious because I'm generous? (Mt20,11-15)

It is common in the tradition of the Church to regard this text as a warning of Jesus that not the amount of time and effort dedicated to the realization of the Kingdom of God determines the reward after death. God is free to give workers of the eleventh hour a privileged position. This exegesis of the church ignores the appalling conditions of the hearers of Jesus who would have little understanding for such an explanation.

What is the impression this parable makes on the hearers of Jesus? I think that they knew very well that Jesus did not think of the future workers in the church but had them in mind. In his eyes they were not worth less than others who had more opportunities in life. Jesus not only does focus the attention on the workers of the eleventh hour but also on the behavior of the owner. The owner does not stick to the usual rules and standards in society. He breaks with the usual conventions, that regulate the relations between employer and workers. In the eyes of Jesus another basis is needed for human behavior : it is customary to speak of an alternative wisdom, what is wise and right in the eyes of God. Jesus wants to open our eyes to another reality: a life under the Lordship of God, in which not everything is going according to accepted standards and conventions in society. This parable fits perfectly with what we expect from Jesus.

CHAPTER 5 A PICTURE OF JESUS

Various sources have provided us with the information we need to paint a reliable picture of Jesus. This information was mainly to be found in the sayings and parables that circulated in the earliest period after the death of Jesus. The *Q* document and the Thomas Gospel, however, contain only sayings and parables but no information about the life of Jesus. The Gospel texts of the canonical writers form

the framework within which most of the information has come to us. The written records of the stories about Jesus began only after forty years with the publication of the Gospel of Mark. Some forty years after the death of Jesus, however, already a certain tradition was present in which people no longer watched the man Jesus without prejudice. Certain opinions about him had become commonplace among his followers. He was no ordinary man and this must be reflected in his actions. We see this in the way the evangelists speak about him. While for Mark Jesus is the coming Messiah, a Messiah whose coming was predicted in the books of the OT (Old Testament), Matthew sees him primarily as a Jewish scribe of unique format. John describes Jesus, however, as the incarnate son of God. In him we already see clearly the first indications of a theological development around the person of Jesus. The adjustment of the data from the oral period was done in accordance with the personal vision of the evangelist, which creates a biased image of Jesus. For an objective researcher it is difficult to discover the real historical Jesus. On the other hand, part of the stories of the Gospels remains necessary to give the researcher much needed insight into the context that can be sorely missed. The stories bring us closer to the time and person of Jesus. They visualize how Jesus' followers experienced him, how they received his words and deeds. The evangelists stood as Jesus in the same Jewish tradition, they understood better than we do now what he meant when he spoke about the Kingdom of God. Without gospel stories, the sayings and parables of Jesus would tell us less about him than they do now.

We always have read the stories of the evangelists with caution, caused by the fact that the historicity of the events they describe is usually impossible to prove. We lack descriptions of the same events

from independent sources and this is the reason to give little attention to the numerous miracles you can find in the Gospels.

It is the independence of information flows and sometimes even the tone that emerges in certain texts that help us to discover the real Jesus. It is the choice of words and tone, different from the style and usual vocabulary of the evangelist, that gives us some certainty that we experienced behind the text a shadow of the man Jesus.

A sketch of the man Jesus of Nazareth

We must never forget that Jesus was a Jew and this was a determining factor in his life. The Jewish Law regulates the entire life in Israel and Jesus has adapted himself accordingly. This must be assumed, because a deviant behavior certainly would have been a reason for grave criticism of his person. Surely there was criticism of him but focused on the personal interpretation that he gave of certain provisions in Jewish Law. For him there was no room for formalism. Practical compliance to the rules must never be an obstacle for caring for others. He pointed to the risk that one runs with too strict adherence to rules, because then it becomes easy to lose sight of what are the major things in life. This is clear from his statements and his parables.

Jesus had little sympathy with the way in which the family ties in his day held the family in a stranglehold. He saw the family ties as an obstacle to the free choice of each member of the family. So he is challenging the existing social structure of society, which nipped individuality in the bud. Jesus saw this as an obstacle for a full commitment to God's Kingdom.

In our study, we looked at Jesus from different angles and were searching for relevant texts. The Kingdom of God was the central theme of Jesus' life and determined his attitude against social abuses. He spoke against the oppression and exploitation of his countrymen. Jesus behaved like a social prophet of the Old Testament, that's for sure. He stood up for the oppressed people. The gap between the few rich and the great mass of the less fortunate was huge. The rich were not inclined to let the poor share in their wealth and showed by their attitude a complete indifference for the need of the poor.

"Wealth without compassion for the other, excludes a relationship with God", These words are a clear political challenge against the political rulers: what happens in our society is wrong, even in the eyes of God. But Jesus did not behave like a politically inspired man but acted out of religious conviction: it is God who wants us to have compassion with people. In his characteristic way, he expressed his thoughts under words. He did this through his special choice of words, his humor, his ability to exaggerate, by describing ridiculous situations to relativize things, sometimes by placing shocking comments to clearly emphasize the importance of something.

But he was more than a social prophet. He did not only point to abuses and social inequality. Everything he said and did had to do with God. The Kingdom of God was not the same to him as a communist state with equality for all. The directive for people to preach the Kingdom of God, has a deeper meaning than social justice alone. Jesus experienced the presence of God on earth even during his life as a reality, but as a reality that still has to be developed to its fullness. Jesus makes it clear that his disciples and listeners are involved in

the realisation of that empire of God, and that they play an important role. He means that people in our community have the duty to make God visible on earth. As a Jew, he was strongly conscious of the mission of the chosen people to help with the unfolding of the creation. This re-creation he saw as a remake in accordance with the will of God. The life and ministry of Jesus stood entirely in the service of this mission. The presence of Jesus communities around the central theme of the Kingdom of God proves that the first disciples have understood Jesus in one respect: the Kingdom of God means action. Jesus has by his manner of speaking about the Kingdom of God, set in motion a movement but a movement with no structure and no clear organisation rules. Jesus has given the Jewish commandment to love your neighbour as yourself a new content by using different words. In his formulation "love your enemies", Jesus reminds the people of the ultimate consequences of this command from the Old Testament. By emphasizing love for the enemy, Jesus attracts the hostile outsider in the circle of their own community and elevates the relationships between people to a level that far exceeds what a man is capable of doing. Man is apparently expected to behave as God behaves towards us. It means that one can not ignore this reality and choose an easy excuse for deviant behavior. Jesus dares to ask this from his followers and they apparently try to do so in their life, that says a lot about this unique man.

During my research on the historical Jesus, I discovered a man whom one does not see often in life. Thanks to this charismatic man the world looks now very different. Thanks to the work of his followers, the treasures of the Jewish heritage are now available to all humani-

ty. The Bible testifies of this and so does the complete history of the christian religion.

CHAPTER 6 THE GOSPEL OF MARK

This gospel is the oldest narrative account of the life of Jesus and therefore an extremely important document. Although it seems that we are dealing with a historical document, we must realize that we are also dealing with a narrative. This religious story certainly contains some truth but is not a factual account of events and of what Jesus told. Do not forget that forty years elapsed after the death of Jesus. Who of us can still give a good and reliable record of anything after such a long period? However, we should not make the mistake to think that the inability to remember details also means that the evangelist and other witnesses are not able to remember clearly the figure of Jesus and how he was. Details fade but the unforgettable impression remains as long as one lives.

The community of Mark was originally a religious-social community within jewish society with emphasis on the word social, because the jewish members remained loyal to the Jewish Law and remained religiously associated with the local synagogue. Jesus had entrusted his followers to proclaim the Kingdom of God and as long as they did not come in conflict with the jewish religious leaders, there was nothing to worry about. The problems came when the behavior of the group became different from what was seen as normal. Gradually, the relationship with the Jews came under pressure. Why? The community did not have that somewhat aggressive character, as we perceive in the *Q*-people; the lack of the typical statements from Matthew and Luke testify thereof.

There are no society undermining statements, but a quiet and dignified behavior consistent with that of the Jewish environment. Probably the problems were caused by the composition of the group, since more and more non-Jews became members. In any case, it is certain that eventually the door of the synagogue was closed to them. When the door is closed and you are left alone, then much changes in one's life. It does not matter whether this is caused by a gradual drifting apart or a sudden, radical break as a result of some event. For the church of Mark now the time has come that they stand alone. The movement must leave the Jewish community and try to find its own way. This does not only imply a break with the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition, with much pain and emotions, but it also means that the position of Jesus comes up for discussion. How did they react? That, the history of the movement will teach us. History leaves traces in what is recorded in writing and is available for research. The text of the Gospel must give us the key to figure out how Mark has reacted to the problems of his community.

