

Introduction

JESUS ENCOUNTERED

The life of Jesus closed with a violent death. But this death did not extinguish his voice, which has continued to kindle the hearts and minds of many people at the same time as it has moved others to reject him. What was there in his person, in his behavior, and in his words that prompted both the enthusiasm of so many followers and the extreme hostility of those who killed him? To what extent was his activity born of a profound crisis that affected not only his own environment but also vast sectors of society in classical antiquity? The historical and cultural figure of Jesus is enormous, and there is no risk of exhausting the significance of what it represents. New questions continually arise—and as soon as they appear, discussions and debates rage.

This book is the fruit of a long collaboration between an anthropologist (Adriana Destro) and a historian (Mauro Pesce). It takes its position within the principal currents of research that have renewed scholarly work on Jesus and on the origins of Christianity in recent decades. Our epoch is characterized by big questions and new goals for knowledge. Our hope is to contribute to the emancipation from presuppositions or paradigms that correspond only poorly to the drive for knowledge that animates our age. Jesus belongs to the heritage of humanity, and his story involves us all. What is needed, however, is a reflection that employs ever more appropriate tools of analysis and methodologies in order to give him a place in the sphere of today's intellectual debate. This can help establish a contact between his story and our own culture, which is still being shaped by Christianity.

The starting point for our investigation is the fact that his death, which is the incontestable proof of his life and of the way in which he led it, did not succeed in halting his message. We do not analyze this fact; we simply recall it. This is where we start the task of recovering and analyzing his life, wherever this is possible.

LIFESTYLE AS THE FIRST MESSAGE

Jesus kindled hopes, mobilized consensus, and brought people together. Were the hopes and expectations that he had aroused diminished by his death? Were his followers faithful to his message? It is difficult to give a clear and decisive answer to these questions. Gerd Theissen thinks that “popular expectations of Jesus of Nazareth included everything the people expected of charismatic leader figures at that time: he was to be an interpreter of Scripture who expounded Torah more convincingly than other interpreters; a prophet who not only announced a better future but actually brought this about; a messianic king of the people, who restored freedom to the Jews. And yet, Jesus shattered all these expectations and roles.”¹ Doubtless one sector of the population, that which was closest to the learned men and the theologians, was capable of sharing these Judaic religious concepts, but the expectations of the majority were much simpler, more urgent.

The clearest impression that the reader of the Gospel of Mark receives—an impression that the other Gospels do not negate—is that at one particular moment in his life, in the fullness of his adult existence, Jesus made a radical choice and that he staked his whole existence on this fundamental choice, right to the very end of his life. One other fact is essential, however. He pursued his objective in just one way: by going to meet the people to whom he belonged, the Judaic people, and taking his place among them.

At the center of our reflection, therefore, is the fact that Jesus addressed real persons with his words and his actions. He had taken on the task of solidarity with ordinary people in order to help them, to heal them, and to give them a concrete hope. Every day, he encountered crucial existential situations: domestic life, the narrow and absolute horizon constituted by family interests, the sickness of the poor, the insolent arrogance of the rich, the invasive power of the Romans. And it was the concreteness of these situations that he constantly addressed, making use of his own word and the power of his own body. His lifestyle is marked by two basic needs: the overturning of the coercive conditions that afflicted the existence of the people, and the expectation—in a “tomorrow” that was imminent—of a radical rebirth determined by God’s dominion over the world.

It is precisely by penetrating into the depths of Jesus’ lifestyle and habitual actions that we discern the secret of his person. On the one hand, he did not refuse to be physically present to people; but, on the other hand, his firm intention was not to have roots in any place, not to

settle down in any environment. Jesus knew how to safeguard his own freedom of action and his complete independence. And because of this independence, which often took the form of a search for solitude, it is possible to reconstruct his life only in part. Many of his most intimate experiences remained unknown even to his disciples, and important segments of his existence were not captured in the writings that have come down to us.

