

## THE GALILEAN JESUS AND A CONTEMPORARY CHRISTOLOGY

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*Current interest in the Galilean Jesus as a historical figure has obscured the christological claims of the New Testament with regard to his person and ministry. This article seeks to build bridges between Jesus and the proclamation about him by exploring three themes arising from accounts of his ministry (messiahship, openness to Gentiles, and the role of wisdom teacher) by examining each theme within the context of Galilean life in the Herodian period, and by demonstrating how these aspects of Jesus' Galilean career are carried forward and developed into the early Christian proclamation.*

**I**N THIS ARTICLE I seek to integrate three different aspects of Jesus' career in Galilee with the early Christian proclamation about him: Jesus as messianic claimant, the openness of Jesus to Gentiles, and Jesus as wisdom teacher. I suggest that these aspects take on richer and deeper significance when they are interpreted in the context of the everyday experiences of Galilean life and landscape in the Herodian period. My contention is that only such a historico-theological approach can illustrate the universal meaning that is disclosed in and through the particularity of Jesus' life. God did not become human as a universal, but in the particularity of the life and praxis of Jesus.

### METHODOLOGICAL REDUCTIONISM

In an oft-repeated introductory statement to his *Theology of the New Testament*, Rudolph Bultmann declared that "*the message of Jesus* is the presupposition for the theology of the New Testament rather than a part of

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that theology itself.”<sup>1</sup> This statement may well arise from Bultmann’s belief, expressed elsewhere, that we should only be interested in the *daß* (the “that”) of Jesus, not the *was* (the “what”), since the sources are both legendary and mythological. Yet his skepticism seems to have carried over to the Synoptic Gospels also, since the theologies of Jesus according to Matthew, Mark, and Luke play no part in Bultmann’s synthesis, which is based on the pillars of Paul and John. Recent scholarship has reversed this trend by relying heavily on the Synoptics, not in terms of constructing a New Testament theology—an enterprise that has virtually collapsed—but rather as sources from which data for constructing a life of Jesus could be mined.

Unlike the 19th-century liberal quest for the historical Jesus, the target of Bultmann’s skeptical reaction, the present so-called third quest is often conducted in ways that seek to retrieve the historical figure of Jesus independently of his relationship with the movement that emerged in his name. Thus the historical skepticism of Bultmann has, it would seem, been replaced by late 20th-century historicism. Yet neither can be said to do justice to the remembered Jesus of early Christian witness, which affirms his continued and unique significance for Christian belief and identity. Both are seriously reductionist: the Bultmannian position ignores the importance of Jesus’ life for an adequate theology of the New Testament, and the more recent trends seek to discover a Jesus without Christianity.

### Exploring a *Via Media*

In this article I explore a *via media* by highlighting the importance of the life of Jesus, that is, what he said and did, within the theologies of the Synoptic Gospels. While redaction criticism has taught us to recognize the different portrayals of Jesus in these three writings, they share a common gestalt of Jesus as a Galilean teacher/prophet/healer, whose life and ministry continued to have significance in different contexts for different early Christian congregations. To be sure, other portrayals of Jesus’ life were also current, most notably John’s, but this situation of diverse accounts did not give rise to an ethos of anomie in early Christianity. It is surely noteworthy that the emerging great church of the second century, even when confronted with pagan taunts about contradictions between the various accounts, opted for the fourfold Gospel witness, rather than a single version of Jesus’ life, such as Tatian attempted. While an adequate New Testament theology has to take full cognizance of this diversity and avoid reducing it to an imposed unity, it should equally be remembered that this creedal and myth-making diversity within early Christianity was based on the memory of the actual

<sup>1</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, 2 vols., trans. Kendrick Grobel (London: SCM) 1:3, emphasis original.

Jesus. Christian gnostic writings did indeed minimize the importance of the pre-Easter Jesus, but even then there is some connection with the received story of Jesus, such as the reliance on the sayings tradition in the Gospel of Thomas, or encounters of known members of Jesus' inner circle with the Risen One in the Gospels of Mary and Judas, and the Apocalypses of Peter and James. It is only in works such as the Gospel of the Egyptians, or the Gospel of Truth, where the full-blown gnostic redeemer myth has taken over, that reference to the historical figure of Jesus disappears completely.

### A Historico-Theological Approach

In a thought-provoking introduction to a recent collection of essays on New Testament theology, Rowan Williams distinguishes the two different approaches to the New Testament today—the theological and the historical—with reference to the Barth-Bultmann debates of the early 20th century.<sup>2</sup> He suggests that their different perspectives represent two different reading strategies—one a reading *with* the text in order to enter its world and experience the challenge that this otherness presents, and the other a reading *of* the text to determine what the text *does not know* in order to correct or supplement it, thereby aiding our understanding of its genre, its represented world, and its intentions. I suggest that these two strategies are not mutually exclusive, even if the first seems more straightforward in that it is the text rather than the interpreter that sets the agenda. Yet the second approach has a legitimate and highly significant role as well, one that goes beyond merely pointing out errors or omissions in the text, but has a more positive function of aiding the reader by showing what aspects of the past of Jesus were important for the choices of the Gospel writers and their audiences, and why this might be the case.

