



Fig. 0.2. The Sea of Galilee (also called Lake Gennesaret or the Sea of Tiberias), seen from the Mountain of the Beatitudes near Tabgha and Bethsaida. In the first century the lake was the center of a significant fishing industry in which some of Jesus' disciples had worked. Jesus' parables reflect other spheres of economic life in Galilee in which production for export had replaced the sustenance village economy. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

UNEARTHING A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

U ntil recently a people's history of Christianity—particularly in the New Testament period—would have been considered a contradiction in terms, according to the canons of standard history. There are two reasons for this, the first having to do with the “people,” and the second with “Christianity.” First, until very recently, history was focused almost entirely on the ruling elites who were involved in significant events, particularly the “kings and wars,” the statesmen and generals who made history. Since those who wrote history were intellectuals employed by the dominant classes, moreover, historical accounts were written in the interests of and from the perspective of the elites. The meaning of history, furthermore, turned out to be the meaning for the elites. Ordinary people simply were not a subject worthy of historical investigation, according to established historians.

Since at least the French Revolution, however, ordinary people have adamantly insisted on their own interests and rights. In fact, they were so brazen as to make history themselves in ways that could not be suppressed. In recent decades, colonized peoples, Latin American campesinos, Southeast Asian peasants, African Americans, and women's groups around the world have taken significant historical action that elites could no longer effectively suppress, much less ignore. In response, a younger generation of professional historians finally gave an ever-widening attention to the history of ordinary people.

The second reason that a people's history of Christianity would have to be considered an oxymoron is rooted in the Enlightenment origins of what is usually understood as history. The Enlightenment thinkers who determined the subject matter, methods, and criteria of what constitutes history were struggling to get out from under the authoritarian dogma of established Christianity. Accordingly, religion was defined in restrictive ways, as irrational (to be suppressed) or as a matter of individual belief (to be

tolerated). As an irrational or essentially private matter, religion was excluded from history proper. History came to mean primarily the story of politics, national and international. The exclusion of religion from history was reinforced by the separation of church and state in many Western societies.

The result has been the development of smaller peripheral fields such as the history of Christianity and, for the period of the origins of Christianity, the overlapping field of New Testament studies. The modern developers of these interrelated fields, moreover, accepted both the standard focus of history on the elite and the separation of religion from history proper as focused on political affairs. This meant that the history of Christianity concentrated on the bishops, theologians, and church councils (which corresponded to “kings and wars”). And it meant that the field of New Testament focused on the origin of what was defined as a religion, as if it could be separated from the broader concrete historical context. As both a goal and a result of interpretation of the New Testament and related texts, New Testament studies focused on the origins of the Christian sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), creeds, Christology, and church order. The only people who mattered were the apostles, such as Peter and Paul, and the evangelists, such as Matthew and John, and they were important primarily for their faith and theology. The principal distinction made among people was between the Jews, among whom the new religion had its background, and the Gentiles, among whom the religion flourished and expanded.

For the New Testament period in particular there is considerable irony that a people’s history of Christianity would have been considered a contradiction in terms. For in the period of their origins, the communities and movements that were later called Christianity consisted of nothing but people’s history. This requires a great deal of rethinking concerning some of the basic assumptions, approaches, and conceptual apparatus previously standard in the fields of New Testament and Christian origins.

Perhaps the first thing to be recognized is that Christianity did not yet exist in the New Testament period as an identifiable religion. Similar to the period of colonization of the Atlantic seaboard that preceded the origins of the United States, the New Testament period was a time of origins of parallel movements and communities, some of which later became identified as Christian. Most books of the New Testament have no reference to Christians, let alone Christianity. The people who produced and used the Gospels of Mark, Matthew, and John, for example, understood themselves as a renewal or an extension of the people of Israel. Somewhat similarly Paul seems to think of even the non-Israelite assemblies he helped catalyze in terms of an extension of Israel’s blessings to other peoples in fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. Certainly there is no Christianity over against Judaism in most books of the New Testament.

This means that the people involved in these communities and movements were not defined by being the nonelite within Christianity. They were not the ordinary laity as distinct from the bishops, popes, theologians, and church councils. This makes the people we focus on in volume 1 of *A People's History of Christianity* different from the people to be focused on in the other volumes—those who were in some way Christian. They are rather very small groups from among the peoples subject to the wealthy and powerful imperial elite and their aristocracies in the provinces and cities of the Roman Empire, such as Galilee and Judea or Antioch and Corinth.

Once we recognize that the communities and movements associated with New Testament literature had not (yet) developed into what was later identified as Christianity, it should be easier not to restrict them to the category of religion. Religion as separate from politics and economics is a peculiar modern Western concept and phenomenon. In the ancient Roman Empire, as in most other times and places, religion was inseparable from political-economic life. The diverse communities and movements to be examined in this volume almost certainly understood themselves as more than what modern Westerners would think of as religious. Insofar as these communities and movements emerged among peoples subject to the Roman Empire, whose rulers were intensely suspicious and repressive of any disturbance of the imperial order, they often developed in conflict with the Roman imperial elite and its culture. In fact, it could be that a principal reason that they developed into what can be called religion is that the Roman imperial order blocked them from continuing as more than religion, in some cases as an alternative society.

