3

Did Jesus Plan to Start a New Religion?

Matthew Thiessen

In his 1526 lectures on the book of Jonah, Martin Luther argued that the plant that grows over Jonah's head represents Judaism, and the worm that eats and kills that plant turns out to be Jesus (lesson 11.3): "The Worm, Christ, Destroys Judaism. God appoints a worm to smite the plant. This signifies that Christ appeared with His Gospel at a time when the Jews vaunted most vaingloriously that they alone were God's people. He attacked the wild plant, that is, He preached against it and abolished the Law through His Holy Spirit and liberated us from the Law and its power. Therefore Judaism withered and decayed in all the world."[1] Over two hundred years later, Immanuel Kant claimed that Christianity arose quickly, "completely forsaking the Judaism from which it sprang."[2] He also argued that were contemporary Jews to adopt the "religion of Jesus" this would happily result in "the euthanasia of Judaism."[3] Such claims, far from unique in Christian writings or thought, as Amy Newman has shown, belong within a larger Protestant trope about the purported death of Judaism.[4]

1. Luther, "Lectures on Jonah," in *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II*, vol. 19 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Hilton Oswald (St. Louis: Concordia, 1963), 3–104.

2. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), 118.

3. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 95.

4. Amy Newman, "The Death of Judaism in German Protestant Thought from Luther to Hegel," *JAAR* 61 (1993): 455–84. See also Heiko Oberman, *Wurzeln des Antisemitismus. Christenangst und Judenplage im Zeitalter von Humanismus und Reformation* (Berlin: Severin und Siedler, 1981); William Brustein, *Roots of Hate: Anti-Semitism in Europe before the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Not surprisingly, given the dominance of this motif in European Christian thinking, early historical Jesus scholars made similar claims.[5] For instance, in 1863 Ernest Renan claimed the following: "One idea, at least, which Jesus brought from Jerusalem, and which henceforth appears rooted in his mind, was that there was no union possible between him and the ancient Jewish religion. The abolition of the sacrifices which had caused him so much disgust, the suppression of an impious and haughty priesthood, and, in a general sense, the abrogation of the law, appeared to him absolutely necessary. From this time he appears no more as a Jewish reformer, but as a destroyer of Judaism."[6] And in 1900, Adolf von Harnack argued: "[Jews] thought of God as of a despot guarding the ceremonial observances in His household; [Jesus] breathed in the presence of God. [The Jews] saw Him only in His law, which they had converted into a labyrinth of dark defiles, blind alleys and secret passages; [Jesus] saw and felt Him everywhere."[7]

In more recent times, numerous scholars have made analogous claims, albeit more nuanced in order to avoid the blatant anti-Judaism of these earlier writers. For example, John Dominic Crossan argues that Jesus saw himself as the "functional opponent, alternative, and substitute" to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, while on the other side of the ideological spectrum N. T. Wright suggests that "Jesus implicitly and explicitly attacked what had become standard symbols of the second-Temple Jewish worldview; he saw them not as bad in themselves but as out of date, belonging to the period before the coming of the kingdom and to be jettisoned now that the new day had dawned."[8]

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5. One significant voice of dissent was Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Fragments*, trans. Ralph S. Fraser, ed. Charles H. Talbert (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1970), 100–101: "Jesus considered Moses' law in every respect, and down to the most minute details, eternal and immutable as long as the earth should last, just as other Jews did, and he reckoned not only that the law would not be abolished and come to an end, but that it would be especially valid and strictly observed in his kingdom of heaven that was imminent," and "since it is primarily the ceremonial law that makes the Jewish religion Jewish and distinguishes it from others, it is also evident that Jesus in no way intended to abolish this Jewish religion and introduce a new one in its place."

6. Ernest Renan, *The Life of Jesus* (New York: Modern Library, 1927), 224.

7. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?*, trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1957), 50–51.

8. John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 355; N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers

In contrast, Jewish scholars, such as Joseph Klausner, David Flusser, Geza Vermes, Paula Fredriksen, and Amy-Jill Levine,[9] have long stressed the continuity between Jesus' teachings and that of his fellow Jews. And a good number of non-Jewish scholars, most notably E. P. Sanders, have sought to place Jesus within Judaism, not against it, and not seeking to cause its death.[10] Before I can answer the question in the title of this chapter, I need to provide two caveats: one about Jesus and one about religion.