### Jesus, Judaism, and Galilee

One aspect of the life of Jesus on which all three Synoptics agree is that the public ministry of Jesus was primarily located in Galilee. Indeed, each in their different way wants to underline the singular importance of that fact. They also agree that it was only after the arrest of John that Jesus moves to Galilee, thus associating his ministry with that of the Baptist who is described as the Elijah who was to come. Matthew is particularly emphatic, applying two of his Scripture fulfillment texts to this fact. As a child, Jesus is brought by his parents to Nazareth in Galilee to avoid Archelaus's tyrannical rule in Judea, and the name of his village immediately evokes

<sup>2</sup> Rowan Williams, "Foreword," in *The Nature of New Testament Theology: Essays in Honour of Robert Morgan*, ed. Christopher Rowland and Christopher Tuckett (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2006) xiii–xix.

for Matthew the Isaian prophecy of the shoot (*nazir*) of Jesse, David's father (Isa 11:1; 53:2). When the adult Jesus settles in Capernaum after his baptism, the Matthean author again senses divine providence at work and applies to Jesus' ministry the Isaian prophecy for the northern tribes of restoration after the eighth-century Assyrian devastation and deportations (Isa 8:23; Mt 4:14–16). Mark emphasizes that Jesus' coming into Galilee to proclaim the arrival of the eschatological kingly rule of God is linked with "the fulfillment of time" (*kairos*, Mk 1:14–15), that is, God's appointed and appropriate moment. Luke uses the equally pregnant term *arche* to highlight the beginning in Galilee of Jesus' ministry that will eventually take him to Jerusalem (Lk 4:44; 23:3; Acts 10:37). Entering into the spirit of the texts, it is clear that, for the Evangelists, the fact that Jesus' ministry takes place in Galilee is no accident. The Evangelists present the Galilean ministry of Jesus as (a) the divinely foretold theater for (b) the manifestation of the eschatological event of God's saving act, which could (c) also be seen as a new beginning for humanity, and thus likened to the new creation.

Further, a second, more critical reading of the texts will show that much can be added to fill out the highly selective representation of Galilee that the different Evangelists present.<sup>3</sup> All three are looking back to the originating Galilean moment through resurrection-tinted glasses, yet all agree that Galilee was the place of beginnings. That fact could not be glossed over, even if apologetic concerns of a later time might have suggested that it would have been better had this not been the case. Galilee would forever be an integral part of the Christian proclamation of the Good News by and about Jesus Christ. Such a second reading engages in what I have elsewhere described as an intertextual exercise, borrowing Ernst Renan's much-used description of the Galilean landscape as "a fifth gospel, torn but still legible."<sup>4</sup> As is well known, the Galilean landscape is today *torn* in ways that Renan could scarcely have dreamed of, through scientific surveys and excavations of various sites. The data gathered from this work, as well as the critical readings of other literary sources concerning Galilee, provide a more comprehensive view from below of life in the region that can greatly assist in our understanding of various aspects of Jesus' life and ministry, aspects left hanging or indeterminate in the Gospel narratives. By bringing these Gospel narratives into a critical dialogue with our knowledge of Galilee, it is possible to suggest new and challenging readings of various sayings, episodes, and incidents, thereby sharpening the focus on the actual Jesus of the Gospel texts, and his ways of confronting the social

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion see Sean Freyne, *Galilee, Jesus, and the Gospels: Literary Approaches and Historical Investigations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988) 33–115.

<sup>4</sup> Ernst Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (1863; Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus, 1935, 1991) 23.

and religious life of his own time. Such an exercise of critical retrieval is not to engage in the historicist approaches of recent studies of the historical Jesus. These studies often discard the so-called framework statements of the Gospels as secondary and generalized, replacing them with a narrative framework within which the isolated scraps of information deemed authentic can be rearranged, and which present a modernized and often liberal account of Jesus that bears little resemblance to what the original was likely to have been.

In what follows I propose to focus on three separate aspects of Jesus' ministry as represented in the kerygmatic Gospel accounts. I seek to illustrate the theological implications of these aspects by placing them in the larger political and social, but also religious, setting of first-century Galilee, insofar as this can be critically reconstructed from available sources. In this respect it is important to remind ourselves that Jesus was not a freestanding and isolated figure, waiting to be clothed suitably by his followers in images arising from Jewish hopes and expectations. As a Galilean Jewish figure, he must have participated in and been affected by the everyday experiences of life as lived in the region. He would have been inspired and challenged by the stories of Israel's life in the north, been keenly aware of the ways his fellow Galileans in the past had responded to threats from within and without to their identity, and been acutely conscious of the dangers confronting him and his community in the immediate present. In other words, we must allow Jesus a fully human history as a Galilean, but one that is also steeped in his own Jewish religious traditions and the hopes emanating from them, something that his sojourn with John the Baptist must have both clarified and deepened. In seeking to build bridges between Jesus and his followers, it is often forgotten that they shared many of the same memories and hopes, and that both could draw on this rich repertoire of Jewish beliefs in order to understand and interpret their own experiences and feelings.