Insofar as the people involved in the communities and movements of the New Testament period were acting without the leadership of a Christian elite and were almost always acting in conflict with the elites who controlled the Roman imperial order, they were making history. Those who formed these communities took the initiatives in various ways, eventually producing the diverse wider movements that became an important historical force in the late Empire.¹

In writing the history of the Roman Empire, historians have almost always focused on the triumphs of the Roman warlords and emperors. The aristocratic ancient Judean historian Josephus focuses on the relations of the Roman imperial elite and the Herodian and high priestly rulers of Judea and Galilee. Yet one cannot read very far into his accounts without realizing that it was the popular movements, and particularly the popular protests and revolts by the Judean and Galilean peasantry, that drove events in Palestine during the time of Peter and Mary Magdalene. The rulers were repeatedly in a reactive posture, trying to respond to initiatives taken by the Judean and Galilean people. Similarly, in the Greek cities of the Empire,

the aristocracies spent their time obsequiously cultivating the emperor and reliving the bygone glories of classical Greek culture.² Like the Galilean and Judean peasants in Roman Palestine, it was the people who formed the communities associated with New Testament and related literature who took new historical initiatives. These communities and movements, therefore, cannot be consigned to a marginalized history of religion in the ancient world but must be understood as those who made history in a more general sense, including the conflicts of power and politics.

A people's history of the New Testament period, therefore, presents a challenge to the usual understanding of history, particularly as practiced by modern Western historians. Western historians of India, for example, virtually ignored the significance of peasant movements in the anticolonial struggle because they were defined as religious. In premodern and non-Western societies, however, not only is religion inseparable from political-economic life, but adherence to traditional religion and culture can inspire historical movements. It is thus important, in response to the modern Western separation of religion from politics, to explain how religious phenomena are factors in historical movements, hence in the making of history. Established New Testament scholars, apparently embarrassed by demon possession and exorcism and people swept up in ecstatic spiritual behavior, have given such phenomena little attention, even downplayed them. Yet the spirit possession, prophecy, healings, and similar spiritual experiences may be precisely what catalyzed community solidarity and the motivation for the formation of alternative communities and resistance to the dominant order.

The historical explorations in this volume thus do not have the problem of some recent exercises in social history that have drawn criticism for having no genuine problem to figure out. The task before us is to explore the ways in which ordinary people whose lives were determined by the Roman imperial order formed communities and movements that spread and expanded into a significant historical force in late antiquity. The explorations pursue a number of interrelated factors in what were complex and varied historical developments, depending on local conditions and cultures: the interrelationship of problematic circumstances, discontented people, and distinctive leaders, messages, and organizations that resulted in movements and communities with the solidarity and staying power to survive and expand. We are striving both to discover and reconstruct significant historical communities and movements and to explain them.³ While this often involves investigations into local conditions and cultures, it requires attention to events in the wider imperial world, since nearly all of the areas into which these movements spread were directly or indirectly subject to Rome. And since ordinary people are almost invariably subject

to various layers of the wealthy and powerful, the key to understanding may often be particular relations of power.

Our soundings in people's history could thus be compared with standard history in several basic respects:⁴

	<i>people's history</i>	<i>standard history</i>
focus:	ordinary people	elites such as "kings and wars"
scope:	all aspects of life	mainly political events at the top
view:	from below	from above
sources:	archaeology, texts, comparative studies	written texts, archives
approach:	interdisciplinary	the discipline of history

The exploratory studies in this volume thus raise new questions about New Testament and other already familiar materials, looking again at less familiar sources, questioning old assumptions, and working critically toward new conceptual tools more appropriate to how ordinary people made history. The initiative to explore these materials in terms of people's history just happens to come at a time when recent research on various issues is forcing us to rethink assumptions about and approaches to people of the ancient Mediterranean world. Even more, our investigations of people's history lead us beyond the standard assumptions, approaches, and agenda of traditional New Testament studies in several basic respects:

	<i>people's history</i>	<i>New Testament studies</i>
focus:	reconstruction of people's history	interpretation of texts
scope:	all aspects of life	mainly religion and meaning
basic division:	rulers versus ruled	Judaism versus Hellenism
issues:	people's circumstances and actions	Christian theological questions
media:	oral communication in communities	writings by authors
culture:	popular tradition versus elite culture	stable Scripture
agenda:	people in their own circumstances	bridging the distance from text to today

At the risk of oversimplifying historical complexities, we can sketch some basic factors and issues involved.

INHERITING A TRADITION OF REVOLT

Certain major events and developments in the wider history of the ancient Mediterranean world helped set up the conditions in which a small number of ordinary people formed movements focused on Jesus of Nazareth.

The movements that gathered around Jesus as their martyred prophet (or messiah) originated among the peasants of Galilee and spread quickly among Judeans and Samaritans. These were all descendants of the ancient Israelites. In their Passover meal they celebrated the ancestors' escape from foreign rulers in the exodus from hard labor under the Egyptian pharaoh led by the great prophet Moses. They also cultivated the memory of resistance that the prophet Elijah led against the oppressive rule of King Ahab. Just before Jesus was born, Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean peasants lived under the rule of the military strongman Herod, who had been installed by the Roman Senate as king of the Judeans (40–4 BCE). Herod, in turn, kept intact the Jerusalem temple-state, headed by a priestly aristocracy. Herod's oppressive rule of the Judeans, Galileans, and Samaritans was a decisive stage in a long history of conflict between Israelite peoples and their rulers, one that set the stage for the Jesus movements.

