

## The Sayings of Jesus An Overview

The former dominance of Christianity in Western culture makes the New Testament very familiar, but no longer widely read or studied. The currents of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth century and the meteoric rise of science in the eighteenth century cast doubt on Christianity, especially the frequent appeal to miracles to certify Christian doctrine. Thomas Jefferson is known to have reedited the Gospels, cutting out of the text all reference to miracles. After three centuries of polemics from believers and skeptics, each side has grown tired and, it would seem, indifferent. Christianity is tolerated but separated from the more dominant secular society.

In its beginnings, however, Christianity was an energetic and spirited social and religious movement. It arose in an empire that was more secular than religious, much more interested in trade and prosperity than religion. But religion thrived because enormous social and economic inequality left many with little to eat and little opportunity to better their lives. The first Christians lived in the Galilee, once a part of Israel, but in the time of Jesus a province of Greece taken over by the Rome. The center of their former religion, Judaism, was in Judea to the South, ruled by a Roman Procurator.

We know that Jesus enters the scene shortly after Herod, the vassal king of Judea, was deposed and replaced by a Roman Procurator. Jesus was known to be a wonder-worker and a healer, but to his followers in Galilee he was better known as the Rabbi who preached the message of the Kingdom of God. Jesus copied the message of his cousin, John the Baptizer, who urged the people to repent and be cleansed of their sins. In Jewish theology, at least since the Babylonian Captivity some 450 years earlier, the misfortunes of Israel, especially the loss of kingship was attributed to the sins of the people. John perceived that if they were to be delivered from the Roman occupation, they needed to repent and undergo a change of heart.

But Jesus went beyond the message of his cousin John to draw attention to what comes after repentance. How should the people live in this new regime, the rule (kingdom) of God? Jesus did not dwell on the people's sins, but on their needs and the blessedness they would have in the Kingdom. He called them blessed, he encouraged them to pray with the expectation that they would receive even more than they asked for. He encouraged them to help, support, and forgive one another, to live as a family in which all are brothers and sisters with God as their Father.

Following biblical tradition he healed the sick, the blind, and the lame, and he cast out demons, thought at that time to be the real masters of the world. But he did not seek out people to heal; they came to him. Rather his mission was to proclaim the imminent reign (kingdom) of God. He reached out to fellow Jews, whatever their status in the community, whether farmer, fisherman, or builder (tehton); freeman, indentured servant, or slave; Pharisee, Scribe, or (hated) tax collector. He did not preach to non-Jews (Gentiles); they were to hear about the Good News after his death.

He met his audience where they were in their lives. He gave lessons while attending banquets held by the rich. He went out in a boat to address a crowd huddled along the shore. He climbed a high hill to speak to the people below. On Saturdays he went to the local synagogue to worship and preach, and on high holy days he journeyed down to Jerusalem where he taught in the Temple.

His message and his teaching we learn from the gospels, mainly the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Mark was the first to write a gospel, a short chronicle of the deeds of Jesus up to his death by crucifixion. This gospel was compiled and circulated some 40 years after the death of Jesus. Its purpose was to show by the wonders he worked that Jesus was the Son of God. But Mark's good news included only a few of the teachings of Jesus. When Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels some 20 years later, they found a source that had been in circulation among the Christian communities in Galilee as early perhaps as a few years after the death of Jesus in 30 AD. This source, which the scripture scholars call Q (for *Quelle*, "source" in German) is lost to us. It can only be reconstructed, in part by what is in Matthew and Luke's gospels, but not in Mark's, and by additional sayings in John's (much later) gospel, and in the (much earlier, about 50 AD) gospel of Thomas found in a monastery near Nag Hamadi less than a century ago.

This reconstruction is called *The Lost Gospel*, or *The Earliest Gospel*, *The Sayings Gospel*, or simply, *The Gospel of Q*. This gospel of the Sayings of Jesus will bring us as close as we can get to the mind of Jesus. In this seminar we will seek to understand these sayings in their historical context, and in their meaning for our lives today.