## GALILEAN ROOTS OF NEW TESTAMENT THEMES IN THE KERYGMA ABOUT JESUS

### Jesus, the Messiah of Israel

Awareness of Jewish expectations is certainly true in the case of the messiahship of Jesus, a topic that has returned to the scholarly agenda in the wake of some important discussions on the variety of messianic hopes in the literature of Second Temple Judaism.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the Synoptic authors invested the Galilean career of Jesus with messianic status. The fact that a term previously used to describe a role was transformed at quite

<sup>5</sup> John J. Collins, *The Scepter and the Star: The Messiahs of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Ancient Literature* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).

an early (pre-Pauline) stage into a personal name, *Jesus Christ*, raises the question as to whether it might already have been associated with the pre-Easter Jesus. In that event the New Testament texts bear witness to the transformation of Jewish messianism into early Christology.

There is, however, a significant difference in the various Synoptic presentations of Jesus' career as messianic.<sup>6</sup> The so-called messianic secret, which features Jesus' desire not to have his true identity disclosed, dominates the Markan narrative. Nowhere does Jesus declare himself to be the messiah until the final trial scene. When others recognize him as such, he silences them as in the case of the demons (Mk 1:25; 3:11–12; 5:8–9), or changes the terms of discussion as after Peter's confession (Mk 8:31). Even in Mark's trial before the high priest when Jesus replies "I am" to the question, "Are you the *Christos*, the son of the Blessed One?" He immediately elaborates on his answer by declaring that his claim will be authenticated in the future by his enthronement as the Son of Man at God's right hand, and his coming on the clouds of heaven (Mk 15:61–62).

By contrast, both Matthew and Luke remove the secrecy in their redaction of the Markan account. Both extend messianic status to the birth of Jesus, where his true identity and purpose are already made known by heavenly signs and voices. For Matthew, Jesus' messianic status is plain to see, since his life is the fulfillment of scriptural expectations at every step of the way, most especially in his words and healings, which are described as "the works (*erga*) of the Christ" (Mt 11:2). Throughout, Matthew is at pains to show that Jesus is the Son of David, and on each occasion the declaration gives rise to a heated discussion with the Jewish authorities. Yet, significantly, as we shall see, Jesus' actions and demeanor do not correspond with popular expectations of the Son of David, as these are expressed in the contemporary Jewish literature. Clearly, by the time of the writing of Matthew's Gospel the messianic status of Jesus has become a major bone of contention with the synagogue, as was also true in the case of the Fourth Gospel (Jn 7:25–44; 10:24–25; 12:34–35).

Luke invests the career of Jesus with a messianic aura from the outset as well. Thus the hopes of Israel are repeatedly to be found on the lips of various characters in the infancy stories (Lk 1:32–33; 1:68–79; 2:11; 2:25). The programmatic scene in the synagogue at Nazareth (Lk 4:16–22) is particularly important for Luke's presentation of Jesus' career, when he applies to himself the Isaian passage (Isa 61:1–2) dealing with the prophet anointed (*chrio*) by the Lord to bring good news to the poor (Lk 4:18).

<sup>6</sup> Graham Stanton, "Messianism and Christology: Mark, Matthew, Luke and Acts," in *Redemption and Resistance: The Messianic Hopes of Jews and Christians in Antiquity*, ed. Marcus Bockmuehl and James Carlton Paget (New York: T. & T. Clark International, 2007) 78–96.

At his trial the Lukan Jesus is accused of stirring up revolt throughout the country from Galilee to Jerusalem (Lk 23:2, 5), thus underlining the social aspects of Jesus' teaching as Luke presents it in the narrative. The theme of Israel's liberation is continued in the post-Resurrection encounters when the two disciples on the road to Emmaus declare that they had hoped that Jesus would be the redeemer of Israel (Lk 24:21). By the time of Luke's writing such a purely political hope lay in ruins, together with Jerusalem. But, for Luke, the messianic hope is not frustrated by Jesus' death as a prophet of justice, a true martyr/witness. Contrary to Jewish ideas about a glorious triumphant messiah figure, the risen Jesus reassures the eleven and those gathered with them that the death of the messiah was foretold in the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms, and that he would eventually triumph (Lk 24:26, 46). The way has been opened up for them to continue the witness about this alternative messianic community "from Jerusalem to the end of the earth," as Luke will report in Acts.

From this brief survey it is clear that the early Christian claims about messianic status of Jesus were highly contentious, and we can see signs of later polemics influencing the Gospel accounts of the life and ministry of Jesus in Galilee. Yet, especially in view of the early emergence of *Christos* as a name for Jesus, we are entitled to inquire whether or not such claims might plausibly reflect his earthly career, and, if so, which aspects were most likely to resonate with distinctively Galilean hopes? Clearly, his ministry was not going to satisfy the dominant Jewish expectation of a Davidic king who would liberate Israel from her enemies, purify Jerusalem of the impious, and establish a kingdom of justice and peace. Jesus' career could not match war-like profiles like that of the Psalms of Solomon, where such hopes found their fullest expression, especially Psalm 17. Jesus did indeed proclaim peace—"blessed are the peace-makers"—but unlike the imposed peace of Roman imperial rule and their Herodian retainers, the peace of Jesus came from the heart and called for openness, trust, and respect for the other. In this view, true peace can occur only when true justice reigns.