The Jerusalem temple-state had been set up by the Persian Empire in the sixth century BCE. It served several purposes simultaneously: it institutionalized an indigenous people's service of their own God, it established a ruling priestly aristocracy that owed their position to the imperial regime, and it set up a Temple administration to secure revenues for the imperial court as well as itself. The Hellenistic empires established by the successors of Alexander the Great in the third century BCE imposed the Greek language and Greek political forms on much of the ancient Near East. But they left the high priesthood in control of the Temple in Jerusalem, where Judean villagers continued to deliver their tithes and offerings.

An attempt by ambitious figures in the priestly aristocracy to transform Jerusalem into a Hellenistic city-state, more integrated into the dominant imperial cultural order, evoked resistance by scribal teachers, including those who produced in the Book of Daniel the visions of future restoration of the people's independence. The imperial regime's military enforcement of the changes in the people's traditional way of life touched off a popular insurgency led by Judas "the Maccabee" ("Hammer"), from an ordinary priestly family, the Hasmoneans. After several years of guerrilla warfare, the Judean peasants and ordinary priests managed to fight the imperial armies and their war elephants to a standoff.

In the ensuing vacuum of imperial power, successive Hasmonean brothers negotiated with rival imperial rulers to take over the high priesthood in Jerusalem. Depending increasingly on mercenary troops, the Hasmonean regime in Jerusalem proceeded to expand its power over other traditional Israelite territories. After conquering Samaria and destroying the Samaritan temple on Mount Gerizim, they finally took over Galilee as well in 104 BCE and required the inhabitants to live "according to the laws

of the Judeans.” Galileans were thus, about a hundred years before the generation of Jesus, brought together with other Israelite people under the Temple and high priesthood. But in contrast to their Israelite cousins in Judea they would not have been accustomed to rule and taxation by the Jerusalem temple-state.

The Roman takeover of Palestine in 63 BCE and their imposition of Herod as king in 40 BCE meant that the Galilean, Samaritan, and Judean peasants were suddenly subject to three layers of rulers and their respective demands for revenues: tribute to Rome, taxes to Herod, and tithes and offerings to the Temple and priesthood. With military fortresses and highly repressive measures, Herod maintained tight control of the people. At his death, however, revolts erupted in every major district of his realm, most of them led by popular leaders whom their followers acclaimed as king, that is, in Israelite parlance, “messiah.”

The Romans reconquered Galilee and Judea with typically vengeful destruction of villages, slaughter and enslavement of the inhabitants, and crucifixion of hundreds of combatants to further terrorize the populace. They installed Herod’s Rome-educated son Antipas as ruler of Galilee. After ten years of ineffective rule by Archelaus, Judea and Samaria were placed under a Roman governor, who governed through the priestly aristocracy. Galileans now for the first time in their history had their ruler living in Galilee itself. In fact Herod Antipas not only rebuilt the town of Sepphoris as his fortress-capital but within twenty years built yet another capital city on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, named Tiberias after the new emperor in Rome. One can imagine that collection of the taxes necessary to fund these massive building projects was suddenly far more efficient in Galilee than under distant rulers. It may be significant to note that after only a hundred years under Jerusalem jurisdiction, Galileans were no longer under Jerusalem control during the lifetimes of Peter, Mary Magdalene, and others among the earliest participants in Jesus movements.

Both Galilee and Judea experienced increasing political-economic turmoil from around the time of Jesus’ mission until widespread revolt erupted in the summer of 66 CE (as we know from the accounts of Josephus, who witnessed many of the events firsthand). The epidemic and escalating social banditry may be a good barometer of the steady disintegration of village life under the accumulating economic pressures. A series of popular prophetic movements anticipating replays of the exodus led by Moses and of the battle of Jericho led by Joshua arose in the Samaritan and Judean countryside from the 30s to the 50s. The increasingly predatory high priestly families who were building ever more luxurious mansions for themselves in Jerusalem gradually lost authority among the people and,

eventually, had virtually no social control over Judean society. Eventually some of the very Pharisees and other scribal intellectuals who served the temple-state as retainers organized a terrorist group of “dagger-men” to assassinate high priestly figures who collaborated too closely in imperial rule. Repressive measures taken by the Roman governors seemed only to exacerbate the popular protests and resistance. This is precisely the historical context in which movements focused on Jesus were spreading from Galilee to Samaria and Judea and beyond to Syrian villages and towns, such as Damascus.

The historical conditions of the various areas in the wider Roman Empire in which followers of Jesus established new communities were similarly set by Roman conquest and the resulting Roman imperial order of the first century CE.

On a pretext the Romans attacked a league of Greek cities centered at Corinth and utterly destroyed the classical city in 146 BCE. A hundred years later, Julius Caesar founded a colony on the site, to which he sent some of the freed slaves and other surplus population from the city of Rome. That colony then developed into the aspiring cosmopolitan center of East-West trade in the eastern Empire, its politics typically dominated by a few extremely wealthy families and its city center rebuilt with a focus on the imperial cult. Its inhabitants would have been a mishmash of deracinated individuals cut off from any cultural roots by generations of imperial conquests, enslavement, and migration from the countryside or other cities in search of a livelihood.