While for the congregation of Luke, Jesus was already a person of the past, the members of the group around Mark were still trying to find out their position relative to Jewish history and tradition, and to say it in a modern way: they had to find a new identity. When Mark wrote his gospel, the temple and Jerusalem had been destroyed only recently.

The church of Mark had educated people among its members, and so their response to the difficulties was to consult the Scriptures, where they hoped to find the solution for the problems. If you wonder what really is the place of Jesus in the Jewish tradition, then it requires study and deep thinking. His ignominious death on the cross made

an end to the high expectation, that he would be the Messiah who would free them from the yoke of the occupier. After his death, his followers were therefore first gravely frustrated. What was the significance of Jesus? It could certainly only have to do with the future. Maybe he was the one who must come at the end of time to pronounce the judgment upon the world. To find an answer to this question was of vital importance for the community of Mark, who had connected her future with this Jesus. This was probably the first major issue in the community of Mark. In the text of his Gospel you can read the conclusions of his community.

How creative was Mark?

Forty years had passed since the death of Jesus when Mark started to write. What did the world look like at that time? The Jewish war against the Roman occupier was probably not over yet. The last Jewish resistance had to be quashed and that happened in the year 74. The destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in the year 70 was a great shock to both Jews and Christians. It marked the end of the Jewish temple state.

Christianity as it took shape in Asia Minor, the Christ-cult, had penetrated in a period of 35 years from Antioch, in Northern Syria, into Rome, where Peter and Paul died as martyrs several years earlier.

Don't forget: when Mark starts writing, the prototype of today's Christianity existed already about 35 years! Mark knew that, as can be observed in the text of his gospel. But Mark appears not to have been a follower of the Christ-cult. Perhaps his Jewish congregation was a bit shocked by the excessive language that we can read in the letters of Paul and that is characteristic for the Christ-cult. Moreover,

the Christ-cult was obsessed with the meaning of the death of Jesus, while in the Jesus communities the attention was directed to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. Only later, influenced by the Christ-Cult, one started thinking about the significance of Jesus' death. Mark was almost certainly aware of the existence of the group of disciples that wrote the *Q*-document. But strangely enough, Mark has hardly used the typical sayings of Jesus from the core of this document, which also are to be found in the Gospel of Thomas. As a result, this gospel lacks the spicy sauce that is the seasoning in Matthew and Luke. Perhaps Mark had his reservations about these vagabonds with their exaggerated slogans that could be understood as undermining the society. There is a veil of secrecy over the whole text of Mark. Who is Jesus in reality, what is his mission, what will happen to him? This will remain a big question for the reader, although the text makes clear that something special is taking place. From the beginning, Mark leaves no doubt that, in the eyes of Jahweh, Jesus is very special. Already in Mk1,11 we read that at the baptism in the Jordan river the heaven opens and the Holy Spirit descends as a dove on Jesus, and a voice comes from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on you' (Mk1,11). Jesus shows up in the synagogue of Capernaum and speaks with great authority and turns words into deeds through his many miracles. One would expect now that Jesus' disciples realize how special he is. But the opposite is true. However, only the evil spirits know who he really is, but they are told by Jesus to shut up. In the rest of his story Mark keeps his audience in suspense and only in chapter 8 of the gospel, after the second miraculous feeding, Peter answered the question of Jesus in verse 29: 'But you,' he asked them, 'who do you say I am?' Peter spoke up and said to him, 'You are the Christ.' In the eyes of Mark, Jesus is the Messiah,

who is accepting knowingly and voluntarily his destination. But there is, according to the exegetical science, nothing to be found in the oral tradition about the suffering and death of Jesus. That he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, we only know with certainty from the reports of Roman historians. In the oral tradition no stories circulated about the death of Jesus that could form the basis for the later known stories in the Gospels. Actually Mark had little reliable information to give some body to a story about the life of Jesus. But where his knowledge was lacking, he was helped by his creativity and ability to imagine how the life of Jesus must have looked. He also had a vision, an idea how he could give his community a better foundation for a secure future. We'll see how he realised this.

It's a shock when you are raised with the assurance that the Bible contains the word of God. That's true but not in the sense that the writer has no creative freedom while composing his text, provided he remains within the limits of the known data. This means that in the absence of reliable information (I doubt the historicity of most of the stories of Mark) I can accept his interpretation of the few correct data. Mark wants to give the figure of Jesus a life as the main person in a biography. The available information comes partly from the oral tradition, a collection of typical sayings and parables attributed to Jesus. This oral tradition is like a living organism that has been modified over the years within the christian community. The result is that in many sayings Jesus speaks as if he is a Christian; he often speaks to us from a christian agenda.

What is it that Mark exactly wants to achieve? Mark is concerned for the interest of his congregation, he wants to make his parishioners clear that by choosing for Jesus, they are on the right track. He places

this Jesus in the center of the Jewish tradition and will demonstrate that the Jewish history of salvation has found in him the expected Messiah. How Mark will make this plausible, we shall see later. Mark sees Jesus as the Messiah but not as a Messiah who would expel the occupier by the sword. To demonstrate this, Mark has to deal with a major problem: Jesus never spoke about himself as the coming Messiah, while Mark believes that this is true. However, there are no clues in that direction in Jesus' behaviour and even when the Jews ask Jesus for a sign, he refuses categorically. Mark has therefore to find good arguments for demonstrating the messianicity of Jesus and has to make clear why Jesus in this regard had been so reticent. To achieve this, Mark chooses for an ongoing story in which Jesus is the central figure. In this way he has the possibility to progressively develop his ideas and to include, where necessary, spectacular events. This gives him the opportunity for choosing arguments that prove the special position of Jesus. He uses two elements that complement and support each other: namely the voices of the demons who were expelled by Jesus and were put forward as the most reliable witnesses, and the abundance of miracles, which display the power and authority of Jesus.

The first encounter with Jesus

In the first part of the text we meet the most important persons in the story: John the Baptist, Jesus and his first followers, but above all the author himself. By his choice of the subjects and the order in which he deals with these, he puts his mark on the contents of the gospel. We read the reactions of the population during the first encounter with Jesus. After reading a couple of pages, we have a large amount of information, gathered in a small piece of text. Mark

overwhelms us here! He is so eager to score that Jesus did not have a chance to say anything himself, while the audience is dumbfounded and full of admiration. One reads mainly miracle stories and hears angry demons scream out their anger. Frankly, it is the evangelist himself who creates this impression but by a profusion of uncontrollable information he hides that he actually has very little real knowledge of the historical Jesus. In a few lines from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew and Luke, we know more about him than after this profusion of useless information. Everything he tells the reader must demonstrate that Jesus is very special in the eyes of God and the audience. We now know at least that Jesus had a full time job curing all sorts of diseases and exercising evil spirits. Jesus forbade not only the evil spirits to make him known to the people, but he did not want that people who were healed told this to others.

Remarkably, however, Jesus is two times too late with his warning to the evil spirits to remain silent, just enough for Mark to express clearly his intention, but that of course is the privilege of the author!

The writer refers to the "Other World" to prove that Jesus is very special. That Jesus is the Messiah, is not a statement of Jesus himself, according to Mark, but of others who apparently know who Jesus really is. Jesus himself does not cooperate, and will not answer any questions about this issue. What we read in the text is apparently the result of hard thinking in the group. One sees Jesus as the Messiah: not as the one who would drive out the occupier by force, but as the one who will pronounce the judgment over the world at the end of time, an interpretation that is not customary in the Jewish religion. This may explain the reluctance of Jesus, who knew how people would react if he admitted to be the Messiah. While the demons fulfill

their mission by pointing to Jesus as the "Holy One of God", Jesus himself speaks with authority in the synagogue. The Jews listen in amazement to him, wondering where his knowledge comes from and from where the authority to speak as he does.

And his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority. (Mk1,22)

The people were so astonished that they started asking one another what it all meant, saying. 'Here is a teaching that is new, and with authority behind it: he gives orders even to unclean spirits and they obey him.' (Mk 1,27)

The authority with which he spoke in the synagogue was supported by the many miracles he performed: unclean spirits were exorcised, a leper was cleansed (Mk1,40), a lame was healed (Mk2,1), the healing of a man with a withered hand (Mk3,1), the upstanding from the death of the daughter of Jairus (Mk5,21), the woman with blood issue (Mk5,25), the first miraculous feeding (Mk6,35), Jesus walks on the water and calms a storm (Mk6,45), the faith of the Syro-Phenician woman (Mk7,24), the healing of a deaf (Mk7,32) , the second miraculous feeding (Mk8,1), the healing of a blind man (Mk 8,22), the healing of a possessed boy (Mk9,14), the withering of the fig tree (Mk11,12).