Other aspects of Jesus' activity in Galilee were highly compatible with a messianic profile, especially his healings and exorcisms. While he himself makes an explicit link between these actions and the presence of the kingdom of God (Mt 12:28; Lk 11:20), they also point to his own person as the one through whom that kingdom was both proclaimed and realized now.<sup>7</sup> This connection between the deeds of Jesus and his person is most clearly expressed in the Fourth Gospel, where the crowds proclaim him as prophet and want to take him by force to make him king, but he escapes

<sup>7</sup> Lidija Novakovic, *Messiah, the Healer of the Sick*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament (hereafter WUNT) 170 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).



their overtures (Jn 6:14–15). Here it would seem that claiming the title of Messiah was of no great interest to Jesus. Indeed, Mark says it is a sign of a false messiah to proclaim oneself in such a way (Mk 13:6, 21). For Jesus, the challenge seems to have been to live out the messianic values as he understood them, and to leave the future to his heavenly Father.

The establishment of the Twelve as the symbolic core of his new family could well have been understood as making a strong messianic claim. Indeed, there is evidence that some of his own closest disciples thought along these lines (Mk 10:35–37; Acts 1:6). One of the roles of Elijah was to gather the tribes that had been dispersed in preparation for the end time restoration (Sir 48:10), and the Davidic messiah was expected to do a similar task according to the Psalm of Solomon 17:25. This recurring hope was based on the legend of the northern tribes still existing across the Euphrates. This legend had a long “shelf life,” clearly indicating just how devastating the Assyrian conquest of the north had been in Israelite memory. As mentioned previously, an Isaian oracle of redemption to come was addressed to *Galilee of the nations*, which once had been occupied by four northern tribes: the Land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali (the two major tribes), the way of the Sea (i.e., the coastal plain, which the tribe of Asher had once inhabited), and beyond the Jordan (to where the tribe of Dan migrated, Isa 8:23).<sup>8</sup> While Matthew uses this Isaian text to link the coming of Jesus into Galilee to the theme of fulfillment, there is no reason why it would not also have played a role in Jesus’ own sense of mission and that of his contemporaries. As I have argued elsewhere, the journeys of Jesus in the northern region can be seen as enacting this “map of restoration,” which recurs at several places in the Jewish literature.<sup>9</sup>

In selecting the Twelve, Jesus clearly draws on this tradition and its implications for the north. But it is important to note how he redeploys the symbol for his own particular vision of what restoration means. When the idea of the twelve tribes (or its territorial equivalent in the north) is mentioned in Jewish literature, there is a clear sense of boundaries. Detailed lists of places are given (Ezek 47:13–23; Josh 13:2–7; Num 34:7–9), or alternatively, the right to occupy the territory in question is affirmed in

<sup>8</sup> The precise geography of this prose introduction to the poetic oracle is ambiguous, but it probably refers to the territories of the three Assyrian provinces in the region, Dura (Dor), Maggidu (Megiddo), and Galidu (Gilead). Thus the whole extent of the promised land as described by Ezekiel 47:15–19 and Joshua 13:2–7 is included in the redemption to come. The territory in question also covers the regions traversed by Jesus as described in Mark 7:31.

<sup>9</sup> Sean Freyne, “Messiah and Galilee,” in Freyne, *Galilee and Gospel: Collected Essays*, WUNT 125 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000) 230–70, esp. 253–56; and Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: A New Reading of the Jesus Story* (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2005) 74–91.



terms of ancestral lands (1 Macc 15:33). On the other hand, for the Jesus of the Gospels and his movements, the establishment of the Twelve has no such territorial implications. We are told instead that the Twelve will sit at his table in his kingdom (Luke) or sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew). Both images—meal and judgment seat—have a clear eschatological dimension. They symbolize the restored and renewed Israel of Jewish expectations, which involves a partnership, not a hierarchical model of community solidarity.

Thus, while other Galileans, both immediately before and after his time, engaged in violent reaction to the exploitation they were encountering, Jesus chose to challenge the status quo in a more subtle but in the end more effective and long-lasting manner, namely, through the power of symbolic actions and choices. This way was more effective because it did not continue the spiral of violence that was endemic in that society, but rather it sought to challenge both the oppressors and his overly enthusiastic followers to see the world differently and to prioritize their value system accordingly.<sup>10</sup> The second-century Christian apologist, Justin Martyr, has Trypho, his Jewish interlocutor, declare: “You Christians have shaped for yourselves a Christ for whom you are blindly giving up your lives” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 8:4). In fact, however, it was Jesus who long beforehand in Galilee had begun this process of reinterpreting the idea of the messiah in the light of his understanding of God’s kingdom.

