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Introduction

Beginnings hold a fascination for us. When we encounter something phenomenal, we are drawn to its beginnings—how did it start? What was the moment when it first appeared?

The Protestant movement, for example. It spread so rapidly through sixteenth-century Europe. It began with a single priest. So we try to find out all we can about him: what were the influences on him. Especially important is that moment and that experience before which he was not yet a Protestant, and after which he was. That moment is studied. It's the kernel, the fundamental, the ultimate ground of all that follows.

We study its development. We watch how, step by step, this seed grew into what we know today. Those early years, when so many options were still open, fascinate us. How come it went this way and not that?

Only when we get some clues as to what happened then can we relive the experience of that priest, Martin Luther. Otherwise we are limited to reading it all backward and when we do that, everything that happened has a certain inevitability about it. But for those who lived it, it was far from inevitable that it would develop the way it did. At the time it was happening, it seemed so open-ended, so filled with possibilities, and so in need of decisions.

Like Robert Frost's narrator in his poem "The Road Not Taken," when we look backward we have it all figured out. Here's the path I took and here were the consequences, and none of this would have happened had I gone down the other path. It's so pat. It's missing a crucial ingredient. It isn't the way it was. To understand it better, we have to find out what it was like for those in the middle of it.

Recently I saw a televised production of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*. As I watched, I was sorry I already knew the ending. How I wished that I had never read it before. An edge was gone that would have made such a difference in my enjoyment. In Dickens' day the work appeared a few chapters at a time in a monthly magazine. Nobody knew what was going to happen to Darnay. They lived through it with him.

In a previous book, *Meeting Jesus*, I tried to imagine Jesus' life as he experienced it, from within, in the dark about the future, making one decision at a time. In this book I would like to do the same for the years just after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What was it like for those who lived the first years of Christianity? What do we know about their scene? Can we get into the options that they faced, and the choices that they made and the choices that they rejected? Can we remove the weight of inevitability that keeps us from reliving their lives, from imagining ourselves back there, in the dark about the future? Can we relive their decisions?

Any effort along this line comes up against a fact about this period of history that has well been stated by one of the scholars of Hellenistic religion, A. Deissmann: "The origin of the cult of Christ (and that means, of christology) is the secret of the earliest Palestinian community."¹

We simply do not have the data to re-create with certainty what the actual sequence of events in those earliest years was.

However, this does not leave us without anything to say about those years, as thousands of articles and books testify. But it does mean that we are operating in a world of probabilities, plausibilities, and impossibilities. Just as when physicists study the origin of the universe, the lack of hard data does not rule out endless speculating by the finest scientific minds, so, too, those interested in Christian origins are constantly discussing and trying to distinguish the probable from the impossible, the plausible, and the unlikely.

What I offer here is a projection, one possible scenario of what might have happened in those earliest years. I select what I consider the most plausible scenario. As Otto Betz wrote in *What Do We Know About Jesus?* "The Gospels force us to make our own picture of Jesus, one which will do justice both to [the testimony of the four

Gospels] and to our own restless urge for truth.”² So, too, in the New Testament, The Acts of the Apostles and especially the Letters of Paul force us to make our own picture of the earliest Church.

We are doing what the author of Acts tried to do for his audience: give them some indication of how it must have been to be alive and in the middle of it all during those first years.

My own interest was aroused by a work of Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord*, a study of early Christian devotion.³ This led me to the many writings of Martin Hengel of Tübingen in which he studies the earliest years of Christianity. His work has been built upon by so many others.

Hengel states his central concern well in the opening paragraph of his *The Son of God*:

At the feast of the Passover in the year 30, in Jerusalem, a Galilean Jew was nailed to the cross for claiming to be Messiah. About twenty-five years later, the former Pharisee Paul quotes a hymn about this crucified man in a letter which he writes to one of the communities of the messianic sect which he has founded in the Roman colony of Philippi... The discrepancy between the shameful death of a Jewish state criminal and the confession that depicts this executed man as a pre-existent divine figure who becomes man and humbles himself to a slave’s death is, as far as I can see, without analogy in the ancient world.⁴

That “discrepancy” between the events of AD 30 and the creation of the hymn contained in Paul’s letter provides me with the time period I will focus on, the very earliest Church.

It was during that brief period that the earliest Palestinian community became involved in the cult of Christ. It is a time wrapped in darkness for us. There is not the light that would be produced by letters or autobiographies, or financial statements, or odds and ends written by those who were there.

We enter a dark room. We must pause and let our eyes get used to the darkness. What we will see are shadows, vague, incomplete forms, a glint here and there. “What is that form near the window?” “Is it a computer?” That’s a possibility. “Maybe it’s a gas heater.” “No. It’s too narrow.”

Into the darkness we project possibilities. We try them out. That's what I am doing here, projecting a possibility. For these earliest years that's all we can do, produce scenarios of what might have happened. Events did take place. People did make decisions. These decisions did lead them on to strange paths. Changes did occur. By the time the lights go on, much has already happened.

Here is one of the common scenarios:

A band of disciples totally disheartened by the Passover events flees to Galilee. There they gradually become convinced that Jesus' death could not have been the end of such a spectacularly good life. The goodness they had seen in him could not have been buried in his tomb. Such a finale would mean that God was totally indifferent to human goodness. The Jesus-Event must be continuing in a triumphant mode. He must be still existing. In his new mode of existence, Jesus must have received a vindication from God. In a way hidden from the world, his story has continued and a new final chapter has been written in the heavens. Jesus is still alive!

As the days pass they attend their synagogues and reflect on the nature of this new life of Jesus. Certain texts of the Scripture become clues to the particulars of Jesus' new life. He is seen as being the enthroned one, the power above all powers, the one to be prayed to and sung about.

But they are still believers in Yahweh. There is only the one God. They are still devout Jews, monotheists, members of the synagogue, and when they come to Jerusalem, they worship in the Temple.

After a time, they begin to admit pagans into their sect. This creates conflict with the religious leaders, and more importantly opens the Church to influences very alien to Judaism. The pagans have been converted from religions which revered many gods in the heavens. Divinity was shared by a crowd of personalities.

When the converts from paganism begin to preach the good news to their fellow pagans, they naturally explain Jesus by translating him into their way of speaking about the divine. There is no way that they can deny to him divinity

when it is the boast of so many lesser figures. These converts have none of the sensitivity of the Jews toward monotheism. It is in their circles that Jesus is spoken of as divine, and the Church is drawn toward the trinitarian faith that will dominate its history. It is among them that Jesus becomes the divine Son, true God of true God. Most of the writers of the New Testament come under their influence. They turn a Jewish sect into a totally new religion.

With many variations in detail, of course, this is a common scenario held by people over the last century.

But... did it happen this way? Who knows? We are in an area where guessing is inevitable.

For many Christians this scenario is impossible to believe. They see it as an invitation to stop believing. They are disturbed when they are told by some of the experts that this is the only possible way any reasonable person could read the events. They are tempted to give up believing—or to give up on reasoning.

But there are other scenarios that can be written. The one I will spell out in this book will be much more supportive of the traditional faith of Christians. Its plausibility will be indicated by the scholars who think along these lines, people whose expertise is honored throughout the field of scriptural scholarship even by those who disagree with their particular suggestions.

To the degree that the scenario presented here is likely, it will be useful. Where it is unlikely, may it stimulate others to produce better ones.