These are the main miracle signs mentioned by Mark, besides the countless miracles mentioned almost casually, as in (Mk 6,56):

And wherever he went, to village or farm, they laid down the sick in the open spaces, begging him to let them touch even the fringe of his cloak. And all those who touched him were saved.

The exaggerated manner in which the evangelist wants to score, can not be in accordance with reality.

Mark wants to emphasize that the apostles did not really understand who Jesus was. What they did not know, however, the community of Mark has clearly understood! This lack of belief of the apostles, stressed to the absurd, has vanished in Caesarea Philippi when Peter finally pronounces the faith of the disciples in Mk 8,27-30.

Jesus and his disciples left for the villages around Caesarea Philippi. On the way he put this question to his disciples:

‘Who do people say I am?’ And they told him. ‘John the Baptist, others Elijah, others again, one of the prophets.’ ‘But you,’ he asked them, ‘who do you say I am?’ Peter spoke up and said to him. ‘You are the Christ,’ ‘And he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him.

Mark has played his arguments well and he seems to have convinced us that Jesus is the promised Messiah. But did Jesus see himself as such? We will have to wait until the end of the gospel before Jesus himself shall act in a manner that proves that Mark is right.

Where was the divine inspiration that must guide the author during his writing? Divine inspiration may have been present, perhaps not during writing but certainly in the growth process that took place in the community, and that Mark has documented later. Divine revelation and inspired texts don't fall from the sky! What comes about in a human community, is the result of hard work, concentrated thinking, being open for what is new, with an open eye for what's going on around us, and praying for enlightenment by God. Jesus died and then it became time for people to understand this and to give it a place in life. God does not work with a dictaphone!

The information you can find in the Jesus communities is the primary source of our faith. The faith in the Jesus-movements determines half of the face of the christian religion. The other half originated in Asia Minor where the Christ-cult, the cult of the crucified Christ, was mixed with the ideas of the Jesus movements, giving life to what is called the christian religion.

CHAPTER 7 : THE OTHER FACE OF CHRISTIANITY

The Christ-cult in Asia Minor.

The rise of Christianity is a success story. That is undeniable when we see that, after three centuries, it has become the binding element in the Roman Empire. How can one explain this success of the new religion?

Emperor Constantine must have had a great confidence in the potential of Christianity, to link the future of his empire to the fortunes of a new religion that has to prove itself yet. It is not enough to point out the high moral content of the new religion. The emperor could have taken this decision only at that time, around the year 300, if the number of Christians already constituted a substantial part of the population of the empire. The sociologist Stark gives an estimate of about ten percent, wich is about six million Christians from a total of sixty million people.¹⁴

We now give a brief description of the circumstances in the first century. What took place in Asia Minor was of an entirely different order

¹⁴Rodney Stark, The rise of Christianity, a sociologist reconsiders history, Princeton University Press 1996; (a paperback is available from 1997).

than what happened in Palestine. Responsible for the difference in approach and execution are the exceptional circumstances, characteristic of Asia Minor at that time. In the first centuries Asia Minor was a melting pot of different cultures and religions, and it is this region that has become the birthplace of the new religion in the form that is characteristic for Christianity today. We refer to the standard work of Mack, which gives a profound description of the colliding cultures in the Greco-Roman period. In places like Damascus and Antioch the new religion found its first supporters in Asia Minor and spread from there soon into the heart of the Roman Empire: Rome.

Through the Roman domination in Asia Minor, the nations lost their independence. They were acquainted with the ruthless repression and the speed with which the Romans acted to suppress possible resistance without hesitation. Notorious were the brutal executions used by the occupiers because of the deterrent effect of it.

The culture of the oppressed people loses to the Greek culture, Hellenism, that, in the period preceding the Roman domination, had gradually eclipsed the existing culture in all of Asia Minor. The Greek language had become the language of the elite and, moreover, the trade language in the Roman Empire. The temptations triggered by Hellenism with its beauty in art forms, with its sophisticated lifestyle and its challenging ideas for the intellect, were fatal for many primitive societies. Often this meant the loss of their own culture with disastrous consequences for their own identity. If the link with the past, which is typical for a community, comes under pressure, it creates unrest and uncertainty. One is trying to find a new base in life, either by going back to what is likely to be lost, or by going in search of a new meaning in life; open for a critical examination of society

and for searching new values; open to social experiments and attempts within a small group of like-minded people. Without the presence of large groups of Jews in Asia Minor, it had been very likely that Christianity would have suffered a marginal existence. It would have even disappeared as a new religion.

What are the facts. The number of Hellenized Jews in the diaspora at that time is estimated at over 4 million, compared with about 1 million Jews in Palestine. The Jews who had built their existence outside the motherland lived in large cities and felt at home in the cultural climate of Hellenism. They spoke Greek and knew barely the religious language of the Jewish divine service; they kept the Jewish heritage alive and continued to feel strongly connected to their home country and especially to the temple in Jerusalem. They therefore felt the necessity to translate the Jewish Bible in Greek; this translation was produced in Alexandria in Egypt and was called the Septuagint. Although they lived according to the Jewish Law, the Diaspora Jews did not have the rigid views as they had in Jerusalem and they were more open to changes. For non-Jews, the Jewish moral law was attractive because of its emphasis on the practice of social justice. However the ethnic closeness of Judaism with its circumcision and the Jewish Law with its many rules were for a non-Semitic an almost insurmountable obstacle. Therefore, many had sympathy for Judaism and were loyal visitors of the synagogue, but they did not live by the rules of the Jewish laws; In the Acts they are called the God-fearing. Among the Jews and the God-fearing, Christianity in Asia Minor must have found its first adherents. As we can read in the Acts of Luke, itinerant preachers, arriving in a town, first visited the synagogue to speak about Jesus. This was certainly the case in the beginning

when the new religion had yet to get its first followers. We can imagine what happened. Imagine: a meeting of followers of Jesus with Diaspora Jews and godly (God-fearing) in a synagogue on the Sabbath. I suppose this happened in Damascus or Antioch. The visitors from Jerusalem will have told about Jesus and his ideas. How he was captured and executed and then buried, how gradually the rumors arose that spoke about the upstanding of Jesus from the dead and how he then appeared to Peter and the Twelve Apostles.

Jews in the Diaspora were not entirely unknown with Jesus and his ideas about the kingdom of God. During their visits to Jerusalem during the major Jewish celebrations they had already gotten acquainted with his ideas. There will be speculation about what Jesus meant by the Kingdom of God that would come. Was that Kingdom of God the new Israel or did Jesus mean something different. Who could become member of the Kingdom and when would it come? There was talk about the criticism of Jesus against the oppression of the poor, how wealth was refused to the poor, about selfishness, about caring for the other, the love-commandment; his social program asked for a personal commitment that had to be accompanied by deeds. Both groups, Jews and God-fearing, must have understood what Jesus stood for and they must have realized that this united them. They must have looked at each other with a sense of mutual recognition as equals. Was the Kingdom of God not meant for everyone? Could someone who does not belong to Israel, be part of that empire? After the service some wanted, I imagine, a further talk with the visitors from Jerusalem. They met in the home of one of them. They wanted to get an idea what the Kingdom of God could mean for each individual. This is something that had to be thought out well

and it demanded time. In a small group they took, I imagine, the decision to behave as Jesus in their lives; together, Jews and God-fearing, in a new community with a new way of life according to the ideas of Jesus. The gathering of Jews with God-fearing outside the synagogue caused problems with the official Jewish organizations. Therefore, more and more the need was felt to justify themselves for the synagogue for a practice that could be seen as contrary to Jewish Law. In the first phase of the existence of the new movement, without speaking about Christians and Christianity, this is the first big problem that had to be faced. The first hurdle that has to be taken by the new movement is the removal of a barrier located in the Jewish Law, in order to enable the mutual acceptance of each other: Jews and Greek. They organized regular meetings in the home of one of the participants. These meetings took place in a way that was usual for meetings of associations of like-minded in the Greek world. A lot of thinking had to be done to figure out what gave them the right to meet each other as a unity of Jews and non-Jews. The process of deep thinking during that period is reflected in the ideas and the program of the new movement, in which the relationship between Jesus and the members of the movement is defined. Let us discuss the big problem for the new movement.

The boundary between Jews and non-Jews is sharply drawn: non-Jews are sinful because they live outside the Jewish Law, and Jews who did not live according to the Jewish Law are sinners. Sin does not have the same meaning as we are used to. For a Jew sin means not acting in accordance with Jewish Law. When Jews and Gentiles together make a movement of like-minded people to meet outside the synagogue, the Jewish members of the movement act against the

Jewish Law and therefore are sinful, just as their partners who live outside the Jewish Law.