### Jesus and the Nations

The links in the Synoptics between this theme of restoration and the messianic significance of the Galilean career of Jesus bring us to the attitude of Jesus toward the Gentiles, and their place in the Galilean ministry. In his ground-breaking study, E. P. Sanders writes: “Jesus started a movement which came to see the Gentile mission as the logical extension of itself.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, after some discussion of the evidence, Sanders is not able to identify any plausibly authentic saying of Jesus that might give some clues as to his views regarding the admission of Gentiles into his movement, either in the present or at the eschatological *denouement*, as Joachim Jeremias had suggested.<sup>12</sup> Thus, we shall have to infer what Jesus’ attitude might have been on the basis of the more securely established aspects of his ministry.

One could point to the Isaian citation about the Temple as “the house of prayer for all the nations” (Isa 56:7), which Mark puts on the lips of Jesus during the Temple incident (Mk 11:15–19). But, given the symbolic nature

<sup>10</sup> Gerd Theissen, “Die Jesusbewegung als charismatische Werterevolution,” *New Testament Studies* 35 (1989) 343–60.

<sup>11</sup> E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (London: SCM, 1985) 220.

<sup>12</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *Jesus’ Promise to the Nations* (London: SCM, 1958).

of this whole episode, one would like to be able to show that such sentiments reflected a more general attitude of Jesus toward Israel's relationship with the Gentiles, especially in view of his regathering of the tribes of the restored Israel at the end-time, which seems to have been central to his project, as was argued above. There is need, therefore, to search more widely to see how Israel's restoration and the inclusion of the Gentiles can form a single vision.

Sanders points out conflicting points of view on this topic, ranging from God's annihilation of the Gentiles as idolaters and serial sinners to the belief that the nations would come streaming to Zion in search of the wisdom of the restored Israel, a view particularly favored by Isaiah. As regards individual conversions and the question of daily contacts, the evidence is equally ambiguous. Attitudes obviously varied at different times and between the Diaspora and the homeland. Every shade of opinion seems to have been represented: from full-blown conversion (proselytes), to adherence to Israel's God while retaining one's former allegiances (God fearers), to the recognition by some rabbis that some Gentiles could be righteous.<sup>13</sup>

Early Christian practice might be our best witness to the more general situation, recognizing that it only represents how one group of Christ-believing Jews dealt with the matter. Paul, but also James, the brother of the Lord, can give us some insight into the issues at stake and perhaps also point us in the right direction for understanding Jesus' views. Recent studies have moved away from the history of religions view of Paul as the founder of a Hellenistic Christ-cult association toward views that favor Paul the Jew, deeply concerned with his own people from the outset of his mission.<sup>14</sup> In this revised, and surely correct, view of Paul's overall concerns, he and Jesus can be seen to share a similar Isaian model of the relationship of Israel and the nations, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

At this point James's view must also be taken into account with regard to how Jesus' vision and praxis could best find expression. The point at issue between Paul and James was not whether Gentiles could or should be admitted to the new movement, but rather the conditions under which that

<sup>13</sup> Paula Fredrickson, "Judaism, the Circumcision of Gentiles, and Apocalyptic Hope: Another Look at Galatians 1 and 2," *Journal of Theological Studies*, n.s. 42 (1991) 532–64, esp. 533–48.

<sup>14</sup> Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles and Other Essays* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976); E. P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns in Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paulus zwischen Damaskus und Antiochien: Die unbekannte Jahre des Apostles*, WUNT 102 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> See Sean Freyne, "The Jesus-Paul Debate Revisited and Re-Imaging Christian Origins," in *Christian Origins: Worship, Belief, and Society*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament, Supplement Series 241, ed. Kieran O'Mahoney (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003) 143–62.

should be allowed. Cultural as much as religious differences come into play between the Galilean Jewish perspective of James—a perspective that caused him to be centered in Jerusalem, as the logical outcome of his (belated) acceptance of Jesus as Messiah<sup>16</sup>—and that of Paul, the Diaspora Jew, with a more tolerant approach to Gentiles and their cultural affiliations. In Acts, Luke, writing for a later generation, sought to smooth out the differences between Paul and James, while acknowledging the latter's importance by giving him the right to decide on the matter in the account of the so-called Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:13–21). Reading between the lines of the various Pauline epistles, Galatians, Philippians, and 2 Corinthians in particular, one gets the impression that the different backgrounds gave rise to deeper theological fissures in which the Christ of faith of the Pauline school encountered the Jesus of history, as he was remembered and preached by Jerusalem/Galilean followers of Jesus.

The fact that no direct appeal to Jesus could be made to resolve the debate points us back to the initial question, namely, the attitude of Jesus toward Gentiles during his Galilean ministry. As is well known, the Isaian epithet *galil ha-goyim*/Galilee of the Nations has sometimes been used to describe the actual world of Jesus' ministry, supporting the claim that he was only marginally Jewish or, in its most extreme form, not Jewish at all. However, this view of Galilee can be exposed for what it was and still is today, namely, the product of a 19th-century overemphasis on the Hellenized and therefore enlightened, it is claimed, ethos of the region, and the devaluing of Galilee's Jewishness as sterile and outmoded.<sup>17</sup> It has been one of the major achievements of the archeological investigation of the region to show how one-sided and biased the older view was. The largely village culture within which Jesus' ministry was conducted, it can now be safely asserted, was thoroughly Jewish in ethos, affiliation, and practice.<sup>18</sup>

