

Timeless Transformations

When Did the Jesus Movement Begin?

The Jesus movement started in Galilee, a region in northern Israel, at the start of the first century Common Era (C.E.) around the 30s and 40s. Scattered groups of people, including Jewish and Gentiles (Romans), started gathering to talk about a new social reformation that was innovative and exciting. The idea was based on the concept of a perfect society conceptualized as “the kingdom.” Followers of Jesus sought after a new way to live so that any person, no matter what their social status, capability, culture, health, or past was, could belong to this kingdom. It was a social concept that cut across boundaries to bridge the gap between people of all cultures!

These movements started with small groups and networks of people that worked out the details as they went along. The various backgrounds and cultures of the people affected how each group formulated their understanding about this new kingdom. That is why there were so many lines of thoughts and interpretations about how this new kingdom would be organized. Though many differences, the two primary commonalities were: 1) the practice of meeting to gather for meals and 2) an agreement that Jesus’ followers honored him as their founder. Jesus’ ideas that were discussed during this time were shared with other groups and verbally embellished, and the movement grew to become more of a school of thought rather than a religious community.

Because there were few people that could write at that time, there is little history. Most of the history is recorded in oral knowledge and scraps of information, based on memory, imagination, sayings, teachings, and anecdotes. As a result, it is easy to shape and reshape the memory of Jesus, and to develop his voice and character. Each group in the movement created Jesus, not in its own image, but in the image of their group it had become, or wanted to become. Complicating matters, even if they could write, they did not have the paper or pens or any other tools to document anything. So, the Jesus movement and its history, as portrayed in the New Testament gospels, did not occur until two generations after Jesus’ death, when Mark wrote his story of Jesus after the Roman-Jewish war.

The path from the early Jesus movements to the Christian religion that finally materialized 300-400 years later was long and difficult, requiring a great amount of social compromise, intellectual effort, and devastating war. This new school of thought about the “the kingdom” was visionary. Jesus’ teachings and insights marks a point in time as being one of the greatest social reformations that changed humanity and the western culture for all time.