In Asia Minor Roman conquest and destruction played less of a role. But the Romans did drain the area economically in the first century BCE, reinforcing the tendencies to concentrate wealth in the hands of local oligarchies. Under the Empire set up by Augustus after the battle of Actium (31 BCE), those powerful oligarchies, loyal to the imperial court that maintained them in power, controlled their cities as bastions of the imperial “peace and prosperity.”

The people of Italy and Rome itself, the center of the Empire, paid a price for the imperial expansion led by the Roman warlords. While Roman and Italian peasant-soldiers were off serving in the Legions enslaving subject peoples such as Judeans and Syrians, their families fell into mounting debts. Ironically, perhaps as many as a million peasants thus gradually lost their land to the wealthy families of their warlord commanders during the first century BCE, many of them swelling the mob of the destitute in Rome itself and other cities. The wealthy patrician families, in turn, imported gangs of cheap slaves from each successive conquest to farm their burgeoning

estates. Moreover, as hundreds of thousands of slaves and other displaced people flooded into Rome and Italy, the now increasingly rootless populace became ever more diverse ethnically and culturally.

POLARIZATION AND POWER

It is difficult for Americans and Europeans who live in societies of mainly middle-class people to appreciate the dramatic divide that separated the dominant elite and the ordinary people in most ancient and medieval societies.⁵ The Roman Empire, under which what became Christianity developed in diverse communities, was dominated by a numerically tiny but extremely wealthy elite who owned or controlled most of the land as well as large numbers of slaves. The imperial, provincial, and city elites monopolized the civil-religious offices such as the civic and imperial priesthoods. The vast majority of people (roughly 90 percent) were peasants living at subsistence levels in villages and towns. In some areas of the Empire peasants may have retained control over their ancestral land and village communities. But many had sunk to the status of sharecroppers or landless laborers vulnerable to wealthy absentee landlords. A much smaller percentage of ordinary people eked out a subsistence living in the cities as artisans and laborers. In certain areas of the Roman Empire the estates of the wealthy were worked by smaller or larger gangs of slaves taken in various conquests of subject peoples. The large urban households and country villas of the elite were staffed by more domestic slaves, the more educated of whom served as tutors, readers, and managers. There were a very few people in between who served as agents or clients of the ruling aristocracies. But there was no middle class in either an economic or a political sense under the Roman Empire.

Given the political-economic polarization, it is not surprising that there were deep social divisions and significant cultural differences between the elite and powerful and the subordinate. Peasants were often of different ethnic and cultural heritage from their urban landlords and rulers. Villagers had little contact with the wealthy and powerful families in the cities, except for the agents sent to collect rents, taxes, and tribute. Especially where the peasantry continued on ancestral lands, villages were semi-independent communities, with their own local assemblies (called “synagogues” in the Gospels) and even distinctive local customs and rituals.

In Galilee, where the Jesus movements arose, there is little or no evidence of villagers’ interaction with the new cities built by Herod Antipas,



Fig. 0.3. Oil lamp decorated with fisherman and a bowl of fish, from the Herodian period. Israel. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

presumably in Roman style—other than tax collection and perhaps labor in the construction. The Judean historian Josephus, however, does emphasize the popular attacks on Sepphoris in 4 BCE and the regularly threatened peasant attacks on the pro-Roman elites in both Sepphoris and Tiberias during the great revolt in 66–67. In Judea villagers rendered up offerings as well as tithes to the Temple and priesthood and supposedly participated in the pilgrimage festivals centered in the Temple. The Judean peasantry, however, far from simply acquiescing to these mediating rituals, mounted periodic movements of independence from or direct attack on Jerusalem rule and found in the pilgrimage festivals occasions for protest against Roman as well as aristocratic domination. Josephus claims that the Pharisees had influence among the people (did he mean the Judean peasantry or only the Jerusalemites?). But he portrays them as agents and representatives of the Hasmonean, Herodian, and high priestly regimes. There is no evidence of the Pharisees or other scribal circles having made common cause with any peasant groups. When a “teacher” named Menahem and his scribal followers attempted to set themselves at the head of the revolt in the summer of 66, the Jerusalemites themselves attacked and killed him.

In the cities of the Roman Empire there was more contact between ordinary people and the urban elite. The free poor, like slaves and freedmen and freedwomen, often made a living by catering to the needs of the wealthy. But strict norms governed those interactions. Partly as a means of social control, the elite sponsored festivals and entertainments for the ordinary people. Imperial games funded by an urban elite in honor of Caesar might be the only occasion on which the urban poor ever tasted meat. The plebian citizens of Rome itself (but not resident aliens and other destitute people), of course, enjoyed the bread and circuses arranged by the Roman imperial aristocracy. Ordinary city folks could attend gladiatorial contests. In city centers the urban magnates erected shrines and temples to the emperor, which then constituted the very architectural environment of public life. But the riffraff would never be invited to a banquet in an aristocratic household. Some of the urban poor who made at least a subsistence living as artisans formed clubs or associations that held their own dinners, only on a relatively modest scale. Some of those clubs may have honored wealthy patrons at their dinners in return for financial support. Beyond the imperial games and city festivals, however, there was little to bridge the gulf between the extremely wealthy magnates and the mass of the poor. Recent claims that the participants in Pauline churches represented a cross section of urban society simply do not fit the sharp divide in ancient Roman urban society known from evidence outside of New Testament and other Christian sources.