However, balance is needed in assessing this finding with regard to Jesus. For one thing, the Gospels, especially Mark, stress that Jesus moved in the periphery of Roman Galilee: Tyre and Sidon, Caesarea Philippi/Banias, and the Decapolis. The very name *Galilee*, meaning *the circle*, may well have resurfaced from earlier times with the rise in the Hellenistic and Roman period of the Greek cities in the wake of Alexander's conquest, in order to express the same feeling of being encircled by a non-Israelite culture. Even within the Galilee of Jesus' day there were tangible

<sup>16</sup> Sean Freyne, "Jesus and the Servant Community in Zion: Continuity in Context," in *Jesus from Judaism to Christianity: Continuum Approaches to the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén (New York: T. & T. Clark, 2007) 109–24.

<sup>17</sup> Mark A. Chancey, *The Myth of a Gentile Galilee*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series 118 (New York: Cambridge University, 2002).

<sup>18</sup> Sean Freyne, "Archaeology and the Historical Jesus," in *Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. John R. Bartlett (New York: Routledge, 1997) 117–44.

signs of Romanization at the Herodian centers of Sepphoris and Tiberias. In other words, Jesus may have been concerned with the largely Jewish population of the region, but it was not a Gentile-free zone. In terms of day-to-day contacts, the purity laws, especially as developed by the Pharisaic party, functioned to separate Jew from Greek (and Syrian). There is evidence that some of the more observant elements had developed their own boundary between areas where Jewish observance (with regard to the food and agricultural laws, e.g.) could be assured, and places (mainly close to the pagan cities) where it was less certain.<sup>19</sup>

The journeys of Jesus as described by Mark took him to those very regions of doubtful observance according to Pharisaic standards. But that did not make him or the inhabitants of the region any less Jewish in terms of their loyalties and worldview. The story of his encounter with the Syro-Phoenician woman whom he met in the region of Tyre (Mk 7:24–30) illustrates this point. Mark gives her a double identification: she was culturally Greek but Syro-Phoenician by birth.<sup>20</sup> That is, she was a thoroughly Hellenized inhabitant from one of the mixed, non-Jewish ethnic minorities of the area. Now relations between the Galilean Jews and the coastal cities varied considerably. And there is evidence of trading exchanges: Tyrian coins and pottery on the one hand, and Galilean agricultural produce (wheat, olives, and wine) on the other. Nonetheless, at certain moments the deep-seated religious and ethnic suspicions and animosities that were endemic to the ancient spiral of violence in the region would flare up, leading to bloodshed, destruction, and enslavement.

Thus, from the viewpoint of a Galilean Jew, Jesus' willingness to engage with this representative of an alien culture, and a woman besides, shows that he was not bound by the rigid purity and other markers of difference inscribed in that setting. Yet, his initial reaction to the woman's request for healing—likening her and her people to dogs—was disparaging, despite the best efforts of exegetes to soften its impact. Not deterred, the woman's response had the effect of opening Jesus' eyes to recognize the dark side of what he had said. It unmasked the potentially racist dimensions of his inherited tradition and revealed the ethnocentric leanings of his own vision of restoration.<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a story such as this with its implications of Jesus' narrowed vision being the creation of Mark. Actual or not, the story

<sup>19</sup> Rafael Frankel et al., *Settlement Dynamic and Regional Diversity in Ancient Upper Galilee*, Israel Antiquities Authority Reports 14 (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2001) 110–14.

<sup>20</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1992) 61–80.

<sup>21</sup> Elaine Mary Wainwright, *Shall We Look for Another? A Feminist Rereading of the Matthean Jesus* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998) 84–100.

illustrates the real world of everyday interaction, its plot moving between the poles of suspicion and openness, human need and plenty, within which the Galilean ministry of Jesus was conducted. We are entitled to enquire what might have been the impact of such an encounter on Jesus' own understanding. For Mark the episode is the prelude for Jesus' journey in the outer rim of Galilee that takes him via Sidon to the midst of the Decapolis (Mk 7:31).<sup>22</sup> How might this encounter have helped him clarify the values he had inherited and how best to sharpen them in order to reflect and express the graciousness of God's kingly rule that he proclaimed, as well as the gift of the land that he and his people had received? On the one hand, there is evidence in contemporary Jewish literature that one should forgive one's enemy (Sir 28:6–7), not refuse bread to the needy (Prov 25:21–22), not return evil for evil (Joseph and Asenath 28:14), and do good (Test of Joseph 18:2). On the other hand, nowhere except in the sayings of Jesus do we hear the injunction, "love your enemy," precisely because God's universal and individual care is for the whole human family, irrespective of their moral probity (Mt 5:24–25).<sup>23</sup> Thus, one might indeed wonder whether Jesus' seeming casual encounter with this *other*—other by culture, race, and gender—helped him see more clearly the ethnic, yet universal, implications of his total trust in the creator God, whom he could call Father.