Two problems ask to be solved: how to justify the Jewish members for their sinful behaviour and how to remove non-Jews from the category of sinners. The first pronouncement of the new movement should therefore have concerned this issue: the legitimacy of the joint effort of Jews and non-Jews. In searching for the right arguments, they focused the attention not to the life of Jesus but to his death and what that could mean for Jesus and for those who wanted to follow him. Not the teaching of Jesus is central in this approach, but the idea of his martyrdom and exaltation by God as a reward for his persistence and commitment to the good cause. Both in the Jewish and Greek culture exists the veneration of those who, despite adversity and persecution, had remained firm; the Greek myth of the noble death and the Jewish myth of the persecuted wise man occur frequently in Greek literature and in Jewish wisdom stories. Jesus fits exactly in this type of person. To legitimize their behaviour the Jewish members of the group came with the following very bold claim:

God sees in the faith of Jesus for the good cause and in his suffering and death a reason for the justification of everyone who shares the faith of Jesus.

With this assumption a foundation was laid for a worship, which was the start of a new religion: the *Christ-cult* in the formulation of Mack.

Now it is time to address the matter seriously. We need facts to get a good view of what happened in the first years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The story in Luke's Acts of the Apostles, about the first Pentecost in Jerusalem and the subsequent spread of the

new faith, is not a reliable source to get an accurate view of what has happened in that time. The mere fact that Luke probably started writing 60 years, or even later, after the death of Jesus, detracts from the historical accuracy of his work. We can expect a global story from him and nothing more. We want a testimony from someone who has experienced everything closely. Such a witness we have in the person of the Apostle Paul, whose letters contain the information we are looking for. Without Paul, we would have remained in the dark about what has happened in the first decades after the death of Jesus in Asia Minor. What can we learn from Paul's letters.

THE APOSTLE PAUL AND HIS VISION

Let's first get acquainted with Paul and see what he says about himself. We read in his letter to the Galatians:

You have surely heard how I lived in the past, within Judaism, and how there was simply no limit to the way I persecuted the Church of God in my attempts to destroy it; and how, in Judaism, I outstripped most of my Jewish contemporaries in my limitless enthusiasm for the traditions of my ancestors. (Gal 1,13-14)

And in the letter to the Christians of Philippi:

Circumcised on the eighth day of my life. I was born of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrew parents. In the matter of the Law, I was a Pharisee; as for religious fervour, I was a persecutor of the Church; as for the uprightness embodied in the Law, I was faultless. (Phil 3,5-6)

Paul came from Tarsus, a city in Asia Minor, and was a Pharisee who was fanatically committed to enforce the Jewish Law by his Jewish brethren. In that capacity he came into contact with a Jesus move-

ment of Jews and Gentiles, which he, apparently by attitude and behaviour, saw as a major threat to the Jewish religion. Paul in his letter to the Galatians is saying emphatically "an attempt to eradicate" the new movement. From this I must conclude that what took place in the movement at that time was more than a mere social experiment of a mixed group of Jews and God-fearing. There was already a development that resembled the formation of a new cult, independent of the Jewish religion. This meant that the new movement was a threat to the Jewish orthodoxy. Paul had heard about Jesus and knew what had happened in Jerusalem. And now this same Jesus became the central figure in a development which was revolutionary. The idea that this Jesus is the hub of a new cult that connects Jews and non-Jews was in his eyes fascinating but not acceptable. He felt irresistibly attracted to what he saw, but felt forced to intervene in his zeal for the Jewish cause. Fanatic Pharisee as he was, we can not expect Paul himself to have been an initiator for the involvement of non-Jews in a religious development together with Jews. But after he became acquainted with the new cult, he could not resist the image of a religion that would enlarge the boundaries of historic Israel. Paul was a convert who eventually succumbed to the major attractive power exerted by the new movement.

Paul's conversion is likely to have occurred in the year 34. This can be deduced from observations made by him in his letter to the Galatians, chapter 2. In it he wrote 14 years after his conversion to have visited the Apostles Peter, John and James, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, to consult with them about his missionary work among the Gentiles. This visit can be dated approximately to the year 48, which means that Paul's conversion took place in the year 34. This

also tells us that Christianity in Asia Minor already arose shortly after the death of Jesus. It is a fact that Paul's letters were written in the fifties. This means that there is a time lag between Paul's conversion and what he tells us, mostly in his own words, about the movement that he previously prosecuted. Paul became acquainted with what already existed and it interests us particularly to learn something more about that. It appears that hidden in the letters of Paul there are texts that directly go back to these early followers of Jesus in Asia Minor. You will find in his letters not only his personal thoughts, but as well information derived from the ideas of the movement, which helps us to understand what happened during the change of a Jesus movement into a cult of Christ. The letters contain fragmentary bits of text, sometimes in the form of poetry or poems, that differ in style and vocabulary from what is typical of Paul. Scientists were able to isolate such texts and giving inside into the developments within a movement of Jews and God-fearing. Paul has copied some of the texts of the movement sometimes verbatim, without stating the source as was customary at time. Other texts were edited by him with traces of what was written originally. There are texts in which the apostle indicates that what he wrote down, he had learned after his conversion and inclusion in the new movement. Such texts are very important and deserve to be studied extensively. What was so attractive that Paul finally had to give up his opposition? You can find the answer in Romans 3.21-26:

God's saving justice was witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, but now it has been revealed altogether apart from Law: God's saving justice given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. No distinction is made: all have sinned and lack God's glory.(Rom 3,21-23)

What follows is the conviction (logic) in the movement in Paul's own words

and all are justified by the free gift of his grace through being set free in Christ Jesus. God appointed him as a sacrifice for reconciliation through faith, by the shedding of his blood, and so showed his justness, first for the past, when sins went unpunished because he held his hand; and now again for the present age, to show how he is just and justifies everyone who has faith in Jesus. (Rom 3,24-26)

We have learned to read Paul's words and to understand them in the theological context given by the churches: justification by faith alone. What is meant here with faith? When Paul wrote down, in his own words, the conclusion made by the movement, nearly twenty years had passed and in that time the ideas in the movement had already reached a much higher level. The letter to the Romans is a theological elaboration of the justification of the Gentiles in the eyes of Yahweh. He uses the loaded word faith in Jesus, which has probably for us a different meaning, through centuries of theological discussions, than for the readers of the letter in his time. Paul means, of course, to display it in simple words, that God assesses the followers of Jesus, Jew or Gentile, according to their loyalty to Jesus in their lives. In this sense, I understand the words of Paul. The so heavily loaded statement: justified by faith alone, can be understood without the concept of predestination that makes life unbearable! The text from Romans is clearly the earliest formulation during the development, but the original text has been adapted by Paul. Scientists have managed to reconstruct the key core of this early doctrinal statement with, the following result:

In times past God condoned the sins of the Gentiles. But now God has seen Jesus' death as a means of reconciliation because of his faith. He did this to show his righteousness and to justify the one whose faith is descended from Jesus' own faith.

The text in the letter to the Romans must be understood as, in principle, a formulation of a legal argument for the removal of an ethnic barrier, which should allow a joint effort of Jews and Gentiles around the ideas of Jesus. Theological reflection and doctrinal statements should not be expected in the initial phase of the joint effort of the Jews and God-fearing. It would indeed be naive to expect that from one moment to the other a ready-made theology of redemption is available. Everything must have its time. It remains largely a case of trial and error, whereby the guiding hand of God is present in the background. At such a moment you realize how large the contribution of man himself is in the development of new religions, Christianity not excluded.

Hereby a foundation was laid for a worship, that gradually took the form of a religion, the Christ-cult in the formulation of Mack, with which Paul became acquainted. It was indeed a bold and, I would almost say, brutal step from a small group of enthusiasts, but one with major consequences. It opened wide the door for those who were non-Jews. It opened the way for a development without precedent. Now the problem of legitimacy had been solved, they must find an identity for the new movement. Both partners, Jews and non-Jews, had their own ideas, with the Gentiles being somewhat bolder than the Jews. It was unthinkable for Jews to involve a man, Jesus, in a process that could elevate him to the level of their God. During the the first phase of the new religion there was therefore no room for a

further upgrading of the man Jesus, although certain statements from the new movement suggest the contrary. It then went very quickly. We can read it in the first letter of Paul to the Christians in Corinth and in his letter to the Philippians.