TWO CAVEATS

First, about Jesus. We find ourselves facing a serious problem in trying to answer the question of Jesus' plans and intentions, since we have no unmediated access to Jesus. What we do have are various accounts of his followers that purport to pass on his accounts of his actions and sayings.[11] Numerous scholars have developed and deployed a series of criteria in order to help one sift through what might go back to the historical Jesus and what might be stories created by later Christians.[12] One can see the apex of this approach in John P. Meier's thirty-five-hundred-page *A Marginal Jew*. These criteria of authenticity, though, have come under increasing scrutiny in recent years.[13]

Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 55. Elsewhere, Wright talks of "a very Jewish Jesus who was nevertheless opposed to some high-profile features of first-century Judaism." See *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 93.

9. See Joseph Klausner, *Jesus of Nazareth: His Life, Times, and Teaching*, trans. Herbert Danby (Boston: Beacon, 1925); David Flusser, *Jesus in Selbstzeugnissen und Bilddokumenten* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1968); Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (New York: Macmillan, 1973); Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Paula Fredriksen, "What You See Is What You Get: Context and Content in Current Research on the Historical Jesus," *ThTo* 52 (1995): 75–97; Amy-Jill Levine, *The Misunderstood Jew: The Church and the Scandal of the Jewish Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006); Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

10. E. P. Sanders, *Jesus and Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985). See also James H. Charlesworth, *Jesus within Judaism: New Light from Exciting Archaeological Discoveries*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1988).

11. For one attempt to leap this hurdle, see Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM, 1979).

12. For a discussion of these criteria, see John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, vol. 1, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 112–95.

13. For example, Dale C. Allison Jr., *Constructing Jesus: Memory, Imagination, and History* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne, eds., *Jesus, Criteria,*

One of the most important criteria used to authenticate a saying or action of Jesus is the criterion of multiple attestation, which rightly assumes that the more independent witnesses one has to an event or saying, the more confident one can be that this event happened as the various witnesses claim or that Jesus did in fact say X, Y, or Z. Unfortunately, what is essential for this criterion, *independence*, is precisely what I am convinced we lack. Most scholars are now convinced that both Matthew and Luke used the Gospel of Mark, and a growing number, myself included, have become convinced that Luke also used the Gospel of Matthew. In other words, the Synoptic Gospels do not provide multiple attestation. For that matter, neither does the Gospel of John, nor the Gospel of Thomas.[14] Ultimately, I no longer find persuasive efforts to get behind the Gospels to the historical Jesus: the various criteria, while not entirely without merit, are simply too weak to yield results of much value. Consequently, I would provisionally change the title of this chapter from "Did Jesus plan to start a new religion?" to "According to the gospel writers, did Jesus plan to start a new religion?" Given space constraints, let me change that yet again: "According to the Synoptic Gospel writers, did Jesus plan to start a new religion?"

But having changed the title, let me address my second caveat: *religion*. In this context, the question about a new religion is obviously a question about whether Jesus intended to reject Judaism and start Christianity. Put this way, we can see the anachronism of the question: Jesus was not a Christian. But even apart from this concern, the term "religion" is highly contentious.[15] In relation to Jews and Christ-followers in antiquity, I note the work especially of Brent Nongbri, Carlin Barton, and Daniel Boyarin.

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and the Demise of Authenticity (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Jonathan Bernier, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus after the Demise of Authenticity: Toward a Critical Realist Philosophy of History in Jesus Studies*, LNTS 540 (London: T&T Clark, 2016).

14. On John's knowledge of at least one of the Synoptic Gospels, see the various arguments in Adelbert Denaux, ed., *John and the Synoptics*, BETL 101 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992).

15. E.g., Peter Harrison, *"Religion" and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Brent Nongbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013); Carlin A. Barton and Daniel Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion: How Modern Abstractions Hide Ancient Realities* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016).

