

JESUS

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

THE HISTORICAL JOURNEY OF JESUS
THROUGH THE JEWISH FESTIVALS

JESUS

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

BRAD STEUERWALD



Jesus: What Really Happened

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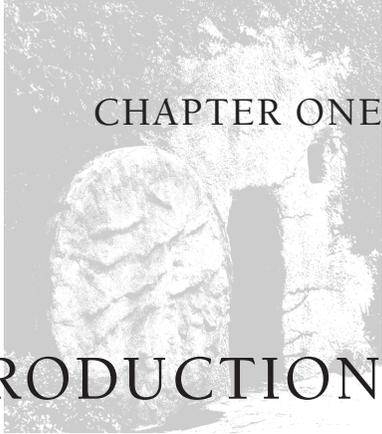
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

AROUND TEN YEARS AGO, I was visiting the ruins of ancient Ephesus in Turkey, which has been excavated since 1869 from burial in deltaic sediments of the Meander River. There I saw some crosses scratched in the marble pavement just outside the magnificent two-tiered library with its façade of eight Ionian columns surmounted by eight Corinthian columns. The crosses were likely used by early members of the church to identify themselves to others, possibly secret believers. These crosses likely dated back to the first century. It was striking to me that so soon after the beginnings of the church in Roman Palestine, this young movement had already arrived in Ephesus with vigor—the third greatest city of the Roman Empire.

I looked off into the surrounding hills where Jesus' mother, the Virgin Mary, was supposed to have come with John the apostle. Today one can visit her house—of uncertain historical authenticity. Like many other questions concerning the first-century church, Mary's historical presence here is in doubt. I wondered if the Virgin Mary had actually come here.

Indeed, after reading widely on the subject, I can confidently assert that every one of the fundamental questions concerning the origins and history of the first-century church remains unresolved. What was the outlook of Jesus and his disciples? What did he set out

to accomplish? Why was he crucified? Why did his earliest followers believe that he had risen from the dead? How did the church arise? How was it organized? What were its practices? What were the roles of the principles—Mary, James, Peter, Paul, and John? How did the Gospels get written? Why are they so contradictory?

The best scholars have tried to answer such questions ever since the Enlightenment. These scholars have succeeded in defining the difficulties, and have uncovered a great deal of information especially concerning the milieu in which the historical Jesus and the earliest church existed and acted. But it is fair to say that the basic historical questions, and similar and corollary questions, remain unanswered.

There is a “black hole” at the heart of Western civilization, surrounding the question of how the church of Jesus arose in the first century. As this metaphor of the black hole implies, those who have looked at the historical problems, and at the history of failed attempts to resolve these questions, have now arrived at a scholarly consensus. This consensus, in effect, holds that answers to such historical questions are *in principle* impossible to obtain. Just as the laws of physics forbid penetration and retrieval of information from a cosmological black hole, so it is maintained that the nature of history, together with the nature of the earliest Christian phenomenon—the historical Jesus and the earliest church—preclude the resolution of this history.

How can this be? How is it possible that the origins of what is arguably the world’s largest, longest-lasting, most successful cultural phenomenon, have been irretrievably lost, or in any case, become so confused as to be irresolvable? Jesus himself, or in any case the “historical Jesus,” the consensus holds, has been lost to the awesome event of his resurrection. Paul Johnson expresses this view, “Though Paul was in Jerusalem at the time of Stephen’s death in 36, he did not return as a Christian until two years later. This chronological gap was quite adequate to cloud everything connected with the historical Jesus, as men, dazzled by the fact of the resurrection, thought back from this to the Jesus they had known and reconstructed him in their minds. Paul got there too late in the day; the well of truth had already been muddied. We probably know more about Jesus than he did, despite the intervals of nearly 2,000 years.”¹

Here Johnson also assumes the consensus viewpoint that Paul, having left the earliest written documents, should be looked to as the best source of information concerning the history of Jesus. This notwithstanding, unlike Mary, John, Peter, and James, Paul had no experience of Jesus during his lifetime.

Back to the black hole out of which the earliest church somehow emerged, a “black hole” in which data are irreversibly scattered and disorganized, from which no meaningful information can emerge, the scholars rather spitefully have projected confusion and ignorance! Thus again in Johnson: “All these synoptic gospels, moreover, emerged from a miasma of oral tradition and counter-tradition.”² Johnson adds, “They [early church preachers] were not divines or orators or indeed educated people.”³

Johnson does, however, recognize the problem involved in hypothesizing ignorance and confusion as the historical core of Christianity. “And if we reduce our knowledge of Jesus to points where there is unanimity, plausibility, and an absence of objections, we are left with a phenomenon almost devoid of significance. This ‘residual’ Jesus told stories, uttered various wise sayings, was executed in circumstances which are not clear, and was then commemorated in a ceremony by his followers. Such a version is incredible because it does not explain the rise of Christianity.”⁴

Again, Jesus’ resurrection, mysterious, and by its nature somehow “beyond history,” is called upon to explain the rise of Christianity out of the “black hole” of confusion and ignorance. “Men and women began frantically and frenetically to preach Jesus’s gospel because they believed he had come back to them from the dead and given them the authority and the power to do so.”⁵

The modern religious sect, typical of the American south, seems to best fit this scenario of confusion, ignorance, and emotionalism. Although Jesus and his fellow Jews were the progeny of a cultured, esthetically refined, scholarly Jewish tradition, the earliest church is envisioned as a gathering of revivalists, peopled by uneducated primitives who relied on “oral tradition” and enthusiasm.