POPULAR CULTURE IN INTERACTION WITH ELITE CULTURE

People's movements are usually rooted in popular culture, which is different from high culture. That should not be surprising, since peasants are often of different ethnic background from their lords and often live in semi-autonomous village communities. While culture can be diverse among the elite, even in an imperial order where the dominant culture becomes somewhat cosmopolitan, popular culture is usually far more diverse in its local variations.

Anthropologists and social historians, drawing on comparative studies of agrarian societies, have moved well beyond the problematic old two-tier model of aristocratic culture and folk culture.⁶ In most situations there is an interaction between a "little tradition," the "distinctive patterns of belief and behavior . . . valued by the peasantry," and the corresponding "great tradition" of the elite. The popular tradition can absorb influences from the dominant culture, which is often parallel and overlapping, and the great tradition can adopt or adapt cultural materials such as stories of origin from the people, from among whom the elite may have risen to power. Yet the popular tradition can embody values and express interests sharply different from and even opposed to the great tradition. In certain circumstances the little tradition can thus become the matrix of "protest and profanation" by popular movements, even of peasant revolts.

The differences and relations between popular culture and dominant culture are particularly salient for the investigations in this volume focused on the religious-cultural dimension of people's history. The problem and our approach to it play out somewhat differently for the Jesus movements and early Gospel materials rooted in Galilee and Judea, on the one hand, and for the Pauline and other communities and movements in other areas of the Roman Empire, on the other. In both cases, very recent research on particular aspects of ancient Jewish, Greek, and Roman culture is seriously challenging standard assumptions and generalization in New Testament studies. As a result we are in a position of having to make educated projections on what the implications may be as we wait for more detailed historical investigations of particular situations and issues.

One marker of the differences between elite and people's culture and religion in the Roman Empire was literacy,⁷ which was basically confined to the urban elite and some of those who served them. Most males of the aristocracy could read, although they often had slaves read to them and write letters and other documents for them. Decrees and honorific statements in honor of imperial figures or local magnates were inscribed on monuments in public places to impress the people. But literacy was not used in most

social and economic interaction, certainly not among the ordinary people. Even village scribes in Egypt, who were local administrators for the central government, could barely inscribe their name on the shards given as receipts to peasants for taxes paid or on papyri lists sent to district offices.

Literacy was, if anything, more limited in Judea and Galilee than in the rest of the Roman Empire.⁸ Writing was confined mainly to scribal circles and the Herodian and high priestly administrations. Oral communication dominated at all levels of the society, completely so in the villages. This makes the old depiction of the ancient Jews as generally literate and a “people of the book” highly dubious. It also calls into question the frequent assumption that early Christians were also literate and quickly also became a people of the book. This means, for example, that Judean texts from around the time of Jesus provide evidence not for what the Jews in general believed and practiced, but only for the literate circles that produced those texts.⁹

We are only beginning to realize that there was no standard and stable text of the Hebrew Bible (still often referred to inappropriately as the “Old Testament” by Christian interpreters). Close examination of the many manuscripts of the books of the Pentateuch (five books of Moses) found among the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1947 indicates that different versions of these books still coexisted among the scribes and literate priests.¹⁰ Thus no standardized scripture operated as *the* authority even in the scribal and priestly circles who controlled the Temple. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that the Hebrew scriptures were known to Judean and Galilean peasants. Scrolls, which were extremely expensive and cumbersome, were more or less confined to scribal circles.¹¹

The nonliterate ordinary people could not have read them anyhow. Galilean and Judean villagers spoke a dialect of Aramaic, so they would hardly have understood Hebrew if it were read to them. The Gospel of Luke is projecting Greek urban practices onto the synagogue in Nazareth in its portrayal of Jesus opening a scroll of Isaiah and reading from it. Peasants would have known of the existence of the scripture, since it was deposited in the Temple and supposedly read (recited) on ceremonial occasions. And fragmentary knowledge of one or another version of the scripture of the Jerusalem great tradition may well have been mediated to villagers through Pharisees and other scribal representatives of the temple-state. Such mediation would have been minimal for Galilean peasants, however, since they had been brought under Jerusalem rule only about a hundred years before Jesus’ birth.¹²

While only minimally and indirectly acquainted with the still-developing scriptures of the Jerusalem priestly and scribal elite, however, Judean and Galilean peasants were well-grounded in Israelite tradition—or rather

their own popular Israelite tradition. Given the different regional histories of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea, there must have been local variations in the Israelite little tradition. Yet many of the most basic aspects of that tradition, such as the foundational legend of the exodus and memories of prophets of renewal such as Elijah, would have been common to all regions. Josephus mentions many incidents that indicate that Galileans were adamantly committed to the basic principles of the Mosaic covenant as the fundamental guide to socioeconomic life.¹³ Josephus's hostile accounts of popular prophetic and messianic movements enable us to see this Israelite popular tradition in action, as it were. The Gospels provide what is perhaps our best access to at least a Galilean version of Israelite popular tradition.