For the purposes of this chapter, I want to think about religion in light of Cicero's second-century BCE remarks that Roman *religio* consisted of rituals, auspices, and prophetic warnings from the Sybil, soothsayers, and portents (*Nat. d.* 3.2.5). More precisely, I want to focus on rituals, or what Cicero elsewhere calls the cult of the gods (*cultu pio deorum*) and equates with *religio* (1.42.117; see 2.3: *religione id est cultu deorum*). This cult consists of fear and ceremonies toward the divine (*Religionem eam quae in metu et caerimonia deorum sit appellant*; see *Inv.* 2.22.66). This is by no means the entirety of what Cicero means by *religio*,[16] but it is this one aspect of his definition that I want to apply to the Jesus of the Gospels and the Judaism of Jesus' day. Consequently, let me suggest one more modification to the given title: instead of "According to the Synoptic Gospel writers, did Jesus plan to start a new religion?" let me retitle this chapter, "According to the Synoptic Gospel writers, did Jesus plan to change the various ceremonies related to the cult of the Jewish God?" Admittedly, whatever I have gained in accuracy, I have lost in pithiness. In this chapter I examine just three aspects of the Jewish cult: temple, ritual impurity, and sacred time.[17]

TEMPLE

The Jerusalem temple was the epicenter of the cult related to the Jewish God.[18] It was the place where God had chosen to concentrate his presence on

16. See Barton and Boyarin, *Imagine No Religion*, 39–52. Elsewhere, for instance, Cicero defines *religio* in the following way: "Religion is that which brings men to serve and worship a higher order of nature which they call divine" (*Religio est, quae superioris cuiusdam naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caerimoniamque affert*; see *Inv.* 2.53.161). The translation here follows Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods; Academics*, trans. H. Rackham, LCL (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1933).

17. Other aspects could be considered, such as circumcision. In the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus never speaks about circumcision, although he does undergo it, according to Luke 2:21. In the Gospel of John, Jesus uses the fact that circumcision can take place on the Sabbath as a basis for his Sabbath healing practices (7:23). This story, and the legal rationale of Jesus' argument, coincides with later rabbinic thinking, e.g., m. Ned. 3.11; t. Shabb. 15.16. Nor will I examine Jesus' views on dietary laws, for which see Yair Furstenberg, "Defilement Penetrating the Body: A New Understanding of Contamination in Mark 7.15," *NTS* 54 (2008): 176–200; John VanMaaren, "Does Mark's Jesus Abrogate Torah? Jesus' Purity Logion and Its Illustration in Mark 7:15–23," *JJMJS* 4 (2017): 21–41. Finally, one could consider frequent references to Jesus' presence in various synagogues (e.g., Mark 1:21, 39; Matt 4:23; 9:35; Luke 4:16, which claims it was Jesus' custom to attend synagogue). See Jordan Ryan, The Role of the Synagogue in the Aims of Jesus (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017).

18. See R. Timothy McLay, ed., *The Temple in Text and Tradition: A Festschrift in Honour of Robert Hayward*, LSTS 83 (London: Bloomsbury, 2015); Eyal Regev, *The Temple in Early*

earth. Recently, Simon Joseph has argued that that Jesus aimed to "change the Mosaic customs of the Jews" by rejecting the "violent" blood sacrifice inherent in the temple cult.[19] He claims that Mark and Q depict an anti-temple Jesus, although Matthew, Luke, and John cloud the issue by introducing the concept of Jesus' death as sacrificial. The Gospels provide no evidence, though, that Jesus thought that sacrifice was an inherently violent action. How, then, do they depict Jesus' thinking about and actions toward the temple?

From his birth, the Gospels depict Jesus and his family behaving as though the temple is truly sacred space, worthy of reverence. Forty days after Jesus' birth, Joseph and Mary go to Jerusalem, undergoing ritual purification[20] in order to enter the Jerusalem temple so that they can present Jesus to the Jewish God, all in accordance with the law, Luke repeatedly tells his readers (2:22, 23, 24, 39). Of course, Jesus is forty days old at this point, so Luke's Jesus has no say in these actions. Immediately after this story, though, Luke depicts a twelve-year-old Jesus accompanying his parents to Jerusalem for the Passover festival, something they attended annually (2:41). After Passover, Jesus remains in the temple in order to listen to and ask questions of the teachers there. His words to his mother demonstrate his thinking about the temple: "Did you not know that it is necessary for me to be in my father's house?"[21] (2:49). Jesus needs to be in the temple, a building that he describes as his father's house (*en tois tou patros mou*),[22] where he amazes all who hear him speak (2:47). Luke's adolescent Jesus believes that the temple is the earthly dwelling of the Jewish God.