Many books about Jesus center on his message, his words, or his most important public actions. Ed Parish Sanders, in *Jesus and Judaism*, attempts to base the historical portrait of Jesus not so much on his words, which are difficult to reconstruct in their original form, as on elements that are historically more certain, “facts about Jesus’ career and its aftermath.”² The novelty in our own research consists in the identification of an even more solid and certain foundation, what we call the “lifestyle” or “practice of life” of Jesus, that which shaped and determined his way of living. We have been guided by an anthropological intention in our investigations into the texts of earliest Christianity. When we speak of the lifestyle and practice of life of Jesus, we mean the cultural forms on which he based his life, the mechanisms by means of which he organized his existence and his means of support, the logic of his actions, and the modalities of his contacts with people and with institutions. We have used the word “practice” to indicate that the center of his personality consists not only in ideas but in a constant way of acting—a style of life. We want to find out how his concrete actions produced new realities and turned things upside down in the lives of the persons who encountered him. We want to identify the precise social environments in which his words, which were born in the interior of his existence, circulated, thanks to direct contacts.

His true message, therefore, is the message transmitted by his way of living, by the way in which he positioned himself in the world. His teaching passed through the various events of his career within a complex cultural context which is anything but transparent. His religious vision is incomprehensible outside his practical experience and his share in the life that people led. An utterance such as “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (Luke 9:58) has very little significance if it remains outside the real meaning of the practice of Jesus’ life, if it is not understood in the light of the fact that he was a man who had abandoned home, goods, and work. He entered people’s houses and taught within domestic reality. This provoked conflicts, for example, between the two sisters Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42). When he tells them that only one thing is necessary for

a woman—listening to the message—he is not formulating an abstract principle. A different way of evaluating individual behavior has made its way into the working relationships of a domestic unit.

Cultural anthropology teaches us that a cultural configuration coincides with an ensemble of behaviors and of relationships that are based on patterns that condition the existence of individuals precisely in their singularity.³ Accordingly, our first task has been to show how Jesus positioned himself with regard to the social forms of his time, and to identify the substance of the innovations he proposed. Without examining his concrete actions and the way in which he was in contact with real human life stories, it is impossible to clarify whether his project corresponded to people's expectations. Did this project affect only a few persons or only the people of Israel, or did Jesus envisage a social transformation embracing the whole of humanity? Did he call into question the cultural and religious basis of the Judaic society of his time, or did he appeal to this basis against those who did not respect it? Without examining the details of his way of living, it is pointless to ask what meaning he attributed to his own proclamation and what essential reason led him to put his own life utterly at risk. Accordingly, we have sought to discern how Jesus met people, how he was physically involved in the crowds that came together and thronged around him, what were the forms of association that he preferred or with which he came into conflict. We have not resisted the temptation of shedding some light on his interior life, his emotions and feelings; the task is difficult, but not impossible. Ultimately, we have found ourselves facing an astonishing figure and a lifestyle that is personal, radical, and alternative.

THE HISTORICAL RELIABILITY OF THE GOSPELS

In the task of reconstructing the historical figure of Jesus,⁴ the Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew and the Gospel of John are indispensable. But the so-called Jewish-Christian Gospels are also important: the Gospels of the Nazarenes, of the Hebrews, and of the Ebionites. The *Gospel of Thomas*, which is certainly extremely ancient in its first redaction, offers significant help, although its contents primarily concern the words of Jesus, which are not the principal object of this book. We have drawn on the seven authentic letters of Paul, especially on 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and 1 Thessalonians. Useful information and a stimulus to further analysis are offered us by the Letter of James and the *Didache*, which transmit sizable repertoire of words of Jesus and, in the case of the *Didache*, indications about the form of the Lord's Prayer, about the

Eucharist, and about the eschatological expectations that were linked to Jesus. A work from the close of the first century, the *Ascension of Isaiah*, is important because it helps us understand the eschatological scenarios and the experiences of contact with the supernatural that were widespread among the first disciples. The Acts of the Apostles provides essential information about the refraction of Jesus' action on the various currents of followers who came into existence after his death.