The interrelation of high and popular culture was far more complex for the communities of Jesus-believers that emerged in the more multicultural and cosmopolitan urban contexts of Corinth and Rome and even in the smaller cities of Asia Minor. New Testament interpreters have tended to work with a highly synthetic construction of Hellenistic culture and religion, to which they then compare Pauline letters and other New Testament literature. But cities had their own distinctive cultural features. An indigenous Thracian or Macedonian culture, for example, apparently survived in Thessalonica under the veneer of official assimilation of Roman culture under Augustus and his successors. Because it was a hub of shipping, Corinth became a cultural melting pot after its colonization by Roman veterans and freedpersons, who presumably spoke Latin. Rome would have been the most culturally diverse city of all—underneath the revival of traditional Roman culture spearheaded by Augustus as official policy.

As suggested by some of these distinctively local cultural variations, there seems little reason to imagine that ordinary people in cities of the Empire were assimilated to and identified with the high culture known in Greek and Latin literature, philosophy, inscriptions, and monuments. For example, scholars have recently rediscovered how Paul's arguments resemble the standard patterns of Greek rhetoric. This may well suggest that he shared cultural forms that had become common coin of oral communication in Greek-speaking cities. Yet Paul gives no indication that he knew classical Greek literature. It appears unlikely, therefore, that this diaspora Judean from the Greek-speaking city of Tarsus, who played a key role in the formation of communities of Christ-believers, helped to mediate Greek high culture. It is surmised that most of the urban poor in Greek cities participated in the imperial festivals sponsored by the urban magnates as a means to maintain social order and consolidate their own power.¹⁴ While they were undoubtedly influenced by the festivals and monuments sponsored by the city elites, however, it would be unwarranted simply to assume that they merely acquiesced.¹⁵

A major aspect of popular culture in relation to elite culture that had not been a factor for the Galileans, Samaritans, and Judeans among whom the Jesus movement originated arose for the non-Israelite peoples who joined communities of Jesus-believers. For those of Israelite heritage, the Jesus movements developed on the basis of their own popular tradition. Indeed, the Jesus movements for which we have documentation appear to understand themselves as fulfillments of Israelite historical and prophetic tradition. The non-Israelite peoples who joined the nascent communities of Christ-believers, however, were, to a greater or lesser extent, identifying with and assimilating another people's cultural tradition. Envoys of Christ from the Judean diaspora such as Paul, Barnabas, and Prisca and Aquila were presenting a message and movement identified with and developing out of Israelite popular tradition. The Gentile peoples among whom they worked were thus put in a position of identifying in some way with Israelite tradition. On the one hand, this meant a rejection or dis-identification with the dominant Greek urban and Roman imperial culture. On the other hand, it meant identifying with another subject people's tradition, in some relationship with whatever culture they brought with them into the new community. The resulting new social-cultural identity would almost certainly have been a hybrid.

THE PROBLEM OF SOURCES

As suggested by the lack of sources for popular culture, investigation of people's history with a view from below faces a serious problem with regard to sources. Investigators of the history of kings and wars, bishops and councils, can easily find written sources in books and archives. Ordinary people in previous eras, however, have seldom left written sources as evidence of their own stories, hopes, and actions. Writers of the literate elite in antiquity, moreover, rarely mention ordinary people, and most modern scholars who interpret ancient sources generally work from a culturally dominant perspective. The people make the papers only when they make trouble for their rulers, who then condemn their irrational and unjustifiable "riots" and "banditry." Complaints by writers from the elite thus provide at least some indirect evidence, but we must obviously discount the hostility of such accounts.

Some of the Judean literature produced by the scribal elite of an imperially subjected people took stands against the imperial order. Occasionally some of the various Judean scribal circles who served as retainers of the Herodian and high priestly aristocracy protested when their patrons collaborated too closely with their own imperial patrons. The apocalyptic and

hymnic literature they produced (for example, the Book of Daniel, the Psalms of Solomon), however, does not necessarily represent the views and expectations of Judean and Galilean peasants.¹⁶

With regard to elite written sources, but perhaps particularly with regard to hostile witnesses such as Josephus or the Roman historian Tacitus, it is up to the critical investigator, in effect, to force the issue. Historians must critically pose appropriate questions in order to elicit evidence from such elite sources.¹⁷ Read as a source for an essentialist Judaism subdivided into four sects, Josephus's histories yielded information about the "Zealots," along with the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. Once we recognized the Zealots as a synthetic modern scholarly construct, suddenly Josephus became a source for a variety of popular protests and movements of resistance and renewal that took distinctively Israelite forms.¹⁸ Various birth narratives were just further examples of a vague myth of the birth of a hero until historians asked sufficiently precise questions that led to different social locations of the various stories.¹⁹

Indeed, sufficient critical source-analysis has been done to provide some useful guidelines for critically cutting through the rhetoric and interests of elite sources, and additional principles will surely emerge. For example, since the authors of written texts, who were almost always male, tended to write women out of history, modern historians must take every clue to discern the presence and often the prominence of women, as feminist scholars have insisted.²⁰

Some of the people investigated in this volume, however, are highly unusual, almost unique among ordinary people in antiquity, for having left texts that survive in writing. Insofar as the communities and movements that they represent or address had not yet developed a hierarchy that stood in power over the membership, most New Testament and related texts, in contrast with Josephus's histories or Pliny's letters, provide more or less direct sources for these people's movements. In the case of the Gospels, the contents are stories and speeches that are not only about peasants but stem from a peasant movement and, in the cases of Mark and Q, even represent a popular viewpoint. As sources from and for popular movements among peoples subject to imperial and local rulers, the Gospel of Mark and Q, and even the Gospels of John and Matthew, appear all the more striking in comparison with literature from the Judean scribal elite, such as the Psalms of Solomon or 1 Maccabees. These Gospel sources must be used critically, of course. They have distinctive viewpoints and interests. But they are some of those rare historical cases of literature that represents the view from below. Of non-Gospel literature, the Revelation to John, *The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles (Didache)*, and the Epistle of James (Jacob) also appear to be such sources.