These stories come from Luke, the latest of the Synoptic Gospels. But they fit with how Matthew depicts Jesus in his adult life. For instance, in

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Christianity: Experiencing the Sacred, AYBRL (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).

19. Simon J. Joseph, *Jesus and the Temple: The Crucifixion in its Jewish Context*, SNTSMS 165 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 25.

20. See Matthew Thiessen, "Luke 2:22, Leviticus 12, and Parturient Impurity," *NovT* 54 (2012): 16–29.

21. Unless noted otherwise, biblical translations in this chapter are the author's own.

22. Following other interpreters, I understand the Greek phrase *en tois tou patros mou* to mean "my father's house," even though it could plausibly be rendered "my father's business." See, for instance, Origen, *Homilies on Luke* 18.5; 20.3; Cyril of Jerusalem, *On Luke*, sermon 5; Epiphanius, *Heresies* 66.42.12. Confirmation for this reading can be found in Gen 41:51 LXX, which translates the Hebrew "all the house of my father" (*kol-bet abi*) as *pantōn tōn tou patros mou*. In Acts, Luke uses a similar expression: at Tyre, Paul and his traveling companions board a ship, and the locals who come to say farewell return "to their homes" (*eis ta idia*; Acts 21:6).

the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew's Jesus tells his hearers that if they are offering a gift at the altar (προσφέρῃς τὸ δῶρόν σου ἐπὶ τὸ θυσιαστήριον), an altar that can only be at the Jerusalem temple, but realize they need to be reconciled to another human being, they should immediately leave, be reconciled, and then return to finish offering (5:23–24). The saying casually assumes and in fact endorses cultic piety, the language of offering a gift being common to sacrificial contexts, whether of meat or grains (e.g., Lev 1:2–3, 14, 2:1, 4).[23] The reason Jesus assumes the value of cultic piety can be seen later in Matthew's Gospel, for in talking about oath practices he claims that the temple's altar actually makes what is offered on it holy (23:19–20). The altar, then, is infused with holy power. This is because the sanctuary (*naos*), which houses the altar, is the place where the Jewish God dwells (*katoikounti*, 23:21).

Again this is from the Gospel of Matthew. What about the Gospel of Mark, the earliest of the Synoptics? Jesus says nothing explicit about the Jerusalem temple until his first trip in the narrative to Jerusalem. There he enters the temple, where he creates an incident, disrupting the business taking place in one section of it (Mark 11:15–19). Quoting Isaiah 56:7 and Jeremiah 7:11, Mark's Jesus expresses his anger at what he perceives to be actions that have turned the house of the Jewish God from a place of prayer into a den of thieves (see Matt 21:13; Luke 19:46; John 2:16). So seriously does Jesus take the belief that the Jewish God dwells in the Jerusalem temple that he angrily chastises people for what he perceives to be their deep irreverence for holy space. For the Jesus of the Gospels, then, the Jerusalem temple is God's house.[24]

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23. Matthew Goldstone notes that Jesus' words here parallel later rabbinic thinking. See Goldstone, "Murder, Anger, and Altars: The First Matthean Antithesis in Light of Exodus 21:14 and Its Early Rabbinic Interpretation," *NovT* 59 (2017): 339–54.

24. See Solomon Wong, *The Temple Incident in Mark 11,15–19: The Disclosure of Jesus and the Marcan Faction* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), who argues that in Mark the story functions not to reject the temple but to distance Christ-followers from the zealots who have taken over the temple complex during the Jewish Revolt against Rome. Similarly, Joel Marcus, "No More Zealots in the House of the Lord: A Note on the History of Interpretation of Zechariah 14:21," *NovT* 55 (2013): 22–30. In contrast, Cecilia Wassen argues that Jesus, like those at Qumran, held the apocalyptic belief that the temple had become defiled, needed to be destroyed, and then would be rebuilt again as God's dwelling. See Wassen, "The Use of the Dead Sea Scrolls for Interpreting Jesus's Action in the Temple," *DSD* 23 (2016): 280–303.