In the absence of Jesus and his world, which have now disappeared, anthropological analysis too must turn to these ancient written texts, products of the mentalities of an age that has passed away, texts that share the perspectives of that age. These are very distinctive works that appear to most of today's readers (or are presented to them) as closed and untouchable. Anthropology looks in them for the traces of a world that was real but is now vanished; for the references that concern the author and the addressees; and for the concrete aspects of the life of Jesus and the cultural context of these aspects. Anthropology endeavors to uncover the strategies and the elements of challenge that (often in a way that is scarcely visible) characterize the world of human relationships. In this way, anthropology gives a voice and a visibility to elements and situations that allow the reconstruction of an entire human and social order. We must supplement a tendency among scholars who are, in general, reluctant to shed light on ordinary cultural contents that they regard as possessing scanty cognitive value. In this way, we can delineate what was required in an environment that was governed by matters of custom.

The questions that anthropology puts to a text are not purely literary or theological. On the contrary, these questions follow an interpretive process that gives priority to the factors and events that shape a person's life. We have chosen a methodology that interweaves different models and structures of anthropological analysis,⁵ looking at the places and the dislocation of persons, the domestic units, the phenomena of associations, and the distribution of the primary means of sustenance (from food to housing). The more open the dialogue among these interpretive models, the more the various cultural factors will converge in a plausible image of the human life of Jesus that is truly integrated into a precise human context. We are interested above all in spatial and temporal dimensions (where and when Jesus worked); in his personal relationships, circumstances, and contacts (how he related within and outside kinship groups and how he dealt with the transactions of giving and receiving on which these groups were based); in his private and public roles and gestures (how he used his body, the itinerant life, the

periods of isolation); and in his interior states (how he expressed his feelings). Along these lines, an attentive investigation of the materials offered by the Gospels—materials that are sometimes highly stratified, and not explicit⁶—leads to the discovery of an extraordinary quantity of information and supplements the results of historical or literary and exegetical approaches.

THE NECESSITY OF RESEARCH INTO THE HISTORICAL JESUS

Why is it necessary to reconstruct the historical figure of Jesus? The answer lies in two sets of facts: the nature of the documents and the divergences that exist among them. The documentation that permits us to know about Jesus consists essentially of texts. Like any written work, the texts of earliest Christianity must be examined critically.

All texts are cultural products, and written texts are among the most refined instruments that human culture has ever produced. But they do not simply reproduce the facts: they *propose* facts by making use of points of view and interpretive patterns. They offer first of all visions or give glimpses of their authors and of their projects. There is, therefore, an ineradicable difference between the historical reality and the texts that document it.⁷ This makes it necessary to undertake a critical analysis of the nature of the documents, the paths they take, and their intellectual structures.

The sources that we have used are not documents from an archive. They are not texts that were laid down in a written form to become in some way or other a fetish. They are not novelistic productions nor works of fantasy, and they are certainly not philosophical. They are expressions of persons and of human groups that mirrored themselves in these texts and constructed their own memory and their own convictions. They are not neutral texts, because they take a stance; but they are truthful texts, in that they reproduce the authentic beliefs or the religious points of view of those who wrote them.

The Gospel narratives are the result of a lengthy process of accumulation and selection of information that was passed from person to person. Interpretive, anthropological, and historical methods cannot avoid taking account of the choices that shaped the processes of memory. Anthropology offers paths to analyze the transition from event to text, including the technique of recording and the need to forget.⁸ No transmission, whether oral or written, is truly literal. The value of many diverse aspects in a transmission—from formal discourses to occasional

speeches, to reported speeches, to gossip and rumors—can be extremely variable. There is no material that is uncontaminated or totally truthful and authentic. This necessary interdependence between memory and forgetfulness, between speaking and keeping silent, should be neither suppressed nor overestimated, for it is, in fact, obvious that a narrative concentrates its attention only on some elements that its author judges relevant to the goals he or she has sought to realize—and such goals are always partial. Let us give only one example. In some cases, the author was limited by the scarcity of certain and verifiable information, of memories that can safely be accepted. If all we had was the Gospel of John, we would not know the Lord's Prayer. On the basis of the oldest form of chapter 16 of Mark, we would not know about the appearances of the risen Jesus. And in Mark, many of the words that Luke and Matthew attribute to Jesus are absent. Some parables, such as the celebrated story of the good Samaritan, are transmitted only by Luke. The anthropologist's awareness of the process of memorization demands the critical reconstruction of the history, of the persons involved, of the environments, and of the goals (often implicit) pursued by the authors of a text.