We must be far more suspicious of some other New Testament and related documents. While the Gospel of Luke includes materials of popular provenance, its viewpoint is no longer that of the peasants from whom they originated. Insofar as Luke's Gospel is addressing later communities in a different cultural ethos from the one in which his Gospel materials originated, it is in a mediating position with regard to earlier Jesus movements. As for the Book of Acts, insofar as Luke has written the history of Paul's mission from a very distinctive point of view, we must seriously discount his presentation of Paul's activities and words in various mission sites, his sketches of leading figures in the assemblies Paul supposedly founded there, and his representation of the attitude of Roman authorities toward the developing movement and the hostile response of the Jews. The deutero-Pauline letters such as Colossians and Ephesians and particularly the Pastoral letters still represent communities of ordinary people. Insofar as they insist that their people pattern their family and community life after the dominant social order, however, they appear to be blunting the ways in which those communities might have been striving toward alternatives rooted in popular interests.

In addition to literary sources we have at least some evidence from very recent archaeology. Archaeologists are finally exploring sites of ordinary people's lives, and not just the monumental sites for which it is easier to obtain funding. An increasing supply of inscriptions from antiquity provides additional evidence. Extreme caution must be used, however, in extrapolating from inscriptions left by the (semi)literate to the views of ordinary people. Crude graffiti, for example, cannot be taken as evidence for literacy.

LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES, PEOPLE AND TEXTS

The relationship between leaders and followers in the communities and movements of the New Testament period is closely related to the question of nonelite sources, since some of the latter were produced by some of those leaders. While leaders of popular movements occasionally come from higher social ranks, they usually emerge from among the people themselves.

In the movements and communities of the New Testament period, most of the leaders, such as the apostles and prophets, emerged from among the ordinary people. As fishermen, Peter and Andrew, James and John, and others of the Twelve were hardly businessmen but more like sharecroppers who "farmed" the Sea of Galilee (had they lost their ancestral land in Galilean villages?). Diaspora Judeans from various cities of the Roman Empire were prominent in the early leadership. Prisca and Aquila, among those expelled from Rome in the 40s, were poor artisans (were they descendants of slaves

or freed slaves?). Leaders such as Mary of Magdala and Phoebe of Cenchreae (Rom. 16:1-2), neither of whom is identified by her husband and embedded in a patriarchal family, had apparently become independent women, perhaps by force of difficult circumstances.

Some of the leaders in the communities and movements were also the composers of letters or Gospels. Those texts, moreover, not only constitute our principal or in some cases our only sources for communities but were key factors in their life and development as well. There is thus necessarily a close relationship, for example, between the Gospel of Matthew and the communities in which it arose and was used, or between Paul's letters to the Corinthians and the Corinthian community, or between the Revelation to John and the seven assemblies to which it is addressed. Our purpose is to explore primarily the history of the people involved, not the texts as texts (the principal goal of New Testament studies). It is necessary, therefore, to clarify critically the relation of such leaders and texts to the communities they addressed.

Paul has proved an especially puzzling case for recent interpreters. Many of the arguments in his letters appear similar to the standard forms of Greco-Roman rhetoric. But that does not mean that he had received a formal rhetorical education (handbooks of the time represented a systematization of long-standing practice in public culture). Certainly his letters give no sense that he had any knowledge of Greek literature. We must doubt the claim in the Book of Acts that he was a Roman citizen. His comment that with regard to the Law he was a Pharisee (Phil. 3:5) does not mean that he received a scribal education in Jerusalem at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3) and became a protégé of the leading Pharisees. As an enforcer of a program of ethnic-cultural discipline and solidarity (*ioudaismos*, Gal. 1:13-14) among Judeans, Saul in effect operated as a mediator of the imperial order. As a diaspora Judean who had become caught up in an apocalyptic perspective while in Jerusalem, Saul certainly did become downwardly mobile by joining a popular movement led by Galilean peasants such as Peter and James. Thereafter he became as fanatically dedicated to spreading the new movement of "God's assembly" as he had been of persecuting the movement previously.