While once again traveling around the Aegean and the Middle East in September 1997, I read a book which I thought provided some insight into these questions. Before I read this book, *Liberating*

the Gospels,⁶ I had not given any thought to the relationship of the gospels and Christianity to the Jewish festivals. In this book Bishop John Shelby Spong demonstrates that the Synoptic Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, each provide for liturgical observance of the Jewish festivals by the first-century church. Six major festivals: Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkoth, Hanukkah, Passover, Pentecost, each have festival-specific passages in these gospels. In Matthew each festival has its own teaching section.

When I got back home, I began looking into the Jewish festivals at the Loyola University Library here in New Orleans. As I studied the themes of the six festivals, it appeared to me that the petitions of the Lord's Prayer were actually petitions of these festivals. (This will be demonstrated in a coming chapter.) I began to believe that the festivals and their themes were important, indeed, if they form the structure and logic of this most concentrated and fundamental prayer of the church.

The structure of the Gospel of John, though, remained a mystery. I decided to take a look at this "different" gospel. As I examined John, it appeared that it also might display a festival structure, consisting of continuous festival-specific readings—a "lectionary." This could explain some of the strange and abrupt transitions (a lectionary has no continuous "plot"). For example, Jesus is at a wedding in Cana in one paragraph, and then he's driving traders from the temple in the next. Such a sudden change might mean that one has moved from a Sukkoth feast and harvest reading to a reading pertaining to Hanukkah, the festival of the restoration and purification of the temple.

A "lectionary" is a year-long collection of scripture readings for public worship. Each reading is related to a particular theme emphasized by the religious community during that season. For example, a Jewish synagogue will have a reading pertaining to Passover at that time of year; a Christian congregation will hear a reading pertaining to Jesus' birth at Christmas.

Similarly, John's sudden "change of subject" in the conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, from right worship to food and harvest, might indicate movement from Yom Kippur, which emphasizes repentance and turning to God, to Sukkoth, with its

emphasis on food and harvest. It looked as if the Jewish festival sequence was repeated three times in the Gospel of John over the three years of Jesus' public proclamation.

Then it occurred to me that if the Gospel of John is "all festival," with readings used in the year-long worship of the Johannine community, the passages originally would have been grouped just by festival season in continuity, rather than reading year by year in the three-year account of Jesus' ministry. So I tried this, and it fit remarkably well, both according to the themes of the festival season and to the inferred number of readings corresponding to the number of Sabbaths between festivals. The result is given in the following chapter.

Having formed this John Lectionary structure and hypothesis—that the Gospel of John was originally a year-long lectionary with all passages related to the six major festivals of the Jewish liturgical year—I needed to investigate where this lectionary came from, what was its place in the early church, how it influenced other New Testament writings, where its outlook originated, who was in the community, what was its relationship to the history of Jesus and the church, and so on.

So using the John Lectionary hypothesis, I began rummaging about the New Testament, the earliest traditions, the perspectives and theologies of the contemporary Jewish sects, all with a view to discovering the origins and influences of the John Lectionary and the community which used it at their liturgical gatherings.

As I did so, I became convinced that the Jewish festival structure was the key to understanding the earliest church and its outlook, practice, and literature. It became clear to me that the festival accounts of John are also reliable accounts of the actual historical course of Jesus; not his words, but the history of festival "signs" that he performed. Moreover, it also became apparent that Jesus had set out to demonstrate the meaning and practice of the Jewish festivals as he demonstrated how the Son of Man/Son of God moved and acted through ideal Jewish festival time. In doing this, Jesus was following the path blazed by John the Baptist, who had proclaimed and demonstrated just two festivals Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

As I proceeded to test the New Testament literature against the sophisticated, erudite, culturally and esthetically refined structure and themes of the Jewish festivals, the supposed “miasma” of ignorance and confusion in the “black hole” of the New Testament began to yield to structure, reason, and beauty. When the Word was spoken to the primal void—word of the Jewish festivals—light, order, and beauty emerged.

I was amazed to find the festival structure underlying other New Testament documents: 1 Peter, 1 John, Romans. Other books manifested their structure and perspective when analyzed according to just one or several festivals. The book of Revelation is organized according to the structure of the three festivals Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkoth. The letter to the Hebrews reflects just Yom Kippur. The letter of James is a Pentecost teaching document. Acts of the Apostles is also framed by Pentecost. Most important, the petitions of the Lord’s Prayer, central to the teaching, outlook, and spirituality of the early church are petitions of the Jewish festivals, which mean that they are petitions of Jesus’ life as he demonstrated and proclaimed these festivals.

Knowing the “actual history” of Jesus’ life as he enacted the festivals presented in the Gospel of John, it was then possible to understand the plan and perspective of the Synoptic Gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—which are also arranged according to festival structure and perspective. These gospels present allegorical, parabolic accounts of Jesus moving through festival time, composited before and after his death on the cross. Recognizing their plan, they are seen to be fully compatible with the more “straight historical” account of John.

The little-known, much undervalued *Birth of Mary, Apocalypse of James*, a high allegorical biographical sketch by Jesus’ older brother James of his mother, the Virgin Mary, is also structured according to the Jewish festivals. Analyzed as such, utilizing the valuable history of James as documented by Eisenman,⁷ much information on the history of Mary, Jesus, and James and the earliest church can be unearthed.

“Unearthed” is the operative paradigm for this book. It has become apparent to me, using the powerful working hypothesis of the

Jewish festival structure, that the first century church is in essence an extinct culture. Starting with the Jewish festival hypothesis of the Gospel of John, it has been my happy privilege and vexing burden to excavate this long lost culture. I am overwhelmed by my own inadequacy in presenting this history, and by the tragic loss of this *weltanschauung* and the perversions and misunderstandings it has suffered through nearly two millennia.