Let us now look at the second aspect that makes it necessary to carry out research into the historical figure of Jesus. Earliest Christianity in its first two centuries was characterized by a multiplicity of currents that give us diverse images of him. None of these can claim to be more authentic or unequivocally exclusive vis-à-vis the other images. At least for the first one hundred and fifty years after the death of Jesus, different tendencies coexist within emerging Christianity; there is no normative Christianity recognized by all. It is in the second half of the second century that for the first time we find the idea that the deviation from a certain norm that emerged in one precise historical form is to be considered open to censure as a "heresy." It seems that it was Justin, shortly after 150, who gave the Greek word *hairesis* the meaning of an opinion that was to be condemned—a heresy.⁹ Before Justin, this term signified one distinct free opinion that was admitted on equal terms with all other opinions. However, the need for an orthodoxy—a fact that is culturally relevant and reveals a change of perceptions and expectations—does not mean that there was universal agreement about the doctrines that were to be considered "orthodox." And another century again had to pass before the New Testament was formed, the collection of twenty-seven normative works that were regarded as inspired by God.¹⁰ The writings of the New Testament are necessary for the reconstruction of the historical image of Jesus, but they are not sufficient for this task. It is a partial collection full of gaps. It gathers together only some of the

Christian works written in roughly the first one hundred and twenty years, and this means that it excludes various images of Jesus that are scattered in other writings, some of which are lost today, although they were widespread in the first century.

Furthermore, the twenty-seven writings included in the New Testament can be used only on certain conditions. First and foremost, one must free oneself of the idea that the four canonical Gospels were known by everyone in the first or second century. It cannot be taken for granted that, at that period, the readers of the *Gospel of Thomas* or the *Gospel of the Hebrews* or any other of the many existing Gospels would have known Matthew or Luke or Mark. Justin, in the mid-second century, speaks of “the memoirs of the apostles” (1 Apol 67; Dial. 103.106), but continues to make use of words of Jesus transmitted by noncanonical gospels and texts.¹¹ The *Didache*, probably redacted toward the end of the first century and contemporary with the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, is close only to the Gospel of Matthew, but without being dependent on it. The community of Rhossus (in the southeast of today’s Turkey) knew the *Gospel of Peter*, but not the others.¹² Despite this, some of the synoptic Gospels had become points of reference that were widely consulted toward the middle of the second century, as seems to be demonstrated by the *Gospel of Judas*.¹³ But this does not mean that the canonical Gospels were considered normative all at once. In the first century, Mark was not more important than *Thomas*. The fact that Luke had recourse to sources of his own when he wrote his Gospel (Luke 1:1-4) shows that he did not consider the others normative—not even the Gospel of Mark.

It is the differences among the Gospels that oblige us to ask about the words pronounced by Jesus or the actions performed by him. Here, we limit ourselves to a few remarks by way of example. (a) According to the Gospel of Mark, followed by Luke and by Matthew, Jesus went to Jerusalem only once, after having preached only in the north of the Land of Israel; but according to the Gospel of John, he went there several times and worked extensively in Judea. In John, Jesus expels the merchants from the Temple near the beginning of his activity, but in Mark, Luke, and Matthew, he does so at the end. (b) The order of the facts concerning the life of Jesus varies among the three Gospels of Mark, Luke, and Matthew. (c) It suffices to examine accurately the three versions of the parable of the banquet that have come down to us¹⁴ to see that the Gospel of Matthew has profoundly modified the original parable of Jesus, and that the versions of Luke and the *Gospel of Thomas* are more reliable. The comparison with the *Gospel of Thomas* allows us to affirm that sometimes the parables were adapted in order to express the supernatu-

ral role that the earliest Christian communities attributed to Jesus. This is the case with the parable of the murderous tenants in the vineyard.¹⁵ (d) The Gospels of Matthew and John have a tendency to place lengthy discourses on the lips of Jesus, but the exegesis of every detail of the text shows that the discourses of Matthew are made up of individual sayings of Jesus that the earlier tradition had handed on separately, while those of John seem profoundly influenced by the theology that was typical of the Johannine community.