### Jesus, Wisdom, and Creation

Thus far I have attempted to show how the theological themes found in the Gospels of the messiahship of Jesus and his attitude toward the Nations might have emerged from the historical context of his life and ministry as a Galilean Jew. In this section I will suggest how those narratives were deepened and universalized by a theme that appears in one of the earliest postresurrection reflections on the identity of Jesus, the putative Q document, which Matthew and Luke used independently. I will also explore the possible historical roots of this Gospel theme in the ministry of the Galilean Jesus and what those roots can suggest for its significance in contemporary Christology.

Twice in the Q document Jesus is identified with personified wisdom, *Sophia*. For Matthew this identification is based on his works, whereas Luke probably retains the more likely original children of wisdom

<sup>22</sup> Tomas Schmeller, "Jesus im Umland Galiläas: Zu den Markinischen Berichten zum Aufenthalt Jesu in den Gebieten von Tyros, Caesarea Philippi, und der Dekapolis," *Biblische Zeitschrift* 38 (1994) 44–66.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Marguerat, "Jésus le juif selon la troisième Quête du Jésus de l'histoire" (paper presented at the conference, La recerca del Jesús historic, Barcelona, May 15–17, 2008) 5–7 (forthcoming 2009).

(Mt 11:19; Lk 7:35). Later, we hear that *Sophia* has sent various emissaries to Israel (Mt 23:34: “prophets, wise men, and scribes”; Lk 11:49: “prophets and apostles”), but they have all been rejected. Both Evangelists clearly endorse this early designation of Jesus as Wisdom, but Mark also mentions wisdom as a suitable category for understanding Jesus (Mk 6:2). Furthermore, Mark’s account of the Passion has strong echoes of the persecution of the just wise one who is vindicated by God, as described in the Wisdom of Solomon (2:10–20). Paul is also aware of this identification of Jesus when he speaks of him as “Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Cor 1:24). The opening *Logos* hymn in the Fourth Gospel is a further development of this early christological trajectory, highlighting a role in creation, even if the term *Sophia* does not occur. Thus the Johannine Jesus can later declare, “My father is working until now and I am working,” alluding to the creation story of Genesis as his justification of healing on the Sabbath (Jn 5:17).

How might this identification with Wisdom, then, have its roots in Jesus’ own career, and what light might a consideration of its implication have for our contemporary christological reflections based on the memory of the Galilean Jesus?<sup>24</sup> A first step toward an adequate answer is to recall the contrast between Jesus as a wisdom teacher and his Jerusalem namesake, Jesus ben Sirach. The latter places the ideal scribe among the elite: only those who have leisure can acquire wisdom. The work of others is important for “maintaining the fabric of the world,” but for Jesus ben Sirach, only the scribe can acquire true insight (Sir 38:24–39:11, at 38:34).

As a craftsman, Jesus of Nazareth does not fit into that category. Indeed we hear of scribes from Jerusalem coming to Galilee to discredit him (Mk 3:22; 7:1). The Jerusalem scribes sneer dismissively in John’s account, “These people who do not know the law are accursed. . . . Are you too a Galilean?” because Nicodemus had asked for a fair hearing for Jesus (Jn 7:49, 51–52). The tenor and range of images in Jesus’ teaching—parabolic, pithy, and proverbial—clearly reflect the gnomic wisdom of the peasant based in their experience of coping with life’s struggles.<sup>25</sup> Yet, while clearly tapping into this rich source of human insight, Jesus develops his own distinctive voice. His wisdom, though proverbial in style, is subversive in content, as the strange outcomes of the plots in his parables demonstrate. These innocent-sounding simple stories are packed with surprise and irony, thus challenging addressees to hear and see the world differently from their everyday expectations, fears, and hopes. Hence, as employed by Jesus, the wisdom orientation of his teaching presupposed a deeper knowledge of

<sup>24</sup> Denis Edwards, *Jesus the Wisdom of God: An Ecological Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> Leo G. Perdue, “The Wisdom Sayings of Jesus,” *Forum* 2 (1986) 3–35.

God and God's ways in the world. This suggests that Jesus was no ordinary scribe, but rather a seer to whom the deeper, hidden mystery of things had been given. "To you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything happens in riddles" (Mk 4:10).

According to the Book of Proverbs, Lady Wisdom gained the insight that she shares with humanity through her presence with God in the creation of the world (Prov 8:21–31). Little wonder that Jesus, as the wisdom teacher who claimed such knowledge of the mystery of the kingdom, could declare it to be "good news" for all. He thus showed a deep understanding of God as creator and sustainer of all. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth," he declares, clearly echoing the opening verse of Genesis, before going on to invite "the little ones," that is, the poor and the marginalized, to come to him, just as Lady Wisdom had done (Mt 11:25–30; Prov 9:1–6). Jesus' understanding of God as creator underpins his whole life's work and his ethical teaching, so much so in fact that it seems to universalize his distinctively Jewish experience of God as the Yahweh of the Exodus. Thus, he can contemplate many people coming from the four cardinal points of the compass to join Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the great eschatological banquet foretold by Isaiah, while the children are excluded, painful as such a conclusion must have been for him (Mt 8:11–12; Lk 13:28–29).