Finally, one accusation that leads to Jesus' crucifixion in the Gospels relates to the Jerusalem temple. According to Mark, some people claimed that Jesus stated that he would destroy the temple and build a new temple not made by hands (14:58). Interestingly, Mark characterizes this accusation as false (ἐψευδομαρτύρουν, 14:57). Matthew also appears to consider this charge to be trumped up (Matt 26:59–61). Interestingly, Luke does not reproduce this charge, presumably because he does not want anyone to believe it.[25]

RITUAL IMPURITY

The assumption that the Jerusalem temple is the dwelling place of the Jewish God can be seen in another aspect related to Jesus and the Jewish cult: the ritual impurity system. Virtually all ancient Mediterranean cultures constructed such systems, but for Jews ritual impurity arose from three distinct sources: what the Greek translators of Leviticus call *lepra* (Lev 13–14),[26] genital discharges of blood and semen (Lev 12; 15), and corpses (Num 19). Significantly, Mark, Matthew, and Luke depict Jesus coming into contact with the impurity created by these three physical sources.[27]

First, Mark depicts a man suffering *lepra* coming to Jesus asking to be purified. Three times Mark uses purity language in this account (1:40, 41, 44). Mark's Jesus does not reject the idea that this condition makes the man

25. The Gospel of John attributes a similar saying ("Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it," John 2:19) to Jesus, but claims that it refers not to the Jerusalem temple but to Jesus' own body, which will rise from the dead.

26. This is *not* leprosy, as English Bible translations render it; rather, it is a series of minor skin conditions. On the ritual impurity systems in ancient Mediterranean cultures, see Christian Frevel and Christophe Nihan, eds., *Purity and the Forming of Religious Traditions in the Ancient Mediterranean World and Ancient Judaism*, Dynamics in the History of Religion 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

27. For a fuller treatment, see Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, forthcoming). For efforts to get behind the gospel narratives to the historical Jesus, see Thomas Kazen, *Jesus and Purity Halakhah: Was Jesus Indifferent to Impurity?*, ConBNT 38 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002); Kazen, *Scripture, Interpretation, or Authority? Motives and Arguments in Jesus' Halakic Conflicts*, WUNT 320 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013), and Cecilia Wassen, "The Jewishness of Jesus and Ritual Purity," *Scripta Institute Donneriani Aboensis* 27 (2016): 11–36; Wassen, "Jesus' Work as a Healer in Light of Jewish Purity Laws," in *Bridging between Sister Religions: Studies of Jewish and Christian Scriptures in Honor of Prof. John T. Townsend*, ed. Isaac Kalimi, Brill Reference Library of Judaism 51 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 87–104.

impure; rather, he uses his power to remove the condition that creates this impurity. Further, he tells the man to then go to the priest in order to offer at the temple that which the law requires once *lepra* has left a person (1:44; see Lev 13–14). As Paula Fredriksen puts it: "This is an uncomplicated endorsement of a very elaborate sequence of ablutions and sacrifices (a bird, two male lambs, one perfect year-old ewe), detailed in Leviticus 14, by which the leper moves from pollution to purity, from isolation back into life in the community."[28] Matthew and Luke both retain this story (Matt 8:2–4; Luke 5:12–14). In fact, Luke adds yet another story of Jesus removing *lepra* from ten different men at once (Luke 17:12–18).[29] Again, Luke's Jesus commands these men to go to the priest, presumably, as in Luke 5:12–14, to have the priest proclaim them pure so that they can undergo the proper rituals to remove the residual ritual impurity so they can be reintegrated into society.

Mark also depicts Jesus interacting with a woman who suffers from a long-term genital discharge of blood (Mark 5:25–34).[30] Jesus does not choose to do anything in this incident; the woman's choice to touch him results in his body unthinkingly healing the condition that leads to her being ritually impure. Again, both Matthew and Luke repeat this story (Matt 9:20–22; Luke 8:43–48).[31] In fact, both Matthew and Luke add one subtle detail to Mark's account that emphasizes Jesus' law observance: in their accounts the woman touches the fringe (Greek: *kraspedon*) of Jesus' garment (see

28. Paula Fredriksen, *Sin: The Early History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 20–21.

29. On this latter story, see Wilhelm Bruners, *Die Reinigung der zehn Aussätzigen und die Heilung des Samariters, Lk 17,11–19 Ein Beitrag zur lukanischen Interpretation der Reinigung von Aussatzigen*, FB 23 (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1977).