The text in 1Cor15,3-5 comes across as a creed, in which the choice of words suggests an existing formulation in which the essence is defined clearly with explicit mention of the Scriptures as a basis for the assertions. Also notable is the remark of Paul that he himself is not responsible for this text, which was communicated to him as a tradition:

The tradition I hande on to you in the first place, a tradition which I had myself received, was that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried; and that on the third day, he was raised to life, in accordance with the scriptures; and that he appeared to Cephas; and later to the Twelve. (1Cor 15,3-5)

The letter to the Philippians, verses from 2.6 to 11, is a hymn, in poetic form, composed at a later stage by the first followers of Jesus; it refers to a new christian religion:

Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be crasped.

But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death on a cross.

And for this God raised him high, and gave him the name which is above all other names; so that all beings in the heavens, on earth and in the underworld, should bend the knee at the name of Jesus and that every ton-

gue should acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, to glory of God the Father.
(Phil 2,6-11)

We may assume that the ideas about Jesus in the first years would not be in conflict with the jewish religious beliefs. Jesus' veneration in the first years after his death, does not resemble to what we see pronounced a few centuries later at the Council of Nicea. For the jewish followers of Jesus the time was not ripe yet to see in him a God-man, man and God in the same person. As Jews they could not think that way. That happened later when the influence of the non-jewish members was increasing. This means that the above hymn can only be understood as a mythical description of the place that Jesus has in the eyes of the members of the new movement. However, we have learned as christian believers to understand this hymn literally, but this attitude is not reasonable to defend.

The transition from the Jesus movement into a religion has been realized in a few years. Jerusalem had no influence on this development. What happened there, has never shown this character. The letters of Paul show the continuing distrust of the church in Jerusalem for what took place outside Palestine.

CHAPTER 8: AFTER THE FIRST FEW YEARS

We begin with a brief summary of what happened in the first century of Christianity. Then we give a short survey of what happened in later centuries, ending with the embrace of the new religion by the secular rulers of the empire.

Scientists were able to demonstrate, through intensive study of historical sources, that there are different developments based on the ideas of Jesus. The developments showed remarkable differences

between the various communities and the traces of it are found in the canonical gospel texts, in the Acts and in Paul's letters, but also in the apocryphal writings. We were introduced to the Jesus movements and the communities of the Christ in Asia Minor. Through the history of the *Q*-people we got to know the myths which are essential for every religion. We have seen how gradually the position of Jesus in the movements has been upgraded, and special properties were accredited to him such as apocalyptic prophet by the *Q*-community, Messiah by Mark, the incarnation of the Word of God by John and the God-man Jesus Christ by the communities of the Christ at a later stage in their development.

The end of the first century showed a pluralistic picture of the christian religion. Christianity had to go through a process of development of which the outcome was not certain. Actually that is not surprising, when we realize that Jesus before his departure had not given clear directions about what to do later. The slogan "The Kingdom of God" was the only beacon that his followers had been given for the future. Moreover, given the different circumstances in which the followers of Jesus lived, it was a great adventure what the future would bring.

We compare Jesus movements with the communities of the Christ. The Jesus movements gradually left the jewish community after a painful process of parting, In these communities the development was less stormy than in the Christ-cult, but no less clear. With his famous interpretation of the parable of the wicked tenants, Mark makes clear that the followers of Jesus now have occupied the place that originally was reserved to the Jews by Jahweh. The destruction of Jerusalem and the temple is the punishment for killing Jesus. The

interpretation of Mark is clear: everything that has taken place in the past and can be read in the ancient books of the Bible, has to do with Jesus.

After the destruction of the temple and during the reflection process of the Jewish religious leaders on the future of their religion, the controversy between the two communities, Jews and Christians, has hardened further. Being Christian and at the same time a full member of the Jewish community was not accepted any more. The break became total. At a meeting of the Pharisees after the destruction of the temple, held in Jamnia located in the vicinity of Jaffa, the formal excommunication was pronounced against Christians along with a curse of the heretics and the curse had to be repeated at the beginning of each service in the synagogue. This refines somewhat the picture that anti-Semitism is entirely due to the Christians.

The situation was very different in the crucible of uprooted local cultures in Asia Minor with its new and dominant culture of Hellenism: a breeding ground for all kinds of experiments. Religions popped up everywhere in the most exorbitant forms. Truly a breeding ground for something special. The presence of large Jewish communities in the Diaspora of Asia Minor was the base for the emergence of a new religion, with Paul as the great animator of a development that competed with the great local religious movements. In the development of the Christian communities in Asia Minor, the attention was first focussed on the risen Lord, but later the man Jesus became part of a further development of the religion and was he transformed into the God-man Jesus Christ, which fits with how societies at that time and in that region coped with the supernatural.

But if we assess objectively what has happened in Asia Minor, we have to conclude that there was an essential element missing, there was no Jesus-story. Who was Jesus anyway? In the letters of Paul we could not find any information. But people have a need for an approach that fits within their perceptions and experiences. In a religion one is looking for a man who is an example by his way of life, a man who can be imitated. One seeks someone who can be admired, a man of flesh and blood. Ideas are nice but ultimately never enough for a popular movement and lasting success. It was Mark who first wrote a narrative account of the life of Jesus. This gospel, the first of an extensive collection of stories, is the success story of the new religion. The academic speculations of Paul found a counterpart therein. The doctrines of the redemption and atonement, of the significance of the Christ, and of the Trinity remain but they are difficult to understand by the ordinary believer. Paul speaks out about the position of Jesus, the Christ, through whom salvation for all men has become available, with even a perspective of a life after death. Let us not forget Luke who understood the significance of a Life of Jesus as a binding element for the new religion. By writing his two books, consisting of a gospel and the Acts, he makes clear that Paul's work has been the continuation of the life of Jesus. In the first chapters of the Acts he lets both episodes blend together seamlessly. In the practice of the faith the Gospel still stands central.

THEOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Christianity in the first period showed us a number of independent communities with different characteristics. In the second period important processes took place that focused the quest for unity. It concerned the search for a uniform christian doctrine, the adoption

of a directive, indicating which are the holy books, and a church structure with clear lines of authority and power. My interest goes mainly to the theological foundation of the new religion that took place in the second phase of the development. In particular I have in mind the Credo, which every Sunday is pronounced in the celebrations by singing or reading its text. Initially, in the first century, the risen Lord was in the centre of attention in the churches of the Christ, and therefore we have to understand that everything that was said in those early days stood in relation to this heavenly figure. In the theological development during the second phase of the evolution of Christianity, the attention was focused on the man Jesus. The historical Jesus had become someone from the past. The theological debate then found a new challenge.

The man Jesus became involved in the theology around the Christ-figure. Certainly, the exaltation of the risen Lord, the Christ, during the first period of Christianity fits into the spirit of the age. The elevation of a martyr who died for the good cause and was an example of virtue, fits into the Hellenistic pattern of hero worship. Also in Jewish history the image of the man who has fought the good fight, suffered and was awarded posthumously, was not uncommon. However the exaltation of the man Jesus, by giving him a divine dignity, is a fact that can not be denied. The church has apparently found, in the spirit of the time, a way to express the unique position of Jesus. In our time we would have expressed ourselves in a more reserved way. It is very difficult for us to understand why the man Jesus of Nazareth also must share in the deification of the risen Christ. How did it come to this, I wonder? However, the facts speak for themselves. This transformation in which the historical Jesus, after his death, was

transformed into a new historical figure, with both divine and human qualities, was not achieved without struggle. The theological visions followed each other at rapid pace. It was in particular this theological struggle that for centuries was the big issue and has led to major schisms. Church history from the early centuries clearly shows the contradictions in theological beliefs between different groups. This brings me to the question: where was, during this long struggle, divine inspiration involved and where not? What determined the choice of the direction which Christianity finally has taken? Was this choice inspired or were theologians decisive, with their personal preferences and ambitions? It may sound cynical, but at such a moment I realize how often people cause misery to others by their nagging and stubbornness! Before the dogmatic formulations were written down by the theologians, and were recorded during councils, there was a fierce longlasting battle going on about the position and appreciation of Jesus, that caused many heresies, which still divide Christianity on key points today. The first ecumenical council at Nicaea in 325 was in the following centuries followed by many others, including those of Constantineople in 381, of Ephesus in 431 and that of Chalcedon in 451. In the wording of the decisions that were taken in the councils, we see the record of what has happened at that time. They give a subcutaneous view on the battle between the new theological visions. In the Creed of the Sunday celebration we always affirm, singing or praying, our faith in formulations recorded during these councils of the new religion. The decisions of the councils, the concepts and formulations, stem from a time that has little in common with ours. The church leadership has repeated these statements of faith again and again over the centuries . So be it!