More important, we have recently become more critically aware that we cannot read the history of a Pauline Christianity directly off the pages of Paul's letters.²¹ In the course of his mission, he came into cities as an outsider who worked, initially with other outsiders, to catalyze new



Fig. 0.4. Lone fisherman in a small boat, relief on a funeral stele, found on L'Isle Saint Jacques, France. First or second century CE. Evidence indicates the fishing industry in Roman Galilee generally involved much larger boats worked by crews. Photo: Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

communities among residents there. His letters are ad hoc communications aimed at maintaining cohesion and discipline of the local community and loyalty to his own leadership. Most of his letters give evidence of serious conflict among the members of the local assembly or between some in the assembly and himself. Far from Paul's argument being direct evidence for Pauline Christianity, however, they are rather sources for various voices that can be heard, however faintly, through Paul's arguments aimed at persuading them to agree with his own point of view. Thus Paul's letters provide windows (however cloudy) onto the struggles in which the communities addressed were engaged.

There appears to be less tension between other texts and the communities they address. Nevertheless, we cannot reconstruct the beliefs and behavior of communities directly off instructions in the *Didache* or the discourses in Matthew or the revelations to John.

AGENDA, ASSUMPTIONS, APPROACHES

In distinction from the standard agenda of New Testament studies, the explorations of people's history in this volume do not focus primarily on interpretation of New Testament and related texts. Those texts may provide our principal sources. But our studies focus rather on communities or movements in key locations such as Galilee, Judea, Antioch, Corinth, and Rome; on basic social forms and factors such as family, slavery, and poverty; and on modes of communication and leadership such as storytelling and prophecy.

Correspondingly, our investigations do not depend heavily on the standard assumptions, approaches, and interpretive accounts of New Testament studies, which have been heavily determined by Christian theology. Rather, the exploration of new materials, new questions, and different questions addressed to familiar texts requires us to work critically toward the new assumptions and approaches that seem appropriate to the focus on the people and their communities, social forms, and distinctive modes of communication. Different approaches may be appropriate for different explorations.

We focus on the religious aspects in these case studies. This is only appropriate in a people's history of Christianity and exploits the professional training and experience of the authors of these chapters in the interpretation of the symbolizing practices of texts, stories, symbols, and rituals. Yet insofar as religion is inseparable from the political-economic aspects of ancient life, religious motives and expressions can be understood only in the political-economic context in which they are embedded.

Aware that studies of popular culture in the Reformation and early modern Europe have been criticized for neglecting material conditions,²² we include analysis of political-economic structures and power relations. We are interested in the dynamics of those power relations, however, not in the structures for their own sake. Hence we attempt to move beyond recent applications of functionalist sociological models to biblical texts and history, which may obscure the fundamental divide between the powerful elite and the mass of ordinary people in the Roman Empire.²³ The rise and expansion of new social movements may be interrelated more with the historical shifts and changes in fundamental structures and challenges to basic social forms than to the structures themselves. Moreover, we are now exploring these ancient social movements in a newfound awareness that power operates not only through political-economic structures but through religious symbols, rituals, and movements as well. The formation of communities whose loyalty (faith) focused on Jesus Christ as their Savior and refused loyalty to Caesar as the Savior who had supposedly brought them peace and security had implications for imperial power relations, however limited at the outset.²⁴

Another concern of our explorations is to use information, where available, on local conditions in particular areas of the Roman Empire in which Jesus movements and Christ-centered communities developed. In this regard recent investigations of archaeological and textual evidence enable us to move underneath older synthetic generalizations about the Hellenistic world to distinctive political-economic patterns and cultural features of key areas.²⁵ Rarely is it possible to construct much of a “thick description” (anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s term for a detailed, multi-level analysis) because of the relative lack of evidence from antiquity. Yet with more precise localized information in a few cases it may be possible to investigate indigenous social forms and the particular cultural traditions of communal life in the context of the political-economic-religious pressures impinging on local subsistence communities.

Together with archaeological and historical information and analysis, we seek cultural information for particular areas and communities. To focus on one key example, it is helpful and significant to know that people in Galilee were poor. It is even more useful and significant to know that they were being further impoverished by increasing taxation or rents. To understand the origins and concerns of a new popular movement, however, it would be much more useful and significant to understand the particular cultural meaning and social implications of their impoverishment. To understand and explain the people’s movements, stories, and prophecies we are exploring, the key questions might well be the cultural meaning of their desire for dignity and the political-economic-religious mechanisms

by which dignity is denied them. Information on that cultural meaning and those mechanisms might also be the clues to why a particular leader, message, or ritual could become an originating catalyst or a continuing cultivator of a movement or community.

Our investigations help clarify the ways and extent to which the communities and movements of the New Testament period formed and expanded in resistance to the dominant social-religious as well as political-economic order in the Roman Empire. Yet the people involved in these communities, as mostly subsistence peasants and artisans and even slaves, were embedded in that dominant order in various connections. They could not help adjusting and accommodating in various ways. And there were inevitably internal politics in these communities and movements, whether struggles between rival leaders or between local factions or between leaders and followers. All of those conflicts can be discerned even in the same community, as in the case of the Corinthian assembly behind 1 and 2 Corinthians. We thus attend closely to the internal politics of these movements and communities. It is impossible, however, to treat separately the movements' resistance to the dominant order and their assimilation and reinscription of aspects of that order. The latter is inevitably entailed in the interaction with the dominant order by communities of resistance, which were *in*, if not *of*, the dominant order.

Since our purpose is to explore the development of particular communities or movements, as well as key social forms and factors and modes of communication involved in most of them, we do not emphasize particular methods or models. Our approaches are eclectically multidisciplinary and self-consciously critical when adapting a given method for a particular purpose.