30. See Susan Haber, "A Woman's Touch: Feminist Encounters with the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5.24–34," *JSNT* 26 (2003): 171–92; Cecilia Wassen, "Jesus and the Hemorrhaging Woman in Mark 5:24–34: Insights from Purity Laws from Qumran," in *Scripture in Transition: Essays on Septuagint: Hebrew Bible, and Dead Sea Scrolls in Honour of Jaija Sollamo*, ed. Anssi Voitila and Jutta Jokiranta, JSJSup 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 641–60.

31. Ultimately, I do not find convincing efforts to distance these accounts from concerns about ritual impurity. For examples of such efforts, see Amy-Jill Levine, "Discharging Responsibility: Matthean Jesus, Biblical Law, and Hemorrhaging Woman," in *Treasures New and Old: Contributions to Matthean Studies*, ed. David Bauer and Mark Allan Powell, SymS 1 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996), 379–97; and Annette Weissenrieder, "The Plague of Uncleanness? The Ancient Illness Construct 'Issue of Blood' in Luke 8:43–48," in *The Social Setting of Jesus and the Gospels*, ed. Wolfgang Stegemann, Bruce J. Malina, and Gerd Theissen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 207–22.

Mark 6:56; Matt 14:36). This fringe refers to the tassels (in Hebrew: *tzitzit*) that God had instructed Israelites to wear in order to remind them of *all* of God's commandments (see Num 15:38–39; Deut 22:12; Matt 23:5).

Immediately after this incident, Jesus encounters the corpse of a twelve-year-old girl who has just died (Mark 5:35–43). Undeterred, he takes hold of the corpse, telling the young girl to rise, which she does, returning to the realm of the living. Again, Matthew and Luke preserve this story (Matt 9:18, 23–25; Luke 8:49–56).[32] Again, Luke adds yet another corpse that Jesus raises, this time a young man whose body is being transported for burial (Luke 7:11–17).

All of these people were ritually impure at the time they encountered Jesus. At no point does Jesus tell them not to worry about being ritually impure. Not once does he deny the existence of impurity. And not once does he break the law in relation to these various people: after all, touching or being touched by people who are ritually impure neither is a breach of the law, nor is it sinful. What Jesus does, willingly or otherwise, is remove the sources of impurity that make these people ritually impure. And once these sources of impurity have been dealt with, these various people find themselves able to undergo the minor purification rites that remove the residual ritual impurities, and then reenter into the temple precincts. In other words, these various stories demonstrate Jesus' belief in the existence of ritual impurity and his opposition to its causes, almost as though he wants people to be free of ritual impurity so that they can visit the Jerusalem temple.

SACRED TIME

Finally, what does Jesus think of sacred time—the various Jewish festivals and the Sabbath? Let me begin with festivals, more broadly. I have already noted above that, according to Luke, Jesus grew up in a family that went up to Jerusalem on an annual basis in order to celebrate the Passover feast (Luke 2:41–42). Apart from this story, we hear nothing of Jesus' observance

32. Again, while Levine ("Discharging Responsibility," 385) is correct to note that the story "says nothing about corpse uncleanness," almost all ancient readers, Jewish or non-Jewish, would have understood the corpse to emit ritual impurity.

of the Passover until immediately before his crucifixion. Does this silence suggest that Jesus did not usually observe it? Presumably not, since observance would not be notable, while abandoning this practice would have been. In fact, according to both Mark and Matthew, Jesus' disciples assume that Jesus wanted to celebrate this feast, asking him, "Where would you like us to go and make the preparations for you to eat the Passover?" (Mark 14:12; Matt 26:17). This question assumes that, in the narrative world of the gospel writers, Jesus had annually observed Passover. Luke's rewriting of Mark and Matthew, in contrast, begins with Jesus asking Peter and John to prepare everything for their Passover feast, which then prompts them to ask about which location Jesus would like (Luke 22:8–9). Regardless, all three gospels take for granted that Jesus celebrates the Passover, as was customary among Jews of his day (see John 13).[33]

While the Synoptic Gospels mention neither the Festival of Weeks (Shavuot) nor the Festival of Booths (Sukkot), they contain numerous stories about Jesus' actions on the Sabbath and the controversies that arose as a result.[34] Many scholars of the Gospels conclude, in agreement with Jesus' opponents within the gospel narratives, that Jesus profaned the Sabbath, thereby abandoning an important component of Jewish law observance.[35] In recent years, this position has come under question.[36] Elsewhere I dis-