We could easily multiply such examples of divergences. But to say that the Gospels sometimes present discordances does not imply that these words are historically untrustworthy. As a matter of fact, the Gospels very frequently converge, and their documentary value is extremely high, as is also that of those other texts that the communities would later regard as apocryphal. Critical analysis must be made on a case-by-case basis, just as in the historical investigation of any document. Our starting point is the presupposition that the Gospel documents are reliable, but only at some extent, and we seek to understand the motives that led their authors to omit or to modify what they had received from others.

Faced with the divergent testimonies in earliest Christianity, there is no alternative than to trust in the traditional methodologies of historical criticism and in anthropology's competence in the analysis of the complex of relationships and experiences. There is, however, a specific debate about the criteria that should be applied to research into the historical figure of Jesus. Here, we limit ourselves to a presentation of the criteria that we have followed in the present book.

There is an immense gap between today's culture and the culture of Jesus. The first criterion that we have adopted systematically here consists in reading the way of life, the actions, and the words of Jesus within his own culture and environment. Our theory about the three levels of depth of the text¹⁶ allows us to identify in the Gospels deep cultural strata that are the most solid base for showing us how Jesus related to the world around him. We could call this the criterion of continuity, or conformity with regard to the culture of his environment; and of discontinuity, or lack of conformity, with regard to today's culture. We have taken on the role of one who observes from afar,¹⁷ aware of our own distance from the ancient world and, at the same time, of the contemporary values that we bear and of the analytical experiences that have been elaborated in our own historical-cultural context.¹⁸

Some contemporary tendencies in theology reject the necessity of recognizing the distance and the cultural gap, insisting on the fact that the texts of earliest Christianity were produced by persons and commu-

nities who believed in Jesus, just as today's faithful believe in him. They infer from this that only faith—a faith that traditionally is presumed to be uniform and unvaried—makes it possible to understand these texts. In reality, this affirmation is not very helpful. It is true that the writings of earliest Christianity were produced by persons who believed in Jesus and intended to propagate their faith, but from the very beginning, the *faiths* in Jesus were many—just as the faiths of today diverge greatly from one another, and some churches accuse others of not being faithful to the will and the message of Jesus. This shows why we need an anthropological and historical approach that attempts to grasp what was in fact the faith of Jesus, and what was the faith of his disciples.¹⁹ Anthropologists and historians are aware that their own reconstructions are partial and depend on their own points of view. But it is precisely this ineradicable subjectivity that gives value to their research and provides the energy for further investigations.²⁰

The second criterion we have followed consists in taking account of the difference between the ideas and actions of Jesus and the ideas and actions of the first communities of his followers. We regard as authentic the attribution to Jesus of words and actions when these contrast or are not in harmony with the words and actions of the first Christian groups, for it is improbable that the original communities would have arbitrarily ascribed to him actions that contradicted their own practice and customs.²¹ The distance of Jesus vis-à-vis his own environment is also important. In some individual instances, we encounter actions and words in which he criticized certain aspects of his own Judaic context. Nevertheless, we must always seek to grasp to what extent the attribution to Jesus of a critical attitude is determined by the polemic that the communities subsequently elaborated against the Judeans.

We regard as certainly historical those sayings attributed to Jesus in which there is no affirmation about his salvific function or his special supernatural dignity. For example, the petition in the Lord's Prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt 6:12), must be considered authentic because it attributes the forgiveness of sins exclusively to God and to the behavior of human beings—not to Jesus' death on the cross. For the same reason, it is highly probable that the following words that Luke ascribes to Jesus are authentic: "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did" (Luke 13:3).