The care of this creator God transcends ethnic boundaries: "He makes his sun to shine on the bad and the good and rains on the just and the unjust alike" (Mt 5:45; Lk 6:35). Hence there is no need for anxious concerns about the necessities of life (Mt 6:25–34; Lk 12:22–34). The fertile land of lower Galilee, where most of the ministry of Jesus was conducted, presents a sharp contrast to the desert experience with John, not to speak of the Egyptian experiences of his forebears. One can imagine that his own exodus from the desert of John to the land of Galilee gave Jesus a new appreciation of the divinely blessed reality of this "land of hills and valleys which drinks in water from heaven, a land which the Lord God cares for, since the eyes of the Lord God are upon it from the beginning of the year to the end" (Deut 11:10–11).<sup>26</sup> The land also provided Jesus with a rich repertoire of metaphors for God's ongoing creative presence. Thus, the experience of the farmer awaiting patiently for the harvest as "the earth of itself, he knows not how, brings forth the ripe grain" (Mk 4:30–32) is a yearly reenactment of the miracle of the first creation: "Let the earth bring forth . . ." (Gen 1:11). The creator God is always engaged in the act of creation, and Wisdom can reveal that active presence for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see, as it did for Jesus himself.

<sup>26</sup> Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean* 40–48.



Unfortunately, the resources of this land were unevenly distributed. A new ruling elite had entered the scene when Jesus was a young adult growing up in lower Galilee. These were the Herodians of the Gospels, and the two centers of Sepphoris and Tiberias, one refurbished and the other a new foundation, were not only home to Herod and his collaborators but also symbols for their neighbors of an oppressive imperial regime in their midst. Natural and human resources were now being exploited for the benefit of these centers. The surrounding villages were likely to be denuded not just of the necessities of life—water and food—but their way of life and the values associated with it were also being eroded. Jesus distanced himself from those centers, and declared the poor and the deprived blessed rather than the rich and powerful. He visited their villages and homes, reassuring the people of God's paternal care and acting as the agent of that care through his mighty deeds of healing and sharing.

Those first theologians had recognized that Jesus was not merely another wisdom teacher, but Wisdom herself who had penetrated deeply into the secret of this world, so deeply, in fact, that they came to recognize the presence of Jesus as the new creation already unfolding in their midst. They saw his words and deeds as important because they were the words and deeds of Wisdom, fashioned by his experience of God's presence in those hills and valleys of Galilee, just as others of his contemporaries surely believed that it was in Jerusalem alone that this God could be encountered. Jesus did not abandon this central belief of his tradition, that Yahweh resided among his people in the Jerusalem Temple. Yet his emphasis on the creator God's presence in the everyday lives of the Galilean peasants meant that access to Israel's God no longer had to be mediated by an official representative of the people. God was accessible to all, because his creation was meant to be shared alike and equally by all. Thus, on the one hand, it is historically likely that the one recorded visit of Jesus as an adult to the Temple became a direct challenge to the priestly aristocracy and their way of life because the very class of priests who so jealously guarded their privileged access to God had become collaborators with the Roman occupiers who denied the peasants their share of the fruits of the land as gifts of the creator God. On the other hand, it is equally true that in Jesus' theological view the Temple as sole symbol of God's presence to Israel was already under judgment as a result of his Galilean ministry that offered God's forgiveness to the just and unjust alike. The historical action in the Temple merely confirmed that theological reality.

## CONCLUSION

In this article I have tried to suggest how Jesus' career in Galilee helped to shape the early Christian proclamation about him, and how this may aid

contemporary readers to understand that proclamation more fully. I have argued that Jesus begins his reinterpretation of the idea of messiahship in Galilee, where the Synoptics tell us he formulated his understanding of the kingdom of God and his role in its arrival. I have suggested that his encounters with the *other* in Galilee and the surrounding provinces helped him to formulate his injunction to “love your enemy” and to be open to Gentiles as implications of his total trust in the creator God whom he knew as Father. And I have argued that Jesus’ experience of the oppression and marginalization of God’s people in Galilee deepened and universalized the themes of messiahship and openness to Gentiles by uniting them in his self-understanding as the prophet and seer of the creative wisdom of God.

Thus, I have sought to demonstrate how each theme takes on a richer and deeper theological significance when it is set back into the concrete, everyday experiences of Galilean life and landscape in the Herodian period. My intent was to show how a historico-theological approach can illustrate the universal meaning disclosed in and through the particularity of Jesus’ life. God did not become human as a universal, but in the particularity of Jesus’ life and praxis, which began in Galilee. From a Christian theological perspective, therefore, every particular human life can become a Galilean experience of divine disclosure within the world of actual things.

The final injunction of Mark’s Gospel declares: “Go back to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you” (Mk 16:7). Yet Mark never tells us whether that meeting took place. Instead, the disciples in Mark must remember that he had said, “I will *go before* you to Galilee” (Mk 14:28, emphasis added). Their challenge was to discover the risen Jesus as leader by following in his way. Theirs was a journey to discover how, in the light of his earthly activities and words, everyday encounters with a variety of *others*—especially the weak and the marginalized—could ultimately lead to a disclosure of the ultimate *Other*, God.