But I still have my problems to understand what happened in the Hellenistic Asia Minor, with the most bizarre phenomena in the field of religions. There by merging the wealth of ideas of the great greek thinkers and philosophers with the jewish treasure of religious thought, the foundation was laid for the christian religion as we know it today. The lead was taken by the Church-Fathers and the young educated theologians, with knowledge of greek philosophy and literature, the jewish writings and the history of early Christianity. They were aware of the wealth of ideas of the philosopher Plato. The Jews had already used ideas and concepts of Plato in the interpretation of their own writings. Known is the work of the jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria in Egypt, born 30 BC and deceased at 45 AD. The concept of logos, from the philosophy of Plato, was used by Philo in his philosophical reflections about jewish thought. This concept has been fundamental in the development of the theology of the new religion. In addition to the concept of logos, concepts from jewish wisdom literature also played a major role. Moreover, we know that in the jewish wisdom literature, activities and attributes of God are described as if they exist separate from him , although connected to him. We have in mind concepts such as the Spirit of God, the Wisdom of God, personified images of divine actions and divine attributes. Consciously, we use capital letters to display such words. When we are talking about the Word of God, the creative Word that emanates from him, we are essentially just referring to God himself. We are trying to cover our inability to catch him in images, by using human images of what we perceive as the results of his actions. In the Gospel of John we see that the philosophical ideas of the Greeks have led to the speculations about the figure of Christ. This gospel

has played an important role in the development of theology about Jesus of Nazareth.

CHRISTIANITY: THE BACKBONE OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

During the process of development of the new religion there was a fierce competition between different groups to reach orthodoxy in the manner as they saw it. It was the time of the big names: Valentinus, Tertullian, Irenaeus and Origen, to name only a few. Valentinus, the great representative of the gnostic movement, on the one side and Tertullian and Irenaeus, the fighters against the heresy, as the victors are usually called, on the other side. The struggle was not only about the correct assessment of the figure of Jesus and the place of the Jewish heritage in the new religion, but also about a responsible choice of the holy books. The unity of doctrine and Scripture was only achieved after a long struggle in which well-meaning supporters of one party were denounced by equally well-meaning opponents. The battle for the right choice was fierce and was fought in a way that would fit in the political arena in our days. The battle was often ruthless against opponents, involving personal attacks. Even bringing the personal integrity of the adversary into disrepute, was an accepted strategy. Heretics were often described as deceivers who do not hesitate to lead devout Christians astray. The main heretic fighter was Irenaeus (around 180 AD), bishop of Lyon. He was a fierce opponent of Gnosticism. In his view the more or less non-committal behavior, which he observed at religious ceremonies in certain communities, was absolutely not acceptable. He also had major objections to the important place of some women in the celebrations. In this dispute the victory was for those with the strongest arguments and the best organization behind him. In this fight, the

contribution of Irenaeus was extremely important. He appealed to the apostolic tradition, which he found visibly present in the four canonical gospels, especially in the two books of Luke. In the canonical Gospels, the most widespread and coherent view on the person of Jesus Christ could be found. They were considered as a historically accurate account of the life of Jesus. Moreover, the evangelist interprets the writings of the Old Testament as referring to what had happened to Jesus. So there is a connection between the canonical texts and the books in the Old Testament. As a person who pursued a vigorous ecclesiastical structure, Irenaeus had the support of those who were of the same mind.

In the year 313 freedom of religion was proclaimed by Emperor Constantine, so that the christian faith could openly be professed. From that moment the internal tensions within the young religion became visible. The violent polemics and contradictions, about which we have just written in the previous section, were seen by Constantine as a threat for the survival of the young religion. He wanted unity and peace within his realm and he did not tolerate further internal quarrels. In the year 325 he convened in Nicea the first ecumenical council of Christianity. His influence on the course of the council and the decisions that were taken there, was considerable. That way, an end was made to theological differences by the Emperor, at least for the time being. The unity of the church was now guaranteed, but at the expense of the loss of independence. The Empire has embraced Christianity so closely that it has obstructed the possibilities of the young church for a long time, says Hans Küng. He speaks about a Catholic State Church, under the control of the emperor, even with a substantial influence on the content of the decisions of the councils.

But after this, more or less, enforced unity through political intervention of the emperor, still all kinds of heresies emerged and led to splits in the christian churches. At that time, Christianity as an institution has gradually acquired the characteristic traits of the Roman society. Indeed, even now we recognize in the current organization of the Roman Catholic Church, the power structure of the Roman Empire, with the Pope at the head and directly below him the government apparatus, the Curia, and the bishops and heads of the local communities of believers. As the power relations in the Roman Empire were absolute, it is still so in the Roman Catholic Church. In the year 367 bishop Athanasius of Alexandria formulated a list of books that had to be considered as inspired. The final choice out of the many available texts, was essential for the sake of unity within the ecclesial community. From that moment on the church had a canon, a guide for the new religion. The church in the time of Constantine, was a church with a doctrine that fits perfectly into the hellinistic culture and with a structure derived from the realm of the imperial supervisor. It was a religion with a strong social face, with the moral values of the jewish ethics but without the obligations of the Jewish Law. In the battle for orthodoxy the former (jewish) Jesus-movement of the Ebonites was placed outside the official church as a heretical movement. Being Jew and at the same time a follower of Jesus was not in compliance with the new ideas.

The Church history teaches us how unity has grown out of the chaos of diversity. Not without struggles and pains and even not without persecution of deviating beliefs. For the achieved unity a high price was paid. After several centuries nothing was left of the free spirituality in Christianity from the first period. What previously was a diffe-

rence in interpretation, which could be considered as an enrichment, was now considered as deviating from the orthodox doctrine. Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism, has put on a tight theological straightjacket. Pluralism degenerated into rigidity and aberrant convictions were not accepted anymore. Diversity was exchanged for heresy: the consequence of this changed vision.

CHAPTER 8 : EPILOGUE

The research carried out by me was much more extensive than what is included in this study. What now lies before you gives the necessary elements that are important for a clear picture of what I discovered during my investigations.

Our research has focused on the earliest period in the development of Christianity. What took place later, is no part of my study. Anyone who is interested can find enough literature about the early history of Christianity. But little is known about the very first period when the new religion was in its infancy and hardly to characterize as such, It is the time of the oral tradition and the first texts which we now know thanks to recent discoveries and scientific research. The study focusing on what happened during this early first period is still not completed. But the results of recent studies are, I dare to say, mostly unknown to the leaders of the different Churches.

RETROSPECT AND CONCLUSIONS

Looking back, I realize how, in recent years, my view on Christianity has changed. The motivation for my research was the discontent that gradually had come over me. The christian faith had lost for me its obviousness. More and more questions forced themselves on me. How was it possible that the Church's teaching was so often at odds

with reason, the rational mind of man. A feeling of annoyance emerged about the tenacity with which the Church holds on to questionable matters such as the doctrine of the original sin, the virginity of Mary, the old belief based on dogmas in often incomprehensible formulations, and the ancient ecclesiastical structure from the Roman period. What can the church still mean to me at a time that has so little in common with the time in which Jesus lived. How can the doctrine of the church, which took shape, get a place in a worldview that differs so substantially from that of the past? The realization that no solution could be expected from the Church, certainly not within a reasonable time, was for me the reason to start a personal investigation. What was more natural than to begin with a study of the origins of Christianity and the central figure in it: Jesus of Nazareth.

Using modern scientific literature that was available in abundance at that time, I have subsequently oriented myself as widely as possible. Optimistic as I was, I tried to undertake a businesslike and objective investigation. It's an illusion to think that such a rational approach is really possible. What an illusion to think that it is possible to conduct first an investigation and then only afterwards to draw conclusions. Emotions during my activities taught me how greatly the christian faith was integrated in my life and how painful some experiences were. Because research into the origins of Christianity was not possible without trying to learn something about the historic man Jesus of Nazareth, my view on Christianity has changed substantially in more than one respect. It is for sure that I never more will read the texts in the Gospels in the same naive way as before. The result of the research was both shocking and enlightening. Through the demythologizing of the texts, to quote the famous German theologian Ru-

dolf Bultmann, Jesus of Nazareth stands there before me, a human being like you and me. The church has always told us the story of Jesus of Nazareth as the story of the God-man who has atoned for our sins by his suffering and death. For the elderly among us this was never a problem. We made no distinction between the man and the God-man Jesus, with the result that we learned to understand the gospel as the history of a living person, as someone who has always remained among us. For believers, Jesus is the same person before and even after his death and resurrection. But this absolutely does not fit with the Jesus of Nazareth whom we have learned to know through the texts.