33. See Shemuel Safrai, "Early Testimonies in the New Testament of Laws and Practices Relating to Pilgrimage and Passover," in *Jesus' Last Week*, ed. R. Steven Notley, Marc Turnage, and Brian Becker (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 41–51; Jonathan Klawans, "Interpreting the Last Supper: Sacrifice, Spiritualization, and Anti-Sacrifice," *NTS* 48 (2002): 1–17; Joel Marcus, "Passover and Last Supper Revisited," *NTS* 59 (2013): 303–24.

34. To be sure, in John 7 Jesus initially refuses to go up to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Booths, but this is not due to disregard for the festival but because his time to be widely recognized has not yet arrived (7:8).

35. E.g., Yong-Eui Yang, *Jesus and the Sabbath in Matthew's Gospel*, JSNTSup 139 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997).

36. Lutz Doering, "Much Ado about Nothing? Jesus' Sabbath Healings and Their Halakhic Implications Revisited," in *Judaistik und Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft: Standorte–Grenzen–Beziehungen*, ed. Lutz Doering, Hans-Günther Waubke, and Florian Wilk, FRLANT 226 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008) 217–41; Doering, "Sabbath Laws in the New Testament Gospels," in *The New Testament and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Reimund Bieringer et al., JSJSup 136 (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 207–54; Nina L. Collins, *Jesus, the Sabbath and the Jewish Debate: Healing on the Sabbath in the First and Second Centuries CE*, LNTS 474 (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Isaac W. Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE: Reading Matthew and Luke-Acts as Jewish Texts*, WUNT 2/355 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Although I do not agree with her overarching argument about the reason *why* the gospel writers include these Sabbath controversies, Collins provides careful evidence showing that the legal reasoning in these

cuss at length many of these stories;[37] here I restrict myself to a number of broader remarks. First, apart from one story, these Sabbath controversies revolve around Jesus' penchant for performing healings and exorcisms on the Sabbath (Mark 1:21–28; Mark 3:1–6 // Matt 12:10–14 // Luke 6:6–11; Mark 6:1–6; Luke 13:10–17; Luke 14:1–6; see John 5:1–18; 7:19–24; 9:1–17). What work precisely, then, is involved in healing these people? Jesus makes no money from these healed people and derives no benefit from them. He does not break a sweat. In fact, apart from one story, the most he does is touch the sick people. In healing the man with a withered hand, as John Meier notes, "Jesus literally *does nothing*. He simply issues two brief, simple commands to the afflicted man."[38]

Further, when confronted, Jesus always makes legal arguments to support his actions. For example, in this story of the man with the withered hand, Jesus responds to resistance with the question, "*Is it lawful* [Ἔξεστιν] to do good or to do harm on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?" This is no rejection of the Sabbath but a question of how to observe it properly (see Matt 12:10; Luke 6:6–9). In fact, Matthew's version of this controversy develops Jesus' legal argument. Here Jesus assumes that his hearers would save the life of one of their animals if it fell in a pit on the Sabbath. Since human life is more valuable than animal life, he concludes that it is of course lawful to heal on the Sabbath (Matt 12:11–12). While Luke does not contain this Matthean addition to the story, in a story unique to Luke Jesus heals a crippled woman who has a demon (Luke 13:10–17). Again Jesus defends his actions not by dismissing the Sabbath, but through legal argumentation about what he assumes to be the common practice of caring for animals on the Sabbath as a basis for caring for human life, which is of greater value. Finally, in one last story unique to Luke, Jesus encounters a man with dropsy (Luke 14:1–6). As in the story with the man with the withered hand, Luke's Jesus asks, "Is it lawful [Ἔξεστιν] to heal people on the Sabbath or not?" Once again he points out that care for animals or for a small child

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stories coincides with rabbinic thinking about the Sabbath. On Sabbath more broadly, see Lutz Doering, *Schabbat: Sabbathalacha und -praxis im antiken Judentum und Urchristentum*, TSAJ 78 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999).

37. See ch. 7 of Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death*; see also Oliver, *Torah Praxis after 70 CE*.