It is often the case that an action, a saying, or a parable of Jesus is attested by only one source, but this is not a sufficient reason to dismiss it as unhistorical. For if the contents of these actions and words con-

verge with other actions and words in which it is difficult to doubt the historicity, they are to be considered reliable.

The attempt to reconstruct a plausible image of Jesus always encounters one obstacle: namely the fact that no source puts us in direct contact with him. None of the Gospels is the work of eyewitnesses, but only of followers from the second or subsequent generations. However, eyewitness testimony, which is the basis of ethnographical reconstruction, has a relative value, and it is accompanied in anthropological analysis by other strategies of verification. The interweaving of appearance and reality, of the invisibility and the visibility of the phenomena, is at the center of wide-ranging discussions of the reliability of the observer's eye. It is well known, on the one hand, that "the testimony of the next day"—which reports after a brief lapse of time something that happened in the past—opens up a whole series of historical and interpretive problems. On the other hand, a faithful transcription contemporary with the event itself is an extremely rare thing, and it entails the risk of incompleteness and of the momentary impression made on a person.

The authors of the Gospels were persons who belonged to the Hellenistic-Roman culture, but their works portray the career of a Galilean Judean who spoke Aramaic. Since they spoke and wrote in Greek, they do not record for us the words that Jesus may perhaps have spoken in his own language. The authors of the Gospels made use of narratives that originated in persons who had had a direct relationship with him or who had been informed indirectly about him. It is certain that the comparative examination of the Gospels permits us to go back to the common sources of their authors and to what these sources contained; but it does not permit us to go back to Jesus himself, to what he in fact said and did. We can reconstruct with a certain amount of reliability the form that his parables, his sayings, or the stories about him had before they were reworked and entered into the various formulations of the Gospels. But it is obvious that we cannot go back to a phase more ancient than that of those who supplied the information to the authors of our Gospels. There is an empty space, a distance, between the testimonies on which the Gospels are based and Jesus—and this gap is not filled by any intermediary testimony accessible to the historian. Nevertheless, we reject a skeptical attitude, since that would be unjustified. The data that emerge from the earliest Christian sources are numerous, and their convergence allows us to reconstruct a sufficiently convincing image of the historical figure of Jesus. Although it often remains hypothetical, it possesses a significant degree of reliability.

The primary need that moves us to begin this investigation of the historical figure of Jesus is the conviction that is possible even today to appeal to Jesus as an indispensable basis of our culture and our morality.

Research into the historical Jesus bears within itself the possibility of a regeneration of the religious world for which he is the point of reference. It is not true to say that shedding light on the contrast between the historical Jesus and the later churches and their dissonant interpretations amounts to an attack and a denial of Christianity. To argue in this way would mean yielding to a fundamentalist mentality that holds that the churches of today have always been faithful in every way to the lifestyle and teaching of Jesus, and that they put into practice a great inheritance that is monolithic and untouchable—and improbably uncoupled from the evolution of history. Anthropological and historical research brings out the complexity of many cultural aspects and the reasons for the historical change that is always going on. These data can have a constructive influence on doctrinal reflection (as happened, for example, in Christian theology in the decades after the Second World War) and even on the conceptions of religion and religiosity.

In this book, we maintain that Jesus practiced his traditional religion and was not the founder of a religious system different from that in which he was born. His lifestyle and his message, the movement that he created during his existence, were not a religion (a concept absent from the Judaism of his time).²² Rather, he invited people to change their behavior in order to bring about a profound renewal within the Judaic world in which he lived.

The figure of Jesus was detached totally from Judaic culture only when the great majority of his followers were non-Judean. People lost sight of his human dimension when they began to regard him primarily as a divine being. His figure was transformed at that time from the authentic believer that he was into the figure of an innovator and reformer who was critical of his own culture. In this way, people began to lose their appreciation of his fidelity to God and of his expectation that God would intervene. It is from this time on that a wedge was inserted between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of the later churches.