More than ever, I am aware of the immense distance between Jesus and the image of him that the church shows us. The man Jesus of Nazareth is someone from the past! That this must affect the faith of the Church seems obvious to me. I realize that this confession makes me vulnerable in the eyes of the ecclesiastical guardians of the true faith.

Yet, I have the conviction to be a more conscious Christian than before, and with the feeling to be more connected with the Christian traditions than ever before. This may sound absurd; I will try to explain this belief. But first, I will summarize the main points of my research.

JESUS, THE MAN BEHIND THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

The experience, gained during my research on the historical Jesus, is priceless. I met a man as one does not often see in life. I was able to touch a mystery of God in the shape of a man. Thanks to this charismatic man the world looks now very different. Thanks to the work of his followers, he made the treasure of the Jewish heritage available

to all humanity. The Bible testifies thereof and so does the history of the Church.

The man Jesus remains still and always the man with the many faces, present in the interpretation of every biblical author. And Jesus said ..., as we read constantly. How difficult it is to pick up the gold granules that reflect something of the real Jesus.

From a christian interpretation that obscures differences and aligns with the Church's teaching, a picture of Jesus is presented to us. This image moves between two extremes: the description as Matthew gives us and the interpretation of John. The description in Matthew fits closely to the jewish origins of Christianity with the jewish moral laws. It is the Sermon on the Mount with the proclamation of the eight beatitudes that is characteristic of this view. Matthew portrays Jesus here as a unique jewish scribe. Certainly, Jesus lived from the Jewish Law and the faith of his people but what counts is how he was perceived by his friends and listeners. John, however, gives a picture of Jesus that has little in common with the man Jesus. Both evangelists have also made Jesus to the interpreter of the frustrations they had in their relations with the jewish community in the vicinity.

Apart from the Bible writers, who have given us their personal vision, also the church has taught us, believers, how to look at the gospel texts.

The church has created its own Jesus, who speaks, after his death and resurrection, the language of the church leaders and with his voice supports the decisions taken by them. The Roman Catholic Church tells us again and again with the voice of Jesus that women explicitly are excluded from the ordained ministry. The church leadership pronounces even now a veto in our time. Apparently, the church

cannot get rid of beliefs that characterize the primitive societies of the past, with their dominance of men and the total subordinate position of women. As the appendix in the course of evolution has lost its usefulness to humans, but often remains a source of physical misery, in a similar way the primitive worldview remains important in religious beliefs and especially in our time, can be a permanent source of misunderstanding and disagreement in christian society. Although popes regularly speak about the lofty task of motherhood and praise women as the heart of the family, the church fails when it comes to assigning rights to women that puts them in a similar position as the men. There is no indication to be found in the Gospels that Jesus is responsible for this conviction. Yes, indeed, Jesus lived in a society where women were marginalized. But we also know that Jesus has not founded the church and so could not rule out anybody for an ecclesiastical office.

Why would he, a law-abiding Jew, who was aware of his mission as a son of the chosen people, establish a new religious community? This was reserved for the gentile Christians who took the initiative in Asia Minor where the outlines of a new religion became visible.

However, the Church remains convinced that it was Jesus himself who founded the church and introduced the sacraments, such as Baptism, Confirmation and the Confession. The texts that should support this conviction, however, lack a historical reality, because they are written with the intention to attribute ecclesiastical developments to Jesus. Especially the resurrection stories are ideal for statements of Jesus to support the development of the young community. You may, perhaps, be surprised that such stories are taking place mainly in the period after the resurrection. The problems of the

young churches had to do with competency issues, with power and authority in a phase of construction. That is why the evangelists after the resurrection, describe Jesus as the Risen Lord who personally teaches the future church leaders, in accordance with the ideas that existed within the communities. These texts clearly have no other historical reality than the gospel writer (or later copyists) claimed. The evangelists are engaged here in a kind of creative history-writing that matches with the developments in their own ranks.

The Gospel of John contains in chapter 21, in later editions, an additional passage in the verses from 15 to 25, where explicitly the apostle Peter was appointed by Jesus as the shepherd of the flock of the church. This demonstrates Peter's unique position, and that of the subsequent popes.

The Church relies on the same evangelist when it comes to the institution of the sacrament of Confession. The well-known text in Jn20,22-23 reads: "After saying this he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained."

Another example is the text from Matthew chapter 16 with the famous confession of Peter at Caesarea Philippi. This text in verse 15 reads: 'But you, 'he said. 'who do you say I am? 'Then Simon Peter spoke up and said. 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God' Jesus replied, 'Simon son of Jonah, you are a blessed man! Because it was no human agency that revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. So I now say to you: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my community. And the gates of the underworld can never overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of Heaven: whatever you bind

on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”.

In the Gospel of Matthew we read in the last chapter in verses 18-20 the main commission of Jesus to his apostles. In it, he recommends to make all nations his disciples and to baptize them "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." Here Jesus speaks the famous baptismal formula, which is still in use in the liturgy but which clearly dates from a later period.

NOTHING HAS CHANGED

We can observe that fundamentally nothing had changed after two thousand years of Christianity in the way the Church speaks about the content of faith. The same words and the same images are still in use in liturgy and sermon. The original sin and the virgin birth of Jesus remain cornerstones of faith. Sticking to the original sin, in the old and existing formulation, frustrates the intellect of man. Continuing to believe in the virgin birth of Jesus means a denial of the natural order for procreation, gives sexuality in human society a negative image, negates confidence in the human ability to play an essential role in God's plan and turns Jesus of Nazareth into a man who factually is not a real man anymore. These are examples of what was seen before as a meaningful and enriching experience, but now, by the insistence of the church to hold onto its literal truth, as no longer acceptable for modern people. The pastoral practice acknowledges those difficulties.

And what to think about a pastor who, on the feast of Corpus Christi, the day that commemorates the institution of the Eucharist by the Roman Catholics, wants to tell the believers a meaningful story about

the Eucharist and the charged theological term transubstantiation, and about the presence of Christ in the form of consecrated bread and wine. Can he now say to his listeners that the true meaning of the liturgical text is different from what is pronounced in the literal words: that it is about what lies beyond, about sacrifice and suffering, about commemoration in gratitude, about sharing and together being one. He could also refer to the meaning of the eucharistic meals in the Hellenistic Asia Minor, where in the tradition of Jesus, the poor were allowed to share in the prosperity of the more fortunate.

Modern people cannot understand and appreciate ideas and visions that were normal in the first centuries of Christianity. The way of thinking and the used concepts of modern humans differ substantially from those of the early Christians. Or better formulated: people today are simply unable to understand what exactly is meant by a theological statement from that time. Or perhaps even better: people will now almost certainly misunderstand the former statements, because they will, without further reflection, almost automatically give a completely different meaning to concepts and words than was originally intended. Arguments and reasoning that were then common, are now outdated. Mythical stories are seen as characteristic for times long ago. Without a thorough study, a modern man is not able to properly assess theological texts of that time. This not only requires knowledge of Hellenistic culture and Greek philosophy, but also of the theological issues of that time, and of the social and political conditions. At the time of the roman emperors religion was a political issue. The influence of politics at the time of the emperors on theological formulations of dogmas during the councils must not be

underestimated. However, there is something else that is just as crucial. It's not just about formulations of the past being difficult to understand. It lies deeper! People are now fundamentally different. The early Christians considered the presence of the divine in their lives as quite normal. For them the Jesus, who lived as a human being, is the same as the Christ, the risen Lord. He was not someone from the past. For them it was quite common to believe in the supernatural. Miracles, miraculous healings, and deification after death did not sound strange, but appealed to a need for contact with what is above us. In the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus, Luke understood perfectly the needs of his contemporaries. Through the centuries, the Church has kept alive the connection between heaven and earth by responding to the needs of humans for contact with the supernatural. That happened in lofty liturgical celebrations, in the Marian devotion, in church festivals. On the feasts of All Saints and on 2-November the lasting bond with the deceased was highlighted, with those who were transferred to another life. But gradually there came a rift between heaven and earth. The time of the Enlightenment emphasized the causality, the regularity of things happening in nature. The gaze from the people was directed more and more horizontally towards the earth, and the earth became a challenge that demanded all attention. The feeling of dependence on a higher power reduced. The affinity for what is outside our observational world has almost disappeared. The distance between heaven and earth has become very large. Jesus has become a man of the past. The connection between Jesus of Nazareth and the Christ-figure is no longer experienced as a living reality. That is the way I feel and experience it, and many others with me. But the Church keeps silent and worries only about the past. It is time to approach this issue more seriously and

look for a new approach of the fundamental truths in a contemporary world.