38. Meier, *Law and Love*, 254.

takes precedence over Sabbath rest, something he assumes his readers will recognize, thereby providing his healing actions with a legal basis.

In the one exception to this trend, Jesus' disciples pick grains while they are walking through fields on the Sabbath (Mark 2:23–28 // Matt 12:1–8 // Luke 6:1–5). At least according to Matthew and Luke, they eat what they pick. Matthew claims this is because they were hungry. In all three gospels, Jesus appeals to David's actions in eating bread that was unlawful for him to eat (1 Sam 21:1–6). This story indicates that human need takes precedent over the temple cult and its laws. What I believe is implicit in Mark and Luke is that if human need takes precedence over the temple cult, as Jesus argues from Scripture itself, then it also must take priority over the Sabbath. Matthew makes this implicit claim explicit, depicting Jesus arguing about priests working on the Sabbath in the temple, showing that temple cult is more important than Sabbath observance. Consequently, the disciples' hunger should be dealt with, even if this means they pluck grain on the Sabbath. One could no doubt disagree with this claim, but the fact that Jesus makes a legal argument in all three accounts of this story indicates that he has not abandoned belief in the sanctity of the Sabbath; rather, he assumes it, but argues that human life is of even more value than the Sabbath. In this, he was hardly alone among his fellow Jews.

CONCLUSION

So, we return to the beginning: "According to the Synoptic gospel writers, did Jesus plan to change the various ceremonies related to the cult of the Jewish God?" As Amy-Jill Levine concludes, "The Gospels and Acts depict Jesus, his family, and his followers as worshiping in the Temple and participating in the Temple sacrificial system."[39] The answer to my mind, is a clear no. But this answer has implications, I think, for the original question of this chapter: Did Jesus plan to start a new religion? Let me quote the words here of Paula Fredriksen: "On the evidence of Paul's letters, the Gospels, and Acts, [Jesus'] apostles chose to live in Jerusalem, worship in the Temple, and keep the festivals, the Sabbath, and the food laws. Could

39. Levine, *Misunderstood Jew*, 154.

they really have understood nothing?"[40] Likewise, if Jesus had rejected these integral components of Jewish piety (temple cult, ritual impurity, Sabbath, festivals), how did the earliest gospel writers come to depict him in a way that contradicts this truth? Could the gospel writers "really have understood nothing"?

I think the obvious conclusion historians must accept is that, regardless of the historicity of the individual stories and sayings found in the Gospels, the gospel writers are consistent in depicting Jesus as seeking to observe these aspects of the Jewish law and using generally accepted methods of legal argumentation to defend any actions deemed controversial. They are either intentionally misrepresenting Jesus' view of the Jewish law by making him more law observant than he actually was, or their depiction of a law-observant Jesus fits, in general, with who the historical Jesus really was, what he thought, and how he acted. If the former, I agree with Dale Allison that any attempt to locate the historical Jesus is doomed: "If the chief witnesses fail us in the larger matters, we cannot trust them in the smaller matters either, and we are not clever enough to make up their lack. To imagine otherwise, to pretend that we are as dexterous at doing history as Sherlock Holmes was at solving crimes, is to deceive ourselves."[41] But I am convinced by the latter. Again, I quote Allison: "The first-century traditions about Jesus are not an amorphous mess. On the contrary, certain themes, motifs, and rhetorical strategies recur again and again throughout the primary sources; and it must be in those themes and motifs and rhetorical strategies—which, taken together, leave some distinct impressions—if it is anywhere, that we will find memory."[42] One of these themes, which Allison does not himself examine in his important book *Constructing Jesus*, is Jesus' view regarding central aspects of Jewish *religio*. The Jesus of the Gospels, to use Meier's expression, is the "halakic Jesus,"[43] a Jesus concerned to keep the law properly and to make legal arguments for why he keeps it in the way that he does. Whatever the precise difference between history and the narratives of the Gospels with regard to details about deeds and

40. Fredriksen, "What You See."
41. Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 17.
42. Allison, *Constructing Jesus*, 15.
43. Meier, *Law and Love*, 8.

saying, the historical conclusion can only be that the halakic Jesus of the Gospels exists only because the historical Jesus was himself law observant. Did Jesus plan to start a new religion, then? No.