A LIVING TRADITION THAT STARTS WITH ABRAHAM

During my investigation of the early years of Christianity, I was impressed by the importance of the Jewish people and its religion on the development and spread of the new religion. The growing awareness of belonging to a living tradition that connects both religions, despite the differences, can for me only be a great support in my life. This tradition is divided into two parts and its history also consists of two parts. The oldest part is called the Old Testament, containing the books about the history of the Jewish people. The Christians have given their contributions the name New Testament. It would be correcter, as it is usual among scientists, to speak of the First and the Second Testament, so that the connection between the two books is clearly displayed. The First Testament is the treasure of the Jews, the Second Testament, with the central figure of Jesus of Nazareth, is the book of the Christians. Jews will have mixed feelings about texts in the New Testament, being painfully touched by the many passages that have portrayed them in an ignominious way. Christians, however, have read the texts of the Jews with the intention to find something that transcends the typical Jewish time of the Old Testament and that refers to the New One. In the Bible both contributions can be found in the same book. They belong together and together they give us an unbroken line of living faith, whether Jewish of character or with a Christian signature. Those living traditions of faith in the same God, I want to examine briefly.

I'm always looking for certainty, for something that can survive the test of criticism. But history in ancient times, either political or reli-

gious in nature, always contain mythical elements. It is difficult to trace the historical core: what is true and what actually happened that way. There are moments in the history of the Jewish people that are undeniable, even if it is doubtful whether it concerns events that really took place. An author can make a comment that he experiences something as a living reality, whether it is true or not. This is the case when one reads how Abraham throws the stone idols of his father onto the ground. It is not important whether it was indeed done that way, but Abraham is put here into the limelight as the personification of a stubborn person who refuses to make an effigy of God in the shape of a living being: human or animal. In this way he expresses the total otherness of Yahweh; he expresses the human inability to think and to speak about him in human images. This idea or even conviction, by a people of a transcendent God is unique and can hardly be imagined so early in the history of mankind. Amid the surrounding peoples Israel has this exceptional conviction. Transcendent, elusive and distant as he is, he wants at the same time to be a God who is near and he chooses a people with whom he enters into a covenant. Throughout the Old Testament we experience that the Jews were convinced to have been chosen by Yahweh as his own people. Yahweh made a covenant with Abraham, who got the promise to become the father of a great nation. This conviction comes across clearly in all scriptures and begins to take real shape after the exodus from Egypt under Moses. The historicity of the early history and what preceded the conquest of the Promised Land, is not so important. The authors wanted to illustrate what lived among the people and how they experienced the relationship with Yahweh, and that's what matters. The covenant is an essential element in Jewish history. The covenant with Yahweh, as enshrined in the five books of Moses,

puts an extra claim on how to live in practice. The moral laws and standards are not simple. Love for Jahweh and the fellow man are put next to each other; in dealing with other people the care for widows, orphans, foreigners and slaves comes first. The Jewish Law does not talk only about religion, the Jewish Law is also the foundation of the Jewish community. The Jewish religion is ethnically based and the Jewish Law defines the social boundaries of a people: it determines what is outside and what is inside. Jewish history is both of religious and political character. At the time of Jesus a significant number of inhabitants of the Roman Empire came into contact with the rich Jewish ideas of social justice and the high moral values. The number of Jews and sympathizers is estimated to be between seven and ten million, about 10% of the total population of the Roman Empire, according to the historian Salo W. Baron. This is an incredibly high percentage. The admiration for the Jewish religion was tempered by the almost impregnable barrier formed by the Jewish Law, which constitutes a major obstacle by its practical implementation for non-Jews; a complete acceptance of the Jewish religion means accepting its many ritual obligations, with dietary laws and the circumcision.

The awareness of being a chosen people, was no guarantee of a life in accordance with it. Who reads in the books of the Old Testament, experiences soon that the relationship of the Jewish people with Yahweh was constantly under pressure. The Jewish people were never a very docile people. It was always tempting to participate in the pagan worship services of the surrounding nations. Social abuses were the rule rather than the exception. Oppression by foreign nations, was always seen as a punishment from Yahweh for straying

from the straight path. This is where the prophets came in, who as hornets continually pointed to abuses. Their active role has been of fundamental importance for the survival of the Jewish religion. These men had not only a significant influence on the religious side of life but also played often an eminent role in the political world. When we think of prophets, Christians always immediately think of people predicting what will happen in the future. That is typically the meaning that Christians give to the word prophet, since one considers the texts of the Old Testament as a reference to Jesus of Nazareth. Prophets were indeed visionaries, people with their antenna tuned to the divine, receptive to the spirit of God. With both feet in reality, they felt themselves called and touched by God, even though some felt ill-suited to the task and even had an aversion to what was expected of them. From the biblical texts we can deduce what they saw as their mission: warning, pointing to abuses, even threatening, giving counsel, encouraging, comforting and referring to the salvation that will come from Jahweh by painting heavenly pictures of the messianic time when the world will have a different appearance.

The Old Testament describes the history of the Jewish people before the coming of Jesus of Nazareth. With the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in the year 70 and the subsequent war with Rome in the second century, there came no end to the Jewish religion and the Jewish identity, but for a long time the Jewish people were merely deprived of a homeland. The destruction of the temple and Jerusalem forced the spiritual leaders to reflect on a future without temple and temple state. In Palestine and later mainly in the Diaspora the foundation was laid for a new form of religious Jewish life and thought. The Talmud is the written record of this new way of religious Jewish

live. It offers the opportunity to survive as a Jew in a hostile world. Scattered across the world, the Jewish religion and identity remained intact through the centuries, and still the Jews continue to cherish the great past with the same old ideals and expectations in mind. The Jewish religion is a living religion.

At the border of the transition from the Old to the New Testament, stands Jesus of Nazareth. Belonging to the Old Testament before his death, born of Jewish parents and Jew among his countrymen, he becomes after his death, the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, the icon of God in the New Testament. Christianity has taken over from the Jews the image of the transcendent God, who nevertheless is a God close by, but at the same time adapted it to the customs and needs of people to express their faith in human images. This option was available to them thanks to the man Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity has given God a human face by dressing the man Jesus with divine dignity. In the development of new religions, myths are indispensable. With the Jewish people, we see this reflected in the great stories around the key figures in its history. By the fundamental rejection of the humanization of Yahweh, the mythmaking was limited to men only and has never centered around Yahweh. Through the focus on Jesus as the risen Lord in the new religion and the strong influence of the pagan environment, it was almost inevitable that the man Jesus could not escape from mythification.

The Christians lived in the belief that after the death and resurrection of Jesus the old covenant with the Jews was replaced by a new covenant with the followers of the risen Lord as the new chosen people. We see this view in the gospel of Mark, who infers the rejection of the Jews from the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Throughout history of the church we see the practical effects of this belief, which are extremely painful for the Jews. Christianity owes much to the Jews; it did not go unprepared and without mental baggage on its adventurous road to conquer the world. Judaism had paved the way for Christians by its spread in the Roman Empire and the attractive power exerted by its ideas and way of living. In this way the Jewish centers in the Roman Empire became a base for the new religion. Not only Christianity has exploited the Jewish heritage, as testified by the social legislation in the Western world, but it has also taken over the sympathy of the Roman world for Judaism. Because Jewish Law was an obstacle for the complete acceptance of the Jewish religion, it was unable to compete with the emerging Christian faith that adopted the high moral content of Judaism but not the obstacles thereof.

The new religion began the great adventure without any experience, but had access to the entire biblical treasure of Jewish history. So one could experience how the relationship with Yahweh had been through the ages and how in a process of trial and error the religion has won in depth. It became a source from which the Christian churches have drawn richly and lastingly.

Even the followers of Jesus of Nazareth were vulnerable to all possible imperfections and shortcomings inherent to people in our world. It's hard to insist that Christians would be better people than non-Christians. The history of Christianity has many dark pages, some of them written in blood. It is unfortunate to note this. Politicians have embraced Christianity from the beginning as the binding force for the nations, with the result that it was almost impossible for the Church to maintain an independent course during many centuries. In

this way, the Church was too often compromised by walking on a leash of worldly interests. The persecution of dissenters, the inquisition against church members who wanted to follow their own conscience, the conversions by the sword during the conquest of territories in the New World, speak for themselves. But what is undeniable is the continuous stream of great people, who are shining examples and beacons for the faith community on its way towards a society of love and justice. Every generation has its own examples with the spirit and inspiration for the society in which they lived, sometimes with a global reach, sometimes in smaller circles, but always clearly people, marked by God. They were and are people in whom we feel the presence of God. They showed what really matters in life. What began with Jesus of Nazareth, continues in them.

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